Workshop 11

Between Politics, Social History and Culture
The Press in the Middle East and North Africa before Independence

directed by

Anthony Gorman
University of Edinburgh, UK
anthony.gorman@ed.ac.uk

Didier Monciaud
Groupe de recherches sur le Maghreb et le Moyen-Orient (GREMAMO), Université Paris VII - Denis Diderot, France
mociaud@yahoo.com

Workshop abstract

The press in the Middle East offers a fertile field for historical research. Much more than a historical source, the press has functioned as a basic medium through which societies have represented themselves, to themselves and to others. A common public space where a wide range of public and private phenomena intersected, the press has served as a transmitter of news, political currents and opinions, social attitudes, economic interests, and the changing pattern of everyday life. The variety of periodical literature has been testimony to the ferment of associational, professional and intellectual life. This great vitality was rarely unhindered by state authorities who have regulated the press through legal regimes and often censorship so that the character of the press has been a measure of the acceptable limits of political debate. Yet even in the period before independence, the press in many Middle Eastern societies provided an arena for the contest over many political, social and cultural issues, both a site that asserted indigenous, local identity and a medium that demonstrated and expressed the influence of European culture and power. This workshop aims to address a number of these aspects of press history in the Middle East and North Africa: its role in political and social life; its representation of public culture; and the development of a press milieu, specifically the emergence of the professional journalist, professional associations and press groups. We seek to bring together historians and political scientists, broadly defined, working on different aspects of Middle Eastern political, cultural, social and economic life as they relate to newspapers and periodicals, journalists and news organisations.
Workshop description

The press occupies an essential place in the history of the Middle East especially in the period before independence. Its interest and appeal is explained by its importance as a representation that a society produces of itself and for itself. It is therefore easily lends itself to a historical framework that aims to give an account of the evolution of public opinion and currents of thought.

The richness of the press in the Middle East is impressive although knowledge of the full range of these sources is far from complete. Nevertheless, a wealth of studies are available. On the Egyptian press, important work has been done on the development of the press (‘Abdu 1983, ‘Abdel Meguid), on individual newspapers such as al-Ahrâm (Abdu 1951) and al-Misri (Iskander), cultural reviews (Shalash), and on the political press of the left (al-Sa‘îd), the Wafd (Kâmel) and the Muslim Brothers (al-Ghabbâchî). Some studies deal with relationship between the press and other issues such as the national question (Kâm el 1996, Iskander 1992 and 1996), the national movement (Sâlem, 1987), Zionism and the Zionist press (Nassâr, Abdel Rahmân) and the role of journalistic figures such as Dr Muhammad Haykal of the Liberal Constitutionalist party (Mohammad) and Muhammad Hassanayn Haykal, pillar of the Nasser regime (al-Shalabi).

The contribution of studies on the press is essential to an understanding of political history and its representation. The need of a monograph and of case studies therefore is as great as the diversity of the field of the press is important and the history of these societies dynamic. For example, local press have been still little used and studied, not to speak of the newspapers of professional and social groups. The press in the Middle East has also had a multilingual form that reflected the pluralist character of local societies and the impact of foreign influences. In some cases, this was expressed in the presence of foreign communities such as the Greeks and Armenians. More often, this reflected the power and influence of European culture, particularly French, Italian and English and their reception by different social groups particularly among the elites and the middle class. However, there has been a certain disequilibrium: a great number of titles exist but there is little in the way of documentary sources on the newspaper business. Some archives are limited, some others do not exist. Where they have survived, access can be far from simple.

Research has developed and integrated the history of the press into a cultural history around three axes: the press as a vector of history, as an agent of history and as a source that allows an understanding of the transformation of societies. Other avenues of enquiry also suggest themselves, beginning with a deeper understanding of its different political, economic, cultural, social dimensions but also its technical aspects, namely the history of the means and technologies of information and of the communication, circulation and exchange of information. As Delporte has said, this engages with « l’ensemble du processus qui, de l’émission à la réception, met en jeu l’outil, le message, le médiateur, les publics, avec cette particularité duale qu’il privilégie l’observation des phénomènes massifs et s’applique, comme historien, à les mettre en perspective » (2001). Essentially, this involves an examination of how the press has constituted an autonomous sphere and has favoured the emergence of norms and representation of a true ‘culture’.

