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Peter Gran

MODERN TRENDS IN EGYPTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY: A REVIEW ARTICLE

The graduate history program of 'Ayn Shams University has produced some of the finest scholarly studies in the field of Egyptian history in recent years. The program has been particularly receptive to the shift toward a social and economic approach within the discipline of history. It is noteworthy that for a number of years this program has been directed by two historians who were not themselves trained in this specialization. Dr. Aḥmad 'Izzat 'Abd al-Karīm (the founder of the program) is an institutional historian, and Dr. 'Abd al-Raḥīm Muṣṭafā (the current chairman) is a political historian.

The significance of the program for the reshaping of Egyptian consciousness – as well as the more general scholarly consciousness – of the Egyptian past became apparent in the late 1960s, when the earlier program of Muḥammad Anīs at Cairo University lost some of its impetus.¹

Anīs had led the way in introducing social and economic categories into historical analysis. At the same time, he continued the patriotic eulogizing of older writings such as those of 'Abd al-Raḥman al-Rāfi', who on occasion had celebrated rather than analyzed some of the key political events of Egyptian history, such as those of 1798, 1881, 1919, and 1952. Anīs placed particular emphasis on European economic exploitation of Egypt. Unlike the journalists of the 1930s and 1940s, he documented his sources. His works *Ḥaḍārat Miṣr al-ḥadītha*² and *Thawrat 23 yūlyū 1952 wa usūluhā al-tārikhiyya*³ are virtually the only works that attempt to portray an inner dynamic running through modern Egyptian history. For Anīs, modern Egypt is neither a prisoner of a prefixed Asiatic mode of production nor a backward country striving to become a Europeanized state, but a nation struggling to industrialize in the face of great obstacles. The strongest point of Anīs's analysis is his emphasis on the struggle within Egypt between national and nonnational elements within the ruling class.

Anīs followed Braudel's interpretation of the sixteenth century as the water-

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¹ For a general overview, see Afaf Lutfi al-Sayyid Marsot, 'Egyptian Historical Research and Writing on Egypt in the Twentieth Century', *MESA Bulletin*, 7, 2 (1973), 1–15; Jack Crabbs, Jr., 'Politics, History, and Culture in Nasser's Egypt', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 6, 4 (1975), 386–420.

² Cairo, n.d.

³ With Professor Rajab Ḥarrāz (Cairo, 1965).

shed for the study of all modern history. For this reason, he could speak of the Egyptianization of the later Ottoman regime, and of the relative continuity of Islamic cultural life. His portrayal of Muḥammad ‘Alī included areas of continuity, for example, in administrative practice. His portrayal of the British occupation stressed the economic disruption of industry. Although agriculture expanded under the British occupation, Egypt was nevertheless forced to import food.

Anīs analyzed the revolt of 1919 as the crucible of the national bourgeoisie, of which Ṭal‘at Ḥarb was a quintessential representative. The national bourgeoisie carried on a struggle for economic independence and a parallel struggle for political independence.⁴ Anīs’s use of these terms in the 1950s was similar to that of many scholars in the newly independent countries of the Third World, but he was at first alone among Egyptian academicians. His student at Cairo University, ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Ramaḍān, later wrote a study of the national movement⁵ (the main work written to date on this topic) from the same perspective, a perspective shared by Hossam Issa in his interpretation of the rise of commercial law in Egypt.⁶

Anīs argued that elements of the landowning class led the struggle against European capital and, in fact, formed the backbone of the nationalist movement from the nineteenth century onward, and that this was the opposite of what took place in Europe.⁷ But Anīs could also abandon class analysis or change its meaning quite abruptly. He stated that the European capitalists concentrated on seizing the real centers of power – a vague political term of the period – in consolidating their hold on a ruling class in Egypt. This led him into interpretations rooted in a kind of political determinism. Anīs stated that the basis of Egypt’s economic independence had to be its political independence.⁸ His conception of class was, in fact, unclear: on the one hand, he referred to landowners as a class, and on the other, to ‘intellectuals’ as a class. In the main line of his thought, the class bases of the national movement were clear. Anīs argued that Sa‘d Zaghlūl became the embodiment of Egyptian nationalism in the midst of the reactionary large landowning class. Anīs did not develop a theory of culture, but he suggested that the large landowners as a class encouraged the opposition to cultural reform and to the growth of secular culture which was supported by what one might call the ‘left-wing Wafd’ and the intellectuals. This view tries to show that there was a conservative alliance against change among al-Azhar, the monarchy, and the large landowners. The shift of a number of intellectuals back to religion, to the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1930s, and the further interplay within the Muslim Brotherhood between socialist ideas and Islamic values is given short shrift by Anīs and also by Ramaḍān. In sum, the background against which Anīs wrote was that of the prerevolutionary events:

⁴ Anīs, *Ḥaḍārat*, p. 164.

