5.1 On justice towards peasants: from Rifaa Rafi al-Tahtawi’s Paths of Egyptian Minds in the Delights of Modern Culture, 1869 Juan R. I. Cole

Preface

The Egyptian reformer and educator Rifaa Rafi al-Tahtawi (1801-73), a major figure of the Arab Renaissance of the mid-nineteenth century, was born in the small town of Tahta in Upper Egypt. He rose to become one of Egypt's great landlords, and a pillar of the establishment in Ottoman Egypt under the khedives. One might have expected him to disdain the poor and workers, as, in fact, many among the Egyptian notables did. Despite a strong element of paternalism in his views he is remarkably sympathetic to the working poor. He was sent to study at Al-Azhar seminary in 1817 on his father's death, following in the footsteps of many of his uncles. In 1822 he began teaching at Al-Azhar, and in 1824 his mentor Hasan al_Attar nominated him as the preacher for one of Muhammad Ali Pasa's newly formed military units. In 1826, again on Al-Attars initiative, he was appointed one of four prayer leaders for an educational mission to Paris. While in France until 1831, he completed a rigorous course of university studies. On his return in 1831, Ibrahim Pap granted him thirty-one feddans of land as a reward for his accomplishments, and he became a French teacher at the medical school. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s he busied himself as a translator and promoter of language-learning, and by 1846 was promoted to the civil rank of miralay and given a substantial grant of land. In 1850-4 he was exiled to Khartoum in the Sudan by "bus I, but was permitted to return to Cairo by Said Pap, where he worked again as a translator, and subsequently as superintendent of the military academy in the Citadel until its closure in 1860.

By 1863 the government's financial woes had been assuaged by the Cotton Boom, and Ismail Pasa had come to the throne, appointing Al-Tahtawi head of a new Translation Bureau charged with rendering into Arabic the Napoleonic Code. In 1868 Al-Tahtawi’s history of ancient Egypt, The Glorious Lights of Divine Confirmation (Anwar Tawfiq al-Jalil) was published, and in 1869 he brought out a long and very important book on political economy, Paths for Egyptian Minds to the Delights of Modern Culture (Manahij al-Albab al-Misriyya fi Mabahij al-Adab al-'Asriyya), from which the translation below is drawn. The heady atmosphere of the Cotton Boom years (1862-6), as well as the class stratification, dislocations, high indebtedness, growing taxes, and spiraling population growth
of the mid- to the late 1860s, are apparent in this book. After 1850 Egypt’s population growth-rate also swelled; the number of Egyptians rose from about 5 million in 1848 to about 8 million in 1882, a very substantial increase that put pressure on the land and contributed to the fragmentation of peasant estates. The number of landless laborers grew during this period.

In the passages that precede the text below, Al-Tahtawi attempts to explain why private property in land arises and why peoples give up their natural indolence to labor in agriculture. He was influenced in his thinking on these matters by his knowledge of European political economy, but also by his experiences in the Sudan, where he saw pastoral nomads such as the Dinka in a state he presumed to be pre-agricultural. He argued that, over time, population growth makes it impossible to live off the land as nomads do, impelling peoples to begin actively cultivating the soil. This turn to agriculture for Malthusian reasons makes land a commodity that can be bought and sold in the market, further increasing its value and the value of agricultural labor. Because of his labor theory of value, Al-Tahtawi seeks a better deal for workers, without wishing to expropriate landowners or to denigrate government officials. The French utopian socialist movement known as Saint-Simonianism influenced his ideas on these issues. They also owed something, however, to his understanding of Islamic law, which he interprets in a highly progressive manner. It is unknown whether Al-Tahtawi attempted to put into practice his ideals by paying his own peasants better than did other landlords of the time.

