CULTURE CONTACTS AND THE MAKING OF CULTURES

Papers in Homage to
Itamar Even-Zohar

Edited by

Rakefet Sela-Sheffy and Gideon Toury

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Culture Planning and Counter-Planning: The Young Hasan al-Banna and the Formation of Egyptian-Islamic Culture in Egypt[1]

Israel Gershoni

Introduction: Culture Planning vs. Counter-culture Planning

I would like to open with a personal note. Over two decades ago, Itamar Even-Zohar first expressed an interest in 'culture planning.' He was one of the first, for me the first, to define the concept and to pursue scholarly research in this field. Itamar, in typical fashion, extracted a term from the world of linguistics, economics, engineering, architecture or tax planning and used it as a central term in cultural studies. When he began to conceptualize the then new term 'culture planning' and render this into a detailed and practical agenda for research in the early 1990s, I was honored that Itamar considered me his confidant in framing his terminology and in fomenting his research 'revolution.' He would patiently wait for me in his small office, and when I would arrive, he would excitedly spout his subversive idea and wait for my reaction. After initial shock, I would eventually catch my breath, and slowly I became accustomed to the conceptual framework and its significance for cultural studies. Afterwards, I attempted to include the theory in my own research on modern Egyptian Arab culture. The concept of 'culture planning' proved applicable to my specific field of interest, namely intellectual labor in Egyptian society, culture, and politics. I discovered that the idea of studying the toil of intellectuals as architects of culture is appropriate to a specific group of Egyptian idea-makers and cultural entrepreneurs who were active from the late nineteenth century to the 1940s. I am referring to a group of luminary intellectual entrepreneurs whose members can be defined as the founding forefathers of a modern Egyptian-Arab cultural system. Their ideas and actions as founding culture planners took place in a formative historical

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[1] This article is a condensed version of a more extensive Hebrew language article written in honor of Prof. Itamar Even-Zohar.

environment characterized by a profound metamorphosis: i.e. the dissolution of the existing "traditional" cultural polysystem, and the emergence of a new "modern" cultural polysystem.

Two or three years later, after digesting the revolutionary idea and trying to appropriate it for my own work, Even-Zohar and I again met in the winter of 1996 for another comprehensive discussion on the topic. This time Even-Zohar strived to redefine the concept and present a more detailed explanation. He claimed that it is important to distinguish between 'culture planning' and 'culture *stichya*.' He argued that 'culture planning' is an intentional, deliberate, and well-designed act of intervention by great makers of ideas who can also be defined as intellectual planners or cultural planners. These are powerful free agents, usually pioneer founding fathers of a new culture, such as philosophers, writers, poets, playwrights, journalists, or politicians. The grand planning is the province of a handful of 'luminary,' 'brilliant,' 'gifted,' and 'truly unique' idea-makers who intervene in reality (in order to) change it. They plan the structures, themes, contents, symbols, and language of a new cultural system. As cultural architects and engineers, they draft the contours of the new culture, shape its basic skeleton, organize the components and other ingredients of the system, choose the key reservoirs and select materials and symbols, and determine how to best utilize them in erecting the new cultural building.

Moreover, the culture planners do not stop at the planning stage. Usually, after they produce the new cultural system or its archetypes, they fulfill the task of social dissemination. Aware of the political nature of the struggle for control of the new culture, they reach out to the public and conduct an open marketing battle for the hearts and minds of the different strata of the national community. The intellectual labor process involves several stages. First the idea-makers establish their status as primary cultural authorities, launch circles of readers and disciples, and ascertain their central position as 'thinkers of the time.' The acceptance of new cultural products across society takes place, because increasing numbers of consumer publics view these idea-makers as 'gurus,' or the ultimate spiritual authorities who confer a compass for a new future on the community and who create a new modern cultural identity that gives authentic expression to its ideals and desires, as well as its agonies and dilemmas, on its path to modernity. Then, with the

