

Bedouin of Mount Sinai

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*An Anthropological Study
of Their Political Economy*



Emanuel Marx



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For
Egypt's Sociologist
Saad Eddin Ibrahim
An Advocate for Sinai

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Introduction



How I Came to Study the Bedouin of Mount Sinai

Soon after the Israeli forces occupied Sinai in 1967 the peninsula was inundated with many kinds of tourists and journalists. I avidly listened to their glowing accounts of the Bedouin of Sinai, yet for several years I hesitated to visit. I wavered between fear and hope that I would be tempted to study the Bedouin, and again experience the intellectual and emotional tumult of my earlier study of the Negev Bedouin. That first study had engaged my undivided attention for five exciting and memorable years. Between 1960 and 1963 I did eighteen months of fieldwork in the Negev, and then wrote a PhD thesis and a monograph (Marx 1967). The effort involved in living with and understanding the Bedouin had been considerable, and even at the time I knew that the experience was transforming my sociological thinking and would also deeply affect my life course.

On completing the study of the Negev Bedouin I decided to move in an entirely new direction, in order to add a second string to my professional fiddle. My vague desires rapidly took a clear shape when Max Gluckman from the University of Manchester invited me to join the Bernstein Israel Research Project, a comprehensive research project on the adaptation of Jewish immigrants to a new life. From 1964 to 1966 I lived in Maalot, a new town in Galilee. Most of the townspeople, as well as the immigrants who



were still arriving in large numbers, were of Moroccan origin. A handful of officials catered to the basic needs of the new arrivals, such as housing, social welfare, health, and education. There was hardly any local employment, so the townspeople continued to depend on the assistance provided by the state. While there were many large households with growing needs, conditions in the town did not improve over time. The townspeople became so inured to subsisting for years on a combination of relief work, national insurance, and social welfare benefits that they considered the monthly welfare checks as equivalent to regular wages. The effects of this situation were, unsurprisingly, that the inhabitants came to depend on the officials and held the state responsible for their livelihood and welfare. They provided an extreme instance of the welfare state in action, showing how it controls and humiliates the people it presumes to help.

I found some of the social consequences of this situation quite surprising. Kinship ties, even those between members of the same household, were tenuous to the point where relatives were no longer prepared to help one another when in need. Parents often refused to support their grown-up children and siblings would not aid one another financially. Yet, if we may rely on the anthropological literature, Moroccan Jews were distinguished by strong family links. The town's schools were not very effective either. While some of the teachers were excellent, the pupils expected little from adult life and their scholarly achievements were quite low. It was strange to hear many townspeople complain bitterly about their utter dependence on bureaucrats and their poor life chances in the town. Yet they rarely moved away, even though many of them had kin and friends in more prosperous places. Finally, the relations between some of the officials and their clients were punctuated with minor violent incidents that, so I thought, generally ended inconclusively.

In short, the townspeople were for me an "exotic" society, quite distinct from the Negev Bedouin, whose actions had always made perfectly good sense to me. I could not fathom their behavior, and I found their often heated exchanges with officials especially perplexing. It was many months after leaving the field that I began to understand the complex structure of these violent encounters and, in the end, I concentrated my efforts on analyzing them



(Marx 2004c). Since then my interest in violent behavior, and its manifestations in bureaucratic practice, has never waned.

I mentioned above that when Israel occupied Sinai in 1967, I did not rush in to study the local Bedouin, as I feared to be drawn into a long-term commitment. As a preventive measure, I persuaded myself that these Bedouin were already familiar from the classic writings of Niebuhr (1799), Burckhardt (1992), Robinson (1867), Palmer (1871), Murray (1935), and Jarvis (1931), and that there was little I could add to the accounts of these acute observers. For good measure, I also refrained from joining any of the popular tours of Sinai. Instead, in 1968 I deliberately became involved in what was to become a long-term study of Palestine refugee camps under the Israeli occupation (Ben-Porath and Marx 1971). I followed the rapid integration of the camp dwellers into the larger economy, observed how the refugee camps evolved into regular urban quarters, how the refugees gradually transformed their simple shelters into decent dwellings and consolidated their ownership of the homes, while the flow of United Nations aid continued unabated. But I also learned that these developments did not affect the refugees' resolve to return to their ancestral homes, and became convinced that as long as the refugees and their descendants were not compensated for their sufferings, this moral issue would stay with us.

My self-imposed *cordon sanitaire* worked well, until the day in 1972 when Mr. Moshe Sela, an official of the Israeli Civil Administration in South Sinai, came to see me. He offered to arrange a short visit to the region, where he would show me the work of the administration with the Bedouin. Perhaps, as an experienced student of Bedouin, I could suggest improvements. He knew intuitively that there was nothing that I wanted more than to meet the Sinai Bedouin. No wonder I walked with open eyes into the baited snare. The short visit resulted in an extended period of fieldwork in South Sinai, during which Moshe Sela became a trusted friend, taskmaster, and interlocutor.

