Abstract: A century ago, Egypt’s British-run government conscripted thousands of
peasant children annually to pick caterpillars from cotton plants. Amidst a double crisis
of agro-ecological degradation and financial collapse, the nationalist movement simulta-
necessarily critiqued the exploitation of peasant labor by unproductive foreign finance and
endorsed these cotton-worm campaigns as a national obligation. This article builds upon
recent efforts to re-theorize capitalism as world-ecology in order to explain this apparently
paradoxical position. Rather than frame such confrontations between “society” and
“nature” as instances of an elite regime of “techno-politics”, it argues that both the nationalist
critique of foreign capital and the widely felt imperative to wage “war against insects” were
features of an “ecology of interest” that multiple waves of financial investment had produced.
Egypt’s crises provided fodder for anti-colonial mobilizations. But they also inaugurated
a new predicament of developing national capital in a landscape already pillaged as a
commodity frontier for empire.

Keywords: Egypt, imperialism, ecology, finance capital, commodity frontier, crisis

A sweet, invigorating sensation spread through my being when I experienced the fresh,
warm pulsation in my veins. I turned towards the field, and a feeling of virility spread
through my whole body. Gathered in the field was a great crowd of boys and girls,
working under the supervision of Shaykh Salīm and his assistant. And they were all
engrossed in cleaning the [cotton] worm from the cotton plants. The worm had waged
a crushing assault upon the cotton that year. Confronting it demanded work day and
night to repel the invading danger from the crop.

I had grown accustomed to doing this work in the daytime, but in laboring at night
there was a strange pleasure. It inspired in me a fresh, exhilarating feeling and aroused
a joy that beat through my limbs. There, the moon was casting its glorious light across
the green field and the cotton’s tiny pale blossoms. And the damp summer zephyr
breathed upon the faces and flirted with the feelings of the virginal young girls. We
did not, however, rely on moonlight alone in our defense of the cotton against our mor-
tal foe, for we employed lanterns that cast a powerful light and transformed the cotton
field into something more like a festival.

(Khalīl Ḥasan Khalīl, al-Wisīyah [The Estate], 1983)

It is a peculiar setting for a first adolescent experience of sexual arousal. But the nar-
rator’s “invigorating sensation” is not the strangest feature of this passage from
Khalīl’s pseudo-autobiographical novel. The bildungsroman is a classic of Nasserist
rural realism. The early chapters, documenting the peasant narrator’s youth on the
eponymous estate during the inter-war era, read as a scathing indictment of the
social order that Gamal Abdel Nasser’s revolutionary regime had promised to transform. While condemning Egypt’s agrarian political economy as a vast mechanism for extorting the national wealth that peasants produce, however, Khalīl imbues the system of forced child labor employed to eradicate cotton-eating caterpillars with a romanticized combination of overwrought sensuality and martial glory (Khalil 1996).

An account of Egypt’s cotton economy that merged a critique of peasant exploitation with an embrace of peasant child conscription was particular neither to Khalīl’s novel nor to Nasserist ideology. Rather, this apparent contradiction was a defining characteristic of economic nationalism in Egypt from the moment it emerged as a coherent discourse. In the early 1900s, a growing chorus of activists and journalists advanced diverse and penetrating critiques of both the manifest unevenness of capital accumulation under British rule and the principles of classical political economy that had bolstered British claims to managerial expertise. Yet these same figures also endorsed the government’s conscription campaigns as a national obligation in the Egyptian people’s collective struggle against their “mortal foe”. This attitude is all the more surprising given that the cotton-worm campaigns, which annually entailed the labor of hundreds of thousands of children, were inaugurated by Egypt’s pseudo-colonial government under British occupation. The first such campaign, in 1905, came a mere 15 years after Egypt’s British “advisers” had publicized the abolition of state labor conscription, corvée, as a triumph of Western liberal principles over so-called “Oriental despotism”. This stunning reversal might have seemed an easy target for nationalist rebuke. But like other coercive farming regulations that would soon follow, the cotton-worm campaigns attracted little such criticism. Instead, Egyptian nationalists figured the struggle against caterpillars as a necessary component of their people’s inexorable conquest over nature.

This article undertakes to explain and historicize the paradox of a nationalist movement that idealized the Egyptian peasant as the foremost victim of foreign exploitation and at the same time endorsed the coercive appropriation of peasant child labor to fight caterpillars. Taken together, these oddly paired features give the lie to what remain the two dominant modes of analysis in histories of anti-colonial nationalism in Egypt. The first, grounded in an older tradition of left nationalism, reads Egypt’s modern political history prior to 1952 as one long string of machinations by a large landowning class intent on reproducing its dominant status (Abbas and El-Dessouky 2012). But the simultaneous glorification of peasant smallholders as the repository of nationalism’s normative claims and their vilification as the primary agents of agro-ecological destruction defy any such straightforward mapping of political ideology onto class interests. The second, inspired by the discursive turn in postcolonial studies (Adas 1989; Chatterjee 1986, 1993; Prakash 1999), narrates the powerful and enduring ramifications of colonialism as an act of epistemic violence (El Shakry 2007; Esmeir 2012; Gasper 2009; Jacob 2011; Pollard 2005). In this vein, the continued idealization of a conquest over nature might seem to exemplify what Partha Chatterjee famously describes as anti-colonial nationalism’s derivative replication of the “material domain ... of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology,
a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed” (1993:6). But the same nationalist movement that accepted the coercive dictates of colonial agronomy repudiated classical political economy and the profound crises that Western dominance had unleashed. If in Egypt, as elsewhere in the postcolonial world, the “material domain” was not in fact immune to critical scrutiny, then the putative Western provenance of ideas and practices cannot suffice to explain why colonial subjects embraced some and rejected others.

It is, at least in part, to address the limitations of both economistic and discursivist approaches to postcolonial studies that Timothy Mitchell (2002) invites his readers to consider the story of another insect in the Egyptian countryside in his influential essay “Can the Mosquito Speak?”. In his brilliant exposition, Mitchell elaborates a methodology that foregrounds the dense tangle of interactions between material objects, political practices, and forms of thought and representation that modern regimes of power simultaneously generate and obscure. While sympathetic towards Mitchell’s lucid critique of the reified binary between “society” and “nature” that has long underpinned mainstream social science, this article will argue that his dissection of Egypt’s “rule of experts” yields important insights it cannot, on its own terms, explain. Reading Mitchell together with more recent efforts to retheorize the modern world-system as “world-ecology”, I will offer an alternative account of the postcolonial state’s apparent compulsion to stage ever-more-grandiose confrontations between human and non-human nature. Elaborating such an account and solving the puzzle of Egypt’s cotton-worm campaigns, I suggest, requires both a different history and a different theory of capitalism and empire.

On the first count, a long tradition of scholarship has narrated Egypt’s modern history as an archetype of economic peripheralization; foreign finance in such works appears as the willing partner of industrial capital, paving the way for foreign rule and securing Egypt’s status as a plantation for long-staple cotton and a market for European manufactures (Beckert 2014; Luxemburg 2003; Owen 1969). But Egypt’s colonial history was written in red ink not once but twice. The era of British rule after 1882 coincided with a massive financial expansion that marked what Giovanni Arrighi (1994) poetically labels the “autumn” of British hegemony. Whereas the industrial mills of Lancashire had once seemed to represent the leading edge of capitalist modernity, bankers and boosters now saw the future in a marriage of metropolitan finance and colonial agriculture. New institutions of agricultural credit, they argued, would stoke productivity and transform backward peasants into prosperous yeoman farmers.

