

## BOOK REVIEW

**Linda Herrera, *Educating Egypt: Civic Values and Ideological Struggles*, ISBN pb 978-1-6490-3102-0, hb 978-1-6490-3169-3, 2022, Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 256 pages.**

*Educating Egypt* offers a topical and compelling account written against the backdrop of immense changes taking place within Egypt's 'new' education system. What makes this book unique is that it traces Herrera's research trajectories from being a postgraduate researcher conducting an ethnographic study of a Cairene school in the early 1990s, to becoming a key consultant in Egypt's efforts to reform and digitise its education system. Despite this involvement, she is under no illusions regarding the difficulties facing Egypt's youth in accessing an empowering and just education. The book aims to trace 'the everyday practices, policy ideas, and ideological and political battles relating to education from the era of nation building in the twentieth century to the age of digital disruption in the twenty-first' (p.1), with the main theme being how schooling and education, more broadly, 'have consistently mirrored larger political, economic, and cultural trends and competing ideas about what constitutes the "good society", the "good citizen", and the "educated person"' (ibid.). At first glance, a challenging feat given Egypt's complex history, nonetheless, remarkably achieved in an accessible and engaging manner.

In addition to an introductory chapter that illustrates the key issues shaping Herrera's oeuvre, the book is divided into four parts. Part One traces her ethnographic work presenting a vivid portrayal of the everyday workings of a girls' preparatory school in the early 1990s; a period shaped by the First Gulf War, the growth of Islamist influence on education, and Egypt's Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Programme (ERSAP). Chapter One, aptly entitled *An Ethnographer's Orientation*, illustrates the dilemmas and delicate balances that have to be negotiated within the Egyptian context. A reflection that is contemporary to ethnographers in 2022. Chapter Two focuses on a unique feature of Egyptian schools: The *Tabur*. The morning assembly that 'brings together the entire school community, the body politic, in a ritualistic performance of nationalism, discipline, and community building' (p.35).

In Chapter Three, gender is utilised as a lens to examine the school as 'a space of political socialisation and integration into middle class urban society' (p.50). Herrera focuses on the subject of Home Economics which, at the time, was compulsory for all female students at the preparatory level. She argues that through unpacking the subject's associated hidden curriculum and ideological underpinnings, one is able to understand how traditional gender roles are maintained and middle-class consumer culture embraced. This, problematically, 'did not reflect the lived reality of students from predominantly urban poor and lower middle-class sectors' (p.60) where 'middle-class sensibilities implicit in the home economics framework...played out in a manner that accentuated class differences and set students apart' (p.65).

Chapter Four shifts the lens towards the steady decline of teaching as a respected profession in Egypt. Unable to earn a liveable wage, working in difficult conditions, and suffering from a deteriorating social

status, many teachers had to resort to giving private lessons, with some having to draw on ‘a sadistic arsenal of hitting, insulting, and psychologically abusing students to bully them into taking private lessons’ (p.77). Chapter Five builds on this by focusing on another vital factor contributing to the growth of private lessons: high-stakes exams. This has inevitably led to the formation of a ‘shadow education system’ placing a huge financial burden on Egyptians. This conundrum is pertinently summarised when Herrera argues that ‘The shadow education system exists and thrives in an environment where examinations are sacrosanct. Private tutors act as high priests and priestesses who prepare students to enter the temples of examination rooms, where futures and life chances are determined’ (p.87).

Part Two, entitled *Political Islam and Education*, consists of three chapters based on Herrera’s doctoral research on private Islamic schools. Chapter Six showcases the Egyptian state’s conflict with Islamist militancy and how it played out in the education system leading to education becoming further engrained within Egypt’s security apparatus. In doing so, the chapter offers an overview of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) which ‘provides an important context for understanding the heightened securitisation of Egyptian education from the 1990s into the 2000s’ (p.102). Herrera additionally outlines how, in the process of purging schools of Islamist influence, the Egyptian government inadvertently contributed to the rise of private Islamic schools as part of its privatisation push. This served to exacerbate the ongoing conflict to control official school knowledge.

