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Conceptualizing “hydraulic society”: The social and cultural history of the Aswan Dam in Egypt, 1882-1970.

At the heart of this dissertation is the Aswan Dam Project, from the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 up to its completion in 1970. Though hydrological projects and dam building have a long tradition in Egypt, the Egyptian “culture of control” with regard to the River Nile has changed and intensified during the modern period. The plan to subjugate the Nile was strongly connected to advances in modern science and technology during the period from 1882 to 1970. The goal was the transformation of the river into a gigantic hydraulic space, integrating almost the whole fertile area of Egypt into a system of ditches, dams and irrigation technology. Within this process of transformation, a diachronic perspective of “traditional” and “modern” perceptions of nature as well as of the colonial and postcolonial periods can shed light on the relationship between man and nature in the broader contexts of “colonial development” and modernization theory. Both concepts incorporate a strong notion of planning, which influenced man’s awareness of nature as a space to be controlled and thus his perception of the natural environment. From this perspective, the British hydraulic projects and later the Aswan High Dam visibly represent the intention of controlling and harnessing nature.

To what extent can we talk about the development of knowledge transfer in terms of progress and modernization ideologies during the colonial period, and to what extent was this adopted by the Egyptian elite class? How could hydrological projects like the Aswan Dam as conceptualized by the British lend momentum to Egyptian nationalism and become an important source of national identification for Egyptian society? How could man’s manipulations of and intervention in the natural environment as described above become affairs of nation and state, and even major conditions of Egyptian sovereignty and statehood? What are the impacts and consequences of these developments on the River Nile as an ecological space? These are the main questions that my dissertation sets out to answer; they should in turn give substance to my thesis that Egyptian society is even today a “hydraulic society”, whose constitution is strongly connected to the control of water resources.

Besides the historical sources in the national archives of Egypt, Great Britain and the United States which contain material on the Aswan Dam and its technical, energy, water management, electrical aspects, etc., I will use a selection of contemporary literature on the River Nile, as well as professional articles and travel reports of engineers and officials involved in construction. These sources can give some insight into how the natural resource of water was perceived, as well as into contemporary understanding of nature in general.

The relationship between man and culture/nature is crucial for my study. Taking into account the particular ambivalence of this relationship, my aim is to present the concept of a “hydraulic society” as an ideal type, which can be used as a pattern or model for Egyptian society, in order to grasp the way the Nile was made into a social and cultural construct. The goal is an analysis of Egyptian society centered on the Aswan Dam and its historical development. This project was part of the Egyptian history for almost hundred years and serves as a benchmark by which to assess the major importance of the River Nile and the resource of water for the structuring of society in Egypt. Here, nature appears as an actor in its own right, with the power to set social structures and contest the view of the natural environment as a mere object for human control.