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The Camel and the Aeroplane

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Education, Class and Religion in Two Egyptian Films
Crossing the Bridge

In 1992, when I was a nineteen-year-old year student abroad at The American University in Cairo, I left the student hostel in Zamalek, an elite district in downtown Cairo known for its plethora of foreign embassies, art galleries, five-star hotels and trendy restaurants, and moved across the Nile to Imbaba, a neighborhood The New York Times once described as "a sprawling Cairo slum." I had just gotten married, and my new husband – an Egyptian student of political science and fellow AUCian – was as broke as I was. Though we both came from middle-class backgrounds, both of us had parents who were going through financial crises: mine were getting a divorce back in America; his had been trapped in Kuwait during the Iraqi invasion and had lost their life savings. If we wanted to stay in school, and be together, we needed to find cheaper living quarters. I didn't know one Cairo neighborhood from another, but he was studying Muslim/Christian clashes and suggested Imbaba, a neighborhood known for its religious tension. "It'll be interesting," he assured me. He was right.

After an evening of haggling in coffee shops we found a small, three-room apartment in the center of the district, which we bought for $600 – almost all of our combined savings. The floors were made of dried mud, and the concrete walls were streaked with dried blood. (We were told that before becoming our apartment it had been a slaughterhouse.) We managed to accumulate a mattress, one broken mirror, a table and two chairs, and a kerosene stove, all of which had been discarded from local furniture shops. We also had a portable black-and-white television that he had borrowed from an elderly aunt. It was humble, but it was home.

Four months after we moved in, the secularist writer Farag Foda was assassinated by members of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya ("The Islamic Group"), an Islamist organization that had its roots in Islamic Jihad – the organization responsible for the assassination of Anwar Sadat – and before that, The Muslim Brotherhood. (The Muslim Brotherhood, by far the largest Islamist organization in Egypt, had renounced violence in the 1970s.) Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya was based in Imbaba. Our neighborhood was soon surrounded by police and military vehicles, with no one allowed in or out.

This event was followed by six months of clashes between government forces and Imbaba residents, culminating in the infamous "December siege," a raid that lasted five weeks and led to the arrest of over a thousand men. On December 8, 1992, the police instituted a curfew that cut Imbaba off from the rest of Cairo, deployed tear gas to break up the rioting that

followed, and then swept through the narrow lanes, destroying homes and smashing shop windows as they rounded up residents. Men with beards were stopped indiscriminately. If a wanted suspect could not be found, they arrested other family members, anyone they found at home: a man's wife, his mother, even children as young as eight. Some of the women were raped in custody, where they were held as bait for wanted men. Fourteen thousand troops soon occupied the district.

Two years later Human Rights Watch catalogued the government's actions in Imbaba during those weeks in December. The men who were detained, they reported, were tortured during interrogations: beaten with coiled wires, electrocuted, or forced to stand outside naked while they were doused with cold water. Soldiers also engaged in falanga, an ancient practice in which the soles of the victim's feet are bound, pulled back, and then beaten with sticks or copper wires. Nerve endings transmit pain signals up the legs and straight into the spine, but the body is pulled rigid and unable to absorb the shock. Unlike whippings, falanga has the advantage of leaving few scars, so providing evidence after the fact becomes a matter of the victim's word against the torturer's (Human Rights Watch, 1994).

Unsurprisingly, the siege backfired. Young men who were previously apolitical became radicalized in prison. Even residents who had not been affected by the raids increasingly saw their relationship with the government as one of "us" versus "them." Unlike older, more established baladi districts in Cairo, where families may have lived in the same neighborhood for generations, most of Imbaba's residents were recent arrivals from rural Egypt. Its population had grown from just under six thousand in 1947 to approximately one million by the mid-1990s (Abdo, 2000). Because Cairo is not a city of skyscrapers, the only option has been to pack residents more and more tightly – a reality satellite photos capture well, where Imbaba appears to be a solid mass of concrete, uninterrupted by parks, pools, traffic circles, or vegetation. Despite its location in the absolute center of Cairo, the government had neither the interest nor the ability to provide Imbaba with many social services. The sewer system was especially notorious, cobbled together with makeshift pipes that broke down so reliably that the residents jokingly referred to the area as "Little Venice." But the school system suffered most of all.

Before moving to Imbaba I'd had no special interest in education. Like most people I saw it as an unproblematic positive. When I thought about the issue at all, I assumed the main obstacle in developing countries was that not enough schools were being built and that not enough children were enrolled in the ones that existed. Inside a school one could tinker with specifics – the use of one curriculum over another, the pros and cons of tracking and mainstreaming special needs students – but the main goal, of course, was to get as many people as possible as many years of education as possible. I was studying international development and had heard many development practitioners bemoan the way organizations such as the World Bank and IMF prioritized economic development over human development. Education, they argued, should receive much greater attention than

it had been given; provide the infrastructure for schools and birth rates would go down, life expectancy would go up, women would become leaders in their communities, and, in the case of the Middle East, the attraction to radical Islamist movements would decrease. Aside from the cost, I could not imagine how this proposal could be considered controversial. Schooling may not solve all problems, but certainly it would play a positive role wherever it was implemented. It was in Imbaba, however, that I met Mohammed, a nine-year-old boy who would cause me to re-think some of these assumptions.

