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ART AND LIBERTY: SURREALISM IN EGYPT

by Don LaCoss

Egyptian surrealism broke above ground in late 1937 in Cairo, midwifed through the efforts of Georges Henein, Ramsīs Yūnān, Kāmil al-Tilmisāni, and the brothers Fu'ad and Anwar Kāmil. Throughout the Second World War, the group attracted the involvement of native Egyptians and European expatriates; they propagated a program for the revolutionary defense of the imagination, free expression, and social freedom. Their approach was consistent with ever other surrealist group in the world: a challenging blend of libertarian anti-capitalism, Freudian theories of the unconscious, and wild, poetic subversions of the sort found in the pages of Rimbaud and Lautréamont. In addition to targeting the moribund cultural values of academicism and conservative pharaonicism that dominated Egyptian intellectual and artistic production at the time, the surrealists also critically attacked fascism, the British military occupation, Egyptian monarchists and the liberal bourgeoisie, Muslim nationalism, the brutal persistence of landowner feudalism, and the institutionalized exploitation of women and industrial workers. The Egyptian surrealists were active for the best part of the decade before being dismantled by Egyptian police and British military occupation authorities in the first days of the Cold War.
The greatest and most lasting impact of the Egyptian surrealists' projects was the creation of the "Art and Liberty Group" (in Arabic the initials are "JFH"), which had been set up as a chapter of the International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art (acronymed "FIARI" in French), a global network of intellectual and creative workers pledged to "emancipating the imagination from any and all constraints" by any means necessary. FIARI was formulated in Coyoacán, Mexico at the home of Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera in the summer of 1938 by surrealist poet André Breton and exiled revolutionist Leon Trotsky with the manifesto "For an Independent Revolutionary Art."
This brief joint statement from Mexico proposed FIARI as a critical response to the reactionary cultural politics of Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and Franco. FIARI was described as a free forum of "divergent aesthetic, philosophical, and political leanings"; it was to be open to all so long as there was a complete commitment to the radical freedom of all creative

expression in the culture wars against the repulsive racist Nazi “New Traditionalism,” the Third International’s insipid regimes of socialist realism and proletarian literature, and all other authoritarian policing of free thought and expression. The “For an Independent Revolutionary Art” statement concludes with a dialectical couplet that succinctly captures the goals of FIARI: “We want the independence of art for the revolution and the revolution for the extreme liberation of art.”

In response to Breton and Trotsky’s manifesto, small FIARI groups sprang up in New York City, London, Brussels, Paris, Fort-de-France (Martinique), Santiago (Chile), and Cairo, but the timing, of course, was terrible: the outbreak of World War II (September 1939), the murder of Trotsky by Stalinist assassins (August 1940), and the subsequent splits within the Trotskyite Fourth International seriously impeded the network’s internationalist efforts. Despite the disintegration of the global FIARI network in the early ‘40s, however, the surrealists who had set up Egypt’s JFH stubbornly promoted the FIARI program, but their publications delved into other subjects: antifascist action, anti-imperialism, radical educational reform, Freudian theory, women’s emancipation. Each issue of their newspaper *al-Tatawwur* (“Evolution”)—the first socialist journal in Egypt since Marxism was outlawed there in 1924 and the first socialist paper to publish completely in Arabic—affirmed some of its concerns in its editorial statement: “This review fights against the reactionary spirit, protects the rights of the individual and insists on the right of women to live in freedom. This review fights for modern art and free thought, and presents to young Egypt the movements of today.” In the second issue of *al-Tatawwur*, a short statement by Tawfiq Hana’ Allah called “A School of Discontent” summed up the group’s goals: “Our primary task is to establish a school where we can teach people how and why they should be discontented, discontented with the chains that bind them and the society whose values are set in stone.” In one police spy report filed with the Egyptian prime minister, *al-Tatawwur* was described as a publication dedicated to “spread anarchy, destroy morals and religion, and bring about the collapse of the pillars of the social and legal establishment necessary for the running of the country.”

