ETHNOGRAPHY, IDENTITY, AND THE PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

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I never intended to become an advocate of participant-observation and ethnographic methods. The research methods we employ, after all, should be determined by the questions we ask and the subjects we seek to explore. I became a proponent of participant-observation and ethnography through practice*, only after conducting research using various methods—including participant-observation/ethnography—and comparing the character and types of knowledge different research methods produce.*

My initial research project was to investigate working-class politics and culture in Egypt, and, more specifically, shop floor politics, working-class culture, and class formation at the point of production, inside the factory. Although a significant literature existed on the Egyptian working class in both Arabic and English, surprisingly, few if any of these authors had ever spent any significant time in Egyptian factories or with Egyptian workers, either because they thought it unnecessary or because they simply could not gain access. The literature that existed, therefore, dealt with questions of class and class formation almost exclusively, through instances of strikes, labor organization, and collective action. The analysis was mostly limited to discussions of textual sources; analysis of print media, newspaper accounts, pamphlets, institutional histories of unions, and instances of strikes; and a few interviews with union leaders. What was sorely lacking was an analysis of ordinary workers and working life. Not only did we know very little about what went on inside Egyptian factories, we also knew remarkably little about working-class culture and shop-floor politics.

Ethnography rather than questionnaires, interviews, or archival research was best suited for studying workers' lived experiences and the social world of the factory. What better way, after all, was there to penetrate what Marx called "the hidden abode of production. On whose threshold there hangs the notice—'No Admittance Except on Business'" (Marx 1967, 172).

There are of course other reasons that drew me to ethnography and participant-observation. It always made intuitive sense to me that if one really wanted to learn about something, there was no better way than to see things for oneself, speak with those involved, and experience the phenomenon as much as one could—in short, to get to know something well by being there, as Clifford Geertz suggests (1988, 4–5).

Moreover, it has always seemed to me that the most important questions in the social sciences are not about macro structures, large processes, or social institutions—but about people: living, breathing, flesh and blood, real people who, it turns out, whether intentionally or not, produce structures, set processes in motion, and establish institutions. And because the human sciences must remain primarily about humans, any science about the social world must provide the

perspectives of those responsible for establishing institutions, setting processes in motion, and producing structures: that is, the perspectives of the participants (whether we end up accepting these perspectives or not is irrelevant—they remain important and part of what must be explained). And by the "perspectives of the participants" I do not mean the generic rational "choices" that actors make. I mean how real people understand their situations and social world. There is no better method for providing these perspectives (and ground-level analysis more generally) than participant-observation.

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For many of the people I worked with, I was the only person they knew who lived in the United States. As *Amrika* has a definite place in the Egyptian imagination (as in many other countries), my presence provided them an opportunity to learn about *ard al-ahlam* (the land of dreams) directly. It provided me an opportunity to learn about Egyptian social structure.

Workers weren't the only people shocked and amazed at the method I had chosen for my research. Middle- and upper-class friends and relatives could not believe what I was up to, and the Chairman of the Board of Directors who interviewed me before allowing me to undertake the research had a specific question in mind: Why would someone who was *ibn naas* (the son of respectable people), with a Master's degree and doing a Ph.D. at Princeton, want to work in a factory, on a machine? It made no sense to him either.
—*Samer Shehata* (2004, 248, 256)

When I decided to study working-class politics and culture in Egypt as a participant-observer in two textile factories in Alexandria, the last thing I imagined was writing about myself or my personal experiences. Preparing a conference paper about identity and research, I realized that the questions people had been asking about "what the natives thought of me" were themselves quite serious and scholarly. People wanted to know how I was received in the factory. How did workers react? How was I treated and what did people make of my research? Was my presence on the shop floor disruptive or unusual? What everyone seemed most curious about was how "the natives" perceived me. Indeed, these were crucial epistemological questions about my research and the character of ethnographic knowledge. Although personal, they were also about method and had to be taken seriously.

Questions about ethnographic text are especially important to me because I am not an anthropologist. What some anthropologists take for granted—ethnography as method—I must consciously defend, day in and day out. As a political scientist I find that my colleagues are generally quite wary of ethnography. If taken seriously, it is viewed with suspicion—not as competing method but as pseudoscience.[1]

In the classical ethnography of anthropology (see, e.g., Malinowski 1922), the ethnographer is nowhere to be found; identity and the subjective experience of fieldwork are erased.[2] The traditional monograph, in fact, looks as if it were produced by an "objective machine." It is a purely scholarly production and the conditions of its birth are noticeably absent. Occasionally, and only occasionally, the ethnographer emerges from the text, usually in the introduction and "arrival story," only to convince the reader that "what they say is a result of their having . . . 'been there.'"[3] This approach to ethnography began to be questioned by the end of the 1960s. For example, Peggy Golde (1970, 2) wrote that one of the primary issues that her edited volume *Women in the*

Field: Anthropological Experiences was meant to address was "how the characteristics of the ethnographer may indirectly and inadvertently affect the process of research." More recently, some of these issues have resurfaced under the guise of reflexivity and postmodernism. In the work of James Clifford, George Marcus (1986), and Clifford Geertz (1988), three highly influential anthropologists, reflexivity has meant an analysis of, in Geertz's phrase, "the anthropologist as author." Rather than examining "the problematics of fieldwork" (Geertz 1988), these anthropologists concentrate on writing, discourse, and authorship; in short, how ethnographic *texts* function and how they convince. The analysis is literary and discursive, focusing on narrative structure, trope, metaphor, language, and rhetorical style.[4] Textual reflexivity seems to be the dominant mode these days.

Reflexivity, however, has also meant the examination of fieldwork as a personal and epistemological activity. In this mode, the field encounter is analyzed as a method of knowledge production, and the ethnographer is placed at the center of the drama. Consciously autobiographical and explicitly personal, these works abandon many of the traditional conventions of academic writing. Self-reflexivity is, at times, highly entertaining, revealing aspects of fieldwork that normally would not make it to the printed page. The ethnographer appears not as scientist but as human. Here, reflexivity means being self-conscious about fieldwork and the role of the ethnographer in the production of knowledge; it is a reflexivity not about writing and textuality (although these concerns are legitimate), but about fieldwork as method and the ethnographer as "positioned subject."[5]

It has become more acceptable to view ethnographers not as "objective machines" but as "positioned subjects"—human, constructed, "natives" somewhere, with emotions, ideas, and agendas.[6] They bring their identities as well as their theories to the field. Ethnographic fieldwork is, in this sense, a thoroughly "subjective" experience, based, as it is, on the personal interactions of the ethnographer in "the field."[7] *Thus, in ethnography, the ethnographer's self becomes a conduit of research and a primary vehicle of knowledge production.* How does this affect the production of knowledge? How does the ethnographer's identity affect the ethnographic encounter? The answers I propose to these difficult questions are tentative and come from a critical examination of my own fieldwork. Reformulated, the questions become: How did my identity affect my fieldwork? What did "the natives" think of me? Which categories did they employ to make sense of me and my research? And ultimately, how does the essentially "personal and subjective" ethnographic encounter affect the ostensibly "scientific" production of "objective" knowledge?

