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Editorial

The present issue of Khamsin goes to the press almost exactly one year

after Israel's invasion of Lebanon. The events of the war -the

invasion, the siege of Beirut, the massacre of Sabra and Chatila - have

received wide coverage in the press and in a number of books. The

central theme of the present issue is not a description of these events

themselves, but their broader context.

In his article Pax Hebraica, E. Farjoun shows that the Israeli inter-

vention in Lebanon was but a first step towards implementing a far-

reaching plan. This plan - openly discussed in Israel, where it is

referred to as the 'Big Thing' -aims to re-draw the map of the Arab

East and place it under the hegemony of a new imperial Israel. Part of

this plan, associated particularly with the name of Ariel Sharon, is to

'solve' the Palestinian problem by establishing a puppet state on the

East Bank of Jordan, and compelling hundreds of thousands of Pales-

tinians presently living in Lebanon and the West Bank to move into that

state. Only against this larger background can Israel's genocidal

conduct of the war be properly understood. Farjoun's article, written

just before the Sabra-Chatila massacre, also helps to explain how that

massacre fits in with broader Israeli designs. This analysis lends added

credence to the growing body of evidence that when Sharon and his

generals invited the Phalange into Sabra and Chatila, they were fully

aware of the probable consequences. (The Kahan Commission

dismissed this possibility, without giving it proper consideration.)

Recent events in Lebanon did not happen in a vacuum; the Lebanese

body politic was in an advanced state of disintegration long before the

Israeli invasion. As the civil war dragged on, any initial political distinc-

tion between right and left tended to get drowned in the blood of

sectarian killings. Magida Salman's article describes the political

psychology of the warring sects, their continuing feuds and their new

illusions.

In this section we also print a letter from a reader in the West Bank,

'Adil Samara, who comments from an independent leftist viewpoint on

the war and the dilemma which its consequences has posed to the PLO.

Future developments in the Middle East will depend crucially on the

internal political evolution of Israel. In this connection it is important

to understand the nature of the support which the Begin government

has won among Israel's Oriental Jewish working class. E. Farjoun's

article Class divisions in Israeli society as well as A. Ehrlich's critique of

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Editorial

that article constitute a debate on this important topic. Although the

two writers differ on several points, they are at one in rejecting the wide-

spread view that the mass support for Begin is motivated purely, or even

predominantly, by ideology. Rather, this support has important

material causes, which must be sought in the specific socio-economiC

structure of Israeli society.

The first section of the present issue ends with an eye-witness report

on the everyday realities in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip.

Apart from articles on Israel and its waf in Lebanon, this issue contains

an article by Azar Tabari, in which she subjects to critical examination

the widespread view that the rise of Islam improved the lot of women

compared to their situation in pre-Islamic Arabia.

The Discussion Forum in this issue contains two contributions by our

readers. Clive Bradley's contribution criticises certain aspects of P.

Clawson's analysis of the development of capitalism in Egypt (Khamsin

9). Roberto Sussman's reply to I. Shahak's essay on the Jewish religion

(Khamsin 8 and 9) criticises Shahak's 'moralistic' attitude and disputes

his view of Jewish history in the Middle Ages. Shahak's controversial

essay has attracted much comment, and the debate around it will no

doubt continue.

~ ~~

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Pax Hebraica

Emmanuel Farjoun

One thing is utterly clear and obvious about Israel's war in Lebanon.

Namely, that the level of violence and destruction inflicted upon the

population in general and the Palestinians in particular has been much

higher than needed in order to occupy Lebanon south of Beirut and to

destroy the military power of the PLO, driving its armed forces out of

the country. With all their deep-seated, though eroding, pro-Israeli bias

the Western media have captured this elementary truth. The highlights

of Israel's violence were:

1 Utter destruction of whole Palestinian communities in Lebanon.

This was done not only during the fighting itself, by massive bombard-

ment, but also by systematic house-to-house destruction of the largest

refugee camps in Tyre and Sidon (Al-Rashidiyya and' Ain Hilwa) and

Beirut - using bulldozers, dynamite etc.

2 Systematic elimination (by killing, expulsion or detention in

concentration camps) of all male Palestinian population between the

ages of 14-65. According to well-corroborated reports, no Palestinian

males of these ages are to be found in the area controlled by Israel.

3 Deliberate destruction of Lebanese towns, especially along the

coast, but also elsewhere.

4 Attempts to expel as many Palestinian families as possible out of

Lebanon. An Israeli reserve colonel, Dov Yirmiah, resigned his post in

the army after he had been specifically instructed by the government

not to extend any help to the Palestinian children and women who were

wandering around the destroyed communities. In fact, on 18 June, he

was told by a cabinet minister to 'push the Palestinians eastwards'. Hè

was not to allow them to set up tents as shelter against the intense heat.

He was not even allowed to let anyone else take care of these refugees.l

The Israeli hope was that this combination of starvation, lack of

shelter, and mass arrest of the male population would eventually force

hundreds of thousands of Palestinians out of Lebanon into Syrian-held

territories.

5 Brutal bombardment of Beirut, using anti-personnel weapons such

as cluster bombs and phospherous shells, under the pretext of flushing

4

Pax Hebraica

out the PLO. The two main Palestinian neighbourhoods in Beirut were

destroyed by combined attacks from air, sea and ground - driving all

the population to the heart of Beirut, where they were subjected to

further anti-civilian showers of bombs. The siege of Beirut lasted more

than nine weeks and deprived the population of food, water, gas and

electricity. This, as well as the destruction of hospitals and the deliber-

ate bombing raids against blocks with heavy Palestinian refugee

population, has been amply documented and widely reported.

Genocide

In the light of all this, we see that the war in Lebanon has been much

more than a war of occupation against the Palestinian forces and their

Lebanese allies. In plain language it amounts to nothing less than a

policy of genocide against the Palestinian people in Lebanon. Genocide

in the literal sense of the word, namely the physical destruction of as

many Palestinians as possible and the expulsion, scattering and deten-

tion in concentration camps of the rest. Israeli soldiers were under

specific orders to kill as many 'PLO members' as possible. But, for

better or worse, the PLO in Lebanon was a sort of quasi-state, with its

own extensive bureaucracy and services - schools, clinics, hospitals etc.

Therefore virtually every Palestinian in Lebanon was associated with it

from birth to death in one way or another. The call for the destruction,

annihilation and killing of the PLO infrastructure was simply a euph-

emism for a policy of utter destruction of the 500,000 strong Palestinian

community in Lebanon as a national entity, and their elimination as

individ uals.

Dov Yirmiah, who had resigned his post as head of an Israel army

unit dealing with the civilian population, wrote:

'Whoever put the unit together did not assign to it the right people.

Most of them knew no Arabic and some hated Arabs to such an extent

that it obstructed the activity of the unit. . . The Red Cross aid was not

accepted and I know of other attempts to help which were rejected-

among them aid from Jewish and Israeli organisations. Is it not

hypocrisy and cruelty to mention in this context that we distributed

3000 blankets? The story of the tens of thousands of Pålestinian

children, women and elderly refugees will be told some time in the

future and we will all have to pay the heavy human and moral cost. I

shall mention only three things. . .

'1 When Minister Meridor [assigned to the matter by the government]

was asked about the fate of the Palestinians on 18.6.82 he replied,

"Push them eastwards".

'2 The only policy of our commanders towards them was strict

prohibition to deal with them in the framework of the unit. "Let

UNRWA take care of them".

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'3 They were not allowed to set up tents plenty of which were in

UNRW A's hands. This was an inhuman and cruel act and it teaches us

about the "humanity" boasted of by [the present commander]

Maimon. '2

Notice that Co!. Yirmiyah refers only to children, women and elderly

Palestinian refugees. The menfolk were nowhere to be seen. They had

'vanished' into the concentration camps and eastward to Syria.

Once this genocidal dimension is recognised as being the only one in

which one can comprehend Israel's conduct in the war, the question

naturally arises: Why did Israel go to such extremes of destruction,

alienating the whole Middle East, including its newly-found ally Egypt,

as well as both European and American public opinion? After all, the

policy of destruction of the Palestinians in Lebanon will not itself bring

any closer the resolution of the Palestinian problem; neither for the two

million Palestinians who live under direct Israeli contol in Palestine,

nor for the many hundreds of thousands of Palestinian diaspora

scattered around the Middle East.

The 'Big Thing'

To answer this question one must comrehend both the short-term and

long-term policies of the present government - plans which are direct

continuations of the former Labour government's policy of

colonisation of the territories occupied in June 1967.

The short-term policies are well known: destroy the PLO, thus

depriving the Palestinians of national cohesiveness and unity. This,

Israel hopes, will make a de facto, and later formal, annexatior:. of the

West Bank and Gaza Strip much easier.

Israeli political analysts had long predicted the war with many of its

appalling dimensions precisely on these grounds. The administrator of

the occupied territories, M. Milson, had said at the beginning of 1982

that 'we are entering into the most crucial stage of the war with the

Palestinians since 1948', thereby correctly setting the framework of the

present war. Thus in the immediate sense the war in Lebanon was a war

over the eventual possession of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Israel

hopes to set up there a collaborationist structure around the Village

League - an Israeli -sponsored organisation which however weak at the

present is already entrusted with the conduct of many aspects of civilian

day-to-day life such as licences, road building, emigration, schooling

etc. In addition, for the first time in Zionist history Palestinian armed

militias were formed to enforce the quislings' rule. These are still no

more than armed gangs who act as bodyguards and fascist thugs. But

given time Israel will try to develop them into the core of a Palestinian

repressive regime - to repress and help extinguish any opposition to the

policy of rapid colonisation and land-grabbing.

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This West-Bank dimension of the war is extremely important and

widely recognised. It explains the attempts to destroy the PLO as a

viable organisation. But it does not explain directly the genocidal aspect

of the war. This aspect is derived from the wider context, present and

future, ofthe war in Lebanon. Because, with all its immediate and far-

reaching implications, the war is but one link in a whole strategic plan.

This plan is the brainchild of Defence Minister A. Sharon and is

referred to in Israeli parlance as the 'Big Thing'. It revives an old

ambition for a drive to the north-east, which was on the cards already in

the days of the first Israeli prime minister, D. Ben-Gurion.3

The Lebanon war had its roots in the traumatic experience of the

1973 war with Syria and Egypt. No one in Israel has forgotten the

spectre of the two Arab armies attempting to recover their national

lands taken in 1967. Of course, the Egyptian army, even in a combined

attack with Syrian forces, represented no real danger to the State of

Israel as such. The trauma was caused by the fact that there could not be

a knock-out Israeli victory; that despite huge effort during three weeks

the Israelis could not roll back the Egyptian soldiers who were using

modern weaponry; that despite many thousands of losses on both sides

there was no decisive Israeli victory. The 3000 Israeli soldiers who lost

their lives had to be taken into account. In 1973 the mighty Israeli army

had lost its credibility as an invincible force in the eyes of the Arab

armies; and this state of affairs could not be tolerated for too long.

In the eyes of most Israeli politicians, the whole of Sinai was much

too high a price to be paid for a peace with Egypt. The Israeli army had

the awkward feeling that the loss of Sinai was the direct result of its

inability in 1973 to achieve a rapid victory and the need to get American

supplies in the midst of the war - supplies which emphasised Israel's

day-to-day dependence on the United States.

Therefore Israel undertook a complete renovation of its armed forces

from A to Z. New aeroplanes, tanks and troop carriers and huge stores

of supplies and ammunition were built, produced and bought with

generous American help. The next war was to be fought without an

American airlift of supplies - and with minimal Israeli casualties. Ever

since 1973 Israel had been looking desperately for a large-scale war to

test its renewed war machine and to re-establish its reputation as a local

military superpower.

When Begin came to power he drew far-reaching lessons from the

1973 fiasco. His conclusions were radical and clear. Israel could no

longer fight a major war on two distant fronts, north and south, and

still achieve a decisive victory at acceptable costs in terms of loss of life

and political dependence on the United States. One should not forget

that the 1973 fiasco had also brought in its wake a sharp increase in the

emigration of Israelis, with total net 'losses' from the immigration/

emigration balance of about 40,000 Israelis according to official

statistics: a very large number indeed by Israeli standards. Unable to

fight wars successfully on two fronts, Begin decided that Israel's future

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strategy would be to concentrate military action on one front - the

north-eastern. In order to achieve this, he agreed to give up Sinai to the

last inch of territory - in exchange for peace with Egypt. Israel's

relations with the Arab world, including Egypt, with the Palestinians

both in Palestine and outside, as well as with the United States would be

determined and decided by the military development on this one front.

The essential difference between the new north-eastern front, which

includes Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, and the old Egyptian front is that

in the former wars must be fought in densely populated areas. Three

major Arab capitals - Beirut, Damascus and Amman - are within

about an hour's drive from Israeli-held territories.

Begin and Sharon decided that this fact opens up an immense new

possibility for Israel. From now on, while concentrating on this front,

Israel would strive to go much further in its wars. The aim of war would

be not only to destroy Arab armies in order to defend old territorial

expansions and acquire more land. An important strategic aim on this

front would be to intervene directly in the political structure of the Arab

countries around it. Israel would try to set up regimes which would suit

its colonialist ambition on the West Bank, in southern Lebanon and

beyond. For that it needs direct lines of communication and control

over the nearby-Arab capitals. This shift in Israel's war aims has been

amply illustrated recently.

First, one of the aims of the war in the Lebanon was to establish there

a 'strong state' which would make peace with Israel and would be

controlled by Israel's allies in the Maronite community. The model of

this state was set up by Israel several years ago in the shape of 'Free

Lebanon' under Major Haddad - a direct Israeli agent. Israeli papers

discussed openly day after day the need to establish direct Israeli-

Phalangist control over the whole of Lebanon. This was achieved by the

forced election of Bashir Gemayel to the presidency. B. Gemayel was

not exactly an Israeli stooge but a longstanding ally, who would have

depended on Israel for his very stay in power. The 'need' to station

Israeli troops in Lebanon for the foreseeable future was pointed out by

many Israeli analysts.

Another example of the same kind is the famous statement by

Defence Minister Sharon that, had he been Prime Minister, he would

have given King Hussein of Jordan 48 hours to leave Amman, his

capital, thereby opening the way to the establishment of a 'Palestinian

State' on the East Bank of the Jordan river.

The ideological and political driving force behind this new strategy is

of course the old and by no means exhausted Zionist colonisation

project of 'The Land of Israel' whose exact boundaries are to be

determined by future developments.

The Israeli leaders shudder at the prospect of a hurried peaceful

solution to the Middle East tangle which would integrate Israel too

quickly into the region. It was realised with horror in Israel that the

Sadat initiative, fuelled by Begin's agreement to give up Sinai, would

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have a natural continuation. The continuation, as exemplified by the

Saudi plan of King Fahd (which was endorsed in September 1982 by the

Arab summit conference at Fez) implies Arab willingness to accept

Israel into the Middle East club, on one condition: namely, that it is cut

down to its 'natural size' -the 1967 borderline. This would imply that

Israel must playa relatively minor role in the region's politics, that the

Palestinians would get a mini-state and that Israel's further territorial

ambitions are to be checked. This prospect is abhorrent to the Israeli

leaders, not because they do not want peace, but rather because it would

seal Israel within the 1967 border and throttle the Zionist project which

they believe is still in its full swing.

Sharon and Begin do want to join the Middle East club but only on

their own terms: as a local military and political superpower. Therefore

as soon as the Sadat peace initiative started to spread to other Arab

countries and especially to the PLO itself, something had to be done

quickly to halt this development. The PLO's approval of King Fahd's

plan and its rigorous adherenc~ to the 1981 cease-fire agreement along

the Israeli-Lebanese border weJe signs of moderation and acceptance of

the diplomatic approach. This moderation is the very thing Israel fears

most. Professor Yehoshua Porath, a distinguished scholar of Middle-

East history at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, author of several

important books on the history of the Palestinian national movement,

went so far as to say that Israel started the war precisely because of the

very clear signs of moderation and strict control shown by the PLO.4

But this is only one part of the picture.

After Lebanon - Jordan?

In order to understand the nature of the Lebanon war one must put it in

the context of Sharon's grand plan, which goes far beyond the

Lebanese involvement. It has at least two further interlinked elements:

transforming Jordan into a Palestinian puppet state and concentrating

the Palestinian people on the East Bank of the Jordan.

Let us recall that an eventual annexation of the West Bank and Gaza

- which is the official government policy and the single most important

project of Begin - implies a grave problem for the Jewish character of

Israel. This is because in Palestine as a whole there are two million

Palestinians living alongside about three and a half million Israeli Jews.

If these Palestinians were granted Israeli citizenship, then in a

generation or two the Greater Israel will have more Arab than Jewish

citizens, and this is inconsistent with the Zionist notion of a Jewish

State. If the territories are to be annexed without giving their inhabi-

tants the same rights that half a million Palestinians already have in the

pre-1967 lines - then this will create a severe national, social and

juridical problem which will become ever more explosive with the

growing dependence óf the Israeli economy on Arab labour, and will

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Pax Hebraica

confirm the trend of creating a society on the South African model.

Both alternatives are extremely unattractive to Begin, or any other

Zionist for that matter.

Thus the grand plan of Sharon calls for 'satisfying the national

aspiration' of the Palestinians by turning Jordan into the 'new Pales-

tine' - opening the way for a large wave of 'population transfer' of

Palestinians from all over the Middle East into 'their own state',

namely Jordan. In plain language, this calls for the expulsion of

hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza

into Jordan. .

The systematic expulsion of Palestinians from Lebanon in the war

was a prelude to a much wider design in that direction. Israel hopes to

put immense pressure on Jordan to accept them. Sharon's plan may

seem crazy at first sight, but then who would have believed at the

beginning of 1982 that the subsequent atrocities against an Arab capital

with a million inhabitants were possible? Further, let us not forget that

in the 1967 war hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and Syrians were

driven away from their homes and camps in the Golan, Gaza and the

West Bank. They have not been able to return up to now.

The Jordanian-state solution to the Palestinian problem is discussed

daily in all seriousness in the Israeli press; it is widely accepted in one

form or another, even by many 'moderate' Israelis, as a just solution.

The United States had to give special assurances to King Hussein that it

does not support this solution. Hussein has taken special care recently

to play down Palestinian influences in Jordan, where more than a

million Palestinians live. Furthermore, in an editorial the New York

Times5 writes: 'Winning Jordan's help will require persuading King

Huss'ein that his throne is at stake'. This thinly veiled threat against

Jordan shows that at least this aspect of the 'crazy' Sharon plan has

become a living, necessary, element of political manoeuvring in the

Middle East. It has very wide support not only in Begin's Likud but also

in the Labour Party. The other part, namely the expulsion of Pales-

tinians from Palestine, is more speculative and draws much less support

in Israel- mostly because other Zionist parties consider it too risky and

wild. Not that they would not be very happy with it if it could be carried

through without shattering Israel's future in the Middle East. The code

word in Israel for expulsion is 'the truck-loads solution for the Pales-

tinian problem', referring to the need to load most of them on trucks

and send them away. It is a very serious proposition; and given half a

chance, say in the shape of a war on the eastern front or a popular

uprising in the West Bank, Israel may attempt to carry it through.

The most consistent outspoken supporter of the solution is Professor

Yuval Ne'eman, Israel's Minister of Science, representing the rather

powerful Tehiya (Revival) Party. In several interviews he expressed his

opinion that after the annexation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip,

Israel would have to deal with the demographic problem and that he

thinks that within Greater Israel (= Palestine) there could be a minority

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Pax Hebraica

of a million or so Palestinians. This implies expulsion of one million out

of the two who currently live there.

Thus in the minds of Begin and Sharon the Lebanon war is an open-

ing move in the one-front strategy. The aim of this strategy is to build

around a greater Israel a zone of direct Israel presence and influence. A

z-one of pax Habraica, in which Israel will have direct lines of

communication and control over its immediate neighbours: Lebanon,

Syria and Jordan and by implication over the entire Arab East from

Egypt to Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

Will Israel be checked?

It is highly doubtful whether actual developments in the field will go

according to the above lines. The difficulties are enormous and quite

obvious: to accomplish the first step, namely setting up an Israeli

'strong-state' protectorate in Lebanon, will be difficult by itself and in

the coming years Begin and Sharon will find themselves bogged down

in a Lebanese morass. They think that by brute force and with

American acquiescence they can do it - but this is far from clear. If

they do however, this will be a very long step in the direction of pax

Hebraica because Israel would then be controlling a substantial

portion of Lebanon, so neither Syria nor Jordan are safe. The less than

friendly relations between these two Arab states will keep many

options open for the Israelis to intervene both directly and other-

wise.

But even if Sharon will not be able to carry through his ideas and

ambitions, their influence will be felt throughout the Middle East in the

coming decade. An era of fierce struggle, wars and strife is at hand-

unless the United States decides to cut all this short. Because it is the

United States and only the United States that can check Israel at will.

Without the 4 billion dollar yearly handout to Israel, and without the

diplomatic blank cheque given to Israel, none of the above can be

carried through. Even if Begin or Sharon will try to ignore real pressure

from the United States, the bulk of the Zionist political structure will

not allow them to pit Israel against the United States for long. The

economic and social implication of going it alone even for a few months

are enormous and will topple anyone who will try to do so.

In the Lebanese war Israel very shrewdly used a window of confusion

and indecision in American foreign policy: it had complete American

support for all the immediate and long term aims of the war: 30 miles'

security strip, which simply means occupation by Israel's stooges of the

Lebanese land up to the Utani River; destruction; expulsion of the

PLO, which means mass expulsion of Palestinians and setting up a

strong state while leaving Israeli troops as long as the Syrians remain

there - namely for a long time indeed.

Such complete and open support has never been given before, not

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even in 1967 when the United States did not endorse the annexation of

Jerusalem.

The exact lines of American foreign policy are of immense

importance for the future of the Middle East, but they are slow in

forming. The longer Israel has a free hand in shaping the actual realities

in the region, the more these new realities will become irreversible and

the closer will the emerging Amèrican policy have to correpond to the

pac Hebraica plan.

References

1 Ha'aretz, 23 July 1982.

2 Ibid.

3 According to Ben-Gurion's own diaries (as reported by his trusted bio-

grapher, M. Bar-Zohar) he proposed the following plan in a secret meeting

held near Paris on 22 October 1956, in which he and the French Prime

Minister finalised the plan of the Suez war: 'First of all, the liquidation and

overthrow of Nasser. Then - Jordan to be partitioned by giving the W-est

Bank to Israel and the East Bank to Iraq [then still under Western tutelage].

From Israel's point of view, the condition for this is that Iraq should sign a

peace treaty with Israel and agree to settle the refugees on its own soil.

Lebanon to be cut up by giving part of it to Syria and another part, up to the

Litani River, to Israel. In the remaining part a Christian state will be set up.

In the enlarged Syria the regime will be stabilised under a pro-Western

ruler.' Ben-Gurion's grand plan was rejected by France and Britain. See

Michael Bar-Zohar, Ben-Gurion, A Political Biography, (Hebrew), Am

Oved Publishers, Tel-Aviv, 1977, vol 3, p 1234f.

4 Prof. Yehoshua Porath, 'First political summary', Ha'aretz, 25 June 1982.

5 Quoted in International Herald Tribune, 9 August 1982.

12

The Lebanese communities and their

little wars

Magida Salman

Will the election of Amin Gemayel as president of 'all of Lebanon' fin-

ally put an end to the ghastly pageant of civil war in that country? Many

Lebanese hope so, but their desires are as mangled and bewildering as

were their heroes of yesterday - or their martyrs, whose portraits still

cover the bullet-ridden walls of Beirut.

Seven years of wars great and small- all of them waged by all camps

in the name of victory, with Muslims, Christians, leftists, and rightists

ever flashing the V sign - have forged myths and reinforced them.

Chief among these is the myth of Lebanon 'the way it used to be' , that

battleground of two rival visions, on the one hand the three b's-

brothels, banks, and brawls - on the other the crossroads of civilis-

ations, Switzerland of the Middle East. The old Lebanon, in which pro-

Western and Arab nationalist outlooks vied with one another, is now

becoming an object of joint nostalgia: the lost paradise that must be

regained at any price. Lebanon's population now believes that it faces a

choice between a strong state and the anarchic and arbitrary rule of

rival armed groups and neighbourhood gangs. The former option

seems to be carrying the day, at least for the moment.

This view is shared by the various religious communities. Christians

of all sects, Sunnis, Shi'is and Druzes have suffered the same calamities

and identical violent daily tragedies, and each community has drawn its

own conclusions. These remain divergent, but they concur in the desire

to rebuild an everyday life that approximates normality. By forcing the

Palestinian resistance to leave Lebanon, by destroying those buildings

that were still standing, Sharon's army has offered the Lebanese an

opportunity to weave illusions about a future peace that will not be

without its scapegoats: the Palestinian population of the refugee

camps.

The Christian community in Lebanon, although heterogeneous in its

class structure, has nevertheless always been united in its feeling that it

constitutes a threatened minority and in its need to assert its specific

identity, which it calls Lebanese. A statement by Bashir Gemayel epito-

mises this sentiment: 'We were under attack as Christians, we defended

ourselves as Lebanese.' Such is the Christian conception of Lebanese

nationalism, intransigent in its opposition to Arab nationalism, which

the Christians regard as a clear and present danger menacing their tra-

ditions and culture (which, however Arab it might be, is nevertheless

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The Lebanese communities and their little wars

non-Muslim). The Christians saw Nasser's Arab nationalism purely as

a threat, to integrate Lebanon into a 'rapacious Islamic entity' within

which the Christians of Lebanon would enjoy the same unenviable

status as the Iraqi Christians or the Egyptian Copts.

The choice confronting the Christian community in Lebanon seemed

to be defined in stark terms: Islamisation or Westernisation. The Chris-

tians of Lebanon have long gazed westwards with affection. Their

oppression during the Ottoman era (the Porte cleverly playing on

Muslim unity in an effort to cement its rule), as well as their economic

marginalisation (paralleled by that of the Armenians), encouraged

them to look in directions in which the sea afforded openings the Otto-

mans lacked the power to block. To this day the nationalism of the

Lebanese Christians is imbued with the heroic memories and romantic

literature of the struggle against the 'Turkish oppressor'.

The attitude to France was not so one-sided. Although French compe-

tition crushed the Christian silk workshops of the Lebanese mountains,

which were unable to meet the challenge of the city of Lyon towards the

end of the nineteenth century, the French won the gratitude of the

mountain populace by making their future friends the merchants for

the silk trade, and soon for other commodities as well.

The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War and the

formal Allied recognition of French hegemony in the post-war order

transformed the status of the Lebanese Christians from one of a cau-

tious minority to a majority fiercely defending a new political system

and national borders that entailed privileged representation in the rul-

ing institutions of the Lebanese state. Ever since the establishment of

the National Pact in the mid-forties, the Christians have viewed the

confessional structure of the state as synonymous with its very exist-

ence. Whether they were workers (and 45 per cent OP the Lebanese

working class was Christian, especially Maronite, on the eve of the out-

. break of the civil war), rich traders, or petty bourgeois, the Christians

saw what they called the 'Lebanese formula' as the only alternative to

their absorption into the dominant Arab-Muslim current of the Middle

East. Hence the label 'isolationists' slapped on them by the 'Islamo-

progressive' forces during the civil war.

This tendency to confound the very existence of any Lebanese"state

with the confessional partition of the state power was especially deeply

rooted among the Maronites, while the Greek Orthodox Christians

enjoyed neither such a healthy slice of the pie nor the same history of

struggle in the Lebanes mountains. But the dynamic of the civil war it-

self, although it concentrated political power in the Christian sector in

the hands of the largely Maronite Phalangists, paradoxically integrated

the adherents of Greek Orthodoxy more closely into the Christian com-

munity. The mortars, bombs and bullets slung back and forth indis-

criminately between Christian and Muslim neighbourhoods made no

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distinctions between one sort of church and another, or between one

sort of mosque and another. When the feeling of being subjected arbi-

trarily to sudden death becomes paramount, it is difficult not to come

to believe in the forces shooting at the other side from your own neigh-

bourhood, whoever they may be.

Like any minority seeking to preserve its own specific character in the

face of a perceived threat, the Christian community combined hatred

and contempt for their adversary: Arabist Islam. The ideology that

embodied this sentiment saw itself as based on so-called Western

values: 'We represent European civilisation in this backward and

under-developed corner of the world.' 'At least our men don't marry

four wives.' But these European pretensions nevertheless remained

firmly anchored in the Arab Mediterranean reality of which these same

Christians so clearly are part; pure and simple confessionalism, and

belief in a highly politicised god and church are themselves character-

istic of that reality.

After 1967, the Palestinians, most of them Muslim, were no longer

'only' refugees in Lebanon. They became a political and military force

that bolstered the 'Arabist' camp, the exponents of a cause that was

more Arab than Lebanese, a cause that was intermingled with that of

Egypt, Syria, Jordan, and other Arab states.

The Phalangists, representative par excellence of Christian

Lebanism, became the vanguard in the counter-attack against 'this new

reality'. The little wars and armed clashes that erupted sporadically

between Phalangists and Palestinian organisations - rather coyly

known as 'events' and resulting regularly in handfuls of injuries here

and there - heralded the big 'event', the civil war that broke out in the

spring of 1975.

The Palestino-Muslim camp was always far more heterogeneous than

the 'Christian camp'. Hence the fluid, vague - and false - appellations

that were attributed to it: 'Islamo-progressive' , 'progressive forces' , or

'nationalist forces'.

Among the components of this camp were the Sunni Muslims, their

allegiance divided among the traditional Muslim leaders (like Saeb

Salam and Rashid Karameh, two former prime ministers), various

Nasserist formations, the largest of which was the Murabitun, and

various rival Ba'thist factions. The Lebanese left (Jumblatists, the

Lebanese Communist Party, the Communist Action Organisation of

Lebanon) joined - or rather, merged with - this component.

The Lebanese Sunnis were as heterogenous as the Christians in their

class composition, except that the proportion of workers was even

smaller among this Muslim community. Their integration into the

Lebanese economy paralleled that of the Christians and was similar to

it. In the realm of ideology, however, things were completely different.

The Sunnis had no phobia against the Syrians, Egyptians, and other

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Arabs and could afford to flirt with the idea of Arab unity. Large

photographs of Nasser were proudly displayed in the streets of West

Beirut along with, less frequently, this or that Ba'thist leader in the act

of praying with some Sunni personality from Beirut or Tripoli.

But the Sunni elite lacked the political instruments with which the

Maronite leaders were endowed. They had no political party in the

modern sense of the word. The relationship between voters and leaders

thus remained more traditional, resting not only on the inherited autho-

rity transmitted from father to son within the ruling family, but also on

the patriarchal or tribal relationship between representative and rep-

resented.

This element is essential in understanding the proliferation of dozens

of armed groups and grouplets and the power acquired by their ga'ids in

the streets of West Beirut.

Historically, southern Lebanon was by-passed by the anarchic develop-

ment of the country. An agricultural region dominated by the cultiva-

tion of tobacco - in small plantations of peasant families or agricultural

workers employed by large landlords - southern Lebanon remained

one of the most disadvantaged regions of the country even after the

Second World War and the boom of the sixties. Until that decade, the

super-exploited peasants of the South never questioned their loyalty to

their traditional leaders, the scions of rich families. These families gar-

nered fat profits either by directly appropriating the produce of these

peasants or by selling it to the state tobacco monopoly. These profits

were never reinvested in the South but were put into commercial trans-

actions and companies headquartered in Beirut. Despite this, the fami-

lies of notables - Assad, Zain, etc. - remained masters in the South.

The persistent Israeli attacks after 1967, along with the great migra-

tion of Shi 'i workers to the cities, especially Beirut, where they formed a

pool of cheap or perenially unemployed labour huddled together in

large families in the periphery of Beirut, eventually transformed the

political climate within the Shi'i community and thereby within Leba-

nese Islam.

From the early seventies onwards, Imam Musa Sadr, religious chief

of the Shi'i community, forged his popularity out of this base, first in

the South and later in the suburbs of Beirut.

In the best Shi 'i tradition, he launched a movement of the mahrumin,

the 'dispossessed'. It was an essentially populist movement whose

vague social demands were married both to religious masochism (self-

flagellation ceremonies during 'Ashurah) and to the more general senti-

ments of a deprived and neglected community.

This movement, whose slogans and statutes (an assembly around a

religious chief) were easily adaptable to the political consciousness of

poor peasants and workers freshly crammed into the Beirut suburbs,

had little difficulty reducing the left organisations first to secondary

competitors and then to enemies within the Shi'i community.

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With the civil war, the movement of Musa Sadr (called Amal, or

Hope) grew apace in both size and force of persuasion, for the war

drastically worsened the conditions of the poor layers of Shi'is, who

rapidly lost even their status as workers and peasants, and became

instead mere groups of refugees, now feeling the South as a result of

Israeli attacks, now pouring out of their densely populated neighbour-

hoods in and around Beirut, caught in the fighting between the enemy

factions in the civil war.

The example of Naba 'a, a neighbourhood adjacent to the Palestinian

camp of Tel al-Za 'atar, is illustrative. At the start of the war it was an

agglomeration of insalubrious buildings and shanties often inhabitated

by as many as a dozen people each, an enclave in Christian East Beirut,

most of whose population were Shi'i workers, with a small minority of

poor Christians.

At the beginning of the civil war, the inhabitants of Naba 'a sup-

ported the various organisations of the Palestinian movement or of the

Lebanese left, which had located their central headquarters in this geo-

graphically strategic neighbourhood. But the longer the war dragged

on, as the bombing and shelling took their mounting toll of lives and a

stifling blockade strangled the neighbourhood, the more the enthusi-

asm of the inhabitants of Naba 'a gave way to rancour. The organisa-

tions of the 'Islamo-Palestinian left' cared little about the problems

faced by the local pòpulation in their daily civilian life (housing, food,

and so on), and acted exclusively in the military domain. Shi 'i commun-

al sentiments were inflamed again, and flared higher when Musa Sadr

established a small hospital in the neighbourhood, in sharp contrast to

the politico-military organisations, which had spent money only on

arms.

Soon afterwards, when Naba'a fell to Phalangist assault, the Shi'i

population did not resist; in a battle between rival 'occupation forces',

the neighbourhood's inhabitants felt themselves unconcerned.

