

Market Tyrannies, Popular History, and the End of the Guilds in Egypt

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Introduction

The decline and disappearance of the Egyptian guilds 1800-1914 is usually seen as a top-down affair in which decaying and passive traditional trades and guilds were destroyed by European imports on the one side and abolished by official decree linked to reforming projects of modernizing elites on the other. My research has attempted to revise this top-down picture by recovering the grassroots history of guilds, crafts and service workers on the basis of much new source material. I argue that the breakdown of the corporate order and the rise of new networks and organizations were related as much to economic adaptation from below and popular protest as they were to the actions of elites. The guilds were broken up as much as by economic restructuring and adaptation as they were by the disappearance of traditional trades: monopolies were undermined by the loss of customary rights and duties and the growth of competition related to the spread of market relations. The rapid expansion of certain trades made guild organization weak or problematic. The ruralization of the textile industry, not its economic collapse, broke up the textile guilds. The emergence of new forms of production (larger workshops, putting out systems, contracting networks) and intensified forms of exploitation made guild organization more difficult, or created conflicts which guilds could not contain. In short, social and economic changes, spurred on by the adaptation of guild members themselves, worked to break up the guilds. But as the end of the guilds was ultimately a transformation of political order and community, even more important

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was contentious interaction with the state, which forms the main focus of this paper. It was not that modernizing elites crafting wise solutions sought to abolish guilds seen as backward and traditional and eventually got their way. Instead, nineteenth century officialdom sought to use the guilds for new purposes, and resistance by guild members to such policies (not their passivity) played a major role in the official abrogation of the guilds in 1890. The protests of guild members against local exploitation built new networks and ultimately new organizations, discredited guilds and their customs, and dragged the state and new regulations into guild affairs, undermining the autonomy of the guild. In these ways the guild order was broken up from within as well as from without.

Defining the End of the Guilds

The Ottoman guilds in Egypt were neither a mystical and fraternal brotherhood (Massignon), a tool in the hand of the government (Baer), or a backward and restrictive monopoly (Raymond, Baer). Instead they embodied an enduring, varied, and flexible corporate order for the organization of urban occupational life. The guild (*ta'ifa*, pl. *tawa'if*) was a group of all those practicing a particular profession in a particular place. Guilds usually enjoyed a monopoly guaranteed by customary rights and duties and underpinned by a segmented market structure. Guilds often formed social communities for their members, as suggested by their corporate presence at major festivities, the existence of initiation ceremonies, ethnic, national or linguistic markers, trade customs, and distinctive clothes and locations. They also often solved economic and social problems for their members – regulating numbers in the trade, the flow of raw materials, and on occasion providing mutual assistance. Guilds were usually headed by a shaykh who exercised leadership and solved disputes on the basis of customary law, and linked guilds to the government, chiefly through maintaining order and collecting and distributing taxes. Their complex, semiautonomous relationship to the government was bolstered by their rich network of connections to other groups and individuals drawn from state, society, and in-between: sufi orders, Janissary corps, tax farmers, members of Pasha's household, mamluks, the court system and the men of religion ('ulama').

By 1914 this corporate order, which had evolved in dynamic fashion for centuries, had largely broken up. True, certain guild-like groups were still to be found at public celebrations until even the mid-twentieth century. One or two

