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Old regime and modernity in Egypt: Al-Jabarti and the ambiguous heritage of the French Revolution

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I'd like to thank the promoters of this session for giving me the opportunity of presenting this essay of analysis of the impact of the French revolutionary ideas on Egypt as seen from the Egyptian side. My main source is the chronicle the Cairoite notable al-Jabarti wrote during the period of the French occupation between 1798 and 1801. This episode is part of a wider project of writing a history of Egypt.

Al-Jabarti and his view on the French occupation of Egypt have often been at the centre of debates on orientalism in Middle-Eastern studies. Edward Said himself used this episode as a key feature in his interpretation of the roots of the asymmetric and perverse relationship between Europe and the Middle-East. As it pertains to a founding and crucial moment, and as it involves value judgments on the relationship between two civilisation spheres caught in a process of redefinition, it is fully logical that this specific moment be the object of fierce interpretations. And as al-Jabarti's writing is a unique source in allowing to have a view on how a local notable interpreted the European invasion, his chronicle is also at the centre of many debates. The field I am going to confront with in this paper is in no way neutral in Middle-Eastern studies. Many debates already occurred since the 70's and each new contribution participates in bringing further interpretations on the impact of Europe with the Middle-East. But our aim here is to reflect on global history. And the perspective I would like to illustrate consists in using a moment of confrontation and interaction between two systems in order not only to catch the specific dynamics of interaction, but also to take profit of the interaction to make each system more explicit. I conceive here global history as a method, and in no way as an enveloping process in which greater truth would come out of unusual comparisons. What I am interested in is to understand better the old regime Ottoman society in Egypt at the moment of its confrontation to an external aggression.

Because as for global history, the French occupation of Egypt has often been read from two main perspectives: the century long imperial rivalry between France and Great Britain, and the confrontation between the West and the East in a founding moment for colonial history, these respective categories having sometimes been the object of reifications whose roots are to be found into misinterpretations of what happened at the turn of the XIXth century in Egypt. It is of course important in global history to try and build globalizing civilisational

interpretations, but It must not be at the cost of leaving another scale of practice of global history unexplored: a scale more related to the interaction of two systems at a precise moment in a precise place.

And indeed this crucial moment both in the history of the French Revolution and in the history of the Middle-East can also be analysed in a perspective pertaining to global history in many other ways. Global history is a method and not just a scale of perspective. The object of this paper is thus not again another analysis of the large scale stakes pertaining to changes in the geopolitical order in the Mediterranean (even if it is not to be excluded that conclusions at a micro-global scale have an echo at this scale), but rather a reading of the interaction between the French revolutionary idea and another social order. The key feature in this reading is deliberately not dominated by culturalist views, but by paradigms related to the analysis of the basic functioning principles of a society. Here: old regime and a certain idea of modernity, bearing a certain amount of funding ambiguities. The aim is to go back to cultural elements only after this effort of avoiding their implicit dominance.

My choice is to try and read what happened in Egypt between 1798 and 1801 through an analysis of the chronicle written by the local notable 'Abd al-Rahmân al-Jabartî. And here are some of the main questions I'd like to try and raise, in order to discuss the roots of the relationship between a European style of revolutionary regime in the action of exporting its principles and an ottoman old regime:

What kind of contestation of the old regime order do the French impose in Egypt? In what extent is it related to what had been implemented in France in the previous years and months? In other words, how is the exported modernity distorted compared to the revolutionary ideal (himself already distorted by 8 years of revolutionary regime and on its way between a Jacobin dictatorship and a bonapartist dictatorship). Where can we already detect a culturalist and colonialist interpretation by French occupiers of revolutionary principles? How is external pressure inducing a reaction of the ottoman old regime structures? How is the funding distortion of modernity as exported by force by revolutionary French a key element in the understanding of the evolution of the local Egyptian and imperial ottoman old regime?

