

Fanon in the postcolonial Mediterranean:  
Sovereignty and agency in neoliberal Egypt

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*Abstract*

In this paper I revisit Fanon's theory on the emergence of a postcolonial elite in the Global South, and suggest that his argument around the dynamics of imperial transformation following the end of formal colonial rule can shed light on the postcolonial era, in particular the period of neoliberalisation that began in the 1970s to which foreign capital such as EU capital has been central. I use the concept of amnesia to highlight some of these changes, focusing on two forms: the amnesia of radical critique and the amnesia of empire, arguing that they allow for questions of economic dependency, sovereignty, agency and resistance to come to the fore, highlighting both change and continuity. In particular, Fanon's work allows for an exploration of both forms of amnesia, through his emphasis on a dependent bourgeoisie as well as the ways in which global political economic structures condition postcolonial agency.

Key words: Fanon, decolonisation, neoliberalism, Egypt, postcolonialism

## *Introduction*

In plain words, the colonial power says: ‘Since you want independence, take it and starve,’ (Fanon 1967, 76).

We live in strange times. On the one hand, the Mediterranean in today’s popular imagination has increasingly come to represent paths of migration and the ever-urgent crisis of black and brown death as people try to reach the shores of Fortress Europe. It has come to symbolise the zone of non-being that separates the deserving from the undeserving, a water barrier that supposedly neatly cuts off “civilisation” from its other. On the other hand, the European Union (EU)—the very institution that enacts Fortress Europe and whose policies are part of the crisis of death we see in the Mediterranean—has become, for many, a project worth fighting for in the face of increasing right-wing nationalism and events such as Brexit. The irony of fighting to “save” the EU is not lost in light of the increasing reality of the Mediterranean as a site of racialised death; indeed the two are not unconnected, nor is it lost in light of the history of empire that has shaped both the construction of the EU as well as the many ways in which it works in today’s global world. The Mediterranean is increasingly becoming a central site of postcolonial politics; a site through which we can read the workings of empire today. This is not an accident; it is tied to the histories of empire that have not only shaped nations on both sides of the Mediterranean, but that continue to produce concrete legacies today.

The broader aim of this special issue is to build on work unpacking the ways in which colonialism is inscribed into the broader project of European integration through a focus on the Mediterranean “as an epistemic and geopolitical site of knowledge production,” (Pace and Roccu 2019/2020). The legacies of European imperialism, it is argued, have left concrete

imprints on contemporary economic and political processes across the region. One avenue through which the special issue investigates this is through the concept of *amnesia*. This article builds largely off this concept, deploying it in two ways: amnesia of empire and amnesia of radical critique. I use the lens of an EU strategy towards the Mediterranean as a starting point from which to explore questions of historical imperial entanglements (ibid, 4).

The amnesia surrounding European empire has been documented by scholars seeking to show how this amnesia is both purposeful and damaging.<sup>i</sup> The first aim of this article is to challenge this amnesia by drawing a connecting thread between the British Empire, decolonisation, and contemporary neoliberalism. Focusing on the case of Egypt, I argue that where the postcolonial period to some extent worked to disrupt empire, current neoliberal restructuring has more fully replicated—and indeed depended on—forms of imperial domination that existed not so long ago. The second form of amnesia I discuss is related to a shift in the *forms* of resistance, away from radical modes of critique towards more institutionalised ones. In other words, by amnesia of radical critique I mean that we also seem to suffer from an amnesia that erases the radical forms of resistance to foreign aid and foreign capital.

To chart these two forms of amnesia, I use the work of Frantz Fanon. There has recently been a resurgence of interest in the work of Fanon<sup>ii</sup> whose seminal works *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, White Masks* dramatically influenced the ways in which we understand decolonization across the Global South. In particular, Fanon’s work allows for an exploration of both forms of amnesia, though his emphasis on a dependent bourgeoisie as well as the ways in which the “colonial international,”<sup>iii</sup> to use Vivienne Jabri’s term (2012), conditions postcolonial agency.

This article traces a brief history of how Fanon’s work can help in understanding Egypt’s imperial entanglements over the past few decades, and situates this within the emergence of

the modern independent Egyptian state and the legacies of European imperialism within the broader Middle East. Specifically, I argue that the relationship between the EU and the broader Middle East is an interesting starting point from which to explore debates around sovereignty, and that Fanon's work on sovereignty and colonialism is one way of doing so (1963).

Egypt's process of neoliberalisation—which has led to an increasing dependency on foreign capital investment and foreign aid—is central to questions about Egyptian sovereignty, and has a longer history rooted in Egypt's colonial experience. Neoliberalisation is often understood as a process that radically transforms the economic make-up of a nation. Yet what we have seen in contexts such as Egypt is a radical transformation of the social and political—as well as the economic—and a major indent in the ability of Egypt to exercise sovereignty over its own economic and political system. The moment of decolonization in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century saw sovereignty framed as the most important issue that needed to be resolved in order for full independence to take place. Without full control of economic and political policies, it was unlikely that decolonization would be anything more than a surface shift in who governed countries in the Global South.

