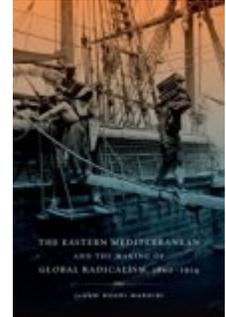


Ilham Khuri-Makdisi. *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. 288 S. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-26201-0.



Reviewed by Thomas Philipp

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Historical studies on leftist, socialist, communist, not to mention anarchist tendencies in Middle Eastern societies are relatively rare. Even today, doing research on groups promoting such ideas remains in various states a politically sensitive matter. More importantly, throughout the twentieth century Arab nationalism has established itself as the dominant political narrative and has in the process weakened any other sociopolitical, emancipatory movements such as socialism or feminism with the argument that they endangered national unity in the fight against imperialism. For recent attempts to challenge the nationalist narrative, see the two books edited by Christoph Schumann: *Liberal Thought in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Leiden 2008; *Nationalism and Liberal Thought in the Arab East*, London 2010. Therefore the present study is to be welcomed for its attempt to extend the history of socialist and anarchist movements in the Eastern Mediterranean to the period before World War I and to correct at the same time the nationalist narrative that ignores such movements.

Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, Assistant Professor of History at North Eastern University in Boston, sees these groups as part of the Nahda, the movement that established a new, non-traditional, educated class as the intellectual and ideological leaders of Arab society in a changing, historical environment. The socialist and anarchist tendencies were the radical but not readily acknowledged off-springs of the Nahda. Later historiography saw the Nahda as the direct and exclusive precursor of Arab nationalism.

A major goal of Ilham Khuri-Makdisi is to demonstrate how the radical groups developed, spread and gained force in close connection and exchange with global networks of socialist and anarchist movements before World War I. At the same time she does not lose sight of the local networks stretching between the ‚new‘ cities of Beirut and Alexandria and the rapidly developing Cairo under British occupation.

Without debating the general meaning of the terms ‚radicalism‘ or ‚anarchism‘ she turns to the historical evidence and observes that between 1870 and 1914 there existed a Left in the Arab

World or even a „multiplicity of Lefts“ (p. 8) and that the radical leftist ideas that began to circulate were „selective adaptations of socialist and anarchist principles, including specific calls for social justice, workers' rights, mass secular education, and anticlericalism, and more broadly a general challenge to the existent social and political order at home and abroad“ (p. 1). In this manner she provides us with a clear sense of the ideas that historically played a role and filled the program of demands or action plans of radical groups. She recognizes that „[i]f the abolition of the state was one of anarchism's presumed main tenets, it was not necessarily the most evident goal to implement, and most anarchists focused their energies on spreading ideas about social justice, mutual aid, and general and individual emancipation through propaganda work“ (p. 20). This does not sound very ‚radical‘ but rather like an enlightened and modernizing attitude and Khuri-Makdisi leaves us somewhat in the dark about the definitions of ‚radicalism‘, ‚anarchism‘ or ‚left‘ per se. This becomes a problem when she apparently uses ‚socialism‘ and ‚anarchism‘ as interchangeable terms or distinguishes between ‚anarchism‘ and „other radical and reformist“ movements (pp. 22, 34).

By analyzing the journals „al-Hilal“ and „al-Muqtataf“, Khuri-Makdisi traces the shift of the two most prominent public forums of the Nahda from an antisocialist position to a supportive one. The shift here was not so smooth because both were profoundly engaged in presenting, explaining, defending Darwinism which was not easily blended with socialism.

In a highly original and insightful chapter she speaks about the role of the theater for the radical movements. She provides a short history of this innovation in Arab society and describes how the new educated elite declared the theater „progressive“. The press, and that means again the members of the Nahda, supported the theater as a tool of education, wrote about pieces performed and

protested attempts to censor the theater – all issues concerning the press directly, too. Khuri-Makdisi analyzes the theater as a new public space, and as a tool for addressing the masses, especially the illiterate. The stage becomes a further means for informing, teaching, explaining and creating a new world and new world view to the spectators. Far from being seen as subversive, the theater was considered by the municipalities of Alexandria, Beirut and Cairo as a symbol of modern urban life and as such was supported financially by them. The theater's role as a pedagogical instrument was not only recognized by the rising bourgeoisie but also by marginal and radical groups. Khuri-Makdisi analyzes the politicization and radicalization of the repertoire to the point of „staging the revolution“ with a play about the Spanish anarchist Ferrer a few days after his execution in October 1909. Khuri-Makdisi discovers for us here a vibrant, multifaceted, engagé and creative theater culture, the historical study of which – with its political and social implications – has been neglected heretofore.

With the help of a network analysis Khuri-Makdisi makes another important point about the radical movements in the region: they were in close contact and intellectual exchange with similar movements all over the world. This is convincingly demonstrated with the help of migration movements. She differentiates between a local migration network of Syro-Lebanese in Egypt, moving mainly between the three cities mentioned above, and the farther emigration to South and North America and other places. All groups remained in close touch with the place of origin, mainly through the Arabic journals originating from Cairo and abroad and through frequent returns of migrants. Of equal importance was the migration to Egypt by Italian workers, familiar with anarchism in Italy. Between all these different places and groups, she argues, there existed a global exchange of ideas and often cooperation; selective adaptation of ideas and methods made for a great variation of what is described as radi-

calism but also for effective local action such as organizing strikes, evening schools for workers or demonstrations against the church.

Some points in this study could have been more elaborated to the benefit of the whole argument: The role of the Freemasons in the global exchange of ideas is mentioned but clearly got short shrift. The Arabic language issue preoccupied the Nahda in general, creating, as it did, a simplified and standard print language in the permanent search of the largest market for its print products. But what was spoken on stage? Egyptian or Syrian dialect, which were easily comprehensible to specific audiences, or the print language, which must have sounded very artificial? At least in the case of „al-Hilal“ the support for socialism remained extremely weak as long as its founder, Jurji Zaydan, was alive. The change was not really from Darwinism to socialism. Darwinism and Social Darwinism had to share uneasily the pages of „al-Hilal“ and „al-Muqtataf“ from the beginning with the educational ideas of the Enlightenment which themselves became later also part and parcel of socialist and anarchist thought, radical or not. The true radicalism of the Nahda lay in its rigorous secularism which made social radicalism and nationalism possible.

But regardless of this critique the book presents highly innovative research in topic as well as methods. Its argumentation is persuasively sourced. Khuri-Makdisi adds an important first chapter to the history of leftist movements in the Eastern Mediterranean, she questions in meaningful ways the standard narrative of Arab nationalism and she argues convincingly the global dimension of the local radical movements. Finally the book is also an essential contribution to the history of the Arabic theater. The book is recommended to all interested in the intellectual and political history of the region in the last phase of the Ottoman Empire.

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