Reflecting critically on my own identity in relation to my fieldwork—how I was perceived and what "the natives" thought of me—has proven especially useful in illuminating the subject of my research: the social world of the factory and the class structure of Egyptian society. I set out to study workers in two textile factories in Egypt, and my fieldwork experiences reflect, in part, my problematic place within the Egyptian class system. I learned about the significance and meaning of social class in Egypt firsthand, in a way I never intended or expected. As an Egyptian-American, a semi-indigenous researcher, and someone who was definitely not a worker, I *experienced* social class. I was thrown into (or, more aptly, thrown up against) a rigid class structure, and I experienced the reactions of those within it to my research and identity. How people reacted to what I was doing and their expectations of me were revealing of their attitudes and understandings of what social class in the factory and society is all about. Examining these interactions and reflecting upon them has proven useful for understanding the social world of the factory and the class structure of Egyptian society.

In order to address questions about how my identity—my ethnographic self—worked to generate insights into the Egyptian class structure, I must be somewhat autobiographical. This causes

great anxiety for most social scientists, and I am certainly no exception. As a political scientist I feel especially uneasy, guilty, and unprofessional. After all, we are taught as researchers that the personal is trivial, uninteresting, and certainly not the serious business of science. However, since my identity proved crucial in shaping my findings, I will briefly outline those features of my identity that my workmates took to be most salient. Each of these facets of my identity colored my presence and affected my research. (It is important to note that these characteristics, as will become apparent later, are certainly not unproblematic or stable themselves.) Then I will discuss how these characteristics impacted my fieldwork and affected my findings.

Although born in Alexandria, I have lived most of my life outside Egypt, in England and the United States, and fit neatly into the category of the "hyphenated American." Put differently, I am an Egyptian-American fluent in Arabic. At the time of the research, I was not married. As a social scientist and researcher, I had significantly more formal education than the workers I studied. And, except for a few engineers in the highest ranks of the administration, I had more formal education than most in the company. Although I am not terribly connected in Egyptian society, especially compared with others of similar family and class backgrounds living in Egypt, compared with the workers I was *wasil* (connected)—connected enough to gain access to the factory and the shop floor. I also came from a significantly different class background than my coworkers, as well as most of the administrative and engineering staff for that matter. Moreover, I am male, Muslim, and originally from the region where the research was undertaken. My identity is obviously more complicated than this simple combination of features. These characteristics, however, turned out to be most important to those I worked with and studied.

In the sections that follow, I recount the specifics of a variety of research events, encounters, and stories from my twelve months of field research. These stories might be organized in a variety of ways as they reflect different combinations of the features of my identity. To simplify the explication, I have organized them according to the approximate importance (in my view) workers, management, and engineers accorded different features of my identity. Some stories reveal ways in which "the natives" were able to make sense of me in terms of fairly common categories of region, gender, religion, and organizational membership. As I was thus "pegged" by the people with whom I was working, facets of the setting were either revealed to me (e.g., as a Muslim) or concealed (as a male). In other stories, my identity and my research purposes proved much more disruptive, as "natives" struggled to understand why an educated, connected Egyptian-American would study working-class people, much less work alongside them. It was these situations—provoked by my failure to fit standard expectations—that proved most revelatory about the functioning of the Egyptian class system. By analyzing all of these interactions and presenting the knowledge I gained from them, I demonstrate how I learned about the social world of the factory and the class structure of Egyptian society, in part, *through* my identity.

EGYPTIAN-AMERICAN

It seemed like I spent the first month of my twelve-month sojourn in the factories answering questions. Most Egyptians are both friendly and curious, and it felt like the limits of the personal and private were significantly different from what I was accustomed to. Questions came not only from workmates but also from almost everyone with whom I came into contact, including people I had never met, inside the factory and elsewhere. Everything about me was fair game and open for investigation, from my father's occupation, to the exact amount of my research stipend, to the extent of my religious observance.[8]

Of all the questions, however, the two that seemed most frequent and especially important to my questioners were: "Which is better—America or Egypt?" and "Are you going to marry an Egyptian or a foreigner?" Obviously, my identity as an Egyptian-American was at the root of both questions. Despite the difficulty of answering potentially sensitive questions like these, not to mention the problematic nature of the questions themselves, I soon established comfortable answers that, as well as being true, seemed to satisfy my questioners. I told my questioners that both Egypt and the United States had advantages and drawbacks and "which was better" depended on how one prioritized these qualities. As far as marriage was concerned, I mimicked the classic Egyptian and superficially fatalistic response of *isma wa nasib* (meaning, basically, whatever fate had in store for me).[9]

Being Egyptian-American produced a set of responses that smoothed my entrance into the factory. It produced warmth and kindness. My being American produced interest and curiosity. Interest in the United States (*Amrika*, as it was called) generated questions that are fascinating in and of themselves for what they reveal in terms of background knowledge, perspective, and orientation. These questions also provided an opportunity for me to ask similar questions and explore related issues. For instance, I was bombarded with inquiries about life in Amrika, which included everything from the particulars of household consumption (i.e., how much milk people drink daily, especially children) and gender relations to union activity and perspectives on society and politics more generally.[10] Explicit comparison was made easy and much information was gathered in this manner.

Mohamed, an illiterate coworker in my department who dropped out of fourth grade and attended an anti-illiteracy program in the evenings, was particularly fascinated with my notebook and what I wrote in it. Once, after watching me scribble something by the side of a machine, he approached and asked, "Do all people who know English write from left to right or is it just you?" Our conversation covered a number of topics including life in the United States. After a long, rambling monologue about how great Amrika must be in terms of standard of living, personal and political freedom, and so on, Mohamed ended, without pause and in the same tone of voice, by stating (about Americans), "Lakin ma aendahumsh din . . . min al-dar ila al-nar" ("but they have no religion . . . from home to hell").[11]

Other workers' impressions of the United States (and the West more generally) were no less interesting or complex. Many described the United States and Europe as having "Islam without Muslims," while Egypt had "Muslims without Islam" (*Islam bala Muslimeen* and *Muslimeen bala Islam*).[12] This was a short but sophisticated, double-edged ethical and religious critique of both the "West" and Egypt (in the same breath!). While praising the "West" for having "Islam"—referring to fair and just systems of government, the absence of significant corruption, the seriousness of work, economic development, equality, and high standards of living—they criticized the "West" for not believing in Islam, for not being Muslim. At the very same time, in this short phrase, workers criticized Egyptians for not living by Islamic principles of justice, fairness, order, charity, and so forth, and, thus, of being Muslims in name only—"Muslims without Islam," as it were.

RESEARCHER

As a social scientist studying working-class culture and the social organization of production, I experienced reactions of bewilderment, confusion, and respect. Despite my determined efforts to explain exactly what I was doing, for the longest time many workers believed that I was studying the machines on the shop floor and not the social relations of production. Workers'

only previous experiences of research were engineers who occasionally marched onto the shop floor, oblivious to the workers, to study some aspect of the machines or a technical matter relating to production.[13] Six weeks into the research, for example, Fathy, a winding machine operator with whom I worked closely, asked whether I would become an English teacher after I finished at the factory. Although I had previously explained to everyone in the department, on a number of different occasions, exactly what I was studying and for what purpose, people were quite genuinely confused. I was the only "social scientist" most had ever met.

