

5/2019

Pascale Ghazaleh

Past Imperfect, Future Tense

Writing People's Histories
in the Middle East Today

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Forum Transregionale Studien e.V. Berlin
Essays of the Forum Transregionale Studien 5/2019

Editorial Team: Georges Khalil, Moritz Buchner, Jenny Meurer

Corporate Design: Plural | Severin Wucher, Berlin

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The Forum Transregionale Studien is sponsored by the Governing Mayor of Berlin – Senate Chancellery Higher Education and Research. In the area of internationalization and open access publications the Forum cooperates with the Max Weber Foundation – German Humanities Institutes Abroad. The German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) supports this cooperation.



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The full text is published open access in *Essays of the Forum Transregionale Studien* at www.perspectivia.net, the publication platform of the Max Weber Stiftung. It is also available in the publication section at www.forum-transregionale-studien.de.

DOI: 10.25360/01-2019-00028

ISSN (Print) 2364-8945

ISSN (Online) 2364-8953

**Forum
Transregionale
Studien**

Pascale Ghazaleh

Past Imperfect, Future Tense

Writing People's Histories in the Middle East
Today

Abstract:

Historians of the Middle East face a variety of obstacles in accessing state archives, at a time when archival material has become indispensable to historical research. In response, scholars have developed a range of strategies: some have taken to reflecting on the research process and the difficulties it entails, while others have turned to sources other than the state, questioning the official definition of the archive as well as the narratives and counter-narratives it has engendered. Are these adequate responses to the discursive and physical violence researchers must endure? Or do such strategies merely further empower security and market forces in their assault on the production of academic knowledge?

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Past Imperfect, Future Tense: Writing People's Histories in the Middle East Today¹

"Antiquity is a garden that belongs by natural right to those who cultivate and harvest its fruits."²

Introduction

It is no longer possible in the Middle East today to function as a scholar—at least in the humanities and social sciences—without being acutely aware of the power structures, political stakes, and mechanisms of repression that underlie the research process. Indeed, so fraught with risk has our practice become, whether in the field or the archives, that it has now become common for writing about the research process to precede, and sometimes to replace, that process itself.³ Humanities and so-

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- 1 I presented the ideas outlined here in two Berliner Seminars of EUROPE IN THE MIDDLE EAST—THE MIDDLE EAST IN EUROPE (EUME) at the Forum Transregionale Studien (Berlin) in 2017-18, as a Georg Forster Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (hosted by EUME and the Center of Global History at Freie Universität Berlin). I would like to thank all those who offered critiques and advice, especially Georges Khalil, and EUME Fellows Lamia Moghnieh, Rasha Chatta, Seda Altug, and Alia Mossallam. I am grateful to Sebastian Conrad of the Freie Universität Berlin and the Forum for opening up a stimulating academic environment. This is part of a wider project on property and citizenship, developed within the framework of a working group led by Simona Cerutti and Isabelle Grangaud at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales.
 - 2 Captain E. de Verninac Saint-Maur, *Voyage de Louxor* (1835), cited in Donald Reid, *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 1.
 - 3 See for example Lucia Carminati, "Dead Ends in and out of the Archive: an Ethnography of Dār al Wathā'iq al Qawmiyya, the Egyptian National Archive," *Rethinking History*, 23/1, 2019: *History as Creative Writing*, 34-51, doi: 10.1080/13642529.2018.1494933 ; Chloe Bordewich, "I Am Still Not a Spy,"

cial sciences in the region, cornered as they may be, are sites of engagement, for asserting citizenship and carving out space for political existence.

Historians have traditionally struggled with the process of constituting an archival corpus through their scholarly work: the archive, whether as a source for historical study or a subject of study in its own right, offers exceptional access to the past, but is always mediated through our perceptions and understanding. There are no neatly constituted collections that contain ready answers to our complex questions; we must piece those together from what we are able to read and what kinds of documents we find. The questions we are able to ask, as well as the answers we propose, rely—sometimes more than we expect—on lucky accidents or unknown omissions. Thus the historian's work, the tentative questions and the more or less satisfactory ways of answering them, must be a product of the archives, but must also produce and mediate them for the public (in the sense that it is only through historians' scholarship that most people who are interested in the past actually have any contact with archival material).

These questions have ontological dimensions but also eminently practical ones. Scholars in much of the region do face acute, concrete problems in gaining physical access to archives. In coming decades, historians working on Syria, Iraq, Libya, or Yemen will likely face insurmountable difficulties in recovering historical documents. Even for scholars in countries that are not being torn apart by war, research is fraught with real, immediate existential risks, beyond the harassment, intimidation, and stonewalling we have come to accept as the price we pay for access to information. Indeed, although nothing could have prepared us

for the torture and killing of Giulio Regeni, an Italian student at Cambridge who was writing his dissertation on independent trade unions in Egypt,⁴ his murder was immediately incorporated into the spectrum of possible risks that academics must reckon with before embarking on a research project. The second effect was to cancel the margin of immunity that researchers from abroad had previously enjoyed. As Lucie Ryzova has written:

For decades the primary dangers threatening foreign scholars included the denial of a visa or research permit, or, at worst, expulsion. Giulio's death had the effect of leveling the playing field between foreign researcher and [...] Egyptian informant, turning the former from a "bystander" or "witness" to a direct participant in enduring the consequences of social enquiry.⁵

Ryzova acknowledges, of course, that "Egyptians remain in incomparably greater danger than foreigners". We should also remember that Regeni's murder, however brutal and absurd, was the logical culmination of the "security mindset" that Khaled Fahmy has identified as pervading the Egyptian academic and

4 Stephanie Kirchgaessner, Ruth Michaelson and Aisha Gani, "Italian student Giulio Regeni found dead in Cairo 'with signs of torture'", *The Guardian*, 4 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/04/italian-student-found-dead-egypt-giulio-regeni-torture> [accessed 19 January 2019]. "The Egyptian prosecutor leading the investigation team on the case said Regeni's body had been found with marks on it, cuts to the ears and signs of beatings and a 'slow death'. A source at the Giza public prosecutor's office said Regeni's body was found on the Cairo-Alexandria desert road, on an overpass close to Cairo's 6th October district and that his body appeared to have been dragged along the ground. Responding to earlier reports, the source added that the body did not have any noticeable stab wounds, but that other marks could have been cigarette burns."

