

## **Review – Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony**

Written by Nicola Pratt

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NICOLA PRATT, JUN 10 2021

### ***Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony***

**By Sara Salem**

**Cambridge University Press, 2020**

Sara Salem's book provides a significant new reading of the 2011 Egyptian revolution by historicizing it against the backdrop of the development of the modern Egyptian state and its relationship to anticolonial struggle, decolonization and the rise of neoliberalism. Salem argues that the outbreak of the 2011 revolution should be understood as a consequence of the failure of the regime of Hosni Mubarak (1981-2011) and, before that, of Anwar al-Sadat (1970-1981), to (re-)create the hegemony achieved by the regime of Gamal Abdel-Nasser (1952-1970), Egypt's first post-independence ruler. The first part of the book considers the reasons for the success of the Nasser regime and its political project of Nasserism. The second part examines the failure of the Sadat and Mubarak regimes to reproduce hegemony in a context of intensifying neoliberal economic restructuring, resulting in growing levels of repression.

### **Antonio Gramsci meets Frantz Fanon**

The book adopts Antonio Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and historical bloc in order to analyse postcolonial state-building and regime consolidation. As Salem notes, the book is not the first to apply Gramsci's insights to politics in the Middle East and North Africa; however, it is unique in bringing Gramsci into conversation with postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon to skilfully analyse the political dynamics of postcolonial states and societies. Whilst Fanon was sympathetic to Marxism, his writings constituted a corrective to the Eurocentrism of Marxist thought. He recognised the specificity of capitalism in the colony (and, hence, the postcolony), viewing the political elite that came to power after independence as a 'dependent bourgeoisie'. This 'dependent bourgeoisie' was more accountable to the metropole than to their fellow citizens, due to the colonial nature of capitalism. In contrast, Salem argues that the Nasser regime and its political project of Nasserism constitutes an example of hegemony because, rather than subordinating itself to the 'colonial international' – a term borrowed from Vivienne Jabri (2012) to refer to Western domination of international relations rooted in histories of empire – the Nasser regime sought to resist it through its involvement in the Non-Aligned Movement and its industrialisation policies that attempted to break dependency on colonial capital.

### **Nasserism and Hegemony**

Chapter 2 of the book effectively applies the concepts of hegemony and historical bloc in order to understand how the Nasser regime produced widespread consent for its rule. Part of the success of the Nasser regime was its ability to reflect and appropriate the concerns and demands of radical movements already existing within Egyptian society, namely, demands for freedom from colonial domination and for social justice, even as it moved to suppress these movements. Consequently, the Nasser regime was able to build a historical bloc of popular forces, comprising workers, peasants, soldiers and nationalist capitalists, which was cemented through the extension of material benefits to millions of working people. Yet, Nasserism contained several contradictions and limitations. A central part

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of Nasserism's allure was its promise of progress and freedom from colonial domination. However, in its means of pursuing these objectives, it reproduced colonial forms of development that depended upon the exploitation of workers and the dispossession of the Nubian people. Meanwhile, '[t]he decision by the new bloc to limit rather than eliminate capitalist forms of economic development meant that Egypt's integration into the capitalist world market [...] was reinforced rather than broken' (p.151). Thus, Nasserism was unable to fully liberate Egypt from the colonial international and truly fulfil the promises of decolonization. The final nail in the coffin of the Nasserist project was the 1967 military defeat of the Arab armies at the hands of Israel. This created a crisis for the regime, leading to efforts to dismantle Nasserism.

### **Neoliberalism and the Afterlives of Hegemony**

The second part of the book examines in detail the failure of successive regimes to recreate hegemony, largely due to the inability of economic liberalization policies, aimed at attracting foreign and private investment, to provide material benefits for the majority of Egyptian people. As a result, the regime increasingly relied on the support of Western capital and Western governments, alongside increasing levels of coercion, to stay in power, making it a good example of the dependent bourgeoisie described by Fanon. In essence, the reinsertion of Egypt into the colonial international and the impossibility of national development to the benefit of the majority of Egyptians made it impossible to create hegemony after 1967. In this respect, Salem calls the period between 1967 and 2011, 'the afterlife of hegemony', which should be understood in terms of Gramsci's notion of 'interregnum' – 'a time of uncertainty in which the old is dying but the new cannot be born' (p.204). Popular frustration with this situation led to the outbreak of the 2011 revolution.