Mohammed was the nephew of our upstairs neighbor. Both his parents had died when he was small, so he lived with his grandmother, aunt, and uncle in a two-room apartment a few lanes away from ours. Although he had been passed to the fourth grade, he could not read or write and could only recognize a few letters of the alphabet. His uncle, who had become friends with my husband, complained of having to track the boy down every day, since lately he'd stopped going to school entirely and had started hanging around an auto parts store where the shopkeeper gave him a few piasters to make small deliveries to customers. Although the family no doubt appreciated any extra income, they also valued education – at least in theory.

In practice, the public school Mohammed attended operated in three shifts, with seventy students to each chaotic classroom. The teacher was often absent, and when he did come he was notorious for beating his students. Mohammed, quite reasonably, did not see the point of the whole endeavor. But his family was in a bind: only one generation removed from the village, they had come to Cairo to have all the opportunities and advantages of urban life, and education for the children was a cornerstone of that ambition. To encourage Mohammed to drop out of school would be unthinkable. Yet they could not afford private education, and investing the time, energy, and money into keeping him a dedicated pupil in a public school that was offering him so little in return? This, too, seemed hard to justify when the family was struggling as it was.

The books I was reading at the time, the ones that advocated the expansion of educational access in countries like Egypt, had little to say about what a good school would look like. They simply talked of "schools," period. Nor did they spend much time on the opportunity cost of education. In Mohammed's family's case, keeping him in school not only meant the loss of his income from the auto parts store – an income that would presumably grow as he reached adolescence – but also the cost of school books and supplies, the cost maintaining a household in Cairo, the emotional and financial toll of living away from the support system they'd left behind in the village, and, for Mohammed himself, the psychological toll of participating in a system where he was humiliated and physically assaulted in exchange for an education that was barely beyond kindergarten level. From my new vantage point in Imbaba, the economists and sociologists who sang the praises of schools as the solution to all social ills now seemed deeply out of touch.

I returned to Egypt for a few shorter trips during the 1990s, and again, most recently, in the summer of 2008. In retrospect it was clear that the 1990s had been a watershed time in modern Egyptian history, a time when the Islamist movement consolidated the power it had built since the Sadat era. Although the revolution al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya had hoped for did not come to pass – in part, no doubt, because of the mass arrests that followed the 1997 attack in Luxor, which killed fifty-nine tourists, four Egyptians, and wounded twenty-six others – Islamists did succeed in gaining majorities in many of the nation's leading professional associations, including the Egyptian Bar Association (Wickham, 1997), winning a surprising twenty percent of parliamentary seats in Egypt's 2005 election (Knell, 2008), and, as many Cairenes told me in 2008, in contributing to a more generally conservative climate in the country. In the Western press, the Islamist movement is often presented in purely religious terms, with reporters combing the Qur'an and other ancient texts for evidence that Islamic tradition justifies, or even demands, a violent defense on the part of its followers. The socioeconomic factors that draw young people to such organizations receive comparatively less attention, and when they do they are often presented uncritically, painting Islamist extremism as a problem of "the poor," generically. Under both explanations there is an assumed rift between "tradition" and "modernity."

But as Ayubi (1991) writes, "The Islamists are not angry because the aeroplane has replaced the camel; they are angry because they could not get on to the aeroplane" (p. 177). In his meticulously researched study of the Islamist movement from 1967 to the 1980s, he finds that most of the young men attracted to such groups are neither the rural poor nor members of the urban working- and middle-classes, but rather those whose families are making the transition between the two statuses. They are families who have, at great personal cost, left the village and moved to the urban shanties of cities like Cairo, where they have enrolled their children in public schools: in other words, families like Mohammed's, and many others in Imbaba. In previous generations the sons of such families would have worked the land alongside their fathers and eventually inherited a patch of it. In the city, the boys do no productive work until they are in their mid-twenties at the earliest, a trade-off families are willing to make in exchange for the promise of their children's economic advancement once they complete their educations. When that promise fails to materialize, the frustration of these young men goes beyond the stress of poverty – it is, according to Ayubi, the frustration of failed expectations.

After the 1952 revolution, Nasser guaranteed a free university education to all Egyptians and a job to every high school and college graduate. By the mid-1980s it was clear there would be no hope of making good on this promise. Although education was still free, classrooms were severely overcrowded and Egypt, with its young population, had become overwhelmed with graduates waiting for their government jobs to materialize (Sayed, 2006). The result was a growing number of young, idle men, unemployed and living with their parents and siblings in some of Cairo's most neglected neighborhoods, unable to marry or save for an apartment of their own. It is this transitional sector from which the Islamist movement draws the majority of its supporters, maintains Ayubi, with the

expansion of government-funded schooling playing a crucial but surprisingly negative role.

Thus we can see that a major source of frustration is over the unfulfilled promise of education. Individuals and families go through tremendous sacrifices to enable the young to acquire higher education in one of the vastly expanding universities, in the expectation that the qualification will improve their lot – but it does not because they end up being unemployed, or poorly employed (and poorly paid). (Ayubi, 1991, p. 162)

Below I discuss two Egyptian films in light of Ayubi's thesis and my own experience living in Imbaba during the 1990s. Although education is not the focus of either film, both stories reflect popular understanding of the problems poor and lower-middle-class Egyptians face when encountering the country's bloated, ineffectual educational system, as well as the way education, as currently constructed in Cairo's lower-income districts, is not always a buffer against the poverty, corruption, and violence that poor students face in other aspects of their lives, but can in fact be implicated in perpetuating these cycles. To this end the films serve as a useful entry point into current research on educational access and attainment in Egypt, particularly as they are related to the attraction of Islamist politics.