The first axis concerns the context and the limits of press activity. This raises the issue of a real or potential public. The target audience of newspaper editors corresponds to the existence and growing demand in terms of reading, information, even entertainment. This signifies interest in sale and distribution. On reception and readership, Beth Baron has published important work on women’s press in Egypt, and Relli Schechter has discussed advertising (2003, 2005). Far from focusing on economic issues, his approach allows engagement with socio-cultural aspects.
Technical conditions represent another important theme. These cannot be reduced to simple technological issues but concern matters such as the transmission of news (telegraph, telephone, teleprinter, press agencies). Similarly, the consideration of the conditions of production (composition, printing) should not be limited to costs. The circulation of a newspaper (the means of transport and distribution networks), the last stage of the production process, is also an essential aspect.

The economic dimension of the press is a fascinating area. A commercial and industrial model of the press characterised by the price, sale, editions, pagination, supplements, colours, illustrations, announcements and publicity can be applied. Profitability remains an important criterion and leads to consideration of the financial aspects of the press and the development of press groups such as al-Ahram and al-Hilal.

Knowledge of the internal dynamics of the press remains challenging because of source problems. This makes difficult the study of the press as an institution, a business and of all that relates to matters of finance, recruitment procedures, power structure, office holders and administration. One also cannot neglect the political constraints (surveillance, censorship, connections with the state and colonial powers, connections with parties and political currents). Press laws represent an important element not only in its structural but also its concrete aspects. An examination of the types of periodicals that have appeared allow us to overcome what seems to be an artificial dichotomy between ‘pression d’information’ and press opinion, commercial and political press. Albert Hourani invoked the ‘review of ideas’ and later « le journal d’opinion non officiel » (Hourani, p403).

An examination of the professions of the press represents a stimulating approach in exploring its character and form. This concerns the full range of personnel working in the press (professionals in most cases but in some cases volunteers and militants), not only journalists but associates and those in the printing trades. Journalists, themselves, represent a large field to explore such as the range of the profession, the organisation of the conditions of work, its unionism, professional and social status. The assertion of a professional identity, the emergence of its own structures (associations, unions, societies), the economic and social development of the practice of the profession, the tensions within the group itself and with other ranks of the editorial staff are also rich avenues of enquiry. One could envisage biographical and prosopographical studies of pressmen and women.

There are a number of stimulating axes to apprehend the microcosm of different press staff and ultimately its environment, to examine the places that unite and divide them, to follow long term professional careers that often follow a zigzag between different titles and institutions. The question of the relation with state authority is far from secondary. One needs to consider, when it is possible, the power connections in the press, its practice, rhythm, programme and everyday life.

The last theme concerns cultural history. How does the rise of the press involve itself in the transformation of culture with the cultural break set up by more regular access to information (Kalifa)? The discovery of information allows new populations, notably urban, to find their way in metropolitan spaces, to participate in social life and to equip themselves with a memory of events. How does the logic of an industrial culture with all that this signifies of cultural practices and collective imagination penetrate and act on Middle Eastern societies from the end of the 19th century?

Another question is that of periodisation: when can one place the beginning of a ‘media’ era with the foundation of structures of mass diffusion and the rise of a real press culture? Can one consider the notion of a media culture and the existence of cultural production as operating?

This material offers many research themes, some are already well-established in studies of political history but others are relatively new to study of the Middle Eastern press. The directors of the
workshop welcome exchanges and critiques from different directions in bringing together work that builds on different approaches and themes.

We propose the following:

1. The press as a political and social actor
2. The practice of journalism: individuals, profession and environment
3. Situating the periodical: between mouthpiece and business
4. Institutions of the press and media groups.
5. Press and culture: the rise and dimensions of a new culture

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Directors’ individual paper abstracts

The Radical Press in Egypt before the First World War

Anthony Gorman

In February 1877, Il Lavoratore (‘The Worker’), a newspaper announcing itself as an organ of the International, appeared in Alexandria. Although quickly suppressed by authorities it represented the first of a series of radical newspapers published in Egypt before 1914. These included the bilingual (Italian/ French) La Tribuna Libera (Alexandria, 1901), which discussed social injustice and condemned ‘the tyranny of capital’, the libertarian il Domani (Cairo, 1903), the Greek language O Ergatis (1907-08), ‘organ of emancipation of women and the worker’, and L’Unione (1913-14) an anarchist weekly edited in Cairo and Alexandria.

