Book Reviews

Review Article
Imperialism, Class and Power in pre-Republican Egypt


BASHEER M. NAFI

These two books, covering a crucial period of Egypt’s modern history, belong to two different genres of writing, one being memoirs of a former khedive, while the second is an academic study of social history; yet there is a strong unifying element that runs through the two books. By this I don’t mean their focus on the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Egypt, but rather their concern with the position of the Egyptian upper classes. In 1940, more than two decades after his forced dethronement, Abbas Hilmi II [‘Abbās Hilmi al-Thānī] (r. 1892–1914) wrote to justify his rule, to respond to his critics and to defend his place in history; while in the late 1990s, as Egypt began to witness some fundamental socio-economic transformation, where wealth and social power are becoming respectable and desired, Magda Baraka tries to rehabilitate the princes and pashas [pāshās] of the pre-1952 Egypt, to write them back, and not without honour, into Egypt’s modern history. Both books are essentially about power, power that was taken away by the British and still sorely lamented by the late khedive, and power lost by the upper classes after the 1952 revolution of the Free Officers but never forsaken.

Egypt, of which we read in these two books, began to evolve during Muhammad Ali’s rule, 1805–1849. An energetic and highly ambitious Ottoman wāli of Egypt, Muhammad Ali [Muḥammad ‘Ali] (d. 1849) launched...
a period of state-led industrial, agricultural and military revival, establishing Egypt, by the early 1830s, as a major regional power. His desire to occupy a central position in the Ottoman empire put him on a collision course with the ruling quarters in Istanbul and led him to launch two major wars against the Ottoman sultanate. Muhammad Ali’s firm control of the southeastern Mediterranean region threatened the strategic interests of the British and their route to India, and precipitated their intervention against him and the Egyptian expansionism. By 1840, Muhammad Ali had been defeated, pushed back into Egypt and forced to severely scale down his military and industrial capabilities. His only compensation was the granting of semi-autonomous status to Egypt and a dynastic rule of his family, a family that continued to rule Egypt, first as khedives and from 1922 as kings, until 1952. The defeat of Muhammad Ali, however, did not diminish the strategic significance of Egypt. If anything, this significance was enormously heightened after the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, leading, after another period of economic and military revival under khedive Ismā‘il Pāshā (r. 1863–79), to the occupation of Egypt by the British in 1882.

The British arrival to Egypt, apparently to quell a nationalist revolt against khedive Tawfiq [Muhammad Tawfiq Pāshā] (r. 1879–92) and the ruling Turkish-Circassian elite, had no international legality or justification. Although autonomous, Egypt was still part of the Ottoman empire, and no state of war existed between the British and the Ottomans to give Britain the right of conquest, and was equally seen strategically important by other imperialist powers, none of whom, especially France, was prepared to accept a long-term British presence in Egypt. Officially, the British maintained that their presence in Egypt was temporary and would last only until internal stability and security were guaranteed. In reality, however, the British viceroy in Cairo, backed by the British army, quickly emerged as the centre of power in the country, whereby British advisors and officials in the Egyptian army and various departments of government held almost all vital strings of the state in their hands. The khedive and his government were thus reduced to marginal positions, and as the British penetration of the Egyptian life


continued, Egyptian prime ministers would more and more take the side of
the British rather than safeguard their country’s interests or the rights of their
sovereign, the khedive.

It was under these circumstances that Abbas Hilmi II (1874–1944), not yet
nineteen years of age, was declared a khedive of Egypt in 1892, after the death
of his father, Tawfiq, whose weakness and ineptitude helped the British to
consolidate their presence in the country during the past ten years. Between
1883 and 1892, Abbas was educated in the not-necessarily pro-British schools
of Switzerland and Austria, becoming the first of the Muhammad Ali’s
dynasty to receive a European education. Young, imbued by the European
liberal values of the late-nineteenth century, and not yet familiar with the
realities of the situation in his country, Abbas’s return to Egypt marked one of
the most interesting periods of its modern history, a period during which
Egyptian nationalism would be born and acquire its most essential features.
Abbas’s tempestuous relations with the British reached its breaking point after
the outbreak of World War I in 1914, as London decided to remove him from
the throne and replace him by a weaker and detached member of Muhammad
Ali’s family. His memoirs, presented in a powerful English text for the first
time by the Georgetown University academic Amira Sonbol, cover his period
as a khedive, and makes no mention of his life in exile (1914–1944), which is
no less interesting to the historian for the complex relations and activities of
the deposed khedive during the interwar period.

