Haunted histories:
Nasserism and the promises of the past

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Abstract

This article revisits the Nasserist project through the lens of haunting. It explores the afterlives of Nasserism, in particular in relation to Egypt's move towards a free market economy from the 1970s onwards. To do this, the Nasserist project is explored in order to excavate some of the promises that were made, and trace the legacies these created. I argue that these promises—although only partially fulfilled—continued to act as powerful political memories that limited Egyptian politics in the decades that followed. Thinking of Nasserism as a form of haunting allows for a deeper understanding of how different political projects seep into one another, problematizing the notion of a linear teleological or providential trajectory consisting of distinct eras. In distinction to work that has mobilised the concept of haunting (originally theorized by Jacques Derrida) in order to elaborate on the historical manifestation of damaging or violent legacies in the present, I argue that Nasserist forms of haunting should be read as a productive and destructive normative force in the present. This paper puts forward examples of both, particularly in relation to questions of social justice, socialism, and anti-imperialism.

Keywords: Egypt; Nasser; Hauntology; Decolonisation

Introduction

> To be haunted is to be tied to historical and social effects.
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> —Avery Gordon[1]

> The living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us.
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> —Frederick Jameson[2]

The defeat of the Nasserist project in 1967 represents a paradigmatic shift in Egyptian and broader Arab politics. Symbolising the end of pan-Arabism, anticolonial nationalism, independent economic development, and Arab socialism, the collapse of Nasserism in many ways can be read as the end of a particular historical epoch. What came after 1967 was radically different, both in terms of ideological orientation and material consequence. The death of Nasser and the rise of Sadat saw the emergence of Egypt's experiment with a free market economy, the rise of consumerism, and the embracing of a Western-focused foreign policy, which included a controversial peace settlement with Israel. In some ways, then, it is difficult to think of the Nasserist project influencing the one that came after it, which I refer to as the *Infitah* project.

In this article, I trace some of the subtle ways in which Nasserism seeped into the new, post-1967 Egypt. This haunting is more than simply Sadat's use of Nasserist rhetoric—which he did extensively at the start of his project—or the use of Nasserism as a warning and excuse for broader neoliberal reforms. Rather, I use haunting to refer to how the spectre of the Nasserist project continued—and continues—to set the standard of what a successful hegemonic project looks like, thereby explicitly and implicitly setting expectations around what other projects should say, do, or be. In other words, I posit that Nasserism set the terms of the political and economic debate in contemporary Egypt; the projects that came after consistently found that they had to work within these terms—or face serious crises. Such expectations are not mere rhetoric but also have material repercussions, as I show with regard to attempts by Sadat to implement neoliberal reforms.

On the one hand, then, I see Nasserism as haunting in the sense that it normalised certain ideas around what politics should look like—for good or bad—and what an economic model founded on independent development could deliver. On the other hand, Nasserism should be understood as a form of haunting in that it significantly affected the ability of radical social forces to prevent the very neoliberal project Nasser consistently warned Egyptians about. Nasser's complete decimation of the left—perhaps the only force that could have mobilised successfully against the reforms Sadat was to put in place—is one of the major failures of the Nasserist project more broadly, and one that continues to have repercussions on contemporary Egyptian politics. Nasserism thus haunts us in two ways: as a historical moment and project that promised much but ultimately failed—therefore as a king of historical alternative that never quite materialised; and as

[1] Avery Gordon (2008) *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination* (Twin Cities: University of Minnesota Press), pp. 1.

[2] Michael Sprinker, ed., (1999) *Ghostly demarcations: a symposium on Jacques Derrida's Spectres of Marx* (London: Verso), pp. 39.

a damaging project filled with social violence that continues to haunt contemporary Egyptian politics today.

This notion of haunting is useful in various ways. It pushes for an understanding of how the legacies of some projects continue to have aftereffects, but not always in visible or measurable ways. The concept of hauntology owes its roots to Derrida, who made ghosts the subject of analysis in his book *Spectres of Marx*.[3] Derrida asks us to listen and speak with the spectre, to resist the disinclination we have towards this because of how we have been academically trained, and to be open to secrets or other forms of knowledge this listening may reveal. Listening to the ghost means listening to the past and the future at the same time.

