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On Philip Abrams and a Multi-Faceted "Historical Event": The Urabi Movement (1879-1882) in Egypt

Abstract

This article explores the Urabi Revolt (1879-1882) in Egypt as a unique historical event from Philip Abrams' theoretical perspective. Abrams argues that the extent of the complexity and uniqueness of a historical event can be assessed based on the conjunction of various elements and aspects the event embodies. The Urabi movement represents a "puzzle of the complex factors", to use Abrams' terminology, which impacts a large-scale social transformation – the transition of Egypt from a Middle Eastern monarchy to a modern nation-state. Departing from this point of view, in the article, I argue that the Urabi movement was a convergence of a range of loosely related developments over the course of a historical event. Hence the question here is not about choosing a single development among a variety of them and focusing on it to explain the whole process, but about capturing how each development shaped the course and character of the event and to what degree.

Keywords: Egypt, Historical Sociology, Historical Event, Philip Abrams, Urabi Revolt.

Philip Abrams ve Çok Yönlü Bir "Tarihsel Olay" Üzerine: Mısır'daki Urabi Hareketi (1879-1882)

Öz

Bu makale, Philip Abrams'ın teorik perspektifinden Mısır'daki Urabi İsyanı'nı (1879-1882) özgün bir tarihsel olay olarak incelemektedir. Abrams tarihsel bir olayın özgünlüğünün ve karmaşıklığının boyutunun o olayın temsil ettiği çeşitli öğe ve özelliklerinin bileşimi üzerinden değerlendirilebileceğini tartışmaktadır. Abrams'ın terminolojisini kullanacak olursak, Urabi Hareketi büyük çaplı bir toplumsal dönüşümü – Mısır'ın bir Orta Doğu monarşisinden modern ulus-devlete geçişi – etkileyen karmaşık faktörlerden oluşan bir bulmaca şeklinde ortaya çıkar. Bu bakış açısından hareketle, bu makalede Urabi Hareketi'nin tarihsel bir olay sürecinde bir araya gelen birbiriyle ilintili farklı gelişmelerin bir bütünü olduğunu tartışmaktayım. Dolayısıyla buradaki mevzu, bütün bir süreci açıklamada bir çok gelişme arasından tek bir tarihsel gelişmeyi seçip ona odaklanmak değil, her bir gelişmenin olayın karakteri ve sürecini nasıl ve ne derece şekillendirdiğini kavramaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Mısır, Tarihsel Sosyoloji, Tarihsel Olay, Philip Abrams, Urabi İsyanı.

Introduction

The Urabi revolt is a unique and complex historical event in the modern history of Egypt. Philip Abrams argues that the extent of the complexity and uniqueness of an event can be assessed based on the conjunction of various elements and aspects the historical event embodies (Abrams 1982: 197). This embodiment refers to a general social process (Abrams 1982: 210). This article explores the Urabi revolt (1879-1882) as such a unique, historical event that embodies multiple political, economic and cultural aspects of the Egyptian modernization in the late nineteenth century. By discussing this event, the main aim of the article is to investigate the re-construction of a social event by different and competing historical approaches.

The Urabi revolt was a popular protest movement led by Colonel Ahmed Urabi against the European intervention, as well as the Turco-Circassian elite in the Egyptian army. Its slogan was "Egypt for the Egyptians". The uprising triggered a series of political and military events, which ended with the death or exile of many of its leaders, and resulted in the colonial occupation of Egypt by British forces in 1882. The origin of the revolt lays years earlier in the policies of the Khedive Ismail (1863–79), the ruler of Egypt at the time. By 1877, the Khedive Ismail was bankrupt due to bad investments, military expeditions to the Sudan, and lavish spending on a number of projects. He met the financial crisis by allowing France and Great Britain to set up a dual financial control over Egypt's state revenues. Moreover, the Khedive Ismail at the expense of local, Egyptian officers favored the officers of Turkish origin. That is why Ahmed Urabi whose promotion was stalled due to his local background led a protest against the Khedive within the army rank and file. His movement was backed by Egyptians in the army, civil service and business world, so the Khedive Tawfiq (the successor of the Khedive Ismail) had to accept their request of the purge of Turkish elements from the officers' corps and the formation of a new government including the Urabi's supporters; and he nominated Urabi to the position of the Ministry of War.

