

The London School of Economics and Political Science

*“Without hope there is no life.” Class, affect, and
meritocracy in middle-class Cairo*

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Declaration

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Abstract:

This thesis examines the lives of a group of young middle-class Egyptian men who experience a mismatch between their aspirations and their chances of realising them. It analyses the historical emergence of an under-recognised ‘falling’ middle-class in contemporary Egypt, by comparing their relative fall with another middle-class population which has experienced a dramatic rise in wealth and status in the aftermath of neoliberal economic change. I contribute to literature examining the rise of the middle-classes across the Global South in recent years. First, I reveal the importance of historically-owned rural land, cultural privilege, the legal and political remnants of state socialism, and international migration in the socio-economic rise of an Egyptian middle-class. Second, I move away from a predominant focus on consumption, and instead highlight how educational markers, and ‘character’ differences enable the exercise of a new form of ‘open-minded’ middle-class distinction. But finally, I challenge existing literature by uncovering the emergence of an alternative, less-celebratory middle-class in the late-20th and early-21st century, one which has experienced relative decline as the public sector jobs, education, and subsidies they relied on to forge their middle-class lives have been stripped away.

The rest of the thesis uses eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork stretched over two years to delve into the lives of a group of young men in this falling middle-class category as they attempt to make the transition from education to ‘aspired to’ employment. It first establishes the existence of a rupture in the Bourdieu-like congruence between their aspirations for a globalised middle-class life, and their ability to reach it. The three main empirical chapters analyse the consequences of this ‘mismatch.’ By applying affect theory to the study of class immobility, I recast existing understandings of how people navigate conditions of ‘waithood,’ in particular through reintroducing a focus on stability and power. I argue that these young men survive their classed and aged immobility through forming a ‘cruel attachment’ to a discursive and material terrain of Egyptianised meritocracy that affects them with hope for the future. This terrain was continuously extended by certain labour market industries and institutions, such as training centres, recruitment agencies, and an entrepreneurship ‘scene,’ that constituted part of Cairo’s ‘hopeful city.’ The thesis therefore demonstrates how Egypt’s capitalist-authoritarian regime *also* survives, securing the compliance of young middle-class men, despite denying them access to respectable middle-class living, by continually regurgitating a hopeful promise of future fulfilment.

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List of Abbreviations

AfBD – African Development Bank

AUC – American University in Cairo

CAPMAS – Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics

CIB – Corporate and Investment Banking

CMA – Certified Management Accountant

ECS – Enterprise Consultancy Services

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

GSK - GlaxoSmithKline

GTO – Graduate Training Organisation

GUC – German University in Cairo

IGCSE – International General Certificate of Secondary Education

IYF – International Youth Foundation

ILO – International Labour Organisation

IMF – International Monetary Fund

IRC – Information Resource Center, US Embassy in Cairo

ITIDA – Information Technology Industry Development Agency

MENA – Middle East and North Africa

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

PwC – PricewaterhouseCoopers

QNB – Qatar National Bank

SWOT – Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats analysis

UNDP – United Nations Development Program

UNICEF – United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

WHO – World Health Organisation

WTO – World Trade Organisation

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Glossary of key Arabic terms

Note on transliteration

The ways in which Arabic is reproduced in Latin script vary greatly, and the systems preferred by Western scholars are different from those used by most Arabic speakers for practical purposes. For names, the spelling used by the persons themselves or otherwise current in use is preferred. For other Arabic terms, the rules of the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* are used.

Kullyāt al sha‘b – faculties of the people

Istaqrār – stability

Al-ṭabaqa al-mutawasiṭa al-‘alya – upper-middle class

Sha‘by – a term that has come to connote the lower-classes in contemporary Egypt

Rāqy – classy

Min ghīr al ‘amal mafīsh ḥayāt – without hope there is no life

Auwwil ṭabaqa al-mutawasiṭa – lower-middle class

Ibn al-nass’ – son of the people

Qabr l’al sha‘b – tomb for the youth

Ikti’āb – depression

Wasta – nepotism

Salūq al-shakḥs’ – attitude of the individual

Yiṭawwar nafsuh – to develop oneself

Yistaslim – to surrender

Balad bint al-wisskhr – daughter of a whore country

Law kān al-nil salsa, makuntsh koft al-kusa illy f’ Masr – if the Nile was salsa, there would not be enough with which to cook all the zucchini (nepotism) that is in Egypt.

La illaha illa anta sabhanak iny kunt min elzalemiyyn – none has the right to be worshipped by You (Allah), Glorified are You. Truly, I have been of the wrong-doers

Mukāfeḥ – struggler

Lāzim ta‘mil illy aliyyk, we rabina heya‘mil al bāqy – you need to do what you are supposed to do, and God will do the rest

Mashyeen fe dowama – walking in a whirlpool

Chapter 1 Introduction: *Hope, meritocracy, and the middle-classes in contemporary Egypt*

On a typically hot evening in the summer of 2015, Gamal and I were walking along Qasr al- Nil Bridge towards Tahrir Square in the centre of Cairo. Gamal graduated five years ago from Cairo University's Faculty of Law. Once a prestigious faculty producing some of Egypt's highest-ranking judges, in recent years it has become colloquially known as one of the 'kullyāt al sha'b' (faculties of the people), due to its ever-increasing volume of students and the low-quality education it offers. Many of these graduates can now be found, not in the law courts, but working as taxi-drivers or serving shawarma sandwiches in the city. Gamal, like many of his friends, did not want that life. He dreamt of escaping his lower/lower-middle class neighbourhood and inhabiting another kind of city. He imagined himself working as an international trade lawyer in the glamorous Nile City towers, a modern office block on the banks of the Nile, living in one of the newly-built gated communities on the outskirts of the city, and eventually moving abroad to work in London.

For the last few years Gamal has been working hard to make this dream a reality, developing his English, reading extensively about international trade law, taking courses in CV writing and interview techniques, and obtaining relevant work experience. He has repeatedly been told, by course trainers and people who were working in good jobs, that he would make it if he just improved his English, made the right connections, or gained some experience. For eleven months from the middle of 2014, I had been following Gamal and others like him around the city, as he attended a 'soft skills' course, went to a scholarship fair, submitted his CV to prestigious law firms, and sat in cafés drinking tea and talking about his ideal future. But by the summer of 2015 Gamal was a long way from realising his dream. Over the years he had experienced many false starts, holding three different unpaid positions in small law firms

before leaving due to the broken promises of a forthcoming salary. Each time he thought he was on the cusp of success, it proved to be an illusion. These disappointments brought forth much anguish for Gamal, which manifested in long rants against corruption in the labour market, and the decrepit state of Egypt's economy. However, despite calls from his parents to give up and take a job in his local neighbourhood, Gamal would not. He could not. After meeting me to complain about his situation, Gamal would quickly move on to his next attempt. As we were walking along the bridge, he excitedly told me about how an internet search had identified an international law course in England. He would apply the next day.

Our conversation was interrupted when we came across a group of young men staring anxiously into the water below. We were informed that an old man had just jumped. We stood looking out over the edge trying to spot him as someone called the police, but we were told that the body had disappeared. After waiting a few minutes Gamal suggested we walk on. I said it was sad to think of someone being driven to kill themselves. "Of course it is sad," he replied, "but I think it is weak, to do something like that is giving up, you have to withstand the tough circumstances, like I am doing." Gamal assumed the man had jumped because he was not able to tolerate Egypt's difficult labour market. I replied that I knew of young men, like Gamal, who had talked of suicide due to these difficulties. "But they can find a job!" he responded in shock, "then move out and rent a flat, they just need independence, like me. They will make it...you know there is a phrase in Egypt, "the journey of 1000 miles starts with a single step," you just have to take that step and keep going. You need to be positive, you need to keep hope."

In this same spot four and a half years previously, nearly 1000 Egyptians, mostly men, died at the hands of Egypt's security forces as millions marched to demand an end to the 30 year rule

of Hosni Mubarak. A few also attempted to emulate Mohamed Bouazizi's act of self-immolation in Tunisia that had originally sparked the region's wave of uprisings. Egyptians generally recall with great fondness and nostalgia the feeling they felt during those days. It was a feeling of hope, a feeling that their country, and thereby their own lives were once again moving towards a fulfilling future. This hope famously demanded "aīsh, hurriyya, w' 'adāla igtimā'iyya' (bread, freedom, and social justice), the overhaul of a system which was denying access to a dignified life to so many. Those who died were held up as martyrs (al-shuhadā') who had sacrificed themselves for the security of that hope. Almost five years on, Gamal's interpretation of another who died in the same place was quite different. His was not an act of defiance against an unjust system, but an act of weakness. He had been blamed for refusing to hope, to persevere with the belief that his efforts would be compensated within Egypt's current economic landscape. Instead it was Gamal's stoicism and refusal to give up hope in the face of difficulty that secured respect.

This thesis uses eleven months of ethnographic field stretched over 2 years to document and interpret the attempts of young men like Gamal to lead a good life in contemporary Egypt. Gamal belongs to part of a young Egyptian middle-class, whose sense of frustration at their inability to do just that was seen as a major stimulus for the Uprising (Bayat, 2011; Kandil, 2012). In the run up to 2011, the country witnessed intensified political repression, the entrenchment of corruption, a declining quality of public services, and rising levels of poverty, inequality, and unemployment. Whilst some Egyptians accrued vast amounts of wealth aided by late-twentieth century neoliberal reforms – symbolised by the exclusive gated communities, glitzy shopping malls, securitised office blocks, and expensive private educational institutions that have sprung up in Cairo in recent years – the majority have been pushed into conditions resembling poverty. Many in Egypt's young middle-class struggled to acquire the stable office

job, good quality education, and housing they rely on to forge their adult middle-class lives. Instead they have been forced into low-paid, low-status, insecure employment, and to reside in overcrowded informal neighbourhoods.

This stagnant middle-class has been under-researched in Egyptian scholarship. The aim of this thesis is to shed light on the lives of its members, whose plight reflects that of many around the world. Scholars across the social sciences have asserted the widespread rupturing among various groups, especially youth, of the teleological imperative to live out the present in expectation of future progress (Miyazaki, 2004; Jackson, 2011). The Bourdieu-like congruence between people's aspirations for independent adulthood, a certain class lifestyle, and respectable masculinity or femininity, and their objective chances of realising them is being broken down as capitalist regimes fail to deliver dignified work, education, and housing to many. Instead, huge numbers, and no longer only those traditionally recognised as 'outcasts,' have entered an 'impasse' (Berlant 2011), prolonged periods of 'waithood' (Honwana, 2012), and faced 'abjection' (Ferguson, 1999; Anand, 2012), from the ability to build a 'good life.' In this thesis, I address the following research questions:

- What happens when a mismatch between classed aspirations and chances develops within young middle-class men in Egypt?
- What constitutes their lived experience of middle-class immobility?

For this, I depart from mainstream sociological approaches to understanding classed, aged, and gendered immobility, and turn attention to affect and emotion. Some scholars have posited that a feeling of hope, a vital presence for individualised projects of class, gender, and age, is being replaced by frustration, fear, and disenchantment among stagnant populations across the world

(Hage, 2003; Hochschild, 2016). These emotions can also be channelled politically in various ways. According to some, it was personalised frustrations stemming from middle-class immobility that were channelled into the wave of right-wing, racially-infused narratives which brought about Brexit, the election of Donald Trump, and the success of Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan in recent years (Hochschild, 2016; Müller, 2017). Other scholars are attempting to locate acts of resistance emerging out of hamstrung frustration that represent more progressive 'spaces of hope' (Harvey, 2000). These are found in a plethora of protest movements, alongside more mundane acts of defiance that signify resistance to punitive capitalist regimes, as well as the possible emergence of alternative, and more just socio-economic arrangements. Egypt's uprising, centred on Tahrir Square, was projected to be one such place of utopian hope (Gregory, 2013), initiated, in part, by a frustrated middle-class (Bayat, 2011). The events literally provided the space for the conception of radical alternative socio-economic orders and relations, recreating for millions of Egyptians a sense of hope for a good future that had been lost (Mittermaier, 2014). Yet the revolutionary period was brief. Though protests and occupations lasted for two years after 2011, spending time with young middle-class men like Gamal more than four years after the uprising, the kind of hope it had induced felt remote. Though Gamal had attended protests in early 2011 as a university student, he was now relying on very different registers of hope, the kind that – in his words – turns martyrs into cowards.

Revolutions are truly exceptional moments. When protests cease, most people return to what they had been doing before, trying to get a good job and afford a fulfilling lifestyle for themselves and their families. The inability to do this had led to the events of 2011. And for many Egyptians, economic stagnation, political instability, and the return of authoritarian government has only made this task harder since. If 2011-13 offered a glimpse of radical hope for them, I wanted to understand how young middle-class men were holding on to a vital sense

of hope for a good future in post-revolutionary, or ‘normal’ times when my research began in the summer of 2014. I was interested in the registers, languages, and daily enactments of hope on to which they hold as they struggle to obtain a respectable middle-class job, afford a desirable lifestyle, get married, and raise a family.

Despite what is yearned for by many scholars, most Egyptians are not engaged in resistance at present. The overwhelming trend remains one of stability, not transformation. Indeed, Samuli Schielke (2016) recently argued that stability, ‘istaqrār’ in Arabic, is a post-revolutionary aspiration among ordinary Egyptians. Yet, personal growth is inherent to his definition of ‘stability.’ I want to therefore tackle a further research question:

- How is ‘stability’ maintained when many are still being denied movement towards their classed, gendered, and aged dreams?

In doing so, my key contribution is uncovering a much quieter, but more pervasive and powerful *meritocratic* revolution that has been taking place in Egypt, and specifically within Cairo’s global city, in recent decades. This revolution establishes the individual as the determinant of success and failure, and promises the fulfilment of dreams to all. It is this revolution that provides hope to young middle-class Egyptians in their daily lives, and perpetually staves off frustration arising from their immobility. Thus, ultimately I want to argue that, whilst producing populations who cannot achieve a ‘good life,’ Egypt’s capitalist regime secures compliance by offering up the possibility and promise that it will come. By making this argument, and turning attention to affect and emotion, I want to contribute new understandings to the lived experience of class in Egypt, and class immobility specifically. I also want to reveal a new dimension of the way people cope in periods of waithood, in Egypt

and beyond, as well as to the way capitalist-authoritarian regimes survive despite pushing millions into deprivation.

This opening chapter provides a context, overviews existing literature, asks some key research questions, and establishes a conceptual framework through which those questions will be answered. It begins by challenging the hopeful narrative of a rising middle-class across the Global South, by using a Bourdieu-inspired approach to class to explicating the emergence of alternative, less-celebratory middle-classes who have faced decline in the early 21st century. I then introduce one such middle-class group in Egypt. Thereafter, the chapter sets out a conceptual framework for approaching the lives of people who experience classed, aged, and gendered immobility and waitness. I depart from the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu, and instead turn to work on affect and emotion, which helps explain how contemporary class immobility is lived through a loss of a vital feeling of hope. I then critique studies that focus on either the potential for resistance to develop, or the adaptive capacity of the structurally disenfranchised. I instead call for more attention to the objects, places, and discourses that induce particular emotions, and finish by arguing that a discursive and material terrain of meritocracy might be affecting people who are being pushed into conditions of waitness with perpetual hope.

March of the global middle class?

Before 2011, Egypt had been projected as a place of hope by development institutions (AfDB, 2011). Not only was economic growth strong, it was also an important signifier for what has been advertised by development organisations, global consultancy firms, the media, and parts of academia as the surge of a new middle class across the Global South over the last 30 years.

Whilst the middle classes in the Global North has been widely understood to be experiencing decline, much quantitative research has pointed to a huge expansion of a population in the Global South which is enjoying incomes and spending power lifting it out of established boundaries of poverty, towards ‘secure’ and ‘comfortable’ living (Banerjee and Duflo, 2008; Ravallion, 2009; Birdsall, 2010; Ncube & Lufumpa, 2014).¹ This middle-class subject is defined as urban, holding a ‘secure job,’ enjoying a higher disposable income which can be spent on higher quality – often private – education and healthcare as well as ‘modern,’ ‘world-class’ commodities (such as refrigerators, telephones, TVs, and cars), and possessing an ability to aspire and plan for future prosperity for them and their family (Das, 2009).



Figure 1.1 - Illustration depicting the rising middle-class (Source: The Christian Science Monitor, 2011)

¹ Defining its entrants has predominantly been based on different numerical measures of relative or absolute income, or spending power and patterns.

According to a 2011 OECD report, this ‘new middle-class’ – defined as those who spend or earn between \$10-\$100 per day – will grow from 1.8 billion to 4.9 billion between 2009 and 2030, to over half of the world’s population (Kharas, 2010). The majority of this growth will be in China and India, however it was also projected to grow significantly elsewhere too. The Middle East and North African middle-class was expected to rise from 105 million (33% of the population) to 238 million (54%) over the same period. Egypt in this report was established as a key growth area. The German Development Institute concluded that Egypt’s middle-class, defined again as those who spend between \$10-\$100 per day, increased by a factor of four from 1990 to 2010 (to around 25% of the population, Brandi & Buge, 2014). The African Development Bank (2011), using an alternative definition of people who spend \$4-\$20 per day, stated that a rising Egyptian middle class reached 31.6% by 2010. This figure increased to an incredible 79.7% if what the AfDB defined as the ‘vulnerable, floating middle’ (those who spend \$2-\$4 per day) was included.

These were figures and projections to be celebrated. The explosion of the middle was held up as a sign that previously ‘provincial’ countries and peoples were leaving the “waiting room of history” (Chakrabarty, 2000: 8), and finally enjoying the wealth and modernisation that globalisation, development, and economic liberalisation promised to bring. It was proof that wealth is ‘trickling down’ (Deloitte, 2012), and that economic growth was ‘sustainable’ and ‘inclusive’ (Das, 2010). It marked the end of a ‘twin peaks’ world (Quah, 1996). Looking into the future, this population was projected to drive economic growth further through their consumption, and to promote liberal democratic and market values – an aversion to corruption, promotion of private property rights, entrepreneurship, and meritocracy – that will help solidify democracy and reduce ‘distributional conflict’ (Weitzke & Sumner, 2014), an expectation

apparently vindicated by the supposed progressive role played by the middle classes in Europe (Glassman, 1995; Ziblatt, 2006).

This was an intensely hopeful story, both for the people and the countries on the march towards modernity and progress. But the events of 2011, at least in the Arab World, punctured this narrative. Development institutions, the media, and researchers now posit that “middle-class frustration fuelled the Arab Spring” (see Kandil, 2012; Zayed, 2014).² This ‘awakening’ has been projected as the manifestation of the democratic demands of a rising middle-class, but new economic measurements reveal an alternative story. A 2015 World Bank report concluded that Egypt’s middle-class shrank in the years preceding 2011. Defining it as those who receive an income of more than \$4.9 per day in 2005 terms, it plots that the middle-class declined from 14.3% to 9.8% between the mid-2000s and the end of the decade, while the number of poor grew over the same period (see Ghanem, 2013). The same report also points to a decline in “happiness levels” among the middle-classes, not only in Egypt but across the Arab world, due to deteriorating living standards, the quality of public services, high unemployment, and governance issues (Ianchovichina et al. 2015: 7).

These new accounts, which were only instigated by an event rendering broad discontent visible, usefully serve to highlight the politicised nature of previous celebrations. The projection of a large middle is utilised as a signifier of healthy and just socio-economic arrangements that are benefiting broader populations, not only a few at the top. From a Marxist perspective, the middle-class is inherently a construction that, as Slavoj Žižek (2010) has argued, attempts to disavow distributional conflict by negating the tensions between capital and labour, by establishing a group which resides in between. Thus, for those vested in those arrangements,

² <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2015/10/21/middle-class-frustration-that-fueled-the-arab-spring>

projecting a coherent, expanding middle legitimises their project, and in this case a global project of economic liberalisation (Heiman et al. 2012). It is both a vindication of the present, and a projection of hope for a future development course that raises the masses along with it. Yet, in the aftermath of Egypt's Uprising, this narrative no longer made sense. The middle-class, instead of rising, was falling. And the distance between them and the rich was increasing.

Echoing new understandings of the Egyptian context, rival quantitative analysis has exposed some of the fissures within this celebratory narrative globally. Ravallion (2009) for example posits that only 95 million of the extra 1.2 billion who supposedly entered the middle-class in recent years joined the 'upper stratum' (PPP\$13 per day spending), equating to just 4.3% of his calculated middle-class population of 2.6 billion. Similarly, Nancy Birdsall (2010) posits that the 'secure middle-class and rich' (those who spend above PPP\$10 per day) only make up 8.3% of the Global South's population, far below the projections of the OECD report. They, along with others, demonstrate the emergence of a 'new middle-class' that is, for the most part, living in insecure conditions and therefore vulnerable to sliding back into poverty – according to their economic definition (Banerjee & Duflo, 2008; Weitzke & Sumner, 2014; Kochhar, 2015). Birdsall et al. (2013) also demonstrate how absolute income gains for the middle-class' upper-strata are actually rising at a faster rate than those in the lower-strata. The number of people living the 'secure' middle class life defined by Das (2010) is exposed to be extremely small. Furthermore, that population is pulling away from the rest.³

Despite reservations, these studies still largely reaffirm a story of populations on the rise, even if that rise might be precarious and unevenly distributed. An alternative, much less hopeful

³ Estimates of the size of any middle class are perhaps superfluous – quantitative analyses are plagued by problems of differing definitions, data inaccuracies, and manipulation that can produce contrasting stories – as in the case of Egypt. Yet, this analysis begins to disrupt the celebrations.

story arises when wealth is measured, which is important as it provides a window into the ability of populations to afford traditional markers of a middle-class life, such as housing, education, and accumulation of property and other assets. Credit Suisse's 2015 Annual Global Wealth Report found that there has been a decline in middle-class wealth in *every* region of the Globe except China since 2000. The distribution of wealth gains has shifted almost universally in favour of those at higher wealth levels. This report reveals that Egypt's middle-class (those holding between US\$14,544 and US\$145,440) – which it registers to be only 5% of the population – was halved between 2000 and 2015. What was left of the middle lost US\$ 7 billion during that period, while those above (0.4% of the population) gained US\$ 72 billion. This is a damning analysis, and it maps on to Thomas Piketty's (2013) own analysis, which demonstrates how all but 1% of the world's population has seen real wealth fall or stagnate since the mid-20th century.⁴ It disrupts the hopeful narrative of the last 30 years being a period to celebrate. Piketty's work in particular has provided fresh impetus and public exposure to the study of the inequalities that have been produced in the aftermath of rapid market liberalisation and state retrenchment (Atkinson, 2015; Boushey et al. 2017). Emergent quantitative research is now challenging the projection of a large, coherent, growing, and rising middle-class across the Global South. Yet the next section discusses how this is not yet reflected in qualitative work, which adds an integral processual dimension to understanding the life of the middle-classes.

Middle-class outcasts of 21st century cities

There are many populations that do not reflect the hope projected within the global middle-class discourse. Recent economic, political, and environmental arrangements have seen

⁴ For evidence of these trends in the Middle East see Alvaredo & Piketty (2014).

millions pushed into acute social and economic deprivation, with people being thrown off the land they had once dwelled on, into precarious dwellings or homelessness (Davis, 2006; Ghertner, 2015), and many more being pushed into insecure employment or unemployment as growth concentrates in capital-intensive industries and social welfare is stripped away (Ferguson, 1999 & 2013; Standing, 2011; Sassen, 2014). Furthermore, millions are being pushed into refugee camps, into prison, and into protracted conflict around the world. But, research highlighting the destructive effects of capitalist arrangements has overwhelmingly gravitated towards the poor.

In terms of the middle-class, whilst there is growing recognition of those facing stagnation and decline in the Global North (Hage, 2003; Garfinkle, 2006; Heiman, 2015; Hochschild, 2016), the vast majority of research in the Global South remains wedded to the narrative of a ‘middle-class’ on the rise.⁵ This has taken the form of numerous contextual studies examining groups – labelled as middle-class by authors as a result of both conceptual and vernacular understandings of class – that have benefited from recent economic transformations.⁶ Rather than only measuring wealth or income gains, these studies necessarily reintroduce the complex theorizations of social class developed over 150 years of scholarship since the writings of Karl Marx (Joyce, 1995). What it means to live a middle-class life, and within any class, is not reducible to a certain income level or amount of wealth. Marx himself differentiated between workers and capitalists, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, according to their contrasting positions in the capitalist mode of production. The bourgeoisie own the means of production, and extract value from those (the workers) who make commodities. Marx (1997) saw that the workers would develop a common ‘class’ identity out of their labour, in relation to those who

⁵ There is even some speculation that that these contrasting fortunes are linked through the flight of industry from Global North to South (Birdsall, 2010).

⁶ Caldiera, 2001 (Brazil); Fernandes, 2006 (India); Zhang, 2010 & Pow, 2009 (China); de Koning, 2009 (Egypt); Liechty, 2003 (Nepal); Cohen, 2004 (Morocco); Sloane, 1999 (Malaysia); Mercer, 2014 (Tanzania).

extract value from them. Viewing one's employment as the predominant means through which people understand their class position remains a dominant approach in sociological work (Wright, 1976). Yet, the emergence of different types of labour (white and blue collar) long ago began to complicate a definitive division between labour and capital.

Max Weber, writing in an early 20th century context when overt struggles between labour and capital had begun to wane, the European and American 'middle-classes' were growing rapidly, and a new mass-production-based consumer society was emerging (Slater, 1997), moved away from a Marxist focus on material relations, and instead introduced cultural power as an important element to understanding social class. He introduced the notion of social status (honour or prestige), which stems from the consumption of goods and services in the market (Weber, 1946). He saw that the new 'middle-classes' in Europe and the US, though they did not own the means of production, were being offered access to other forms of property, such as consumer goods, cars, and private homes. They were also one step removed from the 'vulgarity' of production processes through their engagement in tertiary labour (as professionals, bureaucrats, teachers, retail entrepreneurs, independent artisans). This enabled the assertion of 'honour' in relation to both the working classes and the bourgeoisie, stemming from one's lifestyle: education, training, socialisation, material culture, and inherited or occupational prestige (Mills, 1951).

Weber noted high correlations between one's class (economic) standing, and one's status, but he never explicitly laid out a mechanism theorising the links between cultural power and material or economic power. Both Marxist and Weberian conceptions of class were restricted by static categorisations and dualistic structural oppositions. In the late 20th century, there were various efforts to 'processualise class,' to theorise class as an ongoing cultural project and

practice (Thompson, 1991). The sociology of Pierre Bourdieu represented one particularly influential attempt. Bourdieu posited that one's class position stems from the interrelated make up of cultural, social, and economic capital, where each can be 'converted' into the other. Bourdieu defines cultural capital in three forms: institutionalised (educational certificates or specialised knowledge), embodied (personality, speech, or skills), and objectified (certain belongings such as clothes or art; 1986: 47). Social capital is defined as "useful networks of mutual acquaintance," i.e. who you know (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 119). Relative differences in the distribution of economic, social, and cultural capital enable people to achieve distinction – when they become legitimised into 'symbolic capital' – over others within particular fields, which Bourdieu and Wacquant defined as:

“A network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determination they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions (domination, subordination, homology, etc.)” (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992: 97).

One's ability to acquire cultural and social capital is heavily dependent on wealth or income (economic capital) – for example to afford an education, or a certain kind of house – but it is not reducible to it. They are part of independent schemas that require contextually grounded investigation. Bourdieu did not restrict himself to the realm of production or consumption, but looked instead to social relations in general arising out of differing conditions of existence (Brubaker, 1985). The precise forms of cultural, economic, and social capital required to secure

belonging within a particular class are constantly contested, incomplete, and in flux (Wacquant, 1991; Liechty, 2003). In each context there exist concurrent and competing notions of class belonging in continuous struggle with one another. Various actors play a part in the assertion, reproduction, and transformation of class boundaries, including the state, educational institutions, private companies, the media, as well as populations themselves. These boundaries are also heavily inflected by gender, caste, race, age, sexuality, religion, and notions of morality (Lamont, 2002; Savage et al. 2008). Asserting belonging is a continually incomplete endeavour, in need of reasserting as the standards of membership – the type of commodities or education required – and the abilities of people to reach those standards, fluctuate. As Weber pointed out long ago, as a result of its in-between position the middle-class is particularly dependent upon education, certain commodities, and access to certain jobs for its distinction. As a result of boundary fluctuations, the middle-class is an inherently and uniquely insecure social position (Wacquant, 1991).

Studies on the middle-classes in the Global South have taken on these European theorisations of class, and the middle-class in particular, and applied them when looking at how certain groups managed to take advantage of late-20th century neoliberal economic transformations.⁷ Utilising changes in urban labour and property markets (privatisation and commodification), the expansion of private service provision such as education and health, the proliferation of global commodities and consumer culture, as well as culturally and historically-specific classed, gendered, sexualised, racial, and religious inequalities, certain groups have managed to forge and lay claim to new markers of middle-class belonging (De Angelis 2010; Ellis 2011). These studies attempt to combine European understandings of middle class-ness with

⁷ These changes are not reducible to one uncontested type, but are broadly associated with the spread of market relations, retraction of the state, and expansion of the private sector centered on global financial and commercial industries (see Sassen, 2001; Harvey, 2005, and Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007, for a broader discussion on changes associated with neoliberalism).

vernacular definitions, by focusing on distinction in the realms of employment, education, consumption, familial life, sociability, and politics (see Lentz, 2015). Though always context-specific, markers are often associated with the private sector – in terms of employment or amenities – and with certain ‘modern,’ globalised forms of consumption. In many cases, these new standards have overlain those associated with the middle-classes that were built on the “populist, modernist, bureaucratic, state-driven economic policies of mid-20th century states” (Heiman et al. 2012: 14). It was certain segments of those ‘old’ middle classes that were able to take advantage of neoliberal economic changes.

These middle-classes are understood to be made up of people who, despite often continued rural connections and origins (Mercer, 2017), accumulate and spend their wealth in urban areas. Thus, the city has provided a vital ‘platform’ for the emergence of these new middle-classes (Centner, 2010). A claim to a middle-class life is a claim to a certain kind of city. It has long been a site on which certain ideals, values, and modes of living are projected and contested. Thus, new middle-class research has discussed how ‘world-class’ or ‘global’ cities that symbolise both a nation’s modern, globalised, capitalist development dreams, and the idealised middle-class subject, have been built (Goldman, 2010; Ong & Roy, 2011; Ghertner, 2015). Expensive private schools and universities, exclusive gated residences, securitized business parks, and glitzy leisure places provide both speedy avenues of capital accumulation, and at the same time embody and enable the reproduction of new symbolic middle class boundaries. Again, various actors are involved in this building process. Even though these middle-class populations are associated in public discourse with privatized lives, in terms of employment, education, consumption, and residence, the state plays a vital role in driving and sponsoring their urban projects (Ghannam, 2002). The middle-class provides an effective legitimising

construct for the erection of these places, as it pertains to represent society's hard-working, modern, liberal 'everyman' (Baviskar & Ray, 2015).

Studies on the new middle-classes overwhelmingly suggest that membership is open to extremely small numbers. These populations suffer from perpetual insecurity and a fear of falling (Caldeira, 2001; O'Dougherty, 2002), and in part driven by this fear, rather than working to increase distributional politics, as developmental discourse promises, they intensely protect their privilege and their places from those below, from bodies that do not fit the vision (Baviskar & Ray, 2015). They therefore actively prevent the march towards modern, global, middle-class living for many. But although existing qualitative work has done much to complicate the theorisation of class in the Global South, its intense focus on affluent middle-classes threatens to homogenise what has been exposed to be an extremely heterogeneous group, and render invisible other experiences of middle class-ness in the 21st century (Davis, 2010; Lemanski & Lama-Rewal, 2012). Research on those excluded from this middle-class march, as well as the 'world-class' cities they inhabit, tends to focus on the vast numbers of poor displaced to make way for modern urban developments and capital-intensive growth (Davis, 2006; McFarlane, 2011; Schindler, 2014; Ghertner, 2015), and who are pushed into an 'informal' city working in 'precarious' forms of work (Standing, 2011; Ferguson, 2015). The dual focus on the urban poor, and upwardly-mobile middle-classes produces a depiction of a divided city, with the walled off upper/upper-middle class beneficiaries of capitalist development inhabiting a city distinct from the masses – increasingly 'unnecessary' for neoliberal growth, who live more and more 'informally' (Sassen, 2001).⁸ While this produces

⁸ There is much critique of the notion that middle-class city-building is a "formal" process, in contrast to the informality of the urban poor (Mercer, 2014).

powerful political imagery (see Figure 1.2), it has the effect of glossing over more interstitial experiences in contemporary cities that do not fit these two extremes.

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Figure 1.2 - Depiction of a divided world between rich on one side of the fence and poor on the other

Victoria Lawson (2012) recently called for more diversity in middle-class research, on populations experiencing hardship in the aftermath of neoliberal reforms (see O'Dougherty, 2002; Fernandes & Heller, 2006; Davis, 2010). While increasingly accepted in the Global North, a focus on such groups in the Global South has been overshadowed by the powerful narrative of a middle-class on an upward trajectory. In Egypt – and possibly around the world if wealth data are to be accepted – it is decline that seems to encompass the middle-class experience for many in recent decades. Yet, decline is not only measurable through changes to wealth or income. It must be understood in relation to markers of middle class-ness, to one's ability to obtain a desirable job, afford a good education, or live a good lifestyle. Importantly,

these markers may shift upwards, thus inducing an experience of decline even if income might have increased.

Many of the studies on the new middle-class do allude to the presence of populations that have not managed to make the transition to the globalised, modern middle-classes on which they focus. They suggest that members of the ‘traditional’ middle-classes may have experienced increased precariousness in the wake of neoliberal changes as the pillars upon which their lives were built before the 1980s – a public sector job, a good quality free education, affordable housing, and government subsidies – have been stripped away (Cohen, 2004; Davis, 2010). Yet, empirical investigation of such groups, the ‘fragile middle’ as they are labelled by Donnan et al. (2014) is rare. This is a key contribution of this thesis.

This is a vital endeavour, not only to uncover more interstitial experiences, but because the middle-class in recent years has been used to project a narrative of success, a sign that neoliberal regimes are carrying large numbers towards prosperity. Yet, in many cases this narrative is exposed to be just a narrative. Challenging it can certainly be done through uncovering the continued plight of the poor, but exposing declining middle-class groups debunks some of its core myths; that nations are becoming more prosperous, fair, and democratic. Lawson (2012) argued that investigation of middle-class victims should be used to encourage political alliances between the middle-classes and the poor to combat the malign effects of contemporary capitalist arrangements. Yet, recent events in the Global North tell us that middle-class frustration can be easily directed to less progressive ends. In any case, dissatisfied middles have long played key roles in the political, economic, and cultural trajectories of nations (Wolf, 1973). It is therefore imperative to understand their dissatisfaction.

One alternative ‘new’ middle-class garnering attention in recent years is the educated un-/underemployed emerging in different contexts of the Global South (Jeffrey et al. 2008; Weiss, 2009; Cole, 2010; Jeffrey, 2010; Mains, 2012; Schielke, 2015).⁹ These are people who are unable to acquire the jobs associated with a middle-class life, and who thus experience stagnation rather than hopeful mobility. Although not a new phenomenon, as work by Dore (1976) showed, Jeffrey et al. (2008) set out how it has increased in recent decades across the Global South. Whilst ever greater numbers continue to gain access to a higher education, economic changes associated with neoliberalism have both decreased public sector employment, and failed to generate large numbers of the permanent, secure white-collar work that they expect. In different contexts, a rising youth demographic contributes to this problem. But it is also bound up with the accusation that neoliberal development has produced ‘jobless growth’ (Wade, 2004). It has provided some with avenues for rapid wealth accumulation, but has simultaneously created masses of surplus, educated labour (Ferguson, 2015). The jobs that remain go to those able to mobilise the resources to acquire the best education, a possibility perhaps made easier due to the expansion of private educational systems whereby some can buy a good quality education (Varghese, 2006).

This thesis adds to this work, by focusing on a middle-class group in Egypt that has experienced decline in the context of the country’s economic liberalisation and entry into the ‘global’ economy. The following section provides a brief introduction to this group.

⁹ There is also literature on this phenomenon in the global North (Kaplinsky, 2005; Livingstone, 2009; Standing, 2011).

Egypt's 'middle-class poor'



Figure 1.3 - Illustration depicting the death of Egypt's middle-class (Source: Daily News Egypt, 2016)

This picture (Figure 1.3) appeared in an Egyptian English-language newspaper in late 2016. It counteracts rather bluntly the hopeful depiction of a middle-class on the march towards prosperity. In Egypt, 'middle-class' frustration, and even its death according to commentators and ordinary Egyptians, is now considered to have partially fuelled the 2011 uprising (Kandil, 2012; Zayed, 2014).

As I explore in more depth in Chapter 3, the label 'middle-class,' or 'middle-level' (al-ṭabaqa al-mutawasiṭa), has its origins in a late-19th century state-building project to create a nationalist, bureaucratic workforce in Egypt (Ryzova, 2014). But it was under the Presidency of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1956-1970), and thereafter Anwar Sadat, when a larger middle-class was created

out of the expansion of public education, the provision of government employment to all graduates of secondary education and above, the distribution of substantial subsidies (for example for fuel and food), and the availability of affordable housing (Armbrust, 1996). Middle-class belonging was secured for many out of a stable non-manual job in the public sector, a state education, material security aided by subsidies, and a strong sense of belonging to a national culture (Armbrust, 1999; Schielke, 2012: 37; Ryzova, 2014).

However, in the aftermath of neoliberal economic changes in the 1980s and 90s, new, competing standards of ‘middle class-ness’ began to emerge in Egypt, out of increased consumptive possibilities and international mobility, new forms of labour and educational options, and historical forms of class distinction. This middle-class distinction has been enabled by the government’s ambition to construct a ‘global capital city’ (Ghannam, 2002; Sims, 2014): in recent years, Cairo has seen an explosion of internationalised educational institutions, gated communities, glamorous new office developments, and upscale shopping malls catering for upwardly-mobile Egyptians who have made vast amounts of wealth on the back of economic liberalisation.

The lives of this new ‘middle’ – which is often referred to by Egyptians as the ‘upper-middle class’ (al-ṭabaqa al-mutawasita al-‘alya) – have provided the focus for two recent contemporary studies (de Koning, 2009; Peterson, 2011). However, many have been excluded from this transition. Much scholarship has concentrated on the ‘poor’ or ‘popular classes’ residing in informal neighbourhoods (‘ashwa’yāt), and working in informal forms of employment (Singerman, 1996; Ismail, 2006; Bayat, 2009), or the industrial working classes (Shehata, 2009). Yet, there also exists an alternative, unexamined middle-class story. Many in the Nasserist middle-class did not make the transition to the new middle. Furthermore, their own

pathway towards a middle-class life began to destabilise in the aftermath of neoliberal transformations which have slashed government employment and wages, led to the deterioration of public services, and decreased the stock of affordable housing (Schielke, 2015). These problems have all been exacerbated in the context of a rapidly growing youth demographic (Brookings, 2016). Asef Bayat (2011) describes the emergence of a ‘middle-class poor’ out of these changes, a group he labels the new ‘proletariat’ of the Middle East. Focusing on young people, he describes how many are pushed into prolonged periods of unemployment after university or into low-skilled, low-status, insecure employment, as street vendors, sales persons, supermarket box boys, or taxi drivers (Bayat, 2011), and into Cairo’s overcrowded informal neighbourhoods alongside the poor. They now struggle to differentiate themselves from sha‘by living. The word sha‘by has been used since the 1940s, by the media before it came into daily language (Ghannam, 2002: 79). It comes from the word sha‘b, which means people or folk, but is distinct from the word balady (local or popular) – or ibn al-balad, which defines an authentic, traditional Egyptian identity (El-Messiri, 1978; Elyachar, 2011; Ghannam, 2011). In the aftermath of Egypt’s infitah, sha‘by, and balady have become derogatory terms to describe the lower-classes in upper-middle/upper-class discourse.¹⁰ Throughout the thesis, its myriad meanings will be frequently discussed.

The thesis focuses on members of this middle-class that lost out in the aftermath of late-20th century development. It delves into the lives of a group of young men who have just graduated from public university, some within Cairo and others in different towns and cities across the country. The faculties they attended, mostly commerce, law, and humanities, if they were once prestigious, have become infamous for their poor quality and classroom overcrowding in recent years. In a system that is increasingly privatised, they have remained dependent on an ever

¹⁰ There remain positive associations of sha‘by culture with fun and authenticity within the lower-classes.

more uncompetitive public education. Their parents mostly work in low-level public sector jobs – jobs given to them by a socialist-era ‘appointment’ policy. But their stagnant wages in the face of steady inflation have made sustaining a middle-class life – affording decent housing, a good education for their children, or buying a car – progressively more difficult. They live in the degraded, overcrowded informal areas of Cairo and other cities (see Figures 1.4 and 1.5).



Figure 1.4 Map of Egypt showing origins of interlocutors who moved to Cairo (Map data: Google, DigitalGlobe)



Figure 1.5 Map of Cairo showing places where my Cairo-based interlocutors lived (Map data: Google, DigitalGlobe)

The thesis' first aim and contribution is to plot the historical emergence of this middle-class condition, to understand the specific events and transformations that led to relative decline. In doing so, I want to disrupt hegemonic narratives of middle-classes on the rise in the Global South. Chapter 3: *The Rise and Fall of Egypt's Middle-Class*, conducts a comparative analysis of the relative rise and fall of two distinct middle-class groups in the previous 80 years: one that accumulated vast amounts of wealth in the aftermath of neoliberal reforms, thereby securing belonging in Cairo's global city and its 'upper-middle classes,' and another that was not able to accumulate wealth, and therefore became reliant on poor quality public education, low-paid public or insecure private sector jobs, and forced to reside in overcrowded informal areas surrounded by the poor. Adding texture to debates on the global middle-classes, the chapter explicates the importance of historic rural land ownership, timely investment in real estate and import/export, being well-positioned in the state bureaucracy, and international migration in the rise of Egypt's new middle-class. It also reveals how this is economic capital was 'reconverted' into new forms of cultural capital (private education, language skills, and subtle markers of 'modern' sociability). Most importantly though, the Chapter reveals the plight of another section of the Nasserist middle-class in the aftermath of neoliberal change.

Having established the historical emergence of these two contrasting middle-class groups, the rest of the thesis, using eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork in and around Cairo, delves into the lives of a group of young men in Egypt's 'lower-middle class,' with the aim of understanding how they experience and navigate their difficult transition to the labour market. In the rest of this introduction, I map out a conceptual framework through which their lives can be grasped.

‘All that is solid melts into air’ (Berman, 1982)

A cornerstone of Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory is the proposition that people do not normally aspire after lifestyles (or forms of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital) they cannot reach. Through a process of ‘adjustment,’ in childhood and beyond, there develops a congruence between one’s ‘subjective expectations,’ derived from their classed ‘habitus,’ and one’s ‘objective probabilities’ in the fields they enter: in other words between one’s dreams for the future and the future pathways permitted to them by the capitals they hold (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu defines habitus as a “system of acquired dispositions functioning on the practical level as categories of perception and assessment or as classificatory principles as well as being the organizing principles of action” (1990: 12-13). It is constituted by tacit knowledge, rather than a conscious set of rules. A habitus generally corresponds to the social group in which one is raised. It is specific to one’s class, as well as one’s gender, race, and sexuality. It is learned, for example, through one’s parents, schooling, and the popular culture to which one is exposed. According to Bourdieu, this means that the son of a garbage collector is not likely to aspire to become a lawyer, because it is perceived to be neither realistic nor indeed desirable (Willis, 1981). He will perceive that such a job, or indeed the university he would have to attend in order to reach it, are ‘not his places.’ For Bourdieu this is the mechanism ensuring stability in an unequal social order, as people ‘misrecognise’ where they belong and see their current place and future pathway as legitimate. He labels this process, whereby people exclude themselves from certain higher social positions, as symbolic violence.

However, Bourdieu has faced much critique for offering up a view of human behaviour, and symbolic domination, which is deterministic (King, 2000; Burawoy, 2012). He views people as locked into the tastes and dispositions connected to their class positions, trajectories, and the

institutionalised trainings to which they are exposed. Recent research within sociology has demonstrated, in part by taking Bourdieu's propositions outside of the mid-20th century French context, how individuals often express heterogeneous tastes and dispositions that stretch beyond the boundaries of their designated social class.¹¹ For example, focusing on consumption, some scholars have noted the increased propensity for the middle-class to be cultural omnivorous, whereby they can consume 'low-brow' popular culture as well as luxury goods and 'high' art (Peterson, 1992; Warde et al. 2007). But in the realm of employment aspirations as well, there are ever more occurrences of mismatch. Bourdieu admitted as much in later work:

“on the one hand, the generalisation of access to education – and the consequent structural discrepancy between the qualifications attained, and therefore the positions hoped for, and the jobs actually obtained – and of occupational insecurity tends to multiply the situations of mismatch, which generate tensions and frustrations” (Bourdieu, 2000: 234).

Bourdieu states that the simultaneous expansion of education – which increases aspirations for white-collar jobs – alongside increased job insecurity raises the propensity of situations of mismatch between one's 'habitus,' or aspirations that are built for a higher social position than the one they hold. This might have become a widespread condition in the contemporary moment in various contexts, owing to the simultaneous rise in ordinary aspirations, alongside a diminution of people's life chances.

¹¹ Dispositions are also heavily dependent upon gender, race, sexuality, and religion (Savage et al. 2008).

The decreased availability of affordable housing (Davis, 2006) and stable, well-paid employment (Standing, 2011; Honwana, 2012; Sassen, 2014), the stripping away of social welfare, and the heightened incidence of economic crisis is, in Bourdieu's terms, leading to a widespread decrease in the 'objective chances' of millions, including in the middle-classes, around the world (Rank et al. 2016). Yet, at the same time, contemporary capitalism continues to stimulate the aspirations for the kind of job, house and lifestyle, and the amount of wealth one is able to acquire. As Bourdieu states above, this is in part due to increasing access to education. However, it is perhaps a much more generalised condition of 'modernity,' as processes of globalisation, technological change and even urbanisation around the world are exposing people and groups to possible lives they were not previously seeing (Giddens, 1991; Appadurai, 1996; Beck, 2000; Bauman, 2011; Weiss, 2009; Ghertner, 2015). To repeat a phrase that Marshal Berman (1982) borrowed from Marx, 'all that is solid melts into air' in the context of the drastic and disruptive social changes brought about by modernity, including the pathways wished for by many.