Although principally produced by Italian workers, the radical press over this time extended to other communities, particularly Jews and Greeks, and had a significant if not yet quantified impact on Arabophone Egyptian workers. Collectively, it boasted a diverse ethnic readership and promoted, among other things, some of the new ideas of science, secularism and social justice, and thus anticipated the writings of Egyptian intellectuals such as Salama Musa. This paper will address the political, social and cultural importance of this press in Egypt addressing firstly, the significant role it played in raising working class consciousness and articulating the demands of all workers in Egypt in a local and international context and secondly, its importance as a genuine and unusually well-documented vehicle for the transmission of non-elite ideas and practices. Finally, it will explore how the radical press served as an essential medium for the maintenance of an international network of activists during the so-called first age of globalisation.

A voice ‘from below’ in the Egyptian press during the 1940s: the experience of Chobra a labour trade unionist weekly

Didier Monciaud

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Cairo northern suburb of Chobra-al-Khyma turned into an industrial and labour stronghold. A very dynamic workers’ movement arose. In this process, the textile sector was a key element.

The fight for official recognition and better economic conditions was only one part of the workers’ struggles. Progressively, labour became an effective actor on the public scene. British colonial rule, the authoritarian Egyptian monarchy and the Wafd, the main liberal nationalist movement, were the three key parts.

In Chobra al-Khyma, the textile industry had a specific structure: mostly middle or small enterprises owned by foreigners (French and Belgian) or Egyptianized (Syro-Lebanese, Jews and Armenians). Labour struggles had a strong “national” dimension.

This period was one of rich experience for workers and trade unionists. Despite strong nationalist feelings, textile unionism attempted to follow an independent path, avoiding any kind of control, especially from the Wafd.
The Workers General Union of Mechanical Textile of Cairo and its Suburbs (WGUMTCS) played a leading role in this history, building strong support in Cairo but also linking itself to other workers’ networks in the country. The leading “team” became radicalised through its own experiences of resistance, shifting from a purely economic outlook to political awareness.

In such circumstances, this trade union decided to establish its own mouthpiece. It rented and edited a weekly called *Chubra* from April 1942 to January 1943. This paper gained a large audience among workers. Strong external pressures on its legal owner lead to its final closure as a labour magazine.

*Chubra* was one of the few papers aimed at a worker audience, which was managed and edited by trade unionists themselves. This experiment is a rather rare phenomenon in Egypt where a lot of ‘non-workers’, such as lawyers and journalists, interfered strongly in the workers’ movement in order to establish the hegemony of different political forces (Wafd, Constitutional Liberals and the Palace).

This weekly remains a rich source for the understanding and knowledge of the labour history. Based on the stimulating work of Alain Touraine, we aim to examine such a workers’ voice. Touraine considers that three principles can be found in labour expression: a principle of identity, of opposition and of totality. This means respectively, a worker self-designation, views of the opponents, and representations of their commitment and what is at stake.

This weekly paper was a tool to express ideas, values and world conceptions of labour unionists that cannot be reduced to statements, declarations or unions’ programs.

We will mainly deal with the history of the idea. We will try to get into a cultural history by focusing a part of our work on the editorial culture of the paper. But the lack of any archives of the paper is such a negative element. We want to discuss how the original paper can be considered as a specific but limited ‘space of workshop for labour ideas’ and how it developed specific labour viewpoints and agenda.

The first section will explain the general context (social, political and cultural) in which this paper appeared. Then, we will examine its launch and management before dealing with its more specific “journalistic” dimensions, such as writing and editing. We will analyse the outlook focusing on specific issues: the world of textile labour in Egypt; union issues, society and elements of what can be called a labour culture (poetry, advertising etc). We will then analyse the political dimensions of this trade unionist paper. Finally, we will put this paper experiment in perspective by comparing it to the workers’ press of the 1940s. For the written draft, we intend to select several documents (first pages, articles and iconography).

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1 In Egypt, legal restrictions made it rather difficult to have a licence to edit a paper or a review. A common way was to rent an existing paper to its legal owner.