The values of Modernity in the Middle East: The Case of Muhammad Ali Pasha

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1. Introduction

Whilst committing to text his impressions of the French government and society in the mid-19th century, contemporary Egyptian scholar Rifā’ah al-Ṭahṭāwī noted that “their intellect has decided that justice and equity are the causes for the civilisation of kingdoms”.¹ In Georges Corm’s study of Arab Political Thought recently translated into English, al-Ṭahṭāwī, along with his benefactor and Egyptian governor Muhammad Ali Pasha, appear as energetic reformers. Corm argues that their “burning desire for modernity” ² challenges arguments that posit a transhistorical ‘clash of civilisations’ between modernity and backwards fundamentalism neatly mapping onto cartographies of west and east.³ Yet whilst for Corm the process of Egyptian modernisation coheres with the values of modernity, Egyptian historian and political activist Khaled Fahmy has drawn attention to the disciplinary techniques pervading Muhammad Ali’s modern reformism. Focusing not on Pan-Arab intellectual history but on the practices of the Egyptian state, Fahmy argues that Muhammad Ali founded a distinctly Egyptian experience of coercive state modernisation. Modernity again assumes a different fashion in the work of pre-eminent scholar Edward Said. For Said, it is the orientalising gaze of British traveller Edward Lane that most clearly embodies Egypt’s experience of modernity, prefiguring a colonial era in which western ‘values’ become oppressive mystifications of imperialism.⁴

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² Corm, Georges, Patricia M. Phillips-Batoma, and Atoma T. Batoma. 2020, Arab Political Thought: Past and Present (London: Hurst & Company) p. 9 Georges Corm is a Lebanese economist and political scientist
³ See for example Huntington, S.P. 1996, “The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order” (New York: Simon & Schuster), and Lewis, B. (1990). The Roots of Muslim Rage. The Atlantic, 266(3), 47. Huntington’s thesis is that with the fall of Soviet Communism, geopolitical tensions have been reconfigured along immutable cultural lines, precipitating a clash between the West and an antagonistic, fundamentalist East.
2. Discussion

19th century Egypt is a productive space within which to situate, narrate and interrogate various conceptions of modernity as an episteme, as well as exploring its relationship to the processes of modernisation. Yet this intellectual diversity is obscured in different ways by Corm and Said. Corm’s work, as earlier suggested, accepts modernity in typically western terms: as monolithically desirable and achievable through a process of ‘modernisation’. Challenging this perspective, Said’s powerful study of ‘Orientalism’ casts modernity as implicated in the production of colonial domination. Said’s analysis represents a colonial strand of a more general critique of the ‘black-mail of enlightenment’, in which values of truth, justice and liberty are seen as embedded in desires for power, be it over a subject of the state, or historically over a colonial other. Yet this critique sets modernity up as historically monolithic, necessarily reducing values commonly associated with the enlightenment such as truth, justice, and liberty to vehicles of western or western-influenced hegemony. This interacts awkwardly with Fahmy’s analysis of Muhammad Ali’s modernising programmes, which itself depends on a normative notion of justice against which to critique the Egyptian ruler. Yet an attentiveness to the contingent environment in which Muhammad Ali modernised his polity can help rethink modernity, bringing attention to the alternative voices and actions that participated in its making and resisted its eventual historical manifestation. Ultimately, both Corm and Fahmy attempt to draw on these alternatives to challenge cultural and political forms of oppression experienced in the contemporary middle east. By pluralising the idea of modernity, this article hopes to reconcile their laudable aims, dispelling notions of an essentially anti-modern Middle East whilst reinforcing Fahmy’s resistance to the long reign of the Egyptian dictatorial state.

