BRILL

Editorial Perspective

‘Stretching’ Marxism in the Postcolonial World *Egyptian Decolonisation and the Contradictions of National Sovereignty*

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Abstract

This article focuses on Egypt’s moment of decolonisation in order to explore some of the productive tensions between Marxism, Frantz Fanon’s work, and postcolonial contexts. Through a reading of Egypt’s attempts at independent industrialisation and decolonising ‘the international’, the article uses Frantz Fanon’s invitation to ‘stretch Marxism’ as a way of understanding the particularities of capitalism in the colonial and postcolonial world. It is posited that events such as decolonisation across the postcolonial world have been central to the evolution of global capitalism, and should be centred within Marxist analyses of global politics. It is further argued that these moments can shed light on the contradictions of nationalism, sovereignty and independence, and the ways in which anticolonialism in places like Egypt ultimately reproduced, rather than challenged, colonial capitalism.

Keywords

Fanon – postcolonial studies – Egypt – decolonisation – anticolonialism

Introduction

There is a long history of engagement between Marxist theory and anticolonial movements and thinkers across the Global South. In some ways, the momentous movements for independence in Africa, Asia and Latin America point to important syntheses between anti-capitalist politics, socialism, anticolonialism, and anti-racism, and suggest that the Marxist canon as we imagine it is and has never been simply 'Western'. Some of this engagement has taken place in the form of a debate between postcolonial studies and Marxism. Situating the emergence of postcolonial studies within the decline of anticolonial nationalism and the turn towards neoliberalism across much of the Global South, Neil Lazarus writes:

The substance and trajectory of the work produced in postcolonial studies was strongly marked by this epochal reversal of the fortunes and influence of insurgent national liberation movements and revolutionary ideologies in the 'Third World.'¹

While debates between Marxism and postcolonial studies have often seemed polarised, I want to note that there are also spaces within both traditions that have come together to constitute important sites of collaboration. When we look at Marxist traditions from within the postcolonial world, we see a vast array of writing: Samir Amin, Anour Abdel-Malek, Mehdi Ben Barka, George Padmore, Kwame Nkrumah, Mehdi Amel, Aimé Césaire, Eduardo Galeano, Frantz Fanon, Amílcar Cabral, Fidel Castro, C.L.R. James, Truong Ching, Ranajit Guha, Eqbal Ahmad, and Maxime Rodinson, among others. Ultimately what brought many of these thinkers together is an exploration of the connections between capitalism, colonialism and racism. Moreover, as Rashmi Varma and Subir Sinha note, it is difficult to speak holistically about either tradition, given large divergences within them:

Does one go with early or late Marx, the mechanistic or the Romantic Marx, or indeed the canonical or the 'Other' Marx? Is one more partial to world systemic derivations from Marx, or to 'political' Marxism? Does one, conversely, follow the postcolonial theory that is inextricable from postmodern and poststructuralist formulations, or one that hitches itself to revolutionary anticolonial thought? Does one concede that modernity arose in 'Europe' or 'the West,' thereby underscoring the stability of these

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¹ Lazarus 2011, p. 9.

terms, or does one see modernity as emerging as a single but uneven system? In the heat of these polemics, these differences *within* Marxism and postcolonial theory, which exist prior to the differences *between* them, are dissolved.²

Along these lines, Rahul Rao has called for 'recovering reparative readings' of postcolonialism and Marxism.³ Rao shows that the blanket designation of Marxism as Eurocentric fails to attend to the nuances embedded within Marx's position on imperialism. While the debate around Marx's Eurocentrism is an important one, I am equally interested in what gets represented as 'Marxism' in this debate. In other words, what are we assuming to be the Marxist 'canon'? If we take seriously the work of Samir Amin, C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon and Claudia Jones, then the Marxist canon itself is not as stable as often imagined.

While the tensions inherent in both traditions are one way of thinking through capitalism in Egypt, I want to instead focus on a particular historical moment as a way of exploring the co-constitution of colonialism and capitalism, one that spans several decades, beginning in the 1940s and ending in the 1970s, and marks Egypt's anticolonial project that culminated in independence. I think this moment holds value for us to explore the complexities of capitalism in a postcolonial context such as Egypt for several reasons. First, anticolonialism in Egypt was marked by a coming together of anticolonial nationalism and Arab socialism, and exploring the ways in which these were synthesised as well as the contradictions embedded within them can tell us about the present-day politics of anticapitalism in Egypt more broadly. Second, this moment sees the emergence of some of Fanon's predictions around a dependent bourgeoisie, while at the same time producing a form of class politics that diverged from Fanon's predictions; exploring this can shed light on Fanon's notion of stretching Marxism, as well as the particular form of capitalist development we see in Egypt. Finally, unpacking the Nasserist project's independent industrialisation drive in particular represents a concrete example of the 'pitfalls' of anticolonial nationalism, as Fanon might term it, and how these are connected to structures of global capital.

Instead of seeing Marxism as a set of tools or a body of work that can be applied to contexts such as Egypt, then, this article instead posits that Egypt holds just as much importance for Marxist theorising. Rather than simply applying Marxism to the region, it excavates aspects of regional politics that challenge or strengthen the Marxist tradition. In order to do this, Frantz Fanon's notion

² Varma and Sinha 2015, p. 6.

