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THE RIGHT TO NATURE

Social Movements, Environmental Justice
and Neoliberal Natures

Edited by
ELIA APOSTOLOPOULOU and
JOSE A. CORTES-VAZQUEZ

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“Since the 2008 economic crisis, neo-liberal capitalism has intensified its onslaught on nature through accelerating resource extraction and privatizing the commons of nature. This book demonstrates exquisitely the havoc wrought by these infernal dynamics and charts possible terrains for thought and action that could lead to a more just and equitable society-nature relationship. A must read for all concerned with the dwindling rights of nature.”

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THE RIGHT TO NATURE

Since the 2008 financial crash the expansion of neoliberalism has had an enormous impact on nature–society relations around the world. In response, various environmental movements have emerged opposing the neoliberal restructuring of environmental policies using arguments that often bridge traditional divisions between the environmental and labour agendas.

The Right to Nature explores the differing experiences of a number of environmental-social movements and struggles from the point of view of both activists and academics. This collection attempts to both document the social-ecological impacts of neoliberal attempts to exploit non-human nature in the post-crisis context and to analyse the opposition of emerging environmental movements and their demands for a radically different production of nature based on social needs and environmental justice. It also provides a necessary space for the exchange of ideas and experiences between academics and activists and aims to motivate further academic-activist collaborations around alternative and counter-hegemonic re-thinking of environmental politics.

This book will be of great interest to students, scholars and activists interested in environmental policy, environmental justice, social and environmental movements, and radical alternatives to capitalism.

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*Edited by
Elia Apostolopoulou and
Jose A. Cortes-Vazquez*

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EGYPTIAN ENVIRONMENTALISM AND URBAN GRASSROOTS MOBILIZATION

Noura Wahby

Introduction

In February 2015, a group of mostly upper-class women gathered to protest a viral social media video that shows the killing of a street dog in one of Cairo's low-income areas, and treatment of wildlife in general. The women laid siege to a famous square in the quaint Zamalek neighbourhood, next to the exclusive Gezira Club. Everything seemed to run smoothly, until a veiled woman in humble clothes carrying her sickly child approached and began reprimanding the women. She accused them of caring more about the rights of animals than the rights of Cairo's poor, invoking her dilemma of treating her son's unknown disease (Omara and Ghoneim, 2015). Aggressively, the woman was shunned and attacked by the protesters for her lack of understanding surrounding animal rights. She was then arrested by police officers and held with other women accused of prostitution. Meanwhile, the protest continued, and the women left after they felt their voices were sufficiently heard by the media at hand.

A few months later, residents of a low-income class neighbourhood in Giza, part of the Greater Cairo region, took to the streets in September to protest repeated water shortages in the governorate (Abdel Azim, 2015). They cut off a nearby highway in order to capture the attention of authorities, to bring to light the chronic water shortages they had experienced over the past year (*ibid.*). This was not the first time this sort of protest had taken place. Similar scenes had played out due to lack of running water during the peak summer months of 2015, where citizens were expected to fend for themselves without a clear state solution (Ezz and Arafat, 2015). Motorists picked fights with the protestors and the police scrambled to regain control, promising a resolution. Yet, the authorities responded to the Giza protestors as they have always done – blaming other neighbourhoods for illegally diverting water, providing water tanks for a week and returning to a state of negligence¹.

These two examples offer a glimpse of a highly fragmented environmental scene in Egypt, characterized by class and regional divisions. This scene bears great resemblance to other cases in the developing world such as Delhi (Baviskar, 2003), as well in developed nations where a “sustainability fix” has dominated state policies and marginalised grassroots groups (Béal, 2011, p. 410.). In both cases, the role of the Egyptian state in regulating the environment, class relations and contention, is central. The significance of this role needs to be understood within a wider system of “purposeful negligence” by the state, self-help systems of the grassroots and the co-optation of civil society.

This chapter thus focuses on the interplay between state institutions and environmental movements in shaping Egyptian “environmentalism”. The term is defined as the conceptual, procedural and political meanings and actions delineating society–Nature relationships (Choucri, 2001). This discussion will thus shed light on urban governance issues and accompanying contention in the built environment. It examines the melange of civil society groups, urban elites and the marginalized poor in informal areas around Cairo. It will also illustrate the current domination by certain forms of largely middle-class environmentalism, and efforts by the urban poor and their ‘Non-Movements’ (Bayat, 2013), which have thus far gone unrecognized.

