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Cross-Class and Cross-Ideological Convergences over Time: Insights from the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutionary Uprisings

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Abstract

The 2010–11 Arab uprisings continue to prompt a great deal of discussion. By focusing specifically on Tunisia and Egypt, this article aims to present a more dynamic account of revolutionary moments in these countries. It does so in two ways. First, the changing nature of structures and mechanisms of authoritarian domination over time is explored. Second, the convergences of different social classes and political forces during the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt are not treated as unique and static occurrences. By showing how the two revolutionary networks gradually emerged and enlarged, a truer picture is thus provided. By doing so, this article aims to contribute to a more nuanced interpretation of the two revolutionary outbursts and to the development of the fourth generation of revolutionary studies.

Keywords: authoritarian regime; Egypt; Tunisia; authoritarianism breakdown; revolutionary convergence; Arab uprisings

Great revolutionary outbursts are constantly re-analysed by different generations of scholars. More than 200 years, for instance, have not yet been enough to water down academic interest in the French Revolution of 1789, whilst the recently celebrated first centenary of the 1917 Russian Revolution has led to a somehow relevant scholarly ferment. It might be the case that the inability of mass-based protest movements to take over the state and unleash an overall transformation of society will shorten the re-examination of the Arab revolutionary uprisings of 2010–11. Up to now, however, not only do these events continue to foster much discussion, but it also seems, as observed by Sune Haugbølle and Andreas Bandak (2017: 192), that 'proper analysis of the Arab revolutionary experience has just started'. Being part of such an ongoing academic trend, this article contributes to an exploration of the causes and dynamics of the Arab revolutionary uprisings. By focusing specifically on Tunisia and Egypt, it attempts to present an anti-static and

fluid image of the revolutionary processes in these countries. It aims to do so in two main ways.

First, the two differing contexts in which the revolutions took place are not represented as fixed. In reaction to external and internal pressures, the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes constantly reshaped their economic and institutional settings over the last decades, involuntarily creating the circumstances for the outbreak of revolution. In this regard, whilst certain contexts are more conducive to mass-based uprisings than others, the conditions that characterized such environments are not a static checklist of factors. Changing over time, structures and mechanisms of authoritarian domination create different sets of incentives and constraints for state actors, social classes and political forces. To understand the roots of revolutions it is therefore crucial to shift from historical snapshots to truly changing pictures of the contexts in which they emerge.

On the other hand, the implicit formation of broad and short-lived opposition networks during the revolutionary uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt is not treated as a unique and static occurrence. Whilst it is extremely likely that in the last stages of a successful uprising almost all social classes and political tendencies will be mobilized in the streets, it does not mean that opposition forces come together once and for all, without attracting different actors at different times in the course of the development of a radical movement. It is whether or not and how disparate groups and classes join radical anti-regime protests that produces rather dissimilar convergences of opposition forces – and that is why we require a dynamic understanding of the uprisings.

This article proceeds as follows. The first two sections review the literature on revolution and previous accounts of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, showing how this article can contribute to the development of the fourth generation of revolutionary studies and to a more nuanced interpretation of the two revolutionary outbursts. In the second part, the cross-class and cross-ideological character of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt is empirically assessed. Despite their ultimately broad and all-encompassing nature, the two protest movements were partially dissimilar in regard to their internal composition and the relative weight of the various forces. These differences are explained by: (1) the somewhat diverse economic, social and political structures of the two regimes; (2) the rather dissimilar low-intensity mobilizations in the pre-2011 period; and (3) the peculiar modalities through which the two revolutionary movements emerged and developed during the uprisings. The final section concludes.

Still waiting for real moving pictures

Theories of revolution have gone through four main generations of scholars, often determining a shift in the primary focus of analysis but fostering nonetheless a steady accumulation of knowledge (Goldstone 2001; Lawson 2016). In an apparently paradoxical way, today's scholars know a great deal about the context in which a revolutionary outbreak is more likely to occur, while remaining aware, however, of the impossibility of predicting where and when mass-based uprisings or revolutions will take place (Goodwin 2011). If the unpredictability of revolutionary episodes beforehand represents a widely recognized aspect, the possibility

of providing retroactive explanations in which the ultimate goal is to minimize the elements of randomness remains a fiercely debated issue (for a critical view, see Kurzman 2004). Not surprisingly, the outbreak of the 2010–11 Arab uprisings has provided an opportunity for a new round of confrontation between scholars who point to exploring the economic, social and political context of revolutions and those who instead focus on the actions and interactions among people in phases of confusion and deinstitutionalization. It is, this article argues, the schism between these two theoretical perspectives that confines explanations to one of two unsatisfactory situations: static accounts that represent uprisings as just one episode in a far longer revolutionary process, paying little attention to the transformative event during which opposition networks gradually take form and enlarge, or dynamic explanations of the weeks of the uprisings that come at the price of missing the context and overlooking the role of political forces and social classes.

Various explanations have been offered for the revolutionary uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. These can be clustered into three groups: structuralist accounts, uprising-centred studies and microfoundational analyses. This section critically reviews the first two, whilst the latter is tackled later. Focusing on long-term causes, structuralist scholars have underlined the role of the international context and contemporary imperialism (Hanieh 2013), as well as the peculiar modalities of the entire region, affected by what has been described as 'fettered development' (Achcar 2013). Likewise, the conditions through which society and the economy became capitalist, the passage from state capitalism to neoliberal reforms and the effects of such processes on the ruling coalition and the composition of the working class have been studied as well (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014; Beinin 2016; De Smet 2016).

