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Peasants, Crime, and Tea in Interwar Egypt

OMNIA EL SHAKRY

Egypt's Law 96 of 1992—which reversed the ability of agricultural tenants to secure fixed rents and inherit tenancies in perpetuity—arguably represents one of the most significant reversals of Nasserist land reform, or what Ray Bush refers to as “counter-revolution in Egypt’s countryside.”¹ Social scientists have demonstrated the ways in which the 1992 tenancy law was propagated by the press, political parties, and parliament who backed the power of landlords against tenant farmers.² Perhaps unsurprisingly, representations of the peasantry continue to focus on stereotypes of wayward peasants, killing time in cafes and enjoying the profits derived from their low rents. The political debate surrounding the implementation of Law 96, which focused almost entirely on the perspectives of landowners and their rights, demonstrates a remarkably durable facet of the relationship between Egypt’s political authorities and its rural population.

The debate returns us to the social scientific discourses of the interwar period. These discourses depicted the Egyptian peasant both as culturally authentic, and as profoundly backward. Egypt’s peasants were to be reformed in order to become modern subjects of the nation-state. Such attitudes resulted in the idea of a unique peasant cultural *mentalité*, a stereotype including a propensity for revenge killings and the excessive drinking of black tea. Conveniently obscuring the social and political processes at work, this *mentalité* provided a catchall explanation for Egypt’s rural poverty.³

The “peasant question”

In 1932 two men from the village of Badari in Asyut province in Upper Egypt, Ahmad Ja’idi and Hasan Abu Ashur, were charged with the murder of a rural superintendent. The convicted men levied impassioned accusations of torture, which included multiple humiliations, privations, and brutalities that ranged from being bound, beaten, and dragged, to sodomy. As a legal case, the incident highlighted the cruel oppression of the peasantry by provincial notables. Yet, it also underscored the peasants’ propensity for “revenge”; and the vulnerability of the state apparatus and *kibar al-mullak* (landed elite) to the consequences of this. Indeed, the outbreak of World War II in

1939 was cause for such alarm that the state ordered all firearms removed from peasant households.⁴

The incident at Badari highlights the larger social context for the emergence of the “peasant question” as a discourse of social welfare and the reproduction of power relations in twentieth century Egypt. Beginning in the middle of the 1930s, a core group of Egyptian reformers began to formulate agendas that took the peasantry as their principal object of study and reform. The question of the educability of the peasantry emerged as the call for *al-nahda al-qurawiyya*, *al-nahda al-rifiyya* (a rural renaissance) and reached its apex in the middle to late 1930s. Egyptian public intellectuals often evoked graphic images of rural decay and criminality in order to suggest the immediate need for social reform projects. Such projects were intended to guide the peasantry towards the adoption of “reformed” norms of behavior and social and cultural practices deemed more in line with the modern world. Representations of uncivilized peasants served to rationalize the expertise of social scientists and reformers and to underscore the

Contemporary discussions of the Egyptian peasantry, for example relating to the recent tenancy law, centre on stereotypes of backward peasants. Such discourses, which paint peasants as apolitical creatures and bearers of a backward mentality, can be traced at least as far back as the interwar era. But by using the peasant “mentality” as an all-explanatory device for understanding rural poverty, these discourses ignore the social and political processes that produced rural poverty in the first place.

civility of the urban *effendiyya* (Egypt’s emergent middle class).

In Egypt, the social uplift of the peasantry was understood to depend on a complex of social and cultural values to be inculcated. Among these values, *al-tarbiya wa ‘l-ta’lim* (education), *tamadun* (civility and refinement), *umran* (culture), *raqa* (progress), and *adab* would lead, it was thought, to the elimination of vice, wretchedness, and moral decline. One of the key elements in this transformation was the modification of

what had become known as the “peasant character.” The peasantry had long been associated with pernicious habits—see, for instance Muhammad ‘Umar’s turn-of-the-century work, *The Present State of the Egyptians or the Secret of their Retrogression* (*Hadir al-misriyyin aw sirr ta’khuhrim*), for the author’s portrayal of the peasant as drug addict and thief. Yet, the 1930s and 1940s marked the beginnings of a discourse prioritizing the production of statistical and substantive knowledge about peasant crime. In this context, the Central Narcotics Intelligence Bureau began to collect data on the use of addictive substances, such as hashish, opium, and black tea among peasants, and to link this use to criminality and other social ills. The collection of statistics on rural crime, and violent crime in particular, helped cultivate a discourse on peasant character that emphasized the fellah’s lack of cultural and moral sense.

