Constructing the Achievement State: Cultural Administration in Postrevolutionary Egypt

Transcript

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My name's Walter Harmbrust.

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I'm a fellow of the Middle East Center, in case some of you don't already know me.

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And it is my pleasure to introduce tonight's speaker, which is Shahab Al-Khashab.

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He is an anthropologist.

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Initially, he did his PhD at Oxford.

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He was initially supervised by Paul Grash, and then I had the privilege of becoming Shahab's supervisor after Paul retired, and Shahab was the best.

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student ever to supervise because basically I learned a lot of stuff from him.

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I don't know if he learned anything from me.

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After he finished his DPhil, he had a JRF at Christchurch College and then he had a British Academy postdoc at Cambridge and then he was hired here at Oxford, I think that was in 2021, is that right?

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That's correct.

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As an associate professor in visual anthropology.

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Jihad works on Egyptian cinema, popular culture, humor,

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technology and bureaucracy.

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He published a book called Making Film in Egypt, 2021.

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That was based on his dissertation.

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And then another book called El Fahama in 2022.

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And I want to say a little bit about the Fahama book.

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I unfortunately couldn't find my copy of it.

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I moved about a year ago and I still have boxes of books which I haven't opened, but I did print out a copy of the cover, which I can pass around if you want to see it.

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It was published in Egypt, in Arabic, so many of you won't be familiar with it, and possibly you won't be able to read it.

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She had started writing the text for this book as a series of articles in an online newspaper called Al-Tahrir, which was founded initially as a hard copy paper after the Egyptian Revolution in 2011.

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If memory serves, he was already calling this column of Tahama then.

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Is that right?

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And he told me at one point that someone warned him that the government was starting to become suspicious that his column, Eftahir, is basically a pro-revolution paper, as you might guess from the title.

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So after the warning, he transferred his column to a blog, which he titled Boring Books, and that seems to have been enough to have averted the baleful gaze of authority.

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She had online articles weren't actually about politics in any direct sense,

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Alsahama and Kutubu Milla consisted of short articles explaining ideas, sometimes philosophical ideas, sometimes social science concepts, or just categories of academic writing.

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He wrote about anthropological terms like the self, person, ritual, habitus, and so forth, geographical terms like place and space, heterotopia, infrastructure, and so forth, much more.

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But the thing that made his columns amazing

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And then the book that collected a lot of his online writings that he published later was that he wrote on these topics in a clear and elegant Egyptian dialect.

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His book was basically an unprecedented phenomenon, and I gather it was warmly received in Egypt.

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The title comes from a multi-talented artist named Salah Jahim, who was particularly active in the Nasser era and who is a prominent figure in the book that Shahab is going to talk about today.

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Jahin wrote poetry, he drew cartoons from newspapers, wrote song lyrics, film scenarios, film dialogues.

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Jahin's fahamo, which you can more or less gloss as the understander, was more or less a worldview or a stance towards the world in which the complicated conceits of modern life were demystified and broken down into plain language.

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But sometimes Jahin sometimes illustrated a fahamo satirically

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as a kind of vice-like device which is attached to people's heads, making them understand stuff.

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That's what the cover of Shiham's it's on the cover of Shiham's Behelma book.

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Of course, he's here to talk about his latest book, Constructing the Achievement State: Cultural Administration in Post-Revolutionary Egypt, published by Cambridge University Press.

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Do we have copies?

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We have copies for sale if you have 20 pounds of cash, and I think you can also order a copy if you don't have cash.

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We can do that afterwards and perhaps you can sign copies if you wish.

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You will have seen an abstract of Shihab's talk on the Middle East Center website.

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The achievement state is both an ethnography of the state and an ethnography of Egyptian bureaucracy.

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Shihab argues that the achievement state is an ideological construct and not something that can be assessed through tangible work done by the government or by metrics.

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It's a brilliant work of historical ethnography, well contextualized against comparable post-colonial developmentalist states like Vietnam and Cuba, also the Soviet Union.

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A substantial portion of the book is based on publications of government ministries.

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Shihad calls them achievement books.

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He had a more colorful term for them when he was doing his research, but I won't reveal his secrets.

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You can ask him if you want to, maybe he'll tell him.

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These achievement books were meant mainly for consumption within bureaucracies, or in some cases were used more or less as propaganda for consumption by foreign embassies.

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I expect, in fact, I'm sure he will since he's brought a lot of his sources here with you, that he's going to tell us a bit about how he obtained his sources.

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He has a lot to say about archives and methodology.

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He published an article on this in Comparative Studies in Society and History.

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The title of the article is Notes on the Difficulty of Studying State Archives in Egypt.

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So he is definitely going to be talking about his sources, but if he weren't, we could come back to it during the Q&A.

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A book on bureaucracy may sound like a dry subject, but believe me, it's not.

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For me, this book is a roadmap to many vital aspects of Egyptian life in the second-half of the 20th century, and indeed in many ways still today.

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When I was reading it, I had a constant sensation of revisiting memories of dealing with various aspects of Egyptian bureaucracy, with the lives of people I've known over the past 40 years, and also numerous films and television shows and songs, some of which he discusses in the book.

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It seems to me that there are insights in this book that go well beyond Egypt.

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In many ways, the achievement state is transferable to other places.

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Of course, not necessarily directly, but a lot of what Shihab writes about in his book resonates quite broadly, at least it did for me.

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There's a fair amount of the achievement state here in the UK, for example, particularly in academia.

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One of the lines in the book which really hit me forcefully was this.

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Let me read it.

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The disconnect between the imperative to document achievements and the achievement's genuine impact, that is its impact beyond the bureaucratic core, is in this sense baked into the crust of contemporary bureaucracy and agents.

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That's on page 198 if you want to look it up.

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I think this disconnect between documentation and actual impact is also perhaps baked into the crust of the UK, or at least into UK academia.

