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## **“Expertise” as Systematized Historical Amnesia: Springborg’s Egypt as a Case Study**

by Zeyad el Nabolsy

“Overall, one can say that this book rests on key distortions of recent Egyptian history, and it is primarily valuable as a case study in how expertise in the service of imperialism is constituted.”

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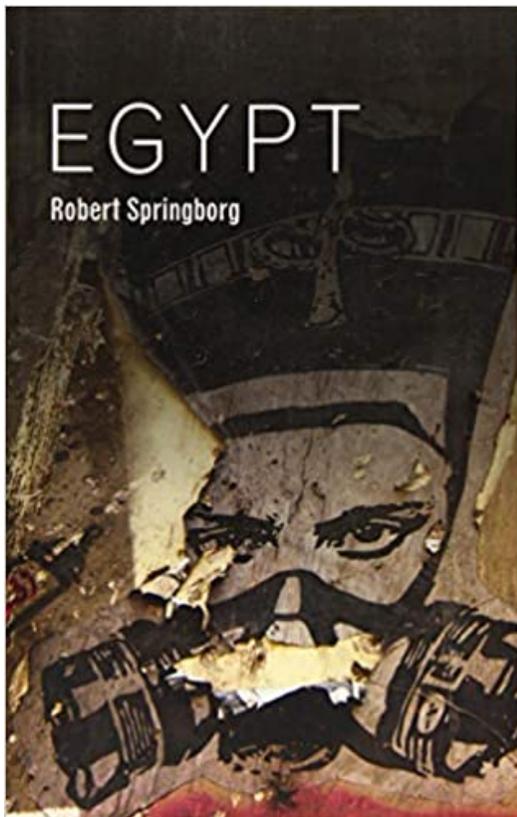
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Robert Springborg, *Egypt*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 245 pages.

If a short, shallow, and much less erudite version of the *Description de l'Égypte* were to be re-written today by a US State Department staff member it would read very much like the book which is under review here. Springborg is supposedly an "expert on Egyptian affairs", however it seems that a basic understanding of modern Egyptian history in its global context is not a necessary condition for being considered an "expert on Egyptian affairs". This book is thus valuable not for any first-order knowledge that it contains regarding Egypt's post-1952 history, but rather as a case study for understanding how "expertise" regarding the MENA region is constructed, and how "experts" can serve to obscure the past and present of imperialism in the region.



Springborg's book purports to diagnose the causes of Egypt's current predicament: a failing economy with almost 40% of Egyptians living on less than \$2 per day (181), massive wealth inequalities, a failing educational system, collapsing social services, armed insurgencies in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula, massive foreign debts, and a weakened regional standing. Springborg paints a grim but, in many respects, an accurate picture of the present. However, his explanation of how Egypt came to be in this situation involves a revisionist history of Egypt which is presented dogmatically without any supporting evidence. According to Springborg, Egypt was in a splendid position before the 1952 coup by the Free Officers

Movement. As Springborg puts it, "although King Faruq was an ineffective dissolute, the state over which he presided was among the most impressive in what was about to be dubbed the "Third World" (32). Springborg also claims that Egypt's economy was booming prior to 1952: "the economy was buoyant, as reflected by the fact that the

Egyptian pound appreciated after World War II to the point where it was worth more than the British pound upon which it was based. A growing industrial sector was being financed by profits from agriculture, which was benefitting from the application of advanced technology learned by Egyptians who studied abroad” (32). I have quoted extensively from this section lest I be accused of arguing against a strawman. For Springborg, things started to go wrong when the Free Officers Movement overthrew the monarchy during the coup of July 23rd, 1952. According to Springborg, the Free Officers, and more specifically Nasser after he was able to win his power struggle against Mohammed Naguib, derailed Egypt’s economic progress. Springborg draws on Douglas North’s institutional economics in order to argue that Nasser established a *limited access order* (LAO), i.e., an order wherein political elites have privileged access to the economic sphere that allows them to draw rents, while keeping other competitors at bay (36). This LAO has, according to Springborg, persisted to the present day and is the fundamental cause of Egypt’s current woes, insofar as Egypt’s ruling elites (what he calls “the deep state”, i.e., the triad of the presidency, the military, and security/intelligence services) have preferred to engage in rent-seeking activities instead of coming up with coherent development plans (168-170).

