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Article:

Tansel, C.B. orcid.org/0000-0001-7586-459X (2018) *Passive revolutions and the dynamics of social change in the peripheries*. *Review of African Political Economy*, 45 (155). pp. 115-124. ISSN 0305-6244

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03056244.2017.1391767>

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Review of African Political Economy on 30/11/2017, available online:
<http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/03056244.2017.1391767>

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DEBATE

PASSIVE REVOLUTIONS AND THE DYNAMICS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN THE PERIPHERIES

CEMAL BURAK TANSEL¹

REVIEW OF AFRICAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

DOI: 10.1080/03056244.2017.1391767

SUMMARY Tansel's contribution to the debate dissects the concept of passive revolution and highlights the significance of understanding passive revolutions as concrete historical episodes of mobilisation and state formation.

¹ Corresponding author: c.b.tansel@sheffield.ac.uk | orcid.org/0000-0001-7586-459X
Department of Politics, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK.

My contribution to this debate will focus on three interlinked fault lines that threaten to destabilise De Smet's otherwise impressive exegesis on Gramsci and the historical materialist analytical tools he utilises to interpret social and political change. Accordingly, the following review is thematically structured around (I) De Smet's conceptualisation of passive revolutions, (II) his engagement with Marx's historical method and the question of Eurocentrism, and finally (III) an excursus into the case of the late Ottoman/Turkish state formation which I will briefly unpack to highlight a number of tensions in De Smet's theoretical framework and empirical analysis.

CLASSIFYING AND DEPLOYING PASSIVE REVOLUTIONS

Gramsci on Tahrir is positioned as a contribution 'to the field of Gramsci studies and especially to the discussion of his [Gramsci's] notion of Caesarism'. De Smet underlines that the book is concerned directly with 'deploy[ing]' Gramsci's concepts to help us understand and explain contemporary issues (3).² Such an analytical strategy is strongly aligned with Gramsci's own *modus operandi* which is marked by an explicit adherence to *absolute historicism*, i.e., an approach to 'locating ideas both in and beyond their context' (Morton 2007a, 17). De Smet, thus, closely follows Gramsci's own approach to historical analysis by retracing and reconstructing concepts designed in/influenced by specific historical conjunctures. While the book presents Caesarism as the main concept at the heart of this reconstruction, I would argue that Caesarism is elevated to this primary position only because the concept of passive revolution remains underdeveloped in De Smet's framework. This drawback then gives birth to De Smet's efforts to fill subsequent lacunae with a rather 'over-extended' conception of Caesarism (cf. Callinicos 2010, 492).

In terms of the structure of the argument, the book's main thrust into the labyrinthine applications of Gramsci's concepts revolves around the Italian communist's arguably most perplexing device: passive revolution. De Smet's reconstruction of the conceptual arsenal offered by Gramsci (often via Marx, Engels and Lenin) – inter alia hegemony, Caesarism, Bonapartism and wars of position and movement – rests on a particular conception of passive revolution as 'a criterion of interpretation' (85; Gramsci 1971, 114, Q15\$62). Given the widespread adoption and appropriation of the concept in the recent critical literature on the Middle East, it is not surprising that De Smet recognises the chameleon-like characteristics of the term and diligently retraces the multiplex ways in which it is deployed in Gramsci's writings.³ De Smet wants us to consider passive revolution not as a 'thing', but as a historical 'theme' and a 'political programme' (68–69). Rejecting a monolithic projection of the term as a 'model' or 'type' of modernisation, he contends that passive revolution should be interpreted as a 'methodological searchlight' that 'highlights the agency and agility of the dominant groups in the process of the class struggle' (70, 68–69). According to De Smet, the failure to do so results in emptying the concept of its analytical value:

² Unless otherwise noted, all in-text citations refer to De Smet (2016).

³ The heterogeneous and often contradictory applications of the concept surface in the analyses of wide-ranging processes from the development of Political Islam to the adoption of neoliberal reforms (Butko 2004; Tuğal 2009, 2012; Munif 2013).

