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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Notes on the Difficulty of Studying State Archives in Egypt

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## Abstract

This article describes how Egyptian state documents are scattered between governmental institutions, private collections, and the second-hand book and paper market. This scattering raises a practical question about the conditions under which official documents become discardable and commodifiable by bureaucrats, their families, and second-hand dealers. This scattering also raises a theoretical question about the nature of a state which takes uneven care in keeping a record of its own institutional past. After outlining the difficulties of access one faces in official archives in Egypt, the article fleshes out the sociological profile of different custodians of state paperwork—including families of bureaucrats, peddlers, and dealers—and the conditions under which state documents become commodified to this day. The overarching objective is not just to show the well-known limitations of national archives as a source of historical material, but also to show how actually existing "state archives" go well beyond the remit of official institutions, with notable consequences over our conception of the state.

**Keywords:** state; state effect; state-idea; bureaucracy; archive; documents; commodification; ethnography; Egypt

When I embarked on a historical and ethnographic study of the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 2018, I began by asking a simple question: where are the administration's archival holdings in Cairo? The answer turned out to be much more complicated than I initially thought, in ways best illustrated by the file in figure 1. This file contains a series of ministerial decrees on the establishment of the Popular University (*al-gāmiʿa al-shaʿbiyya*). The University was initially founded in 1946 as a continuing education center at the Ministry of Public Instruction, in which adults would be able to follow a university-like curriculum in history, literature, philosophy, and various technical vocations. The Popular University became the Institute of Popular Culture (*muʾassasat al-thaqāfa al-shaʿbiyya*) in 1948, and was gradually transformed into a

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series of vocational training centers. This Institute was transferred to the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance in 1958, then became a Mass Culture Institute (*mu'assassat al-thaqāfa al-gamahiriyya*) in 1966. This was the direct ancestor of the current General Organization for Cultural Palaces (*al-hay'a al-'āmma li-qusūr al-thaqāfa*), established in 1989. Shifting away from vocational training, the Mass Culture Institute and its successors ran so-called "cultural palaces," or multifunctional art centers where state-employed cultural programmers put together literary events, conferences, concerts, plays, exhibitions, film screenings, and so on. These palaces have been one of the Ministry of Culture's core institutions since 1958, with extensive geographical reach across all major cities in Egypt. This reach explains, in part, why it

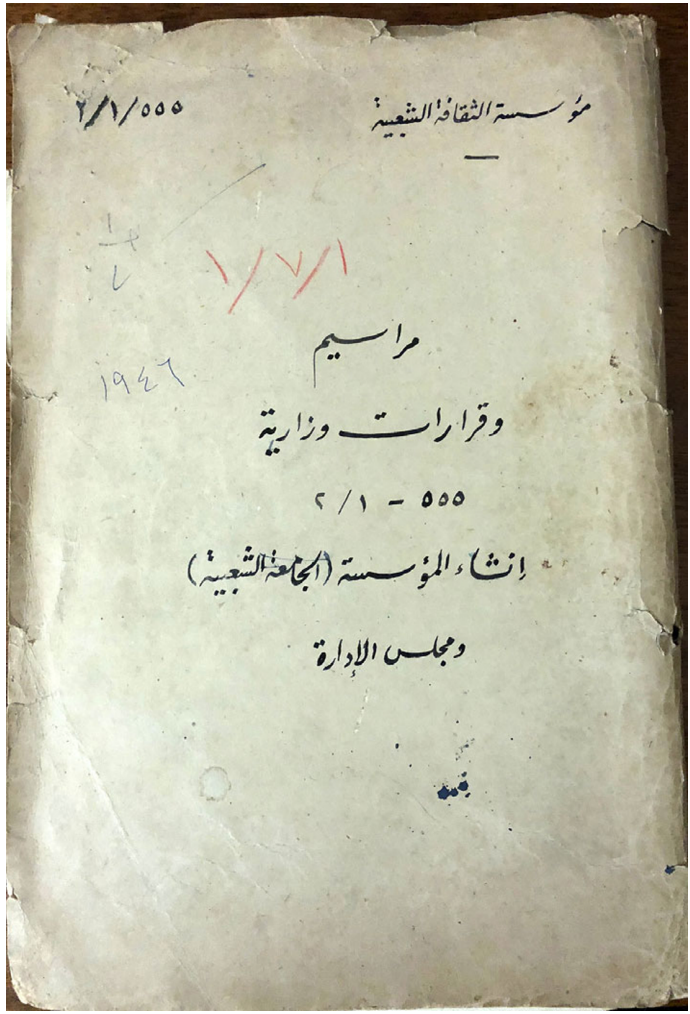



**Figure 1.** File no. 2/1–555 from the Institute of Popular Culture, titled "Bills and Ministerial Decrees on the Establishment of the Institute (the Popular University) and its Board of Directors." The document dates within this file range from 1945 to 1959.

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has been among the few official cultural institutions to receive significant ethnographic attention in Egypt.[1]

The file in figure 1 looks like it was kept in a national archive. The name of the original holding institution is written in the top right corner: the Institute of Popular Culture. The file's archival number is written in the top left: 2/1/555. This archive, to the best of my knowledge, no longer exists. Neither the Ministry of Culture nor the GOCP maintain a central repository with institution-specific documents. Similar documents may well be at the National Archives, but while I have been unable to access their holdings—a story which I will tell later—very few documents from the Ministry of Culture were preserved internally from 1964 onward.[2] In fact, I found this specific file in the private papers of a state official who worked at the Mass Culture Institute. When he left his post, all his papers—including this document—were shipped to his house, where his family has kept his files in orderly fashion. I saw the file after contacting a family member, who kindly allowed me to read through and photograph the official's paperwork in detail.

As I carried on with fieldwork between 2018 and 2019, I discovered that this story was far from being uncommon in Cairo. State documents are not always where the researcher expects to find them. The homes of state officials and their families are filled with vital documents, just like the second-hand book and paper market and the numerous independent archiving initiatives that emerged in recent years in Cairo and Alexandria.[3] The discovery of this file, like all those I encountered during fieldwork, raises some questions: How do official documents end up outside government offices? How do they circulate between private hands until they are accessed by the researcher? How can one access and interpret these documents in a context where they are not kept by the Ministry of Culture or by the National Archives in a centralized way? Who gets to decide what is kept within the administration and what is discarded? Are certain documentary genres more commonly discarded than others?

These practical issues raise two further questions about the nature of archival documents and the nature of the state. The first is: when does an "archival" document become disposable? In a sense, figure 1 could be seen as a non-archival document—snatched from the institutional setting in which it was initially preserved, it no longer holds the same archival value because it is individualized and decontextualized. Extending anthropological work on the social life of documents, however, I ask what happens to a document when it is no longer part of the bureaucrat's everyday

[1]See Jessica Winegar, "Culture Is the Solution: The Civilizing Mission of Egypt's Culture Palaces," *Review of Middle East Studies* 43, 2 (2009): 189–97; Sonali Pahwa and Jessica Winegar, "Culture, State and Revolution," *Middle East Report* 263 (2012): 2–7; Sonali Pahwa, *Theaters of Citizenship: Aesthetics and Politics of Avant-Gardist Performance in Egypt* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020); and Giedrė Šabasevičiūtė, "Creating Spaces for Culture: Self-Efforts and the Production of Marginality in Cairo's Culture Palaces," *Égypte, Soudan, mondes arabes* 25 (2024): 163–82.

[2]This information was confirmed by a recent MA thesis based on the Ministry of Culture's holdings at the National Archives: Shahinda Mustafa. "Al-Mutakāmila al-Archifiyya li-Wizārat al-Thaqāfa wal-Irshād al-Qawmi al-Maḥfuẓa bi-Dār al-Wathā'iq al-Qawmiyya: 'Dirāsa Archifiyya'" [The Archive Group of the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, preserved in the National Archives: "Archival Study"] (MA thesis, Cairo University, 2022).

[3]Examples include the Women and Memory Forum, Archive Shubra, Medina Archives, and Cimathèque in Cairo, as well as the Centre d'Études Alexandrines (CEAlex) and Behna in Alexandria.

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work; that is, when it is archived or, in some cases, discarded.[4] I will argue that, in the Egyptian context, the social life of archival documents extends well beyond governmental institutions through processes of appropriation by different custodians—state officials, their families, and second-hand peddlers and dealers.

The second question is, simply, what is a state without archives? More pointedly, what happens to the unitary project called "the state"—what Philip Abrams calls "the state-idea"—when there is a clear disparity in how each administration keeps a record of its own past?[5] How can one conceptualize a state whose own archival documents escape governmental control? What do these uneven archiving practices tell us about the state apparatus, when one of the basic tenets of many socio-anthropological theories of the state—building on a critique of Max Weber's classical study—is the existence of a more or less organized system of documentation?[6] My main argument is that the difficulty of studying state archives is not merely a difficulty of access borne by the permit-seeking process at the Egyptian National Archives and the various bureaucratic hurdles lying in the researcher's path. Rather, it is equally—if not more so—a physical and conceptual difficulty arising from the fact that state documents are scattered between governmental archives, private homes, and the second-hand book and paper market. Official archives are just a portion of actually existing "state archives," understood as the sum of paperwork produced by state institutions and dispersed in various locations.