The narrative of a global middle-class on the rise may in itself be stimulating aspirations, as people are repeatedly told that prosperity is on the way. Furthermore, the stable stratification of aspiration is also being disrupted by contemporary efforts to promote meritocratic ideals that encourage a belief in the possibility of social mobility for all (Khan, 2012; Littler, 2013). The American dream has long promoted the notion that, as Michelle Obama (and later Melania Trump in a comical act of plagiarism) stated at the 2008 Democratic convention: "the only limit to the height of your achievements is the reach of your dreams and your willingness to work hard for them."¹² Contemporary labour markets are placing more emphasis on continued career progression, the end to a 'job for life,' and offering up the possibility of moving from

¹² <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/michelle-versus-melania-who-said-it/>

‘rags-to-riches.’ Consumption markets continue to rely on people always yearning to acquire more than what they have.

Returning to Bourdieu, this contradictory situation is perhaps increasing the propensity of mismatch between the classed employment and lifestyles to which people aspire, and their ability to reach them through the ‘capitals’ they hold. In Chapter 3, I will set out how this condition developed among young middle-class Egyptian men. Recent studies have observed how processes of globalisation and modernisation – the government’s effort to modernise and transform Cairo into a ‘global city,’ and increased access to forms of media such as TV and the internet – have increased the aspirations of ordinary Egyptians (Ghannam, 2002; Bayat, 2011; Schielke, 2015).¹³ Yet at the same time, dramatic social and economic inequality, widespread corruption, and increased unemployment has impacted on the ability of many Egyptians to live a respectable life. Asef Bayat (2011) discussed how this mismatch plays out amongst the ‘middle-class poor.’ He defines this group as people with:

“high education, self-constructed status, wider worldviews, and global dreams who nonetheless are compelled — by unemployment and poverty — to subsist on the margins of the neoliberal economy as casual, low-paid, low-status, and low-skilled workers, and to reside in the overcrowded slums and squatter settlements of the Arab cities. Economically poor, they still fantasize about an economic status that their expectations demand — working in IT companies, with secure jobs, middle-class consumption patterns, and perhaps migration to the West.”¹⁴

¹³ This process is highly gendered, as, for example, men are more able to roam around the city (Ghannam, 2002).

¹⁴ <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/01/26/a-new-arab-street-in-post-islamist-times/>

In Chapter 3, I describe how young middle-class men, such as Gamal, develop aspirations, often in conflict with their parents, for a life associated with the country's globalised upper-middle classes, as well as those abroad that, evidence suggests, will be difficult to reach. They stem from an increased exposure to the places, commodities, and lifestyles of the upper-middle classes – both in Egypt and abroad – as they engage in university activities, travel around the city, scroll through Facebook, or hear the stories of friends or relatives. But they also originate from an exposure to the increased struggle of those around them to lead a dignified middle-class life, to marry, to look after their families, to find a decent job, to afford a home.

Having established the existence of a mismatch between the subjective aspirations and objective chances of young middle-class men in Egypt, the rest of the thesis is concerned with the consequences: specifically addressing the questions laid out at the beginning of this chapter. These are important questions if mismatch is becoming an increasingly prevalent condition in contemporary Egypt and beyond.

The departure of hope

Bourdieu himself does not explicate very fully what happens in situations of mismatch caused by social immobility, when aspirations overshoot one's ability to realise them. In situations of social mobility, his concepts of hysteresis and habitus clivé (cleft habitus) have attempted to outline how a 'lagging' habitus experiences discomfort when confronted with the tastes and dispositions connected with a higher class, if this involves a significant jump (Friedman, 2016).¹⁵ But what about a habitus that is built for a higher class, and which experiences social immobility? A classic Bourdieu approach might predict a steady process of adaptation of one's

¹⁵ This is related to the psychological concept of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

dispositions to new surroundings. But in the quote set out above regarding mismatches in the realm of employment, Bourdieu himself states that it generates “tensions and frustrations” (2000: 234). In *Distinction* (1987), he expands on this somewhat to explore how it might lead to a sense of ‘alienation,’ or acts of ‘refusal’ in work. And elsewhere, he mentions that mismatch produces a sense of a “lack of a future” (2000: 234).

But, in order to understand how this condition is lived, I want to move beyond the writings of Bourdieu, and turn to a focus on emotion. This focus originates in the 17th century work of Benedict de Spinoza, and aims to combat a view that the present is always experienced through ‘rational’ or ‘conscious’ thought processes, suggesting instead that it is experienced through emotion. But, what has become known as affect theory distinguishes between personal feelings and emotions, and ‘affect.’ Affect describes a transpersonal ability to “affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: xvii). Affects therefore, in contrast to feelings and emotions, go “beyond the strength of those who undergo them ... affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994: 164). Affects take on the “dynamic, kinetic qualities of the atmos” (Anderson, 2009: 78), emerging as bodies/objects encounter one another – this encounter is given the name ‘affection’ (Massumi, 2002).

Personal feelings – and their outward expression as emotion – emerge through these encounters. They constitute the conscious ways in which people make sense of, and provide a biography and a language to, transpersonal intensities with repeated experience. Massumi (2002) describes an emotion as a “subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which from that point onward is defined as personal” (28). Emotions are

therefore formed through the qualification of affect into “semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action/reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized” (ibid. 28). Affect and emotion thus play vital roles in determining our subjective experience of the world. They shape how we make sense of events and decide to act in response. This thesis argues that a focus on emotion and affect can reveal important dimensions to the lived experience of class, and contemporary class immobility or wretchedness in Egypt specifically.

Scholars of affect and emotion have long demonstrated how a feeling of hope is integral to a life. Ghassan Hage (2003) defines hope as a sense of existential mobility, a sense that one is going somewhere with one’s life. Michael Jackson defines it as a “sense that one may become other or more than one presently is or was fated to be” (2011: xi). It rests on motion, what Hirokazu Miyazaki (2004) terms a sense of ‘prospective momentum’ towards what is considered a ‘good’ future. Hoping is distinguished from the act of dreaming – in the sense of the sleep-dream – by its future orientation. To dream is to conjure up “desires smouldering from the past” (Allison, 2013: 8), whereas to hope is to direct consciousness towards the future. Dreaming can also be future orientated, particularly in Egypt, where the word ‘dream’ (ḥilm) is used synonymously with the word ‘aspiration.’ The dream is not “only something that happens inside one’s head,” but acts as something to pursue into the future (Schielke, 2015: 152). Hoping though is distinguishable from dreaming, aspiring, or even desiring. A desire, dream, or aspiration can all be objects of hope. Hope therefore might be defined as a sense that a future dream, aspiration, or desire is *becoming* yours.

The use of the term hope, instead of other terms similarly orientated towards the future – confidence, belief, optimism, positivity, expectation, promise, anticipation, faith, or possibility

– is deliberate. I use hope for both empirical and conceptual reasons. ‘Min ghīr al ’amal mafīsh hayāt’ (without hope there is no life) is a common phrase in Egypt. Hope, unlike other words, defines a more basic sense of having something to live for. It is a prerequisite to life. Its opposite is despair (y’ās). It is therefore more definitively directed towards something desired, a feeling that it might happen, whereas some of the other terms, such as optimism or confidence, define more generalised senses that outcomes will be positive. The boundary between hope as a feeling and the other words mentioned above is porous and difficult to pin down. Hope (’amal in Arabic) though is distinguishable from confidence (thiqa – which can also be translated into trust), even optimism (tafā’wl), since hope is haunted by both a fear and anxiety that what is hoped for will not come to pass. It is more fragile, and less sure of itself. The flip side of this is that it thrives on less. Throughout the thesis, it will become clear that a generalised sense of mobility towards a good future is sometimes felt as confidence, and sometimes as less assured hope. But what underpins this is a need to keep moving.

Why then do people want to go somewhere? What drives this yearning for movement? According to philosophers Hannah Arendt (1958) and Ernst Bloch (1995), a hopeful sensibility is an intrinsic part of human consciousness. It is a product of a “not-yet conscious,” a consciousness formed in anticipation of the future, “towards the side of something new that is dawning up, that has never been conscious before” (Bloch, 1986: 13). It is therefore fuelled by a sense of promise and potential transformation in the appearance of the new as the future unfolds. Yet this sensibility, according to Jackson (2011; xii), is also fuelled by a sense that something is missing in the present, a sense that there is “more to life than what exists for us in the here and now.” This sense of insufficiency is perhaps foundationally connected with a Lacanian notion of desire. Lacan understands desire as being fuelled by a perpetual sense of lack, a lack of recognition from others. According to this notion, “desire’s *raison d’être* is not

to realise its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire” (Žižek, 1997: 38). It rests on separation between the desiring subject and the object that is desired. By contrast, anxiety arises if there is nothing left to be desired (ibid. 1997).

But a sense of insufficiency must also be understood in the context of dominant systems of value within which people orientate themselves. It has been described as a hallmark of capitalism, which requires perpetual investment and growth, and fuels a sense that one cannot be satisfied with what one already has (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2001). There is always something more to be done, to be bought or experienced in order to find fulfilment. This aspirational sensibility is also inflected by age. The life-stage of youth holds within it an inherent sense of incompleteness, in which aspirations for employment, marriage, and family life remain in a state of not-yet.¹⁶ These aged aspirations are always dependent on one’s social class, as well as gender, race, sexuality, and religious belief. We can therefore understand the individualised class project to possess a temporal dimension. It is always future-orientated, and incomplete. This is perhaps more intensely felt in the life stage of youth, as youth chase jobs that can provide marriage and a desirable lifestyle. But people have to constantly re-assert (and improve) their class position, striving for better-paid jobs, better lifestyles, and more commodities. In Rachel Heiman’s (2015) words, people are always ‘driving after class.’ Samuli Schielke (2015; 22) notes that this is particularly pertinent in the middle-class, as a status always “a step short of the upper-classes.” He defines a life guided by these ‘grand schemes’ as an “aspirational sense of existence, where one must always reach for more than what one has, a sensibility that is essentially dependent on its being dynamic and growing” (ibid. 23).¹⁷

¹⁶ Schielke also states that religious salvation and romantic love have similar qualities, in that they are always perpetually unfinished endeavours.

¹⁷ Sara Ahmed (2010) describes how happiness becomes attached to certain normative modes of living that drive action, such as marriage, or a healthy body.

Hope then defines a feeling that one is moving towards this desired future. In this way, we can understand it to be an integral feeling for the class project. According to Hage, the ability to affect hope for the future in a population – to “maintain an experience of the possibility of upward social mobility” (2003: 13) – is essential for a nation-state’s capacity to govern in the face of entrenched inequalities and the inter-generational reproduction of class locations. This means that each person has the opportunity to move towards self-realisation, the realisation of their classed, gendered, aged, and racialized dreams. Returning to Bourdieu’s language, in a situation where one’s subjective expectations line up with objective chances, it is possible to keep alive a sense of movement, or hope, towards a desirable future.¹⁸ In this context, people wait for a good life to continually arrive. However, their patience, their feeling of hope, is dependent upon the perpetual movement of the ‘queue’ (Hage, 2003).

What Hage (2003), along with many others, now claims, is that for huge numbers of people that sense of prospective movement towards a desirable future is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Neoliberal society, he claims, has no commitment to affecting hope. A sense of prospective mobility is instead being replaced, including for many in the middle-classes, by a sense of ‘impasse’ (Berlant, 2011), ‘stuckedness’ (Hage, 2003), ‘limbo’ (Jansen, 2015), and ‘abjection’ (Ferguson, 1999), as a result of an inability to move forward within normative classed, aged, and gendered systems of value. People are being forced into extended periods of ‘waithood’ (Honwana, 2012). This, as I argued above, results from a dramatic upscaling of ordinary aspirations, alongside a diminishment of the possibility of achieving a dignified life. Some studies have traced the emotional dimensions of immobility. This condition could stem from an inability to gain employment, get married or find love, acquire a home, achieve

¹⁸ This is similar to what Appadurai (2004) labels a “capacity to aspire,” the ability to form aspirations and know how to move towards them.

economic independence, or engage in certain forms of consumption. It is experienced in highly gendered ways, as the expectations placed upon, and aspirations developed by, women and men differ (Osella & Osella, 2000; Silberschmidt, 2004). In the realm of employment, ethnographic work has variously uncovered the frustration and anger (Jeffrey, 2010; Hochschild, 2016), boredom (Ralph, 2008; Schielke, 2015; O'Neil, 2017), shame (Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Mains, 2007), and purposelessness or detachment (Bourdieu, 2000; Berlant, 2016) that circulate among people who are unable to locate fulfilling jobs.¹⁹ Arlie Hochschild (2016), for example, reveals how American middle-class men and women in Louisiana develop feelings of frustration and anger out of endlessly awaiting the arrival of the prosperity, fulfilment and security that is supposed to follow a lifetime of hard work.

This work shows that, for millions of people around the world, that vital feeling of hope, that sense that there is something to look forward to in life, is being stripped away. These accounts add much needed texture to literature that asserts 'uncertainty,' (Zeiderman et al. 2015) and 'precarity' (Standing, 2011) as the defining conditions of the 21st century. They reveal the emotional experience of classed, aged, and gendered immobility. However, we need to go beyond the loss of hope uncovered by this literature, to understand the consequences of the generation of anger. The next section reviews literature which has examined the dramatic political events emerging from hamstrung frustration, but finds their focus on exceptional moments of upheaval wanting.

¹⁹ Craig Jeffrey (2010) describes how a sense of immobility is always funnelled through the experience of temporality (Guyer, 2007). The way time is experienced is one of the principal differentiations of the power one holds within society (Bourdieu, 2000). A person who is highly valued experiences a perpetual shortage of time, whereas someone whose time is devalued (the unemployed for example) experiences an excess of time, a sensation where sometimes time hardly seems to move at all. There is nothing to orientate the self towards, nothing to look forward to, and nothing to wait for or invest in. For Jeffrey, there are multiple registers in which time can stand still, firstly in the sense of "clock time" as days become drawn out and left empty by the vacation of normal rhythms, but also due to both lagging behind the "historical possibilities of modernity" (Felski, 2000; 82), and the expectations of independent adulthood.

Hopeful Resistance

Ghassan Hage (2003), discussing the Australian white middle-classes, saw a rise in what he termed ‘paranoid nationalism’ because of a ‘scarcity of hope.’ He saw that people who stopped experiencing a sense of mobility in their lives became “self-centred, jealous of anyone perceived to be ‘advancing’ while they are stuck, vindictive and bigoted and always ready to ‘defend the nation’ in the hope of re-accessing their lost hopes” (ibid. 21). Thirteen years later, people are observing a similar phenomenon in the form of the right-wing movements in the Western context which brought about Brexit, the close-fought election contests in France and The Netherlands, and the election of Donald Trump in 2016. Thus, Hochschild (2016) also observes how Trump supporters in Louisiana direct their frustrations at the racial minorities and women being helped to ‘cut the line’ that leads to the American dream. Hage (2003) understands that in a context where people develop feelings of frustration in their own lives, modernist narratives of future progress lose their ability to *affect* people. Instead, a racialized, masculinist politics develops an affective quality that generates feelings of anger and fear, by directing blame towards outsiders, ‘scroungers,’ and the liberals who ‘help’ them. This politics is geared towards protecting ‘ourselves’ from threats, rather than building a better future (Guyer, 2007; Zeiderman, 2016; Mbembe, 2017).

In this context, there is a desperate attempt from those on the Left to replace this ‘politics of fear’ with a ‘politics of hope,’ to promise a better future rather than to protect from a threatening one.²⁰ But, there has not been enough recognition of how these right-wing narratives affect not only feelings of fear, but hope too. Their strength lies in offering up people who have lost a

²⁰ The direction of this political movement is perhaps specific to the Global North, which has historically-constituted a racial and gendered other – and which “liberalism” is designed to help. This is not as readily available in the Egyptian or Middle-Eastern context.

sense of hope, and power, a temporary avenue through which to renew it, which of course comes at the expense of the hope of many others. The task therefore is to redirect people's anger towards the systems that keep wealth and power in the hands of a few, and away from other 'victims.' Yet, this debate underlines the importance of understanding the affective dimensions of political events (Demertzis, 2013). For people who experience feelings of frustration at their own immobility, encounters with political narratives of radical change hold the potential to affect them with particular emotions.

Much critical scholarship is therefore geared towards locating alternative 'spaces of hope' (Harvey, 2000), or 'concrete utopias' (Dinerstein, 2016), which symbolise a more progressive challenge to the economic and political systems imperilling so many (Bloch, 1986; Lefebvre, 1996; Zournazi, 2002; Back, 2015). They see that immobility, and the frustration that arises with it, is an emotional state that holds imminent potential for radical change (Hage, 2009), as people engage in acts of resistance which provide renewed hope.²¹ Even Bourdieu – famous for under-recognising the potential for social change – states that the “falling out of line” of aspirations and chances can “leave a margin of freedom for political action aimed at reopening the space of possibles” (2000: 234).

There are various forms that resistance can take, ranging from full-scale revolution, engagement in protest, workers' strikes, institutional and informal political claims-making, to more everyday forms of defiance (Scott, 1985). Unemployed, disenfranchised young men are seen as especially susceptible to participation in revolt, and violence (Jeffrey, 2010; Chalcraft, 2012; Enria, 2015). Within urban geography, literature on resistance is overwhelmingly

²¹ There are a wide range of explanations for the occurrence of resistance, stemming from the theorisations of contentious politics (Tilly et al. 2001).

concentrated on the practices of the poor. Scholars have exposed how urban metabolisms open the space for struggle over material resources that sustain employment and livelihoods – and thereby a sense of hopeful movement towards a good life – such as housing (Holston, 2008), amenities (Bayat, 2009), and infrastructure (Lancione & McFarlane, 2016). This focus on material conflict stems from an assertion that the sustained disconnection between capital and labour – where capital is accumulated without massive labour requirements – has rendered symbolic conflict defunct (Schindler, 2017). Contemporary cities are therefore seen as divided. Those in ‘informal’ or lower-class areas do not aspire after social mobility – for example participation in ‘global’ or ‘world-class’ cities. Instead of struggling over access to certain lifestyles or employment, the urban poor fight for a stake in the city’s metabolic configuration. In this thesis, I want to refocus attention on symbolic struggle in the urban Global South. There are people who aspire after the employment and lifestyles that have been made available to some in ‘world class’ cities. Their struggle is both material and symbolic, and it is imperative to understand how it plays out.

Asef Bayat (2011) argued that Egypt’s 2011 uprising was stimulated by a widespread sense of stagnation within the population, and particularly amongst the young middle-classes who struggled in the years preceding this event to access a good education, find a decent job, and afford a house.²² The revolution for many ordinary Egyptians provided a moment of powerful hope, a space to conceive of a better future for themselves and the nation (Soueif, 2012). The atmosphere of Tahrir Square during those days, and for months and years afterwards, held an affective quality of hopeful momentum. Yet, more than three years after, when I met young men like Gamal, the revolutionary hope it stimulated had long faded away. As most do in the

²² There have been a plethora of other types of explanation for the events of 2011, which stem from the theorisations of contentious politics (Beinin, 2015; Ismail, 2012; Ketchley, 2017). Yet, many agree that middle-class stagnation played an important role.

aftermath of revolutionary events, or indeed elections, Egyptians have returned to the daily task of trying to reach a good life, by educating themselves, obtaining a fulfilling job, and beginning preparations for marriage. These were the stunted pursuits that induced a sense of ‘stuckness’ and led to an outpouring of anger in 2011. Prolonged economic stagnation, political turmoil, and a return of authoritarianism have only made those pursuits harder in the past five years, and ensured that the promise of early 2011 is now a distant memory.

Returning to the research questions, the literature on resistance provides one answer by demonstrating how a mismatch between one’s aspirations and chances, in other words class immobility, can lead to the relocation of hope through narratives and practices that signify radical change, or incremental ‘encroachments’ (Bayat, 2009). However, this focus threatens to homogenise the myriad everyday ways people escape the frustration and anger thrown up by ruptured pursuits into the label of ‘resistance.’ Despite the continuation of Muslim Brotherhood, anti-Coptic, and price protests and violence, Egypt is overwhelmingly experiencing stability at present. The country has witnessed the return of an authoritarian regime. According to Schielke, stability is an aspiration for many ordinary Egyptians. Yet, the ‘stability’ he defines is dependent upon perpetual growth (Bourdieu, 2000), which is hard to find for many in contemporary Egypt. This leads on to the final research question introduced above, about the maintenance of stability in the context of a denial of movement towards classed, gendered, and aged dreams? In order to address this, I turn to ethnographic work that pays much closer attention to everyday life, to the mundane ways in which people who are “seemingly marginalised and immiserated” by political-economic structures keep alive a feeling of hope for a good life (Simone, 2004: 407).²³

²³ This work stems from a desire to combat a tendency to view the lives of the destitute as only a “passive experience of suffering” (Masquelier, 2013: 475).

Mundane hope-making

In recent years, there has been a wave of ethnographic studies focused on various groups who have been cast aside from normative modes of life-building (unemployed youth, the homeless, refugees, those living in disaster zones). It investigates the everyday work that goes into reintroducing a sense of ‘prospective momentum’ (Miyazaki, 2004) for a desirable future (Wacquant, 1998; Vigh, 2009; Mains, 2012; Pedersen, 2012; Jansen, 2015; Ralph, 2015; Turner, 2015; Elliot, 2016; O’Neil, 2017). This work builds on a wider literature examining what people (young men in particular) do during periods of ‘waithood’ (Jeffrey, 2010; Ralph, 2008; Newell, 2011). It speaks against a philosophical notion of hope as an intrinsic aspect of human consciousness (Bloch, 1986), and instead tries to pinpoint how this emotional state is ‘affected’ in bodies through certain routinized, gender, class, and age-specific practices. They include playing the lottery, putting faith in God’s rewards, watching films, and consuming drugs. These practices invoke a reorientation of consciousness, what Miyazaki (2004: 52) terms a ‘temporal reorientation’ of knowledge, which reopens the possibility of a good future – for class mobility, migration, or finding a job. This in turn invokes a shift in transpersonal intensity, in affect, which is felt as personalised hope. Daniel Mains (2012: 54-55) for example described how watching films and chewing khat enabled young men in Ethiopia to repetitively dispel the “anxieties associated with unstructured time, introspective thought, and hopelessness,” and to reimagine, albeit transiently, positive futures.²⁴

Bourdieu (2000: 226) himself briefly describes this as the attempt of those who have nothing to look forward to, to escape into fantasy and the imaginary: people act “as if, when nothing

²⁴ This has also been framed by some as an ability to ‘trick time’ (Flaherty, 2010; Ringel, 2016).

was possible, everything became possible, as if all discourses about the future – prophecies, divinations, predictions, millenarian announcements – had no other purpose than to fill what is no doubt one of the most painful of wants: the lack of a future.” Bourdieu has been criticised for underplaying the deliberate and logical attempt of people to reorient their temporal experience, or affect a change in their own emotional states, in response to an unwillingness to accept one’s ‘objective chances’ (Pedersen, 2012). Yet, all of these studies demonstrate how people cope emotionally with being thrown into class, age, and gender ‘stuckness’ outside moments of resistance.

This work can help develop literature in geography that overwhelmingly focuses on the material practices through which structurally disenfranchised people forge respectable lives. Thus, Craig Jeffrey (2010) describes how educated young men in rural India with dismal job prospects engage in ‘creative improvisation’ (jugaad) by acting as political brokers in university; Colin McFarlane (2011) asserts how displaced populations in urban India ‘make-do’ on the urban margins; and Tatiana Thieme (2017) plots how young men in Nairobi ‘get by’ through engaging in ‘hustle’ as they negotiate their lack of access to services, the loss of an income stream, or an unexpected bill. These studies highlight the generative possibilities of the uncertainty and precarity thrown up by capitalist arrangements (Cooper & Pratten, 2015) in that uncertainty engenders the poor’s adaptive capacity (Vigh, 2006). But the practices on which they focus can also be examined through the lens of emotion. They are practices that not only keep alive a material existence, but a vital psychological existence.

In Chapters 4-6, I take forward literature on hope-making, using it to analyse how young middle-class Egyptian men struggling to find a good job sustain hope. This, I argue, constitutes an important dimension of the experience of class immobility. Yet, I also wish to critique this

literature in certain ways. It has overwhelmingly focused on people who have experienced a prolonged rupture in their ability to find a job, obtain a house, or get married. They therefore become ‘inactive.’ I will apply the same conceptual approach to people who continue to be active, who continue the pursuit of a ‘normal’ life (Schielke, 2015). Many people develop mismatches between their aspirations for desirable jobs and their ability to reach them, yet do not experience the same intensity of rupture felt by the long-term unemployed, the homeless, and refugees. I want to examine their more ‘ordinary’ practices of hope-making (Robinson, 2005), by shifting focus to practices such as applying for jobs, reading about entrepreneurship or self-help, praying to God, and engaging in self-study. I argue that these practices become strategies of hope-making for young middle-class Egyptian men over time. I also want to add an important temporal dimension to ethnographic studies of hope, which overwhelmingly concentrate on one period. In situations of structural disenfranchisement, the relocation of prospective mobility is never final. Journeys are tormented, as people are thrown between “flight into the imaginary, and fatalistic surrender to the verdicts of the given” (Bourdieu, 2000: 221), between feelings of hope and feelings of despair, anger, and fear. Their positions require much emotional work in order to maintain forward momentum.

However, I also depart from ethnographic work on hope in another important way, by focusing on the ‘objects’ which act to keep hope alive. Along with scholarship on resistance, a common thread of this work is the assertion that capitalist formations have ‘cast aside’ vast numbers, no longer offering them hope (Hage, 2003). In celebrating the agentive capacity of the structurally disenfranchised to locate hope through mundane practices, ethnographic work neglects how their hope continues to be caught in webs of power. Ghassan Hage (2016) recently criticised ethnographic work for focusing too much on the subject’s production of hope, and not enough

on the ‘spatial terrain’ within which hope comes into being.²⁵ In the final section, I describe how returning to affect theory can help reintroduce the transpersonal dimension of feeling and emotion.

Meritocratic industries of hope

There are several ways that power is neglected in literature on practices of ‘getting by’ or hope-making. First, by concentrating on how groups challenge structures of power, for example state disciplinary power, through appropriating resources or avoiding state regulation, attention is drawn away from the ways these actions also reaffirm them. Bayat (1997), for example, argues that the ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’ can also reaffirm the unequal formal distribution of amenities. Second, the fact that some urban dwellers, as Thieme (2017) states, lose aspirations for ‘formal adulthood’ is an effect of power in Bourdieu’s sense, in that they adapt their aspirations in accordance with social position. Furthermore, focusing on the capacity of the individual to ‘adapt,’ or ‘manage risk’ shifts attention away from social relations that govern adaptive capacity. What about those who refuse, or struggle to hustle or hope? Are they blamed, or do they blame themselves? Gamal, for example, blames someone for jumping from a bridge and refusing to hope. Might these frames of action therefore reproduce hierarchies, by valorising those who get by and ignoring the differential capacity of people – according to class, gender, race, or age – to hustle, improvise, or hope (see Young et al. 2016)?

Finally, there is little recognition of the ‘moral terrain’ that shapes one’s propensity to engage in practices of ‘making-do,’ or ‘hoping,’ only an assertion that people are forced to do so

²⁵ Jansen (2016) similarly criticized this work for not examining how hope is “produced, distributed, and embedded in particular social relations” (451).

through material conditions of precarity. The focus is on the practices of the individual. But is there no moral pressure from without to hustle, hope, or improvise? This could be from others within communities (Lamont, 2002) – informal economies are ridden with hierarchical chains that shape the possible actions of people within them (Suckling, 2016) – or from various institutions that attempt to encourage certain behaviours, such as resilience, or entrepreneurialism (Elyachar, 2005).

In this thesis, I switch focus to the spatial and moral terrains of hope. I call for examination of how the structurally disenfranchised are encouraged to hope for a better future. The theorisations of affect theory can help reintroduce a focus on the transpersonal terrain of emotion. Kathleen Stewart (2007) describes practices of hope-making as the ‘daydream of being included in the world’:

“This is the daydream of a subject whose only antidote to structural disenfranchisement is a literal surge of vitality and mobility. A subject whose extreme vulnerability is rooted in the sad affect of being out of place, out of luck, or caught between a rock and a hard place, and who makes a passionate move to connect to a life when mainstream strategies like self-discipline or the gathering of resources like a fortress around the frail body are not an option. A subject who is literally touched by a force and tries to take it on, to let it puncture and possess one, to make oneself its object, if only in passing. A subject for whom an unattainable hope can become the tunnel vision one needs to believe in a world that could include one” (116).

Stewart describes how people attempt to harness the affective intensities of the world around them, to incite a surge of feeling. She therefore shifts attention to the transpersonal intensities roaming the world. This returns us to affect theory, which suggests that emotion and feeling is induced through the “movement of affect on the body” (Anderson, 2006: 236). Affect, a non-discursive sensation, is omitted by objects, places, and discourses as they are encountered by bodies.²⁶ It inhabits a transpersonal terrain, what Ben Anderson (2009) labels an ‘atmosphere,’ in which subjects and objects encounter one another. Anderson’s label represents an attempt to escape the subject/object binary (affect as impersonal and objective, emotion as personal and subjective). Atmosphere is indeterminate with regard to this distinction, it can be at once collective and at the same time felt as intensely personal. The emergence of affect from “the relations between bodies, and from the encounters that those relations are entangled within, make the materialities of space-time always-already affective” (Anderson, 2006: 736). Seigworth (2000: 232) describes this space-time as a “ceaselessly oscillating foreground/background or, better, an immanent ‘plane’ (i.e. this is an in-between with a consistency all of its own).”

The affectual plane comes to be experienced intimately, and intensely personally, as feelings and emotions by bodies that move within it. Feelings emerge within the ‘encounter’ between bodies and the objects, places, and discourses they interact with and inhabit (Navaro, 2009). As Anderson (2006: 736) states, “movements of affect are expressed through those proprioceptive and visceral shifts in the background habits, and postures, of a body that are commonly described as ‘feelings’.” When one feels angry, one feels the passage of anger, and

²⁶ I use a Foucauldian definition of discourses, which understands them as “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Weedon, 1997: 108).

bodily heat, through one's body (Katz, 1999). The shape of such feeling or emotion is dependent upon the affected body's existing condition to be affected. Both the objects, places, and discourses that omit affects, and the way they are received as feelings, are the product of a diverse set of historical relations (ibid. 1999).

The relationality of this approach to emotion opens space to analyse the objects, discourses, and places which 'affect' people with hope. Hope in ethnographic studies arises from 'encounters' with lottery tickets (visa or monetary), refugee resettlement documents, drugs, television, the city, or religious narratives that emphasise the need for perseverance. Yet these objects and discourses receive little attention, in favour of a focus on the creative abilities of the destitute to retain the indeterminacy of the future. These objects and discourses are all attached to certain industries and institutions, such as development or religious organisations. Ignoring their role stems from a belief that refugees, the unemployed, the homeless, and those living in conflict zones are 'left behind.' But these groups remain subject to various institutions and logics which promise to improve their near future (Li, 2007; Kohl-Arenas, 2015; Zeiderman, 2016). Hage (2009) recently argued that, even in situations of extended crisis, people are encouraged to exercise 'perseverance,' 'resilience,' and 'endurance.'

We therefore need to focus on the objects, discourses, and places that invoke certain affective intensities, and thereby feelings of hope, for people who experience class, age, and gender immobility. Reflecting my focus on a more 'ordinary' pursuit of 'middle-class' jobs, I examine places such as training centres, employment fairs, entrepreneurship events, and objects such as self-help literature, film, religious stories, the internet, CVs, and business cards. These objects and places form part of a meritocratic infrastructure of labour market institutions and industries (training organisations and self-help, recruitment agencies, the entrepreneurship scene), that

span the fields of development, government, and private sector. This infrastructure operates as a spatial terrain of hope for young middle-class Egyptians. I position this infrastructure within the broader spatial formation of Cairo's global city, as it advertises the city's jobs and wealth, and offers up the knowledge required to secure them. I therefore argue that Cairo's global city operates as an atmospheric landscape that affects a sense of hope for middle-class Egyptians who dream of belonging.

I therefore build on work which recognises that capitalist regimes around the world, despite pushing millions into acute deprivation, continue to churn out, and sell, a powerful promise of happiness (Ahmed, 2010; Davies, 2016). A promise is a declaration or assurance that one will do something or that a particular thing will happen. It thus creates expectancy, or hope for the future. Lauren Berlant, in her 2011 book *Cruel Optimism*, discusses various 'good life fantasies' – such as intimacy, dieting, voting, and a belief in meritocracy – which she defines as pillars of liberal-democratic notions of the good life in post-war, neoliberal America. Berlant explores how, despite continual collapse, this 'cluster of promises' retains its power as the poor maintain an optimistic attachment to it because its very presence in their lives continues to represent the possibility of happiness. The makeup of these fantasies is highly context dependent. Chapter 3 describes the exact shape of these aspirational markers among men in middle-class Egypt. They are also always sold in particular places and through particular objects, in schools and universities, in casinos, and through lottery tickets. Various studies have examined how these places are designed in ways that generate, and sell, affective atmospheres of hope (Clotfelter & Cook, 1991; Krige, 2012; Schüll, 2012; Posecznick, 2017).

The strength of 'good life fantasies' in many cases rests on the notion that achieving them depends on one's willingness to work hard, rather than inherited privilege, or where someone

is born. A key discursive shift associated with neoliberalism in different contexts has been the intensification of focus on the individual, the creation of individual ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ who can take charge of their own life chances through exercising certain behaviours, such as ‘resilience’ (Lemke, 2001; Dardot & Laval, 2013; Bröckling, 2016). This has been coupled with the construction of a system that rewards those behaviours: meritocracy. Having started out as a critique of a system that rewards those already ‘gifted’ (Fox, 1956), it was picked up by the New Right in the 1980s to create a system that accepts high inequality, but in which social mobility is fostered through breaking down established hierarchies (Littler, 2013). Within this ideology, no matter what your class, race, gender, or sexuality is, you can ‘make it’ if you acquire the right skills, or ‘human capital.’ Shamus Khan (2012) points to the irony and contradiction that, despite rising inequalities and stagnant social mobility in the US, the meritocratic myth is only becoming more entrenched. There are ever greater efforts in education and the labour market to encourage social mobility, eradicate discrimination, and disrupt ‘backward’ notions of where people belong. This is continually backed up by ‘rags-to-riches’ success stories on our TV screens (see Savage, 2015).

There is little research on the extension of meritocratic logics outside the West. In Egypt, outside the globally visible events of 2011, there has been in recent decades an alternative, quieter revolution taking place. This is summed up by what Talal Asad (2015) labelled the ‘liberal incitement to individual autonomy.’ Asad describes how, following processes of privatisation and economic liberalisation, and as the state stepped back from its role in social reproduction, there has been a shift in ‘moral authority,’ particularly among Egypt’s middle-class, towards the ‘conscience’ of the autonomous individual. ‘Self-fashioning’ (takwin an-nafs) is an increasingly important lens through which Egyptians pursue the goal of “finding wealth and a place in life” (Schielke in Simcik-Arese, 2016: 229). Various scholars have

explored how this has manifested in the increased propensity of self-help literature (Kenney, 2015), entrepreneurship and empowerment programs (Elyachar, 2005; Atia, 2013), and desires for private property (Simcik-Arese, 2016). Others have noted a concurrent process in the realm of Islam, as Muslims increasingly conceive of the cultivation of their own moral behaviour as essential for securing God's satisfaction, and self-realization (Mahmood, 2004). In the chapters that follow, I uncover how a 'modern' shift towards meritocracy is being proliferated in a labour market that is perceived to be 'backwards.' This, I will argue, represents an updated version of what Timothy Mitchell (2002) labelled the 'rule of experts' in Egypt.

The myth of meritocracy has repeatedly been debunked in different contexts (Putnam, 2016; Frank, 2017). This includes Egypt, where the instance of social mobility has declined in recent decades (World Bank, 2012; Binzel & Carvalho, 2016). However, despite repeated demystification, it continues to be held up as a sanctified discourse. Indeed, if it were to be fractured anywhere, Egypt would provide a fertile place in the aftermath of an uprising railing against corruption, inequality, and protracted unemployment. Shamus Khan (2012) demonstrated how the privilege of American elites is legitimised through a meritocratic terrain, as they come to perceive their success as deserved, acquired through certain character traits rather than upper-class backgrounds. It thus normalises inequality, and legitimises blame, and punishment, on the poor (Wacquant, 2009). But this terrain also has important effects beforehand, on those pursuing privilege and social mobility. It encourages the belief that, whoever you are, you can achieve your dreams, whatever they are. It therefore holds within it an affective quality that invokes feelings of hope, bringing 'agency' back to the individual (Miyazaki, 2004).

I will argue that the extension of meritocracy in Egypt acts to invoke a sense of hope for the future among young middle-class men living in a condition of waithood that arises as they aspire for more than they can reach. I will argue that this enables the exercise of a form of power, by labour market institutions and industries, which is distinct from Bourdieu's notion of symbolic domination that rests on inducing an equivalence between expectations and chances. I follow Michael Burawoy's (2012) call for a 'shallower' conception of domination to that extended by Bourdieu; that is, a shift towards a Gramscian notion of hegemony that considers the specific set of, sometimes unexpected, relations that produce 'consent' or 'compliance.'²⁷ Following recent theorisations of affect theory, we need to look at the ways in which power can be exercised on and through emotion (Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2004; Stewart, 2007; Berlant, 2011; Wilson, 2016). Existing research uncovers how certain emotions, or affective states, such as fear, empathy, or anger are directed in particular ways to suit particular interests (Butler, 2009). I focus on hope as one such emotion that secures what I call a form of 'affective compliance' among middle-class young men chasing difficult dreams. I favour the word compliance because it is not dependent upon the active belief of the subject (Scott, 1985).

Ironically, in *Pascalian Meditations*, Bourdieu offers a useful language through which to approach this alternative form of power, briefly describing how 'waiting' might also be "one of the privileged ways of experiencing the effect of power" (2000: 228). It rests on "delaying without destroying hope, on adjourning without totally disappointing, which would have the effect of killing the waiting itself," and is particularly salient in cases that "depend significantly on the belief of the 'patient,' and which work on and through aspirations, on and through time, by controlling time and the rate of fulfilment of expectations" (ibid. 228). He finally describes

²⁷ Gramsci describes hegemony as the "spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is historically caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position in and function in the world of production." (Gramsci, in Jackson-Lears, 1985: 568)

it as an “art of turning down without turning off, of keeping people motivated without driving them to despair” (ibid. 228).

This form of power is always exercised within particular places (Crampton & Elden, 2007).²⁸ It is exercised, I argue, upon middle-class Egyptian young men within training centres, entrepreneurship events, and employment fairs that constitute the labour market infrastructure of Cairo’s ‘global city.’ In arguing this, a final task of the thesis is to reposition literature on ‘world-class’ or ‘global’ cities. Work on those marginalised by contemporary city-making overwhelmingly concentrates on groups residing in an ‘informal’ city, far away from ‘world-class’ urban production. Even those exploring more educated groups either focus on people outside urban centres, or those who are pushed into the ‘informal’ city (Jeffrey, 2010; Mains, 2012). It is assumed they do not compete for the lifestyles offered up by ‘world-class’ cities. When relations are explicated, they usually fit into existing frameworks: of conflict between informal dwellers or workers and the middle-classes (Schindler, 2014); or low-level service workers required by the middle-classes (Ray & Qayum, 2009). This trend stems from a view that ‘world-class’ or ‘global’ cities are sites of exclusion, and disconnection between the exclusive new upper/upper-middle classes and the vast numbers of the urban poor displaced to make way for modern urban developments (Davis, 2006; McFarlane, 2010; Schindler, 2014). But they are not just sites of exclusion that stimulate the anger of ordinary urban dwellers, they are sites of inclusion that stimulate their hopes (de Boeck, 2011). Ghertner (2015), demonstrated how the world-class city can operate as an object of aspiration for marginal urban dwellers. He argues that this stimulates political claims-making. But I make the opposite argument; that the stimulation of aspiration operates as an avenue for securing compliance.

²⁸ Javier Auyero (2012) took on Bourdieu’s insights to document how they are affected upon Argentina’s poor seeking state services. Their ‘subjective submission’ is produced through enforced periods of waiting.

This is achieved through the generation of a material and discursive terrain that induces a feeling of hope that those aspirations can be realised.²⁹ This keeps the wheels turning of an Egyptian capitalist-authoritarian system that denies access to a dignified life to so many.

Conclusions

This introduction began by questioning the prevailing hopeful narrative of a rising middle-class across the Global South. Instead, introducing Pierre Bourdieu's approach to class and theorising it as an imminently forward-looking project, I called for literature to recognise middle-class populations who are experiencing immobility, an inability to move towards normative aspirational markers of middle class-ness (as well as masculinity/femininity, and adulthood). This stems from a dramatic upscaling of ordinary aspirations, even as the possibilities for achieving them are being diminished. I then proposed two research questions stemming from a gap in contemporary class theory, around what happens when a mismatch develops between aspirations and chances.

To build a conceptual framework that could provide an answer, I turned to work that pays attention to the emotional dimensions of everyday life. Using this literature, I posited that a feeling of hope is integral to the individualised class, and youth project. It is this vital sense of hope that is lost as people are thrown into extended 'waithood,' with this emotion replaced by frustration, boredom, and anger. Many scholars have examined how these emotions, and therefore 'mismatch,' might lead to acts of 'resistance' and support for political narratives of radical change. However, I called for a departure from this focus, out of an observation that

²⁹ This builds on recent work recognizing that modern urban developments might obtain the acquiescence of marginal urban dwellers, not only their resistance – for example through discourses of national progress (Melly, 2013), or aesthetic beauty (Harms, 2012).

widespread class immobility is not leading to ‘resistance,’ but rather stability. This led to the final research question, which, in order to answer I turned to ethnographic work which examines how structurally disenfranchised groups sustain feelings of hope for prospective mobility through routinized practices. But, using contemporary theorisations of affect, I criticised this literature for its lack of attention to the objects, places, and discourses that induce hope (and therefore the relations of power that infuse its social life). I finished by calling for use of affect theory to understand how certain objects, discourses, and places ‘affect’ hope in structurally immobile groups, and thereby secure their compliance. I finally posited that meritocracy, and ‘global cities,’ might be objects of hope.

Overall, the chapter demonstrated how a focus on emotion and affect can help conceptualise the contemporary experience of class immobility. In turn, it informs us as to how waithood is navigated in specific contexts, crucially by both people and institutions. In the chapters that follow, I show how the continual provision of meritocratic hope constitutes the lived experience of young middle-class men in Egypt who are unable to move towards markers of respectable adulthood, middle class-ness, and masculinity. The next Chapter will outline the methodological process that went into producing this research project, and Chapter 3, as explained above, sets out the historical constitution of the contemporary condition of mismatch within Egypt’s middle-class. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 then follow a group of young Egyptian men as they pursue lives that are difficult to reach. Each Chapter works through how hope is given, lost, and held on to.

In Chapter 4: *Hopeful city*, I show how Cairo’s global city, as a terrain of objects, places, and discourses, extends an affective atmosphere of hope for future middle-class belonging. As aspirational young men move around the city, they encounter various labour market institutions

spanning public, private, and developmental spheres – training centres, employment fairs, and the entrepreneurship scene – that are designed to bridge the gap between the labour market and job seekers. Within these places, and as they encounter their objects and discourses, young men are affected with a euphoric sense that their global, middle-class aspirations are realisable. The Chapter recasts literature on global cities, everyday hope-making, and the lived experience of class immobility, by arguing that compliance is secured through making people hope.

Chapter 5: *Being hopeful*, analyses the tormented pursuit of the promise sold to young men in the hopeful city. It tells the story of living in a flat with three men who had moved to Cairo in search of a better life. The flat oscillated between an atmosphere of frustration, fear, confusion, and anger, and satisfaction and hope. The chapter shows how these men foreclosed negative emotions arising from their stagnation in low-paid, insecure jobs through engaging with objects and discourses which distract – making jokes, talking about girls, buying a new item of clothing, or watching television – and through engaging with objects and discourses which recreate hope for future mobility. They repetitively return to stories of successful friends, and stories they have read in self-help books and religious texts, which prove that success is possible through hard work. These stories enabled these men to blame both their own, and others', lack of hard work for their immobility, and thus create a blueprint for hope through the promise to work hard. The Chapter therefore contributes to literature on everyday hope-making among immobile populations, revealing how hope can be sustained through a moral economy that rests on self-blame.

Chapter 6: *Cruel hope*, shows how, over time, cynicism and anger overcomes young men because of repeated rejection and disappointment. The city, and its meritocratic myths, therefore produce different emotions. They no longer affect hope, but anger. Echoing previous

literature on the political consequences of a loss of hope, one might expect this to lead to acts of resistance, or, according to Bourdieu inspired analysis, adaptation. However, adapting Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of cruel optimism, the Chapter shows how, even in the face of mounting familial pressure to accept their lot and prepare for marriage, these young men return to the objects, places, and discourses of hope that have harmed them. They shift back into these fantasies, not because they continue to hold a deep belief, but because the alternative of letting go is too much to bear, it would lead to 'death.' This returns to a conception of hope as an intrinsic necessity. I also discuss the implications of this for thinking about the way compliance is secured affectively.

Chapter 2 Methodology

This Chapter tells the story of the eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork that went into the production of the four empirical chapters to follow. This fieldwork was conducted over a period of 25 months from June 2014 to September 2016 in and around Cairo. Reflecting the structure of the thesis, the Chapter will be framed chronologically. It will begin by setting out my entry point that enabled access to lower-middle class youth. Thereafter, I will describe how, and why, I expanded and narrowed the group of research participants, in order to both avoid and acquire specificity in the research. This includes a narrowed focus on men. The Chapter then moves on to describe the methodological practices, decisions, and justifications that went into the four empirical chapters, which explore middle-class histories and aspirations (Chapter 3), the logics and affective workings of the hopeful city (Chapter 4), and finally, the tormented pursuit of the good life by a group of lower-middle class men (Chapters 5 & 6). While discussing these chapters, I will give attention to the difficult practice of researching affect and emotion. In the final section, I will explore some of the methodological torments that arose through the development of close, and complex relationships between these young men, and me, as a friend, researcher, and foreigner. In particular, I explicate how my raced, gendered, and classed body came to affect my participants with the hope that I was at the same time attempting to understand. This discussion will focus on the affective dimensions of the research process, both for researcher and the researched, which often get written out of methodological accounts in favour of a disinterested, rational discussion on research bias and ethics. I will argue that emotion not only constitutes a vital part of research processes, but it can also help elucidate the political and ethical impasses that litter them.