When used as a concept to discern a clearly delineated type of process, passive revolution tends to become an empty signifier, applicable to all cases of transition, elite-driven transformation, or reformism. If everything since the French Revolution can be categorized as a passive revolution, nothing is a passive revolution. (68)

De Smet is right to call for a consistent and tightly contextualised interpretation of the concept, the absence of which has created in different branches of the social sciences a bewildering spectrum of meanings and adaptations.⁴ The corollary of such a conceptual polysemy is the creation of a term that, to paraphrase Marx, *explains everything but teaches us nothing* (cf. Marx 1992, 323). I am thus largely on the same page with De Smet on the necessity of perceiving the concept as a 'criterion of interpretation'. Yet, unlike De Smet, I also recognise passive revolutions as *concrete historical episodes* of blocked revolutionary upheavals and class strategies that result in the constitution or reproduction of the capitalist mode of production. From the Mexican Revolution of 1910–11 to the 1908 Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire, the trajectory of capitalist state formation is riddled with historical moments that brought about concrete manifestations of passive revolutionary strategies, tendencies and outcomes that defined and redefined the constitution of capitalist social relations and the capitalist state. Just as De Smet refers to the 1848 revolutions, Paris Commune in 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1917 as harbingers of permanent revolution (70–71), the Mexican and Young Turk revolutions signal the embodiments of passive revolutionary dynamics. Analysing how these events – many of which were marked, at least in the first instance, by revolutionary ruptures and subaltern mobilisations – were 'displaced' (125, 137, 168) and paved the way for the constitution/reproduction of the emergent capitalist state forms is important not only for theoretical clarity and historical accuracy but also for illuminating contemporary political questions that confront progressive and/or anti-capitalist social movements and radical politics.

De Smet's rejection of passive revolution as a 'type' or 'model' of transition to/reproduction of capitalism is also discordant with Gramsci's own discussion. Gramsci marks the differences between the archetypal French model and the 'successive waves' of state formation in nineteenth-century Europe by claiming that the latter processes 'were made up of a combination of social struggles, interventions from above of the enlightened monarchy type, and national wars' (Gramsci 1971, 115, Q10II§61). The conceptualisation of these processes as 'passive revolutions' is captured in his speculative passage on the 'concept of passive revolution' where he considers whether the term 'applies not only to Italy but also to those countries that modernise the state through a series of reforms or national wars without undergoing a political revolution of a radical Jacobin-type' (Gramsci 1996, 232, Q4§57). His effort to link the politically and socio-spatially divergent examples of state formation in Europe leads him to advance passive revolutionary transitions as a 'model' of producing capitalist hegemony, and hence his question: 'Can this "model" for the creation of the modern states be repeated in other conditions?' (Gramsci 1971, 115, Q10II§61). As Adam Morton and Peter Thomas have highlighted, at this juncture, passive revolution comes to epitomise 'a logic of (a certain type) of modernization' (Thomas 2006, 73; Morton 2007b, 601).

⁴ Compare, for example, the widely differing applications of Gramscian concepts in Landy (2008), Beasley-Murray (2010) and Tuğal (2009). See also Morton (2012, 2013) and Buttigieg (2005) for discussions of interpretative differences and their consequences.

De Smet's insistence on perceiving the concept exclusively as a methodological tool thus blocks an appreciation of the 'specific class strategies and spatial practices that characterize capitalist society and how these have changed with the further development of capitalism' (Morton 2011, 243). Furthermore, it also distorts his empirical analysis to the extent that at least one of the key revolutionary moments he urges us to examine 'by deploying the criterion of passive revolution' (125) fails to meet the criteria he sets out for himself. By adopting Morton's call to conceive of the 'continuum of passive revolution' as 'concrete historical instances in which aspects of the social relations of capitalist development are either instituted and/or expanded' (Morton 2010, 316), De Smet accepts that such 'historical instances' have to establish or reproduce *capitalist* social relations (69). Yet De Smet's discussion of the 1919 revolution in Egypt culminates in a conclusion that unequivocally denies the manifestation of such an outcome:

