Living and dying with the state: The Netherlands according to Egyptians in Amsterdam

Ruijtenberg, W.D.

Conclusion

In the introduction, I announced that this dissertation was not a study of Egyptian migrants, but rather, an inquiry into the nationalization of social-political imagination and infrastructures. In the chapters that followed, I proceeded to describe how the Egyptians whom I met forged their lives as they moved to and settled across Dutch borders (Chapter One), established 'Egyptian' businesses and 'Egyptian' associations (Chapter Two), navigated the terms and conditions of Dutch welfare worlds (Chapter Three), tried to be the best parents they could be for their children (Chapter Four), and tried to induce the right state of mind in the various street-level bureaucrats involved in their lives (Chapter Five).

In the process, I described the vast and open-ended ecosystem of laws, policies, institutions, street-level bureaucrats, and state-subjects that is beyond anyone's direct control, but upon which the people with whom I worked nevertheless tried to act as best as they could, and of which they were ultimately a part. I propose to call this ecosystem the state multiple, which, in my opinion, is to balance an understanding of the state as real in its consequences with a view of the state as a fragmented and incoherent set of images and systems.

Following the Introduction in which I promised to describe how Egyptians danced with the Dutch state multiple, in this Conclusion, I bring to the stage some of the iconic spaces and figures of difference that took part in, and emerged out of, this dance. I do so to show that, as a result of the nationalization of our sociopolitical world, contemporary iconic spaces and figures of difference in one way or another relate to the master categories of "the National" and "the immigrant". Yet, by once again drawing on my fieldwork experiences, I will argue that no matter how profoundly the nationalization of our social-political world shapes (self)-identification, belonging, and social-material inequalities, it does not fully define who we are, or what we do, and this is true both for 'nationals' and for 'immigrants'. I begin by bringing contemporary icons to the stage by summarizing the story of immigration we are made to listen to in the Netherlands, as well as the story of immigration that I have tried to tell.

The immigration stories we are made to listen to

These days, stories of immigration abound. Abdelmalek Sayad (2004) contends that directly or indirectly these stories are always also about nation-states. However, as long as migration and immigration stories are not explicitly interpreted as such, they will inadvertently contribute to the naturalization of the nation-state and the othering of immigrants. Here, I explicitly make the stories of immigration that I grew up with, and that still dominate Dutch public and policy discourse speak to the Netherlands itself, as well as the global order of nation-states.

In a way, the chapters of this dissertation reflect the main parameters of conventional Dutch immigration stories. Chapter One speaks to the story of the immigrant Other as trying to reach Europe by any means possible, threatening 'our' territorial sovereignty, and forcing 'us' to be more and more selective. Chapter Two speaks to the story of the immigrant Other as failing to leave again, forcing 'us' to increase our effort to push 'them' out, as well as the story of the immigrant Other as failing to assimilate into Dutch culture, forcing 'us' to teach them 'our' language, history, norms and values. Chapter Three speaks to the story of the immigrant Other as overusing and potentially abusing welfare services, threatening the future of 'our' social security, and forcing 'us' to introduce more selective eligibility criteria and terms and conditions. Chapter Four speaks to the story of the immigrant Other as imperiling the ethnoracial and sociocultural reproduction of the nation, forcing 'us' to ensure that 'their' children are socialized into virtuous citizen-adults. Chapter Five speaks to the debates of the immigrant Other, and welfare recipients in general, as prioritizing their own interests over the public interest, forcing 'us' to enforce that public interest upon them. In short, this dissertation speaks to the master-narrative of the immigrant Other as a threat that needs, at the very least, be mitigated.

