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**1972:**

**The Egyptian Student Movement and the Politics of Memory**

**Saturday, November 5, 2022**

Fifty years ago, tens of thousands of Egyptian university students took to the streets to demonstrate against the Anwar al-Sadat government for its inaction in the face of neo-imperialist plans in the region, its authoritarianism, and its disavowal of the tenets of nonaligned socialism. The students demanded state-wide reforms, geopolitical action, and ideological clarity.

The eventual defeat of the Student Movement and the subsequent government clamp down on other grassroots movements (be they student or worker led) allowed the official periodization of “decisive” historical moments to remain intact. 1952, 1954, 1956, 1961, 1967, 1973 were years worthy of commemoration in the official nationalist narrative. 1972 was not.

But the unprecedented scale of the protests (students demonstrated and held sit-ins across the entire country not just in Cairo and Alexandria), the duration of the demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes (the entire month of January), the subsequent actions of the government to preempt any further left-leaning uprisings (e.g. their support of business-oriented neoliberal Islamist groups), and the persistent cultural legacies of those uprisings (they were invoked and celebrated during the 2011 uprisings), all underline the centrality of the events of that year to Egypt’s national history.

The 1972 Student Movement was not a singular event. It was the culmination of decades of student activism in the country. As a historical moment, it offers an important bridge between the then fading socialist world of the 1960s and the rising neoliberal world of the 1970s and 1980s not just in Egypt but in the entire region. The events were led by a generation impacted by the 1967 war and attuned to the international student movements of 1968.

Between January 1972 and January 1973 (when student leaders were sentenced en masse to years in prison), the “youth”, the first generations to be born and raised in the Nasserite state, rethought many axioms of their institutionalized revolution. They declared the Nasserite social contract flawed. Giving up political and personal freedoms for progressively diminishing welfare programs was no longer tolerable. They uncovered suppressed histories of the pre-1952 anti-colonial struggles as they rejected the idea that Nasserism was the only answer to decolonization. And they dreamt of alternative trajectories to decolonization, social justice and democracy in the region.

In this day-long symposium, participants will contend with the legacies of 1972 to address such issues as periodization in narratives of the modern Egyptian state; the “afterlives” of defeated uprisings; the suppressed emancipatory potentials of that moment; and the politics of memory.

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**Schedule:**

**Opening Remarks: 9:00-9:15 am EDT (3:00pm-3:15pm Cairo Time)**

**Session 1: 9:15 am- 10:30 am (EDT). (3:15pm-4:30 pm Cairo Time)**

Break: 30 mins

**Session 2: 11:00 am-12:30pm (EDT). (5:00pm -6:30pm Cairo Time)**

Lunch/Early Dinner Break 1hour

**Session 3: 1:30pm-3:00pm (EDT) (7:30 pm -9:00 pm Cairo Time)**

Break: 15 mins

**45 min Concluding session: (3:15-4:00pm EDT) (9:15-10:00pm Cairo Time)**

**Full Program:**

Opening Remarks:

Eman S. Morsi

*Session 1 (9:00-10:30 am EDT / 3:00 pm- 4:30pm Cairo Time)*

*Temporality/Periodization: On the historical and historiographic significance of 1972.*

Chair Eman Morsi

**Presenters:**

***Sara Salem***

***Hannah Elsis***

***Mohammad Ezzeldin***

**Sara Salem, London School of Economics:**

**“On the 1972 student movement and postcolonial time”**

The 1972 student movement erupted during a time of flux; the powerful and hegemonic Nasserist political project was coming apart, and a new project centred around *infitah* was slowly emerging. I want to explore this moment in time through the idea of

*eruption*, suggesting that it was a movement that aimed at disrupting the shift from one political project to another. Where shifts between different projects at times appear inevitable or even smooth in hindsight, the 1972 movement—as well as the 1977 ‘bread riots’—are important disruptions of any linear narrative. They point not only to the emergence of anticolonial ghosts in a time that disavowed itself of anticolonialism entirely, but suggest that postcolonial temporality is made up of eruptions that signal forms of resistance to colonial and capitalist temporality.

