

# Visualizing the Counter-Narratives of Port Said

## An Experiment of Mapping Social History

Nermin Elsherif

[nerminelsherif.wisite.com/othermaps](http://nerminelsherif.wisite.com/othermaps)



History and maps are both social constructions produced by people who attempt to normalize their arguments. But what happens when this process of production becomes collaborative? And when arguments reflect the counter-narratives of people, and not authorities? What happens when primary sources of history are used instead of their interpretation of historians? Could this contribute to creating a counter-map challenging the official representation of depicted spaces, such as cities, for example?

I would like to write about an experiment of mapping the social history of Port Said. A port city that was depicted by the states which were involved in the foundation of the Suez Canal Company, the national Egyptian Survey, as well as different tourist guides. Each of these maps echoed the interests of its makers and commissioners. Although the geography of the city is always present in the residents' stories, their songs, and even their everyday expressions, these bottom-up narratives have never been mapped. This mapping experiment was part of the History Workshops of Egypt<sup>1</sup> activities that took place from the 27<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2016. The goal of the workshop was to train young artists, activists and researchers on the methods of social history. The goal of the map was to visualize their findings in the form of a map which then remained in Boulevard, one of the most active cultural venues of the city. The map-makers worked on collecting primary sources of history about the city, researching in newspapers, on postcards, in songs, through personal archives and conducting oral history interviews with the residents. Collaboratively they redefined the basics of the map, deciding on the legend, the scale, the extents and the methods of inscribing history into the map.

Inspired by the community map in the Fietas Museum of South Africa, the map serves as a board of collective memory of Port Said residents. After the map-makers had set its foundations and visualized all the collected narratives, they invited the city residents to the event, celebrating the end of their research workshop where the map was first introduced to the public. The map was designed to offer the residents a space to share and visualize their memories by adding their own photos and testimonies regarding the five historical periods. Up to my knowledge, the map remained a central part of the cultural venue to which other youth initiatives have also contributed until the venue was closed by the government.

## On Scales and Extents

Knowing how the "consistency of scale" would be a limitation of representing this city, the map-makers decided to use three maps of different scales: a world map, a map of Egypt and finally a map of Port Said. Events were thus indicated in their geographic location and elaborated upon in the corresponding timeline panel. The goal was to recite a counter-history of the city from different perspectives: Egyptian peasants who were forcibly brought from Upper Egypt to dig the Canal in 1859, those who arrived from Europe between 1914 and 1918 searching for a safe refuge and hoping to earn their living, and many others who started in one point of the world and ended up in this city or vice versa.

The timeline panels show how the density of multiple events in the year of the Suez War (1956-1957) occupy an area equal to the calm fifty-five years of city construction (1859-1914). The experiment of visualizing time through the social history of the people showed how a few months were "louder" than several years. The timeline includes images, scans from the residents' personal archives, memoirs of travelers, Simsimiyya<sup>2</sup> songs and quotes of the members of civil resistance who were interviewed. It was put together from the entire material produced and used by the participants of the workshop.

## On the Legend

In order to tie together counter-narratives of the city, the legend for this map had to represent the multiple sources from which these narratives were taken. With threads of five colors representing themes or sources of social history (personal archives in blue, state narratives in black, built environment in white, flow of people and goods in green, and finally cultural history seen in songs and arts in red) different spaces were tied to one timeline. The pins were used to allocate the threads in the geographic locations, and the temporal panel was color-coded in order to represent different time intervals. Although it sounds like a complex system of coding, it evolved naturally through the participants, as they worked to project the stories they had collected within their geographic and temporal contexts. Just by following the blue thread representing a personal narrative of a migrating family, tied to a green pin signifying the years of war, you can understand how and why the family moved.

The legend of this map became a system for narrating each story without the dominance of one over another. This resulted in a map of intersecting and overlapping pins and threads that represented the plethora of multivalent voices behind all the different stories of the city. Nevertheless, this also made it difficult for onlookers to see the overall map behind the threads. This "web" reflected the complexity of the narrative in a reduced visualization. As any map, it is a reduction of a complex landscape.

## Reading the Map

The map can be read both geographically and chronologically. In this context, I would like to write about the chronological reading, since it serves in creating a holistic overview of the map. However, a geographical reading is always possible if the reader wants to follow the history from a specific location within the city.

In the first interval, most of the used materials were either postcards depicting the wide boulevards and arcades of the European Quarter, stressing its cosmopolitan nature or depicting the port and its vast steam ships.

In the second interval, more human faces appear. The photographs and scans from the personal archive of a naval captain who worked in the Suez Canal Company as a ship guide dominate the timeline with spatial reference to the port on Port Said's map. The places he travelled to in Cairo, Alexandria and Paris also appear on the world map. The dominance of the blue threads representing

personal archives in that era shows the intensity of the social life in this city during the interwar period and prior to the Suez War of 1956.

