Culture and society during revolutionary transformation: Rereading Matthew Arnold and Antonio Gramsci in the context of the Arab Spring’s cultural production

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Abstract
Viewing revolutionary political change as a multi-influential, multi-scaled, long-term process allows for the analysis of (in)visible transformations of identities and social realities. The main problem with this approach, however, is that it considers change only in terms of rupture, shift, and transition, or in terms of modernity versus tradition. While many studies focus on the dynamics and indicators of change, they have not adequately considered the role of culture in forming the basis of revolution or in determining how it unfolds. This article couples the theoretical work on culture and society by two pioneering cultural critics, Matthew Arnold and Antonio Gramsci, to make sense of how Arab cultural production can be viewed as a motor for revolutionary change during the Arab Spring.

Keywords
Arab Spring, Matthew Arnold, culture and revolutionary transformation, culture and society, Antonio Gramsci

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In many ways, cultural context dictates the way revolutions develop, just as cultural production (art, music, etc.) reflects revolutionary sentiment and the wider context that help produce it. In his treatment of the Arab Spring, Asef Bayat (2013) indicates that daily concerns collectively encouraged people to hope for change and to take action by mobilizing on the streets. Thus, these social movements offer rich primary source material that can shed light on the role of culture in the why and how of revolution:

It is through their humor, satire, images, and novels that we can get a sense of the discontent of youth that will inevitably lead the next revolution…. The crowd re-articulates history as local, connected, and malleable to the will and desire of political subjects, as opposed to the will of a corrupt dictator. (Khalil, 2012: 63)

There are several scales of analysis that can be used to understand political and social change: individual, collective, daily, historical, local, and global. A comparison of these levels provides insight into how social narratives about the past are constructed. For instance, intellectuals during revolutionary periods reconstruct the past and redefine narratives about their present agency, just as a stable authoritarian regime can nurture fatalistic culturalist myths about the people’s destiny. Matthew Arnold (1822–88) and Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), whose individual endeavours triggered intellectual revolutions, produced theoretical models which, when combined, help to illuminate the causes of dissent and resistance to the established dictatorships in the recent Arab Spring.

The Arab uprisings of 2011 sparked unprecedented waves of change, upheaval, and overwhelming uncertainty about the future of the region. In many cases, the masses who took their grievances to the streets late in 2010 and early in 2011 still face the same challenges. This article explores the works of social critic Matthew Arnold and Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci to address the following questions: how have political transformations since 2011 impacted the wave of ‘Arab street’ creativity and the construction of a collective Arab identity? How have the recent political, socio-economic, and cultural upheavals affected the people’s relationship to intellectual and cultural production? And what are the processes that affect the shaping of a collective Arab ‘transcultural’ identity?

By ‘transcultural identity’, I refer to the extent to which citizens can see themselves in the ‘other’, beyond the divisions of national borders. In the context of Arab transcultural identity, one can ask, for example, what makes a peasant farmer in the suburbs of Egypt identify with an unemployed Tunisian graduate student protesting in the streets of Tunis? Or asked differently, what made the Tunisian masses protesting during the ‘Jasmine Revolution’ inspire the masses in Cairo to protest in Tahrir Square? Can one even imagine that a revolution in Egypt would have been sparked had there not been an uprising in Tunisia that preceded it? Intellectuals, education and agency, and culture lie at the core of the attempt to answer these questions.

This article argues that viewing the cultural products (art, music, etc.) of the Arab Spring in relation to parallel traditions and genres in Western cultural discourse illuminates the phenomenon of revolutionary cultural production, both past and present. Investigating the work of Matthew Arnold and Antonio Gramsci reveals the similarities between the historical, political, economic, and cultural contexts in which they produced
their work and the contemporary Arab world. The article does not use European theorists to justify an analysis of Arab cultural production; rather, it adopts an approach that denies this East–West binary wherever it emerges. Ultimately, this study attempts to shed light on the similarities between revolutionary social movements and their cultural production regardless of place and time. Finally, this research contributes to the dismantling of the East–West binary and the burden of representation by using the writings of Arnold and Gramsci to understand the Arab context, which can lead to the disorientation and fragmentation of underlying colonial trauma.

The revolutionary spirit that resonated through the slogan, ‘the people want the toppling of the regime’, meant more than merely bringing down a political regime, but rather – in Hamid Dabashi’s terms (2012: 15) – sought to dismantle the:

mode of knowledge production about ‘the Middle East,’ ‘North Africa,’ ‘the Arab and Muslim World,’ ‘The West and the rest,’ or any other categorical remnant of a colonial imagination (Orientalism) that still pre-empts the liberation of these societies in an open-ended dynamic.

Nader Siraj’s *Revolutionary Egypt and Its Youth’s Slogans* serves as an example of this effort to offer a new mode of understanding. It probes the symbolic tenor of political slogans in revolutionary conditions by linking the slogans to the visions of those pronouncing them. In the same vein, Rasha Said Aboushakra’s study *Arab Spring Youth Political Discourse* (2018) addresses modes of political expression among Arab youth in revolutionary contexts. Aboushakra’s investigation also demonstrates an attempt to identify the role of culture in moulding consciousness during periods of revolutionary upheaval.