"We'll find people like us": Religion and Class in
The Yacoubian Building

The Yacoubian Building ("Omaret yakobean"), by Alaa Al Aswany (2006), became the best-selling novel in the Arab world in the two years after it was published and has since been translated into over a dozen languages. Four years later it was made into an epic three-hour movie starring Adel Imam, Youssra, and other famous actors well-known to Arab audiences (Hamed, 2006). It is believed to be the most expensive and highest grossing film in Egyptian cinematic history (Siegal, 2005).

The movie, like the book before it, was quickly deemed controversial for its frank portrayal of homosexuality, but what was perhaps more surprising was its depiction of police brutality and state-sanctioned torture: ordinarily, a film so critical of the Egyptian government would not be given the green light by Egypt's censorship authority (Curry, 2008). Because the film tightly follows the plot of the novel, and because it is the plot I am concerned with (rather than the cinematography, literary narrative, or other stylistic issues), I refer here to both the movie and the book unless otherwise noted.

The story revolves around the lives of a cast of characters who live in the Yacoubian Building, a formerly grand apartment building in central Cairo that has slid into decay since it was first built in the 1930s. The Yacoubian Building's tenants include Zaki and Dawlat el-Dessouki, aristocratic siblings now fighting each other over their father's inheritance; Hagg Azzam, a nouveau riche businessman and hopeful politician who has secretly taken a second wife; Hatem, the gay editor of Cairo's French-language newspaper Le Caire and Abd

Rabbuh, the young married soldier from Upper Egypt he seduces; Busayna, a shopgirl trying to support her mother and siblings after the death of her father; and Taha, the son of the building's doorkeeper (bowab), an excellent student who longs to enter the Police Academy. It is Taha I will focus on here, and the role that corruption in the educational system plays in deciding his fate.

Like many buildings in Cairo, residents of the Yacoubian Building occupy all economic classes and have no choice but to be confronted with the vast gaps in wealth that make up Egyptian society. While the ground floor is used as a spacious office by the wealthy Zaki el-Dessouki, the building's rooftop, once a storage space, has been converted into a mini-slum in the face of Cairo's housing shortage, a space where residents like Busayna's impoverished family have sketched out a life for themselves in two bare rooms. Taha el-Shazli, as the son of the doorkeeper, occupies the lowest station in the building's class hierarchy, a fact that becomes a point of contention among the residents as he outperforms the wealthier children in the building:

He has applied himself to memorizing everything for the general secondary examination and as a result obtained a score of 98 percent (Humanities) without private tutoring (apart from a few review groups at the school, for which his father had only just been able to come up with the money)… When Taha enrolled in general secondary school and continued to do well, [the building's tenants] would send for him on exam days and entrust him with difficult tasks that would take a long time, tipping him generously to tempt him, while concealing a malign desire to keep him from his studies. (Al Aswany, 2002, pp. 16-17)

Lacking the twenty-thousand pound bribe that well-to-do families pay to ensure their children's acceptance into the Police Academy, Taha must rely on his exam scores alone to earn admission. He performs well, but at the end of the personal interview he is asked what his father does for a living and he must admit that he is the son of a doorkeeper. His application is denied.

Meanwhile Busayna, his fiancée, finds herself sexually harassed at yet another job, but has been advised by her mother and a girlfriend to endure it because the family cannot afford to lose her income. Incensed that she is knowingly placing herself in this situation, Taha demands she quit. She refuses, and the couple's relationship begins to unravel.

Humiliated that he cannot afford to marry Busayna and provide for them and for her family, and unable to realize his dream of becoming a police officer, Taha grudgingly enters the Faculty of Economics and Political Science at Cairo University. Once there he is embarrassed at his shabby clothing and decides not to befriend anyone lest they ask about his background. Soon, however, he is approached by a student member of al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya. This was the first acquaintance Taha made and in fact from the first moment, just as oil separates from water and forms a distinct layer on top, so the rich students separated themselves from the poor and made up numerous closed coteries formed of

graduates from foreign language schools and those with their own cars, foreign clothes, and imported cigarettes. It was to these that the most beautiful and best-dressed girls gravitated. The poor students, on the other hand, clung to one another like terrified mice, whispering to one another in an embarrassed way. (Al Aswany, 2002, p. 91) In the film this scene takes place in a lecture hall, where Taha is sitting alone, watching a group of wealthier students who are laughing and chatting in the front of the room. He is joined by Khaled Abdel-Raheem, a student from Upper Egypt :

Khaled: I sat with them at first but didn't like what they were saying.
Taha: What were they saying?
Khaled: Talking about their moms and dads. Their fathers are Deputy Ministers, engineers or judges. One of the moms is a UN expert. I was afraid they'd ask my dad's job so I came to sit with you. What's your father's job?
Taha: He's a janitor. A caretaker [bowab]. And yours?
Khaled: A cobbler. We have a little shoe shop.
Taha: If they knew that the university accepted the sons of doormen and cobblers they'd have given up. How will we get along with such people?
Khaled: We'll find people like us. (Hamed, 2006)

The scene then cuts to a mosque near campus. Finding that the other students in al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya are the only ones who do not ridicule his humble origins, Taha quickly becomes an enthusiastic member of the organization. Soon he is arrested at a demonstration at the university and taken to prison, where he is raped and tortured. Profoundly shaken by this experience, and longing for revenge against his torturers, he gives up his studies after his release and begins training at a camp in the desert, eventually being chosen to take part in a mission to assassinate Egypt's National Security officer. He does this, and is killed himself in the process.