One of the central sites in which we can see the workings of aid, development and cooperation—often with the EU as a central player—is within the development sector, and among development NGOs in particular. The connections between development and neocolonialism have been highlighted (Escobar 2011), in particular by drawing a line connecting development and neoliberalism, understood by scholars of post-development in particular as a form of neo-colonial domination (Moodie 2013; Escobar 2011; Karim 2011; Ferguson 2006, 1994; Rankin 2001). Development NGOs in places like Egypt have played a role in producing a whole range of technologies focused on self-regulation that enable neoliberal domination. Moreover, as James Ferguson has argued, we need to think about

what forms of politics are being made impossible through development (1994) – an idea I explore through the amnesia of radical critique. The global neoliberal revolution—led by Thatcher and Reagan—was to have a dramatic impact across the Middle East in general and in Egypt more specifically, marking the end of the anticolonial project of Nasserism and the beginning of a neoliberal one headed by Anwar el Sadat. Central to this new project was the role of global financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank and their structural adjustment programs—a central facet of neoliberal restructuring—as well as new geopolitical connections with the US rather than the Soviets or other non-aligned states.

### *Revisiting Frantz Fanon in Egypt*

Frantz Fanon's body of work touched on the multiple levels inherent in colonization and decolonization. Some of the key assumptions underpinning his work include the existence of both disjuncture and continuity between colonial and postcolonial rule; the multiple dimensions through which colonization took place; the singularity of race in the process of colonization; and the particular ways in which global capitalism is implicated in colonization and decolonization. Fanon's work can be read alongside the work of Kwame Nkrumah, among others, who clearly pointed to neo-colonialism as a material and ideological consequence of colonial rule (1965). Nkrumah understood neo-colonialism as a "situation of infringed national sovereignty and intrusive influence by external elements," (quoted in Langan 2017, 1) thereby centring the question of sovereignty. Neo-colonialism was understood as any policy, event or influence that impeded the ability of a sovereign nation to self-govern. Indeed Nkrumah explicitly mentioned aid when he discussed the ways in which neo-colonialism worked:

Control over government policy in the neo-colonial state may be secured by payments towards the costs of running the state, by the provision of civil servants in positions where they can dictate policy, and by monetary control over foreign exchange through the imposition of a banking system controlled by the imperialist power. “Aid” therefore to a neo-colonial state is merely a revolving credit, paid by the neo-colonial master, passing through the neo-colonial state and returning to the neo-colonial master in the form of increased profits (Nkrumah 1965, ix).

Other African leaders at the time similarly argued that the shift to independence would not be seamless or straightforward, and that former colonial powers would continue to attempt to exercise control over Africa and the rest of the Global South (Sankara and Anderson 1988). This was largely for economic reasons, and here the connections between capitalism and colonialism are key. Referencing histories of colonialism and slavery, which, although part of Marx’s work were not necessarily central to his understanding of how capitalism developed or expanded—Marxists in the Global South have centred the claim that colonialism was central to the spread of capitalism in Europe and the United States and that the current phase of neoliberal capitalism thus cannot be neatly separated from colonial histories (Amin 1974, Abdel-Malek 1968, Ayubi 1996). Fanon connected the colonial to the postcolonial through his category of the “native bourgeoisie,” (1963) a class that emerged at the moment of independence, and that should be understood as the product of the colonial process. The role of this class was to maintain colonial dynamics within a postcolonial setting; in other words, to ensure that colonial capitalism remained in place.

This native bourgeoisie is dependent on global capital for its existence and reproduction, and thus cannot be understood as organic or as having developed from society

itself. Therefore, this bourgeoisie is always already complicit with colonialism. As Rahul Rao has written:

[...] dependent bourgeoisies consolidated their power by relying on their external political and economic linkages – first with the colonial power and subsequently, in the circumstances of informal empire that characterized the Cold War, with either of the superpowers – *rather than* by bargaining with their working classes, as was characteristic of state formation in the West (2016, 10).

The dependent bourgeoisie—one that Fanon argues took power in most African countries after independence—had a historical task: to reject neo-colonialism and achieve independence in the economic, political and social spheres.<sup>iv</sup> Their failure to do just that is precisely what constitutes them as the link between the colonial and the postcolonial.

Colonial modes of resource extraction are responsible for these developments. The infrastructure that was created did not disappear at independence; it needed to be consciously dismantled—which some countries attempted to do—or it remained firmly in place.

Sovereignty meant more than formal independence, or the replacement of a colonial elite with a native one; it meant, rather, the emergence of a native elite that would break all forms of dependency with former colonial powers (1963, 165). Elsewhere I have argued that in the case of Egypt, the regime that came to power at independence did not resemble Fanon's native and dependent bourgeoisie; rather it was the regime of the 1970s that more closely resembled it (2017). In the next section, I unpack the idea of economic sovereignty that animated the Nasserist project, as well as the radical forms of critique that formed the basis of politics in postcolonial Egypt. By tracing both the ways in which Nasserism implemented economic reforms as well as the ways in which postcolonial nations understood

sovereignty as economic, I aim to highlight how central agency was to decolonisation, and how drastically this shifted in the 1970s.