As such, the chapter argues that localized grassroots forms of contention against state damage and negligence of the surrounding environment are undermined by a particular definition of Nature put forth by the new bourgeois classes and co-opted civil society movements. Several cases of grassroots contention will be looked at, and especially water protests in Cairo.

First, the chapter examines the historical development of the relationship between the Egyptian state and the environment. This will lead to a discussion on the role of the state in organizing, managing and implementing environmental policies, as well as the role of donor agencies. The following section will touch upon the difference between middle-class environmentalism and how the poor have claimed their rights to the built environment within cities. The third section will delve further, describing different forms of contention within the Cairene context, and how the poor’s environmental activism has been undermined by the state. This will culminate in the concluding remarks to retackle the main question of the state’s interest in maintaining a fragmented natural landscape.

Nature and state: a historical look

Many clichés surround Egypt’s relationship with its environment, the Nile being the central focus for several historians. This includes Herodotus, who dubbed the country “The gift of the Nile” (Mikhail, 2011, p. 1.), a coinage that has transferred into everyday spoken Arabic and is professed proudly by those living on the riverbanks. The blue river, separating the swathes of desert land on either side, made agriculture the defining feature of the Egyptian economy throughout history. While recent industrialization and service-provision policies, as well as urbanization, have

led to sharp decline in the country's agricultural sector, it still contributes to at least 14% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Kheir-El-Din and El-Laithy, 2008).

Traditionally, Egypt's ruling elites and consecutive colonial powers exploited the country's "commercial agriculture" to their benefit, with land-owning families exerting large political influence for centuries (Mikhail, 2014; Fahmy, 1997). Yet it was only under Ottoman control from the mid-19th century that a change in the relationship between state, citizen and Nature actually took place. With the increasing incorporation of Egypt into trade markets, the centralized government began to invest in large projects to service the needs of global capitalism. Before the 1850s, peasants were left to perform limited maintenance and interventions on their surrounding environment, mostly through improving embankments, irrigation strategies and local infrastructure (Mikhail, 2011, 2014). These were decentralized processes, where rural communities worked on local issues and had autonomy over their natural environment (Mikhail, 2014).

Nonetheless, as Egypt's contribution to international trade grew in size, so did the needs of the Ottoman empire for greater infrastructural investment. This includes areas such as grains storage facilities, and the linking of major cities to the River Nile (*ibid.*). A major change to Egypt's agriculture took place when large numbers of peasants were recruited across the countryside and forced into labour in the 'grands projects' under Ottoman leaders (Fahmy, 1997), as well as in later years under British rule. In this process, peasants who had historically worked on the land were separated from their natural resources and forced into new forms of labour relations away from their fields. These new labour relations and forcible removal of peasants from their land, dominated by state control and regulation, has become "a primary site of contestation over . . . political and economic power" (Mikhail, 2014, p. 25).

While large-scale infrastructure projects served the needs of the developmental state, recent decades have seen a pattern of investment in grand infrastructure projects as a strategy for authoritarian regimes to solicit public support. As aptly put by Mikhail, every 50 years there is a project announced by different governments "regardless of their purported political bent, whether khedival, colonial, socialist, nationalist, neoliberal, or otherwise" (p. 24) to create a "New Egypt". These include the Suez Canal – 1850s and recent 2016 expansion – the Aswan Dam (1890s, 1950s and 1960s), the Toshka Scheme² (2000s) and the recent New Administrative Capital³ (announced 2016).

In the process of manipulating Nature and changing the landscapes of the seas, river and desert, ordinary Egyptians played no role in imagining Nature's future, despite ultimately being its builders. Instead the state remains the sole actor entrusted with the transformation of Nature. Since the 19th century, the state has created institutions, enacted laws and manipulated regulations to this end, as the following section will discuss.

Harnessing and pacifying Nature from the 1970s

Although various institutions traditionally managed Egypt's natural resources, it was only in the 1970s that a real discussion on an overarching environmental policy

occurred (Sowers, 2013). These ideas were brought forth by the local scientist community as they began to participate in several global conferences, such as the Stockholm Conference of 1972. They used Egypt's international convention ratifications as leverage to launch a national dialogue on environmental policy (Gomaa, 1997). This led to the institutionalization of the question of the environment and concretized political interests, as will shortly be described.