observers reported the existence of mutual help in the trades in the early 1900s. Shaykhs or would-be shaykhs continued to exercise unofficial authority in particular trades, or lived on as contractors or brokers, often in highly exploitative forms, into the first decades of the twentieth century. Some guild terminology carried over into new organizations such as unions. But monopolies guaranteed by customary rights and duties for particular trades had disappeared; indeed, the 'freedom' of the trades was decreed in 1890. Licenses to trade were now granted by the state, not by the guild. The old segmented market structure and its 'natural' monopolies (Harvey) had been swept away by new communications infrastructure and the spread of competition and market relations. Whatever remaining social and economic functions maintained by guild-like groups were attenuated, rare, and/or unofficial. A realm of semiautonomous customary law was replaced on the one hand by codified, bureaucratic regulations, implemented by officials, and on the other by local, unofficial networks and rackets. What had been seen as legitimate customary autonomy was now vilified as backward and 'traditional', the latter word taking on an entirely new meaning holding back progress and modernization. The official guild leaderships of yesteryear, who had collected taxes and imposed order on behalf of the government, lost their remaining official functions in 1892. The old, complex relationship to the state was no more as the central bureaucracy emerged, as tax farmers, Janissary corps and other power brokers disappeared, and as sufi orders and the religious establishment lost their older forms of autonomy. Intimate relationships to the qadi courts were severed with the emergence of new secular courts. The unions and syndicates which started to appear, especially after the protests of 1907 were distinctively new forms of social organization, linked to new and changing social groups, with no state-like functions, and premised more on the social interests of individuals and interest-groups than on order, hierarchy, justice and community.

These far reaching social, economic and political changes were not simply the result of the decline of a backward and passive crafts sector, on the one side, and a deluge of European imports/ investment along with the projects of modernizing state officials on the other. What conventional accounts have missed or ignored is the role of economic adaptation and popular protest in driving forward the array of changes that comprised the end of the guilds in Egypt. Here I want to examine first how forms of resistance prior to the 1890s both dragged in the state on the one side, and foiled state-based projects on the other – a process which undermined the guilds

from within and without. Second I will consider how the encounter with the new colonial bureaucracy and emerging forms of exploitation and productive relations after the 1890s provoked new kinds of mobilization which contributed to the establishment of new kinds of social organization. The whole process I have described as 'out of the frying pan' which refers to the crises of the guilds co-opted by dynasty-building and unable to deliver solutions to new problems before 1890, and 'into the fire', which refers to the new crisis of the unprotected encounter with new forms of exploitation and a colonial bureaucracy that was by turns unresponsive and heavy-handed.

Restructuring not Disappearance

It makes much more sense to speak of the restructuring of crafts and service trades than of their destruction. In construction, furnishing, garment-making, weaving, dyeing, urban transport, metallurgy, ironwork, carpentry, tannery, milling, butchery, patisserie-making, chemical industries such as oil, soap, candle-making, and artistic trades such as jewelry, fine-carpentry and embossing, and new trades such as mechanical repair – crafts workers continued to find work in significant numbers and continued to deliver much needed cheap goods and services to large sections of the population. Where imported shoes remained expensive, shoemakers, for example, diversified in their thousands to produce and repair shoes in European-styles, customized to taste. Tailors, seamstresses, furniture-makers, and construction workers in their tens of thousands thoroughly transformed their products in order to tap new demands for European styles. Masons, for example, started to dress stones in the Italian fashion and tailors now sewed European-style suits and shirts. Moreover, some of the commonest urban trades in Egypt by 1914, such as cab-driving and carting, were completely new. These trades, which were ubiquitous in the newly-paved streets of Egypt's cities by 1914, did not exist at all during the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Although put under considerable pressure, and relatively impoverished, the available statistics indicate that numbers in employment steadily increased in absolute terms, and even advanced slightly as a proportion of Egypt's fast growing population. According to the census of 1897, for example, about 260,000 worked in manufacturing of all kinds in Egypt – all but a tiny proportion of this total being employed in small, locally-run workshops. By 1907 this figure had risen to around 380,000, and by 1917 to around 490,000. Such totals represented a steady advance

on the proportion of the population employed in Egypt in industry – from 2.7% to 3.9% over the period. The statistics for Cairo tend to confirm this picture. In 1897 around 53,000 worked in manufacturing, and by 1917 around 84,000 – totals which advanced the proportion of the population working in industry from 9.3% to 10.6%. Again, the overwhelming majority - perhaps more than 97% - of these workers were employed in largely unmechanised, small enterprises. In an indication of this, 'employers' and 'self-employed' outnumber 'workers' in the 1917 census. As the Commission on Commerce and Industry - commissioned to enquire into the state of Egyptian industry during the First World War, when local production suddenly became an issue for British rulers now interested in war-time provisioning - noted, "in reality, and despite its appellation, ['small-industry' is] the most important because it occupies the greatest number of workers and extends its network in all towns and farmsteads of Egypt". Only where crafts and services faced direct competition from large-scale industry duplicating the exact product or service to meet strong and standardisable demand were they steadily destroyed. Where demand was weak, fluctuating or customised in one way or another, crafts and service workers could continue to make a living.