As a university graduate with an advanced degree, I experienced reactions of respect and deference that varied from opinions concerning what work I could and could not do to where I should sit on the company bus. One of the most memorable incidents regarding my status as a social scientist (with formal education) occurred on my first day of work at my second research site. This, too, was a textile firm: a large company that employed 11,000 people and occupied over 500 *feddans*.*

Equipped with its own power and water stations, it was located some distance outside the city. All employees were transported to work each day on a fleet of company buses. The previous week, while visiting the factory, I was told to wait for one of the company's buses at a certain location, the closest scheduled stop to where I was living. The company official responsible for my research introduced me to the driver, told me exactly which bus to get on, described the other employee who boarded at this particular stop, and explained when and where to wait.

On my first day I did exactly as I was told, arriving ten minutes early, at 6:00 A.M., on a chilly summer morning. When the bus finally arrived several minutes late, the driver turned out not to be the same person I had previously met and the passenger I was told would board was nowhere to be found. Nervous and unsure of myself, I boarded and walked toward the middle of the bus, where I spotted many empty seats. All of a sudden I heard several different voices, including the bus driver's, all speaking loudly and at the same time. It didn't occur to me that they could be speaking to me. After all, I did not know anyone on the bus and had never seen these people before. For a brief moment there was a tremendous ruckus, seeming chaos, and commotion. Attempting to make sense of the different sounds and voices I heard, I began to think that everyone on the bus was yelling at me.

In fact, they *were* yelling at me! All the passengers were trying to get my attention. People were asking me, in a flurry of raised and overlapping voices incomprehensible together, where I was going and insisting that I sit in a particular seat—"my seat." This included the driver, who was now turning around, watching me in the aisle (and not looking at the road) while steering the bus at fifty kilometers an hour! Everyone on board, although only half awake at 6:10 A.M. on the first day of a new workweek, looked on, fixated. I hurriedly made my way to the seat toward the front of the bus where I was ordered to sit. Nervous but in "my seat," sweating and with my heart pounding, I thought, What had I done? Had I boarded the wrong bus? Had I committed some grievous crime relating to the peculiar culture of the bus? Had I violated a sacred code relating to bus etiquette of which I was unaware? Doing ethnographic fieldwork, I thought, was not all the fun and games it was purported to be. A few stops later, a middle-aged man boarded and without saying a word sat down beside me. There was hardly a sound or word uttered during the entire ride, and certainly nothing approaching the commotion that I had caused earlier. For the next forty-five minutes on the way to the factory, I recounted the incident in my mind over and over again, trying to figure out what had happened and why.[14]

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*One *feddan* is approximately 1.038 acres.

Toward the end of the shift, the production director called me into his office. It was my first day of work, and he wanted to make sure there were no problems and that things were going well with respect to my research. I related what had happened during the morning bus ride, and after a short outburst of laughter, he explained the company's complicated system of "assigning" seating on all buses. I hadn't boarded the wrong bus. It turned out that as well as providing three different types of buses for different grades of workers and employees (not to mention minibuses and private cars for the very important people in the company like the production director), seating on all buses was "assigned" based on a combination of seniority and educational attainment. This usually corresponded closely with one's position in the company. Not only were there three different sets of buses for shift workers, daytime workers and white-collar employees, and higher-level management; the more senior and better educated in each bus had the privilege of sitting closer to the front, in the "first class" section, as it were.[15]

What had happened on the morning bus ride was that I, innocently and unknowingly, attempted to sit somewhere other than my "assigned" seat. Once assignments are made, a person's "place" on the bus is known by all. Not sitting in my assigned seat caused chaos as the driver and others intervened to set the situation right. My designated seat, behind the driver, was the third best on the bus and fitting for someone who had received a master's degree![16] Thus, despite the fact that the bus was never full and there were plenty of empty seats in the middle and back, I had to share a relatively small seat (an undivided padded bench with a back) with someone else. For the rest of my time at the company, I wished, every morning and afternoon, that I could sit on one of the empty seats in the middle of the bus, where I would have had an entire seat to myself. But no, my status and *brestige* (the Arabic rendering of "prestige") would not allow it!

The bus incident revealed the importance of education in determining social status and the extent of practices that reflected such hierarchy (e.g., the seating system on company buses). The incident also revealed that these hierarchical systems had become accepted and internalized as legitimate by employees (e.g., everyone trying to get me to sit in my proper seat).

My status reflected itself in another, more immediate, form—how I should be addressed. How one is addressed is relatively important in Egypt, as it reflects status and respect. The use of titles and honorifics is quite common. One often notices close friends who are doctors, for instance, address each other as "Doctor So-and-So," in line with the Egyptian custom of labeling someone a doctor from the moment they finish a master's degree and begin pursuing a doctorate. Even within families, one often hears siblings refer to their brothers and sisters who have received medical degrees or Ph.D.s as "Doctor So-and-So."

Although I was never asked, different people came up with various ways of addressing me. Some insisted on calling me "Doktor" or "Ya doktor Samer." Needless to say, having come from an academic subculture where titles and formality are looked at disparagingly, I was embarrassed and uncomfortable with this particular title.[17] Other workers chose to call me by the more familiar and common factory title of *Ya bash muhandis* (engineer), although I wasn't an engineer and knew nothing about engineering. Addressing engineers as "Engineer So-and-So" is important in the factory. So important that several petty conflicts occurred among white-collar staff between those who had engineering degrees and deserved to be addressed as such and those who were not engineers (and had other types of degrees) but were mistakenly referred to by that title by others.[18]

Another, very colloquial and quite *shaabi* (popular) word for engineer is *handasi*, and several workers referred to me this way ("Ya handasi"). Other titles sometimes placed before my name included *Ustaz* (Mr.), *Bey,* and *Basha*.[19] Although many people, after a few months on the job, simply called me by name, several refused and insisted on using some kind of honorific

title (Doktor, Ustaz, etc.). This group, incidentally, included Fathy, the coworker whose sense of honor figures in the next story.

When I finally made it onto the shop floor, I received a rather unexpected welcome. After having struggled for months to get the necessary approvals to do fieldwork, dealt with various government agencies, interviewed with the relevant authorities, explained time and again what I wanted to study (and what I would not study)—in short, after having gotten access to my field site—both shift supervisors and workers did not want me to work.

I was introduced to my shift supervisor by one of the company's head engineers. The engineer explained that I was a *doktor* coming from the United States and would be conducting research in this particular shop floor for the coming months. The shift supervisor was asked to be as cooperative as possible.

When I showed up for work the next morning he was indeed extremely cooperative. His cooperation, however, extended only to a point. He insisted that I not do any work! I literally had to argue and fight for the first week in order to actually work. Out of politeness, courtesy, and respect, feigned or otherwise, or simply people's understanding of the way the Egyptian class system functioned, workers and shift supervisors did not think that performing manual labor was appropriate for me. The first day the shift supervisor stated this in terms of my being a "guest" and it not being appropriate for guests to work. The next day he said that I should not work "so that I would have fond memories of them and the shop floor." After all, to them I was an educated, upper-class doktor coming from the United States, and although it was well and good that I study whatever I liked, especially since this was approved by the "people upstairs," working on a machine, getting my hands dirty, and being ordered around by a shift supervisor simply made no sense.