*Sovereignty and disrupted dependency: The amnesia of radical critique*

Sovereignty was central to the politics of decolonisation across the postcolonial world. Here sovereignty did not just refer to legal control over a bounded national territory, but extended to all spheres of life. I am especially interested in the notion of economic sovereignty, and its attention to foreign capital and its pitfalls. I aim to show that although economic sovereignty was discussed and implemented in problematic ways that still reproduced particular colonial assumptions, there was still a keen awareness of the need to disrupt colonial capitalism and in particular foreign capital. It is precisely this awareness that I see as a form of radical critique that seems to dissipate with the advent of the global neoliberal project. Recall James Ferguson's important intervention into development studies, when he pointed to the "failures" of development and how they contribute to producing "anti-politics" (1994). The depoliticization of questions of redistribution has been a central feature of development across postcolonial spaces. The amnesia of radical critique, I argue, forgets a moment in Egyptian history when questions of resource redistribution were highly politicised. While under Nasserism there was still a discourse of technical expertise working to allocate resources, it was not necessarily understood in the depoliticised way development NGOs often mean it to be. Instead, inequality was highly political, and seen as such—both nationally and internationally. Recalling this moment can serve to dislodge current developmental discourses around inequality and how to alleviate it, which, as I show later, further entrench neoliberalism.



Gamal Abdel Nasser, Egypt's first leader post-independence, created a political project centred around anticolonial nationalism and state-led capitalist development. To do this, Nasser and the Free Officers both drew on and implemented nationalist goals which had already been crafted and popularised by various social movements that came before them. In his book outlining the goals of the revolution, Nasser emphasised eliminating the destructive British presence in the Suez Canal, destroying of imperialism and feudalism, the establishment of social justice, and establishing a democratic system (1954, 6-7). Anticolonial nationalism, then, was integral to Nasserism from the start, with all of its internal contradictions.

What I want to focus on here are the economic dimensions of anticolonialism and the centring of economic sovereignty. Under Nasserism, industry became the base of production—rather than the exporting of raw materials such as cotton—and the public sector replaced the private sector as the main engine of economic growth. Social welfarist policies such as education, health and employment, guaranteed the creation of a strong middle class connected to the state. The old bourgeoisie, which had depended on land ownership and which was connected to colonial rule, was disempowered. This move in particular—alongside the redistribution of land—served to greatly weaken foreign capital in Egypt. Further restrictions on foreign direct investment and foreign ownership of Egyptian assets were put in place. Finally, a wave of nationalizations—of which the Suez Canal is probably the most famous—cemented state control over the economy. These changes were part and parcel of an attempt by Nasserism to displace the old landed elite and create a new social base dependent on state-led capitalism.

To unpack Nasserist ideas of economic sovereignty, I turn to a particular historical moment during which we can trace an awareness of the problems around foreign aid and investment: the building of the High Dam in Aswan, Egypt. Debates around the financing of

the High Dam—Nasser’s major infrastructural project—set the scene for the nationalization of the Suez Canal, a paradigmatic event in the broader process of decolonisation. The High Dam was needed to provide electricity, and was central to Egypt’s industrialisation project. European private capital was preferred to American or World Bank financing because of less constricting conditionalities. English Electric—the main firm involved—threatened to back out of the deal if the World Bank was not included (Heikal 1986, 105). Moreover, a Czech arms deal and Egypt’s growing relationship with the Soviets added tension to already-tense negotiations. The decision by Britain and the US not to fund the Dam highlights the political nature of World Bank loan conditionalities as well as Abdel Nasser’s emerging non-aligned position.<sup>v</sup>

Nevertheless, the decision to withdraw foreign funding still came as a shock to Nasser (Heikal 1986, 74). On July 26 1956, in a speech he gave to the Egyptian public, he announced the full nationalisation of the Suez Canal Company (SCC). Britain, France and Israel attacked Egypt in what became known as the tripartite aggression. This soon came to an abrupt halt following a global outcry as well as the refusal of the US to support the invasion. The nationalisation of Suez marked a turning point in global politics. The nationalisation of the Canal targeted foreign capital in Egypt, and, as noted by Robert Tignor, the invasion was what led to the dissolution of the long-standing British and French economic presence in Egypt. “By viewing the evolution of the government’s relationship toward foreign capital during this period of acute strain, it is possible to see how the regime, so conflicted on the issue of foreign capital and the private sector, took its first decisive steps to undercut the power of foreign capital,” (2015, 128).

What I am interested here is the ways in which the problems with foreign capital and foreign aid were understood, particularly the links to conditionalities, as well as the repercussions countries faced when they refused to “play the game,” so to speak. The

decision to nationalise the Suez Canal to access capital that could then be used to develop Egyptian infrastructure is one that we can scarcely imagine happening today. This is what I mean by the amnesia of radical critique: on the one hand, the amnesia of empire has erased the role of imperialism in creating our contemporary world; on the other, we also seem to suffer from an amnesia that erases the radical forms of resistance to foreign aid and foreign capital.