This involution, the last resort of self-identification, spread and

deepened as the Shi'i masses were increasingly transformed into perma-

nent refugees finding no place to house their families except in miser-

able agglomerations in the proximity of Palestinian camps. Amal, the

Shi'i movement, made ever wider use of its arsenal, which turned out to

be far from negligible. After 1980, the political and military life of

Beirut and the cities of southern Lebanon was dominated by battles

between Amal and the Palestinian organisations and between Amal and

the Lebanese Communist Party. A new dimension was added to the

already intricate amalgam of religious sects, currents, and politico-

military organisations in Lebanon.

'With the introduction of arms, a radical change in roles occurs. Weak-

ness becomes strength. The weapons acquire an exaggerated, almost

magical, quality: a defence and a shield, the symbol of a new identity.

Hence the vanity of the oppressed man displaying his weapons. It is an

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exhibition of that new existence which has finally put an end to resigna-

tion. . . and thus it is that the act of liberation, unless organised and

channeled, is transformed into a kind of magical revolt. It is as if liber-

ation itself consisted in the act of bearing arms, which has opened the

way to individual liberation. . . The inferiority complex cedes to the

superiority complex, the complex of submission to that of omnipo-

tence. The old complex of non-identity, the status of lack of status,

gives way to the status of exceptionality. For the oppressed man who

has taken up arms, anything is possible, including any excess.'\*

To sum up the atmosphere that prevailed in the streets of Lebanon

during the civil war, it is sufficient simply to observe how this 'psycho-

logy of under-development' operated in practice and determined the

fate of the Lebanese population. A 'state of exception', not decreed by a

dictatorial state but brought about by a multitutde of tiny dictatorships,

destroyed the life of the country's inhabitants during the civil war, and

constituted the only politics the Lebanese actually experienced.

On the one side were the civilians, the victims of both camps, ançl on

the' other those who bore arms, the members of the politico-military

organisations that enforced their own law. Within just a few months of

the outbreak of the civil war, that law had become the survival of the

fittest, or of the best armed, a sadistic and arbitrary regime under which

the whim of this or that gang, this or that powerful individual, could

and often did decide the fate of any person's life and property.

Auto theft, burglaries and robberies of houses, harassment on the

street-corners, where the militants of the various politico-military

organisations would establish their barricades and search, pester, insult

and sometimes murder passers-by - these things, little by little, came to

constitute the bulk of the activities of the members of political organi-

sations, when they were not simply engaging in indiscriminate shelling

of the 'enemy' neighbourhoods. On the other hand, these same organi-

sations protected the neighbourhoods in which they were based against

eventual murderous attacks by 'the other side'. The result was an agoni-

sing contradiction for the helpless populace. 'The local thief is our

protector' was a frequent lament, discreetly voiced, in both Lebanons,

Christian and 'Palestino-Muslim'.

In the Christian part of Lebanon, or at least in East Beirut, the Pha-

langists slaughtered their opposition with sufficient ruthlessness to

create a unified order, a state controlled by the dominant Phalangist

militia. Such was not the case in West Beirut, Tripoli, Sid on and other

cities, where the militias gave rise to dozens of mini-states, often com-

peting with one another for control of even the smallest neighbour-

hoods. In East Beirut, for example, the Phalangists alone taxed the

population, after their victory over the other Christian militias. They

were thus able to impose taxes according to some regulation, as the

Lebanese state had done previously. Although the inhabitants of East

Beirut complained about militia-law, they nevertheless felt that a single

strong militia was preferable to 'the anarchy that reigns on the other

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side'. In the West, Muslim Lebanese increasingly came to envy the

security that had been imposed on the Christians in the East. There were

more and more complaints about the competition between rival mili-

tias, the cost of which was paid by the population in fear and human

life. The Syrian army itself acted as just another militia along with all

the rest, one that used its influence to intimidate the population the

better to participate in the multifarious exactions the militias had made

their way of life.

It was not long before the old reflexes re-asserted themselves. The

most facile outlet for frustration is to blame all the trouble on the

Palestinians, who are after all not Lebahese (and the PLO, moreover,

flaunted its friendship with the heartily detested Syrian army), even

though their behaviour was not a whit different from that of the

'Islamo-progressive' militias.

A double language thus took root in 'Islamo-Palestinian', or 'Islamo-

progressive' Lebanon. Hate-filled denunciation of the Palestinian

Resistance and the Palestinians themselves was voiced in private, while

publicly the press and the militias repeated the immutable slogans:

'Lebanese-Palestinian solidarity', 'Lebanese-Syrian solidarity'. Even

Berri, the leader of Amal, declared ceaselessly in the press that his

organisation stood side by side with the Palestinian resistance in its

struggle against Israel, whereas in reality that organisation was waging

an equally relentless armed battle against the Palestinians in southern

Lebanon and in the neighbourhoods of West Beirut.

The Israeli invasion, with its thousands of victims in the space of a

few weeks, with the devastation of cities by bombing and shelling, put

an end to the slew of permanent little wars that had come to constitute

the daily life of the Lebanese population. For most of that population,

the available choices were as pressing as the shock was terrible. On the

one hand was the strong state, whoever might stand at the helm, on the

other not merely anarchy, but the real possibility of an even more

sweeping devastation.

But the peace longed for by the population is fragile. The Israeli and

Syrian armies stand head to head, exchanging angry looks and com-

muniqués, threatening to resort to more lethal projectiles. The future of

the regions controlled by these two occupying powers is impossible to

predict. Confessionalism, further inflamed by the war, is once again

rampant in these areas. In the Israeli-dominated region, Druze and

Maronites savagely attack one another sporadically but continually. In

the Syrian-dominated regions of the north, warfare between Sunni and

Shi'i Muslims erupts from week to week. Both occupations have

imposed their own law, but neither has brought about order.

Only in Beirut, where the international forces (Italian, French,

American, and British) are stationed, has there been a modicum of

peace. But even there, it is doubtful whether the return to normality will

be able to survive the withdrawal of the foreign troops, for none of the

factors that caused the little wars of the Lebanese has been resolved by

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The Lebanese communities and their little wars

the civil war or by the subsequent outside intervention, from whatever

quarter.

Reference

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Letter from the West Bank on the war

in Lebanon

'Adil Samara

Israel started its invasion of Lebanon in perhaps the mot favourable

political circumstances possible in this period. On the Arab front,

Egypt had withdrawn from the arena of the struggle against Israel.

Political and economic relations between Egypt and the other Arab

regimes are being restored to such an extent that some of these regimes

demanded that Egypt be invited to participate in the first Fez Summit

Conference, which failed. The significance of this demand is that, by

making it, these regimes were signalling their approval of the Camp

David accords. In other words, the Arab bourgeois regimes are

prepared to recognise Israel and come to an agreement with it, which

implies that the PLO must be forced to accept this position and imple-

ment it.

However, the acceptance of this position by the PLO could be made

possible only by smashing its military structure in Lebanon. This

explains the total lack of Arab assistance to the PLO against the Israeli

invasion. Indeed, this invasion was in accordance with the interest of

the Arab regimes to smash the Palestinian Resistance, just as it was in

acordance with Israeli interests.

The international circumstances in which the invasion took place

were likewise favourable for Israel. American imperialism is in political

and economic control of the region, as a consquence of the fusion of

economic interests of Arab capital into the world economic order led by

the US. The Arab bourgeoisies see their true interests in tail-ending this

order. It is therefore necessary for them to remove any obstacles. in the

way, and the PLO is one such obstacle. In addition, account must be

taken of the decline of Soviet presence in the region. This presence has

in fact become restricted to artificial relations with Syria and Libya. As

for the People's Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) - its role and ability

to influence events in the Arab world are very limited.

As far as Israel itself was concerned, an additional encouragement to

start this war was provided by the guaranteed neutrality of Egypt in a

war against the PLO. To all this one must add the effect of the semi-

truce that had existed since the summer of 1981 between Israel and the

PLO in the North: the longer this semi-truce lasted, the more difficult it

would be for the Begin-Sharon government to launch a war against the

PLO. From the point of view of this Israeli warmongering clique it was

therefore preferable to start the war as quickly as possible, lest the semi-

truce become a real one.

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Goals of the War

Israel's intentions in invading Lebanon were determined not only by its

military strength and the amount of territory it controlled, but also by

the objectives behind its presence and role in the region and its

expectations for the future. These goals can be summarised as follows.

- To crush the military structures of the PLO and evict it from

Lebanon.

- To gain control over parts of southern Lebanon for a transitional

period, initially under the excuse of security. In the course of time, new

realities would be created. There would be joint economic ventures; for

example, a project for utilising the water of the Litani. This would be

followed by territorial expansion. It is therefore no surprise that the

Israeli government allowed the rabbis to distribute in the army maps

showing Lebanese towns and villages with Hebrew names.

- To sign a treaty of peace and mutual recognition with Lebanon,

with the intention of asserting dominance over the Lebanese economy,

as well as crippling that country as an Arab cultural centre - a role

which the semi-democratic Lebanon used to play in the midst of a

repressive Arab world.

- To test Israel's own ability to exercise regional dominance over

other countries, in preparation for further expansion in the future.

- To throw the blame for Israel's economic crisis on the cost of the

war, thus justifying the raging inflation inflicted on the people, and

creating an argument for increased American aid.

- To place the population of the occupied territories (the West Bank

and the Gaza Strip) in a critical conjuncture, which would force them to

negotiate with Israel on terms dictated by the latter, and through 'repre-

sentatives' hostile to the PLO.

- to initiate a big new wave of colonising activity, in order to

complete the creation of conditions for final annexation.

Consequences of the War

The war has had effects on all the peoples pf the region, including the

Israelis, with which we shall start.

Although the PLO, as the genuine leadership of the Palestinian

national struggle, is the main enemy of Zionism, this war has been

unprecedented in revealing a new protagonist, albeit a timid one, on the

Israeli street -an internal oppositon voicing an anti-war sentiment,

calls for the fall of the government, recognition of the PLO, and so on.

Moreover, although this opposition has no clear class basis (rather, it is

formed of sections of various social classes in Israel) it is nevertheless

the seed for the development of future class positions. We regard this

phenomenon with great appreciation, particularly those aspects of it

that have involved soldiers and democratic officers who refused or held

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back from participating in the war. While the class participation of the

Israeli proletariat is limited or unclear in scope, the Israeli left's

participation in the opposition, in all its currents, is the nucleus for a

much stronger ideological opposition.

I mention these two aspects - class and ideology - not only for their

intrinsic importance, but because they have been the motor forces of

this war: in perpetrating the war, the bourgeois ruling class was, on the

one hand, serving its own class interests, but on the other hand it was

also acting under the impetus of the Zionist ideology and using it as its

spiritual weapon. ' i

The weapon of Zionist ideology itself is the óbstacle to a widening of

the base of the opposition to this war and to those that preceded it.

There can be no doubt that the increase in the government's popularity

(as revealed by public opinion polls) is an emphatic manifestation of the

hegemony of Zionist ideology in Israeli society; it is a factor which must

be taken into account by all those who study that society.

In the occupied territories, there has undoubtedly occurred a heavy

psychological shock which, although it had been foreseen by some, has

not in fact been as deep as expected by the triumvirate Begin-Sharon-

Shamir. The national movement, rather than moving into conflict with

the PLO and towards acquiescence in the occupation, has supported the

PLO as sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people and has

reacted with increased bitterness towards the Arab regimes. Even those

whom Israel labels 'moderates', who represent the commercial and

comprador bourgeoisie with economic interests in Jordan and other

Arab countries, have been unable to decide to come out against the PLO.

On the contrary, they have rallied round it, although at the same time

they have proposed some concessions which they regal'd as justified.

As for the other Arab peoples, I believe they are unable to speak their

mind; any movement is threatened with direct repression. This is why

the only positions visible on the surface are those of the regimes. The

Arab regimes, having maintained silence during the war, became very

energetic after the fighting had stopped. The second Fez Summit was

postponed until the Resistance had departed from Beirut. Although it

was agreed in Fez that a Palestinian state should be established, there

was nevertheless a much greater inclination to accept the Reagan plan,

according to which the Palestinians are to be represented via Jordan.

The regimes have also revealed their willingness to recognise Israel and

to put pressure on the PLO to do likewise, particularly in view of the

fact that the PLO is now under the direct influence of the Arab regimes.

The Problem of the PLO

The PLO, with all its political currents, is facing its historical problem

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today: adopting a policy under the circumstances of defeat in Lebanon

and subjection to the influences of the Arab regimes.

Foremost among the tasks facing the PLO is the preservation of

Palestinian national unity. This is a demand common to all currents,

particularly within the present circumstances. However, the moderate

leadership of the PLO, while seeing the need for maintaining national

unity, believes in the necessity of a rapprochement with Jordan,

allowing King Hussein to act as representative on behalf of the Palestin-

ìans, under the slogan of 'saving what can be saved, before it is too

late'. The left organisations, on the other hand, while also seeing the

need for preserving national unity, advocate closer ties with Syria, as

opposed to Jordan.

The need for national unity increases the likelihood that it will be

maintained. But the liquidation of the Palestinian identity and its

subsumption under one Arab regime or another will threaten this unity

with breakdown.

The dilemma facing the Palestinian Resistance today is critical and

dangerous. This is why even those who advocate negotiations via

Jordan can support their case with some logical arguments. Those who

support closer relations with Syria also have reasonable arguments and

excuses of their own. Neither have a clear-cut case. Moreover, it seems

to me that there is no appreciable difference between the positions of

the two bourgeoisies, the Syrian and the Jordanian; and in any case,

what can possibly be achieved through Arab diplomacy?

How can it be demonstrated that Israel will withdraw from all or part

of the occupied territories, which it considers as 'liberated'?

What guarantee is there that Reagan will force Israel to withdraw,

however partially, from the occupied territories?

Who can vouch even that Israel wil concede the whole of southern

Lebanon?

How can Israel and America be expected to do all this (and it is quite a

lot) in a situation characterised by: the open willingness of the Arab

regimes to recognise Israel; the departure of the PLO from Lebanon,

and the loss of any territory from which it can make its independent

decisions, or the decision to wage armed operations against Israel; the

disintegration of the Arab 'front of rejection and steadfastness' , and its

total lack of support for the PLO; the absence of any role for the Soviet

Union, whose position towards the last war was determined by reasons

of State rather than by reasons of revolution? In the face of all this, why

should Israel and America make any concessions?

The West Bank,

January, 1983

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Books on the war in Lebanon

Seán MacBride et aI, Israel in Lebanon, Report of the International

Commission to enquire into reported violations of International Law

by Israel during its invasion of the Lebanon, Ithaca Press, London,

1983.

This well-researched report is the product of the deliberations of a

distinguished self-appointed international commission. It sets out to

analyse Israel's actions in Lebanon during the summer of 1982 from the

standpoint of international law . Of the commission's six members, five

were lawyers. The chairman, Seán MacBride, is a former minister for

external affairs of Ireland, a leading figure of the international peace

movement, and himself a lawyer. Beyond ascertaining Israeli violations

of international law , the commission aimed 'to create a climate in which

public opinion insists upon adherence by all states and political move-

ments to the international law relative to war' (p xiii). With this in mind,

it presents the legal guidelines concerning the recourse to war and its

subsequent conduct.

The first of the book's three sections discusses the initial act of

invasion. It shows how Israel's proclaimed aims as well as the official

legal and political justification shifted as the invasion advanced. As

new aims emerged, fresh justifications had to be presented. It trans-

pires, then, that in reality the Israeli invasion had very little to do with

'self-defence' (as the label 'Peace for Galillee' was intended to suggest)

but was motivated by aims for which no legal basis exists. These were,

according to the commission, the wish to re-draw the political map of

Labanon and break the Palestinian national will. Other aims and justi-

fications - some genuine, if subsidiary - also provide no legally sus-

tainable grounds for the war.

At this point the commission engages in a somewhat confusing dis-

cussion of Israel's attack on the Palestinian right to self-determination.

The confusion results from the commission's presentation of this right

purely in terms of UN resolutions, which in reality reflected only certain

aspects of the Palestinian issue. The impression gained here is that the

Palestinians acquired the right to self-determination only as a result of

the 1967 war. This impression is only dispelled in Chap. 4, which

presents a potted history of the issue, but introduces new vagueries.

Uncharacteristically, the commission fails to explain how and why

international discourse had shifted from recognising Israel in the

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Books on the war in Lebanon

borders of the 1947 UN partition resolution, to a recognition of Israel in

its borders of 1949-1967 (the 1949 Armistice Lines). The commission

almost ignores the difference between the two borders, and conse-

quently does not explain the shift in international perception from the

original 'national home for Jews' as reflected in the 1947 plan to

'various Security Council resolutions [which] underpinned Israel's legi-

timacy behind the frontiers of 1967' (P25).

The commission goes on to describe the international-legal recogni-

tion of the PLO as a national liberation movement, particularly during

the period 1974-76. This fourth chapter ends with a quite unnecessary

digression in which a 'solution' to the Palestinian problem is proposed.

There are many views as to a possible solution, and it is not within the

commission's self-defined brief to come down in favour of a particular

formula. (It favours the 'two state' solution.)

The report's second section deals with Israel's conduct of the war.

Through clear and well-structured documentation, it shows that the

IDF (the Israeli armed forces) broke virtually every law of war. These

violated laws range from the widest principles to the most detailed rules

governing the use of specific weapons. The mass of collected evidence

shows clearly how the IDF violated, without sustainable justification,

the internation'ally recognised principles of 'military necessity',

'proportionality', 'discrimination' and 'humanity'. The quotations

from Israeli servicemen and press reports are particularly impressive.

The commission gives perhaps insufficient weight to the murder of

individual civilians by members of the IDF. Nevertheless the themes of

'blanket bombing' of the civilian population and the 'incidental'

victims of land, sea and air bombardment are extensively dealt with.

Israel's often contradictory justifications in relation to civilian

deaths are all rejected by the commission on legal grounds. One of the

most shocking facts to emerge in ths connection is that Israeli service-

men had no specific training and instruction on the conduct of war in

civilian populated areas. This is a serious indictment of Israeli military

training, and a condemnation of those who planned the attacks on

Sidon, Tyre and other civilian centres.

The report's third section deals with Israel's actions in Lebanon as an

occupier. Israel still refuses to acknowledge that it is an occupier in

Lebanon; it says it is merely 'present' there. In this way Israel is trying

to disclaim certain obligations incumbent upon an occupier in inter-

national law . The commission shows that Israel is in fact an occupying

force in the strict sense of the term, and goes on to expose serious viola-

tions committed by Israel in this capacity. The damage done to the

Lebanese economy, the extensive arrests, the lack of proper status for

the enormous number of detainees, and the Israeli aid to and use of

certain militias are all critically assessed. Here the commission is quite

right to go beyond its brief, in trying to explain the probable political

motive for Israel's occupation. Few could argue with the commission

when it ' . . . concludes on the evidence before it that [Israeli occupation

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Books on the war in Lebanon

policy] was to push Palestinian people out of the occupied zones and

even out of Lebanon' (P138).

The siege of Beirut and the massacre at Sabra and Chatila are each

covered by a separate chapter. It is shown that Israel's use of certain

weapons and the deployment of militias were conscious violations of

; international law, and that they were designed to terrorise, kill and

maim the civilian population of West Beirut.

Concerning the massacres, the report concludes that 'wider political

and historical findings of the Commission suggest that events at Chatila

and Sabra were not inconsistent with wider Israeli intentions to destroy

Palestinian will and cultural identity.' In view of the evidence

presented, this conclusion is, if anything, too cautious. Israel's respon-

sibility for and control over what happened emerge quite clearly.

Indeed, in one of the report's strongest passages it is pointed out that

Israel's dehumanisation of Palestinian people, and its alleged aim (at

Sabra and Chatila) of 'mopping up 2000 terrorists' provided the

murderers with what was 'virtually a mandate for the indiscriminate

slaughter of "2000 Palestinians", whether armed or not, wnether

identified as PLO fighters or not' (P181).

On the whole, the chapter on the massacres is most impressive and

alongside the first Appendix on genocide and ethnocide it constitutes a

powerful indictment of the Israeli state and not just (as in the Kahan

report) of certain individuals.

The limitations of the legalistic approach to the invasion of Lebanon

and the 'Palestinian problem' in general are obvious, and emerge

several times in the text. But this very readable report is both

comprehensive and instructive within its self-imposed limitations.

Daniel Machover

Selim Nassib with Caroline Tisdall, Beirut: Frontline Story, Pluto

Press, London, 1983.

This book consists largely of selected despatches by Selim Nassib, a

Lebanese journalist for the French leftist daily Libération, arranged in

chronological order. Caroline Tisdall has contributed a rather rambling

general introduction and a fairly impressive final section on the

massacres. The photographs by Chris Steele-Perkins are superb.

On the whole, this is a rather disappointing and uneven book. To

follow one reporter, however good, through the summer of 1982 is not

the best way towards an appreciation of the atmosphere that prevailed

in Beirut, or a fuller understanding of the political and social upheavals

caused by Israel's invasion of Lebanon and siege of Beirut. No single

reporter could always be in the right place at the right time, or find the

most interesting people to interview. No one person could gain a

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sufficiently comprehensive view of the events, at the time when they were

unfolding. If the reader is disappointed, it is because of this central flaw.

Some of Nassib's reports have their merits, but others are singularly

uninformative and a few indulge in romanticising Arafat or the events of

the siege.

The early despatches capture the mood of initial fear and uncertainty,

but even here Nassib's tendency to romanticise the Palestinian fighters

and their allies is evident. As the siege tightens, the despatches become

steadily less informative, though the odd piece is impressive. The

account of the destruction of Tyre -(pp79-82) is particularly good,

whereas the next despatch is largely aimless though perhaps entertaining.

An interesting fact which emerges very clearly is that by mid-July the

principle of withdrawal of the PLO was widely accepted, and the prob-

lem of ensuring the safety of those living in Palestinian camps was the

topic of a fierce debate within the organisation.

There is a ten-day gap in despatches during a vital period (20-28 July)

- which underlines the difficulty of relying on one journalistto supply

good material.

The August despatches often verge on the absurd; that of 13 August

ends with the exclamation: ' . . . this resistance of the weak has become a

challenge for the future. From tomorrow, who will dare say that the

Palestinian people is not a reality?' Perhaps this sounds better in French.

Finally, Nassib's interview with Arafat and the introduction to it are the

worst pieces of romantisation and uninformative interviewing.

The chronology that accompanies Nassib's despatches is quite com-

prehensive, though the various goings on at the UN are not fully covered.

Caroline Tisdall's introduction is both the best and worst part of the

book. She exposes quite effectively the continuity in Zionism, repre-

sented by the massacres of Deir Yassin (1948) and of Sabra and Chatila.

But her rambling account of the PLO's development is too uncritical

and, again, tends to romanticise. The events preceding Black

September 1970 are inadequately assessed, and the civil war in Lebanon

- not an easy topic to describe briefly - is given no greater depth.

Tisdall ends her passage on 'the lessons of the civil war' with a piece of

over-indulgence towards the PLO: 'Unhindered by Lebanese govern-

ment control but under the watchful eye of the Syrian contingent of the

Arab Deterrent Force, they began to restructure and fortify their

revolution.' This is just not good enough. It is necessary to highlight

some of the problems raised by the PLO's policies and conduct in

Lebanon, if only to put them in context and assess their effects. Bland

remarks and insufficient criticism are not a healthy approach to any

political movement, however worthy its cause.

Tisdall's section on the massacres is generally very impressive but the

final 'why?' passage is a somewhat unsatisfying end to a very uneven

book.

Daniel Machover

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Class divisions in Israeli society

Emmanuel Farjoun

In two consecutive general elections -in 1977 and 1981-the lower and

middle echelons of the Israeli Jewish working class, consisting mainly

of Oriental Jews, gave massive (though by no means unanimous)

support to the traditional party of the private bourgeoisie, the Likkud,

headed by M. Begin. To be more precise, the Likkud is an electoral bloc

whose two main components are the fiercely nationalistic Herut

(Freedom) Party and the conservative party of traditional bourgeois

Zionism, the Liberal Party.

The second vote of support came during a period of very rapid infla-

tion (about 130 per cent per year) which had taken its toll of the

standard of living of the poorer sections of the working class. Only six

months before the 1981 election the economic conditions of wage earn-

ers were deteriorating so fast and the popularity of the first Likkud

government had sunk so low that hardly anyone believed that Begin

would be returned to office. In the event, his party greatly increased its

power. Inflation was generated deliberately by government policies as a

tool for controlling the economy by manipulating prices, taxes and

wages. Just before the elections, the government allowed an artificial

but significant reduction in the prices of both foods and durable goods

- and it seems that the electorate had been waiting for just such an

excuse to sweep the Likkud coalition back to office.

This demonstrated ability of the Likkud to retain power even in the

face of grave economic difficulties for the mass of their voters raises

several questions. In view of the well-known political programme of the

Likkud (as demonstrated by the war in Lebanon) these questions are of

fundamental importance for understanding Israeli society and its

future.

It is clear that among Oriental Jews (who form the bulk of the Jewish

working class) support for Begin's Likkud is greater and more solid

than among Ashkenazi Jews. In wide sectors of the Oriental popula-

tion, commitment to Begin is apparently overwhelming and virtually

unconditional: he is seen as Saviour.

What are the reasons for this phenomenon? How does the voting pat-

tern reflect the specific structure of Israeli society?

Obviously, such a clear-cut and powerful sentiment is over-

determined: it has several interlinked causes, related to the present

social and economic position of the Oriental Jews in Israel, as well as to

the painful process of their integration into the Ashkenazi-dominated

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Israeli society, and to their cultural-political background in the Arab

countries.

The usual explanation for the voting patterns of Oriental Jews in

Israel is that on the whole the nationalist rhetoric and explicit anti-Arab

chauvinism of the Likkud appeal to them much more than the relatively

moderate and cautious tone adopted by the Labour Party.

While this explanation does ''Contain an element of truth, it suffers

from several weaknesses.

First, in many cases the actual policies of the first Begin government

(1977 -81) towards the Arab countries, as well as towards the Palestinian

Arabs in Israel and the occupied territories, were more open and less

harsh than those of former Labour governments. For example, it is now

a known fact that when the Labour Party was in office it refused to give

up the whole of Sinai in exchange for a comprehensive peace treaty with

Egypt; the Egyptians proposed such a deal on several occasions, but

were repeatedly rebuffed. Begin's decision to give up the whole of Sinai

and to dismantle the Israeli settlements there in exchange for a peace

treaty with Egypt was most vehemently opposed by predominantly

Ashkenazi extreme right-wing nationalist groups such as the Tehiyyah

(Revival) Party and Gush Emunim; it was also opposed, albeit less

vigorously, by the Labour Party. On the other hand, the peace treaty

was very popular with Israel's Oriental communities.

Thus, while Begin's rhetoric is undeniably more openly chauvinistic

than that of the Labour Party, his policies were not invariably so, until

well into his second term in office.

Further, the central and most important plank in Israel's anti-Arab

policy throughout the post-1967 period has been the massive colonisa-

tion of the West Bank. But this rapid expansion of the dense network of

Israeli settlements has never been popular among the poorer sections of

Israel's Oriental communities. They perceived correctly that to accom-

plish this massive colonisation the government must channel consider-

able resources to the small groups of (mostly Ashkenazi) settlers, and

away from the 'development towns' inside the pre-1967 borders, where

a large proportion of the Oriental population resides.

Here we would like to consider an entirely different root cause of

Begin's popularity - a deep-level class factor which has had and will

continue to have a decisive influence on the political structure of Israel.

The existence of such a factor is betrayed by the very form of the

support that Begin enjoys among wide sectors of the Jewish working

class and petty bourgeoisie: it is an overwhelming and unconditional

support, apparently independent on the precise nature of his policies,

and often accompanied by strong aversion towards the Labour Party.

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Class divisions in Israeli society

Class divisions

In fact, a detailed analysis of the public support given to the two major

party blocs shows that it is closely related to important divisions in the

working class. This division turns out to run parallel to divisions within

the Israeli bourgeoisie. Together, they form a striking pattern which

has a decisive influence on Israeli society and politics.

Let us examine this pattern. The Israeli economy is divided into two

major sectors, roughly equal in size: the bureaucratic-capitalist sector

owned by the state or the Histadrut and its affiliated organisations, and

the private capitalist sector. Obviously, these two sectors are connected

to each other by a multitude of economic (and other) ties; in particular,

many firms are owned jointly by capital from both sectors. However,

there are important characteristic differences, some of which are

summarised in the table which follows. This table is no doubt schema-

tic, but it nonetheless highlights some of the characteristics of each

sector.

One crucial point is the following: the economic sectoral division of

the lower echelons of the working class in Israel, between those who

work in the bureaucratic and private sector respectively, corresponds

rather closely to the national division of that class, between Israeli Jews

and Palestinian Arabs. This is not a mere coincidence; it is rooted in the

very nature of Israel a 1 . settler-state, and its consequences are

far-reaching.

Ever since the be inning of the Zio . st colonisation of Palestine, the

Zionist labour move ent sought to cre e a Jewish monopoly in certain

key sectors of the econo . was done by excluding Arab workers

from these economic activities. This policy continued after the 1948

war: industries and economic activities which were under the control of

the state or the Histadrut (including its affiliated organisations, such as

the kibbutzim) were generally closed 1;0 Arab workers.

With the rapid development of t ~conomy, especially after the 1967

war, a total ban on Arab labour uld no longer be maintained, since

there was an acute shortage ii1abou 0 r. Thus the public construc-

tion industry came to depend on Arab)a our. Today the giant Solel-

Boneh construction concern relies almést exclusively on Arab manual

labour. This concern belongs to the Hlstadrut - the peculiarly Zionist

bureaucratic structure, which combines in one entity the country's only

legally recognised trade union and largest industrial holding company.

But in most other Histadrut-owned enterprises Arab workers are not

to be found. As for state-owned industrial firms -they are almost her-

metically closed to Arabs. Thus Arabs are excluded not only from the

huge state-owned arms industry, which employs over 100,000 people,

. but also from the oil and chemical industries, electronics, aviation,

ports, the sophisticated parts of the engineering industry, shipping and

airlines. It goes without saying that tele-communications, the electricity

and gas industries and the like are also closed to Arabs. All these are

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Class divisions in Israeli society

Bureaucratic sector

Dual structure of Israel's economy

Private sector

Size and character

of firms

Large modern enterprises

Large proportion of

small businesses; some

medium-size firms

Economic branch

Weapons and other

military products, chemi-

cals, energy, oil, cement,

large-scale construction,

large agro-business,

public transport

Consumer goods (metal,

wood, textiles, food), small

and medium-size construc-

tion and services, small-

scale agriculture

Market

Strong orientation

towards export

Local consumer market;

sub-contracting for state

enterprises

Workforce

Almost exclusively Jewish

(except in construction);

very high proportion of

Oriental Jews among

production workers

Large proportion (about

V3) of workers are

Palestinian Arabs

Pay and conditions Low pay, but Very low pay (less than

relatively high job security, $200 a m~nth), no job

good working conditions security and negligible

and fringe benefits fringe benefits (except in

electronics and engineering

subcontractors for arms

industry - where no Arabs

are employed)

Ownership and

management

- Managed by largely

Ashkenazi Zionist elite

(including kibbutzim);

very few Oriental Jews;

no Arabs

Large proportion of Orien-

tal Jewish owners, especial-

ly in smaller enterprises; a

very small proportion of

Arabs

Typical political Labour Alignment

affiliation of owner (Labour Party, Mapam)

or manager

Likkud Bloc (Herut,

Liberal Party)

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Class divisions in Israeli society

considered strategic areas, and Jewish monopoly is maintained in them

not only at management level but also, with very few exceptions, among

the workforce.

The technique of keeping Arabs out is simple: all employees are

required to have a record of military service and a security clearance.

This automatically rules out all but a very small number of Arabs. The

few exceptions - mostly members of the Druze religious sect, who are

conscripted to the army - are dealt with individually. Even the Druze

are excluded from most 'sensitive' and strategic areas of employment,

but their exclusion is not total. Thus, for example, about half of the

manual workers in Israel's biggest sea-port, at Haifa, are now Druze

Arabs: the shortage in manpower was so acute that they had to be

admitted into this former bastion of exclusively Jewish labour.

The policy of keeping Arabs out of the strategic industries has created a

shortage of skilled and semi-skilled labour in these industries. Since the

mid-1970s, the shortage has been getting progressively more acute,

because military-related production has become the fastest growing

area of Israel's economy; by now, it employs about one quarter of the

country's total labour force.l As a result, the Jewish workers in these

industries have been able to obtain relatively good working conditions

and fringe benefits: higher pay, shorter working week,2 longer

holidays, greater job security. Managements have been forced to grant

all this, in order to attract enough Jewish workers. Similar conditions

do not generally exist in private industry, except where the work -force is

highly skilled and purely Jewish - again for 'security reasons'.

The Arab worker is forced to seek employment in the private sector.

The only major exceptions are the large public construction firms,

which use mostly Arab labour on the actual construction site; but here

again, only Jews can be found in the office rooms, where design,

finance and other paper-work is done.3

Some of these points are well illustrated in the following excerpt from

an article in a local Jerusalem newspaper.

, . . . There are types of industrial enterprise where, because of their

defence-related character, there is not an Arab worker to be found -

such as most of the military industry. In Jerusalem I visited a large

enterprise of this kind, employing 500 workers. Jewish workers only.

They operate automatic machines of the most modern type. Their

starting wage is relatively low, at $250 a month, while the average wage

for the country is $350 a month. The firm works a five-day week

schedule [instead of the usual six-day week]. Two meals a day are

provided free of charge. The neighbouring non-military firms find it

difficult to recruit Jewish workers. In Jerusalem there are thousands of

industrial firms, mostly tiny, which together employ 17,000 workers, of

which 5,500 are Palestinian Arabs. Typically, the proportion of Arab

workers is still higher in the newly established factories, built with

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Class divisions in Israeli society

government support in the occupied territories. There, except for one

large factory, most of the 2,800 workers are Palestinian Arabs.'4

As a result of this division, firms in the private sector are utterly

dependent on Arab workers. From the viewpoint of the private

employer, this state of affairs is not an unhappy one: while there are

political barriers to the super-exploitation of large sections of the

Jewish working class, Arab workers do not enjoy similar political

protection. The private employers can therefore go much further in

squeezing the utmost out of their workers, while keeping wages and

working conditions to the minimum level that the labour market will

bear.