Criminology

In the late 1930s Egyptian social scientists began to compile statistical and descriptive studies on the rate, prevalence, and types of crimes being committed. Two key texts published during World War II were Muhammad Mustafa Al-Qolali’s *Essai sur les causes de la criminalité en Egypte* and Muhammad al-Babli’s exhaustive study *al-ljram fi misr* (*Crime in Egypt*).⁵ Al-Qolali was a noted criminal lawyer who received his doctorate from the Sorbonne and taught criminal law at Cairo University. Muhammad al-Babli’s study was the canonical work on criminology at the time. In addition to analyzing the various theories about the factors predisposing to criminality, the author reviewed the methodological approaches to the study of crime. Al-Babli focused in particular on the use of statistical data. At the time of writing, al-Babli was the director of the School of Police, though he had been trained as a lawyer originally. Al-Babli and al-Qolali were good friends and were to cooperate extensively.

A hallmark of criminological studies in Egypt was the classification of criminality as either urban or rural. Each of these types, in turn, was held to possess a different etiology and morphology. On the whole, writers argued that urban crime was materially motivated; while rural crime was of a violent and affective nature—a nature most transparent in crimes of revenge and passion. Social reformers, such as al-Babli, argued that a peasant *mentalité* of ignorance was a predisposing factor in rural crime. The peasant’s naturally patient and submissive yet labile character could, because of his attachment to customs such as the vendetta, suddenly, become vengeful. It was noted that, in comparison to the West, crimes of passion (and not cupidity) were more common in Egypt. This tendency was more marked still in the countryside, where “revenge” crimes (blood murder, assault, arson, destruction, or poisoning of crops or livestock) were far more common than crimes for material gain. In a 1940 article on rural crime, Mustafa Al-Qolali characterized urban crimes as materially motivated, as accounting for the majority of convictions in Cairo, Alexandria, and Suez, and as propagated solely by the urban criminal. Rural crime on the other hand, was characterized by *al-qaswa* (cruelty).

Authorities
marvelled at the
proportion of
income spent on
tea by the average
household.

What, then, were the motives behind rural crime? "Revenge is the blood wound in the social life of the countryside," al-Qolali noted. Most rural crime, even against property, was shown to be motivated by revenge or for the preservation of honor. As such, the custom of *tha'r* (vendetta), the retribution required for a breach of familial or personal honour, was frequently discussed. For al-Qolali, *tha'r* was especially pernicious as it generalized individual feuds to a familial level. Factionalism, itself, was another aspect of rural life that exacerbated criminality allowing individual disputes to escalate out into society. Other authors emphasized the triviality of the motives behind rural crime. Peasant crimes, they noted, were often caused by petty disputes, or minor thefts, usually concerning land, water, crops, or livestock.

Black tea

Peasant habits, too, were implicated in rural crime. In particular, the culture of the coffee house, with its attendant social evils, was thought to play a major role in the moral decadence of the peasantry. The peasantry was thought to have a strong propensity toward addiction to narcotics such as hashish, opium, and black tea. Coffee houses were places for peasants to "kill time," and gamble and where they were exposed to various narcotics and criminal elements. Yet, the presence of most narcotics—hashish, opium, alcohol, morphine, heroin, and cocaine—was thought to be limited to certain small pockets of the rural community. The more prevalent and destructive rural addiction, served in vast quantities in coffee houses, was black tea. This was a potent brew, usually unregulated, adulterated, and equally likely to be drunk by children and adults. Black tea was the term used to refer to the product obtained from boiling tea in a kettle, adding water and re-boiling the mixture: "During the next twenty-four hours the kettle is never cleaned out but more tea leaves and more water are added with the result that all the so-called tea leaves are boiled six or seven times over producing a black, bitter liquid to which large quantities of sugar must be added."⁶

The concern over boiled tea, as well as its commercial adulteration, was so serious that, in 1938, the Ministry of Public Health commissioned a scientific study on tea bought, prepared, and consumed by the fellahin. The study concluded that, although the amount of caffeine and tannin were proportional to the amount of tea used and not dependent on the length of boiling, the sheer daily quantities of caffeine consumed by the Egyptian peasant were bound to be, given the local physical environment and influences such as the presence of endemic diseases, the lack of nutrition, and excessive labour, deleterious to his health.