**Hannah Elsis, NYU Abu Dhabi:**

**“Our Culture Between Yes and No”: The Problems of Generations, Bifurcations and Periodisations in the decade 1967-1977**

The 1972-73 uprising is widely understood as a watershed moment in Egyptian history and historiography; a moment of closure and foreclosure (of the decolonial promise of Arab Socialism) and opening (*infitah*), literal and figurative of newly individualised and globalised subjectivities and economies. In this paper, I want to think through the decade 1967-1977 as a fruitful arena for reconfiguring some of the hallowed periodisations and frameworks in the telling of postcolonial Egyptian history. Namely, I wish to contend with three interrelated questions, emerging from what Mannheim might have called “the problem of generations”. The first, is the idea that the 1972-73 student movement augured the final death knell of the Egyptian left, which had exclusively led it, and the emergence therein of newly hegemonic mass political Islamist movements. That is, the final bifurcation of postcolonial politics into secular left and Islamist right. The second, is the framing of the defeat of the 72-73 movement and the ‘77 uprising, as the decisive moment in which the welfarist developmental and ostensibly non-aligned state/economy gave way to a market-based, globally embedded neoliberal self/economy. The third is the way in which historiographies of the ‘67 defeat form an umbrella narrative that binds these two frames, yet paradoxically fails to unite or synthesise these two binaries welfarist/neoliberal and Secular/Islamist into a synthesised reading of postcolonial hegemony.

**Mohammed Ezzeldin, CUNY:**

**On Arwa Salih and the Temporalities of Defeat**

The questions of failed uprisings and unfulfilled revolutions have been key analytical optics for modernist and nationalist historiography in Egypt. Whether in the anticolonial struggle, postcolonial emancipation, 1970s uprisings or in the 2011 revolution, history was marked by the schemas of lack, incompleteness, and premature foreclosures. Yet, one still needs to rethink the ways we orient ourselves historically to “amputated” openings and suppressed emancipatory potentials. To do so, I revisit the life and writings of Arwa Salih, one of the militant leaders of the 1970s communist and student

movement in Egypt. Salih described her generation as the Stillborn (al-mubtasarun) in her seminal book of the same title. The choice of word designates the unrealized potentials and an experience stuck in a moment that is neither a continuation of the past nor a preparation for the future. Building on Arwa's life and writings in addition to the contemporary debates on revolutionary afterlives, melancholia and futures past, I question the temporalization and periodization of this era and the way it is currently remembered and pay particular attention to critiquing the concept of generation.

[30 MINUTE BREAK]

*Session 2 (11:00 am-12:30pm EDT / 5:00pm -6:30pm Cairo Time)*

*Affective Geographies: On student activists' positionality –nationally and internationally– and the spaces they claimed.*

Chair: Elliott Colla

Presenters and Discussants:

Reem Abou-El-Fadl

Gennaro Gervasio

Aya Nassar

Reem Abou-El-Fadl, SOAS:

**Palestine and South-South Solidarities in the 1972 Egyptian Student Uprising**

Fifty years since the eruption of Egypt's nationwide university uprisings of January 1972, there is much to recall and rethink in their light: the politics of nationalism and the left in Egypt, the long shadow of 1967, the quest for democratic organisation, and more. This intervention focuses on the Egyptian students' engagement with the Palestinian cause, which proved fundamental to their mobilisations in 1972 and their political impact thereafter. It argues that Palestine solidarity was key to the students' emphasis on the indivisibility of democratic reform and national liberation. It examines the extra-'national' visions of political community mobilised through these practices of solidarity. These encompassed south-south relations with liberation movements from across Africa and Asia, whom the students also sought out. Piecing together these connections brings the students into focus as the first line of opposition to president Anwar Sadat's project to reshape the Egyptian state, its social contract and international alignments. This in turn compels a rethinking of the hitherto top-down focus in the literature on the Camp

David Accords, and reaffirms the place of Cairo in the burgeoning scholarship on transnational solidarity in the era of decolonisation.

**Gennaro Gervasio, Roma Tre University:**

**The Premature? Student Activism and Leftist Politics in Sadat's Egypt**

Arwa Saleh's well-known book *al-Mubtasirun* ('The Premature') has given a clear-cut definition of Egypt's early 1970s generation of young activists, especially vis-a-vis their relationship with the underground communist organisations which absorbed many of the students protesting in Egypt's campuses. Whilst the 1968/9 student movement predates the birth of a "New Left" in Egypt, it is the explosion of the student protests against Sadat that will provide the New Left of a most of its recruits. In my short presentation, I will address this 'problematic' relationship between the release of political energies and creativity on campuses by students and their supposed 'premature' encapsulating within secret underground organisations. I will also highlight the role played by Leftist students activism outside campus and underground political life, through street politics and the politics of presence in the larger Egyptian society of the time.