The third interval is the richest in stories and images, even though it represents only one year of the Tripartite Aggression of 1956. Here the dominance of the blue threads (personal stories) can be clearly seen. Almost all of the images within this interval came from Per Orlow, a Swedish photographer who covered the war period. His photographs – as the very few visual documents of the war – document the horrors and the resistance of the people. This interval also included articles and graphics from flyers and publications printed by the popular resistance at the time. Quotes describing the scenes of the war from figures of the popular armed resistance were pinned to their locations in space and time as well. By following the threads, the map shows how the whole city became a terrain of war.

The fourth interval only contains sounds of the city. Since no visual material of the city was found during this research, it is completely made up of the quotes and songs of residents speaking about their deportation as a result of the wars. Between 1957 and 1975, the city witnessed a constant state of unrest. All that remained in the city were the songs of the popular resistance and the images of the defeat.

The last interval represents a new image of the city after the peace treaty with Israel and the declaration of the city as a free zone. The green threads start to emphasize new borders on the map, designating the extents of the tax-free goods in the city. The interval on the timeline shows mostly advertisements for cars, households and clothes. It also shows pieces of news about the tax dodgers. During this period, the post-war housing projects, which extend to the West of the city, were constructed. By looking at the timeline, one could notice the low number of threads starting from this vast urban region. The few threads indicated that this was not very present in the collective memory of the city when compared to the two old districts of the Arab Village and the European Quarter.

By comparing the five different time intervals to each other and taking the three spatial scales of the maps into consideration, a more holistic understanding of the research conducted during this workshop can be developed. The map gave us the chance to realize the silent spaces of the city, to which no memories seemed to be tied. It showed us the centers of struggle and contestation, of agony and loss, of pride and nostalgia, and also of a capitalist economy taking over.

## A Counter-Map?

At this moment it seems worth it to take a step back from the map and question whether it can be considered a counter-map or not. The map – in terms of content – was an attempt to visualize a counter-history of the city; a history that is constructed through material from personal archives, songs, testimonies and primary sources. Moreover, the process of making the map by replacing single authoritarian figures with a group of participants from different backgrounds to collaboratively trace their subjects of research in place and time is a counteract in itself. It defies the normative process of map-making. This results in several counter-aspects of the map, from the legend that shows the multiple sources of the social history instead of official boundaries to the scale that became absolutely inconsistent, putting together three different scales of the world, the country and the city. By the end of the mapping process, the map appeared to be covered with a complex network of colored threads and pins that made it difficult for users to decipher and understand its contents when viewing it for the first time. However, this complexity was also described by the map-makers who, by looking at the map, realized how difficult it is to visualize social histories, probably due to the difficulty or even the impossibility of the task. It is hard to say whether this experiment is a counter-map of Port Said or not, but it is definitely an attempt to visualize counter-narratives and to defy the normative format of maps. This experiment shows that it is possible to design a map of multiple narratives that can be read in multiple ways: geographically, chronologically, and thematically.

## Endnotes

1. The History Workshops of Egypt is an initiative founded by the social historian Alia Mossallam who worked on collecting oral history in different regions of Egypt from Nubia, to Port Said, Alexandria, and Cairo. More about the initiative, its workshops and outcome can be found here: [historyworkshopsegypt.net](http://historyworkshopsegypt.net)
2. A string instrument that came to Port Said from Upper Egypt with the workers who were forcibly brought to dig the canal. This instrument turned into a music genre which is related to the identity of the city and also used as a popular method for reciting history. For more information see Mossallam (2012).

