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The Building of Modern Egypt¹

Goldschmidt, Arthur, Jr. Modern Egypt. Formation of a Nation-State. London: Century Hutchinson, Inc., 1988. Pp.x + 211.

(ISBN 0-86531-183-8)

Youssef, Michael. Revolt Against Modernity. Leiden: The Netherlands: E. J. Brill, 1985. Pp.x + 189. (ISBN 90 04 07559

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An old Arab legend recounts that, when God created the peoples of the world, he granted their choice of a desirable distinction accompanied by a divine curse. The Egyptians chose never to go hungry. God granted the Nile, whose recurrent flooding would water and fertilise their crops--making them the envy of all nations and the object of perpetual conquest.

The shadows of non-Egyptian rule over Egyptians extend

¹The subject here stated is vast. This paper makes no attempt to summarise the general history leading to modern statehood, but merely to extract salient points which, like stepping stones, delineate the path taken to reach that situate.

through the sands of time much like those cast upon the desert by mighty pyramids. The continual presence of foreign rulers throughout much of its history has played a significant role in both defining and complicating Egypt's emergence as a modern state.

In 1730 B.C. Egypt was conquered by the Hyksos, a band of west Asian nomads--its first foreign rulers--falling subsequently to Libyans, Kushites, Assyrians and Persians. Repeatedly regaining autonomy only to quickly surrender it, the arrival of Alexander's Macedonians in 332 B.C., finally saw Egypt ruled contiguously by non-Egyptians until 1952.

Egypt, one of the first countries to be encounter Christianity, was predominantly of that faith by the fourth century. Estranged from the Orthodox church in the fifth century over a philosophical and somewhat esoteric debate regarding the nature of Christ, with their unfortunate proclivity for subjugation, the stage was set for an Arab invasion and the gradual dissemination of Islam. Both religions coexisted and, during the tenth and eleventh centuries, religious toleration encouraged by Fatimid rulers allowed Egypt to become the intellectual and commercial centre of the entire Muslim world. As a province of the Ottoman empire, beginning in 1517, Egypt fared less well: with trade routes diverted, artisans and scholars began a exodus to Constantinople, reducing Cairo to the state of a cultural ghetto.

The British, Dutch and Portuguese navies

commanded the sea, but among the Muslim countries, Egypt suffered the greatest isolation as a result of the discover of the Cape of Good Hope route. . . .(Youssef, 1985, p.49)

The effects of eternal foreign domination upon the national character of Egypt was most clearly revealed during the power vacuum subsequent to the Napoleon's expulsion. Two contemporary sayings demonstrate the point: "In the land of Egypt, its good things belong to others";(Goldschmidt, 1988, p.17) and, "If I were a lord and you were a lord, who would drive the donkey?"(Goldschmidt, 1988, p.17) Egyptians then were the first to acknowledge that only foreigners could rule. Ironically, this was in fact the moment--not so much of modern Egypt's birth, but of a twinkle that flashed in the eye of her father. Muhammad Ali, an Albanian trained as an Ottoman officer, speaking mainly Turkish rather than Arabic, illiterate until later middle age, succeeded where Napoleon failed and effectively founded modern Egypt. Muhammad Ali was far from philanthropic and the development of Egypt was to a large degree a by-product of his consolidation and maintenance of power. Nevertheless, strict state control over agricultural production and price controls, in which the government served as a monopolic broker, bore early fruit, bringing renewed prosperity to the country. With the engagement of French engineers, canals, dams and irrigation systems provided improvements to the agricultural infrastructure. Along with a concomitant rise in population, cash crops replaced

subsistence crops, systems of transportation and grain storage were improved, sugar refineries and other capitol improvements were made. Egypt was not only moving towards modernity, but it had regained its former agricultural prosperity.

Not surprisingly, Egypt became the first non-Western country to make faltering steps towards an industrial revolution, with various state controlled factories being builded. Dependent upon conscripted and often unpaid workers, supported by foreign engineers and managers, controlled by foreign rule, this entire modernising exercise contained all the elements that had defined Egypt's past.

The London Convention of 1841 was a result of Egypt's increasing military might and stated simply that Egyptian troops would be removed from Syria in return for Ottoman and European recognition of Muhammad Ali's right to pass governorship to his heirs. Lasting until 1914, this accord essentially realised Egypt as an autonomous province within the Ottoman Empire. With the development of educational institutions, Ali left to his successors an autonomous and almost independent state, with technically trained army officers and bureaucrats committed both to westernised reform and autonomy. And so began the period of increasing European influence, in which the British constructed the countries first railway line, between Cairo and Alexandria-- this followed by a French countermove to build the Suez canal. Simultaneously, the state run monopolies established by Muhammad Ali were gradually being removed, whilst the 1858