In the years prior to starting this project, I spent eighteen months in Cairo, so by the time I began fieldwork, I had also consumed my fair share of Egyptian stories about emigration and Europe, and the Netherlands in particular. In their own way, these stories too form the backdrop of the subsequent chapters. Chapter One speaks to an Egyptian story of emigration as a way for aspiring youth to overcome a sense of 'stuckedness' and of the West as meritocratic and fair but morally corrupt. Chapter Two speaks to the portrait of Egyptians as divided according to class, but collectively superior to others, including 'morally corrupt' Westerners and 'backward' Moroccans. Chapter Three speaks to the history of the demise of the Egyptian welfare state, and of the image of (Northern) European welfare states as protecting people's social rights. Chapter Four is set against the tension between parents' desire to believe that their children would benefit from Dutch privileges and the haunting fear that, perhaps, instead, they

were subject to racist discrimination. Chapter Five speaks to the narrative of 'good' services and 'bad' interventions, and 'good' professionals, who respect the rules or bend them according to their clients' best interests and 'bad' professionals who do so according to their own or their institutions interest.

In preparation for fieldwork, I read existing studies and newspaper items about Egyptians in the Netherlands. There was not much, but I did find stories about Egyptians in the Netherlands as 'entrepreneurial' (Choenni, 1993; 1997; Fijnaut and Bovenkerk, 1996; Rath 2002) but suspiciously successful, about Egyptian men as likely to marry Dutch citizens and to divorce them three years later (de Valk et al., 2004; Sportel, 2016), about Egyptian women as especially fertile (de Valk et al., 2004), and about Egyptian parents as curiously likely to move their children to stay with their grandparents in Egypt. I also tried to find Egyptian stories about Egyptians in the Netherlands, and I did find a few, notably the movie Hamam fi Amsterdam (see Chapter One). However, after asking around in Egypt, I got the sense that, in Egypt, Egyptians in the Netherlands are imagined as part of the more general group of Egyptian emigrants in Europe, while the Netherlands is imagined as part and parcel of Europe.

The directors of the Egyptian associations to whom I reached out in the first few weeks of fieldwork repeated the stories about Egyptians in the Netherlands that I had already read. In fact, I found that the directors I spoke with had previously told the same stories to the researchers who came before me, and I presume they have continued to tell the story to researchers who came after me. As I described in Chapter Two, my interlocutors drew on the general story of Egyptians in the Netherlands to position themselves vis-à-vis each other, other immigrant Others, and the Dutch (see Chapter Two).

As I continued to hang out at these associations, I discovered that my interlocutors used what they collectively construed as an 'Egyptian divorce crisis in the Netherland' to elaborate a version of the history of Egyptians in the Netherlands that was more rooted in lived experience. As described in Chapter Three, as they talked about divorce, my interlocutors talked about what it had been like to move to and settle in the Netherlands, about the hopes and dreams they once had, how these dreams had shifted over time, and how they were looking back upon what had been and forward to what was to come. These stories did not establish a radically different world than the public stories I described above, but rather offered another rendition of Egyptian men as deceitful, Egyptian women as gullible, Egypt as patriarchal, and the Netherlands as feminist.

People categorized as migrants are asked to tell their immigration stories again and again, and my interlocutors were no exception. This begins during the process of applying for a visa, when people need to provide an explanation for why they wish to travel to the Netherlands. Here,

already, there are good stories to tell and wrong stories to tell, or, at least, stories that increase your chances of obtaining a visa and stories that reduce those chances. If you are granted a visa, you need to tell the story at the border again, preferably in exactly the same words, so as not to create any on-record inconsistencies. If you are not, and you decide to cross the border anyway, you need to tell an alternative story to legitimize why you did so, such as a flight story. After entering the Netherlands, in addition to still having to tell the story of why you came, you will be asked, again and again, why you are staying, and whether or not you are learning the language, and adopting national practices, maybe less so if you are interpellated as 'expat', but then still. How often can you answer a question like that without wondering whether, perhaps, the person asking is not genuinely interested in the answer, but more so in putting you in your place, or rather, outside of the Dutch political community. And how often can you provide an answer without forgetting that the answer you gave is only a particular version of your truth?