The availability of such low profit areas in the economy was only the pre-requisite for crafts' survival in a new age. Increasingly competitive conditions forced crafts and service workers to restructure their production. New trades appeared, older trades adapted or were abandoned; larger workshops and putting out networks were built. Production costs were lowered by the use of cheaper premises and the widespread purchase of cheaper and more convenient raw materials, often produced by factory-industry. Productivity was improved to some degree in various cases by piecemeal mechanisation. The key to cheap production, however, was reductions in the cost of labour – both skilled and unskilled. In competition with large-scale production and with each other, crafts and service workers owning some means of production engaged in self-exploitation, lowering their rates to the extent that their profits only sufficed for their own subsistence and the reproduction of their existing fixed and working capital. And where labour was cheap, abundant and largely unprotected, masters squeezed the semi-skilled and unskilled workers under their control, lengthening hours, lowering wages, raising the intensity of work and allowing conditions to deteriorate.

Unofficial Resistance

If there was no simple economic destruction of the guilds, artisans, and small crafts, retail and services industries, it was also not the case that the guilds were simply abolished by the modernising state. In fact, for much of the nineteenth century, officials did not seek to destroy the guilds, but to co-opt them in tax-raising and regulation for dynasty building in the name of progress and order. Just as in the countryside where village headmen and umda-s were increasingly important for the state, in the towns the central government sought to use guild shaykhs and leaderships to raise new and increased taxes, to conscript labour, and to impose new forms of order and regulation connected to town planning, hygiene, law and order, and so on.

In part because their local guilds were the very instrument of new impositions, it was difficult for members of guilds to combine together to resist. Unlike during the last days of the mamluks in Egypt, or for the Istanbul guilds during the deposition of Selim III, furthermore, they had few allies among the middling classes – as the Janissary corps had been abolished, the sufi orders, tax-farmers and religious establishment brought to heel. The crushing of rural rebellions must have been a formidable deterrent to would-be rebels. Direct complaints about policies emanating from the centre were largely off-limits – the fate of village shaykhs who tried being testimony to this.

Amid the frying pan of dynasty-building and self-strengthening, and important form of resistance involved guild members and their leaderships in unofficial and silent forms of co-ordinated resistance, differentiated from James C. Scott's 'weapons of the weak' in that these tactics were not entirely individualistic. The principal form of this involved co-ordination between guild leaderships and their allies in the guild to diminish their tax assessments, or to hide members from the tax-levy completely. Such forms of resistance should not be underestimated. These practices may have been fairly widespread – in the case of the grain warehouse assistants, or the Nubian servants or the boatmen and brokers and Alexandria. The case of the Cairo bakers of 1878 shows that a substantial proportion of bakers in Cairo – 545 – could go undetected by the tax man thanks to this kind of resistance. They frustrated state officials who responded by seeking to get ever closer to guild affairs. In the case of the bakers, the local authorities warned "all the masters in the district" to tender statements being warned that they would be held responsible if those working for them were not paying the professional tax. Furthermore, such

taxes started to cost more to levy than they yielded in revenue, a fact not lost on the British and Egyptians alike concerned with tax reform to repay the foreign debt after 1879. This contributed in turn to the actual abolition of many of these 'vexatious' taxes in the 1880s and 1890s. Because of guild resistance, tax reform started to be linked to the notion of guild abolition from the late 1870s onwards. Not only did this form of resistance discredit the guilds in the eyes of the authorities, however, but also impugned guild solidarity and community in the eyes of their members. For unofficial resistance was not based on guild solidarity but on pitting a clique of leaders and allies against other members of the guild. Weaker and poorer members of the guild, those who had no alliances with guild leaderships, inevitably lost out. These losses on occasion drove them to complain to the state, which could act as a referee, further dividing the guilds from within.