Ottoman Land Law allowed personal ownership of property. New land owners, *outrerois* village headmen, were becoming increasingly wealthy. Sa'id, great grandson of Muhammad Ali, as a means of controlling the power of such men, made it common practice to conscript their son into army and marine academies. This, though sufficiently significant to Sa'id, had greater and unforeseen implications, for it marked the beginning of ethnic Egyptians' advancement into governing circles. But if Egyptians were finally reaching offices of authority, the offices themselves were about to lose much of their potency. This occurred, not surprisingly, as a result of spiralling national debt. During the mid-1980s, Egypt's new ruler, Khedive Isma'il, desperate for funds, proceeded with thoughtless recklessness, the results of which would be keenly and *longly* felt. Most ominous was the sale, in 1875, of government shares of the Suez Canal Company to Britain, foreshadowing British control. At the same time, with so much now at stake, the British made an assessment of Egypt's financial viability and found it to be tottering upon the precipice. With further embarrassment stemming from involvement in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, Isma'il authorised Britain and France to instate the Dual Financial Control over Egyptian state revenues and expenditures, a step which resulted in British and French ministers taking their place in cabinet. Since all historic action is met by an equal reaction, the stalwart European presence in Egyptian politics was the catalyst allowing for the arrival of nationalist

sentiment and, soon, nationalist movement. This movement was closely aligned to the Islamic faith:

. . . since the Muslims firmly believed that all power comes from God, they could not comprehend, let alone admit, that God gave to the Christian infidels the power to rule over the chosen people. (Youssef, 1985, p.53)

In 1879, Isma'il was deposed by Ottoman direction and replaced with his son, Tawfiq. The dichotomy of influence which Tawfiq faced--European and nationalistic--saw the new ruler playing safe, believing his position most secure under European predominance. Goldschmidt aptly articulates the ramification of this decision:

By using their influence to depose his father, the European powers had reduced the khedivate to a pawn in a larger political game. Egypt's ruling family would never recover its independence. (Goldschmidt, 1988, p.31)

British occupation was the inevitable result; Egyptian acceptance of this foreign rule was the inevitable response. It was the increasing influence of Islamic dogma that finally turned the tables: Muslims living under non-Muslim rule were encouraged either to resist or to move. Egypt, because of the omnipresent Nile, was in many respects the oldest of the worlds nations, and the decided reluctance of its people to dislocate existed as the predominant sentiment; thus was borne the Nationalist Party.

The outbreak of world war I served to further entrench British rule: the last vestiges of the Ottoman empire had sided with Germany, forcing Britain to declare a protectorate over the country. Following the war, complex compromises were made in an effort to limit foreign control. In this respect, Islam again raised its ubiquitous head, for Egyptians were becoming increasingly disillusioned by European ideas and institutions. Subsequent to world war II, The society of Muslim Brother articulated a general rejection of "parties, parliaments and constitutions,"(Goldschmidt, 1988, p.72) calling instead for the installation of authentic Muslim institutions.

The change of government that occurred in 1952 was not merely a military coup, but a major transformation of Egyptian society: not only was the landowning elite, ushered in by the 1858 Ottoman Land Law, an encumbrance to peasants, but foreign business and foreign technocrats hindered the advancement of young ambitious Egyptians.

The government of both Nasir and Anwar al Sadat were equally dictatorial--though Sadat was somewhat less obtrusive and showed a stronger inclination to European expectations and has accordingly been granted a more favourable review in the west. But it was fiscal problems as much as philosophical ideology that finally forced Sadat to join the western camp: five wars and an arms race with Israel augmented the burden of debt and meant that a nationalistic policy took precedence over Arab unity. In a sense, the dichotomy of influence which Tawfiq

faced--European and nationalistic--was now replayed on a larger scale, with Western and Islamic forces now face to face.

As with much of the world, modern Egypt saw an ever widening gulf between the rich and poor, the haves and have-nots. High income from increased tourism, investment, Suez Canal tolls and oil tolls were of benefit only to a minority, and it is for this reason that growing Muslim militant opposition--opposition to capitalistic western ideology--is as much a social phenomenon as a religious one.

Both *Modern Egypt* and *Revolt Against Modernity* provide a satisfactory outline of Egyptian history leading towards the advent of the recognisably modern State. Goldschmidt, though dealing with what we might term mainstream history, is attentive to historiographical tendencies and elucidates, briefly, various schools of thought and matters of some controversy before presenting his own and largely uncontroversial readings.

As suggested by the title, Youssef offers a text which leans towards the religious question of Muslim zealots. Indeed, according to his preliminary "Statement of Intent" this is to be the essential focus of the book. In this respect we are met with equivocal results, for Youssef spends the greatest part of his pages particularising history and context, and only in the latter chapters does his "intent" become apparent.

If Goldschmidt offers a general account which is missing some of the subtleties of motivation and movement, then we

might read Youssef concurrently, since it provides no small detail of the religious dimension lacking in the former. Together they present not only history but an historiographic view which explains away many western preconceptions, stereotypes, archetypes and prejudices. Egyptian modernity, with all its imperative problems and inimical forces, is shown definitively to be the result of its subjugative anteriority.