What to do with all these stories? We could take these stories at face value, map them onto each other and create a composite image of the Egyptian experience in the Netherlands. However, to take stories at face value is to ignore the specific conditions under which they became the ones that can be told, and, as such, to naturalize those specific conditions. In this particular case of immigration stories, it is to naturalize the idea that people belong to nations, that nations belong to territories, and that national sovereignty is the best, or at least most just, form of authority, or, to denaturalize the idea that people move and settle in order to increase the possibilities of their lives. Another option would be to make explicit the myriad ways in which these stories misrepresent the world, the stereotypes that they help producing, and the particular political project they serve. This is definitely a worthwhile project, and in this dissertation, I have tried to do some of this. However, in my reading, these stories do not merely misrepresent the world. Instead, they are world-making, not only because of the way in which they inform action, as I will discuss in the next section, but also because of the way in which they reflect the paradoxes of the human-made world of nation-states.

Indeed, if we read these stories as a reflection of our social-political world, it appears that we are living in a world in which we can tell ourselves and each other that the global order of nation-states produces and reproduces global inequalities, while simultaneously explaining away these inequalities by referring to the differences between nationals and immigrants. When Dutch commentators tell the story of 'them' desperately trying to reach Europe, and when Egyptians commentators tell the story of emigration as a way to overcome 'stuckedness', they acknowledge the enormous gap between the possibilities of life 'here' and 'over there'. Similarly, when Dutch commentators tell stories about 'them' threatening 'our' way of life and social security, they ac-

knowledge that 'our' privileges rely on 'their' marginalization and exclusion, while Egyptian commentators who relate migration to the demise of the middle-classes, acknowledge the growing gap between what Egyptian youth aspire to and what is available to them in life. Then again, by narrating the Netherlands as meritocratic and fair, and Egypt as corrupt, these commentators make it seem as if these differences have nothing to do with the global order of nation-states.

In sum, if we interpret the stories that we tell each other as reflecting and making a world, we see that knowledge about the way in which the world works is not enough to change it. Or, to put it more polemically, if we care about undoing the structures that harm people, and creating a world that sustains life more equitably, coming up with alternative stories does not suffice. We must act, in solidarity with those who move and settle against the grain, and with a vision for a common future.

Mirror-dancing

In the Introduction, I drew on the work of Michael Keith to suggest that the stories I summarized above emerge through the mirror-dance between "the expectations of the institutions of the urban system and the strategies, tactics, successes and the failures of the migrant minorities of first, second, and subsequent generations." In the chapters that followed, I drew on my fieldwork to describe various acts of this dance, and in this section, I draw on those descriptions to argue that this mirror-dance between institutional strategies and people's tactics is nationalized, and nationalizing.

In Chapter One I explored the mirror dance between efforts to discourage 'third world-looking' people from moving and settling in the Netherlands, and the efforts of impoverished Egyptians to nevertheless move to and settle in the Netherlands. I began by suggesting that, as the hallmark of national sovereignty, borders create an image of horizontal relations between the nations, while actually facilitating the ongoing extractions from former colonies, and making it dangerous for formerly colonized people to follow the wealth to where it is concentrating. This makes it such that, materially speaking, life in a country like the Netherlands indeed offers more than life in a country like Egypt. I then juxtaposed the history of Egyptian emigration and Dutch immigration policies, to suggest that the fact that these policies seem to respond to one another reflects the specific positions of the Netherlands and Egypt within the emerging global order of nation-states.

At the time of my fieldwork, the Dutch state required Egyptian citizens to hold a visa before travelling to the Netherlands, but the Immigration and Naturalization Service (IND) were

rejecting visa applications from travelers who were seen to be of no benefit to the country. In addition, the Dutch state was pressuring air carriers to control for visa and had internalized the border by linking the right to reside to the right to work and access most welfare and health-care services. On top of that, the Repatriation and Departure Service (DT&V) threatened and regularly tried to deport illegalized people, and to do so, could detain them for up to eighteen months.

