

*Chapter 1*

## THE FACTORY AS CRUCIBLE



‘So this is phase two of the revolution ... what we need  
to do now is to take Tahrir to the factories.’

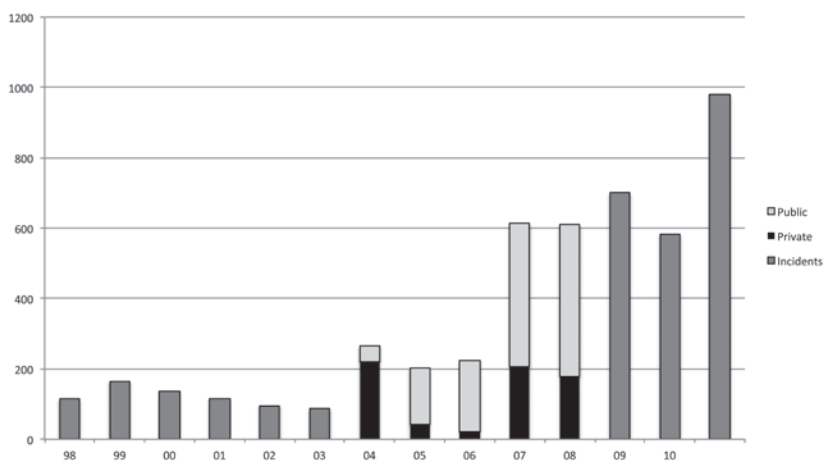
In May 2011, some three months after huge crowds in Cairo’s Tahrir Square had jubilantly celebrated the forced removal of Egypt’s long-serving President Hosni Mubarak, the *Guardian* newspaper’s online series ‘The new Egypt: 100 days on’ carried a guest column by Hossam al-Hamalawy.<sup>1</sup> al-Hamalawy had long been a prolific blogger and tweeter on Egypt’s Arab Spring upheavals, using a wide gamut of social media.<sup>2</sup> Writing in English as well as in Arabic, he was amongst the most prominent of Egypt’s representatives of what Thomas Friedman later came to call the ‘Square People’,<sup>3</sup> characterised as ‘mostly young, aspiring to a higher standard of living and more liberty, seeking either reform or revolution (depending on their existing government), connected to one another either by massing in squares or through virtual squares or both’.

Taken at face value, al-Hamalawy’s ‘To the factories!’ exhortations might easily be dismissed as the trendy musings of a Westernised urban intellectual, disconnected from the realities of everyday life outside Egypt’s e-savvy enclaves of privilege. In fact, though, he had been one of the first to draw explicit attention to the ‘crucial but under-researched’ (Gunning and Baron 2013: 59) role which widespread labour unrest played in the build-up to Mubarak’s downfall. Blogging in its immediate aftermath on his ‘3arabawy’ website, he wrote:

In Tahrir Square you found sons and daughters of the Egyptian elite ... But remember that it's only when the mass strikes started three days ago that's when the regime started crumbling ... Some have been surprised that the workers started striking. I really don't know what to say. The workers have been staging the longest and most sustained strike wave in Egypt's history, triggered by the Mahalla strike in December 2006. It's not the workers' fault that you were not paying attention to their news.<sup>4</sup>

The distinguished labour historian Joel Beinin and others (Abdalla 2012; Achcar 2013; Gunning and Baron 2013; Tripp 2013; Abdelrahman 2014; Gerges 2014; Schenker 2016) have published collated data on the overall scale and nature of labour unrest in Egypt,<sup>5</sup> showing a pattern of successive waves building to the denouement highlighted by al-Hamalawy (Figure 1.1). Beinin had also been assiduous in chronicling many of these labour disputes at the time they were unfolding (2005, 2006, 2007; Beinin and al-Hamalawy 2007a,b). His accounts of the 2006–7 Mahalla strikes vividly describe how workers had become embittered towards their managers, as, for example, when they held aloft placards saying '*Ilhaquna!* (Come to our rescue!) *Il-haramiyya saraquna!* (These thieves have robbed us blind!)' (Beinin 2007).<sup>6</sup> In other instances criticisms were more personalised, as when in 2007 striking textile workers in a factory in Kafr el Dawar publicly excoriated their Chairman with the expletive '*Ali gazma!* (Ali is a shoe i.e. worthless)'.<sup>7</sup> And in 2005 workers at a recently privatised factory in Qalyoub openly complained to the press about their new proprietor and his allies:<sup>8</sup>

We are dealing with a regular mafia here. Do you think we're joking? This man tried to wipe out all our rights. He really showed us the ugly face of privatisation.



**Figure 1.1** Industrial labour actions in Egypt

Yet it was in the preceding year of 2004, on a hot summer afternoon in the Mediterranean city of Port Said, that I had found myself experiencing a radically different kind of labour demonstration, as the employees of the privately owned garment manufacturing company to whose shop floor I had secured participant-observer research access drove around in electorally festooned factory buses, supporting their own proprietor's candidacy in the elections then underway for the Upper House of Egypt's Parliament shouting slogans such as '*Entikhbbo* (vote for) *Qasim Fahmy! Ism Allah 'aleh* (the name of Allah be upon him)! *Hami rayetna* (the protector of our flag)!'. From my seat, jammed in among the giggling, cheering female workers, there was nothing forced about the demonstration. These workers were as enthusiastic in support of their proprietor as the workers of Qalyoub, Kafr el Dawar and Mahalla were in repudiation and condemnation of theirs. As I look back on my time on the shop floor from February to December 2004, inevitably now through the prism of all that has happened in Egypt since then, I am still struck by the totality of the contrast and intrigued by the underlying causes and factors which might explain it.

These go deeper than obvious factors such as the presence or absence of organised trade unions. When Nasser nationalised the most important sectors of the Egyptian economy in the state socialism of the 1950s, the only unions that were legally permitted were a limited number of national, sector-specific unions (including the General Union of Textile Workers), all of which were branches of the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (Posusney 1997; Pratt 1998). From its inception in 1957 the ETUF operated as, in effect, an arm of the security state, controlling its millions of registered workers in state-owned enterprises, and frequently marshalling them in active political support of the Nasser-Sadat-Mubarak regimes. Though strikes were, in theory, permitted, they could only legally take place with the authorisation of a two-thirds majority of ETUF's Board (which consisted of regime appointees) – and in its entire history the ETUF only ever authorised a total of two strikes. The wildcat strikers of the state-owned enterprises and recently privatised firms who galvanised and made up the waves of labour unrest charted above were, as a result, almost invariably as vehement in their denunciations of their ETUF representatives as they were towards their management. And as Figure 1.1 shows, the fact that private sector company employees were legally forbidden (and sometimes beaten up and physically prevented) from forming independent trade unions did not in any way mean that private factories and firms were free from labour unrest. In my own fieldwork site, my time on the shop floor was marked by a seemingly endless series of management–labour arguments, fights and disputes. Yet my co-workers evidently had fostered a social contract with their proprietor that was honoured on terms different from those which the striking workers of Mahalla and other factories had with theirs.

At the time of my fieldwork in 2004, Fashion Express (as I will call the firm, using a pseudonym) was an export-orientated garment manufacturing enterprise, located within Port Said's Export Processing Zone (EPZ) at the northern mouth of the Suez Canal. The EPZ was one of nine such onshore tax havens established by the Egyptian government to enable export-orientated garment and other manufacturing to boost local economies and employment opportunities. The firm was run as a family business by Qasim Fahmy, who was also its local investor, employing a workforce of 450 male and female employees. In seeking to understand the management–labour dynamics in play, I have focused my ethnographic research on ways in which categories of gender, class and religion intersect on a labour-intensive shop floor which, because of the export profile of the firm, provides a nexus where myriad global and local economic forces interact to influence the environment of the workplace.

My research also aims to break new ground in the literature of gender and work in the Middle East by providing an ethnographic account of the public and visible economic activities of women in an institutional workplace within the formal economy. For although issues relating to women and gender have received considerable attention in Middle East studies (Meriwether and Tucker 1999; Keddie 2007; Whitlock 2007), when it comes to women's increasing economic roles it is the informal sector that most studies have emphasised. Even here, with the exception of a handful of ethnographies covering women's economic activity in home-based work and related areas (Rugh 1985; Hoodfar 1997a; el-Kholy 2002; Rugh 1985; Sonbol 2003), most studies have taken as their focus communities where women's educational backgrounds have not qualified them to seek work in the formal economy, causing them to rely primarily on self-help initiatives and informal networks (Early 1993a,b; Singerman and Hoodfar 1996; Bibars 2001; Barsoum 2002; Assad 2003; Ismail 2006; Assad and Barsoum 2009). This study aims to address this lacuna with an ethnography which recognises women as active economic actors within the public workplace. The research thus has dual, intertwined objectives: on the one hand, to provide an ethnography of a hitherto 'hidden' community, and on the other to interrogate the ethnographic data in order to explore issues of gender, class and religion in a context that has not yet been analysed.

In this introductory chapter I 'set the scene' for Fashion Express, the factory that was my research setting, and summarise the main points of focus, inspiration and methodological challenge for my research. In doing so, I first of all describe the distinctive urban environment of Port Said, highlighting the continuities between the present and the past which inform the city's daily life. Next I focus on Fashion Express, describing 'the factory as blueprint', the type of ordered, efficient enterprise which any management would wish to present to prospective international clients within the complex subcontracting chain



that characterises the globalised garment industry (Lim 1990; Cairoli 1999; Rofel 1999; Kabeer 2000; Collins 2003; Hale and Willis 2005; Hewamanne 2008). An immediate dislocation, however, becomes apparent between the 'smoothly humming machine' that the factory is designed to operate as, and the stop-go production cycle it is forced to operate by 'famine and feast' peaks and troughs in the orders actually coming in.

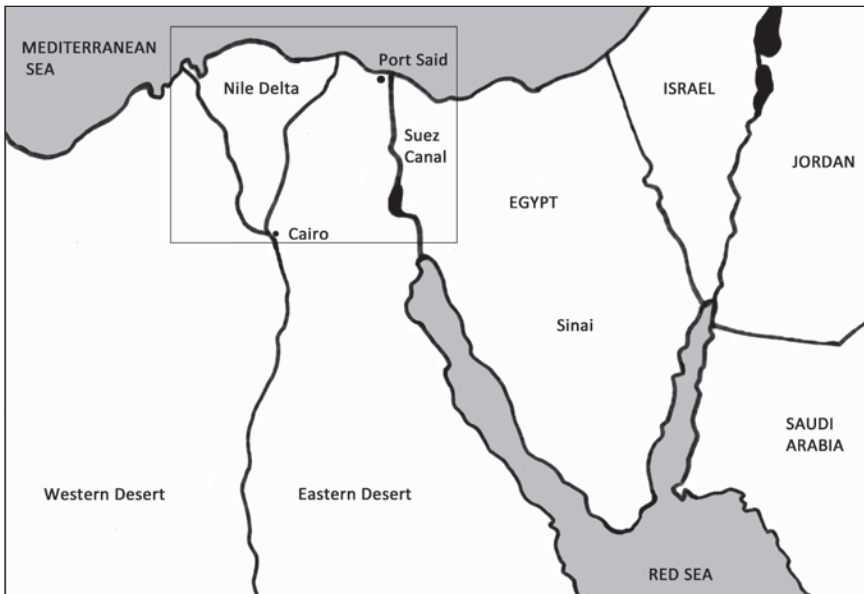
I then describe the workforce which populates the blueprint, deliberately adopting the technocratic, de-humanised perspective of the official 'manpower statistics' which I was given. From there I shift my focus to the human beings behind the raw labour statistics, who were my colleagues, my informants and my guides during my time on the shop floor. It is the lived experience of their daily lives which provides, in Lévi-Strauss' ringing formulation, 'a means of assigning to human facts their true dimensions' (Lévi-Strauss 1967: 52). A sharp contrast emerges between the anonymous, dehumanised, smoothly efficient perspective of the factory as blueprint, and the chaotic, raucous social experience of the human beings who populate it.

This contrast provides the basis for identifying the research questions which guided this study, and which I set out in the following section. I move on to reflect on some of the theoretical insights and understandings from other scholars that inspired and challenged me as I fought to make sense of the welter of impressions and insights in which I was submerged, and highlight the principal methodological challenges and ethical issues that I found myself facing. Finally, I end this introductory chapter by setting out the sequence of the chapters that follow.