Other accounts have adopted a middle-term perspective, pointing to the emergence of radical protest movements in the years before the revolutionary outbreaks. Maha Abdelrahman's (2014) book on the Egyptian revolution is arguably the finest study published in this regard. It emphasizes both the cross-class character of the 'economic' wing of the protest movement and the cross-ideological nature of pro-democracy mobilizations that swept the country throughout the 2000s. Instead, drawing attention to the reasons that concur in explaining the success of the two revolutionary uprisings, both the ultimately decisive disposition of the armed forces and the internal composition of the protest movement have been analysed. Regarding the former, scholars have pointed to the institutional character of the military, its economic motivations and the perception of regime fragility in light of the level of social mobilization (Bellin 2012; Nepstad 2013). In terms of the protest movements, on the other hand, the crucial participation of multiple political and social forces has been recognized (Goldstone 2011). In Tunisia, Michele Penner Angrist (2013: 554) emphasized the emergence of 'sustained, cross-class, geographically widespread mass-protest', finding confirmation in other analyses (Ayeb 2011; Brooks 2013; Zemni 2013). In rather similar ways, scholars interpret the Egyptian uprising as an 'embryonic alliance between the discontented and the dispossessed' (Roccu 2013: 437), a broad popular movement (Marfleet 2016) or the product of a rapid reconfiguration of autonomous social networks under the leadership of 'unexpected brokers' (Clarke 2014). The cross-class character of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings has been

recognized even in those analyses specifically dedicated to the two countries' labour movements (Beinin 2016), whereas Vincent Durac (2015) was probably the first scholar to interpret the uprisings in terms of broad cross-class and cross-ideological coalitions that developed over time. In an interesting article, Mark Beissinger et al. (2015) notice the more middle-class character of the revolution in Egypt compared with that in Tunisia, suggesting therefore that different constituencies might have different weights.

One of the most fascinating attempts to synthesize many of these insights has been proposed by John Foran (2014). In his view, it is possible to make sense of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions in terms of the pattern put forward in *Taking Power*. In this book, Foran (2005) himself sees Third World revolutions as emerging out of five individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions: dependent development; an exclusionary, personalist state; political cultures of resistance; economic downturns; and world-systemic opening. If all five conditions are met, Foran (2005: 23) states, 'a multi-class, cross-racial, and all-gendered coalition of aggrieved social forces will emerge and coalesce to carry out a revolutionary project'. Whilst there is no interest here in discussing whether or not and to what extent Foran's model was vindicated by the Arab uprisings, its attempt to provide a new amalgam among international factors, structural conditions, regime type, mobilizing ideologies and collective action is representative of many other studies produced by the fourth generation of revolutionary theory (Beck 2014; Lawson 2005; Parsa 2000; Ritter 2015).

In comparison to the previous generation of scholars, there are three main areas in which Foran's (2005) work provides advances. First, moving beyond cases of agrarian proto-bureaucracies analysed by Theda Skocpol (1979), most states vulnerable to revolution in the Third World are identified. Drawing from Robert Dix (1984), Jeff Goodwin and Theda Skocpol (1989), Timothy Wickham-Crowley (1992), Misagh Parsa (2000) and Goodwin (2001), corrupt and repressive civilian authoritarian regimes with neopatrimonial traits are regarded as more prone to being dislodged by revolutionary attempts. Second, avoiding the reductive emphasis on the peasantry of the third generation, the key question of who makes revolution is tackled anew from the vantage point of coalitions. Relying on previous insights into the necessity of forming broad and temporary alliances among different classes (Huntington 1968; Tilly 1973; Trotsky 2017 [1932]), the emergence of multi-class and multi-ethnic coalitions led by professional revolutionaries is pointed out (Dix 1984; Goodwin 2001; Goodwin and Skocpol 1989). Third and finally, in reaction to the overall emphasis on political and economic structures of previous analyses, the crucial and partially independent role played by culture, values, ideas and ideology is assessed (Scott 1990; Sewell 1985).

Despite all its merits, Foran's (2005) study falls short in providing a view of revolutions as truly 'moving spectacles' (Lawson 2016: 117). Although more variables are added and a larger number of cases covered, his study has to be considered a historical snapshot. It is historical for the attention paid to long-term processes. It remains, nevertheless, a snapshot in that it is ultimately reducible to a checklist of static conditions that can be either present or not. In any case, entities do not interact among them. In such a perspective, state and authoritarian structures are fixed over time and, even more problematic, the coming together of

different social classes and political tendencies is seen as following from the full matching of the checklist of supposedly crucial factors. That is the reason why what happens during an uprising is often overlooked in such studies, whereas the gradual and incremental convergence of networks of opposition forces is merely represented as the emergence – once and for all – of a stable coalition, implicitly suggesting a level of formality that is often absent in revolutionary episodes.[1] Likewise, if structural characteristics and dispositions of the army help explain defections in Tunisia and Egypt, mutinies were also the product of peculiar insurrectional situations that threatened military cohesion (Goodwin 2011).

Dynamic, but decontextualized, events

Microfoundational approaches provide interesting answers to some of the problematic aspects underlined in the previous section. Instead of focusing on a set of structural factors, the attention switches here to the actions and interactions of people in contentious moments. In general, such analyses start from what William Sewell (1996) defines as the transformative event – that is, the initial act of transgression or rupture that sets in motion a sequence that results in the transformation of structures. The underlying element is the reaching of a critical threshold and the activation of a revolutionary bandwagon through which more and more people might be induced to join an ongoing protest movement, despite the often scarce relevance of the initial event. Scholars disagree, however, in regard to what actually steers such an activation. Timur Kuran (1995: 17) emphasizes the importance of 'preference falsification'. Especially under authoritarian regimes, people may keep their preferences private, making it impossible to know the circumstances under which they might be likely to take to the streets. Charles Kurzman (2004) suggests, on the contrary, that much more attention should be paid to the contingency and unpredictability of revolutionary situations, when people's preferences might suddenly change. In such a regard, revolutionary thresholds are not static, but might shift rapidly, even in the space of a few hours, in response to unverified rumours, conflicting predictions and intense conversations with other people. Potential participants cannot therefore be taken for granted as already formed (Jasper 2010). They are, in what might sound circular, the product of revolution. In his analysis of North Africa, Frederic Volpi (2017) makes a similar point in arguing that the identity of the actors is also the product of new circumstances created by a period of rapid deinstitutionalization, when formal and informal mechanisms that structure people's views are no longer what they used to be. Similarly, the behaviour of state actors would also be affected by the element of contingency, rendering impossible the ability to predict it in advance. The difficulty of limiting emulation effects within 'holy' national boundaries has led scholars to analyse the diffusion of the revolutionary wave in the entire Middle East, pointing to the crucial role of cognitive shortcuts (Weyland 2012), emotions (Pearlman 2013) or the emergence of a new public sphere in the region throughout the 2000s (Lynch 2012).

