

Book Review

Amina Elbendary, *Crowds and Sultans: Urban Protest in Late Medieval Egypt and Syria* (Cairo/New York: The American University of Cairo Press, 2015), 276 pages. ISBN: 9789774167171, Price: \$49.95 (Cloth).

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Amina Elbendary's book is an attempt to reconsider the social implications of the economic crises and political transformations of the fifteenth century while taking into account the point of view of common people, especially the urban non-elite. This "non-elite" is defined as craftsmen, artisans, and tradesmen, as well as minor clerks and employees of the ruling and educational institutions of Egyptian and Syrian cities. All these members of society were traditionally marginalized in contemporary sources, but their increasing presence in the narratives of the late Mamluk period is interpreted by Elbendary as the result of social transformations. Popular protests thus offer a unique window to observe non-elite participation in politics.

The period considered is a long fifteenth century, presented in Chapter 1 (pp.1-18). This century begins with the reign of Sultan Barqūq (r. 1382-1399) and includes the start of the Ottoman domination over the Arab provinces,

which undermines the generally accepted periodization, and erases the rupture between Mamluks and Ottomans. The author chooses to avoid the "decline and fall paradigm" and instead reinstates the Mamluk regime in line with the work of Imad Abu Ghazi. She considers that the actions taken by the Mamluk regime to address declining revenues (such as the payment of bribes and the venality of offices) formed part of a policy of financial compensation, which allowed the state to function in a more decentralized manner. Challenging the supremacy of the sultan paved the way for the participation of other groups – amirs as well as people from the middle class – in political life. Despite the undeniably autocratic nature of the regime, certain policies could be adjusted or modified in response to public dissatisfaction. The different political and economic crises that dotted this century can thus be considered as opportunities for some groups to gain more access to power and renegotiate their positions.

Chapter 2 (“The Mamluk State transformed,” pp. 19-43) is devoted to the transformations of the State and the reactions prompted by these changes. By deductive reasoning, the author endeavors to determine the root causes behind these transformations and the sequence of events: state response, popular reaction, and the turn to negotiated settlements. “The policies that the Mamluk rulers followed were not only a reaction to these changes, but also factors that shaped them, and they resulted in many people’s suffering and/or social displacement. This in turn prompted more acts of protest” (p. 20). The first challenge was the black plague, for which the author gives an estimate of the human and economic cost based on the studies of M. Dols, J. Abu Lughod, and A. Raymond (between one-third and two-fifths of the population of Cairo wiped out, and two-fifths of Syria). A decline in resources fueled elite competition, while a shortage of gold and subsequent currency devaluation led to popular protests. A revolt against Qāyt Bāy in 1481 related by Ibn Iyās, which was sparked by the issuance of new copper coins, reveals the existence of negotiation procedures: the authorities accepted a monetary adjustment in order to regulate the conflict. Yet the reader would have liked a more detailed presentation of the monetary reforms, since they were the cause of numerous popular revolts in both Cairo and Damascus and gave rise to numerous historiographical commentaries from al-Maqrīzī to Ibn Ṭawq (see notably the studies of W. Schultz¹).

1. Warren C. Schultz, “Mahmūd ibn ‘Alī and the ‘New Fulūs’: Late Fourteenth Century Mamluk Egyptian Copper Coinage Reconsidered,” *American Journal of Numismatics*, 2nd series,

The author briefly reviews the revolts brought on by currency devaluation in chapter 5 (pp. 136-9), but without further consideration of the objectives pursued by the authorities, notably in relation to the urban popular classes directly targeted by these reforms.

Other measures, interpreted as signs of decline and corruption by contemporaries, aimed at solving the economic crisis: taxation, or alternative measures such as bribery, *ḥimāya*, forced sales (*ṭarḥ*), sales of offices, extortion, confiscation, and land sales. According to the author, who cites J. Meloy, bribery and extortion were “a routine feature that allowed the state to function” (p. 33). The *iqṭā‘* system collapsed because of the conversion of land into private property, while the Mamluk amirs were given administrative and judiciary functions, reinforcing the militarization of society. Thus, the entire Mamluk system was transformed. In this respect, the author concludes of decentralization and the diffusion of power among numerous actors.

