

“DIVERSE IN RACE, RELIGION AND NATIONALITY... BUT
UNITED IN ASPIRATIONS OF CIVIL PROGRESS”:
THE ANARCHIST MOVEMENT IN EGYPT 1860–1940

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Anarchism first appeared in Egypt among Italian political refugees and workers during the 1860s. Nurtured by a developing international network of labour, transport and communications across the Mediterranean, it expanded beyond Italian circles to attract members from across Egypt's diverse ethnic and religious communities over the following decades. Though heterogeneous in character, different anarchist trends shared a discourse of radical social emancipation that in its propaganda and public actions proclaimed the universality of humankind and decried the evils of capitalism, state power and religious dogma.

In the years after 1900, anarcho-syndicalism played an energetic and central role in the development of the labour movement in Egypt, articulating the rights of workers in the struggle against capital and promoting an internationalist activism that resisted nationality, religion and race as the basis of organisation as it countered imperialist, nationalist and state-based perspectives. Yet, while it rejected nationalism as an organising principle, anarchism did at times make common cause with the nationalists against imperialism and arguably influenced the strategy and tactics of the nationalist movement.

Origins

The presence of a foreign working community in Egypt at the end of the 19th century has its roots in the policies pursued by Muhammad Ali, ruler of Egypt from 1805 until 1849. Embarking on a program to modernise the military, state administration and the economy, he had encouraged those with the necessary skills to migrate to Egypt to assist in the task. Under his successors, Sa'ïd (1854–1863) and Isma'ïl (1863–1879), an impressive series of infrastructure projects, all requiring

skilled labour went ahead—the establishment of a railway network, the expansion of the canal system and an extensive urban building program. The flagship project, the construction of the Suez Canal, required large numbers Italian, Greek, Syrian and Dalmatian workers, in addition to Egyptian labourers before being completed in 1869.¹ However, the availability and employment of such labour, both long-term migrants and seasonal workers, was not a phenomenon confined to Egypt but part of a broader trend throughout the Mediterranean and beyond to the New World that laid the foundations of an international network not only in labour but capital, goods and ideas.²

That anarchism should first find a following amongst Italians in Egypt is not surprising given the presence of a significant Italian working community, the established tradition of Egypt as a place of refuge for political exiles and the historical role played by Italians in the development of the anarchist movement.³ In time this combination of labour and political radicalism proved potent. The Italian Workers Society (*Società Operaio Italiana*), formed in Alexandria in the early 1860s to protect the interest of its members, was the first in a series of Italian organisations that took on an increasingly political character.

By the middle of the next decade veterans from Garibaldi's campaigns and other radicals established Thought and Action (*Pensiero ed Azione*), a political association based on Mazzinian principles.⁴ Soon after in 1876, a more radical splinter group was recognised as an official section of the First International in Alexandria.⁵ Additional

¹ Athanase G. Politis, *L'Hellénisme et L'Égypte Moderne*, Paris: Félix Alcan, 1930, vol. 2, 82–85.

² Ilham Khuri-Makdisi, "Levantine Trajectories: The Formulation and Dissemination of Radical Ideas in and between Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria, 1860–1914", Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2003, 318–326.

³ Ersilio Michel, *Esuli Italiani in Egitto (1815–1861)*, Pisa, 1958. It should be noted that contemporary sources usually refer to 'internationalists' although the subsequent development of the movement makes clear that the majority of these were anarchists with some legalitarian socialists (Marxists).

⁴ Giuseppe Mazzini (1805–72) was a prominent Italian political figure associated with the First International who held democratic, republican and, for a time, radical views.

⁵ Leonardo Bettini, *Bibliografia dell'anarchismo*, Florence: Editrice, 1976, vol. 2, 282n. Bettini's short essay, 'Appunti per una storia dell'anarchismo italiano in Egitto', 281–288 stands out as a pioneering work on Italian anarchism in Egypt.

sections were formed in Cairo, Port Said and Ismailia the following year and presented their first report at the Anti-Authoritarian International held at Verviers, Belgium that September.⁶

Although strongly Italian in character, even at this early stage the movement was seeking to expand its activities beyond the boundaries of this ethnic community. The report presented at Verviers does not survive but the published proceedings show that the Alexandria section, with the support of the section in Cairo, and the Greek Federation, successfully sponsored a proposal, calling on the federal bureau to disseminate socialist propaganda in the East “in Italian, Illyrian, Greek, Turkish and Arabic”.⁷ The dissolution of the International soon after meant the motion came to nothing yet it was a clear statement of the intention to disseminate the ideas of the First International beyond European communities to the indigenous peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The international network

The anarchist movement was not only global in ambition but international in connections, scope and operation. The Egyptian participation at Verviers was the beginning of a continuing pattern of involvement with international congresses. At the London conference in July 1881 that unsuccessfully sought to reconstitute the International, the Egyptian sections, now in federation with Istanbul, were represented by Errico Malatesta, one of the pre-eminent anarchists of his time.⁸ Francesco Cini, who lived for many years in Egypt from the 1870s, attended the revolutionary socialist congress at Capolago in Italy in 1891 that strongly endorsed an anarchist program. Later, Cini would be chosen as the delegate for Egyptian anarchists at the London conference of August 1914 subsequently cancelled due to the outbreak of

⁶ James Guillaume, *L'Internationale, Documents et Souvenirs, 1864–1878*, Paris: Gerard Lebovici, 1985, vol. IV, 258, 262. The Anti-Authoritarian wing of the International had been set up by Mikhail Bakunin and his allies following the split with Karl Marx at the Hague Congress of the First International in 1872.

⁷ Bettini, *Bibliografia dell'anarchismo*, 281n; see also Guillaume, *L'Internationale*, vol. IV, 259, 261. All translations are mine.

⁸ C. Masini, *Storia degli anarchici italiani da Bakunin a Malatesta*, Milan: Rizzoli, 204. Malatesta (1853–1932) led a tireless life of militancy in Europe, the Americas and the Middle East over the next fifty years.

the war.⁹ The pattern continued beyond the war with the participation of Alexandria anarchists at the Second Congress of the Italian Anarchist Union (*Unione Anarchica Italiana*), held in Italy in July 1920.¹⁰

More informally, the international anarchist network was lubricated by the frequent movement of individual militants between different countries and across continents, from Asia to Europe, North Africa and the Americas. Egypt itself had the advantages of serving as a relatively safe political haven while not being far from Europe. In time, it developed into a significant anarchist centre at the eastern end of the Mediterranean with close connections to Greece and Turkey, attested by the confederation between anarchists in Egypt and Istanbul during the 1880s. Regular connections were also maintained with groups in Tunis, Palestine and Lebanon, as individual activists crisscrossed the Mediterranean or followed the line of the North African coast, utilising a network based on personal recommendation and shared ideological vision. These links operated far beyond the Mediterranean, extending not only with the main European centres but also across the Atlantic to the United States, particularly in the greater New York area, and to South America, in Brazil and Argentina.

While most of this movement was perforce of the rank-and-file fleeing repression, carrying confidential information, or seeking economic opportunity, leading anarchists also travelled for personal and political purposes. Egypt was a regular destination. Amilcare Cipriani, a key if mercurial figure of revolutionary politics during the 19th century, was perhaps one of the first, visiting twice in the 1860s.¹¹ Other notable visitors included the celebrated geographer, Élisée Reclus (1884),¹²

⁹ Nunzio Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism 1864–1892*, Princeton University Press, 1993, 255–257; *Ambasciata d'Italia in Egitto*, Archivio Storico Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome, Italy b. 142 (1914) Ministry of Interior memo, 22 March 1914, hereafter AIE.

