

STRUGGLING AND SURVIVING^I:

THE TRAJECTORY OF SHEIKH MOUBARAK ABDU FADL.

A HISTORICAL FIGURE OF THE EGYPTIAN LEFT

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The chronicler who narrates events without distinguishing between big ones and small ones, takes into consideration, by doing so, the following truth: everything that has ever happened should not be considered lost for history.

(Walter Benjamin)

The objective of this study is to reconstruct the path of a particular historical actor and to locate his specific experience in the context of the period and to reflect on what it represents for his generation. Moubarak Abdu Fadl possesses a profile and a trajectory which are both rich and original. Of Nubian origin, he studied at the Islamic university of Al-Azhar, where he became a Marxist and was expelled for his political activities. He was to become a leading member of DMNL² until its *self-dissolution*.

Following this, he closely participated in the *invigoration* of the communist movement in Egypt. For a long time, he had served as one of its spokesmen. In 1987 he ran as a candidate for parliamentary elections. Research done on communism has tended to exhibit a preference for intellectuals and labour cadres whose social visibility led to their greater prominence. Moubarak Abdu Fadl, coming from the lowest population strata never became part of the educated middle class and the new administrative and cultural elite as did many of his

fellow comrades. Both his uniqueness and his quasi absence from the historical record on the Egyptian left contribute to the fascination he holds for the biographer/historian.

The biographical emphasis helps unveil and reconstruct the underlying meanings of a life as well as the self-representation of the historical actor. Neither over nor under-estimating individual autonomy we take as our point of departure the view:

that history is basically shaped by social forces. It results precisely from a full understanding of the fact that an infinite number of individual pressures will tend to create random movements which largely cancel each other out to the extent that they are purely individual. In order for a definite movement of history to appear – that is, for history to possess a pattern that is intelligible and not merely a meaningless succession of unconnected accidents – common aspects have to be discovered in individuals' behaviour.

(Mandel 1986: 61-62)

The critical reinterpretation of Moubarak Abdu Fadl's itinerary is based on four interviews³ as well as critical readings of the works on the Egyptian communist movement and political history⁴. This relocates *practice-oriented approaches*. The interest in the experience of people can help “not to distort the quality of people's subjective experiences nor isolate their consciousness from the world it perceives” (Morsy/Saad/Nelson/Sholkamy 1991: 106).

The goal here is to choose an exemplar for a particular collectivity. He is a member of a generation of Egyptian communists who can be described as *historic* although they appear on the margins of recorded history. As a result of their experience and the place they occupied in the movement, Moubarak Abdu Fadl and his generation figure as *living legends*, representing at the present time the human continuity and a part of the political memory of Egypt. Moubarak Abdu Fadl possesses characteristics as well as sharing with them a particular historical identity. Such a biography highlights uniqueness and singularity while simultaneously serving as a collective instrument of analysis of a social group. It leads us to

tend to understand the subject's 'point of view' constraining a reflection of the multiple interrelations which are the bases of the production of biographical facts, including those of the scholars.

(Pudal 1991: 111-112)

The biographical method is not without certain risks: by emphasizing the individual it tends to separate the subject from the social field in which the action is taking place, while postulating the existence of a subject or a life geared towards accomplishment (Dammane 1994: 183). It also creates the illusion that life has but a single meaning (Pudal 1991: 112). The subject is also the informer. He is asked to recall, describe and discuss his own life. "He becomes the spokesman of his own history, the representative of his past, the informer on his own conduct and action" (Peneff 1994: 27). The subject, therefore, reveals some opinions but these opinions are occasioned by the presence of the interested interviewer, who is not in the least neutral. As Pollak specifies:

The location of the interview itself, like the autobiographic writing, is a point of attestation and reconstruction of identity of the person being interviewed. This shapes the preliminary negotiations of the meetings and the delimitation of the demanded writings.

(Pollak 1986: 12)

The historical time during which the subject recounts his life conditions the interpretation in a decisive manner. Numerous subjects have the tendency to mask their real personality and efface themselves behind the group. It is a matter of recounting his life in the name of a general value.

There also exists a specific discourse of interviews which can be defined as

the will to conform with the presupposed values of the interviewer, when he is himself distant from the narrator, both socially and intellectually because of his status.

(Peneff 1995: 57)

The interview can show “an idealization of the past and an exaltation of moral traditional values, as a reaction to the interviewer” (Peneff 1995: 57-58).

This essay is divided into two main parts. The first will provide a chronological trajectory of Moubarak Abdu Fadl’s life. We will then focus on the foundations of such a commitment. We will study the period of the Nasserist regime, followed by a discussion of the course of Fadl’s activity after the dissolution of the movement.

The study will attempt to understand the different dimensions which shaped Fadl’s path through the Egyptian left. His adherence to Marxism will also be investigated by tracing how his life participates in the formation of what could be identified as a *national communism*. We will conclude with an assessment of his heritage.

Origins of a Commitment

Moubarak Abdu Fadl was born into a poor family on June 23 1927, in the village of Armima located in the Nubian section of Egypt. His father married four times and had fifteen children from two of his wives. He migrated to Cairo to work as a modest employee in the tax Service and lived in the popular neighborhoods of Boulaq, Sabtaya and al-Azhar. Towards the age of eleven, Moubarak Abdu Fadl became concerned about his future, a preoccupation he shared with Nubian boys of his age. A common ideal was to remain in the village with one’s family. The dream for the majority of youth of this era was to work in a city as domestic servants of rich Egyptians or foreigner families and then return to marry and settle in the village. Most of them lived in Cairo the whole year to return home only for a few weeks.

As he grew older, Fadl wanted to leave the village to work. His father at that time a servant himself thought ill of such a future for his son as he detested his own experience. He made a great effort to dissuade his sons from following the same path explaining to them that education would afford them the chance to escape such a destiny by allowing them to become civil servants.

Towards 1939, however, defective eye sight prevented Fadl from entering government school shattering his father’s hopes. He rejoined his father in Cairo where he was obliged to take the only path available for someone coming from so modest a background: the al-Azhar

school system. He devoted two years to memorizing the Koran before he could enter al-Azhar in 1942. His professional hopes faded, he contemplated being reduced to the functions of a Sheikh reciting the Koran at funerals. During this interim, the child who had not had the least desire for such a destiny, tried, unsuccessfully to resist his parents' will. Passing the entrance exam he joined the secondary al-Azhar school. He was grouped alongside all other Nubian students with the Sudanese in the *riwaq shamal al-Soudan* (order of north Sudan).

He recalls how much he detested wearing the Azhar uniform during these years. No sooner were the classes ended than he would quickly don his *gallabeya*. After completing the required readings, he frequently went to libraries especially *Dar al Kutub* (National Library) to devour books by contemporary authors, among them Taha Hussein, Mahmoud Abbas al-Aqqad, Tawfiq al-Hakim and also the nationalist historian Abdel Rahman al Rafi'i. In later years this academic background provided him with the title of Sheikh which he kept and by which he is known even in communist ranks.

The Nubian and Sudanese Azhari students of the third year received a monthly stipend of three pounds in addition to a government grant of one pound. Fadl gave all his salary to help his family as his father's income only totaled two pounds a month. This generosity led him to be treated with profound respect at home. Matters of great seriousness were discussed with him. One day when his father lost his salary and that of one of his friends which totaled eight pounds, Fadl helped by collecting money from among his fellow students. He attributes his political commitment to the misery and poverty experienced by him and by the majority of Nubians. His joining of al-Azhar further strengthened his sentiments as the Azharites more so than other students came from poor backgrounds. He also felt patriotic emotions at the vision of English troops in the city. This representation, to be more accurate, is characteristic of autobiographical accounts where

conforming with the telegraphic reconstruction which underlies all accounts of a life labeled as political, it is always presented as the result of a fundamental experience which affected the narrator's youth, determining his values and his cause.

