HIST 7090

Writing Rural Egypt

The Politics of the Peasant Subject in Scholarly Literature

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According to July 2011 estimates, rural Egyptians (also known as *fellahīn*, the Arabic plural for "peasants") made up 57% of Egypt's population—a figure that decreases as urban migration grows annually.[1] This figure accounts for approximately 46 million people or roughly 19% of all native Arabic speakers worldwide. In a country where cultural production is dominated by its urban centers—primarily Cairo and to a lesser extent Alexandria and Port Said—political claims to represent the Egyptian nation were often negotiated through intellectual (i.e. scholarly, political, and literary) representations of the *fellahīn*.

To understand the mechanisms behind this relationship between power and representation, this essay adopts an integrated approach to historical social science borrowed from William H. Sewell Jr.'s influential book *Logics of History* (2005). After first outlining Sewell's theoretical and epistemological concepts as well as his methodological imperatives, this essay will provide a few propositions for applying Sewell's integrated method to the study of historiographical corpora. This method is then applied to the historiographical corpus of scholarship on the Egyptian peasant and rural Egypt. The scholarly conversation that once turned on the tension between stasis and change in the countryside has ultimately become mired in an epistemological quagmire that implicates intellectual representations of the *fellahīn* in the mechanisms of power and domination. I will conclude by offering Sewell's notion of cultural "practice" as a means to rethink peasant consciousness and agency, and thus move past the epistemological impasse of this recent scholarship. I believe the methodological corollary of this theoretical move has already been undertaken by certain scholars who focus on oral/aural performance and colloquial Egyptian sources in their studies of Egyptian history. Tracing the historical development of scholarship on the Egyptian peasant and rural Egypt and the ways in which it has articulated with contemporaneous shifts in political, economic, and cultural structures will give us greater insight into the relationship between power and scholarly representations of rural Egypt.

[1] Central Intelligence Agency. The world factbook: Egypt. Retrieved 7 Dec. 2011: https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html

Social Structures and Historiography

Logics of History (2005) is a collection, consolidation, and reinterpretation of works from the influential historian of revolutionary France, William Sewell Jr. Sewell hopes the book will spark a rapprochement between History and the social sciences, a project he had become interested in after a debate with Historian of modern revolutions Theda Skocpol in the *Journal of Modern History* (1985) led him to begin to sketch out an original ontological and epistemological stance.[2] *Logics of History* lays out a variety of theoretical, epistemological, and political arguments, as well as a series of methodological imperatives for the practitioner of Sewell's "integrated historical social science." This section will build on Sewell's concept of social structure and his methodological attention to historical temporality in order to propose a method for studying bodies of historical scholarship.

While decrying the positivist forms of contemporary social science and the mechanistic notions of causality employed by most of its practitioners, Sewell argues that historians have a lot to gain from adapting social scientists' emphasis on structure and willingness to confront important historical questions about power and inequality. He laments his own turn away from such "big questions" of social structure, and that of his cohort in the American academy, calling on historians "regain a more robust sense of the social, but to do so precisely on the richer and more supple epistemological terrain opened up by the cultural turn."[3] To facilitate this program, Sewell emphasizes the dual nature of social structures—which consist of virtual schemata and physical resources, or, in a later formulation, semiotic systems and the "built environment."[4] This means that the material world influences and constrains the possibilities for individuals to conceive of their subjectivity. For Sewell, this influence operates through a process of semiotic interpretation—the fixing of the institutions and spatial geographies of resources that constitute the social world into symbolic systems. There is never a given, natural interpretation of these resource

[2] For a broad range of contextualizations and responses to Sewell's work, see the special section of *Social Science History* 32:4 (Winter 2008). I am particularly indebted to (Steinmetz 2008) for insight into Sewell's project

[3] (Sewell 2005) pp. 80

[4] In Chapter 4, "A Theory of Structure," (originally published 1992) Sewell uses a reading of Anthony Giddens' conception of structure as rules and resources to make this point. In Chapter 10, "Refiguring the 'Social' in Social Science," (originally published 2001) Sewell presents a re-worked conception of the duality of structure based on Wittgensteinian language games the notion of social constructionism. (Sewell 2005)

geographies and existing social mediators. Rather, these are put in relation to one another in the cultural "practice" of historical agents. To speak of "structure" in Sewell's sense is to call for a "critical analysis of the dialectical interactions through which humans shape their history."[5] Because of the ontological priority of social life in Sewell's scheme, "social" structures entail political, economic, and cultural sets of resources and rules. This has important implications for the study of historiographical corpora. Scholarly work as a cultural practice is subject to influence by the material world; its hegemonic institutions and the distribution of resources that exist in it. Social structures thus constrain scholarly discourse and limit possibilities for conceiving of the object of study.