What is astounding is that he thinks that “monarchical Egypt had been an at least partially open access order” (36). This is astounding because, even if we accept his claim, which he does not provide any evidential support for, we still have to ask: open for whom? Clearly it was not open to most Egyptians. Springborg is aware of this objection and he attempts to pre-empt it by claiming that it was “steadily opening up to Egyptians” before 1952, without providing any justification for this claim (36). While he is never quite explicit about it, Springborg seems to suggest that if the 1952 coup had not taken place, Egypt would have followed a similar trajectory to that followed by South Korea (30, 165). Thus while he does not spend much time on the Nasser period, the core argument of his book is dependent on showing that Egypt’s economic decline began in the 1950s (31). However, I argue that Springborg distorts modern Egyptian history by completely neglecting colonialism and the struggle against it. Moreover, I will show that this distortion serves an ideological function which can be detected in his proposed remedies for Egypt’s current ills.

The first thing that would strike a reader who is familiar with Egypt’s modern history is that there is no discussion of colonialism whatsoever in the book. In fact, a reader of the book who is not familiar with Egyptian history would be under the impression that, under the monarchy, Egypt was already independent. However, this is simply not

true. Despite the fact that Egypt attained nominal independence from British rule in 1922, the monarchy in Egypt was still subordinate to the British (Mansfield 1969, 27). This subordination was exemplified in the so-called incident of February 4th in 1942, “when [Egyptian army] officers stationed around the royal palace stood powerless as British tanks surrounded them and forced King Farouk, almost at gunpoint, to replace the existing government (suspected of Nazi sympathies) with one led by the liberal al-Wafd” (Kandil 2014, 10). This incident both disgraced King Farouk who was seen by all for what he was, i.e., a powerless puppet of the British, and it led to the undermining of the legitimacy of the Wafd party, which now appeared to be an opportunistic and collaborationist party.

Furthermore, Springborg completely neglects the key social question which dominated Egyptian politics in the years leading up to the coup of 1952, namely the agrarian question. He paints a rosy picture of agrarian life under the monarchy without any mention of the problem of landless peasants: “Egypt was in the vanguard of the nineteenth-century precursor green revolution and its associated infrastructure was the envy of the colonial world” (163). He also speaks of highly developed “human capital” under the monarchy (32). Springborg neglects to mention that by 1952, there were around 11-14 million peasants in Egypt without land (Abdel-Malek 1968, 61), and 6% of landowners held 65% of the land under cultivation (Abdel-Malek 1968, 16). The example of the Chinese Revolution brought the question of agrarian reform to the forefront of Egyptian politics in the post WWII period. There was American pressure for carrying out land reform as a way to pre-empt a communist takeover of power in Egypt (Abdel-Malek 1968, 67-68). Despite the urgency of land reform, the Wafd party never really engaged seriously with the agrarian question (Abdel-Malek 1968, 14). This can be explained by the fact that the party was dominated by big landowners who were unwilling to embark on land reform, even when it became clear that neglect of this issue might lead to a more radical Chinese style solution to the agrarian question. Moreover at the level of national industrial development, the political dominance of the big landowners was preventing the further development of industrialization in Egypt. There was some industrial development in the 1940s — World War II provided a stimulus for the Egyptian economy as the country was forced to support the allied war effort, and it was during World War II that the country was finally able to pay off the foreign debts that had been accumulating since the 1860s (Amin 2012, 45) — nonetheless, most of the industries, including the mining and oil industries, were dominated by foreign companies (Said 2004, 48).