Popular initiative from below was displaced not only by the reform from above of the British colonial state, but also by the conservative landlords who directed the nationalist movement. There was no Jacobin faction that pushed the movement to complete political emancipation: full national sovereignty, eradication of feudal relations, and a democratic republic. Instead of overthrowing and transforming the colonial historical bloc, the landowners merely renegotiated the relations of power to their advantage. (125)

De Smet further reiterates that the events in 1919 did little to strengthen or expand capitalist social relations in Egypt:

The failure of national capitalists to industrialize the economy, and the consolidation of the power of domestic commercial capitalists, large estate holders, the Palace, and foreign financial capital, revealed that Egypt in the first half of the twentieth century was not a social formation moving gradually and naturally towards 'full' capitalism, but an unstable combination of national capitalist and precapitalist forms subordinated to international monopoly capital. (131)

Consequently, while De Smet is right to suggest a passive revolutionary 'displacement' of revolutionary demands by imperialist forces and ruling classes, his refusal to recognise passive revolutionary 'models' of capitalist transition/reproduction leads him to miss how those acts of displacement did not – by De Smet's own admission – entrench the capitalist mode of production in Egypt.

The analyses of the subsequent episodes of revolution–restoration in Egypt are further troubled by an incomplete portrayal of passive revolution as De Smet concludes that '[t]he political trajectory of Egypt shows the nonsensicality of passive revolution as a specific, clearly delineated *type* of capitalist transition' (168, original emphasis). Yet he immediately qualifies this statement by arguing that

The 1919 revolution, the 1952 Free Officers' coup, and Sadat's Infitah are not cosmetic iterations of basically the same phenomenon. Instead what emerges is a cascade of *qualitatively different passive revolutions*, or, more correctly, a historical process for which the concept of passive revolution highlights the various forms in which the dynamic of permanent revolution is replaced by initiative from above. (168, emphasis added)

Curiously, De Smet does not seem to recognise that the 'type' or 'model' of passive revolution Gramsci invokes in his above-cited fourth and tenth notebooks corresponds precisely to such 'forms in which the dynamic of permanent revolution is replaced by initiative from above'. De Smet's insistence on understanding this 'type' or 'model' as a homogeneous and potentially instru-

mentalist class strategy to facilitate a ‘transition’ to capitalism prevents him from capturing the multiplicity of the forms with which such a transition can take place and be conceptualised as part of a common historical dynamic (i.e., passive revolution). Precisely because of this conundrum, De Smet resorts to Caesarism to fill in the gaps in his analysis and claims, for example, that ‘Caesarism appears as a necessary conceptual addition to passive revolution in order to understand the ambiguity and complexity of the Nasserist episode’ (169; see also Salem in this issue). There is no doubt that Caesarist interventions can complement passive revolutionary episodes;⁵ yet De Smet’s analysis essentially reduces passive revolution into a mere methodological criterion to analyse various forms of Caesarisms rather than positioning the latter as a ‘specific political form’ (Gramsci 1971, 215, Q13§23) that may or may not accompany passive revolutions (101).⁶

TAKING EUROCENTRISM (AND ITS MARXIST CRITICS) SERIOUSLY

Notwithstanding the above critique of De Smet’s conceptualisation of passive revolutions, *Gramsci on Tahrir* excels at constructing a thorough engagement with Gramsci’s corpus and the broader historical materialist canon on revolutions and social and political change. It is thus surprising to see that the book fails to establish a similar dialogue with the contemporary literature on Marxist historiography and the rich debates on universalism, Eurocentrism and post-colonial interventions. Preempting the charges of transposing concepts drawn from European history onto a potentially incompatible non-Western case, De Smet defends the universality of historical materialist method and reassures us that ‘a concern for Eurocentrism is misplaced’ (7). This guarantee, however, is repeatedly undermined throughout the text as the analysis lacks a constructive dialogue with *Marxist* critiques of Eurocentrism and reduces Marx’s own theory of history into a linear progression of modes of productions.

