



Denial ain't just a river in Egypt: On the importance of ambiguity in an authoritarian state

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In 1931, an American newspaper competition asked its readers to submit the best use of the word denial in a sentence. The winner was “Denial ain’t (just) a river in Egypt” (Quote Investigator 2012). A play on the words the Nile and denial, the pun jokingly suggests that someone is in denial. The saying is ensnaring. If the Nile (denial) were only a place in Egypt, denial as a social phenomenon would not



exist. There is no way out of the statement without either denying the existence of denial or admitting its presence. Illustrating the convoluted nature of denial, the linguistic enigma presumably never intended to say anything about denial in Egypt. When analyzed as a statement about the world, however, it is spot on. Denials as social strategies and rhetorical devices are integral to Egyptian public and political life; so commonplace that Mariz Tadros (2011) named the country a “Republic of Denial”.

Public denials are infamous for creating bizarre situations. In 2014, a stork ended up in jail in Upper Egypt. The bird, called Menez, was arrested on suspicion of espionage after a farmer spotted an electronic device on its upper body as it rested by the Nile. Soon, Egyptian and international media started to circulate images of the bird behind bars. The comic drama got more surreal when local authorities denied any wrong doing. The refusal to admit that arresting a bird-spy was an embarrassing mistake prompted satirical commentators to conclude that detaining animals in prisons was standard practice or that the Egyptian authorities made no difference between human and non-human prisoners. The spy bird was released into the wild after spending some time recovering in the bathroom of an ecologist, but it was soon caught again, this time ending up not behind bars, but as soup (Ahlberg 2014).

The story of the stork is just one example of surreal events involving ridiculous public denials. Why then are denials so common in Egypt? What functions do they perform in social and political life? In this post, I suggest that the social power of denial emerges from the concept’s capacity to override binary logics, while providing a form of semantic ambiguity that protects the speakers and triggers absurd situations.

According to dictionary definitions, “denying” means “declaring something untrue” or “refusing to admit or acknowledge it.” Hence, a speaker can deny a claim because they believe it to be false, but they might just as well deny the claim because they think it is correct. They may have reasons for not acknowledging this - only the speaker knows. As a social strategy and rhetorical



device, a denial can provide a form of semantic ambivalence that makes it impossible to gauge the “inner position” of the speaker from a statement alone (Berthomé et al 2012, Carey 2017).

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Decades of misrule and impunity in Egypt have nurtured a social and public climate of fear, secrecy and mistrust. Dysfunctional legal procedures and institutions have eroded citizens’ expectations when it comes to processes that seek to establish truth, justice or demand accountability (Mbembé 2001, Navaro-Yashin 2002, Cherstich 2014). In this atmosphere, where information is potentially dangerous, telling the truth is not a prime concern. On the contrary, social actors often avoid pinning down another speaker’s inner position or revealing their own. In this context, denials offer a semantic shield for the speaker who does not have to disclose what they know or think. Used in this way, acts of denial are not seen as immoral but expected and warranted social strategies to create ambiguities, alliances and protection for oneself or others (Taussig 1999, Wedeen 1999, Johnson 2020). If denials in everyday life emerge from the need to conceal potentially dangerous information/truths, public denials tend to generate absurd or surreal situations due to their blatant disregard for truth. Public denials often mock the truths and undermine people’s sense of sanity. They signal a fantastical side to authoritarian politics, in which, for instance, storks can be considered spies. But absurdity not only lends itself to crude power exertion; feelings of absurdity simultaneously serve to inform people that something is not quite right in the land of the Nile.



The smokescreen of the bazaar

My fascination with denials as a social phenomenon emerged during my doctoral research in Egypt's tourism sector in the early 2010s. In the field, I struggled to navigate the social dynamics of denials. I could not get my head around when a denial was a "truthful denial" and when a speaker refused to acknowledge insight into a topic for other reasons. At the time, I spent most of my time in Cairo's tourism bazaars, a social space pregnant with rumours, gossip, and smokescreens. Playing with "truth" was part of everyday entertainment among the shopkeepers in the market (see, Alexander 2017 for comparable game playing in the Turkish bureaucracy). One game involved telling unbelievable stories, ideally about someone else in the market, and seeing how long it would take for the listener to catch the lie. The excitement of the game, which I did not master, emerged from a shared understanding of information as inherently dangerous (Gilsenan 1976, Carey 2017). According to this rationale, the less people knew about you, the better. The more you knew about others, the better. And the less they knew about *what* you knew, even better. As a form of deep play, however, the seemingly innocent timepass allowed shopkeepers to gauge the validity of rumours, plant suspicion around characters and signal insights into others' affairs.

Denials were important in this environment. Remember, one tenet of the social dynamic rested on pretending to be ignorant of others' affairs. Applied to mundane matters, however, this practice struck me as curious, as if the shopkeepers were lying for the sake of lying. I was flustered when my best friend, the shopkeeper Hussein, subjected me to such a denial. After a visit to a factory supplying products for his souvenir shop, I expressed surprise over the rather decent salaries that the workers had reported, to which Hussein cryptically responded, "If you say so." Later, when I learned that the salaries cited were indeed gross exaggerations, I was not surprised. By then, I had realized that any statement in such encounters had to be critically assessed in relation to context and speaker. But I was nonetheless annoyed by Hussein's behaviour.



When I confronted Hussein about why he had denied insight into the workers' salaries, he laughingly told me how stupid I had been to believe the workers in the first place. Then he just shrugged. "Like me, you have to find out who you can trust, and who you can't. Time will tell." It was comforting to realize that I was not alone in the struggle to navigate the social politics of denial and misinformation. It was less reassuring to discover that one of my closest interlocutors could be so disconcertingly economical with the truth. More importantly, this time by direct confrontation, I had managed to pin down Hussein's inner position. I had also established that his denial was not "truthful" but clearly "intended"; spoken with the aim of concealing the truth. I was upset. Later I understood that my anger stemmed from a western principle of truth-correspondence, and the notion that lying is fundamentally immoral, at least when you don't have good reasons for it.

