

Introduction

Colonialism, Nationalism, and Knowledge Production

In 1917 Egypt's premier literary intellectual, Taha Husayn, wrote his doctoral thesis on the social philosophy of Ibn Khaldun, under the supervision of Émile Durkheim at the Sorbonne.¹ The blind scholar from a humble rural background was initially inspired by Durkheim's stimulating lectures on sociology.² Only a few years earlier Husayn's friend, writer and philosopher Mansur Fahmi, had written his controversial thesis *La condition de la femme dans le tradition et l'évolution de l'Islamisme* under the tutelage of the anthropologically inclined philosopher Lucien Lévy-Bruhl.³ Both thinkers were heavily influenced by the intellectual climate of the Sorbonne—immersed in the writings of Auguste Comte, Georg Simmel, and Émile Durkheim—yet chose topics that reflected an interest in the historical specificity of their own cultural milieu. Asserting that Ibn Khaldun was the first thinker to take society as an object of study *sui generis*, Husayn nevertheless hesitated to confer the title of “sociologue” upon the esteemed fourteenth-century philosopher.⁴ Husayn's thesis demonstrated the range and erudition of Khaldunian social philosophy, while maintaining a privileged place for the modern science of society—as understood by luminaries such as Durkheim—as a distinct and autonomous science concerned with social facts while utilizing an experimental method.⁵

The complex intellectual formation and trajectory of individuals such as Taha Husayn and Mansur Fahmi belies conventional narratives of the “internationalization of the social sciences” in several ways.⁶ First, although the history of the social-scientific disciplines has traditionally been written as a European field of knowledge imposed upon non-Europeans, non-Europeans were, in fact, actively involved in the development and

transformation of the social sciences.⁷ Nor was European knowledge simply transplanted into the colonies; rather, forms of knowledge, such as positivism, were refracted, deflected, or reconfigured in colonial contexts.⁸ Second, social science itself emerged as an authoritative field of expertise in an imperial age. Scholars have unraveled the colonial genealogy of knowledge in fields with clear connections to empire—namely, anthropology and geography—as well as in disciplines with less obvious colonial associations, such as economics and psychology.⁹ Thus, both Durkheimian sociology and Lévy-Bruhl’s philosophical thought were critical in the development of French ethnology, demonstrating the role of ethnology in understanding, and developing, “peoples of inferior civilization.”¹⁰ Social science was thus implicated in a larger process of categorizing societies, cultures, and races within a hierarchical gradation of humanity.

Indeed, the story of the rise of the authority of social science to manage populations is by now familiar. Histories of social-scientific inquiry in Germany, England, and France have demonstrated the interconnectedness of knowledge production, empire or nation-state building projects, and the governance of populations.¹¹ Yet such concerns were hardly unique to Europe. A smaller, but now growing, body of literature has addressed the history and development of social science within non-Western and, specifically, colonial contexts.¹² For example, Andrew Barshay has demonstrated the interplay between unifying and particularizing impulses in Japanese social science that sought to retain a “national essence” in the face of Western influence, and Partha Chatterjee has shown how the introduction of the “modern science of politics” in colonial Bengal was tempered by indigenous notions of *dharma* (structured around religion as a form of virtue or political ethics).¹³

Yet very few studies have addressed the nature of social-scientific research within Middle Eastern societies. Rather than simply trying to fill a lacuna in Middle East scholarship, however, I argue that the story of social science in Egypt is distinctive and significant for comparative colonial and postcolonial history. Although it can be argued that the theoretical literature on subaltern studies has canonized the experience of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British India as the paradigmatic example of colonialism, it is important to ask ourselves what other historical trajectories can tell us about the development of modern forms of statecraft, political governance, and knowledge production under the pressures of European global hegemony.¹⁴ For example, Selim Deringil and Ussama Makdisi have demonstrated that imperial Ottoman efforts at modernization in the nineteenth century were as much a local reaction to European representations of Ottoman backwardness as they were a response to perceived European

military and technological superiority—a process that some have referred to in other historical contexts, such as Tianjin China, as “semicolonialism.”¹⁵