5 Lucie Ryzova, "New Asymmetries in the New Authoritarianism: Research in Egypt in the Age of Post-Revolution", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49/3, 2017, 511. doi: 10.1017/S002074381700037X.

scientific landscape in the aftermath of 2011.⁶ The current atmosphere of xenophobia, furthermore, has expanded the definition of ‘foreignness’ to include anyone that ‘loyal citizens’ identify as somehow suspicious. This is not something entirely new; twenty years ago, for example, when I needed to obtain a permit from the Egyptian Ministry of Endowments to carry out research for my doctoral dissertation, I underwent an interview with a member of state security, in which my complexion, religion, accent, and style of dress were all topics of discussion. The conversation concluded on a jovial note, as the interviewer sighed and asked me rhetorically: “If all parents in Egypt brought up their children the way yours brought you up, what would happen to our national identity?” I agreed that this would indeed be a potential tragedy and, satisfied that I was sufficiently chastened, he granted me the authorization. In Egypt today, however, the struggle over ownership of national identity, which in various forms took up most of the twentieth century, has reached a turning point, and forces of exclusion are gaining the upper hand. As I hope to show, their grip extends not only to contemporary “national security” matters but also to the past.

Absences, Invented and Real

Security risks constitute only one—albeit perhaps the most frightening—aspect of the ways in which public space is closing down in Egypt and across the region today. Another problem is

6 Khaled Fahmy, “Mr Minister, what are you talking about?”, Khaled Fahmy: *Reflections on Egypt, the Middle East, and History*, 23 June 2013, <https://khaledfahmy.org/en/2013/06/23/mr-minister-what-are-you-talking-about/> [accessed 19 January 2019].

the monopoly that parts of the state apparatus seek to impose on access to various sorts of information. Twenty years ago, it was easy for historians in Egypt, like myself, working on the Ottoman period to obtain a permit and access the Ottoman court records, which at the time were kept in the Property Registration Bureau on Ramses Street in downtown Cairo. When I started research for my master's thesis, I walked into the reading room—a group of tables around which historians huddled together sipping tea while leafing through the court registers—and selected a volume at random off a shelf. No precautions were taken to preserve the documents (one of the doctoral students, having finished his dissertation, took it upon himself to “restore” the registers with lined notebook paper and craft glue, signing each with a flourish), and no security concerns limited our ability to view the archives. This free-for-all was gradually circumscribed, until 2013, when two related developments imposed dramatic restrictions on researchers' freedom of access. The first was the imposition of tighter state security control on areas where it had previously been uneven or cursory; the second was the expansion of that control, resulting in the designation of seemingly irrelevant fields as security or strategic concerns. Underpinning these developments was the elaboration and extension of a nationalist narrative that, in its quest to legitimize the 2013 coup, incorporated wide swathes of the past into its remit, and appropriated exclusive authority to speak about them.

I followed a lengthy and circuitous route to obtain a permit to enter the National Archives in Egypt. Some of the incidents I recount here may seem trivial; but in fact, they made up the texture of work at the archives—mine and that of many other scholars—for years. They informed historians' research, by allowing or preventing access in very real ways to documents that might or might not exist. Anyone who has been to Dar al-Watha'iq

(the National Archives, where the bulk of the records produced by the state since the early Ottoman period are kept) knows that, even before security clearance has been obtained, it is the staff of the reading room who control what one sees or does not see. The ladies who process paperwork, monitor researchers, and ensure that regulations are being strictly followed are also those who can suggest the correct way to formulate an application for a permit, or who can reveal the existence of an index no one knew about. Such is their authority that, when I was going to apply for my permanent permit (separate authorizations must be obtained for research towards master's and PhD degrees, promotions or tenure, and, finally, when one has run out of certificates to strive for, a "permanent" research situation), the first thing I did was to take my son with me in the hope that he would charm Madame N. (then the supervisor of the reading room). Despite the selfies she took with him, my plan was not as effective as I had anticipated it might be.

Knowledge of the archives, such as it is, rests with Madame N. and her colleagues. On one occasion, I asked to see registers from the Ottoman financial administration of Egypt (*Ruznama*). The reading room staff informed me that these registers were not then available, as Madame S. was in the process of classifying them; Madame S. was also in the process of compiling an exhaustive index; but until this endeavor was complete, no one but Madame S. (and perhaps not even she) knew exactly what the *Ruznama* registers contained. Six years after my initial request, the indexing was still underway, the registers still unavailable, and my dissertation was complete, without the information that the *Ruznama* might have contained. Madame S. has since passed away, but I never had the opportunity to ascertain whether the index came into existence.

I don't mean to mock the ladies of the reading room, because they do their work diligently and have always been kind and helpful to me. I believe that this is because I approached them with utmost respect, wore extremely modest clothing, and comported myself in a manner befitting what my mother would have called a bluestocking. Others have not been so lucky. One of my more flamboyant colleagues eventually had to stop going to the archives, so difficult was it for her to obtain any hint as to whether the documents she sought were or were not there. The reading room ladies are not only morality police, however. They also work to secure the national interest as they understand it: for example, by telling one Israeli historian that documents he wanted—concerning the Bedouin tribes of Sinai—simply did not exist. They willingly provided him with a steady flow of other, utterly irrelevant resources, however.