A first step was to establish the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA) in 1982 by Presidential decree no. 631 of the same year (*ibid.*). The agency went through several institutional reforms, the first in 1985 and another in 1991 (Sowers, 2013). The latter expanded its mandate over more environmental resources, but also removed provincial technical offices from its organization (Gomaa, 1997), following a governmental pattern of provincial marginalization. Yet, both these reforms enshrined the agency's limited role to simply coordinate between ministries, albeit for "land protection, afforestation and park development" where they had authoritative powers (p. 8). Even with the establishment of a Ministry of State for Environmental Affairs, the control of Nature remained fragmented across state sectors, as institutions competed for resources (Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency, 2016).

This became particularly clear within a wide societal discussion on the Environmental Law No.4 of 1994. In an unprecedented display of the inner workings of state policy-making, parliamentary debates on the law illuminated competing ministerial interests, which worked to delay the law (Sowers, 2013). In particular, ministries concerned with industry and petrochemicals advocated for the lowest possible environmentalist standards, in order to satisfy their customers, while the military establishment and industries continued to maintain its para-legal status (protecting its operations from civilian oversight) (*ibid.*). Eventually, the law was passed and revised once more in 2009, while a National Environmental Action Plan (NEAP) was created as early as 1992, with significant contributions by the World Bank (Gomaa, 1997, p. 36). The main issues targeted were air and water pollution, land degradation and solid waste management, as well as natural heritage protection (p. 39).

The directives of foreign institutions played a large role in determining the state's authority over the environment. The governments of the 1990s and early 2000s were engrossed in a dual mission – on the one hand, they catered to multinationals in an effort to increase Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). On the other, the state also wanted to promote its environmental profile to increase its cut of global environmental aid. The first objective in particular resulted in a plethora of public ventures with foreign companies, as part of the privatization drive of the 1990s. This resulted in creating spaces of investment, such as Free Industrial Zones, providing tax exemptions and public land leases (ElMusa and Sowers, 2009). These implicitly meant a relaxation of environmental standards.

Several cases of de-prioritizing environmental regulations can be found across various sectors. The most flagrant of these is along the Red Sea Coast, where investment in tourist resort development skyrocketed during the Mubarak era (Sowers, 2013). Marine and local heritage activists in the affected areas fought long battles

against international hoteliers and local real estate giants to preserve Bedouin lifestyles and underwater life endangered by the exploitative tourism industry (*ibid.*). The same holds true for the Delta fisheries industry. Exploitative strategies promoted by USAID advocated for the creation of fish farms in the Northern Delta, and these have left local fishermen unable to access the privatized commons (Bush and Sabri, 2000).

These examples and many more cases illustrate how the Egyptian state has employed a purposefully unequal management of resource allocation “and the increasing privatization of historically collective assets”, thus prioritising FDI and global capital ventures (*ibid.*)

On the other hand, international interventions contributed to pressuring the Egyptian state towards fuller environmental regulation for some positive results. The first of these was the direct establishment of a technical office within the EEAA to develop concrete policies in line with international standards (Gomaa, 1997). Similarly, donors pressured the government to pass the Environmental Law of 1994, with promises of appetizing environmental aid packages for “environmental mainstreaming” (Sowers, 2013). In reality, aid agencies actually funded a narrow range of projects and mostly relating to water and sanitation infrastructure, due to their visibility and tangible impact on communities (Hicks et al. cited in Sowers, 2013).

Quickly, Egypt began to rank as one of the highest recipients of environmental aid in the 1980s and 1990s. It was numbered in the 1990s as the seventh highest recipient among developing countries with an approximate \$3.2 billion share (Sowers, 2013, p. 30; Barnes, 2014). This became apparent in the increased level of institutional reporting by state agencies, for instance. Environmental reporting per governorate and per sector have been regularly published by the government from the late 1990s onwards, providing essential statistics that had not been previously available (EEAA website). These also include assessment reports on the current state of the environment, coinciding, for example, with the 2005 Egypt Human Development Report that termed environmental deterioration as “limiting Egypt’s development prospects” (Sowers, 2013, p. 7.). This was especially true in predominantly urban governorates, and the case of Cairo as a significant example will be explored as follows.