Discussion

The story takes place in the mid-1990s, at the height of political tensions between Islamists and the Mubarak administration. Between 1992 and 1999, approximately one thousand people were killed in Islamist attacks and another twenty thousand arrested. Although Islamists had been active throughout the 1980s, most dramatically with the assassination of Sadat, it was in 1991 that they began to consolidate their power and organize a violent campaign against Egypt's tourist industry. Because Egypt was dependent on tourist dollars to repay its foreign debt, and because Mubarak was dependent on foreign (particularly American) aid, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya shrewdly calculated that a blow to tourism would be a blow to Mubarak. If they could force tourists out of the country, they reasoned, Egypt would be forced to default on its debt, American aid would dry up, the country's economy would collapse, the ensuing chaos would force Mubarak out of power, and the Islamists would take over. To this end they engaged in a series of attacks in areas frequented by tourists such as the Egyptian Museum, bookstores, tourist buses passing through Asyut on

the way to Luxor, hotels and cafes popular with foreigners, theaters, banks, and apartment buildings in expatriate neighborhoods. By the end of 1992 tourism had fallen –by as much as seventy-five percent, according to some sources – and there was real concern that Egypt would follow Algeria's example into a civil war between those who supported the government and the advocates of an Islamist revolution (Ibrahim, 2002; Napoli, 1993; Sayed, 2006).

Targeting tourists also worked on a symbolic level. Although they were chosen because of the foreign currency they brought into the country – that is, for pragmatic reasons – depicting the conflict as one of "traditional Muslims" vs. "the secular West" served the rhetorical strategies of both the Islamists, who wanted to portray themselves as the keepers of Islamic identity, and their opponents, who decried Islamic tradition as resistant to change. Both readings concentrated on cultural differences between the two groups , obscuring the socioeconomic gap between them.

The Yacoubian Building aptly portrays the mixing of classes, a feature Ayubi found to be a significant source of stress among recent rural-to-urban migrants. In his analysis of the backgrounds of 280 Islamic Jihad members accused in Sadat's assassination, he found that although young men from Upper Egypt were disproportionately represented in the sample , only two percent of them were farmers. If it were only poverty, and the desperation that comes with it, that served as an attraction to Islamist militancy, farmers would have presumably constituted a larger percentage of the accused because the peasant classes are among the poorest in Egypt. Instead, he found that Islamist activity was much more common in the popular quarters of Cairo and other cities where migrants were slightly better off (e.g. workers and students) but were confronted with gross wealth inequities they would not have faced in their villages. "One of the characteristics of late, uneven and dependent capitalist 'development'," he writes, "is that the rates of growth in urbanisation, education and bureaucratisation are never matched by similar rates of growth in industrialisation" (1991, p. 171). Thus migrants are presented with all the promises of a middle class lifestyle – education, career, family, the accumulation of consumer goods – but are inhibited from actually attaining them. Lacking a stable route to (this definition of) success, and denied the status they would have had in traditional village culture, they are pressed to search for alternative ways of realizing their identity and maintaining their self-respect. A conservative version of Islam, which stresses the innate equality of all human beings in the eyes of God and the necessity of fighting against injustice, is, for many young men, just the answer.

Taha's failed relationship with Busayna is also significant. Singerman (1997) discusses the "objective of reproducing the family," a seemingly apolitical issue that is in fact at the core of many other issues that are recognized as having political value, since for most Egyptian families the marriage of one's children is the goal to which all spare resources are directed: "While marriage does not compete with screaming headlines on new economic projects, Palestinian autonomy, regional political alliances, or 'high politics,' it is one of

the most important issues around which 'low politics' is centered" (p. 15). It is, therefore, the key to understanding Egyptians' reactions to these "high" political topics.

Ignoring the material, social, and cultural struggle to reproduce the family makes it very difficult to understand why gender and sexual relations are so sensitive in Egypt, why housing costs are so high and yet so many apartments lay vacant, why migration is so critical to younger Egyptians, and why people riot over increases in the cost of bread and other commodities. A bread riot is not only a protest over prices or a government but a threat to the goal of reproducing the family. Raising the price of bread directly affects the ability of young people and their families to save money, and savings are directed, almost entirely among certain age cohorts, toward the goal of marriage. Marriage is a deeply held normative preference in Egypt (as self- expression or individual rights might be in other societies), and it allows young people to engage in affective and sexual relations after a closely supervised adolescence. Through marriage, one generation transfers its assets to another, and a couple gains some autonomy by creating a new household. (Singerman, 1997, p. 15)