After struggling to work my first week, the following week a new shift supervisor appeared with a different group of workers who were just as adamant that I neither work nor "tire myself" in any way. This shift supervisor went so far as to order one of "his" workers to bring me his own chair, the only chair on the shop floor, to sit on. After making it clear to everyone that I wanted to work, that performing manual labor was part of the research, and that I would work despite any and all protestations, things changed and working became less of an issue. Up until the very end of my research, however, Fathy, a coworker, would not allow me to sweep around my machine with the broom, part of the job assignment for the winding machine I operated. He accepted the fact that I could work, eat, joke, and laugh with him, but I could not be allowed to clean—that wouldn't be right. And on several occasions he literally fought me for the broom, saying, "May sah hish ya doktor" ("doctor, it's not right") while wrestling it out of my hands. The reactions of white-collar employees and engineers to this aspect of my research were just as interesting. Word spread among some of the younger bureaucrats, administrators, and engineers that I was actually working on a machine, and this seemed to amuse them no end. Some made silly jokes or references, and a few even came down to the shop floor, something most white-collar employees never did, to see for themselves what the doktor was up to.

All of these examples of workers and shift supervisors not wanting me to work, my coworker not allowing me to sweep around my machine, and the disbelief of many in management that I was actually working on the shop floor revealed what people in the factory took for granted about appropriate and inappropriate behavior by someone who had received higher education (e.g., a researcher with a master's degree who was pursuing a Ph.D.). These encounters exposed the assumptions and "commonsense" understandings of those in the factory— from workers to management—about the proper relationship between educational attainment, status, and appropriate and inappropriate labor.

UNKNOWN, POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS OUTSIDER

One of the reasons for using participant-observation as a research method, aside from the possibility of directly observing the social relations of production, was the hope that actual work alongside other workers would bridge, to some degree, the social distance between myself and my coworkers. This, in fact, happened to a considerable extent. We worked, ate, and joked together, used the same facilities, got searched the same way when we exited the factory, and socialized outside of work. Nevertheless, caution and calculation did mark some of my interactions, especially with people with whom I did not work directly.

The idea of the state or the company administration placing spies among workers is by no means far fetched. This has happened and continues to occur in Egypt today. Even more common, however, are certain workers who inform on workmates in exchange for favors, easy work routines, and favorable relations with superiors. It was said, in fact, that the public relations department was nothing other than the company's own intelligence gathering agency. Although I had no relationship to the company administration other than simply asking and being allowed to conduct fieldwork, it took some time before most people felt comfortable enough to talk openly about certain subjects in front of me. On several occasions workers and employees asked directly about my relationship to the top people in the company. Others asked who would be reading my notes. After some time, after I became friendly with many workers and a high degree of trust was established, we joked about what I did and did not write. Some reminded me they had "families to care for and kids to feed" and that I should be careful in terms of what I wrote. "Ihna eandani awlad" ("We've got kids") or "Shaklina han khush al-sign" ("Looks like we're going to jail") were often repeated and always produced a great deal of laughter on everyone's part.

On several occasions, particularly at the beginning, certain people were hesitant to speak openly in my presence. Once, while in the cafeteria with a group of young, white-collar employees, conversation turned to a recent scandal in which an administrator was caught embezzling money and was transferred to another department. While the events were being described, an older woman turned to her younger colleague narrating the story and said, "Limi nafsik" ("Watch your words" or "Take care"), since, I assume, I was sitting at their table.

I cannot forget feeling outraged that the older, female employee whom I saw in the cafeteria almost every day, exchanging polite greetings, would feel this way about me. I, after all, had absolutely no relationship to the administration and would never inform on anyone in any circumstance. I considered confronting her the next day but stopped myself, thinking that this might only make the situation more unpleasant. Moreover, although I would never have informed on anyone, she did not know exactly who I was or what I was doing. If you add to this the almost complete lack of trust between top management and employees (both workers and white-collar staff) and the fact that she was in the firm for life whereas I would be there for less than a year, her reaction becomes quite understandable.

On another occasion, I approached two workers, only one of whom I knew well, who happened to be discussing privatization and how this might affect them. The person I didn't know suddenly became silent as I got close and only resumed speaking when the other worker (the one I knew) said, "Huwwa maeana" ("He's with us"). Similar incidents also took place during my interactions with higher-level administration and engineers. Several days after a mechanic on my shop floor showed me what he considered to be substandard work produced by the company's machine shop, explaining how this negatively affected production, I heard that someone had recounted the incident to a worried engineer in charge of the machine shop.

Fear and distrust were the cost of admission ("entrée") to my research site, a cost I had no choice but to pay. But it was through my interactions and as a result of my perceived relationship to the administration that I witnessed workers' distrust of the company. These interactions also revealed that fear and distrust were not the monopoly of workers or lower-level white-collar employees, but extended to higher level employees and engineers as well.

CLASS

My status as a researcher, presence in the factory (and what this entailed), and class background are intimately related and only analytically distinct in terms of how they affected my research experience. From the very beginning there was tension, struggle, and negotiation concerning my identity in the factory. Many people, mostly "respectable" upper- and middle-class types, both inside and outside the company, had a difficult time understanding or accepting what I was doing or why I was doing it. They were amused and fascinated by my accounts of life on the shop floor and my knowledge of the working-class masses. Even top-level company administration did not, at first, understand what I was up to. In fact, before being allowed to undertake research, I was interviewed, the purpose of which was not to understand my research project or the effect I would have on production. Neither was the interview intended to determine whether I was potentially a security risk. It was, as I was told directly, so they could try to understand why someone who was ibn naas (the son of respectable people) wanted to work in a factory *as a worker*—even if it was research.[20]

In a very significant way, the reactions of high-level company administrators and upper- and middle-class Egyptians paralleled those of workers on the shop floor. To all concerned, my presence in the factory as a "worker" toiling away on a machine was disruptive, in a fundamental sense, of their understanding of the way the Egyptian class system worked. The idea that an upper-class doktor who was ibn naas would actually work, eat, joke, and socialize with shop floor workers was bizarre. The idea that I would become friends with many workers, show them respect, and get to know them as human beings, even as a consequence of research, defied their expectations, as it went directly against what everyone knew and took for granted about the Egyptian class system and the way it functioned.

In fact, I believe that this is one reason why more research of an ethnographic sort has not been done in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East by local academics. When most Egyptian academics and intellectuals study workers (or peasants), it is usually through interviews, questionnaires, or surveys. For academics also occupy a particular position in the rigid Egyptian system of social hierarchy. The idea that after achieving the status and social distinction that comes with a higher degree, they would willingly—even for research—work in a factory on a machine or as an agricultural laborer (for a significant period of time) is almost unimaginable.

The tension and conflict my presence caused extended to the reactions I received from the middle-class white-collar administrators and engineers I interacted with daily. After the research was approved, I was sent to a senior engineer who was made responsible for me from that time onward. After hearing what I intended to do, his reaction was no different from what I described above. Without my having asked for his advice, he immediately suggested, with great seriousness and conviction, that I simply change my research method. During our next meeting he proposed that I work in the quality control department as a supervisor (*muraqib*) instead of working on a machine as a production worker. This way, he explained, I would have all the daily interaction with workers I wanted, but would not have to work or be with "them" constantly. As a supervisor, he explained, I wouldn't get my hands dirty or be exposed to the constant noise of the shop floor.