(Neveu 1994: 9)

The combination of experiences within his family, his community and al-Azhar, directed his own self-questioning towards politics. Around 1944-45, he met a Nubian student who aroused his political consciousness asking him what he knew about communism. He answered that all he had heard was that communists defended the poor. The student suggested that Fadl learn more about it. He began to study Marxist theory under the tutelage of a Nubian-Sudanese. The material they used were seven reports which dealt with such topics as the sicknesses of society, development, capitalism, colonialism, socialism, the party, fascism and the war which impressed on Fadl that communism first and foremost is an orientation in favor of the disenfranchised. Eager to learn more he asked for the seven reports but was met with refusal. During the same period, he also frequented Henri Curiel's bookstore *Au Rond Point*⁵. This bookstore was inclined towards francophone and cosmopolitan audiences with progressive and Marxist materials in foreign languages. However the literature became rapidly accessible to Arabic speakers through translation, notably with a series known as the green books, referring to their cover. Fadl plunged into his first Marxist readings. A while later he entered EMNL⁶.

We emphasize here that this organization was known for its mild position on the subject of religion, choosing to differentiate it from political questions. One Azharite Abdel Rahman al Thaqafi published two brochures on Islam analyzing it as a religion opposed to exploitation and domination. The issue of faith never constituted a key problem for the future Sheikh Moubarak. What really mattered to him was the point of view of *class* and not philosophical considerations.

With more strength and visibility than the ordinary, it is in the times of crisis in a social system, when the individual is confronted with abrupt social and political change, the transformation of their social conditions and with the disintegration of their identities, that these alternative cultural forms become widespread and take over the dominant forms. Another 'world' provides new ideals with which to identify and that are all gathered in an intellectual and practical scheme, an entire stock of models of action and images of the self, significantly directing the conduct of these candidates, in quest of fame, such Saints of justice, in a position to actualize them.

(Damamme 1994: 185)

The organizational structure of EMNL consisted of a system of sectors based on corporate identities like the Nubians, students and workers. The movement was also present in university faculties as well as in provincial institutes. Each sector was essentially composed of a small number of Sudanese, Nubians and Egyptians. Fadl was dissatisfied with the fact that his comrades were mainly content with discussing general matters. He desired more active intervention. Thus he began to speak out from the top of the *minbar* in the mosque. On King Farouk's birthday, which was an official holiday at al-Azhar, he gave a speech opposing these festivities. He denounced the role of the King as the agent of British colonial domination. Within a few months, he was made the leader of the Azhar sector.

The sector consisting of almost seventy members (Botman 1988: 44). EMNL was the only Marxist group involved among Azharites. The membership of the organization remained very flexible. A Nubian, who was also an Azharite, could belong to the two sections and there developed close relations between Nubians and the Sudanese (al-Amin 1995: 433-54) earning the nickname of "the society of salt and sodium" (al-Sa'id March 1994: 70). These sectors enjoyed a special status with Curiel (Perrault 1987) who decisively supported their action. Sheikh Moubarak smiled as he remembered Curiel wearing shorts at his meetings with Azharites and Nubian students. EMNL analyzed the role of the Azharites as follows:

Men of religion in the country have always played an important part against imperialism – French, Turk, English. At present, Zahra (code name for al-Azhar) is standing at the crossroads between the people and the bourgeoisie. The importance of Zahra is as follows: it is the religious body which assists reaction, its men represent the working classes, they enjoy spiritual confidence among the people, their roots grow deep among many classes of Egyptians – teachers, preachers, Imams, etc. ... As they are so important, we must win them away from reaction and the Palace. Our aims: To make the Azharites join in the national struggle with us. We must not allow the Azharites to be a toy in the hands of reaction.⁷

The young communist Nubians including Zaki Mourad (al-Sa'id April 1992; Zaki 1979: 64), or Mohammad Khalil Qassem (al-Sa'id Feb 1992; Abdu Fadl 1989; Ishaq 1996), to name but a few, participated in the

activities of the Egyptian Marxists according it a specific Nubian dimension. The Nubian-Sudanese Abdu Dahab (al-Sa'id March 1994) played a key and pioneering role. He had a great amount of political experience. Co-founder and leader of EMNL, he worked on the paper *Hureyat al Shu'ub* before editing *Omdurman* in 1945-46, for the Sudanese living in Cairo. There were also a number of other Nubian students of al-Azhar. They intervened in the associations and community clubs in Cairo. They were particularly active in the Nubian Club, located at the time behind 'Abdin court. Created in 1920, it was almost completely under the control of Nubian notables who were far from dynamic. The young militants tried to extend their efforts towards other Nubian community associations.

Mohammad Khalil Qassem, one of the leading organizers, wrote articles and poetry in the club review *al-nuba al-haditha* and organized large social activities especially in Nubian residential areas of Abdin, Boulaq and Imbaba. Actions were not limited to cultural or social fields; there were political battles as well. During this period the Sudanese party *Umma* began propagating the idea of secession among the Nubians of Egypt. As the Nubians were considered to be of Sudanese origin a separatist scheme was advocated. The Nubian Marxists counter-attacked vigorously by asserting their cultural and historical affiliation to Egypt.

The radicalization of these young Nubians was closely linked to their social position as a minority. Sheikh Moubarak recalled that when he was young, a Nubian taking a walk could find himself surrounded by a group of children who would call him *barbarian* and mock him. The solution was not to be found in a fanciful, utopian separation but sustaining their position in a community that fully recognized their rights.

Fadl's activities caused him troubles when his father discovered some hidden pamphlets at home. His commitment became known later. After a heated dispute with his father, he was kicked out of the house.

In 1947, the unification of the two groups, EMNL and ISKRA (meaning spark), resulted in the rise of a new organization called DMNL. Sheikh Moubarak stressed the political differences between these two trends. EMNL was geared more towards mass action, while ISKRA was more interested in theory. ISKRA members came mostly from an upper-class background while members of EMNL were from

the lower strata. The DMNL weekly, *al-Gamahir*, was influential⁸. Fadl organized the work of the al-Azhar and Nubian sections until 1948-49⁹ when he became a full-timer for the Damanhour-Mahalla region. Arrested in Mahalla in 1948, he was successively interned in Mahalla, Tanta and Hackstep. He was not freed until February 1950. Expelled from al-Azhar for the first time in 1948, he returned in 1950 before being definitively expelled in 1951.

After 1950, Fadl joined the leadership of DMNL serving on the central committee, political bureau and the permanent secretariat. He remained faithful to Henri Curiel and his orientation. The situation at the same time was marked by the imprisonment of key organizers. He had to analyze the burning of Cairo in 1952. He considered the king and the English to be responsible. He was arrested and set free after he denied owning a pamphlet found in his possession. Once, the police pretended he was Sudanese; he successfully overcame an expulsion to Sudan!

The Revolution and the Nasserist Experience: Between Confrontation and Integration

The coup of July, 1952 was no surprise to the DMNL as the latter had a sector in the army and forged strong bonds with the Free Officers. DMNL supplied support in the publication and dissemination of pamphlets. Nasser only accepted the participation of Marxist officers on an individual basis. Fadl speaks of an organic connection.

The political reactions to the coup were very diverse. DMNL, the only group informed about the preparations, supported it, while the other organizations denounced it as a right-wing and pro-American putsch. Beinin made the following estimations: at this moment DMNL numbered two thousand members, the Worker's Avant Garde around three hundred and the ECP-al-Raya¹⁰ around one hundred (Beinin 1987: 575).

The *Kafr al Dawwar* episode in 1952 was the first conflict between communists and the new regime. This worker's strike erupted in a small industrial village located about thirty kilometers from Alexandria. It turned into a violent riot and resulted in the killing of workers and soldiers. The proceedings of the military court resulted in two death sentences. DMNL could only denounce the verdicts deplored

the limited vision of a *patriotic* regime¹¹. For Fadl, the position of DMNL at the time was to defend the workers *and* avoid a confrontation with the regime. He vigorously repudiated accusations that DMNL supported the anti-worker repression.