⁵ *Taṭawwur al-ḥaraka al-waṭaniyya fī Miṣr min sanat 1918 ilā sanat 1936* (Cairo, 1968).

⁶ *Capitalisme et sociétés anonymes en Egypte* (Paris: Librairie Général du Droit et de Jurisprudence, 1970).

⁷ Anīs, *Ḥaḍārat*, p. 161.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 141, 143, 162–163, 167, 169, and *passim*.

the increasing exploitation by the large landowners, the Palestine war, and the struggles of the nationalist movement.

For the younger generation of scholars who were formed by the culture of the 1952 revolution, and whose work appears at 'Ayn Shams in the late 1960s, the domination of the landed class existed only in books. Egypt was ruled by various state institutions that were headed by army officers and state capitalists. Egypt's direction was toward industrialization. In time, this program of industrialization became a threat to certain Western, regional, and indigenous interests.⁹ These interests successfully tried to obstruct industrialization policies; and in the late 1960s, after the war of June 1967 with Israel, the state sector stagnated. By the mid-1970s, landowners and factory owners had begun to be reinstated. These events encouraged a reinterpretation of the past, in line with changed conditions.

Three young historians have studied the rise of the large landowning class in Egypt from the nineteenth century to the 1950s. Their intention was to demonstrate that Anīs's distinction between the 'national' and the foreign or nonnational was untenable, that there was in fact an essential internal unity of class, and therefore no distinguishable 'national' bourgeoisie.¹⁰

'Āṣim al-Disūqī's *Kibār mullāk al-arāḍi al-zirā'iyya wa dawruhum fī'l-mujtama' al-miṣri 1914-1952* is a major archival work and a tribute to the pedagogy of Professors 'Izzat 'Abd al-Karīm and 'Abd al-Rahīm Muṣṭafā.¹¹ Al-Disūqī's findings regarding industry and Bank Miṣr proved that large landowners, even some of the very largest, invested in industry. This would appear to eliminate Ramaḍān's distinction between the class of absentee landowners and the class of industrialists or the national bourgeoisie. Furthermore, he showed that the impression that political power moved into the hands of industrialists and away from large landowners is not supported by an actual count of those who held positions in the various national and regional legislative and administrative councils, although he does not take up Ramaḍān's point that this trend is most notable from 1936 to 1945.¹² Al-Disūqī further discussed the role of foreign companies as landowners, whose politics and policies were not distinguishable from those of Egyptian landowners during this period. This is also in contrast with the arguments of Anīs and Ramaḍān, who saw an alliance of the largest landowners, many of them of Turkish descent, with the Europeans against Egyptian landowners who led the national movement. Further, al-Disūqī found that the government itself, through its large endowments, was a landowner, and that the large landowners belonged to all parties.¹³ His book

⁹ Erskine Childers, *The Road to Suez* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1962).

¹⁰ Rā'ūf 'Abbās Hāmid, *al-Niẓām al-Ijtimā'i fī Miṣr fī ḡill al-milkiyyāt al-zirā'iyya al-kābira, 1837-1914* (Cairo, 1973); 'Āṣim al-Disūqī, *Kibār mullāk al-arāḍi al-zirā'iyya wa dawruhum fī'l-mujtama' al-miṣri, 1914-1952* (Cairo, 1975). 'Alī Barakāt's work on the land system from the nineteenth century to 1914 is in press.

¹¹ It should be noted that the land registers in the archives of the Ministry of Treasury are organized not according to the name of the landholder but by each town or village in which he had holdings. This greatly extends the amount of time and energy required for such a study.

¹² Al-Disūqī, *Kibār mullāk*, p. 44.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 39, 44, 61, 324.

is an extended analysis of trends rather than an account of significant change. It is a critique of Anīs's theory of the underlying dynamics of modern Egyptian history, for it was Anīs's writing that explains why al-Disūqī and others such as Rā'ūf 'Abbās insist that possession of a certain number of feddans is not at all a clear indicator of wealth and power. It is a feature of their period that they do not adopt *in practice* a Marxian concept of class, but give their definitions of class in static numerical terms.

Al-Disūqī's efforts to subsume Egyptian industrialization under the wing of the landowning class will no doubt be one of the more controversial areas of his research. His extensive evidence is drawn from a study of membership of boards of directors and from information on capital investment. It is clear that the large landowners were a majority on boards of directors of many companies. But this role did not alter their essential economic orientation or relation to the system of production, that is, extracting rents from agriculture.¹⁴ Al-Disūqī suggests the need to understand the social role of industry in Egypt as a subordinate one, apparently even after 1936. This is obviously a critique of the identification of industry with the national bourgeoisie.