During the Arab Spring, the people’s movement on the ground progressed at a faster pace than those in both Arab and Western intellectual and political circles could imagine. Therefore, the Arab cultural and literary scenes attempted to keep pace with the process of socio-political and cultural change. These lively attempts reflected the revolutionary movement and demonstrated the ways in which literary and cultural productions visualized and examined the significance of this upheaval. An example of such attempts is Ahmad Shirak’s *The Sociology of the Arab Spring*, which, through revisiting notions of democracy, stability, change, revolution, and uprising, offers an interpretive approach to the Arab Spring. The book investigates the role of Arab cultural and intellectual production, and the outpourings, mass gatherings, and resonating forms of expression and action. This approach involves an examination of the elements that contributed to the outbreak of the uprisings, such as despotism, digital revolution, and reawakening. Shirak explores new cultural tools or modes of expression, including graffiti, flash or video clip poems, and social media messages, along with the predominance of sarcasm as a means of deconstructing despotism and motivating the spirit of protest.

On the literary level, some works that tackled the (post)revolutionary scene include novels like Ahmad Sabry Aboul-Fotouh’s *Sayyid Al-Ahl’s Agenda* (2011), Mahmoud Ahmad Ali’s *Revolution of the Naked* (in Arabic, 2014), and Yasmine El-Rashidi’s *Chronicle of a Last Summer* (2016), which narrate how Egyptian youth dealt with the state’s repressive measures to distort political history, blur revolutionary memory, and suppress the cultural revolution. Another major artistic mode of expression that reflected the revolutionary spirit involved the emergence of numerous documentaries that attempted
to provide a realistic representation of the upheaval. These were especially important given that the revolutionary imagination was ahead of the literary/cultural imagination. Examples of documentaries include *Al Midan* (Noujaim, 2013), the *Tahrir 2011* trilogy (Ezzat et al., 2011), and *Arij – Scent of the Revolution* (Shafik, 2014), which registered the momentous events in the history of the Egyptian revolution and beyond.

Those cultural productions expressed Arab popular consciousness with respect to demands for agency and social, economic and political changes. The creative expressions underlining the uprisings index the multiple channels through which autonomy, agency, and self-representation have been mediated. While many Western-based studies focus on the dynamics and indicators of change, inadequate attention is paid to the role of culture in forming the basis of these uprisings or in determining how they unfold. This article couples the theoretical work on culture and society by two pioneering cultural critics, Matthew Arnold and Antonio Gramsci, to make sense of how Arab cultural production can be viewed as a motor for revolutionary change during the Arab Spring.

**From Arnold and Gramsci to the Arab Spring: the role of the intellectuals**

Poet and social critic Matthew Arnold and Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci are considered foundational thinkers in modern critical sociological theory. At first glance, the theoretical writings of these two intellectuals seem to have little in common, making them an odd combination for analysis of the Arab Spring. Contemporary Marxist analysis of Arnold’s work argues that his theory is founded on racist, imperialist, and bourgeois-hegemonic structures, while Gramsci’s work has become part of the socialist canon and a foundation for postcolonial studies (Caufield, 2016: 37). But a close comparison of their work reveals striking parallels in the theoretical concerns they expressed. Their shared interests reflect intriguing similarities between their positionalities and historical contexts. Surprising as it may seem, the ideas expressed by Gramsci the communist and the ‘pseudo-aristocratic’ Arnold (Martin Wiener, 1981: 10) share a common discourse: cultural criticism illuminating the motivations behind revolutionary social movements.

In Arab Spring states we have witnessed similar epistemological trends that emanate from particular social, political and economic conditions. In *Criticism and Ideology*, Terry Eagleton (2006: 104) discerns key similarities between the works of Arnold and Gramsci, noting that Gramsci shrewdly assimilated Arnold’s notion of the traditional intellectual into his own concept of the organic intellectual, which means that both theorists called for a revolutionary, classless and culturally enlightened egalitarian society. David Oswell (2006) also explores similarities between their theoretical aims and suggests that Arnold and Gramsci both advocated for an intellectual frontline to disseminate idealized culture, and this attests to the similarity between their contexts and that of the Arab Spring. Oswell (2006: 212) points out the striking similarity between the Gramscian ‘vanguard’ movement and Arnoldian ‘elite’ intellectuals, meaning that these frontline thinkers can pave the way for the masses to be influenced by either Arnold’s sweetness and light or Gramsci’s perfection. Richard Hoggart (1998: 314) highlights this shared Gramscian and Arnoldian advocacy for the development of ‘critical self-consciousness’
in the transmission of culture among the masses. He notes that both Arnold and Gramsci perceived societal decay in their own eras, each acknowledging that his was an interregnum during which the old order was dying while the new was ‘powerless to be born’ (Arnold as quoted in Machann, 1998: 32) or ‘cannot be born’ (Gramsci, 1971: 275).

This description is applicable to the scene in the Arab world from late 2010 to the present as public mainstream artists and intellectuals failed to represent ‘frontline’ thinkers, and a new generation of young intellectuals were born out of the that dying old order. Arab writers, especially young generation poets and rappers such as the Tunisian rapper Hamada Ben Amor, known as El Général, acted as catalysts for the uprisings in the Arab world. Here, El Général’s lyric ‘Rayes Leblad’ (Mr. President) is an example of the striking proliferation of artwork that has emerged in response to a historical moment to challenge and smash the old world of the authoritarian fathers. This rapper helped to raise consciousness and thereby propel political processes through activated culture:

Mister President!