The archives housed in Dar al-Mahfuzat (the documents produced by Egypt's Civil Courts, registers related to land administration during the Ottoman period, as well as records of births and deaths), at the Cairo Citadel, are also guarded by a series of institutional and individual gatekeepers. An acquaintance of mine, seeking a copy of his grandfather's birth certificate, was told that none of the employees would enter the store-rooms, which were full of rats; when he said he was willing to brave the rodents, the employees informed him they had introduced snakes to get rid of the rats, and told him to try again a few years hence. One scholar who did gain access to Dar al-Mahfuzat put together the following series of tips for colleagues seeking to gain access to the archives kept there:

[...] permission needs to be requested from the Ministry of Finance [...]. They have a form you have [to] fill in. Bring all kinds of photocopies of your passport/ID plus at least two photographs.

They will tell you that it is around 2-3 months to get the permission.

I was informed previously that foreigners are not really welcomed in this archive, so I asked also [for] a special letter in Arabic from my ambassador, confirming my being a researcher etc. plus another letter in Arabic from my institution [...] I got it approx. in 1 year—also likely due to the political changes in Egypt. It is valid for 1 year from the date of issue.

With the permission (you need another photograph), you go to the Citadel to Dar al-Mahfuzat and you will have a chat with the strange director, Madame I. They are mad about security, you will be followed everywhere by a security guard.

For research, you have to be really luxurious with your time since we are only allowed 3 hours per day (from 10 am to 1 pm) to be in the building. There are only handwritten catalogs and you have to know exactly what you want in order to be able to find a specific file. Only to get through the catalogs you will need lots of time. (3 hours per day!)

For this reason, in your request write a time period/research subject as wide as possible because they will literally block you from any further data after your stated period.

Every time you get a file, a security guard will come and sit next to you, closely observing what you are doing. Be humble.

For those of you who are not good in Arabic, I would suggest either to find someone [to work] for you or consider not to work there.⁷

Such treasure hunts notwithstanding, the diligence of a few individuals, or the “security mindset” that informs the functioning of various government bodies—a mindset so widespread as to warrant its description as ‘systematic’ or ‘institutionalized’

7 Personal communication from a colleague working on theater in the late nineteenth century.

(contrary to the knowledge that it seeks to preserve from the wrong kinds of questions)—does not account for all that is missing from our potential archives. One young PhD student, writing her dissertation on Muhammad Ali's military campaigns in the Hijaz, ordered box upon box of files, only to find that each contained, at most, one or two pieces of paper. The explanation, whispered outside the reading room: wealthy Saudis had somehow bought almost every document in that collection.

Archival Value, Concrete and Symbolic

The archives have concrete material value, then, of different sorts. Some see them as potential reservoirs of objective information, to be converted into the only kind of social power available to young, poor academics from the provinces—PhD students who, as the late sociologist Muhammad Hakim once pointed out, had to save for months to make a trip to Cairo, spending every possible minute copying out documents from the registers, unable even to afford a sandwich for lunch.⁸ Many of these scholars, brutalized by the Egyptian academic establishment, used by their supervisors as slave labor, sources of revenue, and scholarly output, come to view the archives as their only wealth, and base their expertise on the number of documents they have converted into data. These scholars contributed, for a brief period during the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century, to an efflorescence in Ottoman studies in Egypt—an endeavor that gave them a sense of real ownership in the historiography of this former Ottoman province, and that fostered interest in the working and middle classes of the Otto-

8 Personal communication, 1998.

man period. In a few cases, the paths of these young scholars converged with those of non-Egyptian academics whose limited time and tenuous grasp of Arabic made a research assistant necessary. In exchange for a few months' worth of relative material comfort, and perhaps a footnoted acknowledgement, or occasional invitations for workshops abroad, some Arabic-speaking scholars also became native informants to their American or European counterparts, while producing research of their own that was almost never translated into English or French.⁹

Once or twice, desperate young scholars even sought to convert potential symbolic capital into more tangible benefits by trying to smuggle registers out of the archives and sell them. A lively market exists in particular for Ottoman-era documents, which are still relatively easy to obtain. Perhaps ironically, the most likely consumers of such commodities are least likely to read them, and prefer to frame them in distressed gold and hang them on living room walls. Thus one finds random documents relating to child custody or purchase of merchandise (utterly unrelated to the family whose dining room they adorn, and valuable to those who buy them only because they look old and authentic) hanging next to a priceless Bukhara and a genuine Aubusson. Reduced to pure form, such documents take on an altogether different value, but are no less commodified than when they are reduced to pure content, in the other circumstances I have just evoked. Today, some historians contribute to

9 A few cases of translation are: Magdi Guirguis, *An Armenian Artist in Ottoman Egypt: Yuhanna al-Armani and His Coptic Icons*, trans. Amina Elbendary, Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2008; Husam 'Abd al-Mu'ti, "Piety and Profit: The Haramayn Endowments in Egypt (1517-1814)", in: Pascale Ghazaleh (ed.), *Held in Trust: Waqf in the Islamic World*, 41-72, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2011; Nasir Ibrahim, "The Sadir al-Fuqaha' wa-l-Fuqara' Endowment (Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi) in Alexandria during the Eighteenth Century", in: Pascale Ghazaleh (ed.), *Held in Trust*, *ibid.*, 73-102.

Fig. 1: Yoga mat with tughra of Suliman the Magnificent.



this market by buying photographs or papers in the hope of saving them from oblivion; the line between scholar and hoarder thus becomes blurred.