Egypt presents an interesting historical example that spans from the semi-colonial to the classically colonial. As a semi-autonomous Ottoman province that often experienced transformations in statecraft and governance in tandem with the Ottoman imperial center, Egypt was the first Arabic-speaking country to be colonized by a European power—with Napoleon Bonaparte’s so-called scientific expedition of 1798.¹⁶ Even the self-styled “founder of modern Egypt,” Mehmed ‘Ali Pasha (r. 1805–48), was nominally a servant of the Ottoman sultan while nevertheless pursuing his own imperial ambitions in the region.¹⁷ British colonial rule in Egypt (1882–1936) was relatively short lived, but scholars have demonstrated the extent to which British colonialism in Egypt inaugurated widespread transformations that ranged from the recasting of the country’s legal system and juridical practices to the reordering of rural space.¹⁸ Although the story of the 1882 British presence in Egypt is perhaps the best known of the country’s occupations, the lasting effects of the “long shadow of Napoleon” and the concomitant influence of Francophone culture on the development of fields of study such as geography and anthropology is also important.¹⁹ Egypt thus experienced what we might refer to as a series of multiple or “nested” colonialisms—Ottoman, French, and British. Further complicating the received binaries of colonizer and colonized is the story of Egypt’s own colonization of the Sudan and its imperial aspirations (often in emulation of the European powers) in sub-Saharan Africa.²⁰ An understanding of the rise of social science in Egypt thus highlights the twentieth-century history of globalized and interconnected forms of knowledge production between Europe and the Arab world under asymmetrical conditions of power, in which Egypt functioned at once as both colonizer and colonized.

The Particularity of Social Science

This book traces the development of the social sciences—anthropology, human geography, and demography—in Egypt during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The aim is not to write a comprehensive history of the social-scientific disciplines, but rather to trace the development of a mode of social-scientific inquiry in colonial and postcolonial settings. Intellectuals and social reformers working within the burgeoning scientific and social associations that emerged in Egypt in the late nineteenth century formulated social science through a broad range of texts and cultural artifacts, ranging from the ethnographic museum to architectural designs

to that pinnacle of social-scientific research, “the article.” In this way they attempted to develop a unified science of society, based on the observation of social facts, the formulation and testing of theories, and the eventual application of scientific principles to the social world. In the process, they converted social-scientific ideas into concrete social engineering projects.

Egyptian intellectuals, many of whom were equally conversant in Western and Arab intellectual traditions, grappled with the tension between a commitment to a universal mode of knowledge production and a commitment to the specificity of local difference—a uniquely charged dilemma in the colonial context and one faced by intellectuals in regions as far flung as Bengal, Martinique, and Senegal.²¹ Egyptian social scientists grounded their sociology of knowledge in the particular and the local. Such a foundation was not a simple valorization of the local over the universal; it was, rather, the registering of a more radical epistemological difference from the West—a difference based on the rejection of universal anthropocentric (or secular) history and universal taxonomies of civilization.²²

Encyclopedist European social thought was based upon the post-Enlightenment project of creating an epistemology founded on universal rationality (conceived of as ahistorical and independent from social and cultural particularity), practiced by self-constituted, autonomous agents freed from the fetters of tradition.²³ This corpus of ideas would become central to defining both what it meant to be a rational, moral, and autonomous agent freed from the constraints of tradition and prejudice, and the meaning of progress itself.²⁴

It can be argued that modern European colonial projects were marked by the desire to transform the world into their own image in the name of the good of the other—an image based upon Enlightenment ideals, themselves contingent upon the distinction between civilized and barbaric life. In the words of Britain’s agent and consul general in Cairo, Sir Evelyn Baring, the “moral and material improvement” of subject races was best accomplished by Englishmen whose “special aptitude . . . in the government of Oriental races pointed to England as the most effective and beneficent instrument for the gradual introduction of European civilization into Egypt.”²⁵ Civilization as such referred always and only to European civilization. It is this story, of the *particularity* of European history and civilization *masquerading as the universal*, that constitutes the fundamental plot of colonialism.²⁶

