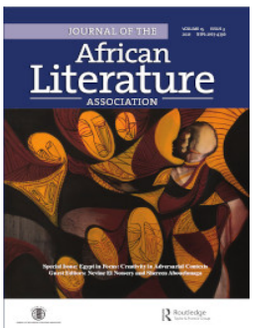

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A brief history of the future of culture in Egypt

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ABSTRACT

This essay offers a brief intellectual history of the discourse surrounding "the future of culture" in Egypt. Starting with reflections on the future of the official cultural apparatus after the 2011 revolution, the essay moves on to three significant moments in the longer history of such reflections, each with its own set of concerns. These concerns range from culture and globalization in the 1990s and early 2000s, to cultural planning and development in the 1960s and 1970s, to culture and education in the wake of Taha Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938). Such changing concerns show how the so-called "future of culture" changes in different historical circumstances, while conceptions of culture remain tied to changing imaginaries of the nation-state.

KEYWORDS

Egypt; Culture; Revolution; Nationalism; Nation-State; Globalization

In October 2013, the Supreme Council of Culture (SCC), an advisory body sometimes described as the "mind of the Ministry of Culture," convened a conference titled "Egypt's Culture in Confrontation" (*Thaqafat Misr fil-Muwagaha*). The conference elicited recommendations about the direction in which the Ministry should go after the 25th January 2011 revolution and the 30th June 2013 ousting of President Mohammed Morsi, which was conceived as a "second revolution" in this setting. The conference's overall recommendations were read out in fourteen bullet points to a room packed with journalists, by a panel of prominent intellectuals including the novelist Bahaa Taher, the film director Magdy Ahmad Ali, and the editor Mohammed Hashem. The recommendations included some declarations of principle—for instance, to promote free speech; to end political censorship on cultural products; to increase state support for "independent" (i.e. non-Ministry) cultural activities—in addition to more specific policy proposals—for instance, to retrieve Egypt's cinematic heritage from private corporations or to rename the General Organization for Cultural Palaces as the "Mass Culture Institution" (*al-thaqāfa al-gamahiriyya*), the organization's moniker in the 1960s.

This conference marked, in hindsight, one of the last moments in which an official meeting organized by the SCC espoused an overtly revolutionary rhetoric. The effervescence surrounding the event came after two years of debates, conversations, and publications among intellectuals and cultural producers about their vision of "culture" (*thaqāfa*). The revolutionary moment called for a reflection on

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the future of culture—with a different inflection depending on one's position towards political events between 2011 and 2013, towards the Ministry of Culture as an institution, or towards the very concept of culture. "In this moment of opening," as anthropologists Sonali Pahwa and Jessica Winegar remarked in 2012, "cultural producers, intellectuals and politicians are asking foundational questions about the role of government in the field of culture and vice versa" (2). With few exceptions, these actors either held official positions at the Ministry of Culture or were intimately involved in the Ministry's activity. The conception of culture that they espoused was therefore informed not only by abstract academic debates, but also by an awareness of existing cultural institutions and what can be done to change them.

This essay situates post-revolutionary reflections on "the future of culture" (*mustaqbal al-thaqāfa*) within a broader intellectual history. Without claiming to exhaust the idea's possible genealogies, I explore how a specific set of Egyptian intellectuals affiliated with the Ministry of Culture have conceived of "culture" (whatever its specific meaning) in relation to a future that they anticipate, expect, welcome, or fear. Crucially, I argue that the intellectual's position within and towards the state's cultural apparatus informs how this future is envisaged. "To a very great extent," as Edward Said reminds us in another context, "culture, cultural formations and intellectuals (…) exist and are made possible by virtue of a very interesting network of relationships with the State's commanding, almost absolute power" (21). In Cairo, the future of culture is intimately bound with the future of the nation-state, which acts as a rhetorical framework to articulate changing political visions. I will highlight how state-affiliated intellectuals use such a framework to create different conceptions of culture and the state across the 20th and 21st centuries.