³ Rao 2017.

of 'stretching Marxism' is deployed.⁴ Following scholars who have argued that Fanon has been misread in ways that undercut his materialist analysis,⁵ it is pertinent to note the particularly unique ways in which Fanon navigated the question of Marxism in the context of the colony, one of which was his writing on the base/superstructure relationship:

This world is divided into compartments, this world cut into two is inhabited by two species. The originality of the colonial context is that economic reality, inequality and the immense difference of ways of life never come to mask the human realities. When you examine at close quarters the colonial context, it is evident that what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging or not belonging to a given race, a given species. In the colonies, the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich.⁶

For Fanon, stretching Marxism was an attempt to contextualise the specificity of capitalism in the colony without completely disregarding the assumptions underpinning Marxism. Where Marx located revolutionary potential within the capitalist core, Fanon instead located it within the colonies themselves – in a sense, he turned Marx's position on its head. Fanon's call to stretch Marxism can be understood as a methodology that allowed for a deeper exploration of colonial capitalism:

Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem. Everything up to and including the very nature of pre-capitalist society, so well explained by Marx, must here be thought out again.⁷

In essence, Fanon understands that in colonial and postcolonial conditions, the kind of 'classical' assumptions Marxism makes in Europe do not hold, because of the pervasive and constitutive role of colonisation and racialisation within the colonies. This did not lead Fanon to disavow Marxism but instead to rearticulate it to account for how capitalism and colonialism were co-constitutive in most of the world. Marxism, then, was a tool for anticolonial liberation

4 Fanon 1963.

5 Lazarus 2011, p. 163; Macey 2000, p. 27; Salem 2015; Sekyi-Otu 1996, p. 3.

6 Fanon 1963, p. 31.

7 Fanon 1963, p. 40.

and the fight against white supremacy – it was this that guided Fanon, not an interest in developing a Marxist theory that spoke to and for Europe alone. Throughout this article I use 'stretching Marxism' to uncover events, topics and shifts that come to light only when we think about colonialism and capitalism as co-constitutive. It is in the exploration of nationalism, sovereignty, anticolonial resistance and solidarity – not always centred in studies on Marxist political economy – that we see how the colonial and the capitalist questions are inseparable in a context such as Egypt.

Various traditions have worked from this set of assumptions. The Black Radical Tradition, for example, has drawn attention to the historical connections between capitalism and racism, arguing against the tendency to see racism as a secondary contradiction that will disappear in a post-capitalist world. This has also led to important work around racial capitalism, a term referring to capitalism as a whole.⁸ Similarly, Marxists across the postcolonial world have engaged in important work thinking through the particularities of capitalism in the colony and postcolony. In the context of Egypt, Marxists such as Anour Abdel-Malek, Nazih Ayubi and Samir Amin have produced important work connecting capitalist expansion to colonial violence, and how this produces particular forms of racialised and colonial capitalism.⁹

Despite Fanon's connection to Algeria, and despite interesting connections between Middle Eastern intellectuals and activists and Fanon, his overt influence on the broader Middle East has been minimal.¹⁰ This is despite the fact that writings on the formation of a dependent bourgeoisie are interesting in relation to contexts such as Egypt, as I explore further on. Moreover, in places like Iran where Fanon became quite popular through the writing and translations of Ali Shariati, it becomes clear that shared goals of anticolonial liberation meant there was a common project between Fanon and anticolonial revolutionaries across the Middle East. 'Both Fanon and Shariati seemed to have shared the same grand narrative of their time, namely that of war and liberation, wars of independence against Western domination, imperialism, and the bourgeoisie, a narrative that could encompass both religious and anticolonial contexts.'¹¹ It is this narrative, very much present in anticolonial Egypt, that, in my view, makes Fanon relevant to the context of the Middle East.

8 Davis 2011; Gilmore 2007; Du Bois 2007; Césaire 2000; Rediker and Linebaugh 2013; Robinson 1983.

9 Amin 1974; Abdel-Malek 1968; Ayubi 1996.

10 Macey 2000, p. 7; Cherki 2006. Exceptions include Fateh in Palestine, which has directly used Fanon in their praxis; and Iran, where Ali Shariati's engagement with and translation of Fanon's work was highly influential (Farahzad 2017).

11 Ibid.

Rather than provide an answer to the question of how colonialism, capitalism and anticolonialism in Egypt during decolonisation came together or fell apart, the article instead sketches out several moments through the lenses of sovereignty, industrialisation and nationalism to highlight some of the tensions that arose around this particular political project, and how these related to the notions of colonial capitalism and stretching Marxism. The following section begins by laying out the historical moment of decolonisation in Egypt, focusing particularly on the economic project of independent industrialisation, the political project of national sovereignty, and the quest to nationalise key sectors of the economy. While these three projects were invariably connected, they represented particular approaches to independence that both challenged certain forms of global power while replicating others. I read these two aspects of this historical moment through a careful attention to the workings of colonial capitalism as well as through Fanon's call to stretch Marxism, in order to think through instances during which anticolonial politics both challenged and replicated capitalism and colonial ways of governing.

Decolonising Egypt

The period of decolonisation remains one of the most pivotal moments in modern history. As Sven Beckert notes, 'Without its Eurocentric distortions, decolonisation would be at the very centre of the narrative we tell about the twentieth century – and this retelling would allow us to see that global capitalism today is most fundamentally shaped by the struggles for independence.'¹² This moment was very much created in and through the global structural constraints which set the limits within which postcolonial states could decolonise, and how newly independent countries such as Egypt responded to these limitations. I argue that central to this tension between (imperial) structure and (anti-colonial) agency was the question of sovereignty and national ownership, particularly of key infrastructure.