In Search of the Archive

Even before 2011, what Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni have termed the “historiographical marketplace”¹⁰ was governed, in Egypt, by conflicting attempts to delineate entitlement, derive profit, and establish legitimacy. In the aftermath of 2011, all these forces, which regulated access to the archives and determined what different actors made of them, reached a sort of paroxysm of intensity. As the historian of science Omnia El Shakry has pointed out,

10 Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni, “The Name and the Game: Unequal Exchange and the Historiographic Marketplace”, in: Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (eds.), *Microhistory and the Lost Peoples of Europe*, 1-10, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991.

Historians have become increasingly accustomed to openly discussing the very material difficulties of accessing archives, which are so intensified in postcolonial contexts—the tortuous security clearances, for example, or the impossibility of archival access in times of war or revolutionary upheaval. For historians of the Middle East, such questions have reached a heightened pitch as scholars face the prospect of ever-diminishing access to archives and national libraries in the region in the wake of recent political convulsions.¹¹

After a long hiatus following the end of my PhD research, I applied for a permanent permit at the archives in December 2015. I presented the necessary paperwork, which included a short research project and a list of the archival collections I wanted to consult (one of the paradoxes of such applications being that one must know what one wants to see before knowing what is actually there). This wish list would prevent me from browsing or requesting anything from a different collection: if I had said I wanted to look at Ottoman court registers, for example, I would not have been allowed to ask for police records, decrees from the department of public works, or anything outside the scope of my initial intention, strictly defined. Following the advice of other scholars, I kept my outline short and my list of collections long. After a couple of months, I learned that “al-amn” (security personnel) had requested a longer and more detailed research project. Keen to present it as quickly as possible, and get the ball rolling, I wrote an honest and detailed outline of what I wished to investigate: in brief, the ways in which people outside the intellectual classes understood and exercised citizenship in late nineteenth-century Egypt, by laying claim to resources to which

11 Omnia El Shakry, “‘History without Documents’: The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East”, *The American Historical Review* 120/3, 2015, 921-922. doi: 10.1093/ahr/120.3.920

they felt entitled. This was my first mistake. I used terms like enfranchisement, referred to the state apparatus as a historical actor asserting its control over new spheres of economic activity while seeking to monopolize definitions and expressions of citizenship ... In short, I casually used loaded terms, with what I realize with hindsight was willful naïveté. Arrogantly, I thought I was somehow different from colleagues whose applications had been rejected. This was misguided, to say the least.

A long period of waiting ensued, punctuated by increasingly desperate WhatsApp messages to Madame N. She responded, occasionally and enigmatically, and then, as the months passed, she fell silent. At one point, I called for news and one of Madame N.'s colleagues told me that an answer had arrived from security. I rushed to the archives, only to find that the answer was in fact a question: "The applicant must clarify," it said, "whether she intends to carry out opinion polls or administer questionnaires." Mystified, I asked the reading room ladies whose opinion I could poll when studying the late nineteenth century. "Do they think you're planning a séance?" one of them asked amid peals of laughter. We composed a sober response, and sent it off. Silence ensued.

Around a year after I had begun the application process, a colleague suggested that I ask my university's legal adviser for help. He in turn referred me to someone who I later found out was a high-ranking National Security official; at the time, I knew him only as Colonel H. We communicated, again via WhatsApp, and he promised to look into the case, only to tell me, a few days later, that my file could not be found. "Submit a new application, and get me the serial number issued when it leaves the archives to go to National Security," he suggested. I spent the next weeks in increasingly Kafkaesque attempts to do so. At this time, the archives were undergoing a security overhaul, and the new head

of security (also, confusingly, named H., but with the potentially more impressive title of General) emphatically refused to reveal the information I was requesting. “Get your colonel to call my office,” he barked when I reached him on the phone, “and tell me personally why he wants this number.”

Faced with this inadmissible assault on “[my] colonel’s” dignity, I attempted more roundabout means of obtaining what I needed. On one of my visits to the archives, the office manager of the security department, a certain Mr. M., waylaid me in a corridor and informed me he remembered me from my early years as a researcher. He knew my topic, my name, and the story of my attempts to obtain a permit. Somewhat disconcertingly, he sat me in the office of the head of security, where I could follow the goings-on in different parts of the archives via several screens. Mr. M. explained to me that new security regulations prevented him from revealing the serial number on my application; he punctuated this speech by waving a sheaf of documents in front of my face, saying: “Oh yes, I have your new application, I’m sending it off today, but unfortunately I can’t give you the number. Totally forbidden. It’s the new regulations, you know.” Then he deposited the documents on the desk in front of me, and left the room, scowling at me. He was almost purple, perhaps with rage, seemingly apoplectic, his mustache quivering as he stalked out. My heart pounding, I sat frozen for a few seconds, then threw my few remaining scruples to the winds and leapt up to take a picture of the topmost document. I was terrified that Mr. M. was setting me up and would reappear at any moment, catch me red-handed, and have me expelled from the archives for life. Later, I looked at the picture I had taken: it was of an application submitted by a master’s student named Mervat, whose proposal had been approved. Was Mr. M. merely messing

with me? I have no way of knowing, but at this point I believed it was likely.