There has been extensive academic interest in Egyptian archives, not only as a source of historical material, but also as an object of study.[7] There has been a similar

[4]On the social life of documents, see Annelise Riles, ed., *Documents: Artifacts of Modern Knowledge* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Matthew S. Hull, *Government of Paper: Materiality and Urban Bureaucracy in Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); and Nayanika Mathur, *Paper Tiger: Law, Bureaucracy, and the Developmental State in Himalayan India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). For a Middle Eastern example, see Yael Navaro-Yashin, "Make-Believe Papers, Legal Forms and the Counterfeit: Affective Interactions between Documents and People in Britain and Cyprus," *Anthropological Theory* 7, 1 (2007): 79–98. For a comprehensive overview on the anthropology of bureaucratic documents, see Mattew S. Hull, "Documents and Bureaucracy," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 251–67.

[5]Philip Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty of Studying the State," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 1, 1 (1988): 58–89.

[6]See Max Weber, "Bureaucracy," in Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds., *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978[1921]), 956–1005. One of the core contributions of the anthropology of the state has been to challenge Weberian assumptions about state bureaucracy as a legal-rational system, by highlighting the representational, spatial, affective, and relational dimensions of statecraft. Here, one could point to works as diverse as James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta's interventions in the 1990s—including "Spatializing States: Toward an Ethnography of Neoliberal Governmentality" *American Ethnologist* 29, 4 (2002): 981–1022—down to more recent work by Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan—*States at Work: Dynamics of African Bureaucracies* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); and Mateusz Laszczkowski and Madeleine Reeves—*Affective States: Entanglements, Suspensions, Suspicions* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2017).

[7]For surveys of the Egyptian National Archives and its historical content, see Helen Rivlin, *The Dār al-wathā'iq in 'Ābdīn Palace at Cairo as a Source for the Study of the Modernization of Egypt in the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1970); F. Robert Hunter, "The Cairo Archives for the Study of Élites in Modern Egypt," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 4 (1973): 476–88; Emad Abou Ghazi, "Al-Wathā'iq wa I'ādat Intāg al-Ma'rifa al-Tārikhiyya ḥawl al-'Ālam al-'Arabi" [Archival documents and reproducing historical knowledge on the Arab world], in Hoda Elsadda, ed., *Intāg al-Ma'rifa 'an al-'Ālam al-'Arabi* [Producing

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interest in archives and archiving practices in the Middle East, with a special attention to memory, nation-building, and digitization.[8] This scholarship's breadth is unsurprising given the wider "archival turn" in historical and social sciences, as well as the increasing dereliction of official archives, which has been observed by numerous scholars and intellectuals in Egypt.[9] This extensive scholarship shows how archiving practices not only matter methodologically for scholars writing history, but also shape the historical object of study itself. While inscribing myself in the lineage of similar ethnographies of state archives, in Egypt and abroad, I move beyond archival material held *within* state institutions to explore their scattering *outside* these institutions, with notable consequences over our methodological and epistemological approach to the Egyptian state.[10] In this article, I explore how "state archives" are inherently bound up with everyday processes of documentary disposal in governmental institutions, and how the scattering of state documents challenges assumptions about the state's coherence over time. I will begin by documenting my own unsuccessful attempts at accessing national archives in Egypt, which pushed me toward alternative sources. I will follow with an analysis of the different custodians involved in maintaining state paperwork and in commodifying archival documents. Throughout, I will highlight how my position within this field of archival and

knowledge on the Arab world] (Cairo: Supreme Council of Culture, 2010); Emad Abou Ghazi, "Egyptian Archives and the Rewriting of the Mamluk's History," *Journal of Islamic Area Studies* 10 (2018): 5–16; Lucia Carminati. "Dead Ends in and out of the Archive: An Ethnography of Dar al- Watha'iq al- Qawmiyya, the Egyptian National Archive," *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 23, 1 (2018): 34–51; and Hanan Hammad, "Daily Encounters that Make History: History from Below and Archival Collaboration," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53 (2021): 139–43. For an analysis of the National Archive's historical constitution, see Yoav Di Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past: Historians and History Writing in Twentieth-Century Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); and Alan Mikhail, *My Egypt Archive* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022).

[8]On digitization, see Christine Jungen and Jihane Sfeir, eds., *Archiver au Moyen-Orient: Fabriques documentaires contemporaines* (Paris: Karthala, 2019); and Hala Bayoumi and Sébastien Oliveau, eds., "Digital Archiving in the Arab World," *Égypte/Monde arabe* 22. On archives as a tool of nation-building, see Rosie Bsheer, *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); Sumayya Ahmed, "To the Nation, Belong the Archives: The Search for Manuscripts and Archival Documents in Postcolonial Morocco," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55 (2023): 421–43; and Nilay Özok-Gündoğan, "The Archive as a 'Collective Project,'" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49 (2017): 529–33.

[9]On the archival turn, see Ann Laura Stoler's pioneering work on the colonial archive, including "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 87–109; and *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). For a wider review, see David Zeitlyn, "Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts. Archives as Anthropological Surrogates," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 461–80. On the dereliction of official archives in Egypt, see Lucie Ryzova, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Collector, Dealer and Academic in the Informal Old-Paper Markets of Cairo," in Sonja Mejcher-Atassi and John-Pedro Schwartz, eds., *Archives, Museums, and Collecting Practices in the Modern Arab World* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012); and *idem*, "Mourning the Archive: Middle Eastern Photographic Heritage between Neoliberalism and Digital Reproduction," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 56, 4 (2014): 1027–61. Egyptian community archiving initiatives have emerged in reaction to this very dereliction; see note 3 above.

[10]On histories and ethnographies of official Egyptian archives, see note 6. Recent ethnographies of the archive elsewhere include Kirsten Weld's *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); and Katherine Verdery, *My Life as a Spy: Investigations in a Secret Police File* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

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ethnographic research, as well as my own interlocutors' interests and practices, have shaped my object of study.

## Inaccessible Archives

Shortly after the 2013 military coup, scholars with an interest in archival research began having great difficulties accessing official archives in Egypt. Writing in 1992, Joel Gordon suggested that "Egypt's willingness to tolerate a constant influx of foreign scholars intent on exploring its past, present, and future … should not be taken for granted."[11] This statement now seems prophetic. Indeed, it has become increasingly difficult to carry out research in any governmental archive with a public purpose. The two main national archives are the National Library and Archives Sector (*qitāʿ dār al-kutub wal-wathāʾiq al-qawmiyya*), which is part of the Ministry of Culture; and the Archives of Legal Deposit (*dār al-maḥfuẓāt*), which have been part of the Egyptian Real Estate Taxation Authority since 1979.[12] These two institutions, as well as predecessors such as the Royal House of Records (*daftarkhānah*), have been integral in shaping the professional identity of Egyptian historians, and some historians of Egypt, since the early twentieth century. The rise of a positivist school of historiography at Cairo University, in the lineage of Muhammad Shafiq Ghurbal and his students, made documents held by official archives the gold standard of historical proof.[13] This imaginary has a direct epistemological consequence today, since many professional historians are still trained to think that their object of study is circumscribed by what such archives hold. As Alan Mikhail images, "Most researchers in the Egyptian National Archives grabbed onto one archival unit like a vein of gold and mined it until it tapped out."[14] This historical and epistemological context conspires to create a sense in which the "standard" archive is, by definition, a governmental one.

However, in Egypt as elsewhere, official records are scattered across the state apparatus given the national archives' idiosyncratic historical trajectory. Some administrations, such as the Ministry of Defense, keep their own central archives, whose holdings are never sent to the National Archives (since they concern matters of national security). Other administrations, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs or the Council of Ministers, have deposited their holdings at the National Archives, but they are only accessible with the administration's explicit permission. A tiny handful of researchers, given their specific positionality and networks, have been able to access such materials.[15] Yet other administrations, such as the Ministry of Culture,

[11]Joel Gordon, *Nasser's Blessed Movement: Egypt's Free Officers and the July Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6.

[12]In addition to these two main archives, governmental press and publishing agencies—including newspapers such as *Al-Ahram*, *Al-Akhbar*, and *Al-Gumhuriyya*, or publishing houses such as Dar Al-Hilal—give the public access to their archives for an entrance fee. These archives mainly hold runs of their own newspapers, periodicals, and organized press clippings. I have found that the employees in these archives, though they are supposed to be public in practice, treat the material under their attention with secrecy and suspicion, reproducing a wider pattern in national archives.

[13]Di Capua, *Gatekeepers*, 196–203.

[14]Mikhail, *My Egypt Archive*, 35.

[15]Recent examples include Rasha Ali Taha's *Wizārat al-Khārigiyya al-Miṣriyya, 1954–1970* [The Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1954–1970] (Cairo: General Egyptian Book Organization, 2016), which cites

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have never had a central archive and, in consequence, their material has always been fragmented across smaller institutions, homes, and the second-hand market. The Ministry of Culture is not uniquely porous: I have encountered similar archival material outside the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Education, and even the Ministry of Defense. Therefore, while some administrations keep more paperwork internally than others, actually existing "state archives" remain inherently fragmented. In practice, then, scholars invested in historical research must use sources beyond the "standard" governmental archive to write the Egyptian state's contemporary history—whether because there are stringent restrictions on access, or because archival documents are scattered.