¹⁰ Emilio Falco, *Armando Borghi e gli anarchici italiani 1900–1922*, Urbino: QuattroVenti, 1992, 211n.

¹¹ Cipriani (1844–1918) was present at both the foundation of the International in London in 1864 and the Paris Commune in 1871. On his second visit to Egypt in September 1867, he was involved in the death of three men, an affair for which he was condemned to 20 years' transportation in New Caledonia in 1881, Masini, *Storia degli anarchici italiani*, 196–197; *Dizionario Biografico degli Anarchici Italiani* s.v. Cipriani, Amilcare.

¹² Henriette Chardak, *Élisée Reclus, une vie: l'homme qui aimait la terre*, Paris: Stock, 1997, 403–407. Reclus (1830–1905) stands in the highest rank of 19th century anarchist thinkers and was an important influence on educational thought in the movement.

Malatesta (1878, 1882–83), Luigi Galleani (1900–1901)¹³ and Pietro Gori, who passed through Egypt and Palestine on a lecture tour in early 1904.¹⁴ The presence of such charismatic activists and thinkers no doubt inspired the local anarchist community to greater efforts even as they spurred on security authorities to greater surveillance.

Important as these visits were, the written word arguably sustained a more regular sense of international community and global political mission among anarchists. An ‘imagined community’ created and consolidated not by ‘print capitalism’ but print internationalism, the scattered arms of the movement were kept connected and informed by an expanding anarchist press from the second half of the 19th century.¹⁵ Information flowed in both directions. Activists in Egypt regularly subscribed to anarchist newspapers published in Europe, North Africa, and the Americas, most often in Italian but also in French and Greek.¹⁶ Militants in Egypt contributed items on Egyptian affairs to anarchist newspapers abroad, particularly before the development of a local anarchist press. When newspapers such as *La Tribuna Libera* (“The Free Tribune”) and *L’Operaio* (“The Worker”) were established, they were available to an international readership that could follow labour and social affairs in Egypt.

In this way anarchists in Egypt (and elsewhere) were able to keep informed of the fortunes of the movement at home and abroad being provided with theoretical discussions, commentary, and serialised literature that promoted a shared sense of the international nature of the anarchist project. Many publications were dedicated to workers’ issues, offering insights, debates and discussion of common difficulties on matters of labour organisation and strategy. Facilitated by an increasingly developed international transport system, particularly

¹³ Galleani (1861–1931) had escaped imprisonment on the island of Pantelleria and taken refuge in Egypt at the end of 1900. In November 1901 he left for the United States to assume the editorship of the anarchist newspaper *La Cronaca Sovversiva*: Ugo Fedeli, *Luigi Galleani, Quarant’anni di lotte rivoluzionarie (1891–1931)*, Cesena: L’Antistato, 1956, 106–107.

¹⁴ Carlo Molaschi, *Pietro Gori*, Il Pensiero: Milano, 1959, 13.

¹⁵ On Anderson’s thesis of the role of print capitalism in creating the ‘imagined’ national community see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, 1981.

¹⁶ Among the newspapers read by anarchists in Egypt were *Il Libertario* (La Spezia), *Il Grido della Folla* (Milan), *Socialistis* (Athens), *La Rivoluzione Sociale* (London), *Le Réveil* (Geneva), *L’Operaio* (Tunis), *La Libertà* (New York), *La Protesta Humana* (San Francisco), and *La Nuova Civiltà* (Buenos Aires).

steamship services, the international anarchist press served as a vital channel for dissemination and diffusion of ideas a movement that saw itself as international in practice and conception.

The local scene

Despite the reverses suffered in Europe at the end of the 1870s and early 1880s, the anarchist movement continued to grow internationally. In 1881 in Alexandria, anarchists had established a European Social Studies Circle (*Circolo europeo di studii sociali*) where they discussed social questions and were operating a clandestine press for the printing of posters. In the same year a conference was convened at Sidi Gabr and attended by about a hundred activists from different anarchist groups across Egypt.¹⁷

At this very time Egypt was in the middle of a deep political crisis. Unable to service the debt incurred to fund expensive infrastructure projects and Ismail's expensive lifestyle, Egypt had been forced to accept European control over its treasury in 1876. Three years later under European pressure, Isma'il had been deposed and succeeded by his son Tawfiq who endeavoured to satisfy Egypt's creditors. A contest for power developed between elements of the Turko-Circassian elite and Egyptian Nationalist officers led by Ahmad 'Urabi who sought a constitutional government. By the beginning of 1882, 'Urabi as War Minister was confronted by hostile British and French governments determined to defend European investments and their own resident nationals.

Characterised as anti-foreign, 'Urabi did in fact receive support from some elements of the foreign community, including Italian workers in Alexandria and a number of anarchists.¹⁸ In June, following their bombardment of Alexandria British forces landed in the city and marched against Urabi, defeating him at a last stand at Tel al-Kabir in September. British occupation of the rest of the country quickly followed.

In the early years of the British occupation, the anarchist movement in Egypt was plagued by the fragmentation, disputation and faction-

¹⁷ Bettini, *Bibliografia dell'anarchismo*, 282, 305.

¹⁸ On Italian workers, see Tareq Y. Ismael and Rifa'at El-Sa'id, *The Communist Movement in Egypt, 1920-1988*, Syracuse UP, 13; on anarchists, see below.

alism that characterised it elsewhere.¹⁹ During the 1870s anarchists and socialists had been uneasy comrades under the umbrella of the International. The defection of Andrea Costa (an influential figure in Egypt) to legalitarian socialism in 1879 had caused a significant local schism. The movement suffered other internal divisions, particularly the enduring conflict between anti-organisationalists and anarcho-syndicalists on the role of collective association in achieving anarchist aims. Until the end of the 19th century, the former trend appears to have been in the ascendancy but with the growth of the labour movement anarcho-syndicalists expanded their influence. Other disputes reflected the power of personalities. Ugo Parrini, a key figure and staunch anti-organisationalist, was notorious for his uncompromising style and was a persistent obstacle to greater cooperation among anarchists. Not until after his death in 1906 was a national program of action agreed which provided a solid basis for collaboration within the Egyptian movement.

Although Italians remained the dominant ethnic group among anarchists in Egypt right up until World War I, over time the movement would expand beyond its original Italian nucleus and take on a more multiethnic character. Greek anarchists, particularly, produced a distinguished record of syndicalist activity, leading militants, and an impressive press and pamphlet literature, but the participation of Jews, Germans, and a variety of Eastern European nationalities was also notable.²⁰

The extent of the participation of Arabophone Egyptians, while undoubted, is still difficult to quantify. While apparently absent from anarchist circles before 1900, the appearance of native Egyptians in important industrial actions, educational activities and anarchist meetings during the first decade of the new century suggests a growing involvement.²¹ That impression is confirmed by the concerns expressed by Egyptians and the British authorities about the potential threat of anarchism and the new radical ideas posed towards Egyptian society.²²

¹⁹ Ugo Parrini's own account of a movement riven by personal and ideological differences, republished in Bettini, *Bibliografia dell'anarchismo*, 303–307, while no doubt generally self-serving, is probably reliable on this point.

²⁰ On Greek anarchists, see my forthcoming article.

²¹ For example, see Enrico Pea, *La vita in Egitto*, Milan: Mondadori, 1949.

