



# On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt

By On Barak

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In this pioneering history of transportation and communication in the modern Middle East, On Barak argues that contrary to accepted wisdom technological modernity in Egypt did not drive a sense of time focused on standardization only. Surprisingly, the introduction of the steamer, railway, telegraph, tramway, and telephone in colonial Egypt actually triggered the development of unique timekeeping practices that resignified and subverted the typical modernist infatuation with expediency and promptness. These countertempos, predicated on uneasiness over “dehumanizing” European standards of efficiency, sprang from and contributed to non-linear modes of arranging time.

Barak shows how these countertempos formed and developed with each new technological innovation during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, contributing to a particularly Egyptian sense of time that extends into the present day, exerting influence over contemporary political language in the Arab world. The universal notion of a modern mechanical standard time and the deviations supposedly characterizing non-Western settings “from time immemorial,” *On Time* provocatively argues, were in fact mutually constitutive and mutually reinforcing.

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## **On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt By On Barak Bibliography**

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## **Editorial Review**

### Review

"A book of impeccable scholarship."

(Robert L. Tignor *American Historical Review* 2014-04-01)

"On Time provides a fascinating read, rich with vivid historical accounts that make the author's arguments all the more striking and memorable."

(Yulia Frumer *Technology and Culture* 2015-10-01)

### From the Inside Flap

"*On Time*'s primary contribution is to offer the first study of modernity in the Egyptian context that attends to the new technological modes by which that distinction in temporality was historically produced. This approach departs from the largely nation- and human-centered narratives of Egyptian history. By focusing on non-human agents and using a trans-regional perspective, a larger cast of actors and other vectors of historical change come into view. This work will advance both historical and critical efforts to de-center secular, pietistic accounts of our shared modern past, whether those pieties belong to civilizations, empires, nation-states, or humankind."

—Wilson Jacob, author of *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940*

"[*On Time*] constitutes a fascinating contribution to a growing field of inquiry – namely, the social construction of time in colonial contexts. Through a close reading of a breathtaking variety of sources, ranging from newspapers to fatwas, from advice books to train schedules, On Barak develops a compelling narrative of how Egyptians, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, developed what he calls 'counter-tempos' – approaches to apprehending and navigating the 'homogenous, empty' time of Western modernity in profoundly subversive ways."

—Paul Sedra, author of *From Mission to Modernity: Evangelicals, Reformers and Education in Nineteenth-Century Egypt*

"*On Time* is a compelling argument about the institutionalization of modern temporality in Egypt, the subjectivities and attitudes it fostered, and the resistances it encountered. With a creative flourish, Barak renders time immanent in this book by tracking its transformation through the use of new technologies (clocks, telegraph, calendars, railways, trams, telephones) all of which in turn changed how Egyptians thought about themselves and related to each other. Through a keen playful analysis of culture, capitalism, and modernity, Barak reminds us how we are made and unmade in time."

—Saba Mahmood, author of *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*

### About the Author

**On Barak** is Senior Lecturer in Middle Eastern history at Tel Aviv University. He is the author of **Names Without Faces: From Polemics to Flirtation in Islamic Chat-room Nick-naming** (Uppsala University Press, 2006).

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