The urban built environment

As previously described, a fragmented scene of environmental mobilization exists across the country, and particularly in the case of urban contexts such as Cairo. Cairo’s built environment has been on the receiving end of uneven state investments, which have resulted in the dominate growth of informal areas and gated communities. This has contributed to the isolation of grassroots mobilizations within an unequal city. As such, there is very little recognition of their attempts to regain control over the built environment through individualized self-help systems. This will be further discussed, but it is important to first understand the urban make-up of the city.

In 1997, Cairo had a countable number of 100 informal ‘slum’ areas (Bayat, 1997), but an exponential growth led to about 1105 *ashwaiyat*⁴ (slums) areas as recorded in 2011 (Cities Alliance, 2008). These areas have been stigmatized by the state as representative of a negative urbanization process that has engulfed the capital. Yet informal areas have been the only form of major housing growth in Egypt’s urban cities (Sims, 2010). In most areas, inhabitants are marginalized citizens who have not been able to afford housing within the traditional city centres, ranging from informal workers to low-ranking bureaucrats and refugees. Meanwhile, the state has invested in reclaiming the surrounding desert circling the city and establishing new suburbs to absorb gated elite aspirations and the new middle classes (*ibid.*).

The result is a fragmented and unequal urban landscape composed of a dilapidated urban core, enmeshed informal communities, old residential areas and sparkling suburbs on the peripheries. The material imagery of this fragmentation corresponds to the state of environmental efforts by a polarized citizenry, which will be discussed in the following section.

Environmental movements– co-opted contention

The above discussion suggests that the state has always been able to determine society–Nature relationships through creating a rigid framework of acceptable interventions. In reality, however, as noted by Bell in early 2000, the state remains incapable of “monopoliz(ing) the environmental agenda” (p. 25). Environmental questions and interventions are thus highly contested by several groups.

As early as the 1980s, environmental groups formed part of civil society, numbering about 62 by early 1990–85% of which were based in Cairo (Gomaa, 1997). They were inspired by the work of the Green Party, which aimed to increase public consciousness over issues such as different types of pollution, and more significantly poverty “as the worst form of pollution” (p. 19). However, this group of early environmental civil society groups was mostly formed by older and conservative academics who avoided confrontation with the state (*ibid.*).

Along with availability of new data, the aid influx in Egypt changed the shape of environmental groups and created a “technical society”. This is an exclusive sphere where academics, scientists and activists turned into “consultants” for projects funded by donors. These consultants were in high demand and for these individuals, it was a financially preferable vocation as opposed to working for the state or local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Gomaa, 1997). These “consultants’ formed an important part of environmental movements.

Similarly, scientific societies and research institutes also increased in number, especially as environmental aid required the assistance of local expertise (*ibid.*). These culminated into what Sowers terms “managerial networks” that have attempted to dominate the implementation and narrative of environmental issues within the country (2013, p. 11.). This included the establishment of a multitude of consulting firms that benefit from relationships with the state and enjoy donor

trust (Gomaa, 1997). In some cases, these firms even form transnational connections with foreign consultancies, such as Chemonics Egypt (Sowers, 2013).

Today, most local environmental NGOs work on single issues and within specific locales. These include, for instance, the Association for the Protection of the Environment (APE) that has adopted the cause of solid waste management communities and recycling policies (Gomaa, 1997). Admirably, the appointment of the first Minister for Urban Renewal and Informal Settlements was an NGO leader involved in solid waste management projects, although the Ministry was prematurely dissolved for political reasons. Another well-known organization is the Hurgada Environment Protection and Conservation Association (HEPCA), which aims at protecting marine biodiversity and local Bedouin communities surrounding the Red Sea (Sowers, 2013).

Another example is the Association for Health and Environment Development (AHED), which focuses on the health consequences from interventions in the environment. They adopted the unique approach to partner with grassroots communities to address pollution resulting from private investment, such as Lake El Manzalah fisheries and lead poisoning in Cairo (Gomaa, 1997). At the other end of the spectrum lies Environmental Quality International (EQI), which focused on a regional approach. This consulting firm was established as early as 1981, and continues to provide consulting services across the Middle East and Africa to a plethora of international donors.

