

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Adam Hanieh, *Lineages of Revolt: Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013. ISBN: 9781608463251 (paper)

Richard Javad Heydarian, *How Capitalism Failed the Arab World: The Economic Roots and Precarious Future of the Middle East Uprisings*, London: Zed Books, 2014. ISBN: 9781780329581 (cloth)

Given the display of the savage Israeli war on Gaza, the barbaric and genocidal violence of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq (and the violent reaction this has prompted from the US and its allies), and Libya's descent into religious and ethnic sectarian fighting during the summer and autumn of 2014, one can understand that pessimism and doubt have replaced the initial optimism of the Arab revolts. With counterrevolutionary forces (such as the Egyptian army) taking back the reins of power, radical religious groups redrawing the geopolitical map of the region, and constant foreign interventions serving the interests of the US and its allies, there's general disillusionment with the outcome of the Arab revolts, and one could be forgiven for asking whether it all was worthwhile. The Syrian carnage and the mindless violence of IS have given rise to conspiracy theories from Rabat to Baghdad and beyond; depicting the Arab revolutions as a big scam manipulated—if not orchestrated—by foreign powers (the US in particular) and their regional allies (like Saudi Arabia) to divide the peoples of the region so as to humiliate and weaken them. This, in turn, is leading to a growing justification for the re-emergence of corrupt but powerful authoritarian leaderships. However, the choice is obviously not between sectarian violence on the one hand and strong authoritarian rule (backed by imperialist forces) on the other. The choice is still, first and foremost, between the will of the people and their aspirations and the counterrevolutionary forces that are trying to thwart the realization of these aspirations. Whether the Arab revolutions have failed or

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not, is not the most pressing or interesting question to raise. Rather, we need to understand how the revolts have deeply challenged the post-World War II order in the region, and gauge the emergent conflicts that will shape the future politics of the region. The task at hand remains to understand the complex and multifaceted reasons for, and consequences of, the uprisings.

Even though there is no consensus on the causes that have triggered the chain of events starting with the ousting of Tunisia's leader Ben Ali in early 2011; most observers agree that the dismal economic and social situation of most of the region's people played a crucial role. The two books under review rightly emphasize the need to contextualize the revolts in a longer term perspective that does not separate the political from the economic realm. Debunking the myth that the Arab revolutions were first and foremost about claiming liberal-democratic rights against authoritarian rule, both authors show—albeit quite differently—that the structural economic roots of the mass mobilizations throughout the region are inextricably linked with the authoritarian political orders. Apart from this—and the fact that both authors can be labeled as “progressive scholars”—both authors understand the political economy of the region differently and thus draw different lessons in explaining the political challenges that flow from that understanding.

Hanieh and Heydarian both speak, in the first place, to an academic and well-informed readership, but their engagement with politics beyond the ivory tower is obvious. In recent years both authors have disseminated shorter articles, op-eds and blog comments, thereby popularizing and opening up their academic research findings to a wider audience. Both authors, however, target different publics. As a lecturer at Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines, and policy adviser to a dozen national and international institutions, Heydarian is first and foremost interested in influencing international policy makers, publishing his thoughts in a wide variety of outlets including *al-Jazeera*, the *Huffington Post* and the *New York Times*. Hanieh, as a senior lecturer in Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies in

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London, wants to offer political and social movements in the Middle East and North Africa region a framework of analysis that could inform their strategies and tactics of mobilization.

The authors' critical political economy contrasts with the bulk of academic scholarship on the region. The predominant Anglo-Saxon approach has focused on what seems to be the pervading feature of Arab politics, that is, the longevity and persistence of authoritarian rule. The energy and resources that have been channeled to explain the stability of Arab authoritarian politics have led to a misjudging of the forces of change in the region. According to Hanieh (p.2-6), this flows from the use of conventional approaches of the region's political economy in which the basic analytical categories of "state" and "civil society" are used as a template to assert the ever-present conflict between "authoritarianism" (located in the state sphere) and the forces of the market and political liberalization (located in civil society). Instead, Hanieh offers a framework in which capitalism and class constitute crucial pivots of analysis. Geographers might find interesting how Hanieh elaborates on the notion of a "Middle Eastern region" as a region integrated in very specific ways into the international economic order. Using a multi-scalar lens, Hanieh convincingly shows how imperialism and the internationalization of capital in the region (and especially in the oil-rich countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council) has deeply transformed its economies and become internalized in the class structures of neighboring states.