Egypt was not the first foreign land to be occupied by the French revolutionary armies. The most well known example, for which the impact of a forced exportation of administration and social revolutionary modernity and local forms of old regime has already been studied, is of course Italy. Works by Anna Maria Rao and Maria Pia Donato illustrated this trend. Of course, generally, Italy is seen as essentially totally different from Egypt: a country with parent cultural features with France, where already existed a progressive opinion in opposition

to monarchy, the Church and the old regime in general. There were local Jacobins. The linguistics of revolution and their antic roots made sense. But anyway, studies on Italy have helped the historian take his distances from too simplistic interpretations of the process of exporting revolution in an old regime foreign country. Italy has also shown how old regime had many different local forms, each one reacting differently. Let us then keep these results of historical research in mind when analysing the impact of the French occupation of Egypt and on its social and government structure, which I call from old regime nature, not by analogy but in an effort to avoid to pose culturalist paradigms on the table before having only collected the ingredients of the dish. Culturalist interpretations can only come in my opinion in a second movement, if. Generally, Egypt is not included into dissertations about the impact of revolutionary principles with old regime for two reasons. The first is that it is not acknowledged that there was an old regime form of social organisation. The second is that it seems obvious that the impact of revolutionary perspectives is with a totally alien society, a feature that imposes to reflect only in terms of colonial encounter or better, confrontation. And of course this dimension is crucial: I would'nt like to suggest in anyway that I believe in French claims of liberating a society oppressed by old regime in exporting revolutionary principles. Egypt is of course just seized, as a pivotal ottoman province, into a strategic war whose development is an early example of colonial occupation in the Middle-East. And the only idea of exporting revolution without other goals was disqualified since at least the Italian expedition.

But it remains that this occupation reveals the confrontation of two social organisational principles. It reveals the ambiguity of European modernity, and it reveals the adaptative capacity of the imperial ottoman old regime framework. I will focus on these points, but I'd like to recall that I never forget the context.

A few words about this context: in a move to weaken the English colonial routes, after having renounced to its invasion projects on England, the French revolutionary army led by Bonaparte was sent to Egypt by the regime of the Directory. Alexandria was seized on the 1st of July 1798 and Cairo later this summer. The idea of an Egyptian expedition was already present in old regime France, with for example a suggestion by Leibniz to Louis the XIVth or by Venture de Paradis in the 1780's. But its implementation responds to the context of revolutionary wars.

And a few words now about the figure of al-Jabarti, whose chronicle I use to promote my global reading of the interaction of distorted European modern principles and an endangered local Egyptian form of imperial ottoman old regime governance. Al-Jabarti was born in 1753.

Trained at al-Azhar university in Cairo, he wrote Ulama biographies and then held a chronicle of his time. He also wrote a great history of Egypt.

And here are the few points on which I'd like to reflect, based upon notes by al-Jabarti during the time of the French occupation.

First, government principles. What is there truly behind the claim by Bonaparte of funding a republican regime? Here there is a linguistic question. For French present their republic as college of the elder (*machikha*) or *jumhur*, an arabic word designing the crowd used by ottomans to qualify european republics. These words are not anchored into the arabic tradition of political philosophy. This does not mean that in this philosophy the idea of a popular or plebeian regime was not linguistically speaking conceivable. This point is important. And it reveals more the ambiguity of the nature of the french republic (a regime on the verge of collapsing under bonapartist cesarism and already a kind of cemented conservatist aristocratic –etymologically the government of a few- stronghold) than the inability of the islamic context to deal with the republican idea.

The composition of the council (*diwan*) promoted by the French confirms this. It is a continuation of the Ottoman council under *mamelouk* domination. But as the military cast of the *mamelouk* is weakened and as ottoman officials are almost all in exile, Napoleon call in religious notables, the *ulemas*. The french do in no way promote a plebeian regime with popular representation. Representativity is though religious and noble notability. The republican idea that is conveyed is on this basis. The new regime presents also itself as a derivation of the old one. A feature that does not impeded the promotion of truly different principles, for example for fiscal policies.