These debates around the question of imperialism, sovereignty, and in particular economic forms of domination were also taking place between postcolonial nations, and can be read through seminal events such as the Afro-Asian conference at Bandung in 1955.<sup>vi</sup> The theme of sovereignty was central to Bandung, and, as Partha Chatterjee notes: “In 1955, no one had any doubt about the principal problem of human rights in the world: the continued existence of colonialism and racial discrimination. The principle of self-determination of peoples and nations was the chief instrument by which human rights were to be established,” (Chatterjee 2017, 672). It is around national sovereignty that the battle lines of anti-imperialism become clear: not all nation states were considered to be sovereign; in fact, the majority were not. Categories such as mandates and protectorates betrayed this linear logic of colonialism, whereby some nations were *potential* nation states (Chatterjee 2017, 668), embodying sovereignty, but to reach this stage meant achieving a certain civilizational status. As Antony Anghie notes, “Sovereignty existed in something like a linear continuum, based on its approximation to the ideal of the European nation-state” (2007, 148).<sup>vii</sup>

The call for sovereignty was matched by a call for industrialisation. The Communiqué issued after the conference begins by listing principles of economic cooperation,<sup>viii</sup> suggesting the importance of the economic in the creation of a new international.<sup>ix</sup> Some of the themes that emerge from these principles include the need for cooperation within the Global South; the creation and sharing of technical expertise, research and development; the

establishment of international bodies to coordinate economic development; and self-determination in terms of economic policy. Most importantly, the principles clearly delineate a program for national development based on industrialisation. The fourth principle calls for the stabilising of commodity trade in the region, and the fifth principle acknowledges the importance of primary commodities and the position of the postcolonial world in supplying them. The sixth principle states: “Asian-African countries should diversify their export trade by processing their raw material, wherever economically feasible, before export.”<sup>x</sup> Furthermore, the nationalisation of banking was strongly proposed, as was the development of infrastructure to engage in trade. As Chatterjee notes, the Communiqué suggests that most countries at the conference saw themselves as “exporters of raw commodities and importers of industrial products,” (Chatterjee 2017, 673). State-led economic development through industrialisation was envisioned as a means of interrupting the dependency they faced on global capital.

These debates highlight the *economic* understanding of sovereignty underpinning these discussions. Sovereignty was not merely about political control over borders or institutions of governance; it was a break from foreign capital and a shift towards national forms of capital. It is precisely here that we see a critical awareness of the limitations of Western foreign capital and aid. The forms of technical aid and support that are listed above and that were discussed thoroughly at Bandung are to take place between and among postcolonial nations *only*. The issue was not so much whether forms of aid or investment should exist at all between sovereign nation states; but rather whether, given the history of European imperialism, they should continue to exist between postcolonial nation states and imperial powers. In other words, horizontal forms of aid did not seem to threaten sovereignty in the ways that vertical forms of aid had and could.

I touched on these two major events—Bandung in 1955 and the nationalisation of the Suez Canal in 1956—to highlight the ways in which unfettered and uncontrolled foreign capital was seen as one of the central threats to postcolonial sovereignty. The actions taken by postcolonial states and the critiques made by radical movements and intellectuals all point to their understanding of independence as predicated on both economic and political independence. Nevertheless, these debates still contained internal contradictions that reproduced colonial understandings of development and the economy. Recalling Jabri, the nationalisation of the Suez Canal can be read as a paradigmatic moment in postcolonial state resistance: “In this moment was contained not simply the desire to reclaim a valuable resource for the nation, but to constitute the nation as a viable political community with a right of access to the realm of the international” (Jabri 2012, 103).

Suez, according to this narrative, marked a moment of resistance; a moment during which, with massive popular support, the “lifeline of the British Empire” was swiftly decolonised. Nationalisation can thus be read as an act of sovereignty; an attempt to access the international on Egypt’s own terms. It was not simply about finding capital to finance the building of the High Dam; it was also about making a claim to Egyptian national resources and their place within the international political economy. It is pertinent to recall the push by Britain and the US to “internationalise” the Suez Canal, thereby bringing it under international protection; the underlying assumption being that Egyptians could not run the canal alone. By arguing that the Canal was Egyptian and that Egypt as a sovereign state had the right to nationalise it, Nasser was re-scripting sovereignty in an attempt to expand the circle of nations who should be thought of as sovereign.