The entry point

I arrived in Cairo in June 2014. Before setting foot in the city, I planned to conduct prolonged ethnographic fieldwork on the country's educated youth who were struggling to locate fulfilling employment, in order to understand how they experienced and negotiated this struggle. This would build on existing studies of educated unemployed people that take an ethnographic approach to understanding how they experience frustration as a result of an inability to move towards hegemonic norms of adulthood, masculinity, and modernity, and how they attempt to accrue 'value' or 'respect' through their daily practices (Jeffrey, 2010; Mains, 2012; Cole, 2010; Weiss, 2009). My immediate concern was finding a gateway through which to obtain access to this group. I set about contacting various non-governmental organisations working in the field of youth unemployment, using internet searches and through asking interviewees for other organisations of which they knew. I quickly conducted interviews with six different organisations, exploring their perspectives on the main issues facing educated young people in Egypt, the reasons why those issues exist, and how they can and are being solved. These interviews quickly led me to the Graduate Training Organisation (GTO), an international employment training organisation designed to help unemployed university graduates obtain jobs – through teaching them the 'soft skills' they were missing in order to achieve success in Egypt's private sector.³⁰ After meeting with the manager to explain that I was doing research on issues facing educated youth, I managed to secure permission to attend classes.

³⁰ Graduate Training Organisation (GTO) is a synonym, used in order to prevent identification of the organisation. All of the names of people used in the thesis are also synonyms.

I had not originally planned to conduct a study on a training course. In all research processes, and perhaps particularly in ethnographic research, rather than exercising active, rational decision making, researchers respond to opportunities that arise and close up before them as specific people respond and others do not, and specific places or data sources become accessible and others close down. It is part of the ethnographic method to follow the avenues that appear interesting to us (Burawoy, 1991). Thus, I decided to continue with this organisation, firstly as a way of accessing the group I was seeking: young graduates who were struggling to locate fulfilling employment, and secondly because I became interested in the language and logics shaping this developmental intervention.

Over a period of three months, I attended three two-month classes, each containing between 20 and 40 young male and female university graduates from both inside and outside Cairo. GTO advertises that it wants ‘underprivileged’ graduates, a group it defines as graduates of public universities, who have been unemployed for more than six months – though this turned out to be a flexible rule. They had to possess some knowledge of English – though again this varied – be able to pay a small ‘commitment fee,’ and take a two month full-time course (affording uniform, travel, and sometimes rental costs). What I found inside the organisation were young people – all aged between 22 and 27 – who had in recent months and years graduated from one of Egypt’s public universities. The vast majority came from the so-labelled ‘kullyāt al sha‘b’ (faculties of the people): commerce, humanities, and law, which are known for their low-quality and classroom overcrowding, and thereby for producing thousands of graduates who are prone to un/underemployment. Most had been employed before, as call centre agents, accountants or lawyers in small firms, or as informal salespersons. But they yearned for better: for more skilled jobs in multinational companies or large Egyptian companies, to be entrepreneurs, or to migrate abroad. They therefore seemed to constitute a minute fraction of

an educated un/underemployed population which had been previously uncovered (Assaad & Kraft, 2014), and also the ‘middle-class poor’ defined by Asef Bayat (2011). They had been pushed into low-status, low-skilled, low-paid jobs in the private sector, but dreamed of participation in Cairo’s globalised economy.

I introduced myself to them as a researcher who was interested in the difficulties faced by educated youth in the labour market, to which the response would come, rather tellingly: “oh well you are in the right place!” I would then begin having conversations with them about the course, and their backgrounds, before asking the people with whom I developed closer relations if they were comfortable being part of the research.

Specifying the field

I very quickly knew that I needed to extend the network of participants beyond course participants, in order to overcome the problem of specificity arising from my ‘entry point.’ This certainly reflects a common complaint made against qualitative research: its un-generalisability (Payne & Williams, 2005). Yet, its specificity is a strength, enabling a grounded, rich understanding of social, political, economic, and cultural processes. However, the ways in which what one is observing might be particular must be explicated, alongside the ways in which it also reflects broader phenomena.

GTO in Egypt is a small organisation. It has trained around 2000 young people since its inception in 2009. The vast majority of Egypt’s tens of thousands of graduates never hear about it, and many who do, do not come. What then had led these young men and women to GTO? Gamal, who was introduced in the introduction, graduated from the faculty of law (Arabic

section) in 2012. After witnessing his cousin obtain a job in an international refugee organisation, he developed the dream of working in an international law firm and migration abroad, and leaving his job as a family lawyer in his local neighbourhood. He was told by his cousin that, if he perfected his English he could obtain a good job. After looking for cheap English courses, he enrolled in one in an upmarket neighbourhood of central Cairo. At the course, he was told to approach foreigners in order to practice English. Through doing that, he met an Italian woman who had a friend working as an instructor at GTO. This person told Gamal about the affordable GTO course. She said it could help him be successful.

As Gamal's story shows, the encounter between these young men and GTO contained much serendipity – others came across GTO on Facebook as they searched for job or training opportunities, or heard from friends who had previously attended – yet it also reflects the particular social position of these youth. Like Gamal, all participants experienced an intense mismatch between their aspirations for the internationalised employment and lifestyles of Cairo's 'global city,' or migration abroad, and the current and previous employment enabled by their social and cultural capital. I describe this condition more fully in the next chapter. There is an important spatial dimension to this. Around half of the participants came from areas outside Cairo, in the Nile Delta and sometimes beyond. In their small towns they had less access to the high-status employment they craved. They also came to perceive that overcoming this mismatch was possible through their own actions, for example through taking a training course. GTO was advertised as a solution to their troubles. Finally, they possessed both an ability to take the two-month long course, as well as an inability to afford more expensive courses.

There are many graduates though who would not end up at GTO. Saami, a GTO course participant who had left a job in translation in order to enrol, had a younger brother who got engaged while he was still in university after meeting a woman he loved. Saami judged his brother for not prioritising his career, and thought he would have difficulty in the future putting in the resources necessary to develop his skills. Saami though also said he might have made a different decision had he met a girl he liked. Thus, graduates who focused their resources on marriage instead would perhaps not enrol in GTO. The same might be said for graduates who were able to obtain access to better employment through their superior education or connections; graduates who did not develop the same disposition that rendered jobs as salespersons, local lawyers, or accountants unsatisfactory; graduates who were prevented from attending by financial constraints, unable to leave jobs or afford daily travel, uniform, or rental costs if they needed to live in Cairo; female graduates who were unable to make the long journeys alone (half the participants were women, and the course ended early to ensure they did not have to travel at night); graduates who were able to afford more expensive courses; graduates who did not believe obtaining better employment was possible; and finally graduates who decided to put up with the employment they hold.

Extending

I attempted to overcome the specificity of GTO participants by asking to meet friends, colleagues, and friends of friends. Over the course of eleven months, I spoke to 49 young men (of whom 23 had attended GTO), and 18 young women (of whom 16 had attended GTO) in Egypt's lower-middle class. I chose this form of 'sampling' purposefully, in order to meet people in a similar socio-economic situation, who might also be struggling to reach what they considered to be fulfilling jobs. Research on the prevalence of educated un/underemployment

suggests this is afflicting a large number of Egypt's educated population (Assaad & Kraft, 2014). Yet, even through meeting friends and colleagues, I encountered young people who were in better jobs which satisfied them, some who were in lower-status jobs and not itching to escape, and some who were already focused on marriage. However, I met many more who were waiting for and working towards a different life, towards employment that met their ambitions. This is the group upon whom I would focus, though their more privileged, and less aspirational others would have important effects upon them.

I also met some who wished for better, but did not believe it was possible. But, again, most were actively working for better employment. Though they had not been to GTO, there were many other avenues through which they were exposed to similar meritocratic logics and knowledges. First, this type of training was far from unique. Based on an International Labour Organisation survey of youth employment projects conducted in 2015, at least 30 out of 233 offer soft skills training specifically for educated youth, which translates into at least 160,000 graduates of higher education.³¹ Many organisations advertise their services at employment fairs, and some are attempting to roll out their programmes to all public universities. Thus, some young men had taken soft skills courses in university, or within different organisations in Cairo and beyond. Others had taken some of the many other courses available in Cairo – accountancy, English, HR, computer training, business administration – that are offered by universities, local and international NGOs, foreign cultural centres, and private entities ranging from large international corporations to self-employed ‘career coaches’ and teachers. Still others accessed forms of training, knowledge, and self-help through less formal channels: within entrepreneurship events, employment and scholarship fairs, student organisations, as they applied for jobs which advertise that application processes reward skills, through self-help

³¹ <http://www.youth-employment-inventory.org/>

books or online quotes or articles, through videos and films, through advice from friends, and finally within religious discourse.

I argued in the previous chapter that the affective condition of these young middle-class Egyptian men might reflect a much broader phenomenon. It stems from developing aspirations which are difficult to reach, yet still trusting that those aspirations are reachable. To reiterate briefly, waitthood is something common to all human consciousness. It stems from the necessary presence of desire for something yet to come. This manifests itself in particular classed, gendered and racialized forms within capitalism, an economic system which is dependent on perpetual growth, and within youthhood, a transitory life-stage in preparation for adulthood. However, in the contemporary moment, this waitthood is being rendered more fraught, uncertain, and prolonged, as endless possible lives are being offered up, at the same time as they are being made more difficult to achieve. Concurrently, there is an ever-greater emphasis in labour regimes on the individual as the determinant of success, on the behaviours and practices which need to be implemented in order to succeed in a hyper-competitive environment. Thus, throughout the thesis, I will discuss how the emotions and practices of these young men are far from unique.

Narrowing

Over time, I developed a prolonged, intensive interaction with 13 young men (of whom eight were GTO graduates) as they tried to find a good job, career, and livelihood. They were all aged between 22 and 27, and were recent graduates of public universities in the faculties of commerce, English literature, law, translation, history, and computer engineering. They were all self-defined Muslims, although, as will become clear throughout the Chapters, they

expressed varying degrees of religiosity.³² Six were from outside Cairo – from Sohag, Zagazig, Zifta, and Mahalla, and had travelled to the city to find work, and take training not available in their hometowns. Seven were from neighbourhoods in Cairo which housed a mixture of poor and lower-middle class residents: Ezbet al Nakhel, Faysal, Abu Numrus, Helwan, and Haram. The parents of these men all worked as either low-level bureaucrats, or small-scale informal traders, and owned family homes – signifying a middle-class status. They all possessed dreams of better jobs than those currently held, or held in the past: as informal salespersons, call centre agents, accountants in small businesses, customer service agents, and translators. They dreamed of working as accountants in bigger businesses, in business administration or HR, as lawyers, entrepreneurs, bankers, and of migration abroad, either to the West, or the Gulf. Both the middle-class background and status of these young men, alongside their aspirations, will be discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

Thus, alongside extension of the research network beyond GTO, over time there was also significant narrowing. The most noticeable narrowing entails the dropout of female participants. Though this gender bias is common for male researchers in Egypt (Schielke, 2015), it was a source of personal frustration, as I had originally planned to conduct research with women as well. The women I met in GTO possessed similar internationalised private sector employment aspirations as the men. They had also come to GTO in the hope of acquiring the skills that would lead them to those aspirations. However, as I developed more prolonged relationships, I quickly developed deeper interactions with men. In part, this was because I could meet them alone. Meeting with women alone might signify the beginning of romantic relations. Indeed, on one occasion I travelled to the home of one woman, and was subsequently

³² Coptic Christians make up around 10% of Egypt's population. Though I got to know many, none were in the group of 13 whom I followed closely. Some of the practices in the Chapters to follow are specific to Muslims, but many were also conducted by the Christians I met.

asked by two male participants if “there was anything happening.” Men would often actively organise meetings with me in their homes, in cafés, or walking around the city, whereas my contact with women was restricted to brief conversations during group outings. My rapport with men also felt more comfortable and open, in part because I was able to spend more time with them, but also because I felt more comfortable about the appropriate way to interact with them, for example which type of humour or physical contact was acceptable. Because of these experiences, after one month I decided to concentrate on the lives of young men.

Yet, even during the brief meetings and conversations that I held with women, the gendered nature of both their aspirations, and their pursuit of them, became clear. This reflects what I mentioned throughout the opening chapter, namely that aspirations, the experience of being unable to move towards them, and attempts to reclaim that movement are all highly gendered. Early on, two young women stressed that, though they were pursuing a career now, after marriage or engagement they would stop working and concentrate on looking after the home. Many men indeed did not want their wives to work, as it would symbolise a shameful inability to support a family alone. According to some of my male participants, this impending retreat into the home relieved pressure on women, as they did not *have* to find a high-status job, or save money for marriage. However, this expectation of retreat can in itself be a source of frustration for some women. Furthermore, during the time I spent with women, there was discussion of the type of man they wished to find, and the type of lifestyle they wished to live. They too yearned for social mobility, through marriage. This opens the possibility of frustration arising from the inability of finding a husband to secure those wishes, or even from the inability of finding a man who can afford marriage.

However, as I said, most of these women were at this stage focused on the individualised pursuit of desirable work. But, they were more restricted in their pursuit. For example, relocating to Cairo was made more complicated by having to find a family member with whom they could stay. Furthermore, certain kinds of jobs were not accessible because of late shifts, or long transport routes. Women also held gender specific relationships with their parents. Many of the male participants actively disobeyed their parents, either refusing the job suggested to them, or refusing to start preparations for marriage. Some men thought that the same ability to disobey would not, and should not, be open to women.

Although the research focuses on young men, women are not completely absent. At various points, I explicate the relations of participants with women, and specifically how women came to influence their pursuit of employment. Having explained how I narrowed the focus down to thirteen young men, as well as how I consider the experiences of these thirteen to resonate more widely, I will now go on to describe how the research process unfolded.

The Research Process

Middle-class histories

The first aim of the research was to understand the historical events that have led to the contemporary condition of the Egyptian middle-class. I wanted to understand how one middle-class has experienced a destabilisation of their middle-class status – and according to some now reside in the ‘lower-middle class’ – while another group has experienced a rapid accumulation of wealth that has secured a life in Cairo’s ‘global city,’ and membership of the ‘upper-middle class.’ I conducted a series of family history interviews with my lower-middle

class young male participants, and thirteen upper-middle class men and women who work in multinational companies and in the entrepreneurship scene – the kinds of jobs to which my interlocutors aspired. These interviews were mostly conducted in November 2015, towards the end of my fieldwork. I located the ‘upper-middle class’ interviewees through friends of the Europeans with whom I lived during the first months of the fieldwork. This avenue of access, when compared to how I accessed my main interlocutors, was extremely symbolic of the distinct class position they held.

The interviews worked through familial social trajectories before and during Egypt’s socialist era, and in the aftermath of economic liberalisation. I asked about jobs, education, earnings, and property of parents and grandparents, and finally about the education and employment of the interviewees themselves. By acquiring this information from grandchildren and children, I opened myself up to data inaccuracies. This was especially difficult when it came to earnings, which was complicated further by Egypt’s currency inflation, and the fact that people were sometimes hesitant about revealing incomes. To combat this, I tried to restrict information to simple facts, and where there was doubt I would ask them to check with their parents and inform me later. I traced the social trajectories of these families by contextualising their information within previous research that plots the historical changes within Egypt’s middle-class.

There are two approaches to life history analysis: one takes data as a symbolic narrative representing the contemporary lifeworld of an individual, and another takes data as an accurate description of an individual’s life trajectory in social contexts (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984). Here, I took the second approach, yet recognise that narrative is impossible to completely remove. To this end, I would attempt to get interviewees to refrain from asserting their own perspectives

on the class position of their families, though I sometimes found this insightful. Instead, I understood their class positions by comparing class markers such as employment, education, earnings, property and landownership, consumption activities, against previous research outlining understandings of Egypt's middle-class, alongside broader theorisations of class and middle class-ness. The labels 'lower-middle' and 'upper-middle' stem from the wordings of the young interviewees themselves.

Chapter 3 also traces the origins of the aspirations among my lower-middle class interlocutors. This required using the alternative approach to life histories, which takes data as a symbolic narrative reflective of an individual's lifeworld. I would ask them about the experiences which led to them developing a desire to become an entrepreneur, to work in a multinational company, or migrate abroad. In return they would relay memories of student initiatives that had stimulated their passions, or hearing of friends or family who had become 'successful,' and who they therefore wished to emulate. This recollection might neglect important aspects of the formation of aspiration, but the process of choosing moments is important in highlighting what they consider to have been formative.

Following a tormented pursuit

The remaining three chapters follow 13 young men, with seven providing the major focus, as they pursued employment. I would meet each at least once a week, and some almost daily. I would go to their homes to eat, chat, or watch films, meet them in cafés, restaurants, and shopping malls, or go for walks. I would also follow them as they looked and applied for jobs, training, educational scholarships, or entrepreneurship funding, in fairs, events, online, or around the city, and as they learned skills, English, entrepreneurship, accountancy, law, or HR

in events and lectures, courses, or in their homes. There were times when these meetings would take place in the evenings after work or a training course, and times when they would take place during the day, as their time was more flexible due to being unemployed. I would sometimes hang out with their friends, but would often try to meet them alone in order to open up conversations about their pursuit of employment. Topics of conversation were varied: it included much discussion of their dreams, and pursuit of them, their plans for finding a job, acquiring skills, migrating abroad, and establishing entrepreneurship projects. We would also discuss experiences that induced frustration, a job rejection, or a prolonged period spent in undesirable employment. More generally, we would discuss the problems with Egypt's economy and government, as well as a diverse range of other topics: girls they liked – including with a few about their views and experiences of sex, their yearning for particular commodities, their favourite TV programmes and films, their opinions on world politics, Egyptian or European football, and funny situations they had encountered. These conversations were conducted in a mixture of Arabic and English. This reflected the fact that participants wanted to practice English, and also the progression of my Arabic over time. In the last six months of the fieldwork, we would predominantly communicate in Arabic.

I quickly became interested in the emotional dimension of their pursuit of good jobs. I began to notice the visible fluctuation in these young men between feelings of hope, confidence, and happiness, and frustration, fear, confusion, anger, and depression. Negative feelings arose in response to particular events, such as a job rejection, or a prolonged period spent in undesirable employment. Positive feelings emerged through certain practices and conversation. I began mapping out, and focusing in on the practices through which these young men were over time keeping alive a feeling of hope, or prospective momentum, towards a desirable job and future. The ethnographic method was vital in enabling me to see and hear about these feelings and

emotions as they arose in socio-spatial configurations. I would access their emotions through a mixture of observation, for example noting their excitement in response to talking about a possible new job or scholarship, and also through talking to them about their feelings in particular moments. I discuss some of the difficulties that arose as I attempted to do this below.

The fieldwork period extended over more than two years. It began with six months in the second half of 2014. I then left for a period of five months, returning to Cairo in May 2015 for three months, again in November 2015 for one month, and finally in September 2016 for a further three weeks. These breaks enabled me to follow the pursuit of these young men over a prolonged period. This produced a longitudinal perspective that ensures the empirical chapters demonstrate their transition from feeling intensely hopeful about the future in 2014, to becoming more and more sceptical and angry as time passed, and they were standing still.

Objects of hope

By following these young men around the city, I became attuned to how their emotions were responsive to particular places, objects, and discourses which they encountered (Hansen & Verkaaik, 2009). I therefore developed an interest in those objects, places, and discourses that were providing hope for them. This brought forth the important dimension of affect, as distinct from feeling and emotion (see Chapter 1). I became interested in the affective atmospheres held within particular places, such as employment fairs, entrepreneurship events, and training courses, and produced by certain objects and discourses, such as a business card, a CV, or a film. This provides the focus for Chapter 4, which explores how the ‘hopeful city’ acted to induce feelings of hope for these young men as they interacted with it. Yet the focus on objects, and therefore affect, continues throughout the thesis. Affective intensities that inhabit particular

objects and places are rendered visible as they pass through bodies, and materialise in feeling and emotion. Thus, methodologically I retained a focus on my participants, but through observing their emotional reactions, I was able to say something about the affective dimensions of the spatial terrain they were encountering. I also always tried to note my own emotional reactions to particular places and events.

My interest in the places of the hopeful city was shaped by where the research began, within the GTO course. But these places included employment fairs organised by recruitment agencies in partnership with government ministries and development donors, international scholarship fairs organised by training centres, entrepreneurship events and lectures organised by the donors, platforms, and entrepreneurs that constitute Cairo's entrepreneurship scene, and finally shopping malls. Within each space, I observed the interaction with these young men, specifically focusing on the emotions enacted by inhabitation. I also though conducted numerous interviews with those involved in the construction of these places, with employees of training organisations that were running soft skills programmes, recruitment agencies that organise employment fairs, and entrepreneurship platforms that run events and lectures. I interviewed twelve people, three working in the entrepreneurship 'scene,' three working for recruitment companies, and six working for training organisations. The aim of these interviews was to understand the 'expert' logics that provide the foundations for the construction of these places (Mitchell, 2002): for example regarding how success is presented within Egypt's labour market. I was also attentive to the ways in which these places were being designed to induce particular emotional responses (Schüll, 2012).

I would only attend these places with participants. Overall, I went to three employment fairs, one scholarship fair, three entrepreneurship events, and several times to different shopping

malls. These events were predominantly held over one day only, but I attended the GTO course every day for almost three months in 2014. My experience in GTO therefore requires more extensive discussion. I would sit in lessons observing and writing notes on classroom activities, information they were learning from teachers, and student behaviour and reactions. I would sometimes participate, for example through helping a group with an English exercise, or responding to a question from a teacher; however for the most part I tried to stay in the background. This quickly became a microstudy on the course itself, its logics, its practice, and the way it affected participants. Accordingly, I began engaging in conversation and conducting more formal interviews with the trainers and managerial staff to understand the origins and motivations of the course. With participants, I began having casual interactions during breaks and after class. This was easiest with those most talkative, and those who were most competent in English: yet this was circumvented as my Arabic became more advanced. Thereafter I joined one group of around 10 students as they went out to eat, relax, or look for jobs. As I hung out with these young men and women I would respond to what they wanted to discuss with me, but also attempt to engage conversations about the course, their aspirations and attempts to realise them, their previous employment, their experience of education, and their perceptions about the problems faced by educated Egyptians in general. These conversations complemented the participant observation in the classroom, which gave me intimate access to the performative effects of exercises, and the discourses extended by trainers and the material.

My presence in GTO, and all of these places, introduced methodological dilemmas arising from my role as a foreign researcher. As I spoke with participants about the GTO course, after initially fearing that I might be acting on behalf of the organisation, they began to open up about some of their frustrations. One female participant began expressing anger that teachers were pushing participants to apply for customer service and call centre jobs, rather than the

jobs they actually wanted. She asked me to speak with them because she felt I could wield some influence. Though I empathised, and criticise this employment focus in the thesis, I felt unable to help, or even to offer advice; both because of my dependency on the organisation for access, and a sense that this would constitute tampering with the field. I was there, as a researcher, to observe, to listen, to write up, and to analyse. This early experience caused me to question the project of research. It brought forth a sense of worthlessness, in that I was observing the problems of the organisation in order to write about them from afar many months (and years) later. I told myself that I could send work to them, or bring up my concerns with the organisation once I had left. Yet, the discomfort arising from the feeling of ‘passively observing’ frustrations in the moment never went away. To observe without influence is in any case impossible, something to which I will return below. This opens up important questions for researchers, about how ‘we’ try to alter the social phenomena we witness and criticise, and help the people we observe who might be victim.

Into the home

Chapters 5 and 6 describe how these young men attempted to sustain the sense of hope that had been affected by the hopeful city. They set out how they actively returned to objects, places, and discourses of hope over time. Chapter 5 focuses on my experience of living with three young men, who formed part of the 13 participants. When I returned to Cairo in May 2015, I had arranged to live with them in their flat in Faysal, a lower/lower-middle class neighbourhood in western Cairo. I shared a room with Eslam, someone I had met in the GTO course six months earlier. Eslam was from Sohag in Upper Egypt, and had decided to stay in Cairo after the course, taking a job in a call centre and renting a cheap flat with colleagues. I lived with these young men, with a few other people coming and going, during the final five months of the

fieldwork, which was stretched over more than a year. This experience enhanced the research (Ring, 2006). In the initial six month stay in 2014, I lived with a group of Europeans, who were working in international NGOs and private universities, in an upmarket area in central Cairo. I was therefore located a long distance from the city, and social world, inhabited by my lower-middle class participants. Furthermore, the spatial terrain inhabited, and social life enjoyed, by Cairo's upper/upper-middle classes and foreigners can quickly feel disconnected, and claustrophobic. I wished to escape this, and embed myself in a different urban lifeworld. In 2014, most of my meetings with participants took place outside their homes, and often their areas. They would therefore constitute a highly exceptional experience for them. I wanted to become a more everyday presence, and access their day-to-day lifeworld. Being in the house enabled me to do that. I saw the everyday frustrations conjured up by difficult jobs and living conditions. I also witnessed everyday attempts to overcome these feelings, through distraction, or relocating hope through looking for jobs and courses, self-learning, reading and talking about self-help, and calling on religious divination.

Before moving on to some of the ethical issues that arose during this fieldwork process, I want to briefly set out how I went about note-taking and analysis. Note-taking was sometimes difficult. I developed a method whereby I would write down reminder words of the conversations and observations I would have throughout the day. This was sometimes hidden and sometimes done with the active knowledge of participants. At the end of each day, often after 12am, I would write up notes of the day's events on my laptop. Some of the quotes therefore reflect a paraphrasing of conversations. Recording conversations was not an option because it would have altered the open relationships I wanted to develop. Notes were taken in English, but I made sure to include the Arabic words that were used where necessary.

When I returned to the UK in between fieldwork periods, I conducted a thematic analysis on my day-to-day notes using NVIVO software. The process of analysis was messy, imperfect, and at times infuriating. But I tried to focus on the themes which had arisen during the fieldwork. This meant splitting my notes into moments within which participants expressed feelings of hope and happiness, and moments in which they expressed anger, fear, despair, and confusion. The empirical chapters will describe the moments in which these feelings expressed themselves, along with the affective intensities held within the “atmosphere” that induced them.

Tormented Methodologies

Ethnography always constitutes an ‘unruly dialogic encounter’ between the researcher and the researched, where ethics and bias are constantly destabilised (Clifford, 1988: 90; Fine, 2003). The process of following young men in their pursuit of the good life was fraught with methodological difficulties and tensions, arising from my complex positionality as both researcher, friend, and foreigner. Looking back on the fieldwork experience, it is the situations that induced particularly strong emotions, in both the participants and me, which provide the most vivid memories in this regard. But the affective dimensions of the research process are too often written out of academic production, in favour of a disembodied, disinterested, rational account of methodological decision-making, specificity, ethics, and bias. As more scholars are identifying, emotions not only need to be recognised as an integral part of the fieldwork process, but elucidating them can also help us to think through the ethical and political complications of research, and the shape of the data itself (Monchamp, 2007; Davies & Spencer, 2010). I will show in this section that it was moments of self-doubt, frustration, guilt, confusion, and discomfort that provide avenues through which to hold important discussions

on the ethical, researcher bias, and political implications which arose through this research project. In particular, I examine how my body became implicated in efforts to sustain hope.

Barely one week into the fieldwork, a female participant of GTO initiated a conversation with me on Facebook. I saw this as a good opportunity, particularly as I had not interacted very much with women, to ask questions, such as “why did you do the course,” and, “what kind of job do you hope for afterwards.” This instigated a question from her, asking whether I was studying them, to which I replied “yes, I am doing research on youth and getting jobs.” The woman then asked “what about you?” before suggesting I am a “youth” as well, who experiences the same issues and has the same dreams. After criticising my perspective on Egyptian youth – I had outlined the difficulties I thought they were facing – she asked if I knew to whom I was speaking. I had not known the woman’s name as I had not communicated with her before. She told me I should have asked or checked, to which I agreed, and said sorry. She responded:

“You are not interested in our names, our friendship or anything. I started the conversation with a friend and I ended it with a researcher, I feel really sad, I added a friend not a researcher, you do not see us.”

My approach to this interaction had been to place this woman in the category of research participant, whereas she had wanted to be treated as a ‘friend.’ Talking to an ‘agnaby’ (foreigner) was something she had sought out, via Facebook rather than in person, as this perhaps represented a more acceptable form of communication. Communicating with foreigners on Facebook is a common activity for young Egyptians, and one that can induce excitement. It is an aspirational practice for people who aspire after cosmopolitan connection,

and perhaps migration abroad to Europe. I would often be introduced and shown off by participants as a “friend,” to friends, family, and on Facebook. However, on this occasion, I had converted this relationship into one of researcher-researched. I had asked too many questions that revealed my instrumental interest in her for research purposes. This instigated a quite different emotional reaction, one of sadness. To be an object of research operationalises a relationship of inequality, perhaps especially so when that researcher is a western foreigner in Egypt. I, as a researcher was there to understand the struggles of these young people, and they, as the researched, were there to be discovered and, perhaps, helped (Ralph, 2015).

One might say that my mistake here was being too eager to acquire information, viewing this relationship too instrumentally, and therefore neglecting to establish relations that constitute friendship and equality, or to establish properly my role as a researcher. This shame-ridden experience certainly gave me an abrupt lesson in how to carry out ethnographic fieldwork. I needed to create mutual relationships, where I might share my struggles as well. However, I was never able to fully overcome the tensions it symbolised: of being both a (foreign) researcher and friend. This is a problem that arises specifically in ethnographic fieldwork, as a method that depends on developing prolonged relationships with participants, and within which ‘data collection’ takes place in ambiguous settings, in homes, in cafés, that blur the boundaries between research and friendship. Indeed any conversation can become data in ethnographic fieldwork. Thus, though I asked the permission of the 13 young male participants to conduct research, they wanted to hang out with me as friends. This desire indeed enabled so much access for me. But this tension caused a number of issues throughout the fieldwork process.

First, I often found myself trying to hide my researcher status out of anxiety of inciting negative feelings. This meant that I was often hanging out while trying to ‘collect data.’ Perhaps this

symbolises the exploitative nature of the ethnographic enterprise. One is always taking something from participants, and the lack of delineation renders this act more concealed. On some occasions the act of taking data ruptured the benefit they garnered from being friends with me. Second, at the beginning I felt pressure to ask many questions about their labour market struggles, in order to obtain information. However, I could sense the agitation this caused. Indeed, on one occasion I received an angry response from a young man I wished to meet to discuss his prolonged struggle in a call centre job. After a period of trying to contact him, he told me over WhatsApp that he saw no point in my research, that I would not be able to help him. He told me to leave him alone. I was subsequently told by this man's friend that I had been too insistent in trying to get him to speak about topics that made him upset. Others would simply change the topic to one they preferred to talk about. Although I initially became agitated by this myself, I quickly understood it as an important practice of distraction from their struggles and feelings of frustration. Hanging out with me, a foreigner, was a good way of achieving this. But my recourse to discussions of their labour market struggles acted to puncture that distraction. It reminded them of where they were, perhaps especially in comparison to a foreign PhD student. At times, I would notice that they would tell me they were feeling fine, when perhaps they were not. They just did not want to talk about their frustrations. This represented a constant challenge to my attempt to understand their undulating emotional journey. Even though they might have experienced certain feelings, these were not expressed explicitly through emotion. However, feelings induce certain bodily reactions that act as signals to the observer. I thus tried to be attentive to these signals. Furthermore, it is important to understand why people might want to hide emotions in particular settings: to avoid showing 'weakness' (for men), to escape difficult feelings, or because one does not feel comfortable with certain people (Goffman, 1967). I tried to circumvent these inconsistencies through developing close relationships with participants. I was even told by some participants

that they felt they could share their aspirations and worries more with me because, unlike their friends or even family, I would not judge them.

Throughout the research, my presence served to influence the emotional journeys of these young men. The most significant effect was my becoming an active ‘object’ of hope for a good future. In the last few days of my stay, Gamal said to me: “I could have given up a lot of times, you were very important for me not giving up, you supported and encouraged me a lot, I might have given up a long time ago without you.” Gamal was chasing a job in international law. Over the two years I knew him, he worked in three unpaid jobs in law firms and local NGOs, leaving each after the promise of a future salary was broken. Gamal faced much criticism from his family for not earning a wage, and becoming independent. He would often come to me with worries, or questions about whether he should give up and accept their calls for him to take “any job which brings money” in his local area. Knowing Gamal’s fervent desire to work in an international setting, I did not feel comfortable advising him to give up, which, as he described, would result in “death.” Furthermore, I perceived that my role as a researcher was to listen. I would therefore listen, and sometimes uncomfortably respond positively about the prospect of things working out. My attempted passivity therefore had a significant affect. Gamal would often say to me how “every time I meet you I feel stronger than before,” or how “I like your positivity, I always feel happy after meeting you.” This emotional reaction did not only come from my positivity, but from being able to hang out with a foreigner with whom he could practice English, have conversations about things he would not usually discuss, go to places he would not ordinarily go, and sometimes even meet other foreigners. He also saw me as a potential avenue through which he could move abroad, repeatedly asking if I could find him an English woman to marry.

Thus, for the participants, my own body came to create an affective atmosphere which induced a feeling of hope within them. First, my status as a foreigner represented a potential key to that life. They could practice English with me, find a useful connection through me, get help with applications and CV writing, or obtain an invitation to come to visit, study, or work in the UK. Second, hanging out with a foreigner is a symbol of elite living in Cairo, and thus hanging out with me felt good, symbolically suggesting that this world and lifestyle was not only accessible in the future, but also being lived in the present. This often involved taking selfies, which would later be posted on Facebook or shown to friends and family in order to provide a 'cool' memory. Socialising with me therefore became incorporated into their daily performances of trying to inhabit the global city they desired. When participants were frustrated by their failed attempts to obtain desirable jobs, spending time with me would provide a brief distraction or source of hope for future achievement, through practicing English together or simply by hanging out.

Finally, I came to incite hope by being positive, or avoiding negativity. Sometimes, for example, I would be asked to help participants fill out application forms for scholarships or jobs. On one occasion, Mostafa, who wanted to apply for university in the UK, asked me for help. As we sat searching for options, I felt pessimistic about his chances. This intensified when he informed me reluctantly that his grade had not reached the minimum required. However, instead of openly speaking about that, I (and he) felt compelled to let it slide. I found myself grasping at the sentence on university websites which said work experience could make up for grades, even though I did not quite believe it. As soon as a potential barrier arose for Mostafa, disappointment and panic would rush across his face. In these moments, I felt compelled to reintroduce positivity. We therefore engaged in a performance, full of miscommunication, which kept alive his sense of hope. At times during our search I also became excited about his chances, momentarily forgetting how difficult it would be. I wanted to be hopeful. Though this

brings forth complex questions of validity, such intimate experiences taught me much about the emotional dynamics of hope about which the reader will read in Chapter 6, namely that the compulsion to hope can overcome ‘rational’ reasoning.

On other occasions, I would be asked for advice by participants. For example, I would be asked: “how can I reach my goal quickly?” or “what piece of advice would you give me from your research?” They would also ask, following a disappointment, whether I thought they should give up their dreams. These questions always brought forth great discomfort, as I considered that these young men were severely inhibited by factors beyond their control – their lack of nepotism, or private education for example. Yet, they wanted actionable advice: practicing English, acquiring a particular skill, or making good connections. I would initially try to avoid answering, asking them how they felt about it. But, following repeated questions, I sometimes found myself repeating the same phrases which were extended in the ‘hopeful city,’ discussed in Chapter 4, such as how one can ‘learn from failure.’ I did this because I felt obligated to feed their need for positivity, for hope. I would reluctantly therefore feed into the reproduction of the ‘hopeful city,’ that I was at the same time beginning to criticise.

This again instigated questions regarding the usefulness of research, as, by simply criticising this discursive arrangement I was not helping the young men from whom I was learning. Yet, there was one moment where I could not stand by. In late 2016, after the fieldwork period had finished, Gamal obtained a job offer in Saudi Arabia. The process of acquiring a work visa is long and expensive, with various documents and medical checks required. Gamal could not borrow the money he needed from his parents, and had unsuccessfully tried to borrow from friends. He reluctantly asked me “as a friend” if he could borrow the money and pay it back later. After deliberating, I decided to do it. Setting aside any fears of ‘tampering with the field,’

I felt obligated to help. On this occasion, I had not only discursively acted to sustain hope, but materially as well.³³

Conclusion

The observations laid out here remove any pretension that the researcher does not influence the field. I, as a foreign researcher and friend became heavily implicated in the emotional journeys of these young men. Most of the time, I could not make a tangible difference to their lives, yet I played an important role in affecting hope. I attempted to overcome this by becoming a more everyday presence, through moving into the home, and being there as they came back from work watched television, and chatted about girls, football, and jobs. Through doing this, and throughout the ethnographic experience, I saw the myriad practices, objects, and places through which a hopeful present was maintained. When I left, their lives returned to ‘normal,’ in that they had little contact with foreigners. However, they retained the same aspirations they had developed before they met me, and the same difficulties in reaching them. They therefore also retained the same experiences of disappointment, and the same practices of reclaiming hope. In the following chapters, we will delve into them. But before that, in the next chapter, I will return to the past, to uncover the historical processes that have led to this contemporary condition.

In this chapter, I have set out the process through which I collected the data that enabled the writing of the empirical chapters. This involved securing access to interlocutors, and both expanding and narrowing the research focus. I then described how I went about developing

³³ My presence also acted as a source of frustration. Seeing me might remind my participants of their lack of mobility, particularly if my spending potential was laid bare, though they would try to insist on paying. Discovering that I could not help them obtain an invitation to travel abroad, provide a useful contact for a job, or affect substantial change in language skills sometimes caused disappointment.

relationships with participants, and became interested in their daily struggles to locate a good future. I have shown in this chapter how this process is always laden with ethical and political complications, but especially so as I, a foreign male researcher entered into the lifeworld of a frustrated Egyptian middle-class. It was the moments which brought forth the most intense emotions, in both me and the participants, which seemed to best represent these complications. Through examining some of these moments, I hope to have encouraged other scholars to reflect on the affective dimensions of their research processes. By doing so, perhaps we can begin to think about how we might overcome the difficult ethical problems thrown up during our research encounters.

Chapter 3 The rise and fall of Egypt's middle-class

Ibrahim and Amr were both 24-years-old when I met them in 2014. I met Ibrahim at a soft skills training course for unemployed university graduates in Cairo. Amr was a friend of a flatmate of mine who worked at the American University of Cairo (AUC). He used to visit our apartment, inhabited by people originally from Austria and the Netherlands, to attend an academic reading group. The contrasting places in which I met these two men reveals something about their respective positioning in Egypt's socio-economic landscape. Ibrahim lives with his parents in a self-built house in a small village in the governorate of Sharkia, 1.5 hours to the north-east of Cairo in the Nile delta. Its population is made up of farmers, small-scale traders, low-level government workers, and factory employees who work in a nearby industrial town. Ibrahim's father works as a teacher in a local Islamic government school – a job given to him by the government upon graduating from technical education – and his mother stays at home. His father tops up the family's modest income by operating as a land broker in the village, and making ceramic tiles as his own father had done. Ibrahim attended a local government school, before taking a bachelor's degree at a local government university in the Faculty of Commerce, now known colloquially as one of the 'kullyāt al sha'b' (faculties of the people). Since graduating, he has struggled to locate a job, his only work since finishing military service in 2013 being in a call centre, infamous as a place one ends up if you have no other choice. Amr on the other hand lives with his parents in Mohandiseen, an upscale district of Cairo on the Nile with one of the most expensive real estate markets in the country. Amr's parents are both professors at Cairo University, jobs gained through the government appointment system. Like Ibrahim's father, they have topped up their modest public sector income, but in more lucrative ways, through operating a private clinic and buying and selling upmarket properties in the city. When I met Amr in 2015, the family were about to move to an

exclusive gated community outside Cairo. Amr attended a private language school – which explains his perfect English – and thereafter studied Economics at the AUC, which had yearly tuition fees of US\$10,000. Thereafter, he began working in a tech start-up as a ‘creative manager.’ He is now on his way to starting his own business, a mobile app that maps Cairo’s complicated web of microbus routes. He also plans to do a Master’s degree in France.

Ibrahim one day told me about a conversation he had with his uncle. They were talking about what had happened to Egypt’s middle-class in the last 60 years:

“He told me there were two classes before the 1952 Revolution (which bought military general Gamal Abdel Nasser to power). A high or rich class (ṭabaqa ‘alya) which was for the pasha (governors, dignitaries, and generals), effendiyya (civil servants), and al ekta‘iyyin (aristocracy). And another one was the popular classes (al sha‘b). Then when Nasser was President, he created a new class called the ‘muwazafiyyin’ (employees), the middle-class (al-ṭabaqa al-mutawasiṭa), people who work in the government as teachers, doctors, or engineers. The ‘muwazafiyyin’ worked to educate their children to be better than them. Then President Sadat began the infitaah (economic opening which began in the 1970s), and the ‘muwazafiyyin’ disappeared. The infitaah broke up a lot of structures. The ‘muwazafiyyin’ transformed into other classes, the doctor or engineer transformed from the middle-class to a high or rich class. The opening was a double-edged sword, some people used it to be richer, and it was unfair with others, they became poorer.”

Ibrahim thought his family were part of the middle-class that has become poorer in the aftermath of the infitaah, perhaps moving into what Bayat (2011) termed the ‘middle-class

poor’ – though Ibrahim described it as the “first level of the middle” (auwwil ṭabaqa al-mutawasiṭa). By this, he meant the bottom of the middle-class, and therefore from here on in I label this group as the lower-middle class. Amr’s family occupied a very different social world. They would be considered members of what has been labelled as the ‘cosmopolitan upper-middle class’ (de Koning, 2009), perhaps even leaving the ‘middle’ to become members of the upper-classes. But Amr described himself as upper-middle class (ṭabaqa al-mutawasiṭa al ‘alya). This chapter addresses the question of how this social chasm developed between the “auwwil ṭabaqa al-mutawasiṭa” and the “ṭabaqa al-mutawasiṭa al ‘alya.” By extension, I want to examine the trajectory of Egypt’s middle-classes in the 20th and 21st centuries. To do so, I call on data gathered during twenty family-history interviews with young people, thirteen who belong to the contemporary upper-middle class, and seven who belong to the lower-middle class. I focus throughout the chapter on Ibrahim and Amr’s families, but will also bring in others in order to illustrate certain points.

I apply Bourdieu’s class theory to the family trajectories, which tells us that what it means to live in a certain ‘class’ (ṭabaqa (level) in Arabic) is not reducible to a certain income level or amount of wealth (economic capital). It is instead attained through one’s acquisition of certain social and cultural markers (institutionalised, embodied, and objectified), in the realms of employment, education, consumption, familial life, sociability, and politics (Lentz, 2015). The chapter describes how these two groups were differentially able to secure the markers that define middle-class belonging over the 20th and early 21st century, with this ability shaped by both macroeconomic changes, their accumulation of economic resources, and the changing nature of what it means to live an Egyptian middle-class life.

Their historical trajectory represents the shape of an hourglass. The first section describes how in the early 20th century these two groups occupied very different socio-economic positions in Egypt's polarised neo-colonial class structure; the contemporary upper-middle class were members of both the traditional landed elite and new bureaucratic middle-classes, and the contemporary lower-middle class inhabited the social world of the popular classes. Thereafter, I explain how these groups were brought closer together in the mid-20th century, by a modern state-socialist project aimed to create a coherent, nationalist, state-dependent middle-class based on government employment and education. In the third and fourth sections, I set out how economic liberalisation from the 1970s onwards caused these two groups to diverge once again. One set of families used their historical privilege to take advantage of new avenues of wealth creation, and thereby secure belonging in Egypt's 'cosmopolitan,' 'privatised' upper-middle class, and Cairo's 'global city' (Ghannam, 2002). Simultaneously, families who were pulled up into the middle-class under Nasser experienced downward mobility, as the stable, well-paid government employment, good quality public education, subsidies, and affordable housing they relied on were stripped away. Therefore they struggled to hang on to their middle-class lives.

The chapter contributes to literature on the global middle-classes in a number of ways. It first uncovers the historical structural privileges, such as land ownership, that have enabled their accumulation. I also illustrate the important role of international migration, and the political and legal remnants of the state-socialist project in their rise. But finally, departing from the narrative of much literature on the middle-classes in the Global South (Heiman et al. 2012), the chapter explicates the emergence of an alternative middle-class that has not benefited from neoliberal change, but instead has been victim of it, the rising inflation it caused, its capital-intensive growth, state retrenchment, and the dilapidation of public services (Mitchell, 2002).

Despite the chasm that exists between Ibrahim and Amr, they both had the same ambition; to establish a technology start-up in Cairo's modern entrepreneurship scene. Amr is well on his way to achieving this. Ibrahim on the other hand is far away from realising his dream. Thus, in the final part of the chapter, I want to tackle the question of why, despite the social chasm that exists between these two groups, have they developed similar aspirations in contemporary Egypt? Young men like Ibrahim, who grow up in the lower levels of Egypt's middle-class no longer look to the state, but are instead developing aspirations for new, classy (rāqy) global ('alamy), private markers of middle class-ness. I show how this is due to both increased exposure to these markers, as well as exposure to the struggles of those in their middle-class level to lead a dignified middle-class life. These struggles are pushing them into sha'by living. This view challenges a cornerstone of Bourdieu's theory, that aspirations normally correspond to chances of reaching them (Bourdieu, 2000). I show how this congruence is being destabilised within the Egyptian middle-class. It has been pulled apart under a process of neoliberalisation.

Pre-Nasser divisions

According to writers such as Perlmutter (1967) and Ryzova (2014), in the 19th century, Egypt did not have a middle-class. Egypt's 'elites,' or 'bourgeoisie,' consisted of the religiously-educated, urban merchants, and rural landlords (al-umada). This elite, as a result of British and French colonisation, developed a connection with European (ifrangy) stylization. Local (balady) cultural practice signified the popular classes – who mostly worked as petty traders (al-sha'b), and in rural areas as peasant farmers (el-fellaheen). In Cairo, elite Egyptians were, along with an increasing foreign-born population (75,000 in 1907), separated from the popular

classes both legally and spatially.³⁴ They lived in the ‘classy’ (rāqy) areas of Downtown, Zamalek, Heliopolis, and Maadi, whereas the popular classes resided in the crowded ‘medieval’ Arab core of what is known as Islamic Cairo (Reynolds, 2012). This bifurcation began to change in the mid-to-late 19th century, as a new class – labelled the effendiya – emerged out of the development of a secular education system under the stewardship of Muhammad Ali, and later King Farouk (Ryzova, 2014). The effendiya were to serve as the civil servants of a new state bureaucracy, as bureaucrats, lawyers, doctors, architects, teachers, journalists, intellectual and cultural producers, and army officers, jobs which many of the old elite secured for their children (Perlmutter, 1967). This is the first time the label ‘middle-class’ (ṭabaqa al-mutawasiṭa) emerges in Egypt. It was associated with a modern, national culture and identity, as well as modern state-building. It was also connected to public employment and education, and therefore distinct from a European industrial middle-class. But Ryzova (2014), pointing to a Weberian distinction between status and material existence, emphasises that many expressed the culture without enjoying the employment. According to Ryzova, the effendiya joined forces with old merchant and artisan families, shop owners, private sector employees, and small and middle-scale entrepreneurs to constitute a diverse Egyptian middle-class. They also formed partnerships with rich landowners, who still dominated politics, finance, and administration in urban areas.

