

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article3367>



Book Review:

# Lineages of the Arab Revolt

- Reviews section -

Publication date: Sunday 13 April 2014

---

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

---

**This book ought to be read – or better, studied – by every socialist interested in the Middle East. On second thought, cut out the last five words; that part of the world is of vital interest to every socialist. As the author puts it in the book’s final paragraph:**

“The Middle East remains a core zone of the world market, and the successes and failures of its social struggles will be a major factor in determining the nature of global capitalism in the years to come. The uprisings that unfolded during 2011 and 2012 are the property of all concerned with building a post-capitalist future. In their best sense, the Arab uprisings represent an essential link in the inspiring chain of struggles that have erupted across the globe over the last two years. And, in much the same way, the creeping spread of counterrevolution across the region is part of the common attempt of all capitalist states to beat back and pacify resistance to crisis and austerity. The Arab uprisings point to the hope, necessity and potential that rebellion holds. This promise of revolt remains ever-present in the political moment – it extends beyond the Middle East and belongs to all who seek a different world.” (176)

Another reason for studying this work is methodological: it is a vindication of the power of Marxian political economy and dialectics.

As the book’s title suggests, it is not primarily about the events of the so-called Arab Spring and its aftermath. The episodes of 2011-12 in the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) [1] – the initial “revolutionary moment,” followed by a “counterrevolutionary moment” – are outlined briefly in the final chapter. But the book is mainly about the socio-economic depredations and devastations of neoliberalism that had been unleashed in the region during the preceding three or four decades.

These are the “lineages” to which the title refers. The 2008 global capitalist crisis, whose effects were transmitted to the region in various ways, did not cause the revolts, but served as an “essential ingredient” that triggered them off.

## Capitalism and Class

Hanieh’s approach is characterized by two principal methodological features, which together make it radically different from mainstream writings on the region:

“[The book’s] goal is to trace in broad outline some of the most significant transformations of the Middle East through the lens of Marxist political economy. Its novelty lies in the emphasis on capitalism and class as crucial pivots of analysis, two categories frequently downplayed in standard approaches to the Middle East. It further attempts to take seriously the nature of the region as a region – to trace the changing hierarchies at the regional scale as an integrated unity that shapes social formations at the national level.” (2)

Insistence on “capitalism and class as crucial pivots of analysis” contrasts with conventional accounts, which focus on the dichotomy between state and civil society – the latter conceptualised as an “agglomeration of atomised individuals, organised in a range of –interest groups’ with varying degrees of ability to choose their political representatives and make demands on their political leaders.” (3)

This state/civil society dichotomy underlies another frequent (although not unchallenged) assertion made in the

literature on the Middle East â€” that of a two-way, causal link between authoritarianism and the weakness of capitalism.

According to this perspective, authoritarianism not only means that political and civil rights are weak or absent, but also that the heavy hand of state control interferes with the operation of a capitalist economy. Individuals are prevented from freely engaging in market activities, while state elites benefit from authoritarianism by engaging in “rent-seeking behavior” â€” using their privileged position to divert economic rents that pass through the state for their own personal enrichment and consolidation of power. Authoritarian states seek to dominate and control economic sectors through their position of strength, allocating rents to favored groups in order to keep society in check. (4)

Hanieh shows that, on the contrary, the authoritarian state forms in the region have been instrumental in imposing neoliberalism. The latter was the underlying cause of the mass uprisings against the former:

“The popular movements that erupted in 2011 represented much more than the overthrow of despised dictators. Of course the protestors were centrally united around demands for authoritarian regimes to end ... But to concentrate on the surface appearances of these demonstrations obscures their real content. These mobilisations indicate that â€”politics’ and â€”economics,’ which are typically conceived as separate spheres, are fused and part of the same struggle. The battle against political despotism is inevitably intertwined with the dynamic of class struggle. These uprisings reflected not just a crisis of regime legitimacy or a concern with political freedom, but were â€” at their root â€” confronting the outcomes of capitalist development itself.” (164)

But the high priests of the neoliberal cult were quick to try and coopt the protests and present the capitalist poison as the antidote. A particularly grotesque instance of this perverse inversion of the true relationship between the authoritarian state and capitalism in the region is a statement made by World Bank president Robert Zoellick.