These developments in Israel's private sector were given a tremen-

dous boost by the outcome of the 1967 war, which opened to the civilian

consumer-goods industry a huge new market. Israeli consumer goods

are sold not only in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, but are also

carried (often after being repackaged, to disguise their origin) across

the 'open bridges' into the Arab countries. At present, this accounts for

about one third of Israel's total exports. At the same time, the

territories occupied in 1967 provided Israel's private industry with a

large new labour market, more than doubling its reserve of Arab

workers. More than 100,000 workers from these territories are now

employed in various branches of the Israeli economy.

These developments, which matured during the 1970s, have had two

important political consequences that concern us here.

First, the ranks of the private Jewish bourgeoisie were swollen and it

became considerably more independent of the state bureaucracy. The

ability of the private sector to take care of itself economically and

politically was greatly enhanced.. Its appetite for political power, to

complement and reflect its newly acquired economic muscle, was

rapidly whetted - and it now had the financial means to mount a proper

large-scale election campaign.

Second, due to the vast expansion of the public-bureaucratic sector,

especially the arms industry, and the resulting shortage of Jewish

labour-power, the Jewish working class also became increasingly

independent of the state and Histadrut bureaucracy and its political

arm, the Labour Party. One no longer had to vote Labour in order to

get a proper job.

The division of the working class according to nationality, between the

public-bureaucratic and private sectors, is supplemented by an

important division of the Jewish wage-workers along the major ethnic

cleavage which divides Israeli Jewish society: between Oriental Jews

(mostly immigrants from Arab countires, and their Israeli-born des-

cendants) and Ashkenazim (Jews of central and eastern European

origin). The bùlk of the Jewish working class - especially in non-mana-

gerial, manual jobs, whether skilled ornot - ismadeupofOriental Jews.

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While the formula for separating Arabs from Jews is 'military

service' and 'security clearance', the euphemism used for excluding

Oriental Jews is 'education'. Most white-collar government jobs are

filled by Ashkenazim. Some government departments, such as the Post

Office, have no educational requirements, and indeed a very high

proportion of workers there, including white-collar employees, are

Oriental. However, for most Oriental Jews, especially those who live in

'development towns', far from the central government sites of Tel-Aviv

and Jerusalem, the only way to secure a respectable job is to join some

firm owned by the state or the Histadrut (including firms owned by

organisations affiliated to the Histadrut, such as the big public trans-

port firms and 'regional enterprises' owned jointly by several kibbutz-

im and employing hired labour). As mentioned above, these firms are

dominant in 'strategic' branches of the economy such as arms produc-

tion, the chemical industry etc. Competition with Arab workers in the

private sector makes that sector very unattractive to Oriental (let alone

Ashkenazi) Jewish workers. Of course, this does not mean that no

Jewish workers are employed in the private sector; many are. But their

preference is to work in the public-bureaucratic sector.

The pattern which has resulted from the operation of these selective

forces over the years is that the typical employment of the 'average'

Oriental Jewish worker is in a blue-collar job in the public-bureaucratic

sectòr, usually in a 'strategic' industry.

Class consciousness of Israel's Oriental Jews

Let us now return to our original question and see how the political

inclinations of Israel's Oriental Jews are affected by their specific

position within the country's economic and cultural life.

As we saw, the vast majority of Oriental Jews are employed in

manual jobs, mostly in the public-bureaucratic sector. While their

position is superior to that of the Arab workers, it is inferior to that of

the Ashkenazim, who hold most of the managerial and professional

jobs.

'\;., Ever since the early 1950s, when large waves of Jewish immigrants

t( arrived jrom Arab countries, these immigrants were regarded by the

Ashkenazi Zionist elite as an inferior group who must somehow be

'raised' to the true cultural level of Jewry - represented by the Ashken-

azim. Clearly, some groups of Oriental immigrants had to go through a

painful period of adaptation in order to acclimatise to a society

fashioned by European, bourgeois-liberal and mostly secular tradi-

tions. But this difficult process of adaptation was made worse by the

attempts at a forced Europeanisation of all aspects of their life.

Although as a matter of fact many of the new Oriental immigrants had

belonged to the middle-class and professional strata in their countries

of origin, a stereotype of Oriental Jew was created in the image of the

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Class divisions in Israeli society

least educated and most backward (from a bourgeois point of view)

among them.

The logic of the whole period of development was to mould these

Oriental ethnic groups into a hard core of the Israeli Jewish proletariat,

working under the supervision of Ashkenazi managers and profession-

als. The fact that the Oriental immigrants had many cultural traits in

common with Arabs made it easier for the Ashkenazi elite to relegate

them to an inferior socio-economic position.5

When the Oriental Jews were slowly and painfully integrating into

Israeli economic life, they always faced the Ashkenazi Jew asa contem-

ptuous boss who was ordering them about and on whose goodwill their

very livelihood depended. Their immediate class enemy - the boss-

was most often a Labour-Party bureaucrat put in control of this or that

Histadrut or state enterprise. Moreover, their trade-union 'represen-

tative' in the Histadrut was again an Ashkenazi, nominated from above

or entrenched in this position since the old pre-state days. The govern-

ment and Histadrut offices in charge of their education, housing,

welfare, employment and health-care were also staffed almost exclusi-

vely by Ashkenazim. For many years they were coerced to vote for the

party of this state-bourgeoisie and union bosses - the Labour Party.

This political coercion was most effective outside the main urban

centres, in villages and smaller towns populated almost exclusively by

Oriental Jews. There, improvements in employment, housing etc.

could be made conditional on 'favourable' electoral returns. (In the

large cities this type of blackmail was less effective, and a large propor-

tion of Oriental Jews living there indeed used to vote for Herut even in

the early days.) Political coercion of this kind was gradually becoming

more difficult to enforce, with the general liberalisation of Israeli

economic and political life, especially after the fall of the first Big Boss,

David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first Prime Minister and for many years

leader of the old Labour Party (Mapai).

What routes of upward socio-economic mobility were open to an

Oriental Jewish worker? In the public-bureaucratic sector' (including

the armed forces) such mobility was slow and difficult, if not entirely

impossible. Managerial and supervisory positions in this sector were

firmly held by Ashkenazim. The educational route upwards was also

largely blocked: to this day, the number of Oriental Jews in universities

is relatively very small, partly because tertiary education is economi-

cally beyond the reach of most working-class families and partly

because children of Oriental families are handicapped by the inferior

quality of primary and secondary education accessible to them.

On the other hand, there was a route of advancement open to an

Oriental Jew -that of becoming self-employed or an owner of a small

private business. In the free market of the private sector, the way up was

much easier than in the public-bureaucratic sphere. As a result, there

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Class divisions in Israeli society

sprang up a very substantial number of small independent businesses

owned and run by Oriental Jews.

The typical aspiration of an Oriental Jewish worker -if there is such

a thing as 'typical aspiration' - is to rid himself of his dependence on

the Ashkenazi bosses and start his own small workshop, where he

would employ, say, three, four or even twenty Arab workers, with

whom he has a lot in common culturally but who would be kept in their

'proper place' by the national social barrier. Nor is this mere wishful

thinking; thousands of businesses of exactly this type - restaurants,

small construction firms, carpentries, garages and the like - have come

into existence, and many have prospéred.

The complex reality determines class consciousness. The Labour Party is

correctly regarded by most Oriental Jews as the party of bureaucratic

bosses, hated by workers and small businessmen alike. The Likkud is

regarded as the party of the class they identify with, the class of small bus-

inessmen, to which most Oriental Jews would like to belong and some do

already belong. The working-class rhetoric of the Histadrut bosses is

seen and despised for what it is - mere rhetoric which attempts to cover

up the role of the Histadrut as the biggest employer in the country.

The Labour Alignment (including the Labour Party itself) is also

strongly associated with the kibbutz movement, deeply hated by most

Oriental Jews. This hatred combines resentment at social discrimina-

tion, and class hostility towards a powerful collective employer.

A large proportion of Oriental Jews brought to Israel were settled - it

felt more like being dumped - in small 'development towns' in remote

corners of the country, with meagre economic base and few resources

for real development. In the same localities, heavily subsidised

kibbutzim have prospered as small agro-industrial communities. The

100,000 odd members of kibbutzim form a peculiar layer of Israeli

society; it can perhaps be best described as Israel's equivalent of the

English landed gentry.

The cultural, social and political background of the kibbutz is totally

alien to the Oriental Jews, who therefore find it virtually impossible to

join these oases of prosperity. Even in the rare cases when they try to

join, their 'mentality' is usually judged to be 'unsuitable'. On the other

hand, the rapidly developing economy of the kibbutzim has become

increasingly dependent on the exploitation of wage labour. About half

of the labour-power employed by the kibbutzim comes, in the form of

wage labour, from the Oriental communities in such 'development

towns' as Qiryat Shmonah in the north or Shderot in the south. Some of

these workers are hired by individual kibbutzim; many others work in

'regional enterprises' owned and managed jointly by several kibbutzim

and relying exclusively on hired manual labour . These Oriental hired

workers of the kibbutzim sometimes work alongside Arab workers, but

they rarely meet kibbutz members except as bosses, managers and

supervisors.

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Class divisions in Israeli society

Here is an excerpt from an Israeli newspaper report on the town of

Qiryat Shmonah, where public meetings of the Labour Party,

addressed by the party's leader, Shim 'on Peres, were broken up by the

angry Oriental inhabitants.

'Qiryat Shmonah, which from time to time reaches the headlines, is a

good model for a close study of the relations between the two sides

[namely, the town's Oriental inhabitants and the nearby kibbutzim].

From government publications one can learn that. . . about 80 per cent

of Qiryat Shmonah's population do hard physical work, with very

limited prospects for on-the-job advancement. Half of all the workers

are employed by the kibbutzim in regional enterprises such as a bakery,

plants for processing agricultural products, hotels, quarries, as well as

in various kinds of hired work inside the kibbutzim. Some time ago,

when unemployment in the town was high, the government was forced

to set up a plant of the arms industry, in which there are higher-level

jobs and therefore the feeling of the workers is better. Here wages are

also better, and so are the prospects for advancement. When the father

of a family comes back home from his work in the kibbutz and tells

about his experiences there (wages which are sometimes low, hard

physical work, kibbutz snobism) the family absorbs these stories and

the pronouncements, so it seems, pass from father to son.'6

It is perfectly natural that the relationship between the two commun-

ities is that of total estrangement. The kibbutzim are perceived as the

darlings of the state, who have got the best land, water and other

resources, such as cheap credit, and who thrive by exploiting the miser-

able living conditions and the political weakness of the Oriental Jewish

workers.

This political weakness is what Israel's Oriental Jews are trying to

reverse by voting Likkud. The Labour Alignment is closely identified

with the kibbutz movement; during election campaigns, kibbutz

members go into the development towns to solicit votes for Labour;

and a relatively high number of Labour candidates are members or ex-

members of kibbutzim. For most Oriental workers it is unthinkable to

vote for such people, and will continue to be so for the foreseeable

future. They are seen as arrogant bosses, who should be politically

checked,notencouraged.

Conclusions

The political allegiance of Israel's Oriental Jews to the Likkud, and

their rejection of Labour, are firmly rooted in the history and class

structure of Israeli society. It does not depend very much on the

position taken by the Likkud on this or that national or economic issue.

Begin will have their support both in taking chauvinist positions and in

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adopting more moderate stands. This contrasts sharply with the

support that Begin enjoys in the fascist-religious milieu of Gush

Emunim or the Tehiyyah (Revival) Party, whose members are mostly

Ashkenazim. This latter support is entirely conditional on the Likkud's

commitment to a Greater Israel, from which Palestinian Arabs are to be

expelled.

The political support of the Ükkud among Israel's Oriental Jewish

working class can be expected to continue for quite some time. It may

decline slowly, following changes in the ethnic composition of the state-

bureaucratic section of the Israeli bourgeoisie. Such changes may come

about precisely as a consequence of the Likkud staying in office long

enough, especially if it will succeed in capturing the Histadrut, in

addition to the state apparatus which it already controls.

References

1 For a survey on Israel's arms production and exports and the militarisation

of the Israeli economy, see Esther Howard, 'Israel, the sorcerer's apprentice',

MERI? Reports 112, February 1983. .

2 The normal working week in Israel is six days.

3 For details on the role of Arab labour in the Israeli economy, see E. Farjoun,

'Palestinian workers in Israel- a reserve army of labour' , Khamsin 7.

4 Qol Yerushalayim, 19 February 1982.

5 Concerning the attitudes ofthe Zionist elite to Oriental Jews, see R. Shapiro,

'Zionism and its Oriental subjects', Khamsin 5.

6 Ha'aretz, 4 November 1982.

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The Oriental support for Begin -

a critique of Farjoun

A vishai Ehrlich

Careful consideration of the article by E. Farjoun raises a series of

questions about several of the 'facts' presented, conclusions derived

from them and his method of analysis which consequently appears in-

complete. That the Oriental support for Begin is a form of protest against

the Labour Party is not a new theory; what Farjoun claims to add is:

1 That this support is neither dependent on Begin's national or

economic policies nor is it an indication of agreement with these

policies.

2 That the protest is an expression of (working) class antagonism

against the Labour corporate bureaucracy.

The 'facts' disputed

To prove the first point, Farjoun argues that: (A) Begin's Oriential

supporters voted for him despite his economic policy which affected

fhem adversely. (B) That the return of Sinai was more popular with the

Orientals than with the Ashkenazim. (C) That the poorer sections of the

Oriental community which support Begin are also against his policy of

massive colonisation of the West Bank.

These arguments are incredible and spurious to say the least, as they

fly in the face of known facts.

(A) In contradistinction to most right-wing governments in the

present world crisis, Begin's government has continued and increased

government deficit spending. This has exacerbated the balance of pay-

ments situation and the foreign debt; but, together with a sophisticated

system of indexation which exists in the country and other welfare

mechanisms, it has enabled most of the population to retain and even

increase their standard of living. Moreover, this high-inflation policy

allowed the government to maintain a very low rate of unemployment

(about 4 per cent) among Jews. The main attack by Labour on Begin's

policy was that it was mortgaging the future for short-term benefits.

These benefits, among others, included the satisfaction of the economic

interests of his supporters. Farjoun argues that they voted for Begin

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despite suffering economically under him; but in fact they voted for

him because they would have suffered more under Labour.

(B) To argue that the Oriental community was more in favour of the

return of Sinai, as part of the peace agreement with Egypt, than the

Ashkenazi community is also unfounded. It is, however, correct that

the extreme right movements which were against the withdrwal (the

Revival Party, Gush Emunim, the Jewish Defence League, etc.) are

mainly Ashkenazi in composition. This fact, nonetheless, is only half

the truth, because the other half is that the organised support for the

return of Sinai and for the Sadat agreement was also mainly Ashkenazi

in composition (the Peace Now movement). There was never a wide

public movement among Orientals for the withdrawal from Sinai prior

to the agreement. The unpleasant truth is that most Oriental public

opinion passively trailed behind the official policy.

(C) With regard to Oriental attitudes towards the massive colonisation

of the West Bank, it is again correct that in the first phases of colonisation

most of the settlers were supporters of the extreme right which is, in the

main, Ashkenazi. However, so was, and is, the opposition to the coloni-

sation. Zionist pioneer settlement of frontier zones was always carried

out by ideological movements which were Ashkenazi. Once the frame-

work was established, Oriental Jews were brought in. This was the case

with the newly occupied territories after the 1948 war, when the first to

move in were kibbutzim; and only afterwards was the area densely popu-

lated by villages and 'development towns' whose inhabitants were

mostly Oriental. The pattern recurs at present with one variation. With

the exception of the Golan Heights, the kibbutz movements, which are

mainly Ashkenazi, were reluctant - for political reasons - to be the van-

guard of settlement in the occupied territories. Their pioneering role was

taken by new movements of the political 'right' , also mainly Ashkenazi.

At present, the Begin -Sharon government has entered into the second

phase of the settlement and absorption of the West Bank. Massive

building of urban and semi-urban neighbourhoods is being completed.

These apartment blocks are offered at cheap, heavily subsidised, prices

to young families; and those finding housing a major problem, mainly

Orientals, are beginning to flock in. It will not be long before the West

Bank (which, with the exception of Jerusalem, has so far been sparsely

populated by Jews) will have a much larger Oriental Jewish population.

In this way the accusation that the settlements divert funds which would

otherwise go towards improving the conditions of Oriental Jews is

being averted. The government argues that the solution for the Oriental

urban poor is in their settlement in the West Bank. The claim that there

is wide Oriental opposition to the settlement of the West Bank is

unfounded; only marginal Oriental groups (supporters of the Black

Panthers etc.) have raised their voices against it. An even greater

willingness to move to the West Bank is only checked by the lack of

employment in the immediate vicinity of the new settlements, which

compels the settlers to commute.

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Summarising, I have shown that Farjoun's argument that Oriental

support for Begin is economically altruistic is simply wrong. Also

unfounded is the implication that the Oriental supporters of Begin have

positive attitudes towards withdrawal from the occupied territories and

are against their settlement.

The incomplete sector analysis

Farjoun's refusal to acknowledge the positive reasons for the support

for Begin and his policies among Orientals is carried into his second

argument, which attempts to analyse the distribution of Orientals and

Ashkenazim into class positions within the public and private sectors of

the Israeli economy. He reaches two conclusions:

1 That in the public sector Orientals and Ashkenazim face each

other in antagonistic class relations: semi-skilled and skilled labourers

against supervisory, managerial, corporate bosses.

2 That the main way towards upward mobility for Orientals was

through entrepreneurship in the private sector. These upwardly mobile

sections ofthe Oriental community relate with antagonism to the public

sector, where their mobility was restricted, and thus identify with the

party of the private bourgeoisie.

Here too the claim is that the support for Begin is due to his being

Labour's opponent rather than because of what he actually stands for.

Farjoun and I share the view that a class analysis of Israeli society must

include both the ethnic and the national divisions. A class analysis of

the Israeli social formation must account for the inter-relationship and

changes in the triangle: Occidentals-Orien,tals-Palestinians. Farjoun's

conclusions are based on a concentration on just one pair of relation-

ships within the triangle: the Occidental-Oriental couple, and ignore the

Oriental-Palestinian, Occidental-Palestinian couples. It is my conten-

tion that his conclusions are the result of an incomplete analysis.

In a capitalist economy, a sudden increase in the supply of unskilled

labour will tend to have the following effects (other things being equal):

1 The price of unskilled labour-power will tend to decrease.

2 The differential between the prices of skilled and unskilled labour-

power will tend to increase.

3 The ratio of cost of labour versus cost of capital will decrease -

encouraging labour-intensive processes of production.

If however, as in Israel, the economy has two sectors, one of which

does not utilise the increased labour supply, the effects on this sector of

the introduction of the new supply of unskilled labour will tend to be:

4 A wider differential of labour prices between the two sectors.

5 A tendency to increase capital-intensive processes of production.

These simple theoretical conclusions are of particular significance in

the class analysis of Israel. They account for some of the consequences

of the segregation of the Jewish and Arab economies in Palestine in the.

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pre-state period; they are also fruitful for the understanding of the

impact of waves of immigration to Israel, in particular the Oriental

immigrations. Since 1967 they are important for understanding the

impact of the absorption of the Palestinian labour force and they are

also illuminating for the understanding of the relationship between the

kibbutz sector and the rest of the Israeli economy.

The effects of Palestinian employment on the Jewish working class

What were the main consequences of the absorption of a large

Palestinian labour force on the Jewish working class? In the private

sector the new source of cheap labour made it possible for larger

numbers of Jews, Oriental and Occidental, to move from positions of

employees to becoming employers. These very small capitaist enter-

prises stand or fall on the continued supply of cheap Palestinian labour.

The 1967 occupation signified for them the opportunity to move out of

the working class. At the other end of the labour force there was a

fraction of the Jewish working class, almost entirely Oriental, which

was unskilled. The introduction of cheap Palestinian labour threatened

to further reduce their wages. To mitigate the effects of this competi-

tion, the Histadrut and the Ministry of Labour intervened to enforce

basic minimum pay rates, but only where the workforce was mixed. The

main trend, however, was towards the division of labour along national

lines, which opened channels of upward mobility for Jews within the

class.

In the segregated sector of the Israeli economy, where Arabs are not

admitted, the effects of the Palestinian workforce were indirect. It

made the supply of the Jewish labour force more scarce and thus

increased the pay differentials between the Jewish and mixed sectors.

The scarcity of labour and its high price was also a cause for capital-

intensification, which itself increases the demand for more skilled

labour thus raising the differentials even further. It is possible to argue

that this sector of the Jewish working class also benefited from the

incorporation of Palestinian workers into other sectors of the

economy.

Although the effects of the incorporation of Palestinians on the

Jewish class changes require more research, it is easy to see even from

the above sketch that the Jewish working class, not only the bour-

geoisie, benefits from the incorporation of Palestinians into the

economy and has an interest in the continuation of this situation. The

converse is also true: wide sections of Jewish working class and new

small capitalists have much to fear in terms of personal status, incomes

and mobility from the discontinuation of Palestinian employment. To

the extent, therefore, that the Labour Party is perceived as willing to

negotiate Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories, this is seen as a

socio-economic threat to these sections. On the other hand, Begin's

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stance - no return of the territories - coupled with actions to make the

separation of the West Bank from Israel impossible, is in line with their

material interests.

There is no contradiction between the hostility of many Oriental

workers to the Labour bureaucracy and their interest in maintaining the

Arab labour force. Indeed, some, mainly the new Oriental entrepre-

. neurs, may combine the two, as they may well imagine that the return of

the territories would necessarily mean the stoppage of mass Palestinian

employment in the Jewish economy and that this could create a return

to the situation in the 1950s, where in the absence of Arabs they them-

selves were forced into the lower echelons of the working class,

subordinated to the Ashkenazim.

The view of many Jewish workers that they do benefit from the incor-

poration of Palestinians into the economy may lead them to object to

the return of the territories but also to be against massive expulsions of

the majority of the Palestinians. Thus, not many workers support the

most extreme right, fascist movements who call for the expulsion of

Palestinians from 'Greater Israel'. Both extremes of Zionism have in

common the aspiration of Israel as purely Jewish. The difference is in

the method, and the scope of what is seen as Israel, but not in concept.

The interest in permanently retaining the Arab labourer in the Jewish

economy as a subordinate presupposes the open and formal institu-

tionalisation of an unequal status to Arabs - discriminated, but

tolerated.

I have tried to show that Farjoun's analysis is incomplete, that wide

sections of the working class and of new small capitalists support Begin,

not just against Labour but also positively endorse what he stands for.

Furthermore, that there is no contradiction between a protest against

Labour and a positive support for Begin's policies.

Is the Oriental reaction a particular class antagonism?

Farjoun claims that it is so, but this is very much a matter of an operation-

al definition. To reach his conclusion, he conflates the Orientals and the

working class; and simultaneously, to create the 'class' enemy, excludes

Occidentals from the working class. If we define the working class as

those who do not own means of production and make their living by

selling their labour power, we still find that a majority of Occidentals are

workers, perhaps highly skilled, professionals, perhaps not proletariat,

not in the productive sectors but workers nonetheless. At most we could

say that Occidentals and Orientals are differentially distributed in

various fractions of the working class. This argument echoes a current

debate among Marxists, whether to define the working class minimally

or maximally, a debate which reflects the complex division of labour in

advanced capitalism as well as different political strategies.

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One of the effects of the incorporation of the Palestinian labour

force into the Israeli economy has been to open up and diversify the

class composition of the Oriental communities. It is now less correct to

assume a class homogeneity of Oriental Jews than it was at any time

since their arrival in Israel. It would be of interest to find out whether

the Oriental supporters of Begin, a subset of the Orientals, are concen-

trated in particular class positions, whether these positions are mainly

working class and in particular in which fractions of the working class.

The concepts 'lower' and 'middle' echelons are inadequate; they mean,

presumably, lower and middle income groups - but this is not a particu-

larly Marxist criterion of class determination. I have doubts as to

whether the staunchest supporters of Begin among the Orientals are

also the most proletarian elements among them, that is, workers in the

productive sectors of large industry.

There is a need for more detailed empirical data on various aspects of

. the composition of the Oriental community before this debate could be

taken further. However, it has occurred to me that if Oriental support

for Begin is indeed a class protest against the Labour Party, it should

have been reflected more in the elections to the Histad~ut than in the

elections to the state's parliament. A larger percentage of the voters to

the Histadrut are workers. If, as Farjoun argues, most of them are

Oriental and most of them view antagonistically the Labour Party, then

there should have been a larger swing towards the Likkud in the Hista-

drut than in the Knesset - in fact the opposite happened:

Percengage of vote for Labour and Likkud in Histadrut elections

Year 1969 1973 1977 1981

Labour 62 58 57 63

Likkud 22 23 28 27

(Source: D.M. Zohar, Political Parties in Israel, 1974, p 124; and A. Diskin in

The Jerusalem Quarterly, no 22, Winter 1981, p10l.)

To be precise, I do not argue that the Oriental support for Begin is not a

protest against the Labour Party; it probably is. What I question is

whether this is a class protest.

Other related issues

My criticisms have been confined to Farjoun's two main theses, but his

article is unclear on wider issues. It is not clear whether it wishes to

explain the causes of Begin's ascent to power or whether it only confines

itself to explaining the Oriental vote for Begin. This vote is only one,

albeit important, reason for Begin's rise but it is by no means the only

one. Begin's first government of 1977, the watershed point which

signified the breakdown of Labour hegemony, was made possible not

just by Oriental protest but by the protest vote of Occidentals for

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Yadin's Democratic Movement for Change, and by the deep trans-

formation in the ranks of the religious bloc of parties - traditional

coalition partners of Labour which deserted it. These shifts as well as

the continuous crisis of Labour still require proper analysis.

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On Friday, 9 April 1982, uniformed Israelis shot at worshippers outside

the al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem. This incident triggered off a wave of

protest throughout the occupied territories. In the Jabaliya refugee

camp in the Gaza Strip, just north of the town of Gaza, Israeli soldiers

used firearms to disperse the demonstrations. Seven-year-old Suhail

Ghabin, who was playing in the sand with his eleven-year-old sister, was

hit by a bullet and seriously wounded. Unlike the demonstrators, who

were aware of the danger and could try to seek shelter or flee, the

children playing in the sand were sitting ducks. A Red Crescent ambu-

lance called to evacuate the boy was stopped by the Israeli occupation

authorities; and when finally the ambulance was allowed through, it

was too late. Suhail died on the way to hospital.

In cases of this kind, the occupation authorities try to take possession

of the body in order to prevent a public funeral. A secret burial is

arranged in the middle of the night, under heavy military supervision

and attended only by a few close relatives of the deceased. Suhail's

family, guessing the authorities' intention, hurried to the mortuary and

stole his body.

A public funeral was held. Thousands of people came out of their

homes and walked towards the military compound. According to eye-

witness reports, it seems as though fear had been transcended: women

clad in black mourning attacked soldiers with their bare hands. Little

children ran up to the patrolling jeeps and, baring their chests, teased

the soldiers, 'Shoot me! Shoot me!'. Old tyres, which are normally used

by the refugees to weigh down the roofs of their huts and which themili-

tary had scrupulously confiscated a few days earlier and placed in a

large heap inside the military compound, were set on fire by youths who

managed to infiltrate the compound. The soldiers responded by

shooting at the crowd and at the water tanks on the roofs of the huts -

a common practice designed to punish the refugees by stopping their

water supply. At the end of this round of shooting, curfew was imposed

on the camp.

This incident was recounted to us in the course of our first evening in

Gaza - a sort of initiation into the Gaza world - in the home of friends.

We were given a factual account of the events that had taken place in the

Gaza Strip during the week following the al-Aqsa incident. (Our hosts

referred to those events in English as the 'troubles', a term apparently

also used in Northern Ireland.) The tales of repression and resistance

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we were told that evening, as well as the accounts and testimonies we

were to hear during the next few days, are hardly known outside the

Strip. 'There is no Hilton Hotel in this town,' remarked a Gazan friend,

'and journalists hate discomfort. They never stay here longer than a

couple of hours.'

Wednesday, 21 April

The Gaza Strip begins some twenty minutes' south of the Israeli town of

Ashkelon, at a road-block. A road-block is a rolled barbed-wire fence,

or a strip of metal with protruding spikes stretched across the road.

Beside this particular road-block, at the northern entrance to the Strip,

under a large tent, sit four or five soldiers - border-guards and reserv-

ists - who supervise the entry and exit of vehicles and people travellìng

on this road. A road-block, as every Israeli Jew and every Palestinian

Arab knows, has one purpose: to distinguish, to discriminate, ulti-

mately to set apart. The road-block is directed at Palestinians, it is there

to scrutinise them, to exercise power over them.

A Palestinian is firstly distinguished by the licence plate of his or her

car; it is blue or grey (while Israeli vehicles have yellow plates) and bears

a Hebrew letter denoting the locality where it was issued - R for

Ramallah, N for Nablus, G for Gaza.

A Palestinian is, secondly, distinguished by name: an Arab name in an

identity card sets the bearer apart as the sought-for object of scrutiny.

Thirdly, the identity card distinguishes between religions -

Jew, Muslim, Christian - or, in the more familiar binary classification:

Jew and non -Jew. In Israel there are officially no Israelis - only Jews and

non-Jews. A Palestinian is also identified by appearance: poverty, sweat

and dirt, rotting teeth and matted hair, clothes in assorted third-world

colours mark the Oriental manuallabourer after aday's work - the Turk

in Berlin, the Algerian in Lyon, the Palestinian in occupied Palestine.

The road-block encounter should not be construed as a symbol of

occupation, neither should it be seen as an isolated facet of daily

experience; for it is that experience, it is the truth of occupation. The

road-block is a paradigm of power which undergoes many transforma-

tions yet remains the same. In it the Palestinians are not merely

distinguished by number-plate, name or appearance; they become that

number-plate, that name, those clothes. Abu Salam from Rafah does

not possess a blue number-plate, nor does he bear and display.an ID

card with his name. In the road-block encounter, he is that blue

number-plate marked with an 'R', or that official piece of paper.

A few kilometres past the road-block - through which my friend and

I, being Jews, were allowed to pass on the nod - the driver has the

choice between following the road straight through the town of Gaza or

using the bypass which goes round the town and rejoins the straight

road further south.

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Observations in Gaza

Road planning in Israel aims at bypassing areas which are predomin-

antly inhabited by Palestinians. When driving from Haifa to Tiberias,

for example, one could never tell that one is passing through a district

whose population is predominantly Palestinian (the Galilee). Arab

villages appear in the distance on the mountain slopes, rarely alongside

the main road, as quaint reminders of the Galilee's rusticity. Road signs

hardly ever display directions to Arab localities. The same principle

guides road construction in the territories occupied since 1967. A

cursory glance at the map of projected settlements and roads in the

West Bank reveals the intention. A Jew living in Gush Segev, a settle-

ment block in the northern part of the West Bank ('Samaria'), will soon

be able to drive to Jerusalem or Tel-Aviv without going through Nablus

and Ramallah and without meeting a single Palestinian. At the same

time, a Palestinian wishing to go from Hebron to Bethlehem will have

to travel right through Jewish towns such as Efrat. He will be forced to

see occupation. The colonisation network and road grid in the occupied

territories are designed so as to make Palestine invisible, and the Pales-

tinians objects for inspection and scrutiny. This is why 'Judea' and

'Samaria' are not merely the names given by Israel to the north and

south of the West Bank; rather, they denote an object distinct from the

West Bank.

The Gaza bypass was designed for the Jewish settlers of the Rafah

enclave and of Gush Qatif in the southern end of the Gaza Strip.

We drove into Gaza town. It has been compared to Pakistan, to

North Africa. 'This place looks like the Third World,' remarked an

Israeli friend who recently accompanied me through the streets of

Gaza. He was referring to the ubiquitous poverty, heat, dust, sand and

colours that range from yellow-brown to grey.

Our hosts, to whose home we promptly drove, did not conceal their

distress at the recent deterioration of the situation in occupied Pales-

tine: The 'bestialisation' of the Israeli military - as a major Hebrew

daily recently called the wanton brutality increasingly practised by the

forces of occupation - was the first topic of our conversation. Our

hosts were agitated, yet spoke calmly in a measured tone, citing

examples such as the one reported above.

In the Shati camp in Gaza town, Israeli Shin-Bet officer 'Abu Sabri'

drove past a burning tyre. (Shin-Bet officers customarily decorate

themselves with Arabic noms de guerre by which alone they are known

to their Palestinian subjects.) He stopped, got out of his car and,

finding no-one around who might be ordered to extinguish the fire, he

rolled the burning tyre, pushing it with a stick towards the nearest

house. He then opened the door and rolled the tyre onto a mattress on

which a man was lying asleep. The victim, a family guest, woke up to

find his blanket on fire, and threw it off while.' Abu Sabri' watched

calmly. 'Abu Sabri' then opened a wardrobe, rolled into it the still

burning tyre, closed the door and departed.

In Khan-Yunis, one quarter of the refugee camp was placed under

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curfew after a gun had allegedly been stolen from a soldier on duty. We

were told that this is what had really happened: a group of women

surrounded the soldiers, disarmed him and forced him at gunpoint to

shout pro-Palestinian slogans. Then they let him go but kept his

weapon.

In the years 1967-72 the Gaza Strip had been the main centre of Pales-

tinian resistance to Israeli occupation. It was 'pacified' by Ariel

Sharon, then military commander of the area. In an intensive counter-

insurgency operation, during which tens of people were killed and

hundreds jailed, Sharon brought to an end a situation in which 'the IDF

ruled by day, the PLO by night,' as Gazans put it. Although active

popular resistance had largely been suppressed, resentment against

Israeli rule remained as powerful as ever. Israel's recent attempt to

enforce the 'autonomy' plan - a regime of collaborators propped up by

Israeli bayonets and bribes - was the match that reignited the flame of

resistance. This in turn has been met with a terrifying avalanche of

repressive measures.

Thursday, 22 April

Nine days have elapsed since the curfew was imposed on Jabaliya. For

the ninth successive day forty thousand people have been shut up in

their homes, allowed out for two hours in every twenty-four in order to

buy food. The catch is that no supplies are allowed into the camp and

the local shops were emptied during the first few days of the curfew.

Jabaliya is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in the area,

numbering 40 to 45 thousand inhabitants at:cording to UNRWA

estimates. It is the only refugee camp with an Israeli military compound

in the middle: a whitewashed edifice dating from the British Mandate

period, surrounded by several rows of barbed-wire fences. Four tanks

and a few jeeps are parked in the enclosure. Machine-gun barrels

protrude from between the sandbags heaped on the roof and window

sills. An Israeli flag flies from a tall pole on the roof: the symbol of the

liberated Jewish people in its homeland.