Amr’s paternal grandfather worked as a doctor in Cairo, and lived in Shubra, a northern suburb. Amr was quick to stress that this was a ‘respectable’ middle-class area, not sha‘by like it is today. His mother’s father was a Professor at Cairo University, before becoming regional director of the World Health Organisation in the 1950s and 60s. Originally from Mansoura –

³⁴ They were exempt from certain laws, such as tax duties, and ordinary Egyptians were prevented from entering elite areas (Reynolds, 2012).

where they owned land – Amr’s grandfather was educated in Germany in the 1920s. Other grandfathers of my upper-middle class interlocutors lived in upper and middle-class neighbourhoods of Cairo, and also occupied professional public sector jobs, as a military vet, agricultural engineer, lawyer brokering land deals, university professor, inspector of technical schooling, treasurer to the King, a top security official, banker in a government-owned bank, English teacher, and high-ranking military officer. Others represented the urban merchant class of the colonial era: one owned clothing stores in Saudi Arabia before moving to Egypt and setting up an ifrangy store in Downtown, one worked as the general manager of a bourgeois department store, Omar Effendi, one accumulated vast wealth trading Egyptian antiquities with Europe, and one worked as a fish merchant, owning multiple shops. Many of these grandparents enjoyed some form of international mobility or connection, whether through education abroad or in foreign-language schools in Cairo, through working abroad – one grandfather worked in Kuwait as a doctor, or through trading with European institutions. Many families also had rural origins, which included some form of landownership. Arafa’s grandfather, who worked as an agricultural engineer, belonged to a family that owned a large amount of land in what is now suburban Cairo. They were part of the landed elite that took advantage of new forms of employment in cities.

From these testimonies, we can see that the families of my upper-middle class interlocutors, like Amr’s, were straddling the old elite of urban merchants and landowners, and the new urban middle-classes. They very often owned significant amounts of land, or merchant capital, and enjoyed international connectivity, which all signified bourgeois status. However, many had taken the public sector employment that rendered them part of the effendiya, and thus the new middle-class. As Perlmutter (1967) pointed out, it was often the children of the old elite who managed to secure this new bureaucratic employment. Through this, they developed an

identification with a ‘middle-class.’ By contrast, the families of my contemporary lower-middle class interlocutors occupied very different positions in Egypt’s neo-colonial structure. Ibrahim’s paternal grandfather worked as a ceramics trader in the village, and his mother’s father was a primary school teacher in a nearby village. Neither family owned any land outside the houses in which they lived. Other grandparents lived in towns and villages outside Cairo, or in popular areas of the city, and worked as farmers, fishermen, barbers, curtain makers, factory workers, coffee shop owners, tailors, and small-scale traders. They also did not own land. Though their employment sometimes secured good money, along with their lack of land and education, it signified membership of the popular classes described above.

Having established the historical divisions that existed between these two groups, the following section will describe how they were brought closer together through the socialist reforms of the mid-20th century into a more coherent ‘middle-class.’

The Nasser convergence

The rise of the effendiya eventually led to the overthrow of Egypt’s colonial-era regime (Ryzova, 2014), their nationalist ideology directly conflicting with the regime’s dependence on the West (Kandil, 2012). In 1952, an officer named Gamal Abd el-Nasser led a military coup against the monarchy. He immediately cut off ties with the West and oriented Egypt towards the Soviet Union. After taking power – after the brief rule of Mohamed Naguib – Nasser initiated wide-ranging social reforms. His first target was the landed class, who effectively controlled parliament before the coup (Helal et al., 1986). Nasser attempted to sequester land from the largest landowners and redistribute it to farmers (Jankowski, 2000). Yet, this redistribution was far from transformative. By the 1980s, only 14% of agricultural

land owned by the largest landowners had been redistributed to 10% of agricultural households – usually wealthier peasants (Bush, 1999). Dispossessed landowners received compensation, and powerful landlords found various ways of retaining their land. Ray Bush (1999) concludes there was ultimately little shift in the balance of political and economic power. However, the families of my upper-middle class interlocutors were affected by these reforms. Many described how their family lost land, in their words it was “stolen.” They managed to keep everything under 200 feddans (211 acres) before 1965, and under 50 after.

Furthermore, the rent these families took from property was also curtailed by a rental law introduced by Nasser that enforced a cap on rents and ensured tenants could keep the property under the same fixed price, despite inflation, for two generations. Arafa described how his father could not make money on the property he owned on his land throughout the 20th century. By 2015, the rental price had become extremely low (10LE (US\$1.25) - 50LE (US\$6.25) per month in 2015). Finally, the income gained from employment was also capped for those working in the government (Waterbury, 1983). Some people even lost employment as a result of the coup. Hamza’s grandfather, who worked in the organisation in charge of the King’s assets, lost his job – he only managed to avoid prosecution because he had gone to school with Mohamed Naguib’s brother. This incidentally illustrates the interconnections between the effendiya and traditional elites. Thereafter, Hamza’s grandfather lived off the rent from the land he owned in the delta.

The 1952 Revolution therefore had the effect of curtailing the wealth, or economic capital, of the pre-Nasser elite. Their land was taken, their property rents limited, and their government wages were capped. But, Nasser’s socialist ideology also had at its heart the idea to create a much larger middle-class who could provide the workforce for the country’s economic

development. Nasser expanded access to education to many more Egyptians. People previously working as petty traders, agricultural labourers, and factory workers gained access to school and university education (technical, academic, and religious) – university enrolment tripled between 1952 and 1970 (de Koning, 2009). Every student graduating from secondary school and university was guaranteed a government job – with university graduates assured an office job. These jobs became available in the aftermath of an ambitious programme of industrialisation geared towards import substitution, and nationalisation.³⁵ Nationalisation was in part a response to foreign and local capitalists refusing to invest money in industry, keeping it instead in land and real estate. The state assumed an increasingly dominant role in the economy and became its main employer. Public employment swelled from 770,000 to 1.1 million between 1962 and 1967 (Brooks, 2008: 72–3). By the early 1980s over half the non-agricultural workforce – and upwards of 20% of the total workforce – was employed by the state (Richards and Waterbury 1996: 184; Rutherford 2013).

Both the children, and sometimes the grandparents themselves who resided in the ‘popular classes’ working as petty traders, factory workers, or agricultural labourers, benefited from this newfound access to public education and employment. Ibrahim’s father attended a newly established public school in the village, and went to an institute of religious education in the nearby town. His mother also attended school, thereafter entering the faculty of sciences at the University of Zagazig. Ibrahim’s father, after a period of working in ceramics with his father, took a job as a teacher in the country’s religious school system, Al-Azhar, with what he

³⁵ By 1962 the private sector had been limited to land ownership (although a co-operative system monitored and controlled it), buildings (though rents were controlled and heavily taxed), construction and contracting, light industry, 25% of national exports, and 75% of internal trade – under state guidance (Zaalouk 1989). The government controlled infrastructure, heavy and medium industry, institutions of foreign trade, and financial operations.

described as a “good salary.” This income was aided by various state subsidies for food and fuel. He quickly built an apartment and married, with Ibrahim’s mother looking after the home.

Other children of the popular classes also obtained government employment, in the distribution of food subsidies, as a train station official, and in a local tax office. These jobs all followed a technical education, which was lower than university level. They were considered to have given “good” salaries – 12LE (US\$30) per month in the case of one father, which, according to him “easily” covered family expenses. After obtaining employment, parents generally quickly married and began looking for an old rental law property, or building an apartment or house with the help of parents. One father did manage to acquire a higher-level university education. Gamal’s father, the son of a barber, entered the faculty of engineering, before obtaining an engineering job in a government-owned company.

These families were lifted up into a new Egyptian middle-class, that was based on “public sector jobs, Arabic state education, and a strong modernist and nationalist sense of belonging to an avant-garde of national culture” (Schielke, 2012: 37). This new definition of middle classness was very much driven by the state, over a short time period. It reflects middle-class emergence in many Global South contexts in the mid-20th century, as a result of populist, developmentalist, modernist, state-driven economic policies (Davis, 2010; Heiman et al. 2012; Weiss, 2009). Historian Walter Armbrust laid out an intricate definition of what it meant to be middle-class in Egypt on the back of Nasserist reforms:

“Middle class does not correlate with a material standard of living. Egyptians who have at least a high school education, and therefore basic literacy and familiarity with how modern institutions work, generally consider themselves middle class.

Egyptians who think of themselves as middle class expect a lifestyle free from manual labour. In the media, the ideal of middle class is often associated with modernity, bureaucracy, and office work, and it is portrayed as having a degree of familiarity with an ideology of national identity that seeks to balance local Egyptian and classical Islamic cultural referents” (1999: 111).

The middle-class did not only encompass public sector workers, but also more affluent sections of the self-employed, and owners of small businesses (Amin, 2000: 31-37, Abdel Moati, 2002). It straddled discourses which viewed the poor as suspect because of a failure to adjust to modern institutions, and the wealthy for a rootless cosmopolitanism and moral looseness (Armbrust, 1999: 112; see Lamont, 2002). Important also was adherence to a reformist notion of Islam as a clear set of rules, rather than the more mystically orientated traditions of the lower-classes (Schielke, 2015). These families were not necessarily lifted up through increases in economic capital – indeed Ibrahim’s grandfather rejected a government job in a train station in favour of continuing in ceramics on these grounds. This was a symbolic rise, which rested on cultural markers of middle class-ness, on an educational certificate, a white-collar government job, and a *rāqy* (classy), educated sociability. They provided people with a sense of ‘comfort’ (*raḥa*), and ‘respectability’ (*iḥtirām*). These markers were strongly gendered, with men overwhelmingly responsible for providing income, and women taking control of the home, and styles of religiosity (Schielke, 2012).

Various efforts have been made to estimate the size of this expanded middle-class, though as outlined in the Introduction this is notoriously difficult. Galal Amin (2000: 31-37) has estimated that Egypt’s middle-class increased from 19% in 1955 to 45% of the total population in 1986, a six fold increase. He based his measurement on income per family, and thus falls

foul of the same critiques levelled at other quantitative analyses (Wacquant, 1991). The middle-class in 1986 encompassed families who earned between 300LE (US\$420) and 10,000LE (US\$14200) per month, a varied populace incorporating extreme affluence and modest living (ibid. 34). However, perhaps this fits with Walter Armbrust's (1999) argument that identifying with a middle-class post-Nasser did not necessarily imply a minimum standard of living. Rather, education and non-manual employment were more significant. Reflecting this, Anouk de Koning (2009: 12), in her attempts to measure the middle-class in Cairo, took her definition from the share of professional and technical labour, concluding that this class made up about 30% of Cairo's population in 1999.

It is widely agreed that during the 1950s and 1960s Egyptian society underwent a process of convergence. Economic, cultural, and consumptive disparities decreased, and the social opportunities available to many Egyptians expanded (Jankowski, 2000; Abu-Lughod, 1971). In a similar way to many parts of the world, conditions were put in place to enable a greater proportion of Egypt's population to reach for and achieve middle-class respectability and comfort. This is reflected in the family histories of my interlocutors. Many who had resided in the popular classes were being pulled into a middle-class through access to education, stable government employment with a decent income, and access to healthcare, subsidies, and housing, while the traditional elites were in some ways restricted in their accumulation of wealth. Their land was partially sequestered and their property rents limited. Many were also positioned in government employment that restricted the opportunities for income growth.

Older divisions however did not disappear. Elites used their pre-existing economic, cultural, and social capital to acquire a better education, and thereafter better public sector jobs. Amr's father, born in 1938, began attending school before Nasser-era reforms. He went to what Amr

described as a well-known public school in Cairo. While at school he joined the scouts, which enabled him to travel to Lebanon. Amr's parents both attended Cairo University. His father entered the faculty of medicine, and his mother the faculty of English literature. After university, they travelled abroad for further study. His father specialised in ophthalmology in London, and his mother – in part supported by money from the land her family held – did a Master's degree in Leeds. After they returned to Egypt in the 1970s, each entered their appointed public sector jobs as professors at Cairo University. This carried a modest salary at the time of around 30LE (US\$80) per month. They began renting an apartment in Mohandiseen under the Nasser-era old rent law.

Most of the parents of the contemporary upper-middle class enjoyed a similar public education, attending what were described as “famous” public schools in Cairo and Alexandria – although one father went to a private British school in Cairo – before enrolment in government universities. Of the twelve fathers, seven entered the faculty of engineering – the most competitive to enter, four the faculty of commerce, and one the faculty of law. This secured access to higher-status government employment, such as landscape engineering, petroleum engineering, and work in a government bank. All of the mothers were also educated to university level. Although many subsequently did not take work after marriage, some entered government jobs, for example as an administrator in a government university, or as a bank employee.

This reflects how the pre-1952 elites and effendiya were well-placed to capitalise on new avenues of employment in state institutions (Abdel-Fadil, 1980; Zaalouk, 1989). Bureaucrats, large and middling landowners, and urban merchants of the previous generation were able to send their children to the best schools – thereby securing high-levels of cultural capital – and

thereafter ensure enrolment in university. This later led to higher-status public employment; engineers, doctors, and military officers in particular were becoming the heroes of the nation during this period. What is also evident is continued markers of elite status, such as connectivity with Europe, of which those lower down the social ladder may have been critical. Thus, even though they were incorporated into a Nasserist middle-class identity, divisions remained. As Egypt embarked on a process of opening up its economy in the decades that followed, their higher levels of economic, cultural, and social capital would enable this group to pull away again from the rest of Egypt's middle-class, who themselves would experience increased instability. The following section explores this divergence.

Neoliberal economic divergence

Anwar Sadat took power in 1970 after Nasser's death. While continuing the policies of extending education and government employment, the socialist developmentalist project began to unravel. Even before Nasser's death, in the context of economic stagnation in the late-1960s, John Waterbury (1983: 222) describes how the goal of "extending basic services to all was quietly abandoned." The state gradually began to accept growing income inequities, the neglect of basic welfare programs, and mounting discrepancies between social services. Furthermore, Zaalouk (1989) notes that government technocrats began to utilise their power over both private and public resources to serve their own business interests and increasingly lavish lifestyles with European goods. This group, along with the private sector bourgeoisie with which they developed partnerships, began in the late-60s to call for less state control of the economy, and greater space for private sector activity.

But it was under Sadat when the country began to change direction. During the 1970s he fast-forwarded a discontinuous process of economic liberalisation and rapprochement with the West. A series of new laws were introduced under the label of ‘infitaah’ (opening), to make Egypt more attractive to international capital, and to give the local private sector both more freedom domestically and more encouragement to work with foreign enterprise (Jankowski, 2000: 171). These policies seemingly represented common sense in response to a stagnating economy and rising government debt, which was worsened by two wars with Israel. By 1975 the public deficit was LE1.3 billion (US\$3.3 billion) and the trade deficit was LE1 billion (US\$2.5 billion) (Zaalouk 1989: 55).

As a result, opportunities for investment suddenly opened up to foreign and domestic capital, mainly in commercial, foreign-orientated, capital-intensive sectors rather than the industrial sector of the economy (Zaalouk, 1989). While the relative share of investment directed towards industrial and production activities (excluding petroleum) declined from 47% to 35.2% between 1973 and 1975 (Cooper, 1982: 111) – with the consequence that exports declined – the importation of consumer durables increased six-fold between 1975 and 1976. Bringing in luxury consumer goods promised high profit margins, but few employment opportunities. Aspiration was slowly redirected towards consumption: as captured by Sadat’s proclamation that “the goal of every Egyptian should be to have a car and a villa” (cited in Ghannam, 2002: 29). The state also wanted to encourage saving and entrepreneurship, by introducing concessions on rent controls, higher-wages for some bureaucrats, and tax exemptions on certain company profits (Cooper, 1982).

Liberalisation continued into the late-20th century, as the government faced further shortfalls in revenue, in part because of military expenditure to the US, defaults on loans to wealthy

entrepreneurs, and falls in oil prices in the wake of the 1990-91 Gulf conflict, which reduced the worker remittances being received from Egyptians who had migrated to the growing Gulf economies (Rutherford, 2013; Mitchell, 2016). In 1991, Hosni Mubarak – who became president after the assassination of Sadat in 1981 – agreed to impose IMF-sponsored economic reform and structural adjustment policies. The state began implementing “financial austerity measures, a depreciation of the exchange rate, elimination of price controls and subsidies, and public sector reform and privatization” (Kienle, 2001: 144). State expenditure was reallocated away from welfare and towards the private sector in the form of loans to businessmen from public banks, tax holidays for business ventures, and investments in infrastructure that benefited new production sites (Mitchell, 2002). By June 2000 the government had sold controlling interest in one third of its enterprises (Rutherford, 2013: 197). Egypt also joined the World Trade Organisation in 1995 with the requirement that the government reduce tariff and nontariff barriers to trade.

The official IMF account paints a story of low inflation, reduced government deficit and foreign debt, and reasonable growth figures during the 1990s. But, Timothy Mitchell (2002) demonstrates how these figures were only enabled through influxes of speculative financial injections in real estate, which led to a construction boom geared towards a small number of wealthy Egyptians, instead of revived production or export expansion, which would have created jobs for the wider population. The economy therefore experienced growth in areas that served a wealthy ‘elite’ who had ties to the government. Various scholars have therefore noted that this period produced dramatic changes in Egypt’s social structure (Cooper, 1982; de Koning, 2009). An *al-iqtisadi* (the economy) editorial on November 15th 1976 stated that:

“the consumption liberalisation, and what it entails in the way of explosive inflation, has changed the structure of Egyptian society dangerously. After being divided into a poor class, a large middle class and a rich class, it has now become composed of a destitute class and a rich class, while the middle class has been transformed into a treadmill, straining on the path to maintain a minimum standard of living” (in Cooper, 1982: 107).

The opening of the economy enabled the traditional bourgeoisie of the pre-Nasser years (large landowners and merchants), the bureaucratic and military strata of the Nasser period, and the commercial nouveaux riches performing new activities to accumulate capital (Zaalouk 1989; de Koning 2009). One set of my interlocutors managed to take part in this accumulation of wealth. In some ways their strategies reflect those of other ‘new middle-class’ populations in the Global South in the context of the growth of the private sector, property markets, and consumption (De Angelis, 2010; Ellis, 2011). However, in certain ways they depart from this narrative. Historical rural landownership, international migration, and the legal and political remnants of state socialism were vital in their rise.

First, high-status government employees used their positions to take advantage of new avenues of wealth creation. Amr’s father, soon after entering the university, opened a private eye clinic in the early 1970s. His government salary in 2015 had reached 10,000LE (US\$1250), but the private clinic has long provided his ‘main’ income. This is one example of government workers utilising their position to venture into the private sector. Government doctors began to serve clients who no longer wanted to attend ever more dilapidated public hospitals. Amr’s father opened his clinic in downtown Cairo, acquiring an apartment through the old rent law; an interesting illustration of how a legal remnant of socialism facilitated ventures into the market.

I asked Amr how his father afforded the machines he needed. He told me he had “saved money for himself and worked very hard.” He had used his cultural capital – in the form of qualifications – and economic capital from his job, while being facilitated by access to cheap property. Later, Amr’s mother also secured another income. In the late 1990s she was “loaned out” to October 6th University, which was the first national private university in Egypt, opening in 1996. This strategy is also reflective of new avenues of wealth production, this time stemming from the establishment of a private education system – which is discussed in more detail below. Although this also provided Amr’s mother’s main income, both parents ensured they remained at Cairo University because of pension and security benefits that continued to come with public sector employment.

Other fathers were part of that bureaucratic segment which enjoyed increased salaries as a result of the *infitaah*. The petroleum engineer’s salary, for example, reached 30,000LE (US\$7500) per month by 2000. However, most parents of my upper-middle class interlocutors had not entered government employment. They were entering the labour market in the mid-1970s to early 1980s, and, reflecting socio-economic transformations that were already taking place, they entered employment in Egypt’s expanding private sector. Four fathers entered jobs in industries that were experiencing rapid growth: as a civil engineer for a petroleum company, a logistics manager in a US construction company, an engineer in a Lebanese construction company, and a lawyer in a private bank. These jobs afforded high salaries, with parents sometimes returning to education in order to enhance them. Kareem’s father, a petroleum engineer, took an MBA at AUC, with a cost of 20,000LE (US\$6700), in the 1990s, which greatly increased his earnings. He could afford this degree through selling an apartment owned by his parents in Heliopolis, an upmarket area which was inhabited in the pre-Nasser years by traditional Egyptian elites and Europeans. This shows how these families were able to use their

inherited privilege in order to take advantage of new forms of economic capital flooding into the private sector. This form of inherited wealth, a property in an upmarket area, was unleashed by the expansion of a private property market. On this occasion, it was reconverted into a distinguished form of cultural capital (an AUC certificate), which enabled greater earning potential.

A similar strategy was used by Hamza's father, who worked as an engineer in a Lebanese construction company. In the mid-1990s he was earning 700LE (US\$205) per month as vice-manager. In order to enhance earnings that were declining in reach due to inflation, he decided to "go it alone," using the contacts he had established. In order to fund the initial outlays he borrowed money from his parents, who sold rural land they owned in Mansoura. Thus, again, historically-owned economic capital, held in rural land, enabled this family to take advantage of new avenues of capital accumulation opening up in construction.

Owning private companies was something five fathers of my upper-middle class interlocutors managed to achieve in the late-20th century. Two had grown companies their parents had run; for example the son of the fish merchant expanded the company into high-end food and beverage imports. This is a sector which, as I mentioned, experienced rapid growth in the late-20th century. Abeer, his daughter, described to me how her father had been lucky, "in the right place at the right time." Another father managed to open a company as a result of a brief period spent earning money abroad. As Egypt was opening itself up to the world in the 1970s and 80s, there was an explosion of employment opportunities in the Gulf due to soaring oil prices. For a period, this offset the declining number of jobs in Egypt's industrial sectors, as well as the inflation afflicting the real incomes of middle-class salaried workers (Amin, 2000). Five of the twelve fathers of my interlocutors travelled to the Gulf in the 1980s.

Yusuf's father only travelled for a short period, but it made a drastic difference to his life. He grew up in a small apartment in Giza, a lower-middle class area. His father was a military officer, but his parents divorced when he was young. His mother, who did not work, had to raise six children in an apartment his father had previously bought. She made money renting out rooms under the old rent law. Though this provided some money, the rent became almost worthless. They therefore lived in difficult conditions, but Yusuf's father managed to enter Cairo University's faculty of engineering after graduating from a famous government school in Giza. Only three of the six brothers entered university. Yusuf said his grandmother valued education, and his father was often the highest performer in school – but he admitted free education helped. In the second year of university, in the early 1980s, Yusuf's father travelled to Iraq for the summer, missing one semester. His older brother had gone to Iraq to work as a carpenter, and so he went to help him. Because of the strong Iraqi currency, at this time one dinar was equivalent to three US dollars, he managed to earn a lot of money. Upon returning to Cairo he opened a copy shop at the university. He apparently went from being one of the poorest students to the richest, even buying a car. Upon graduating in 1984, along with a partner he opened a business importing computers from abroad and selling or renting them to companies inside Egypt. The company was extremely successful, one of the three biggest in the field until the early 2000s.

This set of events shows how a brief period in the Gulf enabled people to take advantage of avenues of wealth accumulation in Egypt, in the context of the import boom that followed the infitah. Yusuf's father had managed to travel due to his good quality education, and his social connections. Two other fathers travelled permanently to the Gulf, because of the vastly superior salaries. Fathi's father travelled to Saudi Arabia after graduating from the faculty of commerce,

Ain Shams University, with the help of his brother who worked in the Bin Laden Company. He worked in a construction company as an accountant. His salary in 2016 was 15,000 Riyal (70,000LE) per month. The company also pays half the family rent.

I have described above the different ways in which these families managed to accumulate large amounts of capital through their employment activities as Egypt opened up its economy. They used their cultural capital (a good quality education), social capital (familial connections used to secure migration or business ownership), and economic capital (inherited land and property) to take advantage of opportunities in an expanding private sector, both in Egypt and abroad. Although all of the fathers held employment, nine out of the thirteen mothers remained in the home; this indeed enabled fathers to earn wages. However, some women contributed significant funds themselves through work outside the home. One worked in a private bank – earning in 2015 between 20-30,000LE per month, and one even opened a business in the importation of pharmaceutical and chemical raw materials. Even if they did not hold employment, many mothers also contributed in the form of land they had inherited.³⁶ This leads us on to a discussion of a final avenue of wealth accumulation for these families, investment in real estate.

Opportunities for real estate investment resulted from a massive construction boom that was enabled in the 1980s by the lifting of rent controls, restrictions on foreign companies and individuals buying property, the release of state-owned land, and subsidised cement and steel (Sims, 2014). Arafa described to me how old rent contracts on properties his father owned finally ended in the mid-2000s, which provided an avenue of rapid wealth accumulation as

³⁶ Female inheritance is not guaranteed, which leads to many women being excluded due to fears of it going to their husbands (Hussein, 2017)

some properties were sold, and others were rented out at a more “sensible” market price. Even during the rent control period the rents doubled his modest government salary, but opening the property market now enabled inherited forms of privilege to be transformed into a strategy of accumulation. After marrying, Amr’s parents soon became interested in property. This was facilitated by public universities giving professors the chance to buy land below market price – again highlighting how high-status public employment opened opportunities for capital accumulation in the private sector. In the late 1980s they bought a house on Egypt’s north coast, and another apartment in central Cairo to rent out. Buying, renovating, and selling property became what Amr described as a “retirement plan,” overseen by his mother who worked part-time. By the time that I met Amr, they had done this with six properties. In the early 1970s, his father bought land in the desert in what is now an exclusive new town replete with gated communities. Back then it was empty farmland, and cost less than the price of a car. His father had no idea it would later be the site of massive redevelopment, “it was just luck,” Amr said.³⁷ They built two houses on this plot into which the family would eventually move, and a third small house for a farmer who works the land. They also inherited land in Nasr city, a middle-class district in eastern Cairo from his dad’s brother. In the late 1990s they began renting houses to families and foreigners, making tenants pay in foreign currency, which was now allowed. They still have the marital apartment they rented under the old rent law, which they also rent out at market rates. They bought another in 1992 in another upper-middle class district in central Cairo, and a third in 2000 in Sheikh Zayed. Amr emphasised how the “crazy” property boom of the 1980s had enabled his family’s real estate exploits, which has seen prices increase between 44% and 148% per year in some upper-middle class areas (Shawkat, 2016).

³⁷ The frequent reference to ‘luck’ gives lie to the upper-middle classes’ insistence, which is illustrated in the following chapter, that social mobility is possible through hard work.

Though these families have privileged backgrounds, their fortunes shot upwards in the second half of the 20th and early 21st century. They used their pre-existing capitals (or privilege) to take advantage of new avenues of wealth accumulation. I will describe in the next section how this economic capital was reconverted into forms of cultural capital to enable the assertion of new markers of middle class-ness, based on private education and employment. But first, I will explain how those who had been lifted into the middle-class under Nasser experienced the opposite trend. Almost immediately following the infitaah, the value of Egypt's currency began declining and inflation took hold. This was directly related to the wealth accumulation of the upper-classes, as lagging production and fast expanding consumption devalued the Egyptian pound. In the mid-1970s the Egyptian pound was equal to US\$2.5. In the mid-1990s this had more than reversed, the dollar was equal to 3.4 Egyptian pounds. By 2011, the pound had dropped to US\$6, before declining after the Revolution to over US\$8 by 2015 – it has since declined even more.

This currency devaluation had a large effect on the relative reach of many Egyptians. While some found ways to increase their income and wealth, those in the lower echelons of the middle-class were experiencing a stagnation of both. Ibrahim's father began working as a teacher in 2000. He originally earned 800LE (US\$200) per month. By 2015, his salary was 2000LE, which equalled only US\$250 per month. The salary of Nabawy's parents was even less, at 1200LE (US\$150) per month – this had been increased from 800LE before the 2011 Revolution. These parents remained in the government employment to which they had originally been appointed, but in lower-level jobs in which salaries did not increase after the infitaah. Through rounds of liberalisation and privatisation, the government continued to employ a relatively large percentage of the workforce – upwards of 20% in the mid-1980s (Rutherford, 2013) – as well as extend food and fuel subsidies (Assaad, 1997). This represented

an effort to allay the structural unemployment and inflation caused by liberalisation as capital concentrated in non-productive sectors. Though designed to provide a buffer against impoverishment, stagnating wages pushed many people towards it. The 2016 World Bank report measured the middle-class as those earning US\$4.90 (LE29) per day in 2005, and found a decrease from 14.3% to 9.8% between 2000 and 2010. Nabawy's parents were pushed outside this bracket.

A dual labour market thus emerged in the aftermath of economic liberalisation (de Koning, 2009). Internationally-orientated sectors – including multinational companies, large Egyptian corporations such as telecoms companies and commercial banks, agencies that offer business producer services to multinationals, NGOs with foreign funding, and private firms delivering services to an affluent clientele such as doctors in private clinics or architects – provide wages on average five times higher than comparable firms outside the internationally-orientated segment (de Koning 2009: 74; Abdelrahman 2007). In 2002 a secretary in a small office of an Egyptian company would earn LE250 per month as opposed to LE2500, for an executive secretary in a large company. Similarly, an engineer in a small business earned a salary of between LE500-1500 compared to LE5000 in a multinational or local up-market construction company (LE1000 equalled between 200-250 Euros) (de Koning, 2009: 75).

These two sets of families followed divergent paths within this labour market. However, the lower-middle classes also engaged in additional activities to supplement their salaries. Ibrahim's father still sometimes makes ceramic floors, operates as a broker for land deals in the village, and raises and sells birds. These activities provide additional funds for the family. With this money Ibrahim's father recently bought a piece of land on the edge of the village that will be used to build homes for his grandchildren. However, unlike Amr's family, this move

into real estate was not an immediate accumulation strategy, but rather provided security against rising house prices. Another father ran a curtain-making business in the evenings after finishing work at the train station. Though these activities were important income sources, they represent extremely different ventures from those of the upper-middle classes.

Thus, the trend reflected here is one of rising economic inequality. While some accumulated vast wealth, national Egyptian figures demonstrate that, by the mid-90s a quarter of the population were poor, with another quarter living on the margins of poverty (Assaad and Rouchdy, 1999: 11). The story that emerges out of neoliberalisation is therefore the arrival of a dual economy (Singerman and Amar, 2006). This economy was orientated towards commercial enterprise, and away from productive sectors, thereby leading to increasing deprivation outside an exclusive group. In the following section, I demonstrate how the newfound discrepancies in economic capital described in this section led to discrepancies in cultural capital amongst these two sets of families. One converted their economic resources into new legitimate markers of belonging to a globalised upper-middle class, and another struggled to hang on to the state-dependent middle-class lives they had been provided under the Nasser regime.

But before that, I want to emphasise that it could have been different for some families. Ibrahim's father travelled to Saudi Arabia in 1980, before taking his appointed teaching job. He stayed for three years, working in ceramics and earning a good salary. He saved enough money to build an apartment in the village and marry. However, he suddenly had to return to Egypt because his father had become ill. This move drastically decreased his earning potential. He could have been reaping the benefits of a prolonged salary in the Gulf, but instead had become dependent on low public-sector wages in Egypt. Gamal's father had a similar

experience. Having graduated from engineering and starting work in a private company, he suddenly had to leave. As the oldest, after his father became ill, he had to support his younger siblings. Engineering would not provide enough income in the short-term, so he left to start a small furniture business in the popular/lower-middle class area in which he lived with his wife. Gamal described how his father sacrificed a career in engineering, and a better salary. According to Gamal, he remains regretful and angry to this day. Gamal's aunt now works as a successful lawyer, and his uncle works as a newspaper editor, both jobs which offer a better salary, and middle-class prestige. These stories show how sometimes it is decisions or events outside the realm of class that have a bearing on socio-economic trajectories. These two families could have benefited from the same avenues of wealth accumulation as those in the upper-middle classes, but instead they were pushed into a precarious lower-middle class.

Growing up in different middles

Immediately upon meeting Amr and Ibrahim, the difference between their social worlds was clear. When I met Amr, I gave him the greeting I would always give Ibrahim, a kiss on both cheeks. Amr though recoiled in shock, saying: “no one has done that in ages.” This act was not something men in his social circles engaged in, it was considered *sha‘by*. Amr had suggested we meet in a new restaurant in Downtown called “‘aish w’ malaḥ” (Bread and Salt), a trendy spot that sold a mixture of European food for 70LE (GBP6) upwards. It is a place I felt comfortable in, but Ibrahim would never have gone. It was both ridiculously priced and the atmosphere too uptight. Ibrahim preferred to meet in noisy *aḥāwy balady* (local cafés) on the street. ‘aish we malaḥ was also full of women either not wearing headscarves or wearing them in fashionable ways. By contrast, women in Ibrahim’s village wore a long black *galabiyya* (dress). One also often heard English in the restaurant. Amr himself described English as a first

language – we would never speak in Arabic. Ibrahim, although still able, often made mistakes and struggled with fluency. His strong accent rendered visible his Arabic education.

The capital accumulation of their parents enabled their children, my upper-middle class interlocutors, to acquire ‘new’ cultural markers of distinction that define belonging to Egypt’s ‘upper-middle class’ (de Koning, 2009; Peterson, 2011). In Bourdieu’s terms, they converted their economic capital into institutionalised (education or specialised knowledge), and embodied (personality, speech, and skills) cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Since the infitaaah, the Nasserist middle-class identity based on public sector employment, public education, and nationalist politics has been overlain by another, centred on “global connection, versatility, metropolitan tastes, language skills, and well-paid professional jobs in the private sector” (Schielke, 2012: 37). The state, educational and employment institutions, the media, and people themselves have all contributed to this shift. It represents a shift in the way Egypt is governed and represented, and in the way the modern is defined, away from the nation and towards the globe – and predominantly the West. It also reflects the state’s ambitions to bring Egypt into the ‘first world.’ These markers echo those described in other parts of the Global South that define membership of the global middle-classes on the back of neoliberal reforms: private sector employment and amenities, and globalised forms of consumption (Liechty, 2003; Fernandes, 2006; Zhang, 2010). However, crucially, these markers are often not new – global connectivity has signified a high-status in Egypt since colonialism.

A plethora of new urban places have emerged which reflect, and enable the acquisition of, these markers. Cairo has seen an explosion of internationalised private educational institutions, gated communities, new office developments, and upscale shopping malls that reflect the Egyptian government’s ambition to construct a ‘global capital city,’ as well as providing rapid avenues

for capital accumulation (Ghannam, 2002; Sims, 2014). In this section, I move away from a focus in the literature on consumptive performances amongst middle-class populations in the Global South (Liechty, 2003), and instead describe how new forms of education and employment enabled Egypt's upper-middle classes to distinguish themselves from others, as modern, open-minded, educated, and cultured. However, I also reveal how these 'new' lines of distinction rest on historically formed privilege.

Growing up global

Amr, along with all of my other interlocutors, described himself as upper-middle class rather than 'upper-class' or 'elite.' They described Egypt's upper-class, or contemporary elite, as people who had 'million pound mansions,' owned huge businesses, and who were connected to high-ranking government officials. Egypt's elite is now understood to consist of a small group of politically connected individuals who became extremely wealthy in the Mubarak era on the back of favourable government loans, land and industry sales, and tax breaks (Kandil, 2012). The label upper-middle class defines a wider population who enjoy the markers defined above. However, the boundaries are difficult to pin down: the parents of some of my interlocutors indeed owned businesses. Their self-labelling also reflected an unwillingness to label themselves as part of an elite or upper-class. I have therefore chosen to use the term upper-middle class because of their labelling, and because they reflect the upper-middle class definitions utilised in previous literature (de Koning, 2009; Schielke, 2012). Furthermore, even though huge gulfs in wealth emerged between them and the lower-middle classes – thus questioning the legitimacy of positioning them in the same 'class' – this upper-middle class label reflects the notion that Egypt's middle-class does not correspond to a precise material standard of living (Armbrust, 1999).

My interlocutors all grew up in upmarket neighbourhoods. Amr was raised in Mohandiseen, an area which was associated with a Nasserist professional middle-class, but which is now known for its fashionable cosmopolitan shops and restaurants, and, as stated, has one of the country's most expensive real-estate markets. Others lived in Giza – close to the Nile where real estate prices are highest, Nasr city – a newer middle-class neighbourhood where 'new money' accumulated in the Gulf is invested, and Heliopolis – an older, more established area where Egyptian elites and Europeans lived under colonial rule. Some were either already living, or about to move, to properties in exclusive gated communities that have sprung up in the outskirts of the city (Zhang, 2010; Ballard & Jones, 2011). These properties played an important part in accumulation strategies, but they also provide the upper-middle/upper-classes with the ability to escape inner-city areas which they describe as becoming overcrowded, noisy, and dirty.

Amr, unlike his parents, did not attend government school. He attended a private German school costing thousands of pounds each year, in which he took the German abitur – in a mixture of German and English. While all of the parents, except one set, attended free Arabic government schools in the 1960s and 1970s, every one of their children attended fee-paying private schools in foreign languages. These included Islamic or secular language schools where one studied an Egyptian curriculum in English and French and experimental language schools that represent a government attempt to offer non-Arabic education for a lower fee, but the majority went to more expensive international schools which taught English, French, German, International Baccalaureate, or American curricula. For this population, private international schooling has become a necessary marker of class belonging. Indeed, de Koning (2009) goes so far as to measure the size of the 'upper-middle class' from the percentage of students

enrolled in private secondary school education. She posited that it makes up 15-20% of Cairo's professional middle class, and between 5-7% of all Cairenes. While not necessarily accurate, this correlates with Mitchell's (2002) position that only 5% of Egypt's population can afford the consumption of upscale goods and services – like private schools.

Under Nasser, most schools were nationalised to give the state control over the curriculum. Government schools, especially those in big cities, were renowned for their quality. But a dual consequence of Egypt's economic liberalisation has been their drastic decline in quality, along with the growth of private alternatives. By 1999/2000, 20% of 'thanawiyya 'amma (high school) students were enrolled in private schools in Cairo, and they totalled 10% of Egyptian schools (7,000 – a hundred of which are international schools). In the late-70s the state decreased expenditure on a range of public services, including health care and education, while the numbers using them continued to rise. At the same time, in response to increasing demand for alternative education options, the government began to stimulate private investment, through tax incentives and relaxing (de facto) control over curricula. This was in part a response to a realisation that a deteriorating public education system could not meet the demands of the international commercial economy (Mehrez, 2008). It also reflects a trend repeated around the world in the context of neoliberalisation, of a decline in direct government investment in public services, and increased privatisation. There was also an influx of international development assistance into education in this period, with donors prioritising western norms and interests, thus directing education towards international socialisation (ibid. 101).

The price of schools attended by my interlocutors ranged from 5000LE (US\$1500-830) to 35,000LE (US\$10000-5800) per year in the 1990s and 2000s.³⁸ This was afforded through the

³⁸ The prices in USD reflect conversion rates in the year 1990 and 2000.

economic capital they had accumulated over the years. Ali for example attended an International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) school in the mid-2000s, costing 15,000LE per year. This equalled four months of his father's salary as a logistics manager at an Egyptian clothing company. In order to afford the education, his father took a bank loan, and repaid it over time by selling a piece of land inherited from his parents. This reflects again how historical rural landownership enabled the reproduction of class belonging in the 21st century. Ali's parents also entered a 'gama'eya,' a rotating credit scheme shared by family and friends. This reflects similar schemes around the world (Bouman, 1995), but it is important to recognise they are differentially accessible to people, and successful, depending on their wealth and the wealth of those they know.

When I asked why my interlocutors had not attended government schools, I would receive laughter in response. Going to private school is now something 'everybody does.' Kareem attended an Islamic private school that taught both an Egyptian curriculum and a British one in English and French. He described the difference between the two: "in English in the Egyptian curriculum we were basically learning ABC at GCSE, while in the foreign one we were reading Owen and Dickens, it was crazy." English fluency is therefore a significant marker of difference between contemporary private and government education. However, Arafa, who went to the same school, described to me – in perfect English – how there were many other problems with government schools that meant upper-middle class families had to avoid them:

"It's really important the way you are educated, and not just because it's in English, that's irrelevant. In the public school you are 50-60 students in class. Teachers don't pay attention to students. In private schools its better...education itself is very different. In public schools for example, you get to 10th grade and they

can't read or write. It's that bad, especially ones outside Cairo. Plus it's dangerous, kids fight all the time, so parents of the upper-class, upper-middle class usually send their kids to private schools."

Arafa went on to describe how the mentality one acquires in private school is important:

"it's more the mentality that makes a difference rather than content...you are prepared to be successful, and think about how to be successful in your career, other kids are caring about carrying a knife, and being badass. This matters from an early age. Richer kids are trained to channel competition into sports, not being a gangster. In my class people were trained in looking for a career, other parents train their kids for being street-smart and tough."

Unlike when their parents attended school, government schools in Egypt are now considered by the upper-middle classes to produce people who are not only uneducated, but violent, and prepared for the toughness of the streets rather than a 'career.' Arafa also described how the privately-educated develop a "questioning mentality," or critical thinking. Government education does not get people to "think for themselves," it is based on memorising material for an exam. They also do not provide labour market skills such as presentation, or communication, which require self-confidence. In private schools these are learned through student activities. Another man described how government education "kills ethics," as it is easy to cheat in exams and get away without studying. These impressions are also reproduced in development documents. A UNDP Arab Human Development Report describes government schools as providing programmes "dominated by didactic not interactive instruction with a drive to install

loyalty, obedience, and support for the regime in power, besides being drenched in social inhibitions and religious taboos” (Mehrez, 2008: 101).

In these descriptions of the deficiencies that stem from government education, these privately-educated men are also saying something about themselves. They are marking their distinction as respectable, professional, critical, ethical, and educated. Michelle Lamont (2002) labelled this practice as ‘boundary-work,’ the attempt of one social group to demarcate themselves over others and acquire ‘self-worth.’ It represents the conversion of economic capital into embodied cultural capital that enables distinction within the field of employment, a process made easier by new divisions in education (Bourdieu, 1986). It also reflects what Shamus Khan (2012) recently noted in US private schools, how privilege becomes crystallised into certain individual character traits. In turn, these upper-middle class young men and women are exercising what Bourdieu termed symbolic violence over the publically-educated, positioning them as people who belong in the streets, not professional settings.

In universities too, new lines of distinction have opened up. Again, every parent attended government universities. But when Amr told his parents he wanted to study law at public university, they laughed because “people in this faculty are considered losers as they only achieved 80% on the thanawiyya ‘amma (high-school exam).” Amr went to the AUC instead to study Economics. Of the 13 men and women I interviewed, eight went to private universities – three to the AUC to study Economics, and five to the German University to study computer and electrical engineering. The fees, when they entered in the mid-2000s, ranged from 35,000LE to 70,000LE per year. The AUC is one of the oldest universities in Egypt, established in 1919. But the GUC, opened in 2003, reflects a recent wave of private university openings; in 2015 there were 35. In 2012/13, 22,000 students were enrolled at more than 20 private

universities, out of 2.3 million students (CAPMAS, 2015).³⁹ This decision was again stimulated by many of the discourses described above. In the UNDP report, public universities were also subject to scrutiny. They are reported to “lack adequate financial, human and material resources and provide poor-quality education that is at once mediocre, dogmatic and conservative” (Mehrez, 2008: 95).

However, although suspicion of public universities is embedded in an upper-middle class disposition, and widely shared, the picture remains complicated. When these young men and women were leaving high school, private universities remained limited in number, and extremely expensive. Thus, five attended government universities, yet the faculties entered, pharmacy and engineering, reveal their privilege. There remain some departments in government universities with a good reputation, namely engineering, medicine, pharmacy, political science, as well as certain language departments. Intense competition has developed for these faculties – with near perfect scores on the high-school exam required. Therefore those with good quality schooling hold an advantage.

But, even those who did not get the grades managed to circumvent a bad result by paying money. Three attended faculties in public universities that now charge fees. In the 1990s universities began opening French and British language sections, which teach the same curriculum, but require a previous language education to enter (Amin, 1999). Arafa got 89.7% in the high school exam – which he said was not high. He was rejected from his first choices, so applied to study commerce in a public university. He quickly stressed this was the English section, which had a good reputation; he did not think about going to the Arabic section. To

³⁹ http://arabdevelopmentportal.com/sites/default/files/publication/852.egypt-statistical_yearbook_2015_-_education.pdf

enter, one had to have attended an English school, and pay 5000LE per year. Arafa described the campus as fancy and posh (*rāqy* in Arabic). It was separated from the Arabic section, but men from the Arabic section would come to look at the “non-hijab wearing women,” Arafa said. This was a proper university Arafa stressed, “where they take attendance and you have to do a dissertation, way different to the Arabic section where you don’t have to turn up.”

Arafa, again, alludes to new lines of distinction that have opened up in Egypt’s university system. The Arabic section of the faculty of commerce, along with law and humanities, though once prestigious have now become known as the country’s ‘*kullyāt al sha‘b*’ (faculties of the people). Some of the parents of my upper-middle class interlocutors attended these faculties, obtaining professional jobs afterwards. But now they are widely-known as faculties where people go “just to get a certificate,” and struggle to find jobs afterwards. This situation has resulted from continued expansion in enrolment – in 2000/2001 20% of the college age population (17-22) were enrolled in higher education compared to just 6.9% in 1970 (de-Koning, 2009: 48) – alongside chronic underinvestment. Consequentially, those who cannot get the evermore impossible grades to enter prestigious faculties are bundled into the faculties of the people. The upper-middle classes avoid them through a mixture of cultural capital acquired in school, and added injections of economic capital that enable them to enter private universities, or fee-paying sections of public universities.