Referring to Mohammed Bouazizi, the 26-year old Tunisian whose self-immolation on December 17 2010 ignited the whole region, Zoellick opined:

“The key point I have also been emphasizing and I emphasized in this speech is that it is not just a question of money. It is a question of policy ... keep in mind, the late Mr Bouazizi was basically driven to burn himself alive because he was harassed with red tape ... one starting point is to quit harassing those people and let them have a chance to start some small businesses.” [\[2\]](#)

The second principal methodological feature of Hanieh’s approach is his insistence on viewing the region holistically, as a structured integral entity, with capital based in the Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates) as the spider at the hub of the entire web:

“The Gulf’s position at the core of an increasingly imbricated set of social relations operating across the regional scale contrasts sharply with any â€”container-like’ models of the nation-state. The region’s capitalist classes have become tied in a fibril web of finance to the reproduction of capitalism in the Gulf. As a consequence, the Middle East needs to be seen as more than just a simple agglomeration of nation-states; rather as a set of internally related social relations that striate national borders. Class and state formation at the national scale both reflect this interlacing of social relations, while simultaneously helping to produce the â€”regional.” (143)

Neoliberalism has been forced on the region by political and economic pressure exercised by imperialism â€” primarily the United States and the European Union. But the Gulf serves as a lever by means of which much of this pressure is transmitted:

“The neoliberal opening of the region over the last two decades has not only been imperialist in nature – facilitating the entry of large European and US companies and the broader subordination of the region to US interests – but it has also been a political project closely aligned to Gulf capitalism. This provides one explanation why imperialism is now articulated to a large extent through the Gulf states in both a political and economic sense.

“This does not mean that there are no rivalries between the Gulf and the western states, or, indeed, within the Gulf itself. Nor, of course, does it mean that imperialist states do not continue to hold dominance over the region. Rather, it is a recognition that the Gulf states form the core of the regional political economy, and that their paramount position in superintending imperialism flows directly from an existential concern in maintaining the patterns of uneven and combined development that have characterised the region as a whole over the last two decades. The Gulf’s location at the apex of these regional hierarchies is a consequence of precisely those same processes that have generated, in another form, the conditions for the mass revolts. This bears important implications for understanding the possible future trajectories of revolution and counterrevolution.” (144)

Thus capital accumulation must be viewed on the regional scale rather than within the box of each of its nation-states. The same applies to class formations. The capitalist class is regional because ownership of capital cuts across the borders of the individual states. The working class too is regional, as a very large number of workers – mainly from Egypt, but also from other MENA countries – migrate to work elsewhere in the region, especially in the Gulf.

Moreover, the formation of the working class goes beyond the region itself. On the one hand, many migrant workers from MENA countries such as Morocco are employed in the EU. On the other hand, in the Gulf countries a large proportion – in some cases a great majority – of the workers are migrants, many of whom are from the Indian subcontinent, the Philippines and elsewhere in Asia.

## Brief Outline

This book is virtually impossible to summarize; while clearly written, it is very compressed, each paragraph containing an important analytic insight or essential factual evidence. Hanieh has digested a huge volume of literature and primary sources: the bibliography takes up 23 pages and the endnotes – some of which are mini-articles – extend over 47 pages.

In addition to short statistical tables in the body of the text, there are 18 pages of extensive tables in two appendices. Much of the source material consists of reports by commanding bodies of global capitalism, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, written in obfuscating boring bureaucratese, which Hanieh has arduously mined for nuggets of information that he presents in accessible form. So, instead of a vain attempt at a summary, I will confine myself to a brief indication of the content of the book’s seven chapters.

The first chapter, “Theories and perspectives,” introduces the author’s approach to the subject. The second, “Framing the region: imperialism and the Middle East,” begins with a brief outline of imperialist political and economic involvement, the rise of secular Arab nationalism and its decline following the 1967 war. Then, since the 1970s, the imperialist powers – using financial instruments such as debt and foreign aid, as well as trade and investment agreements – tightened the integration of the region in the global market and imposed on it the patterns of neoliberalism, resulting in unequal development and deepening inequalities.

The latter theme is taken up and developed in some detail in the third chapter, “Mapping the neoliberal experience.” The mechanisms whereby neoliberalism has been imposed on the region are described and explained, focusing in

particular on Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Jordan.

Most of these mechanisms and processes will be familiar to readers in the older developed capitalist countries; but their effects have been more devastating for the vast majority in the Arab MENA countries, whose poverty and exploitation were much deeper to start with.

An important insight in this chapter is the dialectical combination of centralization and decentralization of state institutions. On the one hand, centralized and authoritarian political power was instrumental in imposing privatization and opening to the world market. On the other hand, budgetary decentralization was introduced within governments, so that various ministries and other state bodies are encouraged to compete with one another in a kind of internal market rather than being allocated funds in a unified way.