### **Port Said – the nation's 'Dual Frontier'**

Port Said (Map 1.1) is one of Egypt's more modern cities, built on previously empty desert in the 1860s (Modelski 2000; Karabell 2003) at the time of the construction of the new canal named after the port city of Suez, located at its opposite end (Map 1.2). Egypt is a land whose centres of human habitation typically trace their origins hundreds – sometimes thousands – of years into the historical past: Suez, for example, traces its history as a city back at least to the 8th century AD (CE). By contrast, Port Said has always been one of Egypt's most enduring icons of modernisation, industrialisation and internationalisation – the nation's 'Dual Frontier', both spatially to the outside world and temporally to a modern, globally engaged and prosperous future.

From the city's foundation through to the overthrow of the monarchy by Gamal Abdel Nasser's Free Officers Revolution of 1952, Port Said maintained a reputation (global as well as domestic) for its commercial elan and European elegance – along with a parallel notoriety for its somewhat



**Map 1.1** Port Said and the Suez Canal

raffish docklands lifestyle. Urban planning and development was deliberately modern, on a rigorously rectangular grid of roads and boulevards. Along the northern corner of the west bank of the Canal stretched the Quartier des Affaires (what we would now call the Central Business District), with its bustling shops, offices, diplomatic representations, cafes, restaurants and hotels (see Illustration 1.1). These shared an architectural template distinctive to the city, and in particular very different from the multi-storey Parisian-style buildings of *belle époque* Cairo (Myntti 2015). The Port Said style was low-rise, and marked by the elegant wooden, often intricately carved, balconies and frontages to be seen adorning the different buildings (Illustration 1.2).

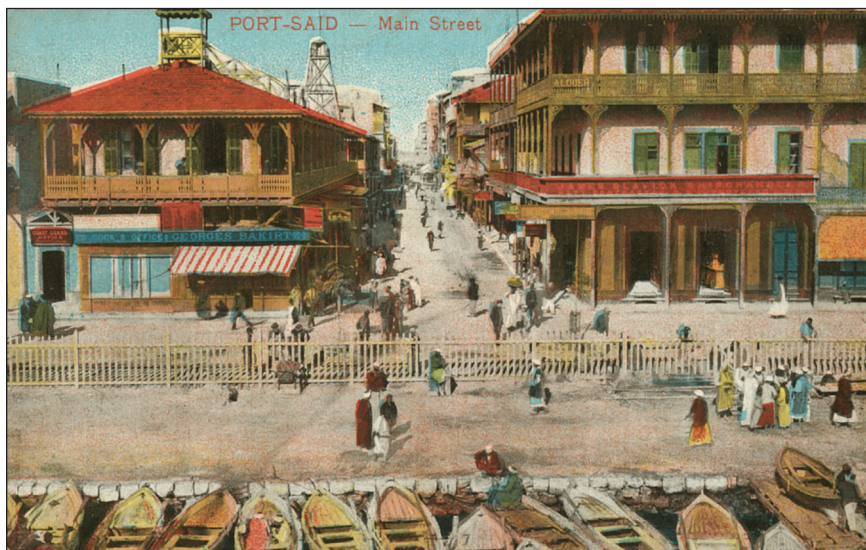
A few blocks inland was the Quartier Residentielle, its elegant villas and apartment blocks maintaining the Port Said aesthetic along tree-lined boulevards and garden squares (Illustration 1.3). Further west was the designated 'Village Arabe', which, though visibly less affluent than the modern European city, nevertheless maintained organisational and aesthetic continuity with it (Illustration 1.4).

Even during the austere years of Nasserist state socialism, the passage of foreign ships, goods and people through the newly nationalised canal (underpinned by the continuing vigour of local traditions of smuggling, contraband commercialism and other forms of shady or illegal business activity) enabled Port Said to sustain its reputation as Egypt's point of



**Map 1.2** Antique map of the Suez Canal (1897)





**Illustration 1.1** Early Port Said – Quartier des Affaires (1910s Postcard)



**Illustration 1.2** Early Port Said – Rue du Commerce



**Illustration 1.3** Early Port Said – Quartier Residentielle



**Illustration 1.4** Early Port Said – Quartier Arabe



engagement with the excitement, glamour, temptation and consumer choice with which the outside world continued to beguile the nascent Republic. The abortive 1956 British-French invasion brought into focus the port-city's strategic military significance, adding to its self-consciously modernist self-image a strong sense of pride in its reputation for fiercely defending the motherland against British, French and later Israeli forces (Farnie 1969; Hamrush 1970; Najm 1987; Hewedy 1989; Kyle 1991; El-Kilsh 1997; Turner 2006).

Following Egypt's defeat in the 1967 Six Day War, the bustling port fell on hard times. The opposing armies facing each other across the Canal converted it into what Moshe Dayan is reputed to have called 'one of the best anti-tank ditches in the world', with the Egyptians blockading all traffic, and the Israelis building a twenty metre high fortified wall of sand along the length of its Eastern bank. At the same time the Egyptian government forcibly evacuated all civilian residents from the city, dispersing them across urban and rural centres throughout the country in what locals still refer to as their years of *hijra* (deliberately borrowing the term in Islamic history for the Prophet Mohamed's temporary retreat from Mecca to regroup in the city of Medina).

In 1975, riding high on Egypt's military breakthrough in the 1973 Yom Kippur War and the cessation of hostilities with Israel, the newly consecrated *Batal il-Ubur* (Hero of the Crossing i.e. of the Canal, by Egyptian forces) President Anwar Sadat led the reversal of decades of Nasserite state-socialism by declaring his new economic *infitah* (opening) policy to reinvigorate and develop international trade and commerce, and so end decades of socialist austerity, war and economic difficulties. A key measure was the re-opening of the Canal to international traffic in 1975. A year later, as part of his ambitious plans for economic regeneration of the war-blighted *mudun il-qanal* (cities of the Canal – namely Port Said at the north, Suez at the south, and Isma'iliyya in the middle) a Free Trade Zone was established in Port Said to encourage international trade and commerce. These steps were offered in the spirit of a reward (and compensation) for the sacrifices of the citizens of Port Said, and to provide an economic incentive for locals to return to their homes in the city.

In the laissez-aller spirit of *infitah*, the re-opening of the city was quickly recognised as one of the fastest routes to making money from the peace bonanza with Israel, triggering an influx of 'carpetbaggers' with no previous connections with Port Said. As one local official responsible for resettling the city's residents said to me, when I asked him – thirty years later – about those heady, chaotic days:

Securing residency in this town was a once in a lifetime opportunity to hit the jackpot. Many individuals without the remotest links to Port Said rushed to

declare themselves its lost descendants, even as they exploited this town. No criteria existed to say who was allowed in or left out. The entire experiment was about survival, personal politics, rivalry, credibility and money. The newcomers remained suspect, despite the fortunes made. Let's put it another way – although everyone was fashioning a living and doing well, we lost the hospitable social infrastructure of the past.

The duty-free imported goods that suddenly flooded the city's shops and street bazaars were immediately seen to be cementing Port Said's reputation as the spearhead for making Egypt a more 'open' country, one that had finally turned to the world and the future. A huge number of small-scale family shops sprang up, which flourished by tapping the enormous pent-up appetite for all kinds of consumer goods, luxuries, cars and the unexpected opportunities that such consumerism reinvigorated. In a short space of time, the new-look Port Said, complete with Customs barriers on all roads leading into it from the rest of the country, captured the hearts, minds and imaginations of most Egyptians as a *madinet il-tuggar* (town of petty shopkeepers) and 'Egypt's first supermarket' (Heikal 1986).

The new duty-free entrepot was quick to embrace the fashion sector in particular, a development which was well in keeping with the reputation that Port Said had previously developed as the only region in Egypt to trade in second-hand clothes. As one local said to me, recalling what for her were 'the good old days':

I can't think of a time when second-hand clothes weren't all the rage. The trade was born from ships passing through the Canal. The harbour is part of life in this town, and as locals we always knew which ship was disembarking where. The sealed containers of clothes were known as *palletta*. Traders were charged by weight, and the cash had to be paid on the spot, without any detailed information about what was inside. It was the luck of the draw as to which items were excavated as the contents of each *palletta* were sifted and separated, and in no time at all the flea markets would be awash with everything from leather jackets to trendy jeans. And once the clothes started to come with specific brand labels the flea markets prospered even more – nobody guessed which market you got your Levis from, or how much you'd forked out for them! Every family here had a member involved in the recycling business. This is the sector credited with giving us Port Saidians our first experience of imported goods, and what you might call *il-mazhar* (a dress sense). Through these widening horizons, we locals became more discerning.

The city, however, experienced a major setback with the abrupt cancellation in 2002 of its duty-free status, reputedly at the personal order of Sadat's successor, President Mubarak, as the latest – and harshest – of a stream of

economic ‘punishments’ inflicted on Port Said in reprisal for an assassination attempt on him during an official visit in 1999. Port Saidians, however, dismiss this account as an excuse, concocted either to mitigate the brutal manner in which state security agents shot dead a local resident with a history of mental instability, who wandered too close to the Presidential motorcade or – at an even darker level of conspiracy – to eliminate competition for a potentially lucrative project which Mubarak’s son Gamal and his business associates were promoting to construct a new harbour on the Canal’s eastern bank. The Presidential decision dealt a devastating blow to the livelihoods of the many locals who, in the two decades since their return from evacuation, had come to regard gaining income from trade (both informal and formal, legal as well as dubious) as their right, and for whom the prospects that took off in the 1980s could not have been bettered.

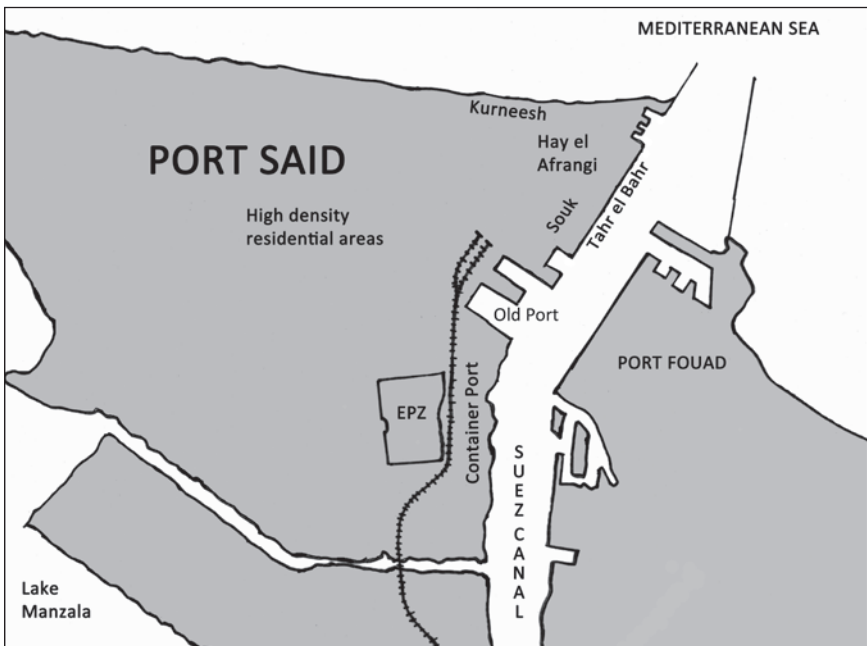
With the city’s duty-free commercial lifeblood choked off, local businessmen had little option but to turn their focus from trade and retail to manufacturing, focusing on the investment incentives available in the new Export Processing Zone (EPZ) recently established within the walls of what had been a cargo storage area adjacent to the port. *Malabis gahza* (ready-made clothes) was only one of a range of sectors officially approved for investment breaks within the Port Said EPZ;<sup>9</sup> yet virtually all newly invested factories turned to garment assembly work. The rapid development of the Zone into ‘one big tailoring shop’ (*mahal khiyata kebir*), as one of the the locals called it, provided further compelling testimony to the centrality of fashion and clothing in Port Said’s history. As my informant about the *palletta* trade went on to put it:

The *istithmar* (EPZ) was for us just the latest face of the world for these transactions: garments, fashion and the West turning up at our doorstep.

At the time of my 2004 fieldwork, in the late Mubarak neoliberalist heyday, the city was suffering something of a loss of its commercial vim and vigour, beset by a loss of international investment to competitor supply chain countries (notably in East Asia) and the general sense of stagnation besetting the domestic economy. Attempts to promote tourism were yielding at best partial success, with international cruise liners pausing only to decant their passengers directly into special buses for day excursions to Cairo and the Pyramids, and domestic tourists favouring the more well-established and upmarket seaside resorts along the Mediterranean coast to Alexandria and further west.