help of affiliated intellectual agents (Even-Zohar defines them as cultural entrepreneurs) they mobilize material and symbolic capital for cultural 'industrialization' – mass production and distribution – of culture commodities. In the process, these agents, also function as makers of life images, and take control of the print media and the publishing houses, including books, newspapers, periodicals, magazines and textbooks. Later they take control of the audiovisual media – the radio and cinema. In addition, they recruit political resources and appropriate political power by forming alliances with political parties or forces, or by cooperating with the state and its institutions and agencies. This represents the culture planners' efforts to ensure that the culture they produced will emerge from the ovens of design and industry and trickle down to the public spheres, find its place and be accepted by broader sectors in society, elite and non-elite. The culture planners also invest great effort in generating neutralizing actions, namely the undermining of 'old' cultural symbols, institutions and practices. In particular they challenge what they term as 'traditional culture' by waging a cultural war against the textual corpus, the icons, and the language of the traditional cultural repertoire.[2]

According to Even-Zohar, 'cultural *stichya'* confronts this intellectual mega-project. By the term cultural *stichya*, Even-Zohar refers to a spontaneous cultural process which emerges and evolves, either shortly after, or long after, the development of a newly designed culture. Moreover, for Even-Zohar, cultural spontaneity refers to unintended, unplanned, amorphous, anonymous, and hybrid cultural processes and productions. These processes are fluid, unpredictable, uncontrolled, and in principle, not conscious. The spontaneity process usually produces unrefined and vulgar popular mass-cultural commodities. Sometimes, these are expressed as resistance to the planned repertoire. Nevertheless, the very existence of this spontaneous *stychic* processes in the cultural field is evident; these processes are important in determining the final products that reach the market, and particularly in representing those social, political, and cultural forces that either do not take part in the intellectual enterprise, or whose initial influence is insignificant. They often attempt to undermine the intellectual cultural project, alter

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[2] See for example Even-Zohar 2010a, and 2010b.

it, vulgarize it, or destroy it. In such instances, over time, under the growing impact of these spontaneous processes, the pioneering intellectual planners loose their authority, and increasingly loose their control and influence in the cultural field. The remnants of the planned culture are stripped of their original nature, and are replenished with new contents, meanings, and symbols, until they take on new forms and become a 'different culture,' more in line with the spontaneous culture. At this point the idea-makers may feel that their culture planning project – although initially successful and now the new dominant culture at the center of cultural polysystem – confronts difficulties and crises that undermine its hegemonic status.

Even-Zohar did not define the time period of the process where the spontaneous culture eroded the master planned culture and indeed thrust it to the sidelines while itself taking over the cultural centers. The process can take dozens or even hundreds of years. Within this slice of time, the scholar of cultural studies can examine how culture planning establishes a dominant culture, and how this in turn yields to the new power of the changing spontaneous culture after a certain amount of time, which also in turn gives way to a new culture planning project. Specific examples of this process in modern times can be found in the *kibbutz* and the *kibbutz* culture in the Yishuv settlement in pre-state British Mandate and in the state of Israel; the Soviet socialist communist culture and its place as the official hegemonic culture of the Soviet Union until this world power collapsed; or the culture planning of the Kemalist (Atatürk) revolution in Turkey and its demise – all these examples demonstrate the struggle between planned culture and spontaneous culture.

Again I needed to take a break to digest this brilliant and insightful observation. The more I thought about it and the more I tried to understand this radical notion within a specific historical context, in a specific time and place, I found myself not *quite* agreeing with Even-Zohar. It seemed to me that cultural spontaneity assumed intensive impersonal activity via deterministic inexorable historical factors and forces, in which the culture producer and agent disappears from culture production, or at least remains passive in the process. The spontaneity, as it were, produces a culture with no producers and agents and sets in motion cultural dynamics not controlled by human agency. As an histori-

