Peter Gran

TAHTAWI IN PARIS

Was Rifa'a El-Tahtawi a genius in the raw whose encounter with French culture informed his endeavour to modernise a backward oriental country? Peter Gran* attempts a less Eurocentric reading of Tahtawi's early life and of the larger subject of the relations of Egypt and France in the 19th century.

Rifa'a El-Tahtawi was a great figure of the 19th century who lived from 1801-1873. Tahtawi seems to exemplify in modern thought the liberal developmental enlightenment type of figure. His development is attributed in the dominant paradigm to his precocity and above all to his sojourn in France where he learned French, translated books and wrote a famous account of his stay there. This was in the period 1826-1831. For the years 1826-1831 Tahtawi served as a the imam of a mission made up of a group of Egyptian students in Paris who were learning French, developing skills in translation and picking up knowledge in various technical fields. Tahtawi described his impression of Paris in a famous work (*Takhlis Al-Ibriz fi Talkhis Bariz*, Cairo: Bulaq Press, 1849) which found favour both in Egypt and then later in France itself.

This mission and Tahtawi's role in it have long served as the iconic moments for a paradigm of Egyptian history, the moment in which Egypt, a backward oriental country, begins on the process of modernising. Tahtawi's life and work have long been seen as a perfect fit for the "Oriental Despotism," "Coming of the West" type of historiography. It is perhaps ironic that the standard sources on which

scholarship might draw to construct this story at least open the door to doubts about how these events have been interpreted.

Tahtawi was from Tahta in Upper Egypt. Tahta was a significant centre of culture and economy in the years during which he was growing up and beyond. According to Ali Mubarak, it was a commercial centre, which he found on his tour a generation or so later, to be a well-stocked one. It even had a clothing factory. The clothing factory went back to the time of Mohamed Ali and to the needs of his navy. In later years, the factory sold its products to the local market, which was composed of the surrounding towns and villages. The town was important enough to support the building of a number of palaces; in short, it had certain pretensions and roots. When the town's main mosque, the mosque of Sidi Abi Qasim El-Huseini, burned down around 1855, it was rebuilt so as to be, according to the same report, one the finest mosques in all of Upper Egypt. The town then had much more importance than one would think beginning with the idea of it as simply a sub-administrative centre for Asyut.

In social terms, the town counted among its citizens a number of Ashraf, a caste group claiming descendence from the Prophet Mohamed. Many of these drew a salary from the central treasury for this or that function which they performed. Apparently the central treasury thus was paying people in Upper Egypt. The long-time Naqib Al-Ashraf in Tahta was Sidi Ali Abidin; he was from the Hawwara tribe which was powerful in that area. This individual lived elegantly in Tahta next to the shrine built by his grandfather. Two other points stand out: Tahtawi's family, especially through the extended kin, had many sheikhs and writers; second, they were Shaf'is not Malikis -- this being an area of the country heavily Maliki.

Placing Tahtawi in terms of social class, however, is not so easy. His father was part of an expanded Ashraf caste category, but this does not lead us very far. Like many a Brahmin in South India or an aristocrat in provincial France, he was penniless -- apparently because Mohamed Ali abolished the system of iltizam or tax- farming. Why this would affect him and not the extended family is not clear. But this being the case, Tahtawi's father's response to poverty during Tahtawi's youth was one of depending on his relatives. So it was that Tahtawi in his youth

started travelling with his father from relative to relative in Upper Egypt, never however managing to escape real poverty. Travel became a large part of his life even as a child. His father wore out from the strains of this regimen and died and Tahtawi's guardianship passed to his uncles back in Tahta and to his mother. He returned to Tahta.

Tahtawi's uncles took the business of rearing and educating him very seriously. At this point he studied the *manqulat* and the *ma'qulat*, i.e. the scholastic sciences which are divided between the transmitted ones and the rational ones. These fields and this manner of thinking about the divisions of knowledge were typically a part of the Azharite curriculum.

Previous scholarship does not suggest this subject matter was found in any typical madrasa. Madrasa education, by way of contrast, often resulted in memorisation of the Qur'an after which a successful student might go to the Azhar. So Tahtawi's early formation needs to be looked into. How did he get to this point at age thirteen or fourteen developing the basic categories he would use a few years later cataloguing French knowledge in the *Takhlis*?

