Linda Herrera, *Educating Egypt. Civic Values and Ideological Struggles*. Cairo, New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2022. xii, 244 pp., ISBN 978-1-64903-169-3.

Education is a fundamental pillar of the state-society contract all over the world, and particularly so in disproportionately young societies where its societal relevance is accentuated, such as Egypt and the broader region as a whole. As a scholarly subject, however, education has received attention largely within the educational sciences, which tend to deal with educational issues from specialized angles, and to focus on their own societies, with the limited exception of international and comparative education studies. Until very recently, Islamic and regional studies have approached education very cautiously, and if at all mostly from the angle of religious education. In Egypt, as in most countries in the region, however, large state educational apparatuses have contributed to shape the contemporary societies in fundamental ways, and there is a paucity of studies that tackle the broader societal relevance of education.

Linda Herrera’s book is a valuable and timely contribution to the small but expanding literature that takes education as a way to understand societal structures, imaginaries, and how they change. *Educating Egypt* deals with the transformations of schooling and education in Egypt throughout its modern history, from the era of nation building to the current phase, marked by a fundamental demise of the role of school. The book proposes to examine both *tarbiya* (upbringing) and *taʿlīm* (knowledge); these words are at times used interchangeably as synonyms for education or schooling (p. 2), but carry different connotations. The main thesis of the author is that education mirrors larger debates about what constitutes the model citizen and the educated person, and she analyses the complex and challenging field of education using a variety of approaches and methodologies, including “ethnography, oral histories, critical analysis of educational policies, laws and textbooks, social historical analyses, and digital social research” (p. 2). Objective is not a tidy or grand theorization of schooling, but rather to bring the complexity of social realities to the surface, raise questions and offer propositions for further research.

*Educating Egypt* presents the results of over three decades of research on different aspects of education. The author, a social anthropologist, professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, came to Egypt in the 1980s for her MA in anthropology and sociology at AUC, before obtaining her PhD in comparative education at Columbia University. She then returned to Egypt, where she lived for almost seventeen years and where she continues to work in different projects. The importance of this book lies in the abundance and depth of the researches presented, ranging from an ethnography of a public school to analyses of three private Islamic schools, to discourses on youth and digital media. Many of the chapters included in this volume were published elsewhere, and are here collected with an introduction that sets the tone for the scope of the book, “researching the unfolding drama of education” (p. 9) as a way of researching the social in Egypt.

The emphasis on research is confirmed by the opening scene of the first chapter, in which the author honestly recalls the difficulties in obtaining access to what has since decades become a securitized environment, as noted already by Iman Farag[[1]](#footnote-1) – the securitization of education indicates both the main preoccupation of the state, that of controlling youth, and the way in which it will do it, by securitizing it. Access is just one among the main methodological challenges, however; the sheer dimension of the educational sector and the difficulties in the collection of data are all known, and the author is careful in showing in each part of the book how she managed her way into such a complex, multifaceted, contradictory pillar of contemporary life.

The book is divided into four parts, although the last one is really more of an open-ended conclusion that elucidates two of the most pressing and recent developments, namely the threatened “extinction” of schooling as we know it (p. 192) and the changes brought forth by the digitalization. These division is not just thematical and chronological, but seems also methodological, other than a way of presenting researches conducted at different times on different topics.

The first Part of the book (chapters 1 to 5) is largely an ethnography of a public school, which documents the everyday working of a school, largely low-tech. This research was originally carried out in 1990-1 for the author’s master thesis at the American University in Cairo, after two years spent waiting for the official permission to conduct it. This part documents a largely foregone era, also from a broader geopolitical aspect, in which the public sector was rather dominant. Part 2 of the book (chapters 6 to 8) deals with private Islamic schools, *al-madāris al-islamiyya al-khāṣṣa*, a new phenomenon that occurred in the 1990s, as a way of investigating the emergence of political Islam in relation to gender and youth. This part is based on the author’s PhD, and the research was conducted in the late 1990s. Part 3 (chapters 9 to 12) deals mostly with youth, and takes education as a fundamental social space, where lots of interaction between boys and girls happen. In the 2000s, “youth” becomes a developmental category, such as women and gender before. This is the context of a knowledge economy increasingly more global, which favors technologically-oriented and market driven approaches to education and learning.