In the meantime, the new political situation stirred the public opinion in the Egyptian society against Europeans. In June 1882 riots broke out in Alexandria and

many foreign nationals and businesses were attacked. These events prompted the British and French to intervene militarily. The British bombarded Alexandria and sent a military ground force to eliminate the Urabists. In September 1882, Urabi and his forces were defeated in the battle of al-Tal al-Kabir. Urabi was exiled to Ceylon (today's Sri Lanka). The British then set out to conquer the entire country, thus beginning the formal era of the British occupation, which lasted in various shapes and forms until 1956.

In his book *Historical Sociology* (1982), Philip Abrams theorizes the ways in which both historians and sociologists can unravel the puzzle of the complex factors that impact large-scale social transformation, and grasp the role of the individual in it. In these efforts, it is important to assume a convergence of a range of loosely related developments over the course of a historical event rather than choosing one development or dynamic to explain the whole process (Abrams 1980: 3). Furthermore, for Abrams, a historian, as well as a sociologist, should be concerned with the issue of meaning, grasp the mentalities of the past, and explore the cultural world of ordinary people in order to explain a historical event rather than the detailed narratives and biographies of statesmen (Abrams 1980). In this exploration, the recognition and theoretical formulation of human agency is crucial to understand a historical event.

By the measure of detail and specificity, the Urabi revolt is "a historical event" in Abrams' terms, but we also need to be able to explain its significance as a marker of transition (Abrams 1982: 195). "The idea of a course is arrived at only by way of the idea of events", Abrams wrote (Abrams 1982: 190). In Egypt, was there anarchy or an organized political mass movement between 1879-1881? To what extent did Urabi shape the direction and course of the event? Was the Urabi movement the result of a class struggle, or was it a movement of national independence? Was it anti-European or anti-colonial? If so, to what extent can we consider it a nationalist uprising?

To answer those questions, various historical approaches interpreted the Urabi revolt in different ways. In the remainder of the article, I will talk about the cultural, political, ideological and economic determinants of the Urabi revolt. And I will discuss different historical schools and approaches that interpreted the event by prioritizing one

determinant over the others, and offered contradictory answers to the following question: how did each determinant shape the course of the event?

Official Historiographies

After the liberation of Egypt from the British colonial rule and its foundation as an independent country in 1956, the Urabi movement came to be regarded as an anti-colonialist and nationalist "glorious" struggle in the official history of Egypt. Today, the official and nationalist historiography of Egypt exalts Ahmad Urabi as the hero of the Egyptian nation.

Among Western historians, especially the British, however, there was a traditional view that the 'Urabi revolution was nothing more than a "revolt" or "insurrection" and definitely not a social revolution. They believed there was anarchy, in the Egyptian society, led by Ahmad Urabi, which later turned out to be a military coup. Cole argues about the distortion of the historical narration of the Urabi movement by the British. Considering the movement as a far-reaching social change, he claims that British statesmen and historians were incorrect "not only in terms of factual detail but also in the very conception of the nature of social change in Egypt" (1999: 16). Hopkins writes that "the riots were less serious than has long been supposed, and they were probably spontaneous" (1986: 375). However, the British informants living in Egypt denounced the new government founded after the revolt as military despotism and the riot in Alexandria as a massacre and expulsion of all the Christians and Europeans, and exaggerated the situation as "the *reign of blank Barbarism* [emphasis original]" (Schölch 1976: 781; Galbraith & al-Sayyid Marsot 1978: 488).