## References

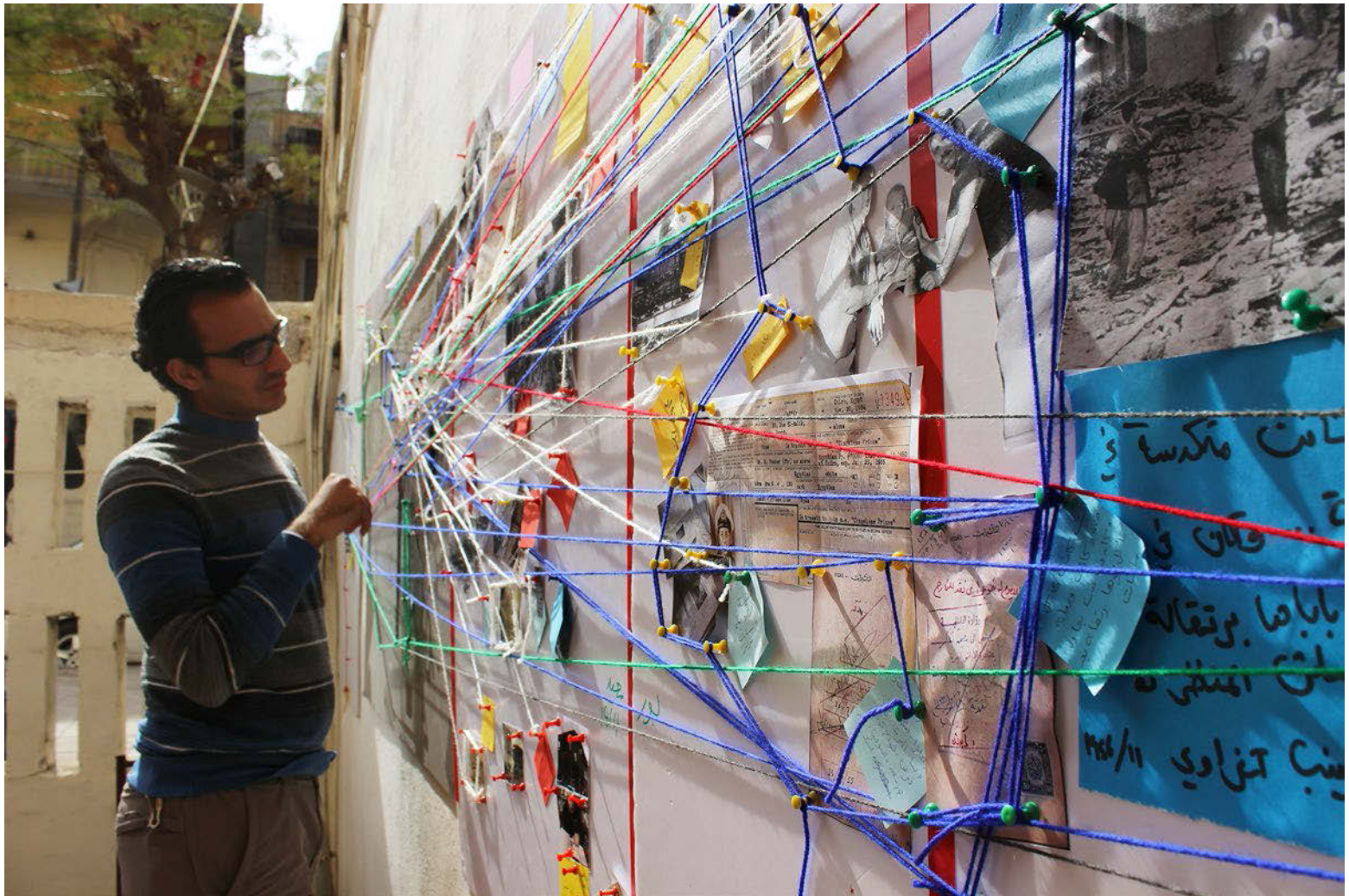
Mossallam, A. 2012. *Hikayat Sha'b – Stories of Peoplehood. Nasserism, Popular Politics and Songs in Egypt 1956-1973*. PhD Thesis. London: London School of Economics.

## Illustrations

The map was made as part of the History Workshops of Egypt, along with the 17 participants and the organizers. The workshop was funded by the ACSS (Arab Council for Social Sciences).

Photographs by Youmna el Khattam, commissioned by the History Workshops of Egypt.





## THE COLLABORATIVE LEGEND

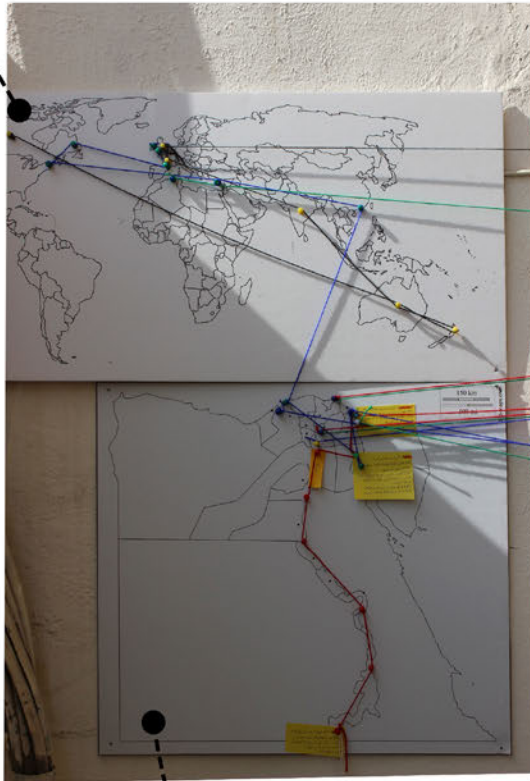
### THREADS:

Blue — Personal Narratives/Personal Archives  
 Black — Official Narratives  
 White — Architecture  
 Green — Flow of people and goods  
 Red — Cultural History and arts

### PINS:

Red — 1859-1914  
 Yellow — 1945-1950  
 Green — 1951-1956  
 Blue — 1957-1976  
 White — 1976-2002

## WORLD MAP



## MAP OF EGYPT



## EXTENTS OF PORTSAID FROM OPENSTREETMAPS

55 years