But most of all, in our perspective of global history, what kind of echo a such ambiguous claims of funding a new regime can have into the fragile local balance of urban factions? Because the French revolutionary rhetoric don't fall into a desert land in terms of political culture. Not only many notables had read accounts of the French revolution and of its troubled aftermaths¹, but also in the recent history of Ottoman Egypt, the struggle between populist factions, noblesse, artisans and representatives of the imperial power had been constant. In Cairo, in addition to this traditional ottoman panorama, there was the importance of the military cast of the *mameluks*. What I call Ottoman regime is the constantly renegotiated

¹ On the reception of the French Revolution in the Ottoman Empire: Sendesni (Wajda), *Regard sur l'historiographie ottomane sur la Révolution française et l'expédition d'Egypte: Tarih-I Cevdet*, Istanbul, Isis, 2003, 150p. On the Egyptian reception: Ibrahim (Nasser) Abbas (Raouf) (Eds.), *Mâiata 'âmm 'ala al hamla al fransiyya*, Cairo, Ru'ya masriyya, Maktabât Dâr al 'Arabiyya, 2007, 706p.

balance between these trends. The big difference might be that in French political culture at the end of the XVIIIth century, the absolute reference was roman history, the actors of the French revolution defining their action with words read in Caesar, Titus Livus and Cicero. In the Ottoman Empire, the roman influence might have survived through the Byzantine heritage, but not in the linguistics of politics. There is then a linguistic and also conceptual impact. But this does not mean that in Ottoman Egypt there was no struggle between notables playing the card of tribune of the plebs and notables playing the card of a closed definition of access to civic rights, all of them trying to gain the support of the imperial structure and dealing with the specificity of the mamluk military rule. That is why I conceive my global approach as the interaction of two systems, and not as one deploying itself into a practical and theoretical vacuum. But it would be a mistake to hunt for analogies. The global perspective is to search for a better understanding of both systems, not to try and reach a necessarily imperfect and false superposition.

In al-Jabarti's chronicle, what is great to follow, just as much as how the French adapted their principles to the local situation according to very interesting distortions, is how the local notables dealt with the occupiers. Al-Jabarti, who was part of the diwan, describes very carefully every step in the negotiation of the organisation of society, from administration to inheritance, from property to charity or from justice to deliberation. The work organisation and fate of the guild system is also at the centre of his interest. It would be sterile to count all the domains in which revolutionary principles are left apart. But the French do insist on imposing a reform of the ottoman old regime, itself with deep medieval roots. The solutions imposed, but not without a great deal of negotiation (negotiation consisted at least in finding a faction who agreed to implement the decision, often after a phase of coercion), contained many elements of contestation of the previous order. Fiscal principles, for example, were deeply reformed. But what I would like to insist on, is not the importation feature, nor the negotiation or coercion one. It is rather the fact that very often, the French influence has changed the existing balance of old regime regulation into a world of references that only partially integrated new elements taken from abroad, and more often led to set the balance on a different position into the old system of reference. And this is one the conclusions global history can lead us to: defy from the belief in the performance of importation, and refine the framework of interpretation of the evolution of the existing system, on the condition of recognizing to this system his existence as a coherent one. Under occupation, violence, coercion, the imperial old regime ottoman system of urban social rule in Egypt reacted in a more complex way than a passive integration of foreign principles. All the details given by al-

Jabarti on this process lead us to a reevaluation of the previous system, and most of all of the existence of a constantly renegotiated balance. People and notables, patrons and workers, men and women, mamluks and civilians, imperial relays and local figures, all was a fragile equilibrium that paradoxically the foreign intrusion and its revolutionary dialectic reveals. And in my opinion, it also an important dimension of global history: using a specific moment of interaction as a revelatory formula for the understanding of a specific system. From al-Jabarti, we not only understand better the nature of the distortion into the French discourse (but we had no illusions about it) but also the nature of Egyptian society.