The following three chapters are concerned with particular, more localized aspects of neoliberalism. Chapter 4, "Capitalism and agrarian change in North Africa," looks at three countries with a large agrarian population: Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. [\[3\]](#)

Here the effects of neoliberalism, especially in Egypt, have been profound. The radical agrarian reform decreed by Nasser's secular nationalist regime has been reversed, mainly under U.S. pressure, and Egypt's fertile land opened up to agribusiness. More than a million people — one-third of all Egyptian farming families — lost their rights to the land. In many cases this was accompanied by brutal state violence against peasants' resistance.

For parallels in the developed capitalist countries one has to go back to the English enclosures and Scottish Highland clearances. Hanieh's restrained style makes the reality he describes all the more enraging.

This applies also to Chapter 5, "Class and state in the West Bank: neoliberalism under occupation."

Common discourse on the Israeli occupation discusses it mostly in terms of violations of Palestinian human and national rights. Hanieh provides a complementary perspective, which makes the picture three-dimensional: that of political economy.

He analyzes the neoliberal, distorted development imposed on the West Bank by Israel in concert with the United States, with the collaboration of the Palestinian Authority. This process is generally in line with developments in other parts of the region, but its unique feature is that it occurs under oppressive conditions of colonization and military-political subjugation.

In Chapter 6, "The regional scale: bringing the Gulf States back in," Hanieh reprises some of the themes he developed in his previous, much acclaimed book, *Capitalism and class in the Gulf Arab states*. [\[4\]](#)

Until the 1970s, these were basically rentier-consumer states, whose monarchs and their extended families lived in great luxury off the royalties paid by foreign oil companies. Since then, a real capitalist class has been formed, albeit mostly related or allied to the rulers. The huge capital of this class is invested in industrial and agricultural production, commerce and finance, and plays a pivotal role throughout the region.

At the same time there has been a large inflow of migrant workers — constituting a majority of the labor force — who have no permanent residence rights and can be deported at any time.

The final, seventh chapter, "Crisis and revolution," sketches the events of 2011-12 in the region, as mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this review.

## Omissions

A book of this size cannot possibly be comprehensive, let alone exhaustive. It deals in detail with the political economy of some Arab MENA countries, as illustrative case studies. Other countries, such as Algeria, Libya, Yemen and Syria are only briefly mentioned. The author cannot be criticized for making this choice.

One omission, however, I find puzzling: the role of cotton in Egypt's agriculture. Hanieh mentions the word "cotton" (which is not listed in the index!) several times, mostly in connection with the textile industry; but only a couple of times, in passing, in connection with agriculture.

Since the early 19th century, under Muhammad Ali and during British colonial rule, cotton played a central role in Egypt's economy, and by 1836 provided 86% of the country's total exports. [5] Today it is still an important agricultural product, though not nearly to the same extent as in the old days. Still, a brief discussion of this, and a comparison of the present role of Egyptian agribusiness with the old cotton-based form, would have been welcome.

Another regrettable omission is the absence of a glossary. Unavoidably, the text abounds in acronyms. Some of these, such as "IMF," may be familiar to most readers, but many others are unlikely to be so.

Finally, the publisher must be criticized for the poor binding. [This doesn't seem to be a problem with ATC's office copy â€"ed.] By the time I got past the middle of the book, flipping constantly between the main text and the endnotes, I was left with a bundle of mostly loose pages, and had to acquire an electronic version. This I advise readers to do in the first place; and, by the way, a searchable electronic version overcomes the problem of the absence of a glossary.

[March/April 2014, ATC 169](#)

---

[1] In this respect the subtitle of the book is misleading: it is not concerned with the whole of the Middle East, nor is it confined to it. Its scope is the Arab MENA. This terminological conflation occurs many times, and the reader of the book, as well as of this review, should note that "the Middle East" and "the region" are used as shorthand for "the Arab MENA."

[2] Zoellick's remarks at the opening press conference of the World Bank meeting on the Middle East, April 14 2011. Quoted by Hanieh, 165.

[3] According to 2010 statistics of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, the percentage of rural population in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia was 57, 42 and 33 respectively.

[4] New York 2011. See also his 2010 article, "Khaleeji-capital: class-formation and regional integration in the Middle-East Gulf," Historical Materialism 18 (2), 35-76. The book was reviewed in Against the Current by Jase Short:<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/3...>

[5] T. Cliff, The problem of the Middle East, 1946: [www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/work...](http://www.marxists.org/archive/cliff/work...). In writing this essay, Cliff was greatly helped by his then comrade Gabriel Baer, a noted expert on the political economy of the Middle East, whom he credits as "Comrade S Munir."