an who assumes that human beings' thoughts and actions exist in every cultural labor, either planned or spontaneous, I found it difficult to accept this observation. I wanted to bring human agency back to the process. Of course, I am well aware that these distinctions and terminology are mine. Furthermore, perhaps I was attributing more weight to these distinctions than Even-Zohar himself did. For Even-Zohar, *stychia* produces a product/s through human agencies, even if in many cases these are anonymous and unidentifiable human agencies. Moreover, in his other works (particularly the polysystem theory), Even-Zohar assumes a reciprocal dynamics between the cultural center and its periphery. He noted the dynamic of certain forces on the edges of the cultural system being shifted to the center, and the marginalization of the central repertoire to the periphery, and so forth. He took into account that the hegemonic cultural planner operates within a cultural polysystem with a periphery that may produce cultural forces that challenge the cultural center and struggle to replace it (Even-Zohar, 1990). Nonetheless, it appeared to me that within the defined category of 'culture planning,' the idea of 'a spontaneous culture' is worthy of re-examination in order to suggest a slightly different theoretical and methodological approach.

And indeed, I would like to argue that the concept of 'spontaneous culture' is not necessarily the most appropriate for historical cultural studies. It may even be misleading. What appears to be a spontaneous challenge that contests the intellectual project and undermines the culture designed by the 'great planners,' should be defined as *counter-culture planning*. This 'another planning,' to rephrase Roger Chartier's concept of "another production" in a different context (LaCapra and Kaplan 1982: 13-46), is effected by defined planners, usually 'secondary' or 'reproductive planners,' or 're-makers.' These second or third tier planners, at least in the formative planning stages, challenge the master planners and subversively attempt to undermine their designed culture by presenting an alternative counter-planning of a new modern culture. It is important to understand that by highlighting this counter-planning, we are not referring to the traditional or conservative forces and factors that act to preserve and safeguard traditional culture. These traditionalists or conservatives seek to limit or nullify any cultural initiative that promotes modernity. They reject any attempt to plan or create a new modern culture, labeling it as a Western-oriented, foreign,

imperialist culture. They foster a conservative 'ideology' sanctifying tradition or neo-traditional indigenous modes of thinking and practices as a defense against "western" modernity. In Even-Zohar's terminology, they function as agents of active resistance who overtly and straightforwardly struggle against the planned modern repertoire.

I refer here to the counter-planning of another different 'modern culture'; in other words, of a culture that seeks to promote norms, values, images, symbols, language, and practices for a *modern* society, economy and polity. It is a modernist planned repertoire, presented as an alternative to the modernist repertoire that the idea-making masters planned, produced and disseminated. Usually, the counter planning intellectual labor begins from the social, political, and cultural margins. The cultural planners function as cultural dissidents against what they negatively term as the dominant establishment culture. They can also be defined as secondary cultural entrepreneurs. They invest new meaning to the very term 'modernism' as an idea, as a cultural strategy and as the platform for action. They challenge the monopoly that the intellectual luminaries claimed for themselves – to exclusively represent modernity and to serve as the exclusive authority that determines its content and meaning, and view themselves as the sole disseminators and those in control of patterns of reception. It is also important to note that this initiated activity of the counter-planners does not occur only when they sense that the 'grand endeavor' has encountered a crisis that augers its demise. We argue that the formative stages of the culture counter-planning can already be identified when and where the master planned cultural endeavor is at its peak, precisely when it is successfully drifting from the planning stages to the public sphere and conquering, for the first time, the major sites of the cultural field. In other words, the counter planning coalesces long before the existent master planned culture expires. A historical dialectical process often occurs, whereby when the planned culture is at its historical peak, and it has become the common culture of the mainstream literate groups in the community, this very culture stimulates and promotes the counter planners to come out of hiding, and to express themselves and act publicly.

Al-Banna and the Production of Egyptian Islamic Culture

I will now turn to examine central contours of the formative process of counter planning in Egypt, with a specific focus on Hasan al-Banna's pioneering role in this process. I will attempt to apply the concept of counter-culture planning to an Egyptian case represented by the early thinking and activity of the Muslim Brothers.