1: Differing Perspectives of modernity: a contested Egyptian setting

George Corm’s analysis of Arab political thought responds to a neoconservative tendency to consider the Middle East as the antithesis of modern values, an ‘other’ which views Western civilisation with fundamentalist ‘resentment’. Corm’s antidote to this view is to exemplify the Arab capacity for critical thought throughout history. Corm does not deny that political and religious ‘fundamentalism’ exists in Arab society, but rather

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8 Corm, Georges, Patricia M. Phillips-Batoma, and Atoma T. Batoma. 2020, Arab Political Thought: Past and Present (London: Hurst & Company) p. 198
laments a systemic preoccupation with the Middle East as anti-western, and thus a “problem for humanity” which has informed US foreign policy since the turn of the 21st century. In making his case, Corm focuses on 19th century Islamic modernism, which sought to challenge prevailing norms about religious doctrine and political organisation. In recognising that “European institutions were an indisputable source of material and moral progress”, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī is seen as a progenitor of this intellectual moment. His publications at the Egyptian press in Bulaq rendered his insights accessible not only to other Islamic scholars, but to Egyptian state officials keen to improve systems of justice. Having discussed al-Ṭaḥṭāwī’s modernising impetus, Corm shifts seamlessly to the policies of his governor Muhammad Ali Pasha, who, in Corm’s words, “declared [legal] equality between Muslims and non-Muslims [in the 1830s]”. Here, Corm posits a causal link between the European thinking of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, and the reformism of his governor. This shift is crucial to Corm’s argument; at few other points in his discussion of Islamic modernism does he anchor his intellectual history to the policy domain. Part of Corm’s response to the ‘Clash of Civilisations’ narrative involves accepting modernity as originating in and emanating from the west (something that will later be contested). Proponents of the clash adopt a similar West-centric idea of modernity, but argue that Arab states were essentially ill-equipped to implement these ideas in a successful programme of modernisation. In challenging this contention, Corm casts modernity as an external set of coherent ideas and reforms which Egyptian scholars could desire and which could be implemented in a benevolent programme of modernisation.

In contrast, Fahmy embeds the policymaking of Muhammad Ali into a distinctly Egyptian narrative of modernity, establishing the foundations of a repressive “deep state” that persists to this day. In doing so, Fahmy challenges Corm’s assumption that values of modernity necessarily corresponded to programmes of modernisation. Whilst Corm challenges neoconservative generalisations made on a Pan-Arab level, Fahmy seeks to refute Egyptian nationalist narratives sponsored by dictatorial regimes in the 19th and 20th

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9 ibid p. 2
10 Ibid. p. 103
12 More context to this declaration of equality is given in the next paragraph
centuries,\textsuperscript{16} which depict Muhammad Ali’s state-building as “humanist, progressive reform”.\textsuperscript{17} Fahmy instead argues that Muhammad Ali sought greater state control by making discipline and obedience seem natural to his soldiers,\textsuperscript{18} producing an army of ‘docile bodies’.\textsuperscript{19} Implicit in Fahmy’s methodology is a Foucauldian focus on the ‘disciplinary society’,\textsuperscript{20} a study of techniques that structure the possible fields of action experienced by the objects of power.\textsuperscript{21} The army’s medicinal, financial and administrative needs were fulfilled by an unprecedented extension of the state apparatus into Egyptian rural society. This was brutal in a corporeal sense, with press gangs descending upon villages to tie peasants up with ropes, before dragging them into conscription.\textsuperscript{22} Meanwhile the rise of documentation that enabled more systematic conscription methods, such as population censuses first conducted in 1813, vested modernisation with an inevitability that gnawed at the fabric of Egyptian rural society.\textsuperscript{23} Juxtaposing Corm, Fahmy’s narrative displaces rather than foregrounds the role of enlightenment values in dictating the policy of the Egyptian state. Through a thicker analysis of Egyptian legal reform, Fahmy links the introduction of equality before the law, celebrated by Corm in his analysis, to state power. New methods of identification and forensic medicine introduced by Muhammad Ali invalidated earlier recourse to oral evidence. Legal matters no longer needed to be resolved by the testimony of a person of good standing, such as a village leader or shaykh, nullifying the stratified judicial system that relied on gender and religious difference to function effectively. This made equality a logistical possibility rather than an ideological ambition.\textsuperscript{24} al-Ṭahṭāwī and the values he espoused are thus effaced

\textsuperscript{16} Muhammad Ali’s grandson, King Fouad Pasha, was particularly keen to draw on his grandfather’s legacy in shoring up his legitimacy, personally collecting flattering correspondence from the era and storing them in Cairo for historical use; see Fahmy’s discussion of Henry Dodwell’s “The Founder of Modern Egypt: a Study of Muhammad Ali (1931)” in Fahmy, K. Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt p. 116