I’m talking to you today

In my name and in the name of the entire enslaved nation!

In 2011 there are still people dying of starvation,

People who want to work for a living

But their demands still go unheard.1

In addition to Tunisia, the Syrian revolution was also inspired in part by a young generation of poets and artists. As per a song published on YouTube, the ‘Syrian longing for freedom’ is still chanted by Syrians, even though its creator Ibrahim Qashoush’s vocal cords were ripped out by Bashar al-Assad’s militias. Saadi Youssef’s poetry invokes a revolutionary social, political and religious discourse, entwining freedom songs chanted in Egypt’s Tahrir Square and later echoed in the Iraqi Tahrir Square (Sly, 2013).

In his ‘Tahrir Square Ode’, Saadi Youssef assumes the collective voice that seeks to transform the name ‘Iraq’ into a homeland. He combines language, where identity is constructed in the name of Iraq/a homeland, with the spatio-temporal realm (lived reality) where the homeland is still yoked to despotism. Interestingly, Youssef has always transcended local boundaries, blending transnational issues in his poems. In his ‘Downing Street Protest’, Youssef sang, ‘Were we to sit-in tonight / in Makka’ (Al-Ubaydi, 2014). It was also Saadi Youssef who subverted the American neo-Orientalist discourse that paved the way for the war on Iraq in his poem ‘God Save America’. Scathingly, he exposes American discourse of freedom and liberation by rhetorically claiming that the ‘neutron bomb is so smart that/It distinguishes between “identity (Self)” and the (Other)’ (Youssef, 2004). In its blended Arabic-English language, the poem both celebrates American culture and denounces the American invasion of Iraq, echoing Adonis’ ‘A grave for New York’ (1971) and Al-Bayati’s ‘Funeral mass for New York’ (1990).
Any attempt to comprehend the critical socio-cultural consciousness as manifested in the Arab Spring context would bring us back to the Gramscian/Arnoldian voice and the critical commonalities of both thinkers, especially in relation to counter-hegemonic discourse. Gramsci’s theoretical and critical concerns – his concern for education, his interest in culture as a means of promoting liberty, and his belief in the importance of class autonomy and agency – reflect a noticeable Arnoldian tinge; in his combination of cultural and social criticism, Gramsci can be likened to a 20th-century Arnold with a revolutionary neo-Marxist bent. Arnold, in *The Future of Liberalism* (1904), both disbelieved and disapproved of any class’s attempt to empower itself with the aid of other classes. He argued that a class should be self-dependent and produce its own speakers and intellectuals. Moreover, Arnold asserted that it is ‘the last left of our illusions’ to believe that a governing class would cater to the interests of other classes without power (Arnold, 1904: 141). Such concepts are echoed in Gramsci’s own thoughts on (counter) hegemony and how each class creates its own group of intellectuals in an attempt to become hegemonic.

Many of the commonalities in Arnold’s and Gramsci’s conceptual frameworks can be linked to the common societal anxieties of their respective historical contexts, Victorian England and early 20th-century Italy. The economic transformations and socio-political struggles of the time shaped these thinkers’ positionalities as social and cultural critics. Arnold was convinced that the defects of society and the decline of its standards concerned him directly, and he wanted criticism to play a social role in their remediation: ‘More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us’ (Arnold, 1865: 109). It is unclear whether he meant this as a statement in support of poetry as a substitute for religion in general or only as a substitute for dogmatic religion. Either way, Arnold suggested that poetry, even more than philosophy or religion, had the power to be an unshakable edifice in an age of instability. Recognizing that he himself – just like other poets and critics in general – was inescapably linked to his own historical and social context, Arnold suggested that literary criticism performed a vital social function. For Arnold, the critic was responsible for more than simply judging a work of art; he or she also had to educate and encourage the public to adopt his or her insight and understanding.

Literature has always been an estuary where social, political and cultural processes converge, and the locus where their future is imagined, especially during revolutionary moments in history. Yet it has always been contested whether a literature of revolution involves literary writings preceding, coinciding with, describing or ‘posting (following)’, or encompassing all three stages. In the latter sense, the literature of a revolution reflects the cyclical, not linear, development of revolution itself in a highly dynamic process that registers both the ups and downs of revolution, and that opens up unbounded imaginary horizons. Here, in the imaginary realm, revolution and literature intersect in being guided – à la Hannah Arendt – by the yearning for novelty as intertwined with the idea of freedom (1994 [1963]: 34). Literature of a revolution is that which instils awareness of reality and lays it bare, insofar as it disseminates an enlightened sense of the inevitability of change. And although creative literature transcends the restrictive boundaries of time and space, it springs from and/or inspires a particular human experience.

In the context of the Arab Spring, it is notable that the cultural and artistic scene witnessed a relatively surprising boom of production in most disciplines and acquired a
fresh approach to artistic creation and expression. The works of art multiplied, and new themes were explored shedding light on the hidden aspects of Arab societies, and thus history in past decades. The revolutions had finally eradicated taboos that had long troubled artists. Movies that depicted violations of human rights under previous regimes were screened openly and in movie theatres. Books such as Gilbert Naccache’s prison memoir Cristal, were sold in bookshops and easily accessed by readers. The new-found freedom functioned as fuel for artists who attempted to break free from all the restraints formerly imposed by the fallen regime.