Hasan al-Banna (1906-1949) was the founder and first leader of the Society of the Muslim Brothers (جمعيات الإخوان المسلمين [*Jam'iyyat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*]) in Egypt and the Arab world. The association was established by al-Banna in March 1928 in Isma'iliya as a peripheral religious charity and educational organization. Towards the end of the 1930s and during the 1940s this changed dramatically, as the Muslim Brothers gained popularity and power. From an elementary school teacher in a distant government school, and a secondary intellectual who occasionally wrote articles and commentaries for marginal Islamicist journals and the head of a small organization with a few dozen members, al-Banna became 'the General Guide' of a mass movement. The Muslim Brothers reached their zenith after World War II, with about one million followers and sympathizers in Egypt and other Arab countries. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, one can say that the Muslim Brothers became the most important and popular Islamic Salafi power (or in more updated language, political Islam or Islamic fundamentalism) in Egypt and the Arab Middle East. It created and implemented an entire modern Islamic counter-culture. This involved creating a rich repertoire of ideas, models, images, practices, patterns of behavior, and modes of organization and political strategies. No less important was the creation of effective means of communication and indoctrination, and aggressive methods of transmission.

I will focus here on the young al-Banna's early writings and activities in the late 1920s to the early 1940s (1928-1941). Al-Banna launched his counter-cultural journey at that point in time when the modernist Westernist Egyptian culture was at its peak.[3]

What were the components and themes of this counter-culture? I will start by presenting al-Banna as a secondary idea-maker and cul-

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[3] For this type of culture and its development see Gershoni 1992.

tural entrepreneur. His formative worldview included a number of ideological principles and a set of programs.

A. Rejecting Colonial Culture

Al-Banna systematically deconstructed the European secular and Egyptian territorialist foundations of Western-oriented Egyptian culture. He defined this hegemonic culture as an alien imitative and thus humiliating culture. For him, this imitative culture is not a genuine culture but rather an artificial one transplanted by the colonial power and embraced by local collaborationists. Suffering under colonial, political, and cultural occupation, al-Banna found it inconceivable and impractical that Islamic Egypt borrow the occupier's cultural repertoire and turn it into models for local culture. Al-Banna emphasized that he was not opposed to assimilating the technical blueprints of a material culture from Europe: technology, science, media, economics, industry, educational systems, etc. But when it came to national spiritual contents, defined later by Partha Chatterjee as the spiritual '"inner" domain of national culture' (Chatterjee 1993: 3-13), these must derive *only* from the Arab-Islamic cultural reservoirs of Egypt. These reservoirs must first be re-discovered, renewed, reshaped, and adapted to modern reality, and then made accessible, in order to build a vital Arab-Islamic cultural repertoire for Egypt and for the Arab Middle East. Lastly this cultural store must be presented as a complete and effective alternative to the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman reservoirs of the neo-Pharaonic, Mediterranean and European-oriented national repertoire.

B. Nationalism and National Culture

Al-Banna rejected the concept of neo-Pharaonic Egyptian territorialist nationalism built on the organic continuum between ancient Egypt and modern Egypt. This primordial territorialist concept assumes that the Egyptian national entity is exclusively based on the unending dialogue between the Egyptian population and the Nile Valley. Al-Banna claimed that nationalism based on geography, ethnicity, and race is necessarily chauvinist and pagan, pre-monotheistic (*Jahilite*). Such nationalism does not correspond with a framework of national identity and culture appropriate for Muslims and for Arabic speakers. He redefined Egyptian national identity by anchoring it in its religion and lan-

guage (not territory) and by tying it to the larger Islamic Arab national community. An Egyptian does not define him or herself by race, territory or pre-Islamic history, but rather by the Islamic religion and the Arabic language. Thus, the Egyptian nation is not the physical landscape of its homeland, but rather the landscape of its language and religion. Indeed, Islamic Arab nationalism is anti-colonial nationalism, which can truly lead Egypt to liberation, emancipation, and independence. Hence, an independent and genuine Egyptian national culture must be anchored solely on post-Pharaonic and post-Greco-Roman Islamic-Arab legacies and traditions of the Nile Valley.