This essay is divided in three sections. The first one examines books, essays, and policy papers about the future of culture written by prominent state-affiliated intellectuals after 2011, such as ex-Ministers Gaber Asfour and Emad Abou Ghazi. The second section examines the trope through three historical periods: the 1990s and early 2000s, marked by a concern over culture and globalization; the 1960s and early 1970s, marked by a concern over cultural development and state planning; and the late 1930s to the early 1950s, marked by debates surrounding culture and education in the wake of Taha Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938). The final section summarizes the continuities and changes within this intellectual lineage. Specifically, it underlines how the future imagined for culture in this lineage is articulated within a modernizing nationalist framework—a framework which modulates to the tune of flexible definitions of culture and the nation. "The future of culture" is therefore an interesting trope to diagnose state action in the cultural field as perceived by state-affiliated intellectuals.

Some intellectuals have challenged this state-centric genealogy after the 2011 revolution, such as Shereen Abouelnaga in *Al-Muthaqqaf al-Intiqāli* [The Transitional Intellectual]. I have chosen to eschew these alternative narratives in this essay in order to describe and analyze in fuller depth the Ministry's core intellectual production. This production is seldom discussed in English-language scholarship, perhaps because it is uneven in literary quality, or because its concerns are too narrowly state-centric. Yet these intellectuals and their texts hold sway over the Cairene intellectual world, not least because they tend to hold high positions at the Ministry

of Culture. Understanding these kinds of texts on their own terms is invaluable to assess the political orientation of the official cultural apparatus after the 2011 revolution, as well as the intricate conceptual link between nation, culture, and the future among state-affiliated intellectuals.

The future of culture after the revolution

The catalogue of papers for the 2013 conference, "Egypt's Culture in Confrontation," is an intriguing textual object. The booklet is somewhere between the soft catalogue of abstracts, common in academic conferences, and the printed proceedings selected by conference conveners. The object's ambiguity is paralleled by the mixture of textual forms throughout the catalogue. Some papers look like abstracts; others look like policy proposals, with a detailed set of guiding strategies and executive recommendations in bullet-point format; yet others take the shape of typical long-form essays. These texts either challenge prevailing orthodoxies about the concept of "culture" used by the Ministry or propose new plans to reform the Ministry's administrative structure. The selection of texts is not guided by an overarching logic or a coherent vision, which allows the catalogue to reveal interesting discrepancies in the meaning attached to "the future of culture" by state-affiliated intellectuals after the 2011 revolution.

One central discrepancy concerns the idea of culture, as visible in the gap between two essays written by the visual artist and long-time administrator Ezzeldin Naguib. The first essay is entitled "'Vision' in the Anticipated Cultural Project" [*Al-Ru'ya fil-Mashru' al-Thaqāfi al-Ma'mūl*]. Naguib starts by detailing what he perceives as core problems in the existing official cultural apparatus, including the undesirable break between the intellectual elite and the masses. In an ominous shift, he goes on to ask, "What is needed for Culture to join the bandwagon of Revolution?" (93) After mentioning some possible paths, Naguib concludes that the answer will vary according to one's conception of culture (94). This open-ended attitude contrasts markedly with his second essay: "Art: Drying Out the Springs of Terrorism and Analphabetism" [*Al-Fann. Tagfif li-Manābi' al-Irhāb wal-Ummiyya*]. Here, Naguib argues that culture ought to be squarely under the Ministry of Culture's purview, and that the Ministry should become the driving institutional force behind the resolution of such pressing issues as Islamist violence and rampant analphabetism. In his own words,

> The future of this cultural work—its continuity or its decline—hinges on the existence of a (political and cultural) national agreement between state and society on the fact that culture is a strategic necessity that cannot be delayed, partitioned or rely on individual or private initiative. It is, in short, institutional work, a state project worthy of a country with an ancient civilization established on a mindset shaped by the arts. This project represents a building operation for a people's spirit, a nation's conscience, an identity's anchoring, and a revolution's triumph over the advocates of obscurity and backwardness. (112–113)

Naguib's tone shifts in a drastic manner in this second essay, from an open-ended questioning of the culture concept to a strong commitment to culture as a weapon

deployed by the state in an ongoing fight against "obscurity" and "backwardness." The obscurantist and backwards forces in question are the government formed by the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party in 2012–2013, which was toppled after a military coup on 3rd July 2013 following a wave of popular protests.

