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A Changing American Context? Reflections on Two Books on Egyptian History from Cairo

Feb 10 2012

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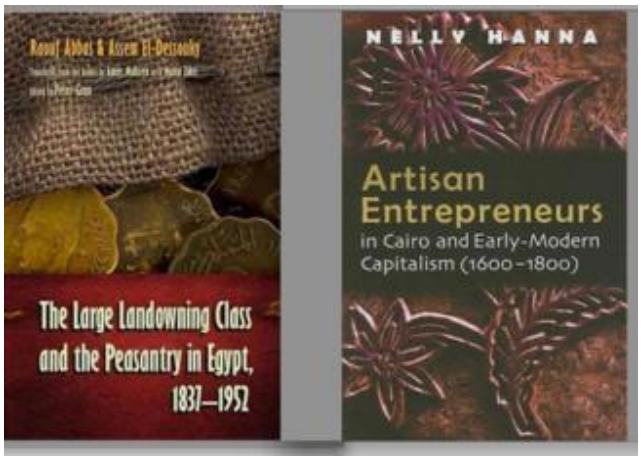
Nelly Hanna, *Artisan Entrepreneurs in Cairo and Early Modern Capitalism (1600–1800)*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011.

Raouf `Abbas Hamid and `Asim el-Dessouky, *The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt, 1837-1952*. Translated from the Arabic by Amer Mohsen with Mona Zikri. Edited by Peter Gran. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011.



[Covers of Raouf `Abbas Hamid's and `Asim el-Dessouky, "The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt, 1837-1952" and Nelly Hanna, "Artisan Entrepreneurs in Cairo and Early Modern Capitalism (1600–1800)"]

The publication of Nelly Hanna's *Artisan Entrepreneurs in Cairo and Early Modern Capitalism (1600–1800)* and Raouf `Abbas Hamid's and `Asim el-Dessouky's *The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt, 1837-1952* marks something of a departure from the norm for the field of modern Egypt in the United States, the norm being the discussion of books produced in this country and Europe. Egypt is a country with a large scholarly community, a point which is well-known, thanks to the American University of Cairo Press; nonetheless, it is a country whose work—for whatever set of reasons—has been largely ignored in Anglo-American scholarship. This is certainly the case in the field of modern history. This leads to the hypothesis that the publication of these two works by a mainstream North American academic press must owe something to some recent changes in the American context. There must be some new set of developments. To explore this hypothesis, I propose to see if I can identify some such changes, then turn to what a reader might expect from a review, a discussion of the importance of these books as scholarly endeavors.

Changes in the American Context: The Years before Tahrir

It seems safe to suggest that over the past half century at least—that is, the years before Tahrir—America has not been especially good at understanding Middle

Eastern countries, but that this has gradually begun to change thanks to other recent changes. Over this past half century, for wide segments even of the intellectual community, it would truly have been a struggle to understand even one Middle Eastern country on its own terms. Our cultural logic worked against our doing so, leading us in an almost opposite direction, towards understanding such countries only as they relate to us and not in and of themselves. The dominant trends in social thought have given our way of proceeding a very considerable legitimacy. Since globalization arose as a set of ideas in the 1980s, history writ large has generally been American national history, to which one adds some globalized version of the rest and how it relates to us. More recently, however, it has become clear that there were other consequences of globalization as well, changes of a different sort, promoting an almost opposite approach.

The changes to which I am referring—at least two of the most important ones—are, first, that in recent times a significant number of Arab-Americans and of others from the Middle East have become a part of the US academic world and are having an impact on the development of knowledge about the Middle East, which is drawing us out from our inward-turning nature referred to above; and, second, the impact of the neo-liberal economy is tending to promote an increasing cosmopolitanism, among some at least. The combination of the two is influencing the direction of the field these days, making one part increasingly interested in the Middle East on its own terms, while having—again for reasons to be discussed—the opposite effect on another part.

As regards the Arab-American contribution to American scholarship, one has the impression that over the past twenty years, it has broadened and deepened the scholarly understanding of the Middle East over what had existed before. One could note as well that its priorities have included some consideration of Arab scholarship. It is scarcely an exaggeration to suggest that in the past, there was no predictable interest on the part of American scholars in the scholarship produced in the modern Middle East, even when it was written in English or French, much less when it was written in Arabic. A modest exception must be made for the work of Arab scholars who were Western-educated, but only a modest one, despite the fact that all the while we have had a substantial translation market for books in modern Arabic. My point is that we do not suffer from a lack of contact; it is more a matter of the choices we have made. Our translation market has been focused, as a result of our choices, on works of literature, works of theology, and on the occasional works by Arabic politicians or by great figures such as a Rifa`ah al-Tahtawi.