It is important to note that Egypt's environmental expert networks and other civil society groups are characterized by their middle-class, elitist nature. Most in fact lack "linkages to broader constituencies" (Sowers, 2013, p. 37). They share this feature with most civil society groups, social institutions and movements in the country (Abdelrahman, 2002). In fact, some scholars have promulgated a theory that "those who are the least likely to be exposed to environmental hazards are the most concerned with the environment" (Gomaa, 1997, p. 5). This ties in with the fact that most NGOs are situated in Cairo among groups with higher socio-economic status and access to political institutions (*ibid.*; Abdelrahman, 2002).

Egypt is no exception in this regard. Scholars of South Asia in general have recorded the emergence of a "bourgeois environmentalism" (Baviskar, 2003, p. 90.) where elite groups work with the state to create "legible natural terrain" and apolitical subjects (Scott, 1998, p. 18). This means that elite urban classes are able to force their imaginaries of "clean" cities unto environmental policies to shape a dominant way of life (*ibid.*). A multitude of such cases can be seen where governments strive to have "world class cities" and are thus unchecked in pursuing slum demolitions, environmental degradation by approved industries and making space for real estate capital (Arabindoo, 2011; Roy, 2005).

The elitism of Egypt's environmental activists sometimes translates into a discourse that claims that "the public does not care about environmental problems" (Sowers, 2013, p. 5.). An early ambitious study undertaken by Hopkins et al. (2001) aimed specifically to dispel these claims by targeting poor areas in Cairo and the countryside to question what "local people" understand about their environment.

The results indicated that in fact residents were fully aware of the changes to their environment, even if it was not articulated using the discursive narrative of environmentalists (Hopkins et al., 2001, p. 6.). The study also revealed the existence of local organizations and movements battling for local environmental issues that have not been widely publicized (*ibid.*).

Very little scholarship has emerged on such local movements of the long decades before the 2011 Revolution, which featured forms of fragmented mass mobilization around multiple issues (Abdelrahman, 2015). Even less have looked at actions around Nature and the built environment. One such case appeared in Damietta, a city in the north Nile Delta, where the Canadian firm Agrium planned a large fertilizer factory near a popular domestic tourist location (Sowers, 2013). Protests erupted as residents began to understand the environmental implications of the factory on their surroundings and sources of income (*ibid.*). Yet the state remained reluctant to cancel the agreement, as it was wary of its international standing and the signal this would send to potential investors, rather than prioritizing citizens' demands (*ibid.*).

The local community thus fought against both the state and a multinational enterprise over several years. It was only through prolonged community strategies that they were able to turn their local problems into an issue of public interest. A significant success factor was the soliciting of local economic and political elites, and appealing to a "stratified citizenry" or different categories of citizens – politicians, local media and similar Delta communities. An organized popular committee coordinated efforts and maintained a "legitimate" discourse, keeping away from national politics and focusing on environmental consequences in an attempt to remain mainstream (ElMusa and Sowers, 2009).

Another instance of grassroots mobilization, which had started in the late 1980s, targeted lead smelters in Northern Cairo (Tewfik, 1997), with the NGO AHED as a strong supporter. Local residents organized themselves once more into citizen committees and used several strategies to make themselves heard by the state. These included complaints, petitions, media appearances, reliance on scientific data and the avoidance of foreign donors to remain within a nationalistic framing (*ibid.*). Recently, NGOs working with agricultural communities, such as the Egyptian Land Centre, have adopted similar approaches to encourage poor farmers to establish organic organizations, such as independent unions and associations, in order to combat land confiscations and arrests by utilities police (Land Centre for Human Rights, 2016). Similarly, a successful campaign by local environmental groups in Alexandria led to changes allowing public access to historical heritage (Bell, 2000).

Nonetheless, similar narratives on grassroots mobilization in the urban centres are missing. It is here that organic movements within cities remain neglected by the state and have come to intervene directly in their built environment with escalating confrontations. The following section will discuss these grassroots efforts in urban Cairo.