This, however, brings us to the internal contradictions embedded within anticolonial understandings of sovereignty in Egypt. This claim to sovereignty ultimately reified a colonial understanding of sovereignty that reproduced the nation state as the bearer of what is

sovereign. Broadly speaking, the adoption of the modern nation state and nationalism on the part of postcolonial elites implied an unspoken acceptance of colonial modes of governance and societal organisation. This critique has been made by postcolonial scholars with reference to anticolonial nationalism and its attempt to capture the state and make it the central locus of politics.<sup>xi</sup> While these nations adopted nationalism in order to fight colonialism, this should not have instituted a long-term organising structure. Joseph Massad makes this point when he claims that the problem is precisely that these leaders in the Middle East did not see the dangers of *believing* that the adoption of nationalism was more than simply strategic (2001, 277-278).

The adoption of state-led capitalist development should also be seen as the continuation of a colonial mode of governance. Indeed the failures of the Nasserist project from an economic perspective were already diagnosed early on by leftist writers and intellectuals,<sup>xiii</sup> including scholars such as Samir Amin, who had laid out the “traps” inherent in adopting capitalist development—even if led by an anticolonial state (Amin 2011, 2007). Given that the expansion of capitalism in Egypt was tied to the expansion of imperialism from the very beginning, it becomes difficult to entangle one from the other. It is this that makes Nasser’s decision to adopt state-led capitalist development contentious. I turn now to the time period after the fall of the Nasserist project in order to trace the ways in which Egyptian sovereignty was once again challenged by global capital.

### *Neoliberalising Egypt: The amnesia of empire*

Where Nasserism had a complicated relationship with Fanon’s idea of the dependent bourgeoisie (Salem 2018), this was less so for the ruling class that emerged in the late 1960s, representing a new project based on very different assumptions. Anwar el Sadat ushered in

Egypt's neoliberal phase, marking the start of the neoliberalization of the economy. The peace treaty with Israel as well as the clear shift towards the United States and foreign capital further cemented this shift. The private sector was resuscitated, based on a strong discourse about public sector inefficiency and corruption. All of this took place within a broader global shift towards neoliberalism. The ascendancy of Hosni Mubarak in the early 1980s, followed by the rise of a new group of businessmen in the late 1990s, marked the deepening of neoliberalism, primarily through finance capital. Egypt thus went from an economy underpinned by industry and the public sector, to one underpinned by finance capital and speculation—all in the span of four decades. Importantly, by the 2000s Egypt's economy was heavily dependent on foreign capital and foreign aid, of which the EU was a key player (Hanieh 2013).

It is thus only with Sadat that we see the clear emergence of Fanon's dependent bourgeoisie in Egypt, a "national bourgeoisie" that "turns its back more and more on the interior and on the real facts of its undeveloped country, and tends to look towards the former mother country and the foreign capitalists who count on its obliging compliance," (Fanon 1963, 165). This dependent bourgeoisie—with its focus on foreign capital and capital accumulation for an increasingly small number of Egyptians—marks a continuation of the conditions that were present pre-independence. Fanon writes:

A bourgeoisie similar to that which developed in Europe is able to elaborate an ideology and at the same time strengthen its own power. Such a bourgeoisie, dynamic, educated and secular, has fully succeeded in its undertaking of the accumulation of capital and has given to the nation a minimum of prosperity. In under-developed countries, we have seen that no true bourgeoisie exists. (...) This get-rich-quick middle class shows itself incapable of great ideas or of

inventiveness. It remembers what it has read in European textbooks and imperceptibly it becomes not even the replica of Europe, but its caricature (1963, 175).

To trace some of the ways in which dependency, neoliberalism and the “colonial international” come together under Sadat, I focus specifically on NGOs and foreign funding, one of the key spaces through which we can see the workings of EU political and economic influence. This is not to suggest that NGOs have been the main drivers of neoliberalism in Egypt, nor that they represent the only space within which dependency on foreign capital is apparent. Indeed, Egypt’s state became equally dependent on foreign capital during this period. It is rather conceptualised as one space among many where the effects of foreign capital, especially EU capital, became visible and contested, and where we can thus trace what I refer to as the amnesia of empire.

As NGOs began to proliferate across the Middle East, civil society began to be conceptualized as a possible counterbalance to authoritarian states. As Islah Jad writes, “The expansion of NGOs is widely viewed as constituting the development of an Arab ‘civil society’ that can contain the authoritarian state and as a healthy sign of real, ‘bottom-up’ democracy in the region,” (2007, 177). Jad goes on to note that the proliferation of NGOs may also be viewed as a new and growing form of dependency on Western nations.<sup>xiii</sup>

Critical discussions of NGOs in the Middle East have often focused on the ways in which the state co-opts NGOs in order to prevent them from challenging authoritarian policies, even as the state uses the presence of civil society to demonstrate that it is liberalizing (Altan-Olcay and Icduygu 2012, 161). A common argument within this discussion is that the state finds NGOs useful insofar as they provide social services and thus allow the state to step away from the provision of welfare. This links back to the core



argument of this article in noting the centrality of increasing neoliberalisation in Egypt, a central aspect of which is the privatization of many of the state's welfare policies. While these discussions have rightly brought attention to the ways in which states attempt to manipulate civil society, this article instead focuses on how some of the funding received by NGOs attempts to do the same. It is pertinent to note, however, that because NGOs must register with the government and must have all of their funding approved, it becomes clear there is a foreign capital-government connection that is also key to the workings of neoliberalism. Indeed here the amnesia of radical critique and of empire seem to meet, with both the destructive role of foreign capital as well as the role of postcolonial states in rejecting it being forgotten.