Another point about his early education is that Tahtawi in his teenage years also studied grammar and theology in Tahta, and later, when he went to the Azhar and needed money, he tutored in those fields, tutoring students, some of whom were technically much more advanced than he was. He obviously progressed quickly. When he came home after six months in the Azhar for the summer break, he surprised even his family by teaching a work in formal logic in a nearby mosque in Mallawi. So, to sum up this part, culture in Egypt was not just in the centre -- in Cairo -- but it was in Tahta. The standard model of historiography can't explain this too well. Even Tahtawi, who himself in some years was a part of this paradigm, seems to realise there was some tension. In his later work *Manahij Al-Albab Al- Misriyah fi Mabahij Al-Adab Al-'Asriyah* (Cairo, 1869) he devotes a couple of pages to commenting on the extraordinary intellectual background of his family, making his family somehow an exception.

The dominant paradigm is heavily invested in exceptionalism. While there is little doubt that Tahtawi was brilliant and was immediately recognised as such, the

emphasis on this point is a scholarly device needed to retain the paradigm. One notices -- here to reinforce this point -- that it is used continuously as a way to avoid dealing with institutions and structures in Egypt -- witness the traditional approach to El-Zabidi, El- Jabarti, El-Attar, etc. They were all individual geniuses in an otherwise dark age.

When Tahtawi studied in the Azhar, he had six teachers, three of whom were famous enough to become Sheikh Al-Azhar. These teachers had many students, none of these six -- apart from Hassan El-Attar -- are identified with reformism in the sense that Tahtawi becomes known for it. We do know that they were crucial in giving him his basic confidence as a writer. His first two written works are from this period and from under their auspices. For example, he studied the *Sahih Al-Bukhari* with Sheikh El-Faddali who died in 1820. El- Faddali was one of the last of the *hadith* scholars left over from the 18th century hadith revival in Egypt with its empiricism and proto-positivism. Sheikh El-Faddali encouraged Tahtawi to write his first work, his *Arjuza fi-l-tawhid*.

To my knowledge the book has not been located. Thus, one can only speculate about the dynamics that surrounded its production or about its contents. The wider context is however known a bit. Sheikhs such as Al-Faddali, sensing that their revival had been seized by Mohamed Ali and turned to other ends, abandoned it. They dropped hadith and turned more toward theology, trying to establish law.

In the process, their epistemology also appears to change. I will go out on a limb here, most of my reading being on earlier material and suggest that the sheikhs who were not "reformists" were Ash'arites or atomists, i.e., upholding a kind of bureaucratic and epistemological politics designed to avoid the Azhar being subsumed into the state. This explains the focus on the helplessness of man, and on the continuous intervention of God and by extension on the need for the ulama. The reformers by way of contrast held out the idea of greater human power.

In later years, e.g., by the middle of the 19th century, after many years of the reign of Sheikh Al-Azhar Ibrahim El-Bajuri, the Azharites succeeded in regaining an assured quasi-autonomy for their institution and one begins to find some relaxing as it were and a drifting back into Maturidite theology and into more rationalism

by the end of the century. Figures like El-Attar and Tahtawi who "broke rank" and went to work for the government early on, championing rationalism, were seen as betraying the mission. El-Attar was hated by many sheikhs, who were his contemporaries, and as a result had a miserable time as Sheikh Al-Azhar; Tahtawi wisely simply distanced himself from that milieu. There is a sense, from the sources even of this period, that reformism was elitism while the Azhar cultural system as it was the prototype of the national educational system. Tahtawi's second work, written by the time he was 20 years old, was a conclusory piece on a grammar text by Ibn Hisham. It too was solicited by one of these teachers.

Another strand in the story line, one already encountered, is the poverty dimension. Thus, we come to learn how his mother sold even her pots and pans to see him through his education, how every day he went and gave private lessons to mamluks like Mohamed Lazugliku, how he even opened a private school in his house and how various Mamluks studied there. In 1821, Tahtawi graduated and began a career teaching at the Azhar. Exactly how this came about is not totally clear but as noted before, he had already become an intellectual resource for students to go to. His teaching career lasted two years. There was not enough income in teaching even when he added in private lessons, so he shifted into another position: that of army preacher. During these two years he met Salih Magdi as a student. Magdi was transformed by him and in later years wrote his biography. This biography is one of the standard sources on which researchers depend. It is known that Tahtawi taught Magdi courses in logic, style, languages and hadith. Who Magdi was and how these courses were taught hasn't been pursued.