These educational trajectories enabled the upper-middle classes, through the institutionalised and embodied cultural capital, and social capital they had gained, to enter what has become high-status employment matching their global dispositions. After the *infitaah*, “Nasser-era celebrations of the professional middle-class, symbolised by the engineer and the doctor, have made way for iconic images of young professionals in the hyper-modern offices of

internationally-orientated companies” (de Koning, 2009: 37). Entrepreneurs have also been a recent addition to this (Schielke, 2012). It is now these workers that are depicted as the ideal representatives of the country’s modern ambitions. Thus, when Amr graduated he no longer looked to the government for employment. He had joined the entrepreneurship society at AUC. This led him into Cairo’s budding entrepreneurship scene. In an event that poignantly illustrates his social capital, upon graduating, Amr was simply told by a friend of a friend, who had established a tech start-up, “you are working with us.” He is now working on his own start-up, a mobile app mapping Cairo’s web of minibuses. Two more interlocutors also began working in entrepreneurship upon graduation, but most obtained jobs in multinational companies, as financial analysts, software engineers, computer programmers, and civil engineers in PwC, Dell, ECS, Nestle, GSK, Euromoney. One person went to take a Master’s in Germany, with two others planning to do the same.⁴⁰

The government is now a place to avoid for the upper-middle classes. First, it is low-paid compared to jobs in the international economy. But more important, the culture (*thakāfa*) does not fit them. Language is an important part of this, as the government overwhelmingly operates in Arabic, whereas many of the upper-middle classes are more comfortable in English. However, reflecting narratives about government education, people also described how, in the government, “nobody does any work,” everything is very slow, robotic, inefficient, and repetitive, and ‘corruption’ is rife. It thus does not fit their critical or ethical subjectivities. Conversely, multinational companies are constantly innovating, fast-paced, require critical thinking, and offer advancement opportunities. Technology is also important here. Technology in Egypt, as around the world, has come to signify modernisation. Amr, for example, is working

⁴⁰ All of the women I interviewed were working, and planned to continue after marriage. This represents a significant shift from the previous generation.

on a technological fix to a transport infrastructure that many in the upper-middle classes, even though they rarely use it, perceive as ‘chaotic.’ The entrepreneurship scene in general, as one employee of a start-up platform told me, favours “innovative, scalable start-ups. Things which are new, adding value to society and things that can be scaled up outside Egypt...a ‘fuwwl’ (fava beans) car is not a start-up, as it is not new.” This distinguishes upper-middle class entrepreneurs from be‘aiyyn (sellers) who work in the street as stallholders, or shop owners.

People working in international companies are also assumed to be different to those working in the government and local private sector, both in regards to the distinctions described above, but also in their culture. Kareem described a difference between “someone who is happy with shisha and local food, and someone who wants to go to France and fine dine.” This reflects what previous scholars have identified, that a certain type of “familiarity and comfortableness with ‘barra,’ an imagined First World abroad” is now an essential marker of upper-middle class belonging (de Koning, 2009: 65). There are many bodily markers of this international orientation: the clothes one wears – for women the type of hijab they wear (if one is worn at all) – the food one eats, the way one speaks Arabic or English, hand gestures one uses, and, indeed, the way in which men introduce themselves to each other.

However, these surface-level markers only serve to represent a deeper character. Arafa described this when we were discussing how he recruits employees in interviews for his company. He had previously described how companies find people through asking employees if they know any friends looking for jobs, and sorting CVs by people who went to private schools or universities, thus uncovering the institutionalised cultural capital, and social capital required to secure entry. But these were done to ensure they interviewed people with the right ‘mentality’:

“I don’t know how to describe it, but you know when you sit with a person and he’s an open-minded person and you talk about different topics and knows about lots of things, and you listen to someone else who doesn’t know anything. It’s not technicalities, not what he studied, just narrow-mindedness. This is a very common interview question; what was the last film you saw, or what’s your favorite band, what music do you listen to, did you travel, things that have nothing to do with your education but make a huge difference, and the problem is it limits certain classes of society, it’s very socially based, it automatically gets some social classes out of the equation, because their interests are different. If you have any client-facing job, you need to impress people, by the way you talk, dress, how witty you are. You don’t have to be smart actually, you have to know how to look smart, talking about foreign politics, about current events.”

Being open-minded, and not judgmental of other ways of living a life, is presented as ethical. This perhaps reflects the boundary work of educated ‘liberals’ in many contexts. According to Arafa, an “open-minded” habitus, or an “international mentality,” is created, not through education, but through one’s family, social circle, and neighbourhood. Crucially, this can only come from historical privilege, not from getting rich quick. If a family becomes rich, and sends their child to a “fancy private school,” but they are uneducated and still live in slums (‘ashwa’yāt) surrounded by sha‘by people, they would not develop this mentality. You have to be ‘ibn al-nass’ (a son of the people). This is originally an Ottoman term describing military officers and notables, but now connotes someone who is well-raised, who has a good background. Sons of the people are, as a result, respectful (muhtaram) and polite (mw‘addab),

but they are also educated, and able to follow international consumption trends – thus it is tied to wealth.

Its opposite is someone who is sha‘by. Sha‘by people are considered to be closed-minded and ignorant with regards to other cultures. Again, this is reproduced by the UNDP report on government education, which states that it produces “thousands who have a fossilised relationship with their own culture, and are suspicious of, if not antagonistic to, other cultures in the world” (2008: 101). Sha‘by people are also vilified as rude, and vulgar (mu‘affin), because they use swear words and speak in a derogatory way about, or harass, women. It is thus highly gendered. It also brings into question one’s religiosity. Sha‘by people are often considered hypocritical by the upper-classes, in that they judge others for their lack of Islamic piety, yet at the same time harass women or smoke hashish.

Arafa stressed that it is easy to see through someone who is faking an upper-middle class mentality, but who is “really ‘sha‘by’ in background.” He said he felt bad for people who take English or computer courses to improve themselves, because “they do not make much difference.” The new lines of distinction expressed by these upper-middle classes were produced out of generations of historical privilege and many years of upbringing in specific social circles. In the next section, I describe how, by contrast to the fortunes of the upper-middle classes, many middle-class Egyptians have experienced increasing difficulty with living a symbolically respectable middle-class life.

Growing up sha‘by

Schielke (2012) explains that the old image of a modernist and committed civil servant has not been abandoned in Egypt. It has rather been complimented by an increased focus on consumption on the back of the socio-economic changes of the late-20th century. A middle-class life requires having “a house or apartment of one’s own, classy interior, marriage to respectable family, command of English, possession of a range of goods, such as a computer, automatic washing machine, or a private car, and a ‘refined’ (rāqy) habitus expressed in one’s styles of dress, socialization, language, and religiosity” (ibid. 34). But for my lower-middle class interlocutors, this has become difficult to maintain. They all grew up in informal areas in Cairo’s suburbs that have rapidly expanded due to continued migration, or in towns and villages beyond. These areas are occupied by a mixture of the lower-middle classes, and ‘al fuqara’ (the poor). Many complained that their neighbourhoods had become overcrowded and dirty over the years. They were now surrounded by sha‘by, uneducated people who worked in informal forms of work, and who hang around on the streets swearing, smoking hashish, and talking about women.⁴¹

They described how their parents also struggled to afford daily expenses as a result of inflation and stagnating wages:

“When my parents first entered work the salary was 12LE, and that was a lot, a sheep was 4LE. By the 1990s the salary was 40LE, a television was 20LE, now it is 2000LE, the fridge was 2500LE in 2005, it is more expensive by a lot now (around 5000LE). Their salary now is 1200LE. If I stay in my salary now (1400LE) it would be nothing, I would not be able to do anything with it.” (Adel)

⁴¹ In terms of neighbourhoods, informal defines areas that are not planned by the government, and which have become heavily populated since the 1960s (Sims, 2010). It is a wider category than “‘ashwa’yāt” (slum), which are occupied by those living in poverty, rather than the lower-middle classes. In terms of work, informal defines people working in the streets, as traders or manual workers, rather than in an office.

Reflecting new consumptive standards of middle class-ness, Adel describes his family's struggle to afford modern household items. He also described how his parents struggle to afford healthcare. This reflects how state services, such as healthcare, education, transport, electricity, and water have deteriorated dramatically. This means that people either have to rely on them, or struggle to pay for low-quality private alternatives.

All of my interlocutors, except Gamal who attended a government-run experimental language school, attended free public schools. Here I wish to outline another example of how the trajectories of these young men were shaped by events outside the boundaries of class. Mahmoud's father entered the military academy faculty of engineering, thereafter travelling to the Gulf for many years, earning a very high salary. However, when Mahmoud was young his parents divorced. His mother – the daughter of a chef in the Japanese embassy – worked in the Ministry of Education. She remarried another man who worked in the Gulf, however Mahmoud was abandoned by both parents. He was passed into the care of his mother's sister, who had remained unmarried and worked in a low-paid government job in Giza (she now earns 1200LE per month). Having begun at a private language school, Mahmoud suddenly switched to a government school because his aunt could not afford it. While Mahmoud remained in government education, he saw half-siblings enjoy a private language education.

Mahmoud was emphatic in his description of the difference between private and public education. In government schools, you learn nothing, most people do not attend lessons, teachers are sometimes violent, and kids fight all the time. As a result of this situation – along with the declining salaries of teachers – a parallel system of private tutoring has developed. Particularly as one reaches the end of high-school, the majority of children pay for private

lessons in preparation for the notorious high-school exam. However, there is huge variation in quality amongst private teachers. Richer parents can pay for less crowded lessons with better teachers. Poor public schooling left these young men having to attend low-quality university faculties, namely the ‘faculties of the people.’ Ibrahim, like many middle-class Egyptian men, wanted to enter the faculty of engineering, but a bad grade in chemistry meant he missed out. Thereafter he could only enter the faculty of commerce at the nearby government university. Ibrahim’s father had offered to pay for the more prestigious English section, but Ibrahim refused because he thought money should not be wasted on an education he did not want. Others had a similar story; they had wanted to enter what they knew to be more prestigious faculties, but because of bad grades, ended up in faculties of commerce, law, and humanities.

When discussing their university experience, these young men relayed stories of lecture halls they could not enter due to overcrowding, having to buy the books written by professors to be able to pass, corruption in grading whereby one might pass even if nothing is written on the exam paper, and fail even if you work hard, and an educational system where memorisation is rewarded and independent thought disabled. There is no way of knowing the validity of these accusations. They were sometimes experienced and sometimes heard from others. But for these young men, they told me how the educational system induces a perception of purposelessness, and thus many stopped going to lectures and working hard to get a good grade. They therefore understood that they had graduated from universities with ‘no qualifications’ or ‘skills’ that were suitable for the labour market. They did not possess the embodied cultural capital to ensure success.

In Egypt, access to good quality, free education which might provide the means for social mobility, has been stripped away. Indeed, to illustrate this, these educational trajectories led to

quite different employment than the upper-middle class. The parents of the lower-middle class had all obtained low-level government jobs. However, government employment is no longer an option for most graduates, as recruitment has been drastically cut. Those entering the public sector upon leaving university declined from 70% to 20% between 1970 and 1996 (Assaad & Kraft, 2014). Many male graduates have instead, according to Bayat (2011), pushed into the informal economy, working as street vendors, sales persons, supermarket box boys, or taxi drivers. In the absence of government employment, and in the context of capital-intensive formal private sector growth, millions have been pushed into informal employment, or extended unemployment – this has been particularly the case for women (Assaad & Kraft, 2014). For my interlocutors, the picture was slightly more mixed than this. Ibrahim’s father tried to secure him a job as an accountant earning a few hundred pounds per month in a factory in 10th of Ramadan, an industrial town close to his village which has provided employment for the region since the 1990s. Others were expected to obtain jobs as family lawyers in their local neighbourhoods, accountants for local companies, or freelance salesmen – earning no more than a few hundred pounds per month. Another form of employment that has become a common pathway for university graduates, particularly in Cairo, is the call centre. This has developed out of a government strategy to provide jobs for university graduates. The information and communication technology industry now employs around 200,000 people.⁴²

Thus, for these lower-middle class men, these are the employment trajectories which have become ‘theirs’ in contemporary Egypt. As a result of socio-economic changes that have taken place over the previous 40 years, this middle-class has been stripped of its ability to acquire a good education. I will show in the final section how the jobs that were supposed to follow did not fit their middle-class dispositions. This is both because these jobs could not provide middle-

⁴² <http://www.egyptindependent.com/call-center-industry-obstacles-and-potential/>

class respectability and comfort, but also because these young men had been exposed to the globalised lives of Egypt's upper-middle classes. This created a rupture within these young middle-class men between their 'objective chances' and 'subjective expectations' (Bourdieu, 2000).

Making a difference to the world

Ibrahim refused the job his father was lining up for him. 10th of Ramadan, he said, is a "qabr l'al sha'b" (tomb for youth). His brother-in-law worked as an accountant in the town, and had become 'depressed' (mukta'ib). His salary of 1500LE meant he struggled to afford family expenses, and therefore remained dependent on parental help. He also faced the constant risk of being fired at any moment, and travelled four hours per day to and from work. His life is "all work and sleep."

Ibrahim therefore looked up to the struggles of those around him. He saw an inability to obtain a respectable, stable job, or afford to look after one's family. Others saw an inability to afford marriage, to buy a house in the context of skyrocketing property prices, to access good education for one's children, or healthcare, and amenities, and to afford basic household appliances. Exposure to this struggle to live up to norms of respectable middle-class masculinity, through their families, friends, and themselves, left them wanting to escape (Ghannam, 2013). They knew that finding good education or healthcare for their children required going private, and finding reliable access to electricity and water meant moving out of their areas. Furthermore, they wanted to afford a car to avoid public transport, and modern appliances in the home. These reflect the shifting markers of a respectable lifestyle in middle-class Egypt, in part as a result of the declining quality of government services.

When I met my interlocutors, many of them had had experience of the labour market, working in call centres, as low-paid accountants, and informal salesmen. At some point they decided these jobs would not provide a basis from which to lead a good life. Mohamed for example, even before graduating from the faculty of commerce, began working as a tyre salesman. He made good money, around 3000LE per month, however decided to look for a formal job in a company because this job would not provide a ‘career.’ Furthermore, the people he worked with smoked cigarettes and hashish. He feared he would do the same. The job would drag him into impious sha‘by culture, and out of a respectable middle-class culture. Those who experienced the call centre also found it to be not respectable. There was the constant threat of being laid off – thus making it impossible to be accepted for marriage – it was not in their fields, the rotating shifts did not allow a social life, and the work itself was chastening, as frustrated customers would abuse you every day.

Thus, the shift in macro-economic circumstances had created for this middle-class group a mismatch between their ‘subjective expectations’ and ‘objective chances.’ The jobs described above, and the lifestyle they enabled, did not fit their middle-class dispositions for comfort, security, or even morality (Jeffrey, 2010). Thus, Mohamed needed a ‘career,’ in his field, or stable job, from which he could marry within his social circle, and he also needed to be surrounded by pious Muslims, not sha‘by people. His job was therefore pushing him beneath the middle-classes. For others, the jobs did not match their educational fields, and did not enable them to look after a family (in terms of marriage, or affording expenses).

This decline in objective chances, an inability to find work that matches their education or provides security and comfort, produced a disjuncture with the dispositions of these young

men. However, I described in the introduction that this phenomenon can also stem from an expansion of ordinary aspirations (Bourdieu, 2000; Bauman, 2011). These young men, as they grew up in lower-middle class areas of Cairo, and in surrounding villages and towns, became exposed to the urban places, commodities, and lifestyles of the upper-middle classes – both in Egypt and abroad – and Cairo’s ‘global city.’

In Zagazig University, Ibrahim hated his accountancy studies. From early on he engaged in various extra-curricular activities, joining Students in Free Enterprise, a global organisation designed to enhance youth entrepreneurship around the world which conducted entrepreneurship courses. Through this, he entered two student start-up competitions at AUC, along with a group of male friends.⁴³ Even though Ibrahim felt different – a group of AUC students had pushed a girl into him and his friends, thereby making fun of his ‘traditional’ views on male/female interaction – Ibrahim described to me the excitement he felt there. He had never seen such advanced knowledge about entrepreneurship and the business world. Reflecting archetypal urban-rural distinctions, he described people in the village as “closed-minded” in comparison. Ibrahim also set up a student initiative called Make Your Goal, which was designed to help students improve their competitiveness in Egypt’s international private sector by teaching CV writing, business structure, interview techniques, and English. The idea came from another international organisation which offered a skills course to secure success in the private sector.

Ibrahim described these activities as “a trip, which through you now about the passion inside and follow” (sic). They helped him “discover himself (yilāqy nafsuḥ).” Ibrahim had decided

⁴³ This reflects the gendered nature of these aspirations. Ghannam (2013) points out that men possess a greater ability to be mobile.

he possessed an “entrepreneurial mind,” which meant he could not work under someone else’s control. He was passionate about the “world of business,” about business administration, HR, marketing, and public relations. Ibrahim had developed a desire to become an entrepreneur, and Steve Jobs – about whom he read extensively online – became his idol. Specifically, he wanted to make a mobile app. Technology, he said, is “very important for progress, twenty years ago we did not have all the stuff there is available now, like smart phones.” Ibrahim wanted to contribute to that progress, to “make a difference to the world, to have [his] message heard in the world and contribute to the development of mankind, not just work to get money, marry and have babies only.” He distinguished this form of entrepreneurship from “be‘aiyyin” (sellers) in his village, who sold mobile accessories. They are not entrepreneurs, because they are not creating anything new. The idea of working as an accountant filled him with dread: you work like a “calculator and a robot,” Ibrahim would say, only gaining money to feed your family. Ibrahim stressed his goals were not about improving his lifestyle: “I am not obsessed to raise my level to get things, like a car, or really nice flat, that stuff is important to get respect from others and be able to do things, but I just want to be comfortable, and not stressed about money. What drives me is to make a difference to the world, Steve Jobs wanted to make a difference to the world.” This in itself though may have been an ethical performance in a context where craving wealth alone is judged.

Despite their very different upbringings, Ibrahim developed aspirations for the same future as Amr. International NGOs staffed by the upper-middle classes, as a result of their outreach efforts, had entered his provincial university and exposed him to the modern, internationalised entrepreneurship scene and private sector. This reflects an active strategy by NGOs and the government to create the means for this aspirational shift. They are part of efforts to tackle the problem of educated unemployment amongst public university graduates, which are discussed

in detail in Chapter 4. Through these activities Ibrahim came into contact with the country's most exclusive private university, and read about successful entrepreneurs on the internet. Thus, the connection between desirable middle-class living and the modern, internationalised economy filtered down Egypt's social structure. As a result he came to think of 'informal employment' as useless and lacking respectability, and a job in the local private sector as robotic and limiting.

Ibrahim was not alone in developing such aspirations. One day we were looking at responses to a question a friend had posted on Facebook asking people for their 'dream jobs.' As we scrolled through them, we saw 'CEO, banker, HR representative, trainer, finance manager, entrepreneur.' My interlocutors had aspirations to work in law, commerce, HR, public relations, and banking in multinational or large Egyptian companies, or to travel abroad. These lower-middle class Egyptian men, despite what is still repeated in development writing (Brookings, 2016), no longer look to the state for employment. For example, Mostafa's parents expected him to get a low-level government job in Mahalla as they had. But he refused. He told me that government work was low-paid and boring: "you just work from 9am to 2pm and go home." Mostafa, like Ibrahim, wished to make a difference to the world.

Both Ibrahim and Mostafa had defied their parents. This was common among many of my interlocutors, which I described in the previous chapter might be specifically gendered. Their parents were considered to be 'boxed in,' unexposed to other possibilities. These young men were being exposed to a wider world. For Ibrahim, this came in university. For others, it came as they travelled around the city seeing billboards advertising gated community living, as they spent time on Facebook reading about successful global entrepreneurs, and as they heard success stories of friends or relatives who, for example, had migrated to the Gulf. One young

man described how he had realised he wanted more from his life when he was working in a restaurant in the upmarket neighbourhood of Zamalek. Two Egyptian customers began speaking English, he thought, so that he could not understand what they were saying. This made him feel that he had to learn English to get a better job for himself.

For Gamal, this exposure came through a family connection. Upon graduating from the faculty of law, he described how he was “just looking for money.” He was ready to become a family lawyer in his neighborhood, like others he knew. However, the sudden social mobility of his cousin stimulated higher ambitions. Shady was five years older than Gamal. His father was an army officer, the husband of Gamal’s aunt. They lived in the upmarket neighborhood of Heliopolis, with Shady working as an IT technician. Through his work Shady met a British woman living in the same area, and they later married. According to Gamal, Shady’s wife helped get him a job in an international refugee organization – and two years afterwards they moved to London.

Shady’s encounter, and sudden mobility, stemmed in part from his upbringing in an upmarket neighbourhood inhabited by Europeans, and his field of work in IT, which brought him into contact with upmarket employment places. Shady’s sudden mobility stimulated ambition in Gamal. Gamal started studying international law on the internet. He had been told by Shady that if he became fluent in English he could help him get a job at the UN, so Gamal set about doing that. This period provided the stimulus for Gamal’s continuing aspiration: “before I educated myself I could have lived there (in his lower-middle class area), but if I had to now I would be very sad.” Gamal not only wanted a prestigious job, but the lifestyle that came with it. Ultimately, he wanted the international mobility Shady enjoyed – his ultimate dream was to also live in London.

Gamal described how he now looks at people in his area and feels different. They lived limited lives, not caring about events beyond the neighbourhood's boundaries:

“most of these people just think of tomorrow only, they don't think of a long-term plan. They only plan for the next day, their dreams become very limited, they become stuck to the area, maybe they want to open up a shop. They just care for money and marriage; they do simple jobs for 2000LE and don't aim for more. People accept work which is not in their fields; they give up and don't use their degree. I don't want to live life planning for the next day only.”

Gamal felt different. He felt *rāqy*, as opposed to “*sha'by*.” Reflecting the discourses I introduced above, he described people in his area as rude, ignorant, violent, trivial, and judgmental. They spend their time playing PlayStation or sitting in the *ahwa* (café). They talk about trivial topics, such as who is best on the PlayStation, about football more generally, gossip about people in the area, how best you can prepare for a fight and what weapons to bring, about girls in a derogatory way, and about drugs. Gamal perceives he is judged for wanting to study rather than spend time on the PlayStation or in the *ahwa*. He prefers to “talk about more serious topics...about work, about the news, or politics.” All this other stuff is “bullshit.” Thus, even though Gamal could earn good money in the area, he cared about the “environment (*be'a*)” now.

Gamal, like all of my interlocutors who grew up in the lower-middle class, had developed a modern, globalised disposition to work in Cairo's internationalized economy and travel abroad. They aspired after the lives of the upper-middle classes in Egypt. This situation has developed

partly out of the socio-economic decline experienced in this section of Egypt's middle-classes, which has increased their precarity (Standing, 2011), and brought them closer to the sha'by lower-classes. But these young men also craved participation in a global circulation of knowledge, people, and capital (Ferguson, 2006). They are being exposed to this circulation within their universities, as they move around the city, in their workplaces, on the internet, and through their families.

Conclusions

This chapter has made clear that realizing their global dreams will be extremely difficult for these young men. Jobs in Cairo's international economy are secured through generations of privilege, which have enabled people like Amr to develop exclusive forms of cultural capital (private education, English, and a 'rāqy' mentality) and social capital (friends who worked in the international economy). The chapter showed how the chasm opened up over the last 70 years between those who live this life, and those who want it. Nasser's dramatic socialist reforms had led to the convergence of these two groups. One was lifted up, culturally, by access to public education and employment, and another was restricted in their accumulation of wealth and symbolic capital. Even though divisions remained, they converged around a more coherent modernist, nationalist middle-class identity. However, the Egyptian infitaah, or economic opening, suddenly opened up new avenues for economic accumulation in the private sector, property market, and the Gulf from the 1970s onwards. Those in the upper-echelons of the Nasserist middle-class were able to take advantage due to their pre-existing economic, cultural, and social capitals. In working through this history, I contributed to existing literature on the global middle-classes, by uncovering the importance of inherited wealth (in the form of land), the legal and political remnants of state-socialism, and international migration in their rise. This

economic accumulation, alongside their historical privilege and changes in labour and education markets, enabled this group to acquire new forms of symbolic capital, including an ‘open-minded’ mentality, which defined membership in the modern, global upper-middle class. Again, this shifted debate away from consumptive distinction, towards educational and ‘personality’ distinction among the new middle-classes.

Yet, I also highlighted the emergence of an alternative middle-class in contemporary Egypt, one that experienced increased hardship. This was in many ways a direct consequence of the speculative accumulation of the upper-middle classes. Those growing up in this ‘lower-middle class’ are now struggling to hang on to the cultural markers of respectable middle-class living. They find it difficult to locate a stable white-collar job, a good education, and a comfortable financial, and even moral, life. This reflects the status of middle-class populations around the world (Hochschild, 2016; Hage, 2003), but it is not being recognized enough in the Global South.

The chapter finally showed how this is creating a rupture within the lives of lower-middle class young men between their aspirations and social trajectories, in Bourdieu’s terms between their subjective expectations and objective chances. Importantly, this has also emerged out of exposure to ‘other possible lives’ (Appadurai, 1996), to the globalized lifestyles enjoyed by Egypt’s upper-middle classes. Egypt’s socio-economic landscape is producing a destabilization of ordinary aspirations. This simultaneous expansion of aspiration, even as the opportunities to realise them diminish, is perhaps becoming a defining condition of the 21st century in different contexts (Heiman, 2015). It represents a breaking down of the forward-looking class project, where people desire more than what they are ‘fated to be’ (Jackson, 2011). The remainder of this thesis is concerned with the consequences of this breakdown. As I described in the

introduction, I turn to affect and emotion, to examine how a vital sense of hope is kept alive in the present among young immobile lower-middle class men. Moving beyond a focus on resistance, and everyday hope-making, I demonstrated in the following chapter how a material and discursive terrain of meritocracy, as it is extended within the ‘global city’ of Cairo, is productive of an affective atmosphere of hope for the realisation of dreams, whatever they are. In turn, the historical privilege, and supposed ‘luck’ described in this chapter, that enabled upper-middle class distinction, is re-narrated into ‘hard work.’

Chapter 4 Hopeful city

Eslam, now 24, travelled to Egypt's enormous capital in September 2014 in search of a better life. He came from Sohag, a city of 200,000 people in Upper Egypt some 500km south of Cairo. Having graduated from the Faculty of English Literature in 2012, Eslam spent two years trying to fulfil a dream to become a professional footballer. However, he finally decided he would not be able to support a family if he continued playing for the city's team. After searching for alternative employment, he found only outdoor sales positions available. This was a job many of his friends were doing, but unhappily. They continually struggled to afford everyday expenses and save for marriage due to low wages and job insecurity, and did not see any possibility of progression. Eslam decided he wanted more for his life, he wanted a career. After coming across an NGO training course located in Cairo offering to teach young people the professional skills they needed to succeed in the private sector, he decided to come and try it out, initially relying on parental funds and the spare bed of his cousin, who was studying in Cairo, to survive. After the course, Eslam took a job in an Arabic language call centre and began renting a cheap apartment in a lower/middle-class area of Giza with colleagues.

Eslam found Cairo life difficult. His job was tiring and frustrating, it was hard to save money from his 1400LE (US\$175) per month salary, and he missed his family – according to him the reason why most people decide to stay in Sohag. Relocating was therefore a difficult decision. It is uncommon for Egyptian men across all classes – and even more so for women – to leave home before marriage. Moving meant being far from familial support, being unable to take an active role in family life, and living in tough conditions. Furthermore, Cairo itself is an intensely stressful, alienating place for people attuned to a slower, more convivial rhythm of life in the provinces. However, despite the difficulties, Eslam did not regret his decision to

come. He was in Cairo “because of the future, not because of the present, today it is hard, but tomorrow an opportunity could come. In Sohag the opportunities are set, you know that your level will not change, but in Cairo opportunities could open up tomorrow.” In difficult moments Eslam focused his mind on the better future to come rather than the frustrating present. This relied on an image of Cairo as unpredictable, a place where immanent transformation could occur. The city holds within it prestigious educational opportunities, employment, and lifestyles that Eslam hoped to one day obtain. His move, though difficult and involving sacrifice, was inducing a resolute sense of social mobility, a sense of hope for a good future.

This chapter examines how the city of Cairo came to *affect* in a group of young lower-middle class Egyptian men a feeling of hope that their ambitious dreams could one day be realised. It builds on recent work exploring how cities are in many ways built, governed, and lived through particular affects and emotions (Gandy, 2002; Thrift, 2004; Davidson et al. 2005; Zeiderman, 2016). It turns attention to how the city, as a set of objects, places, and discourses (Novaro, 2009; Wachsmuth, 2014), generates an affective ‘atmosphere’ that is generative of feelings of hope for inhabitants (Anderson, 2009). The chapter therefore uses affect theory, which draw attention to the capacities of the “materialities of space-time” (Anderson, 2006: 736), in other words certain objects, discourses, and places, to develop and hold within them particular transpersonal affective intensities. These affective intensities, as they move through bodies during encounters between people and objects, discourses, and places, are productive of personal feelings and emotions.

Cities have long stimulated inward migration through the promise of employment and lifestyles not available in rural areas. Within Egypt, its vast capital is the predominant destination for internal movers (Zohry, 2002). Greater Cairo now contains over 20 million inhabitants, one

quarter of the nation's population. It is constantly juxtaposed to other cities. They are places in which the future is predictably difficult, some even describe them as places 'without a future.' Mostafa, for example, came to Cairo in 2013 from Mahalla, an industrial city in the Nile delta with 500,000 inhabitants, after graduating with a Business Administration degree. Mahalla, for him, had no future:

“Mahalla used to be full of clothing factories, clothing of every kind, but it was ruined after the infitaah (economic opening), the economy is now very weak, everything is made abroad. I could have found work there, but the jobs are very basic. I could have worked in a government job, but I don't want to work 9am to 2pm and go home, I want more from my career. I came to Cairo because it is the capital, I am trying to develop myself here, to find courses, and then a good job.”

Mostafa alludes to the changing political economies of Egyptian cities since the mid-20th century. Mahalla used to be an important hub of the global textile industry, but following liberalisation policies of the 1970s many of the factories closed down and moved abroad in search of lower costs. Places like Mahalla and Sohag were therefore perceived to have entered states of decay. If they had once been thriving, they had long since become places of stagnation and disconnection from the global economy. The available employment – low-level government jobs, but more commonly low-paid, low-skilled, small-scale private sector work – did not fulfil the dreams of these young men, as Mostafa once described, to “influence the world” (see Chapter 3).

Cairo on the other hand is a place of possibility. 'Everything is in Cairo' was the ubiquitous response from those who were puzzled to be asked why they had moved. Samuli Schielke

(2015: 10) describes Cairo, for inhabitants of the provinces, as “a place to make money, to make a career, to make things happen – it is a centre of wealth, power, culture, and glamour. Cairo is the place to be, so to speak, in Egypt.” It is often even referred to as ‘Masr’ (Egypt) by those outside the capital, signifying its unrivalled dominance in terms of jobs, services, and administration. It houses the largest national and multinational companies, as well as the best educational opportunities. The city as a whole, therefore, produced an affect, or affectual plane (Seigworth, 2000), that was distinct from the provinces. This affect was experienced as a feeling of hope as these young men came towards it, imagining the prospect of taking courses, and working in those companies. The presence of those jobs and courses makes Cairo a place of indeterminacy, within which new opportunities can arise at any moment (Simone, 2004; di Nunzio, 2014; Zeiderman et al. 2015).

The decision to migrate is often stimulated by peers. Adel, a colleague of Eslam, had come from Zagazig, a city in the east delta, because two friends had relocated and secured good jobs, one as an accountant in a Saudi company, and another in a bank. Adel now hoped to do the same. When the stories of their mobility were told, it was understood to stem from their decisions to move, rather than their privileged forms of social, cultural, or economic capital – one friend took expensive accountancy and English courses, and another entered a bank, notorious for the prevalent use of *wasta* (nepotism) in recruitment. This narration of Cairo as a place which facilitates social mobility affected these men with hope for the future. Their imagined ability to take advantage of the unique companies and courses it contained facilitated a sense that moving spatially also meant moving temporally towards a good life (Hage, 2003). The frustrated sense of immobility that had engulfed them in their hometowns disappeared, alongside an understanding of their structurally marginal position when they arrived in the capital.

Schielke (2015) notes that, despite want, many people are put off or prevented from coming to Cairo by the cost of living or their lack of connections. Though these young men did not possess useful work connections, they could sometimes rely on limited, temporary financial support from parents, and a place to live with relatives. Yet most relied on their meagre salaries and cheap, overcrowded apartments to survive. They also enjoyed the gendered privilege of movement. As Ghannam (2013) states, the early twenties is a life-stage for men in which a certain level of roaming is allowed and even expected. Although women also migrated, it was rarer, and they would often be constrained by the necessity of having to know family with whom to stay. Men, on the other hand, could live with colleagues or friends.

But moving alone was not enough for these men. What will become clear in the following chapters is the undulating, ephemeral nature of feelings of hope in their lives. The city, as much as it produces an affective atmosphere of hope, also affects in these young men feelings of frustration over time, as they are rejected from jobs, or spend a prolonged period in difficult conditions. However, in this chapter I focus on how the city affected a powerful feeling of hope for these men at this stage of their employment transition. Both those who migrated, and those who grew up in Cairo were constantly on the move in order to take advantage of the opportunities the city promised. They were attempting to educate themselves, find a desirable job, and establish their dream start-up. This took them into contact with various places: training centres offering to teach the skills to ensure success in Egypt's internationalised private sector, employment and scholarship fairs presenting private sector jobs and elite education, and entrepreneurship lectures and events providing inspiration for budding entrepreneurs. These places, which span public, private, and developmental spheres, form part of an institutional and industrial infrastructure designed to close the gap between Cairo's private, formal, globalised

employment, and its university graduates. They also form part of Cairo's 'global city,' advertising its jobs and wealth opportunities, and offering the skills required to obtain them.

The chapter works through the encounters between these young men and these places, demonstrating how each generated an affective 'atmosphere' that induced, and sometimes sold, intense feelings of hope that global dreams were reachable. The objects within these places – upper-middle class trainers or entrepreneurs, business cards, or suits – aesthetically symbolised Cairo's 'global city,' thus offering up a sense of inclusion. Furthermore, these objects generated and extended meritocratic discourses that project Egypt's labour market as open, a field in which success is dependent upon 'salūq al-shakhs' (a person's attitude), rather than the exclusionary forms of social, cultural, and economic capital described in the previous chapter. These discourses fill people with the hope that inclusion will come for real.

By intricately demonstrating how this affective process unfolds, the chapter departs from previous literature on hope-making. The hope of these young men is not a 'radical' hope. It is also not a hope that stems from individual resilience. It is a hope that places faith in, and emerges from, the dominant economic system. In Cairo, a focus on places of revolutionary hope has dominated literature in recent years. I render visible an alternative, more mundane cartography of hope in the city, that stems from a rather different 'revolution' which has been taking place in recent years among development workers, entrepreneurs, and government officials who claim to be trying to establish a transparent, fair, and modern labour market. Through doing this, they are able to operationalise a form of compliance that works through affect, through making people who are denied access to a dignified life hope for a better future (Bourdieu, 2000; Auyero, 2012), rather than through making people content with what they already have. In making this claim, the chapter also departs from the literature on global or

world-class cities that analyses them as sites of exclusion and mounting inequalities (Davis, 2006; Sassen, 2014; Schindler, 2014). Instead, I argue that they offer up a semblance of inclusion to those beyond their gates and walls (de Boeck, 2011; Ghertner, 2015), as certain industries and institutions continue to churn out, and profit from, a meritocratic promise that the good life comes through hard work.

Graduate Training Organisation

Ibrahim also looked to Cairo in his quest for a fulfilling job. As outlined in the previous chapter, he defied his father's expectation that he take an accountancy job in 10th of Ramadan in order to pursue his entrepreneurial dream. He graduated from the Faculty of Commerce (Arabic section) in 2012, and spent one year in the army before returning home to his village. He worked briefly in a call centre, but quickly began to hate it. After a year-long struggle to locate a more fulfilling job, like Eslam, he decided to apply for what was labelled a 'scholarship' offered by an NGO in Cairo, about which he had heard from friends who had previously attended. This course offered to provide the skills he was lacking to 'succeed' in Egypt's private sector. Ibrahim hoped it might help him to reach an HR job and also to achieve his longer-term goal of opening a start-up.

This course was one of many undertaken by these young men in the quest to make up for a poor public education. Its decline in quality has opened the space for a thriving private training economy, within which there is much money to be made. Cairo offers a vast array of training options, unrivalled in other parts of Egypt, in the form of universities, local and international NGOs, foreign cultural centres, and private entities ranging from large international

corporations to self-employed ‘career coaches’ and teachers.⁴⁴ Each promises to be the gateway to success. Educational opportunities are highly stratified. The most prestigious courses – for example English courses at the British Council or American University, or the Certified Management Accountant (CMA) certificate – can cost thousands of Egyptian pounds, and thus lay out of reach for most. This leaves people, including my lower-middle class interlocutors, investing in low-cost options, which often means lower-quality and larger crowds. During my fieldwork period, they would take courses in English, accountancy, HR, banking, business administration, and architectural engineering.

The NGO scholarship offered to Ibrahim forms part of a recent effort by the government and development industry to tackle the entrenched problem of unemployment amongst Egypt’s educated youth.⁴⁵ It is provided by multiple local and global non-profit organisations that obtain funding from development donors and the private sector, and also by international training companies who run Corporate Social Responsibility programmes with government funding.⁴⁶ The scholarship offers – for a small ‘commitment fee’ of 150/200 Egyptian pounds (US\$18.75/25) – to provide unemployed university graduates the professional ‘soft skills’ they are apparently lacking to succeed in the labour market: business English, ‘essential labour market skills’ like interview techniques, CV writing, and career planning, and work values/character development such as self-presentation, communication, teamwork, commitment, problem solving, and time management. It also aims to help graduates find ‘decent work,’ an aim on which success is measured and funding rests. This sometimes

⁴⁴ Young et al. (2016) reveal how a similar private training economy has developed in India.

⁴⁵ Youth unemployment has long been a priority for developmental and state intervention (Urdal, 2006; Kelly, 2006), particularly in the Arab World in the aftermath of Uprisings seen to be instigated by large populations of frustrated youth. In Egypt, 34% of its 2.3 million university graduates are unemployed, compared to just 2.4% of those without education (Brookings, 2016). It is a particular problem among women.

⁴⁶ A 2015 International Labour Organisation survey found at least 30 out of 230 youth unemployment initiatives offering soft skills training to educated youth, which translates into 160,000 graduates. But this training extends much deeper, through self-employed “career coaches.” and online material. It is also on the rise, with one organisation introducing their programme into all public universities.

prefaces the establishment of partnerships with companies who offer to employ participants, and which requires the teaching of specific skills attached to those jobs.

The course attended by Ibrahim was provided by an organisation I shall call Graduate Training Organisation (GTO), a US-based non-profit founded in 2006 with the mission to create ‘economic opportunity’ by ‘providing world-class professional and technical training that leads directly to career-building jobs’ for youth in the MENA region. It operates as a series of locally-run franchises across seven countries. By 2013, 25,000 youth had been trained by its programmes in the region. Between August and October 2014, I attended three courses. I also conducted interviews with staff members of four other organisations offering the same course. The scholarship is advertised through employment fairs, within universities, and online through organisation websites, YouTube, and Facebook. As Ibrahim demonstrated, organisations also rely on recommendations from former participants. Each course contains 30-40 young men and women, who had graduated between one to four years earlier and had struggled to locate desirable employment. This course, they hoped, would change that.

The soft-skills focus of these courses has international origins. GTO’s course stems from the International Youth Foundation’s (IYF) global soft skills training initiative, and it uses American textbooks. The IYF considers these “non-technical, professional” abilities to include “communication, interpersonal and customer service skills, as well as personal traits such as integrity and responsibility” (2013: 1). Vocational employment training has historically been associated with preparing people for technical and manual labour, yet there has been a recent rise in attention to ‘non-technical’ skills (Schulz, 2008; Hurrell et al. 2013).⁴⁷ This rise is in

⁴⁷ Much employment-related development assistance is focused on demand-side factors, but attention also goes towards enhancing the skills of populations (Wallace, 1990; Walker et al. 2008). The origins of this focus lie in Becker’s (1975) concept of human capital, but it has intensified with increased emphasis on more vocational forms of education (Watson, 1994; Ansell, 2015).

part associated with global shifts towards immaterial and affective labour, and is derived from surveys conducted with private-sector organisations.

In Egypt, in the case of university students there has been a growth in the view that ‘soft life skills’ rather than technical skills are holding them back: their “personal responsibility, adherence to common work ethic, leadership, and ability to manage conflict and criticism” in addition to “basic IT and English language skills” (IYF, 2013: 1; Osman, 2011). This comes from a view that, first, public education does not provide the English, presentation, or problem-solving skills required by an international service economy. However, this focus also stems from the jobs deemed accessible to, and suitable for, university graduates. GTO attempts to form partnerships with, or otherwise suggest entry-level service or sales work in call centres, hotels, or malls. These are growing fields in Cairo, on the lookout for graduates with basic computer and English skills, as well as people who can deal ‘politely’ with upscale customers. Cairo’s call centre industry remains small but is growing fast, going from just 600 jobs to 50,000 between 2000 and 2010. It receives substantial government support in the form of subsidies and employee training because it is seen as a graduate unemployment fix.⁴⁸

For these jobs, as Mona, a manager of another organisation told me, no specific skills are required:

“You will be surprised but all they need is good communication skills, negotiation, they can present themselves, have confidence, be respectable. In Cairo they need basic computer skills and English, and that’s it they don’t need any other

⁴⁸ <http://egyptoutsourcing.blogspot.com/>

specific skill. Employers tell you bluntly, bring him to me and I'll teach him everything, but at least they can be teachable, that's all I need."

Despite not requiring any skills, these jobs are considered suitable for university graduates. Those targeted mostly come from the *kullyāt al sha‘b* described in the previous chapter. These graduates also self-select, as they are the most prone to unemployment. They were considered to be 'without skills' by programme organisers, disadvantaged youth to be helped. As a result these jobs are considered suitable for them. When pressed, staff would tell me they had to "respond to the market," that "these are the available jobs at the moment." Yet they were also presented as 'good jobs' – for these unskilled graduates anyway. 'Good' was defined by ILO standards of 'decent work' – they have a contract, social insurance, they are white-collar, and have a minimum salary of 1000LE (US\$125) per month.

However, they are not considered 'good' by the graduates themselves (see Chapter 3). After spending four years in university education, they expect more. Call centre work is infamous amongst Egyptian youth, a sign that one is not able to get a job in one's field. There are no opportunities for advancement, it is insecure with rolling one-year contracts, and the work is highly stressful. It does not provide the basis for a respectable middle-class life. Like Ibrahim, most participants had actually worked in call centres before enrolling on the course and left in search of something better. One participant told me on the course's first day he would "rather die than go back."

Amongst staff and within Egypt's development apparatus more broadly, awareness of this misalignment is ubiquitous. Salma Wahba, youth and adolescent development officer for UNICEF Egypt, made this clear in a 2014 interview with the Guardian:⁴⁹

“In Egypt, youth still prefer to work for the government, rather than the private sector, perceiving it to be a secure job. Many people are waiting for the job that best fits their qualifications rather than actively seeking employment and accepting jobs that they think are below their level. This is a major cultural barrier among youth in Egypt.”

Egypt's educated youth are understood to be in 'luxury unemployment' (Brookings, 2016), where they 'choose' to wait for suitable jobs while being supported by parents.⁵⁰ This middle-class waithood is presented as illegitimate, a product of a classist society.⁵¹ GTO staff considered youth too 'image-conscious' and 'closed-minded.' Their aspirations are also seen to be illegitimate, based on what they thought was 'prestigious' rather than on real knowledge. This echoes Arafa's comment in the previous chapter, that it is easy to tell when people are 'faking' and upper-middle class mentality.

Graduates are also described as lazy, and lacking knowledge of how labour markets work:

⁴⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2014/aug/20/youth-unemployment-interactive-salma-wahba>

⁵⁰ This claim is proved by figures such as “30% of unemployed youth refused a job because they felt it “did not match their level of qualification”” (Brookings, 2016).

⁵¹ This is perceived to be a “problem” among young people in many contexts (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/columnists/aldasair-palmer/8276212/Youth-unemployment-cant-work-or-wont-work.html>).

“Youth need to be realistic. The mind-set of graduates now is to finish and get the certificate, and with that it is assumed you get a job, they don’t have guidance to know it doesn’t work like that. I try to think where this taking culture comes from, the lazy culture of expecting things to be done for you. Maybe it was from Nasser and the big government giving jobs, but I wasn’t given anything” (Wafaa, GTO Programme Manager).

Refusal of work becomes another personal deficiency to be solved. Egyptian graduates are projected as ‘lazy,’ lacking understanding of how contemporary labour markets work. One starts low, builds a career slowly, and switches frequently, rather than being given a ‘job for life’ straight away. According to the IYF, many Egyptian workers are ‘short-sighted,’ only considering “short-term financial gains” rather than “longer-term benefits” such as “career development, pensions, and insurance” (2013: 8). Breaking down this ‘mind-set’ emerges as a key and even progressive endeavour. Staff expressed great confidence about their abilities to do this, although they said men are more difficult to convince than women, because they possess more ‘stubborn’ aspirations. It is achieved through teaching participants work commitment, and the western concept of ‘career planning’ (Darmon & Perez, 2011). People are supposed to view themselves as a bundle of skills, to match those skills to the market, and continually engage in self-learning to ‘climb the ladder’ in an open labour market that recruits based on acquirable skills (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2012). Finally, staff expressed how Egyptian graduates do not know they are unskilled. They have to work hard to gain more skills, both those required in modern jobs, and those required to apply for jobs in a modern, meritocratic labour market (CV writing, interview techniques, and presentation skills).