As a child I-lived in Jerusalem. On Saturdays I would go for walks

with my father and see the border fence which, before 1967, ran

between the west and east of the city. My father is not a militarist and at

home I was never taught to regard Arabs as enemies. But I recall so well

the sight of the Jordanian Legion border-guards, the barrels of their

rifles protruding from between the piles of sandbags on the roofs and

window sills of buildings along the other side of the fence. I knew they

were my enemies; I read their hostility in that sight of sandbags and

weapons. Uniforms and guns and sandbags speak a language which

every child can understand, the more so when they are directed against

him.

We wanted to enter the Jabaliya refugee camp, but were not allowed

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in. We tried the three entrances to the camp but finally had to settle for a

view, from the outside, of a road-block encounter. Barbed wire and

soldiers with a smattering of vulgar colonial Arabic arguing with

various people who were trying to get into the camp. the curfew had

been imposed by order of the local commander, with immediate effect;

so many Jabaliyans who were not in the camp at the time were not

allowed to return to their homes during the nine days. On top of this, if

found outside the camp in the course of a routine identity check,

Jabaliyans were liable to pay a heavy fine for. . . breaking the curfew.

Therefore many Jabaliyans, workers and students, who happened to be

outside when the curfew had been imposed, were left with the choice:

either stay out in hiding at the home of a friend or relative, or try some-

how to get back on.

In a sense, curfew is the opposite of a road-block. While the latter sets

the Palestinians apart and trains the spotlight of power upon them,

curfew throws the spotlight onto the holder of power himself. The only

people to be seen on the street are the soldiers, patrolling, checking that

order is maintained, that the Palestinians stay confined in their houses.

Here power displays itself, shows its muscles and turns the Palestinians

into spectators, a passive audience.

At about 4 pm the curfew was lifted for two hours. People streamed

into the streets. Children, having been penned in all day, ran out to play.

Although the curfew was suspended, the camp remained sealed-

no-one was allowed in or out. Since food supplies were running low, and

in some cases were exhausted altogether, many women used the chance

of the recess to sneak out of the camp through the cactus thickets, and

made their way to the nearest grocery shop outside the pale of Jabaliya.

We saw them walking fast, almost running, the grocery bags on their

heads, trying to keep off the main paths where they could be spotted by

the occasional military patrol. The women were helping each other

along, while people on the street were constantly on the lookout for

Israeli patrol jeeps, sounding an alert whenever they spotted one.

The sense of solidarity displayed here is very different from the

ideology of cooperation and social solidarity inculcated in the Israeli

youth movements, an ideology which is part of the Zionist myth of the

pioneering spirit. As an adolescent in post-1967 Israel, I had always

regarded this spirit with suspicion. It seemed to me to be a politically

manufactured myth, a piece of (possible) history transformed into a

virtually official ideology. Standing outside the road-block at the

entrance to the camp, I realised that what makes their type of solidarity

real for these Palestinians is the fact of occupation, the experience of

oppression. The consciousness of unity among Zionists is formed by

the collective memory of persecution, while the uniting principle for the

Palestinians is the reality of living under occupation. Paradoxically,

occupation enslaves the Israelis by making them dependent on

ideology, while it liberates the Palestinians by grounding their

experience in social realities.

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Friday, 23 April

We spent the day in Rafah, which in a few days' time would become a

border town between the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and Egypt. Rafah

is much smaller than Gaza and the local refugee camp inter meshes with

the town in such a way that it is hard to tell where the one ends and the

other begins. We followed the Israeli armoured vehicle in its provoca-

tive glide down the main street. The four soldiers on it were helmeted

and heavily armed. The machine-gun mounted on the vehicle was

pointing at the pavement. The armoured jeep came to a gradual halt

outside the mosque, just when the worshippers were coming out. I tried

to imagine how they must feel, coming out of the mosque into the firing

range of a deadly weapon. Later that day we learned that a week earlier

the soldiers fired directly into the mosque while the people were still

inside. We were shown the bullet holes in the walls.

Some friends took us on a tour of the 'Canada' camp. This camp was

constructed by the Israelis several years ago, after they had bulldozed

entire sections of Rafah in order to widen the streets and facilitate

counter-insurgency operations. Raf;:th camp residents. were allowed to

move into the shacks erected in an area which in the years 1956-1967

had been used by Canadian units of the UN force. This is how the new

camp got its name. Some five hundred refugee families presently live

there.

The problem for these 'Canadians' on 23 April was that their camp

was actually in that part of Rafah which in two days' time was to be

handed back to Egypt. As late as Friday, the residents had not been

notified what their status would be as of the following Sunday. They

had no guarantee that they would be able to cross from Rafah (Egypt)

to their workplaces and schools in Rafah (Palestine). Neither were they

sure that the Egyptian government would accept them. A feeling of

helplessness was conveyed by the people we spoke to.

The border fence, newly erected and prepared for the final ceremony

of withdrawal, put 'Canada' on the Egyptian side. In a few places the

total lack of concern for the inhabitants stood out in all its absurdity.

For example, four families whose houses happened to touch the

barbed-wire border fence were ordered by the Israelis to block up with

cement their windows and doors. facing Israel and build new doors

facing the othèr way. In an architectural sleight of hand, Palestinian

dwellers of, say, 15 Jaffa Road became overnight the family on 23

Alexandria Boulevard.

The shiny barbed-wire fence mockingly bisected someone's fruit

orchard. During the 25 April hand-over celebrations at the newly built

border terminal, just outside Rafah, the Egyptians let off fireworks.

Two of the rockets fired actually burst into brilliant colours high up in

the air; the other three ineptly dropped into the orchard, setting apricot

trees on fire. Nobody seemed to care - the journalists on both sides

were too busy admiring and filming the incandescent rockets of light

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Observations in Gaza

against the greyish sky, and completely overlooked the subtler meaning

of the Israeli-Egyptian peace agreement, which was symbolically acted

out on the ground.

Saturday, 24 April

Persons wounded by Israeli soldiers must pay their own hospital fees.

This we learned on a visit to Gaza's Sha'fa hospital. In addition, they

are liable to heavy fines, because being shot at or beaten up by soldiers

is, according to the logic of the occupation, a sure sign that one was

breaking the law. For this reason, màny cases of injury are never

reported, for fear of getting into worse trouble with the authorities.

In the hospital one learns the many meanings of the term 'wounded' .

We tend to measure the extent of brutality by body counts, not maim-

iugs; but in addition to the twenty or so unarmed civilians killed by

Israelis during March and April, many more (probably several hund-

I,"èd) adults and children were wounded, maimed and disabled for life.

Many blinded, many with mutilated faces, many who will never be able

to have children, to breath independently or to digest their food.

Outside Sha'fa hospital, near the pavement, crouches the omni-

pr~sent mil~tary patrol jeep, and a pair of flashy rimless sunglasses

scrutinise the passers-by.

Curfew was lifted in Jabaliya, and we drove into the camp which

hitherto we had only seen from outside. Jabaliya camp -trench town,

Palestine; the sandy roads charred with the molten black rubber of

burning tyres; rows upon rows of shacks, mud huts, tin huts, breeze-

block huts; television aerials. Masses of children playing in the wide

open spaces where homes had been destroyed in the early 1970s, during

Sharon's 'pacification of Gaza', to make way for the tanks.

In the home of the Ghabin family, mourning services were led by a

local Imam. According to custom the service should have been held a

day earlier, on the seventh day; but the murdered boy's eleven-year-old

sister explains: 'Well, yes, today is the eighth day, but we couldn't hold

the service yesterday because of the curfew .' Very simple; the curfew

prevented the gathering of friends and relatives, so the Imam issued a

dispensation postponing the service to the next day. For the girl, curfew

is 'objective reality' which at times conflicts with tradition, that's all.

Outside the Ghabins' home, some fifty metres down the road, the grey-

green military jeep, our ubiquitous chaperon, was lying in wait.

Sunday, 25 April

Rafah, day of withdrawal. The actual ceremony was to be held at noon

at the main border terminal on the outskirts of Rafah. Only the Egyp-

tians celebrated this final stage of withdrawal; in Israel it was regarded

almost as a national tragedy.

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Most of the journalists and TV crews had been congregating at the

terminal since early morning. In Rafah itself there were few reporters.

Salah aI-Din Street, named after the liberator of Palestine from the cru-

saders (known in the West as Saladin), was to be blocked in the middle

with barbed wire. Two segments of fence stretched out, one from each

side of the street. At noon, they will be joined up with another segment,

completing the separation of Rafah-Sinai from Rafah-Palestine.

A unit of Israeli soldiers was stationed near the fence to supervise the

final division of the town - jobs like disconnecting electricity and

telephone lines, drilling holes in the tarmac road for the last segment of

barbed-wire fence.

The local inhabitants filtered into the street. Women stood in groups

and talked, shopkeepers curiously watched the crews at work and the

children gathered in a growing multitude. No lessons were held on that

day because parents did not want to send their children to school, for

fear that at noon they might be left on the wrong side of the fence.

There was something like a continual contest between the children,

who were moving closer to the fence and the soldiers, w.ho were unsuc-

cessfully pushing them back; a sort of ebb and flow of children and

soldiers. The latter looked very tense; they pushed the children back not

so much because these were getting in the way of the work on the fence,

but because their very presence was felt by the soldiers as a kind of

threat. The kids clearly realised this and used every chance to taunt the

soldiers, to argue with them and appeared thoroughly entertained by

the latter's manifest nervousness. The border-guards used truncheons

and rifle butts to push the children away. When some kids succeeded to

slip through, the soldiers pointed their rifles at them and shouted in

broken colonial Arabic, 'Go away! Everyone your home! Go home!';

but the children were persistent. In about half an hour it was as tough

they had learnt the rules of the new game: push forward, argue with the

soldiers, get pushed back and shouted at, turn around and edge

forwards again.

Suddeny, pak-pak-pak - the sound of shots reverberated through the

whole street. The kids fled and within seconds all the shops were closed

down. Four or five soldiers ran down the street; firing single shots in the

air. Stones were thrown; I heard them land on the str:eet but I was too

far to see them. A few more shots were fired and then a tense silence

descended on Salah ai-Din Street. Now the pneumatic drill near the

fence could be heard clearly, and the barbed wire, as it was drawn from

one pole to the other across the road, made an elecrifying sound.

Within fifteen minutes, the children were back on the street, the

shops had been opened and everything seemed as though life was going

back to normal following a minor disturbance. The young people once

again moved up to see and the soldiers, feeling threatened as before,

pushed them back. I moved away from the soldiers and the fence and

stood among the crQwd. Then I saw the crowd around me turn around

and run, pursued by the soldiers who were firing. Instinctively I realised

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that I must run with the children, escape the soldiers, take cover. I fled

into a half-closed shop where a number of young workers had taken

shelter. They let me in. I put my hand on my chest, to signal fear; they

smiled.

A problem I faced in this as in other encounters with Palestinians in

the Strip was one of disguise: I could not speak Hebrew, because then I

would have been identified as an Israeli and the people would have been

suspicious of me. Neither could I use Arabic, for then my Israeli accent

would have betrayed me. Willy-nilly I found myself speaking English.

But since most young Palestinians do not understand English well

enough, I had to settle for a kind of pidgin English, which I found

uncomfortable. My discomfort was compounded by the fact that many

of these young people spoke good, idiomatically rich colloquial

Hebrew, which they have acquired as workers in Tel-Aviv or in other

Israeli towns which attract cheap Palestinian labour. In an encounter

with a foreigner who does not speak Arabic, they naturally turn to

Hebrew, which for them is the first foreign language. And so I found

myself in countless situations in which I was speaking intentionally

poor English and answered back in fluent Hebrew, which I pretended

not to understand.

I recalled the experience of an Israeli friend who had participated in a

demonstration held last November in Ramallah by the Israeli Commit-

tee for Solidarity with Birzeit University. The demonstrators were

assaulted by border-guards, who used tear gas. In the judgement of

many Israeli dissidents, that demonstration was a watershed in the

history of the Jewish opposition to the occupation, for it signalled an

end to the privileged status of Jewish protesters. I do not know whether

this judgement is correct, but it is certainly true that many demon-

stratórs were deeply shaken by that experience. My friend stood among

the other demonstrators when the tear-gas canisters were fired, but for

some reason she felt immobilised, unable to run. She had to be led away

by local Ramalla youths who had been watching the entire confron-

tation from the sidelines. They took her away from the troubled area

and gave her a lift to the main Ramallah-Jerusalem road. They

instructed her to cover her head with a red kufiyya as a disguise, so that

the soldiers would not notice her. She arrived in Jerusalem safely, but

deeply shaken. As a patriotic Israeli, she felt disturbed at having to

disguise herself as a Palestinian, with a head-dress often associated with

PLO guerrillas, in order to escape the Israeli soldiers.

I thought of her as I stood in the shop looking out at the occupation in

action. The soldiers were running up and down, shooting in the air and

lobbing tear-gas canisters into 'the alleys. The children used every

chance, every moment when the coast was clear, to come out of the

houses and hurl stones at the street or at the closed shops. Two vehicles

bearing Israeli licence plates were demolished in next to no time.

The young workers in the shop said to me in broken English: 'See what

they do to us. We shall kill al-Yahud!' I had heard similar statements

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on previous days, and almost as a rule the soldiers were referred to as

'al- Yahud' or 'the Jewish'. I venture to say that in this context 'Yahud'

does not mean 'Jews' in the general sense of this term. To these

Palestinians, 'al- Yahud' means the soldiers, the conquerors, the

foreign oppressors. An American friend who had recently visited the

Galillee told me that although he persistently introduced himself as an

'American Jew', the Palestinian villagers just as persistently referred to

him as 'an American, not a Jew'.

The Zionists have made a lot of political capital out of such suppos-

edly antisemitic expressions which are common in Palestinian anti-

Israeli rhetoric. But I think that the Palestinians, or at least those young

Palestinians who have only known the Israelis as occupiers and opp-

ressors, are merely using the term that the Israelis use when referring to

themselves, -'the Jews'. In the media, in official publications as well as

in daily discourse, the Israeli Jews commonly speak of themselves

simply as 'the Jews' rather than 'the Israelis' or 'Israeli Jews'. To

accuse Palestinians of antisemitism because they express hostility

towards 'the Jews' is to misunderstand their language. It is also to

commit slander, by attributing to the Palestinians a uniquely European

prejudice and doctrine, a product of European society and culture.

When they speak of 'the Jews', Palestinians mean their Israeli enemy.

On returning to Gaza later that afternoon, we heard that Rafah had

been placed under curfew.

Wednesday, 27 April

We visited Jabaliya camp again and spoke to two families whose homes

had been demolished. The only remains of what used to be the homes of

two ten-member families were the floor tiles and a wall or two. Both

homes had been pulled down in the middle of the night, at short notice,

because their sons were suspected of 'terrorism'.

In the Israeli-occupied territories, such demolitions are carried out

on the basis of suspicion rather than conviction. In theory at least a

young man can be held as a suspect, then be fully acquitted in court and

sent back to his family whose home has in the meantime been

bulldozed.

The families are not allowed to rebuild their houses for a number of

years. They must therefore live without a roof over their heads; at most,

they may put up a tent in which to shelter during the winter rains.

Speaking to numerous Palestinians in the camp, I was impressed with

a sense of optimism shared by the younger generation of Palestinians. I

think that in this they differ from the older generation. I was struck by

the extent to which the younger Palestinians, those under 30, showed a

subtle understanding of Israeli society, politics and culture. I think they

derive this understanding from their daily experiences as manual

labourers in Israel. Going to work there, they enter into direct relations

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of production with Israelis, learn their language and observe them at

close quarters, thus gaining a view of Israel stripped of its myth, no

longer as an all-powerful monolith but as it really is - a society cracked

and riddled with deep conflict, like every class society. In this sense,

working in Israel is exercising a profound influence on the minds of the

Palestinians; it grants them à\ view of reality which is potentially

revolutionary.

The sense of optimism which I detected in the words of those

refugees' children conveyed, in simple terms, something like this

message: 'The Israelis depend on our oppression, but we exist despite of

it! This is the source of our strength and their weakness.'

Thursday, 28 April

Today is Israel's Day of Independence, and official colonisation cere-

monies are being held in eleven new Ma'ahazim (military settlements,

later to become civilian) in the occupied territories. One of the.m,

Nahal-Nissanit, is in the north of the Gaza Strip.

The speakers were a Jewish Agency official, a senior army officer

and a rabbi, representing the trident of contemporary Zionism -land-

grabbing, military force and religious indoctrination. The first speaker

explains, in broad outline, the colonisation programme for the Gaza

Strip. The intention is clear: to surround Gaza with Israeli settlements.

The Qatifblock, south of Gaza, has been in existence for sometime and

the new Nahal-Nissanit is the first of a cluster of settlements planned to

watch over Gaza from the north. I turn to one of the soldiers manning

what is still a military outpost and ask, 'Where is the land planned for

cultivation by the future settlers?' He points at the Palestinian citrus

groves in the valley below and explains, in all sincerity, 'On such fallow,

uncultivated territory' .

I turn back to face the stage where Rabbi Simhah Stetel, regional

rabbi of the Qatif block, is expounding on Zionist semantics: 'Nissanit

is a name which is not mentioned in the Scriptures. It is the name of a

wild flower. A wild flower has a distinct quality - it ciutches the

ground, it strikes deep roots rapidly, all the more so if it is tended,

cultivated. Then it takes such deep hold of the ground that it cannot be

eradicated. '

Gaza, May 1982

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The rise of Islam:

What did happen to women?

Azar Tabari

This article was written several years ago, as a discussion paper. Since

then, a lot more literature on the same topic has come to my attention

and new works have been published. I am nevertheless submitting it for

publication without any updating, because I believe that some of what

it contains may still serve as a starting pointfor further discussion and

clarification.

Introduction

The recent emergence of Islamic movements in the Middle East,

particularly during the Iranian events, has led among other things to

new interest in historical investigations into Islam. Such investigations

are long overdue, but are particularly important now, when prevailing

mystifications and falsifications regarding the history of Islam serve to

consolidate the ideological grip of a very reactionary political

movement. Of no other single social issue is this more true than the

situation of women under Islam. Not only do the present-day propon-

ents of Islamic governments propose a most reactionary and retro-

gressive set of norms, values and rules of human behâviour as the sole

salvation of women, but they also claim that Islam has already proved

once before the validity of its emancipating mission by liberating Arab

women from the oppressive circumstances prevalent in pre-Islamic

Arabia, in the dark period of so;called Jahiliya (ignorance). To be sure,

the proponents of Islam do not claim that it granted women equal

rights; neither do they propose to do so today. They argue that equality

of rights, as understood and interpreted by Western thinkers and their

followers in th.e Muslim world, is but a diversion from a real emancipa-

tion of women, because in this context equality has come to mean

identity of rights. This, they argue, is both unnatural and unjust. Islam

has offered the proper solution by assigning suitable responsibilities

and rights to the two sexes. And in the recognition of these rights and

responsibilities lies the only road to the emancipation of women.l

Even on the Marxist left, although most agree on the reactionary

character of Islamic codes for women today, there is often an unspoken

acceptance that perhaps Islam did carry some positive gains for women

as women when it originally arose almost fourteen centuries ago. As a

universalist religion, Islam provided the basis for the emergence and

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consolidation of a centralised state that, no matter how one may judge

its role today, served to propel Arabia forwards from its tribal pre-state

conditions to a world empire.

How valid are such claims concerning the emancipatory role of Islam

for women, either as argued by proponents of Islam today, or accepted

almost as an article of a faith in historical progress by many on the

Marxist left? What was the real status of women in pre-Islamic Arabia

and how did it change as the Islamic community shaped itself? Did pre-

Islamic Arabs really bury alive their female infants? Were pre-Islamic

Arab women deprived of property rights? What were the rights of

fathers, brothers and husbands over women and how did Islam modify

these traditional norms and customs?

In attempting to answer some of these questions and open a

dis<mssion on others, two caveats have to be made. First, it is not the

task of this essay to give an analysis of Islam in general. Therefore,

statements related to this general question, the conditions of the rise of

Islam and its subsequent impact and development, will be asserted

rather than demonstrated. One justification for this choice is the

already existing literature on this topic.2

The second caveat is more problematic: I am referring to the problem

of sources and documentation. As Rodinson has summarised the

problem, 'There is nothing [in Muslim literature and sources] of which

we can say for certain that it incontestably dates back to the time of the

Prophet.'3 The Qur'an itself, the only text over which there is almost

general agreement amongst all Muslim schools and sects, was not com-

mitted to writing during Muhammad's lifetime. It is said to have been

collated during 'Uthman's caliphate, some twenty years after

Muhammad's death. Being accepted as the word of God, it remains to

this very day closed to scrutiny and not in any need of documentation

and historiography as far as Muslims are concerned. The hadith, the

body of oral tradition that is supposed to go back to the time of

Muhammad himself, was collected in the second and third centuries of

Islam, and the Shi'i version only in the fourth century. The Abbasids in

particular, in their attempt to run a vast empire on Islamic precepts,

needed a thorough codification of laws, social and political guidelines

to run the state. This had to be developed through formulations of

precedents and interpretations of the Qur'an set by the Propet himself,

as in Islam the legislative powers belong solely to God, and His laws

were conveyed only through the Prophet.4 The hadith, therefore,

cannot be depended upon for factual and historical documentation. As

Goldziher has aptly noted, the common formula that opens each

hadith, 'the Prophet said', simply means that the matter as explained

further is correct from a religious point of view, or more often that the

matter as explained by the hadith is the right way of handling the given

problem, and perhaps the Prophet would have also agreed to this.5

Nonetheless, the hadith is not without historical value of a different

kind. Apart from facts that can be extracted from the stories told, they

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reflect what the emerging Muslim community and state legislated,

thought, and attributed to a previous period. Here I tend to agree with

W. Robertson Smith's evaluation of the hadith and other such literary

sources: the stories could be purely fictitious, but the hypothetical

social settings could not be invented arbitrarily. 6

The anthropological data on the period under discussion are also

meagre and uncertain. Despite these difficulties, one can attempt. to

project certain logical and historical hypotheses, which - due to the

difficulties just mentioned - must remain open to further documenta-

tion and challenge, and serve only to initiate a long-overdue historical

investigation.

The historical setting

The emergence of Islam as a universalist religion and a centralising

political movement led to and necessitated three inter-related social

developments in early Islamic society (as compared to pre-Islamic

Arabian society), which are relevant to our discussion of the situation

of women.

First, the emergence of a centralised state, demanding total loyalty

from all its subjects instead of the old traditional tribal loyalties,

required the universalisation of all norms throughout the Islamic

community. One unified code had to replace the multiplicity of norms,

customs and arrangements that varied from one tribe to the next.

Second, this disintegration of the tribal system and the emergence of

the larger community, while dissolving the tribal networks, responsibi-

lities and mutual contracts, consolidated the smaller patriarchal family

unit (composed of husband, wife and children). As against the larger

and much looser kinship network, the individual family was now de-

fined, delineated and consolidated through a whole series of regula-

tions. Perhaps this affected the lot of women more than any other part

of Islamic legislation.

Third, the individual was emphasised as against the tribe or other

kinship networks. It was the individual that was responsible for his own

salvation through conversion to the faith. It was the individual, and not

the tribe, as was the custom of pre-Islamic Arabia, that was to be

punished for any contravention of the social code.?

It was this combination of the emergence of the larger community of

Muslims, coupled withthe consolidation of the smaller family unit and

the emphasis on individuality, all against the background of a

disintegrating tribal system and the breaking-up of the larger kinship

networks, which explains the changes that occurred in the situation of

women. To examine these changes we shall start from a discussion of

the family and the various legislations and codifications surrounding it.

This will cover most of the points related to women. Other issues, such

as female infanticide, will be dealt with at the end.

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Tribe, family and individual

There has been a long-standing discussion about the existence or other-

wise of a matriarchal period in Arabia. W. Robertson Smith, whose

book Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia remains to this day the

single most valuable source on the topic, makes a strong case for the

predominance of the matriarchal family in Arabia. However, much of

the evidence that is marshalled in support of the matriarchal theory

. could be explained even more convincingly in other and simpler ways.

For example, one need not adhere to a matriarchal theory to explain the

factually established pattern of women staying with their own tribe

(rather than moving to the husband's tribe) after marriage. One only

has to remember that a very large number of young and middle-aged

men spent prolonged periods (measured in years) away from their place

of residence with trade caravans. Under these circumstances it would

seem quite natural for the woman to stay with her own tribe to enjoy

their protection and help, rather than move into an alien tribe. It seems

more likely that at the time of the emergence of Islam, the Arabian pen-

insula was not going through a transition from matriarchal to patriar-

chal family. Rather, it was going through a period of consolidation of

the family unit (which was patriarchal, to be sure) at the expense of the

larger kinship net'works and tribal fluidity. 8 The earlier, tribal norms

were in some ways more favourable to women, accepting a laxer atti-

tude to sexual and marital relations. In certain cases they gave women

de facto rights to divorce, and even allowed polyandrous practices.

(This may have been connected with the long periods during which a

man was away from home, making it acceptable for a woman to take

another husband.) Let us look more closely at some of these pre-Islamic

customs.

There seems to be sufficient evidence that in pre-Islamic Arabia there

existed three types of marriage, which differed from each other in the

arrangements for the residence of the wife and children. (It should be

pointed out that, in the eyes of contemporary society, the main issue

was the eventual tribal affiliation of the children rather than the

location of the wife.)

First, the woman could leave her own tribe and join the husband's, in

which case all the children would automatically belong to the husbands

tribe, unless the wife's tribe had stipulated conditions to the contrary.

Second, the wife could stay with her own tribe and the husband

would pay her occasional visits. In this case the children would belong

to their mother's tribe, or join their father's tribe after the first few

years of infancy. It is apparently this mode of marriage that provided

the basis for the later Islamic legislation, according to which the mother

has guardianship of her sons and daughters up to the ages of two and six

respectively.

Third, the woman could stay with her tribe and the husband would

join her. Here the children would belong to the mother's tribe.9

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W. Robertson Smith cites many examples from different sources to

illustrate these different types of marriage. Here is one such story:

'An illustration of this kind of union as it was practised before Islam is

given in the story of Salma bint 'Amr, one of the Najjar clan at Medina

(Ibn Hisham, p88). Salma, we are told, on account of her noble birth

(the reason given by Moslem historians in other cases also for a privilege

they did not comprehend), would not marry anyone except on

condition that she should be her own mistress and separate from him

when she pleased. She was for a time the wife of Hashim the Meccan,

during a sojourn he made at Medina, and bore him a son, afterwards

famous as 'Abd al-Mottalib, who remained with his mother's people.

The story goes on to tell how the father's kin ultimately prevailed on the

mother to give up the boy to them. But even after this, according to a

tradition in Tabari, 1: 1086, the lad had to appeal to his mother's kin

against injustice he had suffered from his father's people. . . The same

conditions underlie other legends of ancient Arabia, e.g., the story of

Omm Kharija, who contracted marriages in more than twenty tribes,

and is represented as living among her sons, who, therefore, ha'd not

followed their respective fathers.'1O

Amina, Muhammad's mother, is said to have stayed with her tribe, and

'Abdallah, Muhammad's father, paid her a visit. Muhammad himself

is said to have lived with his mother until her death, at which time his

father's kin took charge of him.

More interestingly, it seems that it was acceptable for a woman to ask

for sexual intercourse (outside any formal union), or to reject her

husband's demand for sexual intercourse, without incurring any shame

or guilt. Again the stories implying such norms are post-Islamic; but

regardless of their factual value - which is often not very great - they

show that even several centuries after Islam the Muslim historians did

not find it necessary to associate shame or guilt or scorn with these pre-

Islamic customs. Robertson Smith quotes from Aghani (16: 106) a story

related to the marriage of Hatim and Mawiya: 'The women in the

Jahiliya, or some of them, had the right to dismiss their husbands, and

the form of dismissal was this. If they lived in a tent they turned it

round, so that if the door faced east it now faced west, and when the

man saw this he knew that he was dismissed and did not enter.' He later

summarises the three features characteristic of the marriage of Mawiya

as follows: 'She was free to choose her husband, received him in her

own tent, and dismissed him at pleasure.'ll We must add parentheti-

cally that the same story and many similar ones also show that the later

Muslim theologians' boast that in Islam women cannot be married off

against their wishes, unlike the Jahiliya period when women are sup-

posed to have been treated like cattle, is unfounded. At least in some

parts of Arabia, a woman would only marry the man she chose. It is likely

that Muhammad, as in many other cases that will be discussed later,

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selected among the existing customs those that were most suited to the

general development of a universalist religion with emphasis on the

individual.

The story associated with the conception of Muhammad himself

contains at once a case of rejection and demand on the part of a woman

of nobility:

'Taking 'Abdullah by the hand 'Abdu'l-Muttalib went away and they

passed - so it is alleged - .. . the sister of Waraqa b. Naufal. . . When

she looked at him she asked, "Where are you going Abdullah?" He

replied, "With my father ." She said; "If you will take me you can have

as many camels as were sacrificed in your stead." "I am with my father

and I cannot act against his wishes and leave him," he replied.

'Abdul-Muttalib brought him to Wahb. . . and he married him to his

daughter Amina. . .

'It is alleged that 'Abdullah consummated his marriage immediately

and his wife conceived the apostle of God. Then he left her presence and

met the woman who had proposed to him. He asked her why she did not

make the proposal that she made to him the day before; to which she

replied that the light that was with him the day before had left him. . .

'My father Ishaq b. Yasar told me that he was told that 'Abdullah

went in to a woman that he had beside Amina b. Wahb when he had

been working in clay and the marks of the clay were on him. She put him

off when he made a suggestion to her because of the dirt that was on

him. He then left her and washed and bathed himself, and as he made

his way to Amina he passed her and she invited him to come to her. He

refused and went to Amina who conceived Muhammad.'12

Note, by the way, that according to the story Waraqa's sister was not

only very rich (she offered to give 'Abdallah 100 camels for his sexual

favours) but also had the power to dispose of her property as she

wished.

Marriage and sexual codes under Islam

Muhammad, in his attempts to ban all forms of marriage except those

regarded as proper in Islam and to strengthen the family headed by the

husband, had to impose very severe punishments for zina' (sexual inter-

course outside marriage or concubinage): 100 lashes to each partner if

the woman is unmarried, death if the woman is married. And the

husband of a disobedient wife is recommended to take recourse to a

whole range of punishments, ranging from cutting off her allowance to

beating. It seems unlikely that such strict punishments would have been

necessary if extra-marital sexual relations and rejection by the wife of

her husband's sexual advances were very unusual or were already

stigmatised as socially unacceptable and subject to scorn and contempt.

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Numerous Qur'anic verses (I have located 15 at one count) describe

in amusing detail what sexual relations are permitted, which ones are

prohibited, and whom one can or cannot marry. In pre-Islamic Arabia,

a whole range of marriages existed and were acceptable. Some, such as

the musha' marriage where several men shared a common wife, were

acceptable and existed only amongst the poorer members of the tribes,

those who could not each afford a bride-price. Other marriages, such as

istibdha', where a husband would send his wife to'a strong man in order

to get strong offspring, were short-termed and had a specific goal.

Many marriages, particularly among the heads of tribes, were political

acts. One source lists ten different types of marriage, most of which

were later explicitly banned in Islam.13 Apart from musha' and

istibdha', which we have already mentioned, he cites the following:

istibdal, where two men would temporarily swap their wives - banned

in the Qur'an (4:20-21); maqt, that is, the automatic right of a son to

inherit his father's wives - banned in the Qur'an (4:19); mut'a,

temporary marriages that are automatically annulled at the end of the

specified period - still prevalent amongst Shi'is and Malikis, but

.banned in all other Islamic sects; shighar, an arrangement between two

families where each marriage would count as the mahr (the.bride-price)

for the other, so that no bride-price would be paid - banned under

Islam by the ruling that the bride-price must be paid to the woman

herself; sifah, basically amounting to prostitution - banned in many

Qur'anic verses (along with khiddan, that is taking free lovers), e.g.,

4:25,5:5. There seems to have also existed a custom of offering one's

wife's sexual services to another man in exchange for certain favours.

Several verses in the Qur'an forbid husbands to prostitute their wives.

One's female slaves were also not to be forced into prostitution against

their wishes, though otherwise it was not banned.

A word must also be said here about polygamy. Muslim apologists

have offered various justifications and interpretations of this topic.

Some hail it as the proper solution for correcting the supposed arithme-

tical imbalance between men and women. There are always, they argue,

more women than men - especially in times of war, and Arabia at the

time of Muhammad was certainly a war-ridden zone. Others claim that

the famous Qur'anic verse (4:3) which commands men to be just to all

their wives practically outlaws polygamy, as it is impossible for a man

to practice such justice. More pragmatic theoreticians accept that Islam

neither invented nor banned polygamy. But they claim that by restrict-

ing the number of wives to four and by commanding the practice of

fairness towards all wives, Islam improved the status of wives.

Mutahhari devotes almost a quarter of his aforementioned book to the

discussion of polygamy and insists that Muhammad strictly enforced

the 'four wives only' law to the extent that if men with more than four

wives were converted to Islam, he would force them to abandon their

extra wives. 14 He cites several hadith in support of his argument - none

of which stops him from.also recognising without the slightest hint of

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any moral or religious qualm that Muhammad himself in the last ten

years of his life had ten wives and many more concubines. IS Shari'ati,

on the other hand, who does not like portraying a Muhammad who

does not practice what he preaches, dates the revelation of verse 3 of

sura 4 to the eighth year after hijra, that is, when Muhammad already

had all his ten wives and it would have been unfair and inhuman to

abandon any of them.16 The gÌmerally accepted date of the marriage

legislations in sura 4 is shortly after the battle of Uhud, in the third year

after hijra.

But there are several problems with this whole line of justifications

and interpretations of sura 4, verse 3.

