

**In Memoriam: Kathryn Schwartz – April 24, 2023 (Middle East Beyond Borders)
“Rethinking Egypt in the 1870s through ‘The Political Economy of Private Printing in
Cairo’”**

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Good evening. My name is Chloe Bordewich and I am a 2022 alumna of the HMES program. Throughout my time at Harvard, I saw Kathryn as a mentor, a guide to both our institution and our field. I first met her in the fall of 2015 here at Middle East Beyond Borders. It was my first semester in the PhD program and as a member of this workshop. We were discussing a draft of what became “The Political Economy of Private Printing in Cairo as Told from a Commissioning Deal Turned Sour, 1871,” which was published in the International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES) in 2017. The day she passed away, almost seven years later, was the day I filed my dissertation. She had been very much on my mind that week as I drafted my last-minute acknowledgments and reflected on those toward whom I felt the deepest gratitude and admiration.

The qualities that made Kathryn such a fine mentor and colleague were not so different from the qualities that made her a fine scholar. The intellectual interests and the methodologies that manifested in her work reflect, in other words, the person she was outside it. First and foremost was her concern for the humans behind the craft, be they nineteenth-century Egyptian printers or her Harvard colleagues struggling to articulate their thoughts on the page.

Kathryn was committed to generous critique. She began by finding the value in a piece of work and helped its author to chisel a sharper argument from the rough. Each time I presented work here at MEBB, for example, I would receive an email from her days later. By then she had mulled it over and often tracked down fascinating new details to share with me. Twice, I was also lucky enough to experience Kathryn as a classmate: Despite the fact that she had already finished her PhD, she enrolled in two seminars with Khaled Fahmy in which we scrutinized nineteenth-century Egyptian archival documents and discussed medicine, law, and religion from the Mamluk era to the twentieth century. Kathryn was the humblest, most curious ‘student’ in the class.

As a writer and a thinker, Kathryn homed in on details that others had overlooked but that she pursued doggedly with a hunch (generally correct) that they might turn out to be important. She presented us with the puzzles she had yet to solve, asking question after question until the threads at last began to untangle. And she deftly wove between social, economic, intellectual, cultural, and legal history to tell stories that both upended conventional historiography on print culture and were a joy to read.

Care for the humans behind the craft does not merely describe what Kathryn exhibited in interactions with fellow scholars, students, and friends; we also see it at work in “Political Economy of Private Printing.” In the article, Kathryn rejects the study of print with a capital “P,” and with it the technological determinism that very often attaches itself to histories of the printed word. Instead, she chooses to write about Cairo’s private (as opposed to government) printing industry in the mid-to-late 19th century, an industry with its own geographically and temporally specific norms, practices, and, yes, *people*.

The main character in “Political Economy” is not a prolific author or intellectual luminary, but a printer—a Florentine Jewish immigrant to Egypt named Musa Kastali (b. 1816). “The practices, forms, aims, and limitations of [such] men are integral to the very existence and nonexistence of particular texts,” she writes (27). But how can we get at the motivations and limitations of these men, when their names were displayed in the colophons of their printings and often nowhere else? Indeed, as Kathryn notes, there are not many extant texts that explain how the private printing industry functioned from day to day. (In other words, to research an article like this was incredibly difficult.) The one text to which we do have access is a rather strange tract: an 83-page treatise detailing the frustrations of an aggrieved printer (Kastali) with an author (an Azhari shaykh named Hasan al-‘Idwi al-Hamzawi) who had commissioned the printing of a work but had apparently not followed through on payment. Written by the lawyer representing Kastali in Italian, the text was translated into Arabic before it went to print. It is packed with convoluted details about business transactions that trace the devolution of the relationship between the printer and the shaykh. Lacking the benefit of other accounts against which to check puzzling pieces of the case, Kathryn nevertheless unspools its many knotted threads into a fascinating, multifaceted story.

In this article, and in her larger body of work, she makes several important interventions in the historiography of print culture in the modern Middle East. First, as noted, she adamantly rejects technological determinism. Neither the particular way print spread in Egypt and throughout the region, nor the impact print had on society, was inevitable. In addition, Islamicate societies, Egypt included, were not “deficient” in terms of the mode or chronology of print’s spread. Finally, we should not speak of a direct transition—or a clean break—from manuscript to print. The latter, she argues convincingly, borrowed in significant ways from the production model of the former. Private printing in nineteenth-century Cairo was, like manuscript copying, for-profit, clustered around Al-Azhar, and based on commission. An author generally approached a printer with the text he wanted to see in print.

What differed between manuscript copying and printing was the element of risk. A printer produced not one or a few copies of a text but many. Therefore, Kathryn explains in “Political Economy,” the scale of the operation “raised the stakes of commissioning” insofar as there were new kinds of expenses associated with the storage and sale of this greater volume of material. “Whereas a manuscript commissioner and a copyist would be matched one-to-one in a chain that linked a text to its consumer and producer directly,” Kathryn writes, “a print commissioner assumed the uncertainty associated with unstable demand for the text that they paid to reproduce” (29).

Whereas another scholar might be content to explain the mechanics of this model, Kathryn asks what this assumption of risk meant for personal and professional relationships between the people who wrote and the people who printed. For most of the 1860s, it seems, Musa Kastali and Shaykh Hasan were congenial collaborators. But by 1871, when Kastali’s lawyer penned the treatise defending his client and impugning the shaykh, that relationship had turned irrevocably rocky. The printer had fronted costs, expecting to be repaid in full by the commissioning author. However, by Kastali’s lawyer’s account at least, Shaykh Hasan had eventually fallen nearly 4,000 Egyptian pounds in debt to the printer (33).

Even as “Political Economy” draws us into the details of the two men’s dispute, it never loses sight of what these interpersonal dynamics say about the relationship between printing and society at large. The 1870s, when Musa Kastali printed his treatise against the Azhari shaykh who hadn’t paid Kastali his due, were a transformative decade for the production of ‘public’ knowledge in Egypt. By the end of the decade, newspapers were proliferating rapidly, leading generations of historians of media to take the very late 1870s/early 1880s as year zero in the history of a mass Arabic press that Egypt would come to dominate. Kathryn’s work helps us understand the mechanisms that made the impending transformations possible. In doing so, however, she disentangles “print” from “the press,” conjuring the multifarious lives of print as distinct from the news boom of the century’s final decades.

As I wrestled last spring with how to cast the 1870s in my research, I sought Kathryn’s advice as I had done many times before. “From my vantage point,” she told me gently in one of our last email exchanges, “journals in [the mid-1870s] are not ‘the press’ but an extension of books and people who are part of the political project started by Mehmed ‘Ali.” She agreed that the historiography of print culture had “totally skimmed over” the 1870s but assured me this would soon no longer be the case. “I’m working on my 1870s chapter right now and trying to redress this gap,” she promised. “I see the period as a breaking point for what follows in the late 1870s onward. This is the last narrative chapter I’m writing—it’s the end of my story as told on the ground.”

I eagerly awaited the publication of this chapter and the doubtless brilliant book in which it was to be the final episode. More than that, I—all of us here---looked forward immensely to the many future chapters of her life and work that will remain unwritten.