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Peer reviewed

*Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony*, by Sara Salem. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. 312pp. £75.00 (cloth). ISBN: 9781108491518.

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A decade on since the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2011, scholars have turned to the writings of the Italian communist theorist, Antonio Gramsci, to better make sense of this turbulent period. Recent works have included a focus on everyday forms of resistance, the mobilization of civil society, and crises of political hegemony in authoritarian settings (Bayat 2017; Chalcraft 2016, 2021; De Smet 2016; Marchi 2021; Tugal 2009).

To add to this burgeoning literature is Sara Salem's *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt* – a study of the politics of hegemony and colonialism in modern Egypt. Drawn largely from secondary historical works on Egypt, the book impressively synthesizes scholarship in the attempt to examine colonial and anti-colonial “afterlives” in contemporary Egypt, i.e. the legacies of decolonization, the creation of a hegemonic project under Nasser, and the vulnerabilities of this and other postcolonial hegemonic projects. Moreover, Salem's main theoretical intervention is to apply Gramsci's concept of hegemony in a very different time and place from which it was originally written – that of modern Egypt. She does this to better understand modern Egyptian history in an epochal sense and to extend Gramscian theory outside of the European context. To do so, Salem puts Gramsci in conversation with Franz Fanon to make the point that hegemony in the Third World can only be understood in relation to the history and politics of colonialism. By fusing Gramsci and Fanon, the book's more general argument is that ruling classes in peripheral countries cannot successfully construct hegemony under conditions of colonial or neocolonial domination.

After laying out the theoretical stakes, the book proceeds in a relatively chronological order, discussing early to mid-twentieth century colonial rule in Egypt, the construction of hegemony under Nasser, and the subsequent breakdown of this hegemony under Sadat and Mubarak. According to Salem, Nasser was able to produce hegemony in Egypt by securing material gains for Egyptians via (limited) land reforms, widespread infrastructural projects, the provision of free education and healthcare, and the guarantee of post-graduate employment, as well as discursively bringing secular, feminist, and labor movements into the regime's anti-colonial fold. Simultaneously, it deployed coercive tactics against the Egyptian communist movement and the Muslim Brotherhood to stifle potential opposition. However, Nasserism was a contradictory form of politics. Even as it sought to challenge the "colonial international" (an international sphere structured by imperialism), Nasserism reproduced its own colonial forms of domination. These included infrastructural projects, such as the High Dam in Aswan, which displaced Nubians, exploited workers, and "depended on mastering nature, people, and the future" (p. 141). Similarly, the book characterizes Nasser's decision to adopt state-led capitalist development and nationally-scaled industrialization as "a continuation of colonial domination by other means" (p. 151-152).

Following the defeat of pan-Arab nationalism in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, major transformations took place in the Egyptian economy and society that rendered the prevailing hegemonic project obsolete. This included the policies of *infitah* under Sadat, the "transformation of the Muslim Brotherhood into a central pillar of neoliberal accumulation" (p. 184), and the turn towards coercion to deal with student protests. Similarly, Mubarak's rule oversaw structural adjustment programs, waves of privatizations, the rise of finance capital, and the entrenchment of a new "dependent bourgeoisie." As a result of these changes – and alongside

Egypt's closer relations with the U.S., the Gulf states, and Israel – Sadat and Mubarak completely rollbacked Nasser's hegemonic project. As such, Salem argues that the period from 1967-2011 was constituted by “the absence of hegemony, the absence of a historical bloc, the increasing disembedding of consent from coercion, and Egypt's re-insertion into the colonial international” (p. 160).

Despite Salem's synthesis of Egyptian historiography and theoretical interventions, her use of Gramsci – especially the concept of hegemony – could have been more consistent throughout the book. The book's most detailed definition of hegemony is “a system of rule that combines a balance between consent and coercion and that functions through the internalization of specific norms and ideals directly tied to a specific mode of production” and a “process whereby one class exerts influence over society so that other classes follow its political and economic project” (p. 34). However, the book does not clearly identify the “specific mode of production” and the particular “class” that exerts such influence over society within the bounds of the Nasserist project. This has been a question that various scholars have dealt with, but which the book does not extensively engage (see Abdel-Malek 1968; Ayubi 1995; Goldberg 1992; Vitalis 1995; Waterbury 1983, 1991). Because this matter is never resolved, Nasser's quashing of mass labor strikes and his assassination attempt seem to be balanced out by other instances of consent, yet Sadat's ability to coopt the Muslim Brotherhood through coercion and consent is deemed strictly non-hegemonic. Moreover, the book characterizes Sadat's *infitah* as responsible for redirecting capital away from the public sector to the private sector and instituting market-led development. However, as scholars have noted, the state's contribution to industrial capital did not change significantly from the mid-1960s to the late-1970s (Aoude 1994). In fact, Egypt's strategy of import-substitution industrialization (ISI) persisted well into the 1970s, while public

sector employment actually increased during this decade (Handoussa 1989; El-Issawy 1983). Although hegemony is a critical concept for historical sociologists, without specifying and detailing the mode of production and class, the use of political hegemony risks becoming a synonym for political legitimacy. Given that the two terms are not interchangeable, it becomes difficult to justify why one period is labelled as hegemonic while the other is not.

Instead, *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt* tries to demonstrate that the eventual undermining of hegemony in Egypt lies in the characteristics of colonialism. Put simply, Nasserist hegemony was anti-colonial in form but internally reproduced colonial forms of domination. After its defeat at the hands of imperialist powers in 1967, the Sadat and Mubarak governments were never able to reconstruct hegemony because of their reinsertion into the “colonial international.” However, since the precise mechanisms of colonial domination across the Egyptian case are not systematically explained, it is not obvious how exactly colonialism impeded Nasserist and post-Nasserist projects. Sometimes, this is explained through projects of “mastery” such as the High Dam in Aswan. Yet, since infrastructural developments that seek to master “nature, people, and the future” are automatically deemed colonial, the book’s conceptualization of colonialism is so expansive as to diminish the analytical utility of the term. At other times, the primary mechanism for colonial domination is the lack of domestic capital. While this is an important and astute point, it is insufficient for explaining developmental turbulence. Instead, the book could have discussed the decline of Nasserist hegemony by exploring the limits of ISI or engaging with broader political economy works in the developmental state, dependency, and world-systems traditions. Likewise, on the relationship between colonialism and hegemony, Sadat and Mubarak’s dependence on international support is characterized as “unstable” (p. 201) and not “a long-lasting solution” (p. 202). Yet, if anything,

the historical puzzle that needs to be explained is why the Egyptian ruling classes, in their supposed non-hegemonic form, have endured for so long without exclusively relying on coercion.

Nonetheless, Salem's book is a welcome addition to the new literature on Gramscian theory in the Middle East. *Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt* is a useful synthetic and theoretically-innovative work for those interested in understanding the broad contours of post-colonial Egyptian history and the haunting legacies of Nasser in contemporary Egypt. Scholars of modern Egypt and those interested in understanding Gramsci in the periphery would benefit from building on this book.

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