Moreover, social media has been important in recent large-scale protests and demonstrations. Studying the relationships between individuals and their state, their communities, the public sphere, the police, and the economy can expose what allowed, triggered, and sustained these mobilizations. The different time frames at work in the aftermath of the uprisings include some reflections on inherited (neo)colonial patterns (in new forms). Finally, various clichés of temporality need challenging; labels such as ‘Arab spring/Islamic winter’, ‘leaderless and spontaneous mobilizations’, ‘the Arab street’, ‘Facebook revolution’, and ‘failed revolutions’ are problematic because of their colonial bearings and delimiting scope.

In recent research, there has been a fierce critique of how the root causes of the social and political movements of the so-called Arab Spring have been labelled ‘new’. Arguments for the centrality of new media and its use do not take into account ‘ecologies of the anti-authoritarian uprising – that is, the availabilities of different forms of communication to different actors involved in the revolutionary processes at different points in time’ (Rinke and Röder, 2011: 1274). In other words, revolutionary movements in the context of the Arab Spring are not simply explained by new media, despite the major role it played in shaping and triggering action. There is a need to study the Arab Spring in its wider historical context.

Similarly, ideological shifts during the same period are not ‘new’. Islamists, especially the Muslim Brotherhood and – to a lesser degree – the Salafis, were not suddenly changed by the revolution, but the specific context of socio-political transition that followed it lent prominence to post-Islamist ideological transformations even before the toppling of the dictators. With the Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, being driven into the forefront of the political scene, they were compelled to adopt – even if reluctantly – a more inclusive and tolerant approach towards other liberal/secular, or non-Islamic political actors, and showed their readiness to engage in a quite pluralist political environment. One might claim that Western researchers have been trying to pin down the changes that the Arab world has been experiencing over the past 15 years. They have done so by defining a specific and limited period of time and timeline for what they called the ‘Arab Spring’ as a way to keep control over the intelligibility and meaning of these changes. This ‘temporal Othering renders ambiguous processes intelligible, manageable, and ultimately securable under the rubric of democratization’ (Hom, 2016: 166). A longitudinal approach is recommended, with a great focus on the individuals’ multiple relationships to the revolutionary process and to the social and cultural scene.

If the revolution, anywhere and at any time, is primarily a process of cultural reform, then this would justify the presence of a systemic correlation between today’s Arab world with the time/place of Gramsci and Arnold. Gramsci was greatly influenced by
the thinking and work of Karl Marx, Arnold’s contemporary in London in 1849. Both Marx and Arnold tried to conceptualize the problems of Victorian industrialism and capitalism, though their proposed solutions for society’s ills were completely different. The two were, as Alexander Meiklejohn (2006: 36) notes, ‘one in purpose’. They both saw that industrialization was wreaking havoc on English society and each sought a method for resolving this. The ferocity of the First World War, the Great Depression, and the period leading up to the Second World War further shaped the direction of Gramsci’s literary and cultural criticism. Many writers, believing that society was breaking down, discarded traditional literary forms in favour of new, experimental and revolutionary approaches. Artists struggled with these traumatic events, and many – Gramsci among them – expressed feelings of hopelessness and hostility in their works (Warren and Wellek, 1954: 97).

Just like the states involved with the Arab Spring in the 21st century, Italy during the 20th century began to experience the economic imbalance and class shifts that accompanied rapid industrialization and urbanization. Agricultural areas like Sardinia (Gramsci’s home) faced economic depression, spurring migration to industrial centres in the north. This caused immense strain on towns and cities ill-prepared for such a population increase. Gramsci, who himself had been forced to abandon his schooling during his teenage years to begin working, and who spent much of his life among the working class, was more directly and intensely affected by an urbanizing and industrializing world compared to Arnold, who was more economically secure despite shifts in society.

Similarly, the Arab Spring came as a result of deteriorating living conditions, further exacerbated by the 2008 economic crisis. In the literature on the Arab Spring, three subsets that can be identified, each focused on answering a specific question: first, why did the uprisings erupt in 2010–11? Second, what explains the different trajectories between various Arab Spring countries? And third, why has the Arab Spring ‘failed’ to bring democracy? One could argue that these three subsets cover the various structures and processes, but they undermine the role of individuals as autonomous actors and as members of various collectivities, whether social, cultural, political or economic. This is what Sari Hanafi (2012) and Benoit Challand (2011) call the ‘emergence of a new political subjectivity’, which developed during the uprisings and in the aftermath of 2011. This new political subjectivity involves Arabs ‘re-imagining themselves and their political actions’ (Challand, 2011: 271), and it redefines an individual’s own imaginary of self and their identification with the collective.

Some link post-revolution political imaginaries to the broader historical context of violence. This might refer to the Muslim Brotherhood using Mubarak-style violence, the ‘anticipation’ of (the counter-revolution) violence illustrated in Cairo graffiti until 2014, or the securitization of Egypt’s urban choices (like Dubai-style compounds) that fit with the return of a neoliberal belief that we have experienced a ‘failed revolution’. Providing space for violence in the construction of political imaginaries allows some authors like Salwa Ismail (2013) to deconstruct the idea of an educated, peaceful, blogger-led revolution and to show instead how the everyday violence (encounters with the police etc.) experienced by ‘urban sulbalterns’ in Cairo nourished their political imagination and allowed them to make sense of their participation in the revolution.
Gramsci, like Arnold, played the role of a social critic who hoped to explain his world and to empower individuals to live better in it. As a result of his social exclusion as a youth, he spent much of his time reading and identifying with outsiders and the oppressed (Greaves, 2009: 57). As a young student, once he was able to return to school, he found himself identifying first with the Sard nationalist movement and later, during his time as a student in Turin, developing Marxist affiliations. Inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917, he wrote polemically for the socialist cause (Greaves, 2009: 57). Thus, his theory developed from his own life and his personal experience of historical change.

