Chapter 1

Introduction

No country in the Middle East, with the possible exception of Israel, has seen as much scholarly attention devoted to its workers as Egypt. The first book-length studies in English about the Egyptian working class appeared in the mid-1980s.[1] Since then, a number of important works on the subject have appeared.[2] Before this, of course, a significant literature on the history of Egyptian workers existed in Arabic, most notably the work of Rauf Abbas and Amin Ezz Al-Din among others, in addition to the personal memoirs of a number of union leaders.[3]

Despite this attention, however, we still know remarkably little about what goes on inside Egyptian factories. Moreover, much of the literature on Egyptian workers, in both Arabic and English, simply took class formation for granted. Class formation occurred, it was assumed, as a consequence of the building of large factories, the advent of industrial production, and the introduction of capitalist social relations. When class formation was not taken for granted, more often than not authors confined themselves to accounts of organized activity, "political history," and formal labor institutions. In other words, the question of class formation was approached almost exclusively through instances of strikes, labor organizations, and collective action.

What remain sorely lacking are accounts of ordinary workers and an analysis of working life.[4] Not only do we know very little about what goes on inside Egyptian factories, we know remarkably little about shop floor culture and politics and how they are related to class forma-tion. The realms of everyday and industrial life, the social relations in production, accounts of the labor process, struggles on the shop floor, and shop floor culture have so far been all but neglected. One of the primary goals of this study, therefore, is to provide an ethnography of factory life—a detailed account of shop floor culture and politics in two factories where I worked.

Those interested in the heroic battles of a few revolutionary workers will find little of interest in the following pages. Formal labor institutions and strikes are also not my primary concern. Rather, this

book explores the everyday and seemingly trivial in order to grasp the character of social relations on the shop floor.[5] I describe a group of ordinary Egyptian workers who are unremarkable in many respects. I analyze the minutia of factory life in order to understand what it means and how it feels to work in the factory. For what people experience everyday—what they know and how they live—fundamentally shapes their consciousness and being and is, therefore, at least as important as momentary political battles or exceptional historical situations.

As an ethnography of shop floor culture and politics in two Egyptian factories, this study examines a number of issues relating to workers' experiences at work and the process of class formation. By class formation I mean how certain individuals come to think of themselves as workers as opposed to some other category of identity and how others come to view them as such, often with divergent and conflicting interests from themselves.[6] This book analyzes how working class identity emerges at the point of production; how "economic relations" are simultaneously relations of signification and meaning; and how the production of things is, at the same time, the production of categories of identity, patterns of interacting, and understandings of self and other.

What many have taken for granted—individuals becoming conscious of themselves as workers with distinct identities and interests—must, in fact, be explained. People do not become proletarians simply by entering factories or as a result of the positions they occupy in the division of labor. The traditional paradigm of structure determining consciousness, or the necessary movement from "class-in-itself" to "class-for-itself," has not held up, either historically or theoretically. As Michael Hanagan has noted, "proletarian identity does not come included as a standard accessory in the crates that bring the machine technologies to the factory floor; it has to be constructed using local materials drawn from the larger context of social life in which factory and machine are located."[7] This is as true for contemporary Egypt as it is for nineteenth-century England.

The question becomes, therefore, how is proletarian identity constructed? How do individuals come to think of themselves as "workers" and how do others come to understand them as such, often in contrast with themselves? This study explores the role of the shop floor and the importance of workers' experiences in the process of class formation. By doing so, I attempt to reconceptualize class formation at the micro-level, inside the factory, at the point of production.

Through participant observation, working as a winding machine operator in two Egyptian textile factories, I found that the social relations *in* production are essential in determining how individuals come

to understand themselves and their interests. "Worker" is a category of identity whose substantive content is produced and reproduced daily through both material and discursive practices. In this respect, social class is a system of meaning as well as a system of production. In the factory, small, everyday, mundane occurrences and practices that workers experience in common, seemingly insignificant in themselves, serve as crucial rituals in a continuous process of class formation. These common experiences and the shared culture they generate are the invisible cement that make collective identity (and ultimately organization and action) possible. This suggests that the existing literature on class formation fails to pay sufficient attention to the importance of culture and the symbolic dimensions of group formation.