On the one hand, there is a strong argument that the dispatch of the British warships to Alexandria's harbor, not the newly established government led by Urabi, provoked the riots (Cole 1989: 128; Galbraith & al-Sayyid Marsot 1978: 484). On the other hand, Egyptian demands in running their own country does not mean that there was anarchy or disorder at that time (Hopkins 1986: 376). The negative ideas coming

from the British officials or scholars were hasty and biased assumptions which reflect Euro-centrism, British colonial interests and inability to understand the Middle Eastern societies (Cole 1999: 16-17; Galbraith & al-Sayyid Marsot 1978: 482; Farnie 1969: 288).

All regimes carry out a systematic distortion of history for their nationalist ideologies, political goals and economic interests. As Hobsbawm argues, official historiographies turn history into a raw material for such purposes, but historians must have a responsibility to historical facts, and for criticizing the politico-ideological abuse of history (Hobsbawm 1997: 5-6).

To What Extent Did Ahmad Urabi Has a Personal Leadership Effect on the Outbreak of the Revolution?

Alan Moorehead views Urabi as the leader of the Egyptian nation against the Western invasion (Moorehead 1969: 199-200). Hopkins depicts Urabi as a moderate and honorable reformer, but more reluctant and less charismatic than he has usually been depicted (Hopkins 1986: 375). Vatikiotis defines Urabi as a simple soldier who was ambitious beyond his capabilities, found himself at the head of a military conspiracy against a weak Khedive, misjudged the forces at play… confronted superior powers and lost"; and his failure brought the British occupation to Egypt (Vatikiotis 1992: 155). Jean and Simonne Lacouture write that Colonel Urabi was eloquent, had a certain gift for swaying the mob, a patriotic and democratic fervor, and was serving for a just cause, but the movement for independence desired another, more competent leader (Lacouture & Lacouture 1958: 70). For the representatives of the British government, Colvin and Milner, Urabi was neither a nationalist representative of popular feeling, nor a successful reformist (Hopkins 1986: 368). He was an unrepresentative mutineer (Hopkins 1986: 368). Furthermore, the British, at that time, depicted him as a tyrant who oppressed the native Egyptians and massacred the Christians (Hopkins 1986: 384).

In the 1890s, orthodox history dealt primarily with politics and the foreign policies of nation-states. It concentrated on great men. The history of culture or economic history was left obscure so this selection was both narrow and politically biased. Barnes criticizes this methodology as a political fetish in historical writings during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century (Barnes 1972). He argues that the political fetish in historical writing limits history to a study of past politics by focusing on wars, state apparatus and statesmen (Barnes 1972). John Galbraith and Afaf Lutfi Al-Sayyid Marsot criticize the historical approaches that suggest rational explanation for the behaviors of statesmen (Galbraith & Al-Sayyid Marsot 1978: 471). They argue that great decisions might be made on the basis of inadequate or false information, or miscalculations with the consequences, which the decision-makers cannot foresee.

The approach that interprets historical events based on the narrative of political events and statesmen of nation-states reflects Ranke's historical methodology. In Ranke school in the 19th century, historical methodology rested on the simplified collection of raw data. Retreating from the social and cultural, history became the narrative of political events and statesmen of nation-states. Political history was regarded more real and serious than social history, which was assumed to study society and culture after politics left out (Burke 1993: 6).

Burke suggests two reasons for the development of such a methodological school in history. First, the method shifted away from the use of earlier histories and chronicles to the use of the official records of governments in archives. British historians, who adopted Ranke's approach, used governmental documents and correspondence between the British government and British officials in Egypt, and they focused on the thoughts, intentions and actions of statesmen, such as Urabi, the Khedive, Gladstone (president of England at the time), Colvin, Seymour and other representatives of the British government. Following a similar model of historiography, historians, such as Alexander Schölch (1976: 778-782) and Vatikiotis (1992: 151), consider the reason of the occupation of Egypt to be the British consular, journalistic and financial representatives

who lived in Egypt, exaggerated the Urabi movement as a threat of the massacre of the Europeans, and conspired to attract the British government in London to intervene into Egypt.