First, as Rodinson has noted, 'It is, in fact, by no means certain that

polygamy was so widespread in pre-Islamic Arabia. It is hard to see how

an encouragement to take concubines if one is afraid of not acting fairLy

towards a number of wives can be a move in the direction of the suppos-

edly more moral ideal of monogamy. Moreover, the Koranic text is

clearly not a restriction but an exhortation, somewhat vaguely (for us)

connected with fairness to orphans. Probably, as a result of battles and

other factors, the community of Medina included more women than

men. Those who had lost their fathers, and women especially, were not

always well treated by their guardians, who took advantage of their

position to rob them. Muslim widows and orphans had to be married

off as soon as possible. Once again, in order to understand a pheno-

menon, it is necessary to set it in its historical context before allocating

praise or blame in the name of supposedly eternal moral, religious or

political dogmas.' 17

Second, the verse in question is not only highly exhortative; it is by no

means restrictive. The numbers two, three, four, are used in the verse

merely as numerical examples and in no way can one take the verse to

mean no more than four. Other verses in the Qur'an, e.g. 4:24, encour-

age men to take as many wives as they can afford. What does in fact call

for a historical explanation - something that has never been offered,

and which I am myself unable to provide - is why the later Muslim

theologians took sura 4, verse 3 to be a restrictive clause at all.

As already mentioned, Islam banned some of the previously

practised forms of marriage in an attempt to universalise norms and

customs across the Muslim community and to supersede varying tribal

practices. Some legislation clearly aimed at eliminating what was

considered spurious sexual relations and at consolidating the family

unit (e.g., banning sifah, khiddan, and istibdha'). Other prohibitions

would both strengthen the family and establish the primacy of

individual over tribal and kinship rights - an important element in all

universalist religions, which call for individual conversions and res-

ponsibilities, and promise individual salvation (as opposed to group

rights and responsibilities). The ban against shighar and maqt would

seem to emphasise the importance of woman as an individual. The same

observation goes for the insistence on paying the bride-price to the

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woman herself rather than to her father. This practice, however, was

already becoming dominant before the emergence of Islam .18

Closely related to the consolidation of the family and the new

emphasis on individualism was Islam's insistence on the certainty of

fatherhood, clearly a problem with practices such as musha', istibdal,

or offering one's wife's sexual services in exchange for favours. Strict

observation of a waiting period for a woman prior to a new marriage

was also imposed to the same end (3 periods after a divorce - Qu'ran,

2:228 - and four months and ten days after the death of the husband-

2:234 - the extra forty days are presumed to be for respect of the dead

man).

Correspondingly, divorce became more restricted and was regarded

unfavourably. In pre-Islamic Arabia, at least in those parts where

women stayed with their own tribes and retained their own tent, it seems

that they had the right to discontinue the marriage at any time; so had

the men, of course. The only constraint seems to have been that the

woman's tribe would have to pay back the bride-price to the man's

tribe. Moreover, if a man divorced his wife but did not claim back the

mahr he had paid, he would retain the right to go back and claim the

wife again.19 Islam outlawed this practice by discouraging men from

keeping women 'suspended', as it was called; it limited the time within

which a man could go back and seek reconciliation to the three-period

waiting time of the divorced wife; and it prohibited remarriage with the

same woman after three consecutive divorces, unless the woman was

first married to another man (Qur'an 2:230).

In mut 'a marriage, the contract was automatically terminated after a

prescribed period. This was a very common practice, considering the

'mqbile' life style of many men. Rodinson quotes Ammianus Marcel-

linus saying of the Arabs in the fourth century AD: 'Their life is always

on the move, and they have mercenary wives, hired under a temporary

contract. But in order that there may be some semblance of matrimony,

the future wife, by way of dower, offers her husband a spear and a tent,

with the right to leave him after a stipulated time, if she so elects.'2o

Robertson Smith considers the mut 'a already a restriction on the

previous rights of women, where they could divorce their husbands at

any time.21

Apart from mut'a, Islam further restricted women's divorce rights

by leaving it only to the husband to decide on divorce. Although the

practice of foregoing one's mahr for a divorce continues to exist in

Muslim countries up to now, it no longer guarantees the wife a divorce:

the husband has the right to refuse a divorce even if the wife is prepared

to forego her mahr. Only very limited circumstances (such as disappear-

ance of a husband over four years, or extreme physical deformities

leading to sexual impotence) entitle a wife to ask an Islamic judge for a

divorce. The final decision is left to the judge, however.

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Honour, shame and the veil

Along with these elaborate and restrictive rules of marriage .and

divorce, new concepts of honour, chastity and modesty for women

began to emerge. We have already noted that in many stories on pre-

Islamic Arabia, in poetry and in hadith (related to the circumstances of

Muhammad's conception) - regardless of the factual value of such

stories - no concept of shame or dishonour comes through regarding

women's lax sexual relations and frequent marriages. We have argued

that the severe punishment against zina' was aimed at uprooting these

practices. The question of the veil itself also makes sense in this context

of trying to create a new image of modesty in women. The origin of the

veil (the large scarves that women wore in Arabia) remains in dispute.

What is clear, however, is that, regardless of its pre-Islamic functions,

in the Qur'an women are urged to cover their bosoms, to conceal their

ornaments, and to avoid making noises with their ankle ornament

(khalkhal) as a sign of modesty and to show these only to their husband

or to those with whom they could or should not have sexual relations.

Here is the full text of sura 24, verse 31 :22

'And say to the believing women, that they cast down their eyes and

guard their private parts, and reveal not their adornment save such as is

outward; and let them cast their veils over their bosoms, and not reveal

their adornment save to their husbands, or their fathers, or their

husbands' fathers, or their sons, or their husbands' sons, or their

brothers, or their brothers' sons, or their sisters' sons, or their women,

or what their right hand owns, or such men as attend them, not having

sexual desire, or children who have not yet attaiqed knowledge of

women's private parts; nor let them stamp their feet, so that their

hidden ornament may be known. And turn all together to God, 0 you

believers; haply so you will prosper.'

That is, women are commanded not simply to cover themselves, but to

cover themselves for a specific purpose: to keep men's eyes off them,

not to try to attract men through physical display and senSuous games.

Muhammad's wives are ordered even more severe restrictions - these

are presumed commendable for all Muslim women to abide by:

'Wives of the Prophet, you are not as other women. If you are god-

fearing, be not abject in your speech, so that he in whose heart is sick-

ness may be lustful; but speak honourable words. Remain in your

houses; and display not your finery, as did the pagans of old. . . '(33:

33-34)

And further in the same sura:

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'0 believers, enter not the houses of the Prophet, except leave is given

you for a meal, without watching for its hour. But when you are invited,

then enter; and when you have had the meal, disperse, neither lingering

for idle talk; that is hurtful to the Prophet, and he is ashamed before

you; but God is not ashamed before the truth. And when you ask his

wives for any object, ask them from behind a curtain; that is cleaner for

your hearts and theirs. It is not for you to hurt God's Messenger,

neither to marry his wives after him, ever; surely that would be, in

God's sight a monstrous thing.' (33:53)

Up to this day, any physical contact between a man or å woman who

may be sexually attracted to each other is forbidden in Islam.

Mutahhari recommends that women working in modern offices or

going to universities must wear gloves at all times to avoid possible

accidents of touch. Even touching through gloves or other clothes is

permissible only if there is no intention of enjoyment or games.23

The last two issues to be discussed are that of inheritance and female

infanticide. Muslim writers on the subject of inheritance often state

that Islam instituted inheritance and property rights for women, some-

thing that they were presumably deprived of in pre-Islamic Arabia.24

This is simply false and in contradiction to many statements in the

Muslim hadith itself. For example, if women had no property rights, it

becomes inexplicable how a woman such as Khadija (Muhammad's

future wife) is supposed to have had large fortunes and sent off sizeable

- trade caravans, several of which were led by Muhammad. Presumably

she had inherited the wealth either from her father or from a previous

husband. The story of Waraqa's sister cited before is also testimony to

the existence of women with considerable property and complete right

over its disposal. There are numerous examples tothe same effect.

What the historical evidence points to is that in some cities, such as

Madina, where an established patriarchal culture had taken root

(possibly under the influence of Judaism from which.Islam took over a

vast number of its civil codes and religious practices) women do not

seem to have had a share in inheritance; while in other cities, in par-

ticular Muhammad's own town of Mecca, they did have a traditional

share, half that of a man.25 Similar provisions existed concerning

blood-money (at the time of Muhammad 100 camels for an adult male

and fifty for an adult female) and in witnessing procedure (where the

testimony of two women could replac'e that of one man). 26 These Meccan

customs Muhammad institutionalised across the Muslim community.

The practice of female infanticide seems to have ~xisted in some

areas, but not at all to the extent that has been generally alleged later.

Robertson Smith refers to one source indicating 'that the/practice had

once been general, but before the time of the Prophet had nearly gone

out, except among the Tamim.'27 'He, âlong with most other writers,

tends to attribute the occasional practice to poverty. He cites several

examples where it seems that the practice of infanticide had appeared

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again only after long periods of severe drought. The practice seems to

have affected both male and female children, but more the latter. As

men were more mobile and more vital to the continuing of the tradi-

tional trade and possibly past ural life and defence of the tribe, sons

were taken care of, while female infants were seen as useless burdens

upon already meagre resources.28

The Qur'anic verses concerning infanticide refer to general

infanticide in three places (6: 141, 152; 17:33) and to female infanticide

only once (81 :8).

Conclusion

So what can we conclude from this survey? I think the most general

observation that can be made today remains roughly the same as was

made about a century ago by Robertson Smith regarding the Islamic

system of marriage:

'Though Islam softened some of the harshest features of the old law,

it yet has set a permanent seal of subjugation on the female sex by

stereotyping a system of marriage which at bottom is nothing else than

the old marriage of dominion.

'It is very remarkable that in spite of Mohammed's humane ordin-

ances the place of woman in the family and in society has steadily

declined under his law. In ancient Arabia we find, side by side with such

instances of oppression as are recorded at Medina, many proofs that

women moved more freely and asserted themselves more strongly than

in the modern East. '29

Remarkable though this verdict may be, it is nevertheless not surpri-

sing or illogical. No matter what the impact of Islam may have been in

other aspects of social life in Arabia and elsewhere as it spread through

countries and continents, it invariably had the effect of institution-

alising the subjugation of women. The disintegration of tribal ties and

emergence of the community of Muslims may have given the general

community new strength in the face of outsiders, but it lost women a

source of protection they had enjoyed, that of their tribal solidarity.

This, along with the consolidation and rigid institutionalisation of the

patriarchal family, put women in a weaker position within the family.

In the face of undesirable marriages they could no longer ask for a

divorce or enjoy the support of their tribe in such a dispute, and had to

abide by newly instituted norms of modesty and be more and more

secluded 'behind a curtain', as Muhammad's wives were advised. That

Islam became from its inception a state religion par excellence - in the

words of Rodinson, Muhammad combined Jesus Christ and

Charlemagne in a single person - has contributed to the consolidation

of this subjugation in a particular way: throughout the centuries the

forces backing the perpetuation of this subjugation were not limited to

economic and social factors, customs and cultural pressures, families,

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etc.30 It was directly the state itself, its laws, its ideology, and the culture

it regenerated, that at every level reproduced and enforced the subjuga-

tion of women in Muslim societies. To this day this remains the dis-

tinguishing feature of the subjugation of Muslim women.

References

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Mohammed, London, 1971.

3 See Rodinson, op cit, pp x-xii.

4 See Ignaz Goldziher, Darsha'i dar baray Islam (Persian text, Studies on

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Vorlesungen Ober den Islam, Heidelberg, 1910.

5 Goldziher, op cit, p89.

6 W. Robertson Smith, Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia, Cambridge,

1885, (Beirut edition, 1973) p86.

7 For a fuller discussion of these points, see 1. Goldziher, op cit, ppI4-19; M.

Rodinson, op cit, pp25-37, 140-152; and M. Hodgson, op cit, vol. 1, pp130-135.

8 For this discussion see also Hodgson, op cit, vol. 1, P 181; and Rodinson, op

cit, pp229-232.

9 See W. Robertson Smith, op cit, pp76-79; Rodinson, op cit, p230.

10 W. Robertson Smith, op cit, pp85-86.

11 Ibid, pp80-81.

12 A. Guillaume, trans., The Life of Muhammad (English translation of Ibn

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(Persian text, The Development of Women's Rights in History and Religions),

Tehran, 1963, pp47-48.

14 M. Mutahhari, op cit, pp413-414.

15 Ibid, p416.

16 Shari'ati, Zan dar Chashm-o Del-e Muhammad (Persian text, Women in

Muhammad's Eyes and Heart), p32.

17 Rodinson, op cit, p232.

18 See Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam, 1961, p447: 'But even before Islam it

had already become generally usual for the bridal gift to be given to the woman

herself and not to the guardian.'

19 Robertson Smith, op cit, p87, pp112-113.

20 Rodinson, op cit, p15.

21 Robertson Smith, op cit, p83.

22 English translation from A.J. Arberry's version, New York, 1955, vol. 2,

pp49-50.

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pp243-244.

24 See, for example, Mutahhari, Nizam, p247.

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25 See Rodinson, op cit, p232; Robertson Smith, op cit, ppI16-117.

26 W. Montgomery Watt, Islamic Political Thought, Edinburgh, 1968, p7.

27 Robertson Smith, op cit, p292.

28 Ibid, pp292-294.

29 Ibid, ppI21-122.

30 Rodinson, op cit, p293.

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DISCUSSION FORUM

State capitalism in Egypt

A critique of Patrick Clawson

Clive Bradley

Patrick Clawson's analysis of the development of capitalism in Egypt

(Khamsin 9) is a serious contribution to our undêrstanding of the

relationship between Egyptian capital and imperialism. It is a major

advance over the conceptions prevalent on the left, wþich are based on

the analysis of the Egyptian Marxists Anwar Abdel-rYIalik, Mahmoud

Hussein, and Samir Amin.1 In particular, Clawson has demolished the

myth that Egypt's poverty is a product of foreign interference. In

demonstrating the growth of Egyptian capital from the internationali-

stion of (money) capital, he has broken with the nationalist assump-

tions of those previous analyses that have worked within the sociology

of underdevelopment. But there are major gaps in Clawson's theore-

tical framework, and serious problems - and errors - in his analysis.

Since most of the anomalies in Clawson's position are in his sections on

the Nasser period, and since an understanding of this period is most

crucial in grasping the political questions now posed, I shall concentrate

on his account of 'state capitalism'. However, since this cannot be

taken in isolation, a few words on the preceding history are in order.

Capitalism and class struggle

'The history of Egypt over the last two centuries is the history of class

struggle - primarily, the struggle of the international capitalist class to

mould the Egyptian economy to their needs. . . The history of Egypt's

economy is therefore primarily a history of capital's advances' (Pl09).2

Clawson's history of Egyptian capitalism 'from above' argues that

resistance to capital's advances has not been successful. This theme,

which permeates his analysis, is both theoretically and politically

disorienting. It is unfortunate that few of his political conclusions are

more than implicit; yet this lack of explicitness is a consequence of the

focus of his analysis. Effectively, Clawson simply ignores the question

of anti-capitalst struggle, whether potential or actual, on the part of the

working class or the pr.e-capitalist classes. In part, this may be due to

lack of information about the working class movement. But some

information is available, and no account of the development of capital

can be complete unless it recognises that capital can exist only in a

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context of class struggle. No country's history presents a unilateral

process of capitalist hegemonisation, and Egypt's is no exception. If we

are to arrive at strategic conclusions for a future struggle for socialism,

we need to know at least as much about the working class as we do

about its oppressors.3

The internationalisation of capital is certainly a valuable analytical

starting point. Elsewhere Clawson has dealt in more historical detail

with the way the circuits of capital are internationalised.4 But however

useful his perspective is, it remains incomplete without an analysis of

the precise relationship between the various circuits of international

capital and pre-capitalist modes of production, and on this point he is

weak. Such an extension of his outlook would provide some crucial

\_ elements lacking in his analysis of Egypt: an explanation of class

alliances and an investigation of the transformation of the labour

process. Clawson fails to probe the actual relationship between

'capital's advances' and the reorganisation of production, and conse-

quently fails to examine the locus of class conflict. The dynamics of

capitalist production are therefore never specified, and the nature of

capitalist 'development' in its historical totality is not conceptualised.

The Origins of Commodity Production

Clawson argues that Egyptian cotton production arose as a result of the

needs of commodity capital undergoing a process of internationalisa-

tion. Long-staple cotton thus became a commodity for foreign capital-

ists, whilst production within Egypt remained organised along pre-

capitalist lines. 'The internationalisation of capital', he writes, 'not any

conditions internal to Egypt, was the primary factor behind the growth

of cotton production, and therefore of the market, in Egypt' (P80). Yet

it ought to be asked, why did the Egyptian state under Muhammad 'Ali

choose to begin commercial production of cotton for export? Marxist

tradition argues that the penetration of capitalism into pre-capitalist

societies requires a high degree of violence to break the resistance of

traditional classes.5 Whether violence is actually necessary, of course, is

debatable.6 But the least that can be said is that the state in Egypt was

extraordinarily willing to serve the needs of commodity capital. His

mono causal view of capitalist development prevents Clawson from

even raising the question. The decision to begin long-staple cotton

production and the consequent initial reorganisation of cultivation was

only one of Muhammad 'Ali's efforts to change the economy he had

inherited from the Mamluks. It was accompanied by a small-scale

industrialisation programme, an extensive project of rural infra-

structural development, the abolition (and-later the partial recom-

position) of the tax-farming system, and so on. It was not imposed on

the Egyptian state, but was actively chosen. It is thus one-sided at best

to attribute the origins of cotton production simply to the needs of the

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internationalisation of capital. That was certainly one factor, but

another was the need of the Egyptian (pre-capitalist) state itself to

augment a (pre-capitalist) surplus that had been enormously eroded by

Mamluk/tax-farmer rule.? Muhammad 'Ali's 'modernisation' pro-

gramme was at least in part a strategy of the ruling class within Egypt

(chiefly, at this point, the state) designed to extract a surplus with

improved techniques. The sale of cotton was one such attempt.

It is significant that Clawson's treatment of 'Ali's industrialisation

programme appears to overlook the theoretical problem involved. In ex-

plaining its demise, he writes: 'The failure of Ali's factories was due not

only to market forces. . . but also to the European powers, who imposed

free trade on Egypt. . . The dominance of capitalist industry in Europe

meant the internationalisation of commodity capital only.' (P85).

But it is difficult to square the implication that 'Ali's factories were

capitalist with Clawson's insistence that Egypt was not capitalist at the

time.8 The major reason for the failure of 'Ali's factories was that no

capitalist dynamic sustained them. Since they were designed not to

accumulate capital ('Ali not being a capitalist), but rather to fuel a

'modernisation' process made requisite by pre-capitalist dynamics,

machinery was not renewed and the factories simply crumbled. Far

more important than the small-scale growth of non-capitalist industry

in the Muhammad 'Ali period was the phenomenal extension of corvée

labour in rural 'public' works. The underlying dynamic is that of a pre-

capitalist state, but Clawson's one-sided view of capitalist penetration

leads him to fail to follow through the logic of his own analysis.

Recognition of the role of the pre-capitalist mode of production in

Egypt's history provides an explanation of the class alliances upon

which the Egyptian state was based; the mutual interests of foreign

capital and the Egyptian state, though temporary and ultimately partial

underlay the transformation of Egyptian political economy in the

Khedival and colonial periods. Captitalism, of course, ultimately

became dominant, but the obstacles to and force of its penetration were

not generated by the needs of accumulation in the advanced capitalist

countries alone.

Having proposed no explanation of how the Egyptian state emerged

from specific political and economic developments, Clawson can give

no meaning to the expression 'Egyptian capital'. Why did some local

entrepreneurs comé to acquire nationalist ideologies? What was the

basis for national antagonism between foreign and Egyptian capital?

Clawson's optic of the internationalisation of capital can leave one

bewildered as to how nationalism emerged in Egypt at.all. Likewise, his

silence about the relationship between the bourgeois Wafd Party and

the labour movement in the inter-war years leaves a gaping historical

vacuum in any analysis of the class struggle that has shaped Egyptian

capitalism.

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'State Capitalism' and Capitalist Production

Clawson's analysis of the Nasser period is a polemic against the

conception that the regime was socialist. It was instead, he maintains,

'state capitalist'. He creates considerable confusion by labelling the

'socialist' assessment as 'radical', a term he also applies to 'neo-

Marxist' theories, thus suggesting that all 'radicals' held that Nasser's

Egypt was socialist. In fact the term 'state capitalism' is employed far

more widely by Marxists, while the designation 'socialist' is pretty well

confined to the Nasserists themselves. Clawson's proof that Egypt

remained capitalist thus seems somewhat pointless. It is far more

important to analyse how capitalism operated in Egypt, and Clawson's

position here is marred by deep ambiguities. These arise from an

unspecified conception of modes of production, and of the capitalist

mode of production in particular.

Clawson quite rightly rejects the absurd view of Andre Gunder

Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein and others, who equate capitalism with

the market. 9 His analysis of the internationalisation of capital explicitly

situates capital as 'a movement, not a thing at rest', as Marx said. 10 He

is therefore able to provide insights into many aspects of capitalist

development. But he does not spell out its basic dynamics, and at times

implies certain conceptions that could be misleading.

The basis of his claim that Nasserist Egypt was not socialist is a

comparison between it and a hypothetical socialist society. 'To demon-

strate that Egypt under Nasser was not capitalist', he writes, 'we must

set forth the features which distinguish capitalism from socialism. . .

The three fundamental features of capitalism are: first, production for

a market by units which are forced by competition to maximise profits;

second, a large group of people, who are. . . free to work where they

wish and free of any other means of making a living; and third, control

over the means of production by a small group of people. All of these

are compatible with state ownership of the means of production'

(plOt).

These criteria are ambiguous. Capitalism is defined by generalised

commodity production (labour-power and the means of production

being themselves commodities) under which the drive to accumulate

flJore capital is primary: accumulation for accumulation's sake. The

extraction of surplus-value arises from the nature of capitalist

production (not from the need to compete, in the last analysis). It is not

just competition on the market, but the capitalist law of value that

forces capitalists to continually revolutionise the means of production

in order to increase the rate of surplus-value, and so to accumulate."

Clawson's three criteria make no explicit reference to relations of

pr-oduction; arguably, the three together may amount to the same

thing, but it is clear that Clawson makes no distinction between

'socialism' and 'post-capitalism' . The precise significance of relation of

production thus remains problematic. Thus: 'The direct producers had

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neither political power nor control over production' in Egypt (plOt).

The implication is that if a society is not socialist it must be capitalist.

Later he suggests that the Soviet Union, whose dynamics are quite

different from those of Nasser's Egypt, is also state capitalist (p 109).

This obliterates the differentia specifica of capitalist production:

accumulation through the generation of surplus-value (the law of

value).

A society can be post-capitalist without being socialist, or without

being a healthy workers' democracy. 12

Clawson's ambiguity about the hallmark of capitalism is not helped

by his somewhat contradictory comments on the effects of state capita-

lism. He argues that 'the break with state capitalism under Sadat' was

the result of an inability to obtain foreign credit to pay for imports:

'The lack of credit was. . . the logical consequence of poor productivity

and worse profitability of Egyptian industry. . . The capitalist system

forces all operating within it to pursue [profit] maximisation or pay the

consequences: bankruptcy' (p108).

Despite his prior claim that Egyptian state capital always aimed for

maximisation, here Clawson is obviously implying otherwise. If it did

not, half his case that Egypt was capitalist collapses. If it did, then

failure to have done so cannot have been a cause of bankruptcy. Either

way, it would seem that 'irrational capitalism' would be a more

apposite label than 'state capitalism'. Perhaps this is pedantic. But it

does seem that Clawson's analysis of capitalist development ignores

capitalist crisis as an intrinsic feature of the system, a consequence of

the laws of accumulation. The crisis of Egyptian capitalism is seen as

the result of external relations.

In fact, the argument about 'state' capitalism has hindered rather

than helped understanding of Nasserist Egypt. It implies that it differs

fundamentally from private capitalism. There is, however, only one

capitalist mode of production. Moreover, it is a purely empirical and

descriptive, rather than analytical, term (Clawson refers to it as a

description). What we need to know is how, rather than whether,

valorisation took place. But for this we need an analysis of the labour

process, or more broadly of the relationship between the state and the

working class. This Clawson does not provide.

The State and State Capitalism

Clawson adheres to the 'radical' argument that the Nasserite regime

was dominated by the petty bourgeoisie (or new petty bourgeoisiel3).

He differs from Hussein in particular in rejecting personal greed as a

motivation. 'The new petty bourgeoisie, he writes, 'was transformed

into a powerful political force by an ideology, an ideology that allowed

them to gather the support of the proletariat and the proletarianised

masses. . . Nationalisation was seen by the petty bourgeoisie as a

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mechanism to increase the pace of development - thoughts of personal

enrichment were not uppermost in their minds' (P102).

This petty bourgeoisie is left undefined. Clawson refers to it as an

'academic-intellectual-military petty bourgeoisie', which 'seized

economic power'. 14 This kind of catch-all terminology is not very

helpful. The precise fractions of the petty bourgeoisie that seized

(economic and/or political) power (if it can be treated as a single class in

this way) would need to be specified, and their relationship to the

bourgeoisie proper analysed. But any such investigation inevitably

leads to consideration of the role of the military: it was, after all, army

officers that overthrew Faruq. And this means consideration of the role

of the state apparatus.

Nasser and his colleagues were certainly of petty-bourgeois back-

ground. But some of them, Neguib for example, were high-ranking

army officers, and Nasser himself was hardly an NCO. To explain their

role in the state apparatus solely in terms of their social origins would

make it impossible to understand the nature of the Egyptian state. The

state acts in the interests of capital as a whole, in Egypt no less than else-

where, and what was involved in 1952 was not just a few petty bourgeois

usurping power but a wholesale rupture between the state's military

wing and the dominant fraction of the ruling class. The ideology of the

Free Officers, which took time to coalesce, was formulated largely as

pragmatic responses to particular situations. But these were state

responses, not acts of 'the petty bourgeoisie' (although petty-bourgeois

interests no doubt played a role). It was not their ideology that trans-

formed them into a powerful political force. It would be more accurate

to say that as a powerful political force, they developed an ideology

involving populist, or semi-populist conceptions.

It is difficult to see what role Clawson means to attribute to ideology.

One of the last things that could be said about Nasserism is that its

ideology was a sustaining factor in its development (Clawson later says

that 'state capitalism never sank ideological roots in Egypt', though this

too is a half-truth), and certainly it would be difficult to identify a

specific ideology as a unifying force amongst 'the petty bourgeoisie'.

Clawson seems to suggest that what unified the new elite was its view of

nationalisation 'to increase the pace of development', which

presumably implies a shift in the class base of the state authorities after

1956 (in which case the 'new petty bourgeoisie' would be a yet-to-be-

created class different from that which actually seized power). One

other possible interpretation is that this new petty bourgeoisie is defined

by its (petty-bourgeois) ideology, which, as has been pointed out else-

where, is sheer tautology.15

An analysis of the role of the bourgeois state in a capitalist society,

and of ideology in legitimating, or attempting to legitimate the role of

capital, is, of course, extremely important. Clawson's use of the term

'petty bourgeoisie' inevitably ignores the question of the bourgeois

state in a social formation as a whole. In Egypt it seems most accurate to

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see events after 1952 as shaped by a shifting set of class alliances,

ranging from sections of the bourgeoisie to sections of the 'petty

bourgeois' state personnel, within which the (bourgeois) military was

pivotal. The structural conditions of capital accumulation in Egypt

conditioned the ideological responses of these classes or fractions of

classes (see below). The military managed to remain the core of the

shifting alliances, and corporate interests played some part in later

developments. What was more significant in ending the initial alliance

between the regime and the industrial bourgeoisie was the fear gener-

ated amongst that bourgeoisie by the state's expropriations (even

though none of them threatened Egyptian capital at first). Rising

opposition intensified after 1958, particularly in Syria. Fear inhibits

investment, and investment was obviously necessary for 'develop-

ment'; so the state stepped in. To a large extent, though not entirely, the

ideology followed, rather than generated, statist developmental

measures. The regime also had to build a power base, which it found

primarily within the state bureaucracy. It is therefore not surprising to

find it deepening that base prior to 1967. Combined with the dynamics

of capital accumulation within the state enterprises, which were trans-

forming the role of state bureaucrats, this served to create a powerful

bourgeois class within the state apparatus. Tension between the needs

of this new class and Nasserist ideology were inevitable.

State Capitalism in Crisis

Clawson is unambiguous about the causes of the economic crisis that

emerged in the 1965-67 period: 'Hansen and Nashashibi argue stren-

uously that the stagnation of the middle and late 1960s was not due to

the foreign exchange problems alone. Certainly there were other contri-

buting factors, such as the spreading production slowdowns caused by

bureaucratic inefficiencies, but the fact remains that the crunch came

when and only when Egypt ran out of foreign exchange. . . The stag-

nation of the 1960s was the product of a foreign exchange shortage'

(p 107).

Lacking an indigenous capital goods industry, which it could not

create because of foreign competition, Egypt had to import its capital

goods. It therefore needed foreign exchange to pay for them: a shortage

of foreign exchange meant no capital-goods imports, and hence eco-

nomic stagnation. Clawson analyses how the large reserves Egypt had

in 1953 were used up, US aid fell, and economic growth had to be

slowed.

This analysis remains partial. It might be suggested that behind

Egyptian capitalism's balance of payments problems lay more funda-

mental things (for a Marxist) than the mere shortage of foreign ex-

change. Clawson makes no mention of Marx's theory of unequal ex-

change, 16 but it would seem to be an important aspect of any explanation

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of the more general economic problems facing Third World countries.

But Clawson does not see economic crisis as flowing from the internal

dynamics of capitalism itself: a foreign-exchange shortage is an

episodic, conjunctural phenomenon rather than a central feature of all

capital accumulation.

As noted above, Clawson does not have a very clear conception of the

dynamics of capital accumulation. His view of a crisis caused by scarce

exchange reserves is consequently one-sided, for a number of reasons.

Most fundamentally, this approach treats economic issues as essentially

given policy questions: the 'national economy' has to cope with certain

forces outside its control, but the resolution of its problems can be

sorted out given the right policy. The eC;onomic crisis is not seen as

flowing directly from the nature of capital accumulation itself. Of

course, Clawson explains the shortage of foreign exchange in the last

analysis as an inability to compete in the production of capital goods.

But this in itself does not explain very much. I? Would not a 'socialist

state' (as defined by Clawson) face similar problems? Or conversely, if

the root of the problem is a shortage of foreign exchange, would not

attempts to encourage foreign exchange (as under Sad at) be a good

thing? Was the shift in economic policy after 1967 (contrary to Claw-

son, it began before Sadat came to power) merely an epiphenomenon of

the quest for exchange reserves? Clawson is unclear on these questions,

because of the deep ambiguities of his treatment of capital accumula-

tion, and in particular of his treatment (or non-treatment) of the

relationship between national capitals, or between capital accumula-

tion within a particular nation state on the one hand and the inter-

nationalisation of capital on the other. The result is a serious political

ambiguity: the struggle for socialism is implicitly reduced to the

struggle for an alternative economic policy. Clawson's analysis pro-

vides no indication of the precise roles of Egyptian capital and imperial-

ism in meeting the exigencies of capitalism in crisis. As such it provides

no basis for a working-class response.

I contend that the crisis in Egypt is a crisis in the accumulation of

capital that requires from the Egyptian bourgeoisie a strategy to assault

the living standards of the working class. It requires imperialist and

Arab capitalist support, but the central contradiction in Egypt is

between Egyptian capital and Egyptian labour. This crisis must be seen

in the context of the international crisis of capitalism.

The Crisis of Capital Accumulation

There is a sense in which there was a 'dual' crisis by the mid-sixties: a

chronic crisis of non-accumulation in Dept. I (the production of capital

goods), and a specific crisis of profitability in industry as a whole. The

two fuelled each other. But there was no unilinear causal relationship

between the former and the latter.

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The contribution of machine production (in itself a misleading term,

since it consisted mostly of consumer durables) to gross value-added

rose from 0.711/0 in 1952 to 4.411/0 in 1966~67.18 Consequently, as

Clawson indicates, the Egyptian bourgeoisie had to import its capital

goods, its machinery and technology. Basic raw material did not have

to be imported. As Mabro and O'Brien note, , . . . Egyptian industry is

essentially a producer of consumer goods. Its largest components can

be viewed as the last stage of an integrated agicultural system.' 19

Textile production was by far the most important section of industry,

contributing 33.111/0 of total gross value-added in manufacturing in

1952, and 38.111/0 in 1966-67.20 The development of a cotton-based

industry producing largely for the home market alleviated some of the

tension caused by dependence on imports of capital goods. Much of the

problem arose from the organic composition of capital, lower in

Egyptian industry than in those producing the foreign imports. The

result (given a tendency for the rate of profit to equalise) is a transfer of

value out of Egypt, unequal exhcange in Marx's sense. This transfet: of

value hinders accumulation in Dept. II (production of means of

consumption), though it should be noted that as the region's most

developed capitalist country, Egypt has always sought and found

markets for its industrial goods where unequal exchange will probably

operate in its favour. But even suffering in this way, performance in

manufacturing industry has been far from abysmal. The period from

1957-65 saw average annual growth rates of 611/0, depending largely on

manufacturing outputs. The rate of industrial output reached a peak in

1963-64 of 12.511/0, although thereafter it declined dramatically. The

share of industry in GDP grew consistently in the fifties and sixties,

whilst that of agriculture declined.21

Share of GDP at Factor Costs (11/0)

Agricul- Industry, Con- Com-

ture electricity struction Transport Housing merce Services

1952/3 35.6 15.3 2.7 5.9 6.4 10.3 23.8

1956/7 33.6 17.2 2.1 5.8 6.6 10.7 23.3

1959/60 31.5 20.7 3.7 7.2 5.7 10.0 21.2

1964/5 27.1 23.1 5.3 8.9 4.5 8.6 22.5

1969/70 25.1 23.2 5.5 5.5 6.0 9.1 25.6

Source: R. Mabro: The Egyptian Economy, p189.

Problems, exacerbated by the need to import capital goods, began to

reach crisis proportions in the early 1960s. Investment had enormously

increased the capital intensity of industry. In other words, there had

been a substantial rise in the organic composition of capital, which

would tend to alleviate the problem of unequal exchange. But this rise

was not matched by an increase in the productivity of labour. Average

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labour productivity under the 1960-65 plan was the same as before, per

person it even declined. As Hansen and Marzouk comment' . . . it is

disappointing that the big increase in industrial investment has not led

to an increase in the rate of growth of labour productivity.' In part this

was the consequence of the state's attempt to create an internal

consumer market by extensive public-sector employment and relatively

high wages. In a sense, Egyptian capital in the 1970s made the same

policy shift as its imperialist counterparts: faced with a choice between

markets and profit rates, it opted for the latter. A breakdown of income

distribution shows the huge proportional scale of profits in Egypt

before the crisis of the mid-sixties. .