Text

In the course of a people progress, a civilized right emerges among them—the right to own land by occupying it and giving it life where it had been fallow. From this time, the land comes to have a value in and of itself, in addition to the value of the labor. The worker of the land then has a claim on it by virtue of ownership, even when he is not actively laboring on it [...] At that time, each individual in the society will practice farming as his profession, and labor therein, being compelled to hire himself out for tilling and planting, so that he might earn a living through his profession. He works for the owner of the land in the capacity of a hired laborer, and charges himself with spending all his time in the service of the land, without repose save for necessary intervals for eating, drinking, sleeping, praying, and so forth. Thus, the agricultural produce increases and grows day by day through an abundance of labor, and the laborer who at one time worked a small amount and spent his time in idleness, is now obliged to do a huge amount of work in the same time. He seeks to acquire a great deal of produce, in accordance with the increase in human power. That is to say, both the workers and the property owners strive in investigating ways to advance and facilitate work, and to save time doing it.
The laborer, by striving, will be able to accomplish three or four times as much work in a single day as he used to do, insofar as the worker has become freed, under these conditions, from idleness and is at liberty to work and perpetually train himself. The more he practices, the more complete his knowledge, whereby he can make his work excellent. The laborer, by perfecting agriculture, improves it and becomes more skilled in it. He develops his work, becomes versatile, and divides it up. He comes to know times, seasons, and hours, to know what pertains to the various sorts of agriculture and the improvements that will strengthen it. The value of labor rises with experience and excellence, and the laborer likewise comes to have knowledge of the peculiarities of the modern resources on which he depends, which facilitate his craft, such as air, water, and steam. These techniques, which make his work easier, will play the role for him of volunteer labor. Only the master of skills and of crafts can improve their use. When these perfected and beneficial techniques become widespread among farmers, the daily productivity of the workers will improve and the fruits of their labor will prove abundant. An image of the activities of this advanced sort of labor will by these means be impressed on the mirror of the mind of the agricultural community. They will become accustomed to undertaking agricultural tasks with energy, and the social benefits will gradually be renewed, beginning to increase infinitely. And by these popular benefits the wealth of the subjects and the prosperity of their way of life will increase.

It is, at the moment, the landowners alone who pick the fruits of these agricultural improvements and reap the benefits of this reform of farming—which is for the most part produced by labor and the use of the power of tools. They, and not those who practice the profession of agriculture, enjoy the greatest advantages. The land- and farm-owners are the ones who seize the general proceeds, and who obtain their benefits, until everyone else receives hardly anything from these yields. They only give to the people according to the service and labor of the latter, recompensing them for their hardships out of their magnanimity. This is to say that normally the owners enjoy the revenues of the labor, and pay, in exchange for an immense amount of work, an insignificant sum that does not requite this labor. What reaches the workers in return for their labor upon the farms, or makers of tools in return for crafting them, is a small thing in relation to the huge amounts yielded to the owners. The owner seizes most of the produce of the earth for himself, and after settling the accounts of agricultural expenses and all their costs, he takes their produce in its entirety as profit from the land, provender for livestock, and the cost of tools. He only gives an insignificant amount of it to those who perform the labor. He does not take into account that someone among these workers has improved agriculture through his work, and invented productive techniques for it, making great discoveries in causing agriculture to thrive and in multiplying its activities.
The right of ownership and possession of farms has permitted the owners to administer the affairs of their estates with complete liberty; and to give to the workers whatever they think is appropriate for them. The owners believe that they possess great rights because of their ownership, and that they themselves are the most deserving of the prosperity and riches accruing from the revenues of agricultural activity. They hold that none of the other people of the kingdom deserve any of the earth’s produce, except in recompense for his service and the benefit he has been commissioned to render in respect to the land. In consequence, everyone who wants to make his living from service, which is labor, is compelled to work for whatever amount it is possible to get from the owners, depending upon their pleasure, even though this amount be extremely small and incommensurate with the labor. This is particularly so in areas where there are a great many workers, who then accept diminished wages and compete with one another in this, to the benefit of the landowners. This happens even though the earth’s yields and fertility are only improved by the farming activity of these wage laborers whose wages have been cut. And just as the owners monopolize all the agricultural labor of the peasant stratum, in the same way they monopolize the products of all the crafts. For all the crafts strive and endeavor in tasks and activities that are called for by the needs of the farm-workers, such as smith-craft, carpentry; and all the crafts of trades that relate to agricultural affairs.