Cole criticizes the focus on elites as primary actors in the study of historical movements (Cole 1989: 109). He argues that the Urabi movement eventuated in a social revolution, which was primarily triggered not by Urabi who played not dominant but a leading role, but by inequality, exploitation and public resentment as a result of European political and economic interference (Cole 1999: 108, 115).

Was the Urabi Revolt a Nationalist Movement or the Manifestation of a Shared Desire for Upward Social Mobility?

The 19th century was characterized by the rise of nation-states and nationalistic enthusiasm. The Urabi revolt, certainly, might be buttressed by some nationalist thoughts, or might pave the way for the growth of Egyptian nationalism. Vatikiotis, however, argues that Urabi Revolt broke out not because of the existence of a strong and massive nationalist movement, but because of the dissatisfaction of some high-ranked officers with the army rule in Egypt (Vatikiotis 1992).

Before the Urabi movement, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there had already been a process of Egyptianization (or Arabization) in all the social spheres of the society. Arabic had replaced Turkish as the official language; native Egyptians had become the new class of bureaucrats, educators, technicians, professionals and politicians (Vatikiotis 1992: 125). Political awareness and interests of the educated Egyptians had already emerged. In 1881, there were Egyptian state officials, army officers, landowners and journalists who sought for greater participation in power and opposition to the European financial control. They were, however, neither nationalist (organized or not) nor interested in overthrowing the Khedive.

According to Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy* (2001), however, nationalist enthusiasm seems to have been a powerful common feeling in the turn of the twentieth

century in Egypt. This enthusiasm in the book is likely to be related to a nationalist reconstruction of the Egyptian history. That is, Urabi Revolt, which had not mean anything nationalistic to Egyptians, might turn into a remarkable nationalist event in the imagination of the members of Abdul Jawad's family in *Cairo Trilogy*.

For Mary Rowlatt, Urabi movement was the birth of Egyptian nationalism in the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Rowlatt 1962). For Jean and Simonne Lacouture, it was an attempt to retrieve the nation, so it marks the awakening of national consciousness (Lacouture & Lacouture 1958: 69-72). Most of the works written by Western scholars in the 1960s and the 1970s also views Urabi revolution as a nationalist movement. This is partly because the rise of Arab nationalism and the charismatic leading figure of Gamal Abdul Nasser[1] at the time had impact on these works. They tend to consider the Urabi revolt and the 1952 revolution as identical events aiming to establish an independent Egyptian nation at the expense of the economic and political interests of Europeans.

For John Halstead, the Urabi revolt had a xenophobic character, which was driven by a rising native elite's desire for power (Halstead 1969: 86). Hence, it was neither a nationalist nor a mass movement. The Urabi revolt was rather triggered by the xenophobia of the native elites for the conflict of interests and their defense of interests "against the invasion of an alien (European) elite privileged by the capitulations" (Halstead 1969: 87). This approach contrasts with the idea that the Urabi movement was a mass-driven social revolution.

Cole, however, argues differently. To him, the revolt was led by the urban crowd (merchants, workers, students, the head of porters and quarters, skilled craftsmen, civil servants and professionals) rather than native notables (*ulama*, the heads of local garrisons and the landed notables) (Cole 1989: 108). The riot was, so, the work of an urban crowd that consisted of mainly this new middle class, acting somewhat

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[1] The second president of Egypt who served in the office from 1956 to 1970. He was the leading figure of the group of high-ranking army officers who overthrew the monarchy in 1952 after a military coup, and established the republican state in Egypt.

spontaneously (Cole 1989: 127). Not the politics of notables, but the politics of crowd, as Cole argues, historians should deal with.

Moorehead also writes that there was a general resentment at the all strata of the Egyptian society:

> No one was really content with the situation. The Cairo pashas [native landlords] resented Tewfik's subservience to his European advisers; the *Ulema*, the religious leaders in the mosques, resented the influence of the Christian religion; the Egyptian soldiers resented their Turkish officers their Turkish officers, the slavers [also merchants and workers] resented the Western interference with their business, and the fellaheen were simply miserable (1969: 201).

