

REVIEWS

Alaa Al Aswany, *On the State of Egypt: What Caused the Revolution*
Canongate: Edinburgh 2011, £12.99, paperback
192 pp, 978 0 85786 215 0

HAZEM KANDIL

WHOSE GOLDEN AGE?

Revolution is, in essence, a rejection of our dismal reality for one that is entirely divorced from it. The more viable this desired reality appears to us, the more likely we are to pursue it. And how much more viable would this new reality seem if it had in fact existed before? Revolutionary zeal, in this case, feeds on two of the most penetrating human passions: dreaming of a better future, and longing for a once glorious past. Unfortunately, not every ideological movement has recourse to this inspiring mix. In Egypt, and across the Muslim world, Islamists had so far monopolized the power of nostalgia. When preaching about the future, they enticed their audience with recurrent references to an age that actually existed, the time of Prophet Muhammad and his Rightly Guided successors, a time of prosperity, justice, and predominance. Leftists and nationalists, mostly ashamed of what they have contributed to their post-colonial societies, could not claim the same privilege; their ideal realities, they admit, remain unborn. Liberals were even worse off: their past was a disgrace. What Egyptians, in particular, knew about the decades preceding the 1952 coup was what their schoolbooks told them: it was a time of moral and political degeneration; democracy was a sham; peasants were flogged by evil landlords; social disparities were rampant; and the country was ruled by an indolent, childlike sovereign, living contentedly under the shadow of British colonialism.

With the French-educated, Chicago-trained dentist-turned-novelist Alaa Al Aswany, Egypt's liberal past finally stood a chance of being redeemed.

Nostalgia was the theme of his first novel, *The Yacoubian Building*. Published in Arabic in 2002, it became an international best-seller, translated into twenty-seven languages; it was also turned into a major feature film. The Yacoubian building itself, which still survives, was a symbol of the nineteenth-century European architecture that has been ‘assaulted’ during the past six decades by the vulgarities of the new officer class and its cronies. Its fate is typical of other buildings in Cairo’s Parisian-designed downtown, built in the 1860s by Egypt’s great Westernizer, Khedive Ismail, who aspired to turn his country into ‘a piece of Europe’—or at least a ‘fellow traveller’—by importing some of its architectural grandeur. The novel’s leading protagonist was also a relic of the past: the grief-stricken Zaki Bey al-Dessouki, the longest-serving resident of the Yacoubian, constantly agonizing over his lost city and its glittering years. The novel’s most memorable scene has him bel-lowing in the middle of Tahrir Square, the gate to the city’s downtown area, about how the neighbourhood has lost its splendour:

There used to be a lovely bar here with a Greek owner. Next to it there was a hairdresser’s and a restaurant, and here was the leather shop La Bursa Nova. The stores were all fantastically clean and had goods from London and Paris on display . . . See the wonderful architecture! This building was copied to the last detail from a building I saw in the Quartier Latin in Paris.

Curiously, the eager Westernizing tendencies of the liberal age did not serve to diminish patriotism, at least in Aswany’s view. He has Zaki Bey frequently complaining to his young female companion: ‘I cannot fathom your generation. In my day, love for one’s country was like religion’.

In Zaki Bey’s numerous drunken speeches lay all the elements of the not-so-distant gilded age portrayed by liberals: a time when Egyptian society was open and cosmopolitan; when Cairo’s elegant tree-lined boulevards were wide and clean; when its glamorous houses were decorated with Greek statues and Roman pillars, and surrounded by sumptuous gardens with white marble fountains; when the arts flourished and diversity was tolerated; when intellectuals boldly supported enlightenment and freedom. Although it had come to an abrupt end in July 1952, trampled under heavy military boots, it still lies waiting to be revived by a new generation of young liberals. Aswany’s novel was a potent weapon, a means of rehabilitating the past to challenge the present. He understood the gripping power of nostalgia. And he took care to emphasize that the obstacle preventing us from reclaiming our *belle époque* was political, not cultural: ‘If there were a real democratic system,’ Zaki Bey laments, ‘Egypt would be a great power’.

No novel in Egypt’s modern history has sold so many copies in such a short time: it was reprinted over thirty times in less than a decade—and marketed solely, one must add, by word of mouth. Booksellers instantly

recognized Aswany as a phenomenon, a man who made the literature business profitable again. It was quickly made into a motion picture with a star-filled cast. The opening night was exceptionally dazzling, held at the Cairo Opera House, a few yards away from downtown, and attended by a who's-who of Egyptian society, including the leaders of the ruling party. The author, however, was not invited—and with good cause.

