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“The Nile Valley, Urbanized: Agroecology and the making of the “new” Middle East – 1950s-1990s

This PhD dissertation starts from a simple question: why the once thriving colonial sugarcane plantations and Agro-towns in the south of Egypt are now left in ruination while new vast global investments are directed to emerging large-scale plantations a few kilometres south, in the north of Sudan? In Northern Sudan and the South of Egypt (Al-Sa’eed), arrangements of *labour, food, and financialization* in sugarcane plantations and agro-towns represent key, under-explored avenues through which to understand uneven spatial development, dispossession, and ecological ruination in the larger Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In this project, I posit that agro-ecological change in the rural landscapes of the Nile Valley, and its entangled dynamics of extended urbanization, were mediated by, and in turn shaped, uneven geographies of oil since 1973’s so-called oil crisis.

This dissertation situates the Nile’s agro-ecological change in relation to contested sovereignties that are in part co-produced and mediated by regional Gulf-led urbanization and its financialized economies. It asks: what role did ‘Petro-capitalism’ in Gulf urban centres play in the (re)production of a regional scale predicated in part on the movement of labour, food, and finance while reconfiguring regional urban-rural relations; and how might have these processes themselves play a role in shaping Gulf urbanization? Since the mid-1970s oil boom, ‘Petro-states’ played a leading role in forging new entangled relations of labour, land, and capital in the MENA and beyond. These changes have recently led a growing number of scholars of the Middle East to point to the importance of what can be called *the production of a new regional scale*¹. These scholars have also emphasized the need to pay closer attention to the political economy of the Arabian Gulf states in studying the region while destabilizing the “nation-methodological” approaches dominant in Middle Eastern studies. Nevertheless, these ground-breaking works have predominantly focused on the networks of “Gulf capital” and less on the spatialities and material processes of these entangled relations. My project argues that a focus on *regional uneven spatial development* mediated by oil-producing states allows us to move from what Timothy Mitchell calls ‘a focus on oil money’ to the materiality of oil and its role in the production of space across geographical scales².