In this paper I take my cue from Avery Gordon's suggestion to see the "particular density, delicacy and propulsive force of the imagination in sociological analysis, which is too often limited by its restrictive commitment to an empiricist epistemology and its supporting ontology of the visible and the concrete."[4] It blurs the strong lines we often draw between different political projects, suggesting that ideas and decisions from one project can seep into other projects that are constructed as new or antithetical: "Haunting raises spectres, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future."[5] Finally, it gives us a way of thinking through why some projects have the power to haunt, while others do not; what is it about the constitution of particular projects that produces afterlives? More broadly, I am interested in how we come to understand how certain political projects create both "particular kinds of subjects" as well as the "possible and the impossible."[6]

In her magisterial *Ghostly Matters,* Avery Gordon seeks a new way of knowing, one that is more than listening or seeing but that instead searches for what is still among us in the form of "intimations, hints, suggestions, and portents"[7]—all of which make up what she calls 'ghostly matters.' Haunting is frightening, in that it registers and brings to the surface the harm inflicted or loss sustained by social violence that happened in the past or present:

> It seemed to me that haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done.[8]

For Gordon, to study social life means confronting the ghostly aspects of it. This poses a critical challenge to knowledge production and the ways in which we legitimise certain forms of knowing over others. Ghosts can be understood as empirical evidence, or they can be show us that empirical evidence is not always necessary to show something is real. "Of one thing I am sure: it's not that ghosts don't exist. The postmodern, late-capitalist, postcolonial world represses and projects its ghosts or phantoms in similar intensities, if not entirely the same forms, as the older world did."[9]

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[3] Jacques Derrida (2012) *Specters of Marx: The state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international* (London: Routledge).
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid, xv.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid, xvi.
[9] Ibid, 12.

Here, I primarily make use of Avery Gordon's work, but see important symmetries with work by Ann Laura Stoler on haunting and José Esteban Muñoz's work on futurity[10] that provide interesting and creative ways of expanding the limited scope of this article. Ann Laura Stoler's work on haunting reminds us that empire continues to haunt even after imperialism is formally over. She writes: "Haunting occupies the space between what we cannot see and what we know. It wrestles with elusive, nontransparent power and, not least, with attunement to the unexpected sites and lineaments that such knowledge requires."[11] Stoler's conception of haunting has influenced a growing body of work that examines the legacies—both visible and invisible—of colonial rule, and how these legacies continue to reproduce inequalities today.[12] There is little doubt that British colonial rule has similarly left such legacies in Egypt, where being haunted by empire can arguably be seen in the deepening economic, political and social crisis in the country today.

Both Gordon and Stoler use haunting to explore what is hidden, invisible, lingering and unmeasurable. In doing so, they ask questions about what we consider to be real or valid knowledge, and how we can account for the afterlives of certain political projects. It is these afterlives I am interested in, particularly in relation to the Nasserist project in Egypt, one that was arguably much more powerful than those that came after. I explore the ways in which the afterlives of Nasserism complicate the idea of haunting, in that they haunt through both promise and failure. I see Nasserim as an instance of what José Esteban Muñoz terms "performative force of the past."[13] The past is performative because the past *does things*. This does not mean seeing the past as having *led* to the present, but rather to break away from conceptions of linear time entirely. As Derrida argued in *Spectres of Marx,* haunting is one of way of breaking this teleology.

The first section places the Nasserist project within its historical and social context, illustrating that it was pre-dated and outlived Nasser himself. The second section looks at Nasser's decimation of the Egyptian left, arguing that this was one of the major ways in which the project continued to haunt Egyptian politics. The third section explores a different form of haunting, arguing that the promises of Arab socialism and the tangible material and ideological changes put in place by the Nasserist ruling class acted as a limit on the neoliberal project that emerged under Sadat. These two very different forms of haunting suggest that haunting can occur in multiple ways; sometimes as productive and other times as manifesting past social violence. I conclude by tracing why haunted histories matter, and why the afterlives of Nasserism in particular are important to pay attention to.

Nasserism and the promises of the past

> The language through which we chose to read our world (or which history chose for us) was nationalist, as was our historical consciousness.
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> —Arwa Salih[14]

[10] Muñoz, J. E. (2009) *Cruising utopia: The then and there of queer futurity* (New York: New York University Press).
[11] Ann Stoler (2006) *Haunted by empire: Geographies of intimacy in North American history*, (Durham: Duke University Press), pp.1-22.
[12] Ann Stoler (2008). Imperial debris: reflections on ruins and ruination. *Cultural anthropology*, *23*(2), pp.191-219; Ann Stoler (2016) *Duress: Imperial durabilities in our times* (Durham: Duke University Press).
[13] *Cruising utopia*, pp. 21.
[14] Arwa Salih (2018) *The Stillborn* (Calcultta: Seagull Books).

An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself.
—Jacques Derrida[15]

Gamal Abdel Nasser ruled Egypt for fourteen years, from 1956 until his death in 1970. Representing Egypt's formal break with colonial rule as well as an attempted transition towards an industry-driven economy, the Nasser years were a momentous time. Around Nasser there quickly coalesced a project that I refer to in this article as the Nasserist project. This project was a combination of the radical energies of various social movements that predated the 1952 revolution on the one hand, as well as the ideological and material changes put in place by Nasser and the Free Officers on the other. It was a project that cultivated and enjoyed high levels of consent—largely due to its co-optation of these pre-revolutionary energies—and that made use of high levels of coercion. What distinguishes this particular project from the ones that came before and after is that this coercion was often legitimised through the high levels of consent, rendering it an extremely powerful political project—and in turn, explaining why it has the power to haunt.