Terms such as obscurity and backwardness immediately evoke the 1990s cultural battles waged between advocates of "secularism" (*'almaniyya*) and Islamist preachers. As Winegar explains, "Secular-oriented Ministry of Culture officials and intellectuals continually argued for the urgency of [cultural] initiatives to fight what they bemoaned as 'ignorance' and 'backwardness' stemming from misunderstandings of Islam and the West." ("Civilizing Muslim Youth" 450). Cultural initiatives were part of a process of acculturation in which "aspects of the Islamic Revival are lumped together and contrasted with notions of 'light,' 'progress,' 'development,' 'awareness,' 'correct understanding,' 'openness,' and 'taste.'" (Winegar, "Culture is the Solution" 193) This contrast leaves little ground for nuance, as so-called "Islamist" actors can range from Al-Azhar scholars and popular preachers attacking the Ministry's perceived immorality to the armed militias who attack tourist sites and police checkpoints. Likewise, the secular camp has little in common except its loose affiliation with the Ministry and its directed attacks against Islamists understood in the broadest sense.

Ezzeldin Naguib's essay revived this binary opposition in a context where Islamist actors had been in control of many government posts until the 2013 coup. Naguib, as many so-called secular intellectuals, feared that the Muslim Brotherhood would retaliate against the Ministry of Culture after decades of conflict. Under Mubarak, the Ministry had been a prime target for Islamist writers who, unable to attack the presidency or the state's repressive institutions, published regular denunciations of the immorality of official culture in newspapers such as *Al-Sha'b* [The People]. In some cases, such as the polemic against Haydar Haydar's novel *Banquet for Seaweed* (see Al-Ahnaf and Mehrez), intellectuals affiliated to the Ministry of Culture have written impassionate defenses of artistic freedom after Ministry officials were blamed and fired for publishing allegedly immoral content. It is against the backdrop of such "culture wars" that one can understand the fearful reaction of state-affiliated intellectuals towards President Mohammed Morsi and his government. This reaction culminated in a month-long sit-in at the Ministry of Culture in June 2013, convened by prominent intellectuals and cultural producers against the last Minister of Culture appointed by Morsi, Alaa Abdel Aziz.

In hindsight, the impending Islamist takeover of the Egyptian state announced by intellectuals like Naguib was greatly exaggerated. Yet many still assimilated the struggle over "the future of culture" after 2011 to earlier battles between secularists and Islamists. Al Sayyid Yassin, a professor of political sociology and director of the Arab Center for Research and Studies, presented a working paper to the Ministry in 2014 in which he proposed a strategy to strengthen critical thinking, to bridge religious and secular education, to promote "centrist" Islam, to change extremist views, and to "renew Egyptian values" (16–19). These ideas were not new, as Yassin recognizes, but relied on studies that he had conducted and supervised while working at the National Center for Social and Criminal

Research in the 1990s and early 2000s (see Yassin's *The Cultural Environment in Egypt* and *The Cultural Analysis of Society*). Yet the working paper became the basis of the cultural strategy proposed by then Minister of Culture Gaber Asfour, which was published by the literary weekly *Akhbar al-Adab* in November 2014.

Gaber Asfour himself was a key figure in theorizing the struggle between secularism and Islamism in the 1990s. He became instrumental in assimilating President Morsi's government to the "backwards" Islamists that he decried throughout his career. An established literary critic and professor of Arabic Literature at Cairo University, Asfour became Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Culture in 1993. He stayed in this position until he became the founding head of the National Translation Centre in 2006. He was appointed Minister of Culture twice: once for a few days in Mubarak's last moments in power, and later between June 2014 and February 2015. Asfour's ideas about the future of culture are informed by a basic binary opposition between a secular, changing, scientific, enlightened, progressive, cosmopolitan culture and a religious, fixed, superstitious, obscurantist, backwards, and inwards-looking one.

This opposition is well detailed in his newspaper and magazine articles, published in such venues as the prominent state-sponsored daily *Al-Ahram* and the then London-based cultural magazine *Al-Hayat*. These articles were later collected in books whose titles suffice to evoke his intellectual position: *A Critique of the Culture of Backwardness*, *Towards a Changing Culture*. While these books were published prior to the revolution, Asfour continues to publish abundantly on his vision for the future of Egyptian culture, most notably in his weekly column at *Al-Ahram*. His publications range between general thoughts about the direction of culture in Egypt (e.g. when exhorting the state to fight terrorism and analphabetism) and specific policy recommendations (e.g. when arguing for a coordination of cultural work among the Ministries of Culture, Education, Youth, Islamic Endowments, and Antiquities). Although these topics have preoccupied him since the 1990s, Asfour's ambitions of becoming Minister after 2011 and his status as ex-Minister after 2015 gave his post-revolutionary writings a more policy-oriented tenor. This is clear in the columns in which he describes his proposals or personal experiences at the Ministry of Culture, with such titles as "Developing the State's Cultural Apparatus," "On Renewing Cultural Discourse," and "Developing Egyptian Culture."