He thought he was doing me a favor, helping me out. I cannot describe how I felt at that moment. After I had spent months thinking about the project, reading the academic literature on the subject, writing a research proposal for my department, getting it approved, applying for grants, and finally making it through the ridiculously inept and ossified Egyptian bureaucracy (not to mention the paranoid and hypersensitive security apparatuses), this man was telling me, after meeting me for less than five minutes, to change my research method! It was, in one sense, quite absurd.

Because I was processed in the company bureaucracy as a "new worker," all of my paper work went through the training department (*qism al-tadreeb*). Naturally, I got to know the secretaries and director quite well. My first weeks, I spent many hours in the department completing forms, filing papers, and asking questions. The staff proved to be just as interested in me as I was in my new research setting. When it came time for my company identification card to be issued and my working hours to be finalized, the training department staff tried, quite hard, to persuade me to keep management and not factory hours. Management, including all bureaucrats, administrators, and most, although not all, engineers, arrived at work at 8:00 A.M. each morning and left at 2:00 P.M. Workers, by contrast, arrived earlier, at 7:00 A.M., and left later, at 3:00 P.M. For no logical reason other than their feeling that I should come and go with the rest of the administration and white-collar staff, they tried to convince me to keep their hours and not "the difficult factory hours." "Why come and go with the workers?" one of the secretaries asked. "You should come and go with us." What I experienced in the training department was a struggle over who I would identify with (the administration or the workers)—a struggle over my allegiance and identity.[21]

Aside from the difficulties I encountered simply trying to work once I reached the shop floor, the reactions of both workers and supervisors to my presence, and the issue of how I was to be addressed by my workmates, the moment that caused the most upheaval for administrators, engineers, and white-collar staff occurred when I casually mentioned to my young friends in the administration, on a very hot and humid Egyptian summer day, that I was thinking about bringing sandals to work and wearing them on the shop floor—like most workers in the factory. After all, sandals made much sense with the temperature outside over 100 degrees and the humidity unbearable.

The reaction I received was quite fascinating. Each and every one of them was shocked that I could even consider doing such a thing. I had reached, it seemed, the absolute limits of what I could and could not do, and wearing plastic sandals like the other workers was definitely out of the question and impermissible. I was *told*, in no uncertain terms, that it would not be appropriate. Sandals, it turned out, are one of the most important signifiers of one's status in the factory. They are a sign that says unmistakably, "I am a worker," and for me to even propose wearing anything other than shoes shook the entire semiotic system of class in the company.[22]

GENDER

One of the goals of the research was to explore working-class culture outside the factory, away from production, in the realms of consumption and reproduction. Being an unmarried man, however, was one of the primary reasons I was unable to access the working-class home. Although I socialized with many of my workmates, some of whom became genuine friends, this never occurred in their dwellings. Although a week would not pass without someone on my shop floor inviting me to have lunch at his home, for reasons one can barely describe in words, I felt these were formal invitations and not genuine ones. These were the types of invitations one is supposed to politely turn down. Although I was able to enter the homes of young, middle-class, white-collar

employees, the presence of their wives and/or unmarried girls and the general gender ideology were some of the reasons why I never managed to make it into working-class homes. Cost and convenience were other reasons. Inviting someone into one's home, especially in Egypt, requires a suitable home and suitable things to offer. Embarrassment regarding workers' apartments and living conditions more generally could have been other reasons why I was not invited into workers' homes. If you live in an old, sixty-square-meter apartment in a poor district of town with your wife, nine kids, and your unmarried sister, as Darwish, my closest friend in the factory, did, there is hardly space for yourself, let alone guests.[23] We did our socializing in public places—coffee shops, downtown, the occasional outdoor wedding, and Alexandria's *corniche* (the wide coastal road).

Similarly, being male limited my access to and shaped my interaction with women workers and employees. Many factory shop floors are segregated by sex, and I worked on a floor where there were no women workers. But just as my identity closed certain doors, it opened others. Being male provided access to discourses on women, sex, manliness, and gender relations more generally. I was often told stories, and overheard others, that depicted women, and particularly wives, as only suitable for housework, constantly stirring up trouble, and having limited mental capacities compared to men (*naqsan aqlan wa dinan*—"lacking in reason and religion")[24]—qualities, incidentally, that were said to be found in all women. In short, although being male constrained my access to and interaction with women in their roles as employees and wives, it also exposed me to sexism and an ideology of patriarchy, subjects I might otherwise not have encountered.

RELIGION

Like my being male, my identity on the shop floor as a Muslim was not something I actively sought or cultivated. I was cajoled into praying with a shift supervisor and a workmate my second week on the shop floor. Although this was the only time I ever prayed at work, from that moment onward my status as a Muslim was defined for me.[25] Being Muslim exposed me to discourses on religion and politics and was, without any intention on my part, a source of bonding and membership between me and others in the factory, both workers and non-workers. Just as membership has its privileges, however, it also has disadvantages. As well as engendering solidarity, warmth, trust, and unlimited conversation about things religious, membership was also troubling, as it exposed me to what I found to be offensive discourses about *other* people, specifically, Egyptian Copts and Coptic Christianity. In other words, bigotry turned out to be the ugly side of identity, the seemingly inevitable result of the differentiation of oneself from the *other*.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of religion, and more specifically my religion, during fieldwork. Some workers went to great lengths to determine my faith. At my second research site, on my second day on the job, Gamal, a pulling machine operator whose machine was adjacent to mine, started chatting. Barely a minute had passed before his conversation quickly turned into a series of poorly disguised questions. It was clear. Gamal was trying to figure out whether I was Christian or Muslim.

The previous day the shift supervisor had introduced me by my first name. Gamal soon asked about my last name. His was more than a simple question, however. He was doing something quite common in Egypt: trying to make out my religion from my name. Some names clearly indicate one's religion. Someone named Mohamed, Ahmed, Ali or Mustapha, for example, is obviously Muslim, while someone named Boutros, Gerges, George or Michael, for example, is clearly Christian.

Unfortunately for Gamal, some names have no religious meaning or connotation (such as Gamal or Samer for instance) and therefore reveal nothing about their bearer's religion. After being unable to determine anything from my family name, he inquired, undeterred, about my father's name. My full name, however, also reveals nothing about my religion.[26] Thus, poor Gamal was particularly unlucky. After asking about both my last name and my father's name, he was no closer to his goal than when he began.

A different approach was needed and Gamal proceeded without hesitation. Once again, he attempted to conceal his questions, quite unsuccessfully, as stemming from a general interest in the United States and life there. Gamal asked which day of the week "we" (or I) prayed on in the United States. At this point I became genuinely annoyed at his persistent questioning and insistence on determining my religion, something, I believed, that was neither relevant nor any of his business. Without deliberately attempting to confuse him, I answered the question as accurately as possible. I told him that unlike in Egypt, Friday is a workday in the United States and that although Friday prayers exist, they are not well attended. Sunday, I proclaimed, is when the largest communal prayers take place. This confused him no end and he asked me to explain further. For as far as Gamal was concerned, things were quite simple. Muslims prayed on Friday and Christians prayed on Sunday. The idea that Muslims abroad could pray together on Sunday, because of a different work schedule, was not a possibility as far as he was concerned. He soon left, more confused and unsure of my religion than when he first began.