During the struggle between Nasser and Naguib in early 1954, the Communists were overtly critical of the regime's contradictions. For them, the decision of 24th of March to return the army to its barracks and re-establish democracy could have become effective only if there had existed a credible alternative. While in prison Sheikh Moubarak and his comrades were surprised by the popular demonstrations hostile to democracy. They understood that the army played a role in these events. DMNL called for the fall of the dictator, sought to make alliances with other tendencies and experimented with the idea of a National Democratic Front (Ramadan 1976) in which Wafdist, Socialists and Communists join together. For Fadl, this line was a grave mistake. It was legitimate to criticize the regime but wrong to call for its overthrow.

During the years 1952-56, while he was at *Rod al-Farag* prison, Sheikh Moubarak conceived an escape plan with his fellow prisoners. The plan appealed to Prince 'Abbas Halim interned for his labor activities. Finally, five of the prisoners made their escape along with Fadl who was recaptured a month later. At the time of his interrogation, he was literally dying of hunger and asked to eat before confessing. After the meal, he explained that he woke up alone in a cell, found the window wide open and at the spot decided to leave! In 1953 he was condemned to three years of imprisonment.

In 1955 the splinter groups of DMNL unified. The new organization (the United Egyptian Communist Party [*mowahad*]) was now in opposition to the regime. Thus it rapidly changed its orientation with the new Egyptian foreign policy called positive neutrality. Egypt was developing links with Eastern European countries, with the famous arms deal with Czechoslovakia.

After the evacuation treaty, Nasser went to Bandung for a non-alignment conference in April 1955 where he affirmed his leadership on an international level. DMNL provided political support while maintaining its criticism on democracy. It issued a declaration entitled *Imperialism is Our Principle Enemy*. This text can be seen as a subor-

dination of the struggle for democracy to the building of a national front against imperialism (ibid.: 576).

The communists supported the nationalization of the Suez Canal in July 1956. They emphasized an *anti-imperialist* trend while maintaining their critique of authoritarian aspects. Sheikh Moubarak left prison a few months before the 1956 war. DMNL actively participated in the resistance in Port Sa'id (al-Rifi'i/Shatla 1957) and worked with the committee of popular resistance. For Fadl, the other groups mainly issued statements.

A new daily *al-Misa'* run by Khaled Mohi Eddin (Mohieddin 1993) promoted progressive themes. Sheikh Moubarak underlines the importance of this paper in the popularization of leftist ideas. His organization cooperated closely with this evening daily (Beinin 1987).

After the 1956 war, the regime freed many communist prisoners. In November 1957, a merger took place with ECP al-Raya giving birth to the Unified Egyptian Communist Party (*moutahhid*). The Workers and Peasants Communist Party (former Workers' Avant-Garde) joined to form the Egyptian Communist Party in January 1958.

From the very beginning the ECP was divided, firstly over the Egyptian-Syrian unity. DMNL militants supported such a unity while those coming from the other groups stood by the Syrian communists who refused to dissolve themselves. When Syria seceded, HADITU members were against such a break while the others were in favor of it. The split finally materialized over Qassem's independent line towards Nasser in Iraq. The party supported Qassem. Ex-DMNL members left to set up the ECP-DMNL.

In fact the disagreement concerned Egypt. Two tendencies and approaches existed: the first one was in opposition to the Free Officers without calling for its overthrow; the second one characterized the regime as an agent of imperialist forces. The two trends redefined their view: the first one having a positive characterization of the regime as *anti-imperialist* while the second one remained in opposition.

For Fadl, the idea of unifying such trends was immature. There was no serious study of the reasons behind the split. He recalls a *genuine rush* in the unification process. The break-up occurred because, for him, the organization always consisted of two blocs. He remembers a

meeting where he was suspended from voting after having criticized the other position. This type of action led to retaliatory measures and paved the way for the split.

The Marxist support for Qassem was considered treason by Nasser. A new wave of repression began on the first of January, 1959. The police launched a massive operation arresting more than 280 people followed by 700 others between January and April. Most of the leaders of ECP-DMNL found themselves interned again. Some prisoners including Fadl nevertheless sent a letter of support for Nasser in September 1959.

Imprisoned successively at the Citadel, in the oasis, then in Cairo, Sheikh Moubarak was sent with his comrades to Alexandria to appear before the military court in 1959 (Labib 1990: 417-27). They opted for a legal defense without any hope of success and also submitted their political agenda. Refusing to admit their membership to the ECP-DMNL, they reaffirmed their agenda and their support to Nasser while maintaining that he had been misled. They were condemned to ten years of hard labor.

These proceedings took place at the time of the nationalization of Misr Bank in February 1960 and continued during that year. Sheikh Moubarak was at Abu Za'bal jail where the discussions were quite fervent among the prisoners. Several tendencies confronted each other. The first one considered the current experience as a way of opening the road to a socialist revolution. The others rejected this hypothesis. Nevertheless all agreed on the patriotic nature of the regime.

A prison conference organized soon before July 1961 elaborated the analysis that came to be known as the *socialist group*. Fadl played a key role in this analysis. For such an approach, the influence of the socialist movement and the patriotic and independent orientation of the Nasser group, led to the existence in Egypt, of non-scientific socialist trends. According to their thought, the Communists should seek the reinforcement of the unity of action with such a trend in favor of the national democratic objectives. Such a process would lead the way to scientific socialism (Labib 1990: 427).

Key members such as Zaki Mourad and Sherif Hatata believed unity was possible with Nasser group. Fadl considered the group to be socialist and its policies to be progressive. It appeared to him possible to envision a unity but the conditions were not yet ripe. It was necessary

to preserve their independence until that time, without incurring any hostility. The strategy had to be decided during the congress¹².

Supporting a regime which sent them to jail was based on their political analysis. My question about this apparent strange paradox did not disturb Fadl. The organization gave critical support to the regime. This was the attitude of Shuhdi Atteya who later died of torture. During their trial, Atteya publicly supported the regime while criticizing authoritarianism and internal issues.

In April 1964, the Communists were freed.¹³ For them maintaining an autonomous organization was an issue. Some ex-leaders had already joined the regime. Key members such as Zaki Mourad and Sherif Hatata (Hatata 1995) joined the Socialist Avant-Garde (al-Sa'id 1986: 273). In 1963, Nasser had set up a secret organization made up of those with faith in the revolution and in socialism (Selim 1982: 59-227; Hamrouche 1983: 237-76). Former or active communists like Abdel Ma'boud al Gibali, Ahmed Rifa'i or Fouad Morsi were suggested (Anis 1994: 15-17).

The regime also sent envoys like Khaled Mohieddin, Ahmed Fou'ad and Ahmed Hamroush to convince them to disband¹⁴. At the time of the ECP-DMNL congress, Kamal Abdel Halim, the most famous figure of the party decided to dissolve the organization even though support for the idea to continue still existed. The dissolution was made public in spring 1965 (*Qadaya Fikrya* 1992: 389-403).

Dissolution or Resignation?

In jail the Communists evaluated the economic and social measures positively. DMNL considered it necessary to encourage such a move while ECP-al-Raya was still focusing on the monopolistic nature of the regime. Sheikh Mubarak considers that unity with the regime was a real issue as Nasser was talking about socialism and had set up an avant-garde organization. Abdu Fadl was a supporter of an evolutionary method “like a process which achieves development over a long period of time.”

The nationalization of the Bank Misr and other anti-capitalist measures weighed heavily in their conclusion. Our interlocutor recounts how the idea of a unified socialist party had influenced them with the

example of Cuba where revolutionaries and Communists had joined together. Their evaluation of the situation was, in his eyes, false. They also believed wrongly that a single organization could be based on socialist thought.

Maintaining a structure was rejected. The Communists never tried to coordinate common work or even a common line within the Arab Socialist Union. They simply joined as individuals as working collectively could have hampered them, and they could have been accused of disloyalty.

Such a decision illustrates their strategy of integrating the movement with the national struggle against imperialism (Beinin, op.cit.: 579). Today, Fadl believes that they rushed. They should have continued discussions even without an organized link. Their decision led to the dismantling of the movement. The state also put pressure: it favored a kind of social integration through jobs and positions.

Their orientation can be grasped in a work entitled “The Egyptian Road Towards Socialism” published by *At-Tail'a*; with contributions by Michel Kamel, Loutfi al-Kholi, Mohamed Sid Ahmed. Fouad Morsy's article expresses the point of view of Tibi and Sabri Abdallah in that it emphasizes that the experience of socialist transformation had started in Egypt. The communists insisted on the organization of an avant-garde to lead this process.