Yet under the somewhat desultory atmosphere, the city’s distinctive heritage continued to be very visible in everyday contemporary life – as, indeed, it still does. North of the three original port basins – as clearly recognisable today as they were in early maps of the city (see inset in Map





**Map 1.3** Port Said Today

1.2) – stretches the district now known as Tahr il-Bahr (First Fruitbuds of the Sea), its upmarket boutiques, shops and cafes (see Illustration 1.5) retaining many of the original architectural features of the original Commercial District's business/recreational facilities (see Illustration 1.2). A few streets inland, their fading elegance rapidly gives way to the downmarket hustle and bustle of the local *souk* (market/shopping/social area – see Illustration 1.6), with its profusion of household stores, eateries and garment emporiums so characteristic of the busy *madinet il-tuggar*.

Further inland on the site of the old Quartier Residentielle, but now extending north to the expensive hotels and restaurants along the Kurneesh (Corniche), is the upmarket residential area now known as Hay el Afrangi (Foreign Quarter), many of its elegant apartment blocks continuing, more or less, to hold their own against a clutter of illegal rooftop extensions and commercial add-ons (see Illustration 1.7), as well as the constant threat of demolition for redevelopment.<sup>10</sup> Just as in the old postcards, the contrast continues to be vivid with the city's lower-income housing areas (see Illustration 1.8), which stretch out westwards from the site of the old Village Arabe. The inhabitants of this high-density housing make their feelings clear in their slang designation of the posher residential quarter as Hay il-Bodra (Cocaine Quarter).



**Illustration 1.5** Port Said Today – Tarh el Bahr (Commercial District) (Photo: Jamie Furlong)



**Illustration 1.6** Port Said Today – the *souk* (market)

"MADE IN EGYPT: Gendered Identity and Aspiration on the Globalised Shop Floor" by Leila Zaki Chakravarti. <https://berghahnbooks.com/title/ChakravartiMade>



**Illustration 1.7** Port Said Today – Hay el Afrangi (the ‘Foreign Quarter’) (Photo: The Egyptian at the English language Wikipedia)



**Illustration 1.8** Port Said Today – lower-income housing (Photo: Jamie Furlong)

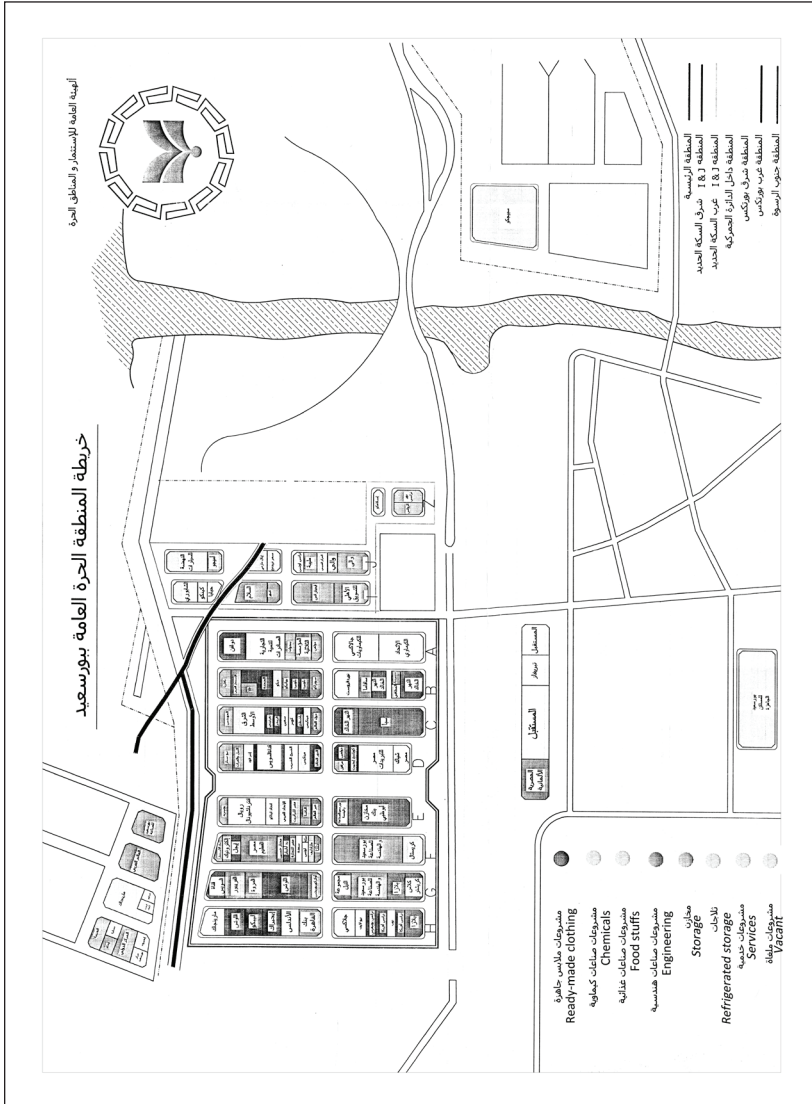


Immediately to the west of the railway line serving the new container port, and running though to the city's railway station, is the prominently visible rectangular grid of the Export Processing Zone – and it is onto this that I now zoom for a closer look at the location of the factory which was my workplace for fifteen transformative months of my life.

### **Space and order: the factory as blueprint – and as lived experience**

The Port Said Export Processing Zone was one of the first to be established by the Egyptian government under its newly passed Investment Law 8 of 1997, aimed at attracting both local and international private sector investors to reinvigorate the country's struggling manufacturing sector, and so counterbalance the economy's overwhelming reliance on tourism, Canal revenues from international shipping, and remittances from the large numbers of expatriate Egyptians working in the Gulf and other parts of the Middle East. Incentives included providing subsidies for the cost of feasibility and related studies, facilitating loans from banks at favourable rates, granting rebates on the duties paid on imported equipment, and setting up tax relief windows for extended periods of time (Hinnebusch 1990; Hill 2003). In 2005 the site was described glowingly on an official government website ([www.bmentp.gov.eg](http://www.bmentp.gov.eg)) as 'the hub of trade between Middle East, Europe and Far East'.

The official plan of the EPZ (see Figure 1.2) shows its origins as a walled compound that had previously been a storage zone for the adjacent container docking area, with its factories laid out in a neat and orderly grid. The plan graphically captures the impression the enterprise seeks to make on potential international clients, presenting itself as an oasis of ordered, modern efficiency – with raw materials flowing in and finished garments flowing out, virtually without setting foot in the hustle, bustle and hassle of 'real Egypt', and its tenants overflowing into adjacent compounds as testament to its bustling popularity as an investment choice. Needless to say, the official presentation masks inconvenient realities which get in the way of the desired impression, e.g. the fact that, at the time of my fieldwork, only seventeen of the more than one hundred units shown were actually operating as working factories – all the others were either used as warehouses for cloth and other raw materials, or were completely shuttered and locked. Over thirty units are highlighted in the plan as *Malabis Gabza* (ready-made clothes, i.e. garment) factories, the sector which is awarded top place in the key at the bottom left of the plan: the others are for chemicals, foods or engineering industries, and for ancillary services such as refrigeration and storage.<sup>11</sup>

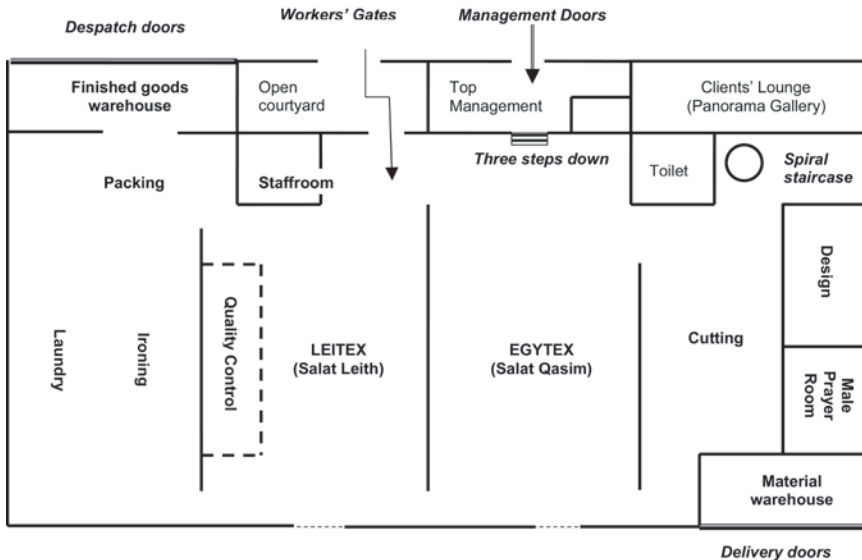


One of the roofs that make up the grid is that of Fashion Express. The factory offers clients the facility for ‘Cut and Make’ (C&M) garment assembly.<sup>12</sup> The C&M client provides the design specifications, the material and accessories – along with a specimen of the finished garment. Production works through the set stages of cutting, assembly, quality control, laundry, ironing and packing so that the finished goods can be despatched in compliance with strict completion deadlines. The ground-floor plan of the factory provided in Figure 1.3 shows how its physical layout is structured around the production process and its stages, which in effect runs from bottom-right to top-left of the diagram, in the sequence described below.

### *The Production Process*

#### Cutting

The process begins when the large corrugated iron doors tucked away at the rear of the building are unlocked and pulled back for trucks to unload rolls of cloth into the warehouse attached to the Cutting Unit. Six male workers known as *faraddin* (rollers) load the cloth onto rollers, then work in pairs to run these up and down the length of the twenty-metre cutting tables, spreading the fabric until the number of layers specified by the Planning Department has been achieved. Preparations are complete when the unit supervisor unrolls over the top layer a large paper pattern, which the Design



**Figure 1.3** Schematic plan of the factory (ground floor)

Department has printed out from a computer disk provided by the client, and ensures that it is stapled securely to the material. At each table skilled workers then wield industrial cutters, hanging from electric cables in the ceiling, to slice through the layers of material according to the pattern marked. It requires skill, strength and concentration to guide the heavy, vibrating implements round the contours of each component, as if using a fretsaw to cut wood.



**Illustration 1.9** Cutting

Two supervisors inspect the cut components for defects, before they are moved to a nearby *targim* (marking) table where three female workers swing into action. Marking is a standing job that requires a rapid wrist movement to flick through the layers of materials with one hand (rather like a bank teller counting notes), while with the other using a marking pistol to attach a sticker printed with a unique serial number to each item in the pile. The number identifies both the component and the layer of material from which it has been cut. This ensures that each assembled garment will be made up of components cut from the same layer of cloth, so that any variations in dyeing are matched (something of particular importance for finished denim garments). The marked items are tied into bundles using long strips of leftover

material from the cutting tables, recorded in the supervisor's notebook, and moved to metal stands ready for transfer to the assembly lines.

### Assembly

The two Assembly Halls (*salat* in Arabic, deliberately differentiated from the standard *qism* used for all other units or departments) form the heart of the entire operation. The one nearest Cutting is the more recent, originally sectioned off from the main *sala* to fulfil contracts under a commercial partnership (long since defunct) with another firm from elsewhere in the Middle East. A sign hanging in the centre of the hall that announces its name as Salet Qasim (i.e. Qasim Hall, after the proprietor) – although in the daily language of the shop floor it is known simply as Egytex, after the name of the vanished partner firm. The remaining area of the main hall takes pride in being the original shop floor from the time when the factory was bought by the current proprietor in 1996. Its sign declares its name to be Salet Leith (after the owner's son), yet it is universally known as Leitex (the original name of the factory). Leitex houses three assembly lines, Egytex a single line.