The practical difficulties involved in accessing national archives have been deplored by historians such as Khaled Fahmy, Omnia El Shakry, and Lucia Carminati.[16] They can be more vividly illustrated by my own failed attempt at obtaining a research permit in both the National Archives and the Archives of Legal Deposit. In November 2018, I went to the National Archives to submit my file, which consisted in a short two-page form with basic information: project title, period, a reference letter from Oxford, a copy of my Egyptian national ID, and a so-called "research plan" (*khiṭṭat baḥth*). This plan is a research proposal and, more importantly, a list of the specific archival units to be consulted with a short justification in each case. The permit does not give access to the archive at large, but only to those units identified in the research plan. Moreover, the list of archival units is not publicly available, which leaves the Head of the research room to tell researchers about the units they need to access based on a vague understanding of their project. Accessing archival units, in this sense, is usually mediated by a personal relationship.[17] Knowing how difficult getting the research permit can be, I had consulted with some colleagues who had gained access after 2011 and modelled my application documents closely on theirs (especially when it came to the research plan). I submitted a similar application to access the Archives of Legal Deposit in March 2019, which was received by the Head of Security at the Real Estate Taxation Authority.

After submitting my files, I returned every two to four weeks over several months to check on my application—to no avail. For instance, on 9 June 2019, I decided to check whether the two permits I had requested from the National Archives and the Archives of Legal Deposit were out yet. I headed to the Real Estate Taxation Authority around 10:30 a.m. When I saw the Head of Security, wearing his usual dark suit and tie, I shook his hand and he smiled. I asked him about the permit, and he leaned a little toward me as he asked me to refresh his memory. I reminded him that I wanted to

material from Foreign Affairs at the National Archives; and Mamdouh Anis Fathi's *Miṣr min al-Thawra ila al-Naksa: Muqaddimāt Ḥarb Ḥuzayrān/Yunyu 1967* [Egypt from revolution to defeat: prolegomena of the June 1967 war] (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, 2018), which cites material in the army's archive.

[16]Khaled Fahmy, "Azmat al-Kitāba al-Tārikhiyya fi Miṣr" [The crisis of historical writing in Egypt], *Mada Masr*, 10 July 2014; Omnia El Shakry, "'History without Documents': The Vexed Archives of Decolonization in the Middle East," *American Historical Review* 120, 3 (2015): 920–34; Lucia Carminati, "Dead Ends"; and Alan Mikhail, *My Egypt Archive*.

[17]I managed to track down an old list of archival units published in a student manual, which allowed me to circumvent this oral process. Unfortunately, this circumvention may not have been to my advantage in the end.

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gain access to the Archives of Legal Deposit for a book on the Ministry of Culture, and I mentioned that the permit should have been issued by 16 May, according to the initial timeline he had given me. We went to his office, and I sat in my usual wooden chair by his desk. He took out the key to open the drawer, and I saw him taking out my file, which looked like it had not left the drawer in weeks. He said flatly, "The permit is not out yet." He added that I should call him in a week. He gave me a number to call so I would not have to come in. I thanked him and took the piece of paper with the number, and I realized it was (unlike the previous time) a personal mobile number.

After I was done at the Archives of Legal Deposit, I took a cab to the National Archives by midday. I went to the front door and asked the security guards whether the permits from the research room were out. One guard asked me whether I was here to submit a request, or whether I had done so already, and I said that I submitted already. He asked for my national ID card, kept flipping it over for a while, until he called the room's receptionist and asked about someone who would have had a demand submitted back in November 2018. He closed the phone and told me to put my backpack in a locker behind him and said I should go upstairs to the room. When I entered the cool, calm, slightly lit room, I saw the usual receptionist sitting by the desk. I went straight to her and told her my name. She asked when I had submitted the demand, so I repeated: "November 2018." She went through the paper register and asked for my full name, but as I peered into the folder, the slot next to my name looked empty. "The permit isn't in yet," she stated. I asked when the latest permit had been issued. She did not answer initially but pointed to other names on her list who had submitted a demand in November 2018 without receiving answers either. She said that "they"—a common euphemism for the shadowy security state—did not issue a single permit for requests submitted in the second half of November 2018. She said that I could "follow [the permit's progress] over the phone" afterward. I smiled, thanked her, and went to the lockers.

My access requests had not been answered by the time I was getting ready to leave Cairo in October 2019. Every time, I would arrive at the main desk, ask to go to the research room, talk to the receptionist—who had a handwritten list of all the research permit applications—and the result column next to my name would remain blank. While the file was past the internal process at the National Archives—which is why my name was inscribed on the receptionist's handwritten list—I would return to discover that no decision had yet been made. The main reason behind this extensive delay was a change in the review process that happened around 2013 or 2014. During the Mubarak era, the process would have been concluded within the bounds of the National Archives administration, but over the past decade roughly, applications have been reviewed by an additional committee within the General Intelligence Service, which involves a burdensome security attention to each file, leading to response times of regularly up to twelve or eighteen months, or in my case, even more.[18]

[18]This piece of information was provided by an ex-Minister of Culture, whose anonymity I will protect given the sensitive subject matter. The ancillary evidence to this effect is that, when I asked research room employees where my file went after a few months, many mentioned that it was "with them," the cryptic term used to designate the security state. The implication was that the National Archives administration had approved the request so far but was waiting on security approval at a higher level. Under Mubarak, the security official *within* the National Archives would have had the discretion to process the request on behalf of higher-up intelligence services, but now files went elsewhere *systematically*, presumably, to the central offices

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One could speculate about the reasons behind my request's stalling. Although I am an Egyptian citizen, I have spent most of my life outside Egypt (in Canada and, later, the United Kingdom). This leaves me with what seems like a suspiciously thin personal file in comparison with Egyptian colleagues. I have no Egyptian diplomas, no driver's license, no employment history, no property to my name, no utility bills: just a birth certificate, an exemption from military service, and a dual citizenship certificate issued by the Ministry of Interior. This unusually "empty" file could have raised eyebrows among security officials, which might explain (speculatively) why I was regularly being queried about my own history by the Head of Security at the Real Estate Taxation Authority. On a related note, being based in a foreign university may have raised additional suspicions, regardless of citizenship. Foreign as well as Egyptian researchers based in non-Egyptian institutions have become an open target of state surveillance since 2013, most obviously after Giulio Regeni, a Cambridge-based Italian Ph.D. student researching independent labor unions, was arrested and tortured to death by state security in January 2015. Regeni's assassination was met with international condemnation and limited diplomatic pressure for accountability on the current regime. The perverse consequence of such pressure, however, was to amplify the security apparatus' sense that *any* researcher affiliated with a foreign university could be an active threat.[19] That said, some researchers—regardless of their nationality or foreign affiliations—have still been allowed into the national archives in recent years. My positionality may well have shaped my archival access conditions, but it is difficult to know definitively. What is interesting to note is that, whether or not one succeeds in accessing the national archives, securitization creates an uncertain and anxiogenic research environment.

For the anecdote, when I went to check on my application in October 2019, the security guard at the gate said it was "still way too early." When I returned in May 2021, after a year and a half away, I had still not received a decision. The application was neither rejected nor accepted. It now lies in bureaucratic limbo, and I will probably have to begin the process from scratch when I return to Cairo next. So I, like many colleagues in Egypt, could not access official archives and began to ask myself: what sources could one find *outside* these archives to write a history of the Ministry of Culture and, more generally, of the Egyptian state? The practical answers led me in two key directions: the private collections held by state officials and their families, and the second-hand book and paper market.

## Custodians of State Documents

In *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past*, Yoav Di Capua portrays official Egyptian historiography as a realm of historians and archivists. These "gatekeepers," as he calls them, are protagonists in a drama in which the nation's history is at stake. In

of General Intelligence. For another permit-seeking experience under Mubarak, see Mikhail, *My Egypt Archive*, 29–33.

[19]Egyptian researchers based in foreign universities have explicitly been targeted by state security since 2013. Prominent cases of imprisonment include Ahmed Samir Santawy and Patrick Zaki, in addition to numerous researchers detained, interrogated, and intimidated by the National Security Agency (*al-amn al-waṭani*). The Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression (AFTE) has compiled a useful report on the matter in 2021, at https://afteegypt.org/research/monitoring-reports/2021/12/23/27836-afteegypt.html (accessed on 17 Jan. 2025).

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David Zeitlyn's words, "Archivists [select] which items are archived and which are condemned to oblivion by being omitted. This process is another instrumentality of power. Present choices determine future history, selecting the materials available to future historians."[20] While official archives and assorted workers retain a gatekeeping function over hegemonic understandings of the Egyptian past, I would argue that the range of actors invested in such gatekeeping is much wider in practice. When it comes to the history of the Egyptian state, in particular, these actors include bureaucrats, their families, and the various peddlers and dealers who circulate state paperwork in the second-hand market. This section examines the assumptions and sociological positions of these understudied custodians of state documents, to explore why these documents are scattered and, by extension, what it tells us about the contemporary Egyptian state.

State documents constitute only a share of the private collections of state officials or the second-hand market in Cairo, but it is striking to note that these documents would be in private hands at all, or that they would sell as second-hand goods. Why do documents leak out of state institutions to begin with? In principle, the value chain behind state documents should not exist, given the laws and decrees governing the civil administration's archiving procedures. This legal framework is encapsulated by two key edicts: law no. 356 of 1954 and the Ministry of Finance's decree no. 270 of 2009. The former established the Egyptian National Archives as well as its legal power to seize all documents of historical value held by state institutions or by private individuals. The determination of such value, legally, is left within the hands of the Head of the National Archives, the Minister of National Guidance (later Culture), and permanent archival committees in each state administration (*ligān dā'ima lil-maḥfuẓāt*).[21]

Decree no. 270, on its part, set down the requirements of legal deposit for all paperwork produced by state administrations (so-called "*maḥfuẓāt al-ḥukūma*").[22]

[20]Zeitlyn, "Anthropology in and of the Archives," 463.