Springborg laments the fact that “Nasser’s agrarian reforms politically decapitated large landowners” (166). He argues that by doing so, Nasser undermined the existence of a “rural lobby” that could push for agricultural development — which for Springborg is synonymous with the “Green Revolution” of the 1950s and 1960s (167). Springborg, because he completely neglects the global imperial context, does not recognize that by breaking the political power of the big landowners, the agrarian reform broke up the alliance between the cotton lords and the British which had dominated Egypt for almost a century. It was thus a decisive blow against foreign domination of Egypt. We should criticize the land reforms which took place under Nasser, but we should criticize them for not going far enough, and *not for having been attempted in the first place*: the land reform which was initiated in September of 1952 was not as far-reaching as many had hoped; by 1962 only 645,642 feddans out of 5,964,000 feddans were re-distributed (Abdel-Malek 1968, 72). Thus by the 1970s 33 % of all rural families in Egypt were still landless (Batatu 1983, 19). The middling peasantry had benefited the most from the agrarian reform while the causal agricultural laborers had benefited the least. Nonetheless, the agrarian reforms were not insignificant, otherwise the NDP (The National Democratic Party) would not have devoted so much effort to rolling back the agrarian reforms during the 1980s and 1990s (Bush 2011). The relative importance of the agrarian reforms is also evidenced by the testimony collected in Khaled Abu Al-Leil’s tremendously important oral history of Egypt during the Nasser period (Abu Al-Leil 2015). The testimony collected belies Springborg’s rosy picture of life under the monarchy. As one of the interviewees points out, prior to the agrarian reform, “we had something similar to slavery. The peasant was like a slave to the person who owned the land that he cultivated” (Abu Al-Leil 2015, 159). Some of the other heart-rending testimony includes accounts of peasants being forced to eat grasses due to their poverty (Abu Al-Leil 2015, 157). On the eve of the Suez Crisis average annual incomes had not increased in Egypt since the First World War (Amin 2012:, 46). Springborg neglects all of this in favour of an ideological account (in the Marxist sense) of the development of “human capital” under the monarchy — at certain points the book reads like a royalist history of Egypt. Furthermore, Springborg’s treatment of the agrarian question in Egypt is confused. For on the one hand, he posits South Korean agriculture as a development model to be followed by Egypt (164). On the other hand, he is ambivalent about Nasser’s land reforms, which is surprising because the South Korean model involved the carrying out of radical land reforms (Toussaint 2012, 6), something that Springborg himself acknowledges, albeit in passing.

Another key failing in his treatment of modern Egyptian history is the fact that he posits almost complete continuity between the Nasser period, and the subsequent Sadat and Mubarak periods, even in foreign policy where we can undoubtedly point to important discontinuities. Thus for him all the republican regimes in Egypt have based their foreign policy upon “geo-strategic rent-seeking” (190). While it is accurate to describe Sadat and Mubarak’s foreign policy as driven by rent-seeking considerations, this is hardly accurate for the Nasser period. It is difficult to see how Nasser’s support for the Algerian revolution, for example, can be understood as the product of rent-seeking considerations, especially when it led to France joining Israel and Britain in the Tripartite Aggression against Egypt in 1956 in the aftermath of the nationalization of the Suez Canal. Nor is it clear how Nasser’s support for African liberation movements, with there being offices for around 26 different African liberation movements in Cairo during the 1960s, can be subsumed under the model of rent-seeking foreign policy (Sharawy 2019, 211). Due to the fact that Springborg does not take imperialism or anti-imperialism seriously, he fails to register the magnitude of the shift that took place under Sadat. The Camp David Treaty which took the strongest and most populous Arab state out of the Arab-Israeli conflict was viewed by many Arab and African states as a betrayal, and it led to the regional isolation of Egypt and its expulsion from the Arab League (whose headquarters were temporarily moved to Tunis) and the undermining of its status a leading regional power. Moreover, under Sadat, Egypt’s policy towards other African countries became increasingly reactionary for as part of Sadat’s shift towards the West, he began supporting reactionary actors on the African continent, e.g., UNITA in Angola, and Mobutu’s regime in Congo (Sharawy 2019; 240-250).

It would be more accurate to suggest that Egypt’s decline began in the mid to late 1970s, and not in the 1950s as imagined by Springborg. Sadat’s foreign policies were deeply unpopular both with the army and with his civilian officials (as noted by the frequent resignations of his foreign ministers leading up to the Camp David Treaty in 1978). Sadat’s unpopularity was exacerbated by his economic policies. Sadat attempted to create a class of dependent capitalists who would be loyal to him, and who would counter Nasser’s social base, i.e., the middling peasantry and the urban middle-class. There was in fact a shift in the class basis of Sadat’s rule, which is not adequately registered in Springborg’s account, because instead of engaging in class analysis, he prefers to speak of “civil society” and “elites”. Sadat opened up Egypt to foreign investment and attempted to weaken the public sector. What occurred was essentially a systematic undermining of the productive foundations of the Egyptian economy,

and the turn towards economic growth without development, i.e., the comprador bourgeoisie in Egypt found that the easiest way to accumulate capital after the *Infitah* was to engage in mercantile and financial activities; hence the proliferation of private import-export firms during the 1970s and 1980s, and financial speculation. Egypt's economy became dominated by rent-seeking activities. These rent-seeking activities contributed to growth, for it is true that between 1973 and 1984 the annual rate of growth of GDP was 8.5%, but they did not contribute to any attempts to overcome the structural disarticulation of the Egyptian economy (Amin 2000: 39).

