

EGYPT: FROM ROMANTICISM TO REALISM

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“My fathers and mothers go back to the pyramids and to histories of parrots, and even as far back as Mayan culture. So I don’t feel that I belong to a specific generation ... However, as far as the 60s generation is concerned, I believe I only wished to have experienced May 1968—just as I would have liked to have been involved in the 1972 student demonstrations in Egypt.”

These words by poet and translator Huda Hussein, taken from an interview published in *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, not only summarize the influence exerted by the “’68 movement” in Egypt but also show that such influence has now, for the most part, vanished. The present generation, born around 1968, is not moved by Egyptians who directly experienced 1968; there is only a sense of a “nostalgic” connection with student demonstrations at Egyptian universities in the early 1970s. The real influence that the 1990s generation feels (those now entering college) derives directly from the ’68 movement as originally manifested in Europe.

Mixing politics and ideology with culture

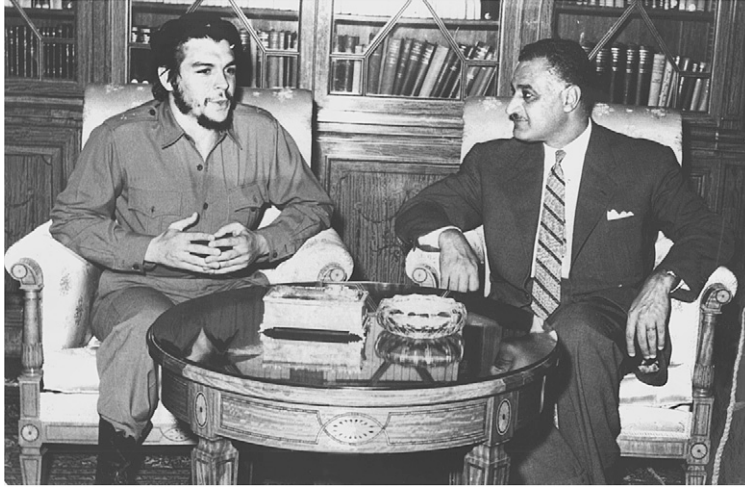
Allow me to turn for a moment to a leading personality who exemplifies the enthusiastic objector: the late Ibrahim Mansur, an intellectual who was one of the founders of the celebrated *Gallery 68*, a journal that played a significant role in providing roots for the writers of the ’60s generation. In addition, in the 1970s Mansur was one of the best-known opponents of the policies of Anwar al-Sadat, then Egyptian president. He is now established in Egyptian intellectuals’ collective memory as the “national conscience,” whose keen sword of criticism descended on anyone who opposed the nationalist feelings held by most of the population.

Mansur embodies the paradigm of the Egyptian intellectual who mixes politics and ideology with culture. This mixture is typical of the ’60s generation, making it a general characteristic of Egyptian culture. But this is precisely what the ’90s generation openly rejects in pursuing individualism and favoring aesthetics at the expense of ideology.

More liberty for student associations

While it is true that the Mansur generation played an important role in the ’60s and ’70s—as a result of some circumstances, such

as the Arab defeat in the Six-Day War of 1967—it is, nonetheless, not improbable that the '68 movement in France was the main



**Che Guevara meets
Egyptian Premier Nasser
in Cairo on June 19, 1958.**

influence on the November demonstrations in Egypt. These demonstrations gained such momentum that Egyptian President Abdel Nasser yielded to students' demands and conceded greater independence, effectiveness, and freedom of movement to their groups. Student associations

were also allowed to be politically active.

Nevertheless, this generation, successful in exerting pressure on its president, did not play any great part later in influencing the modernization of Egyptian society. Despite all its political and ideological activities, it was not in a position to effectively counter corruption and the population's marginalization in political life—a state of affairs Egyptian society had to struggle against during the '80s and '90s. Literature was affected, too. Perhaps this was the reason the '90s generation rejected its predecessors in the spheres of ideology, creativity, and politics.

Movement of the urban population

When the '60s generation was growing up, it profited from the 1952 revolution, which had led to free education and welfare benefits. On the other hand, this generation was also shaped by the revolutionary atmosphere that became characteristic of Egyptian society as a whole, in which people trusted by those in power were given precedence over those better qualified. Another consequence of the revolution was the fact that young people from rural areas now enjoyed the advantages of education. In addition, work opportunities arose in Cairo, so that people brought their customs, traditions, behaviors, and values to the city, adhering to these instead of exchanging them for modern urban ways. In other words, the capital

imported values from the regions instead of the city spreading urban standards to rural areas.