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I read that passage and I suddenly had a flash of recognition, which Pascal will have as well.

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My God, I thought, he's not just talking about Egypt, he's talking about the REF.

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The REF, the Research Excellence Framework, is a British bureaucratic institution for measuring

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or attempting to measure achievements in academia.

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It's like putting the whole country through tenure review every seven years.

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I was a REF coordinator for area studies in the last REF.

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Now Pascal has that honor, which was in 2021.

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You absolutely could not come up with a better description of the REF than this line in Shihab's book describing a disconnect between the imperative to document and the actual impact of what is documented.

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The REF functions first through enumerating our academic REF outputs, academic achievements, which we call outputs, and then ranking them on a one to four scale.

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So a really good REF output gets four stars.

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The department of the person who wrote the output therefore gets more money from the government.

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After the exercise in enumerating academic achievements, the REF then compels us to make a case that some portion of our outputs have impact.

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outside academia or outside the bureaucratic core, as the line in the book says.

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Breath impact is supposed to be based on evidence, but like the achievements of Nasser era in Egypt, the impact of academic achievements in breath is substantially an ideological construct.

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And so putting on my old breath coordinator hat,

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I read The Achievement State and was left with absolute certainty that Shihab's book will be a four-star, double-weighted ref hat.

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But more importantly, taking off my ref hat outside the dubious hunt for achievement merits, Shihab's Achievement State also happens to be a genuinely fascinating book.

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And so let me turn it over to Shihab to talk about it.

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Thank you, Walter, for just very much too generous introduction.

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I don't know where to start now.

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I wanted to start, yes, maybe by thanking Eugene Rogan, who initially invited me to deliver this talk.

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He is not with us here tonight, but I think it's very fitting for me to be in conversation with Walter, and I think he's made it clear in his own introduction because unlike what he just said, his imprint on this book and on my whole academic career is undeniable.

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I think also more generally, this book is very much part of conversations that have happened, well, partly in this room, but in the Middle East Center and St.

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Anthony's over the years with the Center's fellows and students.

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So it's really a pleasure to be here to launch this book into the world.

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So let me just get straight into what the book is about.

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I wanted to show you

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first the full cover image of my book.

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So what you kind of see on the book's cover right now has been truncated because the series in which it was published in Cambridge has a particular style.

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But I think rather cleverly, the cover designer put the rest of the image on the thumbnail right here, which I thought was a nice touch by them.

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But so basically this image, the full image, I think captures to my mind the book's core argument in visual form.

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Though, I do find it a quite pleasant drawing.

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The image isn't from an edgy artistic publication, but from the 1967 Statistical Atlas of the United Arab Republic, which I have here.

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You can circulate around the table if you want to have a look.

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So to those who don't know, the UAR, or the United Arab Republic, was the name of the country created by the unification of Egypt and Syria in 1958.

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And although that union didn't last very long, it kind of crumbled in 1961.

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The UAR remained Egypt's official name until 1971, when it became the Arab Republic of Egypt on paper to this day.

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But so anyways, this statistical atlas was published by the Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics, or CAPMAS, in July of 1967.

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a few weeks after Egypt's crushing defeat against Israel in June 1967, what is known in Arabic as the Naxa.

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In the book, you won't see virtually any trace of the Naxa, even though it's very much of that moment, because really the book is meant to present to the wider Egyptian public how much the country has progressed in agricultural and industrial production, in imports and exports, in infrastructural reach, tourism revenue, education, cultural production, so all the areas in which the government actively

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intervened since the 1952 revolution.

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And this book is part of a wider genre of governmental publications, which is always simply called Facts and Figures in Arabic.

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And basically, this genre usually consists in kind of lengthy tables outlining pure quantitative information about, for example, industrial growth rates or the number of students in schools and universities or the number of tickets sold

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in theater halls and concerts in a given year and so on and so forth.

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But so what's distinctive about this 1967 statistical atlas is that in addition to these dry tables, every page is filled with highly refined drawings, such as this one.

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It's unclear exactly who drew them.

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To my mind, they're in the style of a well-known Egyptian painter called Hossein Dikar.

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But regardless, I mean, each drawing is basically about one or another area of the state's work, industry, agriculture, tourism, etc.

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And this particular drawing, which is a frontispiece on the book's preface, the preface was written by the head of the agency that published it, General Gamel Oscar.

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It's on page 5 for those who have the book in their hands.

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This particular drawing is a kind of holistic representation of

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all state achievements in all areas using a kind of recognizable Nasr era iconography.

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So on top, for example, you see a military plane that kind of represents the army and military industries.

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Then below, there's this pyramid, which represents tourism and antiquities.

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Then below, there's a minaret representing the importance of Islamic endowments to the state.

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Then next to it, you have a book.

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And if you can see right above the book, there's kind of a little painting palette almost, which represents sort of the role of public education and the arts.

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And then below it, you have like a train and a ship that show the role of transportation.

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Then there's agricultural and industrial equipment that show industrial development, all sorts of other details within that image, which illustrate one or another aspect of the state's work.

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And now this image as kind of the state as a sum of its achievements is, in my view, the visual instantiation of what state officials understood the state, quote unquote, to be after the 1952 revolution.

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It's the outcome of a specific ideology about the state's role in society and about the role of culture and media in crafting this state idea.

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In short,

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that the state is kind of a machine that achieves in a kind of rapid, progressive, cumulative, and self-referential way, I think a little bit like Walter outlined earlier.

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It's really a kind of inward-looking discourse for other bureaucrats, rather than a kind of outward-looking one.

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So Constructing the Achievement State, in short, is a historical and ethnographic study of official, cultural, and media institutions after the 23rd of July 1952 revolution, with a focus on the period of Gamer Abdel-Nossar's presidency between

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1954 and 1970, though the book in practice actually moves back and forth between the 1950s and the late 2010s, which is when I did my fieldwork.