Aid, as Nkrumah has noted, has long functioned as a means of political and economic control, and should primarily be understood as a form of 'revolving credit,' where Western governments eventually recover their 'investment' in a variety of ways (quoted in Langan 2017, 63). Aside from the military aid Egypt receives each year, US aid, for example, helps in "setting the parameters for Washington's influence in Egypt's domestic affairs and established a possible collusion between Washington and Egypt's program for political liberalization," (Bush 2009, 85). Ray Bush goes on to discuss EU aid in the same context, focusing on the EU-Egypt Action Plan and its call for Egypt to enhance political institutions and protect human rights (*ibid*). Similarly, the European Investment Bank has been heavily involved in various types of economic interventions, including project aid, budget support, and 'blending'—combining private sector support with aid.

The EU's entanglements in the region are many. In particular the debate around the EU as a normative or civilising power is instructive, as it explores some of the ways in which the EU serves to influence the Mediterranean region without appearing to do so (Bicchi 2006). Pace has summarised this process succinctly: "Since the 1990s, in the post-cold war

context of the collapse of communist rule, the EU has been pursuing an almost messianic quest for the internationalization of liberal democracy abroad, as a key foreign policy instrument in its external relations. The European model of liberal democracy has been taken as a necessarily ‘good’ thing and its pursuit supposedly as a primary goal in and of itself,” (2009, 39). Bicchi has instead labelled EU interventions as “our size fits all,” and therefore as a form of civilising power (2006, 293). Democracy promotion has been central to this, particularly after the Cold War (Bicchi 2009; Pace 2009). Other scholars have explicitly focused on these entanglements post-2010/2011, highlighting how they have both stayed the same and changed (Balfour 2011; Pace and Seeberg 2013). I focus here on two particular forms of foreign economic intervention in Egypt: the rise of democracy promotion, and the use of gender equality, both of which are framed through the language of the free market (Pace 2014). I briefly present each form, before discussing in a final section their connection to neoliberalisation, read through Fanon and today’s postcolonial Mediterranean.

### *Democracy promotion and neoliberalism*

The EU has been particularly active within the field of democracy promotion in the broader Middle East. In a paper entitled *Taming Arab social movements: exporting neoliberal governmentality*, Tagma, Kalaycioglu and Akcali argue that the EU’s attempts at democracy promotion in Egypt post-2011 can be viewed as a case of active promotion of neoliberal policies in order to create forms of subjectivity in accordance with EU interests in the region (2013). Through the selection of actors to finance in Egypt, the EU ensures that liberal civil society organisations are favoured over other types (Islamic or welfarist) and thus attempts to discipline these organisations so that they in turn *discipline the government*. This is similar to pre-2011 where aid was often tied to democratic or human rights reforms.

Underlying projects geared towards democracy promotion are specific assumptions about what democracy entails (Pace 2014). Procedural democracy becomes the top priority, and it is often posed alongside a neoliberal economic system<sup>xiv</sup>:

The procedural conceptualization of democracy can be found in the joint communication on ‘A New Response to a Changing Neighborhood’. Here it is stated that ‘there is no set model or a ready-made recipe for political reform’, and that there are nonetheless common elements to ‘building deep and sustainable democracy’. These common elements include free and fair elections, freedom of association/expression/assembly, the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary, combatting corruption, and civilian control of the security establishment. Recognizing this liberal ‘bias’ is not to argue either for or against the indispensability of these freedoms for democracy, but rather to note that their prioritization belongs to a certain understanding of democracy at the expense of others (Tagma et. al 386).

This echoes Pace’s argument that the European model of liberal democracy has been taken as a necessarily ‘good’ thing (2009, 39). By focusing on issues that are linked to access to political institutions rather than issues related to structural transformation or social justice, specific NGO donors partake in creating a common sense understanding of democracy that ultimately aids in neoliberalisation.

Importantly, many of these donor-partner relationships continue to work within power dynamics that are reminiscent of colonial era relationships. In their book on the Euro-Mediterranean partnerships, Samir Amin and Ali el Kenz demonstrate the underlying goals underpinning this partnership and its connections to neoliberalisation (2005). The Euro-Med

process was launched in 1995 and its aim was to create a free trade area—the Mediterranean Free Trade Zone. Although conceptualized as a “new” type of partnership in which trust and dialogue between all partners are central, in fact “The Euro-Med partnership reveals, in spite of all the diplomatic euphemisms and solemn declarations, a duplicity, or at least an ambiguity, that is cunningly concealed in the discourse. This project is principally a ‘defence’ agreement and one that protects the EU against possible social, political and cultural influences ‘overflowing’; from the countries on the southern side of the Mediterranean,” (2005, 61).