A central thread running across these essays, just as in the 2013 conference catalogue, is the assumption that the future of culture, whatever it may be, necessarily involves the Ministry of Culture's reform. This reformist tone is most notable in the writings of Emad Abou Ghazi, a historian and now emeritus professor in the Department of Libraries and Information Science at Cairo University. Abou Ghazi was appointed Minister of Culture between March and November 2011, in the first government formed after Mubarak's demise, which was sworn in by the Supreme Council of Armed Forces under the leadership of Prime Minister Essam Sharaf. Abou Ghazi had extensive experience at the Ministry prior to his appointment: he started as the Head of the Central Administration for Divisions and Committees at the Supreme Council of Culture under Gaber Asfour's lead in 1999, going up the ladder until he became Secretary General in 2009. This experience informs his considered takes on the Ministry's reform, which were published both

in a 2014 edited volume on post-revolutionary cultural policy and in a special issue in the magazine *Ahwal Misriyya* in 2017.

These two essays are structured in a similar way. They begin with a detailed account of the history of cultural institutions in modern Egypt, starting from the institutions founded by Mehmet Ali and his successors in the 19th century, all the way to the creation of a Ministry of National Guidance in 1952, until the 2011 revolution. This account highlights the institutional legacy with which a new cultural strategy needs to reckon before being implemented, then it moves to making detailed proposals about the Ministry's administrative restructuring. The goal, as Abou Ghazi states, is to allow the state to protect national heritage, to protect intellectual property rights, and to make cultural events accessible to the public ("The State and Culture in Egypt" 55). Much as the majority of papers in the 2013 conference catalogue, Abou Ghazi focuses on what should be done to the Ministry's existing institutions without asking fundamental questions about the nature of culture. He recognizes the polysemy of the term, yet quickly commits to outlining his program of institutional reform under the assumption that "culture" is whatever a liberal-democratic state committed to heritage, intellectual property, and the arts would govern.

The cases of Naguib, Yassin, Asfour, and Abou Ghazi show that state-affiliated intellectuals think about "the future of culture" as being, in fact, the future of the official cultural apparatus. This apparatus is usually associated with the Nasser-era "system of institutions through which [the regime] intended to control and mobilize the intellectuals, a system which in its essentials still exists today." (Jacquemond 15) The kernel of this system began with the foundation of the Ministry of National Guidance a few short months after the 1952 revolution. That Ministry consolidated existing media and arts institutions across the state apparatus, with the explicit goal of "guiding" the nation according to the new regime's priorities. Article 1.1 in its founding act states that the Ministry's mission is "to orient and guide the nation's individuals towards what elevates their material and literary status, what strengthens their spirit and their sense of responsibility, and motivates them to cooperate, to sacrifice, and to multiply their efforts in serving the nation" (Foundation Bill of the Ministry of National Guidance of 1952). This missionary spirit has animated the Ministry of Culture since 1958, when the Ministry of National Guidance was reorganized and renamed as a Ministry of Culture and National Guidance. The events of 2011 cast a doubt over this core mission, just as it has cast a doubt on the state's legitimacy. The cultural reflections carried out after 2011 therefore mark an important internal revisiting of the Ministry's core project.

The future of culture until the revolution

One can trace three key moments in reflections on the future of culture prior to the 2011 revolution in Egypt. The first moment, between the 1990s and the early 2000s, was characterized by concerns about the place of Arab/Egyptian culture in a globalized world. The second moment, between the 1960s and the early 1970s, was less concerned about globalization than it was about the development of national cultural institutions. The last moment, between the late 1930s and the early 1950s,

was characterized by the debates over culture and education spawned by Taha Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. The evident blind spot, here, is the period between the 1970s and the early 1980s, which was marked by a decline in the Ministry of Culture's budget and political prominence. This can be attributed to President Sadat's notorious aversion to intellectuals, even state-affiliated ones, but also to rapid institutional turnover. Ten different Ministers were appointed between 1970 and 1987, giving little opportunity or institutional stability to write about "the future of culture" except in cursory manner. In contrast, the periods singled out earlier coincide with waves of institution-building where texts written by state-affiliated intellectuals would harbor hopes and anxieties about what the future holds for official cultural institutions.