On the second count, this article builds upon Jason Moore’s (2011a) incisive meditations on the role of the “commodity frontier” in a capitalist world-ecology. What I refer to as Egypt’s “ecology of interest” will serve as a shorthand for three related ideas that I elaborate through the historical narrative that follows. First, the multiple, overlapping circuits of finance capital moving around and through the agrarian landscape were not only a mechanism for extracting value but also a “way of organizing nature” (Moore 2011c). Second, and perhaps most crucially, interest rates on loans both great and small conditioned both metabolic relations
between farmers and the soil and socio-political relations between distinct classes of landowners. Finally, the “interests of capital” were not singular but plural and contradictory. Egypt’s late-century financial boom, until now largely ignored in the extant historiography, was a decidedly mixed blessing for the profitable production of raw cotton. On the one hand, financialization made flows of credit ever more vital to the reproduction of farmlands and the human livelihoods they supported. On the other, it dramatically accelerated changes to both human and extra-human nature that undermined the prospects for agricultural commodity production.

The boom that briefly won Egypt global renown hastened the onset of a double crisis, at once financial and ecological. The creaking tower of leverage that came crashing down in 1907, the figure of the improvident peasant that became the target of colonial agricultural regulation, and the ravenous caterpillar that ate its way across cotton fields were all features of the ecology of interest that imperial finance had helped to produce. It was in the wake of this doubled crisis that a robust and coherent economic nationalism began to take shape. Attentive to the dense interweaving of political and economic subordination that characterized Egypt’s colonial occupation, that movement, like its counterparts elsewhere, identified the formation of national capital as central to any project of national liberation. Yet the national space within which that capital would need to fructify was an already-plundered “commodity frontier”. This was the ecological conundrum that empire bequeathed to the project of postcolonial development. And it became the setting for the paradoxical musings of Khalil’s pubescent narrator, for the imperative to wage such national wars against nature was ultimately that of capital in a landscape shorn of its free gifts.

**Debugging Colonial History**

Mitchell’s audience with the mosquito would seem an obvious place to begin a history of Egypt’s fraught relationship with insects. While still rooted in the concerns of postcolonial studies, Mitchell pitches his work as a broader intervention in social theory. He opens with an account of the malaria epidemic that ravaged Upper Egypt in 1942. Drawing on the “actor-network theory” of Bruno Latour and Michel Callon, he shows that the arrival of the mosquito’s parasitic payload was the outcome of multiple contingent interactions between factors including irrigation infrastructures, farming practices, local diet, and wartime fertilizer shortages. The method of inquiry that organizes this narrative, he suggests, throws into question a pervasive tendency in the social sciences to explain particular events as instances of universal social processes (Mitchell 2002:28).

In presupposing the distinction between nature and society, Mitchell continues, social theory obscures, and in fact participates in, a “politics of expertise” that works by manufacturing the dualism between human intentionality and the object world upon which it acts. Like Latour, he does suggest that the form of power he labels “techno-politics” originated in Western thought and practice and that its global spread both depended upon and facilitated the operations of empire (Latour 1993). Mitchell thus follows a line of postcolonial critique that exposes the
entanglements of mainstream social science with histories of colonial domination. But the effectiveness and durability of techno-politics point beyond the mere derivative replication of colonial thought. The ubiquitous conceptual purchase of the nature/society binary, he goes on to argue, has less to do with the imperiousness of Western scientific discourse than with the kind of recursive expansion it instantiates, a process whereby techno-politics continuously remakes the material world in its own image. The new critical method Mitchell proposes, then, uses a flat ontology of interactions and assemblages to show how “ideas and technology did not precede this mixture as pure forms of thought brought to bear upon the messy world of reality. They emerged from the mixture and were manufactured in the processes themselves” (Mitchell 2002:52).

One would be hard pressed to find a better illustration of “nature on the one side, and human calculation and expertise on the other” than Egypt’s protracted war against insects (Mitchell 2002:36). Yet on closer examination Mitchell’s intervention proves problematic for two reasons, both of which are evident in the following passage:

Resolving these processes into reason versus force, intelligence versus nature, or the imagined versus the real misapprehends the complexity. But this misapprehension was necessary, for it was exactly how the production of techno-power proceeded. Overlooking the mixed way things happen, indeed producing the effect of neatly separate realms of reason and the real world, ideas and their objects, the human and the non-human, was how power was coming to work in Egypt, and in the 20th century in general (Mitchell 2002:52).

First, while Mitchell’s characterization of “techno-politics” usefully describes the examples he adduces, his brief history of techno-politics itself relies on frequent invocations of a necessity that remains unexplained. In other words, aside from attributions of a generalized imperial will to power or descriptions of techno-power’s own logical entailments, Mitchell offers little indication of why this particular way of organizing, representing, and “misapprehending” the material world was “necessary” in Egypt, let alone anywhere else in the world. Second, Mitchell’s theory, in its most expansive formulation, cannot account for its own claims to global significance. He opens with a sweeping critique of the way social theory relates “particular cases to a larger pattern or process”. Following Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), he rejects “the universal to which social theory aspires” as “a category founded within and expressed by the particular history of the West” (Mitchell 2002:29). He then goes on to suggest, quite convincingly, that techno-political arrangements in Egypt bear an obvious resemblance to similar projects in other places. But having dismissed such global comparisons as instances of the abstract universalism through which the “rule of experts” operates, Mitchell fails to explain what grounds remain for exploring “how power was coming to work in Egypt, and in the 20th century more generally”.

Though he was writing about an earlier work, Colonising Egypt (Mitchell 1991), the anthropologist Fernando Coronil identified a similar tangle of problems when he observed that “for Mitchell, power seems to be epochal rather than historical; it is the expression of an age, not of a particular society” (Coronil 1996:74). Rather
than referring the invocations of necessity that also bear considerable, if unacknowledged, weight in Mitchell’s earlier work either to a generalized will to power or to the internal logic of a disembodied form of politics or “modern constitution” (Latour 1993), Coronil suggests that the kinds of dualistic representation and the techniques of power Mitchell so lucidly identifies are in fact “necessary” to the making of a specifically capitalist historical geography. And if analyses of that “particular society” have often reproduced the determinism and anthropocentrism that Mitchell’s later work rightly aims to overturn, Coronil’s own profound engagement with the tradition of Lefebvrian geography shows that a critique of capital need not lead in that direction (Coronil 1997).

While the sizable tradition of “Green Marxism” to which Coronil contributed receives no mention in Mitchell’s study or the canonical works of actor-network theory on which he draws, its point of departure has been a similar impulse to overcome the “Great Divide” between “society” and “nature”. Admittedly, some early efforts to rescue Marxism from its reputation for an unrelenting productivism (Fleischman, this issue) were more concerned with demonstrating Marx’s awareness of capitalism’s destructive ecological effects than with questioning an environmentalism that still reified the Cartesian division between society and nature (Foster 1999). But as Lefebvre’s distinction between “first” and “second” nature already implied, the relational ontology that Marx developed could provide the basis for an analysis that treats the co-production of human and non-human nature as crucial moments within the totality of historical capitalism (Harvey 1996; Lefebvre 1991; Smith 2008). From this perspective, Mitchell is correct in suggesting both that a kind of necessity imposes the nature/society binary upon modern regimes of power and that the form of techno-politics he identifies in Egypt resembles developments in other parts of the globe. But these paired insights, which betray the limitations of ANT’s emphasis on methodological particularism and radical contingency, require further specification within the historical geography of capitalism.