The social organization of production—the way the factory and work are organized—profoundly shapes how individuals come to think of themselves and others. The significance of this should not be lost. How work is organized is not exclusively or even primarily the result of particular technologies or production processes. It is a contingent social arrangement, something that could always be otherwise. Thus, different ways of organizing production (and different rules and procedures governing social interaction in the factory) can have profound effects on what it means to be a worker and how this identity is understood.

Examining company policies and practices that systematically differentiate workers from nonworkers reveals how the organization of work contributes to the process of class formation. It is partially through these practices that the category of worker emerges inside the factory at the point of production. What it means to be a worker and how others understand this turns out to have a great deal to do with how work is organized.

Shop floor culture is also integral to the process of class formation. By shop floor culture I mean the distinctive material and symbolic forms specific to workers that develop out of the circumstances of the work hall. In the factories where I worked, for example, this included certain recurrent rituals such as tea and the particular manner in which it was consumed, forms of working class sociability (*bizar*—joking around and horseplay), verbal and nonverbal communication specific to the work hall (spoken and sign language), dress and clothing (plastic sandals), conceptions of masculinity and the particular way time, among other things, was experienced by workers. It was through such a distinctive culture that workers differentiated themselves from others, whether intentionally or not, and were themselves differentiated by others.

As well as reconceptualizing the process of class formation at the point of production (chapters 1 & 2), this book also addresses ques-

tions of power and resistance, the labor process, authority relations in the firm and the epistemology of ethnography. In chapter 3, I describe the labor process on the winding machine, the machine I worked on, analyzing the amount and intensity of physical labor required of machine operators. For in addition to producing identities, that is workers, the factory also produced goods: cotton and wool woven fabric and readymade garments. Thus, I describe how hard workers worked and analyze why they worked as hard as they did.

Getting people inside factories after all, is not the same as getting them to work. And the intensity and quality of work are never primarily the result of formal negotiations or labor contracts. Despite the existence of institutional mechanisms for ensuring a certain amount of output, workers managed to play an active role in negotiating the amount and intensity of effort they expended each day. These negotiations did not take place in boardrooms nor were they the result of collective bargaining, however. They transpired on the shop floor, each day at the machines. Workers had an arsenal of strategies and tactics, techniques and methods they employed often quite successfully to control and regulate when, how, and how hard they worked. In addition to describing how work was supposed to be accomplished, therefore, in chapter 4 I document how it actually got done.

If the factory is about the production of identities as well as the production of commodities, it is also about power. By shop floor politics I mean the micro-relations of power and authority that exist between superiors and subordinates in the factory. This, of course, includes the negotiation of effort mentioned above. The factories where I worked, typical of most factories and many organizations, consisted of a series of authority relations, a chain of command, linking superiors and subordinates.

In chapter 5, I analyze authority relations in the firm. What was remarkable about authority relations in these firms was that they were incredibly hierarchical. A peculiar organizational culture emerged in which each individual within the rigid hierarchy of authority relations became subservient to those above while dominating those below. Power was exercised arbitrarily and without limitation. By analyzing how power is generated and exercised by those who hold positions of institutional authority—shift supervisors, engineers, and most notably the chief executive officer—and describing the culture this generates, I explain the political culture of authoritarianism in the firm.

One of the objectives of this study is to convey what daily life, including work, in the factories is like. I accomplish this by paying close attention to the quotidian activities of the shop floor and the

day-to-day experiences of workers. I describe much of what transpires in the factory, at times in broad brush strokes and at others in minute detail. This is not a story about mass strikes or revolutionary workers; it is about everyday working life. The aim is to bring the social world of the factory to life.