The first period corresponds to a resurgence in cultural activity at the Supreme Council of Culture in the 1990s and early 2000s. This resurgence can be attributed, in part, to the SCC's organization of international conferences held in Cairo. These conferences were politically significant insofar as they contributed to the normalization of relations with Arab League countries, at a time when Egypt was still isolated on the world stage following the Camp David accords. The SCC has grown in size and in importance through these international conferences, under the leadership of Secretary General Gaber Asfour and his collaborators. Among the SCC's published conference proceedings, there are two volumes on topics directly related to the future of culture: one in 1997 called *The Future of Arab Culture*, and another in 2003 called *Towards a New Cultural Discourse*. The tone and content of both conferences contrast with their 2013 successor. The 1997 conference, for instance, is steeped in a debate about the place of Arab/Egyptian culture in a globalizing world. These globalization debates have much in common with contemporary ones emerging in Western academic settings (see, e.g., Appadurai's *Modernity-at-Large*). The contributions all share a sense in which the accelerating movement of people, goods, and media in a world now dominated by one superpower threatens the disappearance of local or regional particularity. The contributions diagnosed the dire circumstances in which Arab culture found itself: it remained in a condition of "backwardness" compared to the fast-advancing world, yet it was threatened to lose its identity if it chose to join the train of progress led by the Euro-American locomotive.

The intellectual who posed these dilemmas in most explicit terms is once again Gaber Asfour. His essay, "The Question of the Future and the Future of Culture," begins with the following reflection: "I reckon that contemplating the question of the future *within* culture is what one must begin with before effectively contemplating the future *of* culture, because what culture can reach in the future necessarily rests on its consciousness of the question of the future itself, insofar as it is a consciousness of the possibilities of an effective present" (13, emphasis added). The essay goes on to elaborate on two conceptions of the future: one in which the future moves forward through scientific advancement, and another in which the future is an endless repetition of the past. These conceptions, argues Asfour, correspond to two opposite kinds of "culture" in a broad sense—opposite kinds of habits, of fine arts, of acquired knowledge. These camps correspond neatly to the binary opposition detailed above between a secular/progressive and an Islamist/backwards culture, in

which Asfour champions the secular camp. In *Towards a Changing Culture*, he argues most clearly that a progressive secular culture should be built through coordination among state institutions, an overall strategy for cultural and economic development, faith in scientific development, freedom of choice, and a modern secular state (63–69). The Arab intellectual, in his view, must take a firm stance against the local culture of backwardness while avoiding losing his own identity through globalization.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, in contrast, concerns about the future of culture were more attentive to national institution-building and cultural development. These questions occupied intellectuals with prominent positions at the Ministry of Culture, including Abdel Moneim al-Sawi, Tharwat Okasha, and Badr Eddine Abou Ghazi. Al-Sawi was Vice-Minister of Culture between 1958 and 1970, and he briefly became Minister in 1977. Tharwat Okasha, on his part, was twice Minister of Culture, once between 1958 and 1962, and another time between 1966 and 1970. Okasha is hailed as the Ministry's founding father, being involved in building up numerous institutions such as the Mass Culture Institution and the Academy of Arts. Badr Eddine Abou Ghazi, lastly, was an important art critic and member of the Supreme Council for Arts, Literature, and Social Science in the 1960s. He became Minister of Culture between November 1970 and May 1971.

The positions held by these writers explain why they would be so concerned about building up cultural institutions, at a time when the Ministry's activities and guiding principles were still being established. These concerns manifested in writings that were simultaneously intellectual and administrative in nature. For instance, Al-Sawi's *On Culture* was based on presentations about cultural planning given at the National Planning Institute in 1963 and 1965 (10). Most of the book is an anthropological exploration of human evolution, culminating in a chapter where the author argues that the development of culture (which he defines as a set of evolving environmental, intellectual, existential, social, and psychological characteristics) must run through state planning (323). Al-Sawi's text loses some coherence at this juncture, because he is content with reprinting recommendations about institutional reform made at haphazard national and international conferences between 1958 and 1965. Similar recommendations constitute the core of Okasha's book, *Cultural Policy*, as well as Abou Ghazi's writings in the magazine *Al-Idara* [Administration]. Without delving into detail, these works provide an overview of existing cultural institutions as well as the numerous concrete projects that the authors intended on developing within these spaces. No matter their conception of culture, these state-affiliated intellectuals proposed administrative reforms to allow the state to provide "more culture" to the public (much like Emad Abou Ghazi's proposals after the 2011 revolution).