²² See, for example, Egyptian concerns, Zachary Lockman, 'Imagining the Working Class: Culture, Nationalism, and Class Formation in Egypt, 1899–1914', *Poetics Today*, 15 (1994) 176n; for British concerns regarding young native Egyptians returning from

The ethnic diversity of the anarchists in Egypt was matched by the wide range of occupational backgrounds. The majority of anarchists were skilled artisans such as carpenters, masons, cabinetmakers, shoemakers, stonemasons, tailors and painters, a phenomenon usually explained by the strong tradition of the guild, the better education and the relatively greater economic security of skilled tradesmen over factory workers.²³ Some came from the *petite bourgeoisie*, particularly grocers, jewellers, tavern and bar owners, whose businesses offered a useful place for meetings. Yet other anarchists had a commercial background being involved in trade, owning or working for merchant houses—particularly true of Jews in Alexandria—or came from the professional class, chiefly doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, journalists and writers. By the end of the 19th century there was a shift away from the artisan core to the new working class, particularly cigarette workers, printers and the employees of the new large utilities, such as the tramway companies, providing new members. The great majority of anarchists attested in the record are men but the establishment of a separate women's section in Cairo in the 1870s and the attention given to women's issues suggests significant initial and ongoing female participation.²⁴

Addressing the East

A diverse, multi-dimensional and sometimes contradictory assemblage of ideas, anarchism called for the moral, political, economic and social emancipation of all men and women through international solidarity and brotherhood. In promoting 'the Idea', it called for a struggle against the main causes of human exploitation, ignorance and injustice: capital (and its agent, the bourgeoisie), the state and dogmatic religious authority.

Anarchists never came to an absolute agreement on how this struggle might be conducted in Egypt but there was recognition of the particular

studies abroad, FO Foreign Office, National Archives, UK, 371/1115/ 46990, Lord Kitchener to Sir Edward Grey, 14 Nov. 1911, hereafter FO.

²³ Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism*, 78–79.

²⁴ Bettini, *Bibliografia dell'anarchismo*, 282n. A list of 53 anarchists, which contains the names of 6 or 7 women, may provide a representative sample of the movement in Alexandria in the early 1880s: Polizia Internazionale, Archivio Storico Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome, Italy, b. 41 Rome to Alex, 7 April 1881, hereafter PI. It should also be noted that the 'anarchist couple' was a regular feature of the movement.

difficulties the anarchist message faced there. Dr Enrico Insabato, an anarchist in Cairo, believed that European anarchists had first to disassociate themselves from those things that had overshadowed relations between East and West in order to effectively promote their message.²⁵ He singled out three particular aspects: the tradition of religious division (which he accused priests of creating); Western attempts at political domination of the East, notably the Crusades and the more recent ‘clerical and diplomatic dynamite’ conducted by certain Western powers; and finally, the forces of international capital.

We must show [them, i.e. the Arabs] that not all Europeans are exploiters and besides that the enemies of the Orient are also ours... For them irresponsible anonymous capital is European [but] the day they become aware that the capitalist does not constitute the lowest part of the European population, they will give just form to their hatred.

Once anarchists found a “common language” and established intellectual communication with an audience in the East, Insabato believed that “the Idea is not only possible here but that it is destined to be the most illuminating fulcrum for the future development of European-Oriental relations”.²⁶

Anarchist language in Egypt was strongest when it was attacking the evils of capitalism. While it also believed that dogmatic religious authority was one of the chief forces responsible for ignorance and injustice and called for emancipation not only from churches but “from synagogues, from temples and from mosques”,²⁷ Islam as a faith does not seem to have been specifically targeted in anarchist literature. This may have been because its non-hierarchical structure put it in a favourable light compared to other religions. Insabato himself had singled out Catholicism and Brahmanism as anarchism’s religious adversaries since they taught “blind and passive obedience” and were thus a type of “intellectual alcoholism”. Islam, by contrast, was praised for its tolerance by Raoul Canivet at the opening of the Free Popular University.²⁸

The anarchist attitude to the Egyptian state was much more hostile even if it appears not to be detailed or systematic. There was general

²⁵ For the following, see Enrico Insabato, ‘Le Idee Avanzate in Egitto (II)’, *Lux!* Vol. 1 no. 3 (16 July 1903), 37–38.

²⁶ Insabato, ‘Le Idee Avanzate in Egitto (II)’, 37.

²⁷ Quote from a 1906 May Day poster, AIE, b. 107 (1904–1906) Anarchici.

²⁸ Anthony Gorman, “Anarchists in Education: The Free Popular University in Egypt (1901)”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 41: 3, 2005, 308.

condemnation of the coercive aspects of the state, particularly the actions of the police, state security services and the culture of surveillance. The injustice of laws and the abuse of power were regularly criticised. Anarchists eschewed involvement in institutional politics in principle but they believed that the particular character of the Egyptian government, which impeded the formation of political parties and electoral contests, meant that the anarchist approach was better suited to Egyptian conditions than the pursuit of power through parliamentary contests advocated by legalitarian socialists.²⁹

Further research is required to present a more complete picture of how anarchists viewed Islam and the Egyptian state. Pragmatic considerations, such as the viability of anti-religious rhetoric or concerns of deportation may have played some role in determining the limits of activism. Whether for ideological or practical reasons, anarchists did not target religion or the state head on. The program of action agreed at the anarchist conference held in 1909, one of the most widely agreed manifestos of the Egyptian movement, observed the standard demands for the abolition of private property and the state, but it gave more attention to the goal of social transformation through the use of propaganda, education and workers' associations, urging members

...to take part collectively and individually in all agitation of a moral, economic and social nature, actively participating in all struggles between capital and labour, and [...] to maintain in their public and private life that consistency between ideal and action that attracts popular sympathy towards anarchists.³⁰

The commitment to its internationalist mission and membership remained a central theme of anarchist discourse in Egypt. Public statements consistently emphasized the universal solidarity of all peoples. As one May Day poster announced,

On this day, across the sea and borders, conscious minorities of people, diverse in race, religion, nationality and customs but united in aspirations of civil progress, love, peace, well-being, liberty and hope greet the fateful date of 1 May.³¹

²⁹ Enrico Insabato, 'Le Idee Avanzate in Egitto', *Lux!* Vol. 1 no. 2 (15 June 1903) 7.

³⁰ AIE b. 120 (1909–1910) *Stampa sovversiva*, 'Perche siamo anarchici—Che cosa vogliamo'.

³¹ Dated 1906 and signed 'Gli Anarchici' (The Anarchists), AIE b. 107 (1904–1906) *Anarchici*.

Such sentiments were commonly expressed by anarchists internationally. In Egypt, the reality of a multi-ethnic working class gave this ideal of people of different races, religions and nationalities united in solidarity more than rhetorical force. Particularly after 1900, this was a distinctive feature of Egyptian anarchism: that it sought to engage with the ethnic, religious and linguistic pluralism experienced by many in their everyday and working life to promote an internationalist message. At public conferences and labour meetings audiences of different faiths and nationalities gathered to listen to the same message delivered in a number of languages. This is not to say that this internationalist call did not meet obstacles, sometimes within the movement itself though more often without. Nevertheless, the record suggests that anarchism was in principle committed to adapting to and engaging with the diversity of Egyptian society at large.

Propagating the Idea

Anarchists in Egypt overwhelmingly favoured propaganda of the word over “propaganda of the deed”. Although there were some cases of workplace-related violence, they eschewed political assassination and violence against members of the government or ruling class even if they applauded such acts carried out by their comrades in Europe and the United States.³² Nevertheless, local consular authorities were eager to promote a sense of the threat that anarchism posed to society at large.