C. Political Government and Political Culture

Al-Banna expressed his objection to the existing parliamentary system of liberal democracy. He vehemently rejected the multi-party system, labeling it self-serving factionalism (*ḥizbiyya*). Al-Banna claimed that democratic politics corrupted society. By only promoting the interests of the elite, democracy is concerned solely with the welfare of the wealthy, the landowners, the big merchants and the bankers. Democracy creates a social and cultural rift, deepens social gaps, and destroys national unity, thereby playing into the hands of the Western colonial power which aims to divide the colonized nation, in order to perpetuate its occupation. In al-Banna's planned political agenda, he envisioned a kind of theocratic or autocratic government headed by the royal family, specifically King Faruq. According to his agenda, the Palace regime will rule with the aid of an advisory council to be made up of what al-Banna defined as great spiritual authorities of the nation, i.e. reputable, respected individuals that represent all segments of society (al-Banna did not specify how the council members would be elected). The ruling King and the council would underline the Islamic foundations of the political regime in Egypt, both symbolically and practically. Thus al-Banna did not call for the blanket application of Islamic law (*al-shariʿa)* rather he imagined a sort of neo-Caliphate monarchial order, receptive to the needs of modern reality.

D. Education and History

Al-Banna called for the elimination of Westernized education which was reducing Islamic studies to a meager 10% in all levels of schooling.

He presented the Ministry of Education with a detailed agenda for an across-the-board expansion of Islamic studies in Egyptian schools. Simultaneously he suggested a drastic reduction of what he defined as Western studies, based on the culture of the enlightenment. This agenda specifically underlined a new historical narrative: rejection of the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman past as pagan, and unrelated to Egyptian Islamic history. According to al-Banna, true Egyptian history only commenced with the Arab-Islamic conquering of the Land of the Nile in the seventh century. Islamic religion and Arabic language placed Egypt on a genuine historical stage. In this Islamization and Arabization of history, al-Banna elevated the medieval Islamic Arabic heroes of Egypt, such as Ibn Tulun, Baybars, Salah al-Din, as well as Omar Makram from the beginning of the nineteenth century. Egypt's leading role in Islamic history was expressed in its defense of Islamic *umma* particularly in removing the Mongolian threat and in defeating the crusaders.

E. Culture, Art, Fine Arts

Al-Banna resisted the neo-Pharaonic and the territorial nationalist realism of Egyptian culture and art. He rejected modern Egyptian sculpture, painting, architecture, and specifically, their entry to public buildings and institutions. He also opposed Western iconography, and neo-Pharaonic public monuments (for example Mukhtar's monumental public sculpture of 'The Revival of Egypt' and the two statues erected in honor of Sa'd Zaghlul). As an alternative, he suggested returning to Islamic architecture, mainly to traditional and neo-traditional forms, represented in the public sphere by mosques and other Islamic monuments and structures.

F. Moving from ideology and program to practice

I would like to briefly present the methods al-Banna and the Muslim Brothers used to transform the planned counter-culture into the concrete management of daily life. This happened within the new context of Egypt and the Arab Middle East, which changed dramatically during the 1930s and 1940s. The political, economic, social, and ideological transformations propelled new literate publics of secondary cultural consumers to the market. They changed the market and created a new

environment for reception of al-Banna's counter-cultural products. Eventually, these new conditions turned the counter-culture into a primary culture consumed both by secondary elites and broader sectors of the literate society. It was specifically the swift ascent of the groups of the educated urban middle class (the new young *effendiyya*) to the center of the public sphere and cultural field, which propelled this process. Many of them found in the Muslim Brother's cultural message a home for developing their own culture. Al-Banna, himself a typical *effendi,* and his *effendiyya* followers, created a sense of identification between the *effendiyya* and the Muslim Brothers. They defined the Egyptian Islamic culture they created as 'the *effendiyya* culture' and claimed that the Muslim Brothers' cultural message is the '*effendiyya*'s message.'