De Smet’s conception of the emergence and development of capitalism displays strong affinities with Robert Brenner’s social property relations approach (21). De Smet claims that ‘with the rise of capitalism and the forceful integration of different parts of the world into the emerging global market economy separate histories became *for the first time* a shared world history’ (7–8, emphasis added; also 111, 114). Resorting to what I would call a literal reading of the mode of production schema found in Marx’s Preface to *A contribution to the critique of political economy*, De Smet claims that, for Marx and Engels, this universalisation was a necessary stage as it created ‘an absolute material base for a new society’ i.e., the future communist society (111). While De Smet high-

⁵ See, for example, Cox (1983, 166); Gowan (2005, 12); Öncü (2003).

⁶ I vehemently reject Joel Beinin’s claim that De Smet’s work is ‘obscurantist’ or that it suffers from ‘over-theorization’. Yet I find myself agreeing with his claim that in De Smet’s analysis, Caesarism ‘[applies] to everything that has happened in Egypt since 1952’. See the exchanges in Beinin (2014) and De Smet (2014) where the latter argues that passive revolution should be understood as ‘a methodological device to investigate the contemporary and historical process’. Given the mediatory role of Trotsky’s deployment of Caesarism on De Smet’s analysis (cf. Trotsky 1972, 277), a brief discussion of the shortcomings of Trotsky’s own conceptualisation could have greatly clarified the scope and validity of the concept (see Bergman 1987, 94).

lights the inherent problems in the Preface formula,⁷ he does not adequately challenge or go beyond his conclusion that ‘Marx and Engels stressed the necessity of a capitalist and bourgeois “stage” in the world-historical transition towards communism’ (112).

I argue that De Smet overlooks the focal point of the recent Marxist critiques of Eurocentrism. The materialist critiques of Eurocentrism – a group in which I position my own work⁸ – do not articulate a normative critique today, nor do they challenge the key role of the West in constituting global capitalism. What the contemporary critique aims to demonstrate is the historical deficiencies of the argument that the universalisation of history concurred exclusively with the development of Western capitalism. Instead, the critique posits that the emergence and development of capitalism itself materialised within an existing global history, the interwoven connections of which underpinned both the mercantile networks and the precapitalist social and property relations that were absorbed or, to varying degrees, affected by industrial capitalism. Marxists should not, of course, forget that ‘[i]t is the universal commoditisation of labour power and the universalisation of wage labour that also defines the moment of emergence of the world market and globalisation, which is not to be conflated with the mere existence or extension of trade routes’ (Kaiwar 2014, 293). But this premise should not preclude the analysis of historical processes within which the building blocks of the capitalist mode of production existed in geographically and temporally distinct contexts.

Does this mean that Marxist critics of Eurocentrism are trying to have their non-Eurocentric Marxist cake and eat it too? One could suggest that historical materialism is inherently Eurocentric and any effort to confront this Eurocentrism would result in a considerable degree of separation from Marxist tenets (see, for example, Hobson 2011, 148). Yet this could only be a valid claim if we wholly ignore how Marx’s own corpus provides a wealth of evidence to formulate a non-Eurocentric yet universalist historical method. While De Smet’s reading of the Preface formula creates an immediate barrier to theorising non-Western/non-capitalist development – which De Smet accurately recognises – this does not mean that Marx advocated a strict ‘stagism’, i.e., the view that socio-economic development materialises as a linear succession of modes of organisation that all societies have to go through and experience in a similar, if not the same, manner. On the contrary, Marx’s treatment of the development of capitalism from his London Notebooks to Ethnological Notebooks is geared towards explaining the ‘multilinear character of historical development’ (Vitkin 1982, 63).⁹ While the Preface formula seems to suggest a unilinear stagism in which capitalism is perceived as a necessary predecessor of a future communist society, Marx clarified this claim as a historical exposition specific to the trajectory of Western Europe, not a general theoretical principle. Indicatively, in his exchange with Vera Zasulich, Marx quotes from *Capital* that ‘the metamorphosis of *feudal production* into *capital production*’ was engendered by ‘*the expropriation of the agricultural producer*’ and that ‘*all other countries of Western Europe* are undergoing

⁷ ‘The problem with this view was, first, that it cast the subaltern struggles of bygone ages into a tragically determinist light, as they were doomed to fail due to the absolute deficiency of their material base – which was only discovered in the age of capitalism’ (111).