This experience brought Gramsci’s theory close to Arnold’s, with a counter-industrialist bent, though for different reasons. Gramsci’s ultimate objective for introducing a new politics was to revolutionize the normative life experiences of those living at the margins, and he believed that the possibility for change depended on human will, which he drew on in his new political theory (mainly to dissolve the centre/periphery binary). This is where traditional Marxism intersected with his new peripheral perspective (Germino, 1986: 23). In this regard, the proletariat/bourgeoisie (periphery/centre) struggle represented the heart of his new politics, which was not limited to the economic or the political but rather ‘makes room for the world of culture in a way that the [Marxist] class struggle model does not’ (Germino, 1986: 24). Gramsci’s neo-Marxist theory is not simply materialist, as it considers culture a key location for struggle and change, especially through criticism. This assertion is similar to Arnold’s, despite his very different opinions on what those changes should be.

Gramsci noted that technological and industrial development provided new tools for capitalist control of society. Drawing on Gramsci’s notion of ‘manufacturing consent’ and reconstructing his theory of ‘unconscious consent to hegemony [or to domination]’, Michael Burawoy (2012: 192) suggests that Gramsci’s originality lay in his periodization of capitalism based on the ‘state–civil society nexus’ that organized or regulated consent and thus assimilated any challenges to capitalism. Referring to the United States, Gramsci deemed the factory, and not civil society, the seedbed for hegemony. Through Fordism, he contended, the factory had its own ‘internal state’, where the labourers were ‘industrial citizens’ with certain rights and obligations as detailed in the labour contract. Such hegemony was earned by capital through the granting of labour concessions (Burawoy, 2012: 193). By conceptualizing factories in this way, Gramsci hoped to give workers the tools to gain greater voice and control over their own lives.

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony thus describes power as the imposition of the universal values and the particular interests of the ruling class while the ruled – the dominated – accept or consent to the political system as a quasi-natural state. This means that a political system is not imposed only by coercion but also by the cultural consensus of the rulers and the ruled. For Gramsci, social transformation was possible through the breakdown of hegemony and the ‘creation of a new subaltern hegemony’, where class forces would be balanced in what Gramsci termed the ‘war of position’ (1971: 233–9). Berthold Molden (2015) suggests that according to Gramsci’s (mnemonic) war of position between dominant/subjugated narratives, only a structural crisis can accelerate what is otherwise a slow process of change. In this process, and when a master narrative loses dominance, especially when the dominant political order suffers
a degree of instability, it is not immediately substituted by the rise of a formerly subalter,
unified counter-discourse. Rather, a polyphony of narratives persists through the
counter-hegemonic process (Molden, 2015: 131). However, since the newly con-
structed discourse will end in the predominance of a certain counter-discourse that
pushes other revolutionary memory discourses to the margins, there is a need to main-
tain symmetric polyphony or a memory ‘multiculture’ (Molden, 2015: 131). Gramsci
suggested that hegemony is produced and sustained through culture. Molden maintains
that Gramsci’s interest in culture is driven by a desire for political change, and that his
view of hegemonic relations is charted within a class paradigm.

In the Arab world, a new culture emanates from a desire for change and is witnessed
in a series of protests that began in December 2010 in Tunisia and were not the first in
the country’s history of political activism. So why were they inspirational enough to
spark a ‘tidal wave’ of protests affecting every Arab country? First, the Tunisian protests
were successful: the regime was overthrown. This was unexpected for everyone, includ-
ing citizens, regimes, and observers. Tunisia’s revolution was a catalyst and moved the
country from the periphery to the centre. It is hard to imagine Egyptians going to Tahrir
in the same numbers and enthusiasm if Tunisians had not had an uprising. In this obser-
vation, one can argue that the domino effect of protests illustrates a type of transcultural
solidarity across different Arab societies, despite the differences in their various local
contexts. States were simply not delivering what their citizens expected them to, whether
this was the promise of a public job for every Egyptian graduate student since Nasser’s
time, or the expectation among citizens in Bahrain or Morocco that their respective mon-
archs would follow through on their promises of reform. The Arab world experienced an
emotionally powerful ‘moment’ of pan-Arab solidarity in 2011, at least up until March/
April when the Arab regional order began to dramatically shift. The urgent social, cul-
tural, political and economic realities which have unsettled the hegemonic structures of
state formations and processes of subjectivation have also revealed how identity is made
up of collective meaning-giving practices, beliefs and habits of thought. Accordingly, the
given categories and conditions of ethnicity, religion, governance, citizenship, gender,
socio-economic status and nationality have been subject to a widespread and profound
re-negotiation that has entailed both the discovery of new cultural forms and the recovery
of former popular discourses.

