Trajectories of Anticolonialism in Egypt

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SARA SALEM, APR 3 2019

Decolonisation across Africa and the Middle East brought about historic changes and was a moment of solidarity, optimism and radical rethinking. Nations across the continent articulated new projects of economic development and political sovereignty that considered the structural limits imposed by colonial rule. In particular, the lines separating the global and the local were purposefully blurred in order to articulate new forms of international solidarity. In a sense, these projects went beyond the nation and imagined a new global order that de-centred the nation as the only sphere of politics. This was certainly the case in Egypt, the focus of this article. However, the ways in which this radical form of internationalism was imagined differed greatly from one actor to the next; in particular, the forms of solidarity imagined by radical groups such as Egyptian feminists, workers, and students often broke free of the exclusionary imaginary of the nation state that always came back to exert itself on the articulations of leaders and state representatives. While both ends of this spectrum within anticolonial movements called for decolonization that was global, the ways in which they imagined this was vastly different.

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. Jabri argued that the changes put forward by postcolonial leaders such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser should be understood as attempts to access the international.[1] 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 states[2] embodying sovereignty, but to reach this stage meant achieving a certain civilizational status. As Antony Anghie notes, "Sovereignty existed in something like a linear continuum, based on its approximation to the ideal of the European nation-state."[3]

Regaining control over the institutions of international political economy—the same institutions that reproduced global inequality—was seen as the path to independence.[4] However, this is always done vis-à-vis the international; it is this tension that mediates anything and everything the postcolonial state does. Moments such as the 1955 Afro-Asian Solidarity Conference at Bandung were attempts at carving out a new international—attempts that ultimately failed as we see the return of the colonial international in the late 1960s. Across Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, resistance to colonial rule materialised in varied and intersecting ways, whether through calls for independent industrialisation, cultural renewal, political self-determination, or the nationalisation of assets. In contexts such as Egypt, Nasser's project was not merely a project of *national* independence, but an attempt at decolonizing both the national *and* the international. Resistance meant not only removing Egyptian production from this international sphere that was in and of itself colonial, but also the creation and articulation of new social and political projects that moved beyond binaries of East and West.[5]

The political economy of decolonisation was central to these attempts at "decolonising the international." Take the Communiqué issued after the conference at Bandung, which called 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 program 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. As Partha Chatterjee notes, the

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Communiqué suggests that most countries at the conference saw themselves as "exporters of raw commodities and importers of industrial products."[6] State-led economic development through industrialisation was envisioned as a means of interrupting the dependency they faced on global capital.

In Egypt, Nasserism—a project that positioned itself as anticolonial—was formed in the early 1950s. The dismantling of the Egyptian landed elite, the (limited) land reform program, 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. Also falling under material shifts 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 changes radically transformed the ability of many Egyptians to access social services and social mobility. None of these are beyond critique, and, as I show further on, despite being represented as part of an anticolonial state-building project they very much relied on the reproduction of capitalist development. The changes put in place reified a colonial understanding of sovereignty that ultimately reproduced the nation state as the bearer of what is sovereign. Partly, this is due to the centrality of the nation and nationalism to these projects.[7] It is also the result of Nasserism's adoption of state-led capitalist development.

Indeed the failures of the Nasserist project from an economic perspective were already diagnosed early on by leftist writers and intellectuals,[8] including scholars such as Samir Amin, who had laid out the "traps" inherent in adopting capitalist development—even if led by an anticolonial state.[9] Given that the expansion of capitalism in Egypt was tied to the expansion of imperialism from the very beginning, it becomes difficult to disentangle one from the other.[10] 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. It is perhaps only by rejecting altogether that the process of decolonisation could have reached its ultimate end.

I want to briefly turn to alternate trajectories of anticolonialism that existed during Egypt's period of decolonisation. Indeed, much of the groundwork for the Nasserist project was laid before Nasser ever came to power. In the rest of this piece, I touch on how feminists and workers were part and parcel of Egypt's decolonisation process, even if the history of this process is very much told through the lens of Nasser and the postcolonial Egyptian state.