\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. p. 19


\textsuperscript{22} Mitchell, T. 1988, Colonising Egypt. (Berkeley : University of California Press) p. 47

from Muhammad Ali’s account of modern Egypt. When considered in this context, Corm’s work perpetuates a nationalist mythology that reads the reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha purely through the texts of al-Tahtāwī. Fahmy instead seeks to emphasise its “intrinsically military character” which exerts an oppressive longue durée in the authoritarianisms of Nasser, Mubarak and el-Sisi. Drawing on Foucault, Fahmy introduces a new vocabulary through which modernisation can be described, distinct from the language of enlightenment values.

2: The values of modernity: an epistemological problem

When placed in a wider poststructuralist and postcolonial context, the works of Corm and Foucault (if not necessarily Fahmy) posit alternative framing narratives of modernity. Foucault uses his analysis of power to dispute that modernity permeates through the spread of enlightenment values, suggesting that the will to knowledge, critical thought and rationality (common enlightenment ‘precepts’) are entangled with the will to power, indeed mystifying the techniques of domination that constitute modernity’s essence. Said’s study of orientalism applies these insights to a postcolonial context. Because the travel writing of the British orientalist Edward Lane subordinates his Egyptian setting to European sensibility and superiority, Said uses the him as a synecdoche of Western hegemony. Lane functions as a “special agent of western power” whose consistent ‘othering’ of the Orient colours a ‘discursive formation’ that gives colonising power its operative discourse. In Said’s works, the values of modernity underpin western hegemony, which in monopolising reason rejects moral relativity when interacting with the epistemes of other cultures. David Scott aptly summarises the postcolonial critique of enlightenment, defined as a “universalising project aimed aggressively and systematically at displacing the varied traditions... that existed in the nonmodern world”. This postcolonial assessment of the enlightenment poses an epistemological challenge to Corm’s work. If ideas of critical reason were produced in the western enlightenment and sharpened with reference to the colonial other, then the modernising values that Corm uses to redeem Arab thought cannot be disentangled from colonial domination.

26 It is important to exclude Fahmy from this narrative, for reasons that shall be explored later
27 It is debatable whether Foucault would agree with this, given his opposition to ‘totalising theories’; see Steven Best and Douglas Kellner. 1991, ‘Foucault and the Critique of Modernity,’ in Best and Kellner (eds), Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations (London : Macmillan) p. 72 for a discussion on Foucault’s failure to distinguish between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ macrotheories
Yet drawing on Foucault, Scott notes that, when extended to its logical conclusion, all forms of resistance to tyranny and domination depend on the critical terrain that is part of the enlightenment’s inheritance.\footnote{Ibid. p. 180} This is also the case with concepts of liberty and justice propagated as absolute during the enlightenment and implicit even in Fahmy’s opposition to the Egyptian state.\footnote{Fahmy, K. “The Long Revolution”, Aeon, 03/11/2015 [accessed: 04/04/2020]} Foucault’s proposed solution to this ‘blackmail of enlightenment’ is essentially to embrace the paradox, suggesting that a rejection of reason is as self-defeating as its uncritical acceptance. Yet it is important to recognise that Said is depicting a historically specific variant of modernity in which, via a series of complex historical processes, colonial authorities harnessed the ideals of ‘western civilisation’ to reinforce colonial domination. That these domineering constructs emerged, above others, in the actions of western militaries and colonial officials of the mid-late 19th century does not mean that they should solely define the intellectual legacies of the enlightenment. Carey and Festa propose exploring the enlightenment as a “state of intellectual tension” in order to pluralise its actors and problematise its “universal”, and therefore unilaterally hegemonic, characteristics. A similar approach will now be taken regarding the voices and actors of Egyptian modernity, in order to nuance Said’s assessment of the western episteme and produce alternative archaeologies of values commonly associated with the enlightenment project.