Between 1972 and 1982 I spent altogether twelve months in the field. It was a rather turbulent decade that comprised on the one hand rapid and uncontrolled Israeli colonization, and on the other a period of relative economic prosperity for the Bedouin, punctuated by several serious political and economic crises, including



the 1973 war between Egypt and Israel. At an early stage I realized that the study should focus on the political economy of the Bedouin of Mount Sinai, particularly on labor migration, which I then considered to be the key to understanding the Bedouin. Only in the mid-1990s did I realize that the economy was more complex and variable than I had thought, and that drug smuggling, pastoralism, horticulture, and trade rivaled labor migration in importance. From then on all my thoughts concentrated on examining these aspects of the economy. The phases of this gradual transformation in my thinking are set out in chapter 1.

Military Occupation and Colonization

The eminent Egyptian geographer Jamal Hamdan has identified the strategic importance of Sinai for Egypt: "The northern strip of Sinai is the first and foremost entrance gate to Egypt, and most of Egypt's military history revolved around it" (1993: 6). This is an astonishing statement, considering the total dependence of Egypt on the sources of the Nile, as well as the general vulnerability of the Nile Valley to invasions from every direction. Even 2,400 years ago, the Egyptians knew that they were living in "an acquired country, the gift of the river" (Herodotus 1947: 82). They were always preoccupied with annual variations in the water supply, which made the difference between lean and fat years, periods of drought and plenty. While they depended on a steady water supply, they never feared that neighbors in the south would cut off the flow of their lifeblood. The threat that a developing Sudan would claim its full share of the waters of the Nile under the 1929 Nile Waters Agreement became real and significant only when oil production in the Sudan really took off in 1999 (United States Energy Information Administration 2007).

But invasions from the north were a recurrent feature of Egyptian history, and the invading armies always used the Sinai Desert as the passageway to the Nile Valley. The Mediterranean littoral was, and still is, the chief land route into Egypt (see map 1). It is a well-traveled route dotted with watering points (Cytryn-Silverman 2001: 4), and has never been an effective barrier against invaders. Therefore, Egyptians in every age viewed Sinai as their most



MAP 1. The Sinai Peninsula

problematic frontier (Mouton 2000: chap. 20); they constructed fortifications both along the coastline and in the eastern reaches of the Nile Delta in the hope of holding up the expected invaders. I doubt whether the Israeli authorities ever realized how sensitive the Egyptians were to the occupation of Sinai by a foreign power.



While the Israeli authorities initially had no policy of colonizing Sinai, and only viewed it as a negotiating chip in a future peace settlement with Egypt, the scarcity of land in Israel created irresistible pressures to colonize all territories occupied by the military. The Israeli Land Administration nominally owns 93 percent of all the land in the country, but nearly half of it is in practice controlled and administrated by Israel's army. Privately owned land is hard to obtain and is therefore in great demand. In order to wrest land out of the control of the bureaucracy, great staying power and clout are needed. The ordinary citizen stands little chance of obtaining the title to land of his own. Compared to this, land in occupied areas, at least in the early stages of occupation, is relatively cheap and can often be bought from private owners. The situation creates almost irresistible social pressures to colonize occupied areas.

Colonization is therefore a process that starts from below, and because it is initiated simultaneously by many individuals and groups and at numerous points, it is almost uncontrollable, and tends to drag the state into a running battle with colonists, a battle that it is bound to lose (see Algazi's 2006 case study of Upper Modi'in in the occupied West Bank for a similar situation). Some politicians always join the winning side, and by degree the state adopts a policy of colonization.

In Sinai's Santa Katarina region the rapid progress of colonization can be easily documented. It started in a small way in 1967, when the Israeli occupying forces quartered a small garrison, between ten to twenty soldiers and two vehicles, in the Santa Katarina monastery. The soldiers put up tents in the courtyard of the monastery, used the monks' water and electricity, and caused frequent altercations. They quickly became a burden to the monks, who sought ways to get rid of them. Moshe Sela, an official of the civil administration, the government agency responsible for supplying services to the Bedouin population, tried in 1969 to establish himself in the Bedouin village of Milqa, near the approach road to the monastery. He won the approval of the males of an extended family of the Awlad Jindi section of the Jabaliya tribe by offering to provide their compound with running water and electricity if they permitted him to attach to it a small building that was to serve as an office. When Moshe Sela began construc-



tion, the monks feared that they would lose control of the land in the vicinity of the monastery, to which they claimed title, and the tithes levied on the Bedouin orchards. Therefore, they instructed the Bedouin, some of whom were permanent employees in the monastery and did not wish to jeopardize their jobs, to put an end to the building activities. The matriarch of the group showed her disapproval by pouring rubbish onto the foundations of the building, but could not really hold up the work while the males of the family stood by. They assumed that the administration would eventually move into permanent accommodation and that the new building would then become their property. Instead, the building became the nucleus of an ever-expanding administrative center, and the Israelis stayed in it right up to the end of the occupation.

