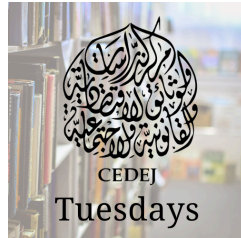


Centre d'études et de documentation
économiques, juridiques et sociales



On Tuesday, May 14, 2024 at 11am at CEDEJ, **Shehab Ismail** will present his book:
Pipe Economics: Engineering the Waters of Modern Cairo.



In this talk, I will discuss my forthcoming book *Pipe Economics: Engineering the Waters of Modern Cairo*. Based on archival research in Egypt and the United Kingdom, the book seeks to achieve two interrelated objectives. First, it retells the history of Cairo from the perspective of water systems, exploring how pipes and

expertise, my intention is to critically assess the significance of the profession to our understanding of the social and economic world.

As a history of urban waters, the story has two sides: water supply and sewerage. Cairo's water distribution network was first installed by a private company (Société Anonyme des Eaux du Caire) that was financed by French and local investors. Founded in 1865, the company held a century-long monopoly on water distribution. The establishment of a corporate regime with exclusive rights over water supply was part of a fateful moment in the history of the Middle East when the region was assimilated to the logic of global capitalism before it was officially annexed by European empires. Fast forward nearly a century later, the water company was nationalized in 1957, a year after the seizure of the Suez Canal by the Egyptian government. Meanwhile, the sewage system was built in 1915 after more than twenty-five years of study and planning. The reason for such a lengthy period of preparation was ultimately economic: mechanized drainage was a very expensive technology.

In 1890, the project was slated to cost in excess of half a million Egyptian pounds. A few years later, the estimated cost doubled to one million pounds. In 1907, the project came with the price tag of two million pounds, almost the same as the Aswan Dam. By the standards of the time, this was the most expensive engineering undertaking in an Egyptian city. After the system was built, it took three more decades to connect all buildings to the sewers. By the 1940s, Cairo was almost universally connected to water and drainage.

By foregrounding the engineers involved in Cairo waterworks, the book raises two theoretical issues whose significance transcends the specific context. The first concerns the history of water. It is common sense that humanity has been dependent on water since the beginning of time. However, it would be wrong to conclude that our relationship to water has been constant throughout the past. Wherever mechanized systems of water supply and drainage were introduced, they transformed modes of water consumption and fundamentally changed practices of public health and urban planning. The second theoretical issue is related to the discipline of economics. Cairo's engineers have analyzed the economics of water management from many angles. For example, they examined the profitability of the water company and studied the economic feasibility of drainage projects. Drawing on their analysis, I argue that the history of engineering provides a critical perspective on mainstream economics.

Shehab Ismail is a historian of the modern Middle East with specialization in history of science and technology, political economy, and the urban environment. He received a Ph.D. in history from Columbia University (New York), was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science (Berlin), and taught history of science and technology at Technical University Munich. He is currently finishing a book titled *Pipe Economics: Engineering the Waters of Modern Cairo* (under contract