Chapter Seven offers a deeper analysis of how these private Islamic schools were able to cultivate alternative ideas about civic belonging and group identity. By focusing on three schools, Herrera illustrates how, although different ‘in terms of class affiliations,

educational vision, and business models, they all shared to some degree a recognition of themselves as working toward a counternationalist project' (p.126). One that does not necessarily reject Egyptian identity, but advocates a notion of citizenship based on being a particular kind of Muslim. Chapter Eight, the shortest chapter, sheds light on 'downveiling', the shift by Muslim girls and women to less concealing and conservative forms of Islamic dress and changing embodied religious practices. Downveiling should be viewed as a dynamic and non-linear process representing 'citizenship in action' where young women push boundaries and reshape norms.

Part Three on *Youth in a Changing Global Order* consists of four chapters connecting education to empire to 'interrogate the effects of the post-Cold War global order on education systems and the teaching profession' (p.136). Chapter Nine focuses on Mubarak's regime and his proclamations that the 1990s represented Egypt's 'Education Decade'; one that witnessed an impressive quantitative growth in terms of state education budgets, schools built, and enrolment numbers, that, nonetheless, was not reflected in Egypt's performance in developmental indices. Herrera specifically points to how these educational reforms hardly paid attention to youth, let alone involved them in the process. The section on the politics of curriculum reform highlights, I believe, an issue that is scarcely paid attention to. Namely, USAID's role in influencing curricular reform in the region and its push for a global citizenship that downplays issues of 'global power, inequality, and geopolitics, but rather serve[s] as a way to erase and mute these issues' (p.147).

Chapter Ten follows two Egyptian youth and illustrates their disparate yet overlapping future hopes and concerns. These interviews were conducted prior to 2011 and puts into perspective the circumstances leading to the Egyptian Uprisings and aims to dispel the myth that

the immediate challenges facing youth are the spread of Islamist movements and radicalism. Rather, the key issues revolve around the scarcity of jobs and the absence of justice in education, employment, and government accountability. Chapter Eleven focuses on the immediate period following Mubarak's in February 2011 and chronicles the changes in Egyptian youth's 'digital' engagement in public life within and beyond schools and universities. The chapter also warns against considering this as a panacea to challenge the existing education system given the digital inequality facing many Egyptians.

Chapter Twelve employs Guy Standing's 'precariat' to argue that youth in the region have similarly been affected by the global crisis leading to growing anger, anomie, anxiety, and alienation. Here, Herrera critiques prescriptive models of development (in particular, the 2016 Arab Human Development Report) that dismiss youth as agents of change capable of realising new forms of social, cultural, and political action. She also critiques mainstream (read: neoliberal) prescriptions for reforming education and youth unemployment which 'unproblematically correlat[e] education with jobs and the demands of the labour market' (p.188).

Part Four questions whether we are capable of re-imagining the future of schools. Herrera argues that Covid-19, alongside the Egyptian government's push to digitally transform education, has opened up avenues to 'disrupt' how we teach and learn. Nonetheless, and in keeping with earlier caveats, she argues that 'The act of upending the older education system and replacing it with a different one does not necessarily "fix the old problems" or lead to improved outcomes for the majority of the population' (p.199). If education consistently mirrors larger political, economic, and cultural trends, then in order to truly transform education, we will need to ensure that this process is not separated from the reality facing

Egyptians. We must be bold and imaginative in our demands for a better future where we are able to ‘strive to build knowledge and engage in dialogue about how education can best serve and support the common good, the global good’ (p.200).

In short, *Educating Egypt* represents a significant contribution to debates surrounding education in the Global South. It offers a sober and timely analysis which will be of relevance to students, academics, and policy makers. I first came across Herrera’s work as a PhD candidate which helped shaped many of my arguments and continues to do so. Undoubtedly, many others will also be as inspired when they read this book.

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