⁸ Inter alia, Anderson (2010); Brown (2010); Lindner (2010); Nişancıoğlu (2013). See Tansel (2013, 2015a) for extensive discussions of the importance of articulating a Marxist critique of Eurocentrism.

⁹ See Marx (1972), Pradella (2015, 92–122), and Tansel (2015a, 91–93).

the same process'; yet he quickly underscores that he 'expressly *limited* this "historical inevitability" to the "*countries of Western Europe*" (1989a; 1989b, 360; 1989c, 370; 1976, 876, original emphasis). Consequently, in contrast to De Smet's characterisation of modes of productions as abstractions that embody 'the universal and static character[s]' of socio-economic systems (17), Marx's theory of history perceives such systems as inherently dynamic ensembles that are not predestined to follow each other in a sequential manner. The transition in the Ottoman Empire and early Republican Turkey represents this messiness and problematises De Smet's conception of capitalist development.

DIAGNOSING THE PERIPHERIES WITH PASSIVE REVOLUTIONS

In the final part of this review, I would like bring into focus another important state formation case in the Middle East, the parallel development of the capitalist state in Turkey. I should preface the following comments with the proviso that I do not aim to overemphasise De Smet's brief comments on the Turkish case. The book's main focus is ultimately Egypt and De Smet only references Turkey in several points to highlight the comparative utility of his concepts. Still, I would argue that these brief allusions heighten the tensions in De Smet's analysis rather than demonstrating the applicability and validity of his main arguments. As such, I highlight the problematic insertion of Turkey as a comparative case not because it detracts from his discussion on Egypt but precisely because it throws into sharp relief the questions about passive revolution and Eurocentrism that the book struggles to answer.

The tension between De Smet's reading of passive revolutions and his prioritisation of Caesarism I outlined in the first section manifests once again in his brief discussion of the Turkish trajectory. While, in an earlier discussion, De Smet convincingly deconstructs Neil Davidson's reassertion of the *bourgeois* character of 'bourgeois revolutions' (76, 82), he curiously goes on to adopt Davidson's problematic historical categorisation regarding the position of non-Western states in the 'uneven and combined' expansion of capitalism. Echoing the above-discussed stagism, De Smet claims that nineteenth-century European transformations turned 'the fragmented history of the world' into 'world history' (114), yet countries such as Russia and the Ottoman Empire, who remained outside the European epicentre of world revolution, were 'threatened by Western military successes [and] engaged in a limited industrialization from above' (116–117; see Davidson 2009, 14). This dynamic, to De Smet, suggests that those countries witnessed a distorted modernisation as – echoing Trotsky – he claims that 'sometimes more advanced forms were debased when they were embedded in a backward context, which paradoxically led to a strengthening of these backwards conditions instead of revolutionising them' (116–117). The corollary of these twisting paths of capitalist accommodation is the emergence of variegated trajectories of social and political change in the region. Building on his adoption of Davidson's account, De Smet offers the following account in an effort to demonstrate the multiplicity of passages to the capitalist statehood in the Middle East:

Developments in Turkey and Iran presented other trajectories. Although these nations were never formally colonized, they were dominated by foreign interests, and their modernization efforts were blocked, particularly as a result of the struggle for power between Britain and Russia. The Young Turks [*sic*] led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) turned the crisis and collapse of the Ottoman Empire into an op-

portunity to establish a modern nation, renegotiating the relation between national capital and imperialism. Similarly to the Russian case, the Young Turks [*sic*] were able to push back imperialism by militarily defeating the Western-supported Sultanate. The Kemalist transformation from above fulfilled all the 'historical tasks' of the bourgeois revolution, but in a Bonapartist way, without a bourgeoisie leading a popular revolt from above. (136)