The final chapter of the book considers the afterlives of hegemony in Egypt through the concept of haunting, borrowed in particular from Avery Gordon (2008), to refer to the lingering of the past in the present. For me, this is a stand-out chapter because it centres the historical experience of anticolonial struggle in understanding contemporary political dynamics and political subjectivities in postcolonial states. This is something that I have also sought to underline in my earlier work on the emergence of authoritarianism in the Arab world (2008) as well as in relation to understanding the challenges of political transformation after the 2011 revolution (2015). Salem uses the concept of haunting to understand the on-going power of the Nasserist project:

On the one hand, I see Nasserism as haunting in the sense that it normalized certain ideas around what politics in Egypt's postcolonial period should look like and what an economic model founded on ideas of independent development could deliver. On the other hand, Nasserism should be understood as a form of haunting in that it significantly affected the ability of leftist social forces to prevent the very neoliberal project Nasser consistently warned Egyptians about (p.260).

In this respect, the chapter discusses how the spectre of Nasserism informed workers' resistance to neoliberal restructuring from the 1970s onwards and their demands for a restoration of the working conditions and industrial relations established under Nasser. Yet, the fact that neoliberalism was able to make such strides in Egypt was also a reflection of the weakness of the left and their ideas. Whilst this criticism is not without grounds, it is also important to remember that the left was more or less defeated internationally – either as a result of direct repression by right-wing allies of the United States in the name of fighting communism or as a result of becoming ideologically discredited with the fall of the Soviet Union.

### **Towards a Decolonial Future and the Ghosts of Nasserism**

Salem ends the book with Fanon's call to reject Europe as a model to emulate. This would mean rejecting notions of 'sovereignty' and 'mastery', breaking free from 'capitalist modernity' and transcending 'the nation' in order for decolonization to be fully realised (pp.278-79). This call could not be more timely and more urgent. Today, capitalism is more firmly entrenched than ever before, right-wing forces are in the ascendancy across the globe and we face health pandemics and environmental catastrophe. However, the question remains as to how to arrive at a decolonial future? This is beyond the scope of this particular book. However, on this question of praxis, Antonio Gramsci's writings provide a vital resource for thinking through the politics of *challenging* hegemony – namely, through the

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concepts of 'war of position' (an attack on the dominant ideology and worldview) and 'war of manoeuvre' (an attack on the coercive apparatus of the state) (Gramsci 1971). In the 2011 revolution, Egyptians waged a successful war of manoeuvre against the Ministry of the Interior. However, the return of the military to power in 2013, on a wave of hyper-nationalism and nostalgia for the Nasser era, suggests that revolutionaries failed to wage a coherent war of position. In this respect, Sara Salem's book highlights the political necessity of finally putting the ghost of Nasserism to rest if the promises of freedom, dignity and social justice are to be realised.

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## About the author:

**Nicola Pratt** is Professor of the International Politics of the Middle East at the University of Warwick. Her research examines gender, war, and political activism in the Middle East, informed by long-standing involvement in anti-war and transnational solidarity movements. She has published widely on politics in the Arab world and on feminist international relations more broadly. Recent publications include (with Columba Achilleos-Sarll) "Sun, sea and sexual violence: the political economy of party tourism", *International Affairs* 101(4), 2025; (with Hala Shoman, Ashjan Ajour, Sara Ababneh, Afaf Jabiri, Jemima Repo and Maryam Aldossari) "Feminist Silences in the Face of Israel's Genocide Against the Palestinian People: A Call for Decolonial Praxis Against Complicity", *Gender, Work & Organization*, March 2025; and (with Afaf Jabiri, Ashjan Ajour, Hala Shoman, Maryam Aldossari, and Sara Ababneh) the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* Conversations Section, "Why Palestine is a Feminist Issue: A Reckoning with Western Feminism in a Time of Genocide", 27(1), 2025. She is also the author of *Embodying Geopolitics: Generations of Women's Activism in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon* (University of California Press, 2020), winner of the BISA Susan Strange Best Book Prize for 2020. She is currently writing a monograph on politics and popular culture in the 2011 Egyptian revolution and its aftermath.