

Review of *The Universalistic Theory of Knowledge and History* by Karam Khella. Hamburg: Theorie und Praxis Verlag, 2026. Paperback. 149 Pages. ISBN: 978-3-939710-41-7

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Born in Asyut, Egypt, on 24 October 1936, Karam Khella moved to Germany in 1958 after completing his bachelor's degree at the Coptic Faculty in Cairo, where he obtained his doctorate in 1963 with a thesis on “*Dioscorus I of Alexandria (444-454) – Theology and Church Politics*” in 1963. While still a student in Cairo, Khella had already established an “Office for Social Services”, an institution independent of state authorities and the first of its kind in Egypt. Karam Khella will continue his commitment to the socially deprived and underprivileged in Germany. The intertwining of justice-oriented social work and imperialism-critical studies became a key character of Karam Khella's oeuvre and legacy.

The *Arab Student Union*, which he co-founded in 1960, organised demonstrations for Algeria's independence from French settler colonialism. The escalation of the US imperialist aggression against Vietnam and the Zionist state's war of expansion in Palestine in June 1967 further politicised Karam Khella. Participation in professional conferences in Halle in the *German Democratic Republic* (GDR), the socialist part of Germany, motivated Khella in the late 1960s to take a more in-depth look at the theory of historical materialism (Marxism). His engagement as a students' pastor led Karam Khella into the world of social work and the problems faced by industrial workers in Stuttgart.

From 1969 to 1971, he was director of the church-run institution ‘*Middle Eastern Students in Europe*’ in Geneva, where he published the series ‘*Study Texts on Problems of Development and Progress in the Middle East*’. In Hamburg, where Khella worked at the *Europa Studienkolleg* in the early 1970s, his criticism of capitalism and his commitment to independence and liberation movements in the Global South and to the socially deprived and marginalised in the imperialist states of the North brought him into the sights of German security services. A persecution which was continued throughout his entire period of humanistic, solidarity-based and practically oriented teaching in Germany, culminating in threats of deportation in the 1980s and a ban on teaching in the mid-1990s. This did not deter him from his relentless work, publishing and activism in anti-imperialist solidarity with the peoples of Asia, Africa and Asia, both inside and outside universities. This continued until he was threatened with deportation in the 1980s and banned from teaching in the mid-1990s.

In 1971, Karam Khella has taken up a lectureship in the ‘*Supplementary Social Pedagogy Studies*’ (SPZ) programme at the University of Hamburg. His teaching and development of practical approaches to social work and education resulted in a five-volume work that demystifies the capitalist euphemisms of the welfare and social state and develops new approaches to social work based on the needs of those directly affected. On the one hand, Karam Khella subjects the contemptuous discourse about the social marginalised, including homeless people, who were discriminatorily referred to as ‘bums’ in the term coined by the state, to fundamental criticism. At the same time, he develops a subject-led social pedagogy that leads out of the impoverishment of the declassed in capitalist society. The five-volume handbook ‘*Social Work and Social Pedagogy*’ (Hamburg 1973–1983), including ‘*Social Work from Below*,’ has established itself as a standard textbook – there are no comparable works to date. In this comprehensive and still relevant work, Karam Khella follows approaches based on historical materialist and Marxist theory and methods, e.g. class analysis, but does not apply them rigidly or dogmatically. Not least, marginalised social groups are rehabilitated

as subjects of their own history. And – significant for the prehistory of the developing universalist theory of knowledge and history – the critique of capitalism and the repressive administration of poverty is philosophically embedded. A mechanistic, objectivist understanding of Marxism, which is often characterised by a disregard for those socially marginalised outside the working class in imperialist production, is contrasted with a creative, subject-oriented understanding: “The change in consciousness precedes the change in being.” (Khella 1978, 66) In his writings from the late 1970s, including “*Dialectical and Historical Materialism*” (Khella 1979), there are already signs of criticism of the objectivism and determinism of historical materialism, which, with the development of Eurocentrism criticism in subsequent debates with Marxism, paved the way for the universalist theory of history. The primacy of politics over economics corresponds to the primacy of consciousness over being – a dialectic that objectivist schools of Marxism, especially in Europe, have neglected. Furthermore, history cannot be forced into the rigid and Eurocentric scheme of five epochs (primitive society, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism) shared by Marxism and bourgeois schools of thought, apart from differences in terminology.

In his work ‘*History of the Arab Peoples*’ (Hamburg 1994) – which provides the historical and empirical material for theoretical reflection – Khella presents his ‘Universalist Theory of History’. A long-term historical and universal periodisation follows the history of anti-colonial resistance, here using the example of the Arab and African peoples. Accordingly, we live in the “present of European colonialism and Western imperialism and the struggle for freedom of peoples and independence of states (since 1441).” (Khella 1994, 364) Resistance to Zionist settler colonialism in Palestine is of central importance in this context.