The Nasserist project was created by and flourished within a particular historical moment, that of decolonisation. Its mobilisation of anticolonial nationalism and independent, state-led industrialisation mirrored a broader trend across the postcolonial world that saw the dependency of former colonies on the metropole a major challenge to meaningful independence. Key changes such as the nationalisation of the Suez Canal, the adoption of positive neutralism, land reforms, the expansion of the public sector, and the introduction of free social services such as education and healthcare were part of this broader move to take control of the national economy. This control, however, had a very limited purview; it belonged to the ruling class, who liberally employed both consent and coercion to garner support and crush resistance.

The Nasserist project, however, went far beyond Nasser, and also predated him. The project formed in the 1950s, against a backdrop of the intense nationalist fervour that had engulfed the country for decades. Rather than nationalist sentiment acting as merely a backdrop in the formation of this bloc, it was very much its *raison d'etre*. From feminists to workers, from communists to liberals, there was a strong consensus that anti-colonialism and nationalism were the sites of struggle in twentieth century Egypt. The nationalist cause was one that seeped into everything and gave it its full character; because for the majority of Egyptians, independence was seen as the most important political, economic and social goal. Because of the centrality of nationalism to almost all social movements in the decades leading up to 1952, the groundwork for the Nasserist project was already in place when it was 'officially' established in 1952. It used the same language, discourses and ideas that many Egyptians had already become familiar with; it also put in place material projects that Egyptians had been calling for, such as nationalisation and industrialisation.

This mixed record is what complicates an understanding of Nasserism as haunting. It is clear that Nasserism had afterlives, and that the figure of Nasser himself continued to linger in the Egyptian public imagination. Certain events, such as the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the 1967 defeat to Israel, as well as certain policies, such as the land reform program, became landmarks in Egyptian history, moments that set the contours of what an independent Egypt could be. Haunting, however, expressed itself in different ways. On the one hand, as a reminder of the social violence that had come before; in the next section I look at this through the repression

[15] *Spectres of Marx,* pp. 18.

leftists in Egypt faced under Nasserism. On the other hand, as a reminder of a promise that was extremely powerful, and yet that ultimately failed. Haunting is thus also split between these realities: that of promise and of failure. At times, it is the promises of Nasserism that haunt Egypt, as I show in the section on neoliberalism; at other times, it is the failures of Nasserism that continue to haunt Egypt.

These failures were tied to the project itself, most notably in its reproduction of capitalism rather than its abandonment of it, as well as through its reproduction of the nation state as the ultimate vessel of sovereignty and independence. The problem is not so much the adoption of nationalism in order to fight colonialism—an adoption that was rendered necessary and, in many cases, was the only option for postcolonial nations. The problem is that these leaders did not see the dangers of believing that this adoption was more than simply strategic.[16] Similarly, the reproduction of capitalism embroiled Egypt within a global system of dependency. As Adam Hanieh and others have noted, perhaps nothing indicated the problems with the Nasserist project more than its decision to exclude labour from the centres of power.[17]

If we follow Fanon, true socialism in the postcolony would have meant a radical form of democracy.[18] Democracy here takes on a different meaning from civil institutions, civil liberties, and the protection of liberal freedoms; rather for Fanon democracy refers to the redistribution of wealth across the nation. This wealth does not refer only to wealth within the nation, but also imperial wealth: "We are not blinded by the moral reparation of national independence; nor are we fed by it. The wealth of the imperial countries is our wealth too."[19] Yet it is its redistribution that is key: the wealth of the nation belongs to all of us within the nation. Indeed much of Fanon's work has looked at the exclusions within the nation, most prominently the exclusion of the peasantry. For him, real decolonisation takes place once everyone within the nation is able to access this wealth. While nationalising industries is important, the bigger question is who is allowed to partake in this process of nationalising. In a strong condemnation of nationalist elites, he writes: "For if you think you can manage a country without letting the people interfere, if you think that the people upset the game by their mere presence, whether they slow it down or whether by their natural ignorance they sabotage it, then you must have no hesitation: you must keep the people out."[20] It is in this coherence of economic independence and a radical notion of democracy that we more clearly see the promises and failures of the Nasserist project. By excluding workers and peasants from the project of decolonisation, and by attempting to fully decolonise through the very structures colonialism had created and passed down, the Nasserist project was ultimately unable to free Egypt from its colonial status.

'The Stillborn': Nasser's destruction of the Egyptian left

> Because the past always haunts the present, sociology must imaginatively engage those apparitions, those ghosts that tie present subjects to past histories.

[16] Joseph Massad. (2001) *Colonial effects: The making of national identity in Jordan* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 277-8.
[17] Adam Hanieh (2013) *Lineages of revolt: Issues of contemporary capitalism in the Middle East* (London: Haymarket).
[18] Frantz Fanon (1963) *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press), p. 78.
[19] Ibid, 81.
[20] Ibid, 152.