By abandoning retroactive prediction, microfoundational accounts help to open up the black box of revolutionary situations, showing that the timing of events and their sequence are crucial. Such elements affect the growth and the sustainability of

mass-based revolutionary movements over time, as well as the behaviour of the state actor that in the last stages of revolutions is decisive in determining the outcome – the military. Such attention to *process* comes, however, at a predictable price: the underestimation of the economic and political context in which transformative events take place. This, in turn, also clarifies why several of these studies are unable to explain why some countries in the region were not swept up in the revolutionary wave, often providing unverifiable accounts of the success of the uprisings in some countries and their failure elsewhere. Similarly problematic is the great emphasis put on individuals, nebulous multitudes, or 'the people' in a generic and all-encompassing way. By doing so, microfoundational studies tend to overlook the role of political groups and the different weight that different social classes might have in revolutionary episodes, producing some sort of sociological reductionism. One person counts once in the ballot box. Yet, in the storm of a radical uprising, the general picture is never the mere sum of its parts. The contradictions involuntarily unleashed by a mass-based revolt and, above all, the political direction of the movement are much more important factors than a sociological portrait of those gathered in a square.

By understanding revolutions as emerging processes in which state structures change over time and networks of opposition forces are gradually forged in unique ways, this article tries to address some of the underlined limitations in the literature. In this way, specific attention is given to political forces and social classes, as well as to their coming together in phases of deinstitutionalization.

Revolutionary convergences in Tunisia and Egypt

The attempt to apply the insights developed by the studies on revolution to the Tunisian and Egyptian events leads immediately to the problematic and often-raised question of whether either of the two countries experienced a revolution. This article retains as valid and useful the distinction that has been drawn many times between political and social revolutions. The latter are characterized by three crucial factors: mass participation, political change and structural transformation (Foran 2005: 7). Political revolutions, by contrast, fall short in terms of achieving a radical restructuring of a country's social and class relations. Seen in this light, the Tunisian and Egyptian events qualify as political, rather than social, revolutions. In particular, both cases appear as revolutionary mobilizations with reformist trajectories. Yet the limited success of 'revolution as change' cannot obscure the relevance of 'revolution as movement', especially in the process of breaking down previous existing regimes (Bayat 2017: 154).

Autocracies in Tunisia and Egypt were not defeated by pacted transition among elites. They were overthrown by mass-based uprisings in which a cross-class and cross-ideological revolutionary convergence throughout (almost) the entire country imposed a regime change. It is true that the role of the military was instrumentally crucial in the last stages of these uprisings, forcing out of power both Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. The armed forces, however, did not act autonomously. Rather, they were compelled to adapt rapidly to a new scenario created by unprecedented mass actions. Given the expansive character of the uprisings in class and ideological terms, had the two army chiefs of

staff ordered junior officials and rank-and-file soldiers to fire on protesters, it is likely that they would have had to deal with a mutiny in the military's ranks (Brooks 2013; Ketchley 2017; Nassif 2015). In other words, the 'limits of the possible' had shrunk to such a level that the armed forces had no other option than to abandon the regime to protect their own institution as well as the whole system. The key question, therefore, revolves around the establishment and development of such revolutionary networks.

The Tunisian uprising was unleashed by Mohamed Bouazizi's desperate act on 17 December 2010. It was therefore a protest neither called for nor planned. On the contrary, it was the product of several spontaneous acts of rebellion that took place at the same time in the marginalized and poor interior of Tunisia. Emerging far away from key urban centres and production sites, the Tunisian uprising, to be successful, had to travel from the interior to the coast, from the countryside to the cities, and from impoverished regions to industrialized ones. It was not a national uprising that attracted almost all social forces and political groups from its initial eruption. It had to become something like that gradually.

The spontaneous character of the protests in Sidi Bouzid does not mean that these were acephalous. The backing of three constituencies beyond Bouazizi's family members, neighbours and friends, who immediately staged unplanned gatherings in front of public buildings, was indeed crucial. The first group was composed of the unemployed, informal workers and students, who emerged as the real engine of the protests, physically challenging the security forces and resisting their assaults (Ayeb 2011: 470–71). However, with the partial exception of the feeble organizational support provided by the Union des Diplômés Chômeurs (UDC – Union of Unemployed Graduates), these sectors acted in an uncoordinated way. Militant local union members of the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT – Tunisian General Labour Union), often supporters of a critical internal current, represented the group that played the most crucial role in the initial stages of the uprising (Angrist 2013: 559–561). Many of them were members of unrecognized, extreme-left parties – first and foremost, the Parti Communiste des Ouvriers de Tunisie (PCOT – Tunisian Workers' Communist Party) – or active in the left-leaning UGTT's federations, especially those of primary and secondary education, the postal sector and the public health service, that had been conquered by the political left in the 1970s and then remained strongholds of *gauchiste* (leftist) militants (Feltrin 2018: 8). The day after Bouazizi's self-immolation, a committee of support for the ongoing mobilization was established by local union cells, whilst the UGTT's headquarters emerged as the key gathering points for union members, human rights activists, political opponents and young people (Yousfi 2015: 60–63). Throughout its history, the union has constantly fluctuated between being a docile transmission belt for the political authorities and representing the most relentless opposition to the regime. The historical ambivalence of the union was exacerbated by the emergence of a new structural contradiction in the 2000s, when the national leadership was co-opted whilst scattered local unions retained some degree of autonomy and remained militant. It was the existence of 'the two UGTTs' that provided room for manoeuvre to rank-and-file members, propelling the development of a process that forced the leadership into more adversarial stances (Chouikha and Geisser 2010: 417). The other key group in supporting the uprising