It is here that Moore’s analysis of capitalism as “world-ecology” proves instructive. In his recent essays, Moore reads the tradition of Green Marxism together with Arrighi’s reformulation of world-systems analysis to arrive at a “theory of crisis and development that views the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the production of nature as differentiated moments within the singularity of historical capitalism” (Moore 2011b). Moore’s auto-critique of his earlier writings (Moore 2000, 2003), I suggest, provides a theoretical foundation from which to explain the peculiar contradictions of Egypt’s war against insects and, more generally, to overcome the two problematic features of Mitchell’s account outlined above. He begins by arguing that capitalism is “premised on a fragmented relation to nature, pivotal to its expanded reproduction: the internalization of nature qua human labor power (reclassified as ‘social’) and the externalization of nature as ‘free gift’” (Moore 2011b:12). Rather than locate the divide between human and extra-human nature, pace Mitchell, in elite forms of knowledge and expertise, in other words, Moore suggests that this ubiquitous ontological distinction is internal to the value form itself. It is posited at the level of everyday human practice under capitalism.
This “necessary” externalization of non-human nature, Moore continues, has been constitutive of capitalism’s historical geography since its inception. His argument takes off from Marx’s basic observation, in Volume III of *Capital*, that “the rate of profit falls or rises in the opposite direction to the price of the raw material” (Marx 1981:201). Moreover, as technical innovation increases the productivity of labor:

the value of the raw material forms an ever-growing component of the value of the commodity produced, not only because it enters into it as a whole, but because in each aliquot part of the total product, the part formed by the depreciation of the machines and the part formed by newly added labour both constantly decline (Marx 1981:204).

Marx himself says little about the ecological implications of these insights. He simply lists “foreign trade” and the falling value of raw materials due to higher labor productivity among the “counteracting factors” to the falling rate of profit (Marx 1981:342–347). But for Moore, these passages anchor a critical revision of his own earlier work on the “commodity frontier”.

The struggle to maintain higher rates of profit by counteracting the rising organic composition of capital—the ratio of constant capital (the value embodied in machinery, equipment, and raw materials) to variable capital (the value of labor power)—depends upon the availability of ever-greater supplies of food, energy, and other raw materials at ever-lower prices. Over capitalism’s long history, Moore contends, that unrelenting need for cheap inputs has been met not simply by “foreign trade” and technical ingenuity but by acts of “appropriation” that keep the value composition of those raw materials at a minimum. To achieve that end, capital seeks to “mobilize extra-human natures capable of reproducing themselves relatively autonomously from the circuit of capital. A large ecological surplus is found whenever a relatively modest amount of capital sets in motion a very large mass of use-values” (Moore 2011a:129–130). At the scale of the capitalist world-ecology, Moore suggests, the onset of systemic crises has been significantly attenuated by a relentless expansion through un-capitalized or under-capitalized “commodity frontiers”, regions that feed “the system’s capacity to appropriate nature’s ‘free gifts’ faster than it has capitalized their reproduction” (Moore 2011b:2).

For present purposes, this endeavor to tease out the world-ecological significance of the value form has two important implications. First, Moore’s revised account situates a concept of “ecological crisis” firmly within the dynamics of the accumulation process. As Moore deploys the term, “ecological crises” are not crises of nature as such but crises for capital arising out of its own internal contradictions. To be clear, Moore is not arguing that the kinds of contingency or non-human agency that carry such analytical significance in ANT and many environmental histories somehow disappear before the totalizing logic of capital. The varieties of agency, adaptation, and unpredictability that continue to characterize living things across the planet do, however, assume specific meaning and importance for human collectivities that have come to depend upon the value form for their own reproduction. Ecological crisis, in other words, here describes the moment at which relations between human and non-human nature born of and for capital can only be maintained through “deepening participation in the circuits of capital on a world-scale ... The more that social ecologies—fields, forests, fisheries, and so forth—become
capitalized ecologies, the more their reproduction is entrained within the reproduction of capital” (Moore 2011a:32).

Second, this reframing of ecological crisis casts the apparent “necessity” of the nature/society binary and the techno-political projects it informs in a different light. As Nancy Fraser (2014:63) has recently observed, in a line of argument that complements Moore’s work:

Structurally, capitalism assumes—indeed, inaugurates—a sharp division between a natural realm, conceived as offering a free, unproduced supply of “raw material” that is available for appropriation, and an economic realm, conceived as a sphere of value, produced by and for human beings.

This fraught relationship in turn underlies “the hardening of a pre-existing distinction between the human—seen as spiritual, socio-cultural and historical—and non-human nature, seen as material, objectively given and historical” (Fraser 2014:63). Fraser is not trying to imply, in deterministic fashion, that this ontological division is a mere epiphenomenal reflection of some economic “base”, but she does insist that it is “massively intensified” by capitalism’s peculiar way of construing material wealth (Fraser 2014:67).

Of course as is true of the other forms of crisis that arise from its immanent contradictions, the reproduction of nature, both human and non-human, is a cost that capital is ever loathe to bear. So what happens when ecological crises occur? Moore’s own analysis remains largely concerned with the historical geography of capitalism as a whole. From such towering heights, the human/nature dichotomy seems to map rather neatly onto the geographical divisions between core and periphery that characterized older versions of world-systems analysis. The rising cost of raw materials due to the exhaustion of existing commodity frontiers threatens profits in global capitalism’s industrial core; and that threat spurs a continuous search for new sites to appropriate, often under the auspices of imperial coercion.

In tracking the relentless expansion of the capitalist world-ecology, Moore does not dwell at any length on how an ecological crisis might play out within an existing commodity frontier. By shifting the angle of vision to one such locale, the story of cotton, credit, and crisis in Egypt thus not only offers an alternative to Mitchell’s account of “techno-politics” but helps to clarify and expand upon ideas that remain somewhat underdeveloped in Moore’s essays. Three related points are particularly important to the narrative that follows. First, as Moore’s analysis of the way value circulates through human bodies and produced landscapes begins to suggest, the rising organic composition of capital did not occur only “off stage” in the far away factories of the metropole. Rather, the onset of crisis signaled the moment at which the cotton-producing agrarian landscape began to require its own more costly inputs to counteract the marked tendency of yields to decline. Second, non-human nature was “external” to the circuit of capital only in relative, not absolute terms. From the outset, the profitable production of cotton depended on a range of often-brutal strategies devised to keep the capital intensity of growing the precious fiber to a minimum. The arrival of the cotton worm signaled the moment at which that always-blurry boundary between what was “free” and what
was not began to shift. In the ensuing era of crisis, a “massive intensification” of the ontological division between society and nature became a crucial component in the protracted scramble to shunt the new costs of sustaining Egypt’s soil-exhausted and insect-infested farmlands onto other bodies and landscapes lying still outside the circuit of capital. Third, even in a country where cotton was king, the interests of capital were never singular. The paradoxical position of Egypt’s economic nationalists cannot be deduced in any straightforward fashion from the historical geography of capitalism at a global scale. Instead, it was precisely the multiple, competing circuits of capital flowing around and through Egypt’s cotton fields that gave rise to the country’s precarious ecology of interest. And the history of that ecology was tightly intertwined with the rise of imperial finance at the close of the 19th century.