Approaches to Social Class and Class Structure

Questions concerning the nature of social class, how it "happens" and how it is reproduced are not new. They are among the oldest, most contentious, and highly debated issues in social science. As a prelude to what follows, therefore, it will be worthwhile to briefly discuss how I understand social class, what I take to be its defining characteristics, and the traditions that have influenced my research.

Central to Marx's conception of social class is the idea that it is primarily about one's relationship to the means of production. Different relationships to the means of production come with different sets of interests. Capitalism is characterized by the existence of two primary classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. While the bourgeoisie own the means of production, workers own nothing but their labor, which they are forced to sell (on pain of starvation) to capitalists for a wage.[8] The relationship is one of opposition and structural conflict. Thus, rather than defining class as an occupational category or income level, in the Marxist tradition it is understood as a particular type of *social relation* between individuals and groups. As E.P. Thompson has noted, "classes do not exist as separate entities, look around, find an enemy class, and then start to struggle."[9] Rather, classes exist historically in relation to other classes.[10]

Marx believed that bringing large numbers of workers together in factories would have significant consequences. Workers would realize the centrality of their role within production and in the capitalist system as well as their common interests against their employers. Armed with this consciousness, workers would "form combinations (trade unions) against the bourgeoisie."[11] These organizations would eventually turn into working class political parties.[12] Living in close proximity with one another and sharing "modes of life" would further unite the proletariat and contribute to the development of a "revolutionary working class."[13] Working class struggle, coupled with the contradictions inherent in capitalism, according to Marx, would eventually lead to the system's collapse. Much of twentieth-century Marxism has subsequently been concerned with answering the question, "why no revolution?"

In addition to one's relationship to the means of production (one's "objective class position" and the set of interests this creates), consciousness, culture, and a shared mode of life (the subjective dimensions of class) are important factors in the process of class formation. Class is said to have both objective and subjective dimensions. In other words, individuals do not come to act in class ways only because they occupy similar positions in an economic division of labor. Consciousness, culture, and experience are fundamental to class formation. These two dimensions correspond to Marx's famous distinction between "class-in-itself" and "class-for-itself."

More recently there has been renewed interest in the process and dynamics of class formation. Much of this literature explicitly criticizes the "teleological" and "essentialist" aspects of the older, more mechanical conception of class formation. Ira Katznelson and Michael Hanagan, among others, reject the idea that individuals will automatically come to consider themselves to be workers, let alone organize or act collectively on this basis. Class formation, they insist, must be understood as both a "contingent outcome" and a "continuous process."[14]

What does this mean? By contingent outcome, these scholars have come to reject the teleological determinism of the traditional theory: the necessary movement from class-in-itself to class-for-itself. To say that class formation is contingent is to imply that it is an uncertain outcome and not a foregone conclusion, as earlier Marxist theorists had claimed. Instead, class formation is said to be uncertain: only one of many possible outcomes. Individuals do not necessarily come to think of themselves as workers, or exclusively as workers, and they need not act politically on this basis. To claim that class formation is a continuous process is to imply, as Zachary Lockman notes, that "it is not something that happens once and for all to produce a working class with a fixed character. It is rather an open-ended, ongoing process, as classes are constantly remolded by changing economic, political, and cultural forces."[15]

Class should also no longer be thought of in essentialist terms. Katznelson, Zolberg, and others have come to realize that for historical reasons there has been significant variation in working class formation. Not all working classes look alike, let alone think or act alike.

But we must go further. For too long, especially among more traditional Marxists, class has been understood as an exclusive, that is, all-or-nothing identity. In other words, scholars have thought of workers as *only* being workers and by doing so have denied the possibility that their identities could be complex or multifaceted. If they were not manning the barricades, planning revolutions, or reading *Capital*,

workers were somehow thought to be deficient, not conscious of their true identities and interests.