The meticulous institutional proposals of the 1960s and 1970s have a significant historical precedent: the publication of Taha Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt*. The book is mainly a lengthy and detailed essay on education reform. However, it begins with a polemic over Egypt's civilizational status as a "Western" nation with direct Graeco-Roman descent, and it ends with proposals to build new cultural institutions for the radio, cinema, and translation among others. The book's importance cannot be simply attributed to its content, but to the circumstances surrounding

its publication as well as its subsequent reception. Hussein's own introduction explains that he wrote the book as a guide to the youth after the 1936 Anglo-Egyptian treaty, which promised formal independence from British rule, and the 1937 Montreux conference, which formally ended the capitulations regime in Egypt. Thus, as the philosopher Ahmad al-Shelliq notes, Hussein's book can be situated alongside book-length proposals about the direction that the newly independent nation must take by politicians and intellectuals such as Merit Ghaly and Hafez Afifi (9–10). Moreover, Hussein writes that the book came after his participation in two international conferences as Egypt's representative, and instead of writing a report on his activities to be consigned in a government drawer, he chose to write a book to garner wider discussion among intellectuals, educators, and academics.

Hussein's book was widely reviewed in his own time. Within two years of its publication, it was reviewed in two prominent cultural magazines—*Al-Thaqafa* [Culture] and *Al-Risala* [The Message]—in addition to more critical reviews by the painter and writer Ramsès Younane in the surrealist magazine *Al-Tatawwur* [Evolution], and by a writer who would later become an important Islamist figure, Sayyid Qutb. The book continued to elicit critical engagement among later critics, including Marxist intellectuals Mahmoud Amin El Alem and Abdel Azim Anis, the philosopher Louis Awad, the geographer Soliman Huzayn, and the historian Sharif Younis. These engagements come in addition to the book's numerous reprints since the 2011 revolution. Without counting a reprint at the original Dar al-Maaref in 2014 and another one at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in 2018, the book was reprinted by three different institutions within the Ministry of Culture. There was a print published by the Supreme Council of Culture in 2013 (with an introduction by Gaber Asfour), another published by the General Egyptian Book Organization the same year (with an introduction by Ahmad al-Shelliq), and the latest one published by the General Organization for Cultural Palaces in 2018 (with an introduction by ex-Minister of Culture Helmy al-Namnam). These reprints show how the influence of Hussein's book exceeds its era. His vision about the future of culture was time and again revisited since its initial publication. This constant revisiting makes the book an important landmark in the growth of a nationalist discourse around the future of culture among state-affiliated intellectuals.

Culture, nation, and the future

From the 1930s till today, some consistent patterns emerge in the reflection on the future of culture in Egypt. First, many of the intellectuals concerned with the topic are academics, holding a doctoral degree and/or a formal position at an institution of higher learning (most notably Cairo University). This is important because academics, while making up most of the committee members at the Supreme Council of Culture, are a minority within the Ministry of Culture's bureaucratic apparatus and the overall community of writers, poets, playwrights, musicians, filmmakers, and visual artists gravitating around the Ministry. This might lead us to believe, as is often repeated at the Ministry, that these academics produce an abstract discourse with little impact on the ground. Yet those most concerned with the future of culture tend to hold important positions at the Ministry or its earlier avatars. After all,

Emad Abou Ghazi, Gaber Asfour, Badr Eddine Abou Ghazi, and Tharwat Okasha were all Ministers of Culture at one point or another, in addition to the numerous posts that they held throughout their careers at the Ministry. Taha Hussein was Minister of Public Instruction between 1950 and 1952, having been appointed head of the Directorate of General Culture in 1939 and adviser to the Minister in 1942 (Ahmed 9).