**The Making of Egypt’s Cotton Economy**

As the long and gory history of global cotton production attests, nature’s “free gifts” were never exactly free. Rather, the conversion of vast territories into frontiers for the cultivation of “white gold” entailed diverse arrangements for suppressing the real costs of these profound ecological transformations. By the early 1800s, planters in the American South had arrived at the bloody alchemy of conquered land and enslaved labor that made them the world’s leading suppliers of cheap raw cotton (Beckert 2014; Johnson 2013). Egypt’s subsequent arrival as another major source of fiber for Europe’s burgeoning mills occurred in the shadow of the American juggernaut. Although the superior quality and staple length of Egyptian cotton segmented the global market to some degree, competition with the dreadful productivity of Southern plantations helped to shape the regime of appropriation that emerged on the fertile fields of the Nile Delta.

Egypt’s turn to cotton cultivation preceded the actual moment of colonial conquest by nearly a century (Owen 1972). Following the campaign to expel Napoleon’s forces in 1801, the Ottoman province of Egypt was ruled by an ambitious governor named Mehmed ‘Ali Pasha. In a bid to secure an autonomous dynasty for himself and his heirs, the Pasha developed a ruthless system of military fiscalism. He built a disciplined conscript army that provided the means for enforcing his domestic policies. And he waged a series of foreign military campaigns that ultimately won him the concessions he desired from Istanbul (Fahmy 1997). To finance this war machine, Mehmed ‘Ali seized control of Egypt’s farmlands and the valuable crops they yielded up (Owen 1969; Rivlin 1961). In securing a loyal power base and implementing this new agrarian order, he granted properties to members of his own extended family and the existing rural nobility, who together formed the core of an emergent landholding elite (Abbas and El-Dessouky 2012; Baer 1962). He imposed a monopoly over the country’s agricultural produce, dictating the terms on which his government would purchase crops from the peasantry and the price at which it would sell on the world market. And in the 1820s, recognizing the revenue potential of the prized fiber, he forced farmers across the Delta to begin cultivating a local breed of long-staple cotton.
Egypt’s budding cotton economy demanded a wholesale reconfiguration of rural landscapes, from the construction of dams, canals, and railways to the installation of irrigation pumps and cotton gins. Here as well, Mehmed ‘Ali and his heirs were able to substitute coercion for capital investment by imposing the corvée as an added form of taxation. Each year, hundreds of thousands of peasant conscripts provided unpaid labor for new “public works” (Mikhail 2011). Yet the capital expenses of these monumental projects—which also included the construction of downtown Cairo and the excavation of the Suez Canal—soon outstripped the Egyptian state’s available resources (Luxemburg 2003:410–413).

By the 1850s, Mehmed ‘Ali’s successors began to relax the state’s tight controls over economic life, ending government monopolies and inviting foreign capital into the country. To fund their ongoing projects, Egypt’s rulers turned to the banks of London and Paris. At least initially, Egypt’s foreign loans were premised on a calculation that the targeted capitalization of built infrastructures would render up a far larger bounty of under-capitalized nature in the form of rising cotton yields. But the value of Egypt’s cotton depended on far more than the size of the annual harvest.

The pattern of debt-financed state building reached its climax in the reign of Mehmed ‘Ali’s grandson Ismā‘īl. When he assumed power in 1863, the global “cotton famine” due to the American Civil War had created a windfall for other countries like Egypt (Beckert 2004). Khedive Ismā‘īl borrowed lavishly against the inflated revenues of the cotton market. When the war ended and cotton prices fell, his government faced a revenue shortfall that culminated in bankruptcy by 1876 (Landes 1958). With the backing of their respective governments, Egypt’s European creditors imposed harsh austerity measures. The cuts to government and army salaries and the escalation of tax demands fueled widespread unrest which erupted into a national-popular revolt led by the military general Ahmād ‘Urābī Pasha (Cole 1993). Fearing that if the revolt succeeded, Egypt would not pay, Britain intervened and quashed it. Though Egypt was never officially declared a colony, the British assumed effective control of the country. They thereafter governed through a small corps of ministerial “advisers” coordinated by the British Consul General. From 1883 to 1907, that position was held by Evelyn Baring (Lord Cromer after he was raised to the peerage in 1892).

The Bankruptcies of Oriental Despotism

From the outset, Egypt’s new “advisers” proclaimed that they would realize a prodigious and equitable increase in the country’s agricultural output. Whereas the khedives had squandered Egypt’s natural wealth and saddled farmers with the costs of their profligacy, British expertise would unlock the fabled gifts of the Nile. The virtues of foreign occupation would be measured in kantars of cotton. Prior to Cromer’s arrival, the British Cabinet dispatched a mission under their ambassador at Istanbul, Lord Dufferin, to draw up plans for the occupation.¹ Dufferin’s analysis read Egypt’s bankruptcy as the inevitable consequence of “Oriental despotism”. Conversely, “British justice” would not merely resolve the debt problem but inaugurate an era of unprecedented material prosperity (Jakes 2014).
According to the productivist logic that informed the occupation’s policies, British rule would effect so massive an increase in agricultural yields as to resolve Egypt’s debt problems and enrich the local population at the same time. The old regime, British officials argued, had stood as the greatest obstacle between a hearty peasantry and the fertile alluvial soil they tilled. By 1882, well over 600,000 peasant smallholders (owning between 1 and 5 feddans) struggled to maintain possession of their land in the face of the state’s exorbitant revenue demands (Owen 2002:217). At the opposite extreme, the khedives and the landed elite controlled over 40% of the country’s agricultural property. They monopolized access to irrigation water. They abused the odious institution of the corvée by diverting conscript labor to serve on their private estates. Tax assessments bore little relation to the actual rental value of the soil, and the wealthiest proprietors often enjoyed the lightest rates.

British rule, by contrast, would uproot the entrenched interests of this morally and fiscally bankrupt regime and replace it with what Lord Cromer referred to as a “reign of order and regularity.” A staff of British engineers, recruited from India, took control of the Public Works Ministry. Employing funds from a small additional government loan floated Europe in 1885, they set about an overhaul of the country’s irrigation infrastructures that thereafter formed the centerpiece of Britain’s agrarian reforms (Cookson-Hills 2013; Tignor 1963). By centralizing control, the Anglo-Indian engineers enforced a more equitable and regular distribution of water. Improved flow rates also reduced the state’s dependence on corvée for canal clearance, and in 1890, the British announced with great fanfare that, thanks to the improvement of the state’s finances, they had fully replaced this canal clearance corvée with a system of paid government contracts (Egypt. No. 3 1891:3). Finally, beginning in the early 1890s, Cromer’s administration set about the politically treacherous task of reforming the laws governing land ownership and tax assessments (Owen 1969:246–247).

From Dufferin’s report onward, British officials posited that their own just administration, coupled with additional infusions of foreign capital, would allow a long-oppressed smallholding peasantry to unleash vast reserves of untapped productivity. If nature’s gifts were not entirely free, they could once again be made to outstrip the cost of Egypt’s public debt. It was this assumption that allowed Cromer to assert that “there is a much greater identity between the interests of the bondholders, properly understood, and those of the Egyptian people than is often supposed”. And while the British sometimes construed those “interests” in more generic terms, the objective measure of prosperity was almost always cotton. In the absence of other reliable statistics, colonial officials used the aggregate quantity of cotton exported from Alexandria to gauge the success of each new undertaking (Egypt. No. 3 1891:13).