Tea itself came to be viewed as a narcotic substance, its effects mimicking those of any other addictive substance. These effects included nervous and physical stimulation (not dissimilar to those associated with cocaine use, i.e. the shivering of hands, insomnia, and even heart failure); psychological and physical dependence; decreased productivity; and, tellingly, a propensity to criminal activity. Seen as a lower class phenomenon, authorities marvelled at the proportion of income spent on tea by the average household—income, they reasoned, that could have been spent on foodstuffs. According to one estimate, the efficiency of the worker was reduced by twenty-five percent, "based on the time lost and the fact that the tea-drinker is not as able a workman as the non-drinker."⁷

Criminality and peasant "character"

Both al-Babli and Al-Qolali resorted continuously to discussions of the peasant *mentalité* to explain rural crime. Social and economic factors rarely feature in their analysis despite the statistical correlation which al-Babli noted between crimes committed and agricultural seasons. Namely, he showed that there was an increase in crimes during harvesting and storage season, or, as Tawfiq al-Hakim phrased it in *Yawmiyyat Na'ib fil Aryaf*: "every crop has its crime." Nor did reformers view the peasants' unwillingness to cooperate with the authorities in prosecuting criminals as a political act. According to Al-Qolali there was a fifty percent or greater chance for criminals to escape justice altogether. Likewise, though disturbed by it, social researchers did not link the peasants' use of *al-ashqiya'* (brigands or bandits) to social or

economic struggles. Rather than viewing the peasants' refusal to cooperate with the authorities (an attitude in keeping with older conceptions of crime and justice) as a deliberate strategy, these reformers attributed it to ignorance; and rather than treating crimes against the persons and properties of landowners or their agents (especially the so-called "agrarian crimes" of arson, destruction, or poisoning of crops or livestock) as masking social struggles, they treated them as the remnants of an archaic tradition of revenge. In fact, al-Babli went so far as to dismiss the potential effects of revolutionary Soviet communist propaganda, since, in his opinion Egyptians were not naturally amenable to it.

Contemporary views of the Egyptian peasant tend to attribute the causes of rural poverty to a uniform "peasant culture" that purportedly privileges child bearing over small households, extremism over secularism, and irrational folk traditions over national culture. Such views hark directly back to the theories of the interwar social reformers mentioned here. In sum, these reformers posited peasant ignorance as the cause of peasant poverty; and moral and social education as the solution to the problem.⁸ Accordingly, the debates on Law 96 repeat, almost verbatim, interwar allegations of lazy tenants squandering their income. They thus represent the displacement of political and economic explanations onto the domain of culture.

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Drawing from Hekmat Abu Zayd, *Al-takayyuf al-ijtima'i fil rif al-misri al-jadid*. Maktabat al-Anglo al-Misriyya: n.d.

Notes

1. On the implications of Law 96 of 1992 implemented in 1997, see Ray Bush, *Counter-Revolution in Egypt's Countryside* (London: Zed Books, 2002).
2. Reem Saad, "Egyptian Politics and the Tenancy Law," in Bush, *Counter-Revolution in Egypt's Countryside*.
3. Excerpts from *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* by Omnia El Shakry, © 2007 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University, all rights reserved. By permission of the publisher, www.sup.org.
4. Sayyid Ashmawi, *Al-Fellahun wal Sulta* (Cairo: Mirit, 2001).
5. The following account is based on: Muhammad Al-Babli, *Al-Ijram fi Misr* (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyya, 1941); Muhammad Al-Qolali, "Al-Ijram fi al-rif," *Shu'un Ijtima'iyya* 1 (July 1940): 20-29; Mahmud Bey Mahir, "Jara'im al-Qura," *Al-Majalla al-Tibiyya al-Misriyya* 20 (March 1937): 163-169; and Nathan Brown, *Peasant Politics in Modern Egypt: The Struggle Against the State* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).
6. Egyptian Government, CNIB, "Adulterated Tea," *Annual Report for the Year 1938*, 92-94, quotation p. 92. See also Egyptian Government, CNIB, "Boiled tea," *Annual Report for the Year 1939*, 104-105.
7. Dr. L. Askren, "New Method of Taking Opium," in Egyptian Government, Central Narcotics Intelligence Bureau, *Annual Report for the Year 1938*, 98.
8. For contemporary examples see Lila Abu-Lughod, *Dramas of Nationhood: The Politics of Television in Egypt* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Technopolitics, Modernity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).