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# THE LIMITS OF CONTROL

## INFORMAL CITY VERSUS AGRICULTURE LAND ON CAIRO'S FRINGES

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Charlotte  
Malterre Barthes

# «I saw the future, it was dark.»

Austra: 'The Future', in: 'Feel it break' (Paper Bag Records, 2011).

«These buildings were not here six months ago,» says Yahia Shawkat, pointing at fifteen-story concrete and brick-fillings constructions standing amid fields, as we cruise along Cairo's Ring Road. Considered informal because built on former agrarian land, these housing settlements are self-constructed without planning nor permit. While Shawkat, a local expert and architect, claims that the pace of illegal constructions on fertile areas at the Egyptian capital's fringes has quickened since the 2011 revolution, the phenomenon is not new to the Greater Cairo Region (GCR). 65% of the inhabitants of the biggest city on the African continent and seventh largest metropolitan area in the world are living in informal housing.<sup>1</sup> In the twenty million people entity that includes downtown Cairo, Giza, Shubra elKheima, and eight New Towns, urban sprawl has taken a dramatic turn as it expands on an already limited agrarian land.

## GROWING INFORMALLY

In «Understanding Cairo», a definitive work on the growth of the metropolis, David Sims claims that «in 1950 there were virtually no informal settlements around Cairo,» and that the first developments on agricultural land appeared in the early 1960's following President Gamal Nasser's industrialization policies.<sup>2</sup> State housing programs proved unable to cope with the ensuing rural migration. In 1970, housing settlements were identified spreading incrementally on pri-

vately owned farmed land attached to existing rural villages north of Cairo. This urbanization thrived under Anwar Sadat's governance, fueled by liberalization policies and remittances from Egyptian male employment in the Gulf. Illegal settlements grew steadfastly during Hosni Mubarak's liberal government. In 2006, 60% of the metropolis population (about ten million inhabitants) lived in informal areas, spread over a total surface of 160 km<sup>2</sup>.<sup>3</sup> While it is tempting to sensationalize its reckless urban development, Cairo is only growing slightly quicker than the rest of Egypt, approximately 3.5% a year with a stable rural migration. Nonetheless, this growth is continuous and materializes strikingly on the periphery.<sup>4</sup> Galila El-Kadi in «L'articulation des deux circuits de la gestion foncière en Egypte: Le cas du Caire» recognizes in those settlements incremental urban forms that predominantly follow property lines and the contours of the Egyptian *feddan*. This farming area unit of circa 4200 m<sup>2</sup> is usually a narrow strip of land of 100-300 meters long and 6-17 meters wide framed by irrigation canals.<sup>5</sup> Urbanization subdivides that form. The mechanism of a now prevailing informal urbanization that destroys thousands of hectares of arable land on the periphery of Cairo seems to be running without major impediments. It also appears that post-revolution illegal developments have occurred faster than previously, a possible consequence of the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of Mubarak.

## STATE RESPONSES

Responses of the Egyptian State to control informal growth on the periphery varied. When the first informal settlements appeared, transgressing subdivisions of laws and building codes, no official action was undertaken. As initially new buildings were located in the vicinity of existing villages, authorities considered it to be rural housing unaffected by urban regulations. As authorities grew aware of the consequential loss of valuable agrarian land, acts such as Law 59-1966 prohibiting construction on these zones were passed. In 1974, the state adopted Military Decrees 1-7 imposing high penalties and imprisonment for building on agricultural land. Prime Minister Atef Ebeid repealed the laws in 2003. Apart from these largely ineffective and unenforced legal tools, authorities attempted to tackle growth by dedicating alternative sites to development. With the professed ambition to both distribute population and prohibit urban progression onto agrarian land, Nasser launched the Greater Cairo Region Master Scheme in 1969, continued by Sadat's New Towns program in 1974. Satellite cities and new settlements outside of Cairo have been built following the country's scheme of reclaiming desert land, further supported by extensive public financial incentives under Mubarak. However, the success of those satellite towns is insubstantial. While companies moved to remote cities such as 6th of October, residential populations were

slow to follow.<sup>6</sup> Today, the New Towns absorb only 14% of the Greater Cairo Region's population. Besides, it is largely admitted that the huge amount of land transferred from State property to private investors through the program has mostly benefited Mubarak's elites. Also part of the New Town project as a 'development corridor' and likewise intended to contain growth, the Ring Road around Cairo was built between 1980 and 2007. Channeling traffic around the city, the axis was conceived of as a physical barrier against further urban sprawl.<sup>7</sup> Now completed, the 72-kilometer road by no means constrains encroachment on agrarian land. On the contrary, providing access to transportation acted as an incentive, and remaining arable strips enclosed in the Ring Road perimeter are 'de facto' condemned.<sup>8</sup> Some government upgrading plans for informal settlements have been undertaken under Mubarak, with much cost and little impact.<sup>9</sup> The most radical initiative ambitioning to curb informality was the 'tahzim' strategy by the General Organization for Physical Planning (GOPP), a public agency under the Ministry of Housing. In Arabic, 'tahzim' means 'containment' and the scheme aimed to control urbanization of agrarian land next to existing informal areas