Gamal Abdel Nasser ruled Egypt for fourteen years, from 1956 until his death in 1970, and is arguably both the most popular and the most controversial political figure in Egyptian memory. Representing Egypt's formal break with colonial rule as well as an attempted transition towards an industry-driven economy, the Nasser years were a momentous time. Rather than nationalist sentiment acting as a backdrop in the formation of this project, it was very much its reason for coming into being. Nasser and the Free Officers, a group

¹² Beckert 2015, p. 359.

of Egyptian military officers that led the 1952 revolution, created a project that both drew on and implemented nationalist goals which had already been crafted and popularised by various social movements that came before them. From an active workers' movement to the Wafd (Egypt's first nationalist and primarily liberal party); from nationalists to feminists; Egypt pre-1952 was already bursting with activity around the question of anti-colonialism. The failure of the Wafd to secure meaningful independence further set the stage for Nasser and the Officers, who very much fashioned themselves as a more radical alternative that spoke to the everyday Egyptian. Indeed, the class composition of the Officers is key to understanding their widespread popularity, as they were the first, and possibly last, ruling class composed of individuals from non-elite classes.

The Free Officers were initially a nationalist movement, made up of different trends including the Muslim Brotherhood, the Wafdists and the Communists.¹³ Their shared class background explains not only the antipathy many felt towards the monarchy and political parties such as the Wafd that had a clear class bias, but also contributed to their particular understanding of anticolonial nationalism as a material form of decolonisation. This class background was a result of the opening up of Egypt's Military Academy to men from the middle classes in 1936, transforming what had always been an elitist institution. It was in 1949 that Nasser established the 'founding committee' of the Free Officers' movement, initially made up of eight men who met to discuss what kind of political action was needed in Egypt: Nasser, Abdel Mon'im Abdel Ra'uf Kemal al-Din Hussein, Khalid Mohieddin Abdel Hakim Amer, Salah Salem, Hassan Ibrahim, and Abdel Latif al-Boghdadi. In the early 1950s, the first Free Officer pamphlets were printed, stating that the goals of the movement were to bring an end to British imperialism, palace and government corruption, feudalism, and to tackle the Palestine question.

On 23 July 1952, Anwar el Sadat announced to the nation that a coup had taken place. In his book outlining the goals of the revolution, Nasser emphasised the destructive British presence in the Suez Canal, the destruction of imperialism and feudalism, the establishment of social justice, and the establishing of a democratic system.¹⁴ The popularity of the Nasserist project can be explained though its ability to mobilise certain ideologies and forms of activism that pre-dated it, and also that it emerged during a historical moment in which the question of anti-colonialism was dominant. In other ways, the ruling class expended energy in spreading their project through Egyptian civil

13 Botman 1986, p. 350.

14 Nasser 1959, pp. 6–7.

society, be it through popular media such as *Voice of the Arabs*, or through their transformation of Egypt's educational system.

Another reason for the power of the Nasserist project is its materiality. The dismantling of the landed elite, the (limited) land reform programme, the introduction of free education and healthcare, and the guarantee of employment after graduation, were some of the material changes put in place by the Nasserist project. None of these are beyond critique, and, as I show in the last section, they still relied on the reproduction of capitalist development. At the same time, they radically transformed the ability of many Egyptians to access social services and social mobility. Also included in this category are the major infrastructural projects the Nasserist ruling class embarked on, including the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the building of the High Dam. These infrastructural projects spoke directly to the themes of this article such as nationalism, independence, and independent economic development.

Overall, then, the Nasserist project was one that fitted within the remit of anticolonial projects in its centring of sovereignty, independent development, socialism, and industrialisation. The mobilisation of these ideas and practices, however, while presented as ideologically straightforward, was fraught in relation to the forms of social violence and colonial assumptions that were embedded within projects such as the Nasserist one. While some of these goals, such as the nationalisation of national resources, challenged forms of global capital and European imperialism, they often simultaneously reproduced social violence within the nation as well as colonial understandings of development and the future. It is this tension, so symptomatic of anticolonial state-led projects, that makes the era of decolonisation an important one for theorising about capitalism and anti-capitalism.

National Sovereignty and the Colonial International

In this section I will look at the particular ways in which nationalism, sovereignty, Arab socialism and anticolonialism came together in contradictory ways, and why Fanon's work is useful in thinking through some of these contradictions. I am especially interested in how his notion of dependency – created in and through global capitalism – both fits and does not fit the Egyptian context at this moment. Using the stated anticolonial goal of national sovereignty, I shall explore how Nasserism both achieved forms of independence while reproducing forms of dependency at the same time.

In much of his work, Fanon's point of departure is that capitalism in the colonial – and therefore postcolonial – world took a distinct form. He analyses

this specifically through distinguishing between ruling classes in the West and those in the colonised world, arguing that the latter were structurally and fundamentally created *to be dependent*. Even in cases where this ruling class may want to become hegemonic, it will always fail precisely for the structural reasons emended within colonial capitalism, most notably a failure to accumulate capital on the scale necessary to create an authentic bourgeois project. For Fanon, then, decolonisation did not always succeed in its *stated* goal of interrupting colonial structures and forms of dependency, and often merely transferred those same structures and forms to a local class.

In her book *The Postcolonial Subject: Claiming Politics/Governing Others in Late Modernity*, Vivienne Jabri coined the term the *colonial international* to describe an international sphere still perforated by imperialism.¹⁵ There was a prominent belief among postcolonial nations that regaining control over the institutions of international political economy – the same institutions that reproduced global inequality – was the path to independence:

In its role in both accumulation and the establishment of legitimacy, the postcolonial state is an interventionist state: it seeks to construct a hegemonic structure that functions to legitimize a political economy of development; it builds a state apparatus geared for planning as well as the mobilization and management of national resources.¹⁶

However, this is always done vis-à-vis the international; it is this tension that mediates anything and everything the postcolonial state does. The attempted dismantling of the international, which was seen as part and parcel of decolonisation, can be read through seminal events such as the Afro-Asian conference at Bandung in 1955.