This, of course, is theoretically as well as historically problematic. While class often remains a salient feature of identity, the old ways of conceptualizing class as a singular, exclusive all-or-nothing identity are mistaken. Class and other identities are not mutually exclusive.[16] All identities, including working class identities, are never singular; they are always complex, multiple, and overdetermined.

My understanding of class structure is also quite specific and requires elaboration. Throughout much of the history of social science, the concept of structure has been thought of in opposition to agency. Structures have been conceptualized as being external to human action, as limitations and constraints on change. Agency, by contrast, is associated with freedom and choice, contingency, and the ability of individuals to act in and therefore affect the world. Like the relationship between society and the individual, the difficulty of social analysis has been formulating explanations of phenomena that overcome this antinomy.

Following Anthony Giddens, I do not take structures to exist independently of human action. All structures, including the class structure of society, must be understood as being both constituted through and the outcome of human agency.[17] Structures have a virtual nonexistence in time and space and are produced and reproduced in social interaction.

This has radical implications for how we should understand both class and class structure. By class structure I do not mean the occupational geography of Egyptian society. Neither do I take it to be about the different positions people occupy in a division of labor; languages that are often used but are essentially misleading. Nor should it be understood as a fixed, definite, rigid set of primarily "economic" relations (i.e., division of labor, level of technology) independent of the individuals who make up these relations, and radically other than human action. Like all structures, the class structure of society *exists only in human interaction*. It is not a thing, but must be produced continually through practice.[18]

This too has significant implication for how and where we should look in order to examine the class structure of society. A theory of structuration focuses attention on the realm of everyday practices and interactions. It is here, during seemingly trivial face-to-face encounters that the class structure of society is produced and reproduced.[19] Every time Fathy, for example, a winding machine operator in my department, jumped to attention, hid his broken tea glass, and saluted the engineer as the latter confidently marched onto the shop floor (always with the

stride of authority and too busy and self-important to acknowledge any of the workers), I witnessed before my eyes the Egyptian class structure *in action*, being produced and reproduced. For it is in the realm of ordinary day-to-day activities, recurrent practices and patterns of social interaction that the class structure of society is *enacted* and takes material form.

Method: Choosing Cases and Factories and the Logic of Fieldwork and Participant Observation

The research methods we employ are to a large extent determined by the questions we ask and the subjects we seek to explore. Because my goal was to examine shop floor culture and politics, participant observation was the most appropriate method. Ethnography rather than questionnaires, interviews, or archival research was best suited for studying workers' lived experiences and the social world of the factory. What better way, after all, was there to penetrate what Marx called "the hidden abode of production," on whose threshold there hangs the notice—"No Admittance Except on Business."[20]

Only through long-term participant observation would I be able to spend sufficient time observing workers and production. It was also unlikely that other methods of research would allow me to explore particular subjects. Issues like resistance, informality, and the social relations of authority, for example, were unlikely to come up in the course of interviews or conversations, regardless of how informal or relaxed. Engineers and shift supervisors would most likely be unwilling to discuss conflict or insubordination. And it was unimaginable that workers would disclose, in the course of interviews, the various shortcuts they employed in order to fulfill their production quotas in the shortest amount of time and with the least amount of effort. Only intensive fieldwork in one or a small number of locations would allow me to understand daily life and work in the factory.

Of course, it was by no means certain that spending months in one or two factories getting to know workers and observing production would lead to openness on their part or on the part of their superiors. It was partially because of this that I believed that working in the factory and more specifically, performing manual labor, would, to some extent, bridge the gap between "them" and me. After all, I was quite literally coming from a different world—the "first world," a world of privilege and the world of academia. Working alongside others day in and day out, I thought, might allow me to establish relationships that went

beyond that of simply being a "social researcher." Toiling away in the factory eight hours a day, six days a week, I hoped, would establish at least one point of commonality, albeit artificial and temporary, between myself and my co-workers. It would be one way I could make myself less different and, therefore, hopefully more acceptable.