[21]Article 4 in law no. 356 of 1954 stipulates that all historical papers held in the Abdin presidential palace, the Archives of Legal Deposit, the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Islamic Endowments, and Al-Azhar should be handed over to the newly created National Archives, except "those of a secret nature." Article 5 further empowers the Head of the National Archives to seize paperwork deemed historically valuable within the state, while articles 6 and 7 give the Minister of Culture and National Guidance extensive powers to seize historically valuable documents held in private hands. Articles 10 and 11 establish archival committees in each ministry to oversee, in consultation with the National Archives, the handover or discarding of any paperwork. According to Emad Abou Ghazi, a prominent specialist of Egyptian national archives, these committees were not systematically created or activated across state institutions, and many stopped working on a regular basis when the National Archives were merged with the National Library in 1966 and, later, with the General Egyptian Book Organization in 1971. When the Egyptian National Library and Archives Sector was reestablished in 1993, these committees started working again, albeit unevenly across ministries and with a significant gap in material between the 1960s and the 1990s. For more on the National Archives' constitution, see Di Capua, *Gatekeepers of the Arab Past*, 294–98.

[22]This decree was published in the official gazette, *Al-Waqā'i' al-Miṣriyya*, vol. 102, pp. 2–31, on 4 May 2009. The Minister of Finance was entitled to change legal deposit requirements by presidential decree no. 1608 of 1967. The 2009 decree superseded an earlier one by the Council of Ministers, voted on 28 October 1953, regarding "the government's legal deposit paperwork in accounting, services, pensions, and conservation rooms" (*lā'iḥat maḥfuẓāt al-ḥukūma al-khaṣṣa bil-ḥisābāt wal-mustakhdimīn wal-ma'āshāt wa bi-niẓām ghuraf al-ḥifẓ*).

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Article 3 distinguishes between "permanent" paperwork (*maḥfuẓāt mustadīma*), which should be deposited in either the National Archives or the Archives of Legal Deposit, and "temporary" paperwork (*maḥfuẓāt mu'aqqata*), which can be discarded from its home administration after a moratorium of five to thirty-five years, depending on the type of paperwork in question.[23] Documents concerning personnel, legislation, government property, "public interest," or those endowed with "historical value" (using the 1954 law's definition) are meant to be kept permanently. In principle, then, the Head of the National Archives and the Minister of Culture, in consultation with permanent archival committees in each administration, would oversee the transfer of historically valuable material into national archives and, according to article 31 in decree no. 270, would be consulted on any document's historical value prior to disposal. In practice, state officials get rid of, or sell, documents that should not legally be thrown away or sold on a regular basis, which dealers buy and resell though they should not legally be traded. Setting aside occasional requisitions by the customs agency or audits by the Administrative Control Agency (*al-riqāba al-idāriyya*), which is empowered to act against officials accused of corruption or mismanagement,[24] I have not witnessed or heard of a systematic procedure designed to halt the everyday discarding and commodification of state paperwork—hence its prevalence in private homes or in the market.[25]

The state officials with whom I have had conversations share some assumptions about the kind of paperwork to be kept in, and the kind of paperwork to be discarded from, their administrations. These assumptions are based on an everyday interpretation of the law, rather than its zealous enforcement. There is a broad distinction between three kinds of paperwork among Cairene bureaucrats: *maḥfuẓāt*, *wathā'iq*, and *awrā'*. *Maḥfuẓāt* are sometimes simply rendered as "archives" in English, but the term literally

[23]See ministerial decree no. 270 of 2009 by the Ministry of Finance, 21–24.

[24]The Administrative Control Agency (ACA) is an audit organization directly under the President's office's command, which was founded by law no. 54 of 1964. Article 2 in its foundation law specifies four remits for its action, which remain in effect: (1) investigating the reasons behind administrative failure (*quṣūr*) and proposing solutions to it; (2) enforcing laws and decrees within the civil administration; (3) uncovering financial mismanagement or crimes committed by bureaucrats, with the backing of the police and the legal system; and (4) investigating citizen complaints against bureaucrats. Today, the ACA portrays itself (and is often portrayed by bureaucrats) as an anti-corruption agency. Any complaint against a state official can be investigated (and litigated) through the Agency, which retains extensive powers over state bureaucrats. Ethnographically speaking, several bureaucrats at the Ministry of Culture evoked the ACA's name as a source of fear—those who had been "sent to the Agency" (*itḥawwil lil-riqāba al-idāriyya*) were evoked in hushed tones. The overall zeal in keeping paperwork tight was justified by unpredictable, yet possible, ACA audits.

[25]The Egyptian cultural press regularly reports on high-profile thefts from the National Library or the National Archives, usually of rare manuscripts and documents. For recent examples, see Abdelrahman Ahmad, "Min Risālat al-Shaf'i ilal-Waqā'i' … Ihmāl wa Sariqāt Ghāmiḍa Tuhaddid Archif Miṣr al-Qawmi" [From Shaf'i's *Risala* to the *Waqā'i'*: negligence and nebulous thefts threaten the Egyptian National Archive], *Al Jazeera*, 1 Dec. 2022; and Muhammad al-Sadiq, "Dar al-Kutub wal-Wathā'iq … Dhākirat Miṣr Tata'arraḍ lil-Tagrīf" [The National Library and Archives: Egypt's memory faces erasure], *Al Jarida*, 17 June 2013. There are parallel, more sober reports about customs raids seizing rare manuscripts being smuggled. For a recent example, see "Gamārik Sharq Port Saïd Taḍbuṭ Muḥawalat Tahrīb 'Adad Min al-Makhṭūṭāt wal-Lawḥāt al-Athariyya" [The eastern Port Saïd customs stop an attempt at smuggling a number of antique manuscripts and paintings], *Al-Shorouk*, 9 Dec. 2024. That said, the press never reports on the everyday discarding of state documents.

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means "things to keep" or "things to conserve" as a requirement of legal deposit. In Egyptian civil administration, they mainly refer to personal status documents, which can include details of a civil servant's salary, bonuses, promotions, contributions toward health insurance and retirement pensions, et cetera. These documents are the best-preserved ones, in my experience, likely because they affect the direct interests of state bureaucrats. This kind of paperwork is also monitored by the Administrative Control Agency and the Central Agency for Organization and Administration (*al-gihāz al-markazi lil-tanẓīm wal-idāra*), both important audit organizations within civil administration.[26]

*Wathā'iq* are conceived as "historical documents," which are either in the National Archives already or deserving to be archived given their historical significance. These are archival documents in a broad sense, although the Arabic term connotes a certain documentary truth-value as well. Even when bureaucrats agree that certain documents within their remit are actual *wathā'iq*—archive-worthy documents—they are often not sent to the National Archives, for financial and logistical reasons. There are neither sufficient budgets nor labor-time to physically sort through and carry all archival documents to the appropriate institution. Thus, even those documents considered "archival" often remain in the institution where they were produced until it moves, or until an official decides to empty out office space—sometimes without knowing what the paperwork contains in detail, which again can end up either in a state official's home or on the second-hand market.

*Awrā'*, lastly, refer to (usually personal) papers or paperwork in a broad sense. This last category comprises the formidable sum of papers produced by any administration —memos, circulars, decrees, forms, missives (*ma'muriyyāt*), et cetera. These papers, although they may in some cases legally count as documents to be sent to the National Archives, are in practice kept or destroyed at the discretion of state officials in the course of their daily work. The legal justification behind this practice comes from the Ministry of Finance's decree no. 270, which implies that any paper not *explicitly* liable to be deposited in perpetuity can be discarded after a short- to mid-term moratorium.

These different categories of paperwork reveal a further paradox in everyday archiving practices among Cairene bureaucrats. While the line between *maḥfuẓāt*, *wathā'iq*, and *awrā'* can be blurry, that between what must be kept and what can be discarded—whatever "it" is—is meticulously policed. The bureaucrat's *'uhda*, or things under his or her custodianship, is a central emic concept articulating this paradox. The *'uhda* includes every object and document under the bureaucrat's watch, from furniture items to stationery, electronic equipment to paperwork. In principle, these objects and documents belong to "the state," because the *'uhda* is attached to one's office rather than one's private person. Should the bureaucrat leave, the *'uhda* needs to remain intact and be passed onto the next person in office. In

[26]The Central Agency for Organization and Administration (CAOA) is the central state organ responsible for legislating and reforming the civil administration. It was initially a National Administration Centre (*diwān al-muwaẓẓafīn*), legally established by law no. 210 of 1951. Quickly after the 1952 revolution, however, it was reoriented to enforce laws and decrees, to monitor hiring processes and hierarchies, to audit budgets, and suggest legislative reforms in the state's civil sector (see article 2 in bill no. 158 of 1952). The CAOA in its current form was founded by presidential decree no. 118 of 1964, and later reformed by ministerial decrees in 1991 and 2001. Unlike the ACA, the CAOA is not directly tied to the police and the judiciary. However, given its extensive auditing powers, bureaucrats see it as a fearsome organization.