It is around national sovereignty that the battle lines of the colonial international become clear. The international was a colonial international, as Jabri phrased it, precisely because not all nation states were considered to be sovereign; in fact, the majority were not. Categories such as mandates and protectorates betrayed this linear logic of colonialism, whereby some nations were *potential* nation states¹⁷ embodying sovereignty, but to reach this stage meant achieving a certain civilisational status. As Antony Anghie notes, 'Sovereignty

¹⁵ Jabri 2012, p. 100.

¹⁶ Jabri 2012, p. 102.

¹⁷ Chatterjee in Eslava, Fakhri and Nesiah (eds.) 2017, p. 668.

existed in something like a linear continuum, based on its approximation to the ideal of the European nation-state.¹⁸

Any debate on the notion of an international during the mid-twentieth century must touch on previous attempts to generate internationalism, through organisations such as the League against Imperialism¹⁹, through the Communist International – particularly the Third International – as well as transnational activism.²⁰ The Comintern is perhaps the most visible example, for, as Mazower notes, ‘for much of the twentieth century the term “internationalism” was more or less synonymous with organized socialism’.²¹ These international conferences were fascinating in their breadth and scope, and are excellent lenses through which to trace Marxist theorising, communist activism, and new and emerging trends within the left.

The Communist International similarly represented an attempt at a new international, as these meetings very much imagined an international based on equality. Nevertheless, this attempt differed in that inequality was envisioned as based on a universalist understanding of the wage-labour relation, and a tendency towards Eurocentric understandings of class inequality that did not always take imperialism and/or racism as key structures through which class was organised was pronounced. Additionally, the over-representation of Europeans at these various conferences meant that the call for world revolution did not necessarily truly encompass the entire world. While the involvement of Lenin as well as communists from colonised countries, most notably people like M.N. Roy who was very influential within the Comintern before founding the Communist Party of India,²² ensured that imperialism was on the agenda at many of these meetings, by the late 1920s there were increasing conflicts between communists and anti-colonial and anti-racist activists as the latter ‘felt disillusioned with the communist approach to colonial questions, which saw independence from European rule not as a goal in itself, but only as one step towards the communist world order’.²³

Nevertheless, the rich interaction between communists and anti-colonial activists suggests there were important overlaps in how they understood the international. And despite some of these tensions, the Communist International was certainly an attempt at forging a new, radical international, happening around the same time that countries such as Egypt were challenging the colonial international. Importantly, Marxist ideas and methodologies

18 Anghie 2007, p. 148.

19 See Brückenhaus 2017, Chapter 5.

20 For a rich overview of transnational anti-colonial activism, see Brückenhaus 2017.

21 Mazower 2012, p. 55.

22 Brückenhaus 2017, p. 132.

23 Brückenhaus 2017, p. 182.

were part and parcel of attempts by postcolonial nations to challenge imperialism; Nasser, for example, in his book *Philosophy of the Revolution*, clearly addresses socialism as central to his political project, even as he underlined the importance of contextualising the emergence of socialism in Europe. Thus while communists and anticolonial nationalists may have partaken in different projects – all of which attempted to transform international politics – the lines between them often blurred.

The call for sovereignty made by nations such as Egypt was matched by a call for industrialisation, which I shall expand on in more detail in the next section. Tellingly, the Communiqué issued after the conference begins by listing principles of economic cooperation,²⁴ suggesting the importance of the economic in the creation of a new international.²⁵ Some of the themes that emerge from these principles include the need for cooperation within the Global South; the creation and sharing of technical expertise, research and development; the establishment of international bodies to coordinate economic development; and self-determination in terms of economic policy. Most importantly, the principles clearly delineate a programme for national development based on industrialisation. The fourth principle calls for the stabilising of commodity trade in the region, and the fifth principle acknowledges the importance of primary commodities and the position of the postcolonial world in supplying them. The sixth principle states: 'Asian-African countries should diversify their export trade by processing their raw material, wherever economically feasible, before export.' Furthermore, the nationalisation of banking was strongly proposed, as was the development of infrastructure to engage in trade. As Chatterjee notes, the Communiqué suggests that most countries at the conference saw themselves as 'exporters of raw commodities and importers of industrial products'.²⁶ State-led economic development through industrialisation was envisioned as a means of interrupting the dependency they faced on global capital. I shall turn to this next.

Independent Industrialisation

Following the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, there emerged a group of Egyptian nationalists who saw industrialisation as central to Egypt's future

24 The Communiqué can be accessed at: <http://franke.uchicago.edu/Final_Communique_Bandung_1955.pdf>.

25 In some ways, this pre-empted approaches such as dependency and world-systems theory, which situated the global capitalist system as a site of colonial inequality.

26 Chatterjee in Eslava, Fakhri and Nesiah (eds.) 2017, p. 673.

welfare.²⁷ This group emerged at a time when Egypt's economy was very much integrated into the global capitalist economy, with foreign capital dominating major investments. Bank Miṣr, and in particular its founder, Talaat Harb, were central to the project that Nasser was to put in place just decades later. The focus on independence through industrialisation, on national sovereignty, and on the pitfalls of foreign capital set the scene for debates Nasser and the Free Officers were to have in the 1940s and 1950s.

The structural constraints facing these nationalists were multiple;²⁸ above all, it was Egypt's dependency on a single export – cotton – that was deeply concerning, raising questions of diversification and self-sufficiency. Indeed the report of the commission that led to the founding of Bank Miṣr stated that this reliance on a single export was dangerous and that Egypt needed to gain greater control over the purchase and sale of cotton.²⁹ Industrialisation was very much central to the founding of Bank Miṣr, as it was seen as Egypt's way out of its dependency on cotton. Industrialisation was seen, on the one hand, as an economic solution to Egypt's dependency within the global capitalist system; and, on the other, as a solution to a *social* problem: that of poverty.