was formed by lawyers, a professional category that had already emerged as one of the most militant sources of opposition to Ben Ali's rule throughout the 2000s (Gobe 2010). Their contribution was critical in redefining the emotional rage that spread by Bouazizi's act in legal terms, and – it has to be noted – the first lawyers' sit-in at Sidi Bouzid's municipal courthouse took place as early as 18 December (Beinin 2016: 102). In short, by day two or three of the uprising, an embryonic revolutionary network had already been formed. It comprised the lower and unproductive classes, radical white-collar workers and middle-class lawyers. In political terms, it only received the unmediated backing of the PCOT, whilst other unrecognized political parties, from the Maoist Al Watad to the liberal Congrès pour la République (CPR – Congress for the Republic), up to the Nasserist Union Movement, joined in during the following days (Durac 2015: 246). Geographically, the uprising remained restricted to Sidi Bouzid and its neighbouring villages. A revolt was already in the works, but the formation of an actual, broad revolutionary convergence was yet to come.

Eleven days after the removal of Ben Ali, Egypt was preparing to celebrate its Police Day, a national holiday introduced only the year before. Trying to capitalize on the supposedly widespread anti-police feeling, opposition forces had already called for protests – attracting, however, only a few hundred protesters – on 25 January 2010. The following year, despite what had happened in Tunisia, expectations were not much higher. Yet history had something radically different in store.

On 25 January 2011, whilst small-to-medium-sized crowds gathered in many Egyptian cities, some 15,000 to 20,000 people marched to Tahrir Square in central Cairo, marking the beginning of the now-famous 18 days that ultimately led to the fall of Mubarak. Many accounts have highlighted the unplanned and leaderless character of the protests. To a large extent, it could not have been different. After all, the entrance of the masses into the political arena cannot be summoned at will, not even by the best-organized socialist party, trade union or religious guild. Despite this, the meticulous way in which the Egyptian uprising was prepared and consciously planned is unmistakable. As underlined by Brecht De Smet (2016: 188), four main constituencies were crucial in this regard, constituting the backbone of the movement and taking part in protests from the very beginning.

The first one consisted of the youth of the Muslim Brotherhood, who joined the demonstrations, against the wishes of their organization. The latter decided instead to attend a rally at the Supreme Court, urging its members to avoid any kind of participation in street demonstrations. The second broad component was the moderate field, composed of liberals and progressive Islamists who supported Mohamed ElBaradei's campaign – through the launching of the National Association for Change (NAC) in the first months of 2010 – as soon as the Nobel Peace Prize laureate indicated his interest in running as an independent candidate in the 2011 presidential elections. The third group was made up of leftist groups and organizations that supported workers and their struggles. Among the latter, the two most popular NGOs were the Centre for Trade Union and Workers' Services (CTUWS) and the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (ECESR), whilst the leftist groups included both traditional parties such as the Egyptian Communist Party (ECP) and new Trotskyist forces such as the Revolutionary

Socialists (RS) and the Socialist Renewal Current (SRC). The fourth element was represented by members of loosely organized political groups, such as Kefaya (Enough), Tadamon (Solidarity) and the April 6 Movement, based on horizontal principles and animated by young activists with heterogeneous political backgrounds.

The Egyptian revolutionary uprising was initially the product of an implicit convergence between, on the one hand, these constituencies – overwhelmingly middle class in social composition – and, on the other, informal and precarious workers, street vendors and the unemployed. The former were concentrated in the main squares and central locations, whilst the latter mainly acted locally in their poor urban districts (Ketchley 2017: 37–41). It was the framework provided by the middle classes that transformed the masses' deep socioeconomic grievances into political activism. Yet, without the latter, the former would have been as powerless as the year before. Due to its national, even if overwhelmingly urban, character, the Egyptian uprising posited an actual challenge to the regime from the moment of its emergence. However, to be successful, it had to expand in social and political terms.

The roots of two different revolutionary movements

In their last stages, the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings were animated by two revolutionary movements that were rather similar – although not identical – from a social and political point of view. As shown in the previous section, however, their starting points were significantly different. On the one hand, this was the product of the unique and specific way in which each uprising flared up. On the other, it is important to consider the different structures of the authoritarian regimes and the diverse protest movements that emerged in the two countries in the 2000s.

The ultimate roots of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions can be found in the repeated inability of the two countries to become autonomous centres of capitalist accumulation (Achcar 2013: 53–96). If this represents a constant trait, the changing international environment and different solutions proposed by the two states determined significant changes in the composition of the ruling coalition, in its capacity to attract subaltern classes, and in the institutional setting.

Colonial dominations had transformed the two countries into commodity-extracting hinterlands and importers of manufactured consumer goods, blocking industrial development and preventing the emergence of an indigenous bourgeoisie. State capitalism was therefore the sole available solution after independence. Whilst the 'socialist' experiment was stronger in Egypt than in Tunisia, both countries failed to make the qualitative shift from import-substituting industrialization (ISI) to export-oriented economies in the short period during which ISI policies can be supported before ending up in huge state deficits (De Smet 2016: 158–162). The demise of the Keynesian regime of capitalist accumulation at the global level in the late 1960s, the shattering of the myth of 'Arab socialism' after the Egyptian defeat in the 1967 war against Israel and the formation of a capitalist class in those sectors not nationalized – trade, finance and small-scale activities – pushed towards economic liberalization in the 1970s (Achcar 2013: 53; Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 46). It was only the shocking impact of mass revolts in Egypt and Tunisia, in 1977 and 1978, respectively, and the availability of external revenues

that prompted the postponement of liberalization and privatization programmes. This phase was, however, short-lived. The collapse of hydrocarbon prices in 1985–6 and the end of the Cold War meant that the two countries were forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to save their economies from bankruptcy: neoliberal policies began in earnest (De Smet 2016: 172–176; Hanieh 2013: 47–73).