What is at stake in emphasizing this discontinuity between the Sadat and Nasser periods is the extent to which we believe that Egypt's modern history should be understood in its global context. This global context involves colonialism/neo-colonialism and dependency, as well as the struggle against them. With Sadat, Egypt turned away from Third World neutralism and firmly entrenched itself in the imperialist camp. To fail to register this development as a key turning point is to distort Egyptian history, and to contribute to a misunderstanding of the present. Springborg seems to think that decolonization was fairly unimportant. By that I mean that he sometimes seems to think that it would have happened without any kind of struggle. This is evidenced for example in his casual mention of the Suez Canal as an Egyptian asset before 1952 (32), i.e., four years before its nationalization! There is also a pernicious omission in his account of Egyptian history. In his discussion of the failures of the Nasserist project he barely mentions imperialist aggression as a cause. In fact, we may say that the Nasserist project effectively ended in 1967. While it is true that Nasser's import-substitution model ran into structural problems by the mid 1960s (Abul-Magd 2017: 70-71), we cannot discount the significance of the Israeli attack on Egypt, an attack which was directed and supported by the U.S. in order to undermine Nasserism, Pan-Arabism, and Pan-Africanism qua anti-colonial and anti-neocolonial projects in the region. The war of 1967 was not an "accidental war" which led to Israel "accidentally" acquiring Gaza, the West Bank, the Golan Heights, and the Sinai Peninsula as many have come to believe. In fact, an Israeli-American committee was formed in 1967 in order to plan a war against Egypt in order to depose Nasser and to install a friendly regime in Cairo (Kandil 2014: 73). Moreover, the Israeli government had devised a plan to govern the West Bank and Gaza through a military occupation in the summer of 1963, and the "pre-emptive" Israeli strike "was the result of twelve years of planning and several months of concerted practice and maneuvers" (Kandil 2014: 77). Thus while it is important to analyze the internal reasons which led to the

collapse of Nasserism, one cannot discount the significance of imperialism as Springborg does.

At the beginning of this review I noted that this book is an excellent case study of how expertise is constructed in such a manner that it comes to fulfill an ideological function. The ideological function that is fulfilled by the erasure of imperialism is clear. A reader of Springborg's book who is not familiar with Egypt's history in the second half of the twentieth century will come away with the impression that imperialism has no role to play in that history and that Egypt's problems are purely internal, i.e., they can all be diagnosed using the tools of institutional economics without taking into consideration Egypt's shifting place in the capitalist world-system. The reader who has not studied Egypt's modern history will also come away with the impression that there is no significant difference whatsoever between the Nasser period and the Sadat period. Moreover, Springborg's analysis, which eschews all questions of imperialism, leads him to conclude that the primary solution for Egypt's contemporary problems is greater integration into the capitalist world-system, by instituting even more "market-friendly reforms" (165). In fact, Springborg is quite clear on where his sympathies lay. At one point he advocates openly for abandoning food sovereignty (which the Egyptian government has been doing albeit rather hesitantly) in favour of planting peaches and strawberries for export. According to Springborg, these American-Israeli recommendations were "efforts to revitalize Egyptian agriculture", which the backward "deep state" refused due to its outdated commitment to food sovereignty (165). It is amusing that Springborg wants us to believe that the U.S and Israel want to develop Egyptian agriculture, if by "develop Egyptian agriculture" we mean developing an agricultural sector that is articulated with other sectors of the Egyptian economy. However, we can believe that the U.S. and Israel are very much interested in "developing Egyptian agriculture", if by that we mean developing an extraverted agricultural sector that makes Egypt more dependent on the global food market — this has already occurred with Egypt now being the world's largest importer of wheat. Moreover, Israel has an interest in a stable but weakened Egypt; it certainly has no interest in a strong resurgent Egypt that is taking steps towards reasserting its food sovereignty. Overall, one can say that this book rests on key distortions of recent Egyptian history, and it is primarily valuable as a case study in how expertise in the service of imperialism is constituted.

**About the Reviewer:** Zeyad el Nabolsy is a PhD candidate in Africana Studies at Cornell University. He works on African philosophy of culture, African Marxism, the history and philosophy of science in the context of modern African intellectual history, and the history and sociology of philosophy in the context of global intellectual history. His work has appeared in *Science & Society*, *The Journal of African Cultural Studies*, *The Journal of Historical Sociology*, *Problemata: Revista Internacional de Filosofía*, *Kant Studies Online*, *Jadaliyya*, and the *Marx & Philosophy Review of Books*, among others.

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