

Egyptian communism ADD page 2

When I left for Paris in 1947, I did not yet know all the Egyptian communist organizations and their respective histories. I became familiar with these when I met some members of Hadeto who had been expelled from Egypt and gone to live in France in 1947 or 1948: Youssef Hazan, his sister Mimi, André Bereci and doubtless a few others. Soon I also heard another side of the story from Ismail, Moustapha Safouan and Raymond Aghion (whom I first met in connection with the publication of *Moyen Orient*) and gradually inclined towards their criticisms of Hadeto. Thus, when the idea came up of creating the CPE (known by the name of its paper – *Rayat el Shaab* or *People's Standard*), I joined the new party and, held some positions in it between 1952 and 1957, in Paris. I received CPE reports on the political situation, which I translated into French and sent to the PCF and PCI, usually via Raymond Aghion. Fouad Moursi, on his way through Paris (I don't remember exactly when), gave me a pile of CPE and Hadeto documents and instructed me to draw up a report comparing the two from a point of view of our own, in the CPE. I did this, in a highly polemical tone that was to Fouad's liking, and so the report was in a way attributed to him by the CPE leadership. I have placed all these documents – the original CPE and Hadeto papers and pamphlets and the CPE reports – at the disposal of our veterans' committee in Cairo and sent copies to the Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

Subsequently I knew many of these old Egyptian communists, and many of those still alive are today members of the Tagamu (the Party of the Egyptian Left), whose chairman is Khaled Mohi el Dine and general secretary is Rifaat el Said. The story of Egyptian communism has been the object of works by Rifaat el Said (himself a former member of Hadeto), memoirs of various old militants (Sherif Hettata, Didar-Fawzy and others), interviews and tape-recorded reminiscences. But, in my view, a real history still remains to be written: not only because the authors' background inevitably (and quite understandably) makes most of the existing testimonies biased and partisan, sometimes outrageously so, but also because they do not take the trouble to review the history with the benefit of critical, and therefore self-critical, hindsight, or to analyse calmly and methodically the explicit or implicit positions taken by each side on Egyptian society or the Soviet experience. I am struck, for example, by the fact that they think of the USSR as a distant paradise and show little interest in its problems – and that they virtually ignore Maoism and China. Egyptian and, more generally, Arab communists had little or no knowledge of the Chinese Communist Party's famous 'Letter in Twenty-Five Points' to the CPSU (1963); nor of the discussions surrounding the (very Chinese) formula 'states seek independence, nations liberation and peoples revolution' that called for a new articulation of the questions of power, culture and class struggle; nor of the ideas and debates that paved the way for the Cultural Revolution ('The bourgeoisie is not outside the Party but inside it'). If they were known at all, it was only through the deformations – not to say fabrications or falsifications – of Soviet propaganda.

My intention here is neither to dash off an essay on Egyptian communist history – this will, I hope, be the theme of a later serious study, preferably under collective editorship – nor to continue the polemics of the past. But I would like to make it clear that on the whole I consider it to be a glorious history, and the great majority of its members to have been the best children of Egypt, the most sensitive to its dramas and the most courageous in actively facing up to them. These qualities do not mean that particular individuals or even the whole movement were never wrong, or at least that our opinions today should not take account of how history has developed. Here I shall limit my remarks to three major aspects of that history: the Palestine question, Arab unity and relations with the Nasserite project.

Palestine was always an important concern for us. Soviet support for partition in December 1947, echoed by all the Communist parties of the time, gave rise not only to heated discussions but subsequently also to self-criticisms which, though doubtless sincere, do not always seem to have been sufficiently justified or cogently argued. The Third International and the Egyptian and Arab communist movements have always rightly condemned Zionism, seeing it as the expression of a nationalist and racist project to create a settler colony that denies the right to existence of the Palestinian ‘natives’. The Egyptian communist movement today can feel proud that, ever since the 1940s, it supported the anti-Zionist current among the progressive Jews of Egypt. It has no reason to be self-critical on this score, despite the skilful attempts of Zionist propaganda to confuse anti-Zionism with anti-Semitism.

With regard to the partition of Palestine, it is useful to recall a fact that many have tried to overlook in polemical argument: that is, the Soviet Union and Arab, Palestinian and Egyptian democratic forces initially supported the independence of a unified secular Palestinian state open to all the country’s inhabitants, including – a not insignificant concession, this – recent Jewish immigrants. Zionism, on the other hand, always rejected such a solution. With the support of a mandatory power which, while disarming the Palestinian liberation movement, allowed Zionism to arm itself and form a ‘state within the state’, a situation was created on the ground that worked in favour of the expansionist project. It is open to debate whether, in these conditions, a partition plan was the best or the worst way of ‘limiting the damage’. We should remember that, although the UN resolution backing this plan was supported by all the Western and socialist countries, it was rejected by all the African and Asian countries which then belonged to the United Nations. On the Soviet side, certain tactical reasons may have weighed in the balance: the USSR was still terribly isolated and desperately seeking to break the US nuclear monopoly. The support that Egyptian communists gave to this tactic may have been questionable, but it seems to me that the later one-sided ‘self-criticism’ was too clear-cut and underestimated the complexity of the situation in 1947–48.