Such measures created a new ruling class, dismantled the remaining vestiges of post-independence populist coalitions through which lower classes were integrated, and transformed the relations of class forces within Tunisian and Egyptian society (Beinin 2016: 39–59; Hatab 2018: 588). In both countries, the emergence of a strict nexus between the presidency and rapacious tycoons determined that neoliberalism, on the one hand, and cronyism and sultanism, on the other, went hand in hand. This, in turn, considerably weakened the institutional mechanisms through which moderate forces could be co-opted and upward social mobility guaranteed. The two ruling parties lost their function as transmission belts, being transformed into empty shells full of businessmen and technocrats. Likewise, repression of any form of dissent escalated significantly (Abdelrahman 2014: 16–20; Angrist 2013: 550–554). As a result, the state and large sectors of the middle class found themselves on a collision course, whilst the concentration of wealth in a few hands, rural dispossessions and savage attacks on workers' rights triggered social and political protests throughout the 2000s (Hatab 2018: 589).

Before turning to these, it has to be underlined that the two authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt were similar, but not identical. The power of the Egyptian military, despite its decreasing political influence, was not matched in any way by the traditionally small Tunisian army, which was not involved in political matters. Ben Ali's regime was also more sultanistic than Mubarak's, and the private textile sector in Tunisia worked in a more dependent position in relation to European firms than state-owned factories did in Egypt. Finally, whereas Ennahda was slightly more than a party in exile, the Muslim Brotherhood, although severely repressed, remained by far the most important political organization in Egypt. As will be shown, these aspects played a role in the peculiar emergence of protest movements in the 2000s as well as during the uprisings.

Although embryonic collaborations between Nasserists and leftists inside Cairo and Ain Shams Universities had already taken place in the late 1990s, it was the outbreak of the second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 and the subsequent US-led military intervention in Iraq in January 2003 that determined the emergence of a vital and heterogeneous pro-democracy movement in Egypt (Abdelrahman 2014: 92–116). In particular, the sudden reappearance of the masses after decades of apathy, also attested to by the short-lived but prefigurative occupation of Tahrir Square in March 2003, favoured a profound renewal of the opposition environment, stimulating daily cooperation among hostile political tendencies. It was precisely such a collaboration among Nasserists, liberals, Marxists and Islamists that led to the establishment of Kefaya and of its 'sister' organizations in the following years. These newly created groups were horizontal and anti-hierarchical forces that mainly focused on procedural and institutional issues. Although they failed to attract the lower sectors, being narrow networks of

urban middle-class groups – such as professionals, intellectuals and students – their role was crucial in laying the foundations for the emergence of a cross-ideological cooperation and in creating a 'spill-over' effect from one cycle of protest to another.

In Tunisia, on the contrary, the establishment of a pro-democracy movement was not an effect of the politicization of new groups or actors, but mainly the coming together of political militants who had already animated the Tunisian political scene for years, if not decades. After the establishment of the 18 October Coalition on the heels of the World Summit on the Information Society in late 2005, closer collaboration among the secular opposition – such as the PCOT, the Nasserists and human rights groups – the Islamist Ennahda, and two liberal-oriented and genuine opposition parties – the CPR and the Parti Démocratique Progressiste (PDP – Progressive Democratic Party) – took place (Angrist 2013: 556–558). Despite this, the critical mass that the pro-democracy movement reached in Tunisia was never enough to stage street demonstrations. Such a weakness of the pro-democracy movement was, nevertheless, compensated for by the mobilizations of professional groups throughout the 2000s. Although judges and journalists staged sit-ins and organized acts of civil disobedience, lawyers became the most vocal anti-regime profession, challenging Ben Ali's authoritarianism several times. It was within their ranks, moreover, that some of the most advanced collaborations between Islamist and secularist forces were proposed and realized, fostering a climate of reciprocal respect and trust (Gobe 2010: 340–342). In Egypt, too, several professional groups – first and foremost, the judges in the aftermath of the 2005 parliamentary elections – clashed with the regime. The degree of politicization reached by Tunisian lawyers was, however, simply incomparable to any other experience.

Significant differences between the Tunisian and Egyptian protest movements can also be found in the 'economic' mobilizations. In reaction to the neoliberal policies promoted by Mubarak's regime, the longest and strongest wave of worker protest since the late 1940s developed in Egypt in the 2000s (Beinin 2016: 65–70). Such an extraordinary mobilization was largely the product of textile workers concentrated in gigantic state-owned enterprises and – because the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was a completely empty shell – mobilized through the creation of ad hoc strike committees. This unleashed contradictory tendencies. Escaping the control of the union, Egyptian workers staged more radical protests in the workplaces than the Tunisians did. Lacking the possibility of using the logistical support of a national-based structure, however, workers did not have a chance to break the ETUF's hierarchy, being forced therefore to act as mere individuals or through the established strike committees in the course of the uprising. After the appointment of Ahmed Nazif's 'government of businessmen' in 2004, strikes nearly doubled, reaching 200 per year (Beinin 2016: 66). A further salvo for workers' protests was fired by the great strike at the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006, which reverberated through the whole textile sector in the Nile Delta, playing a 'transformative role' in workers' actions (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 101). Between 2007 and 2010, there was an average of more than 500 labour agitations per year, no longer affecting solely the public sector, but private companies as well (Beinin 2016: 66). In addition, a mobilization of traditionally pro-regime clerical workers over a salary disparity

within their ranks led to the formation and subsequent recognition of the first independent trade union in the country's republican history, on the eve of the outbreak of the uprising.