Gramsci put the lives of the working class and the oppressed at the centre of his analy-
sis. In ‘Antonio Gramsci: From the margins to the center, the journey of a hunchback’,
Dante Germino (1986: 20) states that Gramsci’s revolutionary theory has given ‘a new
sun’ to political and social relationships, and that Gramsci successfully brought the life
of the marginalized to the forefront as the core of the political world. Instead of theoriz-
ing hegemons, Gramsci was more interested in how ordinary people experienced life.
Gramsci’s insightful design of a new cultural politics guided by intellectuals helped not
only to dissolve the barrier between the centre and the margin, but also to turn the margin
into a centre. In his new design, culture is the core of the revolution, and the intellectuals’
cultural and ideological struggle against state hegemony can only bear fruit when those
intellectuals manage to transform emancipatory culture into a common sense that lends
power to civil society. The lesson from Gramsci is that he managed to wed theory to
practice or to organically introduce a new revolutionary praxis that is still relevant in
social and political criticism.
In the same vein, the Arab region is more interconnected than ever, and domestic politics are not just domestic, but also regional. Some of the implications of the 2011 protests today include (1) a transformation of the Arab regional state system, (2) four failed states with prolonged civil wars: Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya, (3) foreign and regional interventions (examples include Saudi in Bahrain and Yemen, NATO in Libya, Iran and Russia in Syria), (4) the centrality of the Iranian-Saudi geo-strategic rivalry, (5) the salience of sectarianism and identity politics (coming from the top-down and bottom-up), and (6) the rise of transnational militant groups, such as ISIL.

Arab public and mainstream intellectuals failed to respond to the aspirations of people in the streets and to fully capture the transformation in every dimension of the region’s politics (Abouelnaga, 2016). However, this failure of the intellectuals gave birth to an extraordinarily talented generation of activists, public intellectuals and entrepreneurs. The irresponsible approach to revolution by the Arab public intellectuals led to the success of a new political and cultural network formation, mostly outside the state monopoly. Both Arnold and Gramsci suggested that intellectuals and critics must be responsible for empowering people to change their social and political status. In *Matthew Arnold Revisited*, Linda Ray Pratt (2000: 94) asserts that according to Arnold, the cultural mind desires a vast array of knowledge and then subjects that knowledge to critical analysis. This critical viewpoint results in the free flow of ideas, which then sets the stage for a society ready to discover its ‘best self’.

This border-crossing form of critical art largely crystallizes in an Egyptian cultural and artistic platform has worked to dissolve the differences and boundaries between people in quest of the ‘best self’. In an Egyptian (post-)revolutionary context, *Tara El-Bahr* represents a non-periodic cultural and architectural publication. The Alexandria-based publication’s 2014 pilot issue had a stronger architectural focus, but it now analyses cultural and artistic practices in the city in addition to architecture and everyday life. Publishing reviews, event coverage, translations and photography, *Tara El-Bahr* has an online platform in addition to irregular print editions. Moreover, the organizers of *Nassim al-Raqs*, Alexandria’s esteemed site-specific performing arts festival, since 2011, have a programme that has invited Egyptian and foreign performing artists to create pieces for various sites in the city. These groups address social issues and embody a quest for peace and social justice, and they are a vivid example of how artists can be civil society actors. In their visual arts, literature and music, they are able to open dialogue about how and why to change society. Moreover, they have created an independent space by helping people to engage with others about social issues. For a long time, and still today, Egypt has had a centralized ministry of culture that promotes state ideology and a cultural agenda around a particular national heritage and identity. These groups believe that the ministry is just another corrupt institution, and the revolution has inspired them to use public space to congregate and support cultural activism. They reclaimed their voices, and in so doing they helped everyone else do the same.

The new political and cultural network formed in the freedom squares that dominated Arab public discourse and became a source of power for the masses. Arnold and Gramsci perceived that by providing the masses with culture, they provided them with a source of
power, and Gramsci attacked the kind of culture that separates people from each other (1971: 57). He described this kind of elitist conception of culture as one that:

serves only to create maladjusted people, people who believe they are superior to the rest of humanity because they have memorized a certain number of facts and dates and who rattle them off at every opportunity, so turning them almost into a barrier between themselves and others. (1971: 57)

In the post-Arab Spring context, art and cultural production have become politicized. Egypt’s revolution resulted in arts both reflecting and encouraging political engagement from all people, regardless of their class or their educational background. For example, examining graffiti images on Cairo’s streets between January 2011 and June 2013 suggests that Cairo’s graffiti transitioned from being largely apolitical to narrating Mubarak’s process of resignation, and the process of political transition thereafter. This shows how revolutionary street art can be read as a primary source to shed light on the history of the revolution.

**Power and agency in education, and the role of intellectuals in cultural formation**

The Arab Spring culture of dissent finds an echo in the calls from Arab youth to get rid of the type of instruction in the humanities and social sciences that continues to drill students into obedience and submission to the regime rather than to encourage freedom of thought. Arab educational institutions have always tended not to foster creative and independent thinking, but to make students learn long passages by heart (Loveluck, 2012). The Arab Spring brought to the fore informal learning, by highlighting what youth are doing to educate themselves through technology when the education system falls short. It is through this examination of education and culture that we can discuss such shifting norms in light of the lasting impact of Arnold and Gramsci, who posited education as one of the most important channels of culture-building. Both theorists asserted its importance in empowering the masses and enabling them to wield the authority they were (and are) denied. For both Arnold and Gramsci, schools should be used to develop intellectuals and social critics who could inspire wider change within society.