Long engagements are acknowledged as an important contributing factor to the attraction of Islamist movements (Slackman, 2008). Not only do young unmarried and unemployed men have more time to engage in political activities, but the failure to marry by one's late twenties, as Singerman notes above, is to be an outsider to a "deeply held normative preference." While some women successfully fight against the expectation that they will marry early, preferring to finish their educations first , this should not be confused with the predicament of young couples who have completed their educations and do want to marry, but are unable to for financial reasons. Unlike the U.S. and many European countries, where the transition to adulthood typically happens in stages, it is unusual in Egypt for unmarried couples to date, much less live together, or even to begin their married lives without a fully-furnished apartment. Women are not expected to contribute to this expense, outside of any items they might collect as part of their trousseau. The main costs of marriage – the apartment, its furnishings, the dowry, and the cost of the wedding itself – are to be purchased by the groom, his family, and to a lesser extent the bride's father and brothers. This expectation continues after marriage, where the husband is assumed to be the breadwinner. He might receive "help" from his wife or her family, but this is generally regarded as extra, non-critical support. Men who become financially dependent on their wives are routinely criticized by both the bride and groom's family and often throughout the community at large (Singerman,1997).

Taha's predicament is thus one of gender as well as class. Although Busayna is also poor, and also discriminated against, there is no cultural expectation that she will provide for a family. Although in reality Egyptian women do often contribute to household expenses, either by working full-time or engaging in piecemeal work such as sewing for neighbors, to be a housewife (sitt al-beit) is the assumed, and preferred, role for most women in baladi

neighborhoods, a sign that her husband is a man of means and that she is worthy enough to be protected and supported (cf. Abu-Lughod, 1993; Early, 1993; Rugh, 1985; Singerman, 1997). The fact that Busayna works at all reflects poorly on Taha, not Busayna herself; as her fiancé he should be able to relieve her family's heavy economic burden or at least be moving in that direction. Losing his coveted position in the Police Academy, then, is not just a personal disappointment: it is a sign that he is, and perhaps always will be, a poor provider. The Islamist movement is one of the few spaces in urban Cairo that provides him with an alternative way of framing his identity. While the Police Academy may have shut him out, the doors to the mosque are always open.

"Study and he'll pass you": Infitah and Closed Doors

Closed Doors ("Al-abwab al-moghlaka") is a 1999 film from director Atef Hetata, the son of two prominent Egyptian activists, Sherif Hetata and Nawal El Saadawi, known internationally for their opposition to both Islamism and Western imperialism. In contrast to the blockbuster success of The Yacoubian Building, Closed Doors is a small, independent movie that won critical acclaim at film festivals in Venice, Thessaloniki, and Montpellier. Its backdrop, like that of The Yacoubian Building, is 1990s Cairo, but the focus stays tightly on just two characters: Mohammed Hussein and his mother, Fatma.

In the film's opening scene, Mohammed, a student in his last year of high school, is caught peeping through a crack in his classroom wall at a group of girls in the street below. His teacher, Mr. Mansour, chastises him for not paying attention in class, slaps his hands with a ruler, and sends him home with a warning not to return without his father. "He means his mommy," whispers another student, and the other boys snicker. Mohammed, we learn, lives alone with his mother on one of Cairo's rooftop shanties. His older brother went to fight in Iraq and is now missing and presumed dead; his father abandoned the family several years earlier. Mohammed rightly understands this incident as his teacher's way of coercing him into taking private lessons, a common practice among teachers who want to augment their small government salaries. His mother, however, cannot afford such an expense. She works as a maid and is already struggling to provide basic necessities for the family. "Study and he'll pass you," she advises her son. Mohammed, who longs to become an airline pilot, doubts that this will be enough. What was once a firm path – academic success, followed by university study and a middle-class career – is now in jeopardy.

Mohammed is also realizing that he is no longer a child, and that he, as an able-bodied young man, could be doing more to provide for the family than can his mother, a single and uneducated woman. Although she often lashes out against the older brother who abandoned them to go to Iraq, Mohammed also intuits her admiration for her older son's strength and decisiveness. Their relationship, once almost incestually close given the lack of privacy in their tiny rooftop apartment, has become tense as Mohammed has become increasingly intolerant of playing the role of the younger, "softer" son. He considers and then rejects the idea of going abroad as his brother did, and finds work instead selling

flowers and Kleenex on the street. This job in the informal sector, common in Cairo among street children and old women who have absolutely no other financial options, gives him a measure of freedom he did not find in school and earns him enough money to bring home food and small gifts for his mother, but does not bring him the self- respect he'd longed for. When his mother loses her housekeeping job he worries that she will follow in the footsteps of her friend and neighbor Zeinab, a sex worker, a woman to whom Mohammed is both attracted and repulsed.

Throughout this saga Mohammed has developed a relationship with the members of a nearby mosque, and it is only here that he finds no conflict between his ideal self-image and his external reality. Like Taha in The Yacoubian Building, the mosque, for Mohammed, is a space free of the class-based humiliation he faces in other aspects of his life, including school. Although he is not particularly religious, the brothers at the mosque provide him with community and services he cannot find elsewhere, including a study group, which he hopes will compensate for his inability to pay for private lessons.