In Tunisia as well, workers became more active in the course of the 2000s. The number of strikes, of which 52–70% of the total were concentrated in manufacturing, increased from a yearly average of fewer than 300 episodes between 1996 and 1999 to about 380 from 2000 and 2003, and up to more than 400 per year during the period 2004–7. Even more significantly, the number of workers involved in strikes skyrocketed, rising from an average of about 30,000 people per year in 1996–9 to slightly fewer than 40,000 in 2000–3, then up to an astonishing 84,300 in 2004–7. As briefly underlined by Joel Beinin (2016: 72), 'the per capita number of strikes was far greater in Tunisia than in Egypt'. Nevertheless, most of the strikes were short-lived in Tunisia, lasting only a day or two, because the UGTT leadership authorized them to offer a safety valve to the mounting pressure from below and thus they almost never escalated into a full confrontation between workers and the state. In Tunisia, the event that marked a 'before' and 'after' in the process of 'accumulation of social struggles' was not an industrial dispute, but rather the six-month-long popular revolt in the Gafsa basin in January 2008 (Yousfi 2015: 58). This was the product of an unusual and implicit convergence in one of the most disadvantaged Tunisian regions between precarious workers and the unemployed, on the one hand, and radical UGTT junior cadres in the public administration, especially in the educational sector, on the other. The trigger for the protests was the fraudulent recruitment in the local phosphate company and the occupation, in reaction to this, of the UGTT offices in the small mining town of Redeyef launched by four UDC members (Beinin 2016: 86). Whilst Tunis-based intellectuals, mainstream opposition parties and NGOs did not support the protests, they were immediately backed by the PCOT and lawyers (Chouikha and Geisser 2010: 416). In short, in the course of the Gafsa revolt, the architecture of the 2010–11 revolutionary movement emerged for the first time.

A prefiguration of what would be the internal composition of the anti-regime protest movement in the early stages of the uprising also became clear in Egypt in the pre-2011 period. After Kefaya lost momentum and the radical character of the labour movement became visible, mainly thanks to the great strike in Mahalla al-Kubra in December 2006, an array of Cairo-based activists established Tadamon, through which Marxists from the RS, liberals from the Ghad Party, and Islamists from the Labour Party supported workers' struggles. The convergence between urban middle-class groups and newborn strike committees in the workplaces led to an attempt to organize the first national strike in the textile sector since Nasser's coup. The effort to bring together Cairo-based liberal-oriented political groups and the most politicized part of the labour movement was a fiasco. On 6 April 2008, suffocated by a relentless operation of repression that had already been put in place in the previous days by the regime, Egyptian textile workers did not strike. However, the organizational support provided by the pro-democracy movement allowed informal workers, the unemployed and students to express their frustration. Mahalla al-Kubra was rocked by two days of furious confrontation between demonstrators and security forces. It might sound paradoxical, but it was in the city that symbolized industrial and textile workers in Egypt that an uncommon

convergence between middle-class political networks and urban lumpenproletariat took form. This would be the engine of the 2011 uprising.

The geographical diffusion and political enlargement of the uprisings

In the course of the first week of the Tunisian uprising, the protests, mainly thanks to the role played by the local sections of the UGTT, spread to other small towns and villages in the governorate of Sidi Bouzid (Beinin 2016: 101). On 27 December, after a first gathering had already been organized by an opposition minority within the UGTT two days before, the protest movement reached Tunis in earnest (Feltrin 2018: 17).

Under increasing pressure from below, the UGTT regional section of the capital called a sit-in that was attended by 1,000 people and attracted furious reaction from the UGTT leadership (Yousfi 2015: 70). In a similar fashion, lawyers became increasingly active, suffering repression and arrests. In reaction to the state's behaviour, the Bar Association called for nationwide demonstrations on 31 December. The planned protests took place in cities such as Tunis, Sousse, Monastir, Jendouba and Gafsa, and were once again suppressed severely by the security forces (Zemni 2013: 131). In an upward spiral of confrontation, the Bar Association announced a general strike on 6 January, which was supported by a variously estimated 50–95% of Tunisia's 8,000 or so lawyers, whereas the day before, the National Federation of Secondary School Teachers had gone on strike for 20 minutes in the schools in support of the ongoing agitations (Angrist 2013: 560).

By the end of the second week of protests, whilst the social composition of the revolutionary network was still the same, the movement had spread geographically to nearly the whole country. To be more precise, the beating heart of the protest movement became the region of Kasserine, with as many as 50 protesters killed between 8 and 10 January (Beinin 2016: 103). The inability of the security forces to restore order meant that the regime had to rely on the armed forces. This was the moment when, after about three weeks, a revolt had become a revolutionary uprising.

In Egypt, on the contrary, such a development was much quicker. On 25 January, massive marches took place in Alexandria, Aswan, Beni Suef, Mahalla al-Kubra and Mansura, whilst violent clashes erupted between security forces and demonstrators in Suez, resulting in three young men being killed. Even more importantly, Tahrir Square, in downtown Cairo, was occupied by anti-regime protesters for a few hours, before being cleared by the regime's forces in the late evening. The peculiar character of the Egyptian uprising – that is, urban demonstrations staged simultaneously in all main cities of the country – meant that it had a national character by default since its eruption. Protests, in this regard, did not have to travel elsewhere or spread geographically to pose a serious threat to the regime. At the same time, the impressive exhibition of popular will was not enough to affect the architecture of the state's power, which remained intact (De Smet 2016: 190).