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On the question of Arab unity, the Egyptian communist movement always adopted generally intelligent positions. It never accepted the idea of a ‘multiplicity of Arab nations’ or recognized a series of individual ‘states’ as the definitive horizon for the liberation project. But nor did it blur regional specificities bound up with a history

much older than the imperialist division of the Arab world, or lend credence to the idealist theses of pan-Arab nationalism. Whereas the Egyptian bourgeois-nationalist movement (principally the Wafd) or the Unionists in Sudan denied the specificity of Sudan, the Egyptian and Sudanese communist movement defined its strategy in terms of a common struggle of two fraternal peoples against external and internal enemies. When Egypt and Syria formed the United Arab Republic in 1958, and when new advances towards Arab unity seemed possible following the overthrow of the monarchy in Iraq, the Egyptian communist movement did not hesitate to criticize the undemocratic methods of the Nasser regime and his contempt for the particular realities of the countries in question. History has proven us right, since those methods were largely responsible for the failure of the project. And, when I look back, the differences among communist organizations on this issue seem to have been relatively slight: while some (Hadeto) modulated their criticisms of Nasser, others (the CPE-Raya) more clearly supported the positions of Abdel Karim Qassim, the Iraqi leader of the time. Both positions had their weaknesses, but they were part of a generally correct political line.

The existence of several different organizations, for most of the period from the revival of Egyptian communism (1942–45) to the self-dissolution of the two parties in 1965, seemed to us unacceptable. The violent polemics between them certainly had a personal dimension, to the detriment of a sober examination of the real differences of analysis and strategy. Nevertheless, I wonder today whether the quest for unity (or its substitute: the de facto ‘victory’ of one organization) was not the result of certain conceptions of ‘the Party’ as the sole repository of the ‘correct line’. A better attitude to democracy within the movement, either in a single ‘Party’ or several ‘parties’, would have encouraged a more lucid conduct of debates, without ruling out a common front in many areas of political activity.

The fact remains, however, that the multiplicity of organizations expressed differences concerning the general strategy for revolution in Egypt. Some thought that national liberation should take precedence, or – to use a formulation that may seem extreme but is not intended in a polemical sense – they believed that Egypt essentially needed a bourgeois-democratic national revolution. Others emphasized what they saw as the need to move more rapidly to the stage of socialist construction. I do not think it possible to associate these two visions directly with particular parties: they tended to cut across organizations, even if the shared dogmatic ideology of the times did not allow their contours to appear clearly. All sides based themselves on the ‘quotation method’, the positions of the Soviet Communist Party, a reading of Mao’s New Democracy, and so on. The ambiguities of the debate, linked to ‘personality problems’, meant that the short-lived unification (1958) remained fragile, although we were all very happy that it had been achieved.

The coup d’état by the Free Officers in July 1953, then the crystallization of Nasserism and its further evolution from 1955 to 1961, transformed the choice of strategic perspective into an immediate and unavoidable problem. Should we support, criticize or oppose the new regime? Once again, the plethora of critical reassessments in Egyptian progressive literature, whether intended to justify or to denounce, do not usually go to the heart of the matter. For example, when former members of Hadeto

argue that, having been active in the secret organization of the Free Officers, they were better placed to appreciate the progressive character of Nasserism from the beginning, this does not seem to me to situate the problem on the correct terrain.

For my part, I have argued since 1960 that the Nasserite project never became anything other than it was at the beginning: an inherently national- bourgeois project. Its populist style does not contradict this judgement. For it was the only possible form in which a national-bourgeois project could be deployed, given the weakness and comprador character of the 'liberal' bourgeoisie and the fear that the popular classes (whose support was necessary) might carry things too far. Consequently, the anti-democratic, 'statist' way of running the country did not at all indicate a 'transition to socialism'. Unfortunately, the strategic alliance that Moscow forged after Bandung with the national liberation cause in the third world, as well as the top-down nature of the Soviet system itself, did a great deal to confuse statism and socialism in people's minds.

I think that history has confirmed the correctness of this assessment. Nasserism gave way to Sadatism, as Brezhnevism did to Yeltsinism, and in neither case is it possible to describe the sudden change as a 'counter-revolution'. I myself saw it as an acceleration of tendencies within the two systems, as the new (bourgeois) class constituted in and through statism sought to 'normalize' its status. But I also said and wrote that there was nothing inevitable about what happened. An evolution to the left was also possible, although it would have depended on the maturity of socialist forces within the two societies (and others). In retrospect, I therefore have no problem describing the national-bourgeois project as utopian.