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More specifically, the book examines two key institutions within the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, as it was known, which are the Information Administration, or , which became the State Information Service in 1967

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and the Mass Culture Institute, or which became now the general organization for cultural palaces in 1989.

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So a lot of the institutions that sort of emerged around that time in the 50s are still carrying on into the present, which allowed me to talk a little bit about some of the continuities that might exist and also some of the differences.

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We can talk about that later.

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But anyways, so the core argument basically is that these cultural and media institutions were successful

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in constituting A unified idea of, quote unquote, the state as an achievement machine after the 1952 revolution.

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And what I wanted to specify here is that this is not really the only way in which the state is imagined in Egypt.

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There's all sorts of kind of popular imaginaries of the state, which we can discuss a bit later.

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But my core argument is that this is the main way in which bureaucrats themselves conceive of the state apparatus in which they work, which is obviously much bigger than they are themselves or even the local administrations in which they work.

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And that includes, of course, those who work at the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, who work to kind of create a certain, what I call an estri de coeur, or like a certain professional solidarity among each other.

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And so what was important at the time was not necessarily how these purported achievements that the state was making impacted everyday Egyptian life.

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in some cases had very high impact, in some cases didn't have much of an impact.

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But in a sense, my book remains a bit neutral about that question of actual impact, because I think that ideologically the documentation and dissemination of so-called achievements for a domestic and international audience is mainly what the so-called state is for.

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And I can explain that a little bit later.

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And I also argue that in the context specifically of a kind of reshaping of an old monarchical state apparatus before the 1952 revolution into a sort of modern republican state led by the free officers, this sort of achievement logic became a qualitatively distinctive property of the post-revolutionary state.

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So there's also an argument here with some of the historiography about the era that is very continuous, right?

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It's saying something along the lines of, you know, the early Nasser years of just a continuity of what came before.

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I'm trying to say that this is true in some respects, but in other fundamental respects, there is a big qualitative shift that happens, particularly in how the state is conceived by the people that work in it.

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So this is the book in a nutshell.

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Today's talk will mainly be divided in three parts.

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First, I'll talk about the motivations behind writing this book, what inspired the basic idea behind my research.

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Then I'll talk about my methodology, and I talk a lot about the sources that I use, and I'll make them circulate in due course.

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And then I'll talk about the contents of the book very briefly.

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So let me start with the book's motivations.

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Basically, they're kind of three key motivations if I had to kind of pick them to highlight here.

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As Walter mentioned initially, my DPhil thesis was an ethnography of the contemporary Egyptian film industry based on long-term participant observation and semi-structured interviews among both creative and technical workers in Cairo between 2013 and 2015.

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This DPhil came out as a book with the American University in Cairo Press in 2021.

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which is this book here, making film in Egypt.

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But so what didn't come out in the book was a section of my DFIL where I described a core interface between the film industry and the state in Egypt, which is the permit seeking process.

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So basically, film productions in Egypt always have to seek permits from various state institutions in order to be able to shoot on the streets.

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And this particular section was published as a standalone article called State Control Over Film Production in Egypt, which is available in open access from

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the journal Arab Media and Society.

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But the basic idea is that any external shooting in Egypt is under constant threat of being shut down by mainly police, but also by citizens who can tell on you to the police.

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And in order to ward off these unwanted interruptions, you need to get permits mainly from the Ministry of Interior.

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But it involves a huge amount of stakeholders beyond this.

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And so a large portion of the daily work that production crews do in Cairo is actually to seek out these permits to the point where in a big enough production, you'll have a production crew specifically dedicated to just doing the paperwork for these permits, something that colloquially is called them or, you know, an intermediary who kind of finishes off the paperwork, as it were.

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But so this job was vital to ensure that film projects could continue uninterrupted and at a reasonable price, since permits cost all sorts of formal fees, but also informal fees, as you can imagine, et cetera, et cetera.

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So this experience of the permit seeking process made me ask a wider question about how the state intervenes in Egyptian people's lives through everyday bureaucratic routines.

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I started thinking, okay, so what's this entity called the state, quote unquote, which governs Egyptian lives?

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Like why is it that production workers were so concerned about getting the right permits all the time?

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And in that article that I showed earlier, I discussed some of the contradictions of how some bits of the state have different permits than other bits.

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And so sometimes you could be shooting with one permit, but it's not the right permit in some area and et cetera.

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So I got really interested in that question of these kind of

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differences among state institutions, basically, in how they govern things.

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But equally, the question of why is it that even though these differences exist, then everyone still commits to the idea that there's this thing called the state that's singular and everyone kind of recognizes, as my colleague Nainika Matura would say, has a kind of state-y quality in India.

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And so, well, the other question I was asking is also, when did this idea of the state emerge initially in its current image?

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And so these questions made me return to some fundamental questions concerning the nature of the state in political anthropology.

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Of course, these questions are shared by political sociology and some branches of political sciences, especially in the Middle East.

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I won't get into the theoretical weeds right now.

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It's all in the book.

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If you wanted to talk about this in Q&A, I'm very happy to talk about this.

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But basically, this book very much follows in the footsteps of scholars such as Philip Abrams,

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Timothy Mitchell and Yael Navarro in its inquiry into kind of the relationship between everyday bureaucratic action and the state idea as an ideological whole.

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And so in very short terms, I was interested in learning how a specific idea of the state emerges at the hands of state officials themselves.

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That was part of my initial kind of very theoretical motivation.

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So that's one set of motivations.

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The second main motivation behind writing this book was, to be very, very brief, the experience of the Johnny 25th revolution in 2011, with all its consequences and its influence on my thinking and my queries about this entity called the state, quote unquote.

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So of course there's a well-known sequence of events for the specialists, we won't get into the weeds now, from sort of the 18 days of the revolution in 2011 all the way to the installment of

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the current military dictatorship after a military coup in 2013 and then the election of President Xis in 2014.