Proposal 1: *Social structures constrain and influence scholarly practice.*

But if scholarly work is also cultural practice, then the dual nature of structures presupposes a degree of scholarly agency in this process of reification. Scholars, like all cultural practitioners, can radically re-appropriate elements of the symbolic system and thus transform the cultural structures of the academy. To understand the mechanisms behind these changes, it is helpful to return to Sewell and his conception of the historical event. Structures for Sewell are not singular but multiple, and they overlay the social world in complex and mutually-reinforcing ways. These structures conjoin unpredictably to generate historical "events." An event is a sequence of occurrences that (a) is recognized by contemporaries and (b) results in a "durable transformation of structures."[6] In analyzing the historiographical corpus of studies on the Egyptian peasant, I have encountered seminal texts that are analogous to these transformative events. Such "eventful texts" articulate with political, economic, and cultural structures that exist in the social world in ways that define and transform scholarly convention.

Proposal 2: *Scholarly practice can transform the cultural structures of scholarship through seminal "eventful texts" that are analogous to Sewell's conception of historical events.*

[5] (Sewell 2005)p. 151
[6] (Sewell 2005)p. 228

Because events are *sequences* of occurrences that add up to meaningful changes in structures, Sewell's integrated historical social science places a strong emphasis on the importance historical temporality in its analytical method. Sewell argues that implicit within the discipline of history is a sense that time is fateful and irreversible: "An action, once taken, or an event, once experienced, cannot be obliterated" but is "lodged in the memory of those whom it affects and therefore irrevocably alters the situation in which it occurs."[7] This calls for a historicization of scholarly texts. Placing each text with its chronological and epistemological contemporaries can facilitate the identification of eventful texts. Moreover, I read this methodological imperative as compelling the historian to engage with the scholarly currents of his or her generation to find the problems that need answering based on the historical development of the field and to work to answer those questions through the creative practice of scholarly research and write "eventful" texts.

Proposal 3: *Historiographical corpora move along historical trajectories in which time is fateful and irreversible.*

With this last proposal in mind, the remainder of this study is organized around a chronological presentation of major discursive regularities that have dominated the "structures" of academic research. Eventful texts play an important role in initiating these periods of regularity. Although some reference is made to earlier studies, as well as studies in French and Arabic, the primary domain will be English-language scholarship in the 20th- and 21st-centuries.[8] Identifying the ways in which shifts in scholarly convention articulate to changing political, cultural, and economic structures in Egyptian history will provide insight into the relationship between power and representation in the historiographical corpus of scholarship on rural Egypt.

[7] (Sewell 2005)p. 6-7

[8] A preliminary cross-reference with an annotated bibliography of over 330 French, Arabic, and English studies of the Egyptian *fellaheen* from 1798-1956 indicates that the general patterns unearthed by an examination of English-language scholarship are broadly applicable. (Coult 1958) Many of the trends for Anglophone scholarship are generally applicable to Francophone scholarship, with Arab-language studies emerging with frequency after 1940

Imperial Encounters and Rural Stasis

The earliest scholarship on rural Egypt was constrain and influenced by political dynamics in the age of European high colonialism. Scholarship of this period focused on rural Egypt as a site of continuity stretching back to the ancient Egyptian Pharaonic civilization that had captured the hearts and minds of Europeans and Egyptians alike. However, despite the apparent durability of this civilization which had persisted for millennia, it was consistently represented as threatened, be it by Ottoman and khedival mismanagement, the encroachment of European values, or by the nature of the peasantry itself. This threat, then, justified political intervention to preserve the valued heritage and uplift the backward *fellahīn*.

With more than 600 references to Egypt in the bible and countless discussions of the exotic locale in Greco-Roman manuscript and material culture, Egypt—and indeed the "Islamic Orient" as a whole—had long served as a symbol of radical difference and antagonism against which Christian Europeans defined themselves.[9] In the 18th-century, diverse structural changes—ranging from advances in naval engineering, to the development of commercial networks of European merchants in Egpyt, to the dissemination of literacy and print media in Europe and North America—facilitated a re-thinking of Europe's relationship to Egypt that allowed scholars to undertake projects which brought Egypt into the sphere of intelligibility through the process of scholarly representation. Fredric Louis Norden's *Voyage d'Egypte et de Nubie* (1755 [1741]) and Richard Pococke's *A Description of the East and Some Countries* (1743) are examples of early European studies that mix travel diary, ethnography, and realistic novel to make Egypt—long this radical "other"—something a European could claim to know. Drawings of the Pharaonic ruins at Giza and Karnak from these studies circulated among the European reading public and sparked "Egyptomania" in European world's fairs and Orientalist painting and photography.[10]

It was in this context that Napoleon Bonaparte undertook perhaps the most ambitious study of Egypt to date in commissioning the *Description de l'Egypte*. The raw data for the *Description* was

[9] (Said 1994 [1978]) p. 31-73.
[10] (Bednarski 2005), (Reid 2002)

gathered by a coterie of more than 150 French intellectuals, or "savants," who accompanied Napoleon's army on its campaign in Egypt, beginning in 1798. Napoleon's army was expelled by a coalition of British and Ottoman troops in 1801, but the notes and material gathered during their stay in Egypt became the basis for the savants to create the monumental *Description*, published in twenty-three volumes between 1809 and 1828. Recent studies have questioned the dominant historiography of the *Description*, which locates this text as a turning point in scholarship on Ancient Egypt.[11] However, for the purposes of this study, the *Description* is indeed a watershed because of the ways in which the scholarly endeavor so clearly articulated with political, cultural, and economic logics in Napoleon's quasi-imperial project.

