



CEDEJ Tuesday Seminar

Bread and Fortune: Labor Migration to and Across Nineteenth-Century Egypt

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April 21, 2026 at CEDEJ – 2pm

“We can no longer welcome or tolerate in our country those masses of workers with no craft who, for lack of employment, are driven to vagrancy and threaten public order.” In 1866, an Egyptian-Ottoman official voiced his frustration at the desperate and unruly immigrants continually landing in his country. Nineteenth-century Egypt, like several neighboring territories, offered an alternative to stagnant European economies. It provided relative political stability, granted non-Egyptians access to separate judicial courts, and attracted a diverse crowd of immigrants. My previous research traced the paths of those migrants who headed specifically to the Suez Canal worksites (from around 1859 onward) from the rest of Egypt as well as from North Africa, the Mediterranean basin, other Ottoman provinces, or regions to the south. My book *Seeking Bread and Fortune in Port Said: Labor Migration and the Making of the Suez Canal, 1859–1906* showed how mobile individuals and groups drew on older migratory circuits while also forging new ones that connected Egypt internally, regionally, and globally. My new project extends this work by asking how the Egyptian state handled these internal migrants and foreign newcomers. Did narratives of national homogeneity develop in tandem with the sealing of Egypt’s outer borders? To what extent were migrants, moving inside Egypt’s emerging borders, perceived as intrinsically different from sedentary society? And how did the new arrivals themselves understand their relationship to the place they had entered? This ongoing research moves beyond the banks of the Suez Canal and follows the trajectories of the footloose and displaced, including the thousands of workers dismissed when the new waterway was inaugurated with great pomp and ceremony in November 1869.

Lucia Carminati is a historian of migration and the modern Middle East. She researches the social and cultural history of Egypt in the 19th and 20th centuries with a special focus on migratory routes and mobility at large, imperial interests, and infrastructural transformations. Her ongoing research projects include studies of the history of public health on the Suez Isthmus; a historical analysis of migrants' correspondence; an inquiry into the history of migrant women, children, and gender in and around the Suez Canal worksites. Her first book was published in 2023 and was awarded a Berkshire Conference of Women Historians First Book award; a Lyman Book Award for World Maritime History; a Urban History Association award for Best Book in Urban History.