Chapter 3, “A society in flux” (pp. 45-69), discusses both upward and downward social mobility. Some groups rose to the fore, taking advantage of the diffusion of power and decentralization of government. Once again, the greater visibility of a group in historiography is interpreted as an indication of its

10 (1998): 127-48; Warren C. Schultz, “‘It Has No Root among Any Community that Believes in Revealed Religion, Nor Legal Foundation for Its Implementation’: Placing al-Maqrīzī’s Comments on Money in a Wider Context,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 7, no. 2 (2003): 169-81. On al-Maqrīzī, see Adel Allouche, *Mamluk Economics: A Study and Translation of al-Maqrīzī’s Ighāthah* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994).

increasing political prominence. A case in point were the Bedouins. They took hold of a large share of the *iqṭā'* (46 percent in the province of Sharqiya). Their shaykhs thus became official authorities in the countryside and levied taxes. This situation inevitably caused tensions with the Mamluk authorities, leading to plundering, especially during the pilgrimage and harvest seasons (with the transfer of grain to the capital), an indication of the extent to which the central authorities controlled the countryside.

Coptic conversion to Islam also accelerated during this period. The pressure put on the Copts is seen as the result of the Mamluk rulers bolstering Islam, as they themselves were born non-Muslims (pp. 56-8). The author interprets the numerous acts of violence against non-Muslims as a consequence of the evolving social position of the Coptic community and the will to restore an imagined traditional social order. This explanation is extremely interesting and opens up avenues for future research, but is insufficiently analyzed in the book: the link between conversion and violence against Christians deserves further exploration.² Other unexpected personalities moved from the periphery of society to the core at this time as well. The author examines at length one case of the ascension of a commoner, that of Abū al-Khayr al-Naḥḥās (d. 1459), who has already been studied by R. Mortel.

2. Denis Gril, "Une émeute anti-chrétienne à Qūṣ au début du VIII^e-XIV^e siècle," *Annales islamologiques/Hawliyat Islamiyah* 16 (1980): 241-74, contends that the uprising against the Copts was provoked by their boast of having high-ranking support.

All of these transformations created a sense of anxiety and social malaise, which is reflected in Mamluk sources in terms of nostalgia for the previous social order. In the streets, the social malaise led to an increased rate of violence and urban protest. Indeed, references to incidents of protest appear to be more frequent than those reported for other historical periods. Elbendary relies on a study on suicide and voluntary death by B. Martel-Thoumian, which allow us to gauge the pressure placed on people by the authorities³.

Chapter 4 is entitled "Popularization of culture and the bourgeois trend" (pp. 71-120). The patterns of social mobility analyzed in the previous chapter are presented here as the cause of changes to cultural production (literature, historiography, and religious texts) in the late Mamluk period. This reflects a "bourgeois trend" that allowed people from the "middle class" (in a socio-economic sense) to make their voices heard by engaging in cultural production. One of the principal manifestations of this "bourgeois trend" was the popularization and vernacularizing of cultural forms. Sufism, for example, became the expression of the "merging of classical and vernacular culture and the mainstreaming of popular culture during the late Mamluk period" (p. 78).

The popularization of culture also manifested itself in written texts through the use of colloquial Arabic as well as non-canonical forms of Arabic and colloquial poetry (see, for example, Ibn Sūdūn's (d. 1464) *Nuzhat al-nufūs*

3. B. Martel-Thoumian, "La mort volontaire : le traitement du suicide et du suicidé dans les chroniques mameloukes tardives", *Annales islamologiques* 38 (2004): 405-435.

wa muḍḥik al-‘abūs or the diffusion of *rubā‘iya, kān wa-kān, qūmā, muwashḥah, mawāliya and zajal*). The author interprets this as a means to reach a new audience (pp. 106-9). Mamluk sources “include echoes of the vernacular, reflect an increasing interest in the mundane, and reveal a different sense of self and identity of the authors – many of whom came from popular backgrounds – who include themselves in the narrative” (p. 82). Elbendary devotes specific comments to the inclusion of women in biographical dictionaries (cf. *Kitāb al-nisā’* of al-Sakhāwī (d. 1497) at the end of his *Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’*, pp. 84-7).