In contrast to schools of Historical Materialism, which declare class struggle in advanced capitalist states to be the engine of development – Asian societies are subsumed under the umbrella term ‘Asian mode of production’ as static Oriental despotisms – or the French school of the *Annales*, which, although it follows a long durée (long-term history), the

defining core of the universalist historical theory is to rediscover the history of resistance among the peoples of Asia, Africa and the Americas as a history from below that has largely gone unwritten, not least in European languages, to explore it historiographical and to derive it theoretically. Realising the reality of resistant peoples as historical subjects and forces that shape history requires, first and foremost, an open hermeneutic circle, an understanding of anthropogenic history that is free from Eurocentric bias. Karam Khella has concluded that the socialisation of individuals in imperialist states over generations has cemented a culture of prejudice and arrogance of superiority, which extends from early childhood education to academic education. In the latter, it is scientised and carried back into society. The theory of history is preceded by a socio-psychological epistemology, which makes it possible to delve into the meta-historical question of the individual and social psychological dimensions that continually feed into what is now often referred to as the mainstream view of the world and humanity in the imperial West.

The conceit of white supremacy over the world rarely makes use of racist racial doctrine in the biological sense anymore – even if this has recently a renaissance – but the core message remains unchanged: the imperialist West must determine the course of history and life. And only the West!

In numerous monographs, Khella has described the never-ending imperialist aggression and blockades against independent states since the 1980s (Libya, Yugoslavia, Iraq). The development of his theory was continuously substantiated by case studies, as illustrated by titles such as ‘They're Coming Back... The Gulf and the 200-Year Euro-American War Against the Arabs’ (Hamburg 1991) and ‘The State of Siege’ (Hamburg 1998).

The Universalist Theory of History

Historical thinking in Western Europe, not least in Germany, was and is inspired by Eurocentrism, which scientifically justifies the striving for world domination. Karam Khella's critique of Eurocentrism thus

combines the deciphering of socio-psychological and psycho-historical pathologies that have become inscribed in imperialist ways of thinking and being. On the one hand, Eurocentric periodisation sequences continuity in time and fragments the globe, allowing Eurocentric legends and mythmaking to take deep roots. Historical thinking in Western Europe, not least in Germany, was and is characterised by an imagined Ancient Greece which since the 19th century served as projection screen for European founding myths of all that is good and beautiful (the supposed genesis of democracy, etc.) even though it led a rather marginal and insignificant existence on the periphery of the long-distant trade and knowledge routes (e.g. Silk Road). Marxism is not free from a Europe-first mindset, as England, the 'most developed' capitalist country on earth, served as a mirror for all continents and countries of the world to reflect on their own development and thus, in a sense, as a role model. In contrast, universalist historical theory is based on theoretical and methodological concepts that open our eyes to the unity of time and space in the course of history. The theory of long waves is particularly important as universally integrating time and space. Just like a physical wave that continuously weakens in time and space but continues to move towards infinity, anthropogenic historical waves can be interpreted in the same way. Karam Khella illustrates such a long-term historical development using the example of Egypt (Khella 1994, 330).

Following Napoleon's failed conquest of Egypt and Palestine, a stable and, in many socio-economic areas, prosperous state emerges under the rule of Muhammad Ali in Egypt at the crossroads between Asia, Africa and Europe in the first quarter of the 19th Century. European colonialism was initially pushed back. With the expansion and temporary consolidation of its rule in India, England then had been aiming to conquer Egypt since the late 1870s. The Berlin Colonial Congress of 1882 took place in parallel with the occupation of Egypt (Khella 2008, 127). The imperialist powers in Europe coordinated their attacks on Africa, which began after the conquest of Egypt, and

proceed militarily in a division of labour. Africa becomes a continent with open veins (Eduardo Galeano). Similar long waves of colonialism can be traced in the Americas and Asia. Conversely, a long wave of liberation for Africa had a peak in Egypt and its independence at the beginning of 1952. The wave of resistance spread across the continent with the start of the struggle for independence in Algeria in 1954 and beyond. Another example of a long wave of resistance in history is the Palestinian *Intifada*, the popular uprising in Palestine in 1987, and its impact on all continents.

Karam Khella's universalist theory of history is particularly well equipped to provide a theoretical and methodological framework for exploring the history of peoples' resistance to colonialism and imperialism. In addition to the theoretical corner stones of long-term and universal history, the principle of historicization, everyday history and others, it is the methods that serve as tools for bringing history from below to its unfolding. Resistance history can only rarely draw on primary sources, archives, etc.; throughout human history, it has fallen victim to the eradication efforts of rulers and empires (autodafés, book burnings, etc.). Special methods are required to make resistant traditions (e.g. rites, dances and other resistant practices) usable for the historicization of a history of peoples.

Khella's methodological toolbox offers a range of methodological approaches which, when applied in an integrated manner, can be used to assemble the traces of the supposedly defeated into an overall alternative historical picture. In conjunction with the creative application of the theory of long waves – which assumes that historically resistant waves are amplified by their resurgence in the present – universalist historical theory provides an excellent framework for rediscovering history beyond Eurocentric and imperial legends and for moving towards a post-imperial, peaceful and just world in the future.

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