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Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt by Walter Armbrust

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Sunni doctrine" (p. 93). He suggests that compulsory religious education in government schools and the construction of mosques in Alevi villages be stopped so that the "erosion of Alevism" (p. 92) can be minimized. Faruk Bîlîcî and Ruşen Çakır both contextualize Alevî-Bektashîs in the larger Sunni Islamist milieu of modern Turkey. These two articles seek to demonstrate the contours of minority Alevi political struggles (roughly 20% of the population in Turkey).

The second part of the book brings together 'Alî-oriented religions outside Turkey. İlber Ortaylı briefly discusses the Dönme, the Muslim followers of Sabbetai Zevi (although this is not an 'Alî-oriented group). It is difficult to understand how one could write on this subject without at least mentioning, if not incorporating, the seminal insights contained in the magisterial work of Gershom Scholem (*Sabbetai Zevi*). Jean During, the well-known French ethnomusicologist, provides a brief overview of Ahl-i Haqq studies. He reviews the canonical texts of the tradition and Iranian scholarship before discussing more recent Ahl-i Haqq perceptions of themselves in the context of mainstream Islam. There is a short discussion of "original" Ahl-i Haqq doctrines. Particularly appreciated is his critical appraisal and review of Ahl-i Haqq scholarship until 1990. Since that time, a few noteworthy books have appeared (Abu Ishaq Firuzabadî, *al-Ishara ila madhhab Ahl-I haqq* [Cairo: Wizarat al-Awqaf, 1999]; Muhammad 'Alî Sulţanî, *Qiyam wa-nuhzat-i 'alawîyan-i Zagrus* [Kirmanshah: Nashr-i Suha, 1997]; and a major compendium of poetry in Persian and Kurdish, Siddiq Safizadah Burahkah'i, *Danishnamah-i namavarân-i Yaristan* [Tehran: Hirmand, 1997]). His idiosyncratic use of hyper-Shi'î, perhaps appropriate in French, is counterproductive (in terms of his stated goal of political correctness) in American English.

Jakob Skovgaard-Peterson and Aharon Layish discuss the Druze in Lebanon and Israel, respectively. The Lebanese Druze have declared themselves officially in the fold of Islam. Layish's article describes the legal status of the Druze in modern Israel and the workings of the Druze Religious Council. A translation of Amin Tarif's (d. 1985) will (Tarif is the late leader of the Israeli Druze community) is appended to the article. Marianne Aringberg-Laanatza describes a quasi-comparative history of the Alevis in Turkey and the Alawites in Syria, with their respective Kurdish, Turkish, or Arab ethnic affiliations. One of her conclusions is that modern Alevis and Alawites do not recognize a connection between their groups. Instead, they identify with the nationalist parties of their respective countries. Olsson, who did anthropological work with the Syrian Alawites (12% of the Syrian population) in the 1980s, smoothly translates from Arabic, Persian, and Turkish sources to show how 'Alî is identified with divine reality. Given his history of religions analysis in the Epilogue, one wonders how he can blithely use the term "gnostic religions" (p. 178) as if this were a clear-cut category. Oddly, in a discussion of the Alawite divinity, Khudr (p. 181), the reader is not informed of any relationship, or lack thereof, with the well-known Khidr/Khadir.

Although this volume has a beautiful exterior and many worthwhile articles, it could have benefited considerably from responsible editorial work. Misspellings are rampant, cross-referencing of articles is almost non-existent, and, most astonishing, there is no index.

WALTER ARMBRUST, *Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, vol. 102 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Pp. 286. \$64.95 cloth, \$20.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY LINDA HERRERA, St. Antony's College, Oxford University

"Modernization," or processes of modern socio-political development, and identity formation have been among the most recurrent and pertinent themes of scholarly studies undertaken on 19th- and 20th-century Egypt. Works on intellectual thought; economic, political, and social

history; folk culture; and gender implicitly and explicitly grapple with the issue of the country's transition to, maintenance of, struggle with, or rejection of modernity. Modernization has often been understood through a hegemonic nationalist discourse—that is, through governmental rhetoric, the writings of establishment intellectuals, and uncritical examinations of state institutions. Alternative and counter-hegemonic manifestations and representations of modernity have been largely overlooked, which makes Walter Armbrust's anthropological inquiry into Egyptian mass culture an absolutely vital contribution to the study of modern Egypt.

