

Commentary V: The Age of Discontent

The goal of this commentary is to help us understand the ways in which Naguib Mahfouz's promotion of "literary pharaonism" (a subset of "secular pharaonism") differs from Hasan al-Banna's advocacy for the concept of "Moses vs. Pharaoh." The key issue here is class. Using the "Moses vs. Pharaoh" analytical framework, we can see the ideological divide that separates Westernized Egyptian elites from the general mass of people who subsist much further down the economic ladder. In order to demonstrate their enlightenment and modernity, the political and cultural elites of Egypt—and pretty much every country in the world, differing only in local details—derived their sense of self-worth from subscribing to the same view of Egyptian history that their Western-ized education had taught them to appreciate. To them, this was a sign of progress that would propel Egypt into a global community of enlightened and modern nations. Since the Westerners seemed to dominate the political, economic, and military affairs of the world, it followed that their particular views on culture—which ones are progressive or regressive, which ones are glorious or backward—should also be emulated. That is, Western might and power encouraged non-Western respect for Western culture, which was further cultivated by the physical act of sending your kids to Westernized schools or to schools actually situated in Western countries. Recall Osman Hamdi Bey, the first Westernized Ottoman archaeologist: he went to university in France, wrote and published in French, and even married a French wife (two of them, in fact!). No wonder the museum he curated in Istanbul totally ignored Muslim history, instead filling its shelves with the sort of things his Western professors and scientific colleagues admired: Greco-Roman sculptures. The same thing happened in Egypt in the form of secular pharaonism. This is the phenomenon of Westernized Egyptian elites demonstrating their adherence to the Western view of ancient Egyptian history: i.e., the most admirable ancestors in our 4,000-year history are the pharaohs, because that's who the Westerners who made the modern world—and control the modern world—are obsessed with and admire the most. Secular pharaonism appears in concrete form in the images of pharaohs, sphinxes, and pyramids plastered all over stamps, paper currency, street names, interior décor of public facilities (like the railway station in Cairo), etc. The literary pharaonism of Naguib Mahfouz grows directly out of this—it is an attempt to "nativize" the Westernized fetishization of ancient Egypt to make it look like something that is not beholden to the Westerners and is instead a native modern Egyptian phenomenon. So Mahfouz translates ancient Egyptian literature into modern Arabic and writes fictional historical stories about the age of the pharaohs that he hopes will resonate with a modern audience—that is, will feel authentic to them, not imported by foreigners. Take, for example, his novel *The Struggle for Thebes*, which treats the ancient invasion of the lighter-skinned Hyksos people from Anatolia (Turkey) as foreign invaders whom the ancient pharaohs—native Egyptians—drive out from their land. This is a clear allegory for western imperialism in Egypt, with the obvious irony of Mahfouz's entire inspiration for such a story coming from the Western imperialist treatment of ancient Egyptian history in the first place! The film we are watching in this class, *The Night of Counting the Years*, is pure literary pharaonism—Mahfouz could have been the screenwriter for a film like that (he wasn't, but it would make total sense if he was).

But why don't these ideas resonate among the broader Egyptian public? Because, as al-Banna writes, some 60% of all Egyptians still lived under the poverty line. And he blames Western imperialism for this. By extension, he says any Egyptians who subscribe to Western interpretations of Egypt's history are recreating a form of internal imperialism and are divorced from the Egyptian masses. This is the class, or economic, divide. Secular pharaonism is an expensive luxury that is largely inaccessible to the Egyptian masses, who don't identify in any

Commentary V: The Age of Discontent

meaningful sense with the ancient Egyptians—their religion, customs, dress, languages were all radically different. But popular religion, in this case Islam, doesn't require any expensive Western education or foreign ties to grasp. Not only that, but it promises what appears to be an eminently attainable better life, unlike the Western world, which is very abstract, distant, and inaccessible to most poor Egyptians. Al-Banna took his message straight to the lower classes, telling them that “we see that the Arabs and Muslims have no status and no dignity, they are mere hirelings belonging to the foreigners.” Instead, a nativist discourse of Islam is much more attractive and accessible. Eventually, al-Banna forms the Muslim Brotherhood to recruit people who want to base modern Egyptian identity within a more “authentic” cultural inheritance, one that is more closely related to the everyday concerns and identities of most Egyptians. As a result, the discourse of Moses vs. Pharaoh—as related in the Koran—attains great prominence in al-Banna's teachings, with Moses as the good guy. And though al-Banna himself was not a militant and deplored violence, some of his followers would indeed turn to violence as a means of getting rid of people they deemed as part of the problem of Egypt's failure to achieve wealth and prosperity for all. Thus the assassin who killed Anwar Sadat in 1981 yelled out “I killed pharaoh!”—i.e., a Westernized Egyptian who had close ties to Western countries and echoed their view of Egyptian history and culture. Though we don't go into as much depth in analyzing similar themes in other Middle Eastern countries, nearly every one of them has an analogous divide between a popular Muslim religious identity and an elite Westernized alternative identity that emphasizes the pre-Islamic material past: in Syria, the emblem of this secular alternative to Islam was not the pharaohs but rather the partly Romanized oasis kingdom of Palmyra; in Iran it was the Achaemenid palace Persepolis; and in Iraq it was Babylon.