IL DISFACIMENTO DEL SOCIALISMO ARABO

Data: 27 Novembre 2019 - Di Mirna Khaled Sayed

Rubrica: Letture

Recensione a
A. Kadri, *The Unmaking of Arab Socialism*

Anthem Press, London-New York 2016, pp. 330, £70.00, $115.00

DOI 10.5281/zenodo.3555436

Since postcolonial independence, Arab regimes have struggled to capture an ideological center that would keep the circulation of value within the triad of state, labour and capital to a certain degree of balance, and ensure that working-class consciousness is at the level required to steer capital for its benefit. Instead, what often happens is the increasing estrangement and alienation of the working class from the ruling regime, leading to the consequent weakening of the state and inter-working class violence. The alliance is no longer with the professional working class and bureaucratic elites, but with the international financial class whose profits come at the expense and suffering of the local people.

In this climate of violence and increasing levels of poverty, most academic studies often focus on the end results of historical developments rather than start from the beginning to extract the root causes of the inner deficiencies of the regimes. Illan Peleg and Jonathan Mendilow in 'Corruption and the Arab Spring', for instance, noted the impact of corruption in sparking the Arab

Spring protests, while Sayres Rudy in "Pros and Cons: Americanism against Islamism in the 'War on Terror,'" fixates the topic on terrorism and it arose as a reaction to material grievances and Western imperialism. While these can be considered as fair attempts in pinpointing the region's major problems, it is also a method that lacks a deeper study into the history of development in the Arab world and how historical factors play a great role in changing the power relationships that exist today.

In contrast, Ali Kadri in *The Unmaking of Arab Socialism* offers a more comprehensive picture of the history of Arab regimes, with an aim to delve deeper to figure out why and how the Arab world moved from socialism to neoliberalism. It is important to note that the aim of the book in itself is significant and rare, for a bulk of the literature on Arab socialism often comes with assumptions of its failure due to a rise in deficits and decreasing development. Instead, Kadri points out that policies, such as import substitution, cannot 'run their course'; in other words, it is not the dissatisfaction with socialist measures that marked the end of Arab socialism, but it is the change of people's organization among class lines and the global move away from socialism. By shedding more light on the shifting alliances and the change of the political relationships between the ruling classes to imperialism, Kadri provides a starting point in accurately understanding how the working class population became estranged from the ruling regime, which led to its shrinkage in quality and quantity of output and explains the reasons for the de-development process under neoliberalism later on.

At this point it becomes important to ask: why the working class? And what is Arab socialism? Despite Nasser's reign and existence of the Arab Socialist Union in Egypt, as well as the spate of books and articles that were written on the importance of socialism for Egyptian politics, there still remains a huge confusion among Egyptians and Arabs around the concept. In the Egyptian variant, or as stipulated by Egyptian officials, the concept refers to the social basis of the revolution: the struggle for the abolishment of the exploitation of

Arabs and the establishment of unity. However, Kadri looks at Arab socialism through the history of class alliances, which at the time came to be an alliance of the military with the intermediate classes. He notes that while under Arab socialism the relationships remained predominantly capitalist and the private interests of military were growing, it still created a financial space for the expansion of state-led industrial investment, investment in social infrastructure and the undertaking of vast land reform and redistribution measures, which largely outperformed the ongoing neoliberal model.

He proves so by highlighting that even mainstream scholars such as Anderson (1987) had to admit to the fact that the Arab socialist models acted as engines of growth, and that notions of rising debts and trade deficits breaking the advance of socialism are not evidenced by clear data.

What is particularly significant about Kadri's work is his effort to avoid de-historicizing social development in the Arab world. For instance, he notes that the predominant idea that the military must fall out of class relations erases the historical developments that led to its emergence as a social force following the departure of colonialism. Due to the absence of other classes who had the necessary capital to undertake development, and emerging security threats coming from the formation of Israel, the military took the leading role in enacting socioeconomic reforms from above. The rise of the armed forces as a class, as such, was a historical outcome. He also highlights the problems of promoting Western-style democracy in an undeveloped country with a weakly armed working class whose value of work is omitted in global economic relations, as it results in individuals abstracted from their own social being and thus, elect a social class that partakes in the profits of imperialism. Instead, Kadri notes that the only way a democracy could work is when it is centered on the working class' self-activity, as it is the group best positioned to enact real change and extract concessions from the ruling class.

In the next chapters, Kadri then shifts to explain the Arab world's developmental descent in each of the case studies: Egypt, Syria and Iraq. He

starts by highlighting that the frequent military defeats instilled a spirit of 'defeatism' in the upper layers of society, which erased the elements of armed struggle against imperialism in its nationalist agenda and choosing to cooperate through 'peaceful resolutions', as exemplified by the Camp David Accords. However, there seems to be a little tension between the argument that wars assist in the creation of imperial rents and the expansion of world dollarization, and that peaceful resolutions strengthen the forces of imperialism. It could also be argued that the achievement of peace, in some cases, work against the transactions produced by armed conflicts, as in Libya and Syria for instance, where a loss of chance to find a peaceful resolution leads to an all-out war for many years to come.

In all of the three states, Kurdi gives an excellent exposition on the splintering of the working classes in the Arab world, explicating how a combination of armed conflicts and petrodollar-funded civil society resulted in inter-working class divisions that blocked the development of revolutionary-class consciousness. On the whole, he adds that on top of deepening income divisions and rural–urban disparities, the division of the working class fuels identity-based conflicts that weaken the foundation of the state and breaks its ideological center apart. In explaining the Arab spring protests, Kadri prefers to look at it as merely a state of 'social devastation' in the Arab world, as the masses had no clear working-class unity to formulate a clear revolutionary plan, with only identity driven groups such as the Islamists being the only real mobilized force.

Herein lies the gap that Kadri does not fulfill by the end of the book, for he points out two main factors: first, that Arab socialism's macro variables were healthier compared to the current neo-liberal model, and second, that the Arab world's working class has been divided and estranged from the ruling class. What remains to be unclear, however, is whether there are any remains from the period of Arab socialism that is contributing to the growing social soul of the Arab world's revolutions. Using Rosa Luxemburg's writings on the 1905

Russian Revolution as a reference, the current revolutions in the Arab world could have several goals, though a revolution that is aimed for political aims – removing the status quo – could eventually extend to later become an economic revolution, since if the 'capital boss' loses power in the government, this can also translate to his loss of power over the worker in the workplace. This can be seen by the increasing presence of workers in the current Iraqi protests, for example, which are uniting across religious and political divisions despite its divisive system, as Rana Abdulhadi points out in 'Iraqi protestors unite behind demands, not sectarian identities. Rather than seeing it as merely a mass of protests among sectarian lines, it can be looked at as an extension of the short-lived period of socialism, and can potentially grow to achieve both economic and political goals of the working class.