Aaron Rock-Singer, *Practicing Islam in Egypt. Print Media and Islamic Revival*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 211 pp., ISBN 978-1-108-49205-8.

Writing a book on Islamism and Islamization in Egypt during the Sadat and Mubarak years that tells readers something new is quite an achievement these days. After all, myriad publications have already been published that address, for example, the Egyptian government’s politics of religion, its changing reaction to the activities and demands of Islamist organizations, the radicalization of the *ǧamāʿa islāmiyya*, the Muslim Brotherhood’s attempts to become a participant in the political arena, the calls for the introduction of the sharia, the trend towards veiling, the rise of Salafism and so on and so forth. Aaron Rock-Singer has nevertheless managed to offer an engaging, fresh perspective that, while maybe not revolutionizing the field, genuinely advances our understanding of Egypt’s ‘Islamic Revival.’ His book is based on the study of hitherto neglected sources by a range of Statist, Islamist and Salafi institutions and offers a compelling analysis of how the interplay between state and non-state actors contributed to the entrenchment of Islamic practices in daily and public life. His nuanced argument transcends the customary binary between the state and civil society by showing the diversity of perspectives and interests and both sides and their close intertwinement. It also combines an interest in intellectual history with a careful, theoretically grounded analysis of social phenomena that is extremely fruitful.

In the first chapter, he addresses the intriguing question of how and when the idea of an Islamic revival (*ṣahwa*) was becoming a core part of the Egyptian public debate to the extent that it was accepted by state institutions and used for their own purposes. Rock-Singer demonstrates that this happened in an extremely short time span around the late 1970s; by 1980, the ‘Islamic revival’ had become part of the rhetoric of official religious institutions. While he does not deny continuities with earlier religious reform projects such as those advocated by Salafis, turn-of-the-century religious reformers and the Muslim Brotherhood, he highlights the embeddedness of the Egyptian Islamic revival of the late Sadat era in a particular national and global context. Islamic writers within Egypt, as Rock-Singer shows, closely watched international events, and these did not only include developments in Muslim-majority countries such as the revolution in Iran and the rise of political Islam in Turkey, but also the growing impact of Religious Zionism in Israel and of evangelicalism in the United States. All of this made the claim of an Islamic revival appear increasingly suited to mass mobilization, and by the late 1970s a number of competing actors employed it for that purpose.

In the second chapter, Rock-Singer aims to ‘trace the pathways of participation in competing projects of religious mobilization’ (p. 52) through an analysis of letters to the editor and fatwa request in a number of religious newspapers connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism and the Egyptian state between 1976 and 1981. The material is abundant and allows for a quantitative analysis, which yields a number of interesting results, for example regarding the consistently high degree of mobilization in the Delta governorates, compared to a relatively low degree of mobilization in Upper Egypt. Rock-Singer situates these findings in a discussion of distribution networks, literacy and class aspirations. The fact that students constituted the majority of letter writers might not seem surprising, given that much of the previous research on the Islamization of Egypt during the 1970s has focused on the country’s universities. Rock-Singer goes beyond this convenient finding, however; in order to explore the background of those readers who did not write letters, or whose letters were not published, he also examines the advertising in the magazines. His conclusion is that these ads target professionals to a larger extent than students, which in his interpretation indicates that civil servants, teachers, professors, doctors and other members of the middle-class work force represented a larger share of the readership than the letters to the editor suggest. Alternatively, I would suggest that advertisers were simply appealing to the comparatively higher purchasing power of persons with an income. Perhaps a more telling result of Rock-Singer’s analysis of advertisements is that they ‘transcend the Statist–Islamist divide’ (p. 73), with government companies unabashedly advertising in Islamist magazines.