The sensational announcement in October 1898 of the arrest of eighteen anarchists in Alexandria on charges of conspiracy to assassinate the German Emperor Wilhelm II during his visit to the Middle East was perhaps the most obvious example.³³ Splashed across the local and international press to maximise its impact, the affair seems to have been cooked up by an agent provocateur, perhaps with some assistance

³² A full history of political violence in Egypt has yet to be written. Existing studies take the assassination of Prime Minister Butrus Ghali in 1910, an action possibly inspired by anarchist tactics but carried out by a nationalist, as their starting point. See Donald M. Reid, “Political Assassination in Egypt, 1910–1954”, *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 15: 4, 1982, 625–651; Malak Badrawi, *Political Violence in Egypt 1910–1925: Secret Societies, Plots and Assassinations*, Richmond: Curzon, 2000.

³³ AIE no. 86 (1900–1904) Anarchici, 1899 Processo in Alessandria d’Egitto contro diverti anarchici.

from the Italian consulate, and thus reflects more the concerns of the authorities than any real threat of revolutionary violence by local activists. In the trial the following year, the accused were all acquitted of the main charge although they were found guilty of lesser charges of possession of prohibited literature. A series of rumours of conspiracies ascribed to anarchists in subsequent years should probably be put in the same category.³⁴

Rather than favour political violence, anarchists in Egypt preferred the spoken or printed word to disseminate their ideas, principally through communal study, public meetings, demonstrations and the press. Small groups had been organised at least since the early 1880s as a forum for holding discussions and attracting new members.³⁵ This pattern continued into the new century but it took on a broader compass. The “European Circle” of 1881 gave way to the International Reading Room (*Sala di lettura internazionale*), a small library of anarchist books and newspapers in Cairo, which opened its doors to the public in June 1902, distributing a manifesto in Italian and Hebrew (or Yiddish?) on the occasion.

A series of similar ventures followed: a Social Studies Club was launched in Alexandria by young Jewish anarchists in 1903 and a Libertarian Studies Room (*Sala di studi libertari*) the following year in Cairo.³⁶ Three years later a committee of Europeans, local Jews and Egyptians invited “all workers and friends of justice” to help establish an International Reading Room which would hold “scientific, philosophical, political and social works in every language.”³⁷ Other associations moved beyond the reading room and stressed specific aspects of libertarian thought. Atheist Clubs (*Cercles Athées*) were set up both in Cairo and Alexandria while a section of Free Thinkers (*Libres penseurs*), with a membership of more than two hundred, was organised in Alexandria.³⁸

The local anarchist press aimed for a larger audience. After the false start of 1877, the appearance in Alexandria of the bilingual *La Tribuna Libera/ Le Tribune Libre* heralded a renewed period of activity in

³⁴ See, for example, Lord Cromer’s telegram which refers to alleged rumours of Italian anarchists discussing the assassination of the Khedive (FO 78/5090, 7 Oct. 1900, no. 10). For various Italian concerns, see AIE b. 86 (1900–1904) Anarchici.

³⁵ Bettini, *Bibliografia dell’anarchismo*, 282.

³⁶ AIE b. 85 (1900–1904) Parrini Ugo Ucilio.

³⁷ AIE b. 107 (1904–1906) Stampa Anarchica, Ministry of Interior memos, 6 June, 3 Sept. 1907.

³⁸ AIE b. 120 (1909–1910) Circolo Ateo.

October 1901.³⁹ Announcing itself as an “International organ for the emancipation of the Proletariat”, *La Tribuna* sought nothing less than the “complete emancipation of moral-political-economic and social slavery” of the workers of the world.⁴⁰ In the course of the seven issues that appeared before the end of the year, it set an example for the radical press that followed, featuring articles on anarchist thought, local and international news of the movement, extracts from noted writers such as Leo Tolstoy, and a series on education by Dutch anarchist, Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis.

Over the next decade, a series of newspapers and periodicals took up different aspects of the anarchist program. In Alexandria the weekly *L’Operaio* (1902–03) promoted anarcho-syndicalism, focusing on issues of workers’ associations, education and public health. In response, *il Domani* (“Tomorrow”) (1903) in Cairo adopted a stridently libertarian tone. *Lux!* (“Light!”) (1903) a fortnightly literary journal presented extended discussions of anarchist theory and practice, while the Alexandrian weekly, *Risorgete!* (“Rise Again!”) (1908–1910), promoted a strong anti-clerical line.⁴¹ In 1908 the appearance of *O Ergatis* (“The Worker”), “an organ for the emancipation of women and the worker”, provided for a Greek language readership. Although contrasting in styles and specific orientation, particularly true of *il Domani* and *L’Operaio*, these publications were expressive of the ideological and linguistic diversity of the Egyptian movement. From 1909, a more coordinated anarchist press was forged from the consensus of the conference in Alexandria that year.⁴² In the succeeding years two newspapers, *L’Idea* (1909–1911) and *L’Unione* (1913–14), both co-edited by committees in Cairo and Alexandria, spoke to a broad audience with articles in Italian, French and Greek.

Despite its polyglot character, the anarchist press in Egypt does not appear to have included an Arabic language newspaper.⁴³ Nevertheless,

³⁹ In February 1877 the newly established Alexandria section of the International had published a newspaper, *Il Lavoratore*, that was quickly closed down by the authorities. For this and a useful but incomplete listing of anarchist newspapers published in Egypt, see Bettini, *Bibliografia dell’anarchismo*, 81–88.

⁴⁰ *La Tribuna Libera* 20 Oct. 1901.

⁴¹ This is probably the same as the weekly *Risveglio Egiziano* mentioned in a Ministry of Interior memo, AIE b. 111 (1907–1908), Anarchici, Min of Interior memo, 16 Feb. 1908.

⁴² AIE b. 120 (1909–1910) *Stampa sovversiva*, ‘Perche siamo anarchici—Che cosa vogliamo’.

⁴³ Some short Arabic language texts, mostly advertisements, appeared in *L’Operaio*.

anarchism (usually referred to as *fawdawiyya* in Arabic) had regularly featured in the mainstream Arabic newspapers since the 1890s, usually in reporting the activities of the movement abroad. At the same time modernist journals such as *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Hilal* carried articles discussing the origins and development of anarchist thought and practice, sometimes in the context of the broader socialist movement.⁴⁴ From 1897 *al-Jami'a al-Uthmaniyya* engaged with socialist ideas while a review, *al-Mustaqbal* ("The Future"), which appeared in 1914 but was soon closed down by the authorities, featured the work of Salama Musa and Shibli Shumayyil, two Egyptian writers influenced by anarchist ideas.⁴⁵

As the international anarchist press served to promote the ideas and sustain the identity of the movement globally, so did its local counterpart on a smaller scale. The effectiveness of this press in promoting the ideas of the movement has to be qualified by two important considerations. The first is the literacy of the target audience. This was much higher amongst the foreign working class with, for example, sixty-seven percent of Italians and almost sixty percent of Greeks being able to read and write, than for native Egyptians, where only thirteen per cent of men and about one per cent for women, were literate.⁴⁶ However, access to newspapers was not strictly limited to the literate since the common practice of reading newspapers out aloud in cafés allowed for the transmission of ideas to the unlettered.