Dragging in the State: Loyal Petitioning

Indeed, much urban protest, was not directed against the central state, but against forms of local exploitation, which intensified as the corporate order broke down under political, economic and social pressures. Such forms of exploitation were partly the result of unofficial resistance against tax-raising, which often came at the expense of the weaker members of a guild, or those who had no strong ties to guild shaykhs. Exploitation also intensified amid, *inter alia*, commodification, growing competition, new forms of contracting, and labour squeezing. These protests – in the petitions of loyal subjects addressed to the mercy of the Khedive – sought not to avoid but to appeal to the state and its new regulations, especially new electoral procedures which had been promulgated for guild shaykhs and deputies in 1869. They played an important role in consolidating the role of the central state in guild affairs and undermining the customary autonomy of the guilds. Numerous examples are available, from weighers and measurers up and down the country, to the carters of Bulaq, construction workers, box makers, boatmen of Alexandria, the dyers of Cairo, merchants, the porters of Alexandria and the coal-heavers of Port Said. Here there is space to explore one such example, involving measurers.

In December 1876, some one hundred and thirty-four measurers from Bulaq port sent a long petition (more than one thousand words) to the Interior Minister. They were complaining about being robbed of their measuring fees by a contracting scam organized by a disgraced former head of the guild and five deputies. It appears that the former guild head, one Hasan 'Abd Allah, and a number of deputies had

been sentenced by a court to dismissal from the headship. The deputies had gone to prison, whereas Hasan 'Abd Allah had launched a legal appeal, during which time he does not seem to have been confined. Instead, he apparently brought several allies and managed to get them instated by the police as temporary replacement deputies in the guild of measurers. Meanwhile legitimate elections were held, and the guild voted for three new deputies and a new shaykh. But this election does not seem to have been recognized by the authorities. The temporary, illegitimate deputies started monopolizing measuring contracts and renting out measurers in exploitative way. Previously the measurers simply took the fee directly from the seller of grain, whereas now the deputies took the fee and distributed it later, taking their own unfair cut in the process.

As elsewhere, the petition linked claimants to powerholders, and the Bulaq measurers were careful to reiterate the notions of just ruler and loyal subject that accompanied petitioning. Beyond the usual references to your excellency (*dawlatalu afandim*) and to your servants (*'abidkum*), the petitioners also mention in a more unconventional manner that the corruption of Hasan 'Abd Allah is not hidden "from our wise leaders" (*la yakhfi dhalika 'ala asyaduna dhuya al-ma'qul*), invoking the putative omniscience as well as the benevolence of the powers-that-be. Further, the petitioners articulate and identify their interests with the language of justice (*haqq*). As the petitioners roundly assert, [4th line down on the left] "It is not made up that if we have rights (*huquq*) [fees which have been withheld] on the account of the deputies then we are not slow to complain to the bureaux of the government, which for its part gives each possessing a right his right (*i'ta kulla dhi haqq haqqahu*) and removes injustices". A strong statement as to popular expectations of the ideal functioning of the state. As the petitioners elaborate, [4th line up from bottom, right centre] "it is not permitted to dispossess the guild of about three hundred persons of work and of all the orders of the government". In fact, Hasan 'Abd Allah, it is asserted, [10th line up far left] "takes us as slaves, even though slavery and monopoly are forbidden, and yet his intention is to take us by a type of slavery just as when he was guild head". Measurers were asserting a right to make a living without dispossession or slavery. Finally, the petitioners impugn the probity of Hasan Abd Allah, underlining the fact that he does not enjoy the consent of the guild. There are repeated references to his trickery, treachery, and falsification, and it is several times asserted that the guild desire not Hasan 'Abd Allah but a different

shaykh and three deputies, who, it is claimed, have in fact already been legitimately elected and are of upright character.