Urban water movements – regaining autonomy through self-help

Environmental problems facing the urban fabric are quite different based on place-making within the city. Some overarching problems facing Cairo however include air pollution and water shortages. For the latter, its strongest manifestation is the “black cloud”, which has been blamed on everything from the poor burning garbage, to rice husk burning in the Northern Delta (Hopkins et al., 2001), encroachment on agricultural land and the pollution of the Nile. In most of these cases, there is a constant “blame game” among the classes, with the media mostly pointing to the poor’s activities as the cause of environmental degradation (*ibid.*).

Another recent significant problem is the issue of water shortages. Water, like most infrastructural utilities, continues to be monopolized by the Egyptian state, where state-owned Water Companies provide accessibility, pricing and maintenance for all residents of cities and villages (AbuZeid et al., 2014). Egypt has 2612 water treatment plants across the country, but these have struggle to keep up with water supply demands and have lead to pronounced shortages (*ibid.*). Over the past few years, electricity and water shortages have been particularly acute in Cairo, especially in summer (Ezz and Arafat, 2015), and even in elite settlements (Esterman, 2014). The Water Company manages these crises by simply warning residents through media outlets and supplying water trucks for grieved districts, usually at a price.⁵

Informal areas seem to see the worst end of these shortages (Ibrahim, 2012). Depending on the legal battles surrounding land tenure, residents may or may not have access to piped water. In many cases, however, the local administration and water company willingly formalize citizens’ water systems, as it means more paying customers – while residents use utility bills as proof of tenure for their legal woes (Séjourné, 2012). This was made clear in 2006 when the Governor of Cairo announced “utilities for all” as a “temporary measure” (Sims 2010), regardless of the legality of tenure.

Nonetheless, the confrontation between the poor and the “commodified commons” continues. In many informal areas, communities installed their own infrastructural systems (Bremer and Bhuiyan, 2014) as the state refused recognition of these areas and maintained an “absent presence” as a practice of governance⁶ (Denyer Willis 2016). Communities went through several processes of self-help systems accumulating in communities organizing to tap into mainframe pipes and create their own piped networks, providing access to more than 500 households in some cases (Bremer and Bhuiyan, 2014). Similarly, in the Giza governorate neighbourhoods that were built on agricultural land, residents came together to install deep underground water pumps to access groundwater.⁷ Community organization, maintenance and financial investment dominated these grassroots projects, and added to the social cohesion of mostly fragmented areas of marginalized citizens.

These types of projects are often unaccounted for in scholarship on informal areas in Middle Eastern cities. As opposed to the more contentious Latin American

and South Asian traditions on informality and slums, Arab informality has been looked at through the lens of “quiet encroachment” as coined by Bayat. This is a survival mechanism by which residents avoid political confrontations with the state and remain in search for basic survival in larger cities (Bayat, 2013). Recently, this incremental build-up of mundane activities has been termed “Non-Movements”, where the urban poor move beyond simple encroaching, and their collective actions coalesce into extra-legal norms (ibid).

Through these Non-Movements, the urban poor attempt to make claims on the state in their struggle for citizenship (ibid.). But it is also clear that through these self-help strategies, they are reasserting their autonomy over their immediate natural environment. As previously described, this relationship was broken by the state in the 19th century as it centralized interventions and regulations (Mikhail, 2014). Yet through these unnoticeable systems, grassroots communities are imposing their own connection to Nature. Even in cases where the state intervenes to install its own official piping, community systems continue to serve as a main source of water during chronic shortages.⁸

As such, it seems that this form of contention is ever present in urban communities and takes shape in different ways. These include organic organizations installing infrastructure, popular committees defending neighbourhoods against vandalism during the 2011 Revolution and continued community social work, such as independent trade unions of workers, and local groups concerned with certain environmental causes (Abdelrahman, 2015). Despite their continued existence, they have not formed a uniform “movement” that could embody multiple demands and form a collective front against the state.

In fact, especially in the case of water shortages, these communities have actually come out in protest with a direct confrontation with the state. These could be individualized responses such as writing to local administrators, refusing to pay water bills and resisting formalization procedures, and even chasing water collectors out of neighbourhoods.⁹ Of the collective responses, the most flagrant was the Giza case where different communities, such as Saft El-Laban and Talat Tawabek, burned tyres on highways for hours, protested in front of municipalities and appeared in the media to report their case (Abdel Azim, 2015).