«by providing planned areas on the peripheries of those settlements, that enable them to grow formally and in a planned manner.»<sup>10</sup> The project was part of the «Integrated Development Strategy for Eliminating Informal Settlements in Egypt», a significant choice of words.<sup>11</sup> Currently, the National Action Plan for Unsafe Areas is aiming at infrastructure upgrades and removal of illegal areas. Post-Mubarak government officials still have a negative approach towards such districts. Nahed Naguib from the General Organization of Physical Planning admitted to the need for «a comprehensive strategy to address the issue as a whole», illuminating the current government ambivalent and vague position towards informal areas and its inhabitants.<sup>12</sup> Paradoxically, it is now recognized that a majority of Cairos live in illegally constructed housing.

#### LAND & FOOD

At present, 83% of Cairo's informal settlements have been developed on former fertile areas. Agricultural land is a scarce resource in Egypt, with 3.28 million hectares available for food production.<sup>13</sup> Most of these irrigated fields are located along the Nile Valley, which is also home to circa 80

million Egyptians.<sup>14</sup> As the Egyptian population centupled since 1910, the total area of arable land available decreased over the same period by 75% and is currently 0.05 ha per capita. This is the lowest ratio of agricultural land per person in Africa. In January 2011, when the Egyptian population took to the streets of downtown Cairo to oppose President Mubarak's long-lasting regime, marchers chanted «Bread, Freedom, Social Justice!» Earlier that month in nearby Tunisia, an irate public had toppled the regime of Ben Ali. Demonstrators held baguettes above their heads as a symbol of protest against the rising costs of basic commodities. During the ensuing wave of unrest that seized many Middle Eastern countries and affected cities across the region, bread has been an ever-present component of rallies; it has been held up above crowds, tapped on heads, and even used as a slogan board. This juncture of urban revolt and subsistence exposes issues of feeding cities and the spatial reality involved.<sup>15</sup> These urban uprisings reflect the frustration of populations suffering from the outdatedness of development models unable to provide solutions for housing, basic services and food security.<sup>16</sup> While it is debated whether the Egyptian revolution was solely triggered

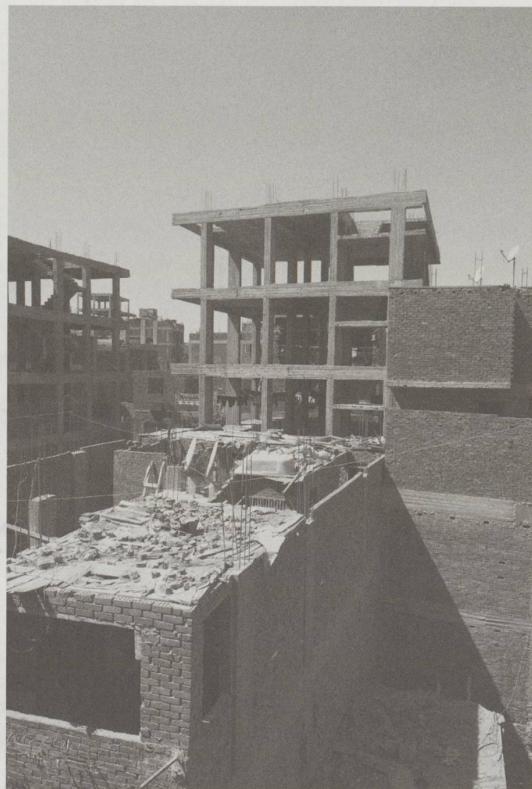


Fig. a  
Ezbet El-Hagana, self-built on desert land.  
© Photo: Lorenz Bürgi



*fig. b*  
Informal area of Mariutiyah, along the Cairo Ring Road.  
© Photo: Lorenz Bürgi

by high food prices, food security has certainly been identified as a catalyst of conflicts in Egypt.<sup>16</sup> The country's political turmoil raises worries about the conditions of its food supply. The food riots of 2008 and the political tumult of 2011 brought attention to the Middle East and shed light on how the world food system is entrenched in the political economy. Egypt's status as the world's largest wheat importer, with an estimated 11.5 million tons in 2011, puts it in the spotlight of this debate.<sup>17</sup> Despite consistent increase in domestic production, the country relies heavily on American, European and ex-USSR imports of grain to satisfy its domestic food needs, making it vulnerable to high global prices. As 17% of its population suffers from food insecurity, the government runs an important national subsidy system to support social equity and political stability. Subsidized 'baladi' bread is accessible to everyone and sold at 5 piasters a loaf, an unchanged price since 1989. 77 % of all of this subsidized wheat is imported, costing the country its total revenues generated by the Suez Canal.<sup>18</sup> Foreign experts and economic institutions controlled by industrialized nations have pushed Egypt into increasing cash crops production for exports to generate exterior income. Furthermore,