The process in Assembly is organised according to two principles: *tahdir* (preparation), and *tagmi'* (assembling), along with in-line quality control inspection. *Tahdir* is stationed towards one end of the hall, where a group of industrial sewing machines are clustered together, demarcated visually as well as spatially from the long, vertical rows of *tagmi'* machines in the hall. *Tahdir* is engaged in stitching and piecing together small components, such as pockets and loops, which will be stitched into the complete garment further down the *tagmi'* lines. Each machine on a *tagmi'* line is engaged in a single *marhala* (sewing task), after which the garment is folded and passed to the next machine. Depending on the design, a garment can easily pass through thirty separate stages of being unfolded, worked and folded again before *tagmi'* is complete. Monitors at in-line quality control stations (*gawdit khutut*) closely scrutinise each partially assembled garment at regular stages, using both qualitative and quantitative measures (such as visually assessing whether a seam looks puckered, or using a tape measure to check the width of a belt loop). Finished garments finally pile up in *gawda niha'i* (final quality control), whose metal tables are located to one side of Leitex. Pre-final checks include *tashtib* (focusing on removing, with small scissors, threads hanging loose from seams) and *tagwid* (removing finer threads protruding from the stitching itself). A final quality control known as *murag'a* gives each finished garment a holistic inspection, checking that it is accurately put together as well as aesthetically pleasing, before it is finally recorded in the QC (quality control) supervisor's notebook.



### Laundry and ironing

*Maghsala* (laundry) occupies the far corner of the factory, its rows of industrial-sized washing and drying machines lined up against an external wall. There is also a special machine for distressing denim and making it look fashionably well worn. Closer to Leitex is *makwa* (ironing) with rows of tables equipped with electric steam pressers. Garments are unfolded, pressed, steamed and folded in a uniform manner, before they are piled up for collection.

### Packing

*Tābi'a* (packaging) is the final stage of the process. It involves fitting the garments with all the accessories that prepare them for final retail, including brand-name/size tags, shop barcodes, and prices in the foreign currency of the market for which they are destined. On a large table the finished garments are folded, wrapped in polythene (on hangers if appropriate), and then meticulously packed into cartons, which are then sealed with a record of the number contained inside. The sealed cartons are piled up neatly, awaiting final tally by the contractor, before they are loaded into the *hawiyya* (containers) of trucks ready to export them from the Zone to ships waiting at the nearby waterside.

### Conception and execution: Edara and Entag

In a seminal work which continues to inform critical labour studies (e.g. Baran and Teegarden 1987), Harry Braverman famously analysed the structural separation between conception and execution in an industrial set-up, and the way in which this is arranged so as to be perceived as both 'logical' and 'natural' in a large-scale factory enterprise and workplace:

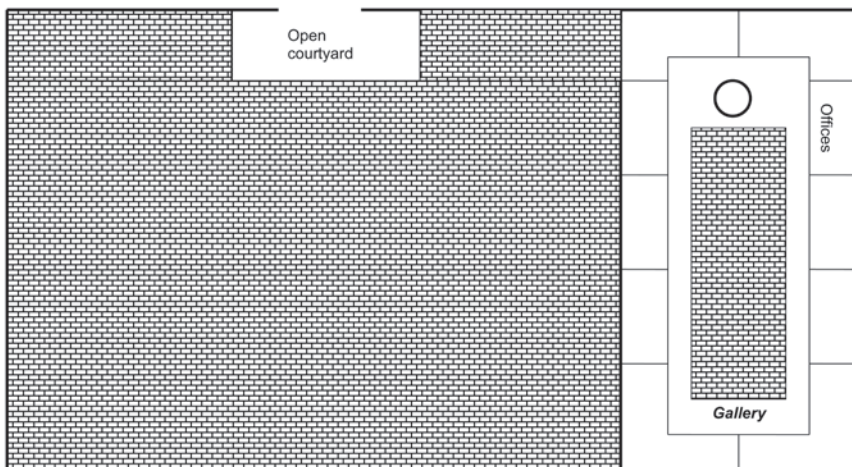
Both in order to ensure management control and to cheapen the worker, conception and execution must be rendered separate spheres of work, and for this purpose the study of work processes must be reserved to management and kept from the workers, to whom its results are communicated only in the form of simplified job tasks governed by simplified instructions which it is thenceforth their duty to follow unthinkingly and without comprehension of the underlying technical reasoning or data. (1974: 118)

This separation operates in Fashion Express, much as in other factories in the Zone. The whole of the productive labour landscape described up until now is collectively referred to as *entag* (production). Responsibility for recruiting the workforce, planning production, monitoring progress and processing the paperwork associated with export is the separate prerogative of

*edara* (administration). The fact that *edara* is entirely invisible within Figure 1.3 (the ground floor plan) is no coincidence. In a vivid demonstration of Braverman's principle of separation, *edara* have their own separate suite of offices – complete with segregated prayer and toilet facilities – located on a mezzanine floor specially constructed for them above the Cutting Department and reached by a single, spiral staircase (as shown in Figure 1.4).

Managerial space is divided into half-walled compartments, separated by large glass panels that allow visual access to all offices and individuals within the 'gallery', as the middle managers of *edara* uniformly refer to their segregated area. Four main departments dominate the gallery, lending weight and authority to the *takhassusat* (specialisations) of managerial work: Planning, Production Studies, Workers' Affairs, and Commercial Affairs. The remaining cubicles stand empty and disused, reminders of the days when, with production booming, there was a need for greater numbers of managerial staff.

Top management's initiation document for any new order, as transmitted to *edara*, specifies the nature of the items to be produced, the production volume required for each, and – most importantly for *shubna* (export orders) – the deadline for completion of the contract. Armed with this mandate, the Planning Department steps in by applying its expertise to draw up a detailed plan that lays out with clarity the separation of individual stages of *entag* (production), allocating the time each will take according to self-declared scientific methods such as stopwatch measurements of how long a worker takes to complete a section of a garment. Planning's computer files store figures and charts, used to generate averages and norms which support its



**Figure 1.4** Schematic plan of the factory (mezzanine gallery)

planning assumptions for how rapidly *entag* can complete an order. Teams of *mutab'in* (monitors) from Planning visit the shop floor every hour to help build a profile of *entag*'s progress in completing each order according to plan.

Planning's expertise is deployed and demonstrated on paper. Production Studies however relies on visual inspection of the *mudilat* (models, i.e. specimen samples) despatched with each new order. All these are carefully scrutinised, favouring *il-mudilat il-sahala* (easy patterns) that characterise orders of *kaswil* (casual, i.e. leisure wear). A knowledge of the realities of earlier production orders gives the exercise a practical edge, with each new order evaluated against other similar orders that have already gone through the production circuit. It is for this reason that when bottlenecks in production disrupt Planning's smooth timelines, it is Production Studies who are called upon to come up with adjustments to the *tazbitat il-shughl* (work arrangements).

Workers' Affairs is responsible for the recruitment of new workers, for monitoring the attendance and performance of existing workers, for keeping records of all fines and penalties issued by supervisors and, in the last resort, for processing the departure of workers who leave the firm.

Commercial Affairs concerns itself with the paperwork associated with completed orders, notably those destined for export – the scale and complexity of which have long made Egypt's customs authorities famous all over the world.

### Top management

Top management's role at the apex of the firm, overseeing the structural divide between conception and execution, is explicitly reflected in its physical separation from both *edara* and *entag*. As shown in Figure 1.3, top management's dedicated entrance at the front of the factory leads directly into a lounge where a leather sofa and several armchairs reflect the hierarchical pre-eminence of the space. Office doors lead to the rooms of the Chairman (as the proprietor is officially known) and the General Manager, while a secretarial space guards access to them. A separate small kitchen is used to prepare refreshments for top management and their visitors. At the far end of the top management lounge, a set of opaque glass doors, carefully watched over by the security guard stationed at the main entrance, opens onto a short flight of three stairs leading down to the *entag* halls. The effect is to ensure that top management is both separate from, and yet in some sense 'close to' the workers, most especially by contrast with the more distant, elevated offices of *edara*.

*The machine in operation – famine and feast*

These details found in the 'blueprint' view of the factory are geared to presenting the image of a well-oiled, gently humming machine, effortlessly converting computerised designs and bales of limp fabric into meticulously finished garments, neatly labelled and packed, ready for export on the next stage of their journey along the international supply chains of the globalised garment industry. In this view, even as the loading bays at the front end of the factory are being emptied of their piles of cartons of completed garments for one order, new rolls of fabric for the next order are being unrolled in the materials warehouse at the opposite corner, so that the relentless cycle of production spins smoothly and efficiently, to the mutual satisfaction of client and contractor alike.

Realities on the ground, however, are somewhat different. To begin with, the relationship between client and contractor is far from one of equal bargaining power. In the globalised garment industry, assembly plants are placed in a dependent position as suppliers of labour to foreign clients, who are themselves linked to foreign markets in a complex subcontracting chain (Lim 1991; Cairoli 1999; Kabeer 2000; Collins 2003). As well as inequality in such vertical relationships, assembly plants are also forced into competition with other firms in their geographical location (Hale and Wills 2005). Firms that are more successful in securing clients have to produce finished garments to demanding contractual deadlines – which means that they, in turn, often need to subcontract part of their work to other firms in their localities, resulting in horizontal relationships that are equally divisive. And since clients have both the discretion and the power to move orders around the globe from one location to another, as well as from one assembly plant to another within the same location, assembly firms can experience rapid changes in fortune – from being recipients of export orders from clients, and prime suppliers of subcontracting orders to others, to finding themselves at the receiving end of the hierarchy.

I was told that, in the not so distant past, Fashion Express had regularly undertaken work directly for international clients, who had provided a steady set of orders for each new season. At the time I undertook my research this was, however, no longer the case, as it was common knowledge that the factory no longer had any *'umala* (clients) with which to liaise directly. Instead, the current orders were labelled as *shughl min il-batin* (under the counter work), i.e. subcontracting orders from other local firms such as Lafayette, Transnational and Top Fashion, who having secured orders that exceeded their production capabilities were unable to meet their pressing deadlines (and so sustain their reputation within the global supply chain) without subcontracting some of the work to other firms. Securing subcontracts of

this type for Fashion Express depended heavily on the proprietor's social and professional networks with other local investors in and outside the Zone, and his skill in mobilising these networks to extract orders. It was also common knowledge in the Zone that the proprietor's current economic difficulties meant that his factory was obliged to operate on an almost ad hoc basis, abandoning long-term planning in favour of taking whatever orders it could grab, often for short durations of time.

The result was an uneven and unpredictable production cycle, oscillating between weeks when assembly lines would fall silent, drained of orders, followed by sudden bursts of work to complete orders for limited quantities of garments within short timescales. The common seasonal slumps to hit the garment assembling plants at specific points in the year also accentuated this particular dimension. It formed a 'famine and feast' pattern of production, contrasting dramatically with the ideal presentation of the smooth-running, uninterrupted functioning of the 'factory as blueprint' – a pattern which, I came to discover, was a major determinant of many of the work practices on the shop floor.

### *Populating the blueprint – the factory's workforce*

Blueprints contain no symbols for the human beings who operate the processes they represent. Yet any visitor to Fashion Express passing through the smoked glass doors at the far end of the top management suite would be overwhelmed, as I was, by the scale and intensity of human activity and interaction taking place in the factory space that is revealed, and the din generated, by humans as much as by machines, on the shop floor. The workforce is mixed male and female. This mixing of genders runs contrary to sociocultural proscriptions and, even in itself, is a relatively recent phenomenon in Egypt's industrial workplaces.

When it comes to divisions between male and female labour, the rigid public gender boundaries that operate in Islamic cultures and societies have been widely recorded and analysed (Minai 1981; Macleod 1991; Poya 1999; Hijab 2001; Sonbol 2003; Keddie 2007). Although Egypt's initial wave of Nasserist state industrialisation gave prominence to employment for women, it respected wider religious, social and cultural gender boundaries by arranging for certain industrial sectors to be understood as suitable for – and restricted to – female employment (Nassar 2003). Garment manufacturing was one such industry, in contrast to the spinning and textile-weaving industry, where the workforce remained wholly male. The same feminised view of the garment industry carried through into the early stages of Sadat's *infitah* programme of economic liberalisation, where garment manufacturing for export was one of the industries prioritised for private sector development.