Colonial rule was premised upon the purported moral and material improvement of the colonized native population. The paradox of the “rule of colonial difference,” according to Partha Chatterjee, lay in its insisting on

the legitimacy and universality of modern regimes of power (when social regulations become “an aspect of the self-disciplining of normalized individuals, power is made more productive, effective, and humane”), while simultaneously denying the universality of those principles in the colonial context.²⁷ The production of the “empirical truth of colonial difference,” typically understood within the colonial context as racial difference, was often embodied in colonial positivist social science with its relentless emphasis upon taxonomy and classification, in which natives functioned as representatives of their race. The language and ideology of improvement were, therefore, belied by the practices of knowledge production about the native population, which aimed at the elaboration and exploitation of difference rather than the uplift of the indigenous population.²⁸

Yet the story told here is of a different order. It is the story of the Egyptian nationalist intelligentsia, who in resisting the totalizing and racialized nature of European claims to progress, reason, and the nation-state, staked the claims of social science on the particularity of local difference—as in, for example, the attempt to create an “Arab social science.” In attempting to argue, however, that as non-Westerners Egyptians had internal indigenous sources of progress, indigenous reformers inadvertently accepted many of the very premises central to Western categories of thought (progress, reason, the nation-state).

Anticolonial nationalists claimed the moral and material improvement of the demographic masses as their primary object. In fact, it is my contention that the continuous moral and material improvement of the population, governed through flexible modern forms of power—the cornerstone of the colonial project—is continued within the context of the modern nation-state.²⁹ It is in the continuation of strategies of governance such as the development of instrumentalist knowledge, statistical languages, the logic of rational planning, the systematic targeting of subaltern populations for improvement and social uplift, and the internalization of a notion of backwardness—indeed the project of the modernizing, industrializing nation-state itself—that the colonial legacy continues. However, rather than view the colonial state as a “bad copy” of a supposedly uniform and coherent European model of modernity, I am more interested in exploring the ways in which Egyptian intellectuals and social reformers attempted to render models of modernity intelligible through the grid of indigenous social and cultural values and practices, and through reformulation or critique.

A central argument of this book is that within colonial social-scientific enterprises, “natives” functioned as passive objects of observation, taxonomy, and classification (“specimens”), that is, individual or collective

representatives of their race, embedded within a hierarchical discourse of civilizational progress. The indigenous nationalist elite, in contrast, inaugurated its own social-scientific program, in which both the uniqueness (a precondition for nationalism) and educability (a precondition for progress) of the collective national subject (e.g., the peasant, the village, the family) could be demonstrated through ethnographies, field experiments, and social-engineering projects—which would remedy the imputed stagnation of Egyptian society.

Such projects were inextricably linked to the sciences of land (geography and agriculture) and the sciences of labor (human geography and demography), and geared toward the social welfare of the demographic masses. The same amount of effort expended by colonialists on the production of the empirical truth of colonial difference (racial inferiority) was expended by nationalists on the educability of the collective national subject. They thus borrowed much of the language and many categories of colonial rule— notions of backwardness, improvement, progress—but in contrast to the colonial state, they staked the decisive claims of social science on the social welfare of the demographic masses.

Social welfare, of course, should not be understood solely as an idealistic, benevolent process whereby the state and social scientists guide citizens towards their own welfare. Rather, it refers quite specifically to the social and political process of reproducing particular social relations—often premised on violence and coercion—such as those between the city and the countryside, in order to ensure the successful reproduction of labor power and to minimize class antagonisms.³⁰ Within a social-welfare framework, Egyptian social scientists and social reformers targeted women and the peasantry (those responsible for the reproduction of labor power and the extraction of wealth from the land) for “reformed” social practices (health, hygiene, and labor) to allow for a healthy, productive, and efficient population—appropriate to the progress of the modern world. This led to the development of new modes of governance, expertise, and social knowledge—all of which entailed subtle translations and subversions of the categories of Western thought.