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But this sequence of events made me wonder how much, quote unquote, the state had changed in recent years.

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In the end, I didn't end up writing a study of the contemporary state's kitchen, as it were, as much as I wrote about sort of the historical continuity between the Nasser era state and today.

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But I did want to move away from a lot of the common tropes that were used to describe the Egyptian state apparatus around the time of the revolution.

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So whether it's the idea of the deep state, quote unquote, or the remnants of the old regime, Furul, or counter-revolution, all of which to my mind were interesting and maybe had some relevance.

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weren't really capturing how the entity that is known as the state remained somewhat coherent through various moments of immense political upheaval across 3/4 of a century, essentially.

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I thought that a lot of these terms were very of their moment, were very kind of, I mean, not, I mean, this is not meant as a derogatory term, but like journalistic in the sense that it's very of a particular moment, right?

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And not enough thinking about the longer

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historical depth behind what makes the Egyptian state what it is ideologically.

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So this is the second set of motivations.

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And now I come to the more personal motivation to write this book, which I think can perhaps better explain why I chose to study the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance in particular, as opposed to a number of ministries or institutions about which I could have also asked similar kind of theoretical and historical questions as I've outlined about the nature of the state and the impact of different revolutions.

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So personally, I am sort of by birth a member of the cultivated, educated stratum that is connected to the Ministry of Culture, and more generally to kind of official cultural, educational, and media institutions in Egypt.

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And this personal connection made me incredibly aware of the link between the constitution of a new idea of the state after the 1952 revolution and the emergence of a new esqui de corps, a new sense of solidarity among state bureaucrats over the same period.

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In very crude terms, the achievement state idea manifests sociologically through a new bureaucratic elite.

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And to give you a concrete example, here's my family tree on both my mom's and my dad's side.

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I do describe it in some length in the book.

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I don't remember the page anymore, it's in the introduction.

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So if you look at kind of through each leaf on this tree, you'll find many people immersed in cultural, artistic, or educational work, some as kind of administrators or technicians, and some as artists and intellectuals.

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And I'm working on a paper right now on that precise distinction, right?

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What makes it, you know, what makes the difference between an intellectual and a bureaucrat in the context where everyone is pretty much a bureaucrat, basically.

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And we can talk about that later.

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But so I'm kind of the black triangle at the bottom.

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You can see here my very kind of classical anthropological genealogy chart.

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And then, so my dad, Wareed Al Khashed, on the left here, and my mom, Mate and Museni, are university professors in Arabic literature and film studies in Canada, but they're mainly known

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among Egyptian intellectuals as cultural critics and writers from the so-called 90s generations.

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It's something called in those circles.

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My mom is known more as a novelist and my dad a bit more as a poet and a critic.

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Although neither of them has ever held a permanent position at the Ministry of Culture in Egypt, they had direct and regular contact with the ministry's different institutions

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through their involvement in cultural and academic life in Cairo.

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So when I was younger, they would regularly visit something actually called the Supreme Council of Culture, the Cultural Development Fund, the National Library, and so on.

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These were spaces I was kind of familiar with from when I was very young.

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Now, if you look on my mom's side here on the right, my grandfather, Abdel Eder al-Nusani,

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and his brothers, Camel and Hassan, were known as artists and filmmakers in the 1950s.

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Abdel-Eder and Hassan in particular were known as pioneers of Egyptian documentary cinema through their company, the Museni Brothers.

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So they were basically getting funding from the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance to make their films.

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Again, like there's this kind of direct connection.

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On my dad's side, Ahmad al-Khasheb and his brother Mostafa are well known as kind of pioneers of sociology at the University of Cairo.

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And likewise, the grandmothers were also involved in those sorts of institutions.

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Altayatel Bessewi, on my mother's side, was a teacher and later a kind of school director at the English School in Heliopolis, which is part of the Ministry of Education.

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And Doraya became a quite high-level administrator at the National Committee of the UNESCO, which is also part of the Ministry of Education in Egypt.

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So I'm not really giving this detailed account of my family to brag.

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But to show you how, because of my own history, I was always part of official cultural circles in Cairo, although I've never worked in official institutions, which allowed me to study the Ministry of Cultural History in a way which might not have been available to someone without my personal and familial connection, or someone who is so deeply involved in the Ministry's work that they'll have other boundaries around what they can study and what they can't, and so on.

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And I also wanted to show you how this family's trees, my own family, is like a lot of family trees of those involved in cultural, educational, and media work in Cairo.

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And that gives you a sense of the composition of the Egyptian state's body after the 1952 revolution as a kind of sociological entity that is inherited to some degree across generations.

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Not quite

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as directly as like Mubarak wanted his son to inherit power or something, but it is kind of more along the lines of what Bourdieu describes as an inheritance across academic generations.

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Anyways, we can talk about that later on.

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But so I had kind of all of these theoretical motivations, more kind of historical motivations, interest in thinking about the state after the revolution, more personal motivations to study ministry of culture.

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So how did I go about it?

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My initial methods derived very intuitively from my own training as an anthropologist.

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When I began what I called ethnographic fieldwork in September of 2019, I was initially aiming to study the contemporary Ministry of Culture by following and talking to its employees.

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And there's a lot of anthropologies of, sorry, ethnographies of bureaucracy that kind of follow a very similar path.

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What I quickly noticed was that a classical ethnography wasn't enough for two main reasons.

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First, because the ministry's activity was way wider than any one person spending a little bit of time in some offices could get kind of an overarching idea of the ministry from.

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But second, also because the ministry has a very long history, which directly impacts its current activities.

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When I did some preliminary research about the ministry's history, I couldn't really find a kind of detailed account to use

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as a sort of background history for my contemporary ethnography, which I mean, in the way I've been trained, at least this is often, the use that anthropologists put history to, right?

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It's kind of like you use other people's work to give a background to.

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what you're doing in the present.