Historians without Archives

Almost two years since I had first submitted my request to enter the archives, I had yet to receive any kind of response. Finally, one of the reading room ladies told me my only remaining course of action was to go to state security headquarters and try to find out what had happened to my application. In desperation, I decided to follow her advice. The imposing complex was festooned with barbed wire and barriers, which I navigated to arrive before a small window where a friendly gentleman stopped me. After I had explained my quest, he told me: “There is no one inside for you to speak to. We don’t deal with civilians, only with government departments. Go back to the archives and you’ll find they have put your request in a drawer somewhere. Go back now and ask them to expedite it.” Despondent, I did so. Three weeks later, I received a WhatsApp message from one of the reading room ladies. It read simply: “Congratulations.” Thus did two and a half years of pleading and petitions come to an unexpected end. Others were not so lucky: two colleagues working on Egypt—one studying seventeenth-century agriculture, the other Jews in the nineteenth century—were banned from the archives for life, merely for requesting permission to carry out projects that state security deemed threatening, or perhaps simply impertinent. Thus, the gatekeepers of the Arab past are alive and well; if anything, the problem is that they are more efficiently equipped than they used to be.

In the meantime, I wonder what we historians are without our archives; I wonder what a historian can be. My teachers were

scholars who studied Ottoman Egypt—Andre Raymond, Nelly Hanna, and Ghislaine Alleaume—or microhistorians like Simona Cerutti, who worked on Europe, mining the archives for evidence of subterranean transformations in material culture or in strategies of knowledge transmission. I am, for better or worse, an empiricist (the less charitable might say a fetishist of the archive); what I have found, and not found, in historical documents has informed the questions I have asked and the practices I have developed. Raymond and Hanna pioneered a methodology and philosophy of history, framed by their belief in the need for social justice, promoted by social history and rooted in the use of Ottoman court archives. The registers of the Ottoman court system gave historians a glimpse into the lives of people that other sources had disregarded or silenced: the “middle classes”, carpenters, barbers, peddlers, and peasants. The documents produced by the British colonial administration after 1882, or the papers collected by historians whom the royal family commissioned to compile commemorative albums, certainly contained many references to these people; but the sheer volume of the Ottoman court registers, and the wealth of detail they contained, were unparalleled in later archival sources. The court archives to which historians turned in the 1970s were perceived as more authentic, representative, and accurate than the sources used by historians of Egypt like P.J. Vatikiotis or even Shafiq Ghurbal—historians who, whatever their political convictions, remained tied to a vision of France or Britain, European colonial powers, and their archives, as the sole legitimate producers and vehicles of valid knowledge about Egypt and the Egyptians. It is no coincidence that the historians who began working on Ottoman court records in the 1970s and 1980s had been influenced by decades of anti-imperialist and decolonization struggles. They saw themselves as progressive, and this informed their un-

derstanding of their sources, their work, and their social and political responsibilities. A scholar like Gabriel Baer was handicapped by the fact that he had worked only on published sources; as an Israeli, he had no access to the archives.

I cannot conclude this section without addressing the question of what, exactly, is being hidden from our gaze in this new age of securitized scholarship. Perhaps my answer is banal in its cynicism: no actual content justifies this degree of securitization. Even what Ann Laura Stoler refers to as “the vulnerability of state power”, which she explores in her book *Along the Archival Grain*,¹² does not substantiate the protective hysteria demonstrated by the new, self-appointed “gatekeepers of [our] past.”¹³ Rather, it is simply the right to scrutinize, assess, approve or reject—the right to pass judgment on who can see the archives, and what questions we may ask of them—that the security institution claims. This also entails the right to exercise power for the sake of it, the right to wield it for the purposes of intimidation and to ensure that its audience acknowledges it in its monolithic entirety. What is at stake, in other words, is the assertion of uncontested ownership of the past; a claim that includes the right to interrogate that past, or, on the contrary, to let it languish, unexamined, for as long as its sentinels decide.

12 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

13 Yoav Di-Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009.

Historians of the Impossible

In this difficult context, nevertheless, scholars, activists, and laypeople have been inventing new ways to confront, sidestep, subvert, or otherwise disrupt monopolies on historical knowledge—whether those monopolies are imposed by state bodies, officious individuals, privatization schemes, or institutions of learning. How, they are asking, can we write histories that are different from the histories written so far? What are the possibilities of producing historical knowledge outside the confines of the state-dominated archives, the marketplace, and the academy? And in the new spaces being carved out, what kinds of knowledge can be generated?

In Egypt, there have been increasing efforts to reflect on these questions, particularly with regard to archives, in the past couple of years. In a series of articles published during 2018, contributors to *Mada Masr* undertook a sustained interrogation of the archives and alternatives to the kinds of scholarship historians have produced so far. In one article, titled “52 questions about the archives” (a reference to pad.ma’s “10 Theses on the Archive”),¹⁴ contributors asked the following rhetorical question:

By fetishizing and perpetually recycling archives, are we—even unintentionally—implicated in autocratic and neoliberal narratives that enshrine the past, both aesthetically and epistemologically, to evade any possible imagination of the future?¹⁵

14 “Pad.ma—short for Public Access Digital Media Archive—is an online archive of densely text-annotated video material, primarily footage and not finished films.” <https://pad.ma/about> [accessed 14 January 2019].

15 Ali Atef, Leila Arman et al., “52 questions about the archive”, *Mada Masr*, 22 May 2018, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2018/05/22/opinion/u/52-questions-about-the-archive/> [accessed 14 January 2019].

In posing this question, they echoed *pad.ma*'s exhortation:

To not wait for the archive is often a practical response to the absence of archives or organized collections in many parts of the world. It also suggests that to wait for the state archive, or to otherwise wait to be archived, may not be a healthy option.¹⁶

Perhaps the desire to cast aside the archive, to transcend it and free ourselves from it, expresses the determination to make a virtue out of necessity. Yet in fact, beyond reflections we could condemn as esoteric or relevant to a limited audience, public space is saturated with debates about history: its valid manifestations, its legitimate beneficiaries, its authorized exegetes. These debates have been particularly urgent and relevant in the current reorganization of urban space, as witnessed in the recent wholesale demolition of a portion of downtown Cairo, and the refurbishment and privatization of other sections.