the country has been undergoing economic reforms, market liberalization and privatization undermining its historical welfare state. Although Egypt is integrated in the world economy, the expected benefit prophesized by the World Bank and the likes did not materialize for farmers. Rural development has been modest at the most. Public and private funds have been diverted to 'new lands' and foreign investment steered projects such as Toshka, a massive agro-business infrastructure in the desert of Upper Egypt. Running in parallel to the New Town Projects and an essential part of agricultural policies since 1952 and Nasser's land reform, land reclamation for food production has been recently intensified in regard to the loss of agrarian land to urban growth. It is said that as much as 1.43 million hectares of land could be reclaimed. However, as one scrutinizes the history of land reclamation in Egypt, it appears to be used as a political card that has been played over and over as an answer to any problem.<sup>19</sup> It is currently used as a means for tackling urbanization and food insecurity. But reclaimed land is not as productive as farmland, and thus the program does not compensate its loss. An official representative said that 30.000 feddans have been lost to construction since

the revolution, while an independent expert claimed the number to be closer to 400.000, an inconsistency in numbers that emphasizes the lack of data and reliable studies on the phenomenon.<sup>20</sup> Experts' opinions not only differ on the amount of lost agricultural land but on its significance, too. Some ironize on «the unacceptable loss of Egypt's precious agricultural land», and argue that the density of informal housing is efficient, land reclamation effective and the loss of agrarian land compensated.<sup>21</sup> However, while most researchers and professionals agree on the importance of the problem, actual threats are rarely formulated.

Even though Egyptian agriculture is extremely productive, with harvests two or three times a year, shrinking available area for food and feed production implies a reduction in local and national food supply. This has several possible effects. For instance, rural inhabitants who traditionally rely on self-production of wheat will need to purchase on public markets. With high wheat prices, households will reach for the subsidized bread available mostly in urban areas. This fact, combined with poor agricultural investment, few job opportunities and overall rural poverty, might convince younger



fig. c  
*Informal area of Mariutya, along the Cairo Ring Road.*  
 © Photo: Lorenz Bürgi

rural populations to migrate to cities, which lack the housing infrastructure to absorb them, pushing informal urban growth onto farmland.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the rising demand for meat related to foreign influence and increasing urban populations fuels the growing dependency of the country on foreign grain. Food imports outnumbering exports reportedly damage small farms, foster high levels of urbanization and decrease food security. In turn, high food prices combined with shortcomings of political systems trigger social unrest, most acutely in urban centers.<sup>23</sup>

#### URBAN GROWTH, FOOD, BIOPOWER.

Either self-constructed and incremental or speculative and immediate, informal housing is a low-cost, socially connected, economically dynamic response to the failures of planning. Although translating the ability of dwellers to supply shelters that meets their needs, the consequences on urban and rural territories reach beyond technical issues of land use.

In *‘Security, territory, and population’*, Michel Foucault places the history of food supply and scarcity at the center of his account of

biopower and biopolitics.<sup>24</sup> He considers food provisioning as a material expression of biopower, and in his lectures at the Collège de France discusses the policing of grain and the threat posed by food shortages in an urban context. Foucault argues that biopolitics originated when politics ceased to be seen as extension of war but rather as tool to control, regulate and manage the lives of populations in the service of the state.<sup>25</sup> It is probable that food, and food subsidies in particular, belong to this ensemble of governmentality as tactics, procedures and apparatuses of security that target populations. In the case of Egypt, the food subsidies system can be considered as a tool of control that backfired at the authorities. On the one hand, cuts in subsidies have proven to be a difficult political move. On the other hand, cheap food imports directed into urban food subsidies are thought to foster urban growth and increase housing demand, which in turn drives informal subdivision of agricultural land.<sup>26</sup> This is manifested in the territorial competition between urban and agricultural space.<sup>27</sup> There is little doubt that neither the great amount of legislation prohibiting the use of agricultural land for urban purposes nor the diverse planning schemes have

been able to curb the loss of fertile land to urban development. Considering the previous statements – that post-revolution urban growth appears steady, that benefits generated by protocols of informal constructions condemn farmland, that most households do not have the means to opt for formal housing, that public housing policies have not responded to low-income demand, that districts in fertile areas are very well connected to major infrastructures and that food policies are suspected to fuel rural migration and demographic growth – it is likely that the encroachment on agrarian land in the immediate peri-urban area of Cairo will consolidate, eventually leading to its disappearance.

At the nexus between informality and spatial transformation, food incentives and food security, the questioning and scrutinizing of Cairo’s informal urban development over agrarian land bears the contemporary concern of the tropism of urban growth.<sup>28</sup> The polarized clash between an ever-changing urban world versus an idealized reassuring pastoral realm, the matter of destructive urbanity growing over green pastures is dramatically confronted by the basic and universal necessity that is food.

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