Meanwhile, for Egyptian youth, traveling to wealthy Europe had become one of the primary ways to close the gap between the life to which they aspired and the life that seemed within reach in Egypt. Yet, to do so, they had to fit themselves into ill-fitting visa-categories, or travel unauthorized. Once in the Netherlands, they had to do whatever it took to maintain their legal status, or to live without one. In the process, the people with whom I worked were relying on existing networks of smugglers, employers, landlords, as well as humanitarians and activists, who helped them survive, but could also exploit and abuse them. In turn, these efforts to move and settle against the grain were invoked by Dutch politicians to call for and in fact implement even stricter visa regulations and border control, which is making it even harder and more dangerous for aspiring Egyptians to travel to the Netherlands as we speak.

Together, this mirror dance creates an image of the Netherlands as an actual nation-state, and of black and brown people who will do anything to travel to the Netherlands, such as taking a boat across the Mediterranean, or conducting a 'sham marriage'. In the meantime, it put professionals in the position to use force, to keep or push people out, and it created a class of people who are easily exploited and even abused, who learn, from the outset, that in the Netherlands, you have to claim your rights against the grain.

In Chapter Two, I elaborated on the mirror dance between top-down efforts to manage so-called 'guests', 'minorities', 'allochthonous people' and 'people with a migration background', and the efforts of impoverished Egyptians to settle in the Netherlands. I showed that (Dutch) immigration research homogenizes immigrants by grouping them according to nationality, and subsequently particularizes them by describing what it is specifically that makes one national group of immigrants different from the other, and, of course, from 'us', nationals. The people with whom I worked had previously provided input for such research on Egyptians, and in turn drew on the resultant reports to narrate their own history, as well as the difference between them and the native Dutch, as well as other immigrant Others, notably 'Moroccans'.

Despite, or actually because of this emphasis on nationality as that which connects and disconnects us, since the early 1990s, Dutch integration policies have been redesigned to dissolve nationality-based immigrant groups, to the point that a lack of contact with fellow nationals

is seen as a sign of integration, if not assimilation, rather than, for example, loneliness. In the meantime, the Dutch government introduced so-called 'target-group policies', which group together people on the basis of a particular problem, such as obesity, or social isolation. Unsurprisingly, Egyptians in Amsterdam still wanted to come together on the basis of their nationality, to reminisce about the country they had left behind, share tips and tricks on how to survive in the country they had moved to, talk about Dutch and Egyptian politics, and mostly to gossip about one another. In a context in which everything is expensive, one of the only ways to structurally do so was for some of the directors of the associations formerly known as Egyptian to apply for funding for a targeted workshop, such as a workshop for 'disempowered Arab women', or 'Uninvolved Arab fathers'. These workshops successfully brought together Egyptians who may or may not have fallen in the targeted group, but, also worked to further stigmatize 'Arabs' and 'Muslims', and to fuel tensions between white Dutch policy professionals and volunteers, who felt betrayed, and the Egyptians who had managed to come together as such.

In Chapter Three, I investigated efforts to care for and control 'at risk' and 'risky' populations on the one hand, and impoverished people's efforts to claim their social rights on the other. I did so by describing the divorces that I saw unfold or about which I otherwise gained intimate knowledge to show that welfare functions as a sorting mechanism, with eligibility criteria, actual material provisions, and the terms and conditions of the services on offer as the concrete technologies that determine who lives under what kind of circumstances. Eligibility criteria make it such that social services are only available for people below a certain threshold. Material provisions determine what conditions are actually good enough for marginalized people to live under, while the terms and conditions of use become the duties that accompany their, but not all of our, social rights. The Egyptians with whom I worked tried to act as best as they could on these circumstances, but often found that they were unable to access services to which they (felt they) had a right, most notably social housing, or the right to see their children. In the process, they sometimes could not help but think of themselves as second rate citizens, in part because as dual citizens they actually had less rights than people who only hold citizenship in the Netherlands, and in part because they recognized that it was not a coincidence that they lived under much more difficult circumstances than 'Dutch' people.

