

The World Humanities Report

# Case Study: The Other Maps of Egypt

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# Case Study: The Other Maps of Egypt

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The Other Maps of Egypt<sup>1</sup> (henceforth referred to as Other Maps) was an initiative that took place between 2014 and 2019, that, according to their response to the World Humanities Report survey, “aimed to scrutinise official maps and visual representations of urban environments and experiment with media of counter-representations.”<sup>2</sup> Other Maps understood mapping as political and believed that maps can provide valuable insights into power relations. They elaborated on their website, stating that “this study is trying to understand the connotations of power structures found in the maps of Cairo between a single authoritative/official set of analog maps and a subjective/individualistic set of digital maps.” They focused on the idea of authorship, or, as they put it, “who draws the city?” In addition, Other Maps analyzed both analog (maps created on paper) and digital maps, asking “whether digital maps could be a tool of creating a counter map that voices the individual instead of the states?”<sup>3</sup>

Their online platform contains a repository of analog maps of Cairo from as early as the seventeenth century to as late as the 1990s.<sup>4</sup> These are all state-mandated, -created, or -owned maps that depict a bird’s-eye view of the city in various stages of development. Many of these maps were created by foreign powers, such as the French. In contrast, Other Maps’ digital maps, collected from various platforms, visualize social phenomena, such as protests, sexual harassment, power outages, and cultural landmarks.<sup>5</sup>

Spatiality and urbanization have increasingly become foci of the humanities and social sciences, particularly in interdisciplinary fields of study. As Laura Vaughan argues, maps are not mere visual representations of space; they are “social constructions . . . objects laden with meaning, which reflect the context of their creation. . . . It is essential to take account of the social and political context

<sup>1</sup> See <https://nerminelsherif.wixsite.com/othermaps>.

<sup>2</sup> The Other Maps of Egypt, responses to the Humanities Initiative online survey by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences / World Humanities Report, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> “Why Maps?” The Other Maps of Egypt, accessed March 4, 2021, <https://nerminelsherif.wixsite.com/othermaps/blank-2>.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://nerminelsherif.wixsite.com/othermaps/analog-maps>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://nerminelsherif.wixsite.com/othermaps/digital-maps>.

within which a map is constructed, before reading it as a historical source.”<sup>6</sup> “The Social Maps of Port Said,” a project on which Other Maps collaborated, is an example of the map as “an object laden with meaning.” The project was part of the History Workshops of Egypt, run by social historian Alia Mossallam in 2016.<sup>7</sup> The map created by this project “serves as a board of collective memory of Port Said residents . . . the map was designed to offer the residents a space to share and visualize their memories by adding their own photos and testimonies.”<sup>8</sup> Port Said is a particularly interesting area because it was the site of several watershed moments in contemporary Egyptian history (e.g., the Tripartite Aggression in 1956 and the 1967 War; it is also the site of the Suez Canal). Other Maps and History Workshops wanted to piece together the community’s memories of these conflicts.<sup>9</sup> This is what Nermin Elsherif, founder of Other Maps, refers to as “bottom-up narratives” that provide a social history other than that of the state or the historians.<sup>10</sup>

Contrast these bottom-up narratives with Other Maps’ collection of state-produced analog maps and it becomes clear that there has always been a relationship between visualization and power. Saskia Sassen explains this at length:

There is visuality in this project of nation-states to build standardized, bureaucratized, and nationalized cages for housing time and territory. For centuries, national states and their enactors worked at nationalizing territory, identity, security, power, rights—in brief, all the key elements of social and political existence. When the national state is the dominant format, the overarching dynamic is centripetal: the center grasps most of what there is to be had. Those nationalizing dynamics assembled the pieces of what we now experience as the national and, too often, the “natural.”<sup>11</sup>

Other Maps view digitization as one method that can mitigate the central-

<sup>6</sup> Laura Vaughan, *Mapping Society: The Spatial Dimensions of Social Cartography* (London: UCL Press, 2018), 7–8.

<sup>7</sup> Alia Mossallam, “History Workshops in Egypt: An Experiment in History Telling,” *History Workshop Journal* 83, no. 1 (2017): 241–51.

<sup>8</sup> Nermin Elsherif, “Visualizing the Counter-Narratives of Port Said: An Experiment of Mapping Social History,” in *This Is Not an Atlas*, ed. Kollektive Oranotango+ (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 252–57.

<sup>9</sup> Alia Mossallam and Nermin Elsherif, “Mapping the Counter-Histories of Port Said: A Critical Reading into a Communal Mapping Project,” *Jadaliyya*, January 25, 2017, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/33966/Mapping-the-Counter-Histories-of-Port-Said-A-Critical-Reading-Into-a-Communal-Mapping-Project>.

<sup>10</sup> Elsherif, “Visualizing the Counter-Narratives,” 253.

<sup>11</sup> Saskia Sassen, “Strategic Geographies: Challenge of Their Visualization,” accessed March 4, 2021, <http://saskiasassen.com/PDFs/publications/SS%20Strategic%20Geographies.pdf>.

ization of state power and states' abilities to represent the lived environment. On their website they state:

The shift from a paper map commissioned by a state to mark territories and set boundaries to a digital crowd sourced map produced by hundreds and millions of anonymous internet users is placed under a microscope. Internet maps gave users the chance to detect the flow of traffic or the best restaurants or even the areas of highest levels of sexual harassment represents the changes in the power structures drawing the city.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the digital maps they refer to, such as Harassmap, allow people to anonymously give information about a harassment incident they faced.<sup>13</sup> The application aggregates these data to visualize hot spots of harassment in different areas in Cairo. Although these types of digital initiatives and technologies have allowed for the proliferation of maps, somewhat curtailing state ownership over cartography, it is questionable whether this should be equated with people having more power or with a more “democratic” mapping process that “voices the individual,” as Other Maps put it.

The rise of digitization, especially with regard to cartography, has raised concerns over surveillance and data ownership. In addition, cartographic digitization poses a danger of obscuring social realities and inequalities. As Shannon Mattern explains, digitization is merely an extension of the idea that cities are information-processing machines, with the added risk of obscuring the people behind the data (along with the standard risks around surveillance and data ownership).<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, analog and digital maps have a common thread of needing to be read and seen in the context from which they arose. If we follow Other Maps' narrative, which is that analog maps reflect the power of governing bodies and visualize their aim to control and measure the lived environment, it makes sense that digitization has allowed for a multitude of authors, which has in turn decentralized the role of the state in mapmaking and offered new narratives about urban spaces. Although the internet and digital technologies do allow for the proliferation of maps, it is not clear that this necessarily causes people to have more power. What stands out in the work of Other Maps—which goes beyond

<sup>12</sup> “Why Maps?” The Other Maps of Egypt.

<sup>13</sup> Harassmap provides a list of similar initiatives around the world, available at <https://harassmap.org/around-world>.

<sup>14</sup> Shannon Mattern, “A City Is Not a Computer,” *Places Journal*, February 2017, <https://placesjournal.org/article/a-city-is-not-a-computer/>.

the repository of analog and digital maps to include social histories and maps of Alexandria and Port Said, for example—is the question at the heart of their work: “Who draws the city?”

**Hana Shaltout** graduated from the American University in Cairo in 2014 with a BA from the Political Science Honours Programme with a specialization in international relations. She completed her MSc in gender, media, and culture at the London School of Economics in 2015. After being a researcher at the Arab Council for Social Sciences working on the World Humanities Report, she is currently doing her PhD in cultural studies at the University of Sussex, on feminist activism in Egypt post-2011. Her research interests include alternative knowledge production, gender studies, cultural studies, and women's participation in the political arena.