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So in a way, I thought, I mean, there's nothing that's really satisfactory in that way, so let me write that history myself.

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And actually, through that process, I then got to think very differently about what history is and what it does, and we can talk about that later on.

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But anyways, basically, just to give you an idea about the available studies on the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, they're mainly published in Arabic.

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Actually, you see some examples on screen.

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And they kind of give a descriptive account of the different administrations that compose the ministry.

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So that's a very complicated matter in its own right.

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And if you read through my very lengthy appendix, you'll see my own attempt at trying to work out what was created, when, how, within the ministry.

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But I don't think it's kind of sufficient to answer the sorts of questions that I had because it doesn't really include a kind of detailed account of everyday practices at the ministry or even

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an analysis of the connection between the Ministry of Culture and its relation to the Constitution of the Free Officers Republic, which is really what interested me in doing this book.

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In addition to these studies, the other sort of source, I suppose, or kind of secondary source that people mobilize, including academics, bureaucrats, general readers in Cairo, to understand the Ministry of Culture's history is memoirs, basically, and memoirs by prominent state officials.

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The main reference point in particular concerning the Ministry of Culture is Tharouat al-Kesh's memoirs in politics and culture, which was initially published in 1988.

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Now, this is, of course, an incredible document.

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It's a kind of first-hand account by one of the most prominent ministers of culture and national guidance in Egyptian history.

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He took over the ministry's charge twice over the kind of 12 or so years

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between 1958 and 1962, he was Minister of Culture and National Guidance, and then from 66 to 1970, he was again Minister of Culture.

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And so I've used Aukesh's memoirs as one source among many, but I have resisted the temptation of its usual treatment in Egypt as a kind of source of all wisdom on the ministry.

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And you'll see this

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replicated in some aspects of the literature in English even, but in Arabic that's definitely the way it's often used, right, as a kind of transparent account of how the ministry was in its time.

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What I've sought to do instead was to widen the source base that is used to narrate the Ministry of Cultural History beyond the strictly administrative accounts I've outlined earlier and beyond personal memoirs.

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My first slightly naive thought was to visit the National Archives, including

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which is where the Ministry of Culture's technical documents should in principle be kept.

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That's sort of, yeah, the front door of the main national archive, as it were.

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And there's another national archive called , which confusingly in English is also often translated as the National Archives.

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But is specifically where personnel files of all Egyptian bureaucrats are kept.

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So if you can imagine, like this one has all the kind of

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meeting minutes, in theory, would have the meeting minutes, the kind of memos going back and forth within different administrations and so on.

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And then Darul Mahfouzad would have, you know, people's retirement papers, people's promotion files, that sort of thing.

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And in principle, they should be accessible for research purposes until 1959.

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And I've said in principle a lot because in two more substantive articles where I talked about my research methods, one published in the journal Ejit Sudan and Arab,

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in 2024 and the second one below published in Comparative Studies in Society and History, as Walter has outlined, I've explained that in the end I didn't really manage to access these archives, as very many researchers working on contemporary Egypt have experienced, and in particular those working on the kind of post-1952 revolution period.

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And so this situation of inaccessibility, as it were, forced me to think a bit outside the box and to ask where I could find alternative sources to study the ministry.

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Again, alternative also to kind of

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the usual memoirs, administrative histories, et cetera.

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Initially, I thought that all of the official sources would be inside the state's offices, but that I would, you know, probably not be able to find anything outside there except non-administrative sources, so something a bit like, you know, governmental periodicals like Al-Ahram, Al-Akhbar, Al-Gumurayya, or governmental magazines like Al-Magalla, Saqafa, Risela, and so on.

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So I spent some time

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press archives, which are technically kind of governmental archives, but are a bit more accessible than the National Archives I talked about earlier.

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I spent some time in the archive of El Gumuraya, which is one of the main national newspapers, and Dar el-Hilal, which you can see here, which technically is a kind of very old publishing house, but it has been nationalized, and since then it's kind of a governmental outlet.

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I also thought that some useful material might be kept in what you might call alternative archival institutions, which have begun mushrooming all over Cairo in the past 15 years or so, and it's particularly noticeable, sorry, after the 2011 revolution.

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These institutions emerged at the hand of civil society academics, journalists, and activists who were concerned about the sorts of accessibility issues that I've outlined and concerned about the loss of some archival material because

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the official archives aren't just securitized as I've outlined earlier, but also they're inattentive to certain kinds of materials because their own sense of what should be kept is, if you want to call it that, a bit old-fashioned.

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So they don't necessarily keep photography, for example, or they don't necessarily keep ephemera or personal papers, etc.

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And so a lot of local initiatives have emerged to keep that sort of material in parallel to the official archives.

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So I spent some time in what you might call civil society archives.

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This is what Dr.

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Ahmed Abouhazi calls them.

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So something like Simatech, which is more kind of film specific, but also Dell for research and media, which is now defunct, unfortunately, and Medina archives, which still exists.

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And you can visit their website.

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And they also, they kind of have an archive as well as an online publication.

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They kind of publish multimedia stuff.

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So what's really interesting

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in that journey of trying to find things outside of official archives is that I did find material that one might call alternative in these archives, so like photographs or ephemera or something like that.

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But I also found a good deal of official material as well, the sorts of material that you would expect to find in the National Archives, internal reports, meeting minutes, personal documents, and a whole host of papers that I didn't really expect to find in unofficial locations.

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And this experience made me rethink my assumptions about the kind of hard and fast separation between official and unofficial archival institutions, which made me imagine that official institutions, initially I thought, okay, official institutions keep the official paperwork and then civil society institutions keep quote unquote alternative paperwork.

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But I was wrong to a large extent.

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And I don't think I'm alone among historians working on post-revolutionary Egypt in thinking that.

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The fact is that the papers of the Free Officers Republic is scattered across

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National Archives, some bit of it remains there, but also institutional archives.