Working on a machine would also provide experiential insight into the physical dimensions of factory labor such as fatigue, stress, boredom, noise, and exhaustion. It would allow me to get a feel for the rhythm of work and the daily routine, providing me with a sense of how hard workers work and what was required of them in terms of effort in order to fulfill their production requirements. In the end, I learned not only how to operate the machine, but also how to manipulate the institutional system that regulated production and measured output.

Working on a winding machine, keeping workers' hours, and using workers' facilities, as well as participating in the daily activities of the shop floor, led to the development of a significant amount of trust between me and other workers. Socializing on the shop floor and then later outside the factory gates gave workers a chance to learn about me and understand what I was up to, quelling many of the doubts they might have otherwise had about the purpose of my research.

This is particularly important in Egypt, as both the populace and the regime, for different reasons, have become quite suspicious of social research. As in other nondemocratic states, the Egyptian government views almost all information as potentially threatening, a strategic resource to be managed carefully—so much that the government denied my application for research clearance even before I arrived in the country. The populace, on the other hand, has grown accustomed to living under a regime that maintains a number of intelligence-gathering agencies while providing few political liberties. The government, the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (the state-controlled labor organization) and company management have all been known to collect information on workers by using spies and informants. Therefore, it was essential for me to establish that I was carrying out research for a doctoral dissertation and that the information gathered would only be used for academic purposes.

I encountered more than a few problems myself dealing with the Egyptian government and the security apparatus. The funding agencies that awarded me research grants—American institutions—required that I obtain official clearance from the Egyptian authorities. But as I mentioned above, my clearance was denied, as is any research the government considers remotely politically sensitive. My first months in the country, therefore, were spent trying to get the decision overturned. I mobilized

my contacts within and around the Egyptian state. Friends and family arranged countless meetings with officials at the Foreign Ministry, the Ministry of Education, the Arab League and other government agencies. Finally, one particularly well-connected relative called a friend in one of the intelligence and security agencies. I was given the man's name, a meeting was set up, and I was directed to his office.

His office turned out to be in one of the most heavily guarded complexes in the entire country. As one of the agencies "handling the terrorist problem," the area was under tremendous security; it was, quite literally, a fortress. Roadblocks had been set up on the surrounding streets and the road leading to the set of buildings where his office was located had been permanently sealed off. As I approached on foot I could see a number of manned watchtowers and armed soldiers patrolling the perimeter of the building on foot. These were lean, well-fed, professional soldiers—not the illiterate traffic cops fulfilling their military service found elsewhere in Cairo.

At the entrance I was asked what I wanted and why I was there. When the officers confirmed that I had an appointment after using a walkie-talkie, I was searched, made to walk through a metal detector and then waited for someone to escort me to the man's office. A few minutes later my escort appeared, a young soldier brandishing an AK-47. We passed through a large courtyard in the middle of the complex on our way to the office. There I saw several armored personnel carriers with soldiers inside, ready for action. I also noticed several civilian cars parked there, but all of them had their license plates covered. Unable to resist asking my escort about the covered license plates, he told me, without pause, that this was so no one would be able to tell which officials and officers drove which cars, in case someone wanted to assassinate them, for example.

When we arrived at the office, another soldier, also carrying a machine gun, met us. He was waiting outside my contact's office, permanently stationed there. I had been inside Egyptian police stations and military bases before, but the level of seriousness and intensity here was disturbing, as if everyone was prepared for battle, ready for conflict. What was I doing here, I thought? All of this was so I could receive official research clearance? I later learned that this complex was the same place where Islamist and other political prisoners are tortured.

I had never met my relative's friend before. Although dressed in civilian clothes, he turned out to be a high-ranking military officer. He greeted me warmly and asked about my relative. The usual pleasantries were exchanged and a mandatory glass of tea soon appeared. He was

told that my research clearance had been denied, he explained, but he knew nothing of the research and did not know what I intended to study. I began explaining my project. After listening attentively to everything I said, he had only one response. "*Seebak min al-siyassa wa al-iqtisad—al-hagat di bi tikhrib buyut*" (stay away from politics and economics—these things are the ruin of households).

