

Marwan Bishara. *The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolution*. New York: Nation Books, 2012. 258pp.

Every now and then I come across a book that I want to share with as many friends, colleagues and others in this troubled world as possible. This book, *The Invisible Arab* by Marwan Bishara is my current recommendation to readers of *Labour, Capital and Society*. It is a direct, engaging, well-informed book that provides in-depth background to the current Arab uprisings and illuminates with many insights the emergence of “historic transformations sweeping through the region”. Bishara asks the right questions in his opening chapter “L’Ancien Régime”: “What went so wrong? How did the dream of liberation from colonialism turn into a nightmare for Arab states?”(p.23) and then takes us along the historical path to the current promises in the region.

As he tells us, too often analyses of the Middle East highlight religion as the main source of Arab “backwardness” or the latest fad currently “the caged Arab mind”. He reminds us bluntly that “the origins of the miserable Arab reality are political *par excellence*” directly related to the “use and misuse of political power” (p.24). As a Palestinian Arab, currently working with Al-Jazeera but previously a lecturer at the American University of Paris, he understands the Middle East from the inside, from the experience of traveling the region, living there, having the access required for good scholarship. He has a sound grasp of the early post-colonial history of the region, the antecedents to the present uprising by the Arab youth and tells the narrative, the unfolding of the story with ease and often undisguised passion. There is immediacy to his writing that draws you in and explains in a straight-forward manner what had seemed so complex.

His caustic humour also comes through in various sections of the book. What could be better to portray these Arab leaders: “After ruling for so many decades, these dinosaurs grew impatient, indolent, and exhausted. Their dyed hair and dark glasses didn’t help much. They mostly looked senile or so sick they could hardly rule.”(62)

The book is divided into seven chapters, all with imaginative titles –L’Ancien Régime; The Miracle Generation; Rude Awakening ; Regional Power vs People Power; The West: Interests over Values; Arabism and Identity (opening with the well-known poem “Identity

Card” by Mahmoud Darwish, here translated by the Montreal-based poet John Mikhail Asfour); Islamists and Democracy (providing a good understanding of the leaders of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood) -- and ends with an Epilogue on “The (now) Visible Arab”. The book also contains a useful list of “Suggested Readings” which includes some of the best scholarship currently on the contemporary Middle East (Aswany, Khalidi, and Maalouf among others). A central thread throughout his argument is that “the voice of the invisible Arab masses was always silenced by the ruling elite” (p.158). Through the detailed exploration of the historical struggles that have been brewing for decades, he shows that “today’s Arab generations are finishing the job their grandparents started several decades ago” (p.176) and that the unity of youth and workers in sit-ins, strikes, and various protests over decades has gone largely unreported (p.180) or been ignored.

He distinguishes the nature of the protests among the countries in the region and relates “how each of these regimes came into historical being” (p.112). Central to his analysis of these protests are the particularities of Egypt and Tunisia with their strong middle and working classes (pp.34 and 112).

Chapter 2 “The Miracle Generation” focuses on the new generation who comprise the “largest youth cohort in the history of the Middle East”, close to 140 million people under the age of 30. Many are unemployed, underemployed and angry. In fact, “unemployment was extremely high in 2010 – nearing close to 25% in many countries of the region and reaching 45% in some, such as Algeria and Iraq”(64ff). This chapter analyzes and informs about the unemployment issue, particularly among the youth. Similar to the rest of the world, youth unemployment and steep inequalities are at the root of the “Arab Spring”. A key insight for me was his identification of the rural exodus to the cities without those Arabs being “urbanized” (p.32). These were the job seekers that moved to the cities. High rates of unemployment ensued where as much as 1/3 among the youth in Libya, for example, were unemployed (p.45).

The book weaves the place of the working class, unemployment and labour struggles into almost every section, but the most important sections in Chapter 2 deal with “The Rise of Labor” followed by “Where Are the Men?” detailing the three thousand women protesting at the Mahallah textile factory in December 2006

in Egypt. The history of labour struggles in the Arab world is long and often brutal. Bishara discusses these struggles and recalls one of the most outstanding labour leaders in Tunisia, Farhat Hached, who was assassinated in 1952. He reminds us that the “Jasmine Revolution” in Tunisia in 2010 was the culmination of years of struggle by the labouring people. Tunisia had peaceful labour protests in January 1978 and again in January 1984 (p.76). While not wanting to give away all the detailed labour history elaborated in this book, I draw your attention also to the “collective worker action throughout Egypt (1,000) between 1998 and 2004” (104ff).

The book also analyzes the position of Arab women in the struggles, and highlights their active role in the revolution while experiencing additional repression and humiliation (p.109). He provides details from his interviews with two Egyptian women activists, Nawal Sa’dawi and Rabab Abdulhadi, “camped at Tahrir Square” who “represent two generations of women revolutionaries that believe the struggle of women’s rights was an integral part of the broader struggle for democracy and human rights” (107ff).

An area needing deeper reflection for me is his discussion of revolution within the history of Islam which he asserts is not commonplace. He argues that: “(C)ontrary to conventional wisdom, revolutions are rarely encouraged or praised, even when Muslims are faced with unjust Muslim leaders. Revolution, or *thawra*, in the contemporary Arab world is a positive pursuit of justice, but its closest equivalent in Islamic history—*fitna*—was perceived as disorderly and unruly...” (197).

Bishara’s analysis of the situation in Syria pre-dates the current extreme militarization of that struggle but he does not hesitate to condemn the early repression by the Syrian government (especially pp.120-21 and fuller discussion on pp.137-44) from the start of the protests on 15 March 2011. “(A)ll the autocrats, including those of Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, responded to people’s demands for serious reforms with severe repression” (p.120).

At times, Bishara’s language seemed somewhat overstated, especially in referring to those leading “the Arab Spring” as the “miracle generation” full of “youthful elegance”. Such terms could also be seen as a contradiction to his central thesis that they were carrying out the transformation that their forbearers had begun and that a range of people, young and old, were there in the squares of the Arab cities.

The Epilogue echoes his optimistic thinking when it opens with the African proverb: “If you think you’re too small to make a difference, try sleeping with a mosquito”. His final argument for a “liberal democracy” appeared at first to be at odds with his opening assertion that the struggle is “all about political power”. But he recognizes that “democracy is cursed by its association with Western imperialism” (p.221). And, he does not shy away from suggesting what he envisions to be the direction of true democratic transformation for the region in spite of obstacles and possible setbacks. Here, too, he outlines some of the elements that the region needs, including to separate religion from the state, to favour reconciliation over revenge, to invoke more directly aspects of *Shura* (consultation), to arrive at a “civic constitution”, and “to rid the region of consumerism and militarism” (222). There is a utopian dimension in Bishara’s suggestions that serves to indicate a range of possibilities for pushing the Arab revolution further. The book leaves one with a sense of optimism in spite of huge obstacles as it records a decisive break with the unwanted past and suggests new hopes for the people of the region.

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