

Book Review

Derr, Jennifer L. 2019. *The Lived Nile: Environment, Disease, and Material Colonial Economy in Egypt*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

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In 1999, the Nile Basin Initiative (NBI) was established to manage and develop the Nile Basin waters. The NBI has fostered and facilitated dialogue among its ten member states since its inception, but tension over the use of the Nile waters remains high. Many countries continue to build large hydroelectric projects in the basin without the agreement of other countries. Egypt has argued that it has a right to a continuous volume of water and has threatened to use military force to guarantee that right. Other factors, particularly climate change, are also undermining the volume and predictability of water supplies in the basin. Access to basin waters is especially in demand to improve national and regional electricity supplies and irrigation and, ultimately, to transform and improve the quality of life of basin residents. But how do these regional and national interventions manifest at the individual and community levels? How do citizens and communities, willingly or not, become subjected to these transformations in their everyday lives? *The Lived Nile* provides an enthralling and critical historical examination of these questions.

The book examines the transformation of the Nile into a perennial source of water for irrigation to support a colonial and postcolonial economy in Egypt. This transformation was not achieved simply through the construction and expansion of dams, barrages, and canals but through the interplay between global and domestic capital, colonial authorities and domestic elites, foreign and Egyptian engineers and physicians, and, ultimately, the lives of Egyptian “bodies.” The book goes beyond “the history of Egypt’s colonial economy from the vantage point of its primary commodity [cotton] and social relations of rural Egypt” to focus on the “environmental transformations that enabled it” (3).

One of the most important contributions of the book is to bring the reader’s attention to how the creation of the “perennial Nile” was experienced by rural Egyptians—“the complex ways in which rural populations and experts alike were rendered subjects of the colonial economy through their entanglements with the river that watered it” (13). Derr does this using extensive and impressive archival evidence, particularly British, French, and Egyptian sources. Each of the five main chapters illustrates how the technical transformation of the Nile was intertwined with the lives of Egyptians. But the chapters can also stand on their own as individual arguments, moving from a critical history of

irrigation engineering to the building of the first Aswan dam to the expansion of agricultural production in the south to the labor and violence that allowed for the expansion of agriculture and to the further expansion of irrigation.

Derr's work is especially rich and important for showing how colonial and European engineers and physicians ignored the expertise and evidence that Egyptians held, revealing deeply held racist beliefs in European and colonial knowledge, administration, and science. The racism is further revealed when Derr examines the rise of parasitic diseases (schistosomiasis and hookworm) in agricultural laborers as irrigation canals expanded. Agricultural laborers, and Egypt more generally, became a focal point for international researchers studying parasites. "As colonial physicians began to observe and make notes of Egyptian bodies, the construction of the Khazan Aswan [the first, low Aswan dam, later raised twice] further transformed these bodies" (120). Derr continues by arguing that whereas the presence of parasites in Egyptian agricultural laborers was prominent in the mid-nineteenth century, by the early twentieth century, colonial physicians had begun to treat Egyptians as part of a broader effort to model the behaviors "that facilitated infection" (120). This research certainly led to new medical and environmental discoveries, but at the same time, it subjected Egyptians to experiments in relation to causation and treatment. Moreover, the knowledge that European researchers were gaining about schistosomiasis was built on research that Egyptians had already conducted—research that had already revealed higher parasitic infection rates among laborers working in canals, where the parasite dominated. Hence, as Derr concludes, "during the century of Egypt's colonial economy the environment in which it was rooted, that of the perennial Nile, played a central role in the production of subjectivity, with human bodies being one of its formation" (157).

Derr's writing is engaging and illustrative. But as the preceding quotation reveals, at times, sentences and arguments are dense. The book frequently refers to "materiality of the environment," for example, though *materiality* is not defined or explained. The argument that multiple technical transformations that produced the perennial Nile—the material—are intertwined and co-produced through the social and political life of Egyptians is convincing and an original argument. The challenge, however, is that those unfamiliar with the concepts of "materiality" or "assemblages" or their use in humanities or science and technology studies, among other disciplines, may find the author's focus on the connection between materiality and subjectivities less precise than it might otherwise have been.

Another way that the book could have been strengthened would have been to situate the study of the perennial Nile and its consequences with other work that has examined how colonial narratives about environmental change often misread or ignored Indigenous knowledge, with ill effects. There is also a rich literature on dams and development in Africa with which Derr could have engaged at the outset of the book to situate it in a broader body of social science research and knowledge, and also to demonstrate what gaps *The Lived Nile* fills

in this literature. Indeed, this is really the most important point: Derr's book shows how the technological transformations of the Nile were realized through the subjugation of Egyptian bodies/residents. But the author also shows how Egyptian engineers, physicians, and citizens resisted this subjugation even while the transformations changed the political economy of the country.

As global environmental politics scholars debate the social, economic, and technological interventions needed to respond to climate change and other environmental crises, the community would benefit from learning from scholars like Derr. *The Lived Nile* is a stark, critical, and brilliant reminder of how environmental transformations pass through and alter the lives of individuals, often using violent and racist means.