For two long days, the fire of the uprising was kept alive only in Suez, where petrol bombs were thrown at several governmental buildings and shipyard workers went on strike. Meanwhile, protest groups and opposition forces were working hard to prepare a 'Day of Rage', called on 28 January. This time the four main constituencies that had planned protests on Police Day were joined by other political actors. After three days of revolt, therefore, a cross-ideological convergence had

already taken place. By far the most important move was the Muslim Brotherhood's decision to be an active participant in the protests. Early estimations of some 100,000 Muslim Brothers in the streets of Cairo alone were evidently exaggerations, but the arrival of the Muslim Brotherhood's members in organized and disciplined blocs made, beyond any reasonable doubt, a great difference in the street battles (Marfleet 2016: 78). Other opposition parties – the radical Nasserist Karama (Dignity) Party founded and led by Hamdeen Sabbahi, the Islamist Labour Party and the liberal Ghad Party – joined in, whereas Mohammed ElBaradei, the champion of liberalism in the country, returned to Egypt to be part of the protest (Durac 2015: 247).

Shortly after the end of the noon prayers, seemingly endless processions of people materialized in every province of Egypt. Policemen tried to resist the crowds, but eventually – after having been out on the street for four consecutive days, and without food, water or munitions – they simply gave up and deserted. Sometime between 4 and 5 p.m. the police were physically defeated by protesters in Cairo (Ketchley 2017: 46). The military had to step in.

Rivers of ink have been poured into trying to understand the real intention of the military in Tunisia and Egypt. As far as this article is concerned, in both countries the actions of the armed forces remained ambiguous and certainly not supportive of the uprising for days. The military's intervention was 'defensive', aimed at protecting vital interests and buildings when no other state institution would have been able to do so (Nassif 2015: 80). In no way should this be considered an implicit, let alone explicit, form of protection for protesters, who were harassed and physically assaulted by the police forces whilst 'the military was sitting on the fence' in Tunisia (Brooks 2013: 215). In Egypt, even more famously, armed pro-Mubarak supporters attacked protesters gathered in downtown Cairo for hours in the so-called 'Battle of the Camel', without any kind of intervention by the nearby military (Ketchley 2017: 65–69).

For some days in Tunisia and for nearly two weeks in Egypt, an unusual scenario developed. Two revolutionary networks, which encompassed a broad spectrum of political currents and social classes, had gradually taken shape and fostered a systemic crisis. Yet none was able to resolve it. The pressure from below was too strong to be dealt with by the Ministry of the Interior alone, but not sufficiently powerful to tear down the regime. The military, in each country, gave the regime every opportunity to find a political solution to the stalemate. At the same time, dealing with such revolutionary convergences, it was unwilling – fearing rupture in its own ranks – to do the dirty job necessary to keep the autocrat in power. As time went by, however, the possibility of a 'genuine' overthrow of the regime, especially in Egypt, decreased. Had the two uprisings failed to attract other key social forces, it is likely that they would have languished for a while and then been smashed by the regime's reaction. In both countries, it was the entrance of the industrial labour movement into the storm of the revolt that tipped the balance of forces in favour of the challengers.

The last blow to Ben Ali's and Mubarak's regimes

The last crucial step in both uprisings was their enlargement in social terms. Surprisingly or not, until a few days before the fall of the two regimes, the

revolutionary networks had been unable to attract new constituencies beyond their founding nucleus. In particular, the industrial proletariat remained largely beyond the front lines. Eventually, workers' disruptive action was unleashed by two apparently influential decisions.

On 10 January, the protests reached the outskirts of Tunis, whilst the following day poor neighbourhoods in the capital, such as Zahrouni and Sidi Hessein, joined the movement (Ayeb 2011: 474). It was in such a context that the gathering of the National Administrative Committee of the UGTT took place. The union, after the regime's violent repression of the protests in Kasserine, was forced to embrace a much more adversarial stance towards Ben Ali. The UGTT's decision was an attempt to balance the increasingly incompatible and centrifugal forces within its organization: on one side, militant local cells, which desired a national general strike; on the other, the central bureau, which remained loyal to the regime. The chosen compromise was to recognize the right of local and regional UGTT sections to organize peaceful protests and strikes (Yousfi 2015: 73). It would become an unexpected and crucial springboard for the revolutionary movement.

On 12 January, three regional sections (Kairouan, Sfax and Tozeur) of the UGTT called for a general strike throughout their territories. Arguably, this was the key turning point in the success of the uprising. In particular, what happened in Sfax – the governorate with the highest concentration of manufacturing in the country – became an extraordinary trigger for Ben Ali's fall. Not only did workers behave as a collective body rather than as atomized individuals, striking and paralysing the economic life of the region, but middle-class groups besides lawyers and local businessmen, who were fed up with their marginalization in comparison to the capitalists of Sousse and Monastir, also joined in (Zemni 2013: 131). In short, a cross-class revolutionary convergence among nearly all sectors of society took real and concrete form in this geographical context for the first time.

The following day, demonstrations in Kasserine, Monastir and Sousse repeated the same slogans against the regime chanted in Sfax, whilst people from both working-class and middle-class neighbourhoods all converged on the Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis (Ayeb 2011: 475). On 14 January, a moderate two-hour regional strike in Greater Tunis was called by the local UGTT. As planned, there was an initial gathering in the square dedicated to Mohamed Ali Hammi. However, radical developments followed immediately, and the expected moderate sit-in became a great and radical protest that spread throughout the central Avenue Habib Bourguiba. Workers, urban middle classes and the youth of peripheral and poor districts marched together using the slogan 'Ben Ali *dégage*'. By noon, the two-hour strike in Greater Tunis had united the whole country in its desire for change and the uprising 'had taken on an expansive cross-class character' (Brooks 2013: 217). Had General Rachid Ammar commanded his troops to restore order, he would have faced a mutiny (Nassif 2015: 78–79). By endangering the stability of the armed forces as an institution, the uprising was thus able to trigger a rupture in the oligarchy of power. In such a context, the neutrality of the armed forces no longer amounted to a passive position but became an indirect support for the protesters. By 4 p.m., Ben Ali and his family had already fled, in what was probably intended to be a temporary withdrawal, to Saudi Arabia.