Armbrust is careful not to conflate modernization with an unambiguous social progression toward Westernization. Indeed, one of the book's greatest strengths is that it traces and provides a critique of how Egyptian modernity has been typified in the hegemonic nationalist narrative by a duality: Westernization—that is, Western enlightenment principles of social progress and rationality—has coexisted with ideals of Egyptian cultural authenticity (*asala*). Armbrust argues that “while Egyptians allow for European influence on their modernism, they also insist strongly that the roots of their transition to modernity lie in their own culture, and that the essence of Egyptian modernism is to maintain an unbroken link with their own tradition” (p. 41). By highlighting the distinctive features of Egyptian modernism and showing a counter-trend that has emerged in popular culture, Armbrust provides insight into how to approach the study of modernity in other post-colonial contexts.

Armbrust compellingly shows how popular mass culture—as distinct from folk culture, the more standard fare of anthropologists of the Middle East (although media studies is a fast growing sub-field within anthropology)—has served as a venue through which alternative conceptions of modernity have emerged. Breaking again with traditional anthropology, Armbrust's concern is not with the peasantry or urban poor but with the educated middle classes who, he forcefully demonstrates, represent an increasingly disfranchised and discontented mass sector of the population. By examining a range of media, including television, music, film, radio, print journalism, and colloquial poetry dating from the 19th century to the present, Armbrust explains why the orthodox version of modernism has been contested in popular culture.

The main symbolic realm through which conflicting articulations of Egyptian modernity are expressed has been the Arabic language, and popular culture has been the stage on which language battles are waged. The state has attempted to use schooling and mass media to nurture in the masses an affinity to literary Arabic that is associated with refined cultural taste. Much of contemporary popular culture, however, with its lower linguistic standards, which critics label “vulgar” (*habit*), serves as a competing force. As Armbrust notes, “[P]opular culture has been linguistically important in Egypt because it has historically been a qualitatively different vehicle for establishing national identity than official discourse” (p. 8).

Critics of the growing vulgarization of language and culture through popular culture often evoke a golden era dating to the 1920s and 1930s. At that time, Egyptian modernism was exemplified in the songs, film characters, and media persona of the popular icon Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab. His Arabic speech and song lyrics were of an educated modern standard, eloquent without being antiquated, and in terms of personality type Abd al-Wahhab blended qualities of a modest Egyptian man of the people (*ibn al-balad*) with European sensibilities, making him an exemplary middle-class Egyptian. In his film *The White Rose* (1933) his character reveals a man who possesses a “fine discrimination of how far one could go in [Westernized] behavior and remain truly Egyptian” (p. 84). Ultimately, the image that was being promoted is one of “radical conservative,” which evokes “both an image of progress and a grounding in tradition” (p. 109).

Although Armbrust astutely locates Abd al-Wahhab (who occupies two of the book's seven chapters) in a larger modernist project, there is a fundamental shortcoming in his treatment of the material that reflects a larger limitation of the book—namely, it unselfconsciously depicts an inherently gendered, or masculine, modernism. Abd al-Wahhab represents an Egyptian mid-

dle-class *man*, and Armbrust neither calls attention to nor problematizes this fairly obvious point. The modern Egyptian woman is shrouded in ambiguity and conflict, indicating that modernism for Egyptian women has remained unresolved. The one example of a female protagonist is that of Zuzu, a repentant belly dancer turned popular university student in the 1972 film *Pay Attention to Zuzu*. However, this example is fraught with gender dilemmas that need the kind of rigorous analysis given to the heroic and sympathetic male characters. What does it mean that the possibility of prostitution looms over Zuzu; that she accepts being slapped in the face by her handsome, aristocratic professor at her home; that her morality is publicly debated at a meeting at the university? We get, in other words, a full theoretical treatment of the *ibn al-balad*, but the treatment of the female version, or *bint al-balad*, is tentative, at best.

It is also worth noting that Zuzu aside, all the female characters from film and television that Armbrust treats are depicted in largely derogatory terms: they have weak moral characters, are opportunistic, disloyal, irrationally jealous, flagrantly corrupt, and greedy. They resort to sly machinations and pursue men solely for their money. It is not clear whether pejorative representations of female characters are common to most, all, or just some films and serials, for Armbrust does not adequately locate his cases in a larger context of film and television characters and themes. With the book recently translated into Arabic (trans. Mohammad al-Sharkawi [Cairo: Supreme Council for Culture, 2000]), an Arab audience well versed in Egypt's rich media culture will undoubtedly raise questions about the choices and representativeness of the various media personalities and products with which Armbrust engages.

Where the book holds relevance for both men and women of Egypt is in its outstanding discussion of "education gone wrong," or the failure of education to fulfill its promise of providing social advancement for all who play by the rules. While the nationalist modernist rhetoric would have one believe that education constitutes a meritocracy with fair rules and social rewards, quite a different picture emerges in the popular mass media. Due to a complex set of factors having partly to do with the economic Open Door (*infatih*) policies in the post-1970 period, education, that "orthodox route to modernity" (p. 39) and the "machinery of cultural transformation" (p. 20), has been a point of contention and tremendous satire in mass culture. In the pre-*infatih* period, the notion of a meritocracy in which a "certain relationship between success in the modern school system and worldly success" (p. 133) prevails, whereas the post-*infatih* period reflects "an increasingly unwieldy vision of modernity" (p. 171).