Contrary to the most widely held view, I believe that Hadeto's support for Nasserism – however critical and however much the regime's anti-communism sometimes called it into question – was a fundamentally incorrect position, based on the idea that a 'national-bourgeois stage' was necessary and positive and would eventually open out into socialism. My own view is that actually existing capitalism is a polarizing global system which inevitably gives any bourgeois project a comprador character, and that the national-bourgeois rejection of that system therefore involves a utopian illusion. I would now argue this more clearly, but in those days I already had more than a glimpse of its truth.

This is why my rereading of the positions of the CPE-Raya, with which I fully sympathized as early as 1950 –51, is different from the sharply critical view that it was fundamentally mistaken about the Nasserite project. Such criticisms, which correspond to the CPE's self-criticisms after 1956 and are today repeated ad nauseam, strike me as very one-sided and tied to a strategy whose failure has been demonstrated by history. Leaving aside secondary issues of language (a 'fascist' regime) or possible imperialist involvement, the key question is whether it was right or wrong to see Nasserism as a bourgeois project doomed to failure.

To be frank, I do not think that Egyptian communism really took on board the analysis of Mao's New Democracy. Hadeto never did at any time in its history, while the CPE starting thinking in that direction before 1956 but then suddenly

pulled away. Take, for example, two successive reports of the CPE: one in 1956 that is extremely critical of the bourgeois Nasserite project and does not consider it a possible stage in the New Democracy (which entails a break with the bourgeois national illusion); and one in 1957 that not only endorses the ‘progressive’ character of bourgeois nationalism (which it might be valid to support tactically so as to deepen the contradictions with imperialism) but also analyses it as a stage (or ‘non-capitalist path’, to use a later term) on the road to socialism. Today this vision contained in New Democracy, like the limits of the Maoism that it inspired, must be criticized in the light of China’s own evolution. But this does not mean that it should be replaced with something worse: that bourgeois national illusion whose stupidity is all too apparent from the catastrophic results in Russia and the third world.

So, in the 1950s, the ‘left position’ substituted the project of a socialist revolution uninterrupted by stages for the project of a bourgeois national revolution. Today I would say that both these positions underestimated the polarization inherent in capitalist expansion, and that Marxism has gradually become fossilized because of its failure to integrate this dimension. Both ‘bourgeois revolution’ (the perspective of social democrats and radical nationalists in the third world) and ‘socialist revolution’ (the perspective of Leninism–Maoism) avoid the real question: what kind of revolution is on the agenda when polarization makes both bourgeois revolution and socialist revolution impossible? Although it is only recently that I have expressed my analysis in these terms, its roots go back to the 1950s.

As a reader of my *L’Égypte nassérienne* may judge, my original verdict on Nasserism was harsh. Today it is more critical still: the Nasser regime did not merely suffer from a democratic deficit, nor did its populist style involve a primitive or inadequate opening to democracy; rather, it held the very idea of democracy in contempt, and behind this contempt lay the class interests of the bourgeoisie. This is also the reason why the regime was thoroughly to blame for what followed: Sadat’s infitah policy and the rise of political Islam.

Mohamad Sid Ahmed’s idea that ‘Nasser nationalized politics’ is worth taking seriously. It is more than a clever formula. For Nasser prohibited the clash of ideas and destroyed the two forces that had dominated the stage since the 1920s: the bourgeois-liberal modernist pole, moderately democratic and only tending towards secularism (such limits had to do with the weakness of the Egyptian bourgeoisie); and the communist pole, which associated modernization with national and social liberation. He destroyed them both systematically, not only through police repression more brutal than the country had witnessed before in modern times, but also through the closure of all venues where ideas could be openly debated. In this way, he created a huge cultural void and opened the door wide for the return of an Islamist traditionalism that had been in constant retreat for a century and a half, since the time of Mohammed Ali. He even encouraged its revival, through policies which, though geared to short-term tactics, were no less dangerous in the long term.

The traditional thinking of pre-capitalist Egypt had been on its way out for a century; Al Azhar, its central institution, paled in significance beside the modern universities. It could have been allowed to continue its slow death, but Nasser tried