Affordability was also a limiting factor. Although anarchist newspapers suffered from regular financial difficulties in production, they were competitively priced. *La Tribuna Libera*, *L'Indipendente* ("The Independent") and *L'Unione* (The Union") all sold for five *millièmes* (half a *piastre*) a copy. This was the same price as the mainstream

⁴⁴ See, for example, 'al-Ishtirakiyyun wa al-fawdawiyyun', *al-Muqtataf* 18 no. 11 (Aug. 1894), 721–729 and 18 no. 12 (Sept. 1894) 801–807 (a short series on socialists and anarchists).

⁴⁵ For a fuller discussion, see Donald M. Reid, "The Syrian Christians and Early Socialism in the Arab World", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 5, 1974, 177–193.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Robert Tignor, *State, Private Enterprise, and Economic Change in Egypt, 1918–1952*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984, Tables A.1-2 and Donald M. Reid, *Cairo University and the Making of Modern Egypt*, Cairo: AUC Press, 1991, 113. The figures are taken from the 1917 census (for Italians and Greeks) and the 1907 census (for Egyptians) on the basis of number of literate persons per 1,000 persons over five years. The rate for Jews, a group that included both Egyptians and non-Egyptians, was almost forty-four per cent (1907).

Arabic language papers at a time when the daily wage for highly skilled (usually European) labour was between twenty and forty piastres and for unskilled (most often Egyptian) workmen, about eight piastres.⁴⁷ *L'Operaio*, unusually for an anarchist newspaper, carried advertising and sold for only one millième. Other anarchist publications, particularly *numeri unici* (one-off issues), were often free or by voluntary donation. At the other end of the scale *Lux!* which in any case was a more literary production was expensive at two piastres a copy. Circulation figures are difficult to establish but we know that the first issue of *La Tribuna Libera* was one thousand copies (six hundred of which were sent abroad).⁴⁸

While the press served to connect its readership through dissemination of news and analysis, the anniversaries of important political events offered an opportunity for a public commemoration of the radical past and celebration of its principles. On these occasions, posters, leaflets and flyers were printed, posted in the streets and distributed to the public by different anarchist groups, promoting the values of their cause and their aspirations for the future. Initially the most fêted of these days was 18 March, the anniversary of the Paris Commune of 1871, publicly celebrated in Egypt by 1889.⁴⁹ In time it would be challenged by May Day in marking the international solidarity of workers.⁵⁰ For Italian anarchists the occasion of 20 September, the anniversary of the capture of Rome and the completion of Italian unification in 1870 provided a specific occasion to contemplate a sense of lost opportunity.⁵¹

Other expressions of anarchist sentiment were more spontaneous. In January 1907 a series of public protests gathered in Alexandria and Cairo to oppose the rumoured deportation of three Russian revolutionaries.⁵² Two years later anarchist hostility towards religious authority and political tyranny came together dramatically when the Spanish government arrested Francesco Ferrer i Guàrdia, a noted anarchist

⁴⁷ Joel Beinin and Zachary Lockman, *Workers on the Nile: Nationalism, Communism, Islam, and the Egyptian Working Class, 1882–1954*, London: I.B. Tauris, 1988, 39.

⁴⁸ AIE b. 87 (1900–1904) Anarchici, *La Tribuna Libera*, Memo 16 Nov. 1901.

⁴⁹ PI b. 41, 1890 Alessandria, Alexandria to Rome, 13 May–April 1890. The 14 July had served as the occasion of a public conference and march in 1881: Bettini, *Bibliografia dell'anarchismo*, 305.

⁵⁰ The earliest attested celebration of 1 May is PI b. 41, 1891 Alessandria, Alexandria to Rome, 18 April 1891.

⁵¹ AIE b. 86 (1900–1904) Anarchici, 25 Sept. 1904.

⁵² *Egyptian Gazette* 19 Jan., 21 Jan. 1907; *al-Ahram* 19 Jan., 26 Jan. 1907.

thinker, educator and founder of the Modern School movement in Spain, on charges of taking part in the anti-conscription uprising. News of the action spread quickly and prompted widespread protest internationally. In Alexandria a Pro-Ferrer committee was formed and hundreds of copies of a *numero unico* published on 30 September 1909 to publicise the case. On 4 October a series of speakers denounced the actions of the Spanish government at a meeting at the Free Popular University. Despite these and other protests Ferrer was executed in Barcelona some days later but he soon acquired martyr status. In Cairo later that month a number of anarchist organisations held a pro-Ferrer protest march.⁵³ By the end of the year a plaque in Ferrer's memory was set up in Alexandria and on 1 May the following year, the cry was heard: "Vive 1 May, Vive liberty, Vive Francesco Ferrer".⁵⁴

Popular education

The outrage expressed at the execution of Ferrer was not simply a protest against state tyranny but recognition of his status as an advocate for secular education, an important vehicle for social emancipation in anarchist thought. Indeed, it was in the cause of public education that anarchists in Egypt mounted their most ambitious project, the Free Popular University (*Università Popolare Libera*, henceforth UPL) in Alexandria in 1901.⁵⁵ Planned in the early months of that year and galvanised by the leadership of Galleani, the UPL was inaugurated in May with the aim of providing free evening education to the popular classes. The event was covered at length in the local European and Arabic language press which endorsed enthusiastically its objectives and drew widespread support from across the full range of Alexandrian society.

Although inspired by a European model (the first UPLs had opened in Italy over the previous twelve months), the UPL in Egypt developed

⁵³ For a hostile report, see 'A Ferrer Fiasco', *Egyptian Gazette*, 18 Oct. 1909.

⁵⁴ AIE b. 126 (1911) Anarchici, Ministry of Interior Memo, 9 Dec. 1909 (plaque); AIE b. 120 (1909–1910), Ministry of Interior Memo, 4 May 1910 (May Day). The Ferrer affair would be taken up in the local Greek and Arabic language press, as well as the theatre: see Ilham Makdisi, "Theater and Radical Politics in Beirut, Cairo and Alexandria", Centre for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 2006.

⁵⁵ For a more detailed discussion, see Anthony Gorman, "Anarchists in Education", 303–320. A similar project planned in Cairo was quickly targeted by the authorities and abandoned at the end of 1901.

its own specific program and character. Ideologically it applied a more radical vision than the Italian UPLs, which had close ties to the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), in offering classes in the humanities and the latest advances in science to workers and providing individual lectures on progressive social issues, such as workers' associations and the position of women in society. The UPL in Alexandria was also more internationalist by virtue of catering to a culturally and linguistically diverse community. Drawing on the services of voluntary teachers, classes were given in a number of languages, principally Italian and French, but also in Arabic and other languages. As one Alexandrian daily newspaper noted, "All the languages that sound in the mouths of the happy fellow drinkers of the waters of the Nile serve as a vehicle in lectures of different university teachers".⁵⁶

Despite this propitious beginning, the radical nature of the UPL soon attracted hostility. Concerned at its political character the Italian consular authorities moved quickly to institute legal proceedings against a UPL lecturer, Dr Curti-Garzoni, after he had made certain remarks in class regarding the recent assassination of the Italian king, Umberto I. The action, while attracting some public criticism, effectively undermined the momentum behind the UPL and witnessed a quick shift in attitude in some quarters. Formerly supportive, *al-Ahram* now accused the university of being based on "depraved principles" and standing "revealed for its disgrace and emptiness".⁵⁷ Within a year reliably bourgeois elements had wrested control of the UPL from its anarchist founders and proceeded to transform it into a vocational college that, among other things, taught shorthand, accountancy and languages. Its brief life as a revolutionary project notwithstanding, the UPL marks an important moment for anarchism in Egypt and almost certainly served as an inspiration to Egyptian nationalists who would establish the Higher Schools Club (*Nadi al-madaris al-'ulya*) in 1905 which similarly put educational means to political purpose.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ 'Università Popolare Libera', *L'Imparziale* 17–18 Nov. 1901.