Translations

This book concerns itself with the problematic of knowledge production by Egyptian intellectuals within a colonial context. The social and cultural disciplines present the most pressing methodological problem in the awareness of cultural difference, “to carve out spaces that would be no less ‘disciplined’ but where national identity would be implicated by defining

the position of the scientist.”³¹ To formulate a nationalist project of modernity, the indigenous elite often translated (that is, adopted and transformed) colonial social-scientific methodologies (such as ethnographic or statistical techniques), while simultaneously linking their arguments to nationalist claims, such as Arabism. I do not mean to insinuate that the formation of Egyptian social science owed its existence to Western forms of knowledge, or that nationalism simply replaced Orientalism. Rather, I am arguing that in the context of Egypt during the colonial and postcolonial periods the two forms of knowledge production were dialectically intertwined.

Turn-of-the-century anticolonial nationalists and pan-Islamists in Egypt often drew stark distinctions between Western and Arab or Islamic modes of thought and practice (terms such as “Western,” “European,” and “foreign” were often used interchangeably in Arabic writings of the early twentieth century). Yet this should not blind us to the contradictions, ambiguities, and overlaps that often existed between colonial and nationalist forms of knowledge production—distinctions between the two were complex and nebulous in practice.³² Nevertheless, “colonial” and “nationalist,” function as heuristic categories necessary to understanding the ideological and political contours of intellectual debates in the social sciences, between and amongst Europeans and Egyptians. Thus, although colonial and nationalist social-scientific methods and epistemological orientations often overlapped, the larger ideological projects within which they were embedded remained fundamentally distinct.

Egyptian social scientists were often able to draw from two contending traditions of social scientific inquiry: a Western-based literature of positivism (including works by scholars such as Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim) on the one hand, and an Arabic-language tradition of sociology (as originated by Ibn Khaldun) and annals history (for instance, works by Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti).³³ The intellectual engagement of Arab thinkers with the fourteenth-century thinker Ibn Khaldun is in sharp contrast to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s claim that “few, if any Indian social scientists or social scientists of India would argue seriously with” premodern South Asian intellectual traditions (as opposed to their engagement with the universalist European social science of, say, Marx and Weber).³⁴

Although sociology was not taught as such in Egypt until 1925, when the Egyptian University was transformed into a state institution, new branches of social inquiry were developing during the first quarter of the twentieth century, prior to the professionalization of the disciplines. Novel and relatively undefined fields such as human geography and population studies, which began emerging in Egypt in the middle of the 1920s, entailed

the integration of social observation, experimentation, analysis, and planning in the constitution of a “great social laboratory where theories can be formulated and general laws deduced on human inter-relationships.”³⁵ Indeed, it can be argued that the interwar period marks the formulation of “society” itself as an entity—an object of scientific study, social control and management.³⁶ This is reflected in the fact that the modern Arabic term for “society,” *mujtamaʿ*, did not come into common usage until around 1930; before then, a variety of compound phrases were used to denote social life (*al-hayʿa al-mujtamaʿiyya*, *nizam al-ijtimaʿ*, *majmuʿat al-umma*, *al-intizam al-ʿumrani*, *al-jamaʿiyya al-muntazima*).³⁷

The metaphor of society as a “great social laboratory” demonstrates the authority of the language of positivism as a tool for understanding social phenomena. As Gyan Prakash has argued, the colonies were laboratories for modernity.³⁸ The authority of science as universal reason, he argues, was instantiated by the elite reformulation of the language of reason as an idiom of power.³⁹ If the “colonies constituted a laboratory of experimentation for the new arts of government capable of bringing a modern and healthy society into being,” as Paul Rabinow claims⁴⁰—if they were sites for the elaboration, experimentation, and refinement of “norms and forms” developed in the metropole—were the colonized simply dependent variables or passive objects?