Both Hanieh and Heydarian criticize the neoliberal policies that several countries have implemented since the 1980s, but explain the origins and outcomes of these policies in different ways. Hanieh's work is firmly embedded within the Marxist political economy tradition, based on a thorough methodology that encompasses both a critique of mainstream Middle East studies as well as a critique on capitalism itself. Heydarian's argument—while sharing much with Hanieh on the nature of economic reform—is less focused on capitalism as such than on its specific neoliberal form. The catchy title of his book is therefore in part a lure as he does not reject capitalism, and

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advocates, as I will argue later, for a renewed developmental state based on Keynesian teachings.

The power of Hanieh's argument resides in his coherent approach combining a number of key insights. Crucial to his research is an approach that rejects the idea of the nation-state being a self-contained political economy that can be studied separately from the ways it interacts and intertwines with other spatial scales, namely the regional and global. His effort to approach the Arab world "as a region" enables him to map the shifting hierarchies within an integrated entity that shapes national social formations and, in turn, interacts dialectically with forces at the global scale. By doing so, Hanieh can probe the specific nature, and describe the main features, of capitalism in the region, including the ways in which the Middle East has been integrated into the world market while remaining a zone of global rivalries and regional turmoil. For Hanieh, authoritarian rule—that is so prevalent in the region—is not attributable to "bad governance" or "wrong policies" but is rather the functional outcome of capitalism itself in the region. Heyderian does not follow this structural analysis, focusing instead on the agential power of the elites: "the reforms were off-balance and one-sided, strengthening the autocrats, at least in the short run, at the expense of genuine economic development" (p.67).

While Heydarian acknowledges that the failure of Arab nationalism and its developmental promises is linked to the region's interaction with the global system (p.57), he nevertheless lays the blame for the "ocean of broken vows" (p.36) upon failing leadership and bad governance. Arab nationalism led to a paternalistic "Orwellian 'Big Brother' state stretching its long arms deep into all aspects of society" (p.44) and silencing the citizenry by providing social welfare in return for political passivity. Hanieh's structural, materialist analysis rejects personal faults or lopsided policies as a ground for explanation. He demonstrates how Arab nationalism, even in its most radical phase, while borrowing socialist rhetoric upheld an anti-class perspective as evidenced by the repression of independent labor movements and

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unions. In short, according to Hanieh, “Arab nationalist regimes acted primarily to strengthen capitalism and an emerging, state-linked capitalist class” (p.26). The negotiation of Cold War rivalries offered the Arab nationalist regimes, for a short period of time, an opportunity to “square the contradictions stemming from its pro-capital orientation and its apparent confrontations with imperialism” (p.25). Hanieh perhaps underestimates the diverse trajectories of different states in the region in dealing with the social and class question. In some countries, like Tunisia and Egypt for example, the state enjoyed a status of relative autonomy vis-à-vis the capitalist classes. These states had some rational-legal bureaucratic dimension rendering them less dependent on the direct interests of the bourgeoisie and offering more possibilities for reform. By critically appropriating Max Weber’s concept of (neo-)patrimonialism, as Gilbert Achcar (2013) does in his *The People Want*, a more subtle analysis of rentier capitalism, crony capitalism, and nepotism (in relation to sectarianism and ethnicity) could have been undertaken to explore the differences between the countries of the region.

Hanieh argues that when the strategy of consolidating local capitalism proved ultimately unsuccessful and most of the Arab states turned to neoliberal economic policies, the integration of the Arab economies into the global market paradoxically strengthened the development of local capitalist classes. The irony was that this did not occur through a break with imperialism but rather through the integration of that class into the circuits of global capital accumulation, leading to less independence as foreign powers were able to “lock certain social forces within the Middle East into a framework of shared interests opposed to those of the vast majority” (p. 27).