### Fields of Finance

From the vantage of this drive to make cotton the currency of both political hegemony and debt repayment, the occupation of Egypt appears as a rather straightforward affair in which British rule served the interests of British capital. Here, as
elsewhere, public debt provided the mechanism for the accelerated appropriation of natural resources and raw materials from colonized territory (Arrighi 2007:224; Harvey 2003:145–152). It was just such instances of seeming alignment—in this case between the City of London and the mills of Lancashire—that famously led Lenin (1916) to suggest that finance capital, the motor force of imperialism, represented a unity of industrial and banking capital. But as David Harvey (2006:319) argued several decades ago: “The unity of banking and industrial capital, if it exists at all, is certainly a stressful one ... The accumulation cycle ... suggests a shifting balance of power between industrial capital and banking capital over the course of the cycle”.

It was the signal contribution of Arrighi’s later work to transpose a remarkably similar insight into a framework for grasping the totality of the capitalist world-system. And as Arrighi’s work helped to show, the First Great Depression of 1873–1896 inaugurated a seismic shift in that “balance of power”. Thanks to cutthroat competition from new industrial powers like Germany, Japan, and the United states, a crisis of overproduction drove down the profit margins that British industrialists long had enjoyed (Arrighi 1994:164). The imperial plundering of human and extra-human natures may have delayed the onset of the crisis (Arrighi 2007:245; Washbrook 1990). But by the late 19th century, over-investment in industrialization was yielding diminishing returns.

In the ensuing era of global financial expansion, as “an increasing mass of money capital ‘[set] itself free’ from its commodity form” (Arrighi 1994:6), colonial territories became a particularly fertile field for a new wave of investment. Whereas the industrial factories of Europe had, for the better part of a century, represented the leading edge of capitalist development, a growing chorus of boosters began to suggest that colonial agriculture might now promise untold profits. In the early 1880s, a particularly impassioned and consequential version of this argument appeared in the writings and speeches of William Wedderburn, a Scottish judge serving in British India. Amidst rising official concern over rural indebtedness, Wedderburn proposed a new union of mutual benefit between colonial peasants and metropolitan financiers:

In India we have a fine clime, a rich soil, and abundance of agricultural labour, both cheap and skilful. All of the conditions would be favourable if the cultivator were not starved for want of capital. On the other hand, here in Europe accumulated capital is anxiously seeking channels for investment ... It is as though on the one hand we had rich but thirsty soil; on the other hand vast stores of fertilizing water. What we now wish to provide is a channel of communication, in order that all parties may be benefited (Wedderburn 1887:14).

Like the larger project of agrarian development of which it became a part, Wedderburn’s plan rested on an implicit understanding that nature’s gifts were free only in relative, not absolute, terms. Because they plowed their own money into the soil and needed to wait for crops to ripen before retrieving it, farmers producing for sale on the world market required sources of credit throughout the growing cycle (Henderson 1998). As colonial administrators had noted with growing alarm, that need for credit could easily become a mechanism for exploitation of agricultural
producers by their creditors. Wedderburn’s plan, by contrast, held out the promise
that agricultural credit could be made to function as capital for lenders and bor-
rowers both. Like the waters of his irrigation metaphor, loans at reasonable rates
of interest would thus help peasant smallholders to coax far greater riches from
the soil they tilled.

The “channel of communication” Wedderburn advocated was an agricultural
bank enjoying two special concessions. First, rather than build its own costly
network of village branches, the bank would use government tax collectors to
service its loans. Second, to help attract investors, the Government of India would
guarantee a minimum return on the bank’s capital. When Wedderburn began to
pitch his ideas in the early 1880s, Lord Cromer was serving in India as Finance
Member of Lord Ripon’s government. Though Cromer and Ripon together
supported Wedderburn’s plan, the Government of India ultimately rejected the
proposal (Catanach 1970:28–29). But Cromer remained committed to the idea,
and he carried it with him to Egypt. Among the numerous ills and abuses afflicting
the Egyptian countryside, Dufferin had singled out the rising indebtedness of
peasant smallholders to local Greek and Levantine moneylenders as one of the
most damning signs of khedivial misrule.\footnote{In this landscape of rural disloca-
tion and financial dispossession, Cromer saw a promising opportunity to test
Wedderburn’s scheme at long last. Beginning in the mid-1890s, at Cromer’s urg-
ing, the Egyptian government oversaw a series of lending experiments that
culminated in the creation of the Agricultural Bank of Egypt in May 1902. Thanks
to the concessions Wedderburn had proposed, the Bank had little trouble
attracting investors. And its mortgages at 9% interest seemed to offer the bank’s
clients an appealing alternative to existing forms of local moneylending and
usufructory mortgage (Kemmerer 1906).}

\textbf{Egypt’s New Ecology of Interest}

According to Wedderburn’s vision, financial investment in colonial territories like
Egypt and India would complement their rightful status as commodity frontiers
and benefit peasant producers along the way. In practice, these predictions held
true only in part and for rather different reasons than their proponents had an-
ticipated. The waves of foreign finance that began crashing upon Egypt’s shores
by the late 1890s did spur peasant smallholders to grow more cotton. But the
British administration’s experiments with the Agricultural Bank occurred alongside
explosive growth in mortgage banking and land development companies,
spurred locally by the apparent success of the occupation’s agrarian reforms
and globally by the lingering effects of the First Great Depression. The dynamics
of the ensuing boom would have two important consequences for the contradic-
tory ecology of interest that these new financial institutions helped to produce.
First, what capital did reach the Egyptian countryside went overwhelmingly to
the wealthiest landowners. In an increasingly striated credit market, interest rates
for this landed elite fell much faster than they did for everyone else (Jakes 2015).
These growing disparities in the cost of money would have pronounced effects
upon how different classes of farmers cropped their land. Second, as the rising
tide of foreign finance drove down the profitability of loans against agricultural land and produce, capital began to flow towards more abstract and speculative investments that appeared to offer higher returns.

In one of the earliest promotional pamphlets touting the wonders of mortgage banking in Egypt, the Belgian lawyer Edouard Van Dieren (1897:3) announced:

On the one hand, the abundance of money accumulates so rapidly and on the other the security of commercial transactions and industrial operations becomes so precarious that ... [the] moment then seems to have come for capitalists to cast their eyes upon new lands, and Egypt among them occupies an entirely special situation.

Van Dieren’s pitch bears an obvious resemblance to Wedderburn’s earlier appeal. But the Belgian booster shared none of the British official’s concern to cultivate a robust smallholding class. Rather, his main objective was to apprise his Belgian compatriots of a “special situation” that promised maximal profits at minimal risk. Without the concessions that the Agricultural Bank received, Egypt’s other new mortgage companies eschewed lending to smallholders in favor of placements they deemed far more reliable.