The course thus represents an extension of western, neoliberal labour market logics to an Egyptian context, thus reflecting the shift towards individual autonomy noted by Talal Asad (2015). These logics are applied by international development and training organisations, and the government as a fix to a local problem of educated unemployment. These logics have been much critiqued, as a ‘technique of power’ for the ‘making-up’ of the ideal worker-citizen required by contemporary capitalism (Dardot & Laval, 2014). First, it valorises work as a means for self-realisation and moral value (Korteweg, 2003). Second, enhancing so called ‘skills’ such as communication and time management is a veil for producing the disciplined worker required by employers, particularly in low-skilled jobs (Lafer, 2004). Finally, career planning encourages workers to see themselves as an autonomous ‘bundle of skills,’ to assess their ‘competence’ and ‘adapt’ to the market. Risks and rewards become the responsibility of the individual rather than society (Lemke, 2001; Kohl-Arenas, 2015). However, although these analyses expose important discursive aspects of training, its actual effects upon recipients are too often assumed. Recipients are given no room to interpret, take on, or reject the messages being given to them (Willis, 1981).⁵²

I will argue in the next section that these Egyptian soft-skills programmes do produce important effects, as they attempt to cultivate the disciplined workers required by a growing low-skilled service economy. This disciplining was stubbornly resisted by participants, yet, in the context of misalignment between the participants’ employment aspirations, and the jobs suggested by the organisation, the most powerful ‘affect’ becomes the extension of meritocracy. This place produced an affective atmosphere that ignited a feeling of hope amongst participants, that

⁵² Laurence Ralph (2015) demonstrates how “career days” are met with the “scornful disdain” of poor black youth in Chicago (79), as they penetrate the fantastical notion that they might one day follow in the footsteps of the black lawyer, academic, or President who are pinned up as role models.

through hard work, positivity, and taking employment, future mobility towards their global fantasies was possible.

Learning to hope

Ibrahim travelled two hours every day from his village to central Cairo where the training centre was located. Other participants made similar journeys, either from Cairo's informal neighbourhoods, or from towns in the delta. These journeys represented a traversal of social worlds. These lower-middle class youth would ordinarily be denied access to places in this part of Cairo, through high prices or the presence of doormen. GTO itself signifies Cairo's upscale globalised economy. Signs are written in English and staff members include a mixture of foreigners and upper-middle class Egyptians – ensuring English is a dominant means of communication. The act of coming to the centre every day and into contact with this space, and these people, was extremely exciting for people like Ibrahim.

When Ibrahim first arrived, his English was tested and he was interviewed. During these interviews, Salma, the Programme Coordinator, asked applicants if they were “ready to work in any job.” If they replied no, or not in a call centre, a negotiation ensued. Salma wanted youth who were ready to work, not youth who wanted to “endlessly take training.” If she figured they would not work, they would be rejected. During negotiations, she would say GTO considers the call centre a good job. She also argued that they provide useful skills, saying to one aspiring lawyer “all lawyers need to be good sales people!” in order to convince him of the utility of sales work.

Ibrahim proudly told me he had lied about being ready to work in customer services, because he knew it would secure access to the course. He made it to ‘Orientation Day.’ When he arrived he was told to sit and wait in a room with other participants. They were asked to introduce themselves in English by outlining their dreams, identifying a role model, and describing where they see themselves in five years – Ibrahim’s dream was to be an entrepreneur, others wanted to travel abroad, or work in a multinational company. Thereafter they were shown an introductory video of GTO, which according to the American CEO on screen, “helps youth get that first job, and gives them an economic advantage, a path to social mobility, and an opportunity of choice.” Former ‘alumni’ are also shown on screen, working in jobs such as a ‘content associate’ or ‘accountant.’ The present job is subsequently crossed out and replaced with ‘future commerce expert?’, ‘future CEO?’ Participants were asked what they understood from the video. One woman responded anxiously that “GTO helps people who have no hope.” Ibrahim followed: “it does not just focus on customer services.” The organiser agreed, but also said: “we think it is important to get that first job.” Thus, from the moment Ibrahim stepped into GTO, he was exposed to narratives that offered up a positive vision of the future. He was encouraged to dream and follow his passion rather than letting it go, yet importantly, this would be achieved through taking employment in a lesser role.

In the first session, Ibrahim was introduced to Wafaa, who in 2014 was a teacher. She also asked participants to outline their dreams, before relaying her story of career advancement in flawless English. Wafaa had wanted to go to AUC upon leaving her private school. She dreamt of becoming an economist or entrepreneur, but had to give up those dreams and attend public university as her father could not afford AUC (which is beyond the reach of most upper-middle class Egyptians). She hated the system of public education and quickly decided to leave. Her father instead paid for her to study English for two years at the British Council – a seven week

course (one of four per level) costs 2000LE (US\$250), more than the monthly salary of all my interlocutors. Over time Wafaa developed fluency in English. The reason for that fluency was her “hard work”: “I would go to the library to read books, and even listen to songs on public transport.” Wafaa described how English gave her “freedom,” as it had been a “hot commodity” at the time. It was vital for her ability to obtain a job as a receptionist in a multinational company, which gave her a salary five times that of an engineer. Once a receptionist, Wafaa kept working to improve herself, teaching herself Excel and even learning German on the job. This “attitude” secured her eventual progression to project management in Vodafone. After she began training new staff in Vodafone, she became interested in the training field. This took her to GTO. Wafaa stressed the key reason for her advancement was that she was: “always working on [her] development.” She then told the students directly: “you have to be passionate and believe. I have seen so many young people who are not sure what they have to gain, or not sure how to develop themselves, the ones who want to achieve will, the only one who stops you is yourself.”

Wafaa’s personal story, and her narration of it, is integral to understanding how GTO became affective. The transnational content of the course becomes intertwined with this development practitioner’s understanding of her own story of social mobility. This upper-middle class woman believed it was her “attitude, dedication, and need to learn” that secured her progression, rather than inherited privilege (Khan, 2012). She also showed it is possible to switch jobs frequently. Her narrative, and therefore her body, come to enact affective intensities that can be productive of hope for young aspirational men and women who encounter them. Wafaa acquired this language through exposure to soft skills discourses, but also through working in international companies that operate ‘meritocratic’ recruitment practices. Like all

GTO staff, she yearned to ‘give back,’ to help youth like Ibrahim do the same. When I suggested that GTO gives youth a sense of hope, she disagreed:

“It doesn’t just give hope, it gives ideas, we are saying you have capabilities, you have to look for your talents and discover them, it is *conviction*. Hope is a weak word, it sounds laid back, like youth just sit at home and hope. We are talking about courage and conviction that something will come, even if the picture is mixed, that conviction that you will work on excel, English, instead of sitting on Facebook like they all do, not learning...in your brain you are capable of looking to a great future, or to be like the guys in the coffee shop.”

Hope, according to Wafaa, is not confident of success. It is also passive, a sign of laziness. GTO was providing “hope with conviction”, a form of hope which requires action. The GTO course is designed to affect in its participants that sense, that through working hard to develop oneself, remaining positive, and taking a job, dreams are realisable.

Ibrahim, like all participants, admired Wafaa. She embodied and spoke their hope, proving that hard work can lead to a successful career in Cairo’s global economy. Ibrahim also loved the classes. Over the following weeks students would excitedly watch videos of Australian executives introducing themselves over work drinks, listen to Steve Jobs’ lecturing advice, practice how to speak English in a ‘non-Egyptianised’ accent with a teacher who had studied in England, learn how to put together professional attire (even which kind of perfume to use), and learn how sales, customer services, and marketing form different aspects of business. It was easy to observe the pleasure induced through these activities, it was written on their excitable faces, demonstrated as they put their hands up before the teacher had even finished

answering her question, and conveyed aurally as they asked for breaks to be delayed so they could carry on learning. Thus, certain objects – the videos, the international marketing textbook, the professional clothing, the privileged teacher – and the discourses they extended, produced affects that were productive of hope for the future.

Sessions were highly interactive. Participants would be asked to perform role plays, or draw out what they were learning (see Figure 4.1). On every occasion there would be a rush of volunteers who wished to take the pen or perform the ‘interviewee’ in order to show off their knowledge of English, marketing, or formal business settings. Ibrahim on many occasions talked to me about how exciting the material was. He was excited about learning the skills he needed for business, and how to behave in business settings, particularly in English. During these conversations, I felt that my positive reactions were important in the maintenance of an atmosphere of hope. Frequent struggles to speak English would serve to highlight the gulf between the teachers and students. I often noticed the disappointment and embarrassment that followed struggles to formulate a sentence, however, teachers would always make sure to extend praise, thus (re)securing the affective atmosphere of hope. This reflected the broader banishment of negativity within the classroom. Participants were told to be encouraging to others, and to “walk into class with a smile” whatever happens outside. According to Wafaa, negativity had led to career stagnation for many of her colleagues, whereas her positive outlook had secured mobility. These young graduates needed to do the same. One teacher showed the way by posting inspirational quotes to Facebook every day: “Smile for life, believe in your dream, believe you can and you will.” This is a practice Ibrahim would quickly pick up and mimic on his own Facebook page.



Figure 4.1 - An object of hope: drawing of 'professional introductions' by GTO participants (Source: author)

Hurrell et al. (2012) argues that 'soft skills' represent the dominant cultural capital held by the 'middle-classes' in a society. In Egypt these 'skills' are intensely classed. Speaking English in a 'non-Egyptianised' accent, presenting oneself in a formal way, and knowledge of formal business structures are recognisable markers of Cairo's global economy and its privately-educated upper-middle classes. They are juxtaposed with the 'humorous' Egyptianised accents, 'impolite' manners, and 'informal' ways of doing business of sha'by culture. These markers are therefore exclusive to a small percentage of the population; they were not on display in Ibrahim's village. In the classroom, these markers of distinction are presented as acquirable 'soft skills' by members of the upper-middle class. Not only exposure, but vitally the sense of acquiring them filled Ibrahim with excitement and self-confidence. He felt socially mobile. As Gamal, who was also a student at GTO, once put it: "I am rāqy in character now, just sha'by in background."

Students were supposed to continue self-development beyond GTO. For this, they would need to manage their time effectively. Time management, the teacher said, is “vital to achieving your professional goals.” It includes stopping activities that are “wasting your life” – such as chatting on Facebook, sleeping long hours, or socialising, and using your time effectively on productive activities such as studying. One should always be active, even during the hours spent on public transport. Ibrahim immediately recognised “time-wasting” as a problem amongst Egyptian youth. Many in his village would just sit in cafés, watching football and smoking rather than working on themselves. Ibrahim on the other hand was here, travelling two hours every day to Cairo to develop himself.⁵³

In one class, participants would conduct a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis, which Wafaa explained would be useful for career changes. It enables you to assess your weaknesses and work on them to create opportunities within your desired field. The opportunities and threats, Wafaa said, “mostly follow from your strengths and weaknesses, but also sometimes from outside, for example if the economy is in bad shape, which it is at the moment, you need to have a plan B in case you cannot access your desired field.” This is one of a few instances where teachers stressed a factor beyond individual control, but the predominant narrative remained an optimistic focus on the self. In the event of failure, youth should not quit, they should learn from *their* mistakes and keep going.

After he had listened intently to Wafaa, taking notes as she spoke, Ibrahim was instructed to conduct a SWOT analysis for himself on a piece of paper. He did one for the HR field. His

⁵³ This provides an interesting juxtaposition to literature on ‘waiting’ (Jeffrey, 2010; Ralph, 2008), showing how it can be an active endeavour.

strengths were his ‘communication skills,’ his ‘passion,’ and ability to match people with suitable jobs. His weaknesses were his lack of connections in HR, and English. Upon completion, Wafaa asked for feedback. One student excitedly said: “it gives a snapshot on me, an organised way of thinking about myself, which can help me to start to plan,” another welcomed learning “how not to get angry with my weaknesses, but to focus on dealing with them.” Ibrahim told me later how the exercise helped him to visualise what he needed to do to reach his dream. The mind-set instilled by this exercise was therefore empowering. Seemingly impenetrable barriers which might produce anger were converted into surmountable weaknesses. This includes what remains a preeminent way through which jobs are obtained in Egypt, even in the globalised economy: “wasta” – the act of getting a job through relatives or friends. In GTO it is refashioned as a legitimate, acquirable resource. When one young man jokingly mentioned it during an exercise discussing tactics for job searches, the teacher was quick to interject, insisting that “nobody pays money, or is just placed in jobs anymore.” Instead recruitment processes are projected as open, and dependent on one’s skills. Ibrahim fully agreed with this. He insisted that private companies do not condone wasta like the government: “they want profit so they want the best people. They will only employ someone if they are skilled and efficient, rather than if they know someone. So if someone knows what he wants and takes the relevant qualifications he can reach it.”

Making use of one’s connections is presented as a job strategy, which could be used to secure an interview in which one shows they ‘deserve’ the job. Wafaa, hinting at her social capital, emphasised that she used her network of friends to find out about the training field. Afterwards, one participant asked how she might combat a bad network. Wafaa asked others to respond. They suggested finding friends, attending conferences, taking courses, and using sites such as LinkedIn, all suggestions with which Wafaa approved. This reformulation converts a widely

acknowledged, exclusionary, class-dependent mechanism, and a source of much anger, into a legitimate and obtainable commodity, a source of hope. Ibrahim could now envisage how he might make inroads into the field of HR. He once described this as the “modern” way of getting a job: building connections, acquiring information and skills, and “marketing yourself” instead of being “placed” into a government job. It is also intensely hopeful.

The course therefore constantly extended discourses that described how Cairo’s labour market is open and meritocratic. This is a narrative of inclusion rather than exclusion in this ‘global city.’ These young men were not being left behind (Hage, 2003), they were actively being subjected by a transnational rule of experts – made up of the state, international donor sector, and the upper-middle classes – that was attempting to establish the notion of a progressive, meritocratic labour market, and create the hardworking, hopeful labourers who comply with its rules and accept its inequalities. My daily presence in this place enabled me to observe how the course operated affectively. ‘Objects’ such as an upper-middle class trainer, a video of Steve Jobs, an international textbook, a piece of paper outlining SWOT analysis, a poster illustrating professional introductions, and the meritocratic discourses they extended – such as time-management, SWOT, the link between hard work and success – all generated an atmosphere of intense positivity, which rendered the future a euphoric realm. This atmosphere, and specifically the encounter between participants and objects and discourses within it, induced bodily reactions that were felt as feelings of hope. Enacting hope (with conviction) was indeed described as the course’s explicit aim. It was especially the exercises that required the active bodily participation of participants that induced what Kathleen Stewart (2007) labels ‘a surge of vitality’ through them. As they pretended to introduce themselves to company managers, carry out a successful interview, or reply to a question in good English, one could

observe, and hear, the excitement rush across their faces. Any surfacing of sadness or cynicism was immediately shutdown by trainers.

However, one aspect of the course produced a quite different affective reaction: the focus on customer service work. Participants would become frustrated, and noticeably disinterested as they were taught customer service skills, and had to tailor their CVs to customer service jobs in CV-writing exercises. Ibrahim said to me one afternoon after the course that skilled graduates like him do not belong in call centres. He thought GTO should expand its focus to other sectors, and even criticised them for just wanting to secure labour for corporate sponsors. A few participants told me they would ‘take what they want’ from GTO and not accept the call centre.

This was a refusal to accept the employment match GTO had made with these university graduates. This refusal though was openly allowed and negotiated by staff.⁵⁴ Near the end of the course, Ibrahim had a conversation with two teachers about his desire to follow his passion for HR and entrepreneurship. Both advised him to follow his passion, rather than give it up. But, following the approved narrative, they said he should take temporary work now in order to save money for his project, and use it as a base from which to apply for HR work. Holding a job, they claimed, would look good to future employers. This was one of many similar conversations teachers would have with anxious, confused students. They would emphasise, using personal stories of people they knew, how taking a job in customer services could provide a stepping stone on to their dreams: it would teach valuable skills and ‘experience’ (khibra) for the career they were passionate about, one could secure promotion to other departments once

⁵⁴ Paul Willis (1981) notes how compliance is sometimes achieved through active resistance. This allowance of agency makes it all the more powerful.

inside through building connections and ‘showing yourself really well,’ or save money to take further courses in one’s chosen field. Hearing such advice – or discourses – from successful people secured a feeling of hope for the future.

Ibrahim’s GTO graduation was therefore a euphoric experience. This was sealed by the final assignment. Participants were instructed to come up with an imaginary business start-up and present it, in English, at a ceremony, which would be held in an events hall in Cairo’s most exclusive neighbourhood, Zamalek. They were told to invite family and friends, and to “imagine this to be the real thing, that you are pitching to potential investors.” They had to come up with a vision, organisational structure, target market, and projected costs and revenue. Wafaa said the project’s idea was to introduce participants to company logistics. When I mentioned during an interview in 2016 the juxtaposition between the project and the low-level employment that comes after, she said: “it is about planting a seed, so if you know you are in a call centre for two years, but you are also working on a project, I’m sure someone can find financing these days.”

Ibrahim was especially enthusiastic about the project, and quickly became his group’s CEO. They spent days planning and researching in order to present a start-up of hydro-powered cars. Wafaa told the group she would definitely buy it if it were real. On graduation day only two participants brought family. However, the atmosphere was one of huge excitement, and nervousness. Students sat together on the right, teachers on the left. This, I thought, was a symbol of the social gulf that existed between them. The General Manager said congratulations, then reminded participants that their employment rate is the most important thing. Next, each group went, one after the other, presenting their GPS watch, sand-manufactured micro-chip, and mobile app that helps navigate government bureaucracy. These items represented

imaginative objects that reflected their hope. Some forgot their lines or messed up their grammar. This represented a brief rupture of the euphoria as their faces became red with embarrassment, but each time it surfaced, it was quickly dispelled by shouts of encouragement or applause. They had done it, they had overcome their fears and proved they could partake in the globalised economy. Each person received hugs from smiling teachers, who told them how proud they should be.

After the presentations, Ibrahim wished to thank GTO. He said on stage: “GTO is not a training centre; it’s a trip in which you can find your passion.” Ibrahim left feeling more emboldened than ever about his trajectory. He made a plan to take a ‘temporary’ customer service job in Cairo, and use it as a base from which to save money, expand his connections in business and HR by applying for jobs and attending events, and also to learn about how companies are run from the inside. This, he said, would help him “develop himself” (yitawwar nafsuh) and gain experience that would lead him towards his dream. Others made similar plans to use customer service work as a springboard to their dreams. Many expressed the self-confidence they now felt about themselves, and the belief they had in the future.

GTO could therefore claim success. These young men and women were obtaining jobs, but in the hope they would lead to something else.⁵⁵ Ibrahim had also brought a friend, Hassan, to the graduation ceremony. Hassan’s voice was hoarse and quiet, his face drained of energy. He had graduated from GTO two years ago, and joined a call centre as a precursor to obtaining his dream job in a bank. Two years later though he had not moved. He described how tiring the job was; he had to speak for 3 hours at a time non-stop, and both his voice and hearing were

⁵⁵ GTO would phone participants three months after the course to find out if they were still in employment. This was used to measure success.

suffering. He had also forgotten his English, lacking the time, money, or energy to maintain it. He would tell me later he had become depressed. One of the teachers came over to say hello, enthusiastically asking “how are you?!” He replied, in Arabic, “good, but the job is hard, there are no opportunities for promotion.” After a brief pause, the teacher replied: “ok well keep trying and working, something will come.” Hassan nodded and smiled, and the teacher moved on.

Hassan represented a lurking presence of the potential future to come for these youth. But, for now, he remained an unacknowledged presence amongst an atmosphere of euphoric hope. Ibrahim felt sorry for Hassan, but he also blamed him for “letting depression overcome him.” He had “surrendered” (istaslim), and stopped working to improve his skills. He had not “managed his time properly.” The discourses Ibrahim had received in GTO, that hard work would succeed, and the feeling of hope they had affected in him, led him to criticise the depression he saw in Hassan. The graduation ceremony secured the affective atmosphere of hope, inducing the feeling that these young men and women had succeeded, that they were now part of the ‘global city.’ They would reach their dreams if they continued working hard and retaining positivity. This training centre had therefore secured their compliance in the labour market through an optimistic incitement of individual autonomy (Asad, 2015). In the following section, I show how a similar process occurred in the places connected to Cairo’s upscale entrepreneurship scene.

Planning in Hope

In October 2014, two months after the GTO course, I attended a UN Day Fair with Ibrahim and two other former students, Mahmoud and Mostafa. They had come across the Fair on

Facebook. It was located in the Fish Garden in Zamalek, an exclusive upper-class neighbourhood in the centre of Cairo that these young men seldom frequented. The park ordinarily required a 15LE (US\$1.90) entry fee, and would be visited by upper-middle/upper-class Cairenes and tourists, but today it was free and open to all. The Fair was designed to commemorate the stories and successes of beneficiaries of the UN in Egypt. It formed a small part of Cairo's entrepreneurship scene that has sprung up in the aftermath of President Obama's 2009 Middle East entrepreneurship initiative. Entrepreneurship is presented as a powerful tool for enhancing inclusive economic growth and decreasing unemployment, particularly for Egypt's 'tech-savvy,' 'bulging' youth population, in a context where the government and private sector are failing to generate jobs.⁵⁶ It incorporates different kinds of donors/investors, incubators and platforms designed to provide supportive 'ecosystems,' educational facilities teaching entrepreneurship skills, and start-ups themselves. There are various links between the training economy and this scene. Centres like GTO often conduct entrepreneurship training, and one 'social entrepreneurship project' also conducts soft-skills training.

⁵⁶ The use of entrepreneurship as a development strategy has been much critiqued (Elyachar, 2005; Dolan & Rajak, 2016).



Figure 4.2 – UN Day Fair (Source: author)

I arrived shortly after the 2pm opening, entering after having my bag checked by security. From 11.30am to 1pm there had been a closed event that government ministers had attended, the only remnants being a marquee filled with empty cocktail tables and a podium. The Fair had an extremely upscale feel, owing to its location and appearance (see Figure 4.2). Ibrahim himself commented on its “professional look.” There were though visible separations. The people running the event and the UN stalls – outside some of the UN-supported microenterprises – were all either from Cairo’s upper-middle/upper-classes or foreigners. One stall attendant was a German flatmate of mine doing a UN internship. These people, and their friends, would move freely both in front of, and behind, the stalls enjoying convivial conversations together. Another group, of which Ibrahim, Mahmoud, and Mostafa were part, was more restricted in movement and exchange. They moved between stalls picking up leaflets and sometimes talking with stall attendants, usually in Arabic after initial attempts in English. These lower-middle class youth had come – as GTO had taught them – to seek employment opportunities, build connections,

and learn useful information. Their communication with the upper-middle classes was always mediated by a desk, and restricted to questions about opportunities of working or project information, and robotic responses in return. Stalls included successful start-ups, it was claimed, who had benefited from UN funding – ranging from date farmers in Upper Egypt to mobile app developers in Cairo – information stands on UN projects, NGOs offering services such as ‘educational networking,’ and UN initiatives seeking volunteers. Many crowded around the UN Volunteering Scheme desk seeking to apply both for jobs and the Scheme itself, only to be disappointed by the response that it was not possible at the fair.

Mostafa excitedly collected any leaflet he could as we walked around. He said he would benefit from reading the information they contained. By the end he had collected too many to carry, and so put a couple down, only to pick them back up after deciding he could not let them go. I offered to put some in my bag, and wondered what would become of these materials. I was reminded of Wafaa’s accusation that youth do not know what they want. Amongst the leaflets was a monthly schedule of the Information Resource Center (IRC) at the US Embassy, on which Mahmoud had marked events he would like to attend: Business Planning for Entrepreneurs, English Conversation Club, and Introduction to Project Management (see Figure 4.3).

Information Resource Center, U.S. Embassy Cairo – October 2014 – Civil Society

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
			1 English Conversation Club "Volunteerism" (IRC members, registration req.) Time: 3:00 – 4:00 PM	2 eLibraryUSA Introduction and Orientation (Open to public) Time: 11:30 – 1:00 PM
3 Eid El Adha IRC is closed	6 Egyptian Armed Forces Day IRC is closed	7 Scrabble Club (Open to public) Time: 1:00 – 3:00 PM	8 English Conversation Club "NGOs" (IRC members, registration req.) Time: 3:00 – 4:00 PM	9 Volunteerism & Community (Participants only) Time: 11:00 – 1:00 PM
12 Columbus Day IRC is closed	13 Business Planning for Entrepreneurs (Registration by GDI required; www.facebook.com/GDITeam) Time: 10:00 – 2:00 PM	14 Business Planning for Entrepreneurs (Registration by GDI required; www.facebook.com/GDITeam) Time: 10:00 – 2:00 PM	15 Business Planning for Entrepreneurs (Registration by GDI required; www.facebook.com/GDITeam) Time: 10:00 – 2:00 PM English Conversation Club "Role of Libraries" (IRC members, registration req.) Time: 3:00 – 4:00 PM	16 Coffee with a Diplomat "Managing an Embassy" (IRC members; Registration required) Time: 11:00 – 12:00 PM
19 Librarian Discussion Group (Invite only) Time: 10:00 – 12:00 PM IRC Technology Club (IRC members; participants only) Time: 11:00 AM – 3:00 PM	20 "Fundraising" 57357 Stories & Experience (Open to public) Time: 1:00-3:00 pm	21 Film Showing & Discussion: "Save your Life: Forks over Knives" (Open to public) Time: 1:00 – 3:30 PM	22 English Conversation Club "Role of Youth" (IRC members, registration req.) Time: 3:00 – 4:00 PM	23 eLibraryUSA Introduction and Orientation (Open to public) Time: 12:00 – 1:30 PM
26 IRC Technology Club (IRC members; participants only) Time: 11:00 AM – 3:00 PM	27 Introduction to Project Management (IRC members; registration req.) Time: 11:00 – 2:00 PM	28 Study in USA: General Info Session (Open to public) Time: 1:00 – 3:30 PM	29 English Conversation Club "Democratic Values" (IRC members; registration req.) Time: 3:00 – 4:00 PM	30 1001 inventions: A National Geographic Publication (Open to public) Time: 1:00 – 3:00 PM

Due to U.S. Embassy security regulations, you cannot enter the Embassy with any electronic items. Please leave all your electronic items (computers, iPads, iPads, chargers, flash drives, etc.) at home. Lighters, sharp objects and large bags are also prohibited. You can only store your mobile phone at the security gate. Please bring a valid government-issued ID. For complete regulations please see: http://photos.state.gov/libraries/egypt/210334/PDFs_001/PROHIBITED_ITEMS.pdf

Figure 4.3 – Timetable for US Embassy (Source: author)

I left the young men briefly so that I could to speak with my flatmate. She told me she had had a conversation with her manager about how many attendees do not know how to have a memorable conversation, or which questions to ask. They just come and listen to the information, ask if there are opportunities, and if so how to apply. They do not show ‘genuine’ interest. I thought about Mostafa during this conversation. He did not show the necessary conduct to stand out or display a deep interest; performed qualities that are considered important. I then reminded myself however, that even with the ‘correct behaviour,’ there were many other barriers preventing him from standing out against the upper-middle class UN employees.

Our conversation was interrupted by Ibrahim, who excitedly called me over to listen to an “amazing story.” A young man from one of Cairo’s ‘ashwa’yāt was selling ice cream. He was prompted by an organiser to tell his story, and began, shyly, to say how he had been in prison

for fighting with someone who had a relative in the police. Since leaving he had established an ice-cream business with UN funding. After expressing our congratulations and buying an ice-cream, we left. Ibrahim immediately said: “isn’t that amazing, he has not done anything bad since and turned his life around...he shows if you do the right thing you can overcome anything.” This story vindicated Ibrahim’s belief in individual power. It embodied hope for his own journey.

We continued on so Ibrahim could exercise his plan. He was here to build connections and find funding for his start-up idea, currently a mobile app to help deaf people communicate. Ibrahim had learned he needed to do these things in lectures by well-known entrepreneurs, entrepreneurship coaching sessions, competitions, and through online reading. He would always excitedly tell me about these events. After one lecture on how to initiate a start-up by an entrepreneur in Ibrahim’s university, he said over Facebook: “it made me so happy (my emphasis), it was so helpful and motivating, I learned how to follow and develop the passion inside me; that makes me feel like I am flying, it was even on TV, it was so cool!” Ibrahim had been told to utilise and expand his network, as well as search hard for the plentiful funding opportunities on offer. He also learned that entrepreneurs need to have passion (shaghaf), to be risk-takers, hard workers (mugtahidiyyn), and to have unwavering belief.

At the fair, Ibrahim found it difficult to bring up his project directly, so the majority of his effort went towards obtaining business cards of stall attendants. By the end he managed to get two – which he was happy with. Following this, we joined the huge crowds at the stage to listen to the free evening concert, which would be performed by Wust al-balad, a post-revolution band popular amongst youth. As we listened to the music, thoughts of entrepreneurial dreams lingered on.

Later, I spoke to Ibrahim, Mostafa, and Mahmoud about the day. When I asked Mostafa why youth went, he responded:

“Most are looking for a chance or to see how they can improve themselves, how it can help them. They have a talent and dream. Today I told myself I can do everything I want to. Others go there for the free concert, you can see that, but there are others who have a goal and a dream. They take inspiration for their own projects.”

In contrast to Mostafa’s optimism, Mahmoud was more sceptical of the Fair. Throughout the day he had been noticeably disinterested, not approaching any stalls. He also said to me that most people come because “they are searching for hope, motivation, and maybe new ideas,” but he had not felt motivated: “I am fed up with speaking with people, I need actions, I am not pessimistic but I am realistic.” For Mahmoud, this particular place had not induced feelings of hope. But for Ibrahim, like Mostafa, this event was extremely exciting. Hearing stories of entrepreneurial transformation, and obtaining business cards ensured the fair enacted a sense that his own dreams were realisable too.

How can the inhabitation of this quintessential place of Cairo’s ‘global city’ by these lower-middle class men be understood? I would argue that it cannot be interpreted using existing analytical framings in urban geography. Ibrahim is not simply exercising class belonging in this global urban place as a member of the upper-middle class. The difference between him and the UN employees was starkly represented in the ways in which they used the space. It could therefore be interpreted as an act of transgression, a lower-middle class man from the provinces traversing spatialized class boundaries. Schindler (2007) has argued that poor

people's inhabitation of shopping malls in India represents a subversive, mimetic act. But, this is an interpretation that privileges a desire to seek out resistance. Yet, it is also insufficient, reflecting the ethnographic studies of hope described in Chapter 1, to see it as a subjective form of hope-making by these marginal people. This neglects the spatial terrain through which hope is affected in the body (Navaro, 2009).

For two of these young men, the spatial terrain of Cairo's global city incited a feeling of hope. This is because the fair, and the objects and discourses within it, enacted an affective atmosphere of hope. Its location, aesthetics, and its upper-middle class inhabitants all signified the global city. But this securitised space opened itself up to others, in this case to lower-middle class men. Objects such as a UN leaflet, a US Embassy timetable, a business card, and an ice-cream seller symbolised successful entrepreneurship, and a global economy of knowledge (Ferguson, 2006). They generated an atmosphere of positivity. For Ibrahim and Mostafa, encountering these objects, and this atmosphere, induced feelings of hope. The act of coming to this place provided a sense of inclusion, of participation in the life of the global city. But it was the active practices of viewing or hearing about inspirational projects, picking up leaflets (and being unable to let them go) and marking future events, and collecting business cards that enacted a sense of 'prospective momentum' towards a desirable future (Miyazaki, 2004).

This enabled these men to distinguish themselves as people focused on the future, as opposed to those who were going nowhere, even those who had come for entertainment. Thus, hope rested on discourses which offered up the 'global city' as reachable for all, by extending a meritocratic fantasy. The discursive reproduction of this fantasy was shown to me as I interviewed employees of the entrepreneurship scene. In September 2016, I met Noura, an employee of a famous platform. She was a graduate of AUC, more fluent in English than

Arabic. Her father owned multiple companies. After discussing Cairo's entrepreneurship scene for an hour, I admitted my scepticism that young men like Ibrahim would open a start-up. She immediately rebuked me, saying: "no, there is hope, you need to be more positive Harry! They are just doing things in the wrong order. You know they need a career coach. They need a plan, a career plan and they will do it, everyone can do it if they do the right things, they are just doing the wrong things." Incidentally, I had not told her what Ibrahim was doing. Noura then told me about Malcolm Gladwell, an author who had proven scientifically that hard work and taking the right actions can secure success.⁵⁷ His writing had inspired her when she was a student. Noura then described how working at the platform had made her more positive: "I was told by my dad I would take over the company only, but here I saw more ambition, and it made me ambitious too. I saw perseverance and ambition here that made me believe anything is possible." She then repeated that I was too negative, and she wanted to make me more positive. She would send me a positive thought to me every day via Facebook; today's was "to be grateful."

Looking around, it was easy to see why Noura was so positive. In the Greek Campus, formerly part of the AUC but now an entrepreneurial 'hub' in Downtown Cairo – which required a membership card for entry – she was surrounded by Egypt's most successful start-ups. The employees of these start-ups had certainly worked hard to succeed, to obtain funding, to build networks, and know-how. However, even through brief conversations with people working in the field – all graduates of international private universities – there were hints of the class position required: outside the fact "nine out of ten start-ups fail," according to Noura. Most start-ups rely on family funding in the pre-prototype phase, Noura told me, as investors do not invest in "just an idea." Furthermore, both she and others emphasised the importance of 'social

⁵⁷ Noura was referencing the book *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2009).

capital,' knowing investors for example. Salma, a researcher in AUC's Centre for Entrepreneurship said: "social capital is important in the early stages, it is facilitated through connections, of clients, the promotion of family and friends, and their resources. If you know investors it is easier too." Salma quickly qualified her statement by saying: "alone it is possible but more difficult." Ghada, Salma's boss then interjected: "you can't generalise though, if it is a good idea people are going to reach out."

These conversations reveal the existence and reproduction of meritocratic discourses within Cairo's global city that posit success as dependent upon the autonomous individual, upon 'attitude' rather than inherited privilege. Whenever a potential barrier arose during conversations – which threatened to penetrate the meritocratic myth – a solution was quickly offered and positivity restored. Funding can be found because "there are so many options!" and networks can be built. The entrepreneurship 'ecosystem' is designed to combat such barriers. Success becomes about personal characteristics: perseverance, passion, risk-taking, and hard work. It is difficult to plot the origins of this terrain. Noura's perspective was shaped by North American self-help, and entrepreneurship discourses are products of transnational ideologies. But, as other scholars have showed, there are many specifically Egyptian ideologies and discourses through which individual autonomy is generated (Mahmood, 2004; Asad, 2015; Schielke, 2015). These ideologies are thus reproduced everyday within global places themselves, in particular locally inflected ways, by the people performing, and seeing, hard work that leads to success.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/02/11/opinion/society/the-precarity-of-youth-entrepreneurship-is-not-the-solution/>

This legitimises the class position of inhabitants of Cairo's global city, by placing emphasis on attitudes and behaviour (Khan, 2012). It also holds power because it is presented as liberal, and progressive, challenging the exclusionary 'family business model' dominating Egypt's private sector (Elyachar, 2005). But, I have shown in the account above how it also has an important 'affect' on those in pursuit of class privilege, because of its hopeful quality. Within the place of the UN Fair, and within entrepreneurship lectures, Ibrahim was told repeatedly, by members of the upper-middle classes, if he worked hard, took risks, remained passionate, and acquired connections he would reach his entrepreneurial dream. In turn, the class hierarchies governing these places were concealed. Hearing these meritocratic discourses, seeing 'proof' of their success in certain 'successful' bodies, and more importantly acting them out produced an intense feeling of hope, making it seem like what Ibrahim desired was within reach.⁵⁹

However, Mahmoud's response to the UN Fair demonstrates that this affective process is far from automatic. As Ben Anderson (2006: 736) states, the shape of the feelings and emotions induced by encounters between objects and bodies is dependent upon the "affected body's existing condition to be affected." Mahmoud was slightly older than Ibrahim. He had had two more years of struggle to locate a stable, fulfilling job. This struggle had brought forth many rounds of frustration, as a result of a closing of the future. At this stage he needed something more tangible: as he said, he needed actions, not words. The UN Fair as a place thus produced a different affective reaction in Mahmoud, one of cynicism.⁶⁰ However, there were other places that could still induce hope for him, like the employment fair, to which I now turn.

⁵⁹ When I asked Ghada and Salma at AUC's Centre for Entrepreneurship if they measure the success rate of Egyptian start-ups, they said no. Rather, they focus on the barriers they face, such as risk-averse investors, or a lack of "social capital."

⁶⁰ Mahmoud's friends often complained that he was a negative person in general. One possible explanation for this, that is difficult to pin down empirically, is his difficult upbringing – which I outlined in Chapter 3. Mahmoud was abandoned by both parents, and passed into the care of his aunt. He said to me on multiple occasions how this made it difficult for him to trust people, and contributed to his general cynicism of the world.

Applying in hope

In November 2015 I attended two employment fairs with Mahmoud. These represented two contrasting types of fair. On each occasion we woke up at 6am to travel by microbus two hours across the city from his home in a lower/lower-middle class informal area in Giza to the glamorous InterContinental, one of the city's newly-built upmarket hotels in an upper-middle class neighbourhood in east Cairo. Mahmoud had come across the fairs during his daily search for new job opportunities on the internet. They had flashed across his Facebook newsfeed. The search for jobs took these young men to various places of the global city: job fairs held in international hotels, private universities, and shopping malls, as well as company offices and upscale business parks. Fairs have been part of Egypt's recruitment circuit since the 1990s, and are enjoying a boom. They are organised by government agencies, private universities, and recruitment firms in conjunction with sponsorship from government ministries, foreign embassies, and private sector stakeholders, and represent an effort to enhance 'communication' between graduates and the labour market, providing a transparent, meritocratic place for companies to locate talent, and for graduates to encounter employers.

By November 2015, a year after the GTO course, and five years after graduating, Mahmoud remained desperate for a fulfilling job. He had just been fired from a data entry job after three months without explanation, having been repeatedly praised for the quality of his work. This had induced intense feelings of frustration and depression. Whenever this story was relayed to others they would rail against this "balad bint al-wisskhr" (daughter of a whore country), where people want you to be a "donkey and just do your job." This event proved the injustice built into Egypt's labour market that prevented them from achieving respectable employment. Thus,

Mahmoud by this stage did not feel hopeful about the future. This section therefore demonstrates how the hopeful city can still affect a feeling of hope, despite a lack of complete investment in its narratives of success.

A call centre fair

In the microbus on November 7th Mahmoud was telling me about his past employment; an accountancy office delivery boy, fanning kebabs in a street restaurant, selling a fake “sexual drug” over the phone, and a teller in a bank. He described how a guy he had outperformed in the bank interviews entered the prestigious customer service department because he was rich. Mahmoud had left after realising he would be counting money as a teller all his life. This was a decision he now regretted, realising it to be a good job in Egypt’s current climate. Mahmoud also talked about a trainer in another soft-skills scholarship he had done before GTO, who had been an inspiration, getting him to feel confident speaking in public. He compared him to Dale Carnegie, an American self-help guru who teaches you how to be “creative, effective, and positive,” and that nothing is impossible. Mahmoud was shocked when I told him that I had not heard of Carnegie, because these skills were so important.

Our conversation was cut short by our impending arrival. Mahmoud was sceptical about this fair. He had seen online it would predominantly advertise call centre jobs, but he thought there might be other opportunities: the advertisement said banking would be represented, or at least English language call centres. This fair was organised by the Information Technology Industry Development Agency (ITIDA), designed to develop Egypt’s technology industry, in conjunction with the Ministry of Communication. It was the 7th annual fair. Upon arrival we were shown through the hotel’s side entrance away from the guests, along with hundreds of

others. Our bags and bodies were scanned and thereafter we entered a shiny, bustling function room where we were to register. In this Fair it was possible just to show up.

Before we began approaching stalls we came across an organiser conducting an interview with state television channel *NileTV*. We listened in as he explained the fair's aims, in Arabic but with use of English words which suggested his membership of the upper-middle class:

“The aim of the fair is to present a variety of companies for young people and to improve the communication between companies and job seekers...It is not just a case of youth coming here and choosing a random job, it is about tailoring yourself to the labour market, and picking the career that best suits you.”

The organiser evokes a language of consumption to describe the fair. Like commodities in a mall, companies are ‘presented’ for youth, who can ‘pick’ their chosen career depending on what best suits them. He thus extends a discourse of hope. Intrinsicly, employment fairs are a material representation of an open labour market. One can apply to desirable employers, in the expectation they will judge you on the ‘skills’ presented on your CV, and how you come across in person. Fairs incubate the perception that recruitment is based on meritocratic principles, that those most qualified succeed. This image is particularly important in Egypt, in the context of the practice of recruiting through *wasta*. But Reem, an employee of a recruitment company that organises fairs, was adamant that *wasta* is not a big problem in the private sector. Companies now recruit “the best candidates.”

The organiser's speech, and the space of the fair, thus creates an air of expectation. However, Mahmoud and I laughed about the supposed choice as we looked around at what were mostly

call centre companies. We also noticed various companies offering ‘soft-skills’ training. I asked a representative of one about their course. After introducing myself, he enthusiastically informed me he had studied at the University of Essex. He went on to tell us that the company offered a scholarship, funded by the Ministry of Communications, to help youth get jobs. The soft-skills focus was because they are needed in a call centre industry that does not require “specific skills.” I asked how they handle graduates who do not want this work. He said this is one of their biggest problems: “we tell them there are opportunities to be promoted, I started in the call centre and I am in HR now.” It is common for upper-middle class Egyptians to take English-language call centre jobs in university holidays. But this represents a very different venture into the field than the lower-middle classes, who could not access foreign language accounts due to their Egyptianized accents.⁶¹

We left the stall. Mahmoud expressed his disappointment at the admission that soft skills were targeted for call centres. He also questioned the hopeful message of transfer to HR: “there are rotation shifts and it is hard to do courses outside, it’s so hard to afford HR diplomas.” His experience within a call centre enabled him to critique this particular mythical discourse. Mahmoud went back to ask how he travelled to England, “was it a scholarship?” The man immediately replied that he paid for it, followed by an awkward laugh. What might have been received by some as a hopeful message was therefore punctured by Mahmoud’s scepticism, which had developed out of a prolonged period of stagnation. It led him to investigate the hopeful claims of this upper-middle class man.

⁶¹ The upper-middle classes are taking this work for extra income, or work experience during holidays. They are therefore taking jobs, temporarily, which others need.

Mahmoud then turned his attention to applying for jobs. We went to different outsourcing companies looking for opportunities and asking questions. He was looking for English accounts, but mentioned every time he applied he had been told his accent was not good enough. I felt obliged to tell him he is good enough, to reintroduce hope. One woman stressed that they have “special training” for language, so you do not need fluency. If Mahmoud did not make it he could go into an Egyptian account. She outlined the ‘steps’ programme in the company, which helps employees “build their dreams”: “people think the call centre is just a temp job, not a career, they don’t know you can rise up.” One slogan reflecting this hope was found at another stall: ‘our today’s beginners are tomorrow’s leaders.’

I described above how the origins of these meritocratic discourses lie in the educational experiences of the upper-middle classes, and the narration of success they have seen and lived through those lenses. Yet, there is also a financial incentive to reproduce them. At another company, young HR reps described how they had a recruitment target which affects their bonuses. They said to me that they therefore “try to convince people to take jobs,” by telling them they can apply for other positions within one or two years, or that it is only a temporary job. They had also worked as agents during university, but studied management systems in private colleges. An expensive private education, very different to Mahmoud’s, became a consistent theme among the representatives behind the stalls. It suggested people like Mahmoud do not make it into the HR department.

These discourses of hope, which were attempting to create an atmosphere of hope, though *affective* to many, were by this stage not affective on Mahmoud. He had come to know them as a lie. As we walked around, we spoke to two young men who were also disappointed by the focus on call centres. After jokingly asking me if I could get them a job in England, they said

they wanted bank work, but “you need wasta.” One of them said his dad works in a bank, but he was unable to use this ‘wasta’ because he only obtained an ‘acceptable’ grade in university, not ‘good.’ In this case, wasta could only be used in conjunction with a minimum university grade, otherwise the bank would be unable to justify the recruitment.⁶² This story punctures the hopeful myth presented in these fairs, and reveals the marginal position of these men, to the extent that they cannot even use the social capital they hold.

Some stalls did offer hope to Mahmoud. He approached one company recruiting engineers and software developers. The HR representative said they have admin jobs, but asked Mahmoud for his experience. He began to respond, nervously in English, that he had worked as a sales rep, an import specialist, but she disengaged quickly and cut him off, asking what his major was. He said commerce, and she put his CV on a huge ‘commerce’ pile. He would never hear. After this, Mahmoud had submitted his CV to every stall he could, so we went to another room in which there were various talks and workshops. One talk was by the CEO of Jobzella, an online employment and course aggregator describing itself as “The World’s First Online Career Mega Mall...providing a one-stop-shop to all career services for job-seekers and professionals to aspire to a better life,” a description which does not hold back in discursively transforming jobs into easily-acquired commodities. The CEO asked the young people sitting before him about the biggest problems they faced in their job searches. They responded with: the prevalence of wasta, lack of experience, the difference between knowledge learned in university and that required by companies, companies advertising a job falsely, and the ubiquitous prevalence of call centre jobs. The CEO, rather than responding to those comments,

⁶² I mentioned in Chapter 3 how the educational system in the faculties of the people often lead to students “giving up.”

went on to confidently describe the problem of joblessness as being down to a ‘communication problem’ between employers and prospective employees:

“There are 4 million jobs available; you can’t say there are no jobs. How you write your CV is crucial. Youth always put “I want a challenging opportunity in an international company,” they won’t listen to that. You need to tell them what you are, who you are, and what you have done, you need to market yourself. Make your CV stand out from everyone else’s.”

According to this logic, the problem lies within CV writing, an easily fixable fault. It is a hopeful logic, enabling people to believe in the possibility of obtaining employment they are currently unable to obtain. This move therefore shutdown the negativity introduced by the audience, and reinstated an affective atmosphere which might be productive of feelings of hope. I asked Mahmoud what he thought. He responded: “I want to believe him, but the situation I have seen is different. I have applied to so many jobs and not been able to get a good one. I spent a lot of time improving my CV, I don’t know if I could have done more.” Mahmoud by now was sceptical, but even though he had invested in this hopeful belief to little material effect, he felt compelled to believe in it.

In September 2016 I met with the CEO and another partner of *Jobzella*. It is a start-up based in the Greek Campus. The CEO was motivated by “helping people and effecting lives.” I described to them how graduates feel they cannot reach their dreams because of wasta or the favouring of private education. The partner immediately responded: “no no I feel like these are excuses for losers. You need to invest in yourself.” The CEO jumped in:

“lots don’t take it seriously, they don’t show up to jobs when they are offered. If you don’t have wasta you can build a professional network, through a website it is easy, you can connect with people and then after show your knowledge. Wasta is not needed nowadays. Look you built your network through Noura, and met me through that, they need to do the same.”

The CEO was referencing the fact that Noura had introduced me to him. He skated over my English language, class compatibility, ethnicity, and my particular ability as a foreign man to reach out to a woman. He then said he meets lots of young people in events who say they want to work in anything, “that is not an answer” he said, “you need to know what you want.” Apparently youth send blanket emails to many companies, but “they have to put in much more effort. You can find information online, how to apply for stuff, or online courses. It goes back to the motivation of the person.” *Jobzella* is one such website through which youth can find courses, and contact people. The internet, he said, is “opening up the world,” because you can find courses, contacts, job information, and not be excluded from networks or knowledge.