⁵⁷ 'al-Kulliyya al-hurra', *al-Ahram* 13 July 1901.

⁵⁸ Egyptian nationalist interest in the UPL is attested by the considerable coverage given to it in the pages of *al-Liwa'*, and by the participation of its correspondent, Muhammad Kalza, in the official opening. On the Higher School Club, see Anthony Gorman, *Historians, State and Politics in Twentieth Century Egypt: Contesting the Nation*, London: Routledge Curzon, 2003, 82; 'Abd al-Rahman al-Rafi'i, Mustafa Kamil, *Ba'th al-haraka al-wataniyya*. Cairo, 1939, 192–195.

Anarcho-syndicalism and labour

Anarchism in Egypt would have its most significant impact on the development of the labour movement. With the emergence of a new working class of critical mass at the end of the 19th century, anarcho-syndicalism, in contrast to the anti-organisationalists, held that formal collective organisation was the necessary instrument of social revolution and began to assert itself as a force. Employing a discourse that stressed the virtues of solidarity, workers' rights, and justice, it played a central role in organisation and formulation of the strategy and tactics of working class militancy in resisting the predations of capital.

Organised labour was far from new in Egypt. Guilds had been an integral part of the traditional Ottoman order, serving as guardians of the trade, regulating entry into the profession, maintaining standards of workmanship, controlling competition and providing a framework for mutual aid.⁵⁹ The modernisation program of Muhammad Ali in the first half of the 19th century and the progressive incorporation of Egypt into the international capitalist system in the second had begun to undermine established social and economic structures. Greater foreign trade, the demand and import of large amounts of goods and the inflow of capital invested in land companies, agriculture and local industry in Egypt significantly changed the economic and social role of guilds and the character of the working class.⁶⁰

As has already been indicated, an important part of this process was the establishment of a local foreign workforce alongside native Egyptian labour. Historians of the Egyptian labour movement, primarily concerned with its contribution to the national movement, have tended to stress the differences between the European and foreign worker above any common basis for action.⁶¹ While acknowledging in varying measure the positive role played by foreign workers in

⁵⁹ For a short, useful discussion, see Joel Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 16–19. For a more detailed analysis on guilds in Egypt during this period, see Juan Cole, *Colonialism and Revolution in the Middle East*, Princeton University Press, 1993, 164–189, and John T. Chalcraft, *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863–1914*, Albany NY: State University of New York, 2005.

⁶⁰ For some discussion on developments in finance during this period, see Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800–1914*, Methuen: London and New York, 1981, 233–243.

⁶¹ Lockman, 'Imagining the Working Class', 186.

inspiring the organisation of Egyptian workers, they have tended to emphasize the factors that militated against such cooperation: the ethnic character of some occupations, the differential rates of pay, and the legal advantages foreign workers enjoyed under the Capitulations.⁶²

This characterisation of the relationship between these two groups requires some revision. While the factors noted clearly played some part in determining the pattern and configuration of labour activism, the record shows a clear and sustained evidence of cooperation and collaboration between the elements within these two groups that took off at the very beginning of the new century. As Lockman has rightly pointed out, the native Egyptian working class was not homogeneous, did it function as a single actor nor did it possess a single subjectivity.⁶³ The same is true of the local foreign working class.⁶⁴ Our understanding of the relations between these two groups should therefore not be reduced to a European style of labour organisation in competition with a new emerging Egyptian labour model. It is argued here that a model of collaboration between European and Egyptian workers grounded in an internationalist ethic and universal workers' rights was locally constituted in Egypt during the critical years from the beginning of the 20th century until 1914.

The international or mixed union (in Arabic, *niqaba mukhtalifa*) was the clearest formal expression of common cause between foreign and Egyptian workers and the most obvious vehicle for anarcho-syndicalist militancy. Accepting workers of all nationalities, these unions were established in important trades, such as cigarette workers, tailors, tobacco workers and shoemakers, but they were also set up on a less specific basis, such as the International Union of Workers and Employees (IUWE) formed in Cairo. Meetings and demonstrations reflected the international character of the membership. At a meeting during the tailors' strike in 1901, workers' demands were read out in

⁶² The Capitulations were a series of agreements made between the Ottoman Empire and many European states that granted certain economic and legal privileges to foreign nationals, principally exemption from certain customs duties and the right to be subject to their own national law administered by consular authorities.

⁶³ Zachary Lockman (ed.), *Workers and Working Classes in the Middle East: Struggles, Histories, Historiographies*. State University of New York Press, 1994, 72.

⁶⁴ For a fuller discussion, see Anthony Gorman, "Foreign Workers in Egypt 1882–1914: Subaltern or labour elite?", 237–259 in Stephanie Cronin (ed.), *Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*, London and New York: Routledge, 2008.

a number of languages while at the inaugural meeting of the IUWE in 1909 speakers addressed an audience of more than two thousand people on the importance of the collective action and international solidarity in Arabic, French, Greek, Italian and German.⁶⁵ Union leadership was similarly international. A committee of fourteen made up of five Greeks, five Egyptians, two Syrians, one Italian and an Armenian, for example, ran the shoemakers union.⁶⁶

In common with existing workers' associations, these international unions provided various welfare services to members but they also represented a break from earlier patterns of labour organisation. They more aggressively championed workers' interests in the battle against employers and they also appealed to higher values of international solidarity and universal brotherhood adopting names redolent with ideological aspirations such as *Concord* (tailors), *Progress* (tobacco workers) and *Reform* (shoemakers). They were complemented in this by the resistance leagues (*leghe di resistenza*), first established in Alexandria amongst printers, tailors and cigarette rollers at the beginning of the decade by the tireless Pietro Vasai, which probably served as a smaller, disciplined core of anarcho-syndicalist practice.⁶⁷ In Cairo in 1910 the common purpose and ideological affiliation between these organisations was made particularly clear, when the IUWE, the Ligue Typographique, the Association of Cigaretters and the International Federation of Resistance, rented a common premises.⁶⁸

The cigarette rollers union embodied the new militancy of the international unions. Originally set up as a Greek body in Cairo during the 1890s, it accepted membership from rollers of all nationalities just prior to launching the successful strike of 1899–1900 that is regarded as a milestone in industrial militancy in Egypt.⁶⁹ The successful outcome of this action put the cigarette workers at the vanguard of the

⁶⁵ Beinin and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 54 (tailors); *Phos* 7 July, 14 July 1909; *al-Muqattam* 12 July 1909 (IUWE). In other sources, this union is known as the *Association Internationale de coopération pour l'amélioration des classes ouvrières*, AIE b. 120, Ministry of Interior Memo, 4 July, 11 July 1909

⁶⁶ *Telegraphos* 26 Dec. 1901

⁶⁷ AIE b. 88 (1900–1904) 29 May 1902.

⁶⁸ AIE b. 126 (1911) Anarchici, 'Movimento anarchico in genere', Memo 8 Aug. 1910'

⁶⁹ For a fuller discussion of these events, see Gorman, 'Foreign Workers in Egypt', 245–249. Among the strike leadership Kordatos identifies the Vourzonides brothers as anarchists and Solomon Goldenberg (known from other sources to be an anarchist),

new labour movement. However, the peaceful gains of this strike contrasted with the bruising confrontations in December of the following year when police used canes and fire hoses to attack workers. More desperate still was the strike of 1903. At the height of the confrontation, anarchists Ugo Parrini and Nicolas Doumas led the call for a general strike, urging workers to fight violence with violence.

