

Caterina Roggero, *Storia del Nord Africa indipendente. Tra imperialismi, nazionalismi e autoritarismi*, Bompiani, Milan, 2019, pp. 480.

Caterina Roggero's book presents an overall analysis of the history of the North African countries of the Mediterranean, centred on the study of postcolonial development, the path to national independence and the process of state-building after World War II. This research seeks to develop a new approach to the study of the recent upheavals in these countries, extending the period of analysis up to the start of the second

decade of the new century. The author has elaborated a historiographical synthesis, analysing the theme from various viewpoints (political, social, economic, religious, cultural). And thanks to her historical perspective, she has researched the origins of the current disorders, which were perceptible already in the years of imperialist domination. The book covers a lengthy stretch of history. It begins with a substantial first chapter on the Ottoman domination of North Africa (except for Morocco, which was independent) and concludes with the recent events, delving deeply into the processes of consolidation of national political structures and the "Arab Spring." The countries studied are those of the Arab West, i.e. the Maghreb: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, plus Egypt, located on the border between the Maghreb and the Mashreq (the Arab East), where it is placed in most analyses. As such, Egypt was often excluded in previous historical work on these issues, but it is included here by virtue of a historical consideration of Roggero's: Egypt has played and in all probability still plays "a leading role in the dissemination of ideas, ideologies, political visions and cultural trends, but also in the mobilization of people, finance, and goods (the latter not as much as one would expect) for the countries of both the East and the West of the Arab-Muslim world, in a median position that allowed it to radiate its own influence" (p. 11). The five North African countries, in the author's view, can be considered together by virtue of the common elements in their history and in modern and contemporary events. These events, however, while all influencing national histories in similar ways, have not produced uniformity of the single national paths (p. 12). Despite the necessary examination of the imperial era, with first Ottoman and then European domination, the work focuses principally on the post-independence period. In particular it traces the birth of nationalism, the paths to decolonization, the processes of state-building, pan-Arabism, and the rise of Islamic radicalism through the study of the political, social and cultural processes of these five countries, which ultimately resulted in the failed experiments of democratization and the Arab Spring (p. 12).

A central theme is the development of the concept of nation-state, which emerges recurrently in the work: this interpretative category, of evident European origin, has proven somewhat difficult to apply to the Arab countries of North Africa. The origin of the concept, in the case of the Arab populations, is a legacy of European colonialism: the cultural, political and historical specificity of North Africa in the years of European dominion and in the struggles for self-determination, has adapted to the concept by assimilating and re-proposing it after independence. In the context of Arab North Africa, indeed, before the arrival of the European colonial powers there were no well-defined borders but only “porous and ephemeral” boundaries (p. 7). These Arab populations did not know “definite national divisions, nor, obviously, was there any national consciousness that opposed Moroccans to Algerians, Egyptians to Libyans” (p. 7). The very empires that “succeeded one another in the so-called Middle Ages [...] not only did not encompass the whole of North Africa, but did not even represent rigid state groups,” reflecting a context in which there were no state borders but only “floating” frontiers, with “migrant populations” who moved from one coast to another in North-West and North-East Africa. This special North African environment, however, underwent a marked change in the years following independence, in which these countries were able to experience – in contrast to Europe, where the second half of the twentieth century, especially starting in the seventies, saw the weakening of the nation-state model – an exemplary diffusion and strengthening of state sovereignty. This combined the growth in scale and importance of the bureaucratic apparatuses with the prevalence of nationalist discourse in government policies. The internationalism that had characterized the anti-colonial battles was one of the many casualties of the evolution of government policies in North Africa. The nationalism that emerged during the decades following the attainment of independence was “a moment of fracture rather than cohesion of the Arab world,” so much so that “the centripetal forces still alive in the period of the decline of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of

the twentieth century were progressively overwhelmed by the centrifugal forces" (p. 9). Despite the demise of the Ottoman Empire, in the periods following both the first and the second world war the Arab nations "remained colonial states, heavily influenced by the legacy of foreign occupation" and therefore the realm of poor economic development, corrupt local elites and a backward civil society (p. 9). The conquest of power by the military avant-gardes in Algeria, Libya, and Egypt produced "failed states, unable to pursue authentic democratization, suffocated by elephantine bureaucracies unable even to exploit natural resources for the benefit of the population" (p. 10). Another consequence of the particular development of the North African state apparatus has been sharpening tensions in the relations between State and Society, which, given the alternating phases of recent history and the varied geographical contexts, has triggered moments of crisis at times of economic depression. See, for instance, the bread riots of the 1980s triggered by the second oil shock and the recession in Europe (p. 208); or the uprisings in 2010 and 2011, consequent to the economic and financial crisis of 2008. The nation-building process in the newly independent countries of North Africa, as in most of the countries that had emerged from centuries of foreign domination, was based especially "on economic development, and the prevalent idea was that this should be guided directly by the state through planning, reform and dirigiste programs" (p. 207). But these grand projects failed, and "Arab socialism" was replaced by "a program of economic liberalization that was in reality a mix of Arab socialist and free market economics, combining a substantial state sector with incentives for foreign investment and private business" (p. 207). The two countries that followed this model, inspired by the program of Sadat's Egypt, were the two that lacked enormous natural resources, namely Tunisia and Morocco. The other two, Algeria and Libya, retained their Arab socialism. In particular, Libya is a case apart in North Africa, in that no stable state structure has developed (p. 207).

The theme of the nation-state is then linked to that of the causes and

consequences of colonial domination, which the author takes into due consideration. This inquiry is supplemented by the important discussion, in the first chapter, of the historical period of four centuries from the Ottoman domination to European colonialism and then the liberation struggles that culminated in the Algerian war of independence, which the author describes as the bitterest conflict, one that “marked the [country’s] vicissitudes for the longest time, also involving the rest of the region” and that ultimately decreed the end of European imperialism (p. 15). The author devotes considerable space to certain crucial events in the history of North Africa: among these, the Suez crisis, which the author analyses together with the independence struggles and the Algerian war, interpreted as one of the two “tombstones of the nineteenth-century French and British imperialist interests, which was followed by U.S. entry into the Middle East” (p. 15). The second chapter focuses on the local dimension, in a country-by-country analysis of the situations that the newly independent nations’ foreign policy faced as the Cold War began and developed. In the third chapter Roggero turns again to the regional dimension, with a discussion of the development of North African authoritarianism and state planning and going into detail on the economic issues, which were central to the five countries’ policy action. The fourth chapter returns to the individual nations and the efforts at transition to democracy since the 1980s, which as the author notes “were resolved in their degeneration into more or less serious authoritarianism, with the affirmation of patriarchal leaders whose control was absolutely firm and practically unchallenged for decades” (p. 16). In the concluding chapter the author offers a careful examination of the Arab Spring, through direct testimony and journalistic accounts of the events, and an analysis of the cooperation projects launched by the European Union in the countries of North Africa.

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