Again, this highlights the similarity of attitudes within these professional labour market institutions. Success is pinned down on the individual. Crucially, the CEO asserted that the internet is playing a key role in enabling a level playing field, neglecting the continued hierarchies that shape who one is able to access, and which courses people are able to afford. I finally mentioned I was doing research with graduates of the ‘faculties of the people.’ The CEO responded saying, “oh yea they all work in call centres right?” This displayed tacit knowingness of where people like Mahmoud really belong according to ‘successful’ people like him, and provides an insight into how they would be judged in application processes. However, in the employment fair, an atmosphere of hope is sustained, by HR representatives who promise, and

seemingly embody, career progression, and by soft-skills trainers and recruitment agents who claim to hold the solution to employment struggles. Furthermore, the materiality of the place itself again symbolised the global city; it was located in an upmarket hotel, it was filled with members of the upper-middle classes, and its signs were in English. For many, interacting with this place and the upscale objects and meritocratic discourses within it, applying to its jobs, making connections, and learning how to write a CV, would induce feelings of hope. However, for Mahmoud, the ‘affect’ of this place was complicated by the prolonged period he had spent in a call centre, and the effort he had extended on improving his CV. The fair thus conjured up frustration, and confusion, as he partially laid bare the fair’s real goal: a governmental effort to train young graduates and place them in call centres.

However, Mahmoud was still at the fair, and yearned to believe in, and feel, its hopeful promise again. When we left, Mahmoud said he was sad about the young men who had asked me to find them a job in the UK: “I like to think I can make it here, but it is just too hard it seems.” This emotional pull represents a subjective aspect of hope-making that will be discussed in Chapter 6. But now I go on to describe Mahmoud’s experience at another kind of fair.

A ‘classy’ fair

On November 21st I was in the microbus with Mahmoud on the way to the InterContinental again. This time he was more excited, but still not optimistic. This Fair would be very different. It was called ‘Our future in our Country’, co-organised by recruitment firm *JobMaster* and Egypt’s branch of the *Rotary Club* in order to “contribute towards social progress and the

development of youth in Egypt.”⁶³ On the way we discussed Mahmoud’s planned entrepreneurial project, a burger restaurant. He was going through the list of items he would sell, before describing how entrepreneurship was becoming so popular because Egypt’s private sector is so difficult.

We soon switched our minds to the fair. As we approached, Mahmoud excitedly discussed the abundance of international companies, banks, and large Egyptian companies, along with the desirable jobs in HR, PR, and administration that would be present. We went through the same arrival, only this time Mahmoud had already filled out an application form – a means of attendee pre-screening – on which he had to declare his qualifications and career goals. Some fairs were inaccessible to these relatively poor, public university graduates. Private universities held fairs exclusively for their own graduates. Other fairs charged a fee for entry (often around 50LE (US\$6.25)), which put off my interlocutors who struggled to afford it and criticised the idea of unemployed youth having to pay for job fair entry. Another format was the one that had been applied in this fair. Prospective attendees had to send their CVs and fill out application forms, and await acceptance. One fair asked which private school applicants had attended and of which ‘nady’ (club) they were a member. Many fairs however remained accessible for these young men. During the interview with Reem, the *JobMaster* employee, she explained this screening process. It was designed to target a particular calibre of graduates for particular jobs. This one, she said, targeted private foreign-language university graduates, but also most university graduates. One fair they had held focused on call centres. This was an ‘open day,’ so anyone could show up. She stressed that they target graduates of law and commerce for call centre jobs.

⁶³ <https://jobmastergroup.wordpress.com/2015/05/17/the-vocational-service-leadership-award-from-rotary-international-and-rotary-kasr-el-nile-club/>

As we entered the hall Mahmoud commented on the ‘professional’ appearance of the fair compared with the previous one (see Figure 4.4). The attendees, he said, were noticeably higher-class, privately educated. He could tell by their clothes. We immediately saw the multitude of prestigious companies, Pirelli, QNB, Vodafone, ElAraby, the list went on. Each stand was surrounded by groups of young men and women waiting impatiently to hand over their CV and talk to HR representatives. A visibly more excited Mahmoud soon joined the crowds. Like GTO and the UN Fair, this exclusive international hotel symbolised the global city desired by these young men – Mahmoud had even applied to work here seven times in the past, never receiving a response. The act of accessing these upmarket places was exciting. Aesthetically they were worlds away from Mahmoud’s home. And, just as some fairs took place in shopping malls, instead of being filled with desirable commodities, they were filled with desirable jobs.



Figure 4.4 – Employment fair at the InterContinental Hotel (Source: author)

Mahmoud began rushing around handing out his CV, the only consultation being to ask which vacancies were available, and whether he could leave his CV. This consultation, unlike at the other fair, took place in English. Once the CV had been delivered, Mahmoud moved to the next opportunity. “The more the better!” he said as I questioned the speed, while thereafter feeling guilty about ‘blaming’ Mahmoud for not cultivating relations with HR representatives. Some firms would tell him to apply online, some said they needed more experience. At one stand Mahmoud had inquired about HR vacancies, but after the representative looked at his CV she wrote down ‘customer services.’ Rather than taking issue, Mahmoud moved on to the next one. Once he applied to all the companies he could, we left. On the way out, Mahmoud tried to submit his CV to the hotel again, but they told him to return the next day, an answer he knew was a way to get rid of him. As we departed, Mahmoud said: “let’s see if they call, I think these fairs are all for marketing, but let’s see.”

Although inside the fair, during the rush to around handing out CVs, Mahmoud had felt flashes of hope, but as we exited the space, its affect upon him waned as he brought back memories of previous employment fairs. A few months earlier Mahmoud had attended a fair at October University for Modern Science & Arts, an international private university. When he told me about this fair, his sense of excitement was clear:

“It was amazing, there were a lot of banks, like CIB bank, Arabic African bank and good insource companies, even Ferrari was there, there were amazing vacancies actually in supply chain, HR, and sales. I really hope I get accepted in any of them. I applied to a supply chain job in MAC, it’s an amazing job, I would be the guy responsible for purchasing, if I get it that would be amazing. Wish me luck!”

Mahmoud's interaction with the affective atmosphere of this fair, its location in an elite private university, objects such as stalls presenting prestigious jobs and upper-middle class attendees, induced lingering feelings of intense hope. The act of attending the fair, coming into contact with many prestigious companies, having his CV accepted and conceivably considered enabled Mahmoud to imagine the job he would be 'responsible for,' and thereby experience an instant of fulfilment dimly anticipatory of a good future. The material representation of meritocracy that is intrinsic to employment fairs had been crucial to that hope. These feelings reflected those that followed the practice of submitting applications to desirable jobs (or scholarships) in general. Every time, I saw how submission generated an imaginary shift into a desirable future that produced a flash of hope.

However, by late 2015 the feeling produced by remembering this same fair was very different. His body was no longer able to receive the affect in the same way (Anderson, 2006). Looking back, he described it as a place of frustration:

“Nobody ever rings back. We applied to every single great company at the MSA fair, and got no reply. They asked us if we were MSA students, they had to put it on the CV, but for everyone else they didn't ask, I think this is corruption. Also at the AUC Greek Campus fair, we went and applied, and not one of us got any response!”

Mahmoud had now concluded that fairs were marketing tools for companies and the government. This once hopeful space, over time, now provided a memory that conjured up frustration, by reminding him of his exclusion. But, despite his scepticism, Mahmoud had gone to another 'high-class' fair. The continued construction of transparent employment fairs left

the door open for hope to return. Mahmoud indeed did return. He had come, he told me, “because I have no other choice but to try, I might get lucky.” Thus, the reproduction of an affective atmosphere of hope continued to catch the body of this young man, but not through a clean linear influence of the subject by certain places, objects, and discourses, but through the body’s compulsion for a feeling of hope.

Conclusions

In this chapter I have used the theoretical insights of affect theory (Anderson, 2009; Seigworth, 2000), to describe how certain places of Cairo’s ‘global city’ generate affective atmospheres of hope. Within training courses, entrepreneurship events, and employment fairs, certain objects – such as a video of Steve Jobs, a business card, and an upper-middle class trainer – represent aesthetically a global circulation of knowledge. They also embody and extend discourses of meritocracy and individual autonomy, which offer up the ‘global city’ as reachable to all. These discourses stem from the transnational educational trainings of the upper-middle classes, through which they learn that their class privilege has been earned (Khan, 2012). But they are also found within specifically Egyptian ideologies (Elyachar, 2005; Kenney, 2015). I have thus examined how a new ‘rule of experts’ (Mitchell, 2002), organised by the government, international development organisations, and members of the upper-middle classes who work in recruitment, entrepreneurship, and training, is attempting to construct a ‘modern,’ seemingly transparent labour market, and destroy ‘backwards’ recruitment practices and prejudicial notions of where people belong. These prejudicial notions though linger on beneath the surface, enabling the upper-middle classes to maintain their class position.

The Chapter demonstrated how this meritocratic promise is extended to lower-middle class young men who are chasing employment in the global city, and thereby social mobility. As these young men come to interact with the places of the hopeful city, and the objects and discourses held within them, they are affected with a bodily feeling of euphoric hope that global, upper-middle class belonging is available, and will come to them. Inhabitants of these places are informed over and over again that their own behaviour can secure social mobility in a labour market that responds to acquired skills. In turn, social relations that determine people's abilities to acquire those 'skills' are veiled over.

In following this analysis, and utilising affect theory, I have suggested an alternative theorisation of the exercise of power to that which rests on securing a congruence between subjective expectations and objective chances (Bourdieu, 2000). This form of compliance, operationalised by certain labour market industries and institutions within Cairo's global city, works through affect, through making people work hard and wait in hope. In the process I have shown how global cities, and certain labour market institutions and industries, also extend discourses and produce landscapes of inclusion, not just exclusion (Hage, 2003; Ghertner, 2015). The personal reception of these transpersonal affective atmospheres is heavily dependent upon the body's condition to be affected. The following chapters discuss how the 'affect' of the city upon these men changed over time. Their experience in Cairo began to unravel their feeling of hope. The next chapter therefore examines how they stitched this feeling back together over time by returning to the same objects and discourses of hope. However, in this chapter, I have concentrated on the generation of affective atmospheres of hope within the city.

Finally, throughout the chapter I have hinted at the financial incentives propelling the reproduction of hope. There is indeed much money to be made from selling hope (Schüll, 2012), and there are many people discussed in this chapter who are doing just that. Recruitment firms make money by setting up fairs, from companies who set up stalls in the expectation of heavy traffic, and sometimes from applicants themselves. GTO sustains itself through getting trainees into the centre and into jobs, and private training centres obtain money out of promising access to jobs. Entrepreneurship organisations make money through hosting events that people attend in anticipation of finding inspiration. And finally, outsourcing companies – even HR reps – benefit from convincing people to take low-end jobs. Thus, many people profit from these narratives of hope, apart from the young men to whom they are sold. In the next two chapters, I show how these young men struggled with the consequences of trying to sustain that promised mobility in a social terrain ridden with hierarchies that prevent it.

Chapter 5 Being hopeful

Eslam, like Ibrahim, after graduating from the GTO programme, heeded its message and took a job in one of Cairo's call centres, an outsourced local Arabic language account for a large mobile phone company. Eslam did not have a defined dream like some of other graduates of GTO, but he would take the job – which he needed to sustain a life in Cairo – in order to gain some experience in customer services and develop his language skills on the side, before looking for a higher-level job after six months. He quickly moved into a flat in an informal neighbourhood of Giza with two of his new colleagues, Adel and Mohammed, who were also in their early 20s. They each paid 400LE (US\$50) a month for a bed in a shared room, and would be joined at different times by friends who had also come to Cairo to work or study. Adel and Mohammed had also come to Cairo after university in order to locate a better job than what was available in their hometowns, Zagazig and Zifta in the Nile Delta. Adel dreamed of a job as an accountant, and Mohammed of working in a 'big company' in which he could grow and have a 'career.' But both had to settle for temporary jobs in the call centre. They hoped to acquire some skills, save some money, and take courses on the side. Coming to Cairo, as explained in the previous chapter, made these young men feel good. Simply being in the city gave them a sense that they were moving towards a desirable future, as opposed to those who had stayed behind and accepted the difficult trajectories in their hometowns.

The previous chapter uncovered how a feeling of hope that rested on a discursive and material terrain of meritocracy was affected by certain labour market institutions and industries in Cairo's 'global city,' in training courses, employment fairs, and entrepreneurial events. This chapter begins to examine the tormented journey to the realisation of that hope. I moved in with Eslam, Adel, and Mohammed in May 2015, five months after they had entered the call

centre. I would live with them for an initial three month period, before returning once more in November 2015 for one month. This chapter tells the story of this living arrangement in this gendered male space, revealing the attempts of these three young migrant men to keep moving towards their dreams, in a context where they have limited means to do so. They set about being the hardworking subjects they had been told to be, gaining experience in the call centre. Yet, over time, negative emotions overwhelmed them. They became frustrated, fearful, confused, and angry as a result of an existential sense of ‘stuckedness’ (Hage, 2003). This took them to discourses which embodied those emotions. They railed against a corrupt government, stagnant economy, and an unjust labour market. But Eslam, Adel, and Mohammed would constantly try to foreclose these emotions; through making jokes, talking about girls, buying something for themselves, or watching television. However, these ‘drugs of life’ often led to more anxiety. All three engaged in practices and thoughts that re-enacted a sense of ‘prospective momentum’ towards future mobility, by returning to meritocratic objects and discourses of hope found in self-help and religion (Miyazaki, 2004). This allowed them to blame themselves for their own predicament, and talk about what they would now do to correct their behaviour. They also accrued respect for themselves, over those who had surrendered. However, over the chapter, their fragile positions will be laid bare. All they could do was talk over and over about how they will work hard in the future.

The Chapter thus complicates the argument outlined in Chapter 4, by introducing time as a significant aspect of affective power. The production of hopeful, hardworking workers is full of confusions, penetrations, fatigue, and periods of disbelief, as the reward for working hard is never grasped. Meritocratic hope maintains its hold because it is emotionally attractive. The Chapter therefore also builds on existing work that reveals how people who are thrust into prolonged class immobility, or periods of waithood, attempt to relocate a sense of movement

in their lives (Mains, 2012; Pedersen, 2012; Jansen, 2015; Ralph, 2015; O’Neil, 2017). First, while the boundaries are sometimes blurred, I make a distinction between practices (and objects) which distract, and practices which re-enact a sense of hope. Although both are embedded in neoliberal capitalism as the objects used are part of chains of consumption, they instil different emotions. Second, I add a notion of temporality, revealing the dramatic oscillation in the lives of the structurally disenfranchised between hope and despair. Third, I move away from this literature’s celebratory tones, which hail people’s ability to find hope in difficult conditions, by taking forward the previous chapter’s focus on the objects and discourses which affect feelings of hope. These young men find hope through meritocratic discourses, and certain objects which embody them, that serve to legitimise their marginal positions. In this way, I examine the moral dimensions of hope (Lamont, 2002; Crapanzano, 2016).

I also wish that the chapter speaks to many who read it, to people who is chasing something – a better job, marriage or love, or a house – that is difficult to locate. As I outlined in the introduction, normative systems of value connected to age, class, and gender rely on forward momentum. But, for many, pursuing adulthood, a satisfying job, or romantic love is extremely challenging. This chapter reveals how young Egyptian men who are extremely limited in their ability to move sometimes need distraction, become angry or disenfranchised that the race is not fair, or that the goal is not worth it, but continue chasing because there is little alternative, and because they crave or need the feeling it keeps alive.

Factory Life

Eslam, Adel, and Mohammed's flat was situated in an informal neighbourhood of Giza, which has developed through a process of landowner property development and inward migration since the 1960s (Sims, 2010). The vast informal areas of Cairo hold a diverse range of people. But this particular neighbourhood, although not considered part of the 'ashwa'yāt' (slums), was on the lower end in terms of socio-economic status. Whenever I mentioned living there to both upper- and lower-middle class research participants, people responded with confusion and fear, before commenting on the sha'by inhabitants they considered to be ignorant, rude, immoral (mish akhlāqy), and violent. Adel, Eslam, and Mohammed certainly wished to live in a more upscale neighbourhood. They were annoyed by the smells and noise coming from the market directly below the third floor flat (see Figure 5.1). The flat itself was also a source of annoyance. It contained five beds in two bedrooms, a simple kitchen that was seldom used and quickly became dirty, a small bathroom where the water often cut out, and a living room consisting of a sofa, television, fridge, and ironing board. It stood in contrast to the relative comfort afforded to them in their family homes.



Figure 5.1 – The street of the apartment (Source: author)

Eslam, Adel, and Mohammed would arrive home every day from work between 2am and 3am. We would sit up for an hour or two while they ate the koshary (a low-cost, but filling dish consisting of pasta, rice, lentils, fried onions and tomato sauce), or pasta with liver that they had bought from the street below. They would watch television, relay stories, laugh and complain about the annoying or rude customers they had encountered during the shift. They would then head to bed, before waking up around 12pm. They would slowly shower and pray, and go out to get breakfast, which consisted of bean and falafel sandwiches. Thereafter, apart from the odd occasion when they needed to run errands, we would sit again in front of the television. During this time we would do the most talking, about the state of Egypt, their current

situations and future dreams, as well as more light-hearted topics of world politics, films, and football. By 3pm they would leave again for work, walking five minutes to the shuttle bus organised by the company before being taken back to what Adel called the ‘factory.’ The only break to this routine came during their days off. Adel and Mohammed returned home every week, where they would sleep, and see friends and family. Eslam usually stayed in the flat, not doing very much, because his home in Sohag was nine hours away.

This daily rhythm quickly began to induce frustration. The call centre, and the phone itself, generated an affective atmosphere of frustration. Though I never worked with them in the call centre – the language requirements presented a barrier – it was clear that this was a taxing place.⁶⁴ They would spend nine hours per shift on the headset, moving from one customer to the next without respite, with a 45-minute break for lunch. This was not only extremely tiring, but also immensely stressful. Every day they would return home drained, complaining about abusive customers who had reacted angrily when a problem was not solved immediately. In the face of such abuse, agents are forced to remain polite, rather than retaliating as they would if they experienced the same treatment outside work. This is a chastening experience, particularly for men. The dignity and respect that comes with normative sociability is stripped away from them on the phone. This over time led to an accumulation of anger for Adel, Mohammed, and Eslam, which often spilled over into their lives outside:

Adel: “you know the problem with this job is it makes you rude when you communicate with people, it makes you not care about other people’s feelings. You learn to do what the customers do, they come and shout and abuse you, and you can’t do

⁶⁴ Jamie Woodcock (2016) examines the stress induced by spending time on the headset among UK call centre workers.

anything, so you take it out in other situations. Like, in the microbus I used to let the driver keep 25 pence if he kept it, but not now, I always get it back now”.

Mohammed: “yea I think when you have a job you enjoy and feel satisfied with you can have a good life outside, to keep up with friends and family. I used to be very involved with my siblings, if they did something wrong I would tell them off. But now when I go home and they do something I don’t care, I don’t have the energy to tell them to stop.”

Most literature on low-skilled service work focuses on the indignity of the work itself (Braverman, 1975; Woodcock, 2016), but Adel and Mohammed are describing here how a difficult job leads to an inability to lead a satisfying life outside. They are unable to live up to the behavioural norms expected of respectable citizens on the streets, or responsible older brothers. The two qualities those roles required, generosity and attentiveness, were being eroded on the headset.

Adel described the call centre as a new kind of ‘factory’ for youth. Having worked on textile machines when he was a student, he said that kind of factory was hard on your body, but the call centre is hard on your mind. Yet this factory also took its toll on the bodies of its workers. Many over time developed health problems, such as hearing or speech impairments, and also become sapped of energy after spending nine hours a day dealing with customers. On one occasion a young man was laid off due to a speech impediment he had developed in work. But primarily, these three young men thought the call centre, as Adel once said to me, was just not the place for people who had spent years in education, and developed dreams for high-skilled jobs in their fields (May et al. 2007). They were unable to ‘find themselves’ (*yilāqu nafsuhum*)

there – something which involves loving what you do – neither as respectable employees, nor even as respectable men (Skeggs, 1997; Braverman, 1975; Sennett, 1998). Call centre work, they feared, would not even provide a basis to secure marriage.

Fucking with your head

These young men would engage in various strategies to forget the daily stresses conjured up by work, and to alter the affective atmosphere that was inducing feelings of frustration. Upon returning home each night Adel, Mohammed, and Eslam would ritualistically spend time relaying stories about the annoying or rude customers they had encountered during the shift. They would laugh at their stupidity and plot fantastical ways they could seek revenge, for example by setting up another line and charging the customer without them knowing. Though they would say things like, “I swear I’m going to do this tomorrow,” they would never actually carry out these revengeful acts. But the activity of talking about them felt therapeutic. Converting these deeply frustrating, chastening events into objects of laughter, and discursively being able to retaliate and correct the wrong, enabled them to dispel the anger that these encounters had built up on the headset.⁶⁵ It reasserted a form of imaginary power and respect over customers who had wronged them. The use of speech and conversation to dispel negativity will be a recurring theme of the chapter. It represents a strategy of people who have extremely limited means to escape their structural precarity.

Yet on some days reliving these work frustrations was unwelcome. On one occasion after a particularly strenuous ‘rush’ period – a period with a higher number of calls than usual –

⁶⁵ See Parkhill et al. (2011) and Billig (2001) for sociological studies on the relationship between humour and affect.

Mohammed and Eslam returned home in a sombre mood. Mohammed started recalling with agitation a woman who had kept screaming at him and swearing at the company. He had repeatedly asked her to calm down, but she refused. He was about to move on to a story of another customer, but Eslam abruptly told him “fuqak” (leave it). He wanted to forget about the day as quickly as possible. So instead he sat down and began scrolling through Facebook on his phone, chuckling to himself intermittently as he read. Mohammed then switched on the television and began watching an episode of Ramez, a Ramadan comedy show that puts celebrities in uncomfortable situations (see Figure 5.2). They both put the frustrations of the day out of their minds as they focused on the devices in front of them (Gorton, 2009; Garde-Hansen & Gorton, 2013).



Figure 5.2 – Inside the flat (Source: author)

Every evening, after they had relayed the day's stories, we would spend time watching television, either a Western film, or an Egyptian show. This would always be something 'light' (khafif), which would be easy to watch in a tired state. They wanted an object which would 'affect' them in a way that removed their anger. As we watched we would talk and joke about football, films, world politics, and girls. Before going to sleep, no matter how late it was, Eslam would then watch a film or television show, or scroll through Facebook on his phone in bed. This activity formed one of his attempts to ensure his life was more than just work. It meant he could sit and enjoy some free time before sleep in which he was not imminently heading back

to work. The timings of shifts meant it was very difficult to do much outside work for these men. As male employees, they always got evening shifts due to the need for women to be home before nightfall. This meant they often missed out on watching football matches, hanging out in the *ahwa*, and meeting the few friends they knew in Cairo. Eslam also complained about not getting time to do sport. Back in Sohag he had played football, but the schedule in Cairo prevented that. Sport made him feel happy: “it makes you feel like you are doing something else with your life, that you are accomplishing something.” It was one of the pillars of his life philosophy. If you sort out your work, religion, sports, and humour you will be happy, he would say. In Cairo he had no “balance,” all he did was work and sleep. Eslam would try to organise to see a friend or go on an outing on his days off. At one stage we talked about planning a day trip away to the beach, but it never happened because we could not coordinate days in which the whole group was free. More infrequently, I would go with Eslam when he went to buy new clothes for himself, either from the shops in the neighbourhood, or sometimes from a mall. Buying something new, he said, was like a “reward.” It too provided a brief break in what was otherwise a monotonous routine. Another of my interlocutors, outside the house, who had a stressful job as a salesman for a cheese company in which he constantly struggled to hit targets, described his activities of smoking, going to the gym, or watching films as “doing anything that fucks with [his] head a bit.” His time in the gym, he said, was the only time he is able to relax and forget about his daily problems of earning money.

The everyday attempts of these men to alleviate the monotony and frustrations of work reflect those of workers around the world. Watching light television, flicking through social media, doing exercise, socialising, and buying new things represent efforts to put the stresses of work out of mind. These are activities, and objects (such as a television, the phone, new clothing, gym equipment, other people), which produce alterations in the atmosphere, which in turn

induces different feelings. They also represent an effort to reclaim control over one's time, and be one's self. They are activities which people want to do in order to adhere to normative classed and gendered modes of value after which they aspire (Skeggs, 1997). In work, people spend time doing something they have to do, their time is not theirs, and they often do not feel 'themselves.' As mentioned above, some took to smoking, drinking alcohol, or smoking hashish to 'fuck with their head' (Schielke, 2015). But, for my three flatmates, this did not conform to their middle-class Islamic subjectivities. Hashish, alcohol, and smoking is often associated with sha'bi culture. I will describe below how they were considered objects which might result in permanent distraction from one's goal of middle-class respectability.⁶⁶

Feeling bored

Over time another more existential set of feelings began to arise for these young men. The everyday frustrations they experienced in the call centre served as a constant reminder of the need for prospective movement, to a job in which they felt themselves. These frustrations would have been more bearable a pathway towards better remained open in their minds. Their time in the call centre was supposed to be temporary, but as six months passed they began to feel like they were becoming stuck. Early on, Adel would frequently repeat something he remembered from the one day he had attended the GTO course a couple of years previously. A trainer had said that one year in the call centre was good experience, because you learn useful skills such as communication, and patience in handling customers. However, over time Adel stopped recalling that lesson. Upon arriving home in early July he told us he had been called by an English-speaking customer. Rather than handling her, he froze when she started

⁶⁶ The practices discussed here, along with the monotonous sense from which these men need to escape, are highly gendered. Many Egyptian women rather experience the frustrations and monotony of home life. They thus develop different, and more spatially limited ways to "escape" (see Ring, 2006).

speaking, before frantically passing her on to a colleague who could speak English. Eslam and Mohammed, trying to turn it into another joke, made fun of Adel for not even trying to ‘handle’ her, but Adel did not find it funny. He claimed, with a palpable sense of nostalgia, that a couple of years ago when he was still in university he would not have had a problem dealing with the customer. This event served to remind him that he was not moving forwards towards his dream accountancy job. In fact, he was moving backwards in the call centre, losing skills he once held. In the days after, he lamented how he felt he was becoming stuck. The job and schedule were preventing him from even thinking about the future, let alone taking courses like he had hoped.

Similar moments would come for Eslam and Mohammed over the summer, through ‘encounters’ that rendered conscious the stubborn and even increasing distance between themselves and what they considered a good life. For Eslam, this led to a period of three days where he did not speak. He would not join in watching television, and instead headed straight to bed. Only afterwards would we have a conversation about this. He said he had been confused by all the stuff I am interested in for the research. He knew I wanted to understand the attempts of youth to get married, obtain good jobs, and afford a desirable lifestyle. He said – while pointing to an advert on television offering new one million pound villas in a new gated community – that he gets annoyed when he thinks about the future, about marriage, a car, his career. As a result of this annoyance, he often chooses not to think about these things, “I have come to think that it is not useful.” But in those few days he could not help it. He was scared of becoming stuck in the call centre. He looked up to people who had been there for three years. They got used to it, they see leaving as a risk. He did not want that to happen to him, he wanted to move on.

These feelings of frustration and confusion overwhelmed all of my interlocutors at different points. Ibrahim, as I described in the previous chapter, had moved to Cairo full of promise. In February 2015, barely two months after arriving, this promise had disappeared. Upon my return to Egypt a few months later, he described to me his change of feeling:

“I could not stay in the job, I was becoming depressed and angry all the time. I was not able to think about anything outside work, only how to reach the targets, the customers. When I went home I would keep thinking about it, and just be so tired from the long shifts that I had to sleep. I was not able to work towards my goals, I was working for the company, not for myself and my dreams. It was a very hard time, I felt stuck, like I was not learning anything, I was not moving towards my dream, I was not going anywhere, it was very depressing.”

Ibrahim’s sense of hopeful mobility had been replaced by a sense of fearful regression. He was living ‘day-to-day,’ not in preparation for a long-term goal. His job consumed his time and energy, meaning he was unable to attend events and courses, make useful connections, conduct research for his start-up, or apply to jobs like he had planned. He was also unable to save money from his salary (1400LE/US\$175 per month) that could go towards a future project, spending it all on rent and daily expenses. Ibrahim looked to his flatmate, Hassan (the same Hassan who had attended GTO’s graduation), who had come to Cairo two years before him. Hassan once dreamed of working in a bank, but had become depressed and stopped trying to reach this job. This was a state Ibrahim feared would befall him. As he described to me during one meeting, he feared “what was once temporary would become permanent.”

The emergence of these feelings of confusion, anxiety, fear, and even depression is reflective of what Ghassan Hage (2003) has previously labelled a sense of ‘stuckedness.’ For these young Egyptian men, the spatial terrain of the city was now inducing frustration rather than hope. This feeling was brought forth through a job rejection, a parent becoming angry about requests for money, a chastening experience at work, a frustrating, alienating interaction in one’s neighbourhood, and even seeing an advert for a gated community villa on TV. These encounters rendered conscious the fact they were not moving towards aspirational markers of adulthood, manhood, or respectable middle-class living.⁶⁷ My racialized, classed body also played a role in reminding these men of this stagnation (see Chapter 2). When I spoke English, told them I was going to the AUC to meet someone, talked about my life in the UK, or even asked them about *their* struggles, I brought to life both the social distance between us and thus the anxiety arising from their precarious positions.

Adel, during one of our afternoon sessions in front of the television, described this sense as a general affliction of Egypt’s youth. He used an analogy of the Hollywood film *Fight Club* to explain what he meant:

“*Fight Club* is about someone who is bored from daily routine, who can consume anything he wants, he can buy a fridge, a television, anything, but he gets bored of that life, he wants something different and stimulating. It is like in Sweden, where they kill themselves because they have so much money that life gets boring, so they get depressed. But here in Egypt we have a different type of boredom, it comes from not being able to do anything, you cannot solve any problems here so

⁶⁷ I described in Chapter 2 how these frustrations differentially afflict women.

you get bored. You can't marry, or get a flat. Lots think that after marriage, and a flat, and family it will all be ok, but there will still be problems you have to solve, and you can still get bored.”

Adel was reflecting here an understanding of boredom that has been described before in the context of un/underemployed people (Ralph, 2008; Schielke, 2015; O’Neil, 2017). It arises not from doing nothing, or from doing the same thing over and over, but from one’s time not seeming to move towards attaining normative aspirational markers. It is therefore connected to the presence of unfulfilled expectations for a better life. Adel compares what he feels as boredom to an alternative sense he attaches to the West, a sense that arises from having too much, perhaps from realising that attaining markers of ‘success’ do not produce fulfilment. But perhaps these senses are connected. They both arise from a sense of lack, from wanting something different to what one already has, which may be an intrinsic human feeling (Jackson, 2012). One may therefore have a lot, but still not find fulfilment. One needs to keep chasing the scene of our desires (Berlant, 2011; see Bettelheim, 1991).

Outbursts of anger

These young men did not shy away from connecting their predicaments to structural problems in Egypt. From early on during my time with Adel, Mohammed, and Eslam we would have many conversations about recent socio-economic transformations that have made life for many Egyptians harder. As I sat with Adel one afternoon in early July, he flicked the television on to a soap describing how Egypt has changed in the fifty years since Nasser. I asked him what had changed exactly:

“The middle-class has finished now. There is no middle class, just rich and the rest are poor. Nasser created the middle-class out of education, and providing jobs, but it is over now, you can’t get educated and you can’t get work. My parents were in the middle-class, because they had education and jobs. But we can’t now. Nasser did some bad things, but the good outweighs the bad. He gave land to poor farmers, and provided education and jobs. The infitaah ruined it all. This was the beginning, where everything started to be bought from outside, and so we didn’t make anything ourselves, the industry was destroyed. There is no industry now, and no jobs. There was oil, and steel. It is finished now. There were factories in Zagazig but not now. Corruption has ruined things too. The government made deals with businessmen and looked after their own interests only. Land was sold for very cheap and factories were closed. We were in the middle, due to education and work, but now in the lower-middle. I think I am poor now. I can’t find decent work, can’t save money. You can’t get educated now too. You have to work in order to pay for more education.”

Adel is calling on various structural explanations for his own difficulties. He blames the lack of jobs and poor state of education on corruption between the government and elites, and the infitaah. In other discussions he would complain about Egypt’s elite making money through corrupt and illegal means, and government disinvestment. Others would also rail against the prevalence of ‘wasta’ in recruitment processes, as well as ingrained class prejudice. Egypt’s 2011 Uprising provided multiple frames through which people can criticise structural problems. These young men latched on to those frames as they experienced and reflected upon the frustration of their own stagnation. These discourses affectively embodied, and provided an outlet for frustration (Hage, 2003; Hochschild, 2016). They complained that a lack of jobs,

nepotism, or corruption prevented them from reaching a good life. The direction of this anger might indeed lead to more active resistance, and perhaps it did in 2011. In these moments, these young men were not being the hopeful subjects they were told to be by the upper-middle classes in the hopeful city, only looking to themselves to explain their plight. They were briefly penetrating the myths on which meritocratic hope relies, and demonstrating that the meritocratic terrain of this neoliberal capitalist regime did not enjoy complete ‘hegemony’ (see Chapter 6 for more discussion).

However, political science literature has long understood the emergence of protest or resistance to be a complex, contingent process (Chalcraft, 2012; Ismail, 2012; Beinin, 2015; Ketchley, 2017). Thus, in 2017 Egypt, although there are still protests – a protest by master’s and doctoral students was held in 2014 demanding state employment – there exists protest fatigue amongst many people, and also constant fear of state violence.⁶⁸ Furthermore, although these young men attended some protests in the 2011 revolution, they have never been actively involved in protest ‘movements.’ In this context, in everyday life, these narratives could not reintroduce hope. These young men call on other frames and practices to override this anger and hang on to the notion that a good life is reachable. Despite acute knowledge of structural constraints, they did not give up, become permanently hopeless, or begin engaging in more active resistance. What follows is concerned with the question of why.

The drugs of life

⁶⁸ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/egypt-protests-masters-phd-degree-holders-appointment-state.html>

The same activities which enabled people to forget daily work stresses were also utilised to escape the anxieties that came with stuntedness. They were described by one young man as the ‘drugs of life,’ allowing you to momentarily forget your dissatisfactions. Samuli Schielke (2015) showed how young men in a rural village in Egypt’s delta attempt to escape their boredom through a number of daily activities; watching football and other kinds of television, hanging out in cafes, going to weddings, joking, walks, flirting, internet chat, pornography, and smoking hashish. In Cairo the practices were no different. As Eslam mentioned, these young men would spend much time trying to not think about the future.

“I don’t think of tomorrow, I just live my life, because I don’t want to think about something that will annoy me. If I think about it I will just think I need lots of money to buy lots of things and I don’t have it right now.”

This quotation comes from Hashem, a young graduate working in a mobile phone shop, but dreaming of work in a bank. As we sat in the café, I asked him for his thoughts about Egypt’s difficult environment, about which one of his friends was always complaining. After giving this answer, he said he dislikes his friend’s negativity. He then switched back to talking about his favourite Egyptian music, and setting out a list of places he wished to travel in the future, Dubai, Turkey, and France. Typical of other young men, he did not want to talk about futures or anxieties, instead he wanted to fill his time and mind with less distressing, more enjoyable activities and thoughts (Ralph, 2008; Jones, 2012).

I would spend many hours with research participants talking about girls they liked – including with a few about their views and experiences of sex – their opinions about, and yearning for, particular commodities, their favourite TV programmes and films, their views on world

politics, Egyptian or European football, and funny situations they had encountered or heard about during the day. It was often the case that, in the middle of a conversation about frustrations in the labour market, we would suddenly switch to talking about a commodity they wished to buy, a girl they liked, or a football match that had just taken place. At first, the researcher in me who was interested in their labour market struggles became agitated by this, but I quickly understood it to be a necessary deflection away from distress.

Whenever groups of young men hung out together, usually in the café but also in the flat, very seldom were job struggles discussed. I was, again, surprised at how little serious conversation was had between friends, sometimes to the extent that they knew nothing of each other's present difficulties. Talking about one's difficulties or dissatisfactions can instil a sense of social shame in men. My interlocutors told me they might be judged and told to stop complaining (Ghannam, 2013). Thus, instead, they would talk about girls, religion, friends, football, or various commodities. This would always involve much joke-making, either at each other or about particular situations. Even when someone's work or the country's problems were discussed, things that might conjure up frustration would be recast in a humorous way (Wedeen, 1999).⁶⁹ I would hear jokes about the state of public services in Egypt, the craziness of Egypt's education system, and the prevalence of bribery or *wasta*. A particularly memorable joke came when hanging out with Hashem's friends. We were discussing the prevalence of *wasta* (nepotism), and one friend quipped: "law kān al-nil salsa, makuntsh koft al-kusa illy f' Masr" (if the Nile was salsa, you could not cook all the "kusa" in Egypt), followed by much laughter. Kusa means zucchini, a vegetable eaten frequently in Egypt with salsa. But it is also a colloquial name for *wasta*, stemming from agricultural practices. When traders wanted to

⁶⁹ Egyptian popular culture has a long history of satirical humour, with many films, soaps, and comedy shows targeted at problems like corruption and government incompetence (Armbrust, 1996).

pick up vegetables to take to trade, those picking up zucchini could jump the queue because it goes bad quickly. Wasta, or knowing someone inside a company, allows someone to do the same. Thus, the joke – originally coined by Egyptian nationalist and revolutionary, Ahmed Orabi – meant that there was so much zucchini (wasta) in Egypt, that if the Nile River was full of salsa, there would still not be enough to cook it all.

Hang out sessions would therefore turn into competitions of joke-making. This was about men relieving frustration, but also showing off their distinctive ability to be humorous (Friedman, 2014). The humour was extremely masculine and hetero-normative. Conversations would often involve language, and topics, that were deemed unsuitable for a female audience – and might even involve joking about women or homosexuality. However, these jokes were classed, with some men finding certain swear words or discussions of women vulgar. I often felt slight discomfort in these situations, knowing the real anguish caused by barriers that were now being converted into objects of humour. But Eslam once said to me: “if we did not laugh we could not survive in Egypt, we would get depressed from the country’s situation.” Egyptians, I was repeatedly told, pride themselves on their ability to laugh despite the difficult conditions they live in. It was understood as a sign of strength, and often compared favourably against the sincerity of Western culture.

Brief distraction was also achieved through watching films, television, or football, playing or listening to music, going shopping and hanging out in the mall, or the gym, and for some thinking of and pursuing sex, smoking, or drinking alcohol. These places and objects enacted affective intensities that enabled the expulsion of feelings of frustration, and brought forth pleasure. These activities would not only provide a form of distraction as they were happening, but also something to look forward to and use to get through the working week. But they were

more than simple distraction of course. They were aspirational, embodying the type of young, modern, middle-class men they wished to be. This differed between men. Thus, Mahmoud or Gamal often wanted to drink alcohol with me. They found it cool, in part because rich Egyptians or foreigners do it. But most, like my flatmates, would not because it did not conform to their Islamic piety. Some would actively pursue women, or at least talk about pursuing women. This was an attempt to reassert masculine power that was absent from their working lives: although it sometimes induced more frustration. Others, again due to religiously-infused norms of respectability, did not try. Furthermore, these activities sometimes actively enabled the incitement of hope for an imagined desirable future in themselves (Mains, 2012). Discussing or looking at a commodity one wished to buy, or talking about the places one wished to travel can provide a surge of vitality stemming from an opening of the future (Stewart, 2007). At other times, the realisation that those dreams will not be realised could also induce frustration. Mahmoud, when we were walking along the Nile one afternoon, was imagining, with a smile on his face, buying a 5 million pound villa. Ibrahim swiftly told him that will never happen. Mahmoud became annoyed, saying “why can’t you let me just pretend for a minute!”

Interacting with, inhabiting, and talking about these objects and places were actively used to improve one’s mood. Eslam, as I mentioned, would spend time every night lying in bed either watching a film on his laptop, reading about football or flicking through Facebook on his phone, or reading a book. He would always try to watch or read something light, funny, or optimistic, and avoid material that was overly negative or focused on the country’s problems. He picked out one film in particular, called *sa’a w’ nuss* (An hour and a half), which was too negative in its portrayal of the difficulties faced by young people. One book Eslam read during my time in the flat, and that I began reading as well, was called ‘*sukhriyya*’ (sarcasm). The

book described funny situations that happen every day in Egypt's streets, in transport, or when dealing with government bureaucracy. When I asked Eslam about the preference for 'light' entertainment, he said: "there is enough negativity in life, like all the stuff you talk about with people for your research, and you need to cut that out of your activities. I don't want to read or watch something negative because "al dunya sa'b" (the environment is difficult) for everyone here already." Therefore these activities can be an important way of sustaining positive emotions. Interacting with objects such as a laptop, a phone, or a book, which produce distinct affective intensities, enables these young men to alter their feelings.

Perhaps we can all recognise this desire to 'switch off' from the daily stresses of securing a job, keeping a job, and earning enough money. People have different ways of doing this, and these are extremely classed and gendered.⁷⁰ However, doing this too much can sometimes lead to anxiety. One evening in early summer, Eslam said he felt he wastes too much time on Facebook. He wanted to try closing it for a week. When he woke up he was supposed to get up, have a shower, eat, and do 'useful' things, but instead he looked at Facebook. He thought if he shut it off he could play sports and study. Mahmoud described his activities, of window shopping, thinking about sex, and drinking alcohol, as the 'drugs of life.' They allow you to forget your labour market struggles for a moment, but they do not solve them, or rid you of the feelings that they produce. They can even make those struggles and feelings worse by securing your permanent distraction. Thus, the remaining half of the chapter describes how my flatmates attempted to keep alive the feeling of mobility for a good job and future. This will focus primarily on Adel, in part to examine a complex emotional and psychological journey, but also because it was Adel with whom I would spend the most time in the flat. Eslam, as I mentioned, was more inclined to avoid these topics.

⁷⁰ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/mind/how-to-find-your-brains-off-switch/>

You can make it on your own

Sitting with Adel one afternoon in July while he waited for another shift to begin, he began telling me about a colleague at work. Henri had been in the call centre for three years, and knew everything about the company. He had applied for a team leader job in order to leave the outsourced company, but was rejected. They first told him he was overqualified, which everyone found ridiculous. But they also apparently said they could not take him because he was from a sha‘by area (one’s neighbourhood of residence is written on their ID), suggesting he was too local and low-class. I questioned whether they would really say that directly, but Adel insisted. Eslam, who was ironing his shirt, backed up Adel’s story. He said he knew two people from another branch who both had the same qualifications, but one got rejected because he was from a sha‘by area, while another was accepted because he was from Mohandiseen, an upmarket area. “It is not so easy to change where you live!” Eslam proclaimed. Adel then jumped in again, relaying with exasperation how the current team leaders know nothing, they always ask people like Henri to do things for them. They must have got the job through wasta because they do not have the qualifications.

Adel said such judgement only happened in this company, but Eslam insisted it happened everywhere. They then discussed if they would use wasta if they had the chance. Adel said he would not, he would also not lie about where he was from. He wanted to feel that he succeeded by his own effort. Eslam did not agree. He had spoken to a graduate of Al Azhar, Cairo’s prestigious religious university, which meant this person would know right from wrong. He had told him you have to use what is given to you, because the environment is so tough. But Adel again said no, if a job came through wasta that was better, and another like his current

job, he would take the current one because he would want to feel like he earned it. This is an interesting debate regarding the morality of using *wasta* in contemporary Egypt. Samuli Schielke (2015) shows how, even though many do not agree with it, they utilise it because conditions are difficult. But Adel's discursive stance demonstrates the moral power of meritocracy. Making it on your own secures self-respect, and using *wasta* secures the opposite. One consequence of this might be the hiding of its use, and thus the maintenance of a discursive terrain of meritocracy, even though it is not reflected in reality.

Eslam then turned to me and said: "this type of rejection gives you such depression Harry, what will I do! I am from Sohag, they won't even call me for an interview!" Eslam had said this jokingly, but it could not hide his anguish. This story induces an affect of "depression" because it closes the possibility of progression, placing it outside their control. No matter how hard they work, they cannot change their place of birth – which they both knew to be *sha'by* in the eyes of the upper-middle class HR employees making the decision. But Adel reiterated again his belief that class prejudice did not happen everywhere in Egypt's private sector. To back this up, he introduced to the conversation a story of a friend from Zagazig. This friend had studied in the same Arabic section of Commerce as Adel, and according to him did not take any extra courses. He had done an interview five or six times for an accountant position with a Saudi firm in Cairo, each time being rejected. But, he had noted down and studied the questions he had been asked after every interview. By the end he knew exactly what they would ask and had prepared answers. Because of this, he got the job in the end. Adel insisted this was proof that you can make it fairly, on your own, without the help of *wasta* or hiding your residence.

This story, whether reflective of the truth or not, superseded the other less hopeful story. It proved to Adel that at least some of the labour market remains open and meritocratic, firstly to

youth from a similar background to him, and also to perseverance. Not all good jobs were decided by exclusionary class signifiers. This friend had exercised perseverance – something Adel could do himself – rather than paying money for courses or using connections. This story – as a discourse – therefore held an affective quality of hope, sustaining for Adel the idea he might succeed by doing the same. In this moment, to use Hirokazu Miyazaki’s (2004) term, it ‘reoriented’ Adel’s knowledge, from what had been a depressing discussion where classed exclusion had momentarily been highlighted, towards positivity that rested on merit and individual power.

These young men often stated that the barriers they faced; a bad education, the prevalence of *wasta* or class prejudice, and a lack of jobs or government help, would not entirely prevent them from obtaining a good job. A bad education could be overcome through ‘self-development,’ *wasta* or class prejudice were not everywhere, and there were still jobs available – in Cairo at least. *Wasta*, as mentioned in Chapter 4, is viewed as a major problem in the government, and in banks, but not in a private sector that wants profit, and therefore qualified people. These three young men had come to Cairo believing that if they develop themselves by taking courses the labour market will be open to them. In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how this hopeful discursive terrain is extended by training courses, entrepreneurship events, and employment fairs. But here it was proved through a more mundane story and rumour passed between lower-middle class youth (Quayson, 2014).