Although the aim of the entire project was to establish free trade, multiple projects promoting human rights and equality were established throughout the southern Mediterranean. It appears that for donors, a link between establishing free trade and promoting a human rights discourse was assumed. Indeed el Kenz highlights this when he points out that the aim of these projects was to help the Southern partners “speak a new language” in order to facilitate the establishment of the free trade zone (ibid, 67). Part of this new language has been projects that emphasize “reforming the judiciary” and “improving laws related to the family,” (ibid, 68). It is precisely these kinds of interventions that make clear the connection between establishing a free trade zone and the use of human rights to establish a neoliberal consent that will facilitate the former. It is useful here to quote el Kenz at length:

The European commitment to support strong civil societies in their countries and to encourage democracy and human rights must be carefully analyzed. It is true that this has facilitated and can continue to facilitate the development of a social and political dynamic that can impose a relative opening up of local dictatorships.

However, linked as it is to the neoliberal strategy of the project as a whole, it is serving as an instrument rather than an end in itself, (ibid, 72).

In other words, the aim is not to condemn all NGO work in contexts such as Egypt, nor to deny that some NGOs do manage to subvert the donors' wishes and do work that is truly emancipatory.<sup>xv</sup> Indeed local Egyptian organisations deploy a much more critical articulation of human rights. The aim instead is to probe the connections between organisations such as the EU and Egypt's elite, and how neoliberalisation plays a role in fostering these connections.

To conclude this section, I want to touch on Fanon's critical intervention around the term "democracy." For Fanon, democracy meant not liberal or civil institutions, but rather the redistribution of wealth across a nation; wealth that was both imperial and national (1963, 152). It is here that we see the limitations of the EU's approach to democracy promotion, which depoliticises democracy and thus erases the question of imperial wealth distribution. In the examples laid out here, democracy promotion works to facilitate neoliberal accumulation—it serves capital accumulation, rather than capital redistribution. For Fanon, this was not what a radical understanding of democracy entails.

### *Gender equality and the neoliberal self*

Shifting to a different arena of civil society, this section traces some of the foreign aid interventions into gender projects in Egypt. Scholars have looked at the ways in which gender is implicated in Egypt's process of neoliberal restructuring, tracing the connections between market exploitation and gendered inequalities (Ghannam 2013, Hoodfar 1997). Gender has constituted one of the principle areas of donor funding—particularly EU donor funding—for

over two decades now. This has often relied on what Chandra Mohanty has called a discourse of the “average third world woman” who is understood to be the passive object of development (1988). The focus of this section is on how this creation of a “third world woman” serves to further the transnational process of neoliberalization in contexts such as Egypt. Lila abu Lughod (2002) and Naila Kabeer (1994) have written extensively on the ways in which these constructions are intricately linked to power within the development industry. Indeed through the commodification of Arab women, donors are allowed to feel as though they are intervening in “indigenous patriarchal domination” to save women (Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Woodsum 2014, 180). These discursive moves are extremely important, as they are part and parcel of particular notions of empowerment and equality.

Adrienne Roberts writes that we can locate a “Transnational Business Feminism” (TBF) that exercises discipline over civil society in various “developing” countries: “There has been an identifiable convergence of social forces around a particular understanding of gender equality and this had led to an emerging project with several identifiable characteristics,” (2014, 211). These characteristics include its transnational nature, the role of corporations in defining its parameters, and its links to liberal feminism and global capitalism. Because of these characteristics, gender equality is understood to be access to the market (devoid of power relations) and therefore as tied to neoliberal expansion. This approach differs from analyses that attempt to portray Egyptian civil society as opposed to the regime and as a pro-democracy force. This not only homogenizes civil society but also disguises its role in the system that the 2011 uprising attempted to dismantle.

Attempts to achieve gender equality through the market are one of the central ways in which donors such as the EU have influenced both gender politics and neoliberalisation in Egypt. As Roberts shows, the dominant discourse defines empowerment as the right to participate in the market economy as producers and consumers of goods and services (2014,

212). The market here is also presented as being devoid of power relations or structurally detrimental to women. The linking of market-based measurements has therefore had the effect of measuring gender equality through the lens of economic competitiveness. Women are seen as producers and consumers that are “good for business.” Indeed the focus on women entrepreneurs has become a major one for donors working in Egypt, as has the emphasis on microfinance programs.

One example is Sweden’s decision to “support women’s rights” in Egypt through funding the creation of 500,000 jobs (Aggour, 2014). As noted by the Swedish ambassador to Cairo, the assumption is that creating jobs is essential to gender equality and democracy. Similarly, Care International’s program in Egypt aimed at addressing women’s rights includes five pillars, two of which rest on women’s entry into the labour market, and one that rests on awareness campaigns. One of Care International’s projects in Asyut that began in 2010 and that is funded by the EU Commission focuses on giving women access to economic resources. As previously mentioned, this in isolation does not target, let alone critique, structural factors that prevent economic justice for women all over Egypt, and even more so in rural areas. Another project, based in Minya and Sohag and funded by Barclays Bank, aims to instil a logic of “financial planning” and “money management” among rural Egyptians, especially women. The project does this by linking people in need to financial institutions - again, a problematic move that can only be seen as progressive coming from a liberal presumption of what economic and gender justice entails. It is worth noting that the construction of rural Egyptians as not only impoverished but also as lacking in knowledge about financial planning or business is key in such projects.