Initially, these ventures laid strict guidelines for their business, limiting the size of any individual loan and lending only to large landlords of established reputation in easily accessible areas in the north of the country. While a growing supply of foreign capital lavished Egypt’s wealthiest proprietors with ever-cheaper sources of credit, however, several banks sought higher profits in new kinds of risk. As early as 1899, these institutions began making loans not against land or commercial goods, but against the stock certificates of new Egyptian companies, many of which were themselves engaged in mortgage lending and land speculation. By the height of the boom between 1905 and 1907, these practices had helped to construct a precarious edifice of layered debts (Arminjon 1907).

**Egypt’s Two Plagues**

Even as colonial administrators and investment promoters dubbed Egypt a latter-day “El Dorado” (Arminjon 1911:590–591), critics in the Arabic press detailed both the profound unevenness of “the new financial movement in Egypt” and the worrying signs of agro-ecological degradation. In January 1905, the nationalist organ al-Mu’ayyad warned of “two great plagues” [“āfatayn kabīratayn”] that “must be combatted” to protect the country’s wealth. The first was “airy speculations” [“al-mudāriḥāt al-huwā‘īyah”]; the second was “the cotton worm” [“dūdat al-qrṭn”]. The former had triggered wild swings in the Alexandria Stock Exchange. The latter had, during the previous season, devoured as much as half the annual cotton crop in some provinces.

The cotton-leaf worm (*Prodenia littoralis*) had made its debut as a menace to Egyptian cotton in 1877 (Willcocks 1910:709–710). The caterpillar’s popular label was probably a misnomer. For millennia, it had lived on the clover grown throughout the country as animal fodder. It was only with the advent of cotton cultivation
that a substantial new source of food became available and the insect’s population began to grow. The year of the British invasion had corresponded with another major infestation (Stuart 1883b:26–27). In response, the Egyptian Council of Ministers decided in May 1883 to appoint a special commission to study the insect pest and propose measures to prevent its spread. The commission urged farmers to cut and burn any leaves on which they spotted caterpillar eggs. These directives, however, merely provided guidance, encouraging rural administrators and farmers to eradicate the bug on behalf of “the general interest” (Jallād 2003:552–554).

A severe attack in 1894 provided the occasion for another government investigation as well as a flurry of articles in the press. It was at this moment that explanations for Egypt’s insect plague began to change. Denouncing the fatalism of those who attributed the infestations to natural or divine agency beyond human control, these commentaries identified a specific class of human actors as the cause of a problem threatening the prosperity of the country as whole. Most observers agreed that the explosion of insect populations arose directly from the steady intensification of cotton farming. Of particular concern was the adoption of a two-year rotation—in which half of a given property was sown in cotton each year—in lieu of the three-year rotation that had prevailed beforehand. Since it was chiefly poor smallholders who “took to farming half their land in cotton rather than a third of it”, press commentaries now began to link the explosion of insect populations to the deviant economic subjectivity of peasants.

Once idealized as the deserving beneficiaries of colonial reform and the motorforce of agricultural regeneration, Egypt’s peasant smallholders now suffered mounting opprobrium as the unwitting vectors of the insect plague. Especially when articulated by British administrators, such condemnations entailed a heavy dose of revisionism. A member of the Dufferin mission, for example, lamented in 1883 that cotton “could be grown every alternate year, provided sufficient water were available, but as a matter of fact a farmer can seldom irrigate more than one third of his farm” (Stuart 1883a:132–133). If Egypt’s peasants had played a disproportionate role in hastening the onset of ecological crisis by adopting the more intensive crop rotation, they were doing exactly as the country’s British “advisers” had intended, albeit for rather different reasons.

To the extent that Egyptian smallholders reacted as they did to Britain’s agrarian reforms, their choices were less the consequence of some innate improvidence than a response to their particular place in Egypt’s new ecology of interest. Already scrambling to outpace their debts when the British arrived, many seized upon the occupation’s inducements to produce more cotton and made the difficult decision to begin exhausting their own land (Richards 1978). Dufferin himself had obliquely acknowledged that peasant indebtedness was an ecological as well as a social problem when he observed that “there is very little land in Egypt capable of supporting this accumulated burden.”

The stated objective of the Agricultural Bank was to lighten the “accumulated burden” of debt by “[advancing] money to the peasantry at a relatively low rate of interest” (Egypt. No. 1 1904:13). But the Bank’s standard rate of 9% was low only relative to what peasants had been paying on prior forms of local lending. It altered the degree but not the character of the problem Dufferin had identified. At least
one contemporary observer came close to making this argument. Towards the end of his landmark study on Egypt’s real estate wealth and mortgage debt, the Belgian doctor, entrepreneur, and vice-consul Alfred Eid offered a brief comparison between a loan on a property of 5 feddans at 7.5% interest, and another on a property of 50 feddans at 6.5%. Even at these hypothetical rates, which were relatively low in the former case and high in the latter, Eid found that the two loans would have markedly different outcomes. The smallholder, he observed, “would find himself in the identical economic position as that of a peasant who had leased a property of the same size”, while the owner of the second property, simply by renting out his land, would retain a comfortable margin above the loan’s annual cost (Eid 1907:131–133). In practice, the best loans available for smallholders continued to exert a strong pressure towards over-cropping. Thanks to the recent glut of mortgage investment, the landholding elite meanwhile enjoyed a growing margin between the rising value of their properties and the falling rate of interest on the mortgages they contracted. These uneven class effects of the financial boom would play a central role in shaping responses to the crises that soon followed.

All Hands on Bug: the Return of the Corvée

In 1904, a severe attack of cotton worm devastated the Egyptian crop, consuming as much as half the cotton in some provinces. For two decades, the project of British rule and the promise of Egyptian prosperity had together depended on the steady increase of cotton yields. The worsening infestations of the cotton worm marked the onset of an ecological crisis, the beginning of the end of nature’s free gifts. From this moment onwards, growing cotton in a worm-eaten and exhausted landscape would require increasing outlays of labor and capital. Having fixed the repayment of Egypt’s foreign debts, both public and private, to the profitable production of ever more cotton, colonial officials sought a means to offset the new costs of reproducing nature. As I have argued above, both the very hungry caterpillar that preyed on cotton plants and the indebted smallholders who overcrowded their fields were features of the ecology of interest that multiple, intersecting circuits of foreign finance had served to produce. In effect, the contradictions of that ecology contributed both to the cotton worm’s emergence as a problem for capital and to the colonial state’s chosen solution for that problem. Attributing the insect plague to the economic and ecological improvidence of Egyptian peasants, British officials inaugurated Egypt’s long war against insects through a thinly disguised revival of corvée. The country’s poorest farmers, those most dependent on the labor of their own children, would thus bear the new costs of reproducing nature for cotton in Egypt.

In April 1905, a new law empowered the Ministry of Interior to conscript all boys between the ages of 10 and 18 to work in gangs to pick, transport, and burn caterpillar-infested cotton leaves. Though the boys would receive a nominal wage for their labor, the work would be compulsory and the owner of the infested field would bear the cost of the labor. Any farmers who withheld their children or failed to pick and burn infested leaves in their fields would face imprisonment or fines.
Children found negligent in their work for the eradication campaigns would face the same punishments (Ministry of the Interior 1906).

