


through repeated use? That the book invites these questions but does not speak to them directly attests to the great deal of research still to be done on sound cultures in the Middle East.

Overall, I highly recommend *Media of the Masses*. Written in an accessible style, it will be of great benefit to scholars, graduate students, and undergraduates interested in Middle Eastern history, media studies, and (ethno)musicology. It also will be of interest to nonacademic readers interested in Egyptian popular culture.

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## The Last Nahdawi: Taha Hussein and Institution Building in Egypt

**Hussam R. Ahmed (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021). Pp. 312. \$90.00 cloth, \$30.00 paper. ISBN: 9781503615342**

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The Egyptian man of letters Taha Hussein is perhaps the most studied Arab intellectual, as scholars have sought to account for his formative role in the Arab cultural renaissance, or the Nahda. There is a rich body of scholarship on his contributions to the development of modern Arab literature, criticism, and education, and his overall promotion of secular culture at the price of his multiple confrontations with Egypt's religious elites. Less well-known is Hussein's long and dynamic career as a civil servant in Egypt's various cultural institutions, which he helped to shape. During his lifetime, Hussein served as Cairo University's Dean of Arts, a senior civil servant in the Ministry of Public Instruction, including a period as controller of the general culture department, which would later give rise to the Ministry of Culture, and a member and, then, president of the Arabic Language Academy. Despite Hussein's prominent position in Egypt's cultural bureaucracy, and the likelihood that this presence was at least partly responsible for the spread and longevity of his ideas, Hussein's involvement in state institutions has not been studied by scholars in a systematic fashion. *The Last Nahdawi: Taha Hussein and Institutional Building in Egypt* by Hussam R. Ahmed intends to fill this gap by locating Hussein's writings in the context of his institutional career. In so doing, it seeks to revisit the established narratives on Hussein, his intellectual generation, and, more broadly, the historical period in which he worked, Egypt's parliamentary era, situated between the two nationalist revolutions of 1919 and 1952.

By adopting an institutional approach to Egypt's intellectual past, as opposed to a purely textual one, the book participates in the recent renewal of the field of Arab intellectual history. For more than a decade, this field of study has witnessed the emergence of works that shifted the scholarly focus from the analysis of public texts to that of infrastructures, material cultures, and social formations. Such a shift, dubbed by scholars as the "material turn," has not only shed new light on intellectual production and debates but also dismantled the binaries that have long dominated discussions of Arab intellectual worlds: modernist/traditionalist, secular/Islamist, and Westernizer/conservative. As Ahmed explains, Hussein has often been the victim of such binary classifications himself (p. 40). Praised in early European scholarship for his cultural proximity to France, Hussein, following the rise of postcolonial studies, was often represented by scholars as a pawn of European colonialism with doubtful allegiances to anti-colonialism. In these polarized and passionate debates,



Hussein has more frequently been used as a symbol of competing political and cultural forces than studied with the aim of understanding his choices. The institutional approach adopted by Ahmed in *The Last Nahdawi*, therefore, adds much-needed nuance to Hussein's public positions by revealing the bureaucratic constraints and opportunities within which he operated. The book not only reveals the hidden side of Hussein's otherwise well-documented story but also elucidates the birth of Egypt's key cultural institutions from the interwar period, which has merited little attention by researchers. It is against this backdrop that Ahmed's book will hopefully spark new conversations in the field of Arab intellectual history on the ways in which cultural bureaucracies participate in thought production.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to the development of the institutional approach into a full-fledged academic trend is problematic access to sources. For *The Last Nahdawi*, Ahmed was fortunate enough to gain access to documents which are not always easy to come across, including materials from the Egyptian National Archives, Cairo University, the Egyptian Ministry of Education, and the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in addition to Hussein's private papers, which the author used with the authorization of his family. The resulting narrative on Hussein's career as a civil servant spans five chapters, each telling the story of a particular mission undertaken by Hussein in his capacity as a statesman in different institutions. These tasks include his efforts to expand Egypt's cultural diplomacy by opening Egyptian cultural institutes around the Mediterranean as the Minister of Public Instruction from 1950 to 1952 (Chapter 1), his work in the Egyptian University as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts (Chapter 2), his role in institution-building, through which he attempted to protect his educational project from divisive partisan politics (Chapter 3), his participation in the Arabic Language Academy (Chapter 4), and his efforts to survive in a reconfigured intellectual world under Nasser, which witnessed Hussein's slow decline (Chapter 5). Backed by close and critical readings of archival documents, the book addresses two main questions: How was Hussein's cultural project shaped by his career as a statesman? And what can an institutional approach say about Egypt's democratic experience during the interwar period, which is often portrayed by scholars as a time of corruption, divisive politics, and an overall failure to bring about reform and full independence?