Although I eventually managed to undertake research, I never received official government clearance. I describe how I gained entrée into the factories where I worked in chapters 5 and 6. Suffice it to say here that I accomplished this the Egyptian way: informally, through personal contacts.

Friends and family arranged for me to visit many different types of factories; large and small, public and private, in a range of sectors and a number of locations. This included food-processing plants (cooking oil, milk, and cheese production, frozen vegetables, fruit packaging, and Western-style snack foods) in and around Alexandria, the 10th of Ramadan city and in the Delta region, textile and readymade garment factories in Burg Al-Arab city, the Cairo Free Zone and Alexandria, furniture and wood factories in Alexandria and the 10th of Ramadan city, a steel factory outside Alexandria, an electronic parts manufacturer in the Cairo Free Zone, and a kitchenware factory in Alexandria. I visited more than fifteen medium- and large-scale factories overall, and a smaller number of *wirash* (workshops). I made repeat visits to many of these facilities.

I conducted research in all of these factories. The primary purpose of these visits, however, was to choose where I would carry out long-term fieldwork. In the end, I chose two textile factories in the Alexandria region. My decision was based on two equally important factors. The first was where I could secure entrée and more specifically, where I could secure the type of access I desired, since it was one thing to be allowed to visit a factory once, ask a few questions, and interview a number of workers and managers, and quite another to be given permission to conduct intensive research, including working on a machine for an extended period of time.

The second factor was no less important. Although from the beginning my intention was to carry out intensive fieldwork including participant observation in only one or at most two factories, I nevertheless wanted to choose the factories carefully. Some factories are better suited to generalizing about Egyptian workers than others.[21] For example, although I had the opportunity to work in a large steel factory—a thoroughly impressive, high-tech, and extremely profitable

Japanese-Egyptian joint venture where the management style was entirely Japanese (based on teamwork and having a minimum of hierarchy)—I questioned the extent to which this company shared significant features with other large-scale manufacturers in Egypt.

For these reasons I was drawn to the textile industry and the Egyptian public sector. As a result of cotton cultivation, the textile industry is one of the oldest in Egypt, dating back to the early nineteenth century.[22] Although many other industries have long since taken root (including food processing, iron, and steel, chemicals, petroleum, pharmaceuticals), textiles, both cotton and wool manufacture for local consumption as well as export (in the form of readymade garments as well as fabric), remain one of the core areas of Egyptian manufacturing.

Textiles and food processing are the largest manufacturing sectors in the country.[23] Over four thousand textile firms employ upward of one million people, accounting for 30 percent of the industrial labor force.[24] According to the Federation of Egyptian Industries, the sector makes up 26 percent of Egypt's manufacturing output and 24 percent of industrial exports. In 1990, the value of textile production was 11 billion Egyptian pounds and by 2001 that figure reached 17.2 billion pounds.[25] The sector is also an important source of foreign revenue.[26] Textile and clothing exports were $1.4 billion in 2004 and in 2007 textile exports to the U.S. exceeded $860 million.[27]

Public sector firms dominated both textile production and employment in large-scale manufacturing after the nationalizations of the 1960s.[28] Many of Egypt's textile workers employed in large manufacturing firms, therefore, have traditionally been employed in public sector companies, although this is changing as a result of ongoing privatization. Although the majority of Egyptian workers are employed in the private and informal sector (and do not necessarily work in factories), many of those engaged in large-scale manufacturing work in public sector companies.[29]

In 1981 public sector textile companies employed more than 290,000 people, the great majority of whom were factory workers. At the time, thirty state-owned textile companies employed more than 27 percent of all public sector workers, making textiles the single largest sectoral employer of industrial workers in the country.[30] The sector has remained the largest employer of industrial workers. By 1991, textile manufacturing accounted for "nearly half of total employment in public sector industry."[31]