Distribution of Income in Total Industry, 1959/60

Wages and Returns to Gross Value Wages and

Salaries Ownership Added Salaries as % of

GVA

Cotton ginning

and pressing 1.2 2.7 3.9 30.8

Mines and

quarries 3.6 14.9 18.5 19.5

manufacturing

industries 83.5 155.6 239.1 34.9

Electrici ty

and gas 2.9 9.0 11.9 24.4

All

in?ustry 91.2 182.2 273.4 33.4

Source: Hansen and Marzouk, Development and Economic Policy in the UAR

Two-thirds of gross value-added in this period was profit. The

annual net rate of return on capital in 1960 was 17-18%. Hensen and

Marzouk suggest that it was higher in 1952. But by 1974, this had fallen

to 2.4070 in the public sector. Given the net decline in investment

beginning in 1963-64 this suggests a crisis in profitability by 1965, lead-

ing to a stagnation in the accumulation of capital. In the late sixties

manufacturing industry was contributing no more to national income

than previously. As the rate of profit fell, existing equipment was not

renewed: Egyptian capital entered a period of acute and sustained

crisis. The chronic crisis of Dept. I now coexisted with a crisis of

stagnation in Dept. II. In the context of the beginnings of international

capitalist crisis, this spelt disaster for Egypt's capital. Since 1965 the

Egyptian state has been seeking ways to reso1ve this crisis. .

Ultimately the logical option was that which began to emerge in the

late sixties and which Sadat was eventually to embrace wholeheartedly.

Its core was 'infitah' (Opening), an economic liberalisation, and

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eventual privatisation based on the encouragement of foreign capital.

The statist strategy, having failed, had to be terminated. The class

structure it had generated remained (the 'new', 'state', or 'bureau-

cratic' bourgeoisie, as it had variously been described; a petty bour-

geoisie and a working class employed by the state), but as conditions

changed, so too did the strategic requirements of Egyptan capital.

This was facilitated by the onset of a major international crisis of

capitalism at the beginning of 1974. The promise of high profits was

potentially an attractive lure for foreign companies facing a crisis in

profitability. To embellish the lure, the Egyptian bourgeoisie had to

secure its own stability. A drive towards peace with Israel thus became

inevitable.

The Working Class in Egypt

Clawson's comments on the working class are brief and intended

largely as a polemic against Amin's and Hussein's view of 'proletarian-

i'sed masses'. He writes: ' . .. the picture is quite different from that

painted by Amin and Hussein. The proletariat (in the strict sense) was a

large social force in Egypt, at least 30 per cent of the population. The

proletariat broadly speaking includes another 50 per cent (7 million) for

a total of 80 per cent' (P98).

This proletariat, 'broadly speaking', includes rural temporary

labourers, as well as small farmers and marginalised urban masses who

depend 'primarily on wage income'. Apart from demonstrating the

supposed size of the working class, this actually tells us little. Even

empirically it is highly questionable, because Clawson plays down the

socio-political effects of differ~ntiation within the working class. He

does not distinguish between small and large-scale production (merging

at times into a distinction between capitalist and petty-commodity

production), between the social effects of different kinds of labour, and

between fully formed classes and those (or sections of those) only in the

process of formation. For Clawson, the size of the proletariat is only a

further proof that Egypt is capitalist. Its composition, formation, and

organisation - not to mention its history - are not even considered, for

they add nothing to the proof.

The problem with Amin's and Hussein's analysis of the working class

is underestimation not so much of its size as of its political centrality.

They subsume the working class into the 'masses', who all 'act' on the

'popular stage' in much the same undifferentiated, 'patriotic' way. 22 In

a sense, Clawson makes a similar mistake: instead of undifferentiated

'masses' we have an undifferentiated 'proletariat' but we are none the

wiser.

To understand the Egyptian working class it is necessary to know

more than how many worked for wages for all or part of the year. The

structure of the working class, the relationship between different

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labour processes, and in particular such questions as the sexual division

of labour need to be examined.

First of all, we must disentangle the strands of the wage-earning mass

presented by Clawson.

By 1970 manufacturing and~mining employed about 11 % of the total

labour force. Obviously the t'otal number of wage earners would be

larger than this, but precise analysis is not possible. Abdel-Fadil

suggests that the total number of salaried employees and wage earners

in 1962 was 63% of the labour force and in 1972 was 66%.23 It is

therefore probably safe to assume that in the 1960s about half the urban

labour force were wage workers of one sort or another.

This proletariat was quite diffuse. More than 50070 were employed in

establishments with fewer than ten workers. Of the rest, by the la.te

sixties the majority worked in establishments with more than 500

workers. But many of these were small by the standards of adanced

capitalism.

The predominance of small-scale industry has had important conse-

quences for the structure of the urban working class. Low levels of

capital accumulation and concentration of workers have limited the

development of the industrial proletariat as a powerful class 'for itself' .

Some sections of the working class, notably in petroleum extraction

(and since the late sixties at Helwan and other big plants) have trans-

cended thjs limitation to a certain extent. Comparative wage rates

reveal a differentiation due at least in part to the varying strengths of

labour unions: the Federation of Petroleum Syndicates has been strong

enough to enforce high wage rates and low hours.24

Wages per Week of the Industrial Work-Force by Sector (piastres)

1951-1969

General Manufac- Mining and Construction Transport

turing quarrying

1951 184 172 574 169 394

1953 196 184 733 181 321

1955 224 203 563 175 328

1957 232 216 874 181 344

1959 233 218 993 195 342

1961 235 217 866 220 324

1963 269 246 378 289 347

1965 325/9 301 469 327 416

1967 337 318 527 284 413

1969 409 403 673 368 430

Source: International Yearbook of Labour Statistics 1958-1975

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A more detailed breakdown of manufacturing industries reveals that

far the highest wagees prevailed in transport equipment production.25

Wages for women were, predictably, much lower than for men. The

. averages in manufacturing were as follows (piastres):

MEN WOMEN

1962 219 117

1967 324 229

Source: International Yearbook of Labour Statistics 1969, 1975

The pattern of national wage rates suggests high increases in the early

years of the 'Revolution', followed by a levelling out before 1960.

Then, during the first Five Year Plan, wages rose at rates substantially

in excess of the rise in labour productivity:26given the crisis arising from

the generally non-productive rise in the organic composition of capital,

these wage rises will have contributed to the collapse in the rate of profit

by the mid-sixties.

The sparse and not altogether reliable statistics tend to suggest that

the chronic inability of Egyptian capital to increase labour productivity

despite significant investment - a vital necessity in overcoming unequal

exchange - was not offset by an ability sufficiently to reduce the wages

of workers in relatively large-scale industry (in other words, to increase

the rate of surplus-value). The period in which the current crisis took

root - roughly speaking that of the first Five Year Plan - was thus one

of intensified class struggles over basic issues, which Egyptian capital

was not able to win. This was a formative period for the renascent

workers movement, preparation for big explosions to come. The defeat

in 1967 was the catalyst for these explosions, which were intensified by

the effect of the regime's post-1965 deflationary policies (a decline in

real wages) and the working-class resistance provoked by these policies.

As we have seen, relatively low levels of capital accumulation have

led to low levels of worker concentration. The few big complexes, such

as the Helwan Iron and Steel Works, are surrounded by myriad small

factories, some of which are little more than workshops. In 1967, a total

of 144,090 manufacturing establishments employing fewer than ten

people averaged two workers each. Some 36070 of small-scale industrial

activity was carried out in rural areas, but 29.6% took place in Cairo

and Alexandria alone. A vast number of wage earners are thus involved

in very small-scale productionY Far more are involved in non-

productive work of various kinds (the so-called informal sector). The

structure of this section of the labour force has changed a little in the

past thirty years. But it has greatly increased in size, and constitutes the

vast bulk of the urban population: it is here that most of the rural

migrants end up.

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The Structure of Informal Service Employment 1947 - 60

Type of activity

(or occupation)

1 Traditional transport

2 Petty trade (street hawkers

& peddlers)

3 Paid domestic servants

4 Waiters, porters and

caretakers

5 Tailoring

6 Hairdressing

7 Laundry & other services

Total

Source: Abdel-Fadil, p18.

Numbers employed %

increase

1947 1960

ODDs % ODDs %

57 9.3 67 8.2 17.5

82 13.4 188 22.9 129.3

235 38.3 192 23.4 -18.3

62 10.1 102 12.4 64.5

85 13.9 119 14.5 40.0

52 8.5 62 7.5 19.2

.40 6.5 92 11.2 130.0

613 100.0 822 100.0 34.1

As is clear, the mass of petty traders has been swelled by rural

migrants, whilst the number of domestic servants declined following

the July coup. Of migrants aged between 10 and 29, women out-

numbered men, and many of them continued to find work as domestic

servants (particularly those from Upper Egypt).

Employment in Personal Services, by Age a~d Sex

1947

Employment

of males

Under 15 48,741

15 and over 285,246

Employment

of females 139,821

Total 473,808

1960 Change (ODDs)

29,333 -19.4

367,748 +82.5

169,946 +30.1

567,027 +93.2

Source: Abdel-Fadil, p19.

Even those opportunities open to women, then, amount to highly

exploitative extensions of their familial role. The vast bulk of women,

however, remain confined to their own homes. 28

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Vast numbers of the urban poor find no stable employment at all. In

1972, a total of 224,000 people or 6.4070 of the total urban labour force,

were unemployed or not classified by any occupation. Of these, 54,000

were women (14.7% of the total female urban labour force). In Cairo

7.0% of the total were in this situation; in Alexandria 11 %.

The work-force of the 'informal' sector is itself highly differentiated,

ranging from self-employed artisans to sellers of cigarette butts. It is

thus not a single class, but a somewhat open-ended amalgam of classes,

ranging from the traditional petty bourgeois to the modern proletarian,

with large numbers constituting a sub-proletariat. Abdel-Fadil has

calculated the following figures for the urban traditional petty

bourgeoisie, proletariat, and sub-proletariat.

Petty Commodity Producers, Proletarians and Sub-Proletarians in

Urban Egypt, 1970/71

Approx. No. (ODDs)

The traditional petty-bourgeoisie:

1 Bottom group of independent professionals ?

2 Small retailers and shopkeepers 250

3 Self-employed artisans 170

4 Salespeople and their assistants 12

The proletariat

1 Production workers (inc. railway workers & dockers) 474

2 Workers in the civil service 170

The sub-proletariat

1 Casual workers on building sites 40

2 Cleaning, maintenance & security workers 78

3 Domestic servants 150

4 Openly unemployed 86

5 Unclassifiable by occupation 138

Source: Abdel-Fadil, p99. (We have not included the figures for the bourgeoisie

and "new" petty-bourgeoisie).

Although Abdel-Fadel's categorisation inay be debatable, permanent

proletarians clearly constitute the largest group, but are nevertheless an

overall minority.

Failure to recognise the complexity of the working class in Egypt is

most apparent in Clawson's bland comments on the rural population.

Noting that 'the 2.5 million farmers with less than 5 acres. . . depend

primarily on wage income' (p98), he misses the significant fact that they

are nevertheless farmers and not unambiguously proletarian: the small

fellahin are engaged in two separate labour processes.

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In both town and countryside the role of subsistence labour, often

performed within the family, is crucial for the accumulation of capital.

If labour-power can be reproduced outside the capitalist mode of

production as such, its value will be lower, and the rate of surplus-value

higher. The growth of the 'informal' sector and the preservation of

subsistence production thus serve an objective function for capital.

What is more, the people on whom the bulk of this work falls are

women. Clawson says nothing whatever about the position of women

in Egypt, yet their role in production is vital for capitalism, in three

respects. First there is their role in reproduction, of both people and

labour-power, within the family. Second, within the wage-labour force

itself, they perform particular jobs with lower incomes, acting as a

reserve army of labour and doing kinds of work men shun. Third, since

many Egyptian men have migrated to seek work overseas, the role of

women in maintaining production (particularly in agriculture) has been

enhanced. As Mona Hammam notes: 'Women, otherwise constrained

from entering the formal wage sector, are compelled to seek access to

income in the informal, sporadic, unregulated sector in order to supple-

ment a husband's earnings, or even as the only source of cash for the

household. In Egypt. . . it is common for a working class husband to

take on a second job in the informal sector while his wife raises

chickens. . . for the family's direct consumption and for exchange.'29

In rural areas 82070 of working women do unpaid family labour, and

dependence upon them increases as families become unable to hire farm

labour. The percentage of the economically active population who were

women was 5.3070 in 1977.30 Of course, the participation of women in

the work-force has increased, predominantly in the textile, paper, and

chamicals industries. But significantly, it is only in domestic services

that women constitute a majority of the labour force.31 It is quite clear,

then, that whether or not most of Egypt's population depends upon

wage income, the majority are not involved in large-scale modern

industry. The labour process is by no means uniformly that of advanced

capitalism, the 'real subsumption of labour to capital', as Marx put it,

in which capital dominates every moment of production.J2

Instead, the predominant activity is either only formally subsumed

under capital (that is, the labour process itself is artisanal) or not strictly

capitalist production, but petty commodity production, whether tradi-

tional or the outgrowth of rural migrants' eking out a living by setting

up shop.

This has deep implications for the structure of capitalism, and

reflects the general backwardness of Egyptian industry, obvious

exceptions as at Helwan notwithstanding. Clawson seems oblivious to

this, as shown by his comments on the agricultural co-operatives:

, . . . actual power rested in the hands of a supervisor [who] exercised

almost complete control over the cotton production process. . . he sold

the cotton, with the peasants getting little. . . from the receipts. . . The

peasants lost control over the means of production, over the product,

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and over the production process. They had, in essence, become a rural

proletariat' (P95).

Yet this formal subordination of peasant labour to capital is distinct

from the increasingly real subordination of landless wage-labourers

proper.33 The distinction is vital in grasping the composition of the

, wòrking class. It also has important ideological consequences (preserv-

ation of conservative peasant values as against the consciousness of the

landless worker), and affects the forms of struggle in which the direct

producers are involved. Again, the penetration of capital into the

countryside is not unilinear; it is a complex historical process that

moulds and remoulds the labour processes. of various sections of a

working class that is by no means homogeneous.

Nasserism and the Working Class

Bent Hansen has commented that Nasserist economics consisted of

following 'the line of least popular dissatisfaction'. The welfare system

guaranteed that, within certain limits, 'social peace was maintained:

nearly everyone was able to draw a little something from the system' .34

Today, in the days of de-Nasserisation, and the attempted dismantling

of the welfare system, the left in Egypt has responded by calling for the

intensification of the Egyptian 'socialist experiment'. Influenced at

least intellectually by the Marxist intelligentsia that liquidated itself into

the Arab Socialist Union in 1965, the official Nasserist left has centred

its propaganda in the last decade and a half on the need to 'defend the

principles of the July 23 Revolution'.

The Free Officers came to power during some of the most intense

class conflicts in Egypt's history. Mass strikes, including general

strikes, demonstrations, and peasant revolts had racked the country

since the end of the Second World War. The class bloc in power,

expressed by the Wafd, was unable to maintain social peace; as in many

such situations, the army then stepped in. Less than a week after the

'Revolution' a major strike and occupation erupted in the textile works

at Kafr al-Dawwar. The leaders of the workers' unions, Mustafa

Khamis and Hassan al-Bakany, were arrested and hanged. The new

regime wasted no time in establishing its anti-working class credentials.

An Advisory Council for Labour was reconstituted, the basic inten-

tion of which was to establish a trade-union movement fully incorpo-

rated into the state. The Council, which included union representation,

established control over union finances. At the same time, it legalised

agricultural unions and enforced a closed shop in any company in

which at least 60070 of the work-force were already union members. It

also strengthened protection against dismissal and raised the minimum

wage. But strikes were to be illegal, and unions were barred from

political activity.

The primary role of the unions in the view of the state was to increase

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productivity. The labour code of 1959 established tripartite boards of

government officials, employers" and workers, whose duties, among

other things, included improving standards of productivity.

The establishment of an incorporated trade-union movement was

central to the political-economic imperatives of Nasserism at all stages

in its development. Its incorporation was able to be achieved institu-

tionally only in part; the Nasserist state was never able to create simple

state syndicates. But Egyptian capital desperately needed some form of

'social contract' with labour in order to overcome the problems of

backward capitalism. We have already seen that an increase in the

organic composition of capital had not generated an equivalent produc-

tivity increase. That would have to come from a rise in the intensity of

labour: workers would have to work harder. If the 'Nation' was to rally

around the 'development' of Egyptian capital, an obedient labour

movement was vital.

Ideologically, the exigencies of heighening the intensity of labour are

central to Nasserism. A casual glance through Nasser's speeches reveals

how concerned he and his idealogues were with 'increasing producti-

vity'. The motto of the Liberation Rally was 'unity, discipline, work'. 35

And later, 'ASU functionaries in Popular Units (i.e. industry) worked

towards increasing output and reducing costs; increasing workers'

awareness of the need to economise at the plant. 36 The National Charter

of 1962 is quite explicit: labour organisations 'no longer remain a mere

counterpart of management in the production operation, but become

the leading vanguard of development. Labour unions can exercise their

leading responsibilities through serious contribution to intellectual and

scientific efficiency and thus increase productivity among labour. '37

The worsening dual crisis of capital accumulation conditioned this

incorporationist productivism in the official ideology of the state. But

at all stages the state failed to achieve sufficient incorporation of the

labour movement or to establish a coherent legitimating ideology:

intensity of labour was not sufficiently augmented; productivity did

not, after all, rise. The organisation of labour process was thus

predominantly bureaucratic: there was neither a dev~loped incorpor-

ation of labour, nor the conditions for a more 'normal' bourgeois

ideology. 'Arab Socialism' was not primarily socialist rhetoric to buy

off the masses, and certainly not a genuine quasi-populist ideology

generated by the regime's anti-imperialist experience, but an inco-

herent, largely unsuccessful, and highly bureaucratic attempt to effect

the subordination of labour to capital through incorporation. The

rapidity with which the workers movement was re-kindled under the

impact of capitalist crisis after 1967 is an index of its failure.

Low levels of concentration limited the ability of the working class to

defend its interests. ,But as we have seen, in some sectors (petroleum

extraction and mining, quarrying, transport and transport equipment)

labour action could secure significantly improved wages and conditions

even within the semi-incorporated trade-union system. Class struggles

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persisted within the production process, albeit at a relatively low level.

The number of workers involved in industrial disputes tended to be

quite small: but industrial action was certainly taking place in the fifties

and sixties.

The state's ability to increase productivity was not hindered by

working-class resistance alone, of course. The regime's need to incor-

porate labour and to create an internal consumer market forced it to

employ far more workers than it would otherwise have done. Bureau-

cratic inefficiency (and to a small extent disease) exacerbated the state's

underlying problems.

The period of the first Five Year Plan, which coincided with the onset

of serious difficulties in capital accumulation, was the time of the

regime's 'socialist' stage. It represented a further step in an incorpora-

tionist strategy (profit-sharing, reduced working hours, increases in

manual wages) which failed (if it ever had any hope of success) because

capitalist crisis destroyed its base. Government interference in the

labour market at various levels reduced the overall capacity of capital to

discipline the work-force,38 and this no doubt afforded the labour

movement some room for manoeuvre, contrary to the intention of its

incorporation. By the crisis point of 1965-67, the working class, which

had resisted the valorisation process throughout the Nasser period, was

well prepared to move into action.

But several factors undermined the capacity of the working class to

resist the depredations of capital in crisis. At the most general level, the

decisive factor deflecting working-class struggle has been the role of the

left.

Significantly, it was in 1965 that the Egyptian Communist Party

disbanded, its members joining the ASU as individuals. Several old

Communists and fellow travellers have been official left ideologues

ever since. It was also in that year that 'Ali Sabri was appointed

Secretary General of the ASU. In the mid-sixties, Sabri, the left

Nasserist dismissed by Sadat in 1971, had stood at the centre of a

national political debate about the role of the ASU in Egyptian social

and political life.

At this point, faced with the emerging crisis, the political represen-

tatives of Egyptian capital began to splinter into warring factions, a

right, centre, and left that persist today. In its first stages, the conflict

centred on the r.elated questions of parliamentary democracy and the

role of the political 'vanguard'. The argument started around 1965,

but it was after June 1967 that it grew into a full-scale national

exchange.

The right favoured political liberalisation and a parliamentary

system. The left, led by Sabri, Khalid Muhieddin, and others, insisted

on carrying forward the 'socialist revolution', intensifying the

vanguardist role of the ASU and developing a more coherent socialist

ideology.39

So it was the left that stood for aggravated incorporation. It was the

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left that opposed democratic liberalisation, that waved the flag of sub-

ordinating all political initiative to the existing party of Egyptian capital

- in the name of socialism. The 'Marxist' intellectuals provided the

theory. Unable to recognise the ASU as an integral part of the

bourgeois state apparatus, the left was incapable of developing \ a

strategy that would challenge capitalism in any sense. As living

standards deteriorated and Sadat moved to the right, a radical response

from the labour movement was needed. Only the left Nasserists were

there to fill the gap. The official left was thus able to consolidate a

hitherto unattained hegemony within the labour movement. Some of

the leftist ideologues abandoned their anti -democratic positions of the

sixties. But acting only as theorists for the left Nasserists, they proved

incapable of taking the workers with them. In 1974 Sad at organised a

series of meetings to discuss a move to a multiparty system. The meeting

of labour unions 'vociferously rejected a multi-party system and

accused named forces. . . of wanting to abolish not only worker repre-

sentation but the very principles of the July 23 Revolution...

unidentified voices attacked their own union leaders as puppets of the

regime. . . At this stage it was abundantly clear that the intellectual

Marxists. . . calling for multipartyism, were overruled by the workers

themselves, who remained loyal to the ASU.'40

But given its need for an economic 'opening', Egyptian capital as a

whole was not able to take advantage of this. By the late sixties the days

of the incorporation strategy were over as far as the bourgeoisie as a

whole was concerned. This cemented left-Nasserism as an oppositional

ideology within the Egyptian labour movement. The deepening crisis of

the 1970s, however, shook even this hegemony. As class struggle

sharpened, the inability of the tame Nasserist old-guard left to propose

even partial solutions to the aggravated misery of the workers and

urban and rural poor paved the way for the shattering of the 'social

contract' between them and the labour movement. The rise of mass

strikes began the process; the riots of January 1977 signalled the

ignominious demise of social contract. The late seventies were conse-

quently marked by a crisis in hegemony: no section of capital, no

political off-shoot of bourgeois nationalism, could maintain its.

domination of the workers movement. Open repression became the

only option.

The Transition from State Capitalism

It is a common, though false, view, which Clawson evidently shares,

that Sadat's post-1974 infitah policy represented a radical break with

the 'state' capitalist past. This view is false at a number of levels: most

particularly because Egypt remains heavily statist even now, and

because the changes that came about in 1974 have their origins in the

capitalist crisis of the mid-sixties. There is a fundamental continuity

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between Nasserism and post-Nasserism, reflecting the fact that infÎtah

represents not a transfer of power from the state bourgeoisie to private

capital, but a different political-economic strategy of the same ruling

class. It is particularly important to recognise this because the view is

widespread that there is something progressive about state capitalism.

Clawson obviously does not hol,d this view; but the notion of a 'break

with state capitalism' under Sadat is easily lent to it.41 The first

murmurs of Egyptian capital's search for a way out of the crisis began

in 1965. After the June War, political crisis made a new strategy

requisite. Announced in Nasser's March 30 Programme of 1968, it

involved a reorientiation at two levels: economically, an attempt to

rebuild foreign exchange; at the level of the labour process, an

organisational and ideological shift. This went hand in hand with a

recomposition of the regime's power-base, and ultimately a drive for

peace with Israel (in the form of the Rogers Plan), which prefigured

Sadat's initiatives.

The keystone of Nasser's programme was the emphasis on 'scientific

management', '... the placing of the right man [sic] in the right

position'.42 The aim was to place the technocracy in control of

production, to de-politicise Egypt's political economy: to move away

from the incorporationist strategy of the past to a more 'efficient'

method of valorisation. Thus began the attacks on worker represent~

ation and all the populist values of the pre-1967 period. As Cooper puts

it, there was a' . . . shift from the aggressive, ideological affirmation of

the worker input, to the administrative scheme to remove it.~43

Reactivating the private sector was vital to this strategy, not because of

a conflict between the state and private capital, but because of the need

to shed the incorporationist legacy in a sphere in which economic

efficiency had to be primary. The policy of redistribution of 'national

wealth' was reversed in an effort to extract a higher rate of surplus-

value by means of 'scientific' managerial techniques. "Infitah" was the

logical corollary: boost the valorisation capacity of the 'Egyptian

economy' by means of foreign investment.

Inevitably, the working class began to resist, but almost equally

inevitably, resistance was defensive: incorporation seemed preferable

to suppression. The consequences have. been noted above.

A final factor of crucial importance is the attempt to find a new

integration of Egyptian capital into the network of Arab capitalism.

Beginning in 1967, Egypt began to rely on Arab oil money in the form

of capital loans and aid. From 1975-77 this reliance increased. As Said

Marei put it, 'Western technology and Arab ,capital and Egyptian

labour = economic growth'.44 Since the oil producers demanded both

skilled and unskilled labour, this has meant an internationalisation of

labour.

Since 1975 the number of Egyptian migrants may have grown to as

many as two million.45 Abroad, these workers are exploited heavily.

The effects of migrant labour on the Egyptian capitalist economy,

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Egyptian Migrant Workers to Capital-Rich States, 1975

Countries of % of Arab No. of Egyptian % of Egyptian

employment migrant workers migrant

workforce workforce

Saudi Arabia 13.6 95,000 23.9

Libya 73.9 229,500 57.8

Kuwait 28.2 37,558 9.4

DAE 20.2 12,500 3.1

Jordan 16.2 5,300 1.3

Iraq 46.1 7.000 1.8

Qatar 19.2 2,850 0.7

Oman 52.3 4,600 1.2

Bahrain 20.1 1,237 0.3

YAR 85.1 2,000 0.5

Total 30.0 397,545 100.0

Source: Birks and Sinclair, Labour Migration in the Arab Middle East

however, are complex. In some cases new groups have to fill the places

of migrants, particularly women, who can be paid less. The subsidis-

ation of the subsistence of workers in Egypt by remittances can also

lower the value of labour-power. It completes a picture of the Egyptian

bourgeoisie's attempts to restore its rate of profit by raising the rate of

e~ploitation .

The Theory of Imperialism

Clawson's analysis of the periodisation of the internationalisation of

capital ultimately begs the crucial question. The internationalisation of

money (finance) capital is clearly meant to be identified with Lenin's

theory of imperialism. The different historical internationalisation of

different circuits of capital is thus presented as a theory of the develop-

ment of imperialism. But serious questions are posed by such a

theorisation, and Clawson does not broach them.

The first and most obvious problem has already been indicated. If

'Egyptian capitalism developed largely due to foreign capital' (P88),

and if it has always needed foreign capital ('The internationalisation of

capital is not a policy option that a government can choose to accept or

reject', (P197), then why did the Egyptian bourgeoisie, with encourag-

ment by the state in the post-1919 period, develop a nationalist ideology

that opposed foreign capitalist domination? Clawson notes that 'Bank

Misr, which was founded out of the nationalist outpouring of the 1919

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revolution, was initially opposed to any co-operation with foreign capi-

tal. [But it] was forced... to take foreign partners who threatened

[competition] with Bank Misr firms' (P90). But the question of why the

Misr group opposed foreign capital, initially or otherwise, 46is left open.

Had Clawson tried to understand the significance of the bourgeois

nation-state for capital accumulation, he could have gone some way

towards seeing that capitalist development is not a unilateral inter-

nationalisation, but a contradictory, dialectical process in which classes

are locked in conflict. The internationalisation of capital cannot trans-

cend limitations imposed by nation-states, which are essential for the

guarantee of the reproduction of capitalist social relations at the

economic, political, and ideological levels .47 Other historical factors

influence the formation of classes as well, of course. But Clawson

appears not to see the problem.

The second problem is more complex, and relates to a broader theo-

retical question. The 'radical' theories of underdevelopment that Claw-

son rightly rejects provided fairly straightforward, albeit populist,

political guidelines. Many of the recent, more vigorous Marxist

attempts to explain relations between advanced and Third World coun-

tries are frustratingly apolitical. Where they have provided political

direction is in breaking through the petty-bourgeois nationalism that

has dominated working-class movements in the Third World. But the

question of imperialism itself has in the process remained unexplored.

If the effect of capitalist penetration is 'underdevelopment', it is

obvious that socialists must oppose it. If, as Clawson argues, capitalist

penetration does not underdevelop Third World countries, then the

attitude socialists should take to it is less clear. Bill Warren, whose

position is similar to Clawson's although infinitely less S()phisticated,

has taken the view of imperialism as a good thing to the extent of

actively supporting such ventures as the Lomé convention.48 Clawson

clearly intends to point not in such a direction,49 but back to Lenin's

position. Yet the changing face of the post-colonial world perhaps

renders many of Lenin's central themes (national independence, etc.)

irrelevant. At the most basic level, socialists obviously oppose capital,

whatèver its national origin. But the issue of imperialism is separate"to

some extent: there is, after all, a difference in power between US and

Egyptian capital. A theory of crisis goes some of the way towards

resolving this problem, since as we have seen, 'infitah' can be situated in

the context of a world capitalist crisis, and imperialism's efforts to

resolve it. But the role of imperialism in Egypt is quite clearly related to

its regional interests and cannot be reduced to the protection of capital

investments. Camp David, the RDF, and so on are part of an imperial-

ist political strategy arising from the global needs of imperialist capital,

rather than simply the internationalisation of capital. The theory of the

internationalisation of capital is intended as counterposition to the

radical sociology of underdevelopment. In some respects, Clawson

does not break completely with these radical conceptions, however.

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The use of expressions like 'dependence on the advanced economies'

(p 104) is an example of an approach that remains to some extent fixated

by inter-nation relations, with the difference that in Clawson's frame-

work 'nations' are rendered anomalous. What is more serious is the

consequent focus on the development of local and international

oppressor classes rather than on the oppressed. Political questions to do

with strategy and ideology (for instance, an assessment of the potential

of a nationalist movement) remain elusive in this perspective.

Clawson's most serious weakness in this respect is that he presents but

the outline of a theory of imperialism that is never actually developed

into such a theory; it never fulfils its promise. As a result, no clear con-

ception of the underlying faults of the existing Marxist literature on

Egypt emerges. The tendency to pose issues related to Egypt in nation-

alist terms - to see Egyptian history first and foremost as an unfolding

national liberation struggle - and to judge the Nasserist state by

nationalist criteria is not challenged. It is not enough to counterpose a

different theory: for Marxism theory has a political purpose. Clawson's

framework leans toward an alternative 'world systems' theory, which is

potentially dangerous. Thus: 'This pattern is much the same as that to

be seen in Latin America, Africa, or Asia. . . The wide applicability of

this overall pattern lends strength to my basic thesis' (p 109).

But is the pattern so uniform? Clawson's argument that it is can rest

only on a model of capitalist development that is monocausal and

devoid of the notion of class struggle. The movement of capital is

always historically specific, and it is doubtful that a theory of 'the

world' is possible. The classical Marxist conception of imperialism,

unlike its post-war imitators, conceived of relations between imperialist

capital and the Third World as the result, not the definition, of

imperialism; Clawson's search for a world theory points back to the

conflation of imperialism with the world economy, and this is a route

we should not take.

Conclusion

It has not been my intention to suggest that Clawson's analysis is hope-

lessly wrong, merely that it is somewhat two-dimensional, and needs

further development. 50 Nor have I tried to answer all the questions that

have been raised.

My objective has been to show that since 1965 a crisis in theaccumula-

tion of capital has developed in Egypt that can be resolved only by

reducing the living standards of the Egyptian masses, in an effort to raise

the rate of surplus-value. January 1977 showed that if it is to succeed in

this, the Egyptian state will have to employ wholesale repression on a

scale of which itis not presently capable. A crucial element in the strategy

is to establish an alliance with US capital, which if achieved would help

enormously in alleviating many of the problems of Egyptian capitalism.

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The continuing instability of the Egyptian state militates against

fructification of this alliance. The crisis of capitalism is thus also a

political crisis, and the question mark hanging over Egypt is whether

the bourgeoisie can impose its solution, or whether the working class

can smash the bourgeois state and reorganise production. If those of us

outside Egypt can contribute something by way of analysis for and

solidarity with the workers in Egypt, all the ink that has flowed will

have been worthwhile.

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7 Prior to Muhammed 'Ali, the state was receiving only 20% of total tax

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'The Origins of Capitalist Develpoment: A Critique of Neo-Smithian

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10 Marx, Capital vol 2, Penguin/NLR. 1978, p185. This is quoted in Clawson.

11 Since he never refers to 'value' , it is possible that Clawson accepts the neo-

Ricardian position that it is a useless concept. In my opinion, rejection of

Marx's value theory means throwing overboard any understanding of social, as

opposed to technical, relations.

12 This, of course, was Trotsky's position. See The Revolution Betrayed, New

Park 1973. See also the articles by Ernest Mandel in Readings in State

Capitalism, IMG Publications.

13 The 'new petty bourgeoisie' has been theorised most elaborately by Nicos

Poulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, NLB 1974.

14 It is difficult to tell whether this is Clawson's term or a parody of Hussein et

al. If the latter, I apologise.

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State capitalism in Egypt: a critique of Patrick Clawson

15 See Ruth First, 'Libya: Class and State in an Oil Economy', in Nore and

Turner, eds.

16 For a discussion of Marx's theory of unequal exchange, as distinct from that

of Emmanuel, see Geoffrey Kay, Development and Underdevelopment: A

Marxist Analysis, Macmillan 1975.

17 An unanswered question that arises from Clawson's position is that of the

relationship between a socialist state and the outside world. He suggests (P107)

the possibility of socialism in one country. For an interesting discussion, see

Gavin Kitching, 'The Theory of Imperialism and its Consequences', MERIP,

no 100/101,1982.

18 Robert Mabro, The Egyptian Economy, OUP 1974, p145

19 Mabro and O'Brien, 'Structural Changes in the Egyptian Economy

1937 -1965, in M.A. Cook, ed., Studies in the Economic History of the Middle

East, OUP 1970, p419.