Just like those involved with the Arab Spring who have witnessed deepening political grievances and a series of socio-economic problems throughout their lives, Gramsci’s lifetime was unsettled by contradictions and revolutionary ideas. This became the ideal ground for the development of critical social movements. With claims to objectivity marking most of the critical trends in his lifetime, he refused to admit to impressionistic criticism and invited an impersonal approach. To be an organic intellectual, according to Gramsci, was not to be isolated from the working class or to introduce one’s own personality; it was to possess a historical sense that enabled one to be involved in one’s class while objectively sacrificing personal expression in order to express the universal. In the same sense, the Arab Spring paves the way for the articulation of fresh critical perspectives with which to investigate forms of cultural production as new modes of knowing. These modes shed light on the nature of social movements with the aim of expanding the reach of political discourse and social theory.
Gramsci called for intellectuals to fuse themselves into the working class, to engage in a ‘philosophy of praxis’ (1971: 425). His theory suggests that a reader will not believe a story about a factory worker written by someone who is detached from that worker or by someone who has no real-life connection to that worker. Gramsci believed that every social group should have its own stratum of intellectuals as cultural makers of their social group. These intellectuals would develop concepts that would give the group identity and power, both social and cultural. Both Gramsci and Arnold suggested that the role of intellectuals was to speak not about themselves as individuals but also as members of a specific class. In the Arab Spring context, it is the new wave of revolutionary intellectuals that has taken shape and that needs to be understood on its own terms. Cultural production has great potential as a weapon in revolutionary, or even counter-revolutionary struggle. Music, poetry, theatre, graffiti and visual arts during Arab Spring were utilized as weapons and heralded the cutting-edge of political change. For instance, Brinda Mehta (2013) argues in her review of ‘Staging Tahrir’ and theatrical work by Laila Soliman that theatre too can be a useful revolutionary tool which both evokes and sustains revolution. She argues that creative dissidence has always been a part of revolutionary movements.

Gramsci called for the dissemination of culture as a propeller of the revolution. Literature of revolution enlightens the public through imaginatively reconceptualizing ordinary experience and redefining the sense of the self and the other. Thus, it plays a key role in probing and shaping reality, given that – in Joel Barlow’s terms – ‘One good song is worth a dozen addresses or proclamations’ (Scheurer, 1991: 27). No wonder then that Nizar Qabbani (d. 1998) claimed that the act of revolution both derives from and sustains the fount of poetry, and that without poetry, nothing is left in the ‘psalm of revolution’. This is evident in his poem ‘Writings on the Walls of Exile’ (in Qabbani, 1999). Qabbani believed that the ‘act of writing and the act of revolting are intertwined’ (1972: 70). After all, understanding a revolution can be an exercise in literary analysis and criticism (Ferguson, 1994: 1). Everett Emerson (1977: viii) concludes that literature flourishes in times of revolutions because of its ability to help people comprehend new realities while rallying them to support the cause of freedom.

Pre-Arab Spring literature in the Arab world, including innovative forms of artistic expression, expounded on the severity of injustice and oppression, and the desire for change and freedom. Educated men and women played significant roles in framing, fomenting and fertilizing the desire for change among the people. This expansive/universal embrace of culture, particularly in its function as political critique, conforms to what Arnold advocated by calling for the dissemination of the ‘best ideas’ for the sake of everyone, to society’s betterment. Gramsci also advocated for intellectuals to develop shared culture when he stated, ‘A human mass does not ‘distinguish’ itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals’ (1971: 57). Those Gramscian organizers and intellectuals or Arnoldian critics are the ones who collect the best ideas and provide them to the masses so that the barrier between the masses and the upper classes can eventually vanish, and a new ideal relation between the citizen and the ruling class can exist. Such is the role of leading poet/intellectuals like Saadi Youssef, whose poems are celebrated for their revolutionary bent.
This revolutionary bent is manifested in the works of Arab poets like Muzhaffar Al-Nawwab (b. 1934), an Iraqi who—in an Eliotean manner—sought to stimulate rebirth in an arid land, not only through political revolution, but also through a revolution in Arab consciousness.\textsuperscript{4} In a reflection of the (Nizar) Qabbani writing-revolting nexus, Stephan Milich (2012), tracing the relationship between words and uprisings in the Arab world, stresses the ‘subversive role’ of literature in its various forms and genres in provoking the tidal wave of the uprisings in the Arab world. He points out that the uprisings, spurred by a sense of disillusionment and frustration with the successive failures of native autocrats, helped to renovate a sense of identitarian consciousness in Arab societies, artistically represented by poets like Muzhaffar Al-Nawwab and the Egyptian Ahmad Fouad Negm (d. 2013). For them, the vernacular tongue bore the seeds of the revolution and better kindled public sentiment. As Elliott Colla (2011) said, in the Egyptian Tahrir Square, poetry not only represents the revolution’s soundtrack, but also ‘composes a significant part of the action itself’. However, Arab intellectuals and people of letters were between the hammer of intimidation and the anvil of being ‘co-opted’ by their autocratic states. According to Milich (2012), European colonial bondage was substituted by the bondage of ‘self-colonialism’ at the hand of ‘local despotic regimes’, intensifying the postcolonial identity crisis for Arab intellectuals and artists.

