Communism, Radicalism, and Social Justice in the Eastern Mediterranean

Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, Associate Professor of Middle East and World History at Northeastern University & Sana Tannoury Karam, Ph.D. Candidate in Middle East and World History at Northeastern University

June 29, 2015

Summary by Mallak Anani

Introduction

Two scholars synthesize specific topics of study during the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of a new social order. From labor movements to migration, coffee houses, theaters, cafes, and broader society begin to witness and experience the intersectionality between local and worldly issues.

From Local to Global and Back

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, radical leftist ideas began to circulate parts of Eastern Mediterranean cities. For the purpose of this lecture, Dr. Khuri-Makdisi focused on the cities of Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria. She described these ideas as “selective adaptations of socialist and anarchist principles,” which ultimately provoke a call for various rights that we, today, recognize as social justice. Workers rights, mass secular education, and more generally, challenges to the existing social and political order within and beyond state borders were all components of these new movements.

Early in her lecture, Khuri-Makdisi recognized that the concepts of social justice went hand in hand with a broader reformist agenda. She mapped out the process in which this reformist agenda made way for change and she began with her explanation of rural migration. In adopting capitalist practices, rural peasants of Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria were dispossessed of land, encouraging them to seek opportunity elsewhere. Most headed to the Americas (particularly to the US and Brazil), leading to what must have been a serious shortage of peasant and manufacturing labor.

While many of these migrants took their grievances, struggles, and methods of contestations to new destinations, there were those who returned and brought back
with them new methods of collective action and new ways of challenging the status quo. People were exposed to leftist ideas associated with social order, and they synthesized, internalized, and adopted these ideas into their own belief system. Recognized as radicals, the migrants of Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria forged a culture of contestation in which they challenged existing and emerging class boundaries, redefined notions of foreignness and belonging, and promoted alternative visions of social and world order.

She noted that throughout the Mediterranean, large numbers of migrant and immigrant workers from various Mediterranean regions were employed, and some of them were connected to larger internationalist movements. Their associations with such movements sought to defend workers’ rights and promote social justice in fields such as workers rights, women’s rights, and national liberalism. It was their connections that played a key role in establishing leagues of resistance and organizing strikes within local, regional, and global initiatives.

Cultural Shifts and Empowerment

Khuri-Makdisi said that these migrants consisted of peasants, artisans, entertainers, craftsmen, and white-collar workers. Upon the return of migrants, a new middle-class was born, as middle-class intellectuals sought to forge an alliance with working classes through the establishment of mutual funds, artisanal and technical training courses, and a shared concern for the local economy.

Both Khuri-Makdisi and Karam spoke to the roles of cultural mediums and their influences on social justice movements. Khuri-Makdisi spearheaded this sentiment in the lecture by explaining that this emerging new class, consisting of intellectuals, sought to gain access to state and social power and did so by securing or appropriating a number of the new key urban institutions, such as the press, the theater, municipalities, new educational institutions, reading rooms, Masonic lodges, and scientific and literary clubs. In their collaboration, members of all classes involved redefined urban social life and from these spaces emerged a new discourse and narrative. Inherently, cultural environments were transformed into original and transformative spaces, linking intellectuals of the middle-class with others from the working class. They utilized spaces such as cafés and the theaters to voice their perceptions and opinions of radical ideas.

Karam expounded on this idea and provided her audience with a vignette of the newspapers that reported on the May 1, 1925 celebration/protest. She continued to explain just how the newspaper possessed the power to disseminate new and radical ideas by articulating new notions of the public sphere. This speaks volumes to other aspects of cultural society in that a periodical, play, and novel would all serve society with this same purpose.

In this new age of migration also came the ability to circulate news and the accessibility to travel from one nation state to another. Khuri-Makdisi speaks to the nahda, in that
civilization meant connecting individual interest to social interest, where progress towards civilization was achieved when individuals had a strong and substantial relationship with the social body, which she calls al-hay’a al-ijtima’iyya. The press, specifically, became a platform for people to demonstrate their support for strikers. News coverage of strikes and reformist demands generated publicity that made the strikers’ cause public knowledge, which ultimately allowed for workers to use the press as a court for the people.