Two themes dominate the *Description's* treatment of Egypt, and specifically rural Egypt, that are relevant to this study. First is the focus on *Antiquitès*, which occupies ten of the twenty-three volumes of the study. A great deal of the space devoted to ancient Egypt is taken up with drawings and lithographs of the ancient monuments of Upper Egypt that are crafted with painstaking detail on the massive, 1m-sq. leaves of the *Description*. The second important theme is the oppressive conditions of life for the *fellahīn* and their capitulation to the despotic administration of their Ottoman governors. The state subjects the peasants to harsh taxes and the coercive appropriation of rural agricultural outputs. [12] These themes converge to paint a picture of a romanticized, ancient civilization at risk of destruction by Oriental despotism. In the *Description*—and indeed in Napoleon's Egypt campaign itself—European knowledge of rural Egypt, the repository of its lost languages and threatened civilization, becomes the basis for European political claims to administer the Egyptian nation in the interests of its people and its history. Perhaps no other event in colonial history lays bare the relationship between European military power and

[11] Indeed, much of the information contained in the *Description* was available in previous Orientalist studies, and Champollion's publication of the *Precis du Systeme Hieroglyphique* (1824) made the *Description* one of the last studies of Ancient Egypt written before widespread mastery of hieroglyphics in scholarly circles, see (Bednarski 2005). I disagree and would also argue that Napolean's campaign was the precondition for the discovery of the Rosetta Stone, which was a monumental beginning of sorts for a certain type of scholarship on Ancient Egypt

[12] (BA School of Information Science ISIS 2011) Vol.4 Antiquites Memoirs pp. 102 http://descegy.bibalex.org/ accessed: 20 Nov. 2011, originally published 1809

European scholarly representation to the extent of the *Description* and Napoleon's Egyptian campaign.[13] This was a transformative event that would have durable effects on the cultural structure of scholarly convention in studying rural Egypt.

The primary legacy of the *Description* and the corpus of studies to which it belonged for scholarly representations of rural Egypt was a focus on the *fellahīn* as direct descendants of ancient Egyptian civilization and rural Egypt as the repository of this civilization. Paradoxically, this civilization was somehow simultaneously that which had endured unchanged for millennia and that which was at risk of extinction in the present. Thus, E.W. Lane describes the goal of his influential project *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836):

> European customs have not yet begun to spread among the Egyptians themselves; but there probably will ere long; and in the expectation that this will soon be the case, I have been most anxious to become well acquainted (before it be too late to make the attempt) with a state of society which has existed, and excited a high degree of interest, for many centuries, and which many persons have deemed almost immutable.[14]

The majority of Lane's work is based on his experiences in Cairo and Alexandria, but references to rural Egypt are dispersed throughout the work. A diverse array of rural customs including blackening the eyes with kohl,[15] the refusal to eat pork,[16] and strict budgeting[17] are explained as holdovers from the Pharaonic past. Commenting on the general impression provided by these references, Egyptian sociologist Moursi Saad el-Din writes in 1954: "It is as if the whole of Egyptian life has receded from the towns and cities and concentrated in the villages where it continues to flourish."[18] Rural society has also suffered from the folly of Turkish and khedival policy.[19] Rural Egypt is therefore simultaneously represented by Lane as both the repository of an ancient tradition that has survived unchanged (and, as such, the signifier of a

[13] Said describes the *Description* as "the first in a long series of European encounters with the Orient in which the Orientalist's special expertise was put directly to functional colonial use." (Said 1994 [1978]) pp. 80
[14] (Lane 1954 [1836]) pp. 562
[15] (Lane 1954 [1836]) pp. 38
[16] (Lane 1954 [1836]) pp. 97
[17] (Lane 1954 [1836]) pp. 133
[18] (Lane 1954 [1836]) pp. viii
[19] "How great a change might have been effected by a truly enlightened government" Lane laments on p. 25. This is echoed on p. 315: "it is melancholy to contrast the present poverty of Egypt with its prosperity in ancient times." (Lane 1954 [1836])

transcendental kernel of "Egyptianness") and the site of complex and threatening political dynamics that are influenced by Turkish administration and the spread of "European customs."

