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STUDI MAGREBINI 21.2 (2023) 145–146

Studi Magrebini/
North African Studies
brill.com/stma

Introduction: Re-thinking Society, Preparing for the Revolution: Radical Thought and Practices in Colonial Egypt

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The first half of the twentieth century in Egypt saw an intense circulation of new political ideas and, in general, was fertile ground for all major contemporary Egyptian political trends. Following the country-wide uprising of 1919, the persistence of the national question prompted new political movements that challenged the liberal system and its elitism, its forms of legalism and parliamentary politics, revealing an intent to transform and replace the fundamental principles of society and of the colonial system. New forms of mobilisation were fostered by social and economic change, the mobility of intellectuals and activists across national borders, the development of the press and radio, growing middle-class access to formal higher education, urbanization, and rising inequalities in landholding and wealth.

The 1930s and the early 1940s witnessed the growth of the labour movement, the entry into politics of the Muslim Brotherhood, the birth of a vibrant student movement, as well as the rise of communism among the urban intelligentsia. All these events paved the way for the wave of protests and strikes that erupted in Egypt after the end of WWII and eventually lead to the Free Officers' Revolution in 1952.

The three articles collected in this dossier, respectively on the role of the Italian radical press in colonial Egypt, on the Muslim Brotherhood student movement in the 1930s and 1940s, and on Sayyid Qutb's *al-'adāla al-iğtimā'yya fī'l-Islām* (Social Justice in Islam, 1949), offer examples of new forms of mobilization and ideological elaborations, which from different standpoints across the political spectrum – from anarchism and socialism to political Islam – all envisioned social and political transformation and exposed the weakness of the Egyptian state in its liberal configuration, denouncing the colonial basis upon which it was constructed.

The articles were originally presented at *Insaniyyat. International Forum for Humanities and Social Sciences* (Tunis, 20–24 September 2022) in a larger panel organized also with the contribution of Gennaro Gervasio (Roma Tre

University) and aimed at investigating experiences of “counter hegemonic (re)-articulations” in colonial Egypt. The idea was also to explore instances of reciprocal contamination and forms of cooperation between different ideological trends often portrayed by Egyptian (but also Western) historiography as conflicting and incompatible blocs, as well as to investigate the ambiguities and conflicts within what are normally perceived as homogeneous political trends, movements and communities.

Alessandra Marchi’s article reconsiders the myth of urban Egyptian cosmopolitanism in order to explore the role of the foreign anarchist press with respect to the broader Egyptian mobilisation by emphasising the internal class fault lines within foreign communities and by exploring the multifaceted composition of the Italian “subaltern” society (or “colony”) as well as its sometimes contradictory relationships with colonialism and the indigenous population. Daniela Pioppi focuses on the pressures put forth by the Muslim Brotherhood student movement for more radical political action and on instances of tactical alliances with other student organisations even of the leftist/progressive camp in open contestation to the directives coming from the Brotherhood leadership. Finally, Patrizia Manduchi examines Sayyid Quṭb’s *Al-‘adāla al-iḡtimā‘īyya fī l-Islām* and its enormous resonance among Egyptian intellectuals and activists across the political spectrum by suggesting a more nuanced vision of the Egyptian political debate of those years, shedding new light on the intersections and overlaps among different currents of thought, notably the “secular” and the “Islamic”.

The three articles presented in the dossier do not pretend to cover the rich variety of “counter hegemonic (re)-articulations” in colonial Egypt, of which they only give a small and somehow random sample. However, by hinting at across-the-political-spectrum contaminations and ideological ambiguities they hope to trigger an interest in what promises to be a fertile field of research in a more transversal perspective.