The Nasser group never accepted any communist role despite the content of the National Charter, the nationalizations and the social transformation. A famous joke circulating at this time was revealing. During a visit to *At-Tali'a* magazine, Nasser asked Abou Seif Youssef, the head of the magazine, if he was a candidate for his position as editor. After replying that he was not, Nasser explained: “You're really smart,” then he turned towards all those present and said: “Your role is like St. Peter – you're here to do propaganda, but not to lead.”

The regime permitted the participation of individuals so as to neutralize them. It contained the Communists, exploited their abilities and talents but destroyed communism as a movement and prevented Marxists from existing as a political force (Botman 1988: 147). As a result, the communists with their agenda contributed in blocking all forms of independent expression of the labor movement, and participated in putting all forms of social expression under strict state control (Beinin 1989: 87).

For a better understanding of such a strategy, we must consider the immense influence of the original Soviet theories of non-capitalist development (Hosseinzadeh 1989) in vogue at the time. This was a key element in the debates and orientations of the movement.

According to this view, there was certainly a bourgeoisie in every social stratum of the Arab-Muslim world through their integration in the relations of production, and of which the interests coincide with those of the large masses of workers in the cities and in the country – a coincidence resulting at a time when it was necessary to construct an internal national market and, above all, to oppose capitalist imperialism which finds, in these social strata, obstacles to domination. The social classes being in other respects undeveloped in this kind of social formation, often fall back on the petite-bourgeoisie to play this role; this is how things went with the Nasserist regime yesterday, the Syrian and Algerian today. These regimes, concerning this issue, assure non-capitalist economic development since, by effectively opposing imperialist economic penetration, they create the material conditions for the transition towards socialism by developing national productive forces.

(Nair 1984: 367)

The return to civil life was carried under the auspices of a committee dealing with the ex-prisoners. Fadl's request to join the Socialist Avant Garde was rejected. After leaving prison in 1964, he was given a job in the consumer co-op of Benzion. He wanted to live in Aswan among Nubians. One engineer from the Kima company offered him a job there. So he left and took the job and began being politically active there. After he was expelled from the Socialist Union, he tried to arrange meetings and political discussions. A year later, his company decided to send him back to Cairo. For him, this was mainly because they wanted to impede any of his political activities.

Returning to the Path after the Disenchantment

The survival of the Communists entailed the disappearance of the movement as an independent force, retaining only small groups or networks. The effective marginalization of the Marxists, reduced to subordinate roles, provoked a profound and serious demoralization (Ismael/al-Sa'id 1988: 127). For them this unity was supposed to be a

fusion. It turned into a completely different experience that embittered a significant number of them. It induced a “progressive glide towards disintegration” (Shoukri 1981: 404). Moreover, a large majority of militants were to abandon the ranks following this experience.

However, here and there, some members decided to return to the road of action. The circle’s episode (Farrag 1993: 19-24) then began. This process led to the reconstitution of an Egyptian Communist party. Secretly, a set of militants decided to regroup and to restructure. Three main circles played a decisive role. Fadl, with his friends Zaki Mourad and Seif Eddin Saleh slowly began to make contact, discuss and regroup themselves. The group in which Sheikh Moubarak participated included more than a dozen people and was named *al-Sumr* (the blacks) because it was mostly made up of Nubians. A second circle, perhaps the most famous, included Michel Kamel, Adib Dimitri and Nabil al-Hilali. Known as *al-Shorouq*, it carried out its first program in Lebanon in 1972. The third of these historic circles was organized around Mohammad Tawfiq and Sa’ad Kamal. It was called *al-Humr* (the red) with reference to the red hair of one of its main leaders Mokhtar al Sayid (al-Sa’id, April 1993).

This operation started during the Nasser era and accelerated with the defeat in June 1967. The link-ups with members notably came from the Nasserist Youth. They began once more to reflect on their setbacks, their errors. The security issue and the integration of numerous former Communists into the regime forced them to be discreet. They relied initially on personal contact based on mutual confidence. The idea was not to rush to open discussions for clarifications. Three main types of members participated in this process: old Communists, young Nasserist Marxists uncovered during the Nasser experience and young university activists (Ismael/al-Sa’id 1988: 129).

None of these networks dared call themselves a Communist party. Our interlocutor explained that they had first to sort out theoretical questions, to reach a practical agreement. Such an agreement was reached in April 1972 and allowed the beginning of some joint work. The unified group published their documents under the pseudonym of Ahmed Urabi al Misri. During the 1973 Ramadan war, the publication of a journal entitled *al-Intissar* (The Victory) started. The first thesis project was edited in January 1974. A political draft was published in

August 1974. The re-establishment of the Communist party was officially announced on the first of May, 1975.

The first congress was to be held secretly in Egypt in the early eighties. The historic role of these circles was underlined in the theses compiled as *Barnamig al-hizb al-shuyu'i al-misry* (1983: 243-50). The congress also reverted to self- criticism, stating that “the decision of the dissolution of the Egyptian communist organizations was a grave political error” (ibid.: 227). The denunciation of this decision was, according to Fadl, one of the bases for the unification of those circles and was publicly affirmed (ibid.: 237). The text included a particular passage about the “old communists” who took part in the dissolution in order to vindicate them. This dismissed a lot of critics who wanted to oppose them, going as far as making accusations of treason. Fadl publicly refuted his own analysis of the *socialist group* (Abdu Fadl/ Nassar 1991: 289-96).

After the Kima society, Sheikh Moubarak worked in the publishing house of Dar al-Thaqafa al-Gedida around 1967. He left a little later to become a party full-timer. In the seventies and eighties he was one of the public figures of his party.

He was arrested several times: after the workers’ strikes and demonstrations in Helwan in 1975 then again on the day following the riots in January 1977. The authorities launched a violent campaign against the left denounced as responsible for the disorder. The different Marxist organizations and the legal *Tagammu'* party were victimized (Soliman 1987: 45-78; 'Abdel Raziq 1984). In 1979 Sheikh Moubarak was jailed for his opposition to the Camp David agreement. He escaped in 1981 when the round-ups took place in September before the assassination of Sadat. In the early eighties, he was one of those accused during the legal proceedings against the Communists (al-Hilali 1989) following which he was sentenced to three years in prison prior to being given amnesty for health reasons.

Sheikh Moubarak was one of the communist public spokesmen from 1980 to 1989. In the 1987 parliamentary elections, he was one of three candidates supported by the ECP (*Al-Ahali* 11., 18., 25.3.87). The latter’s objective was not to win, join parliament or to achieve good results. Sheikh Moubarak wanted to seize the opportunity to make people hear their voice and to increase their audience. In East

Cairo, he gained some 428 votes or about 1.15 percent (Morsy 1989: 341-47). The *Al-Ahali* presented him as the “militant, Marxist, Azhari-te since the forties, independent and supported by the *Tagammu*” (*Al-Ahali* 11.3.87).

His advanced age and health problems curtailed his activities, but he continued to be active. Lately, he figures among the key Egyptian socialists signatories of a press release entitled “To the Masses of Egypt” (*Al-Ahali* 29.11.95). This text expressed the option of different Marxist trends at the time of the legislative election, mainly critical of the political and economical reforms and of the Oslo agreement. The signatories called for a popular vote in favor of those opposing “the American-Israeli domination and their projects.” This obviously drew a positive response from the *Tagammu*, the Nasserists and some independent left candidates.

Personal Stakes: Being a Leftist on a Daily Basis

A Nubian Communist Commitment

Regarding the path of Sheikh Moubarak, an underlying pattern emerges. His experience was at first that of a Nubian Marxist. The foundations of his activity were closely linked to his condition as a Nubian in Egypt in the thirties and forties. He thus always made sure that he maintained a bond and kept up relations with his original community. He made numerous efforts never to stay too far from his family and the village of his birth. This point is essential and is evidenced by many visits to his village.