20 Mabro.

21 Ibid.

22 For this kind of terminology, see in particular Hussein.

23 Mahmoud Abdel-Fadil, The Political Economy of Nasserism, OUP 1980.

24 Ibid.

25 International Yearbook of Labour Statistics, 1969. Similar patterns are

revealed in the length of thè working day.

26 Abdel-Fadil.

27 Ibid.

28 See the account in Unni Wikan, Life Among the Poor in Cairo, Tavistock

1980.

29 Mona Hammam, 'Labor Migration and the Sexual Division of Labor',

MERIP, no 95, p6.

30 Ibid.

31 Judith Tucker, 'Egyptian Women in the Work Force', MERIP, no 50. This

actually conflicts with the evidence in Abdel-Fadil, p19.

32 Marx, Capital Volume 1, Penguin/NLR 1976, appendix. In this brief

exposition of the basic issues related to the labour process, no attempt will be

made to elaborate beyond the 'formal' 'real' distinction in subsumption to

capital. This is, of course, inadequate, and a fuller analysis is required.

33 Evidence is disputed, but there is much to indicate that agricultural wages

have been consistently lower than urban wages. See Abdel-Fadil, Development,

Income Distribution and Social Change in Rural Egypt 1952 -1970, CUP 1975.

34 Quoted in John Waterbury, Egypt: Burdens of the Past, Options for the

future, Indiana University Press 1978.

35 See Jane Mayfield, Rural Politics in Nasser's Egypt, University of Texas

1971.

36 Middle East Record, 1967, p541.

37 Abdel-Fadil, 1980, p1l6.

38 See in particular, Patrick O'Brien, The Revolution in Egypt's Economic

System,OUP 1966.

39 Middle East Record, 1967.

40 Waterbury, p254.

41 For a particularly crass exposition of the view that Sadat's policies marked a

fundamental shift, see Dave Frankel 'Sadat Dies - US Military Build-up Lives',

Intercontinental Press, 19 October 1981. Sad at is portrayed as having been

'forced by imperialism' to carry out a rightist turn.

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42 Quoted in Mark Cooper, 'Egyptian State Capitalism in Crisis', IJMES, vol

10, 1979.

43 Ibid.

44 Quoted in Waterbury.

45 See Hammam; Fred Halliday, 'Labour Migration in the Middle East',

MERIP, no 59; Birks and Sinclair, 'Labour Migration in the Arab Middle East',

Third World Quarterly, vol 1 , no 2; and Hallwood and Sinclair, Oil, Debt and

Development, Allen and Unwin 1981).

46 It is not clear that the later acceptance of foreign partnership was a smooth

transition. Nor is it clear that the struggles of the labour movement in this period

played no role in forcing Egyptian foreign capital together.

47 This is not intended as an expression of Poulantzas's position, though he

does make some useful points.

48 Bill Warren; Imperialism: Pioneer of Capitalism, Verso 1980.

49 He is quite clear about this in Nore and Turner.

50 Ibid. Clawson recognises the incomplete nature of his theory.

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Reply to Israel Shahak

Roberto Sussman

Israel Shahak's essay 'The Jewish religion and its attitude to non-Jews'

(Khamsin 8 and 9) correctly identifies and denounces chauvinistic

elements in the ideology of medieval Judaism. This task has a special

contemporary significance, since medieval Judaism continues to

provide one of the major ideological justifications for the oppressive

and clericalist policies of successive Israeli governments (particularly

that of the Likud coalition). Unfortunately, the effectivenes of

Shahak's essay suffers from a deficient methodology, which is unable

to integrate a confused and disjointed text full of interesting, but ill-

considered, evidence. Additionally, Shahak's obsessive moral funda-

mentalism appears concerned more with condemnation than explana-

tion. As a consequence, Shahak's essay as a whole lacks focus and

clarity, especially in Part I. (Parts II and III are better structured.)

Thus, the reader is led to view many parts of the essay as pieces of

Shahak's own Voltairisic demonology of the Jews, their religion and

their history. To illustrate this point, let us read one passage written by

Voltaire about the Jews:

'But what shall I say to my brother the Jew? Shall I give him dinner?

Yes, provided that during the meal Balaam's ass doesn't take it into its

head to bray; that Ezekiel doesn't come to swallow one of the guests

and keep him in his belly for three days; that a serpent doesn't mix into

the conversation to seduce my wife; that a prophet doesn't take it into

his head to sleep with her after dinner, as that good fellow Hoseah did

for fifteen francs and a bushel of barley; above all that no Jew make a

tour round my house sounding a trumpet, making the walls come

down, killing me, my father, my mother, my wife, my children, my cat

and my dog, according to the former usage of the Jews.'!

Comparing the style and spirit of this and other passages written by

Voltaire with many passages in Shahak's essay (especially in Part I), it is

clear that the essay was not only written within the theoretical frame-

work of the Englightenment, but also has all the literary flavour of

Voltaire, with his lengthy encyclopedic moralistic remarks, and a

profusion of acid sarcasms. It is a thorough impersonation of Voltaire,

not excluding even his well-known call 'Ecrasez l'infâme!' and,

obviously, Voltaire's own prejudices concerning the Jews of his time.2

The editorial in Khamsin 8 which introduces Shahak's essay points

out its two main objectives:

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1 Analysis and critique of medieval ('classical' in Shahak's termin-

ology) Judaism as a whole.

2 Exposition of the fact that modern 'secular' Zionism has inherited

many oppressive, and specifically racist tendencies, from medieval

Judaism.

The reader is warned about the non-Marxist nature of the essay,

whose importance is further justified by stating that 'if Jews have been

the principal victims of racism in this century, this must not be a

restraint to expose racist tendencies within Zionism' . 'Leaving aside for

a while a methodological critique of the essay (whether the theoretical

framework of nineteenth century Enlightenment is an effective tool for

analysing the medieval Jewish influence in modern Zionism), it must be

said that Shahak does succeed in his second objective; that is, he verifies

empirically that many everyday practical and legal matters in modern

Israel are settled using ideological elements borrowed from medieval

Judaism. Such an empirical verification is valuable in itself and,

together with his systematic exhibition of racist, classist and sexist

passages from medieval Jewish liturgy, forms the best of his essay. All

this empirical evidence could lead to a well-structured materialist

analysis, which would not only incorporate these empirical facts, but

could use them for explaining to what degree the clericalism of the State

of Israel is an organic component of it, and not just an incidental

feature (electoral blackmail of religious parties). Shahak also points

out, correctly, how 'deceptive' interpretations of medieval Judaism

(and Jewish history in general) are being propagated by a whole army of

journalists, intellectuals and middlemen ('patriotic liars' in Shahak's

terminology). Worse, these 'deceptions' are still believed by the

majority of Jews today.

Regarding the first objective, the best that can be said is that Shahak

does show the incompatibility of medieval Judaism with the philosophy

of the Enlightenment. Such a finding is not a surprise in itself, since

medieval Judaism is a feudal, corporative institution and, as such, is

anathema to the individualistic conceptions of the Enlightenment.

However, Shahak deals with medieval Judaism in an ahistorical and

non-material manner; he uses isolated empirical facts to present it as a

'closed' and 'totalitarian' institution, taking Karl Popper's 'Open

Society' as a reference for what an ideally non-closed and non-

totalitarian society should look like. I wonder whether it is legitimate to

analyse a medieval institution, contrasting it with a later post-medieval

social model, and therefore conclude that the medieval institution was

'totalitarian'; even in the case when such an ahistorical comparison

could be justified, if it is made without specifying the nature of the

broad social environment in which such a medieval institution

operated, this comparison becomes absurd. In the first part of his

essay, Shahak concludes that medieval Judaism was 'one of the most

totalitarian institutions of human history', but there is no mention

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at all that this institution was immersed in a broader society (medieval

Europe) which would also be 'totalitarian' by Shahak's standards. It

would be foolish to expect medieval Jewish communities to be islands

of Popperian 'Open Societies' in the ocean of medieval corporative

Europe; these islands would have never survived.

Shahak's commentaries regarding some of the supposed character-

istics of modern Jews, like the 'J~wish' sense of humour, are also

absurd. The fact that medieval JudaIsm has no comedies does not imply

a humourless condition of medieval Jews, not to mention modern Jews.

There were also no comedies in medieval Christianity, and the allusion

to totalitarianism in this context is ridiculous. Modern Jews and

medieval Jews lived in very different environments, and therefore they

must have different characteristics: whether or not there is a historical

continuity between them cannot be categorically determined just by an

empirical examination of medieval Judaism.

In the third part of the essay Shahak argues at length that medieval

Judaism was contemptuous of peasants and of agriculture as an

occupation. However he does not use these facts as material for con-

structing a satisfactory analysis nor does he connect them with the

discussion in Part I; consequently the text, as a whole, becomes

extremely confused. Shahak presents an encyclopedic and static view of

medieval Jewish history, that is, full of ill-connected details and lacking

a consistent development and systematisation. His view has the typical

methodological structure of liberal historical analysis, in which the set

of moral considerations and decisions of a few powerful and (usually)

'evil' men constitute the engine of history, all against a static

background of suffering peasants. In the case of medieval Jews, these

'evil' men were the rabbinical caste, and the endurance of medieval

Judaism as an 'oppressive' institution is only a consequence of the

coercive power of this caste, either in collusion with or subordinated to

the equally 'evil' but more powerful Gentile king or feudal lord.

A much more coherent view of medieval Jewish history is that of

Abram Leon,3 in which the medieval Jewish communities are depicted

as a 'people-class' performing a specific socio-economic role: the

exchange of products in a natural economy. Therefore, their relation to

the rest of medieval society depended on how far their socio-economic

role was 'necessary' for the functioning of that society. When this role

was 'necessary', (the 'Radanite'4 period before the Crusades), they

were granted privileges, and were protected by the kings, the nobility

and the Church, having little contact with the serfs. This situation

deteriorated when native merchant classes emerged in western Europe,

displacing the Jews from the former privileged position of 'bankers of

the oligarchy', towards a more 'popular' petty trade and commerce,

which often took the form of usury. It is precisely in this new role that

the Jews came increasingly in contact with the dispossessed layers of

peasants and unskilled artisans, and became the objects of 'popular

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hatred' . 5 In the third part of the essay, Shahak does outline these

developments, but omits them completely when he deals with antì-

Jewish persecutions, presenting the Jews as having the privileges of the

Radanite period, combined with their antagonistic relation to the

peasantry, as simultaneous features throughout the Middle Ages.6

Although Abram Leon's thesis has its own limitations, at least it

provides a much better structured account of Jewish history than all

previous and later idealistic historiographies. Even acceptìng an

idealistic point of view, it is impossible to conclude categorically that in

every case the massacres of Jews in the Middle Ages or in Khmielnicki's

revolt were legitimate acts of exploited serfs against 'privileged and

corrupt' Jews. It is impossible to know in each partìcular event the

moral considerations which different individuals followed, or whether

antagonistìc group interests forced the Jews to take sides independently

of their individual moral considerations. The fact that many of the

precepts and regulations of medieval Judaism seem to be 'immoral' by

the standards of the Enlightenment is not a categorical proof that

medieval Jews had a free choice to behave 'morally', and instead chose

an 'immoral' behaviour, becoming usurers or slave-traders. Even if the

Jews belonged to the privileged strata of medieval society, this does not

mean that their position was very secure; usually it was not, but

depended on the protectìon of kings, noblemen, the clergy, etc. There

were no Jewish armies in the Middle Ages, and if the Jews were the

usual target of popular fury, it may have been because they were the

weakest and most unprotected sector of these privileged strata; and

after the Crusades, perhaps the only one of these sectors which was in

everyday contact with the peasants and urban poor.

According to Abram Leon's theory, the decadence of western Euro-

pean Jewries (except for the Spanish and Portuguese Jewish communi-

ties) was in a very advanced stage just before the French Revolutìon;

therefore the Jews whom enlightened gentlemen like Voltaire came

across were mainly archaic remnants of a long-gone medieval world.

However, the enlighteners also shared some prejudices which belong to

the'European Christian tradition, even if they themselves were fierce

anti-clericalicists.7 These prejudices form the 'money-grabbing,

parasitic,. obscurantist' stereotype, which was reinforced by their

occasional acquaintances with such real Jews.

This myth about the 'wandering evil Jew' is nothing more than one of

the ideological elements common to most political movements in

agrarian societies, consisting in 'idealising the native peasant so as to

oppose him as a prototype to the corrupt urban dweller and to the

foreigner, especially to the Jew'. 8 These myths originated in the anta-

gonism felt by agrarian societies towards any occupation (merchants,

bureaucrats, skilled artisans) which was not directly related to

agrículture. Such antagonism has always been expressed through moral

condemnations. It is by no means a recent phenomenon, and can be

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traced as far back as the ancient Greek and Roman societies.9

Obviously, this attitude forms a strong component of the ancient and

medieval hatred towards non-peasant ethnic groups (Jews, Gypsies,

Armenians, etc). Since the Christian middle ages were a period of

fundamentally agrarian societies, these ideological elements survived

that period and were incorporated in European Christian thought, all

the way until the Enlightenment, when the Jews were the most identi-

fiable group of non-peasant origin in Europe.

During the Enlightenment, when large sectors of western European

society became urbanised, the above-mentioned ideological elements

took different forms depending on the degree of rupture that different

sectors of this society had with respect to the values of the former

agrarian society. Among the most urbanised sector (including many

radical liberals, anti-clericalists and socialists) these ideological

elements were purged of their religious presentation; keeping only the

attribution of moral virtues per se to the peasantry and working class,

on account of the 'morally positive' nature of their occupations. As a

contrast, the Jews were offered emancipation and civil rights as indi-

viduals, but not as a distinct cultural-religious group, since Jewish

culture and religion were associated automatically with 'morally

degrading' activities such as commerce, usury, speculation.

The fact that this image of the Jews and their religion is a mystifica-

tion becomes evident when one examines the way these enlighteners

describe Judaism, Jewish history, and their own attitudes towards

contemporary Jews.1O For the western European enlightened

bourgeoisie, the whole Jewish question was reduced to one simple idea:

the Jews have been despised and persecuted because they fanatically

adhered to their obscurantist faith, and consequeßtly they could only be

accepted in an enlightened society if they would renounce their' Jewish

characteristics'. Western European Jews who were assimilating cultur-

ally to this bourgeoisie did accept this point of view, and believing this

image of themselves, they acquired in their assimilation process these

prejudices when dealing with eastern EurOpean non-enlightened Jews.

Other ethnic groups, such as non-European 'natives' were also mysti-

fied by the enlighteners, and even by early Marxists, as 'noble savages'

who would deserve enlightenment when they renounced their 'uncivili-

sed characteristics'. All these commonly held prejudices can always be

reinforced by manipulating empirical findings when analysing the

history and behaviour of a particular group. For example, a scholar

wishing to exhibit the 'criminal character' of American Blacks could

produce evidence showing over-representation of Blacks in American

jails. However, it is not the amount of empirical evidence which makes

a social analysis worthy of consideration; it is how this evidence is

consistently incorporated into a methodologically sound analysis.

In the case of Voltaire or Marx, when they wrote about the Jews in

general, they were ignorant of their diversity as a product of their

dispersion, which faced these Jewish minorities with different socio-

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economic environments: from medieval Yemen to industrial England.

Thus, their prejudices became self-evident inasmuch as they ignored

any evidence that would have contradicted their beliefs, and they did

not even develop a complete analysis accounting for their known evid-

ence. In the case of a twentieth century Israeli enlightener like Shahak, 11

both situations arise: as an anti-Zionist within Israel, he is confronted

with an oppressive, clericalist state which is officially a 'Jewish' state;

therefore he tries to demonstrate that every single group, throughout

history, which identified itself as Jewish must have shared to a lesser or

greater degree the same type of 'totalitarian' behaviour towards the

Gentile society (especially peasants) as the State of Israel practises

towards the Palestinians and other Arabs. Thus, according to Shahak,

pre-1795 Polish Jewry provides the best 'historical model' explaining

the current political position of Israel in a world-wide context, with the

imperialist powers, Israel, and the Third World's peasants replacing the

roles of the feudal lords, their Jewish servants and bailiffs, and the

serfs, respectively. Without denying some limited validity to such an

analogy, it must be said that it is a flawed second-rate substitute for an

understanding of the role of Israel as a sub-imperialist power in the

Middle East, and as one of the major providers of weapons to military

dictatorships.

The revolt of the Cossack leader Khmielnicki in 1648 provides

another example of how Shahak manipulates historical facts to fit them

into his theories. Independently of historical considerations (whether

or not Shahak's account of this revolt is accurate) and even accepting

the claim that this event was significant in shaping Jewish-Gentile

relations in eastern Europe, it is doubtful that twentieth-century eastern

European Jewish settlers in Palestine ideologically identified the

Palestinians with the Ukrainian peasants participating in Khmielnicki's

revolt. The relation between Jewish settlers and Palestinians was

completely different from that between Jews ,and peasants in

seventeenth-century Ukraine, and of all the factors accounting for the

attitudes and prejudices of the Zionist establishment towards the Pale-

stinians, the specific conditions under which the Zionist settling process

took place are far more important than a historically distant event. In any

case, the Cossack leader who was in the minds of eastern European Jews

during the Zionist colonisation was not Khmielnicki, but rather Petlura;

I doubt very much whether one could'associate any 'positive' attribute to

the latter just by virtue of being a leader of peasants.

I will not deny Shahak's claim that medieval Judaism had a strong anti-

peasant ideological content, and that this fact must have somehow ref-

lected the socio-economic role and prejudices of those who created and

practised the norms and precepts of such a liturgy. As pointed out

before, medieval Christianity, being the religion of a largely agrarian

society, incorporated into its ideology a set of prejudices directed

against those groups who had a non-agricultural occupation. Therefore,

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the Middle Ages witnessed dialectical relations between groups whose

socio-economic nature is in some cases reflected in the ideological

content of their religions, each one understanding the other through a

set of prejudices. Both groups disliked and attributed moral defects to

each other; but they also needed each other and there was mutual

tolerance whenever the whole of medieval society was reasonably

stable. Considering the relatively different regional conditions in each

country and each particular historical period, Jewish-Gentile relations

in medieval Europe fit quite well the urban-rural dialectical relation just

described. Throughout the Middle Ages, either when privileged and

protected or when despised and persecuted, medieval Jews had a dis-

tinctive general feature: they were an easily identifiable town-dwelling

group not related to agricultural activities. Medieval Judaism, as the

religion of a town-dwelling group immersed in an agrarian society,

reflects the anti-peasant prejudices of such a group. Shahak's approach

to this fact is to stress extensively the anti-peasant prejudices of

medieval Judaism (which become demonical attributes), and to ignore

the dialectical relation with the religion of the surrounding society:

medieval Christianity. That is, he examines medieval Judaism (and

also, post-medieval Jewish history) from the ideological system of

reference of the agrarian Christian tradition, using the language and

methodology of its post-medieval continuation: the Enlightenment.

Not only did the Enlightenment fail to produce a convincing account

for the survival of the ethno-religious Jewish minorities, it also

provided the theoretical framework in which the vulgar Jewish historio-

graphies are written. These historiographies, sanctioned by the full

official apparatus of the State of Israel, have the same methodological

structure as Shahak's essay, with a reverse mystification: the 'suffering'

Jews are sanctified and the 'evil' peasants become antisemitic demons.

Needless to say, all these mystifying approaches to medieval Judaism,

treating it in isolation from its social environment, without an under-

standing of the material conditions and evolution of medieval society as

a whole, are empty and misleading, even if they incorporate large

amounts of empirical evidence.

It is worth mentioning that Jewish history is a topic which still needs

further research. There are many non-materialist interpretations which

tend to reinforce in the general public the myths alluded to above. Even

the Marxist interpretation of Abram Leon, being a product of Ortho-

dox Marxism, has an excessively deterministic view; and in spite of

having been already re-examined, requires further critique and

incorporation of recent developments. 12

So far, my critique of Shahak's essay has been confined to enquiring

whether he meets the objectives mentioned in the editorial introduction

to his essay. However, Shahak claims to achieve in his essay a far more

ambitious objective: the demystification of all post-medieval Jewish

history. This objective, together with a clue to Shahak's methodology,

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are contained in the following statement of principles at the end of the

third part of the essay:

'We must confront the Jewish past and those aspects of the present

which are based simultaneously on lying about the past and

worshipping it. The prerequisites of this are, first, total honesty about

the facts, and, secondly the belief (leading to action, whenever possible)

in universalist human principles of ethics and politics.'

It seems that the belief in 'universal human principles of ethics and

politics' means to Shahak that, for ail historical circumstances, the

behaviour of all post-medieval Jews (as individuals or as a group) is to

be gauged in terms of these vague principles, independently of the

material conditions in which these Jews lived. Having 'demonstrated'

the incompatibility of medieval Judaism with these principles, Shahak

concludes that every 'inhuman' or 'negative' aspect of the behaviour of

all post-medieval Jews is just a consequence of their adherence

(possibly uncohsious, possibly secret or conspiratorial, possibly

enforced by the rabbi's coercion) to medieval Judaism with all its

'racist' and 'totalitarian' content. Thus, no further analysis is

necessary, and the lack of explanation of the behaviour of a wide and

disconnected variety of Jews is substituted by the vaguely defined

concept of 'Jewish interest' which as a sinister group interest is the

motivation underlying the acts of the Israeli politician, the Zionist

journalist, the Marxist and Bundist intellectuals, the Hassidic mystic,

the American rabbi, Moses Hess, Martin Buber, etc. All of them, in

spite of the obviously different conditions in which they live or lived,

are or were in danger of being overcome by the obscure forces of

medieval Judaism, and thus finally becoming' Jewish racists' guided by

'Jewish interest'. The text in the first part of the essay is full of

hysterical and distasteful remarks that, taken out of context, could be

read as if quoted from an antisemitic publication. A typical passage of

this Judeophobic demonology is when Shahak deals with the 'fact' that

many Jewish militants in radical left-wing parties still bear the ideology

of the old totalitarian Jewish society:

'An examination of radical, socialist and communist parties can

provide many examples of disguised Jewish chauvinists and racists,

who joined these parties merely for reasons of "Jewish interest" and

are, in this region, in favour of anti-gentile discrimination. One need

only to check how many Jewish "Socialists" have managed to write

about the kibbutz without taking the trouble to mention that it is a

racist institution from which non-Jewish citizens of Israel are rigor-

ously excluded, to see that the phenomenon we are alluding to is by no

means uncommon.'

The implication that left-wing political parties are or have been infiltra-

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ted by 'Jewish racists' who pursue some 'Jewish interest', without

providing detailed documentation specifying which parties and which

Jewish members are being alluded to, is a remark smacking of a scan-

dalous 'conspiracy theory'. Besides being offensive, this remark is

absolutely mistaken, because what an examination of Jewish militants

in radical left-wing parties shows,. in most cases, is extremely

assimilated Jews who are indifferent (if not contemptuous) towards any

specifically Jewish identity. As different sources13 show regarding the

Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, its Jewish members, such as

Trotsky, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Martov, were the most implacable

opponents of the Jewish national-cultural demands that the Bund was

fighting for .14 Possibly, Shahak is condemning the Bund for

campaigning for the 'Jewish interest', but then, what was wrong with

campaigning for a particular group interest (the Jewish working masses

in Tsarist Russia) when they were being oppressed as a group, and the

fulfilment of this group interest - unlike Zionism - did not imply the

oppression of another group? It is possible that Shahak has in mind the

identification of the so-called' Jewish interest' with Zionism, in which

case his reference to the apology for the kibbutz by the 'disguised'

Jewish racists could at least make sense. If it was Shahak's intention to

condemn pro-Zionist inclinations among Jewish members of left-wing

parties, then why does he not say so explicitly? Is it a responsible

attitude to write confused Judeophobic remarks, and to expect well-

intentioned readers to interpret them correctly as anti-Zionist? 15

Even in the case of individual Jewish members of left-wing organisa-

tions, who either campaign openly for Zionism or fail to denounce it, it

is very simplistic to assume that these individuals are disguised Jewish

racists. It is not possible to conclude categorically that if a given

individual claims to subscribe to a certain ideology, he/she is respon-

sible for every single aspect of that ideology. Individuals may adhere to

a given oppressive ideology because of a variety of reasons: ignorance,

opportunism, temporary and personal circumstances, or because the

oppressive nature of that ideology is not evident in the social context in

which the individual lives. In the case of individual Jews outside Israel,

all these reasons hold, and must be understood when confronting their

support for Zionism.

I am not claiming that Jews are free of racism just by virtue of being

Jews, or that they have no responsibility whatsoever for subscribing to

an ideology which necessarily deprives the Palestinian people of its

political rights; but it is also not possible to dismiss all these circum-

stances as 'Jewish interest' somehow originating from the 'racist'

nature of medieval Judaism.

All politically active individuals are guilty of political contradictions,

at least temporarily, without necessarily being hypocrites or disguised

racists. To confront this fact with a hysterical, maximalist, moral-

crusading rhetoric leads nowhere. An example of how Shahak deals

with these facts is his sarcastic account of the rabbis who campaigned

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with Martin Luther King without having made a thorough self-criticism

about anti-Black racism in important passages of medieval Jewish

liturgy. Shahak dismisses these rabbis either as disguised Jewish racists

who supported the Civil Rights movement for tactical reasons dictated

by' Jewish interest', or as schizophrenics. Later on, in the third part of

the essay, he draws a humanising view of nineteenth-century European

anti semites as 'bewildered men who deeply hated modern society in all its

aspects. . . were ardent believers in the conspiracy theory. . . cast [the

Jews] in the role of scapegoat . . . ' It is interesting to seehowitis perfectly

natural for Shahak to excuse political and moral contradictions in

certain individuals and groups as long as they are not Jewish; why

couldn't the American rabbinical scholars have been (at least some of

them) simply confused, contradictoFY (and perhaps in many cases

conservative) individuals whose participation in the Civil Rights move-

ment was honest? Why does Shahak only demand 100 per cent contra-

diction-free moral integrity from the Jewish characters of his demono-

logy? Perhaps he secretly bèlieves in 'Jewish moral superiority' and

castigates the Jew in his imagination for not living up to such superiority.

Another phenomenon which underlies the behaviour of Jewish

individuals and communities is antisemitism, 16 and therefore Shahak is

not justified in playing it down as a mere excuse used by these

individuals and communities to justify their attitudes. The fact that

antisemitism has also been mystified and abused by Zionist rhetoric

does not mean that it is non-existent and should be overlooked; it is a

social phenomenon which has been excessively manipulated by

moralists of all sorts, who have never been able to explain its complex-

ities and perseverance. The following passage in the first part of the

essay shows how Shahak correctly criticises (in his own style) the

manipulation of antisemitism by some non-Jewish apologists of

Judaism, Zionism and the 'approved version' of Jewish history:

, . . : One way to "atone" for the persecution of Jews is to speak out

against evil perpetrated by Jews but to participate in "white lies" about

them .'

Unfortunately, the excessively moralistic condemnatory tone of the

essay leads one to believe that Shahak wishes to challenge the former

manipulation of antisemitism (whose effects he might have suffered as

an anti-Zionist citizen of Israel) by indulging in an approximately

reverse moralistic manipulation, which could be described as follows:

'One way to "explain" the persecution of Jews is to generalise

(ahistorically) to all Jews the evil (nature) of Zionism and to participate

in "white lies" about some of their persecutors.'

It is clear from reading these moralistic manipulations, that antisemit-

ism (and racism in general) is a far too serious social problem to be

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approached only through moral considerations. Unfortunately, and in

this respect I agree with Shahak, Marxist research (especially the

excessively economistic variety) has not yet produced a satisfactory

account of racism in its most virulent forms.

Not surprisingly, even today the ethno-religious Jewish minorities

still feel vulnerable to discrimination to a lesser or greater degree,

depending on the socio-economic position they occupy in the country

where they live. This insecurity must be a relevant factor in the political

awareness of individuals within these minorities. There is still no

coherent account of how and why the large majority of these Jews still

subscribe to Zionism. This important task has not yet been achieved by

anti-Zionist scholars, who have concentrated exclusively on the role of

Zionism in the political scenario of the Middle East, leaving aside the

fact that Zionism, as an ideology and as a political movement, plays a

very different role outside Israel, since the conditions in which the

Jewish minorities live are very different from those of the Israeli Jews,

who are a relatively new national group.

What must be investigated is how Zionism affects the way in which

Jewish minorities have related to their surrounding societies, and how

the outcome of this interrelation has determined their acceptance of

Zionism with the inherent mythologic-catastrophic view of their

history. It must be said that before the Second W orId War Zionism was

never the dominant political movement among the Jews; this can be

verified for example by checking the results of municipal elections in

pre-1939 Poland. To what degree and by what mechanisms did the

Holocaust put Zionism into its present preponderant role? Whose

group interests within the Jewish minorities benefit, in the long run,

from the parasitic relation which developed thereafter between these

minorities and the Israeli ruling class?

These questions may run parallel to Shahak's idea of 'the return to a

closed Jewish society'; however his treatment of this interesting idea

makes it devoid of all merit, since he presents the Jews as passively

awaiting their liberation by 'external forces' (possibly the forces of the

Enlightenment). Thus, he barely mentions what could be called

'assertive reactions' that Jews, by their own initiative, have attempted.

These reactions implied challenging the blackmail according to which

the price of emancipation would be a complete loss of Jewish cultural

and religious specificity; instead the majority, whenever the conditioI1s

were favourable, tried to adapt their backward religion and culture to

the conditions provided by the Enlightenment. The best examples of

these assertive reactions were: Reform Judaism within religion, and the

secular Yiddish and Hebrew cultures together with the Bund as modern

expressions of a Jewish identity. Unfortunately Reform Judaism does

not even merit a word from Shahak; and the Bund, in spite of its

achievements as a genuinely revolutionary party opposing the reac-

tionary Jewish orthodoxy and Zionism,. is played down by arguing that

its leaders promoted the racist idea of 'the superiority of jewish moral

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and intellect', and therefore despised the eastern European peasants

without making any self criticism regarding this attitude.

I do not claim that the Bund, as a political organisation, is beyond

criticism, nor do I believe that its leadership and rank-and-file members

were completely free of the anti-peasant prejudices inherited from

medieval jewish religious tradition. But the same could be said of the

Polish, Russian, Ukrainian or Lithuanian political organisations with

respect to the anti-Jewish prejudices of medieval Christian religious

origin. Any account of the relation between eastern European Jews and

the surrounding population (mainly peasants) cannot ignore the

attitude of this population towards the Jews.

Shahak's account of this relation is basically the simplistic unilateral

view of' Jewish anti-peasant chauvinism' against a static background of

idealised peasants;!7 and is based on the mistaken assumption that, as

late as the twentieth century, eastern European Jews still related to the

peasantry strictly according to the pattern which he previously described

for medieval western Europe. By the time of the Bund, the Yiddish-

speaking masses had undergone a process 0 f proletarianisation parallel

to the gradual but steady loss of their 'people-class' nature. This evolu-

tion meant that the Jewish workers, pedlars and artisans, as an exploited

sector within an oppressed non -territorial national minority, were not

better off than the surrounding peasantry. This peasantry was usually

the cannon-fodder for the most reactionary and chauvinist movements

in eastern Europe, and was often mobilised in order to perpetrate all sorts

of anti-Jewish riots, including the infamous pogroms. Hence, the seeds

of later tragic developments in eastern Europe can be traced to the fact

that these oppressed groups, the Jewish workers and the non-Jewish

peasantry and working class, had a mutual distrust and prejudice which

practically prevented any cooperation between them.

In these circumstances, it is not acceptable by any standard to

demand of the Jewish parties and factions a self-critique of chauvinistic

attitudes, without demanding the same ofthose political organisations

which represented the non-Jewish eastern European peasants, workers

and middle classes. It is certainly regrettable that, even today, Jews of

eastern European descent hold prejudices against eastern European

ethnic groups; One must not forget however that the anti-Jewish

prejudices of these (mainly peasant) ethnic groups had far more tragic

consequences for the Jews, in terms of human lives and suffering, than

Jewish chauvinism against them could have ever had. During the

Second World War, the majority of Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian

peasants (with honourable exceptions) were indifferent to the fate of

the Jews; in spite of their own suffering under Nazi occupation, many

of these peasants participated in the infamous Einsatzgruppen18 which

murdered nearly a million Jews. As a survivor of the Holocaust,

Shahak must be aware of these facts. It is then no surprise at all that the

descendants and relatives of these Jews, now living in America, the

Soviet Union or Israel, are very reluctant to re-examine their prejudices

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against those ethnic groups. Hopefully, there will come the day when

Polish, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and eastern-European Jewish intellect-

uals will re-examine their common history with mutual respect and

understanding. There is not only a lack of Jewish initiative for this; so

far, not a single Polish, Ukrainian or Lithuanian national organisation

has ever carried out a self-criticism of the fact that many oftheir leaders

and members (including many peasants) were prominent in collabora-

ting with the Nazis to 'settle' the Jewish question.

If there is a turn towards a closed, inward-looking, catastrophically

oriented political view within the Jewish communities, a great deal of it

might be because of the recent historical experience that every form of

assertion attempted by the Jews themselves proved to be too feeble

against the prejudices that large sectors of European society has had

against them for centuries. If the preponderance of Zionism is the ugly

consequence of this defeat, then it is doubtful whether it can be

challenged by invoking these same prejudices, presented in a 'scholarly'

way. All those anti-Zionists who pretend that the development of

Zionism in the European context can be explained mainly as a conse-

quence of Jewish racism, do not only misunderstand its relation with

the historical experience of the European Jews, but they aso launch a

political boomerang: a Judeophobic anti-Zionism is the best weapon in

the hands of Zionists. Rather, it is the task of progressive anti-Zionists

(Jews and non-Jews alike) to challenge Zionism as a false liberation, or

better, as a total surrender to antisemitism and an actual negation of

liberation. Hopefully, when the centrality of Zionism in the political

thinking within the Jewish minorities fades away, the fetishistic attach-

ment to the Israeli State will be replaced by a genuine concern for the

development and well-being of Israeli Jews and their Hebrew culture,

together with (and not against) the other nations and cultures of the

Middle East. Perhaps then, under those conditions, there will be a

stimulating renaissance of Jewish culture far beyond the miserable

choices offered by most Jewish communities today: Religion, Zionism

or Assimilation.