Aswany's oppositional views *per se* were not the problem. Opposition leaders dined frequently—and shamelessly—at the tables of the ruling elite. The reason why Aswany was considered a *persona non grata* was his excessively offensive manner. Unlike other novelists, he had no taste for veiled critiques and parodies. His dictator was not symbolically cast into the mould of a patriarchal father, as in Naguib Mahfouz's *Cairo Trilogy*; repression was not condemned by reference to sixteenth-century Mamluk Egypt, as Gamal al-Ghitani did in the early 1970s in *Zayni Barakat*. Aswany pursued his targets directly, and ruthlessly. His first novel exposed state security officers and government ministers, among others, and in his second best-selling work, *Chicago* (published in Arabic in 2007, and performed onstage in Paris in fall 2011), the list extended to include not only intelligence operatives and their sleazy informers, but President Hosni Mubarak himself, who made a rare appearance towards the end. This was something no author had dared to do before.

Aswany's dissident views were publicized weekly through his newspaper columns. *On the State of Egypt* is a representative sample of this genre: a compilation of articles mostly penned during the two years leading up to the January 2011 Revolt—the revolt's back-story, some would say—and typically peppered with anecdotes and recollections of the great bygone past. The book is divided into three sections, each principally devoted to attacking one of Aswany's declared 'public enemies': corrupt politicians, security officers and—his cultural arch-enemies—religious fundamentalists.

The first part of the book denounces purported plans to pass on power to the President's son, highlights the regime's social and political failures, and pokes fun at hypocritical state ministers and other sycophants. Besides the fiery language, one should also note his enthusiastic—and largely futile—attempt to galvanize Egyptians around a potential presidential candidate, the liberal diplomat Mohamed ElBaradei; Aswany liked to compare him to the historic leaders of the liberal Wafd Party, who triggered the 1919 Revolution and enshrined Egyptian liberalism through the 1923 Constitution. Aswany proudly declared that millions of Egyptians considered ElBaradei 'a symbol of hope for change in every sense', and when a few dozen supporters heeded his call to rally around the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, he saw this as evidence that Egypt 'has woken up'. Aswany was also hopeful that united-front politics, spearheaded

by ElBaradei's National Association for Change, would draw in 'hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of Egyptians'. Once more, the past provided Aswany with grounds for believing that a society which had been oppressed for over sixty years could make the shift to liberal democracy with reasonable ease. He charged those who dared suggest that Egyptians were not prepared for such a transition with 'shameful ignorance of Egyptian history'. How could they forget that their country experienced democracy as early as 1866, when Khedive Ismail set up the first advisory council? How could they overlook their society's 'great and early strides toward modernization' since the nineteenth century?

Yet the author's feverish attempt to give his revolutionary liberalism a body and a head did not yield much. It is true that those who spearheaded the popular uprising in January 2011 were typical Aswany readers—young, liberal city-dwellers. It is also true that, as permanent fixtures of downtown's celebrated cafe culture, they naturally cherished the old, authentic Egypt. But the revolutionary movement was ultimately constituted of dozens of liberal, leftist, nationalist and Islamist groups, and became even more fragmented once the dictator stepped down. The relentless Aswany, however, refused to admit that revolutionary liberalism had run out of steam. The reason why it failed to carry through, in his opinion, was because security agencies limited its popular reach. The author's first-hand experience with Mubarak's goons demonstrated how tight surveillance prevented the organization of political opposition, liberal or otherwise. His intellectual salon, held weekly in downtown's fittingly named Cultural Forum Café, was shut down in the summer of 2008. State Security officers considered the meeting of upstart novelists and poets a subversive activity, largely because of their rebellious patron. Aswany commented, tongue-in-cheek, that 'repression in Egypt no longer distinguishes between demonstrators and people taking part in sit-ins . . . and people sitting in cafés and sleeping at home'.

Little wonder that a whole section of his book is devoted to attacking Mubarak's police state. After all, Aswany clearly realized that 'the security agencies in Egypt are the authority that has the decisive say in every sphere and in every detail'. The articles in this section are particularly stirring because he presents his mighty avalanche of accusations in the form of short stories, such as the one where a State Security officer returns home to his wife and ten-year-old daughter only to discover that he cannot wash his bloodstained hands clean no matter how hard he tries, and is forced, as a last resort, to quit his job; or the *Animal Farm*-inspired satire, where riot police are depicted as an 'army of dogs'. Equally important are his criticisms of security men with regard to their piety, something to which no other author has paid attention. Aswany writes indignantly about the 'human slaughterhouses'—police stations and detention centres—that were equipped with

corner mosques for torturers to perform their prayers on time. He also recounts a highly implausible conversation with an officer bearing 'a prayer mark on his head', who, in response to Aswany's inquiry about how one reconciles torture and faith, barked back: 'if you study your religion thoroughly, you will find that what we do at the State Security department is in harmony with Islamic teachings'—another sign of a flawed understanding of Islam, at which Aswany scoffs in the final section of his book.