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practice, however, bureaucrats make constant judgments about what is within their *ʿuhda* and what lies outside of it, which means that their registers seldom match what is kept by their office. Bureaucrats must keep their *ʿuhda* as pristine as they have received it, but the hazards of bureaucratic life mean that they cannot always control what is actually kept and what is actually discarded. What ensues is a constant readjustment of register to reality, and a constant shifting of the lines between what is thought undiscardable, what *can* be discarded, and what *is*, in fact, discarded.

When not destroyed, then, state documents can make it to the homes of state officials, especially when they move their offices, are dismissed by superiors, or retire. Under these circumstances, paperwork enters the custody of the household head, whether the original official or their descendants. As I searched for the Ministry of Culture's history in private collections, I became privy to the varying conditions under which historical material is kept in family homes. It is important to note, here, that I was not just any ethnographer trying to access "the field," but the son of well-known intellectuals who had extensive relationships with different sub-administrations within the Ministry of Culture (though they were never employed by it); and the grandson of an academic, a filmmaker, a schoolteacher, and a civil servant. Thus, the relational and emotional labor involved in visiting homes, drinking tea with families of state officials, and their agreeing to let me access their papers is not read by my interlocutors as just "research," but as an aspect of in-class and in-network sociability. This positionality did not guarantee my access to materials, nor did it preclude my doing the relational work involved in gaining such access, but it certainly explains the relative ease with which some interlocutors opened their homes to me.[27]

Even under the most organized circumstances—that is, when the household head has made a conscious effort to archive their paperwork—finding historical material still requires much physical and relational work. This is well illustrated by the case of Ibrahim, a cultural administrator who invited me to look through his family's files in 2019.[28] When I first arrived in his apartment, Ibrahim took me on a brief tour to show me how he organized the space. The dimly lit rooms were all swimming in large cardboard boxes filled to their brims with folders. The walls were lined with shelves crammed with books. Once we sat down, he explained that the apartment contained collections inherited from different generations of bureaucrats: his father's collection, some of his aunts' and uncles' collection, and a little bit of his mother's collection. After this initial visit, Ibrahim asked me to visit him again to photograph the material he kept. Some months later, we shifted boxes in a further room to reach a suitcase whose exact contents remained mysterious. We took out the suitcase to the crowded living room and started triaging.

The material we uncovered included correspondence and press clippings, but also paperwork from his father's ministerial and civil society activities. We sorted these

[27]In a recent article, I elaborate on the relational dynamics involved in conducting research in private collections in Cairo: "How to Study a State in Ruins," *Égypte, Soudan, mondes arabes* 25 (2024): 209–22.

[28]All my interlocutors have been anonymized in my ethnographic notes and my publications to protect their identity. They are each assigned a single pseudonym, and I have made their professional positions as vague as possible to avoid identifying their role within the Ministry or the second-hand book and paper market. I have also intentionally blurred the temporal bounds around the specific events narrated in this article, in case others present identify my interlocutors. I have obtained their verbal consent to publish my findings in anonymized form, as approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee at the University of Oxford.

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papers into distinct piles by their origin and nature, and I asked Ibrahim about the paperwork as we went along. His explanations were as vital to the research process as some of the material itself. He not only gave me contextual clues to interpret what each piece of paper was (e.g., which positions his father occupied at different moments in time, or in which activities he was involved), but also provided extensive commentary on the paperwork's substance. While going through the material once, for instance, I found a paper produced by an organization called "The Central Association for Cultural Palaces" (*al-gamʿiyya al-markaziyya li-qusūr al-thaqāfa*). Since I had never come across this institution before, I asked Ibrahim what it was. He mentioned that each cultural palace has its own "friends association," which acts as a civil society funding body. The General Organization for Cultural Palaces created a central administration to connect all these associations, whose purpose is to gather all the suggestions and funds made by lower-level associations to reinvest them in improving cultural palaces in the whole country.

Ibrahim presents the case of a bureaucrat who is unusually attentive to his family's paperwork, but I have encountered the opposite extreme as well. I once visited the son of a prominent minister under President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who ruled the country between 1954 and 1970, with high hopes of finding the minister's elusive papers. When I arrived at his apartment, I was greeted by a young butler, who invited me to sit in the living room. A portrait of the father hung on the wall, a tea table lay in the middle of the room, with some flowery rugs, a television, family portraits, and leather couches. Ramsis emerged five minutes later: an elderly man, moving very slowly, looking not too dissimilar to his father. We had a conversation about his life for over an hour and a half, and then moved to his desk room, where there was a corner decorated with pictures belonging to his father (some caricatures, some in his official position, some as a child). Given prior experiences, I was expecting that Ramsis would bring out some documents from his father's files, but he surprised me by saying that he had only kept a draft of his father's letter of resignation from Nasser's government and no more paperwork. The last remaining traces of the prominent minister in his own house were the type of photographs typical of a bourgeois household in Cairo. The remaining paperwork was likely discarded, as I witnessed when I encountered fragments from his office files in a collector's home some months later.

When state papers escape private homes, they are dealt with by a large network of intermediaries working in the second-hand book and paper market.[29] There is a broad professional-cum-sociological difference between two classes of intermediaries: peddlers and dealers. While peddlers buy and sell all sorts of goods by the batch (including furniture, household items, electric equipment, books, and paper), dealers specialize in selling books and documents; sometimes they even focus on specific genres. Fiction, history, or heritage (*turāth*) are common specialties; others

[29]In Egypt, the discarding of state documents into (among other destinations) the second-hand book and paper market is a practice attested since the Middle Ages, if not before: see, for the Mamluk period, Tamer El-Leithy, "Living Documents, Dying Archives: Towards a Historical Anthropology of Medieval Arabic Archives," *Al-Qantara* 32, 2 (2011): 389–434; and Daisy Livingston, "The Paperwork of a Mamluk *Muqṭaʿ*: Documentary Life Cycles, Archival Spaces, and the Importance of Documents Lying Around," *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 28 (2020): 346–75. For the Ottoman period through the present day, see Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics: How Editors and Print Culture Transformed an Intellectual Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020). A complete history of Egypt's second-hand book and paper market, from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century, remains to be written.

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concentrate on reselling photographs, or magazines, or personal papers. Peddlers live like the working poor, reselling items they collect every day to make a living. Book dealers are usually middle-class businessmen with formal educations. Although some dealers inherit their job, many have previous careers or side jobs as lawyers, small business owners, teachers, or even civil servants. Unlike peddlers, the dealers' wealth is built on accumulating books and documents, which are later resold at a premium. Peddlers and non-specialized dealers seldom identify individual books to sell at a higher rate, however rare they may be. For instance, I once bought an original copy of Mohammed Hassanein Heikal's book, *Azmat al-Muthaqqafīn* (The crisis of the intellectuals), from a small-time bookseller near Nasser metro station. The small pocketbook was in the 5 Egyptian pound (EGP) section because it was missing its main cover, so I managed to snatch it for an all-too-modest price (which was roughly equivalent to around US$0.35 in 2018–2019, when US$1.00 was worth between 14 and 15 EGP). While the articles on which the book is based are available in Al-Ahram's archive, only about a thousand copies of the original edition were printed in 1961. This edition crystallized an epoch-defining debate, initially spurred by Lutfi al-Khuli, around the place of intellectuals vis-à-vis the state under Nasser.[30] In a context where the book was sold by size, however, considerations of rarity and research value mattered little to the street-side merchant, whose approach was rather different from the specialized dealer.

The class difference between peddlers and dealers is well-illustrated by a comment I once heard from a colleague at the book market behind Cinema Diana in downtown Cairo. When I arrived at one of the coffee shops in which the market was based, I was greeted by many of the book dealers I knew. My colleague looked like a deer in the headlights, amid the fast, voluminous exchanges of books; dealers rummaging through their plastic bags; waiters running back and forth with hot beverages. Slowly, several dealers brought me the books I had booked online. I had to explain to my colleague the basic principles of this market: customers buy online, dealers bring over reserved books in plastic bags, and then deliver them to customers in exchange for the price agreed online in advance. My colleague was astonished by this whole market because he thought that it was a space in which dealers scream out prices like street peddlers, but he was surprised by the calm and collected demeanor of dealers huddled quietly in the coffee shop and delivering their products, which would have been impossible prior to social media, according to him. The contrast between "rough" peddlers and "quiet" dealers is stereotypical, but it indicates the different associations made with each class of merchants. Fundamentally, dealers are much more specialized merchants than peddlers.

Consider the story of Hallaj, one of the dealers with whom I had extensive interactions (and business). He was formally an employee of the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (*wizārat al-awqāf*), responsible for a small mosque (*zawya*) in Nasr City, in northeast Cairo. Born in a village in the Nile Delta, he began his career as a research assistant with a number of prominent intellectuals and media companies, but eventually decided to enter the second-hand book market to supplement his basic income. Now receiving his full pension and healthcare after

[30]For more on the cultural debate surrounding the "crisis of the intellectuals," see Anouar Abdel Malek, *Égypte: Société militaire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962), 191–218; and Sharif Younis, *Nidā' al-Sha'b: Tarīkh Naqdi lil-Aidiulujya al-Naṣiriyya* [The call of the people: a critical history of Nasserist ideology] (Cairo: Dar al-Shorouk, 2012), 424–37.