I'm especially interested in how, from the 1940s onwards, feminists began to put forward a distinctive articulation of nationalism where anti-capitalism became increasingly prominent. In terms of gender, this lent itself to more structural understandings of inequality that called for more radical transformations. This was undoubtedly connected to the increased prominence of socialist and Marxist theorising globally, including the proliferation of organizations and conferences that connected feminists across the postcolonial world, conferences at which capitalist inequality was a central theme. This gave feminists the analytical tools, including a means of analysing class conflict, to analyse Egypt's position vis-a-vis a rapidly changing world, and also provided a way of analysing what many of them saw as the main problem facing Egypt: social inequality. Some examples include Inji Efflatoun, who, as a delegate of the League of Women Students and Graduates of Egypt, the communist women's organization, to the World Congress of Women held in Paris in 1945, gave the following speech: "I made a very powerful speech in which I linked the oppression of women in Egypt to the British occupation and imperialism. I not only denounced the British, but the King and the politicians as well. It was a very political speech in which I called for national liberation and the liberation of women."[11] Other feminists active as communists included Latifa al-Zayyat and Soraya Adham.

This was part of a growing international momentum around transnational and anti-colonial feminist solidarity. Laura Bier writes, "As new alliances were forged in the international arena, groups of women activists, writers, students, and politicians circulated within the milieu of international conferences, visiting delegations, summits, and committee meetings. The resulting exchanges and networks were part of what made possible the sorts of imaginings that overflowed the boundaries of the nation state."[12] In Egypt, what is interesting is the ways in which the feminist project both intersected with and broke away from Nasserism as a state-led project. In particular, I want to draw attention to how feminists articulated concerns around women's work—both inside and outside of the home—and why this mattered for postcolonial states. In an incisive piece, Mai Taha reads debates Egyptian feminists had through the concept of the "social factory."[13] She argues that projects such as Nasser's centered the factory and

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industrialization in the development of the modern Egyptian nation state while deflecting the question of social reproduction, largely being carried out by women. Some feminist debates, therefore, centered around this displacement, and argued for a postcolonial state formation that took seriously social welfare and social reproductive benefits. Much of this debate focused on the gendered nature of work, and the ways in which public social services could be crafted to meet the extensive work women were faced with at multiple sites. Women joining the workforce was one of the major pillars of Nasser's state feminist project, and new labour laws guaranteeing employment to those who had the correct qualifications were passed. In response, feminist demands for equal pay, maternity leave and day-care centres were articulated.[14] The 1959 Labour Code gave women fifty days of paid maternity leave and required employers to provide day-care facilities in workplaces.[15] New laws also provided women with equal access to higher education and fixed the workday for women to nine hours.

However, the provision of these rights through state legislation came at a cost: "Through legislation, the state was able to intervene in women's networks of communal support by legalizing social life that inhabited the public and private spheres, instead of allowing women to be the architects of their own working conditions."[16] Additionally, much of what was promised never materialised, leading to shortages in services such as day care. Nevertheless, I am interested here in how feminist demands around women's *labour*—inside and outside the home—were articulated and had an effect on the state's feminist project. In particular, I want to note the understanding feminists had of the role of the state in easing or intensifying the gendered work burden, and thus the ways in which feminists lived their lives. In some ways it seems that the demands made by feminists around day-care, equal pay and maternity leave—articulated through the lens of a nationalist project—allowed feminists to negotiate with the Nasserist state project partly because of its own commitment to social welfare, economic development and "Arab socialism"—as tenuous as this claim ended up being.

On the one hand, then, many feminists supported the Nasserist project, often with reservations, for many complex reasons; as mentioned earlier, Nasser was able to use this energy in expanding his project more broadly. This does not mean that they saw him as solely responsible for all the gains that were made during this period, most notably in areas of education and employment; as prominent Egyptian feminist Wedad Mitri noted, the women's movement in Egypt has always demanded the right of women to vote and be elected to office as part of any real grassroots democracy. "In 1956, Gamal Abdel Nasser extended this right to us. But of course, it didn't just happen. It resulted from the struggle of generations and generations of women."[17] On the other hand, what I am interested in is the alternative future the feminist project itself was hinting at, or promising, that never came to fruition. So – the ways in which these feminist articulations of anti-colonialism, nationalism and anti-capitalism were much more radical than the ones put forward by the state and its elites. I am also interested in how we can view this regionally and internationally; so, how the connections and discussions between feminists across the postcolonial world also points to more radical understandings of decolonization, what it means and how it should be achieved.