Sonbol’s translation, introduction and editing effort are highly efficient
and accurate; however, the extensive research into the modern history of
Egypt, conducted and published during the past half century, have rendered
Abbas II’s memoirs somehow redundant as to our understanding of the
history of Egypt under the British. Consisting mainly of disconnected series of
apologetic and contemplative essays, rather than a cohesive, factual record,
these memoirs fail to shed any new light on Abbas II’s rule, his difficult
relations with the British or his relations with the Ottoman state and the
various forces of the Ottoman opposition to sultan Abd al-Hamid II [Sulṭān
‘Abd al-Hamīd al-Thānī] (r. 1876–1909). The memoirs’ most important are the
human dimensions they reveal, the way the khedive saw himself, the way he
saw his associates and interlocutors, and the people he was supposed to have
ruled. One of the first impressions that these memoirs convey is the cultural
detachment of the khedivial rulers from the Egyptian people. Becoming an
Arab or Egyptian was apparently not an essential goal in the upbringing of the
khedivial princes, Abbas included, and not perhaps until after 1922 would the
education of a prince (in this case Fārūq [1920–1965]) be shaped by the
Egyptian-Arab system of education. Speaking of his childhood in Cairo
(seventy years and several generations after the establishment of his family in Egypt), Abbas II wrote (p. 56):

From 1874 to 1880, my childhood was spent in the harem of our home, where Tawfiq’s only wife, my mother, Princess Emine Hanem, personally watched over her children. It was there that I learned of my Turkish descent. My father placed an English governess at my side to attend to my hygiene. Thus, the first languages that I learned to speak were Turkish and English. Between 1880 and 1882 my father had ordered the building of a school with a big garden next to Abdin Palace. This school was for me and my brother, Muhammad Ali, and a hundred children from the best families of Egypt. There they were given free instruction and were offered lunch. In that school I got used to living among the children of the country and learned to speak their language, while being taught English by the teacher.

The distance between the ruler and the ruled created a kind of silent system of government in which Egyptian officials, the majority of whom were still of Turco-Circassian origins, understood their role in, literally, serving the sovereign, while the people lacked access to the centre of power. Repeatedly, Abbas complains of never being advised by men of his government, especially in the early years of his rule when he desperately looked for advice. He laments the absence of a sense of nationness among the Egyptian people, and the failure of his successive governments to stand by him against the bullying and intimidation that he was subjected to by the British officials in Egypt. Moreover, he blames his misfortunes on the convergence of the Ottoman and British aims, as the Ottoman government sought to preclude Egypt from gaining total independence and the British sought to suppress Egyptian forces that opposed their presence. This was largely true, but equally true was the big share of responsibility that Muhammad Ali’s successors, especially khedive Tawfiq (who is strongly defended by his son), carried for this situation.

By not embracing the Arabo-Egyptian culture, by not Egyptionizing the state they ruled for generations, and by holding fast to their alien Turkish origins, Muhammad Ali’s successors never succeeded in establishing strong bonds between themselves and the people of Egypt. What exacerbated this state of affairs was the radical changes, in terms of technology, communications, printing and social mobility, which the late nineteenth century was bringing to Egypt, awakening a sense of identity and demand for political representation. Tawfiq’s weakness and inability to respond to the changes of time was the main reason behind the ‘Urābī [Ahmad ‘Arabī (d. 1911)] revolt (1882) and the subsequent British military intervention. Once the British entered Egypt, neither Tawfiq, nor any of the Turkish ruling class, had
the vision, the courage or the political skill to stop the British from consolidating their position. Tawfiq’s mistrust of the Egyptian elements in the army, of the ‘ulama’ and the Egyptian people at large, made him an easy prey for Lord Cromer, the instinctively imperialist British viceroy. When Abbas rose to the throne, the British had already been entrenched and could no longer be confronted by the political maneuvering of the khedive or simply by peaceful means.