We see here the ways in which industrialisation, social welfare, and the nation come together; industrialisation is not posed simply as a means by which Egyptian capitalists can accumulate capital more effectively, but as a means of improving the Egyptian nation as a whole. This was a prelude to how the Nasserist project would understand industrial development. Ultimately, however, the Bank's project failed. On the one hand, the Bank had been created to further Egyptian industrialisation through creating domestic industries.³⁰ On the other hand, the Bank soon came to the realisation that without foreign capital, and to some extent foreign expertise, it would be unable to embark on major industrial projects. A deeper critique of Bank Miṣr, which I shall elaborate on in the final section and which can be extended to the broader nationalist movement, is that the adoption of capitalist development and the coercion towards labour this entailed meant that these industrialisation projects could never develop the nation in any true sense.³¹

In his extensive writings on Bank Miṣr, Tignor often mentions the optimism and hope that characterised the founding of the Bank and the economic

27 Davis 2014, p. 4.

28 Tignor 1980, p. 103.

29 Tignor 1977, p. 162.

30 See, for example, its 1929 report: *The Creation of Domestic Industries* (cited in Tignor 1977, p. 162).

31 For an excellent example of the limits of national capital, particularly in relation to commodities and nature, see Jakes 2017.

programme it represented,³² seeing it as a 'child of the revolution of 1919' and as representing a 'naïve sentimentality' and 'boundless optimism for Egypt's prospects for development'.³³ The Bank in many ways appears to parallel the similar sentimentality around 1952. While there is little doubt that Talaat Harb and Bank Miṣr laid the foundations for Nasser's industrialisation project, they also represented a warning to this very same project. Like Nasser and the Officers, Talaat Harb saw industrialisation as central to Egypt's future economic and political independence. And yet the failure of Harb's project – and Ali's before him – revealed the nature of the colonial international, and the limits of capitalist development within such an order. It suggested that working from within capitalist development did not necessarily pose the much-desired solution to Egypt's dependency.³⁴ Unfortunately, as we will see next, the Nasserist project did not heed this warning and instead reproduced a similar attempt to liberate Egypt through state-led capitalist development, ultimately coming to face the same failure.

Nasser and the Free Officers, like Ali and Bank Miṣr before them, envisioned industrialisation as central to gaining economic and political independence, as well as social development. One of their first political decisions was to reduce the power of the agrarian capitalists and instead redirect capital investment towards industry through the creation of a new social force made up of industrial capitalists, bureaucrats and technocrats that made up the expanding public sector. The agrarian law of 1952 that limited personal ownership of land was one way of doing this; radically shifting the balance of power between the private and public sector was another. The expansion of the public sector and the provision of social welfare through free education, healthcare and other social services, as well as guaranteeing employment to all university graduates, were further indications of a new emerging project. Duties paid on imported industrial commodities were increased, and duties on imported material inputs were decreased in order to develop Egyptian industry. New companies did not have to pay taxes on profits for their first five years, and tariffs on luxury imports were raised.³⁵ It soon became clear that the aim was to shift investment from agriculture to industry. This was part and parcel of the new government's attempt to re-articulate Egypt's capitalist trajectory rather than dismantle it.

32 Tignor 1977, p. 166.

33 Ibid.

34 For more on this, see Vitalis 1995; he shows the important consequences of looking at archives outside of the state and tracing different groups of capitalists inside Egypt. Nevertheless, the limits of indigenous capitalist development can be understood as a consequence of the tensions between Egyptian capitalists as well as the limitations imposed on all of them by global capitalism.

35 Aoudé 1994, p. 6.

At the same time, the Free Officers restricted foreign capital, pushed through import-substitution industrialisation, and invested heavily in infrastructure.³⁶

The rebalancing of power between the public and private sectors was seen as crucial to the project of industrialisation. Private ownership was limited to the sectors of construction, land, and industry; land reform, rent controls, and new taxation rules were implemented; and social-welfare benefits such as education, healthcare, and a minimum wage were ensured.³⁷ This was soon followed by a wave of nationalisations. In 1960s, the National Bank of Egypt and Bank Miṣr were nationalised. This was followed by all insurance companies and banks, 50 industrial and shipping companies, and most of the financial and manufacturing sectors.³⁸ The 1962 National Charter allowed the state to nationalise any company owned jointly with the private sector, and large companies owned by private individuals were also nationalised.³⁹ By the end of the first five-year plan, the public sector represented 90% of total investment, causing some to argue that state capitalism had successfully eliminated foreign control of Egypt's economy.⁴⁰

Ultimately, like those before it, the Nasserist project was largely unsuccessful at developing a strong industrial sector. The capital needed for significant investments belonged to a very small circle of capitalists who saw Nasser's land reforms as radical, and were thus unwilling to invest in associated projects.⁴¹ The regime's dismantling of the old political parties also eliminated the avenues of influence this circle of elites used, further estranging them from the new government: 'In the absence of political tools by which they could articulate and aggregate their interests, Egyptian capitalists remained suspicious of the Officers' objectives and were reluctant to follow their directives.'⁴² Class tensions played a role here, as the old elite often looked down on the new class of officers, whom they saw as less sophisticated.⁴³ While there was support for industrialisation from the rural middle class, they did not have the capital needed for this diversification.⁴⁴ What this ultimately meant was that state actors became, by default, the principal economic actors while – as Beattie puts it – 'capitalists were left holding the short end of the stick'.⁴⁵