Thus, everyday life became a topic of interest in both literature and history. Yet some discrepancies exist between the historiography of Cairo, more focused on the politics of the sultanate, and that of Syria, where authors like Ibn Ṭawq (d. 1509, a notary at the Damascus court) and Ibn Ṭulūn (d. 1546) were more interested in events from a local perspective. However, in Egypt, changes to historical works only emerged during the period of Ottoman domination. The works of such authors as Ibn Abī al-Surūr al-Bakrī (d. ca. 1619), al-Damurdāshī (d. 1775), and al-Jabartī (d. 1825), suggest a strong connection between the Egyptian historians of the late Mamluk period and the regime, which supports T. Khalidi’s thesis about “*siyāsa*-oriented historiography.”⁴ This does not mean that Egyptian historians were disconnected from the life of the community: they recorded the annual level of the Nile, changing prices, food

shortages, crimes, rumors, disputes, and so forth, which reveal a “civic interest” (pp. 98-103). Despite their differences, both Damascene and Cairene historians seem to have used history as a way to protest against the dominant political order, as shown by their critical attitude toward contemporary rulers (pp. 112-9).

These three chapters set the stage for the remainder of the book, which treats the main subject: popular protest. This section offers more of a synthesis of recent studies on the economic and social situation of Egypt and Syria in the fifteenth century than new research. Some of this material is drawn exclusively in fact from the secondary literature, sometimes quite briefly and without contributing any supplementary conclusions. The subchapter entitled “Emerging landowning class” (pp. 55-6) does not draw from any primary sources and cites only one author (Imad Abu Ghazi) without giving a precise reference. Furthermore, numerous repetitions give an impression of *déjà vu*, and should have been spotted by the editor (sometimes, the same sentence is repeated on the same page, see p. 22).

In chapter 5, “Between riots and negotiations: Popular politics and protest” (pp. 121-55), the author relies on detailed narratives of popular protests, which show that the urban populace, far from being a submissive mass, was part of the transformations taking place in Mamluk society. These events can be understood as a sign of a “new civic awareness and vitality” (p. 122). “Artisans and ulama, traders and amirs, formed temporary alliances for a variety of reasons in order to confront particular situations” (p. 125). The *ulama*—be they high-ranking or more modest—played a key role in protests.

4. See T. Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 182-231.

They did so as agents of protest, as in the revolt in Damascus against the high sugar price fixed by the *ustādār* Ibn Shād Bek (p. 127), and as mediators between the state and the masses, as in Jumādā I 907/ November 1501, when the governor of Damascus sent a delegation including four *qadis* to negotiate with rebel leaders (pp. 127-8).

In Damascus, the protests often included the chanting of *takbīr* and a march to/ from the Umayyad mosque (detailed further in chapter 6, pp. 191-3). At times, women were also involved (pp. 134-6). Demonstrations took place to protest against currency devaluation, extra levies and taxes, food shortages, or whatever was perceived by the rioters as an injustice or an indication of official corruption. The notion of a “moral economy,” conceptualized by E. P. Thomson for early modern Europe, is mentioned once (p. 129), but one would have expected the author to define the concept more precisely during the argumentation itself.⁵

Elbendary also considers Mamluk protests (pp. 149-53). These protests were not only against economic burdens and injustices: they also attempted to maintain a certain social order as shown in chapter 6, “Protest and the medieval social imagination” (pp. 157-201). For example, in the name of *ḥisba* as the responsibility of every Muslim, moral issues (the consumption of alcohol and hashish, especially when they involved members of the military elite) were the cause of popular revolt. Some of these campaigns

to redress injustice thus could have occurred with the official endorsement of the authorities, which would have allowed them to boost their popularity. But crowds sometimes managed to take the law into their own hands in carrying out justice.