The history of the company where I did my fieldwork was no exception. Some of the long-serving workers, who had been with the firm since its inception in 1982 and had stayed with it as it relocated three times<sup>13</sup> before settling in its present location in Port Said's Export Processing Zone, had vivid memories of the times when virtually the factory's entire labour-force was female. Apart from the ironing unit and the small maintenance crew who carried heavy equipment around, only supervisory and management roles were open to men. By the time I came to work in the factory the position had changed dramatically, with men now accounting for 60 per cent of the workforce<sup>14</sup> (though, perhaps contrary to stereotypical expectations of factory labour, the firm honoured the public-sector principle of 'equal pay for equal work' – in terms of wages, bonuses and incentives – for workers of both sexes). The workforce was overwhelmingly young, with nearly three-quarters of all workers under thirty (and only two employees over sixty – both of whom were long-serving men working in the laundry unit). It was also well educated, with only a quarter of employees having failed to complete high school (and over 10 per cent having graduated from university). There were more young men with post-intermediate or university level qualifications than there were young women. This profile confirms recent studies carried out on gender, employment and the gendered nature of the segmented and changing labour market in Egypt (Assad 2003; Nassar 2003). The relatively recent integration of educated male labour in previously all-female sectors is related to unemployment rates and the changing expectations of male graduates, who are willing to enter the private sector whilst pursuing the coveted *wazifa* (civil service) appointment-for-life. By contrast, the obstacles young educated women encounter in obtaining private-sector jobs relate to balancing their economic need to earn wages with what is still perceived as their primary socio-religious responsibility of starting a family, compelling them to confine their employment expectations to 'traditionally' marked areas of work (Assad and Barsoum 2009).

Even such a statement immediately takes us beyond neat and tidy 'workforce statistics', and into the lived reality of the human beings who populate and animate the blueprint. Workers are not simply cogs in the production blueprint, or points on a statistical graph. They have their own perspectives on the operations of the factory, their own experiences of their daily sojourn within its walls. It is these human beings who are the focus of my ethnography, and it is to their daily experiences that I now turn for the remainder of this study.



*The factory as lived experience*

The day starts well before dawn for the many Fashion Express workers who live outside Port Said, in the villages and towns of surrounding provinces. They need to have left their homes in the dark so as to be waiting at their designated pick-up points for the factory bus that will take them to work. A favourite shop floor joke tells how the buses are programmed to arrive punctually all the time, saving their equally 'programmed' breakdowns for the return journey home. Male workers sit at the front of the bus, female workers at the rear – with the middle benches occupied by shop floor *mushrifat* (female supervisors), ever vigilant in ensuring that none of the boys are tempted to turn round and chat up the girls. Friends typically sit next to each other in informally allotted places, catching up on the factory gossip about co-workers' romances, engagements and wedding parties.

As the buses arrive in Port Said after journeys of up to a couple of hours, the city streets are still quiet. But the main gate of the *istithmar* (EPZ) is a honking melee of buses bringing workers from other provinces and for other factories, their exhaust fumes choking the taxis and private cars which have brought management staff and local workers from their homes within the city. Since buses are not allowed into the Zone, workers have to walk through its narrow alleys to the factory, where Security ticks their names in a large, bound register confirming their arrival before the all-important 8 A.M. deadline (late-comers will have their wages docked). As they arrive, the factory's cleaners will still be sweeping up the previous day's debris from the shop floor: sweet papers, chewing gum packets, pieces of thread and blunt sewing needles. Lockers are provided for workers to store their personal belongings, along with separate prayer rooms for men and women to use before taking up their work stations in time for the loud electric bell that rings punctually at 8.30 A.M. to mark the start of morning production.

The early moments provide an opportunity for workers to prepare their stations, while at the same time organising lunch orders for one of their colleagues (typically the youngest male worker) to go out and buy from the food stalls outside the factory gates. Close notice is taken of the outfits everybody has come to work in for the day. Single young men are frequently turned out in designer T-shirts tucked into tight, pre-faded jeans, set off by thick leather belts with studs and dangling silver key-rings, mobile phones, and the latest gelled hairstyles modelled after the best known pop star faces of *aghani shababiyya* (songs of youth), as featured in video clips on TV. Women, by unspoken convention (the factory has no formal dress code), wear a variety of different styles of *hijab* (veil), ranging from the brightly patterned nylon headscarves worn by young, single girls to the austere *niqab*

(covering the whole body, including the face) worn by some of the more self-consciously religious women.

Shop floor workers are required to remain at their stations and not walk about. Even visits to the toilet can only be made by first getting hold of one of the two plastic-covered *tasarih* (permits) that circulate around the shop floor. Supervisors (both male and female), by contrast, fulfil their roles by incessantly moving about in what shop floor argot calls *yi-wir* (literally ‘going round in circles’). As the noise levels from working machines steadily rise, the supervisors move about waving their arms and shouting dramatically – at their workers, and at each other. They pounce on anyone who seems to be slacking, push garments from one station to the next, and count and note on sheets the *entag* (production) quotas churned out on an hourly basis. Every hour monitors from *edara* (middle management) are on the shop floor to collect these statistics, to feed them into their computers upstairs. In the frenzy of meeting quotas, it is easy for order to collapse, as workers along the rows of assembly lines take matters into their own hands, shouting at each other above the deafening clatter of the industrial sewing machines and the penetrating voices of supervisors continuously yelling criticism. Undisciplined scenes can easily evolve, with workers calling, whistling and throwing garments at each other, the din pierced by their mobile phones ringing with the latest *raqs sharqi* (belly dancing) ring-tones. Sometimes calm can only be restored by one of the supervisors switching on the factory’s PA system and playing a cassette recording of the Koran.

Eventually the electric bell rings again, signalling the noon start of *il-rest*, the half hour lunch-break which divides the working day. The factory lights dim, and all workers are required to leave the shop floor under the watchful eye of Security. As most of the Zone’s factories share a common lunch-hour, the rest area outside the factory’s gates becomes a lunchtime promenade for the *istithmar*, allowing workers to review the passing fashion parade of ensembles, veils, footwear and accessories, and catch up on news of former colleagues who, as happens from time to time, have decamped to other employers in the Zone.

Within a few minutes of the bell ringing to signal the end of break, all are back at their stations and work rapidly resumes its earlier hectic pace. However, there always seems to be time for discussion of the latest catalogues of consumer goods to be circulated around the shop floor (offering anything from cosmetics to ready-made desserts to lingerie), or to consult *masader* (sources, informants) about the latest rumours of new orders that Qasim Bey might have managed to secure to keep the firm viable. Animated work-station chit chat however falls silent as soon as anyone suspected of being a *gusus* (spy) for *edara* or *amn* (Security) – say one of the boys who push around trolleys transferring garments from one stage of production



to another – hoves into view. At times of deadline-driven pressure, the PA microphone can be heard to click on again late in the afternoon, as the voice of *edara* announces the names of workers required for *sahra* (staying on late for compulsory overtime). As the Arabic word is also a pun for ‘a fun evening out’, it provokes risqué banter between the men and women on the nominated list.

The long, hot afternoon’s work continues until at last, promptly at 4.30 p.m., the bell rings again down the length of shop floor to mark the end of the working day. Female workers retrieve their handbags from their lockers, change into their outdoor slippers and stand in line – there is a separate line for the men – to be inspected by *amn* to ensure that no garments are being illegally smuggled off the premises. Workers make their way back to the main gates of the *istithmar*, where their waiting buses are surrounded by hawkers doing a brisk trade in small polythene bags of drinks and hot snacks for the road. The dusk ride home provides a chance for discussion of all that has happened in the busy working day, and quiet reflection on the future and the next working day to come.

## Issues, inspiration and method

### *Issues*

There is evidently a sharp dislocation between, on the one hand, the dehumanised efficiency of the ‘factory as blueprint’ view of Fashion Express with its dry charts and tables of workforce statistics, and, on the other, the social energy and emotional intensity of its employees’ human experience of their daily workplace. And it was my deepening understanding of the range and depth of this dislocation which, as my work progressed, enabled me to formulate specific questions on which to focus my ethnography of women as economic actors, namely:

- In what ways do globalised economic forces and local factors interact to determine the distinctive environment of the factory?
- In the face of this, does management invoke or manipulate (and, if so, in what ways) categories of class, gender and religion in order to recruit and retain a viable workforce – and to exert control over it in order to meet contractual deadlines, quality standards and cost ceilings?
- Do workers comply with, resist or contest these management control strategies – and what are the effects of their actions on categorisations of class, gender and religion within the factory?

As I became drawn into exploring these issues, I grew increasingly aware that, while self-consciously seeking to break new ethnographic ground in terms of content, I was nevertheless able to draw deeply on previous research in a range of disciplines. In this section I outline my prime sources of inspiration, showing how the twists and turns of my developing empirical research drew me into particular engagements with a range of insights drawn from the rich scholarly heritage which they represent.

### *Inspiration*

Right from the start of scoping my proposed research, and long before specific research issues and questions started to come into focus for me, I was clear that the 'field' for my intended fieldwork was to be the workplace environment of a factory engaged in industrial production. One of the sources of prior scholarship to which initially I turned was the established body of work by social and cultural historians of the growth and development of Egypt's formal industrial sector which, reflecting the intellectual climate in which it originated in the late sixties, has maintained a strong focus on Egyptian working-class history (Goldberg 1986, 1994; Beinín and Lockman 1987; Lockman 1994a, 1994b; Posusney 1997; Beinín 2001; Chalcraft 2007). Beginning from Egypt's industrialisation and integration into the capitalist economy in the late nineteenth century, the available literature documents a comprehensive chronological account of different periods of labour economics, unionisation, conflict and political involvement. The account is rich in details of wages, working conditions, instances of strikes, the formation of unions, and relations between unions, assorted political movements (including the Wafd, the communists and the Muslim Brotherhood) and the changing attitudes, policies and responses of successive Egyptian regimes. Many studies are founded, if only implicit, on a classically Marxist 'objectivist' conception of class, resulting in a teleological narrative (generally with a male gender bias) of working-class consciousness, exploitation and resistance determined by economic structural processes. One of the field's leading scholars, reflecting on its development and his own part in it, helped orientate and focus my own intended research with his comment that:

To be most useful ... future research will need to be guided by theoretical perspectives different from those that have hitherto largely dominated the field of labor history. Among other things, instead of using 'experience' as a way of directly linking objective circumstances with specific forms of worker consciousness, we will need to look at the discursive field within which there were available to workers several different (though interacting) ways of comprehending (or perhaps more precisely, structuring) their circumstances,

their experiences, and themselves ... including craft identities, gender identities and relations, kinship ties, loyalties to neighbourhoods, and what might be called popular-Islamic conceptions of justice and equity. (Lockman 1994a: 102)

When, after considerable vicissitudes, I was finally able to gain access to my intended 'field' of shop floor production and engaged in garment assembling work, I was struck by the *spatial* organisation of the workplace as a physical setting. My initial memory of joining a workplace of such size and complexity is best described as a mixture of shock and bewilderment as I look out on the vast open-plan layout, filled by row upon row of machinery and inhabited by a large workforce serving a relentless production process. A welter of sensory perceptions give the spatial landscape its manufacturing definition – the intensity of the clattering sounds; the distinctive colour schemes of the garments being put together for the subcontracting orders in hand; the oppressive heat; and the swirl and turbulence of large numbers of individual bodies in motion. Within this welter of sensory data, the visual cortex initially registers the production process as a range of discrete locations on the shop floor. As pieces of work get churned out in bulk by various units, each group appears much like any other, except in the nature of the particular item they produce, and any individual worker appears as just another anonymous face on the crowded shop floor.

As the days grow into weeks, these first overwhelming impressions subside and several issues become clearer. Firstly, the position of different units with respect to each other becomes better defined, as one unit's output becomes another's input, and the directional flow along the overall production process becomes apparent. At the same time, the finer division of labour within each unit emerges, as one begins to understand how the subdivision of skills is the structuring principle underlying the organisation of the workplace (Edwards 1979). Thus Cutting ceases to appear as a single team deploying homogeneous skills, but rather as a number of sub-units each specialising in a particular skill such as *fard* (rolling), *qas* (cutting) and *tarqim* (numbering). And within each unit, both the characters of individual workers, and the social relations between them, start to acquire clarity and granularity – so that what at first appeared simply as a sea of anonymous faces comes into focus as a social network between distinctive personalities. In these ways each unit in the division of shop floor labour becomes a *takhassus* (specialisation), distinct in itself and yet also an integral part of the intensive production process, and of the whole enterprise as firm and community.