After coming out of prison in the sixties he was asked in Cairo to become the president of the association of those originally from his village. He was elected unanimously. The association did not even have an office. A collection allowed them to get an apartment in the district of Abdeen. One day he contacted an official of the ministry of electricity concerning the provision of electricity to his village. A delegation was sent and he obtained an agreement. Fifteen days later, their village had electricity. He refused compensation from the villagers, explaining to them that he had not laid out a penny from his own pocket. They therefore offered to install electricity in his house at their expense. Refusal met their offer.

In this manner he strove to assist his village when it was in need. During the Sadat era, he hid for about a year among Nubians. When he once asked a relative for asylum, the relative answered him "You ask for an extraordinary thing, but if I tell you no I shall be afraid." He stayed for short periods with different families, moving when he felt that he was becoming a burden. It was impossible for him to think that they could work with the security forces.

This Nubian dimension took on a more overt political form. The presence of a leftist Nubian representative for Kum Ombo, Moukhtar Goma'a, at the time of the 1990-95 legislature, was significant. He appeared as the representative of the Nubian population. This was very important in Sheikh Moubarak's eyes. He appreciated and supported this MP who was imprisoned and tortured under Nasser and who struggled against poverty.

Fadl spoke of his family without hesitation but not extensively. He married late, at the age of thirty according to a typically Nubian tradition. For him, a marriage outside his community was difficult signifying an almost automatic break with his roots.

My logic was always to preserve the bond with my relative, my village and the Nubians. Any other choice would not have kept me close; so I married a woman from my village with whom there were parental links.

He was considered to be sensible because he sought to maintain links with his roots. About his children, he explained that living the life of a militant, fraught with imprisonments and escape, he was able to attend only very sporadically to his responsibilities at home. Nevertheless, he believed that he had managed to create and maintain strong links with them. His eldest named after the martyr Shohdy Atteya, studied literary criticism in the ex-U.S.S.R. His second son studied Civil Engineering in Russia. His daughter is an archivist at the *Al-Abli weekly*. His youngest son is still at school.

Concerning such strong links with his community, let us quote a French veteran evoking his own case.

Like the tree that endures much longer by its roots than by its foliage, I remained faithful to my roots ... at the end of a very long struggle oriented towards the future that only appears through the slow march of men walking with their heads high.

(Tillon 1977: 13)

The Militant Model

Such a path helps us to understand how this kind of engagement represents, according to Jean Chesnaux, an *art of living*, which succeeds in forging an entity that has meaning to those who belong to it. It can be seen here as an example of the enhanced value of personal behavior and ethics. There is a tendency to conceive action quasi-exclusively in terms of example incarnated beyond the strictly political content. In Fadl's own view, the militant must try to become an example in his daily life. He has a responsibility towards others and for others. "The Communist must be with the masses. For that he must be human, having the spirit of sacrifice and an instinctive sense of duty." The advocated values such as humanity, respect, courage and integrity make up this revolutionary virtue, of which the communists must be the symbol. "You cannot always talk, it is necessary always to act in your daily life, to be correct." This invokes what Kriegel analyzed:

In principle the idea that the Communist is responsible, not only for himself, but also for the others for whom he must behave as a little sun. Lighting, warming and leading in his course, a circle of satellites: his neighbors, his friends at work or at play and generally, his companions in misery and hope.

(Kriegel 1985: 140)

Fadl has been living in the very popular neighborhood of Dar El Salam on the outskirts of Southern Cairo. He was astonished at a question asked of him concerning the influence of political affiliations in his daily relationships. For him, the accusations of atheism or his actions never had the slightest influence on his relationships with those around him. People know he is a Communist. With his neighbors, he always played a role of support and solidarity. The determining factor

remains in his eyes that he is always able to help them. According to him, there were two ways of convincing people: through discussion or concrete action.

The adherence to Communism, while awarding a supplement of justification, of meaning, of dignity to acts, even the most ordinary ones, and to say so while sanctifying them, gives the feeling of harmony and bliss. All committed lives are penetrated by this.

(Kriegel 1985: 142)

His commitment also generated strong friendships. His best friends were those who shared ideas and prison with him. His real friends were Zaki Mourad, Mohamed Khalil Qassim and Rifa't al-Sa'id, general secretary of the *Tagammu'* party. He maintained solid links with *common* people.

The Experience in Prison

In the course of our interviews, Sheikh Moubarak did not spontaneously evoke his imprisonment. This experience had two functions for him:

for those who are weak or hesitant, this break made them even weaker, for the others, prison reinforced their strength and made them more determined.

This notion was widespread among militants for whom prison experience was a personal litmus test. It was more moral and physical than political and represented an educational phase. It displayed an almost infallible optimism which held out even in prison. He believed that

bad times always pass nonetheless early experiences played a role in my intellectual formation. There is no place for despair when one is a political militant. The participation in the struggle gave us confidence and the militants who abandoned it were already either 'tired' or 'weak'. The optimism was not only political. After the torture my family cried. I smiled and told them not to cry, that this was nothing.

Tortured many times in prison, he suffered the same cruelty which lead to the death of Shuhdi Atteya ('Issa 1990-1991; al-Sa'id 1982). An investigation had established the facts and gathered testimonies on the case (al-Sa'id 1982: 61, 69-70). After the proceedings of 1959, he was transported with many of his comrades to Abu Za'bal. At first they thought the sentence was ending. Yet no sooner had they arrived when once more they became the victims of bad treatment and other cruelties. He recalls that the police modified their treatment according to their evaluation of their action and responsibilities in the organization. Shuhdi Atteya was the first to be accused and he himself was the second. Other than him, there were five more who were tortured. Shuhdi Atteya died there, even though he was strong. He lost consciousness quickly. At the death of Shohdy, the other five were immediately isolated and placed in what they called the "hospital", a simple place managed by a few doctors. Parents and close relatives led a vigorous campaign in court against the police and the authorities out of anger and fear for their wellbeing. Nasser was then on a visit to Yugoslavia. In order to keep up the good relations with Tito, the Egyptian president ordered an investigation, the immediate suspension of the implicated soldiers and the transfer of the prisoners to Qanater. This was the last case of torture against Marxists in Abu Za'bal. Sheikh Moubarak explains his attitude towards the torture:

In difficulties and catastrophes you can't cry, even under torture. When a friend dies, you cry. This is a belief (*'aqida*), the tears are not weakness, but on the contrary, become an enemy.

The prison also signified for him a collective human and political experience. He found himself with other political prisoners. Together, they went through this tough experiment which also was an intense period of politicization, with meetings, discussions and reflection. It was also his first contact with other Marxist groups. They continued to act through letters sent to acquaintances. The Communist spirit was upheld daily thanks to the solidarity of the community. It was truly a micro-society.

Specific Dimensions of a Struggle

The Founding Act

The adherence to Marxism generated a militant commitment. This theoretic affiliation is deeply rooted in an event or a set of events. In the present case, it was Fadl's condition as a poor Nubian at the time when the rapid development of a national movement and of a progressive utopia were taking place. This was a key element at the end of World War II. The coherence, the logic, and the world vision ensuing from this commitment took shape.

It is in similar experiences, when the militant ... feels inducted by history, where he feels the course of his existence is being carried and oriented by the wind of history, which solidly and durably weaves the feeling of belonging to a camp, to a world which upholds the notions of fidelity, loyalty and legitimacy, that constitutes the base of the [communist] conscience.

(Brossat 1991: 88)

This is a logic of protest springing from his immediate real life. Here is analogy with Charles Tillon through his work *La révolte vient de loin* (Tillon 1972) with a feeling of revolt "reigned the flower of a confused hope" (Tillon 1977: 15).

A Certain Understanding of Marxism

Here the basic principle is that Communism is on the side of the oppressed layers. For Fadl the decisive factor lay in the miserable condition of his family and the Nubian community. Kriegel distinguishes between three types of commitment: political, existential and ideological. Fadl's example can be counted as an existential one.

The situation of those for whom belonging to the Communist party constitutes a state of nature and are part of it 'by birth': not necessarily because they are born in Communist families, but rather because the Communist option is derived unequivocally from their national, social, professional and cultural character.