The result of all this is that if the fates do not aid someone to become the possessor of a strip of land, he will continue to share with the owner of the land in the agricultural profits which are obtained, but his enjoyment will be extremely deficient. For, he will receive from the agricultural produce only the amount that the owner grants to him in compensation for his services, his art and craft, and the price of the tools, instruments, and machines suitable to agriculture. If the owner of the land is liberal, generous, and open-handed, he will compensate him completely and be generous to the one by whose art he benefits. It has been the custom that the farm-worker is not requited according to the amount of his service and cultivation because of the famous rule, 'He who sows shall reap;' that is, the harvest belongs to the owner. And Muhammad said, 'The crop belongs to the sower.' However, the meaning here is that the seed and its fruit belong to whoever sows it, though he has to pay a rent-for instance for the land-not that that worker is to take a tiny wage for his labor. A narrative is found in the two books of Sound Traditions that Muhammad treated with the people of Khaybar by dividing into two the fruit and crops that they produced.' That is, he gave them half in recompense for their labor. And in another version, he gave the Jews of

This is a reference to collections of Hadith (a report on the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad) considered reliable by Islamic legal scholars. It is not clear which specific collection(s) A1-Tahtawi has in mind.
Khaybar the date trees, the earth, and materials in return for their labor, leasing, and farming. What pleased Muhammad were the forms of farming such as leasing (musaqah). The crop mentioned in the tradition was barley, as some have demonstrated, and like this above-mentioned crop are mulukhiyya, okra, peaches, and apricots, and it is proper to cultivate these crops by lease. The seed for these crops comes from the landowner, unlike the case where the seed is from the labourer, which is a form of contracting (mukhabara) [for a mature form of the seed] and is also termed an agreement (musharata), which occurs in the case of grapes and peaches. In this instance, the owner provides land to the worker, who then sows it with his own seed, and likewise in the case of wheat. The incidence of contracting, although it is impermissible, is now greater in Egypt than that of [licit] leasing.

Thus the tradition, 'The crop belongs to the sower' does not at all indicate that the owner is allowed to usurp the yield without compensating the worker. Nor can swindling the hired laborer be justified by holding that the owner has paid out his capital for the costs of the farming and taken upon himself its expenses, and thus is the one who most deserves to usurp the enormous yields, and most deserves to profit from his vast wealth, since he is the basis for profit-making, whereas the activity of the farm-workers is only secondary and is produced and improved by investment of capital. Such analyses are pure fallacies, however, since our discussion of the worker has already determined that he is the source of productive labor, without whom the land would not have yielded these great profits. The landowner's short-changing the worker by diminishing his wages is pure injustice against him. His owning the land and expending from his capital on agriculture do not necessitate that he grab up the major portion of the yield and injure the wage laborer, who is vulnerable because peasants are numerous, and are thus willing to take diminished wages and are bid down in competition with one another. This underpayment does not produce love for the owners on the part of the hired labor, and 'Grapes are not reaped of thistles.' In this lies mutual harm, which is forbidden in the revelation.

That it is forbidden is indicated by what Abu Hurayrah related: 'The Messenger of God said, "Be not envious of one another, nor consider one another ritually

2 The plant species Corchorus olitorius, also known as Jew's mallow. It is the prime ingredient in a traditional Arab stew of the same name (i.e mulukhiyya).

He was an early convert to Islam from the Daws tribe, companion of the Prophet, and well-known narrator of Hadith. Quoting Abu Hurayrah here would emphasize the soundness of the Hadith to a nineteenth-century (and even a twenty-first-century) Muslim audience. Recently, the reliability of Abu Hurayrah has become the subject of criticism by Sayyid Muhammad al-Tijam al-Samawi in his book Then I Was Guided (2000). His critique of Abu Hurayrah has been interpreted as an attack on Islamic legal traditions and an attempt to win converts to either the Tijaniyya Sufi order or Shi’ism. For an online glimpse at the back and forth, see www.al-islam.org/guidedl and www.ansar.org/englishanswering.htm.
polluted, nor hate one another, nor turn your backs on one another, nor sell another merchandise after he has contracted to buy it from someone else. Be brotherly servants of God. A Muslim is the brother of a Muslim, and does not transgress against him, nor abandon him, nor lie to him, nor despise him. Piety is right here." He pointed to his breast three times. "It is sufficient evil for a man to despise his Muslim brother. Every Muslim is forbidden to [take from] every other: his blood, his wealth, and his dignity."