The JFH also organized conferences, debates, film screenings, and exhibitions, including five controversial annual “Independent Art Expositions” held in Cairo between 1940 and 1945, each of which presented a broad range of numerous new works in a diversity of styles and media and that sometimes included art from elsewhere in the Arab world, such as Syria and Lebanon. Publication of feisty declarative tracts accompanied each exposition that reiterated some of the FIARI’s core tenets: the 1941 “Free Art in Egypt” manifesto, for instance, called for the “arousal of astonishment in the minds of the masses,” intractable resistance to the dominant forms of conservative neo-classical image-making, and encouraged discussions about contemporary currents of

visual culture; 1942's proclamation "The Message of Free Art" demanded that creative energies be directed to restoring "what has died in the grasp of tyranny" since the rise of fascism, and it cheered the "strong, arousing psychic current" of international solidarity with those suffering under these dictatorships that was electrifying many of those whose work appeared in the exhibition. One of the most remarkable things about the JFH's Independent Art Exposition was the large number of women whose works were prominently featured, especially in the fields of photography and painting— in her memoirs, the prominent Egyptian left-wing feminist Inji Aflatun recalls that her introduction to Marxism came while she was high-school student in Cairo thanks to three years of contact with members of the JFH and her participation in their "independent art" exhibitions.

Because it was the first socialist organization to be led by Arabic-speaking indigenous Egyptians, the JFH had been always closely monitored by the authorities, but both Egyptian and British authorities tolerated their activities since the JFH was so vehemently antifascist—at the time, there were a number of resurgent Sunni Muslim national liberation leagues like the Young Egypt Party, Nationalist Islamic Party, and factions of the Society of the Muslim Brotherhood that were all suspected of collaborating with foreign agents of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, so any native Arabic-language antifascist propaganda was thought to be important for the war effort. By 1942, though, the threat of an indigenous Arabic group agitating for a militant internationalist fight to emancipate workers in Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut, Algiers, and Jerusalem outweighed the benefits of their antifascist interventions and the screws began to tighten.

In late 1944, Egyptian and British authorities began to organize a troop deployment to Greece to fight in that civil war—the right-wing junta there called for foreign assistance to battle the guerrillas that opposed their dictatorship. But when word reached leftist British soldiers stationed in Cairo and Alexandria that they were being sent across the Mediterranean to put down a revolt of workers and former antifascist resistance fighters, a mutiny began to brew. Among those Egyptian socialists who began to call upon British and Greek soldiers to refuse to fight against their fellow workers were those who had been active in the JFH—they smuggled water, food, money and small arms to the mutineers, and on one occasion, switched a cargo of pamphlets that the RAF was scheduled to drop: instead of official British propaganda ordering the mutineers to surrender, the plane instead dropped thousands leaflets encouraging them to resist.

Following the strong showing by (non-Stalinist) Socialist Front candidates in the 1945 general elections, state repression intensified—the Egyptian government established a "Supreme Court of Security" that targeted revolutionary socialists with a strike force of political police officials from the Egyptian Ministry of the Interior and British military intelligence. A number of the surrealists were picked up in police sweeps that shut down

publications, bookstores, and left-wing culture clubs. In response to these crackdowns, the revolutionary socialists helped to organize the protest movement of February 1946 against the King and the British military occupation. Twenty-eight unarmed protestors were killed by the British Army and the Egyptian police force, which in turn triggered huge demonstrations and several strikes throughout February, including the general strike of February 21st. Some of the surrealists were active in the publication of leaflets urging demonstrators to move their protests into working-class neighborhoods and away from the gates of the Palace; under the slogan “Towards The Workers,” a breakaway march of some 3000 students in Alexandria moved towards the districts where 30,000 textile workers lived, prompting police to open fire on the crowd, killing five before the crowd dispersed. Another wave of arrests and more intense police repression followed.