Therefore, the Arab uprisings partially represent an attempt by Arab citizens to re-identify with an Arab ‘homeland’ that has been appropriated by local despots and to regain the right to shape their own societies. In these identitarian struggles, Arab poets and prose writers were the disenchantment-stirring vanguard, whose weapon was words. Their battle was both against despotism and against pessimism. Writers like Muzhaffar Al-Nawwab, Abdur-Rahman Munif (1933–2004) and Sonallah Ibrahim (b. 1937), in a scathingly satirical tone, dismantled the statist discourse of nationalism and whetted public consciousness in preparation for the revolution. Novelist Sonallah Ibrahim publicly refused a state literary prize in 2003, rebelling against what he terms the ‘exploitative majority [that] has robbed us of our soul’ (Hassan, 2003). Another example of anti-despotic writings is Khalid Al-Khamisi’s \textit{Taxi} (2006), a short-story collection that creatively anticipated and perhaps ‘pre-empted’ the later voice of protest in Tahrir Square, in his microcosmic free expression-space of a taxi cab.

This subversive tone of the hegemonic discourse on Arab dictators was tangible in the works of Iraqi poets against the unflinching dictatorical image of Saddam Hussein. Here, Milich quotes Adnan Al-Saegh’s ‘Story of a homeland’ (Al-Saegh, n.d.), in which Saddam is represented as no more than a lifeless, though seemingly sensible, statue fighting against other lifeless statues, and yet the people could not tell which of them is the president! (quoted in Milich, 2012). Interestingly, Al-Saegh’s jibe was not solely aimed at the senseless Arab dictators, he was also criticizing the people for their self-inflicted, freedom-fettering fear of statues, and for being content with the role of mere watchers of an insipid farce. This creative literary critique of foreign and local despotism also involved a newly emerging genre of women’s literature that poignantly targeted the predominantly male discourse. This managed not only to critique paternalistic hegemony, but also to expose and destabilize various established social and cultural taboos that have for long muffled Arab women’s voices. Kathleen Barry (1979: 163) captures these manipulative and gendered constraints on women in her metaphor where she deems the
repression of women as tantamount to colonization. Interestingly, Milich (2012) introduces the Lebanese novelist, Alawiya Sobh, whose works represent a new ‘literary approach to sexuality from a female perspective’, as breaking multiple ‘stubborn taboos’.

The value of Gramscian/Arnoldian figures in the praxis of the Arab Spring seems clear where the Arab voices represent work that these theorists would advocate for. This rapid change in the Arab political scene resulted in an atmosphere characterized by a free and fluid movement of new social and intellectual conditions fraught with uncertainty. The revolutionary Arab scene marks a breach of continuity and an uprooting of life that recalls the Gramscian and Arnoldian theories mentioned above. The so-called Arab Spring provides workers and the lower classes with beneficial cultural inputs capable of bringing about their redemption and freedom. Indeed, Arab cultural production constitutes a pursuit that contributes to a shift in politics and culture. Intellectuals believed that building up a common sense and nurturing the peoples’ revolutionary bent, largely through the infinite powers of art, is the best recipe for an informed revolution.

Conclusion

Social criticism and theory cannot be divorced from the historical context in which it is developed. Arnold and Gramsci catered simultaneously to the demands of their own individual lives and the times in which they lived (Eliot, 1975: 141). Hence, Gramsci’s Marxist and communist foundation connected his writing to the historical context Arnold inhabited. Just as Arnold’s Victorian period in England witnessed revolutionary shifts in the tone of literary and social values, Gramsci was located in a place and time of revolutionary Italian literature and thought. Arnold and Gramsci, in search of the highest possible standards, are at the same time revolutionary and elitist in their views. Arnold, while traditional, authoritarian and politically conservative, made calls for the long-term levelling of British society (Caufield, 2016: 38–9). Likewise, Gramsci managed to be both a communist revolutionary and an elitist, believing socialist revolution to be the highest (elite) standard to which humanity was called.

Though born in different periods and social and cultural contexts, both Arnold and Gramsci were, in many ways, classicists who adopted what they perceived as an objective approach towards culture. Both theorists, in searching for what they each defined as best, limited themselves and excluded everything else. They, in effect, became guardians of what they thought was the best, protecting what they felt to be most beneficial to humankind. Here lurks the historically subjective element in their oddly similar approaches to cultural criticism. In this sense, an awareness of the resonance of culture seems all the more urgent at a time of great uncertainty, contestation and ongoing violence. We witnessed in the Arab world a wave of creativity spreading through the ‘Arab street’ and contesting the regimes’ monopoly of media and culture. This ‘cultural revolution’ has inspired and accompanied the Arab Spring upheavals and its aftermath, and even superseded the political one. Moreover, the focal point is the interplay of different identitarian and cultural elements in the formation of the ever shape-shifting, border-crossing, multicultural and hybridized Arab identity, inside and outside the Arab world. This perspective, besides reconsidering traditional notions of culture/identity and reconceptualizing transculturality from an interdisciplinary perspective, aims to guide further
theoretical and practical studies of Arab identity and cultures as crystallized in a (post) revolutionary age.

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**Notes**

1. El Général’s rap ‘Rayes Lebled’ (2011) is available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KtJ2PkSmco (accessed 14 January 2019).
2. All these examples are given by Abaza (2016).
3. See: https://www.taralbahr.com/
4. For a detailed discussion of Al-Nawwab’s revolutionary poetics, see Gohar (2011).

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