During these two years in which he was teaching in the early 1820s, the Tahta connection resurfaced. One of his relatives came to Cairo and sat in his classes to listen to him. This man was not a student; he was Sheikh Faraj El-Ansari, a writer in Shafi'i theology although a Sufi.

A little more context is useful here. In 1818, an early student mission to France from Egypt produced Osman Nureddin Effendi, a student who came back specialised in war sciences and soon wound up heading the Egyptian navy and marrying Mohamed Ali's daughter. This would appear to make going to France an

obvious career track for Tahtawi's generation. Tahtawi chose it and it paid off for him as well. At the risk of confusing the sequence of events consider the following. In 1831, Ibrahim Pasha, Mohamed Ali's son, met Tahtawi on the wharf in Alexandria on the latter's return to Egypt and inquired how his family was as he (Ibrahim) had gotten to know them in the interim and he offered Tahtawi money on the spot when he learned that they needed it. This suggests how important it was in Mohamed Ali's thinking to get new technology from other countries and to put it under his own control, i.e., how much he then needed translation expertise.

Returning to 1826, the Tahta connection once again manifests itself. In that year, Tahtawi's mother became famous for objecting to her son's leaving Egypt and going abroad. She locked herself up in despair, imagining the day might never come that he would return. Very Sa'idi says the commentary.

Another dimension of the historiography naturally is that dealing with how Tahtawi got to go on the mission in 1826. Here the dominant paradigm constructs the transition as follows. First of all he had studied with the reform-minded Hassan El-Attar in Egypt reading books in fields not taught at that time in the Azhar -- notably history, literature and geography. This prepares the way to explain why El-Attar nominated him as the imam of the mission, how he jumped into translation and how he chose books in those same fields to translate once he got to France. There is also the implication these works studied with El-Attar were foreign books. I am fairly sure that El-Attar did not know French but he knew the Arabic classics in those fields as these had been around in the Azhar in the late 18th century when the Azhar was in better shape. So what appears to have taken place was that Tahtawi read a smattering of works like Ibn Khaldun and then shifted to the popular geographers and cultural sociologists in France such as Malte Brun and Depping. In one place in the *Takhlis*, Tahtawi resolves a point about palm trees by reference to the classical Arabic author Qazwini. In short, this may not have been such a big shift. Tahtawi notes that El-Attar read works which had been translated into Arabic -- and there were a few of them in the early 1820s -- but mainly he recalls in later years (*Manahij*) the helpful marginal notes that El-Attar put in history books, biographical dictionaries of doctors and geography books. This sounds more like the Arabic *tabaqat* literature.

Most writings evaluating Tahtawi's years in France stress that a great change came over him at this point. Those favoring secular culture praise this as enlightenment, those representing the Islamic trend lament the influence of secularism on him. Some of the points of detail found in these discussions which are used as evidence of change include his role in bringing French loan words into Arabic, his contribution of specific ideas, such as the idea of one's nation and finally his deepening acquaintance with modern science and with the Copernican Revolution. These ideas have been well- established in scholarship since the last century but how we should interpret seems today at least to me not to be so clear. Tahtawi in his manner of writing at least does not convey a sense of trying to convey some major change that came over his own thinking.

Of course, Tahtawi did introduce loan words. The words are secular ones; they related to modern society. While this is no doubt the case, it is difficult to evaluate its significance both in terms of Tahtawi and to do so in terms of Arab and Egyptian culture for that period. One would need a real history of the Arabic language to evaluate their significance. It is for example not uncommon in modern Arabic that loan words come into certain places, such as Cairo or Beirut, which are unusually receptive locations for them. In later years, writers in Iraq or Libya or elsewhere Arabise these words and the loan word gradually disappears, the issue being often more a short term matter.