Rather than demonstrating a general, oppressive tendency, Muhammad Ali’s modernising reforms should be situated in their specific context, throwing into sharp relief its contingent intersection between enlightenment thinking and modernising practice. As Fahmy emphasises, Muhammad Ali’s brutal modernisation itself arises from the contingencies of his insecure grasp on power, rather than from a predisposed intent to ‘modernise’, as might be supposed from Corm’s account. Muhammad Ali’s claim to power in Ottoman Egypt arose after Napoleon retreated from Egypt in 1801, forcing the Ottomans to accord him the status of ‘wali’ following a successful power struggle.\footnote{Fahmy, K. (1998). The era of Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, 1805–1848. In M. Daly (Ed.), The Cambridge History of Egypt (The Cambridge History of Egypt, pp. 139-179). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 144; Wali denotes governors of administrative divisions} Faced with various Ottoman-backed coups in the early years of his reign, Muhammad Ali sought to reform his army to protect his domain from the incursions of the empire.\footnote{Ibid. p. 167} His modernising programme was thus corollary to the needs of securing his polity.

These needs were in part satisfied by drawing on a variant of European expertise. In more conventionally postcolonial narratives of modernity, such as that proposed by Mitchell, these European advisers are treated as homogenous exponents of a typically
disciplinary colonial modernity. Mitchell describes how “military officers, Saint-Simonist engineers, educationalists, physicians... flocked to Egypt to create a (normatively) new modern state”, his list making no distinctions between intentions and perspectives of this European contingent. This allows Mitchell to characterise this modernity as a general, colonial phenomenon.

Yet it is more productive to examine the specific type of European that appeared at Muhammad Ali’s court, illustrating that Egyptian modernisation interacted with a certain strand of a contested enlightenment modernity. Abi-Mershed links Saint-Simonianism to the institutional practices of Napoleonic schools such as the Ecole Polytechnique and Ecole d’Application de Metz which sought to discover and disseminate an objective ‘science’ of education. In these educational settings Saint-Simonian thinkers developed a counter-enlightenment preference for the physiology of social organisation over the validity of abstract values or principles. Jobless after the fall of Napoleon, this military contingent sought employment in the Pasha’s expanding bureaucracy, with figures such as Dr Clot serving as his medical officer from 1825. This genealogical sketch highlights the contingencies that led Muhammad Ali to interact with a dissenting strand of a complex enlightenment, in tension with many of its methodological approaches. Thus, Muhammad Ali’s modernising reforms did interact with the enlightenment’s intellectual legacy, but in specific ways. By highlighting the stands of thinking that influenced the Pasha, the enlightenment and its legacy become less monolithic, opening the possibility of alternative links between modern values and modernising practices.

Having focused on the contingency of Muhammad Ali’s oppression, this article will briefly examine the contested nature of his modernising reforms, helping produce a more pluralistic account of Egyptian modernity. A productive start may lie in overturning al-Ṭahtawi’s role as the textual spokesman of Muhammad Ali-Pasha’s modernity. Whilst his work provided crucial intellectual foundations for Islamic modernist thinkers, its depictions of Muhammad Ali’s Egypt are blemished by his dependence on the Pasha’s

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36 For example, suggesting that these panopticon-like structures were also produced in Colonial India (p. 43)
38 Saint-Simonsians tended to think of social structures as organisms, living bodies that could be dissected and perfected. Hence the phrase ‘physiological’
40 Al-Tahtawi translated many ‘western’ political concepts into Arabic, introducing a new generation of thinkers to concepts such as ‘freedom’ and ‘justice’
Whilst Muhammad Ali is praised in al-Ṭahṭāwī’s historical works as “the restorer of Islamic civilisation”, he is viewed as a heretic by contemporary scholar Al-Jabarti in his chronicle of Egyptian history, which criticises Muhammad Ali for imposing illegal taxes and destroying property. Crucially, Al-Jabarti’s comparative anonymity derives not from any inferiority in his account, but rather from what Trouillot has termed the “unequal power of historical production”. In daring to critique Muhammad Ali’s state, Al-Jabarti’s chronicle was censored by the Pasha’s bulaq press, and refused publication until 1880. Yet neither can Al-Jabarti’s critiques cannot be reduced to anti-modern, let alone ‘fundamentalist’ dispositions, with his work displaying an openness to western innovation and justice. Thus, access to knowledge about the nature of Egyptian modernity and its wider relationship to the values of modernity is entangled with Muhammad Ali’s power and monopoly over the press. The presence of an alternative thinker again illustrates that modernisation need not, in intent, have constituted so oppressive an extension of state power. A paucity of alternative narratives is not evidence of their absence; indeed, their very presence may have demanded state repression.