In short, one cannot dismiss discussions on the future of culture as a disinterested and ineffectual academic exercise, insofar as it is produced by institutionally powerful actors whose reflections have a grounded impact, if not on the general public, then on the Ministry's own policies. This explains the formal diversity within the corpus of writings on the future of culture, ranging from the essay to the policy paper; the newspaper column to the academic monograph. Intellectuals mobilize these different forms to drive specific agendas or policies at the Ministry. Taha Hussein's choice of writing a book instead of a government report, a most impactful decision in hindsight, is indicative of the thought put into textual form by these intellectuals. One can read Gaber Asfour's choice of publishing his thoughts in a weekly column at *Al-Ahram* or Tharwat Okasha's choice of printing an allocution at Egypt's National Council in a similar light. Form is not adjusted to content, but to the worldly purpose that the content is meant to serve.

Second, there is a nationalist modernizing spirit running across writings on the future of culture. From Hussein to Okasha to Asfour, there is a consistent discourse predicating the progress of Egypt on a linear ascent towards a civilizational status that has already been achieved elsewhere—"Europe" in Taha Hussein's era, the "developed world" in Gaber Asfour's era. While their conceptions of culture vary even within their own texts, these authors are committed to the idea that culture is delimited by the nation, and its progress can only be a national one—whether "culture" means the high arts, a developmental stage, a set of intellectual trends, a set of habits and customs, or a degree of personal knowledge akin to the French *culture générale*. The ambiguity over the meaning of culture matters little in this context, insofar as the progress of culture is invariably seen as a supreme good. Whatever progress is made by culture—as art, as thought, as practice, as knowledge—is progress made by the nation. All conflicts and contradictions are resolved in a nationalist synthesis.

This could explain the continuing interest in Taha Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt* after the 2011 revolution. Critics in Hussein's own era were quick to point numerous weaknesses in his text: Ramsès Younane argued that Hussein did nothing to provide a coherent definition of culture (10), Zaki Mubarak rejected his ahistorical bridge between Greek civilization and contemporary Egypt (148–9), while Ahmad al-Kerdani (10–11) and Sayyid Qutb (13) criticized his assumptions about the supposed coherence of European nations. Such criticisms do not resurface in the book's post-revolutionary editions, whose introductions instead emphasize how the issues diagnosed by Hussein in his own time are as timely and as relevant as ever. This timeliness is coded differently in each introduction. For instance, Ahmad al-Shelliq emphasizes how the problems diagnosed by Hussein remain unsolved to this day, and how Egypt must reassess its current educational policies using Hussein's model to hope having a better future (29). Helmy al-Namnam, on his part, emphasizes

Hussein's call to build a national army in order to protect Egypt—a most contemporary concern in a context where the military is taking over large portions of the state and economy (16–17). Such reconstructions illustrate how the future of culture is conceived through a nationalist modernizing lens, which erases all historical differences between the 1930s and now in the name of a homogenous national progress supposedly divined in Hussein's original text.

This nationalist reading should not obscure that "the future of culture" is a historically shifting trope, which evolves to the rhythm of varying conceptions of culture and varying conceptions of the state. The critic Haggag Ali argues that Taha Hussein, "like European colonists, assumed a civilizing mission that requires the intervention of 'elite intellectuals' (…) and a centralized state authority" (366). This is a reductive reading, as the historian Hussam Ahmed shows, because Hussein was not imagining central state supervision in a vacuum. Rather, he was planning specific reforms to the bureaucratic structures in which he was himself an influential actor (9). Hussein's educational and cultural program was thought out with a weak parliamentary system in mind, in which he never lost faith despite its numerous limitations (Ahmed 26). The system that was integral to Hussein's vision had largely eroded by the time Al-Sawi, Okasha, and Badr Eddine Abou Ghazi were writing about cultural development in the 1960s and 1970s. Their vision of development was backed by a state-capitalist regime in which the bureaucracy—including the cultural bureaucracy—was expected to grow under the impulse of central planning and investment. Thus, the future imagined for the cultural apparatus in the 1960s cannot be assimilated to the one imagined in the 1930s, insofar as "the state" that intellectuals addressed in each era had changed in fundamental ways.

Such changes again affect writings from the 1990s and early 2000s. The narrative espoused by Gaber Asfour and many others about the struggle between secular/progressive and religious/backwards culture coincides with a time in which Mubarak's regime imposed neoliberal measures: privatizing state-owned companies, encouraging foreign direct investments, commoditizing Egyptian heritage to boost the tourism industry, and so on. Asfour's whole-hearted support for the secular/progressive culture endeavoring to catch up with the "developed world" offered implicit support to the economic policies implemented by the Mubarakist state, especially within the Ministry of Culture. Reducing the struggle over culture to a binary opposition between progress and backwardness hides the political and economic conditions under which said "progress" occurred. This is no less true in the post-2011 era, where multifarious struggles were labeled as "chaos" by state-affiliated intellectuals such as Al-Sayyid Yassin and Gaber Asfour, who argued instead that the country needed the order provided by President Sisi's regime.