To conclude this section, I want to draw a connection to the ways in which drawing women into the labour market is connected to the endless quest for cheap labour on the one hand, and the use of the spectre of a surplus population on the other.<sup>xvi</sup> As noted by Hanieh,

free trade zones in countries like Egypt focus specifically on attracting female workers because they are able to pay less and subject them to terrible working conditions (2013, 100). Yet at the same time, surplus populations act as an important means through which capital disciplines and exploits workers, particularly in the postcolonial world (Li 2010). It is thus pertinent that we think through the connections between work, gender and neoliberalism and the ways in which the EU, as well as other donor organisations, are implicated in problematic discourses and policy outcomes.

### *Fanon in the postcolonial Mediterranean*

Economic sovereignty has been central to the politics of Egypt since independence. Where Nasserism made the quest for economic sovereignty central to his project—despite the presence of internal contradictions that continued to reproduce colonial assumptions—the project of neoliberalisation that began in the late 1960s instead made economic sovereignty increasingly difficult. Fanon’s work has highlighted the ways in which economic sovereignty is tied to colonial capitalism and its production of a dependent ruling class that is structurally created to reproduce dependency. I have shown how on the one hand, the Nasserist ruling class fit that designation in some ways and not in others, and on the other hand how the ruling class that emerged under Sadat more straightforwardly represents the dependent class Fanon predicted.

The amnesia of radical critique helps us remember the radical debates around economic sovereignty that took place in the postcolonial era, including in global spaces such as Bandung as well as national spaces such as Suez. It reminds us of the radical ways in which economic sovereignty was understood and imagined, while at the same time serving as a warning of how these radical ideas did not always materialise. While Nasserism—and



postcolonial state-led projects more broadly—articulated a critique of the uneven distribution of economic sovereignty, this still very much depended on a colonial articulation of sovereignty that was tied up with state-led capitalism.

The amnesia of empire, on the other hand, helps in showcasing the forgetting of imperial legacies that we see dominate Egypt's neoliberal turn in the 1970s, as well as the wilful forgetting of empire on the part of the US, EU, and other political actors. I explored the weakening of Egypt's economic sovereignty from the 1970s onwards by focusing on one space where we see increasing influence from actors like the EU: civil society. From democracy promotion to women's rights, we see the return of colonial norms of governance and subjectivity. Neocolonialism and neoliberalism, two sides of the same coin, become possible through both an amnesia of empire and an amnesia of radical critique, both of which erase the colonial underpinnings of Egypt's free market project as well as the multiple ways in which foreign capital had been problematised by the anticolonial moment.

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<sup>i</sup> Gilroy 1993, Wekker 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Alessandrini 2005; Gordon 2015; Macey 2012; Fanon (eds. Khalfa and Young) 2018.

<sup>iii</sup> This term refers to an international sphere that existed post-independence that still replicated colonial structures and relations.

<sup>iv</sup> For examples of work that demonstrate this, see: Alavi 1972 and Saul 1974.

<sup>v</sup> Ultimately Egypt was to turn to local capital to finance the dam.

<sup>vi</sup> See also Mintoff, this special issue.

<sup>vii</sup> See also Sen, this special issue.

<sup>viii</sup> The Communiqué can be accessed at: [http://franke.uchicago.edu/Final\\_Communique\\_Bandung\\_1955.pdf](http://franke.uchicago.edu/Final_Communique_Bandung_1955.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> In some ways, this pre-empted approaches such as dependency and world systems theory, which centered the global capitalist system as a site of colonial inequality.

<sup>x</sup> For the full text, see: [http://franke.uchicago.edu/Final\\_Communique\\_Bandung\\_1955.pdf](http://franke.uchicago.edu/Final_Communique_Bandung_1955.pdf)

<sup>xi</sup> See: Chatterjee 1986; Seth 1992, pp. 37-54; Said 1978.

<sup>xii</sup> See Abdel-Malek 1968 for a key text on Nasserism.

<sup>xiii</sup> See: Abdelrahman, Maha. “The nationalization of the human rights debate in Egypt.” *Nations and nationalism* 13, no. 2 (2007): 285-300. Indeed the tendency on the part of Egyptian authorities to characterize NGOs as part of an imperialist agenda often ridicules the notion that civil society could indeed be connected to

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modern-day imperialist processes. Nevertheless, it remains important to probe these questions, despite authorities using them as a diversionary tactic.

<sup>xiv</sup> For more, see: Pace 2011; 2008.

<sup>xv</sup> For an excellent article on Egyptian NGOs that have done precisely this, see: Amar 2011.

<sup>xvi</sup> See: Li 2010.