_________

Liberate One, Liberate All: May 1, 1925

Karam discussed an idea that well reflected a popular theme of both talks. In her explanation of the labor movement and its initiation of the May 1, 1925 celebration, she illustrated how the call for workers’ rights provoked a call for many other rights. Labor strikes such as this one spoke volumes to the link between local and global radicals by demonstrating their unified will to challenge the higher authority. Here, however, she began by outlining the demands of the labor movement voiced on this May 1, 1925 day, which consisted of the following:

- Establishing an 8-hour work day
- Setting a minimum wage
- Issuing a labor law
- Implementing a social security system that guaranteed compensation for workers if they were hurt during work
- Ending a discontinuation of night jobs

She then explored how a call for women’s rights emerged from the labor movement. This call demanded women’s participation in political life, laws enforcing women’s right to work, and the protection of women within the workforce. In the discussion portion of the event, Khuri-Makdisi highlighted the need for academics to study this subject matter more frequently and more in depth.

A second effort provoked by the initial labor movement dealt with national liberalism. She drew a connection between nationalism and communism and how they were often discussed in association with one another and their need to resist colonialism. Karam explored how colonialism created environments of inequality and not just for workers, but also for anybody living under its rule, regardless of employment status. Communists acknowledged this as such and publicly exposed the notion that colonialism created a hierarchy within society. Communists then encouraged workers to not only revolt not only against capitalists, but against colonialists, too. This, Karam explained, was a tactic meant to demonstrate how fighting for one just cause would ultimately liberate everyone else within the state as well as themselves.

Karam shared a quote that said, “The French have made of every peasant a rebel, from every worker a revolutionary, and from every striker a communist.” This spoke to the idea that once liberation was achieved from the French (in the case of Lebanon, specifically), and once liberation was achieved from colonialism more generally, then
equality will become much more prevalent and accessible for both workers and citizens of the state.

The May 1, 1925 celebration embraced this idea that if workers unite and call for their demands, they will ultimately unite against common enemies: colonialism and fascism. By uniting, a certain justice will be achieved for workers and non-workers alike. In essence, with the recognition of worker inequalities came the development of other movements, which also aimed to create a more just society. It becomes clear, then, that social justice did not stand on its own, but rather that it was manifested in relation to other issues, such as workers rights, women’s rights, and national liberation from colonial and fascist powers. In the initial stages of radicalism, migrants exemplified that leftist ideas were not codified by any means, but rather that were variable in their perceptions and practices.

Khuri-Makdisi noted in the closing of her presentation that:

The history of radicalism is an intensely local story: it is first and foremost about people interpreting and giving meaning to vocabularies, concepts, and practices that had recently emerged on the local scene. As such, it is not a matter of ‘importing’, but one of adapting, and adaptations cannot take place outside of the local frameworks that give meaning to novel concepts, or local spaces and institutions such as the neighborhood coffeehouse, the theater, literary salons and clubs, periodical offices, or municipalities. Adaptations also obviously have to fit into existing and changing social relations, economic and political structures, and intellectual structures of meaning.

This mandate period represents a time of the fall of an empire and the rise of a new social order. In this era of revolution, however, both Khuri-Makdisi and Karam recognize that those topics of study that specifically focus on the conditions of workers in rural areas, migrants in the context of labor, and women-related issues more generally, are understudied and need more attention. Their research, while inclusive of all of these areas of study, has only provided its audience(s) with a space to explore these topics in depth and continue the conversation they began.

Bios

Ilham Khuri-Makdisi is an Associate Professor of Middle East and World History at Northeastern University, Boston.

Sana Tannoury Karam is a Ph.D. Candidate in Middle East and World History at Northeastern University specializing in the history of communism in the Mandate Levant.