**Aya Nassar, RHUL:**

**A Geopoetics of the City: Cairo's Making and Unmaking in the 1970s**

In my intervention, I will aim to approach the 1970s from an affective and material reading of urban space. My research has looked into the way Sadat sought to spatialize his idea of sovereignty, rule and mastery over the urban space of the capital city. My aim in looking at the 1970s is to trace legacies that continue to affect how we script ourselves in and out of the city today, and I will do so by tracing two questions I believe haunt present-day urban politics. First, what happens when the city is interrupted through protests and sit-ins? How does this murmur live on in an affective urban politics? Secondly, what sort of urban interventions, material replanning, restructuring, and infrastructuring extend or suspend in the wake of this interruption? How is the space of the city mobilized to prevent its subsequent use as a site of the political? I approach these two intersections through a notion of urban geopoetics (as opposed to urban geopolitics). A notion I borrow from Edouard Glissant and Kathrine Mckittrick and that in my reading attends to the entanglement of affect and materiality, word and world, and allows for potentials for storytelling the urban.

[1 HOUR LUNCH/EARLY DINNER BREAK]

***Session 3 (1:30pm-3:00pm EDT / 7:30 pm -9:00 pm Cairo Time)***

## *Memories and Afterlives: How and where is 1972 remembered today?*

*Chair: Eman Morsi*

*Presenters and Discussants:*

*Farah Ramzy*

*Mélanie Henry*

*Samah Selim*

By Farah Ramzy, University of Strasbourg:

*Reg'u el talamdha* (Students are back):

Echoes and afterlives of student mobilizations in the "seventies"

This presentation examines how the memory of the historical student movement, especially the 1972 mobilizations, is actualized among student groups active in the post-2011 and post-2013 contexts. A vague and often inaccurate collection of names, images, slogans from "the seventies" manifests as traces from the past in the contemporary activists' modes of action (demonstration routes), slogans (adaptation of Negm's poetry), but also imagination as to their role in politics. The long history of student mobilizations can be a resource in times of repression, but it can also present a burden when activists attempt to reconsider their priorities beyond their imagined roles, or as a ghost of defeat haunts their present experiences.

Melanie Henry, Independent:

**Alexandria, 1972: Struggle from Below and Revolutionary Nostalgia**

The 1972 movement is part of a history of revolts from below, made up of self-organization practices which people close to the Trotskyist networks and the Communist Workers' Party helped to cultivate and spread. The student movement of 1972 is, via the militancy of the latter in the mobilizations and in the prisons, connected to the world of work, and in particular to the extra-union movement of the 1971 assemblies in Alexandria. This was a founding episode for several activists, and I will present their trajectories, taking care to communicate their expressed attachment to self-organization and the local rooting of the action. The 1972 movement, which forms the peak of the critical and self-organized actions that characterize the period between the 1967 and 1973 wars, encapsulates, better than any other event, a nostalgia for action from below. The 1972 movement polarized the large spectrum of the supporters of the Nasserist project, and reveals the existence of two forms of revolutionary nostalgia operating according to almost opposite logics, one relating to institutional

power, the other to the power of action from below. One of the reasons why these two aspects tend to merge into a left-wing melancholy is the telescoping between the engagement of the body of the individual subject and the engagement of the social body.

**Samah Selim, Rutgers:**

**Arwa Salih and *The Stillborn*: a Feminist Critique of the Student Movement**

Arwa Salih was a cadre of the Egyptian Communist Workers Party and a 1972 student movement militant. My presentation will discuss the gendered biopolitics of her 1991/6 work *The Stillborn* (Al-Mubtasarun) in terms of genre, voice and its unique feminist critique of the masculine subject of Egyptian revolutionary history.

[15 MIN BREAK]

**Concluding Session: Roundtable with all Participants (3:15-4:00pm EDT / 9:15-10:00pm Cairo Time)**