Lane was widely read in his time and highly influential for future studies that would focus exclusively on rural Egypt. Winifred Blackman brought a copy of *Manners and Customs* with her on her trips to Upper Egypt between 1920 and 1926. Research from these excursions became the basis for her study *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (1927). Conceived of as a scholarly contribution to the emerging fields of both anthropology and Egyptology, Blackman's work is motivated by a desire to record the customs of rural Egypt before they suffer from extinction at the hands of education and Europeanization. Blackman blames the geographical isolation of the *fellahīn*, living as they do in the Nile Valley bordered on both sides by desert, for the "characteristic conservatism" of the Egyptian peasants. "This conservatism is particularly apparent in their religious and social customs and their commoner industries," she adds, "which…have remained almost, if not entirely, unchanged from Pharaonic times."[20] In the final chapter, "Ancient Egyptian Analogies," Blackman offers a comprehensive list of contemporary medical and magical customs that she attributes to ancient Egyptian tradition, including the structure of residential dwellings; rituals surrounding birth, the cutting of hair, and death; and the mythology of the *qarineh* or "double" in popular religion.[21]

Blackman also devotes a great deal of space to women's issues, outlining the strict punishment of women who are implicated in sexual relations before marriage and the poor standards of hygiene and attention to women's health issues in the countryside. "I have dwelt on the darker side of the picture at some length," she informs the reader, "not because there is no brighter side…It is because of my real affection for [my village friends], and because I very greatly desire to see their lives improved."[22] This theme of illuminating the backwardness of the *fellahīn* for the purposes of educating and uplifting them was also prominent in studies conducted by Egyptians. Yusuf al-Nahhas published his monumental work *Al-Fellah* in French in 1901, which was later translated into Arabic in 1926. Al-Nahhas reiterated the

[20] (Blackman 1968 [1927]) pp. 21
[21] (Blackman 1968 [1927]) pp. 280-316
[22] (Blackman 1968 [1927]) pp. 45-46

themes of peasant ignorance passivity common to Blackman and Lane, but emphasized the possibility of educating and uplifting the peasant for the sake of the Egyptian nation, outlining a whole platform of rural reform including agricultural credit unions, public education, and laws restricting usurious money lending.[23] Al-Nahhas' study was part of a complex and multifaceted process during the interwar period in which the Egyptian educated bourgeois asserted themselves as the representatives of the nation *vis-à-vis* the British colonial project, and Blackman's reformist discourse articulates with this project .[24]

Echoing Blackman's geographic determinism with an inflection of romanticism, Henry Ayrout describes the *fellahīn* in *Moeurs et Coutumes des Fellahs* (1938) as "molded directly by the soil…the monotony, uniformity and productivity of the Nile Valley have their exact counterpart in the characteristics of the fellah community.[25] Ayrout sets out in his project to provide a picture of the *mentalitè* by focusing on social psychology or the "manner of life" of the *fellah*, "which" we are told, "is at once a social and a geographical phenomenon."[26] Ayrout describes peasant society as "a homogeneous mass…tied to the soil and bounded by their villages…In such an inorganic diversity, the societies of the town touch and overlap each other without co-ordination or penetration and without even understanding each other."[27] "The fellah preserves and repeats," Ayrout writes, "but does not originate or create."[28] The book thus combines human geography, anthropology, and social psychology to paint a picture of *fellahi* society as deficient with respect to agricultural mechanization, standards of living, education, and psychological disposition. "In short," Ayrout concludes, "the problem is to undertake the task of education…The only thing that can awaken without exciting…is a social and spiritual mystique which must begin in the educated class."[29]

[23] (El-Shakry 2007) pp. 98
[24] Selim has argued that literary representations of the peasant in the "village novel" were connected with the rise of nationalism around the turn of the twentieth century. (Selim 2004)
[25] (Ayrout 1963 [1938]) pp. 5
[26] (Ayrout 1963 [1938]) pp. 5
[27] (Ayrout 1963 [1938]) pp. 13
[28] (Ayrout 1963 [1938]) pp. 137
[29] (Ayrout 1963 [1938]) pp. 153

Ayrout's work would go on to become a classic that defined scholarship on the Egyptian peasant for the next 40 years. The French scholarly community of the time was struggling with rural uprisings throughout its crumbling Empire, and an earlier study by Pierre Gourou, *Paysans du delta Tonkinoise* (1936), had initiated the intellectual conversation about the "peasant question" in which Ayrout imagined himself participating.[30] In a pattern reflecting the Cold War dynamics of the era, Ayrout's work was translated into Arabic (1943) and English (1945), then into Russian in the 1950s and back into English in 1963, this time with a foreword from Chester Bowles, then-Special Representative of President Kennedy for African, Asian and Latin American Affairs. As late as 1976, Ayrout's book was relied on to such a great extent that scholars of rural Egypt writing at the time would be accused of plagiarism.[31] Of course, the irony of such accusations, as we have already seen, is that Ayrout's study itself reflects conceptions of the Egyptian peasant stretching back at least to the *Description de l'Egypte*. These studies conceive of the peasantry as unchanged since antiquity and threatened variously by Oriental despotism and their own backwardness. The *fellah* becomes an empty category, devoid of class consciousness and therefore calling for their best interests to be deduced by scholars whose conclusions are borne out of and continually put to use by a political class that claims to represent and administer the Egyptian nation on behalf of its people.