Finally, in perfect agreement with Shahak, I think the Jew must

confront his/her past and this will necessarily involve a thorough and

open critique of the Jewish religion as an important ideological source

'in Jewish history. Under the present political conditions in the Middle

East, this important task can no longer be postponed as could have been

the case under different circumstances. However, I doubt the effect-

tiveness of following a moralistic approach, based on invoking a back-

ground of loosely defined 'universalist' principles. Rather, we must

confront our past with the conviction that no aspect of it is free from

explanation and criticism, and therefore our behaviour and charac-

teristics cannot be understood in isolation from the development of

general society, nor traced to obscure mythological forces, but to

material conditions which could have affected any other human group.

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In the understanding of these conditions lies also the understanding of

our present. London, February 1983

References

1 Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), The Jew in the Modern

World, a Documentary History, Oxford University Press, 1980, p256.

2 Voltaire himself had no personal Judeophobic feelings towards individual

Jews who embraced the philosophy of the Enlightenment. An account of his

correspondence with contemporary Jews is given in Paul R. Mendes-Flohr and

Jehuda Reinharz, op cit, pp252 - 256.

3 Abram Leon, The Jewish Question, a Marxist interpretation, Pathfinder

Press, New York, 1970. It is remarkable that this important work on Jewish

history is not even mentioned by Shahak throughout his essay.

4 The Radanites were Jewish traders in the early Middle Ages, who operated

through a network of Jewish communities extending from western Europe to

China. .

5 An Orthodox Marxist account of the relations between the. Jews and the rest

of medieval social classes is given in Abram Leon, opcit, pp154 -173. See also:

James Parkes, The Jew in the Medieval Community, Harmon, New York, 1976;

Henri Pirenne, Economical and Social History of Medieval Europe, Harcourt

Brace nd World, New York, undated; Salo Baron, A Social and Religious

History of the Jews, Columbia University Press, New York.

6 The only source on medieval history mentioned explicitly by Shahak is Hugh

Trevor-Roper, The Rise of Christian Europe, Thames and Hudson, 1965

p173 - 4. Shahak attributes to this author the merit of being one of the few,

among recent general historians, who 'remarks upon' the popular nature of

medieval anti-Jewish persecutions, and the prominence of the Jews in the early

medieval slave trade. I wonder not only why Shahak does not mention other

sources, but also why only so few modern general historians have emphasised

these facts. Perhaps these facts, being true, were not so clear and widespread as

Shahak claims.

7 Shahak's claim that medieval Christian tradition is relatively free of anti-

Jewish racism is ridiculous. Many examples show the contrary: The Juden Sau,

Jews sucking milk from a pig, is a very common motive in the decoration of

German medieval churches. The charge of 'deicide' thrown up against all Jewry

was not reexamined by the Vatican until recently. (See Maxime Rodinson, Israel

and the Arabs, Penguin, pI52).

8 Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner, Populism, its Meanings and National

Characteristics, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969, p117.

9 See Abram Leon, op cit, p71. See also M.l. Findlay, Aspects of Antiquity,

Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1977.

10 The image of Jews and Judaism held by enlighteners and nineteenth-century

Marxists is thoroughly discussed in the introduction of Robert Wistrich,

Revolutionary Jews, From Marx to Trotsky, Harrop, London, 1976. This

mystification can also be traced in Lenin's view of the Jewish question: Lenin,

The Jewish Question.

11 The fact that I sharply criticìse the methodology of Shahak's essay does not

imply that I fail to recognise his courage and integrity in exposing the violation

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of human rights, which Palestinians suffer every day in Israel and the Occupied

Territories.

12 A critique of Abram Leon's work is found in 'Marxism and the Jewish

Question', essay by David H. Reuben in The Socialist Register, 1982, Merlin

Press, London.

13 Isaac Deutcher, The non-Jewish Jew and other essays, Merlin Press,

London. Also in Jewish Revolutionariesfrom Marx to Trotsky, op cit.

14 This behaviour 0 f left -wing radical Jews is even more pronounced today,

since a 'Jewish identity' has become for the extreme left synomous with

Zionism. Therefore, many left-wing anti-Zionist Jews are more radical in this

respect than non-Jewish militants.

15 This type of Judeophobic manipulation of anti-Zionism is common in

Stalinist antisemitism. See two essays in Robert Wistrich's Anti-Zionism in the

USSR: From Lenin to the Soviet Black Hundreds: Adam Diolkose, '''Anti-

Zionism" in Polish Communist Party Politics and W. Oschlies, 'Neo-Stalinist

Anti-Semitism in Czechoslovakia'. See also Nathan Weinstock's introduction

to Abram Leon, op cit, pp48-54.

16 My understanding of the term 'anti-semitism' is that explained by Maxime

Rodinson in 'Quelques idées simples sur I' Anti-Semitisme', Revue des Etudes

Palestiniennes, vol 1, Beirut 1981, (Published in Paris). For a comprehensive

treatise on antisemitism see Leon Poliakov, The History of Anti-Semitism,

Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1975.

17 Shahak's mystification of the peasantry is similar to that found in most

populisms in agrarian societies (as for example, eastern Europe). It is also a

characteristic of the Russian 'narodniki'. See Ghita Ionescu and Ernest Gellner,

op cit.

18 The Einsatzgruppen were units especially used by the Nazis to murder the

Jews left behind the frontlines of the German military advance in the USSR.

They were formed largely by Polish, Ukranian and Lithuanian peasants who

collaborated with the Nazis.

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Nikki R. Keddie, Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of

Modern Iran. With a section by Yann Richard. Yale University Press.

321 pages. HC f21.00, PB f4.15.

Since 1979, books on Iran have been coming out thick and fast. As the

course of events in that country seemed to show a consistent tendency to

contradict and baffle even expert commentators, an increasing body of

literature on Iran has flooded the market, ranging from hastily put

together journalistic accounts to very valuable historical works. Nikkie

Keddie's recent book Roots of Revolution, is a singularly useful and

welcome addition.

As a historian of modern Iran, with her particular interest in the role

of the 'ulama' in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, she was in a

unique position to bring her historical insights to bear in understanding

the present. The book offers a concise, rather brief and largely descrip-

tive history of Iran over the past two centuries. Although some of the

material in the early chapters is covered by a number of existing books

and articles on Iran, it is still very valuable to have a source book that

covers this whole period in its historical continuity. More significantly,

the book is unique, amongst similar histories of Iran, in its systematic

treatment of two topics. One concerns the situation of women in Iran, a

topic absent from most other accounts and covered for each period in

this book. The second concerns the Babi/Baha'i movement. Iranian

historians, under the ideological pressure (as well as potential physical

threat) of the Islamic clergy who consider the Babis and Baha'is as

heretics, often make the most pejorative references to this movement,

or ignore it alt.ogether. This is particularly true of works printed in

Persian in Iran. To this day a comprehensive account of this movement

and its place in the nineteenth-century history of Iran is missing. Nikki

Keddie's account offers an initial assessment. That a disproportion-

ately large number of orators and political thinkers of the 1906

Constitutional Revolution came from Azali and Babi backgrounds

should provide the Iranian historians of that period with a phenomenon

to be explained rather than avoided or denied.

The various chapters in this book are somewhat uneven in presen-

tation. The earlier ones are much richer in analytical and interpretive

insights. The chapters covering the Pahlavi period become more narra-

tive. This is not surprising, considering Keddie's previous works on

late-nineteenth century Iran and the Constitutional Revolution.

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The most novel and currently topical chapter is Chapter 8, 'Modern

Iranian Political Thought'. It covers the history of political thought in

Iran in its tortuous evolution from what Keddie refers to as 'the concern

of many Iranian leaders and thinkers. . . [about] catching up with the

West' (P186) to the current preoccupation with rejection of the West.

Simplistic though it may seem, I would argue that the contrast is a use-

ful one in placing various 'historical controversies' in context and for

an overall evaluation of the contributions of a number of contemporary

literary and political thinkers of Iran.

One such controversy concerns the respective role of the 'ulama' and

secular intellectuals in the Constitutional Revolution. This question is

raised and discussed in another work by Nikkie Keddie.! However, the

problem is too often posed by one side in terms of the importance of the

clergy in backing the Constitutional Movement, and on the other side

much effort is put into demonstrating that there were also significant

anti -constitutionalist currents amongst the clergy. This is not very

fruitful. Clearly both tendencies existed. It is also undeniable that the

clergy had vast influence both on the mass of the population as well as

on the political atmosphere of the time. The extent of such influence is

partially reflected in the fact that even secular intellectuals and political

thinkers often felt obliged to present their politics in Islamicised

language. Despite this, what is striking in the constitutional period is

the ideological predominance of secular political ideas. Even the

'ulama' were giving their backing not to an Islamic political order but to

a constitutional regime whose ideas had clearly and admittedly origina-

ted from Europe.2

This predominance of secularism in politics is symbolically reflected

in the rejection of the original farman of the shah, declaring a

constitutional regime in which the parliament was referred to as an

'Islamic Assembly'. The Constitutionalists returned thefarman, asking

for this to be changed to a 'National Assembly, as we do not see our-

selves involved in a matter of religion' .3 Seventy odd years later, the

exact opposite took place. Although the new Iranian constitution

referred to the parliament as the 'National Consultative Assembly' , in

the first session of the Assembly this was changed by an overwhelming

vote to 'Islamic Consultative Assembly' .

More significantly, the constitution of 1906 was modelled after Euro-

pean (in particular the Belgian) constitutions. The whole direction of

administrative and political reforms was towards setting up a largely

secular state; although Islamic law was retained, it was integrated into

the civil and criminal codes. Again, today the direction of change has

been reversed. State institutions such as the judiciary are being

dismantled to be replaced by religious courts, the criminal code is

replaced by the Bill of Retribution etc.

This contrast is brought out clearly in Chapter 8 of the book. Even

the pan-Islamic currents of the nineteenth century shared the same

goal; that is, they saw return to Islam not as a means of rejecting the

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West but of catching up with it. As Keddie notes, 'With Jamal ad-Din

[aI-Afghani] and his followers. . . this reinterpretation had a modernist

and reformist bent: Western-style law and science, sometimes constitu-

tions, and other reforms were found in the Quran. Today, however, the

movement in Iran is only in part reformist; it is carried out more by

ulama than by independent intellectuals and stresses the literal

following of many Quranic rules. This greater conservatism after a

century may most briefly be explained by saying that Jamal ad-Din and

his Iranian followers were reacting against a traditional, scarcely

reformed governmental and religious structure and naturally thought

that Iran's problems might be solved by interpreting Islam in ways to

bring it closer to the more successful, stronger, and better functioning

West. Khomeini and his followers, however, reacted to a situation

where Iran was felt to be a junior partner or puppet of the West,

particularly of the United States, and in which cultural and economic

Westernisation of a certain type was occurring at breakneck speed with

little regard for human consequences. When no traditional or Islamic

government had existed for a long time and the formal power of the

ulâma had been curbed, it was easy to imagine that a return to an

idealised Islam, so far past that no one remembered, it, could solve

Iran's problems. . . ' (ppI88-89).

During the Constitutional period, there were even important anti-

religious anti-Islamic (partially anti-Arab) currents amongst the

nationalists and constitutionalists. For those political leaders and

thinkers who paid lip-service to religion, the reference to Islam was

purely utilitarian: they saw it as a necessary concession to avoid the

obvious clash between their ideas of a secular state with the Islamic

institutions.

In this context, it is possible, and politically necessary, to charac-

terise the intellectual and political evolution of the post-1960s, repre-

sented by such figures as Jalal Al-e Ahmad, 'Ali Shari'ati and

Khomeini, as wholly regressive. It is not clear why Nikki Keddie, who

more than anyone else had been drawing our attention to the role of the

clergy and Islam in Iranian history and in the recent anti-Shah move-

ment, is reluctant to draw this conclusion. She says, 'As on many

questions in many periods, it is wrong to characterise the outlook of the

ulama leadership at this time either as purely "reactionary", as did the

regime and most of the foreign press, or as "progressive" , as did some

Iranian students abroad.' (p 157) Further on in the same paragraph she

seems to imply that Khomeini's opposition 'to dictatorship and to

Iranian dependence on the US', in itself was necessarily progressive.

Others would also put his opposition to Israel on the credit side. But as

the experience of Iran has shown, not any opposition to something bad

is necessarily good. To oppose a military dictatorship in order to put in

its place a clerical dictatorship, to oppose dependence on the US in

order to replace it with retrogressive national isolation that destroys the

existing socio-economic fabric of the country, to oppose Israel from an

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anti-semitic standpoint - how could any of these stands be construed as

somehow 'progressive'?

Similarly, an evaluation of the intellectual contribution of Al-e

Ahmad can only be done in a historical perspective. As is noted in the

book, 'Al-e Ahmad was, in the 1960s, the intellectual leader of a new

generation of Iranian thinkers.' (P203). In fact from a secular intellec-

tual direction he represented what Shar'ati represented from a religious

direction. His essay on rejection of the West, Westoxication, became

the intellectual bible of a generation. In this rejection, Al-e Ahmad

turned against the revolutionaries and reformers of the Constitutional

. period and defended the most reactionary currents, as noted in the

book, when summarising Al-e Ahmad views: 'Islam, weakned by divi-

sions betwen Sunnis and Shi'is, by mystical groups, and by Babism-

Bahaism, was vulnerable to imperialism. Iranians succumbed to the

images of "progress" and played the game of the West. Al-e Ahmad

attacks nineteenth-century Westernisers like Mirza Aqa Khan

Kermani, Malkom Khan, and Talebzadeh, and defends the anti-

constitutional Shaikh Fazlollah Nuri for upholding the integrity of Iran

and Islam in the face of the invading West.' (P204).4

The author (Yann Richard), quite accurately in my opinion, charac-

terises the evolution of Al-e Ahmad as an evolution from socialism (he

was in the Tudeh Party for a time) to a political Islam (P205); yet he

insists that, 'this does not mean that Al-e Ahmad was reactionary'.

Provided that one is not throwing around the word 'reactionary' as an

insult but as a historical characterisation, I fail to see how else such an

evolution could be characterised. Significantly, this was not just Al-e

Ahmad's individual evolution, but that of a whole generation. It was

this layer of the intellectuals who paved the path for the ideological

hegemony of Khomeini's Islamic government. In this, they played the

reverse of the role that the pro-constitutionalist clergy (like Na'ini) had

played seventy years earlier. The whole book, particularly Chapter 8,

stands as a testimony to and history of this reversal. Nikki Keddie has

provided us with a valuable book tracing this political trajectory in

modern Iranian history - even though she seems unwilling to draw such

conclusions openly.

References

1 See Iran: Religion, Politics and Society, London, 1980, pp6-7.

2 See F. Adamiyat's discussion of this point in Ideology-e Nehzat-e

Mashrutiyat-e Iran (Ideology of the Iranian Constitutional Movement, in

Persian), Tehran, 1976, ppI56-173 and pp225-228.

3 Quoted in Adamiyat, op cit, p171.

4 This section is by Yann Richards, but it seems to represent an integral part of

the book. Nowhere does Keddie contradict these evaluations.

Azar Tabari

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Edward W. Said, Covering Islam: How the media and the experts deter-

mine how we see the rest of the World, London, Routledge and Kegan

Paul, 1981.

Covering Islam is a particularly topical book. It deals with the role of

some Western news media, experts and intellectuals (especially in the

USA) in shaping public perceptions of what is happening in the Middle

East.

Said's book is linked both in its themes and in its theoretical

conception to his earlier studies Orientalism and The Question of Pales-

tine. 'Orientalism' is for him the flaw which disfigures Western

perceptions of 'Islamic' societies. 'Islam' is placed in quotation marks

for it does not really exist, out there, ready to be discovered. Rather,

according to Said, the very notion of 'Islam' is 'in part fiction, part

ideological label, part minimal description of a religion called Islam'

(px). 'Islam' he argues has in the West a wholly negative image of

'punishment, autocracy, mediaeval modes of logic, theocracy' (PM).

Said follows Maxime Rodinson in suggesting what a more 'respon-

sible' view of 'Islam' might look like. Briefly, this would distinguish

between Muslim religious teachings embodied in the Koran, the conflic-

ting interpretations of those teachings, and the complex shifting

relations between orthodoxy and heresy (pp53-55). As a general posi-

tion, this insistence upon the specifics of history as against the timeless

essences Said attributes to Orientalism is unexceptionable.

Why is the present image of Islam so negative? In part, as readers of

Said's other studies will know, this is held to have its roots in a funda-

mental attitude underpinning Western culture. However, as Sadik J alaI

al'Azm pointed out in Khamsin 8, because Said's concept of 'Oriental-

ism' is so imprecisely dated it does itself function as a kind of essence, a

permanent disabling feature of the Western mind.

But there is a more precise and delimited target too. For Said, the

contemporary villain of the piece is the organisation of the intellectual

field of Middle East studies and reportage. This field is basically

constructed, he argues, in terms of an opposition between Orient and

Occident, and the Orient emerges as a 'malevolent and unthinking

essence' .(p8).

During the 1970s a number of crucial changes have propelled 'Islam'

to increased prominence. The oil crisis of the mid-1970s fuelled a

particular kind of interventionist strategic thinking in the West. The

crisis in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the unresolved

question of the Palestinians' future all combined to place the Middle

East in the centre of the 'arc of crisis'. Reportage flourished, and so did

scholarship - of a kind which Said finds seriously misleading. Its limits

lie in the fact that 'discourse on Islam is, if not absolutely vitiated, then

certainly coloured by the political, economic and intellectual situation

in which it arises' (pxvii). But then, as Said himselfrecognises, albeit in

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passing, exactly this point could be made about the dominant inter-

pretations of Communism in the West. And what would a discourse

free of such determinations look like? How is it to be achieved? There is

an - unsatisfactory - answer to these questions, as we shall see.

At root, what Said calls 'orthodox' knowledge about islam stems, he

argues, less from intellectual curiosity than from the needs of Western

power. Hence, he is highly dismissive of a great deal of US scholarly

research which he sees as either an instrument of government policy or

as suspect because of its sources of finance (such as the Pahlevi

Foundation). The lack of a widespread popular knowledge about

Islamic societies, the absence of outstanding interpreters able to

popularise against the conventional wisdom and the ignorance of media

personnel puts the intellectuals and geo-political strategists into a

commanding position. They provide for the mass media, and therefore

for the widest audiences, 'what is most easily compressed into images'

(P32). Thus, i~ this determinstic picture, the cultural apparatuses

intermesh to produce a homogenised, consensual view. The mass

media, as creatures 'serving and promoting a corporate identity',

cannot escape a 'corporate' (i.e., capitalistic?) logic. Said supports his

argument with case studies of, for example, the media coverage of the

Iran crisis and of the Death of a Princess. controversy.

However, counterposed to this picture of inevitability, there is

another. Some of us, Said included, must be allowed to escape 'the

intellectual regulation of discourse about distant and alien cultures'

which 'positively and affirmatively encourages more of itself' (P148).

How so?

Here the thrust toward explaining intellectual production in a

cultural materialist perspective gives way to a much less satisfactory

argument. Said argues that an 'antitbetical knowledge' is possible

which is 'produced by people who consider themselves to be writing in

opposition to the prevailing orthodoxy' (P 149). This opposition

includes some younger scholars, some older US scholars (Algar,

Keddie), some writers based in Europe (Hourani, Rodinson), and anti-

war and anti-imperialist militants (e.g., I.F. Stone). Said also

commends the work of Eric Rouleau of Le Monde as a model for US

journalism to follow, but he does not classify it.as 'antithetical'.

Those who are exempt from the distortions of Orientalism seem to

achieve their glimpse of the truth because special conditions apply. In

France, for instance, the burdens of imperialist interventionism are

past (so it's argued) and a more enlightened outlook permits the space

for Le Monde to be dispassionate. (What about the rest of the French

press?). At another level entirely, we seem to be talking about the moral

and intellectual qualities of individuals. And, in actuality, Said's

ultimate refuge is an individualist and subjectivist justification for the

truth. he is a man with a mission who believes that the reform of

distorted thinking may be changed by acts of will and consciousness.

What is needed, argues Said, is 'respect for the concrete details of

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human experience, understanding that arises from viewing the other

compassionately'; we should follow the ideal of 'uncoercive contact

with an alien culture through real exchange, and self-consciousness

about the interpretative project itself' (p 142). This argument recalls

strongly the position taken by the German social theorist Jürgen Haber-

mas, who argues that 'non-distorted communication' is possible where

those engaged in discourse operate without the threat of violence or the

constraint of power relations in which some dominate others. It is hard

to envisage such a world, and even antithetical knowledge may be

harnessed to the uses of some power. Moral integrity is no safeguard

against the abuses of a propaganda war; nor is self-consciousness a

guarantee of truth as it can obviously be mistaken about the springs of

action. We are all damned to wander around the perimeters of the

hermeneutic circle: the interpreters shall be interpreted, unto the nth

generation.

Despite these reservations, Said has written a useful book which has

stimulated a lot of interest. Perhaps the construction of 'Islam' is less

enduring than he thinks. He says, early on in his text, 'For the right,

Islam represents barbarism; for the left medieval theocracy; for the

centre a kind of distasteful exoticism' (pxv). At the time of writing, as

the events at the Chatilla and Sabra refugee camps are beginning to be

assessed, it would seem that the label of 'barbari,sm' has now been

affixed to Israel.

Philip Schlesinger

Paula Rayman, The Kibbutz Community and Nation Building, Prince-

ton University Press, 1981

Paula Rayman has written an interesting book which, with some reser-

vations, can be added to the growing list of books and articles that are

gradually helping to shape an acceptable perspective and analysis

regarding Israeli history and social structure. This relatively new corþus

of publications challenges the view that used to dominate the social-

sciences literature, especially that part of it inspired by the Israeli school

led by S.N. Eisenstadt. Her particular contribution is important, since

it relates to the heart of the Zionist myth -the kibbutz.

Paula Rayman was led to study the kibbutz in her search for a

'constructive utopian vision' which would aid the struggle for socialist

change. In this she is no different from other Westerners who went to

Israeli kibbutzim, motivated by such a quest. However, unlike many

others, she did not limit her perspective to the internal dynamics of the

kibbutz, but studied it in its national and (in the post-1948 period)

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regional context. As a result, there emerges a picture very different

from the popular myth of the kibbutz, even in the latter's early

'utopian' beginnings. The kibbutz can be seen as a commune not so

much of utopian socialists as of militants of a colonialist-nationalist

movement.

This is a bitter pill to swallow, even for the author herself. Although

all the crucial data are presented, she hesitates to follow them to their

ultimate conclusion - and this is the book's main weakness. Her assess-

ment of the early period of the kibbutz still defines it, at least in that

early phase, as a socialist community; the Zionist movement, described

as colonialist, militaristic and nationalist, is seen as external to the

kibbutz, although intimately connected with it. But one cannot under-

stand the kibbutz and the dynamics of its development unless. one

recognises that it was never an autonomous entity. It was always totally

dependent on the Zionist project and formed an integral part of it. It

used socialist language but had, at best, a collectivist-voluntaristic

ideology, inherent in which was the exclusion and dispossession of

others.

The subjective view of the kibbutzniks, who saw themselves as

socialists, is totally dependent on blocking (mentally and legally) all

non-Jews as potential partners in the 'utopian socialist' vision.

The case study which is the focus of the book can serve as a perfect

illustration of this truth. It is the story of Kibbutz Hanita (it is given the

fictitious name of Har, but the data in the book makes its identity

unmistakable). Hanita was established in 1938, in an area which

previously did not have any other Jewish settlement but was densely

populated by Palestinian fallahin, tenant-peasants who lived in villages

and worked lands belonging to absentee landlords. Hanita's establish-

ment gained a special political importance not only because of its

location, which was particularly isolated (although the sites of most

kibbutzim were chosen in strategic frontier positions), but also because

of the time of its establishment, at the height of the Palestinian Revolt.

Haim Weizmann, the leader of the Jewish Agency, cabled the settlers:

'Go to Hanita, regardless of cost' (P40). Volunteers (men) of the three

kibbutz federations manned the initial settlement, which was built

using the 'Tower and Stockade' system. Hanita's establishment also

became a turning point in Zionist military strategy, as Or de Wingate,

the British officer, friend of the Hagana, trained there his Night Unit

composed of British soldiers and Hagana members, for offensive

rather than defensive tactics.

The local inhabitants who lived in what was designated as the site of

the permanent kibbutz settlement refused to move, and were physically

evacuated by the settlers. Once this 'trifle' was ov~r, the kibbutzniks

could establish their 'socialist utopia', and devoutly work their land. Or

rather, not their land, but a land leased to them by the new owner -

the Jewish National Fund, whose consittution strictly forbids sale or

even leasing of any of its lands to non-Jews.

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The immediate armed confrontation with the local inhabitants that

took place in Hanita may have been more dramatic than in many other

kibbutzim, and may be more characteristic of the later period in the

establishment of kibbutzim. However, this use of kibbutzim as a

military front position has been universal. The level of confrontation

with local Palestinian peasants depended on the extent to which the

absentee landlords or the Ottoman or British police had already accom-

plished the task of removing the peasants from the locality before the

Zionist colonisation itself took place, as well as on the degree of

organistion of the Palestinian resistance.

What is important to emphasise is that the confrontation between the

kibbutz and the local Palestinians was not only national but had also a

class dimension. Hanita lands were bought from absentee landlords

through a secret agent. The secrecy however, was only preserved vis-à-

vis the local fallahin; information of the sale was given not only to the

British but also to Amir 'Abdalla of Transjordan and the Lebanese

government, who 'kept the secret' and thus gave their silent consent to

the deal.

The national and private capital which bought the kibbutz lands also

enabled the kibbutz to continue to survive during all the following

years, on a subsidised level-,-until profits from the kibbutz industries-

which used hired labour, Jewish (Oriental) and Palestinian -made the

kibbutz economically 'autonomous' (but still getting preferential taxa-

tion treatment from the state).

In view of all this, it is difficult to see how the kibbutz can be

described as either autonomous or a socialist unit. . .

Paula Rayman shows how the various components of early kibbutz

'socialist' ideology - collective ownership, the 'religion' of labour and

self-labour -were functional for the pragmatic needs of the settlers, on

the level ùf the individual kibbutz, and of the Zionist movement as a

whole. (E'.'en the compoent which she claims did not represent a strictly

pragmatic concern, the 'religion' of labour which encouraged a

spiritual direct contact with the land, can be said to be functional to the

extent that this direct relation hid the othE. people who existed on this

land.)

The changes in the principles which fashioned kibbutz life in its

earlier and later stages do not signify transition from socialist to

capitalist ideology as Paula Rayman claims, but rather a shift in its

pragmatic needs, including the pragmatic need for ideology itself,

deliberations and reluctance to shift the ideological discourse notwith-

standing. Since its earliest days the kibbutz, like the whole Zionist

movement, was eclectic in the means it applied to achieve its national-

colonial goals.

Deviations from socialist-egalitarian principles existed not only in

the relations between the kibbutz community and its social environ-

ment, but also internally. Paula Rayman analyses the sexual divisions,

which placed women in inferior positions in the kibbutz since its

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inception. She also describes how other social differentiations develop

in the kibbutz and come to compose its internal stratification.

The most important contribution of the book is the detailed descrip-

tion of the kibbutz in its regional context in the post-1948 period. She

shows how the raison d'être of the kibbutz as a Zionist frontier post

which promotes national and class exclusivity continued, with changes,

also after the establishment of the state, and were applied not only to

the local Palestinians but also to the Oriental Jews who came to live in

development towns and moshavim in the region. The concept of

'region' itself, like many other concepts in the Zionist terminology is

'doublethink'. Not only the catchment area of the 'regional' high

school, but even the local municipal council itself excludes the local

Palestinian and Oreintal Jewish communities. The 'regional' industries

not only exclude them from ownership but have become a class tool for

exploiting them as hired labourers.

This form of exclusionary 'doublethink' has not changed much since

the time the kibbutz was established. One of the poems (cited at the end

of the book) which were composed in honour of the establishment of

the kibbutz in a thickly Palestinian populated area declares:

'On the border of the north,

In desolate wilderness

We have fixed a habitation. . . '

Nira Yuval-Davis

Unni Wikan, Life among the Poor in Cairo, Tavistock 1980, Price

.f4.95 (paperback) pp167.

Unni Wikan's book is about the effects of poverty on interpersonal

relations among the slumdwellers of Cairo and its specific effects on

women. it is based on eight months' fieldwork in one neighbourhood

during which the author, an anthropologist, was able to get to know

and carefully observe seventeen households linked through ties of

community, kinship and reciprocity. The result is a rich fabric of detail

about domestic life in a Muslim country which will be of interest to

many; but it will disappoint those who argue that a kind of spontaneous

feminism characterises the sexually segregated societies of the Middle

East, and those who view poverty as a radicalising and equalising force.

The families in Unni Wikan's study are desperately poor although

they are not the poorest of Egypt's capital city of eight million, where

over a million are homeless. They at least have somewhere to live other

than cemeteries and sewers, and they have a wage earner in the family.

But they live in cramped and unhygienic conditions, whole families

often residing in one room. No family has an income sufficient to meet

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its needs; people are so poor they are afraid to accept hospitality

because they are unable to repay it. Miserable though they are, their

dreams are not of radical social change, but of advance within the

existing system. In 1972, when the study was completed, the neighbour-

hood had little good to say about Nasser, the former nationalist leadq-,

or for his brand of socialism. His government like all others was

regarded as corrupt and bureaucratic and the slum dwellers rarely

availed themselves of the benefits of his public welfare programme:

nobody believed that anything cheap or free could be trusted. They

longed instead for what they saw as the stability and relative prosperity

of life under British rule.

But the focus of the book is not upon this - it is upon the lives of the

women in these families. The slum areas with their narrow streets and

decaying buildings are the women's territory and their flats are their

domain. The men keep away, spending their time at work or in the

cafes. It is unmanly to sit in the home with the women and children. The

women are all, in the convehtional sense of the term 'housewives',

dependent on a male wage earner and with little or no income-

generating activity of their own. Their mornings are spent on house-

work; the rest of the day and much of the evening is taken up with

sustaining, forming or breaking the complex web of alliance with other

women which is an integral part of the daily struggle to make ends meet.

In most cases the only wage earners are husbands and fathers, as

children generally leave home when they begin to work. For women to

enter wage work represents a loss of family honour and reflects badly

on the men in the household. The women's feelings are ambivalent:

they do not want to be seen to be forced into wage work by dilatory hus-

bands, yet many complained of being stopped from earning by family

pressure. Yet these families live on the brink; every illness, marriage or

religious celebration requires additional expenditure and creates a

domestic crisis. While it is the men's responsibility to provide the

income, it is the women's to make sure that what they are given for the

housekeeping goes far enough to meet even unexpected additional ex-

penditures. Survival in these conditions is only possible through

borrowing from friends or through finely tuned relations of reciprocity

established between friends and relatives. Women's savings clubs

organised by themselves also provide a cushion in situations where the

domestic economy is threatened. Most of these arrangements are con-

cealed from the men and the women also try to conceal them from each

other; it is shameful to borrow and to have money problems so the

women constantly exaggerate the degree to which they are financially

secure. But everybody knows, or suspects, the truth because they are all

in the same situation.

Yet despite the fact that dire poverty is common to all the inhabitants

of the neighbourhood and could conceivably draw them together, it

produces the opposite effect of petty competition. Degradation and

desperation turns every family into a battleground and renders every

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friendship precarious through instrumental economic calculation,

jealousy and mistrust. The cramped conditions of the living quarters

and the absence of privacy exacerbates. the situation by creating a

paranoid world of door sitters, window peepers and gossips who con-

struct a pervasive system of social control, based on intolerance, sus-

picion and envy.

If relations between the women are competitive and instrumental,

relations between men and women are equally, if not more, fraught.

The men are almost guests in their own homes; they often take two jobs

to earn enough money for the family's subsistence and will then work a

ten hour day. If they have any leisure time they spend it in the cafes or

visiting relatives rather than in their cramped and noisy apartments.

Husbands and wives fight continuously over money, the wives trying to

secure a larger portion of the wage than that which is given to them.

Each suspects the other of cheating, the women with some reason; men

rarely disclose their earnings and most men keep a sizeable portion for

their own personal use. One man spent a third of his total monthly wage

on his own consumption, f15 out of fS1, while the family of eleven,

including himself, had to eat, dress and live on what remained. Another

man; one of the poorest, kept a family of eight on .f23 per month,

taking a good fifth for his own purposes. The money men spend on

themselves goes on tobacco, occasionally drink, gambling, and on the

cafes. It is not even indirectly spent on the family's behalf. Yet, how-

ever much the men and women may fight, they rarel'y divorce unless the

marriage is recent and there are no children. Children provide both men

and women with a stake in staying married. Women are often deprived

of their children on divorce as well as losing their source of material

support. The social sanctions against women taking independent

initiatives such as working for a wage are considerable even though they

are under extreme financial pressure to do so. Divorced women are the

responsibility of their natal families, so great efforts are made by

relatives to reconcile warring couples. From the man's point of view,

the financial penalties of divorce are considerable if there are children,

as he assumes responsibility for them. If he re-marries he not only

expects to have more children to support, but he must also find the

money to pay for the wedding, and the bridewealth, as well as

contribute to the costs of setting up a new home. So men and women

tend to stay together and to find some kind of modus vivendi, however

unsatisfactory.

Although it is not without sympathy and understanding, this is a

harsh and unromantic view of the urban poor. It is, of course, unclear

as to how far the sample of seventeen families can be seen as representa-

tive of the urban poor in Cairo or even of a particular stratum within it.

We know that these were not the poorest families in Cairo but we do not

know how they compared for example with others, where women were

not dependent on a family wage. The extremes of individualism and

competitiveness documented in this book contrast with those accounts

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of urban slums and shanty towns in parts of Latin America which are

characterised by female support groups, communal solidarity, warm

interpersonal relations and political radicalism. In most cases

communal solidarity of this kind has developed through political

struggles, the work of community, religious, or political activists, or

through forms of rural solidarity transplanted ~o the towns. In other

words it is not the spontaneous correlate of poverty and deprivation.

The social behaviour described by Unni Wikan is not spontaneously

generated either, but why it takes the form it does is not adequately

explained in her account. While she sees poverty as the main cause, she

acknowledges that 'cultural factors do playa part'; but this'observation

is not elaborated upon. it would have been interesting to have known

more about these cultural and religio-ideological influences as they

might help to account for such features as the pronounced gender

hierarchy and paFticular family form characteristic of the households in

the study. More intractable, and more worrying for feminists, is the

problem of why, in the slums of Cairo, the women are more concerned

with defaming each other's morals through the vicious gossip known as

'people's talk' than with how conditions can be improved through

greater co-operation and collective action.

Maxine Molyneux

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