Lord Cromer’s own convoluted discussion of the campaigns attempted to distinguish this new form of labor conscription from the corvée the British claimed to have abolished 15 years prior. While he emphasized both the restraint with which colonial officials would resort to conscription and the “universal approval” the measure had received, his argument rested on an assertion that both human and extra-human nature in Egypt had assumed an exceptional character that in turn required temporary and exceptional forms of intervention. He noted that “European and wealthier proprietors” had been cleaning their crops of caterpillar eggs for years. The same, it seemed, could no longer be said for the peasantry, and the outcome was a dangerous misuse of Egypt’s bountiful natural endowments. “There is an immense difference”, he concluded, “between organizing labour to deal with an agricultural crisis, such as that occasioned by the presence of the cotton worm, and obliging people to labour on ordinary works undertaken for the general development of the country” (Egypt. No. 1 1906:21–22).

**Crisis Doubled**

On its own, this announcement of “agricultural crisis” did little to deter the eager investors who flocked to the Nile Valley. Hungry caterpillars, however, were not the only threat to Egypt’s vaunted prosperity. As noted above, many of Egypt’s new banks had started making loans against stock certificates back in 1899. By the climax of the boom, these practices proved so profitable that the banks were borrowing money on renewable short-term credit from Europe to make more loans in Egypt (Arminjon 1907:11–13). In March 1907, the European creditors began to call in their loans, and the entire edifice of layered debts came tumbling down. By July, the banks were refusing clients of all kinds. Journalists soon reported that even illiterate peasants could be heard uttering lāfẓat krīzah [the word “crise”] throughout the countryside.13

Throughout much of 1907, the British administration downplayed the extent of the crisis, describing it as a mere corrective to the greed of a few unscrupulous stock traders (Egypt. No. 1 1908:4–7). They insisted that the material foundations of Egyptian prosperity remained solid and that the annual bounty of the cotton crop would forestall any long-term damage to the country’s economic well-being. But the following year the financial slump continued, and to make matters worse a growing body of evidence began to suggest that the average yield of cotton per acre had started to fall.14 Most explanations for the reduced yield in 1908 assigned blame chiefly to a virulent attack by the cotton worm. To these alarming infestations, studies of the cotton crop soon added other concerns about rising water tables, deteriorating seed strains, and declining soil fertility.

What Cromer had described five years prior as a temporary “agricultural crisis” was fast becoming a permanent condition. The repercussions of that crisis for Egypt’s role as a profitable commodity frontier were increasingly dire. In a somber bit of analysis for the *Cairo Scientific Journal*, John A. Todd, Professor of Political Economy at Egypt’s Khedivial Law School, noted that the diminished yields of
recent years were inflating the price of Egyptian cotton, which had long enjoyed a premium on global markets for its long staple. Alarmed by the rising cost of Egyptian fiber, textile manufacturers abroad were fast devising ways to employ lower quality cotton from other sources at a lower cost (Todd 1910). In this sense, the “agricultural crisis” placed Egypt in a double bind. The cotton crop’s mounting demand for new inputs of capital and labor was at once causing metropolitan industrialists to seek new commodity frontiers elsewhere and eating into the profits of the crop that still appeared to be the country’s best hope for mitigating the devastation of financial collapse. To help address this problem, the British administration in 1910 formed a new Department of Agriculture with authority to devise and enforce a vast array of farming regulations. The new Department quickly recruited a new staff of English agricultural inspectors to oversee the annual cotton-worm campaigns, which now drew upon the labor of peasant boys and girls alike. Government circulars, moreover, instructed farmers about when they could water their fields, when they could plant and harvest different crops, how they should clear their fields after the cotton harvest, and even where they could store their manure. Building on the model of the cotton-worm campaigns, these regulations, backed by the threat of fines and imprisonment, deployed the coercive powers of the state to displace the new costs of reproducing nature in Egypt’s cotton fields.

These efforts, however, did not succeed in restoring the conditions of undercapitalized natural abundance that had once dazzled foreign investors. Nor were the painful effects of the financial crash limited to those who had erected a perilous tower of leverage prior to 1907. On the contrary, as the crisis dragged on, it was Egypt’s smallholders who endured its most painful consequences. By 1910, the Agricultural Bank disclosed that a stunning 40,000 of its approximately 238,000 outstanding loans were in default. The prolonged depression thus amplified and exacerbated the very class disparities that had ensued from the former dynamics of the boom. Invoking both its obligation to its shareholders and the occupation’s pedagogic duty towards a backward peasantry, the Agricultural Bank lobbied the British administration to sanction larger loans to wealthier proprietors and to reform foreclosure procedures in the courts for more swift and consistent enforcement against bad debts (Egypt. No. 1 1910:13).

The more conservative mortgage banks that had eschewed risky investments and weathered the crash, meanwhile, soon recognized opportunity in the severe constriction of capital flows. The French Crédit Foncier led the way in issuing roughly £4.4 million in new shares to fund fresh mortgages against large landed estates. Freed of competitors, the bank was able to demand 7% for these loans, a rate far higher than had prevailed during the boom (Crédit Foncier Égyptien 1909). Other banks soon followed suit. In this new climate of unbridled crisis profiteering, the discourse of material prosperity and mutual benefit with which the occupation had long rebuffed its critics now rang hollow. As Muṣṭafā Kāmil, the young leader of the Egyptian National Party, had remarked with characteristic wit in October 1907: “The English were ever accustomed to claim in our presence as a title to glory the wealth of our country, up to the day when the last crisis arrived; then having wearied us for many long years they lowered their voices” (Kamel 1907).
Conclusion: Economic Nationalism on a Pillaged Frontier

Kāmil’s ironic turn of phrase announced the possibility of a major shift in the terms of debate over colonial rule. By the end of the first decade of the 20th century, the twin shocks of financial and agro-ecological crisis had shaken Britain’s imperial development project in Egypt to its foundations. It was at this moment that the seemingly paradoxical position of economic nationalism we encountered in the erotic reminiscences of Khalīl’s narrator first took shape. The numerous iterations of this position were, in varying degrees, anti-liberal, anti-financial, and anti-imperial, but they were not anti-capitalist. Rather, its leading proponents saw a process of national capital formation as crucial both to rescuing Egypt’s peasant majority from the prolonged ravages of financial speculation and to achieving a meaningful freedom from colonial rule. And even those who advocated a gradual diversification of productive activity believed that “Egypt’s economic cure” would begin with the revival of cotton cultivation (Ḥarb 2002). But whether the profits from Egyptian cotton redounded to a national public or to imperial interests abroad, those profits would have to grow within an ecology that, like the ravenous pests inching across it, had developed its own insatiable hunger for capital. It was in grappling with this predicament that such thinkers refugured Egypt’s colonial conscription policies as part of a national struggle against nature, a struggle that would soon inspire a quest for new commodity frontiers.

In their own readings of Egypt’s double crisis, Egyptian nationalists recognized that what had been merely a clever hydraulic analogy in William Wedderburn’s pitch for the Agricultural Bank had become a material fact for both human and extra-human nature: Egypt’s farmers and the land they worked depended on regular flows of capital every bit as much as water to sustain their everyday reproduction. In the devastating forms of economic volatility that Britain’s development projects had invited and in the occupation’s highly selective response to those new woes, Egyptian critics found powerful evidence that foreign rule served narrowly foreign interests, interests that diverged from those of the Egyptian public. At the same time, the very crisis conditions that lent force to demands for national independence had revealed that this project of political emancipation could no longer be adequately construed as separate from efforts to overcome the peculiar economic and ecological entanglements of colonial rule.