Post-Coloniality and Writing the Peasant as a Subject

In 1952, Egypt experienced its third anti-colonial revolution in 100 years. By the time of the infamous Suez Canal affair of 1956, all European troops were expelled from Egypt and Gamal Abdel Nasser had emerged as the charismatic leader of the "non-aligned" movement of former colonial nations that attempted to carve their own path in the bifurcated world of the Cold War. The Cold War era also saw the rise of "area studies" departments in the U.S., as that country inherited the role from the European powers of guarantor of the socio-economic status quo after World War II. In the 1950s, academic groups like the Social Science Research council, private foundations such as the Ford and Rockefeller family

[30] (Mitchell 1990) pp. 130
[31] (Mitchell 1990) finds eight instances of un-cited quotations of Ayrout in Richard Critchfield's *Shahat: An Egyptian* (1976)

foundations, and the U.S. federal government, all provided massive funding for scholars from a variety of disciplines whose focus on a particular region of the world overlapped. These scholars were grouped together in new academic departments to collaborate and produce knowledge that could assist the United States in global battle against Communism for the hearts and minds of the third world. This new scholarship, grounded in social science, shifted the focus of research to the dynamics of political, social, and cultural change in the contemporary world.[32]

One of the earliest and most important policies of the Nasser era was the implementation of a Land Reform law which limited the size of legal holdings and re-distributed land to peasant families organized in agricultural cooperatives. One early trend in early area studies scholarship as it relates to rural Egypt was associated with the Land Reform laws, studying their impacts and potential for affecting "development" or social change in the countryside. Warriner (1957) outlines the limited effectiveness of Land Reform in the face of growing demographic pressure and limited agricultural productivity, but ultimately praises the revolutionary government for its inclination toward "social justice."[33] Carrying out similar field research guided by the steady hand of the officials of the Higher Committee for Agrarian Reform, Saad Gadalla (1962) concludes that the Land Reform was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for "development" in the Egyptian countryside.[34] Later field research echoes these same conclusions of qualitative change without structural improvement for the *fellahīn*.[35] Applying quantitative methods from economics, Abdel-Fadil finds that although Land Reform made some influence on the land distribution matrix in rural Egypt, the main beneficiaries of this policy were the rural upper-middle classes who were in a position to take advantage of land sales from distressed large landowners.[36] All of these studies measure the progress of Land Reform against the standard of "development"—a tool of comparison based on the fundamental distinction between "traditional" and "modern" societies, the former always in a state of becoming the latter. This theory of modernization shared an essentialized

[32] (Lockman 2010 [2004]) pp. 122-148
[33] (Warriner 1962 [1957])
[34] (Gadalla 1962)
[35] See (Adams 1987) or (Saad 1988)
[36] (Abdel-Fadil 1975)

picture of rural Egyptian society with earlier studies of the Egyptian peasant, like the *Description de L'Egypte.* As Lockman says, this Orientalist trope was "recast in the language of contemporary social science and deployed to explain a mid-twentieth century world scene marked by rapid social change, decolonization, and the Cold War."[37]

In the worldview of the classical Orientalists and the new modernization theorists and "development", change in rural Egypt was always initiated from the outside, be it political change from the central state in Cairo or cultural change from encroaching European values. Two important trends emerged in the historical scholarship of the 1970s that revised this view by studying processes of change initiated within rural society. The first group of historians used Arabic-language archives to challenge the traditional periodization of modern Egyptian history that saw Napoleon's 1798 invasion as a watershed moment. Gran's influential study *The Islamic Roots of Capitalism in Egypt* (1979) was perhaps the earliest English-language example of scholarship of the Middle East that started from the assumption that "non-Western regions collaborating in the larger social transformation of the late eighteenth century had indigenous roots for their own modern capitalist cultures, formed through processes of indigenous struggle with the European part of the system." Gran uses heretofore unexamined manuscript archives from Cairo's al-Azhar mosque to argue that the class of religious scholars in Cairo introduced secular values through publishing literary and scholarly works and promoting Sufi *turuq* (religious fraternities) as early as 1760.[38] Cuno (1992) investigated the early roots of modernity in rural Egypt by synthesizing material from the archival record of Mansura, a commercial hub in the agricultural trade of Egypt's Delta region, along with Islamic court records, cadastral surveys, and land registers. He finds evidence of a lively market in cash-crop agriculture and the commodification of land that led to the development of a highly stratified rural society by the middle of the 18th-century, allowing him to interpret the reforms of

[37] (Lockman 2010 [2004]) pp. 140

[38] (Gran 1979) pp. lii. Gran's study was preceded by influential articles from Afaf Marsot and particularly Andre Raymond's *Artisans et commercant au Caire au xvii siècle* (1973) which began the process of question traditional periodizations of Egyptian history. Gran's study was phrased most provocatively, however, and was widely influential in the American academy.