Through petitioning and elaborating on the question of justice and the good practice of local leadership petitioners engaged an agreed-on language which linked them to the state and without any hint of transgression, conveying in the process some sense of the moral economy that stood behind the grievances of the 'enslaved' measurers, who were not receiving proper fees for measuring at the hands of corrupt deputies. In practice, whether or not the signatories were telling the whole truth, their petition appears to have been effective, at least as far as the archival record goes. The Interior Minister was quick to demand the truth of the matter from the Cairo governor, who replied a month later to say that the police would now – following a decision against Hasan Abd Allah from the Appeals Court – ensure the dismissal of Hasan Abd Allah from his position.

These protests had an only partially intended structural effect, which was to bring the codes and practices of bureaucracy, here in the shape of the police and the law courts, more closely to bear on guilds and trades, undermining their customary autonomy and local ability to solve disputes in the process. State regulation was not simply imposed on the guilds from without, but was also attracted from within. The abolition of the guilds in 1890 was therefore in part a consequence of contentious interaction with the state. The state was already rooted in craft affairs by the 1880s, so abolition was feasible. Second, it was clear to officials that guilds, because of resistance from below, were not doing the job the state believed that they were supposed to: they were neither delivering order nor collecting taxes adequately. In other words, dis-aggregation had much to do with contention, and abolition had much to do with resistance. Both unofficial resistance and loyal petitioning worked in various ways to build sub- and extra-guild networks, to drag in state intervention, to displace custom as a basis for trade regulation, and undermine the corporate solidarity of the guilds. Loyal petitioning was almost invariably based on a struggle against local exploitation, which pitted rank and file against local exploiters and leaders. The guilds dissolved themselves because of their inadequacies in the face of market relations and state-building – this is why they were never suppressed; this is why there were no protests when they were quietly abolished in 1890. This is why the artisans interviewed by Germain Martin in 1909 could only remember the abuse they had suffered at the hands of their shaykhs and how the past was full of injustice

and 'black jokes'.² Historians have tended to explain guild quiescence with the notion of the passivity and destruction of a whole traditional economy – on the contrary, there was vigorous economic adaptation and restructuring. Therefore we can explain quiescence about abolition because guildsmen were not interested in saving their guilds by 1890 – which now involved a discredited oligarchy failing to solve new political, economic and social problems.

But what of Juan Cole's argument that the guilds played a significant role in popular demonstrations and protests during the 'Urabi rebellion, acting as a kind of 'shop democracy', protecting their members, mobilising resources for demonstrations and lobbying the state? Cole's research certainly showed that guild members participated in large numbers in urban demonstrations. My research also confirms his emphasis on the importance of new electoral practices and appeals to the rule of law within the guilds. My research thus supports Cole's heuristic contention that guild members may have applied the same norms to the Khedive as to local tyrants and this might have motivated protest when the political opportunity arose in 1882.

But how were these protests organized? Cole could not trace empirically the networks and modes of resource mobilisation on which urban demonstrations rested. His work in fact had to assume that the guilds formed the basis for protest – a highly problematic assumption. My own hypothesis is that popular protest was mobilized in sub- and extra-guild networks as much as by guilds acting as corporate units because the evidence I have seen suggests that guilds were deeply divided by restructuring and contentious politics by the early 1880s. Meaningful monopolies were being broken up with growing competition and lack of government protection. New forms of contracting, labour-squeezing, and the commodification of labour, combined with state cooptation of guild leaderships brought new forms of exploitation. Weapons of the weak and loyal petitioning were based on intra-guild conflict, not on guild solidarity. They also dragged in state intervention and undermined guild customary autonomy. Newly established democratic norms probably only raised expectations as the success of protest was decidedly uneven. New norms vivified the failings of the guild leaderships by bringing new standards to bear against their conduct while failing to solve intensifying problems. The fact that

² In Syria the picture may have been similar, at least if the memoirs of trade unionist Jibran Hilal (1908-1990) are anything to go by. He wrote of the abuse of the *shaykh al-kar* (head of the trade) ruling over the paving trade in Damascus "just as he liked" in the 1920s and of a process whereby journeymen rebelled and managed to escape from the unofficial clutches of trade leaderships by touting their trades on the streets so to connect directly with clients. Jibran Hilal, *Dhikriyyat al-Niqabi* [Memoirs of a Trade Unionist], introduction by Abdallah Hanna (Stockholm: Al-Yanabia, 2005), pp. 79-80.