Within six months of the general strike, sixteen members of the Egyptian surrealist group were imprisoned along with more than a thousand other political prisoners. The JFH no longer existed: surrealist theorist and painter Ramsīs Yūnān was arrested in early 1947 and later expelled to France, and his friends Henein and Iqbal al-Ailly did the same, both breaking with the Trotskyist mainstream (at this time, that surrealist poet Benjamin Péret, his comrade from the Spanish Revolution Grandizo Munis, and Trotsky’s widow, Natalya Sedova, were issuing joint declarations from Mexico City denouncing the Fourth International) and relocating to Paris where they, like many other surrealists around the world in the early 1950s, aligned with the anarchists. Other Egyptian surrealists were driven underground, into exile, or into retreat from participation in the spheres of political, social, and cultural activity. Nasser’s nationalist military coup in 1952 signaled the start of increased hostility towards surrealism.

This mention of anarchism above prompts me to say a few words, now, to readers of *Communicating Vessels* about surrealism and Trotskyism. The surrealists were outspoken in their criticisms of the Soviet Union since 1933, but in an effort to save Marx and Engels’s anti-capitalist baby from being thrown out with Stalin’s unremittingly psychotic bathwater, the surrealists began in the mid-‘30s to advocate dissident Marxist alternatives, such as the theories of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexandra Kollontai, Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, Trotsky, and, by 1936, the various libertarian communists of the Spanish Revolution. Surrealist interest in Trotskyism, then, is probably best seen as shorthand for interest in his role as the revolutionary architect of Russia’s withdrawal from the savage intercapitalist hostilities of the First World War and for anti-Stalinist libertarian Marxism more generally, and not for his appalling work as Lenin’s hatchet man against anarchists in Russia during the late ‘teens and early ‘twenties or his tenure as the Red Army high commander during the civil war against White Russian counter-revolutionaries.

Despite their interest in Socialist Party politics during the Egyptian general elections, the surrealists of the JFH were never far from the black magnetic poles of anarchy. The ideas of anti-state communism have always been an important ingredient in all surrealist theory and practice—one notable exception was Anwar Kāmil, one of the founders of the Egyptian surrealist group who split from the JFH and threw in his lot with the Communist Party, only to break with them a short time later and return to the JFH, whereupon he wrote *Opium of the People*, arguably the most scathing, uncompromising attack on Stalinism to have been ever published in the Arab world.

But otherwise anarchism has been a near-constant beneath their Marxist analysis. For example, in a piece published in Cairo in 1936, Georges Henein had championed anarchy as "the victory of the mind over certainty"; ten years later, he translated a poem by antifascist exile Stefano Terra dedicated to the insurrectionary anarcho-communist Errico Malatesta (who, incidentally, had fought against British troops in Egypt in the early 1880s) and published it in the pages of the last surrealist magazine of the period, illustrated with an automatic drawing by Ramsīs Yūnān. In another instance, Feisal 'abd al-Rahman Shahbander wrote an essay called "Limitations and Boundaries" in 1940 for *al-Tatawwur* that proclaimed:

> The word "freedom" is one of those rare words that contain everything. It cannot be added to or subtracted from—if we were to define it, then we would be committing a major error. By defining "freedom" we restrict its meaning, and by explaining it we limit its significance, for the word "freedom" is one of those words that, when released, reveals its meaning by itself. Perhaps the furthest that the human mind has gone in imagining how to free itself from limitations and boundaries is what anarchism has said in the phrase: "Neither god nor master."

The next time that you overhear some idiotic "expert" apologize for Western military interventions by saying that one of the problems with the contemporary Middle East is that there are no traditions of liberty, mention the Cairo surrealists. The JFH is just one of a vast array of currents of radical libertarian thought in the Arab world (and elsewhere) whose stories have been violently suppressed by the forces of industrial capitalism and bourgeois liberal democracy that are now largely lost to history.