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So the kind of sub-administration sometimes keep things that aren't kept by the central archives.

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Something like the Supreme Council of Culture, for example, has its own archive that's not neither in the Ministry of Culture nor in the National Archives.

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And something like the National Theater Center as well has something like that.

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But it's also scattered in the homes of ex-bureaucrats, for example, or in the second-hand book and paper market, which is what I spent a lot of my time discussing in those articles, for those of you who are interested.

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So in very short, what I realized through this journey is to be very crude, the state's archive is not always kept within the state.

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Maybe some paperwork that's considered sensitive under certain historical circumstances becomes subject to extreme caution by some state institutions.

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That's definitely the case.

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There's guarding around certain sorts of paperwork at certain moments.

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But if we think about the sum of bureaucratic paperwork, like all the technical documents, memos, administrative decisions, meeting minutes, et cetera, that are produced every day by all state institutions, that paperwork, that sum, is effectively scattered.

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And the general impression according to which this paperwork is quote unquote inside the archive, unseen by the public, reflects more the imaginary of academics and intellectuals rather than grounded archival practices since the 1950s.

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So one can find actually in state officials' homes and the second-hand market papers which in principle, as I said earlier, should have been in institutional repositories.

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It's basically the same material but in a different location and of course much differently organized.

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That's something we can also talk about later.

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So basically I started looking through my networks for people whose parents were working at the Ministry of Culture or who themselves were working at the Ministry of Culture, and I tried to kind of track down which relative might have kept what paperwork and who might have given me access to this paperwork.

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Because of course, you know, this isn't really

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officially archived paperwork.

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It's basically people's personal property.

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So you have to kind of, show up there and say, like, can I please have a look at it or not?

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And of course, there's a whole, you know, set of ethical issues to consider around how you access this sort of thing.

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And people who've worked in personal papers, of course, have talked about this for a very long time.

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Although the typical literature on this is on kind of literary personal papers more than kind of bureaucrats, which was more my experience, you know, visiting the homes of bureaucrats.

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I've also spent a significant amount of time going to various secondhand bookshops and paper dealers.

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That's an example of what that might look like.

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And they also allowed me to constitute the source base behind this book.

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As Walter, in fact, once told me, I found that working through personal papers and the secondhand market requires ethnographic rather than historical skills.

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Because reaching the source itself is an interpersonal journey fraught with various surprises and hurdles.

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And I can say more about this

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in the Q&A.

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So that's broadly what I've based the book on.

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Now I just wanted to say a bit more about the book's contents before we open up for the Q&A.

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So let me take a bit of a sip.

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Constructing the achievement state starts with a kind of substantial introduction where I outlined

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my main motivations and the methods as I've discussed today, but also where I situate this book within various intellectual lineages, mainly the anthropology of the state and bureaucracy, as well as the kind of enormous historiography on the Nasser era, which we can discuss in the Q&A if you'd like.

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So the book after this introduction follows with four substantive chapters, which each include a kind of mixture of historical and ethnographic material with a marked emphasis on the more historical side.

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And there's also an epilogue at the very end which reflects on the contemporary legacies of the achievement state.

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The first chapter gives you a kind of brief history of the central administration at the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, starting with a brief history of kind of the ministry's different administrative iterations from the time it was created in October 1952 as purely a ministry of what was called national guidance,

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all the way to the end of the 1960s where culture and national guidance are effectively separated.

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And the central administration that was created in 1952 inherited a vast number of much older cultural institutions, which include the National Library, the Opera House, the Egyptian Museum, the Egyptian broadcasting companies, among many others.

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But until October of 1952,

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All of these institutions were separate and had independent directors and administrations, but they were united for the first time after 1952 and they remained together effectively until 1966 when, as I said, culture and national guidance were separated.

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And national guidance then became the Ministry of Information, which looks a little bit more like other ministries of information elsewhere.

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But so I just wanted to mention this because there's often, sometimes when I present in my book, especially in Cairo, people have this hard and fast distinction between culture and media in mind.

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And in the particular period I'm talking about in the 50s and 60s, culture and media were not really independent ministerial portfolios as we understand them.

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And in fact, some of those hard and fast distinctions that emerged later on were being worked out by the bureaucrats that I've been working on historically, as it were.

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So after the sort of preliminary history of the ministry, the chapter focuses on the narratives presented in a series of what I call achievement books, as Walter mentioned,

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that are printed by the information department.

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And specifically, I'm focused on a particular series called The Revolution in X Years.

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So there'll be a book called The Revolution in 11 Years as this one, or in six years, in seven years, etc.

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And this series was published yearly on the anniversary of the July 23rd revolution.

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So it's basically an account of the revolution's achievements with every year, how much more has been done since.

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And I have a couple of

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these sorts of publications with me today, so which I can circulate around.

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You can have a look for yourselves.

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You can push those further down to not let the suspense go too well.

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Oh, yeah, that's fine.

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But so basically, with a specific focus on that specific series that looks at the revolution in X number of years, I argue that the historical narration of the revolution that's presented in these books is different from

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both kind of critical academic histories of the revolution and nationalist histories of the revolution, which are usually the sorts of things that people who work on school textbooks tend to focus on.

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The main difference is that these books that are circulating around the table seek to narrate the entirety of the revolution's achievements to prop up the state's role in creating what they called the new society, Muqtama al-Gadid, as they called it.

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And this kind of achievement-based narrative had both a domestic audience

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which is why some of these books are in Arabic, but also an international one, which is why a lot of these books were translated into English, Spanish, French, German, and some even in Italian and Greek.

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There's one book in Portuguese also, there's a footnote about it in the book.

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And this international dimension reflects the fact that the information department was always very invested and remains to this day invested in showing the kind of the true achievements of the Egyptian state to the world.

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And to this day, people who work in the State Information Service are really obsessed with this idea of Egypt's reputation abroad.

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And I kind of try and give a bit of a historicization of where that idea comes from.