Mr. Mansour, however, has other ideas. One afternoon he passes by Mohammed's small apartment, offering to tutor him for free. His mother eagerly accepts this favor, but Mohammed surmises that his teacher is only providing such a kindness because he is attracted to her. He begs her not to allow the man into their home, but she insists that they cannot afford to reject such an opportunity. Soon she and Mr. Mansour develop a relationship, one that infuriates Mohammed. To his mother Mr. Mansour may be a kindly gentleman who promises to bring a measure of financial and emotional security into their lives, but for Mohammed he is the man who scolds and shames him and threatens to usurp his role, already tenuous, as the only man in his mother's life.

Boldened by his newfound religiosity, Mohammed lectures his mother on wearing the headscarf, encourages her to abandon her friendship with Zeinab, and even brings the imam home one evening with a proposal of a wife for Mohammed and a husband for his mother. Fatma sends them away and fights bitterly with her son for suggesting such an arrangement. Obsessed now with separating her from Mr. Mansour, Mohammed follows them one afternoon and, upon finding them in bed together, stabs them both. The film ends with Mohammed fleeing his teacher's apartment through the back door, his future uncertain.

Discussion

Like The Yacoubian Building, Closed Doors is not a film about the educational system in Egypt. Yet Mohammed's fate, like Taha's, is inextricably tied to corruption in the schools. Both stories begin with young men who see education as a straightforward and uncomplicated route to future success – and see themselves as dedicated students – but are thwarted by circumstances beyond their control. Crucially, these circumstances are not ones that entice them away from school, but rather ones that impede their pathway

into it. In other words Taha and Mohammed are not indifferent scholars who must be coaxed back into a (presumably neutral) system that would serve their needs if only they applied themselves; on the contrary, they are excellent students who want to continue their educations, but cannot, because of inequities built into the system. Both characters begin with the hope, indeed assumption, that if they study and do well they will be rewarded. For Taha, this dream is crushed when he realizes his father's occupation will outweigh all other factors on his application to the Police Academy and that the only way around this is to pay a bribe he cannot afford. For Mohammed, it is the knowledge that whatever learning goes on in the classroom is irrelevant if he cannot pay for private lessons, i.e. bribe his teachers into passing him.

The issue of private tutoring is widely acknowledged as an educational crisis in Egypt. Hussein Kamel Bahaaeddin, Egypt's Minister of Education from the early 1990s until 2004, referred to "the private tutoring mafia" in a 1996 interview with Al-Ahram Weekly, Egypt's largest English- language newspaper. This comment, notes Sayed (2006), "became so dramatized in the media that the press published news about the private tutoring 'mafia' menacing the minister in person! Since then, the Egyptian media has associated the term 'mafia' with private tutoring" (p. 73).

Attempts to counter the private schooling situation have met with little success. Bahaaeddin made his remarks after promising, in 1992, to end the era of private lessons within five years. But his efforts only exacerbated the problem. In 1994 the Education Ministry launched a state- sponsored afterschool initiative designed to compete with private lessons. The program quickly found itself so overwhelmed with students that it resembled the same crowded conditions as the regular school day, a situation that added nothing to the quality of instruction and pushed those who could afford it back into the culture of private tutoring. The Ministry also split the thanawiyya amma testing schedule over two years, intending to alleviate the pressure of the final year; instead, students complained that their stress lasted twice as long, and doubled their need for tutors. A 1996 effort to tax teachers earning income from lessons was likewise unsuccessful, since tutors are paid directly by parents and have no incentive to report their earnings (Khalil, 1998).

The issue of teacher salaries is one of the key factors driving the private tutoring "mafia." In 2006, a first-year primary school teacher earned 151 Egyptian pounds per month (about $30); a secondary school teacher with ten years of experience earned 585 per month (about $117) (El- Sayed, 2006). Even with annual bonuses and taking into consideration Egypt's low cost of living, this is far below a living wage. (In comparison, a housekeeper can earn 50 pounds for one afternoon of cleaning, a doorkeeper 50 pounds per month per tenant, and a tutor 50 pounds per hour of private lessons.) In 2008 the Ministry of Education raised salaries, but tied them to a mandatory standardized exam required of all educators. In a preliminary round of testing ninety percent of teachers failed this test, suggesting it was being used by the Ministry as a gatekeeper in order to keep costs low while shifting public accountability to teachers themselves (Leila, 2008).

In the meantime, a two-tiered system has emerged. Private schools, particularly foreign language schools, attract the wealthiest students in Egypt and much of the middle class. Not only do these schools teach all subjects in foreign languages, but they typically follow a curriculum modeled after American and European school systems, use textbooks produced abroad, and bypass the thanawiyya amma by having students earn O Levels, A Levels, a French baccalaureate, and so forth. Although this relieves the public school system of a significant number of students, it also widens the gap between rich and poor and further politicizes the issue of Western influence on Egyptian institutions, recalling as it does the country's pre-1952 history when Egyptian students were often locked out of an education altogether vis-à-vis British colonial policy. (In Closed Doors, Zeinab asks Fatma if she's putting too much pressure on Mohammed by expecting him to become a pilot. Fatma responds that it's what Mohammed wants, and it's what people do. "Not people like us," Zeinab says.)