The fact that Tahtawi's loan words found acceptance in Egypt at least among translators and fellow literati suggests that the words were needed at a particular time and that they were not too remote from existing patterns in Egyptian Arabic thought. This is an important point given the supposed stagnation of the language at this time. A stagnant language can not intelligently borrow a new theoretical vocabulary because this vocabulary is rooted in philosophical ideas which are not there. Borrowing in the sense being discussed suggests that the Arabic language in Egypt was in the process of evolving and was moreover not too different from French. Borrowing in such a context tends as well to imply on the part of the borrower some element of selection, adaptation and presentation. The term loan word perhaps here ought to be taken to signify appropriation. Such an assumption would fit with the idea that Tahtawi focused on particular words in particular

contexts. And, finally the borrowing of loan words in this sense is an argument against the idea of cognitive break found in the dominant historiography.

The notion of France as a country with citizens who had rights given to them by law is introduced by Tahtawi and this is rightly taken to be a point of entry of a major idea. With the rise of the modern nation states, law was on every one's mind. Islamic tradition, we know from that body of literature, gave vague injunctions to the subject to obey the ruler but not to tolerate injustice. How this was to be worked out in practice was never resolved. The modern clarifications about the rights of citizens under law, law as a social contract, therefore was thus a step forward regrettably coming at a time when the state itself was much stronger and thus much harder to contend with if it was behaving in an unjust manner.

Other writers, myself included, who have examined Tahtawi in relation to the development of modern culture, have noted the issue of the Copernican Revolution in his thought. Indeed Tahtawi does report the assumption among the French that the way to study the universe ought to be to assume that the earth rotates around the sun. If one takes the framework of European cultural history of the Renaissance as a filter, then this ought to have been a big rupture in Egyptian culture but somehow it wasn't. Or at least, there is no evidence that it was. On further reflection as to why this was the case, it would seem that one could be an Ash'arite and uphold the claim of God's active intervention in the world and have no fixed opinion on the details of the universe that might appear since God's will is unknowable. In any case, it is not logical to expect a repetition of what happened in Europe in the 16th century. Astronomers need not expect to be demonised as they once were in Europe.

Two other points about the mission experience. First, it revealed the social inequalities in Egypt in the Mohamed Ali period. Tahtawi earned 250 piasters a month, a fellow student Mahr Dar Abdi Shukri Effendi earned 2500 piasters a month, although Tahtawi was the best of all the students in French language skills and in over all productivity as a translator. Second, Tahtawi, it is said, picked up a degree of moderate republicanism in France and opposed the royalist trend. He came home to write about patriotism and the just society introducing these terms in Egyptian thought. Looked at from the point of view of who he already was in

1826 when he left, and distancing oneself from the old notion that secularism and religion are all that different, one need not necessarily reach that conclusion. One could infer that republicanism would fit with his Maturidist rationalism and anti-Ash'arite theology just as well as French Protestantism did and therefore to express oneself in these terms might not constitute any big rupture. Again, it is unfortunate we do not have the *Arjuza fi-l- tawhid* as a source in hand.

I suspect what one sees at this point in Tahtawi's life in Paris is an example of the common phenomenon of people travelling abroad and finding ideas and social circles not so different from those they left behind but nonetheless growing a bit. If Tahtawi was drawn to republican France he would not have much to do with the monarchists. And indeed, this seems to be the case. Tahtawi writes little about the French Ultras or about the efforts of the Bourbons to restore the legitimacy of monarchism. He never mentions the religious conservatives in France who saw God's continuous interaction in nature and in the world and who hated reason. Here I have in mind the leading poet in France of the period, Chateaubriand, or the leading political writer, Gobineau. Tahtawi was not to be drawn to Ash'arism, Egyptian or French.

Bearing in mind that Tahtawi was writing for Mohamed Ali, one might want to add, as standard scholarship has, that much of the material he included in the way he did could be interpreted as indirect argumentation. This might explain, for example, the lengthy translation of legal documents spelling out French freedoms. This might also explain the discussion of civil society type institutions in Paris as well as the discussion of French intellectual life. When it came to specifics, Tahtawi touched quite lightly on subjects which Mohamed Ali might have found offensive, such as the overthrow of the Bourbon Dynasty in 1830 (*taghayyur* or change) and its replacement by the Duke of Orleans in the July Monarchy leading to a much more constitutional system, or French imperialism in Algeria. Much of Tahtawi's commentary on this latter subject leaves the reader with the idea that the French Church in 1830 saw this as a religious war something like Mohamed Ali's own imperial wars.