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It kind of has changed a lot over time because now it's basically trying to protect the regime as it were.

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Whereas at the time it was in a very, you know, real context of anti-colonial struggle, right, where there was a genuine need to kind of protect, you know, a nascent regime against

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French and English propaganda, especially around the time of the Suez War, which we can talk about later.

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But so it's important to state that what I'm arguing is that these books didn't really have a wide popular impact in Egypt.

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A lot of times when I told people that I was working on this sort of publication, they were like, oh, but who cares?

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Like no one read them, etc.

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But I do think that they're really instructive about how bureaucrats themselves see the state.

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And I think that this is

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actually a very important reason why we need to care about them as a genre of publication and not just as usually these books are kind of, if you went on Google Scholar, you'll find some of these books cited as sources for other things.

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You know, like if you're working on industrial history or something, or if you're working on, there's a book about the police academy or something.

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So it'll be cited as a source as opposed to thought of as a bunch of things that are achievement books, basically.

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Anyways, I think they're sociologically quite useful for that reason.

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So that's the first chapter.

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The second chapter is most closely connected to my own specialism in visual anthropology.

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The chapter mainly analyzes the photographs that are inside those achievement books, basically.

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So if you had to look through those who are in front of you, there will be a lot of pictures.

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Some of them are mainly illustrated books, in fact, in color and so on.

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Some of them are just using the pictures to illustrate what the narrative says.

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But actually, my argument in that chapter is that

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in some ways, the photographs that are in those books are meant to illustrate the achievements narrated in the books, but in other ways, they're also trying to kind of prove the achievement's existence itself through what specialists would call the photograph's indexical nature.

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So the photograph's ability to capture a trace of light as it is happening at a particular moment.

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allows you to say not only like, here's a tractor that shows that we're modernizing, but also here's this specific tractor on that specific land doing it, as you can see, basically.

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And so achievement books don't simply tell you about the revolution's achievements.

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They also embody them materially.

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The books themselves, in fact, in some of these books, they talk about the publication of these books as an achievement, right?

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So there's quite kind of

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convoluted self-referential dimension which is materialized in the images themselves also.

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So this chapter has several layers of visual analysis in it.

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First I talk about the photograph's content, you know what you can see in it, the sort of iconography that is associated with the period.

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Then I talk a little bit about the relationship between the photograph and the textual elements inside the books.

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And lastly, I talk about the kind of visual and social excess outside of the image.

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This is a term that Deborah Poole, an anthropologist, uses for all the things that are kind of happening around the image that aren't visible in it.

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And these particular images are interesting for the systematic way in which they exclude certain things that are interesting to think through.

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So just to give you a brief example of one of my favorite pictures that I found in one of those books, which is not in the book, so you have an exclusive here.

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But so this image was printed in a glossy illustrated book that is simply titled The United Arab Republic 1963, which was published as usual on the anniversary of the 1952 revolution to celebrate its achievements.

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So on a first level, in terms of the content of the image, you could pay attention to the, you know, seemingly middle class woman kind of leafing through some of the ministry's official publications with a library filled with these publications in the background.

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And in fact,

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I think I haven't brought them today, but I own a couple of these books that are on display here that are now in the secondhand book market circulated.

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Then on a second level, you could analyze the relationship between image and text.

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In this case, since the image is coming from an illustrated book, so not from one of the kind of lengthier narrative books that you have, the text is mainly a caption that's translated in multiple languages, as you can see, because this was a thing that was given to embassies and foreign press correspondents in many places.

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But the caption says, the English caption says popular culture, but the Arabic caption says, which is more specifically culture for the people.

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It's not quite, popular culture is not the best translation for it.

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And I actually find, I mean, I have my own take on these translations.

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Maybe you can talk about it later on.

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Anyways, but so this slogan, culture for the people, was a widespread slogan under Nasser.

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And the image in this case does more than just illustrate the caption because it's also an instantiation of the state's achievements in bringing cultural products such as the one you see here to the wider population.

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So it's not just, you know, here's an example of how culture is distributed.

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It's also here is us doing it live, you know, showing it to this particular person.

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But then you could also query what lies outside of this image.

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For example, how well were these publications actually distributed in practice?

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That's one question you could ask.

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Or what are the publications' literary and intellectual qualities, which is in particular in that moment in the 60s, not quite the idea that the Ministry of Culture had.

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It was mainly a kind of quantitative drive to have as many publications circulating rather than asking these more qualitative questions.

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You could also ask questions about class, for example, what sort of class differences existed among readers?

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Why is it that the reader is represented in this particular kind of class and gendered representation and not others?

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And you can ask many similar questions, but the image kind of gives you a hint of what's missing as well as what's visibly present.

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So it's useful to kind of keep all of these layers in mind.

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So that's the sort of analysis that I do for images in that second chapter.

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I'll run quickly because I'm aware that we're close to time.

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But the third chapter in the book discusses everyday cultural administration in a specific institution called the Mass Culture Institute, which had various iterations during the 50s and 60s.

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And this chapter sort of follows how the achievement state is embodied in the daily work of bureaucrats.

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I would say this is the chapter that feels the most ethnographic, I think, in terms of what I talk about.

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And basically I try and think through how bureaucrats in their daily work think about their work through the lens of achievement.

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The reason why I focus on the Mass Culture Institute is partly because for practical reasons that I've gained access to the collections of the first director general of that institution, which was a very rich collection to write from, and I didn't find an equivalent collection to write a similar sort of detailed granular account of everyday administration in the 50s and 60s.

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But also because Mass Culture Institute to this day, as the general organization for cultural palaces, is sort of the backbone of the Ministry of Culture.

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It kind of embodies one of its core missions of bringing culture mainly from the metropolis to the countryside.

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There's this kind of missionary spirit behind the Mass Culture Institute.

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And so this particular chapter begins with a very brief history of the Mass Culture Institute.