Egypt's independence movement advocated "Egypt for Egyptians," a democratizing slogan Nasser took to heart in his public rhetoric but often failed to implement consistently. Sadat's infitah policy was explicitly pro-Western in orientation, as is Mubarak's. As these policies have failed to meet the needs of lower-income students, who cannot afford private schooling and foreign language classes and who do not see their own experiences reflected in Western culture and curricula, the Islamists have provided an alternative:

In many urban slums and rural areas, Islamists have established charity clinics and private tutoring centers with minimal token fees, and direct contact with the population. In many cases they provide cheap garments and free books for students and have established tight networks of solidarity with the local populations. The final image of them was that of groups that had a sincere concern for the population with whom they shared and reinforced conservative religious values, compared to the state, which has been perceived as unresponsive, incompetent, unjust, and corrupt. The constant message given by fundamentalist groups to populations living in absolute poverty has been that the answer to the long-standing developmental and political crises and failures is an ethical revolution. And since ethical in a conservative traditional society means religious, then "Islam is the solution" to all developmental crises. (Sayed, 2006, p. 32)

Egypt's colonial history has also played a role in the modern construction of gender relations. Herbert Liebesny (1975) has described the colonial displacement of local law in majority- Muslim countries as five concentric circles, with commercial law on the outside, followed by penal law, real estate, contracts and torts, and finally family law at the center of the circle, the segment least affected by European influence. Since marriage, divorce, and other "private" matters had scant influence on Europeans' ability to turn a profit in the colonies, these matters were among the only indigenous legal institutions left largely intact in the wake of imperialism. Over time this innermost circle came to represent "authentic

Muslim identity" both inside and outside the Middle East, and anyone who sought change within that circle was suspected of working in consort with the colonizers to erode the last vestiges of a nation's Islamic character. This relationship continues today, with women's issues playing a disproportionate role in conversations around development and modernization. Indeed in the fringe elements of some Islamist groups, writes Ayubi, "the obsession with sex, women and the human body is so strong that it borders on the pathological" (1991, p. 44). Yet this "obsession" is not mere prurience, nor (simply) old-fashioned conservatism, but rather a system linked inexorably to Egypt's status as a postcolonial nation.

The headscarf is one of the starkest symbols of this difference between Arab and European customs. When Mohammed asks his mother to begin veiling, and, later, to end her friendship with Zeinab and marry one of the brothers from the mosque, he is not merely asserting male privilege or expressing a conservative view of religion (though he may be doing those things as well) – he is, primarily, asking her to adopt a particular political view and occupy a particular cultural space. Her approval is paramount to him, and we sense that if she were to acquiesce to this version of womanhood he would be relieved of some of the pressure to succeed by the standards of a rapidly developing secular society, a society which, at this point, has no role for him.

Conclusion

In my hunt for the key to Egypt's religious revival, I soon found that all roads led one way or another to Imbaba.
--Geneive Abdo, No god but God (2000, p. 26)

Todaro (1989), discussing what he terms "the cult of formal education" (p. 330), notes that a country's educational system cannot be divorced from the country's other development policies and priorities. A country that is corrupt or inegalitarian will likely have a school system that is corrupt or inegalitarian. A country that devotes its energy to "catching up" to the West will likely have a school system that favors its most elite and cosmopolitan students, a large portion of whom will subsequently migrate out of the country to seek their fortunes in the Western countries they've been taught to emulate, thereby contributing to the much-lamented "brain drain" of the Third World. And a country that perceives its poor and rural citizens as backwards and ineducable will likely have a school system that ignores or dramatically underserves students from those regions and those classes.

Yet these realities are rarely factored into the discussion around education, where "average number of years in school" is still the traditional method of comparing one population to another. Education is considered a human right, and justifiably so. But education should not be confused with schooling. For one thing, education occurs throughout the life cycle and in many arenas of one's life, not only within school walls. But more importantly, for the

purposes of this discussion, bad schools do not produce real education, and – as I hope to have shown here – can in fact produce outcomes that directly contradict a nation's goals vis-à-vis development, pluralism, stability, and its attempts to foster a higher standard of living and higher quality of life for its people. On paper, my neighbor's nephew Mohammed had had 4.6 years of schooling. In reality, he was still illiterate. Had his family sacrificed nothing for this, it might not have mattered. If he were attending a village school he might have picked up some information about health, hygiene, and the world around him, and then, in adolescence, gone on to take his place on the family farm, no worse off than he was when he started. But that was not so. In fact his entire extended family had marshaled scarce resources toward the goal of keeping Mohammed in school, and his poor outcome threatened to destabilize their security and by extension Egypt's, when his case was repeated hundreds of thousands of times throughout the country.

Does this mean schooling should be de-emphasized? Todaro is cautious:

> "[I]t is the "quality" of education (i.e., the quality of teaching, facilities, and curricula) and not its quantity alone (years of schooling) that best explains differential earnings and productivity. The implication is that governments should spend more to upgrade existing schools and less to expand the number of school places – that is, they should "deepen" the investment in human capital rather than extend it to more people. Unfortunately, this raises serious equity questions…" (p. 337)

Indeed it does. But it need not be either/or. Todaro's solution is to bring schools in line with a nation's development needs and its capacity to absorb their graduates. This, in his view, would involve greater public expenditure on primary and middle schools, more privatization at the high school and tertiary levels, a better balance between urban and rural development to alleviate the pressure of overcrowding in urban areas, bringing the curriculum in line with local needs (rather than a single-minded focus on passing national exams), curbing the brain drain, introducing quotas to ensure low-income students have access to schooling at all levels, and a demand that employers stop using years of schooling as a way to differentiate between candidates for jobs where higher education is not required.