The audience for the so-called vulgar arts, as Armbrust points out, consists largely of university students and educated youth, the very members of society who, by virtue of their modern educations, are supposed to be attracted to more refined Arabic art forms. Indeed, Armbrust's principal informants are university students and recent university graduates whose disillusionment and largely cynical attitudes toward education are juxtaposed with characters, plots, and scenes from television, theater, and film.

The theme of the highly popular 1989 television serial *The White Flag*, for example, is precisely the failure of education. The characters mirror Armbrust's informants and presumably scores of middle-class Egyptians who, as educated individuals, are "ripe for middle-class success" but are nevertheless "depressed and constantly threatened with defeat" (p. 23). Similarly, the 1970s play *School of Troublemakers* has remained popular with Egyptian youth for more than two decades because of its comic portrayal of authority figures in a modern school, "the institution portrayed for decades in literature and films as the solution to all problems of the modern world" (p. 170). By mocking figures of power and symbols of modernity, the popular media strikes a chord with the public.

Although some products of popular culture, particularly music cassettes, spread via an underground black market, popular "vulgar" arts for the most part are located within the state-regulated media. If much of mass culture stands in opposition to national modernist objectives and rhetoric, why does it pass state censors and get disseminated through largely state-con-

trolled channels? Armbrust remarks that the “state . . . has never been able completely to monopolize popular culture” (p. 196), but, unfortunately, he does not tackle the thornier issues having to do with the mechanisms through which the state disseminates, restricts, and censors popular culture. How, in other words, do the state’s cultural machinery, government ministries, and numerous media organs operate and influence what the public sees, hears, and reads? Through what processes are alternative discourses aired? To date, there has been no in-depth critical investigation of Egypt’s cultural machinery, a subject that could make for a fascinating and valuable study.

Despite these shortcomings, Armbrust convincingly argues that post-1970s media resonate with educated middle-class audiences because they address the “humiliation of the common man and the failure, corruption, or simple nonexistence of modernist institutions that are supposed to prevent it” (p. 217). Armbrust characterizes the new media as being “antimodernist” (p. 217), however one might consider them more as advocating a counter-nationalist, darker, and more disparaging version of modernity. While modernity may have gone wrong, while it may not have yielded the culture, affinities, and social promises it intended, it is still modernity.

In addition to contributing to our understanding of complex processes of modernization and documenting changes in the terrain of Egyptian middle classes and mass culture, the book is a testament to the legendary role that language and humor play in Egyptian society. The stingingly witty dialogue and scenarios Armbrust documents illustrate how Egyptians, even when faced with direly demoralizing circumstances, can turn to satire and evoke lyrics of popular songs and poetry that allow them to vent frustration and discontent, an act that many find preferable to the alternative, which might be to break down in tears.

URI MILSTEIN, *History of Israel’s War of Independence: Volume III, The First Invasion*. Trans. and ed. Alan Sachs (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1998). Pp. 414. \$65.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY BRUCE MADDY-WEITZMAN, Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University

For more than a decade, scholars and writers of various stripes have been revisiting the events surrounding the first Arab–Israeli war of 1948, whose outcome heavily shaped subsequent Middle East politics. Basing their work primarily on newly available Israeli, British, and American archival materials, they have shed considerable light and generated much heat regarding the origins, consequences, and degrees of responsibility for the events surrounding the birth of the State of Israel, the uprooting of two-thirds of the Palestinian Arab community, and the defeat of neighboring Arab armies.

As is so often the case in controversies about the past, the debate over 1948 was, and remains, one that is fueled by contemporary agendas, both scholarly and political. A large percentage of those involved are Israeli or former Israeli historians, augmented by Israeli scholars from other disciplines, such as sociology, literature, and political philosophy, as well as a variety of “public” intellectuals and commentators. Some Arab and Palestinian scholars also have joined the fray. As the Oslo process proceeded haltingly toward final status issues, the debate surrounding 1948 took on added significance.

The charter members of the “new historians” club (Benny Morris, Avi Shlaim, Ilan Pappé) assign preponderant responsibility to Israel, and its acts of commission and omission, for the 1948 Palestinian *nakba* (catastrophe) and the accompanying failure to conclude peace treaties between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Many of those Israelis who joined the debate (e.g., Itamar Rabinovich, Avraham Sela, Anita Shapira) agreed with portions of their critiques while