Napoleon and Muhammad ‘Ali more in terms of continuity with early practices than radical rupture.[39] Sedgwick (2004) finds another fascinating dimension of the active cultural life of rural Egypt in his investigation of the Idrisiyya Sufi order, an organization of religious *shaykhs* and their followers that connected *fellahīn* in Upper Egypt, Northern Sudan, and the Western Hejaz in the Arabian Peninsula. The significance of Sedgwick’s study is the lack of Cairo in the equation, and he argues that religious orders like the Idrisiyya are “both a course and a consequences of a separate regional identity” for rural Upper Egyptians.[40]

The second important trend in scholarship on rural Egypt that emerged in the 1970s to challenge some of the assumptions about “traditional” rural societies inherent in the paradigm of modernization theory grew out of the work of Political Theorist/Anthropologist James Scott on the “Moral Economy” of rural society. Based on field work in southeast Asia, Scott found that rural society was governed by patron-client relations in which the rural upper classes were expected to provide the resources necessary for a minimum level of subsistence for their clients or else risk uprising and rebellion.[41] Scott’s later work focused on more mundane forms or “hidden transcripts” of resistance in which rural subalterns quietly carve out space for themselves in the margins when the agents of powerful systems are looking the other way.[42] Focusing on one “big” example of resistance in the Moral Economy tradition, Cole (1993) draws on unpublished manuscripts from the Egyptian National Library (dar al-kutub) to highlight the role of village notables and other middle landowners in backing the anti-imperial revolution with rural uprisings and demands for national political participation.[43] Using rural court records to take a look at more everyday forms of resistance, Brown (1990) reinterprets the phenomenon of “rural criminality” during the colonial period (1882-1919) as an attempt by the *fellahīn* to affect resource allocation in their community along the lines of their conceptions of equity and justice.[44] At the far end of the spectrum, Saad (1988)

[39] (Cuno 1992)
[40] (Sedgwick 2004) pp. 99
[41] (Scott 1976)
[42] (Scott 1985) and (Scott 1992)
[43] (Cole 1993)
[44] (Brown 1990)

uses an ethnographic close-study and takes advantage of his close relationship with his informants in "izbat Morgani" in the Buheira district to illuminate some of the "hidden transcripts" of resistance in an agrarian reform community—where the *fellahīn* maintain a storage of grain in their homes by simply delivering slightly less than all of the grain they harvest to the cooperative groups every season.[45]

Thus, we can broadly discern two types of scholarly projects that emerge in the 1970s in response to the static picture of rural Egypt proposed by both traditional Orientalist accounts and modernization theorists, both attempts to write the peasant as a subject and maker of history. The first revised traditional periodizations and studied networks located outside of centralized nodes of state control, and the second focused on strategies of resistance against systems of centralized control and coercion. These strands of thought articulated with broader critiques of traditional approaches to world history in the works of Immanuel Wallerstein and Andre Gunder Frank, who carried out operations analogous to those of Gran and Sedgwick by theorizing the existence of a "world system" which linked the East and West in long-term processes of uneven development and interdependence. These arguments can be read as the beginnings of a critique of the transcendental East/West binary characteristic of Orientalists and modernizations theorists from the perspective of political economy.[46]

The Linguistic Turn and Questioning Peasant Subjectivity

While various attempts were being made by specialist historians and political anthropologists to write the peasant subject back into Egyptian history, a study produced by an expert in English literature would soon articulate a critique of the Eurocentrism of past scholarly paradigms from a different perspective that would subsume both of these currents in scholarly debates. This was Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which argued that systematic representations of the "Orient" or the Middle East throughout a range of Western cultural forms created and sustained a binary cultural logic that was crucial to the self-constitution of Western intellectual and political culture. Operating through a process of negation and difference, this cultural logic posited the Orient as an eternally deficient "Other" in need of Western

[45] (Saad 1988)
[46] (Lockman 2010 [2004]) pp. 184

intellectuals to discern and speak for its best interests. Said's argument is indebted to Foucault, who outlines his complex theory of power in modern European society perhaps most explicitly in *The History of Sexuality* (1978) when he likens power to "an entire machinery for producing true…knowledge of the subject…of that which divides him, determines him, and above all causes him to be ignorant of himself."[47] For Said, then, European power over the Middle East in the age of high colonialism—in particular, since Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798—has been expressed in the proliferation of representations of the Middle East in fields ranging from academic research, to political speeches, to all genres of literature and theater. Using Foucault in this way, Said operates within the "linguistic turn," a school of French post-structuralist thought that sees language (i.e. any relational system of meanings) as the best metaphor for society and social relations. Like the phoneme in linguistics, the "West" of Orientalist logic can only be understood differentially, through interplay of comparisons, contrasts and identifications with and against the "Orient."