Similarly, sectarian violence manifested as an appeal to revive the restrictions on *dhimmīs*. As for the administration, it was a way to prove its credentials and bolster its legitimacy. Protests were often directed against middle-class officials. *Muḥtasibs* could thus be the targets of stoning, because of the transformation of their function from regulating public morality to more administrative and financial duties. Riots against governors often took place in provincial cities, far from the control of the central government. They could become violent and even lead to murder, as occurred in Damietta in 1417 (pp. 181-2). “This suggests that it was the crowd rather than the ulama, that had the upper hand and were deciding what would happen” (p. 182).

Generally, the head of state—the sultan—remained untouched. A brief analysis of the theoretical literature (from al-Mawardī to Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah) on the legitimacy of rebelling against the ruler shows that the “attitudes and positions in the literature vis-à-vis the imams were transferred to Mamluk sultans, making real, meaningful protest against them very limited. Instead, the sultan was often presented as the judge of last resort and above blame” (p. 188). But this did not prevent the ruling factions from using popular crowds in their struggles for power. Satire and parody could also be used against rulers (pp. 193-7).

This book has the merit of revealing the complexity of urban societies in the

5. For a transposition of the concept in the Mamluk context, see Amalia Levanoni, “The al-Nashw Episode: A Case Study of ‘Moral Economy,’” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 9, no. 1 (2005): 207-20.

pre-modern Middle East and drawing attention to a topic that has been poorly researched until now. Without calling into question the conclusions of the author, this subject would have benefited from being situated in a better defined conceptual framework.

First of all, this concerns the periodization. From the start of the book, the author claims to query the periodization by broadening the fifteenth century to include the Ottoman period, so to speak. The fifteenth century was a time of intense transformations, whose mechanisms are described here with clarity. Nevertheless, the starting point of this specific periodization is not justified. Some elements analyzed in this work appear well before the fifteenth century and characterize the Middle Islamic period spanning from the eleventh to sixteenth centuries. For example, the “popularization” and the changes made to the writing of history pre-existed the fifteenth century. On these issues, Elbendary might have drawn on the work of C. Hirschler, *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands: A Social and Cultural History of Reading Practices* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,

2013). This would have provided a more satisfactory definition of the concept of popularization (i.e., the spread of the written word to non-elite groups) in order to avoid the pitfall of the dichotomy of popular/elite culture.

Further, a conceptual refocusing of revolts and their representation in the sources (notably through the study of vocabulary) would have been expected. A definition of the “urban protests” announced in the title of the book should be given in the introduction,⁶ and the study of Bedouin revolts, addressed in the work, but outside the framework of the urban protests, should be justified.⁷

Finally, the kind of negotiation procedures that put an end to the revolts, and which are discussed here as characteristic of the fifteenth century, have been treated extensively in scholarship on medieval Western Europe since the research of Claude Gauvard⁸. Taking this into account could give rise, *mutatis mutandis*, to quite interesting comparisons with the Islamic Middle East. These remarks notwithstanding, Elbendary’s study of popular protest in the late Mamluk period is a welcome addition to the field.

6. The chapter of Jean-Claude Garcin, “La révolte donnée à voir chez les populations civiles de l’état militaire mamluk (xiii^e-xv^e s.),” in Éric Chaumont (ed.), *Autour du regard : Mélanges Gimaret* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 261-78, would have been very useful in this respect.

7. On the mechanism of this revolt, see Sarah Büsow-Schmitz, “Rules of Communication and Politics between Bedouin and Mamluk Elites in Egypt: The Case of the al-ʿAḥḍab Revolt, c. 1353,” *Nomads in the Political Field. Eurasian Studies* (2010): 67-104.

8. See for instance, the studies collected by C. Gauvard, *Violence et ordre public au Moyen Âge, “Les Médiévistes français”* 5 (Paris, Picard: 2005).