In Chapter Four, I looked into the efforts of Egyptian parents and the Dutch parenting professionals to shape children in their respective images. I started off by discussing the parenting courses for mothers and fathers 'with migration backgrounds'. These courses built on the premise that 'they' need to learn how to turn 'their' children into 'our' future citizens, but under the careful supervision of the Egyptian directors with whom I worked they became sites in

which fathers and mothers could discuss their hopes, fears, and doubts. I described a course for Arab fathers on involved fatherhood which became a site in which Egyptian fathers and mothers discussed the challenges of raising Egyptian children in a context in which Egyptian cultural practices were frowned upon, and a course for Muslim women, which became a site in which Egyptian mothers expressed their hopes that their children would do well in school, as well as their fear that they were being discriminated against. These fears were widespread, but none of the parents I worked with were ready to discuss their concerns directly with the actors involved in their children's lives, lest they hamper their relationship, and thus harm their children. In this context, parents' greatest fear was for their children to be removed from their home. This was on the horizon for Amira, who in response organized for her son to move to his father's care in Egypt, showing that, in the end, some parents could opt out of the Dutch system. The option of removing children, to which both state actors and parents could resort, haunted both public debates and everyday interactions.

In Chapter Five, I examined street-level bureaucrats' efforts to induce the right state of mind in their clients, and Egyptians' efforts to do the same, but the other way around. I began by discussing how eligibility checks prompted Egyptians to once again fit themselves into the right categories in order to convince street-level bureaucrats that they were eligible, which appeared to activate the atmosphere of suspicion that is baked into eligibility checks. I then discussed street-level bureaucrats' attempts to convince the people I worked with to consent to the kind of services they said were in everyone's best interest, but which the people I worked with often saw as the problem, which was most notably so in the case of the services of deportation. Finally, I turned to the post-enrollment phase. This phase was marked by the twin efforts of street-level bureaucrats and the people I with whom I worked to make the other behave as they wanted them. I then suggested that although all this affective labor might undermine the ideal of impersonal authority, in practice, both the street-level bureaucrats and the people whom I accompanied held on to these ideals, and drew on them in order to negotiate the boundaries between public and private, with both seeking to define which problems were public and thus required public solutions, and which problems were private and thus required private solutions.

In sum, in Chapters One through Five, I showed how various social engineering practices that draw on the idea of the nation-state produce and reproduce multiple categories of immigrants. This was extremely clear-cut at the border, but in other contexts, such as welfare, or the education system, these categories were less prominent, leaving the people with whom I worked to wonder whether they were still interpellated as immigrants, and even whether that mattered at all. This was not a question they could answer, but rather a question that indicated a haunt-

ing doubt about their standing in the Netherlands. Indeed, seeing themselves as different from the Dutch, the people with whom I worked knew well that, both formally and informally, their dual citizenship, their phenotypical features, their names, or their religion, could be made to matter. This made for a mode of being in the Netherlands that always verged on existential insecurity, even if many of the people with whom I worked were confident that, no matter what, they would be able to take care of themselves, if only because they had already done so many times before.

Life beyond the nation-state

As described in the Introduction, in the 1990s, anthropologists of the state began to develop an understanding of states as 'fictional realities' (Aretxaga, 2003), or diffuse and fragmented sets of 'ideas', 'systems' and 'practices' that have no clear boundaries, are neither coherent nor stable, but nevertheless imagined and reified as monolithic and unified entities (cf. Nagengast, 1994; Aretxaga, 2003; Sharma and Gupta, 2009). In response, in the late 2000s, anthropologists began to suggest that while states are indeed extremely incoherent and volatile, they are, at the same time, extremely stable and consolidated (Marcus, 2008; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Babül, 2017). I contend that our ability to see this as a paradox stems from methodological nationalism, or our ability to ignore or take for granted that today's states are, or at least meant to be, nation-states. Indeed, if we foreground the desire for national sovereignty, we begin to see the state's incoherence and volatility as the result of varied, contradicting and changing definitions of national interests, and the state's ostensible stability and consolidation as a response to internal and external threats.