Part 4 (chapter 13) is more of an open conclusion that takes its departure in 2014 with the start of the “Education 2.0” project, and in 2017 with the appointment of Dr. Tarek Shawki as Minister of Education, and indicates two fundamental challenges to the educational system. First, it presents a renovated yet deserted school, where students preparing for the *thanawiyya ‘āmma*, the secondary school examination, do not “waste time going to school” and prepare for the exams instead at home or with the help of private tutoring, which are so widely attended that they can be help in stadiums (pp. 193-96). Second, it discusses the digital transformation of learning and teaching, a process only partially linked to the Covid-19 pandemic.

From a content perspective, the book is quite rich and here I will limit myself to highlighting a couple of themes per section. Part 1 discusses themes such as the schooling of future citizens, focused on the rite of the *ṭābūr*, the lining up in the school courtyard for the morning assembly, and on values such as punctuality and leadership. It also discusses the education of girls as mothers, wives, and workers, one of the themes more discussed in the small literature on schools in the region.[[2]](#footnote-2) School personnel works as a family-like organization to instill gender roles through discipline that at times includes corporal punishments. This part also discusses the content of some courses, such as home economy (pp. 56-61). It discusses the teacher profession – “a great vocation, a modest profession”, following Iman Farag’s apt definition – currently plagued by violence and corruption (pp. 75-80); this part does not shy away from a frank discussion of the impossibly low salaries of the category (pp. 69-72). The last chapter of the section focuses on grading, a “frenzy” that threatens to reduce the overall societal importance of the education to grades; the threat seems confirmed in the conclusion – if grades are all what counts, why loose time at school?

The second part of the book introduces private, in this case Islamic, schools, which in 1995-96 represented circa 17% of the total schools in Egypt (p. 114). From a legal point of view these are investment companies (*sharikāt istithmāriyya*); in some cases, they indeed resemble lucrative activities, in others they rather help sustaining local communities. Some have a very anti-nationalist content, no Egyptian flags, no pictures of the president. This strong ideological content, anti-national, is labelled by the author as “schooling the anti-nation”; this part (pp. 119-23) includes an analysis of a school hymn in which “my country” (*bilādī*) becomes “my God” (*Ilāhī*). The first chapter in this section offers an historical analysis of the relationship between the Muslim Brotherhood and education, which starts from the 1990s and then moves back to Ḥasan al-Bannā. Another theme dealt with in this section is “downveiling”, a phenomenon that started already in the mid-1990s as the author documents with two pictures in the same school taken at a distance of two years (pp. 129-30). This part importantly shows how students reflect on their own schools, in very critical ways; this is one of the most ethnographic parts, in which the author shows how anthropology is not about discovering new worlds unknown to the people studied, but to make clear friction lines and try to explain societal change.

The third part focuses on reforms of curriculum, and educational policies in the 1990s, “Egypt’s educational decade” (p. 137), when at least three international agencies, all linked to the USA, the World Bank, USAID, and the US millennial development team, got involved in plans to reform the educational system. This part makes the transnational dimension of educational policies evident. It then focuses on youth, their quest for jobs and justice, the waiting out school and university years; this theme is reprised in the last chapter of the section, where youth is presented as the precariat in the post-uprising condition, in which fundamental issues are still left unsolved. Between the two chapters on youth, there is a part on digital media and how they turned youth into the “wired generation”, the generation that built up and made a revolution.

The final, concluding part introduces the real break of the social contract represented by the demise of the school, and the transformative potential of the digital media. This part could have been longer, but it points to directions for further research. The challenge is how to think together the loss of societal relevance of schooling and the entire educational sphere when there are 23 million pupils enrolled in schools.

This important book offers a perspective on education in Egypt as a societal endeavor, a rather understudied topic, openly dealing with questions of methodology and of positionality; this perspective is presented through materials collected over thirty years of research on the topic, conducted at different times with different challenges and goals, thereby showing the complexity the book aims to address.

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1. Iman Farag, “Higher Education in Egypt: The Realpolitik of Privatization”, *International Higher Education* 18 (1998), 16-17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See, among others, Fida J. Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes: Educating Jordanian Women in Nation, Faith, and Progress* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)