

Was the Red Flag Flying There? Marxist Politics and the Arab-Israeli Conflict in Egypt and Israel, 1948-1965



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British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1992), 215-216.

Stable URL:

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British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies is currently published by Taylor & Francis, Ltd..

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although substantively different, shares the same conceptual and methodological limitations exemplified by Kretzmer's scholarly and legalistic account.

In concluding this review I wish to stress that the above criticisms should not minimize the importance of both books. That their methodological approaches exemplify limitations should not detract from the fact that their contrasting substantive accounts present us with an excellent opportunity to consider from a well-informed basis some of the central concerns that confront both the Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel. The manner and form of resolution of these concerns will play a major role in the future political stability of this region of the Middle East.

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WAS THE RED FLAG FLYING THERE? MARXIST POLITICS AND THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT IN EGYPT AND ISRAEL, 1948-1965. By JOEL BEININ. London, I.B. Tauris, 1990. xix, 317pp. £29.95.

The story of Marxist parties on both sides of the Arab-Israeli divide is largely the story of disorientation, disintegration, fragmentation and progressive marginalization. A study of how these parties viewed the Arab-Israeli conflict and its possible resolution may therefore appear at first sight as an academic exercise of very limited value. But in Joel Beinin these parties have found a scholar who is not only sympathetic but immensely knowledgeable and penetrating. His book is a comparative study of communist and other left-wing parties that were active in Egypt and Israel from 1948 to 1965. His aim is to re-examine the Arab-Israeli conflict through the lens of Marxist politics and his analysis is deeply influenced by the ideas of Antonio Gramsci and especially his conception of hegemony. Beinin's study builds on the work published by revisionist Israeli historians in recent years, and he extends the revision of the conventional wisdom on the reasons behind the deadlock in Arab-Israeli relations into the 1950s and early 1960s with an epilogue on the period since 1967.

Comparative political research on the Middle East which includes Israel is uncommon, not least because of Israel's alleged uniqueness. Beinin notes in his introduction that to treat Egypt and Israel in the same analytical framework may seem odd because at first glance their political systems, cultures and historical trajectories are so different. His justification for doing so is that 'the processes by which nationalist ideologies became the hegemonic political discourse in the two countries were both similar and dialectically related' (p.6).

Beinin's great strength is that he reads both Arabic and Hebrew and is able to draw on an impressive range of primary sources and to place the activities of the Marxist parties in Egypt and Israel in their broader political context. He provides a rich and illuminating account of the process by which these parties, which in 1947-49 were closest to the international consensus in advocating a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian problem, were overwhelmed by what Beinin calls the 'hegemonic nationalist political discourse' in both countries. The fusion of the communist and the Zionist movements was made possible in 1947 because the Soviet Union supported the partition of Palestine and saw Zionism as an anti-imperialist force. But in the 1950s it was Ben-Gurion's aggressive and activist Zionism which shaped the political culture of the new state. Similarly, in the aftermath of the Suez war, it was Nasser's brand of pan-Arab nationalism which set the agenda in Egyptian and inter-Arab politics, relegating the Marxist forces to the sidelines.

Beinin's explanation of the failure of the Marxist parties to gain support for their view of the Arab-Israeli conflict within their respective countries is two-fold. First, in the realm of ideas, Marxist theory was incapable of explaining the power of nationalism, whether Arab or Israeli. Second, and more important, is the political weakness of the social forces on which the Marxist parties in both countries were based. The Gramscian strategy for combating the hegemony of the ruling class is to create a counter-hegemonic bloc consisting of the working class, but the creation of such a bloc was not possible in either Egypt or Israel. In the period since 1967, while the political power of the Marxist parties continued to wane, the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which they had favoured all along began to gain credibility. These parties can claim a moral victory, yet, as Beinin observes, this victory is not unproblematic since the main arguments advanced in support of the two-state solution are pragmatic and national.

While the questions raised in this book are not new, the approach is innovative, the analysis is cogent, and some of the new material is fascinating. The book makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the Arab-Israeli conflict and, more generally, on the role of left-wing forces in the politics of the Middle East.

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EGYPT AND THE CRISIS OF ISLAM. By ZAHIA RAGHEB DAJANI. New York, Peter Lang, 1990. ix, 255pp.

Zahia Ragheb Dajani has written an authoritative study of the works of Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, and 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād, Egyptian intellectuals whose formative writings were undertaken in the 1930s and 1940s, decades of nationalist, religious and spiritual struggle in the country. Calling these writers 'pioneers for a modern Islamic school of thought', Dajani has masterfully argued that, unlike neo-fundamentalists active in the Middle East today, the importance of these authors lies in their view that Islam is compatible with the West and with social and scientific progress and national development.

Rather than shunning Western culture and society, these authors admitted the need to embrace certain aspects of Western life—the most important of which included state-of-the-art technologies, skills, equipment, and even its ideas, most notably political freedom, equality and constitutionalism. Selectively borrowing from the West, they frankly argued, could help Islamic society overcome its stagnation and compete in the modern world. Just as emphatically, however, these writers disdained the West's superior attitude toward Muslims and rejected colonial control of Egypt with all the indignities and affronts connected with it.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Haykal, and 'Abbās Maḥmūd al-'Aqqād, like other high intellectuals of their time, were conversant with Western culture and values and trained in the Arabic language and in Islamic literature. Respectful of both traditions, they were able to defend Islam as well as to present a modern version of the faith to the contemporary Western reader.

Influenced by European intellectual and political movements, they enthusiastically embraced liberalism in its broadest sense. Indeed, through their writings, they helped to create the culture of liberalism which existed in Egypt during the 1930s and 1940s, and make respectable such causes and ideas as democracy, rationalism, constitutionalism, individual rights and universal education. Although liberalism did compete with Islamic fundamentalism and Marxism for ideological dominance in Egypt, it did not, until the advent of Nasserism, lose its prominence as a legitimate and relevant political movement.

During the tumultuous years of the so-called 'liberal age', these authors defended the Arabic language against the charge that it was inadequate for modern usage, demonstrated that Arabic literature had relevance to contemporary generations and celebrated the life of the Prophet and the religious faith he championed. Most significantly, they tried to integrate their modern vision of Islam with the new discoveries and trends current in Western thought, science and life.

Dajani's work is a welcome and needed contribution to the literature on Egypt's intellectual development. However, her study would have been even more useful to a wider reading audience had she discussed the authors in a broader social, political and international context. In particular, a discussion about the authors' lives, their educations, family backgrounds and political affiliations would have deepened a reader's understanding of their intellectual work. Were, for example, their writings reflective of the social class to which they belonged? How did their work evaluate their society which, after all, was controlled by a colonialist power? In what ways did their various political attachments inform their intellectual production? Moreover, had Dajani developed her critique of the authors as 'secular scholars' writing about religious subjects, the reader may have better understood the reception the authors received in Egypt from other members of the intelligentsia.

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