—Avery Gordon[21]

The trade unions, to whom all trade-union activity is forbidden, merely mark time.
—Frantz Fanon[22]

In her memoir, Egyptian communist Arwa Salih uses the term 'stillborn' to describe how her generation of Egyptian leftists related to the Nasserist project, one they saw as an unfinished failure that haunts the present nonetheless:

> I felt profoundly disconnected from the 'national struggle' that haunts every sentence of this book. This national struggle was a historical necessity for liberation-era communists. Both second and third wave communists were hopelessly trapped in the logic of anti-imperial nationalist populism, isolated from 'the only game in town' and forced to lead a 'double life' that destroyed both their integrity and 'their ability to believe.'[23]

The relationship between Nasser and the communists was especially tenuous. Nasser and the Officers began their crackdown on the communist movement early on, and by the mid-1960s, an overwhelming majority were imprisoned. Initially, the majority of Egyptian communist tendencies expressed resistance to the Free Officers and the military coup that brought them to power, especially after an initial brutal crackdown on striking workers in Kafr al-Dawwar, near Alexandria. HADETU (al-Haraka al-Misriyya li'l-Tahrir al-Watani), founded by Henri Curiel, was the only major organization to support the Officers because of their move to prioritize the fight against British imperialism. By 1954, however, international communist organizations began to see pan-Arabism as an important expression of anti-imperialism.[24] In 1956 the communist movement equivocally expressed their support for the emerging ruling class and project, swayed in particular by Nasser's anti-imperialism and the nationalization of the Suez Canal:

> The rapprochement between the communists and the regime was based primarily on support for Nasser's anti-imperialist foreign policy, which was, in Nasserist political discourse, nearly synonymous with pan-Arab nationalism. Understanding the popularity and power of this idiom, the communists embraced it with only faintly articulated reservations about the continuing undemocratic character of the Nasser regime, its prohibition of strikes, its efforts to control the leadership of the trade union movement, and its refusal to allow overt communist political activity.[25]

Soon, however, communists began to criticise what they saw as the excesses—or contradictions—of the Nasserist project. As I noted in the previous section, it quickly became apparent that Nasserism would not centre workers or the address the broader question of wealth redistribution and democracy in a radical way.

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[21] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, pp. 2.
[22] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, pp. 97.
[23] Salih, *The Stillborn,* pp. 1.
[24] Joel Beinin (2005) *The Dispersion of Egyptian Jewry: Culture, Politics, and the Formation of a Modern Diaspora* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press), pp. 153.
[25] Ibid.

Following increasing criticism of the new project from communist groups, waves of repression materialized that severely dismembered the movement. In 1958 all communist currents merged to form the Communist Party of Egypt. In September of the same year, following failed attempts by the government to reach a political agreement, a full-scale attack was launched against the movement.[26] In December, influential communists were arrested and within the next five months an additional 700 were jailed. Many suffered physical and psychological torture in prison.[27] Following negotiations with the government, all communist prisoners were released in 1964, after an agreement stating that all communist parties be dissolved. In 1965, these dissolved parties joined the Arab Socialist Union.

This extended program of disappearances brings us back to the notion of haunting. Gordon writes that disappearance is a "state-sponsored method for haunting a population. The power of disappearance is the power to control everyday reality, to make the unreal real; it is the power to be spoken for, to be vanished as the very condition of your existence."[28] This power was exercised against the left in Nasser's Egypt, despite apparent similarities in how they understood Egypt's future. "The power of disappearance is to create a deathly consent out of our own stolen heterodoxy and will to dissent. The fundamental mode by which disappearance does its dirty nervous work is haunting."[29]

And yet what we see is a continuing loyalty towards the Nasserist project on the part of many communists. As Arwa Salih notes, an intellectual in the sixties could either "sing from behind the bars of his cage" or "wither away in a crushing tomb of solitude."[30] The predicament here was the realisation that at that particular historical moment, anti-imperialism and nationalism were the most important projects, and that Nasser and the Free Officers seemed to represent the most likely possibility of achieving them. Egyptian communists were caught up in a nationalist movement that "ultimately destroyed it,"[31] and, as Salih notes, the "Nasserist vision got all tangled up with Marxism, and it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the two until well after the flood waters had receded."[32] The glaring paradox of this time was precisely the concomitant existence within the left of nostalgia and bitterness towards Nasser.[33] In an excerpt from Mohamed el Wardani's novel *Heads Ripe for Plucking*, one communist prisoners says to another: "What I find hard to understand is how a nationalist government like President Nasser's would actually take it upon itself to sanction the torture, humiliation, wounding, and murder of communist nationalists who stand by it." His comrade responds:

> Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal and challenged the most arrogant and ruthless of imperial powers. We in turn stood by him, nor would it have been conceivable for us not to support him. None of the measures he took would have been undertaken except by a nationalist government that we must back and

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[26] Ibid, 581.
[27] Ibid, 582.
[28] Ibid, 131.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Salih, *The Stillborn*, pp. 23.
[31] Beinin 'The Communist movement', pp. 585.
[32] Salih, *The Stillborn*, pp. 28.
[33] Ibid, 3.

