

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Anthony Gorman.** *Historians, State and Politics in Twentieth Century Egypt: Contesting the Nation.* London and New York: Routledge, 2003. xii + 276 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-29753-0.

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## History Writing in Modern Egypt

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Anthony Gorman has written a detailed study of the main trends of Egyptian history writing in the twentieth century. His work is based on extensive interviewing of leading Egyptian historians and a wide reading in the field from the 1919 Revolution onward. The work is mindful of the wider political context in which this historical work is being written and, indeed, deals not just with professionals but with the larger environment of amateur historians and writers where this is possible.

The point of departure is the royalist school after World War I and its attempt to solidify the picture of the Muhammad 'Ali dynasty in what by then was an age of rising nationalism. This point of departure allows one to see the cosmopolitan nature of Egyptian intellectual life of the period, a point which Gorman often returns to thereafter. Soon the story takes up the Egyptianization of the Egyptian history profession with figures such as Shafiq Ghurbal, Muhammad Sabri al-Surbunni, and Muhammad Rif'at. Soon also one arrives at our near-contemporaries, the late Ahmad 'Izzat 'Abd al-Karim and Muhammad Anis, and the deepening trend toward a liberal empiricism jostling against a more theoretical socialist historiography.

At this point, the work turns toward a consideration of the institutions in Cairo that produced the scholarship of the Nasir period and beyond, concisely sketching a picture of the Center for Political and Strategic Studies, of Cairo University and 'Ayn Shams, and of the bu-

reaucracy. It then considers the writers who were not by employment professional historians, but who wrote and have had influence. In this rubric, he placed some of the early feminists, the early Muslim Brotherhood, and others. Naturally, he included the prolific and ever-popular journalist historian 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rafi'i.

Against this background of a fairly diverse national historiography, the work turns to part 2, entitled "National Dissonance." Part 2 takes up Coptic historiography and that of the minority communities (termed here *mutamassirun*). In this section, the detail concerning a few figures and the depth of analysis is what stands out. In general terms, this section addresses the question of how the existing spectrum of Coptic historiography regards the prevailing national historiography and vice versa. What are some of the outstanding Greek, Jewish, and Armenian historians of modern Egypt? Gorman here is able to discuss sources written in Greek.

There are clearly different audiences for this book and their views about this book will be quite different. On a generic level this work speaks to a major Western academic problem, namely that of not understanding the Arab world, to which the author replies, in effect, why not study how various countries have been developing their knowledge? And, one realizes at once how few works carefully study any field of modern academic culture in Egypt. No wonder even the energetic outsider wishing to understand modern Egypt is at a loss. A second audience is one likely to be composed of those

concerned with the general crisis of historiography of our times, and here too Gorman has something to offer. Nationalism, he believes, is too narrow; the cosmopolitanism of an earlier day ought to be more highly regarded. Here he has in mind the labors of such historians as Sammarco, Douin, and others of the royalist school of the interwar period. He also has in mind the works of historians taking up the subject of the other communities. Finally, the author recognizes that history by bureaucracy is a bad thing and that today, thanks to Sadat and Mubarak, there is more freedom. In other words Gorman has a perspective on the material conditions which allow for good history.

While one might agree with some of Gorman's general line of thought, it might also be worth considering how much was accomplished under the rather nationalistic and bureaucratic years of Nasir, in terms of social history in general and of the study of the struggles of the lower classes in particular. Much of this study actually weakened as one moves into the Sadat period and beyond. Yet for many, the study of the lower classes and the internal dynamic in Egypt still remains the relevant scientific horizon for the profession. What role freedom, however defined, played in this is not certain. Why social history went into a crisis in Egypt as it did is not taken up. One reason perhaps is that Gorman was not so con-

cerned with it as he was with the interplay of national history and minority history.

Gorman's focus in this work was largely on the students of modern history. Certainly these are a conspicuous community within the ranks of historians but the prestige of medieval history, Islamic history, and in more recent years even Ottoman history cannot be overlooked. In trying to delineate the context within which historians write modern history, many would point to the heavy influence of the medieval and classical humanistic tradition to which they have to adjust. This is certainly a constraint and one that needs to be thought about. On a final note, in the Ottoman Seminar over the last decade, much of what Gorman calls for can actually be found. Here one finds studies of Copts, Maghariba, Jews, French Consuls, Egyptian social history, port history, and other subjects commingled. His views on these recent studies of this cosmopolitan period would have been interesting.

In short, Gorman has provided a useful service. We now need a similar work on Egyptian sociology, literary criticism, philosophy, musicology, and the like. We also need works which build on such works, making sociological observations about the layout of professions and the relative position of one profession to another in the academic hierarchy. Perhaps Gorman's work will encourage others to undertake such studies.

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