there was no government discourse depicting guilds as a threat during 1881-82 points to the lack of meaningful guild organization – indeed, the government tried to use guild leaders to maintain order during the rebellion. We do not know how far the state was successful in this, but official perception clearly was not that the guilds were lost to the rebels, and such intervention may have worked to yet further increase intra-guild tension and compromise the position of guild leaderships by putting them on the side of European control and autocracy. In short, although more research on the details is required, it would appear that as far as the evidence goes, resources were probably not mobilized during 1881-82 on the basis of guild solidarity. Just because guild members were involved, this does not mean that their guild organizations were responsible for organizing them. It is more likely that such mobilization took place on the basis of sub- and extra-guild networks, forged already through other forms of protest in the preceding decades.

Collective Action and New Organizations

In spite of the failings of the guilds, their official abolition in 1890 did not mean a golden age of work. In spite of the tax-cuts which accompanied guild abrogation, and were celebrated by many, in a sense guild members had jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire. The distant colonial bureaucracy that took over the state-like functions of the intermediary guild leadership turned out to be unresponsive and distant on the one hand, and heavy-handed on the other. Exploitative guild-like and ex-guild leaderships remained on the scene, alongside new forms of contracting, sweatshops, labour-squeezing and self-exploitation. Furthermore, although some reform projects were discussed by intellectuals, there was no solution forthcoming for the social and economic problems of the crafts, and no social legislation was enacted for small-scale industry. Where workers found allies among an increasingly nationalist middle class, therefore, significant numbers engaged not in unofficial resistance or loyal petitioning, but in mass collective protest. These protests contributed to the making of new organizations – syndicates and unions in the 1900s.

The most dramatic of these mobilizations was the strike of Cairo's cab-drivers in March 1907. The strike was a response to the heavy-handed intervention into their trade by the colonial state allied to the SPCA seeking to protect the cabbies' horses. Cabbies, representing one of the most common and visible trades in Cairo by that time, and struggling to provide for their families under harsh conditions, faced

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regulations which were effected in a selective and arbitrary manner, fines which put them out of business, orders which prevented them from working, or did so in an illogical manner, on a wide scale. Thousands of arrests and fines were meted out in the early 1900s, and there were complaints of police brutality. Unofficial resistance was inadequate, loyal petitioning was tried but failed, and cabbies organized themselves and stopped work in late March, paralyzing the movement of Cairo's upper classes who relied on cabs. The colonial state backed down and rescinded the new regulations because it sought at all costs to prevent an embryonic alliance between the urban poor and middle class nationalists. The strike therefore, was successful, and resulted in organizational links to the nationalist middle class, and the establishment of a syndicate in 1908. This organization, like the unions which emerged from 1909 onwards, was not a guild in any meaningful sense. Such organizations did not defend monopolies, they ceded all state-like functions to the central state, and they were based not on custom, hierarchy and community but on the social interests of members understood in terms of the economy on the one side, and political ideology relating to state power on the other. The shaykh of the cabdrivers who represented his guild members to the authorities in 1907 may have been the very same person as the elected shaykh of the 1870s, but his political role was new: he was now representing the interests of a group, not fulfilling the demands of the Sultan's justice known to all and only contravened by the ambitious, the corrupt or the tyrannical. His object was not personal tyranny but the bureaucratic regulations affecting cab-drivers, however much discourse of tyranny remained to condemn such regulations. Likewise, the cabbies who organized in Autumn of 1907 were not complaining about the personal tyranny when they sought to prevent the import of motorised cabs. Instead they were complaining about an economic system and its management. This was new. Syndicates and unions, furthermore, were not linked to a complex of semiautonomous entities – from Janissary corps to ulama – but now forged organizational links to political parties formed in the Autumn of 1907 and to the other activities of nationalists. In these ways new kinds of organization and a distinctively modern form of mass politics was emerging.