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But hierarchies of principles differ. In a climate where information is potentially dangerous and talking is associated with a risk of social repercussion or punishment, social actors are guided by the principle of secrecy-exposure rather than truth-lying. In Hussein's world, what was fundamentally immoral was to reveal information about others. If Hussein had told me what he knew about the workers' salaries, he would not only disclose information that the workers had chosen not to share, but he would also reveal that they had been meddling with the truth in their interaction with me (cf. Carey 2017). In this social dynamic, lying is still seen as immoral, but *not* revealing information is different to a direct lie. We can see how denials offer a way out of this dilemma. When I confronted Hussein, I put him in a difficult situation. Either he had to lie or admit that he had been lying. Up until then, he had been protected by the semantic ambiguity of denials.



In everyday life, denials provide a smokescreen around the subject who can conceal their insights into potentially dangerous information without being untruthful or lying. The relation to truth is also key to understand why public denials propel absurd situations. Scaled up to the level of national politics, public denials tend to create absurdity because of their blatant disregard for truth and truthfulness.



The Nile is not just a river in Egypt. Residents of the Sudanese capital enjoy a breath of fresh air along the river bank. Picture by author.



Notes on the prison-hotel complex

In the summer of 2023, Moushira Mahmoud Khattab, the President of Egypt's National Council for Human Rights (NCHR), spoke to the media following allegations of mistreatment and deplorable conditions in the Wadi al-Natrun prison. Khattab refuted the accusations by arguing that the high-security prison was like a five-star hotel (Aladam 2023). Given the regime's record on human rights abuses, the comparison came across as tragi-comic to many observers. Further investigation would be needed to determine whether Khattab really believed that allegations of prisoner mistreatment were false (a truthful denial) or if she indeed knew that they were true but evaded responsibility by refusing to admit this publicly (an intended denial). And yet, the truthfulness of Khattab's denial was in many ways irrelevant. In a context where citizens' expectation to hold public actors accountable for their actions or words are low, no-one expected her to speak the truth. Still, her statement was not just empty talk. As a rhetorical device, her denial served to remodel the playing field. Writing an official narrative according to which the standard of the country's prisons is impeccable *per default* means that accusations of substandard conditions can be written off without further investigation. Through this circular argumentation, institutional responsibility is not only evaded: the burden of proof shifts back to those presenting the allegations - now with a "slightly" more difficult task: to prove that prisons are *not* hotels (cf. Lazarus-Black 2001).

This audacious disregard for truth is also what makes Khattab's denial eerily absurd. Put simply, the fact that the President of Egypt's National Council for Human Rights can liken prisons to hotels in conversation with the media in the first place is a cruel display of a power. While the public denial related to the bird behind bars exacerbated an already absurd situation, Khattab's denial instead ensnared the public in a twisted reality that undermined further conversation. Should journalists now provide evidence that prisons are not hotels? How do you engage in a conversation about improving society when people in power refer openly and shamelessly to a make-believe world? What becomes of people's life-worlds when there are no public institutions or mechanisms to determine what is



reasonably real?

In the Land of the Absurd, Something Is Not Quite Right

In Egypt, as in other authoritarian states, reality can be unbelievable and still be part of ordinary life. It is both normal and hilarious that a bird ends up in a human prison. It is dark yet ordinary that authorities equate prisons to hotels. Albert Camus (1942) wrote that states of absurdity reveal a crack in social reality. People experiencing absurd situations of this kind can inhabit a dual position: they are both social protagonists in the event *and* spectators removed from the taken-for-granted reality. As social protagonists, people are often primarily pragmatic, constrained to navigating life within current norms, conditions and limitations. As spectators, however, social actors can also analyse a situation from an outsider's perspective, using as analytical tools the social and ethical predispositions that tell them how things ought to unfold. As the philosopher Thomas Nagel (1971, 722) pointed out, "In ordinary life ... we do not judge a situation absurd unless we have in mind some standards of seriousness, significance, or harmony with which the absurd can be contrasted."

But as several contributions in this Thematic thread highlight, absurd events can be integral to everyday life, incorporated in "the order of things," (Bourdieu 1990) without losing their generative power to indicate that something is not "quite right."

If feelings of absurdity emerge from a rupture in the social fabric, one might assume that such states are exceptional. But as several contributions in this [Thematic thread](#) highlight, absurd events can be integral to everyday life, incorporated in "the order of things," (Bourdieu 1990) *without* losing their generative power to indicate that something is not "quite right." Understood in



this way, the presence of the absurd indicates a mismatch between “what is” and “what ought to be.” This dissonance is also reflected in the ambivalent meaning attached to the concept of “normality” in Egyptian Arabic. People employ the term descriptively to refer to everyday reality (“what is”), but equally use the term to refer to how things *should be* (Kreil and Schielke 2023).

We can now begin to understand why denial and absurdity frequently go hand in hand in Egyptian public life. Both denial and absurdity can be used as tools of oppression, but feelings of absurdity also signal sanity in skewed realities. Denials, on the other hand, offer semantic ambiguity to speakers who can thereby concomitantly indicate one thing, its opposite, or something in-between. Because of this capacity, they allow actors in power and citizens alike to navigate the opaque arbitrariness created by impunity and misrule while trying to evade trouble. If the pun ‘Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt’ never had an ambition to say something about denial in Egypt, as a statement about the world, it aptly captures reality in the land of the Nile.

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