

"On Public Things: National Wealth, Social Infrastructures, and Moral Philosophy in the Aftermath of the January 25th Revolution in Egypt"



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What constitutes wealth? What is a "public thing" and what belongs in private hands? Economic models are being vigorously debated on the streets and in the academy around the world, including on the streets of Cairo since the January 25th Revolution. In this talk, I look at neglected aspects of the background to "Tahrir" as event. I completely sidestep the usual framing of matters economic in terms of "neo-liberalism" to turn to earlier strands of thought in moral philosophy and political economy that I propose shape our ethnographic present around the world. When we put aside debates about neo-liberalism to activate neglected, forgotten, suppressed, and ill-understood traditions of political economy, I propose, we can develop much more robust tools with which to think about what is underway today in Egypt and elsewhere. I turn to debates over the meaning of public utilities, finance, and economic development in the aftermath of the 1952 Revolution in Egypt, roots of those debates in the capitulatory regime of the Ottoman Empire and the West, and then explore how these long-standing debates over wealth and public goods played out in the January 25th Revolution and its aftermath. I will bring these debates in Egypt about public goods and national wealth into conversation with current discussions in anthropology about the politics and poetics of infrastructure. I will conclude by arguing that popular framings of national wealth at the core of political demands in Tahrir rehabilitated key concerns of "moral philosophy" that lie submerged in dominant framings of the economic today.

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Conference Room, Building 50, Room 51A

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