instead to ‘modernize’ Al Azhar, doubtless believing – like all dictators – that he could indefinitely control and even use it. But, through a familiar mechanism, opportunist arguments for a ‘socialist’ interpretation of Islam could be turned around without any difficulty. The right progressive attitude would have been to leave religion its particular sphere and to take the debate elsewhere, outside that sphere – an attitude which, in my view, would also have borne fruit within the religious domain itself, by creating the conditions for the various possible interpretations of religion (progressive and reactionary) to confront one another freely on their own ground. So, what did the ‘modernization’ of Al Azhar consist in? Modernization provided new buildings, dormitories, refectories, lecture rooms, syllabuses, examinations and diplomas – all imitations of a modern educational system. But the mentality was not modernized. So, reform made it possible to give traditionalists a platform and a legitimacy that they had not previously had, with results all too apparent today. In addition to the tens of thousands of students who can learn only by rote, we now have thousands of ‘doctors’ produced in accordance with the same intellectual model. An old friend of mine once heard with his own ears, at the Al Azhar branch of the ‘modern’ university of Assiut, an unspecified ‘doctor’ explain in a lecture on jinns that a man could have sexual relations in his sleep with one of these mythological creatures (a female jinna, that is), and that he had found the material proof of this one morning on his bed sheet. When someone mockingly asked him whether a woman could have similar relations with a male jinn, he explained that this was impossible because it was shameful (eib) and contrary to religious law (the sharia), and besides no one knew of any women who had been made pregnant by a jinn. It seems that this lecturer is a ‘moderate’ Islamist, who has officially condemned terrorism. But his teaching must create religious extremists by the dozen. We are told by serious American magazines and French postmodernists that, truth being relative, belief in such things as jinns is just as valid as quantum theory. This is all very convenient, and there is certainly no denying that it suits the interests of the rich and powerful. Jinns for some, nuclear physics for others: to each according to their specificity.

Much the same may be said about the Nasserite reform that made civil rather than religious courts responsible for applying the law on civil status (which was and remains governed by the sharia): this poisoned the whole judicial system, as the obscurantists then started to argue that the sharia should be applied in all other areas, which had hitherto been governed by secular legislation. A progressive response would have been to draft secular modern legislation on civil status too, leaving it up to citizens to decide between this body of law (implemented by state courts) and religious laws administered in the traditional way. There can be little doubt that people would have increasingly opted for the modern formula. Instead, ‘modernization’ of the religious courts through their absorption into the civil judicial system has tended to destroy what was modern and secular in the Egyptian state. Far from reducing the confusion between the state and religion, Nasserism actually deepened it. Thanks to its ‘reforms’, the Egyptian justice system has returned to the obscurantism of the Ottoman era.

At the level of culture, then, Nasserism turned out to be profoundly reactionary. It is true that the effects seemed to be contained until Nasser’s death, but the rot had already set in. All Sadat had to do was choose the weapon of Islam to force through

his infitah (the comprador policy of capitulation to imperialism and Zionism), and in a trice the obscurantist forces already present in the two basic institutions of social life – education and justice – took them firmly under control. I do not know how long it will take, in the best scenario, for Egypt to extricate itself from this quagmire. To justify these huge steps back in the name of ‘specificity’, presenting them as ‘a form of cultural resistance to Western imperialism’, would be hilarious if it were not so tragic. Obscurantism can only serve the strategies of imperialism; it has never been and never will be a means of confronting the challenge of imperialism.

Arab communism generally rallied to the perspective of a bourgeois national stage and the Soviet theory of a ‘non-capitalist path’. The unity of communists in Syria and Iraq, whose parties reproduced to the point of caricature such features of the Soviet model as the personality cult (around Khaled Bagdash, for example), doubtless seemed superior to Egypt’s organizational fragmentation and could sometimes lead to arrogant attitudes. It is possible that communists in Iraq had stronger popular roots than their comrades in Egypt or even Syria. But nowhere did they manage to form a serious alternative to the rise of Baathism, whose ideological formula was close to Nasserism and the populist bourgeois-nationalist radicalism that was then blossoming in many third world countries. The fusion between civilian Baathists and nationalist officers, the coups d’état that brought the latter to power, could only serve to strengthen this family resemblance. And, as in Egypt, the communists of Syria and Iraq came to form the (perhaps ‘critical’) left wing of the movement, not an alternative to it.

The crumbling of bourgeois national utopianism subsequently eroded the credibility of the Arab communist movement as a historical option. Few of its members had thought the Soviet system could fall apart in the way that it did. Few had taken seriously Mao’s warnings that, in the USSR but also China, the ‘capitalist road’ would inevitably whet the bourgeois appetites of the new class. The communist movement as a whole was therefore not prepared to face the global challenges that followed the Soviet collapse and the end of the Bandung stage of national liberation. Nor, if we judge by the recent Egyptian debate on socialist perspectives and relations with the Tagamu, does it seem to have made much progress since then. The movement is still imbued with nostalgia for the past, nostalgia for the Soviet model, nostalgia for the age of Nasserism. But that is not the basis on which to advance beyond the limits of historical Marxism, in this region or anywhere else in the world. Of course, neither will anything good come from further capitulation to comprador forces and the related displacement of struggle to the mythological terrain of ‘cultural specificity’.

(*Memories* pages 92-103)