In a similar vein, Galbraith and al-Sayyid Marsot define the Urabi movement as a revolution in which military and civilians came together and united in their anger as natives of the country in order to fight for "self-government under a constitution" (Galbraith & al-Sayyid Marsot 1978: 544).

To capture the historical course of the event with its causes and leading actors, historians may need a sociological perspective to be able to see the broader picture. Abrams argues:

> [t]he historian uses a rhetoric of close presentation (seeking to persuade in terms of a dense texture of detail) while the sociologist uses a rhetoric of perspective (seeking to persuade in terms of the elegant patterning of connections seen from a distance) (Abrams 1982: 194).

Only from a broader sociological perspective, he argues that we can understand the historical and cultural context, which structures social action by organizing and signifying it (Abrams 1982:191). Many other contemporary historians, such as James Gelvin (2011) and William Cleveland (2009), also suggest that the idea of the heavy influence of nationalism over masses does not fit the historical and cultural context of the Egyptian society in the late nineteenth century. In addition, not only indigenous elites, but also middle and lower class people participated in the revolution.

Behind the general resentment in Egyptian society, there were different reasons for people belonging to the different social strata of the society to join the revolt. The

revolution manifested itself in a multitude of various movements driven by landlords (they resented the Khedive's tax policies biased for Turco-Circassian elite), peasants (impoverished and oppressed by high taxes and heavy conscription), the intelligentsia (anti-Europeanist secular intellectuals, journalists and *ulama*), army (opposing the Turkish military elite), merchants and craftsmen (impoverished because of the capitalist transformation and privileged European competitors in the country) (Cole 1999: 20).

Intermediate strata (native landowners, army and *ulama*) were searching for the means of political self-expression, and they not only encountered Turco-Circassian elite, "but also found the Europeans blocking them at every turn" (Cole 1989: 118). So, the intermediate strata of native Egyptians, especially the army, allied with the urban crowd in anti-European Urabi revolt. Native Egyptian elites took these protests as an opportunity to put pressure on the Khedive Ismail in order to move him towards constitutionalism and parliamentary rule, and also supported him to encounter the direct European representation in the state administration. Although the Khedive succeeded in that to some degree, he was deposed by European powers, and his son Tewfik was installed as the Khedive in 1879.

Peter Gran argues that during the 1970s, Muhammad Anis and Abd al-Khaliq Lashin developed a materialist historical approach that interprets the Urabi movement as an expression of class interests of Egyptian notables, claiming that Ahmad Urabi was motivated by class interest (Gran 1978: 371). At the time, there were over 1,300 foreign officials who had exorbitant salaries, and the masses supporting Urabi demanded "the dismissal of European employees in the Egyptian government who were earning high salaries" (Galbraith & al-Sayyid Marsot 1978: 474). In the Urabi movement, xenophobia, class conflict and Christian-Muslim conflict intertwined with each other (Cole 1989: 132).

Was the Urabi Revolt an Anti-Christian Islamic uprising?

Anti-European agitation among intellectuals, journalists and the military polarized the urban crowd. And this polarization turned into a Euro-Muslim conflict in the 1870s in Egypt. In this conflict, the urban crowd "adopted a rhetoric of defending Muslim honor against Christian encroachments" (Cole 1989: 112-114; 127-128). During the riots in Alexandria where a large European population was living, agitators ran through the streets calling out, "Muslims, kill the Christians". It was reported that thousands of Egyptian partook in the riot with firearms and sticks. By the end of the day, about fifty Europeans (and European protégés) and Egyptians in similar numbers died, and about thirty-six Europeans, thirty-five Egyptians and two Turks wounded. Shops owned by Europeans were looted and European houses were set on fire (Moorehead 1969: 203; Cole 1989: 122). While politicians in Paris and London began to talk of a dangerous Pan-Islamic conspiracy, it seemed that, in Cairo, Egyptians felt "encircled by a Pan-Christian movement that was becoming more menacing every day" (Moorehead 1969: 201).

