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What does it mean to be an Arab leftist today?

LSE Ideas

By Maher Sharif (with introduction and translation by Neil Ketchley)

The 'Global 1989' as event (and LSE IDEAS research project) remains a critical point of disjuncture in our understanding of contemporary politics. This post will form part of a series of pieces looking at the trajectory of the Arabic Left, post-1989. Based on interviews and works conducted and published in Arabic, it looks to introduce the ideas and experiences of 'Left' Arabic intellectuals and thinkers to an English-speaking audience.

Taken from a recently published op-ed in the Syrian communist weekly, Al-Nur, and re-written for LSE IDEAS, Maher Charif considers in a 2-part piece, What does it mean to be an Arab leftist today?

"Since its emergence in the 19th century, the terms and significance of the Left remain unchanged, i.e. engaging with socially exploited classes and the marginal. The Left struggles for the limiting of inequality between classes, nations, peoples and genders. And this society, which expels all forms of exploitation, discrimination and alienation, is a society which can be called socialist.

The struggle for socialism remains the *raison d'être* of the Arab Left. But it is a distant goal. Despite this goal not being realisable today, the Arab Left has to contribute to any discussion on the world level in defining the characteristics of the desirable alternative society. The experience of the Left, and its experience of the collapse of the Soviet Union, confirms this alternative society will emerge from the womb of capitalism through a transcendent dialectic. However, this vision of tomorrow's socialist society must necessarily be expressed through ethics, and not through the logic of historical determinism.

Some comments on the historical Arab Left

In evaluating the position of the historical Arabic Left, we have to recognise that the communist parties in Arab countries were attracted, since their emergence, to Soviet Marxism, and did not present significant contributions to the reproduction of Marxist thought. Before the October Revolution and the establishment of the Comintern, Arab interest in Marxism remained limited to a small number of intellectuals. With the beginning of the 1920s, a number of communist parties emerged in Arab countries mirroring the principles of Leninism. In doing so, the Arab Left lost its dialectical spirit and was transformed, with Stalinism, into a stagnated doctrine; obligatory for all branches of the Comintern. Through this political reliance on the Soviet version of Marxism, a dependence on a strong imposed centre emerged, leading to weak parties and, in reality, the acceptance of simplistic explanations.

And so, Arab communist parties, like tens of communist parties in different parts of the world, came to embody the Soviet model, on both the theoretical level and in the 'correct' application of Marxism. These parties became reliant on the following ideas: that the October revolution beckoned a new transitional age from capitalism to socialism on the global stage; that establishing a global socialist system, after the Second World War, reinforced the ongoing transformation in the balance of power in favour of socialist reform; that the successes of 'socialist realism' deepened the social content of national liberation movements, in turn making them part of the global socialist revolution.

Crucially, Arab Communist parties understood this phase in world history as being defined by 'national democratic revolutions', meaning a struggle against the imperialist military presence in the region, liberation from the dependence on the centres of global capitalism, and the Zionist project. Whilst the realisation of socialism was not an immediate goal, national democratic revolutions were seen as reinforcing the defining characteristic of this age; that is, the moving from capitalism to socialism on a global level. And on this basis, Arab communist parties understood the concept of progress as social. Here, progress and creating the conditions for socialism, meant betting on the procedures taken from national bourgeois systems, and allying with the Soviet Union and its model of nationalisation, agricultural reforms, mass education and industrialisation. All in an attempt to increase the size of the working classes, whilst generating new relationships of production.

The Left in the restoration and actualisation of the Arab enlightenment project

Through this reliance on external sources of ideas, Arab communists broke with the Arab enlightenment. This was the primary reason for their inability to reproduce Marxism in an independent way. This interruption from a liberatory content and other progressive objectives denied an important source for an explicitly Arab Marxism. Instead Marxism was planted in Arab lands without relying on local origins and roots.

It is then duty of the Arab Left to work on the restoration and actualisation of Enlightenment thinking and solving the unresolved tasks of the renaissance. These include religious reform, the liberation of women, the modernisation of language, and building a modern national citizenry; all equal before the rule of law. But of course the Left retains further goals, as previously mentioned, i.e. righting or seriously reducing the inequalities between classes, peoples and genders.”

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