> support. The problem is that we need, simultaneously, to uphold our call for democracy.[34]

In Mohamed Morsi Qandil's novel, *Broken Soul,* we find similar lamentations about Nasser:

> He was a strange man! Even though he had imprisoned my father, I was incapable of hating him, for he was able to enrol me, thanks to him, in the faculty of medicine, like the children of the elite. Even when they were being tortured they chanted his name. They believed that what was happening to them was a kind of bitter misunderstanding.[35]

These painful ruminations bring to the surface the contradictory consciousness that communists experienced around Nasser and his project, a project they—for a time—saw as closely aligned with their own. This is the generation Arwa Salih focuses on in her book, a "melancholy generation of the sixties" who were content to "sing half a song in Nasser's prisons and whose petty-bourgeois origins destined them to failure and defeat."[36] Second and third wave communists were hopelessly trapped in the logic of anti-imperial nationalist populism, and forced to "lead a double life that destroyed both their integrity and their ability to believe."[37] Remembering, as she writes, is painful; it is not just painful in the way memories can be, but it is also painful in that it forces the leftist to confront their own role in the failure of the Nasserist project. Some, like Salih, did this by acknowledging their guilt; others repressed it, and turned to nostalgia instead.

A crucial point made in Samah Selim's introduction to Arwa Salih's memoir is that it was this left that was inherited by Sadat in 1970.[38] One of the major afterlives of the Nasserist project, then, was the decimation of a left that could have launched an attack on Infitah, neoliberalisation, and the broader shift towards the right. Instead, Sadat's 'corrective revolution' and later purges against leftists were to reveal just how weak the left was, and how discredited many of their ideas had become. The ghosts of Nasserism are many, but surely his exclusion and disappearing of those who supposedly shared his vision for what Egypt could be produced an especially intense form of haunting. In her attempt to understand Nasserism through the contradiction of those who he imprisoned nevertheless "singing his praises" from behind bars, Arwa Salih pinpoints not only a major enigma of the Nasser era, but also one of the central reasons for its ultimate failure.

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[34] Samia Mehrez (2011) *The literary life of Cairo: One hundred years in the heart of the city* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 45-46.
[35] Ibid, 37.
[36] Salih, *The Stillborn*, pp. xvi.
[37] Ibid, xvii.
[38] Ibid, xvi.

Liberalism within limits

> This book is a return to the time of defeat. But it is also a return—though it may seem a paradox—to a time when to speak of the dreams of the nation elicited serious and impassioned discussions in every home, rather than the contempt and ridicule it does today.
>
> —Arwa Salih[39]

> At a time when a new world disorder is attempting to install its neo-capitalism and neo-liberalism, no disavowal has managed to rid itself of all of Marx's ghosts.
>
> —Jacques Derrida[40]

Looking back at the start of the global neoliberal revolution—or counter-revolution, if you like—it seems as though it all happened very quickly, and very decisively. Margaret Thatcher's statement—"There is no alternative"—was not an attempt at debate or conversation, but rather the final word on a matter that had already been decided. Much work today looks at the ways in which neoliberalism produced—and was produced by—forms of liberal subjectivity that facilitated the rise of free market orthodoxy, and all of the self-disciplining this required. Similarly, much work has looked at the ways in which certain notions of public sector inefficiency, state corruption and incompetence, and free market competition became commonplace, despite the lack of evidence. In this section, I focus on some of the debates that took place in Egypt during the transition to Infitah—or free market capitalism—in the late 1960s, and propose that the transition was not as seamless as imagined. I argue that while neoliberal restructuring went ahead materially—albeit very slowly—the ideological legitimation never really fell in place. If we follow Gramsci, we may say that while Nasserism as a project was hegemonic, the one that came after—led by Sadat—was not. The reason for this, I posit, is precisely the failure of free market orthodoxy to successfully challenge the Nasserist version of state-led capitalist development, a project which essentially had already set the parameters within which economic debates could take place.

For Avery Gordon, the spectres or ghosts always appear when the trouble they represent is no longer being contained or repressed or blocked from view:

> Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way, I tried to suggest, we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.[41]

But what happens when haunting has contradictory effects? In other words, what happens when a project that haunts us also has productive or liberatory effects? In this section I argue that the Nasserist project has haunted Egypt in ways that have slowed the encroachment of the neoliberal project, thereby stalling the disastrous economic, social and political effects it would eventually bring with it. Although Nasserism as a project failed in its own stated goals of social justice and

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[39] Salih, *The Stillborn,* pp. 17.
[40] *Spectres of Marx,* pp. 46.
[41] Ibid, xv.

Arab 'socialism,' it did manage to normalise certain notions of how a national economy should work.