Abbas II’s inexperience did not help him, when he became a khedive, to see that he was meant to be a mere titular ruler. As he attempted to assert his position, he was bound to confront the arrogant and ruthless Lord Cromer. It is a credit to Abbas that he began to establish contacts with the reawakening Egyptian nationalist circles, represented by Muṣṭafā Kāmil and Shaykh ‘Alī Yūsuf, in order to counterbalance the power and influence of the British. Largely, it was this association between Abbas II and the Egyptian nationalists that secured for the khedive his place in the history of the Egyptian nationalist movement. Yet, what Abbas left out of his memoirs is certainly more interesting than what he included. He, for example, does not tell us how and why his relations with the British came to improve after the departure of Cromer in 1907. Was it only the mild manners and accommodationist attitudes of Sir Eldon Gorst, who replaced Cromer as the viceroy in Egypt until 1911, or were there other reasons? And why did the khedive’s relations with the Egyptian nationalists deteriorate during the same period? Did he begin to betray his nationalist allies and gamble with the fate of Egypt or was he playing another of his political games with the British?

In 1914, as many of the Egyptian activists found refuge in Istanbul, an Egyptian nationalist tried to assassinate Abbas II in the Caliphate’s capital, encouraged apparently by elements within the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP). This incident reflected the bitterness among the exiled Egyptian nationalists towards the khedive and the mistrust with which the Ottoman officials viewed him. Abbas makes a passing reference to rumours circulating at the time of his aspiration to establish an Arab Caliphate, which would have been a severe blow to what remained of the unity and influence of the Ottoman Caliphate. For the idea of an Arab Caliphate had a lot to do with the British anti-Ottoman policies, prior and after the outbreak of World War

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I, the deepening enmity to Abbas in Istanbul seemed to be understandable. Although Abbas denies any connection to the British anti-Ottoman schemes in the Arab *mashriq*, and the whole issue has not yet been fully investigated by historians, there is evidence to suggest that relations between the khedive and Lord Kitchener (viceroy from 1911–14) were not always as bad as they are portrayed in the memoirs. First contacts between ‘Abd Allāh, the active and conspiring son of Sharīf Husayn of Makkah (King of Hijāz 1919–1924), and the British, represented by Kitchener, took place in Cairo at the instigation of Abbas II. These contacts were the prelude to the later alliance of Sharīf Husayn with the British against the CUP-led Ottoman government, and the emergence of the idea of an Arab Caliphate. Why should the British at this very critical stage lose trust in the khedive and force him into exile, when his relations with the Ottoman government were evidently reaching a low point, is not very clear. The most likely answer is that the British in time of war, as it would happen again and again, became blinded with paranoia.

What is astonishing in Abbas II’s memoirs is the almost total absence of appreciation for the Egyptian upper class, which was supposed to be the real base of the khedivian rule. Apart from members of his own family, who are mentioned with the customary respect, and one or two associates, such as the Armenian Tigrane Pasha, son-in-law of Nubar Pasha, the famous minister of khedive Ismā‘īl, Abbas’s view of the Egyptian upper class is largely condescending and contemptuous. In the long-drawn out battle of wills between him and the British, Abbas II found his allies among the educated elements of the less influential and not yet fully-fledged middle class rather than among the land-owning stratum, whether of Egyptian or Turco-Circassian origins. This, of course, brings us to Magda Baraka’s study of the composition, role and values of the Egyptian upper class during the first half of the twentieth century.

The emergence of the Egyptian upper class is largely linked to the changes in the modes of land ownership, which Egypt witnessed during the nineteenth century. While Egypt, like the rest of the Ottoman land, had not known the system of private landholding, Muhammad Ali’s efforts at expanding agriculture led him to grant tracts of the newly reclaimed land to associates and state officials. Once Muhammad Ali abolished the *iltizam* (land tax-

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5 On Abbas Hilmi II’s support of and contacts with the early Arab nationalists and his desire of an Arab Caliphate, see Eliezer Tauber, *The Emergence of the Arab Movements* (London: Frank Cass, 1993), 26, 113, 156, 217–9, 229, 279.