So what happened in Cairo at the end of the 1960s cannot be compared with the '68 movement in Europe since the latter involved an urban population with all that this implied in terms of culture and patterns of behavior. The Egyptian student movement was fundamentally different. There is an essential difference between intellectuals and citizens in the two cultures, and, in fact, between European and Third World cultures more generally. The Egyptian is essentially a countryman [*muwaatin*], a son of the homeland, whereas the European is a citizen, a son of the city.

Perhaps this unclear understanding of culture and its relationship to the land (i.e., to the homeland) rather than to the given realities was one of the reasons the Egyptian generation of '68 no longer influenced succeeding generations and thus failed to play its part in revolutionizing and modernizing society. This generation was equally incapable of liberating itself from the roots of traditional culture, founded on a dualistic value system of the permitted [*halaal*] and the forbidden [*haraam*]. Its thinking was bound by this dualism.

Romantic representation of the revolt

The second reason this generation failed to significantly influence subsequent generations was its lack of will to record ideas in writing so that they could be discussed more widely and further developed. In my opinion, Ibrahim Mansur, an emblem of oral culture, exemplifies this disparagement of the written word. As a result, his influence was limited to a small circle of people in direct contact with him who repeated his words without writing them down. Reflecting on Ibrahim Mansur thus involves a kind of romanticism—which seems to be a general characteristic of both the '70s generation and its predecessor, as Sharif Younis emphasized in his study of the Egyptian student movement: “The different circumstances of the '70s led to the rise of a student movement characterized by romantic and abstract representation. The romantic hero is someone who does nothing but fight; he does not eat, drink, or work.” (*Al Hewan Al Motamadden*, December 16, 2002).

However, there were many exceptions, particularly within the student movement itself, including the late intellectual Ahmad Abdallah, who played a salient part in the student leadership during this revolt.

Abdallah, who studied economics and politics, headed the students' national committee that directed the January 1972 upheaval—seen by many, especially on the Left, as preparation for the 1973 war against Israel. He also led students' most important campus protest, which the security forces could only bring to an end by using their truncheons. Abdallah was arrested three times in 1972 and 1973. Yet even though Abdallah surmounted many of his generation's afflictions, he had little influence on later student generations because they associate him with populist culture, which they—particularly the intellectuals among them—do not appreciate.

Influence of the European '68 movement

Nevertheless, we cannot view the influence of the European '68 movement and modernization attempts in Egypt as separate phenomena. It does not matter whether such attempts involved the clothes worn then, open relationships, and the start of a new era with a different understanding of relations between the sexes, or perhaps concerning an alternative way of life, borrowing from the hippies by, for example, growing long hair. However, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism at the end of the '70s counteracted this wave of modernization. Then President Anwar al-Sadat used this trend to suppress leftist and communist tendencies—with the outcome that conservatism and religious leanings gained acceptance in Egyptian society.

The '90s generation, likewise, was divided by opposing tendencies. Some of its members seem to have been influenced by '68, but there are also many intellectuals from rural areas whose writings and behavior are rife with contradictions. Some of these intellectuals are traditional conservatives who view themselves as enlightened and avant-garde, but they are far from it. However, this identity crisis affects not only this conservative group of intellectuals and artists but also another stratum of rebels who wanted to undertake a different experiment. Perhaps the most prominent of these experiments was one carried out by the "Grasshopper Group," headed by Ahmad Taha, a '70s generation poet. He attempted to foster a number of '90s poets who had broken taboos in literature with the magazine *Al Garad* [The Grasshoppers], but this group did not survive artistically.

Criticizing the government

Although the European movement of 1968 appears to have had little effect on Egypt, it does have affinities with the modern Egyptian

protest movement. For example, both reject prevailing values concerning power or society's traditionally conservative code of behavior. However, the Egyptian protest movement of today can only be observed using modern technological means like the Internet—and within the past few years, blogs. Here, many open-minded young people reveal a different awareness in how they think and live, consciously and courageously criticizing the government.

Currently in Egypt, another new phenomenon is emerging: the formation of political, social, cultural, and artistic groups in cyberspace, particularly via the increasing popularity of Facebook. Among the virtual groups established recently is "Support Sawiris." It aims to assist Egyptian businessman Naguib Sawiris, whose "Sawiris Institution for Social Development" supports a variety of cultural projects. Most strikingly, he established an Egyptian television channel that shows uncensored cinema films, arousing the rancor of some religious groups.

To me, the Egypt of today seems influenced by the '68 movement in its call for change, the surmounting of traditional values, and liberation from oppression, whether political, social, ethical, or religious. The current generation of young people seems to be launching new movements dedicated to liberation and modernization without any great commotion, inflammatory words, or revolutionary slogans. Rather, things are happening quietly with real dialogue and the development of new ideas that must spread to create a climate suitable for liberalism.

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