As I came to relate my growing experience of the hurly-burly of the spatial organisation of the three-dimensional workplace to the neat and tidy, two-dimensional paper plans and shop floor layout diagrams that I had been given

on arrival, the most powerful theoretical aid to my understanding was Henri Lefebvre's articulation and exploration of 'social space' (1997). Lefebvre sought to challenge abstracted methods of representation that turned social space into fetishised abstractions (space as blueprint), and to emphasise instead 'the lived experience of space'. The critique he developed distinguishes between three interrelated and mutually conditioned aspects of spatial practice: the experienced, the perceived and the imagined. 'Experienced spatial practice' refers to the physical and material flows and interactions that occur in and across space to assure material production as well as social reproduction; 'perceived spatial practice' includes all codes and 'knowledges' about spaces that allow the experienced spatial practices to be articulated and understood; and the 'imagined' dimension refers to the mental inventions that generate new meanings of possible spatial practices.<sup>15</sup> From this perspective, my emerging understanding of the spatial organisation of the factory workspace began to develop a multi-dimensional resonance with aspects of Lefebvre's analysis of 'the monument', in which, as he elaborated:

The affective level – which is to say, the level of the body, bound to symmetries and rhythms – is transformed into a 'property' of monumental space, into symbols which are generally intrinsic parts of a politico-religious whole, into co-ordinated symbols. The component elements of such wholes are disposed according to a strict order for the purposes of the use of space: some at a first level, the level of the affective, bodily, lived experience ... some at a second level, that of the perceived, of socio-political signification; and some at a third level, the level of the conceived, where the dissemination of ... knowledge welds the members of society into a 'consensus', and in so doing confers upon them the status of 'subject'. Monumental space permits of continual back-and-forth between the private speech of ordinary conversations and the public speech of discourses, lectures, sermons, rallying-cries, and all theatrical forms of utterance. (1997: 142)

I could easily relate Lefebvre's first dimension of 'experienced spatial practice' to the flow of raw materials and part-completed garments along the production process according to which the shop floor was arranged. In my understanding, his concept of the second dimension of 'perceived space' was most readily apparent in management's 'lived experience' of the spatial arrangement of the factory shop floor. From management's perspective, the 'codes' and 'knowledges' by which the spatial ordering of the factory is articulated relate primarily to issues of control over a production process driven by tight deadlines and cost ceilings, set through intense competition for subcontracting orders from external clients. From this perspective the neat, black-and-white floor plan diagrams make perfect sense as technocratic representations of an efficient, orderly production process.

From the workers' point of view, however, things can be seen to be different. Their experience of the shop floor workspace seemed to me to be much more in line with what Lefebvre (1997: 142) described as 'sojourning in a poetic world', as they accommodated management's 'codes and knowledges' and used this understanding to move to Lefebvre's third level of 'imagined space', actively generating new meanings and possibilities for spatial practice, through which they challenged spatial domination by transforming it into an 'imagined community' and arena for the realisation of their wider hopes and aspirations.

Yet management was in no position simply to allow the workers a free hand in this respect. Management was driven by the need to maintain demanding quality standards, whilst also meeting tight deadlines for the completion of orders. Issues of power and control were therefore a central preoccupation, not only over the production process, but also over the predominantly young, mixed-gender workforce so actively engaged in their own imagined spatial experiences of the shop floor. During my initial months on the shop floor I was, however, at something of a loss to see where and how power and control were being exercised by management. Instead, production appeared to move effortlessly and apparently under its own volition, as I saw sheets of paper with order specifications appear from management offices, bales of cloth delivered at one gate, and the entire production process swing into action with supervisors governing production as a seamless operation until the assembled garments were packed and ready for collection.

With increasing familiarity with the work environment I came to realise that the rules and practices of the factory were designed to organise the institutional domain into two fundamental, clearly demarcated strata, *edara* (management) and *entag* (production), and give the working day of each its distinctive 'order'. *Edara* was responsible for paperwork, processed in separated spaces fitted out with equipment that define their nature of work: for example, desks and computer screens. *Entag* was designated to carry out the 'labouring' procedures, in separate spaces equipped with machinery appropriate to the stratum. This initial realisation led me to an engagement with Michel Foucault's celebrated studies of the nature of institutional power in prisons and mental asylums in nineteenth-century Europe (Foucault 1979b, 1997). It was Foucault's analyses of the regimentation of such institutions that strengthened my attempts to get beneath the surface of the operations of the factory. In particular, his 'eye of power' analysis of Jeremy Bentham's design for the ideal prison of the Panopticon (Foucault 1997a,b) resonated powerfully with my emerging understanding of the physical organisation of Fashion Express. It helped me see how the open-plan layout of the production landscape was principally organised for maximum visibility in both strata: the offices of *edara*, divided from one another by glass partitions; the well-marked exit and entry points to the factory; and the internal connecting passages,

staircases and corridors all fell into place as 'strategic' resources utilised by management to expose developments in both *edara* and *entag* landscapes.

Armed with this insight, the human dimension to the regimentation of the institution also began to become more apparent. When I joined the production landscape, it was not difficult to identify the faces of 'law and order' as the security staff and supervisors who ceaselessly monitored the production landscape to detect 'irregularities' and who had the power to enforce fines. As I spent more time on the shop floor as a worker in the production lines, the internal system that integrated middle management to the production landscape revealed other more subtle forces that policed and exerted different levels of control. These included the relays of monitors 'sent down' from *edara* to collect hourly production figures from each assembly line, with the recorded totals collated and carefully drawn out in neat graphs and charts to be reviewed by authorised figures for the purpose of producing 'scientific' assessments. They also included visits by top management to the production zones at unpredictable or critical moments.

It was only later that a more extreme instance started to become clear of the intention of unseen, ceaseless, universal control which motivates Foucault's concept of the 'eye of power'. This took the form of an all-pervasive system of surveillance that rested on *gawasis* (spies), who informed top management of developments that they had had occasion to observe, overhear or hear about from others. Its effect was that I began to identify a radically different hierarchical arrangement cutting across the formal ordering of the production and managerial landscape, and revealing the power individual workers and middle management acquired through exercising their roles as informers (reporting across the formal lines and chains of command of line-management) to enable top management to exercise more intimate levels of control. As an established 'work practice', surveillance re-shaped the organisation of the production landscape quite differently from the straightforward hierarchical relationships I had found in the neat organograms with which I was presented when I first started my fieldwork.

This understanding of the ways in which this all-pervasive system of surveillance functioned led me to engage with another of Foucault's insights, namely his analysis of power as 'more a verb than a noun', essentially something that is performed in a micro-context and serves as a strategy, rather than something that is 'possessed' by one party in a unidirectional power relationship (as in the conventional Marxist model of power as a straightforward relationship between oppressor and oppressed). In *Power/Knowledge* (1988), Foucault describes how:

I am not referring to Power with a capital P, dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power

relations. They are multiple; they have different forms, they can be in play in family relations, or within an institution, or an administration ... Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or something which only functions in the form of a chain ... Power is employed and exercised through a netlike organisation ... Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application. (Foucault 1982: 38, 98)

This analysis provided me with a theoretical framework within which to pursue an analysis of the covert networks of power relationships – not simply between managers, supervisors and workers, but perhaps even more so within each of these groups and the many sub-groups and individuals that constituted them – the empirical results of which form a central feature of my ethnography.

When I came to examine how power was asserted, exerted and resisted, I soon saw that the factory's formal systems and processes formed only part of the picture. Power emerged as many other mutations within the factory. Ties of kinship between workers exerted their own power dynamics on the shop floor, not dissimilar to those in operation in the wider sociocultural world outside. Experience of sharing a common geography (e.g. travelling on the bus to work from a particular neighbouring province, or having been evacuated from Port Said during the war years to a particular city elsewhere in Egypt) also created bonds between the individuals concerned, which were amenable to the interplay of power. Religion exerted its own power in different ways, ranging from strongly conservative positions imported from the wider world, to the more tolerant interpretations of tradition of the shop floor. Underlying much of it was a gender dynamic which grew more multifaceted and complex the more I became immersed in it. This growing understanding of the multidimensionality of power within the workplace environment led me to engage with another of Foucault's central insights, namely his distinctive development of the analytical principle of 'discourse'. Although the concept is difficult to pin down, discourse can perhaps best be understood as a mix of images, cultural products and social practice which comprise systems whose meanings are expressed not only in language but also in other signifying practices (Lockman 1994a).

Far from being a reflection of an already existing reality, in Foucault's view discourse is the medium through which reality is ordered. Discourses are normative in the sense that they convey norms of behaviour and standards of what counts as desirable or undesirable, proper or improper. So as well as ordering reality, discourse also defines difference. 'Subjects' are formed – in many ways form themselves – in terms of what they come to recognise and understand from the discourses in which they are involved. And since any individual will be involved in a multiplicity of discourses, and linked to other



discourses, there is an inherent subjectivity and openness in the process of subject formation which renders the outcomes essentially open-ended.

Foucault has also explored the complicity of both parties within any power relationship, emphasising that:

Discourses are tied up with power and serve to reinforce or undermine relations of power between people ... Discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy ... Discourse transmits and produces power, it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault 1978: 100–1)

The more the complex dynamics of control and resistance in operation on the shop floor came into view, the more I could see discourse as relevant not only to the exercise of power, but also to its contestation. This stimulated an engagement with de Certeau's exploration (1984) of ways the supposedly 'powerless' have of seizing opportune moments to 'trick the order of things', and Scott's analysis (1990) of how public performances of deference towards power can incorporate 'hidden transcripts' which are themselves critiques of power expressed in action and language.

Foucault's multi-layered exposition of discourse facilitated an analysis of the unspoken, tacit rules of behaviour that I could see in operation all around me, which together framed the *modus vivendi* of the workplace. As I will show, concepts of *ibtiram* (respectability) and *ikhlaas* (loyalty) ordered reality for the inhabitants of the factory workspace. They also prescribed norms of behaviour, defined difference, and fostered the generation of multiple subjective identities – all within the complex web of power relations, energised by a two-way dynamic involving attempts both to enforce power and to contest it, that formed the framework of an overarching paradigm of the 'firm as family'.

As I applied these insights to my particular interest in issues of gender, I began to notice how it was relevant not only to *actions* individuals were taking on the shop floor but also to the distinctive workplace *personas* some were crafting for themselves. Examples of gendered actions of which I became conscious often related to the recent introduction of male workers within a previously all-female shop floor: these included the exaggeratedly masculinised swagger with which a male cutter would wield the heavy electrical cutters that were the tools of his trade, or the almost caricatured panache with which some of the runners responsible for transferring garment components from one point of the assembly line to another would 'drive' their trolleys, swerving to a halt with the air of a young man showing off his first sports car. Examples of gendered workplace personas included the



changes which female supervisors crafted whilst at work, in their bodily posture, the register and modulation of their voices, their gait and their clothing (Chakravarti 2011).

Presentation of self on the one hand, and action on the other, are both aspects of performance. My growing appreciation of how this played out within the workplace environment resonated with Judith Butler's 'performative' theory of gender (1990, 1993). Building on Foucault's analysis of discourses as productive of the identities they are representing, Butler argues that the notion of performance does not separate the doer from the doing, since 'we become subjects from our performances and the performances of others towards us' (1990: 140).

Butler argues that gender differences and gendered meanings are effects of contingent social practices, and so opens up the possibility that they can be remade in multiple ways. Her emphasis on gender as performative also has the effect of focusing on the ways in which the performance of masculinity and femininity is contextual, and is interdependent with the performance of other aspects of identity such as class and ethnicity. It follows that what is drawn out is a script that can be variable, and that the ideals of femininity and masculinity which it lays out can change over time. This aspect of 'iterability' is significant in Butler's work, insisting that meaning is not fixed by its position in a system or structure, but acquires a temporal dimension which can be captured in language and its relation to gender norms. Its repetition in different contexts allows different meanings to emerge. As she argues:

If we repeat performances in different contexts then different meanings can emerge which can undermine and subvert dominant ones [so that] the coherence of a unified package of gender/sex/sexuality is pulled apart. (1993: 226)

Gender was a central focus of my interest from the outset, and led me to an early engagement with studies of women in the globalised economy. These issues came into focus through accounts of how globalisation's reallocation of labour between developed and developing countries resulted in manufacturing sectors which are 'female-led and export-led' (Joekes 1987). Economic issues were brought to the forefront of early debates on gender through focusing on the demand side of labour, and the economic relations through which women were incorporated in the employment opportunities made available to them.<sup>16</sup>

These analyses of the systematic exploitation of women within globalised capitalism's need for labour efficiency and flexibility had limitations derived from their treating gender as a given, with history something that is 'added on'. The results helped construct an image of the 'type' of worker best suited to capitalism's evolving needs, in the shape of a myth of a global productive

femininity that is homogenous in its low levels of skill, and passive and docile in the face of rampant capitalist management (Lim 1990; Kabeer 2000). The 'nimble-fingered docility' image of women workers in the garment industry has however been contested by more recent ethnographies which, by exploring the gendering processes of the workplace, show that how gender works is indeed central, but not in the ways established in the earlier literature. Salzinger's (1997, 2002, 2003) research in four of Mexico's *maquila* factories interrogates the global myth of the 'docile and dextrous' icon, and exposes this as the construction of a contemporary trans-nationally produced fantasy. While gender continues to be a fundamental feature of global production, Salzinger reveals femininity as a trope – a structure of meaning – through which workers drawn into the industry are understood, and production is designed.