For Stanford Shaw, “French policy in Egypt was a curious combination of timid conservatism and of radical innovation and change, of professed respect for native traditions and their complete disregard in practice”². This analysis, after all, could fit all actions by Bonaparte, France included. But there is here another dimension, of which of course Shaw was aware: the cultural gap. In reading al-Jabarti from a global perspective, however, one can try and avoid focusing only on this gap, and falling into culturalism. The global perspective has to be opened to a focus on the local society and not obsessed by western ambiguities whose list is too easy to compile. For a possible written version of this paper, I would focus on some examples that show how the external impulse induces a shift in the balance of the local organisation beyond the mere implementation of the imposed reform.

The first example is the composition of the diwan, the council³. What is particularly interesting is the way in which the theoretization of communal civic participation by the occupiers interacts with ottoman practices, themselves deriving from medieval heritages. But with a huge distortion which endangers not only the previous fragile balance, but also its fundamentals, without promoting what we could call a modern administrative scheme that would make abstraction from the game of collective identity in order to promote revolutionary individual citizenship. Bonaparte nominates into the council religious muslim erudites and notables from the religious minorities. He goes further than the ottoman into the communal definition of civic participation. This is in no way neutral and will become in the next decades a classic feature of colonial clientelism.

What I am particularly interested in is also the evolution of existing charges of urban government, with an adapted definition.

Here I’d like to evoke the fate of the charge of naqid al ashraf, chief of the nobles. This figure palyed in the ottoman old regime the role of a chief of the urban institutions. As the naqib al

² Shaw (Stanford), *Ottoman Egypt in the Age of the French Revolution*, Harvard Middle-Eastern Monograph Series, 1964, 198p., p.22

³ See Al-Jabarti, vol. 3-4, p.18, p.31.

ashraf fled, Makram, fled the french invasion and Bonaparte failed in convincing him to come back from exile in the neighboring ottoman province of Palestine, he appointed the head of the rival noble faction, Bakri, himself a contested figure in his own clan. So what Bonaparte played on is the playground of the factious games of the ottoman noble civic personnel. This is an important point to be noted.

The second example is the fate of what P.M. Holt defined for the end of the XVIIIth century as a possible kind of tribune of the plebs⁴. Just as the ottoman balance, the French revolution led to its durable eclipse to the profit of more stable notables. So what al-Jabarti's chronicle shows is not only a process of conservatism, but also of sedimentation of long history of central control of local urban populist impulses. The Cairo revolt against French rule is a crucial moment in this process, as the naqib al ashraf was contested by the crowd, some nobles from other factions trying to play the role of tribunes. There the revolutionary movement against the old regime order is directed against the french revolution.

And the third example is about the link between civic rights, religion, submission to the state order and military rule. The basic principles of the functioning of society as promoted by the French are in no way neutral in Egyptian and Ottoman history. The interaction is not between Enlightenment and the dark ages of medieval backwardness, it is between a distorted idea of modernity and imperial ottoman interpretation of the medieval heritage of islamic governance, with the result of a displacement of the balance.

What emerges from this framework is then a dynamic picture in which external violent stimulations reveals the logics of the previous system in the very moment of its decline. It also reveals the ambiguities of the relationship with modernity. Because now that we avoided to start from there, we can try and go back in this direction of the interpretation of the ambiguous relationship with modernity. What is ambiguous is not necessarily that revolutionary principles were adapted to a specific cultural context. After all, isn't Bonaparte himself the adaptation of revolutionary France to the French context? What is ambiguous is instead the distortion by a foreign power of the ottoman balance of old regime rule: communal relations, urban civic rights, fiscal principles. And here, it is not the abstract modernity, would it exist, that was promoted, but a specific image of the society to be reformed, based upon reified *topoi*. This was in no way neutral in the evolution of Egypt and in its relationship to administrative modernity. And this allows to go back to the global system in a journey of a global history rooted into global questionings about local changes.

⁴ Holt (P.M.), « The Career of Küçük Muhammad », *Bulletin of the School of African and Oriental Studies, University of London*, 1962, 26-3, p.269-293.