collection) system, cultivated land came almost entirely under the direct
control of the state, embodied in the wāli himself. *Ib'adiyyah*, uncultivated but
surveyed land that was designated for reclamation, and *usiya*, the land given to
the old land-tax collectors as tax-free properties, were allocated to state civil
and military personnel, as well as to local notables.\textsuperscript{7} The privatization of land
was given a major boost by khedive Ismā‘īl’s 1871 law that, following in the
footsteps of the Ottoman *tanẓimat*, established full legal ownership rights for
holders of *khavājiyyah* land in return for immediate payment. After the British
occupation of Egypt, laws were passed in 1883 and in 1891 affirming the
legality of private land ownership and protecting its sanctity. State land, which
practically meant the khedive-held land, known as *al-dā‘irah al-saniyyah*,
provided the main source for the expansion in land ownership in the late
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as members of the ruling family
were forced to sell large portions of their holdings in order to alleviate and
service the foreign debt.

The very nature of the process of transforming the land from the state
domain to private individuals placed large tracts of land in the possession of a
small number of families, mainly local notables and some foreigners, leading
to the emergence of a social class that shared common interests, and later, after
the formal independence of 1922, came to dominate the state. In 1929, less
than 3200 owners possessed more than 2.5 million feddans (*faddāns*), out of 7.5
million feddans constituting all cultivated lands in Egypt, whereas less than
8000 farmers, with 50–200 feddans each, owned another 1.1 million feddans,
creating thereby a situation whereby 0.5 percent of the people controlled more
than 50 percent of the country’s agricultural land.

Baraka, adopting a socio-cultural approach to defining and understanding
the Egyptian upper class, believes that “objective interests cannot be imputed
to social actors without reference to their conscious interpretation or some
specific context” (pp. 10–11). By this she is trying to justify the portraying of
the Egyptian upper class “not in terms of shared ideologies or programmes of
political action but in terms of life styles, self-perceptions and languages”
(p. 11). That the conventional socio-political approach to the study of class in
general, and in Egypt in particular, is not adequate is a fair assumption. The
problem, however, is that dismissing the social underpinnings of political
behaviour in total would make any attempt to construct a systematic and

\textsuperscript{7} The emergence of private land ownership is studied in details by Gabriel Baer, *A History of
discussion of the nineteenth century is on pp. 13–70. See also, Kenneth M. Cuno, *The Pasha’s
Peasants: Land, Society, and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740–1858* (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1992), especially, 103–98.
logical framework of Egypt’s political history in the first half of the twentieth century an impossible task indeed. More crucial is the question of whose culture (whose discourse) is to be recalled as the referential substance for defining the role and position of the Egyptian upper class. If the Marxist analysis is failing the historian, is it adequate to profile a certain social class by relying exclusively on its own voices? What Magda Baraka is in fact attempting to do in her book amounts to a wholesale re-invention of the Egyptian upper class, re-imagining it as a mild, opened, flux, self-critical and even conscientious stratum.

One of the principal aims of Baraks’s study is to demolish the established notion of identifying the upper class with big landholders. By setting her own criteria of wealth, Baraka includes also big merchants and senior government employees and liberal professionals (medical doctors, lawyers,...etc.). Although she admits the existence of close relationships between the landed class and the newly born industrialist stratum, as was earlier indicated by Charles Issawi, she makes no attempt to investigate other possible interconnections between the landed class and the groups of senior government officials, lawyers, and doctors. Only in the late 1930s, for example, was the military college opened to ordinary Egyptians, and well until 1952, high-ranking army officers were largely drawn from a specific background of wealth and aristocracy. It is not even clear from Baraka’s findings whether the contribution of the non-landed strata to the making of the upper class was significant enough to warrant such a paradigm shift.