Nikki Keddie describes the Urabi movement as an Islamic revolt under urban leaders against Western imperialist conquest (Keddie 1994: 482). Farnie claimed that Egyptians "found their inspiration in religious reformers more than in political reformers," and that Urabi Pasha was more a religious *alim* than a soldier whose leadership provided ultimate security during the Urabi movement (Farnie 1969: 283). Farnie went on that the resentment of Egyptians stemmed from the erosion of *shari'ah* and Islamic way of life due to the intervention of the European rule (Farnie 1969). The effect of the Russo-Turkish war and Islamic Ottomanist sentiments also flared up the Christian-Muslim conflict in Egypt. The Russo-Turkish war (to which the Khedive Ismail contributed troops as a vassal of the sultan) paved the way for the rise of the religious communal tension in Egypt (Cole 1989: 116).

Conclusion

Two different historical approaches appear to be adopted in the interpretation of the Urabi revolt as a historical event. The first one focuses on material interests, and the second on an anti-colonial Euro-Muslim conflict. Juan Cole criticizes the British historians who narrowly defined this revolutionary movement as "Urabi Revolt" or "Suez Crisis", and reduced a set of reasons for the event to a single factor (Cole 1989; 1999). By contrast, Vatikiotis argues that Urabi revolution constitutes a good illustration of historical studies of complex forces at play (Vatikiotis 1992). As a historical sociologist, Cole claims that revolution has many reasons and triggering factors, and as an event, it includes complex and multiple developments. While evaluating the Urabi revolution, Cole appeals to different variables (which conjunctures in the emergence of historical event) such as: "[s]hifting class interests under the impact of economic and demographic change, the organizations of major political actors, their resources, tactics, and recruitment, their repertoires of collective action, their ideologies, the varying repressive capacity of the state, and specific conjunctures of social and political action." (1999: 17).

According to him, all the developments in Urabi revolution provoked the resistance of native Egyptians against the European penetration. After his defeat, Urabi was exiled to Ceylon, from where he returned to Cairo in 1904 to find himself completely forgotten (Lacouture & Lacouture 1958: 70). Vatikiotis argues that Urabi's efforts were in vain because of three reasons: 1) the Ottoman sultan's desire to interfere with the affairs of Egypt, 2) the European's negative stance against the Urabi movement, 3) the absence of overt and strong opposition of the Urabists against the Khedive (Vatikiotis 1992: 147).

In Abrams' terms, Urabi revolution is a unique historical event which embodies various social elements and processes, such as: capitalist transformation, the European political and economic penetration (the opening of Suez Canal and the cotton boom in the 1860s and 1870s brought tens of thousands of Europeans into the country, which generated unequal and exploitative relations between Europeans and native Egyptians),

the declaration of the bankruptcy by the Khedive Ismail because of his inability to pay the debt-servicing, the establishment of the Franco-British Dual Control to supervise the Egypt's national budget, a growing Egyptian middle class (civil servants, merchants, professionals, journalists, intelligentsia) who resented the European intervention and desired to participate in politics and share the power, and the establishment of modern national army. All these developments are significant in and of themselves, but also they conjuncture and trigger a historical event – the Urabi revolt.

The Urabi revolution is a very detailed and complex historical event, which includes various personalities, processes and situations. All those generated a complex but concrete and unique event in the transition of Egypt from a Middle Eastern monarchial society to a nation-state. And, if Abrams interpreted this transition, he would probably recognize the human experience and the social agency of ordinary people rather than the conflict of states and statesmen involved in the event as a major factor. The historical course of the Urabi revolt was shaped by Egyptians from different social strata (landlords, army, *ulama*, intellectuals, middle class and urban crowd), as well as the consequences of the revolt deeply affected and changed them. This is why there is a diversity of historiographies that have developed around the Urabi revolt.

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