Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East

by Joel Beinin

Reviewed by Jonathan Calt Harris

Beinin has produced a strange and difficult book, in large part due to the topic itself: the lives of working people and a chronological survey of Middle East labor movements from 1750 to the present. Surveys of the status and circumstances of the working class in Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Ottoman Balkans, North Africa, and the Maghrib are solid. While maintaining a clear affinity for a more heroic view of both Karl Marx and Edward Said than other subaltern social historians might offer, Beinin is less class-oriented than many a Marxist.

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a dramatic increase in imperial control from Istanbul, but it was also a time of violent localized uprisings and increased Western involvement. Beinin presents these developments through the eyes of a changing peasant identity, and this is not without merit. But it is sometimes difficult to determine if it is the peasant or Beinin whose eyes we see through (e.g., the theme of communism as empowering).

The anecdotal glimpses Beinin offers into the lives of workers are vivid and interesting and enliven a dry topic. Egyptian peasant Fikri al-Khuli, who worked for the Misr Spinning and Weaving Company, turned communist, and later went to prison under Nasser, has a full chapter devoted to his 1950s memoir.

However, the book has an oddly selective coverage: for example, ignoring Lebanon, particularly the 1858 revolt of the northern Lebanese Maronite peasantry led by an apparently elected leader, Tanius Shahin, which receives but cursory mention. The revolt failed and expanded into an all-out religious war, engulfing the whole of Lebanon in violent reciprocal massacres. Napoleon III successfully intervened militarily and stopped the bloodshed. The European powers arbitrated an autonomous Lebanon and separate Christian sector, and nominal Ottoman rule was restored in 1861. In the wake of the peace, Beirut became a cultural center. For one as nostalgic about the hammer-and-tongs as Beinin, to write a book half on the peasantry and all but ignore a Lebanese peasant revolt (led by a blacksmith, no less) that proclaimed a republic and led, albeit bloodily, to enhanced autonomy for the Ottoman province and a cultural renaissance, leaves one perplexed. But then again, successful Western military interventions on behalf of oppressed civilian
populations are perhaps not Benin’s favorite topic.
Who worked in the machinery and in the new labor departments and what was their role? Did the technological equipment play a role in the formation of professional specialties which existed in the factory? How are the technical and gender labor division interwoven? These specific changes of the field of cigarette-makers are going to be traced through our case.

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