Conclusion

Against prevailing views marked by elitism, this paper has argued that over a number of decades, contentious interaction with the state and new forms of

economic exploitation and adaptation broke up the guilds and built new networks and new kinds of organization: monopolies were undermined by the loss of customary rights and duties and the growth of competition related to the spread of market relations. The rapid expansion of certain trades made guild organization weak or problematic. The ruralization of the textile industry, not its economic collapse, broke up the textile guilds. The emergence of new forms of production (larger workshops, putting out systems, contracting networks) and intensified forms of exploitation made guild organization more difficult, or created conflicts which guilds could not contain. Even more important, because the end of the guilds was about a change in community and political order, was contentious interaction with the state. It was not that modernizing elites sought to abolish the traditional guilds and eventually got their way. Instead, nineteenth century officialdom sought to use the guilds for new purposes, and guild resistance to such policies (not their passivity) played a major role in their official abrogation in 1890. Unofficial resistance, loyal petitioning, and eventually mass protests undermined the customary basis of guild life, diminished its autonomy vis-à-vis the state, broke up its capacity to resolve and contain conflicts, broke out of its form of community and vision of corporate order, and forged new kinds of collective organization linked to social interests and political ideologies. The old corporate order was unable to solve new political, economic and social problems linked to state-building, world economic incorporation and colonial rule. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, the guild order was broken up from within as well as from without, and the attempt by those subordinated and disempowered to expand the range of their agency, that is, popular struggle, was irreducibly part of the story.

This account has a fundamental importance for breaking up the conventional, much criticized, but still persistent equation of progress and liberation with modernization. It was not that the end of the guilds represented a benign modernization which allowed Arabs and others to liberate themselves from the old-established tyrannies and immutability of the Ottoman past. The reality was fundamentally different. Instead, an old-established, flexible and semi-autonomous order for the organization of trade life was disrupted by predatory, centralizing, commodifying, reifying, and individuating political and economic transformation, and was rendered incapable of solving new problems, and transformed thereby into a form of exploitation, which popular groups then sought to escape. The older assumption, and the siren song of Arab nationalism, from the political left and right

alike, is that liberation would come through the escape from tradition and the tyrannies of the past. In fact, tradition had been altogether different, and the tyrannies were being made anew by modern conjunctures, and were not simply a left-over from a decayed and exhausted past. The scene of exploitation and the social crisis was not at all a long-standing feature of traditional society, which had its own, different problems, but something wrought through the nineteenth century processes of world economic incorporation, European imperialism, and local state-building and local responses to it. This view would imply that the popular history of these processes cannot be seen as one of liberation, or as effective popular agency, but rather as desperate attempts to build new and more effective forms of collective organization, which enjoyed only very limited success, and continued to be mired in social crisis and colonial rule until well after the First World War.

This history, finally, bears comparison to the contemporary age of neoliberal globalization, with its new imperialism and violence (an echo of colonial conquest), its neoliberal restructuring (an echo of late nineteenth century laissez-faire), the increasingly entrenched client status of local state structures (an echo of indirect colonial rule), the breakup of by older state-based protections and social provision (an echo of the end of the guilds), the development of forms of super-exploitation, disposable labour, and so in the so-called 'informal sector' (an echo of labour squeezing, self-exploitation, and exploitative contracting of the late nineteenth century), and the ongoing failed search for new forms of community and solidarity amid deepening social crisis. The older crisis resolved itself – after two world wars – into anti-colonial nationalism, nominal independence and social redistribution in the periphery, and decolonization, democracy, and welfare states in the core. Where the new crisis – what Eric Hobsbawm called the 'landslide' and what Albert Hourani called the 'disturbance of the spirits' – will lead, no-one knows. Mike Davis' grim vision is of a radically homeless, 'slum planet' confronting fourth generation, Pentagon-run, urban counterinsurgency operations on a world-scale. This, argues Mike Davis, is the real 'clash of civilizations', that is, not a clash of 'civilizations' at all. Let us hope that this is an avoidable future.