Egypt's turn towards neoliberalism can be located just before the defeat of 1967, during which Egypt lost a six-day war to Israel. Egypt's economy was already in crisis, global politics was shifting rapidly, and the high of decolonisation and anticolonial politics was ebbing. Nasserist social forces that supported state-led capitalist development, industrialisation and a strong public sector had dominated for over fifteen years, producing what, in a Gramscian sense, can be understood as a hegemonic project. Through both coercion and consent, this project dismantled the landowning elite, reduced the influence of foreign capital, weakened the left, labour and other groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood who posed a challenge to them, and pushed forward a program of nationalisation and industrialisation. By the 1960s, however, this project and ruling class was coming apart. The question of how Egypt should move forward brought to the surface a range of answers and by extension, social forces. One social force in particular, which favoured a free market transition, was able to gain enough momentum to forge its own project.

Anwar el Sadat came to power on October 15 1970, after Nasser passed away from a heart attack. His initial speeches are interesting in that they are difficult to differentiate in content from Nasser's speeches; he spoke of Egyptian industrialisation, scientific agriculture, achieving socialism, and encouraging national self-sufficiency. He also emphasised Egypt's special relationship with the Soviet Union, the importance of anti-imperialism, and the threat of American and Israeli aggression. This continuity is interesting because it suggests the power of these ideas, and also the need for a slow and steady transition rather than an abrupt one. Sadat needed to perform a rupture with the Nasserist project in order to put in place the changes he wanted to implement, but this rupture had to be done carefully.

It eventually came, several years later. A "corrective revolution" was launched, targeting leftists and Nasserists and demilitarising official government institutions. In 1974, the October Paper was released, in which the military was blamed for the country's economic problems. A new program of Infitah was announced, signalling the opening of Egypt to the world. This project came to be known for a very different set of accomplishments from the Nasserist one: the liberalization of the economy, the peace treaty with Israel, and a turn towards the United States and a (re)turn to foreign capital. A new group of businessmen, working in real estate, finance and speculation, formed the core of the ruling class. There was a clear move towards favouring the private sector, as well as realigning Egypt geopolitically, both in terms of opening the economy to foreign capital as well as shifting away from the Soviets towards the United States.

Under Sadat, capital was once again redirected, away from the public sector and towards the private sector. Despite the rhetoric, the state did not withdraw from the economy; indeed it was the state that redirected investments away from social services and the public sector. As Timothy Mitchell notes, "The reform program's main impact was to concentrate public funds into different hands, and many fewer. The state turned resources away from agriculture and industry. It now subsidized financiers instead of factories, cement kilns instead of bakeries, speculators instead of schools."[42] One particular battle was waged around the public sector and its apparent 'failure,' a discourse that rapidly gained momentum in the 1960s. The public sector was a cornerstone of the Nasserist project and was supposed to drive the project of nationalisation and

[42] Timothy Mitchell (2002) *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 276.

industrialisation. It guaranteed employment to millions, provided free social services, and also guaranteed a job to all university graduates. It was no surprise then, that the failure of this sector would be concerning.

However, several detailed explorations of the performance of the public sector suggest otherwise. In an extensive study, Nazih Ayubi argues that most public sector firms at the end of the 1960s were neither inefficient nor performing as badly as some alleged.[43] Hazem Kandil also casts doubt on the conventional account that Egypt could no longer afford the losses generated by its failed public sector. At the start of the IMF program, 260 out of 314 state-owned companies were profitable, 54 were suffering losses, and the rest were breaking even.[44] Similarly, Timothy Mitchell has noted that it was simply not the case that public sector companies were losing money, citing the year 1989/1990, during which 260 out of 314 non-financial state-owned companies were profitable.[45] In other words, the public sector was not 'failing' in any sense. Rather than taking such claims at face value, the need to represent the public sector as failing should be understood as part of a shift towards a strong private sector, which was central to Infitah. The material shift from investing in a public sector to investing in a private one relied heavily on this framing, which was linked to a broader failure: that of the Nasserist project.

Another aspect of this debate around the public sector and its 'failure' is the importance of the public sector was emphasized by workers, who formed the major groundswell of resistance to privatisation, particularly throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Early on, there were signs that workers were unhappy with changes in the economy. Take, for example, the resistance that erupted over the decision to set up a specialised company for hard currency foreign transactions in 1971. Workers in the already-existing trade company complained to the Arab Socialist Union about a company being set up for solely this purpose, and a debate soon began in the National Assembly.[46] One minister defended the creation of this company by drawing on the notion of efficiency:

> …the new company has all the necessary facilities to be a successful company and the power to permit it to obtain a more appropriate price from the places of production as well as providing a greater opportunity for research and follow up and better evaluation.[47]

This notion of efficiency was important in the shift towards the private sector. As Frederick Cooper notes, "This policy of liberalisation, when it impinged on the public sector, meant change in the distribution of resources—either between the public and private sectors, or among units within the public sector—immediately raised political temperatures."[48] It was politically controversial, especially for workers, because any limitations put on the public sector were seen as an attack on the socialist nature of Egypt's economy, a representation constructed by the Nasserist