In one sense, this demonstrates a deviation from Non-Movement definitions, as these mobilizations could be seen as having “evolved to a point where they undertook contentious action” (Abdelrahman, 2015, p. 66.). While environmentalists focused on debating cleanliness and solid waste management, the protests on water, air quality surrounding urban industries and poisonous tanneries were localized as communities took matters into their own hands (Tewfik, 1997). By protesting “for their environment” and reasserting their autonomy over their connection to Nature, these citizens are in fact making citizenship claims away from the political channels suffocated by the state (Abdelrahman, 2015).

On the other hand, although these citizens assert themselves in the public sphere, they remain reliant on the state’s recognition in order to gain access to the monopolized commons. The same criticism has been made against self-help

systems, where some have described them fuelling the state's neoliberal concepts of self-interest (Ben Néfissa, 2009). This means the poor are forced into paying for their own subsistence rather than having the opportunity to embrace their basic rights to public services. Yet, it remains clear that individualized activities within these contexts has coalesced into the collective form when communities are threatened or opportunities arise for improvement (Bayat, 2013). As the state gradually eases towards the privatization of infrastructure and utilities, it remains to be seen whether these movements will in fact come together to counter the danger, or remain entrenched in a fragmented scene.

Concluding remarks

With the threat of further privatization of the commons in Egypt (Ahmed, 2016), it is useful to look at regional examples of environmental contention for partial reassurance. These include the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul that countered the establishment of a shopping mall on the park (Yoruk and Yuksel, 2014), and the 2015 Beirut garbage protests, which forced a corrupt privatized solid waste management system into assessment (Atallah, 2015).

As this chapter has shown, however, the state continues to dominate the unequal management of all natural resources within Egypt, and maintains the severing of direct citizen–Nature relationships. This continues the evolution from the mid-19th century turnabout in centralizing and the institutionalization of an overarching regulatory regime over Nature, influenced by donor relations, private interests and managerial networks (Barnes, 2014; Sowers, 2013). At the same time, fragmented environmental mobilizations veering from “bourgeoisie environmentalism” to the Non-Movements of the poor, have removed the possibility of a collective mobilization for a common Nature.

The self-help systems and collective contention of the urban poor, on the other hand, have provided a different reading. They demonstrate a claim by the marginalized to directly intervene in their natural surroundings, bypassing the role of the state. It thus remains to be seen whether these struggles morph from ‘quiet encroachment’ and enable opportunities for concrete collective action for citizenship (Abdelrahman, 2015), especially in the face of recently increased state repression. This is the case with the aforementioned Damietta success story, which has since taken a turn for the worst. In 2015, the military regime approved the public venture with Canadian funding and imposed its implementation, even killing a protestor during continued demonstrations (Sowers, 2013).

Hence, for now, the state will continue to dominate the natural landscape and even play the mediator between classes fighting to define their relationship with Nature. For instance, in our first anecdote, although the marginalized woman was ejected from the animal rights protest, she was invited to meet the prime minister who recognized her struggle and provided free medical services for her son (Omara and Ghoneim., 2015). The state emerged as the saviour of the poor against elitist structures in this case, glossing over the negligence of its social contract with marginalized citizens.

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Notes

- 1 Personal communication, Faysal Residents, 2015 Cairo.
- 2 The Toshka- New Valley- scheme was started in 1997 with the aim of diverting water from the Nile in the south of Egypt to the Western Desert.
- 3 Announced in 2015, the state proposed a megaproject to construct a new administrative capital, 45km outside of present-day Cairo. It has since been plagued with delays and developer uncertainty, but site construction has been underway since 2016.
- 4 Egyptian negative colloquialism for informal areas, literally meaning “random”.
- 5 Personal communication, Faysal Residents, 2015 Cairo
- 6 Many scholars have discussed the role of the state in refraining from its role as the provider of services in informal areas. It is simultaneously able to maintain a presence in paralegal negotiations taking place at the local level, while remaining absent in formal governance paradigms. Denyer Willis (2016) describes this in Brazil, and Arias (2006) in Colombia.
- 7 Personal communication, Faysal Residents, 2015 Cairo
- 8 Personal communication, Faysal Residents, 2015, Cairo
- 9 Personal communication, Faysal Residents, 2015 Cairo

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