To say that the colonies were laboratories of and for modernity, however, should not be to imply that they were a setting for modernity and not a site in which modernity was fashioned. As Timothy Mitchell has noted, modernity itself is best conceived of as something staged, or produced, *across* the space of cultural and historical difference.⁴¹ In colonial Egypt, the modern (*al-hadith*) often came to mean a specific set of attributes and inter-linked projects—moral and material progress, scientific and social-scientific inquiry, and the management of health, hygiene, and social welfare—that increasingly relied on new technologies of knowledge production and produced new experiences of space and time.⁴² Indeed, it would be a mistake to assume that modernity is simply a category of contemporary postcolonial analysis, rather than a historically specific and local category of thought and experience.⁴³ The proliferation of fin-de-siècle articles discussing the reasons for Arab or Muslim backwardness (*takhaluf*), stagnation (*jumud*), and decline (*inhibitat*), and the means towards progress (*tatawwur*), and of interwar discussions of modern civilization belies that assumption.⁴⁴ This book tries to redress the metropole-centered vision of a colonial modernity produced out of pressures or forces generated solely from Europe. Thus, it emphasizes the ways in which an Egyptian modernity was produced through a dia-

lectual engagement with the epistemological and ethical domains of social science.⁴⁵

In thinking about projects of modernity, scholars have noted the heuristic value in the notion of translation (in contrast to adaptation), implying, as it does, creativity, contingency, improvisation, and the irreducible heterogeneity of identities.⁴⁶ In Chakrabarty's eloquent phrasing, "what translation produces out of seeming 'incommensurabilities' is neither an absence of relationship between dominant and dominating forms of knowledge nor equivalents that successfully mediate between differences, but precisely the partly opaque relationship we call 'difference.'"⁴⁷ Thus, rather than viewing the colonial experience as merely an incomplete version of a European model of modernity, we can explore the ways in which cultural translations sought to negotiate *other* speaking positions from which to formulate the national modern. Yet the concept of translation has, perhaps, suffered from an imprecise usage in contemporary sociological and literary writings.

To elaborate the sense in which I am using the term *translation*, I will draw upon examples from the modern Arabic literary language.⁴⁸ Thus, for example, the Royal Academy of Arabic Language, founded in Cairo in 1932, heatedly debated the validity of forming new words, whether based on classical analogical derivation; compound words; or the assimilation of foreign words or foreign modes of expression. The work of the academy in the vibrant interwar period consisted of the incorporation of new vocabularies (scientific, technological, and literary) into the already overwhelming lexical wealth of the Arabic language. Although earlier such attempts had been undertaken (beginning with the translation schools of Mehmed 'Ali), the unification and codification of such linguistic innovations through the academy was peculiarly modern. Needless to say, literary attempts at linguistic innovation both predated and coexisted with the academy's efforts, as, for example, with the literati of the *nahda*, whose language ranged from linguistic experimentation to stylistic purity.⁴⁹

This so-called modernization of the Arabic language was accomplished through the classical system of derivation from Arabic roots (*ishtiqaq*) based on various principles, but most notably analogy (*qiyas*). Such derivations were often based upon the semantic expansion of already-existing linguistic molds (*qawalib*). Thus a term such as *majma'* (from the molds designating locality) originally meant a "place of gathering," but by semantic extension came to mean academy.⁵⁰ Further, certain neologisms operate through the "displacement of the object with respect to its classical meaning," as with *ista'mara* (to colonize, as a place) which replaced the classical meaning of "to make someone inhabit, cultivate (a place)."⁵¹ These few examples—

derived from the world of language—should serve to illustrate the sense in which the work of translation was and is always a creative endeavor, but, more importantly, relies upon an already existent grammar of lexical understanding. It is in a similar sense, then, that I refer to the translation of social science and projects of modernity in the context of colonial and postcolonial Egypt.