Fig. 2: Maspero triangle after demolition.

16 “10 Theses on the Archive”, *pad.ma*, April 2010, <https://pad.ma/documents/OH/10> [accessed 14 January 2019].



Fig. 3: Foster + Partner “prize-winning” master plan for the Nile Corniche.



Fig. 4: Asmarat, the state-built housing complex where residents of ‘informal areas’ have been moved after their homes were demolished.

In discussions of the ‘Maspero triangle’ and the fate of the people who lived there, the residents are generally made to speak not for history or the built heritage, but for the material interests of the downtrodden: those who have been displaced and expelled to the margins of the city, while their homes are demolished to make way for office buildings, luxury housing, and shopping malls on the banks of the Nile.

The original residents—this is subtext, although sometimes it is not even concealed—are neither profitable consumers nor qualified protectors of culture. Need and ignorance preclude both these options, and the arguments of investors dovetail here with those of self-appointed heritage guardians: those whose ambition is to protect Egypt’s architectural heritage, in particular against the chaos and vagaries of life as it is. The mission to preserve history from those who might misuse it through ignorance or subversion obeys several Bourdieusian principles:

— The expectation that, for the working class, even historical objects must fulfill a function (understood to be synonymous with crass necessity). As Bourdieu states: “The detachment of the pure gaze cannot be dissociated from a general disposition towards the world which is the paradoxical product of conditioning by negative economic necessities—a life of ease—that tends to induce an active distance from necessity.”¹⁷

— The struggle among gangs of gatekeepers to define and defend “the rules of art”, most importantly against each other (these gatekeepers include the “cultured cosmopolitan” old guard; the heritage protectors, often autodidacts who combine

17 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, 6.

activism with scholarship and have little time for “pure” academics; the historians, who take immense pride in their erudition but only shake their heads at the incursions of the popular classes and the greed of the ruling class...).

— The seeming inability of the “subordinate classes” to impose an aesthetic or a set of criteria regarding, for example, historical use-value, even when this aesthetic is clearly articulated.

In these battles over the past, the right to speak for it and to designate what should be preserved, what space is there for popular histories—whether these are histories of place, of event, of artifact or ritual? What could we mean, for that matter, by a history that belongs to people? It seems urgent to address this question: to ask what value history might have, outside the academy and the marketplace, and to whom. When we speak of people’s histories, then, do we mean:

— Histories written by the people themselves?

— The kinds of local histories that are popular in Europe and the US—unpretentious family or town histories, highlighting what makes a place special, elevating it beyond mundane small-town everyday life, making no claims of academic rigor and using no jargon?

— Histories of events in which people have participated, events to which they give meaning other than the meanings imposed by nation-building narratives or official school texts?

— Histories based on fragments that people hold—letters or photographs, unremarkable items? Do these fragments need to

be inserted into a “known” context in order to be knowable, and to make sense? And who supplies that context?

— People’s right to use the historical resources, to which they are entitled, as they see fit? Seen in this light, the tomb robbers of Shadi Abd al-Salam’s film *Night of Counting the Years* are historians too, appropriating fragments of the past for their own purposes, bringing history into the present by digging through the walls of their homes into adjacent tombs.

— The Baedeker-clutching, Thomas Cook package tourists of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, arriving in Egypt in droves to consume the history of the Pharaohs and the Holy Land?

Any of these questions would provide an entry point to a reflection on people’s history: in conventional Western narratives about the formative years of Egyptology, for example, as Donald Reid has pointed out, “Egyptians flicker in the shadows as trusty foremen, loyal servants, laborers, tomb robbers, antiquities dealers, obstructionist officials, and benighted nationalists.”¹⁸ In contrast, he suggests,

[...] one might develop narratives of the history of Egyptian archaeology as seen from ‘below’ or from the viewpoints of ‘fragments of the nation’—women, Copts, Upper Egyptians, tourist guides, archaeological laborers, antiquities dealers, Nile boat crews, villagers from the Giza pyramids or Qurna (across the river from Luxor), or Islamists, including the splinter groups who have attacked tourists.¹⁹

18 Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?* 10.

19 Reid, *Whose Pharaohs?* 14.



Fig. 5: Still from *Night of Counting the Years* (Arabic: *Al-Mumia*), dir. Shadi Abdel Salam, Egypt: General Egyptian Cinema Organisation, 1969.

In the Middle East today, however, there are specific factors motivating the production of different kinds of narratives, for and by different groups, which situate themselves deliberately outside the academy and outside the official nationalist fairy tales peddled by the current regime. The founders of *Seket El Maaref*, for example, speak of their “long-standing interest in taking [their] academic knowledge beyond the gates of [their] university.”²⁰ For Karim Gössinger, who founded CILAS (the Cairo Institute for Liberal Arts and Sciences), the desire was to confront Eurocentrism, to decolonize the higher education experience, and to foster personal growth: “how to incorporate the concerns of the students, how to embrace our own ignorance, moving out of disciplinary specialisms but also recognizing that discomfort as

20 Malak Rouchdy and Reem Saad, “Beyond the University Gates: The Story of the Free Social Knowledge Circle”, in: Aziza Boucherit, Heba Machhour, and Malak Rouchdy (eds.), *Mélanges offerts à Madiha Doss: La linguistique comme engagement*, 245-252, Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale, 2018, 245.