36 Aoudé 1994, p. 7.

37 Aoudé 1994, p. 8.

38 Beattie 1994, pp. 155–6.

39 Ibid.

40 Beattie 1994, pp. 155–6.

41 Beattie 1994, p. 144.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Beattie 1994, p. 147.

45 Ibid.

At the same time, there were contradictions embedded within the Nasserist project itself that played a role in this failure. In the rest of this section, I shall discuss the adoption of state-led capitalist development and argue that it should be seen as a continuation of a colonial mode of rule. This warning had already been given in the 1950s by Egyptian left-leaning economists, who argued that Nasserism was bound to reproduce capitalist inequalities.⁴⁶ Egyptian Marxists such as Samir Amin have been equally adamant in laying out the 'traps' inherent in adopting capitalist development – even if led by an anticolonial state.⁴⁷ Nazih Ayubi, a critic of designating the Nasserist project as a socialist one, wrote: 'It is not sound to call a system socialist simply because its leaders happen, at a particular political juncture, to raise socialist banners and to use socialist terminology. We do not accept so readily the appellation "democratic" that many of the command regimes attribute to themselves, so why are we so easily prepared to accept a "socialist" designation of a regime simply because it is called so by its leaders?'⁴⁸ Industrialisation was based on notions of scientific progress, modern planning, and centring the state within capitalist production; it is difficult to ignore the modern telos underwriting industrialisation-as-development. While under Nasser investment was to be concentrated in industry, making it a key locus of surplus-value, this did not represent a departure from capitalist development.

This was already made clear by the workers' movement that emerged in the early twentieth century. Resistance to the British occupation and the particular forms of labour discipline this brought with it ranged from desertions and uprisings to refusals to grow the crops requested by landlords.⁴⁹ Connecting this to imperialism, workers quickly built a movement that was both anti-capitalist and anti-colonial. The British became increasingly coercive in their attempts to quell this resistance.⁵⁰ What is significant for us is the deeper critique workers made of capitalism; for workers, the issue was not simply Egypt's dependent position within global capitalism – the issue was capitalism itself. Contrast this to Talaat Harb – or even Nasser – who instead saw the core problem as one of dependency. Additionally, Nasser's reforms – particularly in the field of social welfare – were to de-radicalise the workers' movement through co-optation, intimidation,⁵¹ and through the resulting separation between what were 'political' and what were 'economic' questions. It is during this moment that we see

46 Aoudé 1994; Ayubi 1992; Hosseinzadeh 1988; Hussein 1973.

47 Amin 2011.

48 Ayubi 1992, p. 92.

49 See Mitchell 1991.

50 Mitchell 1991, p. 226.

51 A pivotal moment soon after Nasser came to power in 1952 was the ruthless crackdown on workers at Kafr al-Dawwar, an industrial town 30 kilometres from Alexandria.

the neutralisation of the threat posed by labour, one that called for the radical dismantling of capitalism and for the distribution of social wealth across the nation. While nationalising industries, as Nasser did, is important, the bigger question is who is allowed to partake in this process of nationalisation.

In a strong condemnation of nationalist elites, Fanon writes: 'For if you think you can manage a country without letting the people interfere, if you think that the people upset the game by their mere presence, whether they slow it down or whether by their natural ignorance they sabotage it, then you must have no hesitation: you must keep the people out.'⁵² It is in this bringing-together of economic independence and a radical notion of democracy that we see the flaws of the Nasserist project. The exclusion of 'the people' from the project of decolonisation meant that the Nasserist project was unable to centre class struggle and fully liberate itself from the colonial international. As Fanon noted, the national government should always *cede its power back to the people*. It should, in effect, *dissolve itself*. Because nationalist consciousness during the anticolonial moment comes from the people, this is where it should reside. Returning to Ayubi:

'Socialism,' therefore, did not come to power by way of a political movement intent on putting socialist ideals into practice. It did not come about through a political party formed *before* assuming power along a socialist platform, or through a mass or revolutionary movement with clear popular and egalitarian orientation. The norm was a military coup or a 'palace coup,' and although this sometimes proceeded to build up a single political organization that eventually adopted some 'socialist' objectives, this was done from a position of authority and was often aimed at installing 'socialism without socialists,' as a familiar Arab phrase describes it.⁵³

By de-centring class struggle and the radical critique workers put forward in the build-up to Egyptian independence, the Nasserist project was ultimately unable to complete the project of decolonisation by fully liberating Egypt from the colonial international. Moments such as Bandung and Suez represented the opening up of political space at the international level; the limited changes

52 Fanon 1963, p. 152. Fanon added: 'Yet the national middle class constantly demands the nationalisation of the economy and of the trading sectors. This is because, from their point of view, nationalisation does not mean placing the whole economy at the service of the nation. For them, nationalisation does not mean governing the state with regard to the new social relations whose growth it has been decided to encourage. To them, nationalisation quite simply means the transfer into native hands of those unfair advantages which are a legacy of the colonial period' (Fanon 1963, p. 122).

53 Ayubi 1992, p. 94.

these brought about are precisely why many have seen them as missed or lost opportunities. It was during this moment that there was a possibility for real change; the possibility of a decolonised international. Instead, postcolonial nations were faced with two challenges that proved insurmountable: on the one hand, postcolonial elites who refrained from centring subaltern struggles and pushing for a radical questioning of colonial institutions and structures; and on the other, the colonial international which slowly but surely closed down the space that had just begun to open up.