Immediately afterward, Ayman, another worker in the department and Gamal's close friend, came over and set the record straight. He stated, politely but nevertheless quite bluntly, that Gamal had been trying to determine my religion and my answers had only confused him. I told Ayman I was Muslim, and in less than twenty minutes, it seemed as if the entire shop floor, or at least the Muslims, had been informed of the "good news." At the end of the workday a group of workers gathered by my machine to celebrate the fact that I was Muslim, to welcome me into the club. They spoke generally about religion, praising Islam and comparing it to other religions, and advised me to beware of a certain Christian coworker who was known to cause trouble. One of the men gathered recounted a story about a conflict that had occurred between this particular Christian worker and a *sheikh** who also worked in the hall. From that moment on, it seemed I had won the lottery in terms of friends: friends who wanted to talk, socialize, and ask and be asked questions.

My Christian workmates also tried to determine my religion. After hearing my three-part name and learning that I was living in the United States, one Coptic coworker assumed that I was Christian. This led to a series of comments about the way former President Sadat was greeted when he traveled to Washington, D.C., to visit President Carter. The reference, which seemed out of place and cryptic at the time, concerns a well-known story about Coptic Egyptian-Americans protesting outside the White House during one of Sadat's visits to the United States. They were protesting the condition of Copts in Egypt, the restrictions on building and refurbishing churches, and the generally tense relations between Copts and Muslims at the time. The incident passed into the popular treasure chest of folklore and knowledge about Egyptian politics, and this particular worker was trying to bond with me by recounting it.

Not everyone on the shop floor was bigoted or hateful toward workers who did not share their religion. Unfortunately, it seems that all ethnic, national, and religious groups (and maybe all groups for that matter) have tales they tell about "the other." As Edward Said (1978) so power-

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*In the factory, *sheikh* was a religious title of distinction. "Sheikh" literally means an older man in Arabic, but here, and more commonly, it refers to a religiously learned individual.

fully described in *Orientalism*, racist tales were standard fare in the history of "European scholarship" about the "East" and continued in the form of imperialism and foreign policy. If my religious identity had been different, I would have heard similar things said about "the other," whoever "the other" happened to be. And since the purpose of this essay is not to vilify any particular religion, idea system, or group, it is important to state this explicitly in the hope that exposing bigoted views and ideology does not, in turn, reproduce other racist and bigoted views.

REGIONAL BACKGROUND

Being from the same city as some of my workmates was not only a source of bonding; it was also one of the ways I gained the trust of coworkers. Many asked where exactly in the city my family had lived before we emigrated. Sharing this information and recounting the particular urban geography of my origin made me somehow less different and more familiar. Thus, where I was from turned out to be an unexpected source of identity and solidarity.[27] My identity was made less abstract. As with religion and gender, my regional background established a similarity between myself and others based on our common difference from workers from other parts of Egypt. But even for those who were originally from other parts of the country, either Upper Egypt or the Delta, knowing where I was from, I sensed, was reassuring as they now could associate me with a particular place, a place, it turned out, many of them knew firsthand. My familiarity with the city provided another common experience—a concrete experience—that we could share and that made me more familiar.

Regional identity, I determined, remained a distinctive sociogeographic marker for many in the factory, differentiating workers from urban areas from those originally from the rural provinces. And among workers originally from rural areas, regional identity functioned as a source of solidarity and bonding based on the particular province of origin.

Although regional identity was a distinctive sociogeographic marker, it was less divisive than religion, which, as recounted above, sometimes produced troubling, even bigoted, conduct. Regional differences were important but were taken much less seriously than religious differences, as indicated by the fact that we could joke about regional differences in a way that would never occur with religion. The fact that people were from many different parts of Egypt also meant that the divide was not binary, unlike the religious divide between Muslims and Christians.

CONCLUSION: PRACTICAL KNOWLEDGE AND
THEORETICAL INSIGHT

My multiple identities produced a variety of reactions in the field. My gender, religion, and regional background produced both common membership and solidarity (*inclusion*) as well as *exclusion* from certain groups and interactions. My relationship to the company administration produced *fear* and *distrust*. My identity as an Egyptian-American provoked *curiosity* and *interest*. My social position and class background produced, at least outwardly, *deference*. As a formally educated social scientist studying the working class, I elicited reactions of *bewilderment*, *confusion,* and *respect*.

Reflecting critically on identity in relation to my fieldwork—and more specifically, how I was perceived and what "the natives" thought of me—shaped my understanding of both identity and class, specifically, class identity and structure. In the most general terms, I learned that identity is never singular; like culture, it is forever in the plural. Fieldwork made me acutely aware of the complexities of both my identity *and* the identities of the people I was studying. For just as I am

male, Muslim, Egyptian-American, a researcher with a certain class background, from a particular region in the country, and so on, they too had multiple and overlapping identities. They were Christians and Muslims of varying degrees of religiosity; workers, administrators, and engineers, with differing levels of education and skill; male and female; young and old; from different geographic regions within Egypt; and so forth. At different times and in various contexts, each of these characteristics, as well as others, proved important.

To say that identity is not singular, permanently fixed, or static, however, is not to say that it is completely up for grabs, constructed out of thin air, as some would have us believe, dependent only on what I choose to consume today, for example. I came to my fieldwork with certain, relatively specific features and characteristics, which themselves were partially of my own making and which I then chose to, in part, emphasize or de-emphasize. The individuals with whom I came into contact then gave me other characteristics and markers. They proceeded to interpret and then react to my identity for themselves. All of this, of course, took place within specific contexts and particular situations.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of *context* for identity. Context, as the philosophers of language (e.g., Saussure 1996), have taught us, is, in large part, where meaning comes from. This is certainly the case for language as well as other symbolic systems of meaning. Context is so important and so obvious, in fact, that it often appears invisible. It is the background against which all social action takes place. Although I participated in the shaping of my identity, through my actions and practices (my "presentation of self," in Erving Goffman's [1959] sense), my identity was more the outcome of negotiation between myself and others in particular contexts and specific situations than the result of conscious manipulation on my part. Thus, identities are neither completely given nor completely constructed, neither fixed and unchanging nor arbitrary and up for grabs. Identities are *negotiated*: negotiated within limits—limits that themselves are socially produced, contingent structures (e.g., gender and class), and these structures in turn are themselves the outcomes of human agency.

My most important insights on class identity and structure were products of those aspects of my identity that were most disruptive. Anthropologists have often claimed that one of the primary ways they learn about other cultures and societies is by *unknowingly* breaking social rules and unspoken conventions. By violating implicit and unacknowledged codes, anthropologists make these codes explicit.[28] My presence on the shop floor as "a worker" did precisely this: It broke the rules and conventions governing social class in Egyptian society. It was thoroughly disruptive of everyone's understanding of the Egyptian class system and the way it functioned, from the production workers to the chief executive officer, as well as those outside the factory gates. As a result, there was a significant amount of tension, struggle, and negotiation about who I was, what social role I would occupy, and with whom I would identify (the workers or the administration). For some people in the company this was genuinely threatening, as their very definition of self is predicated on their daily differentiation from others. Thus, my entry into the social world of the factory and my partial disruption of its operating principles was one of the primary ways I explored and experienced the phenomenon of social class in Egypt.