[43] Nazih Ayubi (1980) *Bureaucracy & politics in contemporary Egypt* (No. 10). Middle East Centre Oxford, pp. 282.
[44] Hazem Kandil (2014). *Soldiers, spies, and statesmen: Egypt's road to revolt* (London: Verso), pp. 352.
[45] Timothy Mitchell (1999). Society, economy, and the state effect. *State/culture: State-formation after the cultural turn*, *76*, 90, pp. 11.
[46] Mark Cooper (1979) Egyptian State Capitalism in Crisis: Economic Policies and Political Interests, 1967–1971. *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, *10*(4), 481-516, pp. 488.
[47] Ibid, 489
[48] Ibid, 488.

project. They argued that "tying income to work and productivity and imposing economic criteria" would damage their interests in the structure.[49]

This example was a preview of what was to come in the following decades. Starting in the 1980s and accelerating through the 1990s and 2000s, Egyptian workers launched a major offensive against the expansion of the private sector and the privatisation of national enterprises. Committees were formed to resist privatisation, major strikes were held, one after the other, and contestation around labour rights increased in parliament. Privatisation brought with it new forms of precarity as well as a deepening division between temporary and permanent workers in its attempt to fragment the working class. Recall Derrida, who wrote that ghosts may seem to have been vanquished, but are always ready to come back: "Capitalist societies always heave a sigh of relief and say to themselves: communism is finished since the collapse of the totalitarianisms of the 20th century and not only is it finished, but it did not take place, it was only a ghost. They do no more than disavow the undeniable itself: a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back."[50]

This ghost came back in the form of a particular promise Nasserism consistently made (though never quite delivered). Workers consistently mobilised an idea of what the Egyptian economy should look like in their attempts to challenge neoliberal reforms. This drew on both the rich history of worker contestation in Egypt, that predated Nasserism and that Nasserism was largely based on, as well as certain material changes that took place in the 1950s and 1960s. Combined, these created a certain understanding of the relationship between workers and the state. In a sense, we can understand the years between the decline of the Nasserist project and the 2011 revolution as a slow erosion of this understanding, a chipping away at the material and ideological support for state-led capitalist development.

By the 2000s, finance capital had come to dominate Egypt's economy, and privatisation was rapidly accelerated, both centralising power in the hands of private interests, and effectively "restructuring Egypt's business elite."[51] Large family holdings became characteristic of the Egyptian economy, and many within the new class were able to exercise a level of independence from the state previously unknown in Egypt.[52] By the early 2000s, even sectors traditionally dominated by public capital such as construction and transportation, were now dominated by private capital.[53] This was coupled with the erosion of the industrial sector through the dismantling of manufacturing. A robust manufacturing sector was a legacy of Nasserism's Import Substitution Industrialisation policy (ISI) and thus represented a material reversal of the Nasserist project.[54] By the late 1990s, the state had earned over $1.5 billion from these privatisations and over 100 factories had been privatised and half of all public enterprises were now privately-owned.[55] By the late 2000s, the Egyptian economy was controlled by 20-25 family-owned monopolies,[56] leading to the intensification of strikes in the 2000s.

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[49] Ibid.
[50] *Spectres of Marx,* pp. 123.
[51] Stephen Roll (2010) 'Finance matters!'The influence of financial sector reforms on the development of the entrepreneurial elite in Egypt. *Mediterranean Politics*, *15*(3), 349-370, pp. 350.
[52] Take the example of Samih Sawiris, member of Egypt's richest business family, and his move to register Orascom—one of Egypt's biggest companies—as a Swiss company in order to avoid interference from the Egyptian government (Roll 2010, 366).
[53] Maha Abdelrahman (2014). *Egypt's long revolution: protest movements and uprisings* (London: Routledge), pp. 15.
[54] Brecht de Smet (2016) *Gramsci on Tahrir: revolution and counter-revolution in Egypt* (London: Pluto Press), pp. 174.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Kandil, *Soldiers,* pp. 353.

Major strikes such as those in 2006 and 2008 at Mahalla mobilised workers across sectors, and also went beyond factories and companies, permeating the Egyptian public sphere. These strikes—labelled uprisings—were broadly understood to be political in nature and as against the ruling class and its economic and political policies. Importantly, they were increasingly met with intense levels of coercion (especially the 2008 Mahalla strike), signalling the increasing tenuousness of the neoliberal project that had begun thirty years earlier, and that still hadn't quite justified itself. Workers demanded a return to something, to an era during which privatisation was not the dominant logic of the nation. For some, this may be read as a situation in which workers did not going far enough in expressing radical demands. Yet I propose that it can also be read as the lingering presence of a hegemonic project that was seen as thoroughly Egyptian, a project in which workers saw themselves even as they sought to go beyond it.