Yet beyond the confines of text, resistance from peasant fellahin often used the institutions of modernity to contest state oppression, seeking justice from mechanisms designed to exploit their labour. Muhammad Ali’s conscription methods were most unprecedented in rural communities with hitherto limited contact with the state. This led to widespread resistance by peasant fellahin, including uprisings in 1823 and 1824, as well as rampant military desertion from the 1830s. Whilst Egyptian state officials dismissed this non-compliance as fellahin backwardness, it is a mistake to empty disobedience of its discursive significance. An apt example is the practice of self-maiming to escape military

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41 Ṭahṭāwī’s family’s tax farms had been confiscated in the early phase of Muhammad Ali’s reign, leaving him financially indebted to the Pasha. Al Jabarti, on the other hand, was a man of independent means, and therefore able to critique Muhammad Ali without fear of financial pain
45 Choueiri, Youssef 2003, M. Modern Arab Historiography : Historical Discourse and the Nation-state (New York : RoutledgeCurzon) p. 33 in particular, Al-Jabarti expressed admiration for the system of military justice implemented by the French in their brief occupation of Egypt, contrasting it favourably with Muhammad Ali’s regime
47 Ibid. p. 170
service.⁴⁸ These dramatic acts, which increased throughout the 1830s, did not only enable fellahin to escape the material oppression of conscription, but used modern conceptions of medical ‘fitness for service’ to serve their own ends.⁴⁹ Therefore, the state did not possess a monopoly over the vehicle of modernisation, because modernisation could be appropriated to serve alternative, localised values of justice and fairness, even if they are not immediately visible in the textual historical record.

And it is the values that informed fellah resistance, rather than the values of enlightenment, that underpin Fahmy’s struggle for justice against the oppressive longue durée of the Egyptian state. In his 2015 article on “The Long Revolution” Fahmy uses this resistance to the Pasha’s rule in order to construct an alternative, non-western genealogy that underpins the values he endorses in his modern opposition to Egyptian dictatorship. Here, Fahmy liberates the Fellahin from the condescension of prejudiced state officials, and integrates them into a longstanding, shared struggle to resist “this domestic leviathan by any means at our disposal.”⁵⁰ Thus, not only can early 19th century Egypt be used to illustrate the heterogeneity of the European enlightenment, it can also provide a non-western dimension to values associated with the enlightenment, nuancing some of the paradoxical terrain upon which postcolonial critiques stand.

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5. Conclusions

This article has hoped to nuance the ‘western’ and ‘hegemonic’ nature of values commonly associated with enlightenment. In doing so, it has sketched out a framework in which to reconcile the contrasting narratives of modernity that have taken Egypt and the Middle East as their setting. A focus on alternative thinkers such as al-Jabarti has helped reframe Corm’s laudable critique of the Clash of Civilisations by illustrating interactions between values-orientated enlightenment thinking and the Middle East without rehashing nationalist narratives that misrepresent Muhammad Ali’s rule. Moreover, by foregrounding the intellectual and material tensions of enlightenment, this article challenges the very idea of a modern ‘essence’ that the west possesses, and the east does not. This article does not, on the other hand, dispute the thrust of Said’s analysis. Egypt was orientalised by Edward Lane, which did fuel imperialist ventures dependent on the systematic subjugation of the colonial other. Throughout the 19th century, the British would seek to stifle alternative discourses and use modern values as a smokescreen for geopolitical interests.51 Yet a distinction should be made between ideas of modernity that historically took on an oppressive nature, and modernity as a site of contestation, which involved ideas and modes of action that contested the dominant and would-be dominant strains. As illustrated by Fahmy in his efforts to highlight the historical roots of Egyptian protest, in some instances, imperialist discourses do not necessarily encroach on aims of justice and freedom from oppression. Meanwhile, the Arab Spring and the overthrow of Mubarak in 2011 illustrates that those alternative currents are not vestiges of posterity, even if they have yet to assert their supremacy.

Bibliography


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