As al-Mu‘ayyad’s warning against “the two great plagues” had already anticipated, these advocates for political-economic autonomy understood Egypt’s situation in terms of two closely related crises. Both the material threat of hungry insects and the disembodied force of “airy speculation” had undermined what they referred to as “real wealth” (“al-tharwah al-haqiṣiyah”). To the extent that these figures advanced a critique of the regulatory apparatus the British had recently imposed, their concern was not that the cotton-worm campaigns were too harsh but that Britain’s overall approach had been inconsistent, saddling Egyptian peasants with costly new responsibilities while leaving the banks that had courted disaster to go about their business as usual. Sarcastically aping what it understood to be Britain’s position, the daily al-Jarīdah pronounced that “[t]he best cure for the...
current situation is to work for the improved condition of agriculture in general rather than to interfere in the affairs of private banks”.

By refusing even to consider the latter, the paper suggested, the British left wealth produced by Egyptian labor subject to the whims and exactions of “private banks”. This identification of British rule with the interests of finance had two additional implications. First, it provided those like Kāmil who had been campaigning for political sovereignty since well before 1907 with a powerful new argument, namely that only a state run by and for Egyptians would have the wherewithal to manage the increase of national wealth. Second, it contributed to the notion that, alongside this older struggle for direct political emancipation, Egyptians would now need to work towards the pooling of national capital and the establishment of institutions, most notably a national bank and a network of agricultural cooperatives, that would insulate the credit system from the wild fluctuations of economic forces lying beyond Egypt’s borders.

By the second decade of the 20th century, agricultural cooperation had become a central platform of Egypt’s two leading nationalist organizations, the National Party [al-Hizb al-Watani] and the People’s Party [Hizb al-Ummah]. The foremost advocates of cooperation described it as an institutional mechanism for recruiting a mass rural constituency, forging new political-economic subjects oriented towards the advancement of a collective national interest, promoting techniques for improved agricultural cultivation, and amassing capital to free the country from dependence on foreign finance. Embedded within this idealized program of national revival was an explicit critique of the liberal political-economic doctrines that the occupation continued to promote. Commenting on the cooperative movement that his older brother ʿUmar had established in 1910, the lawyer and ardent nationalist ʿAbd al-Rafīʿī explained, Egyptians had “recognized that selfishness and love of the self and the devotion of people to their own private interests ... have contributed to their remaining in a state of backwardness” (al-Rafīʿī 1914: vi). Linking crisis conditions to the particularities of colonial rule, ʿUmar Luṭfī and his disciples elaborated a line of critique that identified the discourse of economic self-interest and free markets as an alien imposition and an obstacle to Egypt’s advancement. At the same time, contrasting the abstract and ephemeral movements of finance capital to the achievement of tangible and enduring material prosperity, they valorized agricultural commodity production for sale on the world market as fundamental to any future development of Egypt’s national economy. ʿUmar Luṭfī himself argued that:

the basis of independence and freedom for every nation is economic independence, and it is thus imperative ... that we should direct all our efforts today towards strengthening and developing the sources of real wealth, and agriculture in particular, and improving the condition of farmers ... so that we may liberate the country from the servitude of the indebted (al-Rafīʿī 1914:190–191).

The same cooperatives that would facilitate such liberation, he insisted, would simultaneously aid in “the battle against the cotton worm by uniting all the farmers in the village so that they might work together to exterminate the germ of this mortal enemy” (Luṭfī 1911).
That Luṭfī could so comfortably fold this collective “battle” into a project of national emancipation was emblematic of the nationalist movement’s fraught endeavor to remake the ecology of interest that decades of colonial capitalism had produced. Unlike the imperial space economy from which nationalists now hoped to escape, the national economy to which they aspired would be far less able to exploit the resources of extra-human nature lying beyond the confines of national territory. From this vantage, the techno-political arrangements at the center of Mitchell’s provocative essay begin to take on a different meaning. The modern “rule of experts”, Mitchell contends, constantly restages a sharp distinction between “nature” and “society” despite numerous moments of failure and crisis arising from the actual relational character of interactions that elude such a tidy division of the world. At the outset, I argued that Mitchell’s observations about the “necessity” and global patterning of these practices are at once compelling and problematic for his own methodological emphasis on contingent particularity. And I suggested that Jason Moore’s recent reconceptualization of the “commodity frontier” provides the materials for a more adequate alternative account.

By way of conclusion, then, I would propose that Mitchell’s narrative might be reread as the epilogue to story of cotton, caterpillars, and credit that I have laid out, a history of accumulation on an already-pillaged commodity frontier. In short, a national economy would need to grow within a national ecology already shorn of its free gifts. Extending the irrigation infrastructures that once launched the cotton boom in the Delta held out the promise that Upper Egypt could offer up a new natural bounty in sugarcane. By the 1920s, however, the depletion of vital soil nutrients was fueling demand across the country for costly nitrate fertilizers imported from Germany. The imperative to keep the organic composition of capital from rising in cotton and sugar alike thereafter drove a relentless exploration for new internal commodity frontiers that might yield cheaper farm inputs. Framing their business enterprises as integral to a program of national development, the scions of an emergent indigenous bourgeoisie developed plans with the Egyptian state to install energy turbines at the Aswan dam to power domestic fertilizer production (Mitchell 2002:33). When that project failed to materialize by the end of World War II, its chief proponent seized upon the availability of new funding from the United States to contract for the construction of a fertilizer plant at Suez powered instead by waste gas from the Red Sea oil fields (Mitchell 2002:40). Ultimately, as these domestic endeavors met with limited success, the postcolonial state found other ways to pass along the costs of ecological crisis by appropriating resources from outside its borders. The Aswan High Dam—atop which still stands a sign announcing “taḥaddī al-insān al-Miṣrī li-l-ṭabī‘ah al-ṣāmitah” “[the defiance of the Egyptian people towards silent nature]”—secured tremendous new supplies of water and energy by flooding vast tracts of Nubian land. And throughout the Cold War era, the institution of US food aid provided vital relief to the mounting burden of reproducing human and extra-human nature along the Nile. In effect, the cost of labor power in Egypt remained unusually low thanks to the still-formidable ecological bounty of the American Midwest (Iyer 2014).
In the decades that followed, the evolving project of national development would, consequently, unfold as a series of ever more grandiose confrontations between the Egyptian state and the forces of nature that seemed to offer less and less for free. This was the predicament that Egypt’s war against insects, a war waged by the tiny hands of hundreds of thousands of peasant children, had served to announce.

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Endnotes
1 British National Archives (TNA), FO 78/3565: “General Report by the Earl of Dufferin Respecting Reorganization in Egypt” (6 February 1883).
2 A feddan is equal to 0.42 ha or 1.038 acres.
3 TNA, FO 78/4243: Evelyn Baring to Khedive Tawfiq (11 December 1889).
4 TNA, FO 78/4042: Evelyn Baring to Lord Salisbury (31 March 1887).
6 See, for example, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA), MS 17908/1, Minutes of Local Committee for Egypt. No. 1 (Gresham Life Insurance): “Minutes of a Meeting of the Local Board held on 11 February 1904”.
7 LMA, MS 241005/1, Imperial Ottoman Bank: Mr Barry to Lord Hillingdon (20 February 1899).
12 TNA, FO 78/3565: “General Report by the Earl of Dufferin Respecting Reorganization in Egypt” (6 February 1883):21
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