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which sort of in the longer arc of its history shifted from being more of a kind of adult education institution where you could go and take a kind of university like curriculum as someone who doesn't have formal education into after the 1950s more of a kind of cultural services provision institution if you want to call it that.

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So an institution that kind of circulates cultural products across the country including through projects such as this one

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which is something called the culture caravan, where they had these kind of mobile cultural units that were equipped with like a radio and a screening apparatus and a mobile library and had like a moving play, like a theater troupe and so on, and would go around villages in the countryside to disseminate culture, quote, high culture in some respects, to people who were thought of, in their own words, to be starved from culture.

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That's the way that it's presented.

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But so through kind of concrete examples of this sort of initiative and the kind of detailed work that went into them, I tried to show in this chapter how even in very small everyday tasks, the Ministry of Culture's bureaucrats saw their cultural mission and responsibility through the lens of achievement and how kind of documenting

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very everyday achievements, even on the very smallest administrative scale, like, we sent this library there, or we showed that film at that time in this village, or something.

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This sort of documentation and dissemination was a big part of the work that was done by these bureaucrats.

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Now, finally, the 4th chapter looks at an important concept among Nasser-era bureaucrats, which is what they called great projects, or al-Masharia al-Kubra.

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And this is the sort of project that preoccupied mainly kind of high-level state officials in Egypt, people like that I mentioned earlier, or who are ministers of national culture and national guidance.

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And I talk about some of the major obstacles to the realization of these projects, not just

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the money and the logistics and so on, but also the huge amount of coordination and cooperation across ministries that it takes to accomplish some of these bigger projects, which is actually one of the hardest things to do within the state apparatus, as I discovered over time, is actually to get 2 ministries to work on something.

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And in some ways, ministers brag that they can do that.

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Like a strong minister, quote unquote, is someone who's able to coordinate work across administrations further than their own.

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But the other thing that's specific about this chapter in a way is that usually when people talk about great projects, including at that time, they think of something like the Aswan High Dam, for example, which is like a signal great project, or enormous agricultural projects like the Tahrir Province or Waddin Natlun, et cetera.

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So today, similar projects are so-called gigantic projects.

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Now, everything became bigger, right?

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So, it's now called Al-Masharia, but it's the same principle under Sisi's presidency.

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But in this chapter, I try and present a sort of slightly alternative view to this sense of the great project of the Ministry of Culture, which I try to argue is not purely about buildings, but it's also about this thing that in official parlance they called the building of the Egyptian human being, Bene el-Insen el-Muslim.

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And this project persists in one form or another today.

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I mean, here I put, this is an image from a very ongoing contemporary initiative that President Sisi launched to again build the Egyptian human being.

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You can see it here on the left, a new beginning for building the Egyptian human being.

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But so what I try to show in this chapter is that basically the Ministry of Culture's greatest project since its inception was aiming to acculturate the Egyptian population to turn them into righteous citizens, or what's called the Montanin of Salahim.

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And of course, you know, how you acculturate them and for what purpose changes drastically between the 50s and now.

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But that same sort of formal category of what the ministry is trying to do persists.

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Maybe I can say a little bit more about this in the Q&A and why that's interesting.

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So this is very briefly kind of a very sweeping summary of the book's contents.

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But before I finish, I just wanted to say 3 quick things about where this book I think is intervening.

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First, let's say that this book shows what the current, shows that the current achievement state in Egypt is the direct descendant of the Nasser era achievement state.

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So the idea of in Gazet is still very prominent under Sisi and so on.

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But one of the things that kept astonishing me as I worked on the 50s and 60s is how much the same ideas and concepts keep being recycled, but then they're kind of adapted to the political winds of the day.

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And so of course, some things have changed fundamentally.

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I'm not trying to say that they're the same thing.

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But I do think that there are some discourses and practices that are recycled in new wares by bureaucrats about how they conceive of their own work, right?

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So the idea of Egypt's reputation, for example, that I mentioned earlier, which doesn't really mean the same thing anymore today, but is still bandied about by bureaucrats, or the idea of a cultural mission that radiates from the city to the countryside, or

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the idea of, building the Egyptian human being, again, is a similar sort of thing.

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Now, the second thing I'll say quickly is that this book engages with academic and non-academic histories of the Nasser era, which I think sometimes, in my opinion, can over-focus on the personality of Nasser himself and some of the leaders around him, right?

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So, it'll be like Nasser and Abdel Hakim Ahmer, his chief of staff, or like Abdul Tif al-Burdadi, Zakarem Mahideen, etc.

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But now, of course,

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I'm not saying Nasser's leadership was not important to the development of the Free Officers Republic, but the state that emerged in their wake, which is made-up of thousands of people at lower and higher ranks and hundreds of ministers and intellectuals and so on, cannot really be reduced to the personality of Nasser, which some of that literature and the historiography can tend towards implying.

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And so in order to understand all these people and how this state apparatus has carried on over decades, I think

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we need to move beyond some of the public debates usually that are being had about Nasser and, the kind of inane questions about what, was Nasser good or bad, that sort of thing I find.

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Not really helpful for building both a kind of historically sound but also a politically engaged view of the period.

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And the last thing I will say, and Walter mentioned at the very beginning, is that the book does have a significant comparative dimension in the sense that I do try to show how Egypt wasn't the only achievement state in its time, and that the ministries of culture, national guidance and information in neighboring countries, so places like Syria, Iraq, Algeria, or in anti-colonial socialist countries like China and Vietnam and Cuba, also promoted an idea of the state in their own emerging nation states based on a certain concept of achievement.

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And this comparative dimension, I think, is important to highlight the extent to which Egypt is not necessarily exceptional, as it might sometimes seem in some branches of the literature.

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But it is part of contemporaneous global dynamics of the global 50s and 60s.

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We can discuss that in the Q&A.

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Anyways, sorry, I talked too long, but thank you so much.