De Smet continues his rebuttal of the passive revolutionary 'model' of transition by claiming that the historical experience of Japan, Russia, Turkey and Iran 'illustrate that a conceptualization of passive revolution as a clearly delineated type of modernization – instead of an interpretative criterion – runs into contradictions' (137). I would speculate that a passive revolutionary reading of such 'models' would not, in fact, face any contradictions if De Smet had deployed a more accurate historical perspective and refrained from equalising passive revolutionary 'types' of transition with a single, undifferentiated class strategy. Indeed, De Smet's reduction of the Ottoman trajectory into a narrative of 'defensive modernisation' obscures precisely the type of molecular changes in social relations that a Marxist account should aim to uncover (Tansel 2015a, 89–91).¹⁰ As De Smet is unable to detect the social and political changes in the Ottoman social formation, he ignores the key revolutionary period – the Revolution of 1908 – that presents, arguably, one of the most pertinent examples of a passive revolutionary 'model' of capitalist state formation.¹¹

Contravening the depictions of a conventional 'revolution from above', the Revolution of 1908 marked an immense upsurge in grassroots mobilisation and the organisation of collectives that represented the different, and often competing, interests of the various classes and communities within the empire. These groups – ranging from women's collectives and striking workers to non-Muslim communities – all perceived the revolutionary interval as a window of opportunity to reassert their claims or seek greater rights. While their inability to coalesce into organisations/movements with defined goals and effective strategies that could effect long-term social change is all too clear, this failure should not lead to their outright dismissal on the fact that they were not explicitly clad in the mantles of established ideologies; e.g., that they did not espouse 'socialist consciousness' (Tunçay 1978, 31). Keeping in mind Gramsci's observation that '[t]he history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic' (Gramsci 1971, 54–55, Q25§2), a more appropriate lens with which to perceive these mobilisations is to position them as 'spontaneous movements born of a revolutionary situation, of an intensification of the struggle and of an intense concentration of working-class energy' (Luxemburg quoted in Frölich 1940, 167).

De Smet's account – and the broader canon in which he positions his account – can capture neither the 'forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny' (Trotsky 2008, XV) in 1908 nor the fact that Committee of Union and Progress fulfilled a Jacobin function by politically and militarily organising opposition against the state. The omission of this period then forces De Smet to shift the revolutionary dynamic to 1923, to the anti-imperialist struggle defined by the coalition of various resistance forces. It is, again, no surprise that De

¹⁰ In De Smet's account, Egypt's pre-colonial socio-economic trajectory is also strikingly detached from the coeval Ottoman reforms in the nineteenth century – the analysis of which would have created productive points of entry to a discussion of capitalist development in the region.

¹¹ The following account is developed and discussed in detail in Tansel (2015b).

Smet paints the Kemalist regime as a ‘Bonapartist’ intervention rather than the political manifestation of a passive revolutionary dynamic that began more than a decade ago in the Ottoman Empire.

CONCLUSION

Gramsci on Tahrir demonstrates clearly the continuing importance and utility of reading and interpreting Gramsci for contemporary political praxis (Morton 2012). The three fault lines I have identified in this review are not issues that uniquely trouble De Smet’s otherwise admirable work, but the reverberations of a broader current of debate and reflection in the historical materialist canon. As such, De Smet’s carefully reconstructed exposition of revolutionary change would have been all the more remarkable had the analysis taken those debates into account and pushed the boundaries of its theoretical and historical assumptions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Brecht De Smet, Adam David Morton and Sara Salem for comments on an earlier draft.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR

CEMAL BURAK TANSEL is Lecturer in International Politics in the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield. His research focuses on the historical sociology of state formation and capitalist development in the Middle East and the political economy of development. He is the editor of *States of discipline: authoritarian neoliberalism and the contested reproduction of capitalist order* (Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017) and has published peer-reviewed research articles in the *European Journal of International Relations*, *Review of International Studies* and *Journal of International Relations and Development*.

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