

A Bureaucracy without Bureaucrats: Inside the Egyptian Governmental Sector

Abstract

This paper is my first attempt to make sense of the way in which bureaucrats, intellectuals, and cultural producers in and around the Egyptian Ministry of Culture (MOC) understand what it means to be a “bureaucrat” (*mowazzaf*). My overall project is to understand how state power is exercised through everyday administrative work in Cairo since the 1952 revolution. I have two reasons to choose the MOC as a field site. One is practical: I have had the occasion to create extensive contacts with the cultural sector while conducting my doctoral fieldwork on the Egyptian film industry between 2013 and 2015, thereby making the MOC a relatively familiar environment. The other reason is intellectual: the MOC has allowed the official ideology of the Egyptian state to be reproduced since 1958, but it is itself a fragmented institution with multiple overlapping organizations, personalities, and histories. Tracing the tension between a unified “state-idea” (Abrams 1988) and the way in which this institution works can therefore uncover the material and ideological conditions under which the Egyptian nation-state remains conceived as a coherent unit.