Another aim of this work is to demonstrate that the Egyptian upper class underwent substantive change during the period under study, change in size, composition, life style and perception, as well as in the material base upon which it rested. Quoting M. Anis, a leading Egyptian historian, Baraka wrote that the share of property income (that is, rents, profits and interests) declined from 66 percent of national income in the years 1937–9 to 62 percent in 1950, because of the decline in the share of rents of land and buildings from 29 to 24 percent during the same period (p. 43). This is hardly a significant change, and can be easily attributed to normal fluctuations in the economic circle, or to the surge in industrial and manufacturing activities during the Second World War years and the stationing of hundreds of thousands of allied soldiers in Egypt. As other figures in the book show, although the share of the manufacturing sector in the national income slightly rose during the 1940s, land holdings were markedly consolidated and became more entrenched. Whether in the state or society, the land owning stratum was firmly positioned on the eve of

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the 1952 revolution, and even the Wafdi modest proposals for land reform were blocked. Reasons behind the socio-political chaos of the late 1940s, the faltering cohesion of the landed class and its final fall in the 1950s, should be sought somewhere else.

As the ‘Urābī revolt attested to, tension was on the rise between the indigenous Egyptian and the privileged Turco-Circassian elements in the army and the state during the 1870s. Yet, once Egypt came under British control, and particularly after the ascendance of Abbas II to the throne, the thrust of Egyptian nationalism was directed against the British. It was no longer the native versus the Turk, or the ordinary versus the privileged, but rather the Egyptian versus the foreign occupier, whereby the Ottoman sultanate was looked to as the principal ally of the Egyptian nationalists. The Egyptian national solidarity reached a new height during the 1919 revolution. But the half-victory-half-compromise outcome of the revolution enabled the British to create a new political order in Egypt, breaking in effect the national solidarity and redrawing the socio-political setting. By granting Egypt formal independence, the British succeeded in transforming political conflict in the country into an Egyptian-versus-Egyptian mode.9 The British retained full control of the state affairs, sometimes implicitly, and if needed explicitly, and as conflict and competition intensified between squabbling political factions and between the Palace and its opponents, the British became the ultimate arbitrator of power. Baraka is certainly right to highlight the class underpinnings of the 1923 constitution, upon which the whole monarchic era was founded. Never able to reflect and defend the national aspirations of their countrymen, the Egyptian upper class fell victim to the very regime of which it was the principal beneficiary. Divided between several political parties and groupings, which were only nominally different from each other, and competing bitterly for power and control, the upper class undermined its own monopoly of power.10 The rise of the educated strata, as well as the ideologically radical forces, set the scene for the ultimate collapse of the regime in 1952.

Notwithstanding the not so rare mistaken interpretations of tables and figures compiled, Baraka draws a multi-faceted picture of the culture, customs, styles and inclinations of the Egyptian upper class. Imbedded in this picture is


the increasing marginalization of the traditional modes of life, and the unreserved embrace of European culture and values by the Egyptian elite. Yet, the sweet nostalgia by which Baraka re-constructs images of Cairene exclusive clubs, city quarters, theatres and parliament (which was also a sort of exclusive institution), conceals other vital dimensions of the life and works of the Egyptian upper class. To a certain extent, Baraka efficiently documents what she calls the “serious limitations” of the upper class’s attitudes towards democracy and issues of social reform, including the fear from the spread of education among the peasants, the strong beliefs among the landed stratum of its inherent right to rule, and the slow development of democracy and political participation. What she is obviously reluctant to mention was the sharp disparity between the standards of living of the pashas and the ordinary Egyptian, the brutality and exploitation that characterized the relations between the 0.5 percent and the rest, and the vast gap that separated the cultural milieu of the upper class from the daily life of the vast majority of people.

Today’s Egypt seems to be entering a new phase of social polarization and differentiation. After a short period of socially oriented experiment (which, however badly it is now portrayed, did attempt to establish a more inclusive society), the distance between the wealthy few and the poor many is on the increase. As the nouveau riche embrace the American culture in a demeaning manner, the majority of Egyptians seem to sink deeper and deeper, struggling against decaying urban quarters, dehumanizing public transport and a dysfunctional system of education. If only for this, and despite its shortcomings, Baraka’s book should become necessary reading.

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This book is a commentary on the first two sūrah of the Qur’an. It consists of an introductory note of 33 pages, the explanation of Sūrah al-Fātiḥah

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11 On the situation of the Egyptian peasants during the first half of the twentieth century, see the observations of Russell Pasha in his *Egyptian Service, 1902–1946* (London: John Murray, 1949), 30–42.