It was in part through my interactions—and how people reacted to me and my identities—that I learned about the extent of hierarchy (e.g., where I sat on the bus) and the meaning of social class in the factory (e.g., the significance of wearing plastic sandals). Although I did not experience class as a worker at a very deep level—what it means to struggle simply to survive and provide for one's children in a world of unbelievable scarcity and subsistence wages, where everyone works two jobs and when illness or an unforeseen expense can ruin one financially (and otherwise)—this was not the intention of the fieldwork. I did not and could never have become an

Egyptian worker in the way that a few early anthropologists mistakenly thought they could understand the natives by *becoming* native. My not fitting easily into already established categories and my unwillingness to play by the rules of the game made these categories, and the class structure of which they are a part, more apparent.

Class and class structure, after all, are not simply about "one's relationship to the means of production," in Karl Marx's words, where one fits into the division of labor, or a set of quantitative data about income and education—languages that are unfortunately often used but are essentially misleading. Class structure is also not simply the occupational geography of a place. Nor is it about the different positions people occupy within a division of labor. Following Anthony Giddens (1979), I take structures to be both constituted through and the outcome of human agency. Conceptualized as such, class structure should no longer be understood as a fixed, definite, rigid set of primarily "economic" relations (i.e., division of labor, level of technology, etc.) independent of the individuals who make up these relations and radically separate from human action. Rather, like all structures, the class structure of society has a virtual nonexistence in time and place: Because structures (in the realm of human action) are produced and reproduced through the practices and ideas of individuals, they have an ephemeral/fleeting quality to them. This is what renders class structure virtually nonexistent; it is not a "thing" (especially as compared with the more commonsense understanding of "structures" as buildings, which are solid, concrete, unmovable, and so on).

Moreover, agency necessarily includes within it the ideas agents give to their actions. It is in this sense that the actions and idea systems (implicit and explicit understandings, dispositions, habits, taken-for-granted knowledge, "common sense" in Gramsci's [1992] usage, and so on) that individuals in a given society practice and hold—and that refer to social class—make up an important part of a society's class structure. It is precisely through these practices and idea systems that the class structure is, in part, reproduced. Thus, the ideas and practices concerning class that I encountered in the factory are one very important part of the class structure of Egyptian society. My very experiences enacted what it was that I had come to study.

How would my understanding of the Egyptian class structure be different if my identity had been different? Obviously, I can only speculate about this. I probably would still have noticed that seating on the bus reflected patterns of social hierarchy within the company and society, for example. Through observation and questioning, I could have come to understand the basis on which certain people sit in particular seats. Implicit, unstated, almost instinctive understandings of social class, hierarchy, appropriate and inappropriate behavior, and the ideology relating to this (who wears plastic sandals and the struggle over my identity), however, might not have been as easily encountered and explored. Unlike which bus you get on or where you sit, the attitudes, expectations, dispositions, "commonsense" understandings, and implicit knowledge involving social class—the habitus (Bourdieu 1977, esp. chapter 2) of class, as it were—cannot be directly observed. But it is the class habitus that structures social practice and produces the seating assignment.

It was this that my various interactions made visible to me. Even if my identity did not affect my research in the most radical way—that is, did not directly determine my findings—it was partially through my identity, how I was perceived, and the attempt to incorporate me, somewhat clumsily, into systems of hierarchy, power, and prestige, that I came to understand the social world of the factory. For instance, the system of seating on the bus was not a result of my presence. It existed independently of me. But it was through my presence—and more particularly, the way this system attempted to incorporate me—that I learned about the seating system and what was behind it. My "findings"—my understanding of class, religion, power, hierarchy, and so on—were articulated through my identity and fieldwork encounter.[29]

Finally, through my fieldwork and my reflections on the productive nature of identity in the field, I have come to believe that the strengths of ethnography are underestimated at best and misunderstood at worst. Ethnography is best suited to exploring things that cannot be observed directly because they do not have a physical presence in the world, and yet these "things" shape it in very real ways: the implicit assumptions, operating principles, relations among concepts, and categories of thought and understanding that people take for granted and do not make explicit— in short, the "structuring structures" (Bourdieu 1977) of daily life. Other methods of research either cannot accomplish such analysis or accomplish it less well. Ethnography is, after all, the most empirical of methods, the most concrete—dependent upon actual observation, with the researcher physically present, taking nothing for granted, using less mediated knowledge than other methods. It is ironic that it is considered the most "subjective," where that term is commonly used to deny its empirical grounding. And despite being the most concrete, ethnography is best suited to explore what cannot be seen (or easily measured or counted): culture (meaning, ideas, categories, concepts, narratives, discourse, and so forth). And I mean here "thick culture," not the "thin culture" of values, attitudes, and opinions that much survey research measures.

Reflexivity further strengthens ethnography. Ethnographers need to scrutinize and analyze their interactions with "the natives" for what these interactions—additional "data points" if you will—can reveal about the "natives" and their social world. Through my "subjective experience," I learned about other people's worlds. I found these interactions incredibly revealing and informative; they generated the knowledge I claim to have about my research questions. They left me not just with a set of specific personal experiences but also with knowledge beyond my interactions with workers—knowledge about their social world, priorities, values, understandings, and so on.

Recognizing ethnographer-"native" interactions as significant turns some of the traditional thinking about participant-observation and ethnography on its head. For example, one often hears the charge that the presence of a researcher/outside observer itself somehow changes, alters, distorts, or corrupts the research environment. And although one response to this charge is that this is true of all research, this "problem" is particularly acute and unavoidable with ethnography because the presence of the researcher is often obvious and obtrusive, and it changes the very character of the social dynamics. But the opposite is also true—those moments when you are not in the background (observing) but instead are at the center of the action can also be informative (e.g., unintentionally breaking conventions and learning about the social world of the factory in the process). Rather than bemoaning the idea that the ethnographer's presence somehow "corrupts" or "distorts" the research environment (language that invokes a natural science model, even an experimental model positing a sterile environment), I argue that ethnographers can, and should, reflect on and learn from their "personal, subjective" interactions and encounters with the people they are studying because of what these interactions say about "the natives" and their values, ideas, and social world.

This is what I mean by these interactions being additional "data points" (in the language of positivist social science). Rather than being a drawback, the presence of the ethnographer is a way to actively produce knowledge: He or she both participates and observes that participation itself, and learns from it. This is quite different from the older idea that participation was primarily a means to an end, the end being observation; it was believed that by being in "the field" for months and eventually melting into the background of social life, the ethnographer could come to accurately observe the social setting being investigated (without "contaminating" it through one's temporary, short term, disruptive presence). Participation was instrumental—to gain people's trust so that they let you observe them in their "natural" condition. What I have demonstrated, I

hope, is that one should also observe the participation—the interaction itself—and see how people react to you, and that this can also be revealing about their social world, values, and so on.

It was a classic ethnographer, Malinowski, who argued that ethnography's "peculiar character is the production of ostensibly 'scientific' and 'objective' knowledge based on personal interaction and 'subjective' experience" (quoted in Stocking 1992, 51). For some, this has been, and continues to be, quite troubling. Rather than being a cause for concern, a potential problem, or a danger, however, I believe this is ethnography's fundamental strength. The problem lies not with ethnography but with the dominant paradigm of knowledge and the conceptualization of the human sciences. By accepting the natural sciences as *the* model for the human sciences, and more specifically the idea of the strict separation of the "personal" and "subjective" from the "objective," ethnography as method appears inherently problematic—at least as "science." The complete separation of subject and object, researcher and object of research, however, is illusory and particularly inappropriate for the human sciences (Reed-Danahy 1997). Thus, the problem is not with ethnography or anthropology but with the natural science model and its relevance for the human sciences.[30] The ethnographer, after all, is not an objective machine but a positioned subject, never outside the field of research and always radically implicated in the production of knowledge. All researchers are implicated in the knowledge they produce. In ethnography, however, this becomes particularly difficult to disguise, in light of the central role of the ethnographic self in the production of claims to knowledge.