Other works, even foundational works of modern scholarship, are often ignored. Indeed, it would be hard even to find a review of such works, although most could be found in Worldcat. A concern one might have is why there has been such a lack of curiosity for so long, especially when we had reason to expect we could benefit from this work if it was more accessible. Why, if a country produced Naguib Mahfouz, would it not have other intellectual productions of importance? There does not appear to be any clear explanation.

Allow me then to drop this point with the hope that others will take it up, and to turn to the next one, the subject of neo-liberalism and its impact on culture and social theory, and by extension its impact on Middle East studies. And here, as I indicated, it

must suffice simply to focus on the Middle East Studies Association (MESA) as an expression of Middle East studies—in other words, to approach the subject of neo-liberalism and Middle East studies in terms of its impact on MESA in the age of neo-liberalism. If the Arab-American scholarly community has been playing a role in bringing about cultural change, so too has neo-liberalism, and one can observe it by observing MESA.

But is this possible? It is not that the contention is incorrect; it simply is not a practical matter to casually bring this up. The impact of neo-liberalism on the direction of academic culture is a huge subject; there is an entire book on the neo-cons and the writings of American history alone. The neo-liberal impact on MESA doubtless exists, but it too would be bound to be quite a large subject, one too large for any careful consideration short of a monograph. The subject invites someone who would take on such work.

To begin with, neo-liberalism has produced, as was suggested, a culture of globalization, one that is challenging the very idea of the need for area studies of the sort which MESA represents. This alone gives one a lot to think about. Then it could be observed that neo-liberalism has fragmented fields such as Middle East studies, driving one segment, including some Arab-Americans, closer to the Middle East, and another, also including some Arab-Americans, deeper into Washington and its culture. This too provides a lot to think about. If in times past the field was fragmented by the Arab-Israeli issue, now it is fragmented according to one's relation to the American empire.

So how can one connect MESA and neo-liberalism, even in some sort of preliminary way, given such obstacles? Perhaps what is called for is simply to fall back on MESA's basic narrative in order see what it shows us. This is what I propose to begin with here. MESA, which is an indispensable organization for all of us, was created in the late 1960s. It was created to fit the needs of the development revolution, hopefully to provide it with a better fit than had the American Oriental Society (AOS), the organization that preceded it. One impression is that the professors in the AOS were simply not that cooperative, or perhaps simply not that strategic. Its members would not compromise on their interpretation of modern Middle Eastern society as an outgrowth of what they took to be the much more important period to study, the medieval past of the Middle East. They were thus not developmentalists in the government's sense of the word. Furthermore, the research done in the AOS, archeology aside, was largely text-based and thus was fairly low-budget. Support was not an overwhelming matter of concern; AOS members generally supported themselves as language teachers. Thus it was difficult for the government to mold such an organization.

This explains, I believe, the government's interest in creating MESA. MESA scholars are obliged to travel a lot; often they have to do it on the government's dime and pursue as a quid pro quo at least some of the latter's concerns. This explains the difference in the level of prestige of the early MESA of the 1970s, during the heyday of developmentalism—a phenomenon MESA scholars were involved in—and MESA since the 1980s. And, of course, it is this later period that is of greatest concern here.

In the period since the 1980s, the development revolution had ended and neo-liberalism was making its appearance; at that point, what seemed useful to the government were the functionaries who promoted democracy in the Middle East, and along with them the stalwarts of the inter-faith dialogue networks, the latter comprised of groups promoting the idea of the Middle East as religious and the idea of religious understanding as something that we were equipped to undertake. This was not what MESA by and large was involved in. What MESA was involved in was producing old-style reality-based scholarship. And, by the 1980s, such scholarship was already being perceived as somewhat dysfunctional. If facts are something one creates as one needs them—and this is what the neo-cons got out of post-modernism—then who needs the inconvenience of organizations, such as MESA, which produce unplanned facts?

If what one wants to do in the Middle East is run one country after another into debt, invade it, and plunder it, what one needs are think tanks, nongovernmental organizations, and bagmen, not Middle East Centers or MESAs. Thus, just as the American Oriental Society was eclipsed by the rise of MESA, so the rise of the think tanks has in recent years eclipsed MESA; examples of these think tanks include The Ideation Center of Booz and Company, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Brookings Institution after the 2002 takeover by Haim Saban and Martin Indyk, among others.

Put simply, what these think tanks are proposing is what is congruent with neoliberal economic policies in general. As was the case in the nineteenth century under the old classical liberalism, so today under neo-liberalism; scientific scholarship of the MESA sort is thus placed unfortunately in a defensive position. This is MESA's real problem, and it explains why it is sometimes being bypassed.

