Beyond the Urban

NANCY Y. REYNOLDS
Department of History, Washington University in St. Louis, St. Louis, Mo.;
e-mail: nreynolds@wustl.edu
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Studies of public space focus disproportionately on cities. Complex and densely populated urban built environments—with their streets, plazas, institutional buildings, housing projects, markets—make concrete and visible attempts to manage difference. They also structure the ways that less powerful residents challenge and sometimes remake elites' spatial visions of the social order. The robust literature in Middle East studies on Islamic cities, colonial cities, dual cities, quarters and ethnicities, port cities, and so forth is no exception to this urban focus. As James Holston and Arjun Appadurai have argued:

> cities engage most palpably the tumult of citizenship. Their crowds catalyze processes that decisively expand and erode the rules, meanings, and practices of citizenship. Their streets conflate identities of territory and contract with those of race, religion, class, culture, and gender to produce the reactive ingredients of both progressive and reactionary political movements.[1]

A prime example is the rather passive politics facilitated in post-1848 Paris by new boulevards and their commercial spectacles. David Harvey has found that "the public space of the new boulevard provides the setting, but it acquires its qualities in part through the commercial and private activities that illuminate and spill outward onto it. The boundary between public and private spaces is depicted as porous."[2] Harvey's insistence on public space's link to nonpublic, and specifically commercial, space—that the politics produced by space depend on "symbiotic connectivity across the public, institutional (commercial) and private realms"[3]—reminds us that constructions of space are always relational.

Although scholars have begun to investigate electronic and global institutional spaces (those of social media in the Arab Spring, for instance), in an effort to broaden the purview of contemporary space and new forms of politics, few studies of nonurban space (rural, village, agricultural, desert, riparian) have entered debates about the production of public space.[4] This impoverishes our view of politics, as it relegates large segments of the population outside the arena of citizenship and narrows the range of foils for public space. Particularly striking in its absence is research on the vast desert spaces of Middle Eastern countries, or on their powerful rivers—both nonurban areas that abut rural communities and even cities.[5] Such places have historically acted more often as a third kind of space: a commons, which is "neither public nor private space. It implies open access and shared participation without the shadow of the state (with its heavy-handed power to tax or regulate); and it implies a space for community assembly apart from the hard sell of the market."[6] Stripped of facile utopic and redemptive associations, "commons" as an analytical category brings questions of property rights and the status of ownership directly into debates about the production of space. Both deserts and rivers at times come under the control of states and private interests, for instance, to exploit resources (oil, hydraulic or hydroelectric power, reclaimed agricultural land, etc.) or to house state institutions (military infrastructure, prisons), thereby eliminating

common access. Charting these changes over time raises, then, new questions. What are the technologies of the creation and demarcation of public space outside cities? Are the most important areas of symbiosis private and commercial, or something else altogether?

Conflicts over hunting make visible the definition of nonurban public and private spaces. Since animals move between the common space of the desert and the private areas of cultivatable land, hunters constantly mark out boundaries between the two.[7] In the early 20th century, close scrutiny of the lines between public and private space was a hallmark of legal inquiry into Egyptian hunting cases. Conflicts over hunting and rights to enter village land produced one of the most important events of Egyptian politics in this period: the 1906 Dinshaway affair that catalyzed popular support of the nationalist movement.[8] The crisis pitted British officers hunting pigeons in a rural village against Egyptian peasants who relied on the animals for food and fertilizer. British Major Pine-Coffin's testimony at the trial included his response to a question put to him by one of the defense lawyers: "On going to shoot, did you know whether the pigeons were private property or wild pigeons?" His answer revealed the crucial role space played in understanding this divide: "I thought that pigeons were public property when at certain distances."[9] Villagers, by contrast, named the pigeons' owners.[10] Likewise, a conflict over British officers who went fox hunting in 1901 just outside of Cairo on the property of Wilfrid Blunt contested the boundaries between public and private land. As one British official explained:

> On the morning in question, the officers, starting before daybreak from Abassiyeh with their . . . hounds, had been drawing for foxes all along the edge of the desert. The reason [for] the early start made was that the foxes and jackals, which have their earths in the desert, come in at night to the cultivated grounds. At the first streak of dawn they break away for the desert. In the damp of the early morning the scent lies well, and it is thus possible to obtain a run across the desert. A very short time after the sun has risen no trace of scent remains.[11]

These cases forced participants repeatedly to make plain how they distinguished desert from cultivated land, commons from private property, by detailing descriptions of walls, canals, vegetation, pathways, wildlife, and so forth. They also raised crucial political questions about the legal immunity of foreign residents. The crowds of villagers that responded to Dinshaway and to the incidents in Blunt's garden testify to wide community mobilization in conflicts over resources, property rights, legal status, and social differentiation. While in both these instances, "native" Egyptian voices are mediated through British accounts and legal proceedings, it is clear that the rules of access and the material technologies and practices of producing public space differed outside and inside cities. Without a full understanding of the changing ways that rural space was marked off from wilderness and city, we miss crucial dimensions of citizenship and politics.

NOTES

[1]James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: Cities and Citizenship," in *Cities and Citizenship*, ed. James Holston (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999), 2.

[2]David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 221.

[3]David Harvey, "The Political Economy of Public Space," in *The Politics of Public Space*, ed. Setha Low and Neil Smith (New York: Routledge, 2006), 32.

[4]Setha Low and Neil Smith, "The Imperative of Public Space," in Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 3. Excellent studies exist on peasant politics from this period, though they address academic debates on rebellion, states, and political economy more than public space. See, for example, Nathan Brown, *Peasant Politics in Modern Egypt* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990); Ellis Goldberg, "Peasants in Revolt: Egypt in 1919," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 24 (1992): 265–80; and Timothy Mitchell, "The Representation of Rural Violence in Writings on Political Development in Nasserist Egypt," in *Peasants and Politics in the Modern Middle East*, ed. Farhad Kazemi and John Waterbury (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 1991), 222–51. On the production of Egyptian agricultural public space, see Jennifer L. Derr, "Cultivating the State" (PhD diss., Stanford University, 2009).

[5]For discussions of environmental studies of non-Egyptian Middle Eastern deserts, see George R. Trumbull IV, "Body of Work: Water and Reimagining the Sahara in the Era of Decolonization," in *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Diana K. Davis and Edmund Burke III (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011), 87–112; and Richard W. Bulliet, "History and Animal Energy in the Arid Zone," in *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Alan Mikhail (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 51–69.

[6]Elizabeth Blackmar, "Appropriating the 'Commons': The Tragedy of Property Rights Discourse," in Low and Smith, *The Politics of Public Space*, 49–50.

[7]Matt Cartmill, *A View to Death in the Morning: Hunting and Nature through History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 243.

[8]For good recent histories of Dinshaway and its aftermath (albeit with little focus on hunting), see Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), 92–95, 104–108; and Samera Esmeir, *Juridical Humanity* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012), 253–60.

[9]For an English transcription of the trial, see Findlay to Gray, 15 July 1906, no. 56, enclosure 2, FO 407/167, National Archives of the United Kingdom.

[10]Ibid. See, for instance, the testimony of the tenth witness, Muhammad Omar Zayed, a sixty-year-old Dinshaway resident.

[11]Rodd to Lansdowne, Cairo, 25 August 1901. The official British documents about the Blunt property case are collected in *Wilfrid Blunt's Egyptian Garden: Fox-Hunting in Cairo* (London: The Stationery Office, 1999) [no author], 78.