In 1970, Moshe Sela met the monks, led by Archimandrite Dionysius, to settle the outstanding differences and come to an agreement. Sela had informed two Israeli generals, Uri Baidatch, head of the Nature Reserves Authority, and Abraham Yaffe, of the army's southern command, of the negotiations. After he received their blessing he, as well as the commander of the local garrison and three of the monks, formally signed an agreement on 18 September 1970. This document, a copy of which is in my possession, became the charter for more intensive Israeli colonization. It is well worth an analysis.

The main motivation of the monks of Santa Katarina in signing the agreement was to preserve their perpetual right in the lands adjacent to the monastery. They had tenaciously held on to it for centuries and under many consecutive regimes. They wished to ensure that the Israeli occupation forces respected that right, so that they could reclaim it from the regime that would supplant the Israelis. That is why the monastery's right to the land is reiterated in this short document. Thus, the building that the Israeli army was going to erect is "on land that is being hold [*sic*] by the Monastery." If "in the future ... the Army shall decide to leave the building ... the building shall be delivered by the Army to the Monastery." The monks gave the Israelis "permission to search for sources of water," and reserve any "excess of the water ... for the benefit of the Monastery. It is agreed that water shall not be delivered to the local beduins for irrigation of their plantations." This last provision was intended to ensure that the Bedouin would not



acquire any residual rights to water through links with the Israeli authorities.

This document served as a charter for Israeli colonization. The officials worked on two mutually incompatible projects. On the one hand, they provided services for the Bedouin population, such as medical clinics, schools, and shopping centers. They dug new wells, installed an electric generator, and opened a car repair workshop. They also set up a dining room for their Bedouin employees. On the other hand, they built a “field school” (a hostel for Israeli hikers) and homes for the growing number of Israeli official service providers. By the early 1980s the number of permanent Israeli employees had grown to almost forty, while the Bedouin employees were hired and fired according to the needs of current construction projects. Their number was usually just below thirty. The Israeli employees were in a better position than the Bedouin to utilize such services as the car repair shop and the dining room, and eventually monopolized them. The settlement was rapidly becoming an Israeli colony that employed a peripatetic Bedouin workforce. By then the power relations in the Milqa area had changed to such an extent that the initial charter had become quite meaningless. While the local Israeli authorities continued to treat the monks with respect, they constructed buildings in the vicinity without consulting the monastery. The monastery lost control of the region and in practice now owned only the enclosed areas of the monastery and its branches. The monks could no longer collect tithes from Bedouin gardens. The gradual displacement of the Bedouin stopped only with the Israeli evacuation of Sinai.

About the Book

The book is the distillation of many years of work. The twenty-odd articles on the Bedouin of Mount Sinai that I published from 1977 onward became the groundwork for its eight chapters. The earlier articles, such as that on tribal pilgrimages (Marx 1977b), went through several revisions as my thinking on the Bedouin developed. For the purpose of including them in the book I made further changes, and they appear here as chapters 2, 4, and 7. Chap-



ters 1, 3, 5, and 6 are of recent origin: they were published between 1999 and 2008. As I wrote them as segments of the planned book, they required only slight revisions. This introduction, as well as the conclusion, which reports on the dramatic changes I observed during my 2009 visit to Santa Katarina, are entirely new.

I chose the subtitle “An Anthropological Study of Their Political Economy” for two reasons. First, I wanted to indicate that this study is dominated by one theme: the reflection of global and regional politics and economics in the social forms and behavior of the Bedouin. I am particularly concerned with the question how the state’s praxis of ruling, misruling, or neglecting the Bedouin is connected with their political economy, and especially with the various ways the Bedouin eke out a living. And second, I wished to stress that the study examines economic and political issues from an anthropological viewpoint. It deals with a particular collective, the people I lived with at a certain historical moment, and claims ethnological validity for just that moment. I do, however, attach some lasting value to the anthropological insights of the study.

I am not worried by the fact that a whole generation of neo-Marxist writers has associated the term “political economy” with political domination. While I have reservations about the tendency of these writers to attribute excessive power to the state—and hardly any to its suppressed and colonized subjects—I feel that their emphasis on power relations has generally been beneficial to a rather anemic anthropology. The concern with the power of the state is especially important in the case of the Sinai Bedouin. During Egyptian rule, as well as under Israeli military occupation, the governing state has regularly neglected their welfare, underserved and overpoliced them, and in most respects ruled them from afar. The state’s overwhelming power has nevertheless permeated every aspect of the Bedouin and their way of life. Should the state and its capitalist allies decide to intervene systematically in the affairs of the Bedouin, as they have done in the last two decades of the twentieth century, their brittle socioeconomic order is doomed to undergo a profound and perhaps irreversible transformation.

This orientation toward the political economy allowed me to see the Bedouin of Mount Sinai in a new light. For instance, I realized that they were not a bounded community on which numer-