With respect to the first question, the book revises the common narrative on Hussein that casts him as an intellectual complicit in European colonialism. The basis of this narrative is several positions taken by Hussein during his career, such as his argument that Egypt belonged to European civilization in his famous book *The Future of Culture in Egypt*, his lack of outspokenness against French colonialism in North Africa, which came into prominence during his 1957 trip to Algeria, where he did not refer to the Algerian war of independence in a public speech, and his defense of "art for art's sake" in the midst of the rise of committed literature after World War II. Reading these controversial positions in relation to Hussein's commitment to institution-building, Ahmed emphasizes how they strategically supported his political activities, which were conducted behind the scenes. Hussein's *Future of Culture in Egypt*, for example, could be interpreted not as a call to join European civilization, as it often has been by scholars of Egypt's intellectual history, but to strengthen Egypt's institutional infrastructure that would ensure its intellectual parity with Europe. Similarly, Ahmed navigates perhaps the least known episode of Hussein's political career, his mission to expand Egypt's cultural diplomacy in French-dominated North Africa, which led to his confrontation with the French and his attempts to compromise the French institutional presence in Egypt. These counter-readings of Hussein's most controversial positions reminds us that fiery speeches and daring public stands were not the only means to confront European colonialism in former colonies and protectorates. As Hussein shows, European colonialism was also undermined by silent and slow-paced bureaucratic action behind the scenes.

The tension between Hussein the man of letters and Hussein the statesman runs throughout the book, emphasizing the main challenges faced by the interwar intellectual generation. How does one create institutional continuity of culture at a time when political culture was


deeply conflictual? And how does one prevent the nascent institutions of culture from being swallowed up by the divisive partisan politics that characterized Egypt's "liberal experiment"? Ahmed's book convincingly revisits the period of parliamentary Nahda by showing that, despite the partisan game that often disrupted political will, the interwar period was also the time when most of Egypt's cultural institutions came into being. Hussein played the role of front man in the institution-building effort as he devised bureaucratic structures that would shield the educational system from state interference and frequent political turnover. Hussein, consequently, emerges as the one who provided the cultural movement of the Nahda with an institutional face.

Original and well-researched, *The Last Nahdawi* not only provides a valuable contribution to the field of Arab intellectual history but also demonstrates the scientific value of adopting an institutional approach to the study of intellectual worlds. It represents the first attempt to write an institutional history of culture in Egypt during its formative interwar period. Perhaps the only limitation of the study is that it does not delve deeply enough into the polarizing effects that this newly emerging institutional infrastructure, which came to represent Egyptian modernity, had on the larger intellectual field. The new institutions of culture patronized by Hussein emerged at the price of other institutional solutions within the Nahda movement that were eventually marginalized. Bringing into the story the grievances of older educational institutions, such as al-Azhar and Dar al-'Ulum, would have shown that Hussein was, himself, the product of the newly created institutions whose interests he defended. In telling the story of Taha Hussein, it is challenging to maintain the balance between Hussein the intellectual, Hussein the politician, and Hussein the statesman. However, *The Last Nahdawi's* strength lies precisely in revealing the multiplicity of Hussein's roles and the challenges faced by him when navigating them.

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## Hidden Liberalism: Burdened Visions of Progress in Modern Iran

**Hussein Banai (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Pp. 230. \$99.99 cloth, \$44.99 paper. ISBN: 9781108817509**

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Hussein Banai's *Hidden Liberalism* is an engaging and important study of the ways in which Western liberalism, born of the Enlightenment, has shaped and influenced Iranian politics since the nineteenth century. As the title indicates, the paradox of this engagement lies in the fact that "Liberalism is at once everywhere and nowhere to be found; it has formed the basis of many social and political struggles, yet it remains *hidden as a public standpoint*" (p. 3). For the author, the roots of this paradox lie in liberalism's association with Western imperialism and the reality that explicit reference and association with liberal ideas also brings a political cost few are willing to bear. Consequently, "liberalism has remained an embattled, taciturn, even shadowy thought-practice that is more readily detectable in the religious and nationalist double speak of vulnerable intellectuals than in any formalised intellectual program or political agenda" (p. 2).

Banai's book begins with an assessment of liberalism as understood in the West before turning to its absorption into the Iranian milieu, where, the author argues, Western liberal