Said's book was widely influential in sparking a variety of research paths for academics throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but it was applied to the study of the rural peasantry most famously by the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) in Indian historiography. The SSG was a circle of historians of colonial and post-colonial India brought together in the 1980s by Ranajit Guha. Whereas previous scholarship on Indian history centered on the development of an historical consciousness in India as a process that was initiated by colonial administrators (imperial history) or bourgeois Indian elites (nationalist history), the SSG was a collection of Marxist-influence scholars who attempted to write previously-ignored subjects (e.g. workers, peasants, women, etc.) into Indian history. Much of this scholarship initially undertaken by historians like Guha focused on scattered instances of rural demonstration and uprising that can help the historian get at the nature of peasant consciousness.[48] Said's insight into the relationship between scholarly representation and power was brought to this collective of Indian scholars in the work of Gayatri Spivak (1988), among others, who accused scholars like Guha of

[47] (Foucault 1978) pp. 70
[48] (Guha 1983)

inappropriately imposing a notion of subjectivity onto the Indian peasantry. For Spivak, colonialism has carried out a massive act of "epistemic violence" on our ability to understand subaltern consciousness, which is refracted through the colonial and national archives, such that "It is impossible for the contemporary French intellectual to imagine the kind of Power and Desire that would inhabit the unnamed subject of the Other of Europe."[49] Shying away from attempts to study subaltern consciousness, Spivak instead prefers the route of discourse analysis, studying written and cultural texts for clues into the larger power structures which are operative in the lives of subalterns—especially peasant women in India.

A Spivak-esque attention to the epistemic violence of colonialism was brought to studies of rural Egypt by Timothy Mitchell in his classic book *Colonising Egypt* (1988). In this work, Mitchell studies a variety of technologies (e.g. the model village, the planned city, the public education system, and the world exhibition) employed by European imperialists in Egypt to organize space in such a way so as to create the effect of a fundamental ontological distinction between the material world and the transcendental world of representation or meaning. It is only in a world so organized, Mitchell argues, that the self-aware subject can come to be understood as the center of history, an understanding that was crucial to the self-constitution of bourgeois identity in Europe and Egypt.[50] In a later article, Mitchell shows how studies of the Egyptian peasant are organized in such a way so as to remove the considerations of the author from the materiality of everyday life in the peasant village that is being studied, thus creating the illusion of an objective observer that mimics the distinction between the material world and the world of meaning that he criticizes. We are ultimately left with less a picture of anything approaching "rural Egypt" than a mirror held up to a series of other mirrors, as studies of rural Egypt cite and even plagiarize earlier studies in the tradition of Orientalism to lend themselves an air of authority.[51] Writing specifically against the James C. Scott tradition that would have us locate public and hidden "transcripts of resistance" in studying the Egyptian peasant, Abu-Lughod (1990) emphasizes the dialectics of power and resistance, arguing that the instances of resistance to generational and patriarchal authority that she

[49] (Spivak 1988)
[50] (Mitchell, Colonising Egypt 1988)
[51] (Mitchell, Invention and Reinvention of the Egyptian Peasant 1990)

observes in her fieldwork with the Bedouin tribe of Awlad ‘Ali in rural Egypt are more important as clues into the nature of the power structures that influence them than any romantic notions of the peasant as a rugged individual.[52] More recently, studies from Selim (2004) and Gasper (2009) have shed light on the important role of literary representations of the *fellahīn* and the village in the self-constitution of the Egyptian bourgeois intellectuals who were interested in positing themselves as representatives of the emerging Egyptian nation in the early 20th century.[53]

Much of the recent scholarship on the Egyptian peasant therefore leaves us at a bit of an epistemological impasse. Earlier, well-meaning attempts to write the peasant back into Egyptian history as a subject were often too quick to wholesale import European notions of subjectivity and history to explain a reality that developed along its own trajectory. Moreover, Said’s insights illustrate the ways in which scholarly production is locked into a web of discourse about the “Orient” that is an indelible part of any Western subjectivity before it is a reflection of anything approaching the reality of the Orient. In the context of these long-sedimented predispositions that have influenced our historical archives, how can the historian hope to find any objective knowledge about rural Egypt as it was in the past?

Rethinking Peasant Consciousness

In an attempt to move us past this epistemological impasse, Anne Clement—who received her Ph.D. in 2009 from the University of Toronto and is currently working as a post-doctoral fellow at the Academy for International and Area Studies at Harvard University—published her first article in 2010. In this work, she argues that attempts to bring in the peasantry as a subject of history (such as attempts by Cuno and Sedgwick to write of rural Egypt as the origin of historical networks and process or attempts by Brown and Saad to write of the hidden transcripts of resistance employed by the *fellahīn* on a daily basis) as well as attempts to outline the “microphysics” of power in modern representations of rural Egypt (such as those offered by Mitchell, Abu-Lughod, Selim, and Gasper), both suffer from a tendency to reify the side of the power-resistance dialectic that they are interested in studying. Clement argues that a notion of

[52] (Abu-Lughod 1990)
[53] (Gasper 2009); (Selim 2004)

"performance"—borrowed from ethnomusicologists within the framework of oral-formulaic and speech-act theories—"enable the researcher to reintegrate the dimensions of 'simultaneity' and 'mutuality'…so essential to the power relationship."[54] Clement goes on to study the ways that migrant laborers on the Archaeological dig sites of Upper Egypt used folk songs to internalize, negotiate, and subvert the liberal norms that were being imparted to them by the encroaching system of colonial political economy. Far from being unaware of their part in reifying the structures of the world-capitalist system, these subalterns expressed their consciousness of and enacted their mundane resistance to these structures through the performance of hegemonic norms in the course of everyday speech-acts and popular culture. Clement's notion of "performance" is analogous to Sewell's notion of structures as "practiced" by individuals in social life. For Sewell, social structures are reproduced in individual practice such that individual agency derives from the ability to negotiate one's place within the structure and deploy its rules during "eventful" moments of high energy in ways that ultimately result in durable transformations of structures.