Changes in the American Context: Looking Forward from Tahrir

On the brighter side, and to move toward the matter at hand, neo-liberalism appears to have made at least part of the MESA membership, perhaps the anti-imperial part, to go so far as to become interested in the history and development of knowledge production in countries such as Egypt, subjects previously off the radar screen. Thus one finds Donald Reid's work on Cairo University, Anthony Gorman and Yoav di Capua's works on Egyptian historians, and Omniya el-Shakry's work on Egyptian social scientists, among other fairly recent works of this sort. In the circles that read these books, Arabic works of scholarship are cited more and more frequently as footnotes; with the growth of the internet, this is even more the case. It is in this context that the works under discussion here came to be accepted by a mainstream academic press.

These books are not works of literature nor of religious dogma, nor are they being published because the authors are luminaries, nor are they being published simply because of their factual information, nor for even their use of sources, although the works are interesting in these regards as well. What they are—and this is important to keep in mind—are history books of the more complicated sort. The most important thing one might learn from them is interpretation grounded in facts. The publisher was willing to take the calculated risk that a readership for this sort of thing now actually exists, which is why they are being published.

Turning now to the merits of these books, one might note the following. In Nelly Hanna's *Artisan Entrepreneurs in Cairo and Early Modern Capitalism (1600-1800),* one finds that some of the artisans of Cairo of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were producers and sellers of goods for the market—that is, they were apparently thus a part of the motor of early capitalism. This is a new point. A generation ago—and even today, in the work of Timur Kuran and Charles Tripp—such research might be dismissed on the assumption that Islam needed a Protestant Reformation to be capitalist, or on the assumption that during the days of the Ottoman Empire one should focus on Istanbul—in other words, that it is only the upper classes of the imperial center which matter. But, at this point, opinions are changing. Hanna's work was not only discussed this past year in Cairo in a conference; it was recently nominated for a prize competition by the Society for Economic Anthropology, an American social science organization.

Early capitalism, Hanna argues, has to be looked at not just in terms of long distance trade, but also in terms of small-scale production for the local market. I agree with this idea; it seems to me self-defeating to have capitalism all trade, with no worker and no struggle over the wage. To sum up, what is new here is not just the reassertion of production as a part of capitalism, but the idea that the artisan of this period may form a part of the take-off of modern capitalism, the artisan becoming a capitalist, the guild in some instances mutating into a business.

In turning now to the second book, *The Large Landowning Class and the Peasantry in Egypt, 1837–1952*, a work written jointly by Asim el-Dissouky and by the late Raouf `Abbas Hamid, the reader might wonder if this is going to be in essence the translation of some Arabic version of Gabriel Baer or A. E. Crouchley or some other old classic of Egyptian economic history with which we are already familiar. The answer is in the negative. This is a different kind of book altogether. It has a different methodology and a different argument; there is no equivalent to it in English or French.

What the reader encounters is a book that addresses the question of the deep socio-economic issues that led to the 1952 Revolution, a revolution that manifested itself on the level of politics but cannot be fully explained in those terms. What the book shows is how the government, beginning in 1837, promoted a modern kind of state-related land ownership for the individuals close to Muhammad `Ali, and how this set in motion a dynamic of landlord versus peasant to which the state constantly had to turn its attention. The situation progressively worsened over a long period of time, in fact up to now. The 1952 land reform ameliorated things, but did not solve the land problem, which as a result continues. Some of its victims—that is, those thrown off the land more recently—are today doubtless among those who are out in Tahrir Square.

The reader of the *Large Landowning Class* will doubtless be struck by how complex the relation between state and ruling class is. State and class share certain interests at different times, but go their own way in terms of who has what power and what authority. Even at the peak of colonial power, there was not just British power, but also British dependence on Egyptian power, represented in such figures as Nubar Pasha or `Adli Yaqin, landowners who had their hand in politics. It was on this

complicated terrain of state, class, and empire that the Egyptian elite tried to confront the opposition posed by the peasants.

Finally, the reader will encounter a number of subjects, familiar enough in their own right, looked at perhaps for the first time through the lens of landowner and peasant. These subjects include Islam in Egypt in the 1930s, a subject bringing to mind Charles Smith's suggestive term, "a turn to Islam"; al-Disuqi and `Abbas Hamid find the turn to Islam to be one of the liberal age remedies for poverty that was discussed during the Great Depression by the landowners. Changes in marriage and inheritance, the reader will find, also seem to hang on land questions, as the authors show us with material from the nineteenth century. There are other such examples.

To sum up, these few points scarcely do justice to these books, whose publication I believe—to return now to my earlier point—reflects not just their merit, but also changes in the context of Middle East studies as well. We are, as I see it, making a bit of progress as a field, reaching out a bit more, although the context, as I have also been trying to suggest, is not one without its limitations.

[This was first presented as a paper at the 2011 Middle East Studies Association conference.]

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