In a similar vein, Lee's (1993, 1995, 1997) ethnographic work in two electronic assembling plants belonging to the same company but operating in different locations in south China, along with Yelvington's (1995) factory ethnography in a Caribbean workplace and Hewamanne's study of Sri Lanka's EPZs (2008), have looked at how categories such as class and ethnicity are endemic to the ways in which power is constructed and contested in the material productive arrangements of specific contexts. Their pioneering insights reveal that within a culture of domination, local features and attributes are used in the exercise of power as much as in its resistance. Moreover, given that domination for the most part is also insidious, hidden and contorted, the roles these categories play become more significant in understanding the perpetuation and reinforcement of patterns of domination and its links to production politics.

I also gained insights from recent ethnographies looking at women and employment in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East, even though these have tended to focus on the growing informal labour force into which an increasing number of women are drawn either as home-based workers, wage workers or as workers in small family-run workshops and ateliers (White 1994; El-Kholy 2002; Secor 2003; Dedeoglu 2004). El-Kholy's (2002) community study in Cairo found that different forms of employment corresponded with life-cycle phases, so that piecework and home-based work attracted married women, while unmarried adolescents were drawn to relatively better paid wage-work in *warshas* (small sweatshops). The strategic trade-off between wage-labour and the patriarchal expectations of their communities expresses itself in social practices such as the ostentatious display of defloration, through which female respectability and reputation are publicly reaffirmed.

The ethnographies by White (1994) and Dedeoglu (2004) focus more on how family-run, small-scale garment-making firms appear to have resolved the gender paradox of allowing women to work among strangers by restricting their mobility within a strictly familial enterprise. Their social and

gender identity carefully disguises their labour and financial contribution to household budgets. A common theme is the ambivalence which arises around women's categorisation as wage-workers, and the inherent gender paradox between income-generating activities and the complexities associated with working with total strangers. These issues have been interrogated more recently in Ismail's research (2006) in Bulaq, one of Cairo's new quarters. She shows how state practices of heavy surveillance have altered gender relations, leading the women of Bulaq to become more mobile, and to challenge men's fear of community gossip, and their demands for increased Islamic observance, as patriarchal social control practices and masculine enactment stemming from their poor economic prospects.

Inspired as I was by these accounts of Middle Eastern women's labour, I could see from an early stage that my study was going to be different. I was taking as my setting a workplace where women were not merely provisional members of an informal labour force, but instead an integral part of the operations of a formal industrial sector – one that, moreover, had long been identified as female-dominated. Yet the sources summarised above provided me with inspiration and material for reflection through my exploration and analysis of the issues I encountered, which I relate in the following ethnography. In my conclusion I return to these sources, and reflect on how my findings led me to reinforce, contend with, and on occasions even to refute, aspects of the scholarly body which they constitute.

### *Method*

Gaining research access to a factory turned out to be a lengthy and laborious process involving seven dispiriting months of approaches, negotiations, rebuffs and false starts with a range of companies and institutions (including the Egyptian Trade Union Federation). The wary, defensive and sometimes hostile reactions I received showed me the suspicion with which my proposed research subject (blue-collar factory workers) and proposed research method (qualitative participant observation) were widely viewed. At various times I found myself being suspected of being an undercover tax inspector, a spy for the competition, and even a secret agent for U.S./British intelligence. It was made clear to me that factory workplaces and their workforces constituted an *'alam khaas* (separate, distinctive world), which would be impossibly difficult if not downright dangerous (morally as well as physically) for anyone from *hita tanya* (some far-removed place).

The extent to which gaining research access in institutional settings and organisations can turn out to be, to borrow a phrase, 'a game of chance, not skill' (Buchanan, Boddy and McCalman 1988: 56) was confirmed when a passing comment from a personal friend (herself unconnected with

manufacturing, labour or government) put me in touch with one of her acquaintances in the NGO sector, who unexpectedly opened the way to my eventual research site in Port Said. The Export Processing Zone's overt reasons for accepting a researcher from a U.K.-based university turned out to be closely tied to its specific economic conditions, as described above, and ambitions to boost the legitimacy and status of its new garment-for-export enterprises 'in the eyes of the world'.

In addition, although there was a common consensus among Zone officials that, as one of them put it to me, 'the hoarding mentality of the *nouveau riche* has turned us into an inward-looking insular society', the decisive factor proved to be the personally supportive attitude of the proprietor of Fashion Express. As I came to understand the dynamics of the firm more fully, I formed my own thoughts as to what might have motivated him in going against the prevailing winds and allowing me into his factory – points to which it will be more appropriate for me to return to in my conclusion. It nevertheless soon became clear to me that his personal interest in, and support for, my work and my well-being was registered throughout the factory as bestowing a special status known as *il-brestij* (prestige), providing a license to operate and the extra leverage that came from operating under his *awamir* (direct orders, personal commands). A flavour of his behind-the-scenes interventions on my behalf is provided by the reports I received of his reply to complaints from *edara* that I was letting the class side down by engaging in shop floor *entag* labour:

She's doing her *bahth* (research project) – and she knows what she's doing. If tomorrow morning you see her taking 'Am Naguib's ('Uncle' Naguib, the old cleaner's) broomstick and sweeping the floor in *Qas* (Cutting), you're to just leave her to it!

Not that I was being given carte blanche access to all areas of the factory's or the Fahmy family's operations. I soon found out that the proprietor's and his top management colleagues' contracting and subcontracting deals were firmly out of bounds, and only *edara* and *entag* were to be available for research. As a member of Top Management explained to me during my very last month in the factory, visibly relishing his insider knowledge and status:

Qasim gave us the green light to offer assistance and be cooperative. But [with an enigmatic chuckle] you do understand, don't you? There are two kinds of green lights – one with results, and the other without.

Even armed with this degree of top-level personal support, I nevertheless found that Gellner and Hirsch's insights (2001) into how access, even once

granted, has to be continuously renegotiated (and also continuously scrutinised for ways in which it may be transforming the research) remained highly relevant right until I concluded my fieldwork in 2005. My expressed interest in getting involved in the production side of shop floor labour led to my being launched on the standard trajectory for any new female entrant joining the firm with no previous experience. I moved from one stage of production to the next, starting with unskilled work in the Cutting Department (such as counting garments and doing simple arithmetical calculations) until I built up some basic skills that qualified me to join other labour units as a quality control (QC) worker. This progression involved acquiring shop floor experience across a spectrum of diverse *takhasusat* (specialisations) and produced its own insights into how varied the experience of work was in separate labour units. Each labour unit had, I found, developed its own unique style and 'system' for the orderly arranging of work relations, and was vigilant in guarding its territory and distinctive social environment.

For the workers, my insistence on participation went further than simply seeking to experience the work, or get a feel for production. It was rather taken as showing a commitment to take part in the working environment and put up, as everyone did, with the conditions of labour, day in and day out, for months on end. It was about enduring the heat on the shop floor, the deafening din of the sewing machines, the yelling of supervisors, the flaring of tempers, the hours of boredom, the shop floor games, the vigorous trade in sweets, chewing gum and lollipops, and the complicated trail of fights over love entanglements. It mattered to them that I 'stuck at it' when work shifted to late hours, or when I was moved to other units to meet pressing deadlines, and at weekends when not all the workforce was required to be present. As I built up rapport with my co-workers through this progression, I came to recognise sub-groups within the 450-strong workforce differentiated by their regions of origin, as well as their specific workstations.

The factory's *salat* (Assembly Halls) were the most prestigious units of labour, the lifeline of the factory, with the highest wages (and potential for fines) and where all levels of skill were spoken of as requiring 'an eye' (*il-ayyn* – implying smart, experienced working). *Il-ayyn* became a metaphor that, in multiple senses of the word, coloured my experience of labour as a worker. The deafening din in the halls made it difficult to hear workers during the course of the working day and left me lip-reading machinists, a task that became easier with time. From where I was standing on the shop floor, watching doors and exits, I would identify a new face, and speculate if the visitor was a client, an official from the Zone or a new recruit. If my curiosity was aroused then, prevented from leaving my station, I resorted to asking for information from cleaners, supervisors and monitors who were licensed to walk around. At other times, a small and soft 'psst' sound (which strangely



enough was audible over the din) would be enough for others closer to the visiting party to relay the news back to me. Watching people's movements on the shop floor, and simultaneously carrying on with the repetitive task of folding and unfolding garments in rapid succession, my eyes gliding over seams, zippers and lines of sewing stitches, bending forward to mark faulty garments with chalk or stickers, returning them to machinists facing me or passing them to the machinists behind me, I watched the world go by. I saw how social and work scenarios were played out, how new developments unfolded, how old *aflam* (romantic shop floor gossip) could resume with a new twist, and my insatiable curiosity was aroused just like everybody else's.

Cultivating a 'watchful eye' also enabled me to see the garments I was inspecting in a new light – not simply as piles of material cut and stitched in set stages, but as products with a 'life' of their own. Each *marka* (brand order from an international client) was intended for a specific market, demonstrated visually in the range of sizes required, with the U.S. commanding particularly gigantic sizes and the Far East the smallest. Each order was considered to have a 'spirit', referred to in shop floor slang as its *irfa*, infusing the garment in question with its own distinct shop floor personality and history. There was one order (subcontracted from factory T) that left a stubborn black dye on everyone's hands that was difficult to wash off; another that brought an infestation of fleas to the shop floor; a third that had to be sent back to the assembly halls after the zippers burst in the laundry (where the machines had mistakenly been set to the wrong temperature); and a fourth, even more unfortunate order which when sent to be stone-washed had come out *fatafit* (in shreds), a calamity that brought Qasim Bey to the shop floor to 'see with his own eyes'. The range and variety of adjectives given to the *irfa* of each garment order created the *khanqa* (jittery and suffocating) atmosphere of one working day if not the next. It was the unpredictability of each *irfa*, set against the repetitive movement of hands and eyes and stationary positions of shop floor, that plunged me into the rhythms of *entag* as a dynamic process. In the constant rush to meet quotas and keep close tabs on figures, and through the ties cemented between workers in each line and station, the captivating and almost addictive nature of assembling work became real to me as in the supervisors' proud description as the factory's *shughl il-matbakh* (kitchen work, implying the heart of its operation).

'Watchful eye' observation also became an invaluable tool for identifying the implicit rules that governed developments in the internal politics of the shop floor, especially its close entanglements with production issues. It enabled me to gain a deeper grasp of how territorial membership in different shop floor labour units and networks was a vital survival skill deployed in negotiations with management, and understand how the dynamic interplay of gender and class was instrumental in shaping specific outcomes – issues I discuss

at length in chapters 2 and 4. I saw how the sharing of the latest snippets of news was part of an intricate and all-absorbing web of 'insider' knowledge, operating as a surveillance machine in which the entire workforce were the prime participants. I found much truth in the commonly repeated saying that *il-masna' malush asrar* (the factory has no secrets). The underpinning dual function of 'observing while being observed' demanded the skills to read any signs of change, to keep up to date with new developments, to evaluate how the analysis of any single episode fits with other agendas and, finally, whether to wait or to take more assertive action to affect developments, judging who was best qualified to mobilise others to undertake this task.