Rā'ūf 'Abbās Ḥāmid's *al-Niẓām al-ijtimā'i fī Miṣr fī ẓill al-milkiyyāt al-ẓirā'iyya al-kabira, 1837–1914* is a second archival study of the history of the large landowning class in Egypt. It provides new information and statistics based on materials in the Egyptian national archives which show the holdings of the numerous members of the royal family and other grandees of the state. In addition, the study contains interesting information on Bedouins and Copts as they entered the large landholding class. Rā'ūf 'Abbās sets out to impress on the reader the importance of a relational concept of class. But, as he writes, because of the complexity of the land system and the different values of different types of land, this concept became very hard to employ. With reluctance, therefore, he accepted Cromer's definition (formulated in 1894) of a large landowner as someone who owned more than fifty feddans.¹⁵

Rā'ūf 'Abbās's general view can be summarized by saying that Egypt had an unchanging, centralized agricultural system from the beginning of recorded history, but that the development of private property in land and the development of a class of large landowners in the nineteenth century marked a break with five thousand years of previous agricultural history. Unlike Anīs, he cannot easily see how to link the Ottoman period to the nineteenth century, except insofar as the former was a preparation for the latter.¹⁶ 'Abbās, like al-Disūqī and all the younger writers, sees the struggle against the centralized system as hopeless, even that of the notables against the Khedive in the time of 'Urābī.¹⁷

¹⁴ Al-Disūqī, *Kibar mullak*, pp. 94–97, 324 ff.

¹⁵ Ḥāmid, *al-Niẓām al-ijtimā'i*, pp. 24–26, 189.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁷ 'Abd al-Raḥīm 'Abd al-Raḥman 'Abd al-Raḥīm, *al-Rif al-miṣrī fī qarn al-thāmin 'ashar* (Cairo, 1974), presents in his study of the peasantry the most extreme expression of pessimism of any of the works of the period. His focus on Mamlūk oppression leaves no room for the possibility that peasant and Bedouin struggles may have contributed to bringing down Ottoman rule.

‘Abbās points out that ‘Urābī himself owned eight hundred feddans. Of course, this is partly a critique of nationalist hagiography; but it is important to ask what the size of ‘Urābī’s holdings meant dynamically, when each member of the royal family owned more than twenty thousand feddans? In an important statement, ‘Abbās claims that despite differences in ethnicity, and despite the relations with Europe among different strata of the large landowning class, there was a unity of economic interests which reduced the ethnic or national contradictions.¹⁸

In a controversial study of Sa‘d Zaghlūl, ‘Abd al-Khāliq Lāshīn, who received his doctorate from ‘Ayn Shams, argued that much of Zaghlūl’s nationalist activity could be understood as an expression of class interest rather than of pure nationalism.¹⁹ He criticized the hagiographical elements of earlier social and economic history.

The writing of history is affected by the conditions under which it is produced. In applying this maxim to modern Egyptian historical writings, we observe important differences among the writers who were formed by the struggle of the nationalist movement, who witnessed the alliance crossing class lines which supported the development of Egyptian industry. Muḥammad Anīs was a seminal historiographer because he moved from political and institutional history to a socioeconomic analysis of historical reality. Anīs has also been a very influential historian.

After the setbacks following the war of 1967, the socioeconomic approach led to a different set of conclusions, both among the students at ‘Ayn Shams University and among Anīs’s own students. The later studies of the landowning class tend to de-emphasize the struggle of the Egyptian bourgeoisie against the Turco-Circassian elite. Rather, they emphasize the solidarity of all the large landowners, Egyptian and non-Egyptian. The heroes of the nationalist movement, Aḥmad ‘Urābī and Sa‘d Zaghlūl, are critically reassessed and found to have been motivated by class interest.

The new archival material utilized in these studies is genuinely significant and forces these works into the forefront of modern Egyptian historical studies. They are clearly motivated by a deep patriotism. The phenomenological approach, the absence of a social dynamic, even the archivalism of these works may indeed be attributable to the temporary frustration of that vision.

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¹⁸ Hāmid, *al-Niḡām al-Ijtīmā‘i*, pp. 83, 271, 111.

¹⁹ ‘Abd al-Khāliq Lāshīn, *Sa‘d Zaghlūl wa dawruhu fī’l-siyāsa al-miṣriyya ḥattā sanat 1914* (Cairo, 1970).