Ultimately the strike collapsed as employers brought in other Egyptian and Syrian workers as strike breakers and successfully split the united front by branding the industrial dispute an ethnic conflict. Cigarette workers would take some years to recover from the blow. When they did reorganise in 1908, the two cigarette unions, the Matosian Union and the *Ligue Internationale des Ouvriers Cigaretteiers et Papetiers du Caire*, further expanded their membership by accepting all cigarette workers, not only rollers.

By the end of the first decade of the century, the anarcho-syndicalist international union had emerged as a significant industrial and indeed moral force. As one Cairene newspaper confidently announced,⁷⁰

Happily in Cairo some years ago, a movement began to be observed of the fraternisation of the working classes, and after not many years the city of the Caliphs will be one of the first socialist centres on account of its international character.

The optimism may have been overstated but the sentiment expressed captured the confidence of a broad movement within the working classes based on universalist principles in which anarchists and syndicalists had played a leading role.

Competing orientations

Despite the successes of the international unions, the call for workers of all nationalities to unite and defend their interests did not go unchallenged. The closest ideological rivals were the socialists with whom anarchists shared an anti-capitalist program but disagreed on the manner and the rationale it should be pursued.⁷¹

Yiannis Kordatos, *Istoria tou ellinikou ergatikou kinimatos*, Athens: Boukoumani, 1972, 174n.

⁷⁰ Phos 11 March 1909.

⁷¹ The socialist movement in Egypt before 1921 awaits its own study. After the breakup of the First International in the 1870s it probably maintained a continuous if

One source of competition for the loyalty of foreign workers was the local national associations found in the foreign communities that provided welfare services and a social life for members within a communitarian or homeland orientation. These were particularly significant in the Greek community where the power of the bourgeois oligarchy in funding and controlling community institutions maintained a patron-client relationship with workers.⁷²

However, the most significant challenge to the internationalist aspirations of syndicalism in respect of Egyptian workers was the emerging nationalist movement. Initially, workers had not figured in the thinking of young nationalists like Muhammad Farid, who in the mid-1890s had regarded signs of militant labour as part of a “European disease” and alien to the Egyptian context.⁷³ Over the next decade and a half as the phenomenon of strikes increased and the power of the labour movement became clear, the nationalist position shifted.⁷⁴ In 1909 the Watani Party openly backed the formation of the Manual Trades Workers Union (MTWU), a diverse body of Egyptian urban workers, recognising both the need to constitute a broader national community and the political potential of the worker in the struggle against the British occupation.⁷⁵

Well before this time, anarcho-syndicalists had been aware of the need to engage with the native Egyptian worker. This was most easily done in the framework of the international union; however the structure of the working class, where many occupations were for all practical purposes practised only by Egyptians, meant that their formation was often not feasible. Nevertheless, some anarchists and particularly the editors of *L'Operaio* even as they recognised certain difficulties highlighted the importance of promoting the necessity of labour organisation and militancy to the native proletariat. When the cab drivers in Alexandria went on strike in April 1903, the paper her-

uneven existence in the ensuing decades. Under the Second International established in 1889 socialists promoted social democratic politics and were a significant force among Italian and possibly other workers in the decade or so before the outbreak of the First World War.

⁷² Anthony Gorman, “Foreign Workers in Egypt 1882–1914”, 254.

⁷³ Beinin and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 55.

⁷⁴ For the nationalist ‘discovery’ of the working class, see Lockman, “Imagining the Working Class”, 157–190.

⁷⁵ Beinin and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 67–72.

alded this as the beginning of a genuine Egyptian militancy.⁷⁶ The editors of *L'Unione* similarly stressed the shared interests of European and Egyptian workers, emphasizing they had to unite to successfully defend their interests because “capital is our common enemy”. More than that they pointed to the universal condition of workers:⁷⁷

Labour has no frontiers or language. Therefore we make no issue of nationality, of religion, of race. All feel the same needs, all suffer the same grief; all have one single aspiration: their own well-being, which cannot be other than the result of the common well-being.

Egyptian nationalists, however, articulated quite a different political vision and in the years after the formation of the MTWU contended with anarcho-syndicalists for the support of the working class in Egypt, employing both discursive and organisational tactics, and drawing on nativist and ethnocentric appeals to splinter the internationalist labour movement. In this, they followed the employers during the cigarette strike of 1903.

One arena in which these conflicts were played out was the International Printers League of Cairo. Established at the beginning of the century by Italian anarcho-syndicalists, the membership of the union was predominantly Italian but included Greek and Egyptian members. In 1909 a splinter group of Italian workers sought to break away from the union to form an Italian Mutual Assistance Society. The anarchist *l'Idea* came out strongly against the move branding it a “regression” that rejected “brotherhood and international solidarity”.⁷⁸ For a time, a split appears to have been averted but in February 1911 some parting of the ways between Egyptian and European printers seems to have occurred.⁷⁹ In the years that followed, anarcho-syndicalist forces were weakened by the government campaign of deportation waged against activists, Pietro Vasai being among them.⁸⁰ Yet, by 1915 now under the leadership of Italian anarchist Giuseppe Pizzuto, Europeans and Egyptians were again accepted as members of the union on equal terms.⁸¹

⁷⁶ ‘La Coscienza Indigena’ *L’Operaio* 11 April 1903.

⁷⁷ *L’Unione* 13 July 1913.

⁷⁸ *L’Idea* 1 May 1909.

⁷⁹ Amin ‘Izz al-Din, *al-Tabaqa al-‘amila al-misriyya mundhu nashatiha hatta thawrat 1919*, Cairo: Dar al-sha‘b, 1967, 123.

⁸⁰ Kordatos, *Istoria tou Ellinikou Ergatikou Kinimatos*, 175–176.

⁸¹ FO 407/185, no. 155 Allenby to Curzon, Ramleh 31 Aug. 1919.

The postwar order

Britain declared Egypt a protectorate following the outbreak of the World War I and for the next four years oversaw a policy of clamping down on all political activities, interning nationalists, surveilling or deporting foreign anarchists and closing down newspapers. With the end of hostilities in 1918 Egyptian nationalists renewed their calls for the immediate evacuation of British forces and Egyptian independence. The British government sought to resist these demands, a policy that detonated a series of protests across the country, known as the 1919 Revolution, which saw nationalists fronting a broad-based coalition of forces.

The same year witnessed an explosion in industrial unrest unleashed after the enforced moderation of the war years. A strike in the Suez Canal in May was the prelude to an outbreak of strikes in August by Egyptian and foreign workers in Cairo and Alexandria and the establishment of a large number of new labour syndicates. Anarcho-syndicalists again played a leading part in this movement. Pizzuto at the head of the printers' union led the move to set up a Bourse de Travail in Cairo in the summer of 1919 before being deported in September. In February 1921, after considerable planning the General Confederation of Labour (*Confédération Générale du Travail*, CGT, or *Ittihad al-niqabat al-'am*) was established in Alexandria with anarchist Joseph Rosenthal as one of its chief organisers.⁸² The CGT brought together almost three thousand mostly foreign workers from twenty-one unions, but it was a measure of Rosenthal's standing at the time that he was visited privately later in the year by Mustafa al-Nahas, a leading member of the Wafd and future Egyptian Prime Minister.⁸³

These years also saw a reconfiguration of radical political forces. In August 1921 the Egyptian Socialist Party (ESP), the precursor of Egyptian Communist Party, was established. Based in Cairo with branches in Alexandria and the Delta, it claimed a party membership of fifteen hundred by late 1922 drawn from both Egyptian nationals and resident foreigners. Its program was anti-imperialist, calling for the liberation of the Nile Valley (Egypt and the Sudan), and anti-capitalist. Its

⁸² Beinin and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 111–113, 139. The names of both of these organisations owed a clear debt to French anarcho-syndicalism.