Though these points are well-taken, they still reflect a top-down stance to education planning. Zaalouk (2004) advocates another approach. In her survey of the community schools movement in Upper Egypt, she finds that children perform better, and at less cost to the government or funding organization, when the community is an active part of the school's design and implementation.

In community schools, parents and community members are involved at every stage of the planning process. School buildings in rural areas are ideally located on land donated by influential villagers, a practice that both reduces cost and fosters buy-in from other families

in the village. The curriculum is child-directed and in keeping with local priorities, rather than tied to national exams. "Facilitators" (not "teachers") come from the local population, and their feedback is encouraged as an organic part of the training process. The boundary between school and home is fluid, with schools offering literacy and health classes for parents, as well as the sharing of facilities (e.g. a space equipped with sewing machines to be used by women in the village). Violence, either between students or between students and facilitators, is prohibited. Decisions are made democratically, with a special emphasis on avoiding nepotism and favoritism. Zaalouk notes that in more than one case an incompetent facilitator was asked to leave even though she was the relative of a donor to the school. In another case, the school community worked to retain a good facilitator after a feud between her family and a rival clan left her feeling pressured to resign rather than continue to work with members of the "enemy" family. Decisions like this communicated the prioritization of students' needs over other concerns; that is, the school was not permitted to be used as a place where favors were granted or clandestinely revoked. However, it is also clear that this process would not have been respected by the community if the school's facilitators and administrators had not first engaged in a great deal of outreach to the families and the village at large, and worked to include them in the culture of the school and to become invested in its success.

In other words, community schools have begun to do what mosques have always done: reach out to whole families, respect their concerns, and develop programs in keeping with community priorities. In the 1990s Egypt had an unemployment rate of twenty percent. Eighty-five percent of this was educated unemployment, the result of what has been called Egypt's "diploma disease" (Sayed, 2006). In neighborhoods like Imbaba, the mosque has been the only institution capable of absorbing these graduates. While the Islamists deserve credit for the services they have brought into a long-neglected district, their success also points to a dysfunctional school system that is in sore need of remedy.

Egypt's First Lady Suzanne Mubarak, in an interview with the daily paper al-Gumhuriya, explained the need for outreach and shared responsibility in the development of new schools along the community model:

> [The community schools movement] enabled deprived communities to get an education, with special emphasis on the girls in the Sa'id . It has established 200 schools since it began in 1992, through a partnership between the MOE , UNICEF, and NGOs. There must be a real balance and sharing of authority and responsibility between the central government, the local councils, communities, and NGOs. The local councils should coordinate between the central government and the beneficiaries. Decentralization will not occur unless the central government strongly encourages the local councils to enter into negotiation with it. It is only then that the local councils will become agents of real change. (Zaalouk, 2004, p. 154)

Caution is necessary here, too, of course. "Shared authority" and "decentralization" can become buzzwords used to justify dumping the cost of education, but none of the agency, on communities already struggling with poverty and illiteracy. What makes the schools in Zaalouk's study so innovative, however, is the willingness of advisors and administrators to defer to students and their families – to see them as sources of authority – and to build schools based on Freirian-style inclusiveness and respect.

Community schools are not the only model for reform, nor should they be. But their success does speak to the need to see schools as part of a system. Traditional measures of educational success, which prioritize the number of schools built and the number of students enrolled in them, without due attention to the quality of learning that goes on inside the classroom, do not acknowledge the myriad forces impacting students' lives or the ways in which inequity outside the classroom can be exacerbated, not mitigated, if a child's school is indifferent to those inequities or even active in perpetuating them.

End Notes

1. I use the term "Islamist" here as distinct from "Muslim." A Muslim activist, educator, or writer is one who is Muslim by birth or conviction but whose views may reflect a range of political opinions, including the advocacy of secular frameworks. An Islamist, in contrast, advocates the adoption of a political system based on Islamic principles, usually in response to what he or she perceives as the corruption of secular regimes. I avoid the word "fundamentalism" to refer to religious extremism because it is a term borrowed from Christianity not applicable in an Islamic context.

2. Traditional, popular, working-class.

3. Like many developing countries, the rural/urban split is considered significant in Egypt, with those from Upper Egypt – the southern part of the country, mainly agricultural – facing more poverty and discrimination than their counterparts from Cairo and Alexandria in the north.

4. For example, one widespread rumor in early 1993 was that al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya members were throwing acid on the legs of girls wearing short skirts. Although there was no evidence of this, it was consistent with the belief that Islamists were incensed at the moral lapses of Westerners and Westernized Egyptians, rather than upset at government corruption, inadequate social services, and so on.

5. This included both those living in Upper Egypt at the time of their arrest, and those who had recently moved from rural Upper Egypt to urban areas

6. See Abu-Lughod (1993) for a wonderful case study of one such young woman, and the

many obstacles she faced in order to obtain this goal.

7. Egypt's school-leaving exam, akin to the German Abitur or the American high school diploma.

8. "Infitah" means "open door," and referred to Sadat "opening the door" to privatization and foreign investment, particularly Western investment.

9. Upper Egypt

10. Ministry of Education

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