In this nationalized world, state institutions ultimately derive their legitimacy from serving the national interest, whether that is defined as maintaining borders, integrating immigrants, caring for and controlling at risk and risky populations, or schooling children. This is a problem for everyone whose interests are subordinated to, or seen as antithetical to the national interest, and while this could include everyone, people who are already marginalized are much more likely to fall into this category. This is most readily apparent in the case of services that restrict individual liberties in the name of the nation, such as carrier checks that force some traveler to take the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea, deportation services, or closed youth facilitates. At first glance, it is less apparent in those services that are meant to protect people's social rights, like social housing and welfare benefits. In my experience, professionals representing this supposedly 'left-hand' of the state readily deny their connection to profession-

als working for more punitive organizations. However, upon closer look, these services are also inextricably linked to the social order of nation-states, because they categorically exclude non-nationals, and, moreover, produce publics, that, in one way or another, relate to the nation, or fall outside of it.

The above is not to say that national interests are clear-cut. They are not. In fact, they often clash, leading to conflicts among (street-level) bureaucrats, between (street-level) bureaucrats and citizens, and between citizens. This is why the state multiple appears to be so contradictory at times. However, it is to say that, in this world, public organizations need to prove that they are there for a greater good in order to survive. If they successfully claim to serve the national interest, they may get away with the use of violence, for it is in the name of the nation that we let people drown in the Mediterranean Sea, deport people to countries where they will be tortured, imprison children allegedly for their own benefit, and leave people homeless. And it is in these instances that states seem consolidated and stable. Here, I do not wish to suggest that states hold a monopoly on the definition of legitimate violence, which would ignore alternative answers to the question of what forms of violence are legitimate. Rather, I want to suggest that, in the world of nation-states, states sanction violence by referring to, and thus instituting, national interests.

This world was built and is rebuilt to be nationalist. However, no matter how much we invest in the nationalization of identities, belonging, and inequality, nationalization will always fall short of creating a world of fixed boundaries between nations, territories, and sovereign. People will cross borders designed to keep them out, settle in places made hostile, lay claims on wealth stolen from them, and maintain a sense of self that escapes identification in the process. In other words, they will not let themselves be reduced to how they are categorized by nationalist technologies. This is not to celebrate their agency, or to suggest that they are fighting for change. In fact, most of the people who transcend nation-states do so in search of a sedentary lifestyle, a stable income, home ownership, and a hetero-normative family life. However, it is to celebrate that efforts to control people will ultimately fall short, because people will always seek life.

As long as we are stuck with the language we have, we will not be able to speak of all the ways in which people live outside of that language. In fact, trying to do so is only the first step towards trying to control and contain life. We may, however, feel it. We may feel it when we encounter practices and ideas that cannot yet be put into words, that challenge the ways in which we hitherto inhabited the world, and when we find ourselves acting beyond our own scripts. I felt it when I worked through the existing literature to make the epistemic shift from thinking about immigrants through the epistemic of nation-states, to thinking about nation-

states as historically contingent, and produced and reproduced through everyday practices. I felt it when I reached out to all those Egyptians whom I did not yet know, who invited me into their everyday life, and showed me what their world was like. And I felt it when we shared experiences that we could not put into words, and perhaps most sharply when I had to put it all in a dissertation and felt lost for words. We are all human, and we are all part of a larger ecosystem that shapes and sustains us, that is beyond our control, and cannot even be put into words, because language is limiting.

The point here is not that I struggled to represent my ideas in writing, which is not so interesting, or that my representations ultimately fall short, which is similarly unsurprising. The point is that the lives that people live cannot, and should not, be reduced to what they tell us about the world in which we live, while our analysis of the world in which we live should not, and cannot, be reduced to our observations of everyday life. It is in this spirit that I wrote this dissertation, and it is in this spirit that I offer the final story, about the untimely death of Bahaa, who was very dear to me.