NOTES

1. See Bayard de Volo and Schatz (2004). The fact that Bayard de Volo and Schatz need to write an article arguing for the potential utility of ethnography as a method for students of politics, something that should be quite obvious, reflects the current state of the discipline, dominated as it is by quantitative methods, formal modeling, and other non-fieldwork, non-qualitative approaches to the study of politics. Moreover, the authors temper their enthusiasm for ethnography as method with statements such as, "[E]thnography has shortcomings, but if used judiciously, its contribution is noteworthy" (2004, 267). Although their hearts are in the right place, the authors display an incredible defensiveness about ethnography, as if somehow it is inherently problematic in a way that other research methods are not. Bayard de Volo and Schatz do not address the more complex issues about the role of the ethnographer in the production of knowledge discussed in this essay.

2. Some have called these "author-evacuated texts." See Okely and Callaway (1992).

3. For an excellent analysis of the arrival trope see Pratt (1986).

4. In fact, Geertz claims that epistemological questions about "the problematics of field work" (and the status of ethnographic knowledge) have actually obscured the real question. He expresses the problem this way: "The difficulty is that the oddity of constructing texts ostensibly scientific out of experiences broadly biographical, which is after all what ethnographers do, is thoroughly obscured" (1988, 10). For Geertz, this is a "narratological issue," not an "epistemological one."

5. See Judith Okely's prescient "The Self and Scientism" (1975). See also Okely (1992) and Hastrup (1992, esp. page 119).

6. See Okely (1992, 14) and Caplan (1988, 15).

7. For an interesting analysis of the place of "the field" in anthropology, see Gupta and Ferguson (1997).

8. Some of those I worked with most closely occasionally asked even more personal and, at times, embarrassing questions, which would be considered completely off limits in other social contexts and possibly other class contexts.

9. In some ways, my loyalty to Egypt was at stake in my answers. It also seemed that people wanted contradictory, or at least complicated, answers to the first question. "Of course, Egypt is better than anywhere else including the United States. It is, after all, where we are from!" At the same time, however, one can only deceive oneself so far, and if I did not begin with complaints and criticism about the political, economic, and social problems in the country, they did. Although most people were fierce and unthinking nationalists, they were also filled with unending criticism of the state of affairs in the country.

10. After Fathy asked about milk consumption in the United States, he said, "I would be lying to you if I told you my kids drink milk every day."

11. This phrase, *min al-dar ila al-nar* ("from home to hell"), rhymes in Arabic.

12. Interestingly enough, this sentence was first uttered by Mohamed Abdou while characterizing the differences between Europe and the Middle East. Abdou (1849–1905) was one of the leading Egyptian thinkers of the nineteenth century. Exiled for three years, he traveled to Paris and London, eventually returning to become the Mufti of Egypt in 1899. These workers, however, did not know the origin of the phrase.

13. When engineers did arrive to scrutinize the machines or production, they never acknowledged the workers on the shop floor.

14. Few spoke while riding the bus to work. Although some conversed during the ride home (in the afternoon), they were a minority. This made the outburst, noise, and confusion even more worrying—and puzzling.

15. I later noticed that the buses used for shift workers were in significantly worse condition than the other two types of buses. The buses reserved for top management also had higher, more comfortable seat backs. Except for the nice buses reserved for senior employees, seats were similar to those found on school buses in the United States: not individual seats separated from one another, but padded benches with back rests. Thus, not only was hierarchy reflected in which bus you rode (and with whom), but it was also reflected in the quality of the buses, the comfort of the seats, and where specifically you sat inside the bus.

16. At the firm I worked at the longest, my company issued me an identification card that stated, quite unnecessarily, that I had received a master's degree and listed my field of specialization.

17. Not to mention the fact that I had not finished my Ph.D.

18. In one case, a young female engineer was assigned to work in a lab in which the director, although older and more senior, did not have an engineering degree. It was frequently said, including by the young engineer herself, that the lab director resented the fact that one of her employees was referred to by the prestigious title of *bash muhandisa* (engineer), which she herself, not being an engineer, did not receive. A minor dispute resulted between the two women because of this issue.

19. Both *Bek* and *Basha* were official titles of status conferred on distinguished members of Egyptian society (usually large landowners) by the monarchy before the 1952 revolution. Beks and Bashas were two different degrees of lordship, and both titles are used colloquially today in an informal manner.

20. *Ibn naas* literally means "the son of people," referring to not just any people but people of character, standing, and respectability. The meaning seems to have evolved over the last few decades. At first, ibn naas primarily referred to respectability and morals. Today, however, wealth and economic status seem to be just as essential for qualification for this category. In the context of the interview, ibn naas referred to my similarities with the interviewers: sharing the same class background, mixing in similar social circles, membership in the same sporting clubs, and so on.

21. The possibility of management's wanting to keep an eye on me as the reason for the training department staff's reacting this way to my work hours is highly unlikely. First, it was the secretarial core that primarily reacted, not the security people. Second, I am certain management did keep an eye on me, but they did not need to be physically present to do so. Finally, I got my way in the end and showed up at 7:00 every morning and left at 3:00 every afternoon.

22. Another reason wearing sandals entered my mind is that I noticed that the director of the training department kept a pair of quite nice leather sandals under his desk, which he would wear on his way to the administration bathroom to wash before praying. He was ridiculed behind his back by the young administrators for doing so. It was simply not right that a director ("of all people") should wear sandals at work, whatever the reason.

23. Darwish was usually the first one on the shop floor each morning, arriving well before the beginning of the shift. This was somewhat unusual as many tried their hardest to arrive at the very last minute. Darwish was also in no rush to leave when the bell rang. This could have been because his apartment was simply too small and uncomfortable for him and his family.

24. It is popularly believed that this is a quotation from the Qur'an. When it is repeated, it is done so as such. To the best of my knowledge, however, it is not.

25. Although I have no proof, I am certain that the news that I prayed was conveyed to other workers who worked different shifts with me on the same shop floor.

26. Egyptians (and the Egyptian state) often speak of *ism al-thulathy*, one's three-part name (first name, father's first name, and last name).

27. Egypt, like much of the Third World, has experienced mind-boggling rural-urban migration in the decades since World War II. Many of those I worked with had migrated to the city where the factory was located. I, quite literally, witnessed both rural-urban migration and a related process, proletarianization—the transition from agricultural to factory labor.

28. See, for example, Stocking's (1992, 36–40) account of William Rivers's "General Account of Method."

29. The term "findings" often suggests a positivist model of the human sciences in which knowledge is assumed to be "out there," existing already, independent of us, pre-research and pre-theory, waiting to be "discovered"—very much like Columbus "discovered"—or shall I say found—America. This is in contrast to a model of the human sciences based on the idea that knowledge is produced.

30. Whether this model is even appropriate for the natural sciences is a legitimate, although thoroughly different, question. As such, it cannot be addressed here.