(Kriegel 1985: 170-171)

The adherence to Marxism represents more than a simple move to political action. It offers a global alternative vision of the world. It also provides a theoretical framework that could pave the way for radical and effective changes. Man can get the conscious mastering of history with huge potentials to the building of a new society. Science, knowledge and competence altogether provide for humanity the means of liberating itself through understanding and control of the world.

This ideology gives explanations and solutions to all questions and symbolizes this “*redemptive utopia*” of the present time because it is

intensely democratic, by opposing the ancient hierarchies; and denying the necessity of existing again, encouraging the spread of knowledge, which was judged to be in natural agreement with the doctrine, exalting the technical and moral and intellectual resources latent in all of us, denying all the facilities, the new theory opened the large doors of the future.

(Rodinson 1972: 303)

This intellectual framework provides a global alternative vision to the existing world.

It implicitly, but vigorously proposes an ethic which gives each member a lot of moral satisfaction from his engagement. The proletariat must overturn the unjust social order, condemned by science and man in general for universal moral reasons, which must be in favor of the inversion; the individual will not have a clear conscience when he collaborates with what is bad. Engaged in this way, every act, even in private life, in agreement with ideology, is a step towards the realization of myth.

(Rodinson 1972: 249)

It is convenient to highlight that such an example corresponds to a radicalization of the educated class. It appeared in the categories of some *small intellectuals*, a term used by Daniel Hémery in its non-pejorative sense – “small concerning their perspective of social rise but not concerning their intellectual capacity,” proletarized, they denied themselves access to the classic functions of the intellectuals (Hémery 1984: 306). The educated strata occupies a particular *intermediary* place. As they are blocked in the exercise of their essential social func-

tions, they opted for an opposition to the existing social and political order (Hémery 1984: 304).

A Certain Ideological Profile

The adherence to Marxism equally procured a confidence and a certitude about a definite sense of history.

The impassioned feelings about the movement of history hindered by immense obstacles and by its variants, the feelings of a besieged stronghold, are essential in the full deployment of the Stalinist conscience.

(Brossat 1991: 85)

The militant does not learn history in books but in life and action.

Contrary to the great majority of men, he lives in the feeling of the presence of history, in the conscience of history. This immersion and his personal existence in history, this feeling of proximity with history, the conviction that it is the work of humans, and that he himself is such an actor, pave the way to ineradicable subjective intensity.

(Brossat 1991: 90)

This type of certainty is based on deep conviction of being in the same phase with the course of history, which is what gives the militant an almost unshakable sense of confidence. This mixture of optimism and hope (Brossat 1991: 90, 121, 199) is a decisive factor in Sheikh Mubarak's *Stalinist Communist* consciousness.

A Type of National Communism

A Nationalist-Marxist Synthesis

In the case of Vietnam, Hémery underlined the production of specific Marxisms as responses to the crises of non-western societies. This approach is most relevant to the Egyptian case. The tight link with nationalism is inescapable. Marxist ideology is used as a global system offering a substitute to ancient forms of thought and projects accord-

ing to a perspective of national and social *change*. “Marxism is going to come forward, in the context of historic impossibilities, as an alternative solution to the policy of nationalism and as reactualization/over-taking of the problematic which is its own” (Hémery 1984: 301).

Marxism produces a more coherent and rational outcome of the nationalist project with its scientific dimension. Its project is to build a society that has to get rid of any colonial influence. It offers an “alternative solution to political nationalism as the reactualisation/by-passing of the problematic” (Hémery 1984: 310). This syncretism means the rise of a *National Marxism*.

Patriotic and reformist at the same time, such a project cannot be reduced to the fight for independence. It also implies a deep social transformation. The continuity with the patriotic tradition is an attempt to insert the Marxist element into the national culture. We can therefore speak of an extension of the revolutionary nationalist commitment. In its *soviet* form, it provides the theory of imperialism, the vanguard party and other tools and structures, new political practices and the potential to wage a new type of struggle.

The Founding Matrix: Stalinism

Most researches on the Communist movement in Egypt have paid little attention to its Stalinist matrix despite the latter’s impact on its political strategy and the practices.¹⁵ Stalinist hegemony meant the borrowing of themes, theoretical works and strategical approaches from Moscow and its international current (Lowy 1987: 392-400). The Communist development, was above all, determined by national and quasi-nationalist imperatives.

Although the U.S.S.R. was looked upon as the fatherland of socialism, Fadl’s perception of it remains strictly Egyptian. As a patriot, the U.S.S.R. appeared to him as the only international power supporting his country’s claims, thus making it a natural ally. The Soviet Union was to become the supreme example as well as the concrete reference to the possibility of achieving profound social transformation. This was nothing unique at the time, especially in Cairo.

Soviet planning was literally a utopia for them. It incarnated an incredible and fascinating experience of rapid transformation, econo-

ic growth, industrialization and agricultural collectivization where the state was the agent of social transformation. There was never any mention of the authoritarian side of the Soviet experience. The essential strength of this Marxism is the demonstration of its historic viability offered by the U.S.S.R. The Soviet model is seen as evidence that it is possible to escape from the historic fatality of colonialism.

Stalinist U.S.S.R. drew a precise model of revolution, a path of historical development, which represents the only chance to escape, on the condition that it introduces itself in favorable circumstances in the face of this hopeless destiny and finally to resolve the old problem of survival. The Russian revolution is perceived as the producer of a new national society and of a credible method of development based on the doctrine of state control. Such an historical project seems really fascinating.

According to Rodinson, the *Stalinist synthesis* means the following:

Everything is there: the conception of a modern world, a universal sociology opening the doors for the same hope for all peoples of the world, an explanation of the imperialist phenomenon, a practical method of modernization and development, formulas for organization, strategies and tactics, making sacred the ethics of secular schemes which the situation finds pressing, and even an aesthetic theory. An apparently optimistic and militant philosophy headed up an encyclopedic science.

(Rodinson 1972: 302)

A dogmatic codification of Marxism relied on a mechanical conception of objective laws.

Fadl's adopted version is expressed in terms of social reform, salaries, the right to health care, housing, a practical equality and also access to education. Progress for him meant development, state control and industrialization with the conviction that the existence of special conditions in Egypt made a longer stage of transition necessary. The society had to rid itself of exploitation and misery, to build up a new community of free citizens where the Nubians would have a place of their own.

The fall of the U.S.S.R. does not seem to have provoked either disappointment or doubt or bitterness, although it can be termed "a catastrophe for all."

Fadl resolutely rebelled against the idea that a group gained ground by organizing the breakdown of the Soviet system. The collapse goes back further and has old roots. The problems go back to the time before Stalin. The periodization of the progressive descent towards this collapse is necessary. Imperialist forces dragged the U.S.S.R. into the arms race. Yet it was a longer process. Fadl is convinced that it is up to communists today to open the debate and study the question of the beginning of the deterioration in order to understand this failure so that the reconstruction of socialism can be contemplated.

Concerning Stalinism and its historic dimension in the U.S.S.R., Sheikh Moubarak distinguished two main things. Earlier, the communists tended to celebrate and sanctify Stalin. For example, they kept the memory of the day of his death alive as a real tragedy. The discovery of the errors, crimes and weaknesses of the Soviet CP created another situation. Consequently, it became necessary to return to this experience with a precise and profound analysis and without any sanctifications. It is impossible to grasp the breakdown of the U.S.S.R. without going back to the previous causes and their deep roots. With a party containing a million members, one cannot be satisfied with the explanation of submission (*khudu'*) to leadership. The experience had many positive sides but numerous and great errors created the present situation. Sheikh Moubarak refuses, however, to believe that socialism is dead, unlike many disillusioned people. He asserts his optimism without any doubt. The fall of the U.S.S.R. appears to him mainly economic.

Strategic Issues

The strategic implications of the Stalinist position meant self-limitation was central. The adoption of the revolution in stages meant that:

in countries that are colonial or semi-colonial, the accomplishment of a bourgeois-democratic revolution by an alliance with the national bourgeoisie, is a preliminary historic stage to all future socialist revolutions.