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retiring, Hallaj devotes himself more and more to trading books and documents. I met him in the library of a mutual acquaintance, where I spent weeks looking at 1950s and 1960s material. When he learned about my interest in the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance, Hallaj asked his colleagues in the market to gather material that might interest me.[31] Over time, he brought me a significant amount of historical material with direct relevance to my project: some files from the Ministry of Culture's Statistical Unit in 1962–1963; a rare stencil report written by the Popular University's President Azmi Nawwar; some propaganda books produced by the Information Department; and Ministry of Culture booklets detailing ongoing activities. Each item had a separate price tag: the individual files cost around 100 EGP each, and individual books around 25 EGP each, while I received booklets at a discounted rate of 10 EGP per booklet or, in some cases, as small gifts. As usual, prices were agreed based on item size, and Hallaj and I had a commonly agreed currency with these materials regardless of their research "rarity." As Lucie Ryzova argues, "Every merchant or dealer has a client in mind, and this goes especially for the middle and higher end of the market. In those circles, no merchandise ever sits for long, and known buyers are called as soon as 'something' arrives, or even before that, as some retailers only buy for a dealer once they have ascertained a client's interest. Splitting up material into smaller batches is common, as each dealer tries to please a number of his 'good' or regular clients."[32]

Hallaj has always been fair in his dealings with me, as he has a particular market ethic in which goods ought to be exchanged at stable rates. He was regularly critical of book dealers with "no morals" (*ma 'andūsh akhlā'*), by which he meant dealers who increase their prices as soon as they learn that their client wants a specific item. For instance, I was told by a common friend of Hallaj that he had once agreed to buy the full run of a rare magazine at about 5 EGP per copy, which was a significant sum at the time. When he went to collect it, he was surprised to be shown all sorts of other items in a haphazard manner. When he explained to the seller that he had come specifically to get the magazine run, his counterpart backtracked and said that he will have to think about selling it at all. Hallaj and his friend agreed that this kind of dealing was dishonest, because it exploits the client's desire, as the dealer feels that they can increase the price when someone really wants to acquire them.

Hallaj's familiarity with the second-hand book and paper market, as well as his extensive network, made him able to harness specific material for my ongoing research on the Ministry of Culture. Thus, our relationship had not only financial implications—embedding prices in a longer series of transactions—but also epistemic ones, to the extent that what he found became what I read and wrote from. Hallaj's own intellectual makeup—for example, his understanding of modern Egyptian history, his familiarity with state institutions and their evolution over time, and his acquaintance with different genres of state paperwork—shaped, to a noticeable extent, what I accessed about the Ministry of Culture's past. Not all dealers have this specific skill, however. Second-hand dealers are extremely coy

[31]This is, to my knowledge, the main way in which dealers try to reconstitute an "archival" collection, by having a pre-existing customer who is actively seeking such materials. Given the idiosyncrasies of each customer/researcher's taste and the costs involved in acquiring and storing specific materials (i.e., not by the bulk), one can understand why dealers will not, of their own initiative, seek to reconstitute archival collections on specific subjects.

[32]Ryzova, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," 106.

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about their own sources—an understandable way of protecting their profit margin based on information asymmetry. Once, I was intrigued by a file found by Hallaj, and I unsuspectingly asked him where it came from. Our common friend, sitting nearby, yelled: "They never say!" Hallaj smiled a little, as if I had embarrassed him, but he tersely answered: "From the same people.…" When I got to know him better, Hallaj took me on some journeys to peddlers whose existence I had not suspected: a small *rubabikya*[33] kiosk in a side street in Dokki, or warehouses on the outskirts of Cairo, where he could get items much cheaper to resell at a premium. Hallaj even knew where the General Egyptian Book Organization's own warehouses were located, where storage employees would sometimes leak out material not available in their shops (*manāfidh bīʿ*) in central Cairo.

Overall, state documents discarded by bureaucrats, whether intentionally or unintentionally, transition through different phases as they are kept by state officials, their families, peddlers, or dealers. The differences between each custodian parallel conceptual differences in their apprehension of state paperwork: where bureaucrats rely on blurry legal-rational categories to determine what paperwork should be kept and what should be discarded, merchants rely on commercial imperatives related to their specific ways of buying and selling paperwork. These custodians also build a very different relationship with the Egyptian state's history, which is not just a relationship with an existing state, but also an intimate material acquaintance with traces of its past.[34] The intimacy of the relationship is shaped, in some cases, by filial connection—like Ibrahim's interest in his father's paperwork—but it is also shaped by the different historical expertise held by different actors—contrast Ibrahim's knowledge of his paperwork with Ramsis' of his, or how Hallaj identifies paperwork as opposed to the peddlers and small-time dealers. The scattering of state documents not only generates different affective attachments to the state's traces, but also a scattered expertise on the Egyptian past beyond the professional historian's and archivist's grasp.

## The Commodification of Archival Documents

In "Mourning the Archive," Lucie Ryzova astutely notes that, under conditions where national archives are difficult to access in Egypt, the historical study of photography undergoes a dual process of commodification and digitization.[35] On one hand, photographic material discarded from public or private collections ends up on a second-hand market in which the historian must first *buy* material before studying it. On the other hand, photographs held captive in official archives are digitized and uploaded on unworkable platforms—for example, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina's website—where the historian can access mere images, without the data contained in its materiality, its collection practice, or its serial organization. What Ryzova

[33]The term "*rubabikya*" is a colloquial Egyptian corruption of the Italian "*roba vecchia*" (old clothes), which is what used-goods peddlers on Cairo's streets (originally nineteenth-century working-class Italian migrants) would shout out to attract the attention of homeowners to sell or buy used goods by the bulk. These peddlers still walk around well-to-do neighbourhoods selling and buying used goods, including books and papers, and some manage to make enough to establish small stalls or stores.

[34]For more on the affective turn in the anthropology of the state, see Navaro-Yashin, "Make-Believe Papers"; and Laszczkowski and Reeves, *Affective States*.

[35]Ryzova, "Mourning the Archive," 1027–61.

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described in the case of studio photography applies just as much to written records in Egypt, such as books, government reports, and administrative paperwork. The second-hand book, paper, and image market has become a central space for research on contemporary Egyptian history. While this market has been described in depth by Ryzova herself, its practical and theoretical connections to "state archives" deserve to be teased out.

The large local market for second-hand books, and for documents, photography, ephemera, and other media, has three main sources: (1) private collections; (2) private companies or non-governmental organizations; and (3) state institutions. These organizations can discard their stocks of photos, books, or documents when their premises are emptied for a move, or when they close shop, which can happen in old studios, old printing shops, old professional associations and their libraries, different government agencies, and so on. Given their original sources—private collections, companies, and state institutions—merchants find a bit of everything in the "batches" that they buy (what is called a *lott* in colloquial Arabic), but the material is swiftly filtered and resold. Goods are either stored in a second-hand peddler or dealer's house, or what they call "bookshops" (*maktabāt*), which can range in practice from something like a warehouse to a bookstall. These "bookshops" are all over Cairo, although they were historically concentrated in certain districts: most notably, the Ezbekiyya palace garden fence, the Sayyida Zaynab bookstalls, and the Hussein bookstalls.[36] Old books and documents are traded out of these bookshops as well as some well-known public markets, including the bookstalls on Ramsis Street or the online market on Facebook, whose main participants meet every Saturday at a conglomerate of cafés in downtown Cairo to exchange items booked online for a prearranged sum, as described earlier. The emphasis on prearranged prices in the online market is rather different from sales at warehouses or bookstalls, where prices are always negotiable. As Ryzova has noted, these markets deal in relatively lower prices than the regional and global markets run through auction houses, including private auction rooms in downtown Cairo, or companies such as Christie's and Sotheby's with a regional base in Dubai.[37]

It should be noted that the second-hand market's main consumers are not academics avidly searching for historical material, but a combination of students looking for cheaper second-hand textbooks and compulsory readings, employees buying an intriguing paperback for an afternoon of leisurely reading, or private collectors seeking to add the latest "find" to their treasure trove, whether they collect old photos, heritage books, or "top secret" government reports discarded by their original institutions. These buyers do not all buy in the same way, nor do they buy the same things. Private collectors who have extensive relationships with book dealers will often get material delivered to their homes, or buy straight from a dealer's warehouse, away from the invidious eyes of others. Students and employees, however, will be scouring the cheapest bookstalls to get the best deal on a book they may well discard themselves once they have read it. The number of researchers participating in

[36]This is why Ryzova argues that these markets are not singular, as the colloquial understanding goes, but plural. In her words, "Some, like al-Ezbekiyya, are physical locations, while others represent social relations and commercial networks without any fixed physical place. Therefore, I understand 'used paper markets' as a field (in the ethnographic sense) in which the exchange of historically valuable written and printed material takes place in market conditions." "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," 95.

[37]Ibid., 106.

