

REVIEW ESSAY

Sentimentalizing and Hyper-Theorizing Egypt's 2011 Uprising

M. CHERIF BASSIOUNI. *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution and its Aftermath: 2011–2016.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017. xvii + 817 pages, photos, bibliography, index. Paper US\$34.99 ISBN 978-1-107-589991-9.

SEAN F. MCMAHON. *Crisis and Class War in Egypt: Social Reproduction, Factional Realignments and the Global Political Economy.* London: Zed Books, 2016. xii + 228 pages, notes, bibliography, index. Paper US\$29.95 ISBN 978-1-78360-502-6.

The Arab popular uprisings of 2011 caught nearly every scholar, journalist, and foreign policy think tanker by surprise. The literature about them is already prodigious. Despite their failure to democratize the region (with the partial exception of Tunisia) or promote more equitable economic policies, the political and economic crises that impelled the uprisings and the processes of change they initiated are still underway and are unlikely to be resolved for some time. Consequently, most historians would argue that we cannot now have enough perspective or primary documentary evidence to support a nuanced analysis of the multiple intersections of structure and agency that informed the uprisings, the behind-the-scenes forces (including U.S., French, and Saudi interventions to contain or roll back the revolutionary impulses) that influenced short and medium-term outcomes, and the long-term meanings and consequences of the events for the participants and their societies. I am emphatically not suggesting that scholars should not write about these events; I have done so myself (*Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt*, Stanford University Press, 2016). However, a certain modesty, self-critical spirit, and openness to revision is appropriate.

M. Cherif Bassiouni is a respected jurist specializing in international criminal and human rights law, now retired from a long career teaching law and carrying out several high-profile assignments for the UN. His paternal grandfather was a leading Wafdist in the 1919 nationalist revolution and President of the Senate during the monarchy. His father was an ambassador. Someone so well connected might be well positioned to offer unique insights into the popular uprising of 2011 and its aftermath. *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution* is disappointing in that respect.

The book is based on a series of thirty-four “Egypt Update” newsletters that Bassiouni wrote from January 2011 to June 2014 and distributed electronically to about three thousand people. Some chapters reiterate and elaborate on his detailed accounts of events as they unfolded. Others are topically organized discussions of institutions and their roles during and after the uprising—the military, the judiciary, and the educational system—or themes like economics, demography, and geopolitics.

Elements of the empirical narrative are more insightful than most journalistic reports because Bassiouni knows the main public actors, their career trajectories, who is married to whom, and the family and personal connections essential for understanding political and social dynamics in Egypt. But, there are many gaps in the narrative. Answers to many important questions rely on informed speculation or rumor. “No one knows” (although someone obviously does) is a refrain throughout the book.

Moreover, Bassiouni’s *histoire événementielle* (in Braudelian terms) isn’t entirely reliable. He relentlessly ascribes to the Muslim Brothers the worst of intentions with little hard evidence, leading to both analytical flaws and factual errors, like asserting that Anwar al-Sadat’s assassin was a “member (or sympathizer) of the Brotherhood” (17) and astonishingly claiming that, after eight decades of activity, “the Brotherhood...was not well known among the people” (60). There are repetitive, but inconsistent, accounts of some incidents, for example the infamous “Battle of the Camel” (31, 55). Good copy editing could have eliminated such discrepancies and reduced the book’s unwarranted length. Poor proofreading has left errors in dating, syntax, grammar, and even a sentence whose meaning is the opposite of what was apparently intended.

Bassiouni properly foregrounds the importance of Egypt’s Military Institution (*al-mu’assasa al-‘askariyya*). It has been the backbone of the “officers’ republic” from 23 July 1952 to the present, notwithstanding the radically different economic policies and geostrategic alignments over these sixty-five years. The Military Institution is opaque by design. But that does not justify estimates of its share of the GDP ranging from “no one knows” to

“25 percent to 35 percent” (255, 259), or relying on documents dated to 1997 as evidence for what the military intended during 2011–12 (269).

The foundational failure of *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution* is lodged in Bassiouni’s efforts to provide historical contextualization for the present and recent past. He understands the 25 January popular uprising as “just the latest in Egypt’s long history of periodic revolutionary outbursts”—a manifestation of the “liberal/nationalistic/pro-democracy movement” that first erupted in the revolt against Napoleon’s 1798 occupation of Egypt and continued with popular uprisings in 1822, 1844, 1863, the ‘Urabi revolt, and of course, the 1919 nationalist revolution (3, 7, 8, 9, 11–12). This heroic political trajectory inexplicably culminated in “political dysfunction [that] precipitated the military coup of July 23, 1952” which brought the military to power led by “Nasser’s revolutionary fervor, unbridled ambition, and ego” (12, 14). Nonetheless, after a detour of six decades, in January 2011 the “liberal/nationalistic/pro-democracy movement” was, like Osiris, briefly reborn before being “co-opted by the Muslim Brotherhood and then eliminated by the Military Institution” (6).

Bassiouni acknowledges that “[his] may be a sentimental or romantic vision of Egyptian history” (7). Versions of this mythology remain popular in Egypt—notably among the upper-middle classes and civilian elites educated in a Western style. But it is implausible for anyone inclined to a critical understanding of modern Egyptian history. It omits the long history of the Muslim Brothers, the important limits on secularism and democracy during the monarchy, and the overbearing political and social power of the large landowning class and their contempt for the peasant majority of the population. Bassiouni’s is the liberal counternarrative to the equally mythological version of modern Egyptian history that regards the army as the embodiment of the will of the Egyptian people from Mehmet Ali to Ahmad ‘Urabi to Gamal ‘Abd al-Nasir to ‘Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi.

Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution reveals points of convergence of the two myths. Bassiouni’s understanding of Egyptian history proceeds from a conception of “Egyptianhood” which has united Egypt as “a single nation, notwithstanding any divisions among its inhabitants” (2). National unity overrides class, regional, sectarian, or gender conflicts. He briefly discusses violence against women and Copts (318–22, 322–26). But there is no serious analysis of the regime’s manipulation of sectarian sentiment for decades or its permissive attitude towards sexual abuse of women and no mention of the strike and protest movement of workers for years before and after Mubarak’s ouster. Bassiouni’s strong appreciation for the anti-democratic character of the Military Institution is uncritically mixed with the claim

that the Egyptian military is “a national army of the people” and similar myopias (45).

Egypt’s dysfunctional educational system has uncritically disseminated the military mythological version of Egyptian history for decades. Consequently, for many, perhaps a majority, of those who filled Tahrir and other urban squares from 25 January to 11 February 2011, an ahistorical notion of national identity was linked to illusions about the military’s institutional position in Egyptian society and politics. This allowed them to believe that “the people and the army are one hand” (*al-sha‘b w’al-gaysh ‘id wahda*) and that the “fall of the regime” (*al-sha‘b yurid isqat al-nizam*, as the slogan went) was achieved by torturer-in-chief Omar Suleiman’s announcement that President Mubarak had relinquished his authority and that the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) would “manage the affairs of the country” (54).

Bassiouni concludes that “the majority of the people chose the military’s dictatorship over that of the Brotherhood” (624). This formulation is misleading. President Muhammad Mursi (and before that an overwhelming Brotherhood-Salafist parliamentary majority) came to power through the freest elections since the monarchy. Their fundamental unfairness was both a collaborative project of the SCAF and the Muslim Brothers and a legacy of the officers’ republic. The Brothers’ rule was anti-democratic in many respects, to say nothing of incompetent, but no more so than any government since 1952. The demand of the millions who came out to demonstrate against President Muhammad Mursi on 30 June 2013 was for early elections. The military manipulated popular discontent with Mursi’s presidency to stage a coup on 3 July 2013. Just as on the day of Mubarak’s demise, “the majority of the people” had no organizations to represent them and no coherent political vision. Consequently, they accepted the SCAF in 2011 and again in 2013 as embodying the will of the nation. The Egyptian people did not choose anything freely.

If the empirical detail of *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution* is overpowering, mere facts are nearly irrelevant to Sean F. McMahon’s *Crisis and Class War in Egypt*. McMahon reads the Egyptian events through the lens of Marx’s *Capital* (8–9, 18–19), offering what he calls a “value-centric analysis” (104). He explicitly argues that the particularities of Egypt are not an appropriate point of departure for understanding the dynamics of the uprising:

Egyptian society, any society for that matter, can only really be understood as part of the global capitalist totality ... domestic politics is a particular form of the universal relations and processes of global capital. (16–17)

This perspective brings factors like the U.S. Commodity Futures Modernization Act of 2000, which “deregulated and financialized global trade in food commodities” and contributed to a global spike in food prices in 2007–08, to bear in understanding the 2011 popular uprising (50, 52). It helps to explain why uprisings erupted across the Arab region. Emphasizing the political economy of the series of crises that provoked the uprisings spotlights factors that most Westerners, especially those committed to the “transition to democracy,” “youth revolution,” or “Facebook revolution” paradigms overlook. It underscores that the Egyptian regime is an alliance among different fractions of capital, including the Military Institution.

McMahon identifies the military as “productive capital” (85), the Muslim Brothers as “commercial capital” (88), the Gulf Cooperation Council countries as “finance capital” (79), and Gamal Mubarak’s cronies as “predatory capital” (77–78). These categories usefully highlight distinctions and different interests of fractions of capital, but are oversimplified. They miss important features of Egypt’s political economy since 1970, such as: the investments of the Gulf Organization for the Development of Egypt in the military-industrial complex; the family relationship of Safwan Thabet, founder of Egypt’s largest dairy enterprise, Juhayna, with former Muslim Brothers General Guide, Ma’um al-Hudaybi; the engineering and construction empire of Osman Ahmad Osman, a former Brother who remained close to the organization; the social base of the Brothers among engineers, physicians, pharmacists, and other professionals; and foreign and non-military Egyptian investment in private sector garment assembly.

McMahon’s minimal concern for facts leads to gross errors and implausible descriptions. For example, he asserts, offering no evidence, that the Muslim Brothers “condoned the massacre of workers at the Port Said Stadium” in a soccer riot on 1 February 2012 (104). This must be so for McMahon because the SCAF and the Brothers were functionally allies at that point. In fact, ‘Isam al-‘Aryan, Vice-President of the Brothers’ Freedom and Justice Party criticized “the deliberate neglect and absence of the military and the police” and their “plot against democratic transition” (*New York Times*, 1 February 2012).

McMahon is contemptuous of other scholars. He arrogantly scolds the Egyptian working class for not “think[ing] in class terms, rather than the fetishisms of nation and religion” (3). The strike movement of the 2000s and beyond has commonly been neglected. But McMahon’s disinterest in its details allows him to imagine the 2011 uprising as an insurrection of a working class mired in false consciousness. This understanding cannot be supported by any evidence.

Bassiouni and McMahon are far apart on the spectrum of opinion and analysis of the Egyptian popular uprising of 2011. But they are united in offering examples of writing about it that are unlikely to survive the test of time. Neither “sentimental or romantic” empiricism nor theory that regards Egypt as merely “a particular form of the universal” is an adequate methodology. ✂

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