Heydarian completely bypasses the question of imperialism. While he acknowledges the myriad military conflicts throughout the region, and the impact of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, he reduces the question of imperialism to it. Instead, Hanieh offers a more elaborated analysis of imperialism by focusing on the political, military and economic means used by Western powers and their allies in the Gulf to

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subordinate the region's political economy to the forms required by the capitalist system. Both Heydarian and Hanieh offer empirical evidence of the specific mechanisms that were put in place through the introduction of neoliberal policies such as labor market deregulation, privatization, the cutting of subsidies for consumer goods, free trade agreements, and land tenure reforms in the agricultural sector. Both also describe the depressing effects these policies had on the Arab region, such as catastrophically high rates of youth unemployment (aggravated by a demographic explosion), growing working class poverty, the "squeezing" of the middle classes, and skyrocketing corruption, but explain these effects very differently. Heydarian suggests that since autocrats feared the impact of genuine economic reform on their systems of patronage, they consciously put in place predatory forms of privatization leading to crony capitalism—the self-enrichment of state-linked elites at the expense of the majority of people. While acknowledging the role played by "bad policies" and "greedy rulers", according to Hanieh the effects of neoliberal reform should be seen as natural products of the uneven development and forms of exploitation tied to the integration of the region in the global economy.

The Arab uprisings and revolutions are, thus, not only a cry for more political freedoms but also reflect a yearning for more economic development and redistributive justice. Heydarian's plea for the creation of social-democratic states by representative elected governments redressing the great divide between elites and the majority of the populations through policies that overcome the inherent vulnerabilities of markets sounds like a good idea but falls short on practical implementation. With authoritarian rule re-establishing itself throughout the region, it is hard to see how a Keynesian developmental state could thrive. Ultimately, as Hanieh argues, a developmentalist state would, at best, resolve only temporarily issues of development. Hanieh puts no hope in a "patriotic bourgeoisie" acting in the interest of the majority as he considers this class as a part of the problem of stalled economic development and reform. Fundamental change in the region, he argues, can only come about when

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the issue of capitalism and its imperial form is confronted head-on through social struggle. While Hanieh admits that a pan-regional struggle seems like a utopian vision, he still puts his hopes in the promise of revolt. However, the Marxist political economy approach obfuscates in part a focus on the ways in which social movements and other groups have, over the course of recent decades, tried to resist authoritarian rule. Charles Tripp's (2013) *The Power and the People*, for example, could complement Hanieh's insights, as it explores the processes of resistance by various people in their struggle with dominant power and highlights the dialectic between power and resistance.

In the face of ongoing problems throughout the region, it is hard to image how a social revolt can muster the traction and power needed for meaningful change. The mass mobilizations for emancipation that we've witnessed since 2011 inspired many citizens in the Middle East—and beyond—as long as they confronted repressive authoritarian rule. Today's predicament for the peoples of the region stems from the fact that they face multiple forms of repression, bigotry and intolerance. When confronted with the violence of authoritarian leaders holding on to power (from Syria to Saudi Arabia), IS's abject barbarism cloaked as divine mission, and, lest we forget, the grand imperial designs of foreign powers, the peoples of the region have no other option but to pick their battles. Peace, security and political freedom will most certainly rise to the top of the agenda. But without any form of redistributive justice and sustained development, these goals will remain illusory. If we see revolution, following Rosa Luxemburg and looking at the histories of resistance, organization and state repression, as an ongoing, multifaceted process, instead of a singular event (see Zemni et al. 2013), then the peoples of the region have proved that political sovereignty and agency—in the face of all that adversity—lies ultimately with “the people”. Even if the Arab revolts have not realized the immediate political and social emancipation of the masses from domination and exploitation, they have nevertheless

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developed forms of organization and consciousness which provide the basis for new struggles in the (near?) future.

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