Peasant subjectivity thus-conceived has a particular methodological corollary; a need to be attentive to spoken words, colloquial Arabic sources, and oral/aural media when reconstructing subaltern history. This is especially important in the context of Arabic-speaking countries, where the literary written language and the spoken vernaculars are almost mutually unintelligible. A close scholarly attention to high literary texts, then, leaves the illiterate masses out of the picture. This is a criticism of much of the scholarship in the vein of the "linguistic turn" that Clement shares in common with another historian of Modern Egypt, Ziad Fahmy. Fahmy's recent (2011) book uses colloquial Egyptian sources, and especially aural media and popular culture to write a history of Egyptian nationalism from the perspective of "Orindary Egyptians." This approach allows us to get a greater sense of the importance of protests and "carnivalistic" atmospheres that allow people to challenge hegemonic hierarchies by chanting slogans and signing songs in unison.[55] It is still early to make a definitive pronouncement on the contributions of this line of research, but moving past the methods of high discourse analysis so common to scholars

[54] (Clement 2010) p. 78
[55] (Fahmy 2011)

influenced by the linguistic turn toward a focus on cultural performance and especially the use of colloquial Egyptian and oral/aural sources provides exciting possibilities for studying peasant consciousness and rural subjectivities in modern Egypt.

Conclusion

To conclude this study, I would like to revisit the three proposals with which we began, to test their applicability to the historiographical corpus of studies on the Egyptian peasant. First, it is clear that broader social structures have inflected the historical trajectory of studies of the Egyptian peasant. In Sewell's conception, social life is the ontological basis of all other mediated interactions between individuals, including political, economic, and cultural institutions and symbolic systems. "Social structures" are therefore broadly conceived to include all of these mediators in social life. For the Western intellectual, the social facts of imperialism meant that studying rural Egypt was initially done from a position of relative power and dominion over one's subject of research. The *Description de l'Egypte* probably best illustrates this tendency, as the relationship between military power and the scholarly power to represent is laid bare by the savants who accompanied Napoleon on his campaigns in Egypt. This fact of power and the utility of scholarly representations to justify its use continued to inflect studies of the Egyptian peasant through the writings of Lane, Blackman, and Ayrout. Modernization theory re-worked this paradigm to account for the reality of decolonization after World War II, but scholarship emerging from "area studies" departments was still perceived to be useful in the political contest with Soviet Union during the Cold War, and was funded generously by the private sector and the U.S. federal government. The period of the 1970s which saw the flowering of scholarship on rural Egypt corresponds roughly to the "postmodern" period discussed by Lyotard, in which the shifting technological scene facilitates and presupposes the abandonment of metanarrative in our attempts to explain the world.[56] In all of these cases, we can see that broader social trends do indeed inflect scholarly discourse about the *fellahīn*.

Second, we can clearly identify "eventful texts" in the historiographical corpus. The *Description de L'Egypte* provided the fundamental picture of rural Egypt as the repository of ancient tradition that

[56] (Lyotard 1984 [1979])

would be sustain through Ayrout. It was arguably the Land Reform law that was the eventful text to initiate the next transformation of academic culture as it relates to studying rural Egypt, but after the 1952 revolution, credible scholarship could no longer claim that Egypt was unchanged since antiquity. Works such as those of Gran and Scott initiated broad-based attempts to write the peasant back into history as a subject, but it was the work of Said which would ultimately have the greatest effect in transforming our attitude toward representations of rural Egypt. Although google scholar shows it has not been cited once, I believe the work of Anne Clement has the potential to function as a similarly transformative text.

Finally, we can see that time is indeed fateful in studies of the Egyptian peasant. As each attempt is made to revise the story of rural Egypt that has dominated in the past, new opportunities emerge for critique and extension into hitherto unexplored areas. Scholarship on the Egyptian peasant has left us at an epistemological impasse, and it is through engaging with cutting-edge scholarship that we can hope to move forward in studying peasant consciousness. Future research could benefit from adopting the methodologies exemplified in the work of Ziad Fahmy and Anne Clement, analyzing colloquial Egyptian sources and popular culture to find instances where subalterns confront hegemonic norms by internalizing, complicating, or subverting them. With the proliferation of audiovisual media into today's virtual mediascape, the possibilities for research that allows us to glimpse subaltern consciousness are greatly increasing.

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