Fig. 6: Daniel Mayer, The October 1973 War Panorama, 21 July 2008.



essential to critical pedagogy.”²¹ Alia Mossallam, founder of the *History Workshops* in Egypt, describes her goal as:

[...] [exploring] ways to ‘re-tell’ retrieved narratives. Through reproducing these histories in non-academic forms (such as storytelling and film), we hoped to make these untapped narratives accessible both to the aspiring (non) historian, and to the communities whose histories we explored.²²

A general concern, then, is countering the totalizing narratives produced by the state curricula, which buttresses the political agenda of the day and enforces its dissemination by such means as exam questions. The October War Panorama, a monument to the October 1973 War between Egypt and Israel, is only the most glaring example of the use to which the state apparatus has put history.

21 Personal interview with Karim Gössinger, 1 October 2018.

22 Alia Mossallam, “History Workshops in Egypt: An Experiment in History Telling”, *History Workshop Journal* 83/1, 2017, 241.



Fig. 7: Prime Minister Gamal Abdel Nasser (right) and President Muhammad Naguib (left) in an open-top automobile during celebrations marking the second anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, 23 July 1954.

School curricula are also a fertile battleground.

CAIRO - 18 June 2017: In an attempt to introduce educational reforms for the Egyptian High School System (known in Arabic as *Thanawiya Amma*), the Ministry of Education has removed parts referring to both January 25 and June 30 revolutions out of the History subject curriculum.

The move was recommended by a committee tasked with educational curriculum reforms. Official source at the Ministry said existence of topics related to the causes and results of the June 30 Revolution “may cause more troubles and problems both in schools and during setting exams,” according to a press statement.

“Documenting historical events needs at least 15 years,” the source added.

The Ministry of Education has also noted that including lessons about both revolutions before “was not meant to document history, but just to narrate events.” [The source] explained that the July 23 Revolution in 1952 will be the last uprising mentioned in the new history curriculum.²³

23 “Educational reforms cuts revolutionary events”, *Egypt Today*, 18 June 2017,

Fig. 8: Cairo Bookfair 2019: Painting at an Exhibition Stand of the Egyptian Armed Forces.



Overall, some of the individuals who have begun these experiments of learning outside official institutions have been pleasantly surprised with the interest evinced by potential interlocutors. While Gössinger speaks self-deprecatingly about his ambition to bring together students from across the class divide, he also acknowledges with cautious pride that CILAS has almost 17,000 followers on Facebook. His desire to “gently add to something that was already happening” thus seems to be echoed in the response to CILAS’s activities. One educator involved in *Sekket El Maaref*, a study group that developed spontaneously after 2011, similarly expressed astonished gratification that a group of about 140 people now regularly attend the biweekly meetings. Within this venue, discussion topics have evolved organically from the group’s current concerns. From its initiation, *Sekket el Maaref* seems exceptional in the sense that it owes its existence

not to supply (i.e. the organizers' desire to bring something to people), but rather to demand: a number of twenty- or thirty-year-olds who were not political activists but who, in 2013, found themselves confronted with the need to organize themselves and address practical dilemmas concerning governance. As Malak Rouchdy and Reem Saad state,

[...] their questions revolved around their relationship as individuals with society at large, with the revolution, with the political scene, with authority, with God, and indeed with the cosmos; and there was the vague idea that perhaps anthropology would help them.²⁴

Knowledge, for Whom and for What?

It is this trajectory that brings to mind the questions posed by Michael Burawoy in his 2014 ASA presidential address: “Knowledge for whom?” and “Knowledge for what?”²⁵ In much of the Middle East today, these questions are urgent and immediately relevant. “Knowledge for whom” evokes all those who are excluded from learning with dignity, who struggle to obtain a diploma with a vanishing market value, who are disempowered by formal schooling and higher education; but it should also refer to those who need to know how long their sons were tortured before they died, what is in the intelligence file kept on their daughters, where the bodies are buried. It should refer to the military’s secret budget, not the open secret of whether Egypt won the 1973 War. Such enormous amounts of information, al-

24 “Beyond the University Gates”, 247.

25 Michael Burawoy, “For Public Sociology”, *American Sociological Review* 70, 2005, 10-11. doi: 10.1177/000312240507000102.

though relevant to all citizens, are inaccessible and off limits, to such an extent that the questions “knowledge for whom?” and “knowledge for what?” are almost impossible to answer.

Yet, these are questions with which historians must grapple if we are to attempt writing people’s histories. We must also come to terms with the various reasons why people might be interested in archives or museums, and accommodate those who need archives to prove their right to an inheritance, or those who visit the Egyptian Museum to feel pride in something, without questioning the chaos of the displays or the completely impenetrable nature of the signage on the exhibits. We need to ask who needs history, and why they might need it.

This is particularly challenging because the stakes are so high that it is not just knowledge that must be retrieved, rescued, or produced anew; there is the pressure to create an entire discursive field, an epistemological break, a revolution in thought and pedagogy. And in addition to this tension, there are also small and sometimes insurmountable problems besetting the experiments currently underway: difficulties in continuity, disagreements over how stable or fluid study groups should be, conflicts over which direction to take. There is pressure to produce, to generate an output, sometimes in an unfeasibly short time—the entrepreneurial imperative has come to weigh on some of the workshops and seminars that sought to free themselves from the academy.²⁶ There is also the fact that different disciplines can be defensive about their methodologies, training, and expertise. As pad.ma put it:

Historians have [resorted] to a disciplinary defensiveness that relies on a language of ‘the authority of knowledge’ and ‘rigor’ while artists retreat to a zone of blissful aesthetic transcen-

26 Personal interview with Malak Labib, 15 February 2019.

dence. There is something incredibly comfortable about this zone where history continues to produce ‘social facts’ and art produces ‘affect’. Claims of incommensurability provide a ‘euphoric security’ and to think of the affective potential of the archive is to disturb the ‘euphoric security’ which denies conditions of knowing and possibilities of acting beyond that which is already known.”²⁷

And yet: not any old thing is history, and that cannot be ignored.