Nationalisation

In this section I will explore another particular dimension of independent economic development that unravelled under Nasserism. In particular, I pay attention to nationalisation as a pillar of this new economic project, and the ways in which it talks to us about anticolonialism, anti-capitalism and its limits during this moment. The nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the building of the High Dam represent the two major and connected infrastructural projects that emerged as part of the Nasserist project. The nationalisation of the Canal in particular was an event of global significance, and a central part of the anticolonial nationalist project in place. The building of the High Dam, the financing for which came from the nationalisation of the Canal, was similarly connected to global debates around industry and self-sufficiency. Specifically, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, referred to as the 'lifeline of the British Empire',⁵⁴ remains a pivotal moment of decolonisation, symbolising both the end of Britain's global influence as well as the emergence of Nasser as the leader of Arab nationalism. As Ali Hillal Dessouki notes, Suez reflected a conflict between a dying world order and a new order waiting to be born.⁵⁵

In an article on the Suez Canal Company, Tala'at Harb – a prominent Egyptian nationalist and the founder of Bank Miṣr, Egypt's first national bank – discussed European financial imperialism and the domination of foreign capital over Egypt's economy, calling on the Egyptian state to insist on Egyptian representatives on the board of directors, a percentage of the Canal's profits, and that the company would revert to Egyptian ownership once the concession had expired. For Tala'at Harb, the Suez Canal Company (SCC) was an 'egregious example of rapacious and exploitative European capitalism', leading him to call for limits to be placed on its freedom of operation.⁵⁶ The SCC

54 Tignor 2015, p. 171.

55 Louis and Owen 1989, p. 31.

56 Tignor 1977, p. 164.

was an Egyptian firm, but its capital and managers were completely foreign. Egyptians held 0.2% of shares in the company and the board of directors included only two Egyptians out of a total of 32. Following the British occupation of Egypt, the SCC opened an office in London, and the number of British directors increased from three to ten. Britain was the largest user of the canal and thus British shipping was given preferential treatment.⁵⁷ 'In Egypt the company behaved as a state within a state. It considered itself immune from Egyptian law and in the canal towns behaved as if it, and not the Egyptian government, were the real authority.'⁵⁸ It was only in 1936, after the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty was signed, that two Egyptian directors were added to the board. Following mounting Egyptian pressure to 'Egyptianise' the company, Britain and the US had suggested that the canal be 'internationalised' – in other words, brought under international rather than Egyptian control.

Debates around the financing of the High Dam in Aswan – Nasser's major infrastructural project – set the scene for the nationalisation of the canal. The High Dam was seen as part of Egypt's industrialisation project, as controlling floods would provide water for irrigation and generate electricity as well as benefit Egypt's farmland. The Egyptians preferred European private capital to American or World Bank financing. However, English Electric – the main firm involved – threatened to back out of the deal if the World Bank was not included.⁵⁹ An arms deal with the Czechs that year, as well as Egypt's increasingly warm overtures to the Soviets, added more tension to already-fraught negotiations. The eventual decision by the British and US governments not to finance the dam represented a culmination of growing tensions over the politicised nature of conditionalities attached to loans from the World Bank as well as Nasser's emerging non-aligned position.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, the decision to withdraw foreign funding still came as a shock to Nasser.⁶¹ Nasser's response was swift, and shocked the world: on 26 July 1956, in a speech he gave to the Egyptian public, he announced the full nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company. The local response was ecstatic:

There was a moment of silent incredulity, as the significance of what they had just heard sank into the quarter of a million people crowded into Menshiyeh Square (Alexandria). Then pandemonium erupted and scenes of wild excitement broke out in towns and villages through the

⁵⁷ Heikal 1986, p. 22.

⁵⁸ Heikal 1986, p. 23.

⁵⁹ Heikal 1986, p. 105.

⁶⁰ Ultimately Egypt was to turn to local capital to finance the dam.

⁶¹ Heikal 1986, p. 74.

length and breadth of the land where millions had been clustered round their radios to listen to the President's speech. Nobody in Egypt slept much that night.⁶²

The nationalisation of Suez marked a turning point in global politics. Internationally, it led to a powerful wave of Arab support for Nasser, including from countries that had given him a lukewarm reception just a few years earlier and that were pro-West in orientation, such as Iraq and Jordan. As Rashid Khalidi writes, this event not only united Arabs behind Egypt and Nasser, it also gave a 'final push to the tottering hegemony of Britain and France'.⁶³ Suez was also what cemented Egypt's role in the Non-Aligned Movement. There could be no more talk about eliminating Nasser on the part of the British and the Americans.

Domestically, the repercussions were just as significant. The nationalisation of the Canal was aimed at weakening foreign capital in Egypt, as well as targeting an important symbol of British and European imperialism. This was compounded by the increasing tension between Western powers and Egypt, particularly after the tripartite aggression which severed most links between Egypt and France and Britain; following this, many foreign nationals began leaving Egypt and the assets they owned were sequestered. As noted by Robert Tignor, the invasion was what led to the dissolution of the long-standing British and French economic presence in Egypt. 'By viewing the evolution of the government's relationship toward foreign capital during this period of acute strain, it is possible to see how the regime, so conflicted on the issue of foreign capital and the private sector, took its first decisive steps to undercut the power of foreign capital.'⁶⁴

Recalling Jabri, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal can be read as a paradigmatic moment in postcolonial state resistance:

In this moment was contained not simply the desire to reclaim a valuable resource for the nation, but to constitute the nation as a viable political community with a right of access to the realm of the international.⁶⁵

Suez, according to this narrative, marked a moment of resistance; a moment during which, with massive popular support, the 'lifeline of the British Empire' was swiftly decolonised. Nationalisation can thus be read as an act of

62 Heikal 1986, p. 127.

63 In Khalidi, Anderson, Muslih and Simon (eds.) 1991, p. 378.

64 Tignor 1997, p. 128.

65 Jabri 2012, p. 103.

sovereignty; an attempt to access the international on Egypt's own terms. It was not simply about finding capital to finance the building of the High Dam; it was also about making a claim to Egyptian national resources and their place within the international political economy. By arguing that the Canal was Egyptian and that Egypt as a sovereign state had the right to nationalise it, Nasser was re-scripting sovereignty in an attempt to expand the circle of nations who should be thought of as sovereign.