The third chapter describes the development of a parallel Islamic educational infrastructure in Egypt through an interplay of state-sponsored and Islamist efforts. Rather than focusing on the differences between Statist and Islamist projects of religious revival, the author argues that there was significant overlap between them because both subscribed to ‘the Ministry of Education-sponsored Modernist vision of education as a prime motor of social change’ (p. 77). Through his study of religious newspapers, he shows that this change was not merely imposed from above but also demanded by those segments of Egyptian society who had been mobilized by the calls for a religious revival. Rock-Singer outlines competing visions regarding the purpose of educational reform that either aimed at subject formation or at structural change and also their eventual merger when the debate reached a point at which the government adopted Islamist rhetoric while Islamists accepted the authority of the Ministry of Education to administer religious education as a public enterprise. From this point onward, even where broader criticism of curricula in disciplines beyond religious education, such as history and science, occurred, the focus was on state schools. As Rock-Singer shows, this changed around 1979 when Islamist organizations became frustrated with the lack of reform in the state education sector and intensified their own *daʿwa* activities, provoking Statist institutions to follow suit. An increasing number of demands was made for alternative sites of religious subject formation outside the state sector, setting the stage for developments in the Mubarak era.

Chapter four delivers a compelling and quite fascinating account of the way in which ritual prayer became a site of political contestation and of enacting the ‘Islamic revival.’ The author focuses on the Islamist project of establishing the primacy of the right to conduct the *ẓuhr* prayer over the structure of work and school days, especially in state institutions. Rock-Singer argues that, again, this phenomenon cannot be adequately explained by juxtaposing Islamist and secular projects of subject building; rather, it ‘represents a hybrid of bureaucratic logic and Islamic piety’ (p. 108), resulting in the accommodation of prayer times in many educational institutions and in the provision of space for collective prayer by designating or building prayer rooms and mosques. The chapter also shows that the compatibility of daily prayer with life as a student or civil servant only became an Islamist agenda item during the second half of Sadat’s rule, which constitutes a parallel to the debates on education and highlights how rapid a transformation Egyptian society went through between 1976 and 1981.

In the fifth chapter, the author engages with debates on public morality, including and transcending the oft-discussed question of veiling. Rock-Singer does an admirable job at teasing out the complexities, dilemmas, contradiction and gendered hierarchies involved in the popularization of a vision of gendered public morality. While feminine domesticity remained the ideal, the economic and social reality of most Egyptians meant that mix-gender environments were the norm, rather than the exception. This contributed to the prominence of a hitherto marginal branch of *adab*, *ādāb al-ṭarīq*, meant to regulate the morality of interaction in mixed-gender contexts. Islamist and Statist religious voices more and more often attributed to this type of morality, particularly on the part of women, a central role for the well-being of society and the nation.

Rock-Singer continues the narrative into the post-Sadat period and even up until the post-revolutionary era in the sixth chapter. He describes how debates shifted from the inadvisability of women’s access to public space to its regulation through codes of dress and behaviour. The sources used here are not newspapers any longer; instead, the author examines publications devoted to educating Egyptians about Islamic moral norms, such as marriage manuals and popular books of legal rulings. Interestingly, Rock-Singer’s analysis shows that alongside the increasing acceptance of female wage labour, his sources more and more often express the expectation that men should share in domestic labour. Far from idealizing a process in which women became not only objects but also agents of religious change, though, Rock-Singer clearly points out that all the Statist, Islamist and Salafi groups he studied were ‘joined at the hip by a shared belief that male religious elites can and should regulate individual comportment,’ especially where women are concerned.

The book lays out a stringent and convincing argument, is eminently readable and pleasantly compact. The latter aspect is a mixed blessing, however, since specialists in the topic might at some points be interested in a more detailed description and analysis of the data, rather than a short walkthrough underlined with a few illustrative quotations; but this brevity most likely goes back to the publisher’s requirements, as is unfortunately the norm today in British and North American academic publishing.

Rock-Singer delivers his main argument, namely, that Islamist concepts of pious practice emerged from an interaction between Islamist and Statist actors, in an empirically and conceptually sound and convincing manner. This insight might not be quite as novel as the introduction makes out, but it is certainly substantiated in his book in a fresh perspective that is mindful of both social contexts and intellectual genealogies. Maybe the most striking result of Rock-Singer’s analysis, though, concerns the specific and highly condensed temporality of the ‘Islamic Revival’ that took hold of Egypt during the few short years of the second half of Sadat’s reign. In sum, ‘Practicing Islam in Egypt’ is highly recommended reading for scholars and advanced students interested in any aspect of the recent histories of Egypt and global Islamism, as well as an indispensable resource for any specialist in the field.

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