There is also sometimes a disconnect between those who are reaching out from inside the academy, or leaving it altogether, to bring humanities and social sciences into local communities, and the people who, in those communities, are producing scholarship of their own. The historian Jörg Determann refers to a

[...] surge in local and communal writings since the 1970s facilitated by mass education and innovations in word-processing and printing. While political historians concerned with the Egyptian state indeed suffered, authors engaged in social and communal historiography could and did access other archives, such as the records of the Islamic courts and even the police. In addition, they have been able to use sources from within sub-national communities, such as Coptic newspapers.²⁸

Another potential challenge lies in the tendency on the part of some of those who come to popular scholarship from political activism to view the state as a monolith and to demonize or dis-

27 “10 Theses on the Archive”, *pad.ma*, April 2010, <https://pad.ma/documents/OH/50> [accessed 14 January 2019].

28 Jörg Determann, Review of *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt*, by Yoav Di-Capua (University of California Press, 2009), *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London 74, 2011, 142-143. doi: 10.2307/41287931. This has been a global phenomenon, as described in Axel Harneit-Sievers (ed.), *A Place in the World: New Local Historiographies from Africa and South Asia*, Leiden, 2002.

miss it. One historian involved with *Mubtadaa*, an initiative to bring critical thinking and social sciences to high school students, commented: “The question of whether the archives are state-produced or not is irrelevant. The important question is who produced them, and in what conditions?”²⁹ In fact, the true threat posed by the state is not so much its production of risible propaganda, or its unrestrained profit-seeking destruction of built heritage, but rather its gradual and systematic endeavor to crush all space for dissent. An organization as ostensibly unthreatening as the *Women and Memory Forum*, which produces feminist historiography and translates scholarship on gender into Arabic, faces closure because the Ministry of Social Affairs has prevented it from receiving any funding from external donors. The continued existence of small corners of relative freedom, indeed, indicates precisely that these corners don’t (yet) matter. More cynically, one could say they allow the state to continue its systematic destruction of freedoms and critical thought while maintaining an illusion of hope—a semblance of openness. The predicament of the humanities and social sciences is that, unlike STEM, they offer scope for interpretation and this makes them at once indispensable and infinitely disposable, exceptionally dangerous and yet vulnerable to ideological control. While the curriculum in medicine or chemistry can be imported wholesale, and remains subject only to the considerations of Western know-how, history, philosophy, or sociology must be monitored closely for their malleability and their potential to destabilize.

For all these reasons, it sometimes seems as though the only popular history that is possible today is one that engages directly with oppression on its own terms. I am thinking here of

29 Mubtadaa workshop, Cairo, April 2019.

what Efrat Ben-Ze'ev and Issam Aburaiya have called “middle-ground politics”—“the linkage between Palestine as an abstract notion and the concrete daily concerns of the Palestinians”. The authors term activities organized to re-inhabit and thus recreate demolished Palestinian villages and towns “re-Palestinianization.”³⁰ And, as naïve or impossibly hopeful as it sounds, this sort of re-appropriation is not only feasible but necessary, relevant to our circumstances today, and applicable to places other than Palestine. Reinvesting and reinventing public space, for example, is surely inseparable from the exercise of learning that a monument was bulldozed or burnt to the ground because of neglect or corruption. Discovering that a piece of real estate was privatized only recently, and its former residents were expelled, is meaningless without tangible action for justice. At this time, people’s rights are under siege throughout the region and elsewhere; people’s history in particular—and the humanities and social sciences in general—can only offer hope, and can only acquire a reason for existing and a relevant methodology, if they offer concrete ways of asserting citizenship and carving out space for political existence. In this sense, the new directions in popular histories of the Middle East are not only about local or communal histories, but about world history too.

30 Efrat Ben-Ze'ev and Issam Aburaiya, “‘Middle-Ground’ Politics and the Re-Palestinianization of Places in Israel”, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 36/4, 2004, 639–655. doi: 10.1017/S0010417508000169

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Figure 1: Yoga mat with tughra of Suliman the Magnificent, <https://fineartamerica.com/featured/tughra-of-suleiman-the-magnificent-ayhan-altun.html?product=yoga-mat>.

Figure 2: Maspero triangle after demolition. Photo: Georges Khalil.

Figure 3: Foster + Partners' "prizewinning" master plan for Nile Corniche, <https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/news/foster-partners-wins-35ha-cairo-masterplan/8691823.article>.

Figure 4: Asmarat. Photo: Roger Anis. Published in Mostafa Mohie, "Asmarat: The State's Model Housing for Former Slum Residents", *Mada Masr*, 18 June 2018, <https://madamasr.com/en/2018/06/18/feature/politics/asmarat-the-states-model-housing-for-former-slum-residents/>.

Figure 5: Still from *Night of Counting the Years* (Arabic: *Al-Mumia*), dir. Shadi Abdel Salam, Egypt: General Egyptian Cinema Organisation, 1969.

Figure 6: Daniel Mayer, The October 1973 War Panorama, 21 July 2008, *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cairo_-_Heliopolis_-_1973_October_War_Panorama.JPG.

Figure 7: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, “Prime Minister Gamal Abdel Nasser (right) and President Muhammad Naguib (left) in an open-top automobile during celebrations marking the second anniversary of the Egyptian Revolution of 1952, 23 July 1954,” *Wikimedia Commons*, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nasser_and_Naguib,_1954.jpg.

Figure 8: Cairo Bookfair 2019: Painting at an Exhibition Stand of the Egyptian Armed Forces. Photo: Georges Khalil.