(Lowy 1987: 395)

This theoretical frame explains the support given to Nasserism. The non-capitalist road of development provided the keystone for their orientation. Sami Naïr underlined the harmful aspects of this theory pointing to three key issues. It harbors a confusion about the nature of imperialism which comes to overshadow local social relationships. It also supposes that the creation of the conditions of transition towards socialism can only be made via the “national” bourgeoisie. In fact, this does not lead to development but sets up the conditions for the reproduction of underdevelopment. Lastly, development is only understood in an economic way (Naïr 1984: 368).

Fadl's idea of revolution saw it as to an operation which combined the struggle against imperialism with class struggle. He had no understanding of phases, advance or retreat. The revolution had to be violent and bloody, with Russia as the example. For this young educated Nubian, Marxism “pushed the immediate movement into action following a program which will achieve the ideal” (Rodinson 1972: 249). The working class is the agent of universal emancipation with the mission of producing a complete new humanity out of this mosaic world.

Appraisal and Perspectives

Critical Statements

Fadl asserted to us that he would choose the same path today without the slightest hesitation. However, with experience and maturity, he would not have repeated certain acts or gestures. In 1948, after his action in Mahala al-Kubra, he found himself interned in Bulaq close to his family's home. He was 21 and did not try to contact his parents though he had neither food, covers nor even clothes in the middle of winter. He explains this gesture as springing from the excessive enthusiasm he felt in his youth. He remembers his father's visit to the Hackstep prison in about 1948-49. Despite their difficult relationship, his father brought him something. Steeped in ideology, he just tried to use his father to get into contact with foreign comrades. His dad was discovered, expelled and denied visitation.

On the political level, Sheikh Moubarak insists on the absence of any links between the Egyptian and the international Communist

movement since the beginning of the thirties. He recalls the non-existence of regular contact or even integration with other existing structures. He insists that their politics consisted of an Egyptian nationalist element which is preoccupied primarily with the Egyptian question. He insistently recalls that the coup of July 1952 had the support of DMNL. The International Communist Movement, headed by the U.S.S.R., denounced it. Other Egyptian groups did the same. This position did not have any effect on him as he considered himself, first and foremost, an *Egyptian* activist. This lack of an organic link allowed them a better understanding of their 'Egyptianness' according to him.

Today he considers that they developed a rather negative attitude towards the national bourgeoisie. It is possible for him to cooperate with a sector of this class he considers to be progressive. His analysis follows the traditional developments of the pro-Moscow Communist trends. We consider that this development led the Marxists to a strategy of self-restraint in Third World Countries.

The dramatic weakness in which, at present, we find the Marxist movement in the Arab social formations is a direct result of this: condemned to a strategy of alliance in relation to the so-called progressive States, the orthodox communist movement is paralyzed in the face of the considerably repressive policy exercised by these powers regarding popular claims. This is an admirable spirit and a praiseworthy abnegation trustworthy of the major holy preachers.

(Nair 1984: 367-68)

His approach remains within the framework of the Front. According to this concept, Marxists have to collaborate with all forces opposing imperialism.

Concerning the building of the organization, Fadl estimates that the theory was not always suited to local realities. They established the sector system. As an example of their organizational flexibility, he mentions the issue of regional affiliations. The feelings of belonging, of social bonds and solidarity of this kind are strong. In Kafr al Dawwar, workers were firstly organized in cells but rapidly the leaders realized that disagreements were based on regional or tribal lines. So they decided to rebuild on a regional basis.

On the Nasserist experience, he explains

the revolution was undertaken by the nationalist and patriotic forces in the army. Of course DMNL gave its support right from the beginning. We, however, remained opponents according to a political line that led us to call for the fall of the regime.

He considers this position was a mistake. Fadl still believes that the Nasserism regime was patriotic and anti-imperialist. His main critique focuses on its attitude towards other political forces, for which he sees no justification.

The 1965 self-dissolution of his group is his key self-criticism: this decision remains a mistake. His remarks followed the analysis of the first ECP congress in 1981 which condemned the dissolution as a “grave political mistake”¹⁶ (*Bernamig al hizb al shuyu'i al masri*, op. cit.: 227, 237).

Fadl was surprised when I asked him if such a dissolution was a kind of political suicide or an abdication. For him, the dissolution was an extreme exaggeration of the situation. The idea of an alliance did not have any real basis, their evaluation was weak and faulty. The Cuban experience also had a considerable influence. Dissolution was never a resignation: They turned back to the path after they realized their error. The great majority of activists did not however return to political action. He believes that a lot of them lost the desire to remain activists in the context of secrecy and repression.

His assessment of Nasser is an interesting one. He described him as

a revolutionary man, a sincere and devoted patriot who had the capacity to accept new ideas. But he remained an oriental in the situation of a country where there was an absence of democracy or a genuine multi-party system. In addition, it was the military which reinforced his move towards authoritarianism and state interventionism. Purity and integrity characterize him, for he never profited from or used his position for his own personal ends or interests.

His perception of the Nasserists of the time is, by contrast, less flattering. If he recalls a number of honorable men, he cannot forget that “the majority played a negative role.” Spontaneously, he mentions Zakareya Mohieddin whom he describes as a “dictator”. Gamal Selim was not very political in his estimation. Marshal Amer appeared as a sincere patriot who did a lot to build up the army.

He views the existence of a Nasserist current today as positive, especially because the Nasserist party is led by progressive tendencies who envision cooperation with leftists. Nasserist and Marxist thought seems close to him despite disagreements over practice. Common work is the way to clarification. The failure of Nasserism makes it difficult to reclaim it, still it seems necessary to defend its gains.

The Present Meaning of a Struggle

Today he considers the main task is to benefit from negative situations internally and internationally. If secret action remains necessary, there is also a need for a public appearance through a spokesman. They must learn from the mistakes of the past and deepen the links with the *masses*. New conditions can expand their influence. He advocates a certain amount of flexibility on the subject of organization. They must allow much wider discussions. Every decision must be assessed, every member should contribute with critiques before applying.

The cooperation with Communists outside the ECP is an essential factor for him. Acting and debating would allow them to reinforce their position with these Marxist tendencies. They also have to work with other groups. For instance many doctors have progressive ideas but they only want to commit themselves on issues regarding health. The same situation exists with engineers or intellectuals. Today the basis for common action exists as a way of clarifying differences. He also insists on the necessity of joint platforms.

The junction with the new generations remains a sensitive problem:

if personal relationships do exist, the youth do not yet benefit from the heritage of those from the past, whether good or bad. There is no genuine study of international experiences. For a lot of young people, there is the risk of believing that there was not much good in what had happened in the past.

Today Communism retains for Fadl a meaning in term of general, political and economic objectives, which can however, differ from before. For instance, global nationalizations are no longer a condition. For him, it's a matter of advancing without forcing the pace and re-

specting individual freedoms. It is necessary to break off from the Stalinist experience by insuring the total political freedom through a true plurality of parties. Asked about other socialist experiences, he mentions China – “an interesting experience of progress, stages and progressions, especially after the death of Mao.”

On the Arab level, he sees the situation as unbalanced with slowness and real difficulties. There has not been any progress in the realm of democracy. The economic and social situation continues to be bad and cooperation between leftists is not intense enough, “there is a sort of distance between us, in addition to the crisis of the different Arab communist parties.”

For him, the question of Islamism must be dealt with through an analysis of the relevant period. In the 1940s, HADITU considered it possible and desirable to cooperate with the Muslim Brothers. This continued after the revolution. This position changed over time: today such cooperation is almost impossible except in very rare exceptions such as the Press Law.

Asked about the rise to power of the Islamists, he refuses to be pessimistic. This hypothesis does not seem possible even if the danger exists. For him, discussing this would be dangerous since it beguiles people and minimizes the gravity of the problem. Islamists cannot reach power if a real popular resistance exists. In such an eventuality, this will mean arrests, prison and assassinations. For Fadl the difference between the Muslim Brothers and the *Gama'at al Islameya* is not so clear.

