

***The Agrarian Question of Urbanization:  
Infrastructure, Agroecology, and Empire in Egypt's Sugar Belt***  
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During her time at the RCC, Salma will work on a chapter of her dissertation project. Her dissertation explores the intersections of urbanization, ecology, and empire in Egypt (1920s–1980s), with a particular focus on the history of infrastructural and regional planning in the Egyptian ‘sugar belt.’ It offers a historico-geographical account of the transformation of the Egyptian south into a region for sugar production to trace the history of urbanization in modern Egypt in relation to labor, food production, and environmental crises.

Comprised of eight sugar-producing towns and their surrounding sugarcane rural environments, the Egyptian sugar belt emerged through an ambitious agroindustrial project by the end of the nineteenth century and expanded under British colonial rule by a group of British and French financiers. By analyzing four regional and infrastructural planning schemes for the region at different moments of its history, this dissertation will trace how socioecological disposessions, racialized and gendered spatial divisions of labor, and environmental crises were produced by, and materialized in, the regional and infrastructural planning of primary commodity production. It will show how the expansion of primary commodity production and monocropping in the first half of the twentieth century not only led to an uneven and crisis-prone landscape but also influenced the trajectory of the postcolonial developmental project and its ‘green revolution’ centered around the Aswan High Dam.

By analyzing the uneven geographies of the Egyptian south, this project will argue that the rural hinterland was central to the spatial imaginaries and planning projects during the era of decolonization. I will specifically show how colonial extractivism fundamentally influenced the ways anticolonial nationalists offered a set of sophisticated yet troubling mediations about geographical uneven development and city and non-city relations. The sugar industry played a central role at this juncture, as it was not only Egypt’s largest industrial complex and employer, but also because it depended on the country’s second monocrop after cotton. Centering the processes of regional and infrastructural planning in the Egyptian south, the dissertation’s chapters will further show how these debates were dominated by arguments in favor of the dictates of national capital formation. As such, the result was not a critique of capitalist uneven geographical development as much as an effort to rescale capital accumulation within the territorial boundaries of the nation-state. I will show how these rescaling efforts were fundamentally a reorganization of city and non-city relations, with regional planning as a fundamental tool in achieving this politico-economic agenda. The fourth chapter will closely analyze the first pilot regional planning project in postcolonial Egypt, implemented in the city of Aswan and supported by Ford Foundation during the 1960s. The dissertation will conclude at a moment just as that landscape was beginning to confront its own socioecological attenuation as Egypt adopted an open-door policy.

This project will draw upon infrastructural and regional plans, joint stock company archives, and administrative and technical records documenting anthropogenic environmental changes—such as soil erosion, irrigation-induced salination, and waterlogging—to examine the entangled processes of infrastructural planning, labor management, and environment-making that transformed the Egyptian south into a sugar-producing hinterland. Most centrally, this dissertation will closely analyze the archives of the Egyptian Sugar Company (*Société Anonyme des Sucrieries Égyptienne* until 1956). This company was established in 1890 and by 1902 had a monopoly over all industrial sugar production in Egypt. It was the first company to be nationalized by the postcolonial state—and remained the only producer of sugar until the introduction of beet sugar production in reclaimed desert lands in the 1980s. It remains state-owned to this day. The focus on the sugar company’s long history will offer a critical vantage point to study the intersection of infrastructural planning, the land-finance nexus, and environmental change in Egyptian historiography. This research involved an extensive period of archival research at the Egyptian National Archives, the British National Archives, the Ford Foundation archives, the Library of Alexandria, the Nubian Oral History Archive at the American University in Cairo, as well as the author’s personal family archives.