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the second-hand market is quantitatively dwarfed by this wider consumer base, which can better explain why, for instance, bookstalls are filled with used paperback novels and plays, whereas dealers will keep valuable "collectibles" in their warehouses to sell at a premium (e.g., picture books, rare documents). This consumer base also explains how second-hand dealers perceive researchers—in short, as a special kind of collector.[38]

All these second-hand markets act as intermediaries between the researcher and their historical sources. Thus, much research on contemporary Egypt is not just about going to the national archives, but also—and sometimes *more so*—about purchasing historical material. After being initially stored in an apartment or an office, old books and documents are either discarded or sold by the kilogram or by the batch. When a governmental institution is inventorying its contents or when a household clears some paperwork out, unwanted books and documents are either thrown in the trash, sold to a used-goods peddler (*rubabikya*) or, in some cases, sold as a whole library after an appraisal by a specialized dealer.[39] This moment of discarding is where the document's value chain starts, because it will be resold among peddlers and book dealers with an increment at each resale, either by the batch or as individualized items following assessment. The constant process of triage is a central aspect of the book dealer's economic activity, because profit margins increase once items can be sold *individually*, since each item accrues a larger relative value than when it is just a fraction of a batch.

The commodification of sources imposes a number of constraints on academic research. First, there are obvious financial constraints on the accumulation of historical material, which requires substantial funds inaccessible to unfunded students or young researchers who want to constitute large enough collections to write up their research. To take my own example, I had to spend an average of US $350 to $400 per month out of my research budget to constitute the collection based on which I am now writing, which is obviously inflected by my positionality as a researcher based in a well-funded university. Second, the way in which documents are commodified generates logistical constraints, insofar as old material is not organized according to library or archival classifications, but according to the (often personalized) emic categories of book dealers themselves. Consequently, the process of finding what one is looking for research-wise becomes rather circuitous. In Ryzova's words, "Using Ezbekiyya is a process. It is all about hanging around, browsing through tons of dirty papers, endless tea drinking with merchants, and, crucially, spending cash."[40]

To give a simple example, Qasim, one of the book dealers whose warehouses I regularly visited, would sort out books in large piles broadly organized according to

[38]Researchers buy different products in different markets, depending on their particular research interests. However, the great majority of dealers with whom I have built a relationship still try to guess "what I like"—in the same way an amateur collector "likes" things—in order to offer me "more of the same," most often with a tangential or tendentious connection to my research.

[39]The rhythm of this discarding of historical material is quite peculiar, as Ryzova notes: "More commonly, old paper turns up during special clearance occasions: notably, estate sales, the clearance of old apartments, business premises or offices of various institutions. In the case of household refuse, […] the key element in the release of historically valuable material to the market is its alienation from the original owner." "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," 100–1.

[40]Ibid., 107.

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the following categories: culture and arts, law, heritage, hardbound volumes, oversize books, books printed by the Ministry of Public Instruction, and so on. In his warehouse, books and documents were not always kept separate because the space acted as an initial triage center. Once a book or a document was added to a pile, finding any specific title became a matter of patient excavation. More often than not, dealers themselves only have a vague idea of what such piles contain. Moreover, the batches in which books come to the warehouse *before* being sorted are themselves organized according to their original storage conditions or, more frequently, according to the random order in which they were picked up by workers carrying items from one place to the next. This logistical constraint can lead to happy exploratory finds, much like browsing in a library blindly can yield unexpected insights, but it makes it nearly impossible to identify exact titles or specific documents as one would in an organized library or institutional archive.

Lastly, the commodification of historical sources imposes a significant epistemological constraint, since the documents that "sell better" are those that are most frequently found in the market. This situation guarantees that historical sources reach the researcher in a dual state of *decontextualization* from their original context of writing and storage, and *recontextualization* through a specific kind of market value. Qasim, in this sense, was not orienting my research as Hallaj would have done, by finding materials connected to my topic, but rather by presenting me with historical material that *looks like* what someone interested in the 1950s and 1960s wants. This visual/material dimension is central to price calculation, but it also determines the bulk of material offered to researchers by dealers who, like Qasim and unlike Hallaj, treat research topics as a market "preference" in order to sell additional items. Such interactions were instructive about the second-hand market's operations, but they also clarified visual and material relations among items to which I would not have been attentive otherwise. For instance, I became ever better at visually identifying certain series of governmental publications just by glancing at their cover, and I gained a keener sense of whether a book was from a certain decade or another based on paper quality and color.

Consider the book in figure 2, the yearbook of the United Arab Republic from 1963.[41] This yearbook was published more or less annually between 1955 and 1966 by the Information Department (*maṣlaḥat al-istiʿlamāt*). The Department was a branch of the Ministry of Culture and National Guidance tasked with producing a record of the state's achievements since the 1952 revolution, for both domestic and international audiences. The 1963 yearbook exists in English, French, Spanish, and German versions. This copy was sold to me by Qasim for 100 EGP, which was rather more than this type of publication commanded on the market at the time. Publications by the Information Department are not so rare, especially not these yearbooks, because they were produced in large numbers. They were initially distributed for free by the Information Department to governmental and non-governmental bodies, and many copies are still in circulation. Moreover, this book is what dealers in Egypt call "medium size" (*qatʿ wasaṭ*), which is roughly in *octavo* format. Books of this size usually did not sell for more than 50 EGP. In this case, the

[41]Egypt and Syria were united in a single republic under the name of the "United Arab Republic" in 1958, but when Syria left the union in 1961, Egypt's official name remained the same until 1971, when it officially became the "Arab Republic of Egypt."

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**Figure 2.** The 1963 Annual Yearbook of the United Arab Republic.

higher price was justified by three additional factors: first, my affiliation with a foreign university (as Qasim knew I could afford to be charged more than customers paying in local currency); second, the book's age (a 1960s book is not considered rare, but any book older than the 1980s sells for more); and lastly, the book's photographic illustrations (books with pictures of famous monarchs or presidents sell at higher rates). This yearbook was what dealers call a "Nasser-era" book, containing pictures of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, which also increased the book's value.

The reason why illustrations matter so much in determining value is that there is a wider demand for nostalgic products from what is called "*al-zaman al-gamīl*" in Egypt, which can translate as "*la belle époque*" or "the good old times."[42] The actual period designated by this expression can vary, but it roughly covers the monarchical

[42]See Lucie Ryzova, "Nostalgia for the Modern: Archive Fever in Egypt in the Age of Post-Photography," in Costanza Caraffa and Tiziana Serena, eds., *Photo Archives and the Idea of Nation* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2015); and Nermin Elsherif, "The City of *al-Zaman al-Gamîl*: (A)political Nostalgia and the Imaginaries of an Ideal Nation," *Égypte/Monde arabe* 23, 1 (2021): 61–79.

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period all the way up to the Nasser era, depending on one's political and ideological inclinations. In recent decades, there has been a remarkable rise in the consumption of old photographs, documents, or mementos from nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Egypt; they sell at much higher prices now than twenty years ago. A pictureless, medium-sized book from the 1960s sold at the very most for 40–50 EGP in 2018–2019, but if it contained images of Nasser or the Nasser era, the dealer had a chip with which to bargain for a higher price.

Contrast this book's valuation with the document in figure 3, which is a report about the Institute of Popular Culture written by the Institute's director, Azmi

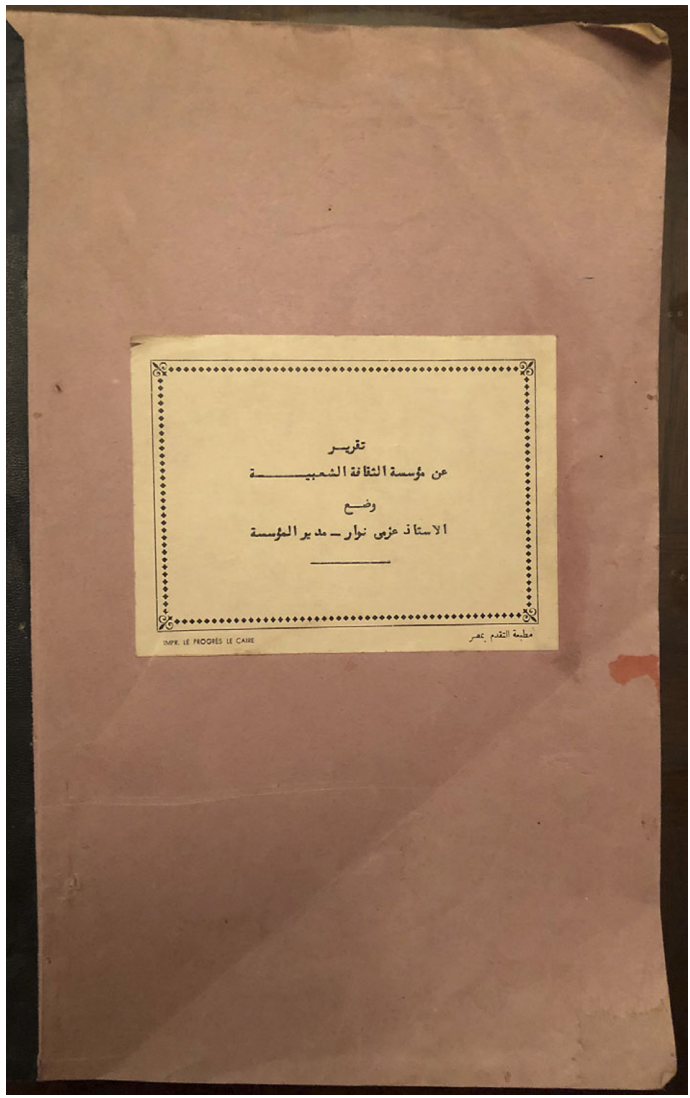



**Figure 3.** A report on the Institute of Popular Culture, written by Mr. Azmi Nawwar, the Institute's Director in 1956.