Similarly, we can see in Egypt's rich history of worker contestation that notions of anticolonialism as connected to anti-capitalism were strongly embedded in activism. Throughout the 20th century, Egypt saw an active worker's movement that was strongly nationalist and anti-colonial. The changes workers and peasants faced were very much connected to both the consolidation of capitalism and the expansion of imperialism. These two processes were not separate: each relied on the other. Many workers thus saw a connection between anti-imperialism and struggles around work, and for the Egyptian worker's movement, there was—as for the feminists—no easy split between nationalism and other causes such as anti-capitalism or feminism. I highlight these movements and the role nationalism played in them in order to show why the Nasserist project was able to extend itself so quickly and thoroughly by building on and co-opting these energies. I also highlight nationalism because of its connection to sovereignty; for all of these different actors, sovereignty—how it could be achieved and what it would look like—was the imminent question. For feminists, workers and other groups, this always and inevitably included an anti-capitalist position. Sovereignty could only be imagined by breaking away from global capitalism; imperialism and capitalism were not two separate entities but rather two co-constitutive realities.

Drawing on Fanon, the exclusion of workers and peasants—and feminists—from the project of decolonisation meant that the Nasserist project was unable to centre class struggle and other forms of radical struggles and fully liberate itself from the colonial international: "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."[18] 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. This leaves us with the question of whether, given the limits of history, anything else was possible; and whether instead postcolonial nations in the mid-twentieth century were bound to get caught in an impossible situation, a situation that presented no easy victory. And yet is this situation as impossible as it is made out to be? I am pointing here to the alternate futures that were imagined by multiple groups, that are important to archive but also bring to the front of debates around the on-going process of decolonization. Understanding the past through how the future was imagined has a lot to tell us about the mechanisms of power in our contemporary post-colonial period.

Notes

NB: *This piece draws from the author's research commissioned by Post-Colonialisms Today, a research and advocacy project which recovers progressive post-independence alternatives for contemporary challenges. The project reserves prior rights to publish this research, including in a full paper which is forthcoming in an edited collection.*

[1] Jabri, V. 2012. *The Postcolonial Subject: Claiming politics/governing others in late modernity*. London: Routledge, p. 100.

[2] Chatterjee, P. 2017. The Legacy of Bandung. In *Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures*, 657-674. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 668.

[3] Anghie, A. 2007. *Imperialism, sovereignty and the making of international law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 148.

[4] Jabri 2012, p. 102.

[5] Jabri 2012, p. 103.

[6] Chatterjee 2017, 673.

[7] See: Chatterjee, P., 1993. *Nationalist thought and the colonial world: a derivative discourse*. London: Zed Books; Seth, S., 1992. Nationalism, National Identity and "History": Nehru's Search for India. *Thesis Eleven*, *32*(1), pp. 37-54. 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 (Massad, J. A. 2012. *Colonial effects: The making of national identity in Jordan*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 277-278).

[8] For a key text on Nasserism see: Abdel-Malek, Anwār, 1968. *Egypt, Military Society*. New York: Vintage Books.

[9] Amin, S., 2011. An Arab Springtime? *Monthly Review*, *63*(5);

[10] Here I follow scholars such as Eric Williams (2014) who argue that the expansion of capitalism depended on slavery and colonisation (Williams, E. 2014. *Capitalism and slavery.* Raleigh: University of North Carolina Press).

[11] Ahmed, L., 1992. *Women and gender in Islam: Historical roots of a modern debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 196.

[12] Bier, L., 2011. Revolutionary womanhood: feminisms, modernity, and the state in Nasser's Egypt. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 159.

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[13] Taha, M. in Eslava, L., Fakhri, M., & Nesiah, V. (Eds.). (2017)*Bandung, Global History, and International Law: Critical Pasts and Pending Futures*. Cambridge University Press, 337-354

[14] Taha 2017, 9.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Salem, S., 2017. Four Women of Egypt: Memory, Geopolitics, and the Egyptian Women's Movement during the Nasser and Sadat Eras. *Hypatia*, *32*(3), pp.593-608.

[18] Fanon, F. 1963. *The wretched of the earth.* New York: Grove Press, p. 152.

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