Today the left is undergoing an acute crisis. The multiplicity of publications and debates on the U.S.S.R., the future of socialism, Marxism and the left are signs of the difficult situation (al-Sa'id 1994; Fathi 1994; Zahran 1992). The Nasserist experience also became subject to criticism. The Egyptian left seems to be more disconnected than ever from the popular milieu. It has also suffered from some serious setbacks among the workers (Posusney 1993; Beinin 1994: 247-70).

The relationships among the left are an important issue. Sheikh Moubarak explains the project of ECP to build a Socialist Alliance made up of Communists, the *Tagammu'* and the Nasserists. Disagreements exist, however, they have, from his point of view, the same

line on defense of Nasserist gains. In Fadl's opinion, the *Tagammu'* is much closer to his own tendency than are the Nasserists. There are certainly some differences but the legal left party possesses a clarity of objectives and the key elements of the *Tagammu'* are closer in their backgrounds and actions (Ramsès 1997).

The Marxist movement today is characterized by weakness and splits (Strategic Report al-Ahram 1987: 363-77). Observers believe there exist around half a dozen groups. Though it is difficult to evaluate precisely, the ECP seems to be the most important organization despite several splits in the seventies and the late 1980s when a tendency around Michel Kamel (now deceased) gave birth to the Socialist People's Party (SPP) with the irregular bulletin *al-Badil*.

Our interlocutor considers that the ECP and SPP are the only parties with a significant amount of strength, the others being reduced to small propagandist activities. He speaks of the Worker's Party (*Hisb al-'Ummâl*) – a radical Marxist group which was influential in the seventies – in negative terms, describing them as 'Trotskyists' e.g. ultra leftists.¹⁷ Still Fadl insists on the idea of the Communists' unity. Such a target can only be realized if some maturity concerning objectives and action is reached.

His main criticism is directed against the SPP, sign of their intense rivalry. Islamism is a central issue in their heated debate. While the ECP stands against the Islamists, the SPP considers it possible to co-operate with them against the regime.¹⁸ For Fadl, Islamists represent a more significant danger which prompts dialogue with the state. Fadl considers that massacres could occur place if the Islamists were to reach power, like in Iran or Sudan. In May 1995, the ECP called for the building of a front made up of the Wafd, the *Tagammu'*, the Nasserists and other Marxist groups as well as the more enlightened or democratic Islamic elements¹⁹ in order to combat Islamism.

Finally, we can say he developed a revised version of Communism, in direct line with the conceptions of the what was called the pro-Moscow currents. His analysis recaptured the developments of a national democratic revolution and the approach through stages in the post Soviet era.

Conclusion

Whatever is the evaluation of such commitment, one can only be fascinated by the richness of Sheikh Moubarak trajectory, the permanence and strength of his convictions. This activist knew lyrical illusions, the confrontation and transgressions before the revival. His confidence was never shaken.

The experience of time changes you and invites you to change again or even reinvigorate you into a new hope which will obliterate all trace of discouragement in spite of ... 'the ashes which strike my heart'.

(Tillon 1977: 13)

It can be asked if one cannot speak of several communist trends, with the stream of trends, groups and splits. This example shows the direction that brought about this type of position.

This adherence relies on the sincere conviction that the U.S.S.R. was the fatherland of socialism, the defense of which was an essential imperative; and that the national-democratic revolution opened the doors for the final butt of the labor movement: socialism.

(Lowy 1980: 32)

Sheikh Moubarak represents the specific engagement of a generation of young Nubians in the forties.²⁰ This is the trajectory of a leader of the DMNL.²¹ An observer cannot be surprised by the *cruel destiny* they suffered under Nasserism. After a confrontation, the state introduced many reforms carried out in an authoritarian method. Their political line contributed to the blocking of any independent workers' voice, the corporatization of the labor movement and disbanding of any autonomous social expression. The present case can help us rethink Joel Beinin's thesis that insists on the key role played by the intellectuals in the elaboration of the Nasserist orientation (Beinin 1989: 87). It also questions Botman's approach that puts stress on a significant distinction between the workers'-popular elements and the middle class intellectuals who were granted important social positions in the regime through the party, the press or state institutions (Botman 1988: 146). Of course such elements played a role as well as did

pressure from the Soviet or foreign Communist parties. Still the decisive factor was the political approach shaped by what we called the Stalinist matrix. Such an outlook was shared by most Communists at that time.

If this testimony rebuilds the uniqueness of an experience, it offers also an example

to refer to the use of biography in order to explore the complex ways in which individuals find their way among social structures, processes and cultural interactions.

(Burke 1993: 6)

It helps us improve our understanding and knowledge of society. Detailed biographical sketches allow us to continue research. Today, there exists a genuine stake in memory of a generation which is gradually disappearing. Preserving signs of such experiences is the work of the Committee for the Archives of the Egyptian Communist Movement.²²

Such an example can be useful to break with the western distorting prism,

at a time when the Middle East is often harshly caricatured in Western Society, these portraits of ordinary men and women and their struggles and attempts to survive in a context of great uncertainty and risk, serve to assert our common humanity.

(Burke 1993: 3)

It can allow a more critical reexamination, and not only confined to the Middle East:

Why, when we study other people's politics – especially people whose world-ly power is less than ours – do we suddenly forget the frustrations and limitations of our own political life? Perhaps if we could see them and their struggles more clearly – and not just what we take to be their problems, their defects and their defeats – we might recover our capacity for openness to others and our willingness to learn from their most promising political experiments.

(Baker 1990: 296)

Notes

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- 1 This title was inspired by the thrilling book edited by Edmund Burke 1993.
- 2 Acronym of the Democratic Movement for National Liberation.
- 3 We interviewed Moubarak Abdu Fadl firstly at Maher Zaki's house, who introduced me to him, then in his own home and two times in the publishing house Dar al-Thaqafa al-Gedida in May and June, 1995.
- 4 See al-Sa'id (1989: 123-210, 365-370), Beinin (1987, 1989) and Botman (1988). Rifa'at al-Sa'id published interviews in 1989 (*ibid.*) and in July 1996.
- 5 See The British Archives Foreign Office: FO 371/vol 45916/J 311/3/16/telg Lord Killearn 147, 20.01.45.
- 6 Acronym for the Egyptian Movement for National Liberation.
- 7 FO 371/vol 62994/J 58/13/16/25.04.48, quoted in Botman 1988: 73.
- 8 FO 371/vol 69250/J 1890/1262/16/Sir R. Campbell to Mr. Bevin 134, 18.03.48.
- 9 A DMNL pamphlet in FO 371/vol 69250/J2953/1262/16/Sir R. Campbell, 25.04.48.
- 10 A Marxist group led by Ismail Sabri Abdallah, Fouad Mursi, Sa'd Zahran, Daoud 'Aziz in 1949; it was extremely hostile to the other leftist tendencies.
- 11 See al-Ghazali (1993). This version denounces the 'real' instigators of the trouble which provoked a confrontation between the army and the workers.
- 12 The debates held at the prison of *Qanater* were rapidly transmitted to the prisoners of the oasis.
- 13 See al-Mouslihi (1979), leader of the "Department of Anti-communist Struggle" who resigned because of the releases of 1964.
- 14 For such a meeting see al-Sa'id (1986: 270-271).

- 15 We are setting aside a small surrealist group Art and Freedom, who tried, unsuccessfully to promote an anti-Stalinist Marxism. See Gharib 1987; al-Siba'i 1988.
- 16 See how an ex-Communist explained this experience shaped by the Stalinist logic. See Sid Ahmed 1996: 67-75.
- 17 For a similar evocation see al-Said/Ismael 1988.
- 18 This organization recently opted for a resolute opposition to the Islamists.
- 19 See the statement of ECP published in *al-Yasar*, June 1995 (Bayan 1995).
- 20 See the meeting (24.05.96) at the Nubian club dedicated to the poet Mahmoud Shindi.
- 21 For other DMNL contributions, see al-Guindi (1996) or Hatata (1995); for other options see Sadeq Saad 1986.
- 22 See “waraqa ‘amal mashrou’ tawthiq, tarikh al haraka al shouyou’ya al misrya [hatta 1965]”, Cairo, 17.05.1995., and the bulletin “*al-dhakkira al-wataniya*.”

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