If the authoritarian regime and its henchmen obstructed his liberal democratic vision politically, Islamists represent an existential threat in cultural terms. Though he proclaims, in several articles, his respect for their political rights, Aswany derides their distorted reading of religion, as compared to the moderate interpretations of the liberal age, built on foundations laid by the liberal reformer Muhammad Abduh (1849–1905). Aswany again celebrates the past, a time when 'Egypt had its own understanding of Islam, a tolerant and open-minded understanding compatible with the civilized nature of Egyptians'—but one that has subsided under the influence of the oil-financed Wahhabi creed of Saudi Arabia, and other 'desert nomadic societies that are far behind Egypt in every field of human activity'.

'We have to restore our civilized Egyptian ideas', Aswany insists. We must retrieve our earlier renaissance in theatre, cinema, literature, education and women's rights. We must find inspiration in a time when 'the pioneering Hoda Shaarawi took the Turkish burka off her face at a public ceremony as a sign that the liberation of the country was inseparable from the liberation of women', and when Pope Cyril V and other Coptic leaders participated with their Muslim brethren in the 1919 revolution: 'This Egyptian spirit we must restore today so that we can accomplish what we wish for Egypt and what Egypt deserves.'

A couple of years before the January 2011 uprising, Aswany got into the habit of ending every article with the axiom: 'Democracy is the solution'—deliberately chosen to contrast with the Muslim Brotherhood's contentious slogan: Islam is the solution. Islamists, allegedly, have nothing to offer in terms of democracy: 'Pick any book you like on Islamic law and you will not find in it a single word on rigging elections . . . many jurists in Islamic history allied themselves with despotic rulers . . . they deliberately ignored the political rights of Muslims.' In one article, Aswany asserts that the 'democracy of early Islam quickly disappeared and long centuries of despotism followed'. He later developed this theme in a highly controversial piece, published shortly after the revolt. The article launched a frontal attack on his rivals' golden age, claiming that the fanciful past they dangled in front of their unsuspecting followers was nothing but an ideological fabrication. Aswany concluded, through some dubious calculation, that 'real' Islamic history knew only three decades of justice, while the remaining fourteen centuries were mired in

tyranny and moral degradation. Though framing his view as a more honest interpretation of history, in truth it was as superficial as that of his rivals: Islamists portrayed their whole history as good, while his supposedly more nuanced reading presented it as perhaps three percent good and the rest downright miserable. But this was not a struggle over historical accuracy—on that account, both versions were equally erroneous—but rather a struggle over which past should inspire the future.

Has Aswany's vision of Egypt's worthier past gained much currency? Some would answer in the affirmative, especially since his work inspired, or at least coincided with, a whole cultural campaign to rehabilitate Egypt's glorious liberal epoch—most notably the immensely popular thirty-hour miniseries *King Farouk*, which aired in 2008 and highlighted the human side of the country's last monarch, presenting him as a true patriot overwhelmed by sinister forces; there was also the award-winning play *Black Coffee* by Khalid Galal, performed in 2008, which mourned the values of a bygone age. In other words, recouping Egypt's past was no longer a one-man odyssey. On the other hand, although Aswany himself was chosen as one of the world's most influential thinkers by *Foreign Policy* in 2011, some might argue that he is losing his hold over his audience back home. Not only did the sex scenes of his second novel—most notoriously, a father watching his daughter performing oral sex—alienate many conservative Egyptians, instead of shocking them out of their timidity as he intended; perhaps more importantly, he seems to have abandoned his most effective tool: literature.

Already in his mid-fifties, Aswany has so far produced two novels and one collection of short stories—not so much the new Naguib Mahfouz everyone thought he would be. The Nobel laureate turned out at least one novel every year for over thirty years, most of which became bestsellers and turned into hugely popular on-screen adaptations. This was a cultural icon who truly shaped the way Egyptians understood their past. In contrast, Aswany the skilled storyteller seems to be giving way to Aswany the febrile political commentator. While literature helped disseminate his message to a wide audience, his 'raw' political columns, along with his sardonic interventions on talk shows, have pigeon-holed him as a hot-headed partisan, a much less commanding position. The recent elections in Egypt—arguably the first free polls in decades—have made it quite clear which past Egyptians were yearning for. And it was not Aswany's precious *belle époque*.