One should mention that the changes in the nature of the Egyptian state apparatus throughout the 20th and 21st centuries do not just correspond to changing visions for the future of culture, but also to changing conceptions of what ought to be governed about "culture." For instance, despite all the different meanings attached to the concept by Taha Hussein, his understanding of culture as an object of governance does not extend beyond educational institutions and the individual minds cultivated through these institutions. Although the opening and closing chapters in *The Future of Culture in Egypt* discuss Egyptian culture in a civilizational

sense, Hussein gives no hint that the Egyptian state ought to govern culture in that very broad sense. This is visibly different by the 1960s, in the writings of Abdel Moneim al-Sawi for instance, where the object of state planning is precisely culture in its broadest sense, even though his recommendations for action are centered on the concrete high-culture institutions described in detail by Okasha and Abou Ghazi.

Culture as an object of governance varies again in writings from the 1990s onwards. In Asfour's writings, both before and after the 2011 revolution, what ought to be governed is not only the state's provision of high-culture products to the masses, but also the allegiance of every citizen to a secular nationalist project. Building a culture of progress, in his vision, is about stripping all Egyptians of "backwards" ideas, customs, habits, knowledge, and art, then filling this void with a new culture open to change and freedom within the bounds of a secular nationalist state. Asfour's vision goes beyond his predecessors in calling upon the state to intervene not just into specific cultural institutions and among the subjects formed within them, but also into the minds and allegiances of all citizens. This contrasts with Emad Abou Ghazi's vision, whose agenda restricts the state's intervention to three specific areas: heritage, intellectual property, and arts funding. This restricted view is maintained by several contributors to the 2013 conference on "Egypt's Culture in Confrontation." In the catalogue's opening, the philosopher Salah Konsowa argues that official cultural institutions can only govern culture understood as a sum of specialized arts and knowledge acquired by an intellectual elite (3). In sum, while remaining within a progressive nationalist framework, writings about the future of culture diagnose changing conceptions of the state as well as what kind of "culture" it ought to govern.

Conclusion

This essay traces a brief history of the idea of "the future of culture" in Egypt. This history puts in perspective attempts to rethink culture among state-affiliated intellectuals after the 2011 revolution. Such perspective shows, on one hand, the significant continuities between cultural projects pre- and post-2011 revolution within the Ministry of Culture. On the other hand, it highlights how these projects are entangled with specific understandings of culture and the state under changing historical circumstances. The question concerning the future of culture is never posed in a disinterested manner, then, but with a specific intent to change the state's cultural apparatus in a direction deemed more modern, more progressive, more enlightened by state-affiliated intellectuals. Whether these changes are articulated as specific institutional reforms or as broader strategies to cultivate the masses, state-affiliated intellectuals remain committed to a nationalist modernizing logic, in which the future of culture is, perforce, the future of the Egyptian nation-state.

It is important to stress, in conclusion, that the texts and intellectuals on which I have focused are not representative of all intellectual trends at the Ministry of Culture, and certainly not since the 2011 revolution. All the intellectuals that I have mentioned are senior males, mostly academics, which perhaps reflects the structures of authority at the institutions that they occupy rather than the sum of cultural writings in Egypt. I have chosen to focus on these intellectuals because their position within the state's

cultural apparatus marks a specific reflection on "the future of culture" as a nationalist project. One should mention, however, that there are alternative projects and questions emerging around the topic in Egypt, such as in Shereen Abouelnaga's *The Transitional Intellectual*. Published in 2014, this book eschews a loose conception of "culture" to analyze different types of intellectuals and their changing attitudes to the official cultural apparatus, both before and after the 2011 revolution. Abouelnaga's reflection on the future of intellectuals marks a degree of self-reflection about one's positioning within and towards state institutions that is largely absent in most writings on the future of culture. The book's open-ended analysis serves, in a way, as a striking contrast with the writings that I have examined throughout this essay, which are more interested in guiding the nation-state to their desired political ends than to explore fundamental questions about the nature of culture and the state.

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