The Intellectual Setting: Epistemological Foundations, Ideological Effects

The twentieth-century Egyptian intellectual elite was committed to the application of positivist thought and method to the problems of interwar social reform. As Anson Rabinbach has noted, the “impact of positivism on social knowledge and on the nineteenth-century ideal of reform politics has somehow escaped the scrutiny of historians.”⁵² Despite commonplace assumptions that positivism had become defunct in twentieth-century social-scientific inquiry, scholars have demonstrated its viability well into the twentieth century.⁵³ In the Egyptian colonial setting, both positivism and the politics of reform were intimately linked to the apparatus of the colonial state. Yet positivism never achieved complete dominance over social inquiry, as strains of romanticism and links to an indigenous tradition of sociological inquiry and annals history pervaded social investigations.

The epistemological grounding of social-scientific inquiry in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egypt thus incorporated two major strands of thought: positivism and romanticism. The Egyptian attempt to ground the social sciences in positivism was rooted in Comtean positivism and based on the inheritance of a Saint Simonian legacy in Egypt during the early nineteenth century.⁵⁴ Comte’s positivism has been characterized as “an approach which rejects as illegitimate all that cannot be directly observed in the investigation and study of any subject.”⁵⁵ Positivist sociology was to become part of a unified science in which a positive language of society was created, based on the observation of social facts, the formulation and testing of theories, and the eventual application of scientific principles to the social world. Statements regarding society were proposed and corrected, and predictions were made. Sociologists were to “discover laws that govern human behavior on a large scale, and the ways in which institutions and norms operate together in a complex yet ultimately predictable system.”⁵⁶ The aim was to formulate empirically grounded general laws and predictions of human behavior, based on observation and the determination of regularities. Methodologically speaking, such an approach often demanded induc-

tion and statistical correlation. For many of those working in the sciences of demography and geography (and its branches of economic, human, and historical geography), the framework of positivism enabled the progression and advancement of science through the accretion of an ever-increasing corpus of sociological facts. Further, positivist social research was often translated into concrete social engineering projects, such as the experiments in rural reconstruction sponsored by the Royal Agricultural Society in the 1930s. Indeed, in a truly Comtean spirit, the epistemological stance of positivism was ideally suited to the ideological orientation of social welfare and engineering.

The second strand of thought was the more romantic tradition of the human sciences.⁵⁷ Romantic themes such as the search for (national) origins, the overvaluation of the experience of nature, and even the notion of the social reformer as creative catalyst of social change were particularly pronounced in writings on the peasantry. This was often the position of the more anthropologically inclined, whose research on the *mentalité* of the peasantry included the representation of their everyday life, manners, and customs, and the collection of folkloric material. For these thinkers, social science was culturally specific. It should proceed from the premise of understanding the “essence” of society as a total social whole, with its specific cultural and historical antecedents. Such an approach was rooted in metaphysical constructs (“culture,” *mentalité*, “personality”), and was deductive and explanatory in method. At its extreme, this position led to an ahistorical romanticism—in the imaginative attempt to capture the “cultural essence” of the peasantry, for example. Such attempts foregrounded the specificity of place, such as, for example, the location of the peasantry in the countryside, and above all their proximity to and intercourse with nature.⁵⁸ Such dichotomies as positivism and romanticism, however, continuously broke down in practice as tensions between the ideas of social reform as a positive scientific project and as a culturally specific moral project of social uplift became apparent.⁵⁹

It must be noted that the embrace of Western positivism by middle-class intellectuals and reformers in Egypt from the turn of the century was itself riddled with difficulties. To reformulate the social and cultural disciplines while acknowledging the specificity of cultural difference was the dilemma that faced the anticolonial nationalist intelligentsia. In the Egyptian setting the liberal nationalist agenda was infused with the rhetoric of anticolonial nationalism. Thus, often enough the nationalist critique of colonialism also enabled various critiques of Western positivism, in the attempt to create an indigenous form of social-scientific knowledge. This may be related to what various Arab intellectuals have referred to as the crisis of Arab modernism.⁶⁰