On 6 February, state-owned enterprises were reopened in Egypt. They had been closed down for nearly two weeks – since 28 January – in an attempt to prevent the

revolutionary fervour from travelling from the squares to the workplaces. The decision to reopen public activities was a combination of the government's need to do so and an attempt to show that normalization was on the way. In sharp contrast to the regime's expectations, however, it would be one of the last acts of Mubarak's rule. The first strikes took place on 6 and 7 February. These were simply the initial signs of the coming seismic shift in the balance of power. By the end of the week, about 300,000 workers all around the country had been involved in collective action in one form or another (Alexander and Bassiouny 2014: 200). The traditional strongholds of the working class – from Suez to Mahalla, from Kafr al-Dawwar to Helwan – led the way. Steel and fertilizer workers in Suez immediately occupied their workplaces, whilst the vital activities of the Canal were disrupted by workers' agitations, including the open-ended strike proclaimed by four subsidiary companies.

This first wave was immediately followed by an even more radical and widespread one. Workers' protests reached textile plants in Mahalla al-Kubra and Kafr al-Dawwar, as well as steel and iron factories in Helwan. The petroleum sector was completely paralysed, whilst the strike called by the Cairo and Alexandria public transport workers made it difficult to get around the country's two main cities (Beinin 2016: 109). Medical doctors joined the fray too, staging sit-ins and protests in front of public hospitals. Even more significantly, military-run factories, which represent a part of the Egyptian economy that is crucial but complicated to assess, were in ferment as well. The fact that conscripts, who were used as manpower, and normal workers alike broke the strict discipline imposed by the military in its own economic complex was a clear sign that the established procedures and hierarchies were crumbling. In short, this tremendous wave of strikes and protests posed a serious threat to the existing order – first and foremost, by stopping the process of capital accumulation – and made it clear that a solution was needed (Holmes 2012: 406). The armed forces tried to force Mubarak to step down, but he refused. The popular rage escalated again and new demonstrations were called for the following day – that is, on 11 February. These developments made it clear to the armed forces that they had to act autonomously. Eventually, calculating the enormous costs and risks of suppressing the unrest, the military staged a 'soft coup' (De Smet 2016: 205). After nearly 30 years of uninterrupted power, Mubarak was through.

Conclusion

As soon as the two revolutionary networks were successful in ousting authoritarian leaders in Tunisia and Egypt, they immediately started to fracture. In the following months and years, several attempts to find new ways of collaboration among their various components were interwoven with increased tension and reciprocal distrust. This article has not dealt with the different trajectories followed by the two countries in the post-uprising period. Nor has it tackled the challenging issue of two potential social revolutions that were not actually such. Although some of the insights developed here might be helpful in this regard, the main goal of this article has been to combine structuralist studies and microfoundational accounts in order to better grasp the origins and dynamics of cross-class and cross-ideological revolutionary movements in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as contribute to the development of the fourth generation of revolutionary theory. Three main aspects have been highlighted.

First, the authoritarian contexts in which the uprisings erupted took form gradually over the previous decades, when the recurrent incapacity of the two countries to emerge as autonomous centres of capitalist accumulation combined with neoliberal policies, sanctioning the sidelining of the middle and lower classes. Although the overall trajectory of the authoritarian domination was rather similar in Tunisia and Egypt, the partially different composition of the ruling coalitions, as well as the dissimilar strength of Islamists and organized labour movements determined two diverse protest movements in the 2000s.

Second, the expansive social and political character of the Tunisian and Egyptian upheavals was an incremental and additive process that developed in the course of the uprisings themselves. It was precisely the capacity of the revolutionary movements to expand far beyond their initial constituencies that allowed them to defeat the two long-standing autocrats. Due to the changing nature of revolutionary processes, power relations are constantly reshaped by the battleground between anti-regime forces and loyalists, requiring that scholars do not judge political and institutional actors' behaviour definitively against a framework of fixed and stable features. It does not matter, for instance, whether the army did or did not have its own agenda in Egypt. Due to the changing picture that the increasingly broad character of the revolutionary uprising gradually triggered, the Egyptian armed forces were pushed step by step towards what would have been seen as the least likely decision only 18 days before. In the storm of an uprising, it is the role of the masses, their unbearable pressure on the state's structure and the strength of the uprising itself that force reluctant and even conservative groups – as shown by the decision of the Muslim Brotherhood to join the protests on 28 January – or largely co-opted organizations like the UGTT, to embrace radical and involuntarily revolutionary stances.

That leads to the third and final element underscored in the article. Even if revolutionary networks in Tunisia and Egypt resembled one another rather closely in the last days of the uprisings, they were not identical. In Tunisia, marginalized capitalists eventually took advantage of the favourable situation to engage in collective action. In contrast, the business elite in Egypt remained silent until Mubarak's removal (Holmes 2012: 393–396). In a similar vein, the role of the various political groups and social forces was also significantly different in the two countries. Whilst the UGTT was the quintessential organizer of the protests in Tunisia, middle-class groups and networks of resistance led the way in Egypt. In addition, the Muslim Brotherhood was much more crucial than Ennahda in the course of the uprising. In both countries, however, it was the late entrance of the workers' movement that proved decisive, crippling the countries' economies and unleashing a systemic crisis. Fearing the unintended consequences that a brutal repression might have brought about, the armed forces sacrificed the ageing dictators to protect their institutions as well as the systems. Two long-standing autocrats were therefore defeated, whilst the path towards a profound restructuring of social and class relations remained long and arduous.

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Notes

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