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Nawwar, in 1956. This kind of report is very rare in my experience. Although printed, these stencil documents are only ever distributed internally, in this case at the Ministry of Education. They are only likely to be found in the personal papers of the report's author or in the papers of the officials to whom the report was sent (or, in rare cases, at the Ministry's library itself). This report was probably discarded from one of these sources, but it is now difficult to trace where exactly it originated, once it has been through several hands. Hallaj sold me this report for 100 EGP, too, the same price as the 1963 yearbook. If an absolute criterion of rarity and research value mattered, one would have expected the report to be much more expensive than the yearbook. Yet this report is not of great value in the second-hand market since it contains no pictures and is not associated with a prominent figure like Nasser.

Thus, value in the second-hand book and paper market does not correspond to the rarity of the document, but to market criteria like the number of images, the historical period, and the document's size. There is an interesting flattening of the researcher and the collector in market terms, because dealers ultimately see both as customers with idiosyncratic tastes. Some of the most valuable documents for the study of the Egyptian state are the cheapest to buy, but they are scarce not only for practical reasons (i.e., because there are fewer copies), but also for market-based reasons (because they do not sell well). More pointedly, value does not inhere in the book or the document itself but is negotiated through the social relations binding book dealers with different types of customers, each with their own assumptions about how much things are worth. Prices are negotiated within these social and economic parameters. In Ryzova's words, "perceptions of 'value' differ significantly among [the market's] various participants. What starts as 'junk' becomes 'collectibles' at the hands of some and 'historical material' at the hands of others; indeed, some 'junk' remains junk."[43] Under these conditions, the commodification of archival documents opens access to historical material which, if held within securitized national archives, might have been less accessible, yet their commodification equally raises serious concerns about the researcher's ability to locate, buy, and assemble relevant sources. More broadly, this commodification is a direct consequence of everyday archiving practices among bureaucrats in Cairo, who discard paperwork into the market on a regular basis (sometimes via private homes).

## State Archives beyond the State

In *My Egypt Archive*, a historian's personal account of the Egyptian National Archives in the decade preceding the 2011 revolution, Alan Mikhail notes that "as complicated and policed as the Egyptian archive is, it remains the central storehouse of the history of the Egyptian state."[44] Mikhail acknowledges that this statement only holds until the 1940s, when state documents become sparse in official records.[45] His solution for studying the state heralded by the Free Officers after the 1952 revolution —to seek "sources other than those generated by the state"[46]—does not allow him to

[43]Ryzova, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," 95.

[44]Mikhail, *My Egypt Archive*, 5.

[45]Ryzova herself notes that "most post-1950s material has not yet been opened to the public, and there is much speculation among researchers as to whether certain records exist, where, and in what state." "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly," 93.

[46]Mikhail, *My Egypt Archive*, 12.

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fully decenter an imaginary of the National Archives as a central repository of the state's history. This article challenges this specific assumption, showing how the contemporary state's traces, too, lie outside official archives. "State archives," properly speaking, are both in official and in unofficial locations; in fragmented state institutions as well as private collections, bookstalls, and warehouses. In Omnia El Shakry's words, "The historian's ability to forge relationships with individuals with genealogical connections and generational bonds to historical personages has replaced the oft-fetishized 'allure of the archives' and the tactile nature of brittle documents."[47] One could add to her account the connections created with peddlers and dealers, which have also become essential in mediating access to historical material on contemporary Egypt. What I have shown is that the material available in all these spaces is not necessarily "alternative" in Mikhail's terms, but precisely the kind of documents one would have found at the National Archives had they not leaked outside of state institutions at some stage in their social life.

Furthermore, this article gives sociological substance to the profile of the state archives' various custodians and to the ongoing commodification of historical material, which allows us to further reflect on the Egyptian state in the spirit of Philip Abrams' essay on the difficulty of studying the state—the direct inspiration behind the article's title. Abrams' starting point is not an abstract meditation on the state, but rather, his concrete attempts to study state institutions in the United Kingdom as a sociologist. He nicely summarizes his initial observation, which also applies to our Egyptian case: "Any attempt to examine politically institutionalised power at close quarters is, in short, liable to bring to light the fact that an integral element of such power is the quite straightforward ability to withhold information, deny observation and dictate the terms of knowledge."[48] This observation, which applies neatly to my futile pursuit of access to the Egyptian National Archives, initially led Abrams to think that the state exists as a separate, autonomous entity, with real power hidden from view—and so one must dig deeper to discover the true source of its power. Abrams ultimately denied such a source's existence, however, as he postulated that this impression—of the existence of a centralized state actively seeking to prevent access to its own records—is produced through a process of ideological legitimation called the "state-idea." This idea, he says, masks the disunity of political power. In his words, "It is *this* above all that the idea of the state conceals. The state is the unified symbol of an actual disunity."[49]

This disunity is very clear in the case of Egypt's existing state archives. Some paperwork is kept within the national archives; some remains in its home administration; some is discarded into the hands of state officials, their families, and second-hand peddlers and dealers. This distribution reflects, to an extent, the fragmentation of the "state-system"; the sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating institutions vying for power in the name of a unitary projection Abrams terms "the state," and Timothy Mitchell calls the "state effect."[50] My description highlights the gap between the unified "state-idea" to which

[47]El Shakry, "History without Documents," 923. Here, El Shakry is referring to Arlette Farge's meditation on archival work, *Le Goût de l'archive* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), rendered in Thomas Scott-Railton's translation as *The Allure of the Archives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

[48]Abrams, "Notes on the Difficulty," 62.

[49]Ibid., 79, my emphasis.

[50]Timothy Mitchell, "The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics," *American Political Science Review* 85, 1 (1991): 77–96; and "Society, Economy, and the State Effect," in George

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Egyptian bureaucrats are committed and the actually existing "state-system." While all bureaucrats and citizens I encountered in Cairo speak of a single state (*al-dawla*), in my everyday observation there are sharp distinctions between, for instance, the national archives, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Defense, and remaining administrations. What impact does archival fragmentation have on the "state-idea"? How do uneven archiving practices across Egyptian state institutions shape how bureaucrats understand and legitimate "the state"?

In a forthcoming monograph, I argue that the state-idea projected by the Egyptian civil administration since the 1952 revolution has been organized around the notion of "achievement" (*ingāz*, pl. *ingazāt*).[51] This argument builds on Sharif Younis' theorization of state ideology under Nasser, whose pillars were twofold: First, the Free Officers' rule was justified by a constant state of emergency (extending Giorgio Agamben's well-known arguments in *State of Exception*).[52] Second, the Free Officers governed "in the name of the People" (*bism al-sha'b*), meaning in the name of a future people who would eventually become mature enough to earn democratic rule once the masses (*gumū'*) became politically wise, economically developed, and widely cultivated.[53] The state bureaucracy's role, in this context, was to "achieve" political, economic, and cultural progress without substantive political deliberation. The Ministry of Culture was central to this drive toward continual achievement, not just because it has been among the largest ministries since 1952, with a wide geographical remit and an extensive portfolio, but also because it was actively working to produce "the state" as a coherent, unified entity enacting the Revolution's will. Thus, the Ministry's role—through its multifarious activities in publishing, visual arts, music, libraries, media production, archaeological heritage, and so on—went beyond pushing a certain ideological line into crafting a sense of the postrevolutionary state's overarching unity.

So, what does the scattering and commodification of archival documents tell us about the achievement state? We can make two inferences: First, to the extent that the labor required to archive the vast seas of documents produced by state institutions is carried out unevenly, commodification acts as an unexpected avenue to outsource this labor without burdening a given institution's budget. The Egyptian civil administration is structurally reliant on a network of peddlers, dealers, and families to shed documentation considered "in excess" of each bureaucrat's custody (*'uhda*). Bureaucrats have great discretion in deciding whether a piece of paper will be kept, thrown away, or sold, and if it is kept, where, until when, and under what conditions. The actual discarding, though, is processed outside the bounds of state institutions. This is a neat illustration, in ethnographic terms, of the way in which the boundary between state (archives) and society is produced as an "effect" of everyday practice in Timothy Mitchell's sense. Second, the state-idea's continuity among bureaucrats is not guaranteed by a central archival record, but instead by a constant sense in which the institution is "achieving" progress within current ideological parameters—that is, according to Arab socialist principles between 1961 and 1967, or according to the

Steinmetz, ed., *State/Culture: State-Formation after the Cultural Turn* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 76–97.

[51]Chihab El Khachab, "Constructing the Achievement State: Cultural Administration in Postrevolutionary Egypt" (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, book forthcoming).

[52]Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, Kevin Attell, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[53]Younis, *Nidā' al-Sha'b*.

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*Egypt 2030* vision under President Sisi. Once the bureaucratic task (or achievement) is "done," whether because it has been superseded or because regime priorities have shifted, paperwork becomes disposable (except when it comes to legal deposit paperwork, or *maḥfuẓāt*). The result is a bureaucratic apparatus whose self-understanding is limited by a presentist imperative to satisfy the regime, while the material needed to constitute a deeper historical sense of the state-system's operation is either privatized or commodified. One could see private collections and the second-hand market, in this sense, as repositories of different versions of the state's past, literally and metaphorically discarded by the march of progress.

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