




BOOK REVIEWS

HISHAM ALAOUI AND ROBERT SPRINGBORG, EDS. *The Political Economy of Education in the Arab World* (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2021). 297pp. \$85.00 cloth. ISBN: 9781626379350.

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Education is a vastly complex social sphere teetering on the cusp of major transformation. In this critical moment of change, investigating central problematics in education becomes not only edifying but imperative. *The Political Economy of Education in the Arab World* is a welcome and timely effort that pays attention to an understudied facet of education in an important part of the world. Utilizing a political-economic lens across a range of topics and geographies, the volume asks why educational quality remains low across Arab countries despite substantial educational spending, improved student access and robust donor support.

The volume's point of departure is that a political-economic lens not only explains the perennial underperformance of "Arab" education, but is also its panacea. The solution to obstinate educational problems, the editors argue, "must engage underlying political and economic problems first – not simply technical or pedagogical issues regarding the practice of instruction" (239). The editors, who readily admit that they have little experience in education in the Arab world, untenably dismiss critical issues of educational philosophy, pedagogy, curriculum, assessment, school organization, teacher training, and educational infrastructure and technology, treating those as mere "technical" issues. Forcing the massively complex and multi-faceted problems of education into a limited purview of political economy, the volume sidelines experts in the multidisciplinary field of education studies and barely converses with educational scholarship – which has a long tradition of engagement with political-economic issues.

Grounded in political science and economics, the volume's central thesis is that Arab states are "limited access orders" that privilege some (insiders) and exclude most (outsiders). Those orders face a central dilemma. How do they reform education in a way that "stimulate[s] economic growth without inducing demands for political openings" (3)? Since education reforms tend to



support critical thinking which leads to an empowered citizenry and questioning of authority, limited access orders *intentionally* keep educational quality low to avert existential threats. Nonetheless, the volume's central theoretical framework, which is imported from neoinstitutional economics, is not sufficiently explained or justified. While limited access orders may have some theoretical purchase in explaining GDP growth rates for instance, education is an infinitely more complex and messier *social* domain and is incommensurable with economic indicators. With few exceptions, the framework is also inadequately integrated, evidenced and problematized throughout the text. It loosely ties the chapters, and ultimately seems forced.

To substantiate their theorizations, the authors infer the intentionality behind the reforms not from official statements or documents, but from the authors' subjective interpretation of them. "Arab educational practices," the editors argue, "provide indirect, if not absolutely conclusive, evidence of intentions" (9). Nevertheless, the authors do not explain how (or if) they are systematically doing that. Importantly, they do not justify why their ascription of intentions is any more sound or valuable than competing interpretations, including official positions. This methodology becomes particularly problematic when coupled with an unfamiliarity with the educational context, which is illustrated in three significant instances.

In chapter 3, Roel Meijer shows how Egyptian rulers "have shaped curricular materials to impart conceptions of citizenship as duties and loyalties, rather than as rights" (9) by comparing two state-sponsored Egyptian history textbooks. Meijer notes that the "more recent Egyptian books are written by anonymous authors," which he interprets as "an indication of state control" (46). However, unbeknownst to the author, this latter version is *not* a government-issued textbook but a very popular private supplementary book (*al-Imtihan*). It is neither authored nor regulated by the state (63). Not only does this significant oversight cast doubt on the chapter's claims and weaken its conclusions, but it also undermines the book's general arguments.

Similarly, Robert Springborg argues in Chapter 5 that the Egyptian state is "bringing private schools and universities under more direct, obtrusive control." He backs this point by claiming that there has been an "Arabization of the first six years of teaching, including mathematics and science. . . including in the so-called language schools" (93). However, a closer reading of the cited sources shows that this is *not* the case. The Arabization that Springborg refers to concerns public Arabic and Japanese schools, not private language schools. Again, this cavalier mishandling of the facts weakens the chapter's conclusion. It also undermines the book's argument that "the Egyptian regime is intensifying its. . . direct control over private educational institutions, including their language of instruction" (248).

This unfamiliarity with the education context is further demonstrated through absences. In his chapter on Egyptian educational policy, Springborg fails to detail Egypt's far-reaching and widely-contested educational reform program beginning in 2018. Instead of exploring the radical curricular overhaul, the new philosophy of assessment, the digital transformation and deep-seated cultural change it entails, Springborg analyzes a patchwork of reforms,

which he uses to make unsubstantiated claims. For instance, he argues that the purpose of the reforms is “more political than educational” (100), and that the Egyptian “government is seeking to privatize education at all levels” (90). To be clear, those propositions cannot be ruled out, and there are in fact plenty of grounds to critique Egypt’s reform program (with regards to new forms of privatization, for instance). But the lack of real evidence or understanding of actual policy change on the ground makes these conclusions questionable at best.

In their conclusion, the editors make the overdue note that the volume is neither “firmly empirically grounded” nor “a definitive investigation.” Rather, it is speculative, “consist[s] of diverse observations and even predictions” and is “intended not to test hypotheses” but to “broaden perspectives on Arab education” (253-54). This volume thus signals the urgent need for work on education in the Arab world that is empirically rich, theoretically robust, methodologically rigorous, and strongly evidenced – which are unfortunately underdeveloped in this volume, at least for Egypt. Political economy is a valid lens to study educational change, but it would enormously benefit from authors who possess a deeper understanding of local contexts and experience in education in the Arab world.

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RELLI SHECHTER. *The Rise of the Egyptian Middle Class: Socio-Economic Mobility and Public Discontent from Nasser to Sadat* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019). 280pp. \$105.00 cloth. ISBN 9781108474481.

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Scholars have long blamed “foreign capital,” “mass consumption,” and “population growth” for the economic crises that stymied economic, social, and political development in modern Egypt. The striking teleological metaphors of lack or unfulfillment used by this generation of political scientists and historians still linger in academic and policy conversations, even if the modernization theory that undergirded them has been widely discredited: “lop-sided development” (Charles Issawi); “development without attaining real growth” (Robert Tignor); “politics without participation” (John Waterbury); “post-populist