In short, there is no expression of any real amazement about France or French culture in the *Takhlis.* Here and there, one finds a kind of tongue-in-cheek

comment about royal scandals or social mores. But, here and there as well, one finds some tendency to Egyptianise Paris. He writes for example at length about the Seine, its islands and the cataracts. He also writes poetry praising the beauty of this landscape. It is like the Nile. He compares streets in Paris to those in Cairo. Over all, however, there is a kind of utilitarian justification for what he is writing. He praises the people of Paris for keeping up with new developments but notes that as it relates to clothing style, all this change for change's sake lacks stability. This unaffected utilitarianism in fact seems to run through all his work in this period. One senses it in the decision to translate twelve books in fields spanning such useful fields as administration, engineering and geography, ethics and natural law. It would seem that over the five years of his residency in France, Tahtawi was simply catching up on knowledge France had developed since the French Revolution and for which Egypt had had to rely on foreigners up to that point. Now was the time to produce the stuff locally in Egypt. Now Egypt should organise itself to do it.

One can see this intent when Tahtawi returned to Cairo and set out to create his own language school, which he hoped to see become a university. Later, much later, the school he created did in fact become a part of today's Ain Shams University. The Egyptian ruling class, it seems, did not share his sense of urgency about creating a university, a point to which I will return.

Back in Egypt, Egyptian dynamics reassert themselves. In 1833-4 when Tahtawi set up the language school, the Sa'idi connection showed up again. Among the early students was one of Tahtawi's own relatives, and there were as well several other students with obviously Sa'idi names.

A last point about the mission experience and one I would rather leave as an open question. This concerns his education there. In Paris, Tahtawi clearly received some unusual benefits. What is the meaning one should attach to the special tutelage and consideration Tahtawi received from one the best-known savants, Edme Francois Jomard, a man who greatly enriched his studies foreseeing for him a long brilliant career in Egypt? There seem to be two ways by which one could explain this. One would be that he gained through this intensive exposure with a senior scholar a big jump which in turn explains how he could understand the

more complicated French thinkers so easily. A second line of thought here, while not denying the first, suggests that this was possible because the relationship was based on structural and cultural affinities. Jomard, moreover, had been in Egypt and probably could situate French writers in Egyptian terms for Tahtawi. This would make him more of a mentor or senior colleague.

The second of these two views seems more likely. Despite what may have been written in the *Description de l'Egypte*, I suspect that Jomard took the French experience as somehow relatable to Egypt as did Tahtawi in his *description de la France*.

Concerning Tahtawi's attraction to France in general terms, this too deserves attention. Tahtawi wrote much more than he was obliged to by Mohamed Ali or by anyone else. He chose to. What appears is that France in the 1820s was a more industrialised version of what Egypt was and could serve as a model in some respects for Egyptians who had a taste for this kind of development. And, in trying to explain the deep impact of France in particular on 19th century Egypt, one might recall that while many types of countries were industrialising in this period, France like Egypt was setting out to develop at that time from a hegemony making use of regionalism as a tool of social stratification. While in neither country was the political economy fully developed in 1820 both were in the process of creating a developed North against a less developed South.

One more point. For both countries referred to here, the dynamic within the high culture took the form of a struggle between positivism and romanticism. Paris, positivism being simply more evolved than it was in Egypt, was attractive to figures such as Tahtawi, whose orientation was positivist; other Egyptians to the contrary experienced France in terms of its romantic bellelettrism and the reverse seems to have been the case in terms of the French in Egypt. An example of the latter from the same period would be the Saint Simonians, who came to work in Egyptian reform. The sense of closeness of France and Egypt to which Tahtawi's writings bear witness lasted through the century until France changed its hegemony becoming a bourgeois democracy well into the Third Republic.

To conclude, the hypothesis that Tahtawi was a genius in the raw or some kind of a blank slate might not be the best way to characterise him. He had had a cultural formation in Egypt; in fact, he had one in Tahta before he even reached Cairo. He continued to develop in France. This was facilitated by the fact that France was more like Egypt than it was different. This is the alternative interpretation. Tahtawi went to France quite aware of what he was getting into.

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