Although the size of the public sector has been reduced considerably as a result of privatization, it remains significant for several reasons. Privatization is politically sensitive and public sector workers have been

active in the recent wave of labor protests that began in 2006. The sector also remains significant in terms of employment and public sector debt.[32] According to a front page article in *Al Ahram* in 2006, the total debt of public sector spinning and weaving firms was 9 billion pounds. Although the number of public sector textile workers has decreased to approximately 100,000, public sector companies still dominate the spinning and weaving segments of the industry, accounting for 90 percent and 60 percent of production in these areas respectively.[33]

It was for these reasons that I decided to work in a public sector textile firm. I worked in two companies. My primary research site was an old, established spinning and weaving firm originally founded before the revolution, in 1946, by a Greek-Egyptian businessman.[34] The company, which I will call MIDIA, was nationalized in 1961 and expanded significantly thereafter. Most recently, it has been slated for privatization.

Unlike many public sector firms, however, MIDIA was profitable, producing wool and cotton fabric and readymade garments for the local and foreign markets. The company also produced blankets and military uniforms for domestic use and high-end bed linens and T-shirts for export. In 1981, the company had 10,204 employees, making it the seventh largest textile company in the country.[35] In 1996 and 1997, when I worked there, it employed approximately 9,000 people, 6,000 of whom were workers, in nine different factories scattered throughout Alexandria.[36]

Illustration 1.1. "The Wool Factory" building at MIDIA.

I worked the day shift in factory number nine, popularly known as "the wool factory," the second largest in the company. The factory employed nearly 2,500 workers and I worked in "The Combing and Wool Preparations Department," the stage directly before spinning. On my shop floor there were combing, pulling, and winding machines. I worked on a thirty-spindle, English-made "Platt" winding machine (*makanit barm*) in a production as opposed to an assembly line. I spent nine months working on the shop floor and an initial period (about six weeks) becoming familiar with the company. During this preparatory period I learned about the firm's internal structure and organizational culture, the production process involved in manufacturing woven fabric out of raw wool and cotton and, very importantly, how to operate the machine I would eventually work on.

The second company I worked in was a large textile firm on the outskirts of Alexandria. This company, which I will call Misr Textiles, was a fully integrated spinning and weaving operation, taking in raw cotton and producing finished fabric and ready-made garments for both the local and foreign markets. The firm was founded in the early 1980s as a joint venture between Egyptian and foreign capital with initial start-up costs, I was told, approaching five hundred million US dollars. The facility was massive, occupying close to 500 *feddans*[37] and included a water station and a power plant. It employed nearly 11,000 people, most of whom were shipped in daily from Alexandria and the surrounding areas on the company's fleet of several hundred buses.

I worked the day shift at Misr Textiles for one month in spinning factory number two. Before beginning work I spent an additional few weeks learning about the company. And as I had at MIDIA, I worked in the same type of department and on the same type of machine. But whereas I had previously operated a thirty-spindle winding machine (wool), at Misr Textiles I worked on two 120-spindle German-made winding machines (cotton). The basic labor process, however, was the same.

Although I used a number of different research methods for this project, only this type of fieldwork provided direct access to workers at the point of production. Participant observation was, by far, the most stimulating and original aspect of my research. Ethnography, I suggest, is also the most empirical of the human sciences, the most concrete method of investigation, without necessarily being empiricist.[38] For I "was there" in Clifford Geertz's sense, talking with workers, working in the factory and participating in everyday life.[39] I write about real people in real places based on direct observation and my

interpretations. There are no Robinson Crusoe figures in the pages that follow, no *Homo Economicus*, the figment of the economistic imagination.