This, however, reified a colonial understanding of sovereignty that ultimately, by shifting the locus of power from the imperial state to the nation state, reproduced the nation state as the bearer of what is sovereign. Broadly speaking, the adoption of the modern nation state and nationalism on the part of postcolonial elites implied an unspoken acceptance of colonial modes of governance and societal organisation. This critique has been made by postcolonial scholars with reference to anticolonial nationalism and its attempt to capture the state and make it the central locus of politics.⁶⁶ While these nations adopted nationalism in order to fight colonialism, this should not have instituted a long-term organising structure. Joseph Massad makes this point when he claims that the problem is precisely that these leaders did not see the dangers of *believing* that the adoption of nationalism was more than simply strategic:

By appropriating colonial discourse, anticolonial nationalism was able to subvert it and resist it, leading to the end of colonial rule. Its subsequent refusal, however, to question colonial modes of governance and the very precepts of colonial epistemology, except for its place in them, meant its abdication of agency to colonial law and discipline. Instead of understanding their anticolonial nationalism as a *strategic* essentialism to fight colonial power, anticolonial nationalists mistook their nationalism for an absolute essence.⁶⁷

Although Massad's focus is on the law and the military as modes of colonial governance, there is no doubt that the adoption of state-led capitalist development should also be seen as the continuation of a colonial mode of governance. Indeed, the failures of the Nasserist project from an economic perspective were already diagnosed early on by leftist writers and intellectuals,⁶⁸ including

66 See Chatterjee 1986; Seth 1992, pp. 37–54; Said 1978.

67 Massad 2001, pp. 277–8.

68 See Abdel-Malek 1968 for a key text on Nasserism.

scholars such as Samir Amin, who had laid out the 'traps' inherent in adopting capitalist development – even if led by an anticolonial state.⁶⁹

Given that the expansion of capitalism in Egypt was tied to the expansion of colonialism from the very beginning, it becomes difficult to disentangle one from the other.⁷⁰ It is this that makes Nasser's decision to adopt state-led capitalist development contentious. Industrialisation was based on notions of scientific progress, modern planning, and centring the state within capitalist production; it is difficult to ignore the modern telos underwriting industrialisation-as-development. While under Nasser investment was to be concentrated in industry, making it a key locus of surplus-value, this did not represent a departure from capitalist development.

Partly this can be explained through the Nasserist project's move to co-opt workers rather than centre their call for a more radical form of anti-colonialism. The radical project of democratisation envisioned by workers meant a redistribution of wealth across the nation. Although this was part of Nasser's rhetoric, it did not become a reality. While nationalising industries is important, the bigger question is who is allowed to partake in this process of nationalisation. Recalling Fanon: 'If you think you can manage a country without letting the people interfere, if you think that the people upset the game by their mere presence, whether they slow it down or whether by their natural ignorance they sabotage it, then you must have no hesitation: you must keep the people out.'⁷¹

Perhaps nothing highlights this more than the massive sacrifices that were required from Egyptian workers – and Egyptians more broadly – in the building of Nasser's infrastructural projects. Although we don't have much in the way of specific details around deaths, injuries or displacement, we do know that the building of the High Dam at Aswan was staggering in terms of the lives it claimed. The displacement of Nubians from their ancestral land, followed by the massive numbers of workers killed or injured during the building of the Dam stand as twin testaments to the high price paid for 'independence' through infrastructure. While it is true that both of these communities saw the Dam as essential to the goals of the revolution, that they felt strong ownership over it, and that they fully supported the view that infrastructure was key to decolonisation and independence,⁷² Fanon's prophetic words about 'keeping

69 Amin 2011.

70 Here I follow scholars such as Eric Williams (2014) who argue that the expansion of capitalism depended on slavery and colonisation.

71 Fanon 1963, p. 65.

72 Mossallam 2012.

the people out' cannot help but trouble this neat picture, revealing the contradictions underlying the move to decolonise infrastructure in an attempt to establish full sovereignty – still on terms set by centuries of colonial rule.

Conclusion

By de-centring more radical approaches to decolonisation, as well as to anticolonial nationalism, the Nasserist project both challenged but also reproduced Egypt's position within the colonial international. Moments such as the nationalisation of Suez and the building of the High Dam represented the opening up of political space at the international level, but equally showcased how high the price of decolonisation could be. The tragedy, in the end, was precisely that the sacrifices made were – seemingly – for nothing; the revolution faltered, and the Nasserist project crumbled. The Canal and the Dam remain standing as reminders of a project long faded, even as its afterlives live on. They are testaments to the recognition that independence can only come through sovereignty over the land and all of the economic value it produces; equally, they are testaments to those whose lives and ways of life are lost in these attempts to exert sovereignty over the land.

Perhaps nothing illustrates this more clearly than the relationship between the Nasserist project and Egypt's left, understood broadly. From trade unions to communist parties, the 1950s and 1960s were decades of hope that gave way to disappointment, of social violence and imprisonment, and ultimately of witnessing the mobilisation of radical ideas, energies, and organisations in service of a project that did not produce a meaningful form of decolonisation. Indeed, the intense repression of communists in particular served to weaken Egypt's left to such an extent that when neoliberal reforms were implemented in the late 1960s, there was almost no locus of organised resistance available to counter it.

The moment of decolonisation, then, has much to tell us about the intricate ways in which colonialism, capitalism, and resistance to both – in the form of anticolonial nationalist sovereignty – come together and come apart. Thinking through some of the key moments in the context of Egypt using the lens of colonial capitalism as well as stretching Marxism, this article has sketched out the complexities of decolonisation, and the limits that postcolonial projects such as Nasserism both experienced and set in place. In a world where sovereignty and economic independence remain a dream for many, this historical moment serves to remind us of the mistakes which should not be repeated.

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