Reading about the instability of garment work (Phizachlea 1990; Green 1996, 2002; Rath 2002; Collins 2003; Hale and Wills 2005) and experiencing it first-hand on the shop floor formed two separate realities. Under the wildly fluctuating 'famine and feast' rhythms of external demand for labour on the shop floor, I came to understand how the perennially vexing issue of the delayed payment of wages was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it was exploited by management to discourage workers from leaving the premises during periods of contractless 'famine' (which could extend for as long as three months), and was deeply troubling in the brutality with which it exacerbated workers' financial difficulties. But, on the other hand, paying workers on time simply gave them a window of opportunity to decamp to other factories where there was work to be had, emphasizing the stark shortages of skilled labour within the Zone. I came to understand that I had to accept, in the same way as other workers with more experience of dealing with it, the economic environment as inherently unstable and unpredictable, and focus my attention on whatever issues turned up, however unexpectedly, each day. As it was not feasible to identify clear patterns in the cycles of feast and famine, and as there were evident contradictions between internal rumours explaining the causes of any particular slump and what could be seen to be taking place outside the factory, fears of closure were always real and pervasive. In the flux of unpredictable work orders and continually fluctuating workforce numbers, everyone involved in production was left trying to make sense of chaos, not knowing whether to stay with the firm or explore other employment avenues.

Periods of slump allowed me to carry out semi-structured interviews with groups of workers. These threw into sharp relief the different provinces and locations from which 'migrant' workers came, and the way in which, under normal conditions of production, they were dispersed across different shop floor units. Girls, and at times boys, from the same region would sit together and participate in these informal gatherings. Each would chip in with her or his version of events. Some were comparatively forthcoming in their views, others preferred to listen quietly, speaking up only on other occasions, or preferring

to arrange one-to-one sessions later on. They gained more confidence once they recognised that they had the option to rephrase an answer or a question. Often they would correct me by reflecting on the question, rephrasing it in different ways for greater precision, and adding new dimensions to the different details that would personalise their account. It was possible in this way to explore how recruitment operated through regional networks, and to develop my understanding of the importance of *taraabut* (togetherness, solidarity) within the workplace, issues which I explore in detail in chapter 2.

Other group conversations were organised according to the hierarchical structure of the workplace. The female supervisors' staffroom was one such distinct hierarchical space to which I was eventually granted 'honorary membership' access. The room was formally known as *odit il-ishraf* (supervisors' room) though it was given by *edara* upstairs more pejorative names such as *wikr il-dababir* (the beehive, implying where plots are laid and conspiracies hatched). It was like the teachers' staffroom in any educational institution. It was the only room in the factory with a fan (though all it did was blow hot air), and the *mushrifat*'s (female supervisors') daily lunch of choice was also a mark of their status. Their strong sense of forming a *shilla* (a group of peers) was vital to their sense of status and rank in *entag* and in the overall structure of the firm. Their many topics of 'staffroom chitchat' covered a range of themes from their personal lives and relations with one another. They also discussed current issues regarding the work environment, sharing the latest snippets of information to have reached any one of them, what to make of it, the best way to keep themselves up to date with all the goings on, and whether to wait or to intervene – their conversation revolving around playing and shaping politics on the shop floor. Many of the decisions they took were based on their intensive observation of the individual circumstances of workers on the shop floor, striking a balance between their dual roles as shop floor controllers and social workers on the scene, which I discuss in greater detail in chapter 4.

Material derived from the *odit il-ishraf*, with its mix of the personal and professional, revealed much about appropriate gender roles and the assumptions underlying them. Whereas I was inclined to take any worker's request at face value, the female supervisors did the reverse. They categorically assumed the worst, trying to fathom the 'real' reason behind the declared one, adamant in their conviction that some hidden interest was lurking there, and in their strong suspicions over the ways subordinates tried to trick them. Female nature was construed as a customised *tarkiba* (mix, as ingredients in a dish) of tactics. Even displays of meek docility in the face of authority (whether hierarchical or patriarchal) were instantly suspected as put-ons, performances staged for other, ulterior motives. Often this declared female characteristic of being *adra* (capable, implying trickery) was admired,

especially when it came to pranks the girls staged on unsuspecting male co-workers, as when a male worker arrived pleading to be relieved of the unsigned heated love letters they had stuffed into his jacket pockets signed with the letter N (there were four girls in the line with the same initial). These anecdotes provided rich material for reading the complex gender dynamics at play on the mixed-gender shop floor, and led me to contest enduring images in the literature characterising female workers in the globalised garment industry as passive, dutiful exemplars of 'nimble-fingered docility'.

Other activities conducted during slack periods of production involved day outings organised by different teams, with the supervisors ever present to keep an eye on their workers. These involved trips to the seaside or to one of Port Said's many street markets, with the girls scouring the range of clothes and scarves on offer for the most sought-after items. I was intrigued and amused to see how the skills acquired in Quality Control were deployed to scrutinise potential purchases, turning girls into shrewd shoppers. The array of objects they bought for their *gihaaz* (prenuptial purchases to furnish the marital home) were up-market products that led me to identify with greater clarity how marriage and prospects of social mobility were part of the class struggle to escape the poverty trap, making real their aspirations as working women. These were also evident on the shop floor itself in the ways in which the landscape of production easily shifted into a space of avid consumption, with different workers hawking and snapping up a wide range of products through *commerce a la valise* transactions or catalogue purchases (activities which I describe in chapter 3), all to improve marriage prospects and, through investing in the collective spirit of *taraabut* (togetherness), to keep the dreams of change alive. Getting invited to attend engagement and wedding functions drove home to me how far these workers had come towards reaching these rising expectations and new heights of consumerism in relations of their choice.

The most serious ethical issue I encountered arose during a major shake-up of Fashion Express's operations by a new firm that was said to be British. For the first time, this rekindled the issue of access – throwing into disarray the process of renegotiating permission to continue the project. While the much-emphasised special status bestowed by the family firm and the proprietor had provided me with some degree of covert protection and a deeper insight into the complex blend of 'real' and 'metaphorical' kinship, I suddenly found myself in a changed and more hostile climate. As a researcher from a British university, I was suspected of being an undercover 'spy' employed to provide the new (purportedly British) firm with data that jeopardised *asrar il-masna* (the secrets of the firm). However, in the intricate entanglements of power and opportunity, not all workers saw my potential 'mole' function in negative terms. If anything, they associated me, in their down-to-earth way, with bringing *il-kheir* (blessings) to the firm, with the resulting opportunity to

gain more shop floor power an advantage to be exploited. After my months of rapport building, it was hard to tell whether the contradictory rumours and speculations spreading like wildfire were having the effect of making me more of an 'insider' and one of them – or a total 'stranger'. I eventually chose not to treat the episode of 'regime change' as a distraction to my research, but to analyse ways in which the encounter between two visions of change in labour relations highlighted the tacit rules that governed the social contract of the 'firm as family', and the distinctive work environment this discourse had carefully and purposefully cultivated in difficult economic times.

### **Ordering and animating the ethnography**

'Writing up' is a deceptively short and simple term for the transformation of fieldwork research into an academic text. After I returned from Port Said, I could not immediately think of a way of arranging my research material so as to convey both the immediacy and the complexity of my fieldwork immersion in the manufacturing world of the factory.

At first, I attempted to order my material according to the 'life story' of a garment making its way along the production line, from raw material to finished, boxed product – rather as Snyder (2008) traces the journey of a pair of jeans from raw denim to manufactured garment to retail commodity, in order to analyse the globalised garment economy. This offered the merit of allowing me to structure my material according to the different production units in which I worked while collecting data. But the fluidity of labour, with workers being switched from one unit to another according to the demands of production, or coming and going according to their own priorities, meant that 'characters' and their issues were refusing to stay neatly in boxes marked cutting, assembly, quality control, etc. This approach also made it impossible to capture the multi-dimensional nature of the working relationships I had experienced, which were 'vertical' (linking *entag* to *edara* to top management and the proprietor) as much as 'horizontal' (within and between production units). It also ran the risk of impoverishing my material, giving prominence to anything and everything to do with production, but leaving no space for consideration of all the activity over and above production which also characterised the factory environment.

I have finally settled on a thematic approach, organising my ethnography according to what seem to me to be the main principles and personalities that combine to create the distinctive world of Fashion Express, and the ways in which class, gender and religion are interwoven within it. The first of my thematic chapters, chapter 2, is built around the stratagems and principles through which the proprietor of Fashion Express, faced with intense



competition from other factory owners for scarce labour, moves beyond the 'family firm' to craft a distinctive workplace environment of 'firm as family', with himself at its head as 'proprietor-patriarch'. I explore the various control mechanisms he and his management team seek to deploy in order to meet demanding contractual deadlines and quality standards, and the forms of workforce resistance with which these are met. Chapter 3 switches the focus to the workforce, describing ways in which, accommodating management's chosen principles of 'firm as family', and in many cases turning these back on themselves, they appropriate the workplace and convert it into a zone for the realisation of their aspirations for romantic and material fulfilment. Chapter 4 focuses on a particular sub-group of the workforce-family, the 'daughters and sons of the factory' as the shop floor supervisors have been christened by the patriarch-proprietor. Their role is crucial in disciplining and nurturing the workforce, in maintaining production through all the interruptions and hiccups that beset the shop floor on a daily basis, and in reinforcing the working culture of 'firm as family'. I highlight ways in which they perform this critical, multi-dimensional role, including the creation and performance of distinctive gendered labour personalities – and how these can come into conflict with socioreligious norms (and what happens when they do). Chapter 5 examines the factory's encounter with a foreign organisational scheme that attempts to modernise the factory. It pulls together the major themes analysed previously, and, by demonstrating how the workforce reassert their preferred paradigm of 'firm as family', draws into sharper focus the issues relevant to the identity and *raison d'être* of a workplace caught between global and local forces. In conclusion I summarise my findings by referring back to the research questions I had defined at the outset, and reflect on possible resonances between my localised experience of labour unrest in 2004 and all that followed in Egypt's Arab Spring uprising of 2011 and its aftermath.

## Notes

1. 'Now Overthrow the Workplace Mubaraks, Urges Labour Activist', *Guardian* 20 May 2011.
2. [www.arabawy.org](http://www.arabawy.org); <https://twitter.com/3arabawy>; <http://www.youtube.com/user/3arabawy>; <http://www.youtube.com/user/3arabawy>.
3. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/opinion/friedman-the-square-people-part-1.html>.
4. <http://www.arabawy.org/2011/02/12/permanent-revolution.html>.
5. Beinín 2010: 16, 2012a: 93, 2012b; Abdalla 2012: 2; Gunning and Baron 2013: 61. Beinín cautions that 'these statistics should be considered approximations'. For the five

years for which data is available I have – for indicative purposes – split the total number of collective incidents pro rata to the number of individual workers who took part in them.

6. The pivotal role of the Mahalla textiles complex in Egypt's labour history, and in the events leading up to the January 2011 revolution, is examined in the the Aljazeera TV documentary *The Factory: A Glimpse into Life inside Egypt's Mahalla Textile Factory – A Cauldron of Revolt where Workers Inspired an Uprising* (Bocchialini and El Gazwy 2012).
7. 'Unprecedented strike wave sweeps Egypt', posted by Ed on <https://libcom.org/news/unprecedented-strike-wave-sweeps-egypt-this-week-14022007>.
8. 'Esco ordeal ends', *Al-Ahram* (745), 2–8 June 2005, (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/745/eg9.htm>); 'We are not for sale – ignored by the press and sidelined by the authorities the Esco textile workers are on strike' *Al-Ahram* (732), 2–9 March 2005 (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/732/eg63.htm>.)
9. Others included chemicals, leather goods, food processing, agricultural processing machinery and electrical appliances manufacturing, as well as petroleum and maritime services.
10. <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/ngos-and-activists-protest-save-architecture-port-said>
11. English gloss added by author.
12. The alternative 'Free on Board' (FOB) system is a different arrangement, as described in my concluding chapter, under which the contractor is required to purchase all materials and components in advance, and only recoups these outlays once the client has paid for the finished garments.
13. The firm initially opened for business in the 10th of Ramadan City, then subsequently relocated to Isma'iliyyaa and then to Mansura (Map 0.1).
14. Detailed workforce statistics are provided in the Appendix.
15. Lefebvre's 'imagined dimension' relates to de Certeau's complementary challenge to abstract conceptions of space, which emphasises the ways in which the subjective experience of everyday practices imbue a space with its distinctive inhabited quality (de Certeau 1984). It also links with Anderson's development of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1983).
16. See for example, Fernandez-Kelly 1983; Kung 1983; Lim 1983, 1990; Elson 1986, 1992; Leacock and Safa 1986; Mies 1986; Safa 1986, 1995; Enloe 1989; Ong 1990; Salaff 1990; Ward 1990; Wolf 1992; Tiano 1994; Chhachhi and Pittin 1996; Fernandes 1997a; Mills 1999.