Ethnography is also, in one sense, the most demanding form of social research, utilizing all of one's senses and physical being, much more so than archival research, surveys, or interviews, for example. It uniquely implicates the researcher in the research process and the production of knowledge and requires a level of involvement far beyond other methods of research. Ethnography also provides access to the "perspective of the participant" (the view from the ground or the "natives'" point of view).

Like all research however, this study is not without limitations. In addition to working in a factory, I had originally intended to live in a working class neighborhood. For although the point of production is, without question, one of the most important places where class "happens," neighborhoods, communities, and households are also significant sites of class formation. In other words, class takes place in multiple locations and is not limited to the activities of the work hall. After choosing my research site, however, I realized that there were a number of practical difficulties involved in living in a working class neighborhood. First, there were simply no apartments for rent in the areas where I had intended to live. And as a single unmarried man at the time, living with a working class family, especially one that included women (wives and daughters, for example) would have been unacceptable if not impossible.[40]

But there was another, quite telling, problem as well. Except for a handful of areas close to a few large industrial plants, it would be somewhat inaccurate to speak of "working class" sections of Egyptian cities. Although the area around MIDIA, for example, was home to a number of factory workers, it was also home to various other sorts of individuals. Low-level government employees, people engaged in petty commodity production and the informal economy, and small-time traders, among others, also lived there. Rather than being referred to as working class sections of the city, areas like this were known as *manatiq sha'beya* (popular districts).[41]

In the end, not living in a working class neighborhood made little difference for this particular project. I was engaged in research eight hours a day, six days a week during working hours, not including the time I socialized with workers outside of work. When I returned home from the factory each day I was physically and mentally exhausted. I would then spend at least two to three hours each evening (and

sometimes longer) transferring my shorthand notes and observations from the pocket-sized notebooks I carried at work into my computer. Trying to conduct additional research in a working class or *sha'bi* neighborhood in the afternoons and evenings would have been overwhelming if not impossible.

I had also hoped to transcribe long conversations, giving workers a chance to express themselves in their own words. Although I managed to do this a few times, there were several practical reasons why regularly transcribing entire conversations verbatim proved unworkable. First, I simply could not spend the entire day walking around, chatting with workers and recording our discussions. I had to attend to the winding machine and make sure it continued to run properly. When we spoke, therefore, it was often while we were working, eating, or having tea. We also spoke when we had free time or when we made free time. Second, regularly taking my notebook out and writing things down in the middle of engaging discussions or when we were simply talking to pass the time would have been awkward and unnatural. At times I did this. But more often, if I wrote down anything at all at the time, I would simply jot down phrases, sentences, and summaries of what I saw happening in front of me and then wait until later, when I was by myself (sitting on the scale next to the machine, in the workers' bathroom, occasionally in the administration cafeteria or when I went home each night) to expand upon my notes more fully.

Using a tape recorder, of course, was out of the question. Having done research in Egypt before, I knew this. But workers also told me so. Several times during informal conversations with co-workers who had become close friends, the idea of a tape recorder was brought up. Workers expressed their concerns: a tape recorder would have provoked suspicion and would have made certain conversations impossible. No one, for example, would have been willing to speak critically of their superiors, the company, or the government, let alone say anything self-incriminating (see chapter 4, "Indiscipline and Unruly Practices") if their voices were being recorded.[42]

Structure of the Book

The following chapters can be thought of as answers to a series of related questions. Chapter 2 asks, *who* is a worker and how is this identity understood in the factory? Chapter 3 asks, *what* is work and how was it supposed to be accomplished at MIDIA and Misr Textiles? Chapter 4, by contrast, asks *how* was work actually done at both factories?

Chapter 5 examines *where* work took place—meaning, the institutional context of work and how this affected workers' experiences. Chapter 6 asks an important epistemological question: *how* do I know what I know about Egyptian workers and factories? And the conclusion aspires to do what all conclusions hope to accomplish—drawing the various threads of our story together. Who, what, how, and where? These are the basic questions. I hope that by the end of the book, I will have provided at least some of the answers.