Ghosts produce material effects. I have suggested in this section that the ghost of Nasserism continued to haunt the new project that formed around Sadat, albeit in a contradictory manner. The strong ideological legitimacy Nasserism deployed around state-led capitalist development, free social services, land reform, and industrialisation came back to haunt Sadat throughout his attempt to transition towards a free market, and liberalism more broadly. This produced a form of liberalism that was contained within limits, limits set by the project that had come before. These limits were also constantly reproduced by worker's strikes, the student movement, leftist activism, and other forms of resistance against Egypt's new direction. In this sense, the revolution of 1952 may have died in 1967, but its ghosts emerged and persisted shortly thereafter.

> The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life.
>
> —Avery Gordon[57]

> In no way must my colour be felt as a stain…another solution is possible. It implies a restructuring of the world.
>
> —Frantz Fanon[58]

To write stories of exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories.[59] In her book *Ghostly Matters,* Avery Gordon asks how we can develop a critical language to describe the historical structures of haunting, and how we can, in turn, articulate a "sense of the ghostly and its social and political effects."[60] If for Gordon the ghost is mainly a symptom of what is missing, I have argued here that the ghost in this story is a symptom for what has failed, for promises that were made but never delivered. Ghosts represent loss, paths not taken, alternative roads never travelled down. In a sense, this means that they can also—at the same time—represent hope, and future possibilities.[61] In this story, however, they instead represent the death of this very hope; the destruction of these future possibilities.

For Arwa Salih and Egyptian leftists, Nasserism was a failure, but a complicated one. For the workers who resisted Sadat's neoliberal reforms, Nasserism was seen rather as a promise whose articulation could disrupt the present, though one that had never quite materialised. And yet we also see moments when haunting inspires, pushes, nurtures, and cultivates hope. The 2011 revolution can be read as a response to a haunting, an attempt to rewrite history:

> Legacies are ambivalent things. The hundreds of thousands of young men and women who took the streets in 2011 were also haunted by the ghosts of the past; their language, their sons and symbols, their remembering of bygone battles all drew on a history rich with the struggle for freedom.[62]

Ghosts are there because they represent unresolved tensions. They point to holes in the social fabric, suggest moments in our neat nationalist histories that are not as pristine as we like to think. 2011 may have been an attempt to confront the ghosts of past revolutions, but it has, in turn, created its own ghosts:

> Yet that moment of unbearable lightness was also followed by utter ruin on a new and perhaps unprecedented scale. And so the same questions will surely return to haunt

[57] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters,* pp. 7.
[58] Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth,* pp. 63.
[59] Ibid, 12.
[60] Ibid, 18.
[61] Ibid, 64.
[62] Selim in Salih, *The Stillborn*, pp. xxvii.

> this generation as it did the ones before: Who were we? What was our experience? How do we assess the truth of who we used to be?[63]

Today, in Egypt, we see the creation of new ghosts, ghosts that will continue to haunt us for decades, centuries to come. Terror and disappearance, torture and elimination, all work to create more ghosts of an unfinished past. Disappearance in particular, perhaps the most notable of the military's tactics in today's Egypt, "is a state-sponsored procedure for producing ghosts to harrowingly haunt a population into submission."[64] As Gordon notes, disappearance is not only about death; it is a form of organised terror unleashed by the state and military to destroy not only any form of organised resistance, but to destroy "the disposition to opposition, the propensity to resist injury and injustice, and the desire to speak out, or simply to sympathise."[65] Its aim is to destroy hope, the will to resist, the will to want, or dream of, more. In that sense, one becomes a target not only if one openly resists; one becomes a target simply by being in the present.

The aim, then, is not to fully disappear people; but rather to partially disappear them in order to impart an augury upon the remaining population. "Disappearance is a public secret." In this endless production of ghosts, between one project and another, social violence is continuously reproduced. Concomitantly, hope is also generated: as long as there is haunting, there is hope. Minute, barely visible, barely tangible—it is there. While haunting never ends, there is always the hope that certain ghosts and certain forms of haunting can be addressed, acknowledged, resolved, and that they might one day fade away. 2011 was perhaps just such an attempt, to deal with the ghost of Nasser and the haunting of the Nasserist project more broadly. Perhaps it was a moment in which people rose up, confronted a particular form of haunting they had endured for decades, and attempted—briefly—to address the ghost of Nasser. And yet without an alternative project, and without the fulfilment of the promises the Nasserist project itself promised, in the end there was no way out. The ghosts of Nasserism persist, and in their midst are more who have only just been born, not least through the martyrs of the 2011 revolution as well as the massacred during events such as Raba'a. As long as there are ghosts, however, there is a chance that people will pause, wonder what really happened in the past, why there should be ghosts in the present. There is a chance—a much smaller one—that people will even rise up, confront the haunting they endure, and fight for a world in which haunting is a thing of the past.

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid, 115.
[65] Ibid, 124.

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