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Cavafy's Alexandria and the Arab Spring

It is not only Cavafy's poetry that lives on but also the cosmopolitanism its verses embody. But this cosmopolitanism is no longer infused with an admiration of French culture or expressed through a European-based multiethnic society and culture. Nor does it consist of the remnants of that world that I encountered in Alexandria when I was researching its history in the 1980s. By then the country had been "Egyptianized" by its nationalist movement. Ultimately, its political failure brought about the Arab Spring and a new range of strategies for Egypt's future. There is an ongoing ferment in which Alexandria has reclaimed its role as a crucible of ideas. The city had been overshadowed by Cairo during the nationalist era but by the same token it was able to retain its tolerance for old and new ways of thinking. The new ideologies spawned by the Arab Spring found a safe haven in Alexandria. Even the Salafists, the more traditional Islamists, acknowledge that their ideas have been nurtured by the city's openness. Alexandria has even got its own "Tahrir Square," a public space in front of the new Library of Alexandria where demonstrators gather. Close by is the Greek Consulate, where for many years a makeshift museum housed Cavafy's possessions.