G. What was the appeal of this new culture?

In terms of the nationalist struggle, the new culture gave the growing *effendiyya* an authentic anti-colonial national culture in their struggle against British colonialism. The *effendi* cultural entrepreneurs presented this culture as a more effective cultural base for bringing liberation and independence to the Egyptian nation. In terms of the socio-economic divide, al-Banna's counter-culture provided the *effendiyya* with an alternative culture to fight the Western-oriented territorialist Egyptian culture that was associated with the old landed elite and other commercial, merchant and bureaucratic upper classes. It also imbued them with a cultural tool to fight against the 'foreigners' (Italians, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews) and against their perceived hegemony in Egypt's capitalist economy. In terms of cultural identity, this culture gave the *effendiyya* a new Arab-Islamic national identity which combined modernity with the local indigenous traditions.

Conclusion

The expansion of al-Banna's counter-culture during the formative years of 1928-1952 did not stem from spontaneous, unplanned, and unstructured cultural processes. On the contrary, al-Banna was more than an intellectual laborer, an idea-maker, a cultural entrepreneur, or a producer of life images. He was a sophisticated and charismatic political activist, and an outstanding orator and effective propagandist. He al-

ways claimed that action (*al-ʿamal*), or realization (*tanfidh*), namely organization, administration, mobilization, and operation is no less important than the idea (*al-fikra*). For him, the 'message' (*al-daʿwa*) must be embodied in a detailed and concrete agenda (*barnamij*), and the shaping of methods of intervention in reality to fundamentally reshape it. And indeed, the transformation of the planned counter-culture into a real and effective political and social implementation was impressive. Al-Banna, as the General Guide, established an extremely strong and disciplined headquarters in Cairo, a General Guidance Council (*Maktab al-Irshad al-ʿAmm*), with hundreds and later thousands of branches in Egypt and throughout the Arab world, subject to the Council's directives and orders. This system of provincial branches was based on family units. The family heads were subject to the authority of local leaders of the branches, who were subject to a system of district offices, who were in turn subject to the supreme General Guidance Council. This system allowed al-Banna to penetrate and mobilize almost all sectors and strata of Egyptian society. The Muslim Brothers successfully recruited urban industrial workers, civil servants and students, as well as small merchants and artisans. They were very successful in mobilizing professionals – journalists, teachers, doctors, engineers, lawyers, clerks, and to some extent also junior military officers. The Muslim Brothers' use of family units also allowed for the inclusion of many women, who were called Muslim Sisters. This centralist hierarchy enabled al-Banna to recruit hundreds of thousands of adherents to his ranks, and to lead them to his cultural orientation. At the height of his success, he created a strong, hard-core membership of tens of thousands of what he termed 'fighters,' 'activists,' 'disciples,' and 'sympathizers.'

The process of cultural penetration involved the establishment of several forums of indoctrination and dissemination. This included the exploitation of mosques, recruiting activities in tea-houses and coffee shops and street gatherings (*ḥalqa*), as well as the generating of demonstrations, parades, meetings, youth sports clubs, the Scouts, the troupes of rovers (*firaq al-jawwala*) and the semi-militaristic battalion system.

All of these were supported by the rigorous activity of the print media: a network of five newspapers, books, pamphlets, and other publications. The 'messages' (*Risala*, pl. *Rasaʾil*) that al-Banna published as 'special calls' (*daʿwāt*) to his followers and the Egyptian and Arab pub-

lic at large were especially noteworthy. These were 'primary' texts, written by al-Banna in a concise and simple style, elucidating his ideology and his platforms for planned action in the fields of culture, religion, economy, society, education, politics, and foreign affairs. The *rasa'il* were distributed in hundreds of thousands copies, in an inexpensive pocket book format. Millions read them, and they were an elementary tool in disseminating the ideas and goals of the Muslim Brothers. Practically, they served as blueprints for actual operations. Al-Banna also established a well-organized network for economic aid for the needy. This network drew funds from membership dues and from larger contributions from philanthropists and public figures who supported the Muslim Brothers. The system of economic support included banks and other financial credit institutions, soup kitchens, women's aid associations, and adult education schools. All of these organizations and institutions acted to promote the Islamic Arab counter-culture and to establish it as the major alternative culture of the time. In fact, considering that al-Banna developed the Egyptian-Islamic culture as a civil counter-culture based mainly on open civil society and principally non-violent means, and with no official governmental backing, his achievements were most impressive.

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