⁸³ FO 141/779/9065 Cairo 1919–1921 Bolshevism, Report on Rosenthal and Edward Zaidman.

economic and social principles owed a significant debt to anarchism even if it did embrace parliamentary politics.⁸⁴ According to one of its leaders, the party aimed

to defend their [i.e. workers'] interests in parliament and elsewhere, and to work to force the government to issue social laws to protect the workers, who were left to the mercy of capitalism and its tyranny.⁸⁵

These words of Rosenthal, a key figure in radical politics of more than twenty years, suggest that many of those who had been anarchist militants before the war were now drawn to the party as the main vehicle for the radical challenge to the traditional political order.⁸⁶ In this they finally agreed with their close rivals, the socialists with whom they had been doing battle and making common cause since the 1880s.

The early life of the ESP was marked by internal conflicts over policy and strategy prompting the departure of more moderate members. One contentious issue was the question of affiliation with the Communist International (Comintern). Following contacts with Moscow, a general meeting of the ESP in January 1923 accepted the necessary twenty one conditions for Comintern membership and the Communist Party of Egypt (ECP) was formally established, adopting a program that called for the end of the Capitulations and equal pay for Egyptian and foreign workers.⁸⁷ Additional conditions were required, among them the expulsion of Rosenthal as an “undesirable” element, very probably because of his anarchist past, and possibly others with a similar record.

In 1922, the bitter dispute between Egyptian nationalists and Britain was temporarily settled by the British decision to unilaterally grant Egypt self-rule even if it reserved certain important powers to itself. At the beginning of 1924, Sa'd Zaghlul at the head of the Wafd, became the head of Egypt's first popularly elected government under the new

⁸⁴ Ismael and Rifa'at El-Sa'id, *Communist Movement in Egypt*, 21–22. Salama Musa's comment that the party was first called the Anarchist Party (*al-hizb al-ibahi*) also suggests a strong debt to the anarchist tradition, Salama Musa, *Tarbiyya Salama Musa*, Dar al-Mustaqbal, 1958, 203.

⁸⁵ Ismael and Rifa'at El-Sa'id, *Communist Movement in Egypt*, 15, 17.

⁸⁶ Though certainly Jewish, Rosenthal's geographic origins are unclear. Beinun and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 130 assert he was born in Palestine but he has variously been described as Russian and Austrian.

⁸⁷ Ismael and El-Sa'id, *Communist Movement in Egypt*, 21–22.

constitution. He soon launched a sustained attack against the ECP and other radical opposition. For the rest of the 1920s and into the early 1930s communists, anarchists, socialist and radical nationalists were subject to a campaign of government repression. During this time anarchists themselves maintained a separate presence in Egypt but more research is required to establish how significant the movement was during this period.⁸⁸ While its role was clearly diminished compared to its pre-war position, anarchist thought and international syndicalism continued to exercise some influence. In the 1930s the Atheists Circle and *Les Libres Penseurs* continued to operate in Cairo, attracting a new generation of socialists and free thinkers, some of whom would play a part in the revived left of the 1940s.⁸⁹ By this time the labour movement drew ideological support from the communist movement and the Muslim Brotherhood but it nevertheless still owed something to its anarcho-syndicalist roots.

Anarchists and Egyptian nationalism

It was not only in the competition for the loyalties of workers that anarchists clashed with nationalists. There was a much more fundamental ideological gulf between the two movements. As Insabato had made clear,⁹⁰

... we do not love religious fanaticism but we find that those who wish to substitute religious fanaticism with that of fatherland, nationality, caste or class make progress go backwards.

Yet despite their profound differences nationalism and anarchism did share a common enemy, imperialism, and on more than one occasion became *de facto* allies in opposing it. Perhaps the earliest example of this was in 1882 when Malatesta and his companions joined Urabi's forces to resist the British, less to assist the nationalist cause per se than to take advantage of the opportunity the situation offered for

⁸⁸ The Italian and Greek governments were concerned about the activities of Egyptian anarchists both at home and abroad. See, for example, the list of antifascists, anarchists and socialists in Marta Petricoli, *Oltre il Mito, L'Egitto degli Italiani (1917-1947)*, Milan: Mondadori, 486-489.

⁸⁹ Interview with Yusuf Darwish, a communist lawyer and activist from the 1940s who attended these associations in the mid-1930s.

⁹⁰ Enrico Insabato, 'Le Idee Avanzate in Egitto (II)', *Lux!*, 37.

social revolution.⁹¹ For its part when the Watani Party embraced the labour movement, it nevertheless recognised the importance of allying with foreign workers and urged Egyptian workers during the tram strike of 1911 to, “Unite and strengthen yourselves and increase your numbers through combination and through unity with the European workers, your comrades”.⁹²

This confluence of political interest was repeated more forcefully during the 1919 Revolution when nationwide agitation against continued British rule and syndicalist activity between foreign and Egyptian labour worked together to improve working conditions.⁹³ Nationalists were also influenced by the strategies and tactics of anarchism at home and abroad. The likelihood of the UPL influencing nationalist education policy has been mentioned. It seems clear the anarchist organisation had influence on nationalist political activity more generally as well.⁹⁴

Conclusion

In the fifty years before World War I an anarchist community emerged in Egypt sustained by an expanding Mediterranean network of migration, labour mobility, communications and transport. Initially taken up by elements in the resident Italian community, it was gradually embraced by members of other communities who shared a radical view of social emancipation of social, economic and intellectual life. In the decade and a half before World War I anarcho-syndicalism, typified by the ‘international’ union, was a leading force in the organisation and development of a militant labour movement. Calling for international solidarity among all workers, it adapted with little effort to a society characterised by ethnic and religious pluralism and articulated an anti-capitalist, anti-nationalist discourse as it did battle with nationalist and other forces in seeking the support of the popular classes in Egypt. As a libertarian movement, anarchists may have had a less definable

⁹¹ The action was later recalled with pride, *Il Processo degli Anarchici*, Alexandria, Cairo 1899, 55. For anarchists at Tel al-Kabir, see PI b. 41, 6 and 20 Oct. 1882.

⁹² Beinín and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 71 (quoting *al-Liwa*).

⁹³ Beinín and Lockman, *Workers on the Nile*, 111–112.

⁹⁴ For example, in September 1910, leading Watanist ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Jawish was reported to be promoting Italian anarchist literature, FO 371/1114, 6–7.

but still significant impact, along with socialists and liberals, on the advancement of secular thought in Egyptian intellectual life.

Despite these successes, the anarchist movement faced considerable difficulties in Egypt. The coercion of the state through a sustained campaign of surveillance, prosecution and occasionally deportation no doubt hampered the movement as did its characterisation by the authorities as a group of dissolute, political adventurers promoting an alien ideology. More than this, however, the achievement that anarchists had made in formulating an anti-capitalist discourse, in calling for social emancipation and articulating the consciousness of workers would from the beginning of the 1920s, be appropriated by other forces, chiefly the Egyptian Communist Party and the Egyptian national movement.

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