A little later in our conversation, when Eslam had gone to watch a film, Adel returned to discuss his situation. He said his current job is not a permanent job, it had made him suffer a lot. He then said he thinks he is “lazy” (*kaslaan*), because he has not been proactive since starting this job to look for another one, or work on his skills. Instead he spends a lot of time doing ‘nothing.’

He then quickly insisted that he would look for courses in English and accountancy after Ramadan, the Holy month in which they were fasting every day. He really wanted to find an accountancy job, he said, followed by a long sigh.

Adel had labelled himself as lazy in direct comparison with his committed friend. This was one of many times he would call himself lazy. He would perceive that his actions, both in the past and present, had not been enough to secure a good job. For example, he had not studied hard at university: “I would sleep for two days in a row.” He had worked hard at the beginning but received bad grades, and when he did not work hard he received good grades. He therefore did not bother. As context, university grading is notoriously chaotic, and I would hear many stories of people not working as a result. But Adel now regretted this, he blamed himself. After graduating, he stayed home for a year not doing much. During this time he forgot accountancy and English. He even attended the GTO course for a day, but did not continue. He also regretted this. If he had taken it, he said, he would be in a great position now – although I thought of Eslam when he said this. Adel’s decision to come to Cairo formed part of his efforts to begin working hard. It was indeed stimulated by his successful friend. But Adel was now being lazy again in Cairo. He was not doing anything outside work, spending too much time doing useless things like watching television, or sleeping.

What can be seen here is how the discursive introduction of meritocracy fosters a moral economy between individuals, those who work hard, and those who do not (Lamont, 2002). It is what Asad (2015) labelled a ‘subjectivisation of morality.’ In this case, Adel passed a moral judgement on his present and former self. He is ‘injuring’ himself, but this injury stems from the presence of a discursive terrain of meritocracy (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). However, through

this identification with self-injury Adel was able to reintroduce a feeling of hope, as it provided a possible blueprint to move towards a different path.

For Eslam, this reorientation was achieved through calling on the power of God. During his period of confusion, Eslam posted the following quotation on Facebook: “la illaha illa anta sabhanak iny kunt min elzalemiyyn” (none has the right to be worshipped by You (Allah), Glorified are You. Truly, I have been of the wrong-doers). This famous Quranic verse represents a symbolic act of repentance for sins committed which have caused present difficulties. It also symbolises a promise to be better, which could thereby secure reward in the future. This act of public prayer helped Eslam to feel better. It reminded him that God is looking after him, and that his present difficulties were part of a broader plan or test. Explaining this to me afterwards, he said:

“You need to have patience, and faith you will be rewarded by God. You have faith you will get a good job, marriage, have kids. I have confidence those things will happen. Something will happen to make it ok. These conditions are a test. You need to live in a good way to keep a good relationship with God, not because of getting rewards though. But he will look after you.”

Eslam’s faith kept him “calm.” The act of prayer, as it had done over the summer, would help dispel feelings of doubt. This represents what Miyazaki (2004) termed an ‘abeyance of agency,’ whereby future events are placed in the hands of God, who will ensure eventual reward (di Nunzio, 2014). However, modern Islamic belief also returns agency to the individual (Mahmood, 2004). It was Eslam’s duty to ‘live in a good way.’ Only this way would he secure reward. This involves not just acts of religiosity, such as prayer, or being helpful (gada’) to

others, but also working hard, as Adel explained through a story “from the time after the Prophet”:

“there were two brothers, one who prayed all the time and did nothing else, and one who worked all the time to look after his family. God told them that the one who worked was more devoted to God. So it is not just about praying all the time, you have to look after your life, family, and yourself, and do things for your life and work.”

Religious discourses therefore hold within them an affective quality that is productive of hope. The concept of religious divination and reward captured within these quotes and stories generates a transpersonal affective terrain that is brought into contact with the body during acts of speech or prayer. It produces bodily shifts that induce feelings of hope, and calmness. Prayer involves calling on a transpersonal power that promises reward, while returning agency to the individual. Modern Islam thus enacts a moral economy in which individuals must constantly (re)secure reward through individual action. In this way, it constantly leaves open the space for hope.

Bill Gates once said...

In response, after Ramadan all three of my flatmates went on the hunt for English courses that they could take while working. They knew this was a difficult task owing to their limited funds and changing shift times, but they were excited about the possibility. An English training centre would be a place which might generate hope. Eslam and Mohammed completed placement tests in a low-cost centre near to the house, only to be told there were only afternoon classes,

meaning they were unable to go. Adel was put in a 9am class. For two sessions he managed to get up in time. I would speak to him afterwards as he recalled with excitement the things he was (re)learning, although the size of the class meant he could not contribute very much. Adel said his mother was encouraging him to attend the class as well. However, in general his parents did not get involved in this aspect of his life. In fact, his father thought Adel would marry from within the call centre, an idea Adel found laughable. Adel's attendance of the course did not last. On the third session he failed to wake up, having gone to bed at 3am the previous night after his shift.

This set of events immediately punctured their newfound hope. It also revealed one of the barriers faced by these young men in their pursuit of self-development. They could not leave their current job due to financial constraints and could not therefore take new courses due to time limitations. Mahmoud at some point had tried to find a part-time call centre job while he took an English course, but was told repeatedly he needed to commit full-time. This induced an angry proclamation that companies just want to keep Egypt's youth as 'slaves' rather than allow them to progress. However, when I had a conversation with Adel on the day he missed class, he said he felt bad. He reiterated that he thinks he is lazy, using his inability to wake up as proof. He had thought he was too tired and so would not be able to concentrate. I said it was very difficult owing to his schedule, but he insisted that despite this he still should have done it. He then said he has also been lazy in looking for an accountancy course. He insisted he would change though: "I am motivated to do it, I will try." He went on:

"I need to put myself in uncomfortable situations for my future, you have done it, you came here, away from family and friends. But you enjoy it too, you enjoy the new experiences even though it is hard. I need to do the same. You know

Bill Gates said four things you need to do to be successful, the first one is never get lazy, then to always keep trying...I can't remember the others. I need to take the opportunity I have in Cairo. I came here to develop myself and work hard. It is a very important time but I am not making the most of it. I am getting stuck. I need to work hard now".

Rather than focusing on his job schedule, or the fact he does not have money to leave it, Adel continued to inflict injury, by blaming himself for 'giving up' the English class. To back up the direction of this blame he pointed to me as an example of someone working hard to achieve their goals, and then rather hazily recalled lessons from Bill Gates about the perseverant character one needs to secure 'success.' This hazy recollection, I thought, revealed the fragility of this lesson. What goes missing is the privilege enjoyed by both me, and perhaps Bill Gates, that enabled us to get where we are. I wanted to come back and outline my privilege, but realised this discourse would not be heard, that it would not want to be heard. Adel had again brought to life, this time using Bill Gates' entrepreneurial wisdom, a meritocratic moral economy that differentiated between hard working and lazy individuals. Although this led to self-blame, it enabled Adel to discursively keep hope alive. Focusing on his under-privilege, or my privilege, was useless. It would induce depression. Asserting his own laziness enabled him to perceive that he might change, and begin working hard like me and Bill Gates. Adel was calling on a meritocratic discourse that legitimised his structural under-privilege, because he needed to maintain a focus on himself to keep going. By actively calling on these discourses, Adel was constructing an affective atmosphere that enabled him to hope. Indeed, the moral economy he was sustaining developed an affective quality of hope.

This moral economy was also reproduced by various visitors to the flat. One evening I brought Gamal, who knew Eslam from GTO. Gamal was at this point working as an unpaid lawyer, believing he was headed towards a paid law job. He therefore felt good about himself. Gamal immediately started asking Eslam if he was taking courses, before suggesting places he could look, AUC and Berlitz (both extremely expensive). Eslam said he could not take courses because his work schedule would not allow it. Gamal said he should leave then, but Eslam shot back, tentatively, saying he cannot afford to do that. When he then discovered Eslam had an English literature degree, he said “you should be a trainer!” He then asked if he was at least saving money, and Eslam said not really. Although Gamal was trying to help, his advice felt like a brutal dissection of Eslam’s stagnation. It placed emphasis on his decisions, and served to increase his perception that he was not doing anything ‘useful,’ in contrast to Gamal.

I am a struggler

Adel, Eslam, and Mohammed set about making new plans. Adel asked me to ask my friends if they knew a good accountancy course. I knew someone who worked in accountancy at PwC, so asked him. He said the only course that makes a difference is the Certified Management Accountant course, and that Adel would need to do it very soon, otherwise it would be too late. I asked him how much this course would cost; he said at least 10,000LE (US\$1250) for the course and more for exams. This was a fee Adel would never be able to afford. I reluctantly told Adel. He had heard about it but also knew it was way beyond his means. He soon made another plan that did not rely on attending a course. He would buy a laptop with savings accumulated from work, and use it to study both English and accountancy, and also to look for courses and jobs. He talked about this for a while before actually doing it, as he struggled to find the time and money. But it was an exciting moment, not only was he buying a ‘cool’ new

piece of technology, but this materialised his hope for an ensuing period of hard work, and thus prospective mobility. Eslam too bought a laptop from his home in Sohag in order to learn English and search for jobs. Adel also bought an internet stick, but Eslam could not afford one.

In the following days, I witnessed increased activity from these young men. Every night after work, Eslam would spend half an hour watching English films and reading a university textbook he had brought from home. He would write down on a notepad words he did not know, before looking up their meaning on his phone, or asking me. This simple practice helped relieve the stress which had built up as a result of his life being consumed by work. It gave the house an atmosphere of hope and forward momentum, and gave him the sense he was doing something ‘useful’ with his time, which was beneficial for his future. Adel tried to do the same. He set up a make-shift desk in his room, and would sit and write random words and phrases he was picking up from material he used. One day he showed me videos of English conversations between Saudi women that he had received from a friend who worked as an English instructor in Saudi Arabia. He gave them to Eslam. These objects, the book, the laptop, and notepad reflected the materiality of their hope. They were vital tools for the precarious construction of a sense of prospective mobility, though they also signified to me their inability to engage in more structured learning. For me, they therefore had a different affect.

When Adel came home one day in August he insisted we speak English. Up to that point we had never spoken English, apart from translating occasional words. It was always a struggle for us to communicate, and their tiredness made it more difficult. But Adel had decided we should start so he could practice. He then went to get his laptop to show me a film he had downloaded at home and watched: *The Pursuit of Happiness*. He wanted me to translate a section. When I finished he said: “this film is an inspiration to Egyptians, because they are used

to these problems, they feel them, the problems Will Smith faces, he struggles a lot, he is close to homelessness, but he is successful in the end through hard work. Egyptians find a lot of hope in that, that they will be rewarded, despite the challenges they meet.”

This film was referenced by many of the young men I met. They had heard about it through word of mouth, or from Facebook posts of friends who shared a link to articles describing ‘inspirational movies.’ This film involves a protagonist, Will Smith, a victim of poverty, homelessness, and institutional racism, who, through continual struggle, manages to overcome these barriers and prove that he is qualified for a prestigious job on Wall Street. The film presents the quintessential American dream, teaching people that, despite tough conditions, through hard work they might find success. It is powerful because it shows the existence of systemic prejudice, but shows that the system remains open. The film again materialised Adel’s optimism. Watching it – in the language of affect, encountering this object – affected in him a sense of hope. This also shows how consumption activities did not only distract or induce pleasure, they could simultaneously incite hope for the future.

Adel and Eslam would fluctuate in and out of ‘hard work’ during this period. Adel admitted that he was struggling for motivation: “it is hard studying on your own, I don’t know what to do, you learn Arabic here, not in England.” Adel was poignantly laying bare the structural constraints faced by these young men. My fluency in Arabic had only been achieved by being paid to travel to Egypt, take courses, and live with Egyptians. They were attempting to learn English by listening to videos in their homes surrounded by non-English speakers. But this did not stop Adel trying. On days when he did not study, he would say he felt bad, especially when he saw me taking field notes late at night. On other days he would study and feel good about it. One afternoon I came home and Adel immediately said he had woken up early because he

did not want to be lazy. I felt obliged to join in with the positivity, to secure the atmosphere, so I congratulated him. We then sat down in front of the television and began talking again about his situation:

“I am fed up with the water, and the heat in the flat. I could live in Zagazig and be comfortable, but what work would I do? There are guys who work in small shops, one in a small accountancy job, but I want more. Everyone who has good work came to Cairo. Like my friend who works for the Saudi company. He struggled for a long time to get into his field, he applied again and again to companies, and memorised the questions, and in the end he was accepted. He was good in English. He took a course while we were in university called New Horizons, it was for English, presentation skills stuff like that. I was rejected from it because you needed to speak English. I was really bad, they asked me to describe myself in English and I said “what?!” This course would have been amazing, if I had taken it I would have been sorted. He is successful now through hard work, I could have done that.”

Adel then referenced another friend who worked in a bank. He also had the same education, but he did courses in accountancy and English. He never took the sort of job Adel had taken. I suggested the friend might have had money to take courses. Adel said: “yes maybe, but he had the motivation, he would not accept the shitty jobs we are in.” Adel said he was lazy compared to him, but that he was trying to change his schedule: “that’s why I got up early!” He then reiterated – almost telling himself – that he had come to Cairo and put himself in a tough situation. He is not like people who work in small shops, or even in the call centre, they accept these jobs and do not look for better like he is willing to do.

Reflecting on this worry about the future, Adel said youth in Egypt are always focused on the future, always stressed about it. You can have a comfortable life abroad, not in Egypt. He then referenced *The Pursuit of Happiness*, and the lesson it teaches people again: “the conditions suck here, but at the start of that film there was a homeless guy who just sleeps, accepts his lot, and gives up, but Will Smith doesn’t, he struggles and doesn’t give up, and is eventually rewarded.” As we were talking, Eslam overheard our discussion of the film. He said, “I like watching films like that.” I asked him why, he replied: “it gives you power, it gives you a positive belief that things are possible.”

This conversation brought forth a palpable sense of déjà vu for me. Adel had talked about his two successful friends, as well as *The Pursuit of Happiness*, many times. It reveals another attempt, while sitting in this dilapidated flat, to wrestle with his own predicament in comparison with successful others. He ‘knew’ he had been lazy in the past. He regretted this, and thought he could be in a good position now if he had worked harder. But he was trying to identify himself with his successful friends, and with Will Smith, because he was now making an effort. He was also trying to disassociate himself from youth who remained in his home town, who had given up – like the homeless man in the film – and accepted their simple jobs.

In another conversation a few days later, Adel was surer of himself. He had seen my copy of Samuli Schielke’s *Egypt in the Future Tense* (2015). On the cover is a picture of a man leaning against a wall holding a cigarette. Adel immediately said: “who is that sarsagy? Is that how you are representing Egypt, who represents us? He is holding a cigarette, doing drugs, he is not doing anything useful.” Adel said a sarsagy is “a person who wants to hang in the street and pick pockets, he holds a knife, and takes money from people.” A sarsagy depends on his words, whereas a baltagy (thug) depends on his body. Adel said he knew people in Zagazig like this.

They had given up getting a good job and just hang out in cafes, smoke hashish, and drink all the time. These are activities which distract you from the tasks you have to do in life:

“If you need to do something, pay money to get something done, and you drink alcohol, you could forget all about it, so it doesn’t help you solve the problems in your life, you just forget them. According to religion it is wrong, all were drinking before the Prophet decreed it wrong, if you pray you can’t focus on God and your words if you have drunk something.”

I half-jokingly, and perhaps cruelly, said television might do the same. Adel agreed, saying it allows you to disconnect, but he also said “you can switch it off.”

Adel thought that people in his hometown were distracting themselves. He, on the other hand, was in Cairo working to develop himself. He was being a ‘mukāfeh’ (struggler). Adel was not alone, many of these young men would compare themselves favourably, and unapologetically, with imaginary youth who had never tried, or had stopped trying to improve their situations. My interlocutors were moving away from home, studying, and searching for better. They were ‘mukāfehīyyn’ (strugglers), active men who are always doing something to improve themselves. They do not complain. For this, they accrue respect, in the expectation they will secure social mobility. This has similarities with Sharad Chari’s (2004) notion of ‘toil,’ which the Indian Gounder class utilise to explain their mobility. Others had ‘surrendered’ to the difficult conditions. They ‘waste time’ hanging out in cafés, smoking hashish, playing PlayStation, talking about unimportant things like girls and gossip (namām), and complaining that trying for better is useless due to the prevalence of wasta. My interlocutors actively avoided these pursuits. Their mid-20s was a period in which men are supposed to work hard they

explained, not relax (Ghannam, 2013).

These young men were therefore sustaining, through their conversations, a moral economy which differentiated between individuals. Its epistemological origins can be located in a variety of materials, both transnational and Egyptian, in the narratives of religious divination, the stories of heroic success in Hollywood films, and in the objects, discourses and places of the hopeful city described in the previous chapter. However, they were repeatedly called upon by these young lower-middle class men because of their affective qualities that induced feelings of hope. Over time, through repetitive discussion, this moral economy itself developed an affective ‘atmosphere’ of its own. Its affective pull explains why it was continually restored, and why it retained its power amongst these young men.

I left Cairo in August 2015 with these young men still working in the call centre, studying English intermittently on their own. Adel said to me that when I came back in October, he would have left the job and taken an accountancy course. I did not have much communication with them in the interim, only speaking to Eslam via Facebook in September. He was angry with himself because he had not improved his English. He was not studying much because he was tired from work. He had also looked again for a suitable English course but could not find one.

I said it would be different

When I returned in late October, Adel was still in the call centre. He quickly recalled telling me he would be in a different position: “I said I would be in a different place, taking a course, in different work, but it is so hard, taking a course takes money.” He had looked but struggled

to find an accountancy course he could afford. He had not looked for another job either. He would leave the call centre first, so he could look properly, he said. Adel still planned to look for an accountancy course. He reiterated: “you can earn 20,000LE as an accountant!” He *had* taken an English course during my time away, in the same centre as before. However, the lack of improvement rather punctured the euphoria he might have felt from carrying out this difficult task. The classroom was overcrowded, and so he did not have the chance to practice his speaking much. He then showed me a Charles Dickens book he had brought from home that he was slowly reading. “I am still trying,” he said, before saying with a sigh: “rabina yisahil (God make it easy), lāzim na‘mil illy ‘alīna” (we need to do what we are supposed to do). Adel again, in this moment of anguish and regret at his immobility, called on God to smooth his passage. He asserted that he was trying to do his duty in return.

But, despite these actions, Adel was upset with himself. Reflecting on the difficulties he has continued to face, he said that you need so much money for everything now, “I need to pay for an accountancy course,” he exclaimed. However, right after this, he stressed: “if I wasn’t lazy I would have left the work and looked for other work already.” He said he could have found a different job and saved money for a course. Adel then told me about a book he had downloaded on to his laptop and started reading. It was by an American self-help guru called Zig Ziglar. Adel was shocked when I said I did not know him, perhaps throwing into question his legitimacy. But Adel insisted he was very famous, “he is an inspiration to all youth, you should ask them, they will all know him.” Zig Ziglar, according to Adel, “helps youth to keep on looking positive, and not get fed up with trying.” He recalled a metaphor he had particularly liked in the book:

“Two guys are trying to get water from a well, and it is really hard to do, and the guy was struggling when it got near the top, and wanted to give up. But if you let go it will go back down and you have to start over again. So it is a metaphor (isti‘ara) for life that you shouldn’t let go, you should keep struggling until you reach your goal.”

Adel quickly went on to tell me about the ‘Egyptian version’ of Zig Ziglar, Ibrahim el Fiky. He has also written similar books in Arabic.⁷¹ El Fiky, Adel said, had started as a waiter and ended up owning a chain of restaurants, taking courses to get there. Adel had watched him on television before and also downloaded one of his books. According to Adel, one thing it claims is that the worst thing to do is “talking only, talking about your goals and not doing them.” Adel recognised himself in this. He is lazy, talking about all the stuff he wants to do, like an accountancy course, changing jobs, or learning English, but he is not doing them.

By this point I understood Adel’s perspective, that he talks a lot about doing stuff without ever getting around to doing them. But I understood this as a product of his lack of money to afford an accountancy course and an exhausting job that took up his time and energy. All he could do was talk, plan and plan again. I was reminded of the character of Davies in Harold Pinter’s *The Caretaker*, who keeps on talking about getting a new pair of shoes, an act that would symbolise the start of a journey to a better future. This act of planning was all Adel could do in order to keep the future open. But Adel put his inability to put this plan into action down to a personal failing. He also ignored that he had taken an English course. Because of the moral economy he had helped sustain, which connects mobility to hard work, his immobility must be the result of ‘laziness.’ This was backed up by an idea he had read in a self-help book, another object which

⁷¹ Kenney (2015) discusses the increased popularity of self-help literature in Egypt since the infitaah.

was able to affect him with hope. He recognised himself as a person who spends too much time talking and not enough time doing. This self-help book again sustained an injurious moral economy between successful and failing individuals. Yet, Adel was ready to hear it. He had sought the book out in order to find ways to improve his life. Asserting his own failure in this moment enabled him to hope to change, again.

A few days later, I came home and told Adel that one of my interlocutors had been asked to recruit youth for call centre work – thereby taking part in the economy of hope himself – but had not received payment in return. Adel was not shocked. He said they are thieves. He mentioned the terrible pay in his own company, but quickly changed tack: “but Mahmoud is good, he will succeed because he is looking and struggling. I am confident I will find something too; I will be satisfied in the end. There is a phrase in Egypt “lāzim ta‘mil illy aliyyk, we rabina heya‘mil al bāqy”” (you need to do what you are supposed to do, and God will do the rest). Adel repeated a religious phrase he had said a few times, which discursively makes a claim on the future. Again, he quickly reoriented this anger-inducing story towards a positive end, because he needed to.

Déjà vu

Two days before my departure at the end of November, I found Adel on the sofa early in the morning studying from an old, battered-looking Arabic book on accountancy. He would explain later that this was a book from his first year of university, the year he had worked hard but failed. He had brought it from home to study. But, he said, he did not remember the material, so was finding it difficult. He then said he needed to learn accountancy in English anyway, not Arabic.

On this day another flatmate joined these young men. Mostafa used to work in the call centre with them, but had been fired due to a prolonged injury lay-off. He had spent six months looking for a job with regular day-shifts so he could take an evening HR course, which he was now doing. Mostafa had the long-term goal of travelling abroad, and felt he was working hard to achieve this. He blamed other young people in Egypt for giving up and spending time distracting themselves through hanging out in the café or watching football. He on the other hand was working hard to improve himself. He believed that God would reward him for that.

Adel looked upon Mostafa with some jealousy. He checked if there were other jobs in the same place Mostafa worked, but there were not. In Adel's words Mostafa had 'gained experience' from his six months doing interviews and being rejected, and looking for courses. Adel, on the other hand, felt he was standing still. He then mentioned his friend again who works in the Saudi company: "he makes me feel lazy, he didn't enter the call centre at all, he learned wrong and right answers, and finally succeeded in an interview. He took a 700LE accountancy course in Zagazig, I should have done that." He then said he wishes he could take the New Horizons course he had been rejected from long ago in university: "I would be really good now if I had taken it, it would be so useful these skills like how to search for jobs, how to do interviews." He became very good in English when he took a course in Zagazig. He was the best in the class, using complicated words even when others did not understand.

Adel, stimulated by Mostafa's arrival and seeming mobility, recollected the past here, the missed opportunities, and the periods in which he had gained skills, and compared it to his stagnant present. He again lamented his need to take an accountancy course, and an English one too, but this time not in a cheap centre. He regretted not using me more for my English.

He could do an accountancy course for 700LE (US\$88) but he knew he needed to do an electronic course. I asked if he could do it in Zagazig, but he immediately said he could not go back there. Returning would represent failure. He again said he feels bad because he is not looking for courses. I then asked why he cannot leave work and do courses for a while. He said: “I wish they would make me leave, fire me, so I am pushed into doing something!” After I pushed him a little more, Adel admitted in hushed tones that he would have a financial problem if he left.

This revealed the structural predicament in which Adel found himself. He cannot leave the job due to financial constraints. In the job he cannot take a course, or even afford one that would make a difference. But Adel’s reluctance to admit that highlights his desire to ignore the barriers he faces. He does not want to think about the reasons why he cannot do something. Instead, he cries out for someone to ‘make’ him do something. I then said to Adel, rather slyly: “I thought that you see yourself as lazy?” He responded: “yes, I am.” I said I do not agree with the idea that youth are lazy. He agreed, saying he knows youth work hard. He told me about a friend who left the call centre four months ago, and has been unemployed since. He is depressed; Adel said he would feel the same way if he was in the same situation. Finally, he said: “I am unsure if people are lazy, or if it is the conditions here.”

Later that evening, Adel asked what piece of advice I would give him after my research. He was looking for some hope. I struggled to answer, first saying I did not really know, before letting out, in a slightly comical yet uncomfortable voice, “find wasta, get money, or travel.” The truth is I thought Adel could do very little to get the kind of job he hoped for, but this was not what he wanted to hear. He responded: “that’s all you have out of your research?!” I then quickly thought about it and said: “I think you need to look for a job with fixed shifts, so you

can take courses like Mostafa is doing.” This answer was better received. Adel finally reiterated that he needs a serious English place, not any place. The reason I found this so difficult was because I knew Mostafa’s seeming mobility was also fake. Even though he was taking courses, Mostafa was also struggling to move where he wanted to go.

Conclusions

This chapter has revealed the attempts of three young men who feel a sense of entrapment, to sustain movement in their lives. In a situation where their options were so limited, all they could do is talk over and over about what they want to do, what they are doing, and what they regret they have not done in the past to reach their dreams. The text is repetitive, going over the same thing again and again, because the same thing happened during my time in the flat again and again. Their entrapment resulted from their falling middle-class position in Egypt’s social structure (see Chapter 3). However, these young men had been told repeatedly that their dreams were reachable, despite the country’s difficult conditions. They went through round after round of trying to exercise hard work, and perceiving mobility as a result. But when they did not get anywhere, when their jobs or English level did not change, when they did not find that course, they blamed themselves, falling back on explanations provided by self-help and religious divination. These explanations were found in books, films, stories and prayer. These objects and discourses generated affective intensities which induced hope when these young men encountered them. In this way, self-blame turned into a way of coping, of keeping hope alive. They could not think about the structural injustice to which they were victim. In the context of everyday life, outside moments of revolution, these narratives induced frustration and depression, not hope. They had to focus on their own ability to work harder. Repeatedly talking about this represented an attempt to sustain movement. It was all they could do.

In relaying the story of these young men, I have contributed a number of points to literature on hope-making, and more broadly on the lives of people living in conditions of precarity and waithood. Waithood can be an extremely active endeavour. There must be a distinction between objects – and the practices that engage them – which distract from difficult emotions, such as social media, television, consumptive items, and the gym, and practices such as self-study, reading self-help, or praying, which re-enact hope. Hope though is ephemeral in the lives of people who are structurally immobile. It has to be constantly relocated. In this case it was relocated through bringing to life meritocratic discourses that serve to legitimise one's marginal position, and inflict self-injury. This reintroduces a notion of power and morality to analysis on groups experiencing waithood. Though these young men became confused, fatigued, and disbelieving when they stood still, they actively returned to, and sustained, a moral economy in which individuals (including themselves) are blamed for failure. This acted to keep concealed the structural inequalities which have produced their condition. They did this because, without this moral economy, they would lose all hope and become depressed. Its power is sustained through emotion. Those intent on battling structural inequality must recognise this emotional pull. When people are engaged in the race for a good life, they need to continue believing that it is possible to reach. They need hope. They cannot listen to critiques of structural inequality, even if they recognise them. This crucial aspect of hope is the focus of the next chapter.

I believe the chapter sheds some light on the ways people cope in conditions of immobility. Perhaps the reader can recognise themselves in the text. I certainly go through similar emotions, feeling stressed about not working hard enough, and guilty about distracting myself too much. I also criticise the premise of having to be so active. However, I keep going, and reengage,

because I feel I have to. The difference between me and these young men is my privilege that enables me to keep movement towards a desired future alive. It is certainly not down to my hard work. We must continue to lay bare this fallacy.

Chapter 6 Cruel hope

“Imagine you are in an isolated desert, with no food or water, you’ll die for sure by the end of the day. And you find a map to a well, but it’s too far and you will never make it. But you don’t have anything else to do but wait for death and think about that. Instead of waiting for death and hurting yourself with negative thoughts, you decide to keep yourself busy, you decide to take the trip to the well, although you know you will never make it, but the feeling of doing this trip and the feeling of drinking water from the well is much better than the feeling of waiting for death. In both ways you are going to die, but it’s all about feelings. The hope of the hopeless, it’s not about achieving anything, it’s just how it makes you feel.”

As we sat in his room in his aunt’s flat, Mahmoud was explaining to me his attempts to keep hope alive. It was November 2015, and he had been through innumerable disappointments in his tormented pursuit of a respectable job. These had brought forth intense feelings of anger and depression, and talk of suicide. He now had no belief that his efforts would be rewarded in Cairo’s rigged labour market. But, Mahmoud kept being active in his day-to-day life. He kept applying to jobs, searching for opportunities to travel abroad, planning his imagined entrepreneurial project, and making wish-lists of items he wanted to buy in the future. On this day, Mahmoud candidly described to me why he still did these aspirational activities. It was not because he believed that they would come to fruition, but rather because the feeling of hope that these activities gave him was preferable, or at least more bearable, than the feeling of ‘waiting for death,’ the feeling of remaining where he was. He did them to *make* himself feel good. After this comment he launched back into describing the burger restaurant he would one day open: ‘Big Ben Burgers.’

This quotation sums up a crucial aspect of hope on which this chapter focuses, namely the body's compulsion for the feeling of hope. Previous chapters have revealed how the discursive and material terrain of meritocracy and individualisation induced a belief that one's dreams will be realised. This, in turn, affects the body with a feeling of hope. In this chapter, I reveal how people keep returning to this terrain, not through belief, but because of the subject's desire, or need, for hope. This renders these objects and discourses powerful because of their affective pull, their ability to produce hope rather than their ability to produce a belief in the possibility of realisation. I draw on Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism (2011), which argues that individuals develop an attachment to the mythical promises of the good life, despite their perpetual break down, so that they can carry on living in the world. I similarly argue that these young Egyptian men hold on to meritocratic forms of hope which have caused so much hardship, and which are revealed as false, in order to avoid 'death.'

The chapter focuses primarily on two young men, Mahmoud and Ibrahim, both of whom the reader has met in previous chapters. As time passed, and their journeys towards their dreams were repeatedly blocked, feelings of frustration, depression, and fear became more common, and critique of the meritocratic myths in which they had previously invested, spread. Yet, despite encroaching disbelief, these men repeatedly refused to accept where they are, and returned to these promising forms of hope, submitting applications to jobs and scholarships, planning and reading about imagined entrepreneurial ventures, and engaging in self-study. They did this in order to foreclose the depression that stems from the realisation that their trajectories and aspirations have been ripped apart.

Throughout the chapter, I will discuss the consequences of these activities for theorising the compliance of people in dominant systems of hierarchical power. Drawing on studies that

recognise its multifaceted, often contradictory nature (Burawoy, 1979; Willis, 1981; Wedeen, 1999; Yurchak, 2006; Ghertner, 2015), I challenge a view that compliance arises from active, conscious ‘consent.’ These young men hold on to meritocratic promises which legitimise their own marginal positions, and the privileged positions of the upper-classes, not because they were duped into believing in them, but because they were attached to the feeling this belief had given them. Their compliance is secured affectively. I also suggest that these activities might constitute an act of defiance as well, against the denial of their claim to a good life. Their compliance is only produced, perversely, through a refusal to accept one’s ‘lot’ (naseeb) in life.

The origins of hope

The previous two chapters have focused on how a hopeful sensibility – what Miyazaki (2004) defines as a sense of ‘prospective momentum’ – comes into being and gets sustained over time among people experiencing class immobility. Work in both Anthropology and Geography has for a number of years tackled a similar question, and yet there remains an unresolved tension arising from the subject’s inherent need for a sense of hope. The philosopher Ernst Bloch (1986) viewed a hopeful sensibility as an intrinsic aspect of human consciousness. He asserted the presence of a ‘not-yet conscious,’ a consciousness that is formed in anticipation of the future. Within this consciousness, people formulate ‘presentiments’ of what they might become, and thereby generate a feeling of hope. Thus for Bloch, hope is an inherent component of the ‘not-yet conscious,’ driven by the future’s intrinsic indeterminacy.⁷²

⁷² Michael Jackson (2011) suggests the existence of hope for the future is driven by an inherent sense of insufficiency in the present.

But ethnographic work has in the last decade attempted to show how a hopeful sensibility is far from constant in human life. Many people at certain moments do not feel hopeful about the future. Scholars have demonstrated how hopefulness emerges and disappears in response to particular socio-historical conditions, historically and contextually contingent existential pursuits, and forms of knowledge production (Miyazaki, 2004). Recent ethnographic studies have shown how groups who are dispossessed of a gendered, classed, and aged sense of ‘prospective momentum’ – the unemployed, refugees, prisoners – attempt to reintroduce a sense of hope through practices that induce a “radical temporal reorientation of knowledge” (Miyazaki, 2004: 5; Mains, 2012; Weiss, 2009; Vigh, 2009; Pedersen, 2012; di Nunzio, 2014; Elliot, 2015). Stimulated by these studies, I have argued that, for educated un/underemployed young Egyptians, working on or submitting an application for a desirable job, engaging in self-study, planning an entrepreneurial venture, and reciting discourses of self-help and religious divination similarly work to sustain a sense of hope and temporal mobility towards a good future. I highlighted moreover that the “hopeful city,” as a set of objects, places, and discourses, plays an integral role in this process, through generating and extending meritocratic discourses which promise mobility to all and therefore affecting these young men with this feeling.

However, this literature underplays the integral role played by the subject in sustaining hope. It often lacks a temporal dimension, which would introduce the question of how people respond to hopes unrealised. Morten Pedersen (2012: 146) posits that sustaining hope involves a process of ‘work,’ of planning for “deliberately unrealisable endpoints whose purpose is the (re)production of social momentum.” I argued instead that hopes are not always ‘deliberately unrealisable.’ I have shown in previous chapters how these young men are told repeatedly that their improbable hopes *are* realisable. But Pedersen does recognise an important aspect of hope, that it is unconstrained by realism (Crapanzano, 2003). The subject’s intrinsic need for a

sense of purpose can drive its emergence, and override perceptions of whether it is realistic (see Ralph, 2015). What that sense of purpose entails, the intensity of the need, and the ways in which hope is created and maintained are always dependent upon socio-historical conditions. But, what happens when those ‘endpoints’ are repeatedly left unrealised? Does the subject continue recreating hope? If so, why and how? And when does the subject decide to stop?

Lauren Berlant, in her 2011 book *Cruel Optimism*, adds this temporal dimension to this sense of hope, or optimism (see also Muñoz, 2009). Berlant (2011: 24) defines cruel optimism in the context of the liberal-capitalist United States as a:

“relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic. What’s cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world.”

Berlant analyses particular ‘scenes’ – from intimacy, to dieting, to voting, to the belief in meritocracy – which she defines as pillars of liberal-democratic notions of the good life. She posits that this ‘cluster of promises,’ which is supposed to connote the good life, is breaking down in contemporary capitalism following post-war neoliberal restructuring. This is a process that has been the focus for a wide range of social inquiry in recent years (see Putnam, 2015; Rank et al. 2016 for further studies in a US context). Berlant, though, moves beyond this to

explore the continued stubbornness of these wrecked promises, answering the question of how they retain their power despite continual collapse. In an analysis of contemporary film, she argues that, despite their breakdown and the pain this iteratively produces, the disadvantaged maintain an ‘optimistic attachment’ to these promises – which deteriorate the conditions that enable happiness to flourish – precisely because their very presence represents the possibility of happiness, and thus “losing the bad object might be deemed worse than being destroyed by it.”⁷³ In this way, ‘optimism’ is sustained over time not because of the expectation of realisation, but because of a need for continuity, as liberal-democratic optimism in itself has become vital for people’s ability to keep on living in the world. Berlant therefore reveals the affective power of promises of the good life.

As in the previous chapter, perhaps we can all see ourselves in this. We are sold the promise of fulfilment, in our careers, in love, in our bodies, yet we are never able to fully reach it, or to feel it for long at least. Instead of giving up, or succumbing to apathy or cynicism, many of us continue in pursuit because we retain an attachment to this feeling of expectancy. Berlant’s argument, however, remains restricted both due to its Western centrality and its methodological focus on film. It is vital to uncover how this relation manifests itself beyond a Western post-war neoliberal context. Berlant also describes cruel optimism as a continuous relation, one that is not broken by temporary disbelief and cynicism. This is something I wish to complicate. Furthermore, unlike Berlant, I favour the word hope over optimism, in part due to its everyday usage among Egyptians, but also due to subtle differences in meaning. Optimism implies a generalised sense of confidence about the future, an expectation that outcomes will be positive. Hope is directed towards something desired, and defines a feeling that it could happen. It is thus both more specific, but entails less conviction.

⁷³ http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605_berlant_lauren_on_cruel_optimism/

The brink of ‘death’

By late 2015, Mahmoud had experienced innumerable disappointments in his quest to reach a good life. Over the year I knew him, he worked as a sales representative in Vodafone, which he hated, and in data entry in a large electrical appliance company, a job from which he was fired. Before that, since graduating in 2009, he had spells working as an accountant in a student dorm, a bank teller, a call centre agent, and even spent time serving kebabs. In between these jobs inside Egypt, he also spent a year working in the UAE. This long list, far from signifying a flexibility, signified the vulnerable precarity of Egypt’s, and the Gulf’s, contemporary labour market to which Mahmoud was exposed (Standing, 2011). All he craved was a stable white-collar job in a large company. Over the years, Mahmoud also made multiple efforts to develop himself, by taking training courses in soft skills and English, and engaging in endless self-study (see Chapter 4). Each time, engaging in these activities provided an intense feeling of expectation that he had finally found the missing link in his quest for a desirable job. Indeed, he has applied in vain for hundreds of jobs in Cairo, for many jobs and scholarships abroad, and searched for funding opportunities for a potential start-up. On one occasion in June 2015 I accompanied him to the Social Development Fund, because he had heard that they had a funding opportunity for the establishment of a small Vodafone accessories store.⁷⁴ He arrived a little sceptical, and was swiftly told that the person he needed to speak to was not available. He was then told that applicants needed to provide initial funds of 50,000LE (US\$6250), which he did not have. We left in frustration, with Mahmoud complaining about the policy of giving financial help to people who already had wealth.

⁷⁴ The SDF was created by the government in partnership with the UNDP in 1991 to support Egyptians returning from the Gulf after the First Gulf War. It now funds sustainable development and microcredit projects.

Each rejection, firing, or prolonged period spent in a difficult job affected Mahmoud with intense feelings of frustration. Especially hurtful were the events – like the time he unexpectedly had to leave the UAE because Egyptian nationals could no longer be hired in his position – that took away his dreams just as he had felt closest to them, when he even felt a brief sense of confidence. As he once explained to me: “every time I get closer I get further away, this is meant to hurt me.” After each disappointment, Mahmoud had to pick himself up and try again. But six years of struggle had taken their toll when the firing happened in August 2015. Mahmoud had been working for two months in a temporary data entry job. But he thought it could finally be a company in which he could find stability and grow. Mahmoud said to his manager one day that he was really happy because he felt: “I can finally plan for the future, for a car and a family.” His manager ominously responded by urging caution against such forward planning, but Mahmoud did not listen. He would talk to me every day about the exciting things happening in the job. He had been sent on a tour of the factory in a private car accompanied by an engineer in order to get to know the products and manufacturing process. He described how the other temporary employees were all jealous of him, and how the engineer had told him that he was asking all the right questions, that he knew how to think. Mahmoud’s manager often praised him for being a ‘fast learner,’ for being creative, and for working well. Mahmoud often boasted about his success to his friends. During this period, the city was generating an atmosphere of positivity and hope.

Two days after the factory tour, Mahmoud was called into the HR office when his manager was not around. He thought: this is finally it, all his efforts would be rewarded through a permanent position. But when he got there they told him he was being laid off. He thought they were joking at first, until they made him sign resignation papers. He asked them why, and they

simply said: “we don’t need you anymore.” On his way out, he spoke to a younger HR employee, to whom he had spoken before. He asked Mahmoud why he was being fired, “your file looks good,” he said. Mahmoud responded: “I really have no idea, I was working well.” The employee replied, if he had to guess, it was either so they can bring a relative in, or because Mahmoud was overqualified. They thought he would not stay long.

When I met Mahmoud, his face was full of anguish, and his voice trembled as he spoke. As soon as we met, he asked: “why did they do it Harry?” Wasta, he said, was not a reason because “why would they do it for such a shitty job, they should do it for other better jobs.” He did not understand their perception that he was overqualified either: “if they thought that why didn’t they just tell me, I would have said to them they are not right, I will stay in the job.” As he said this, Mahmoud pointed to a car in the street and said: “look, I would have bought a small car like this if I had kept the job, I would have been able to in four months, but not anymore.” Mahmoud had decided he could not tell his Aunt (with whom he was living) about losing the job, so every day he left the house at 6.30am as he had done when he went to work. Instead, he went to a library to use a computer and pass the time.⁷⁵ He could not tell her, he said, because she would be so disappointed, and would feel so sorry for him. He did not want to disappoint her.

As we walked, Mahmoud began lamenting the plight of educated youth in Egypt. They have worse prospects than the uneducated, he said, before relaying a story of a young woman he had seen selling perfume on the streets the other day. He could tell by her clothes she was educated, maybe to university level. He felt sorry for her because he understood her difficulty, “you work

⁷⁵ Berlant (2011) discusses how people feel compelled to sustain the pretense of a “normal” life after destructive events.

so hard to educate yourself here and you can't get a job after." He then said directly to me: "in Europe you get a chance to live, to build a decent life, but not here." In the weeks after this event, every time I met Mahmoud he would spend considerable time expressing his deep frustration with Egypt's labour market and rigged economy, the prevalence of wasta, the preference for those with private education, and the corruption of the rich. He would send to me pictures depicting this that he had found on social media (Figure 6.1) – a platform on which many youth, including Mahmoud, had previously shared hopeful quotes and pictures.

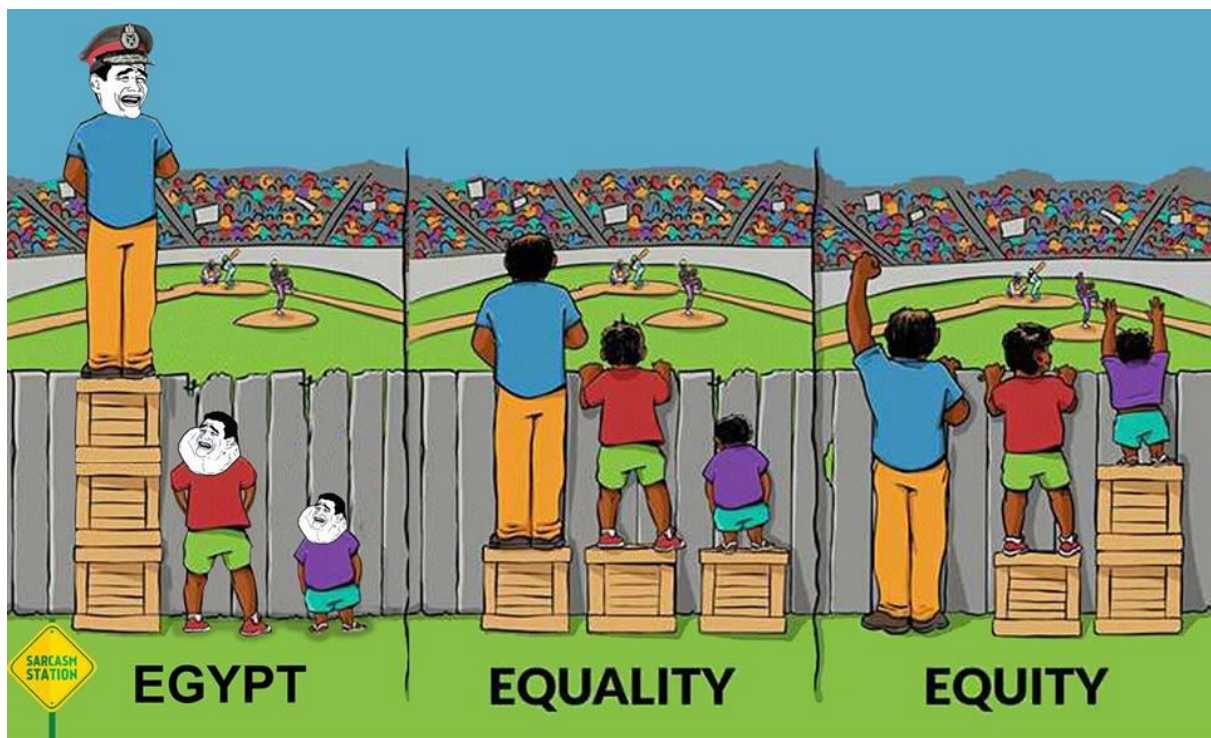


Figure 6.1 - Image comparing "Egypt, Equality, and Equity" (Source: Sarcasm Station)

This picture provides another example of how Egyptians, and these young men, used humour to criticise the inequality they now perceived as inhibiting (see Chapter 5). In response to this, Mahmoud said to me: "look, people know what is really happening in the country." The picture was shared on a page called 'sarcasm station,' and widely shared by its 'fans.' The picture is adapted from an original image created in 2012 by a US 'business professor' (hence the

baseball), who created it to illustrate the difference between ‘equality of opportunity’ and ‘equality of outcome’ in an argument with a conservative activist.⁷⁶ This picture compares that ‘equity’ and ‘equality’ with an Egyptian reality in which the older man, who is depicted as a gleeful, paternalistic army officer, is stood rigidly looking over the two children who cannot see. The children have puffed up faces, which originate from a well-known GIF comic character named ‘Forever Alone.’ This character is often used to express ‘loneliness and disappointment with life.’⁷⁷

Having previously watched self-help videos as a way of giving himself motivation to keep trying, Mahmoud now endlessly criticised those same activities, along with placing one’s faith in God. When I asked him during one meeting about the practice of reading self-help, Mahmoud immediately shot back angrily, saying people engage in these activities “just so they can create hope in their lives, because they need it. But it is bullshit and fake, it only enslaves youth in fake positivity”:

“Some people rely on believing God will make everything alright, other people find hope and inspiration in the stories of famous people like Steve Jobs. I’m the third kind, who has had enough of both.”

When I asked Mahmoud why he had lost belief in these forms of hope, he responded dismissively: “after six years of unemployment I have seen the real world Harry.”

⁷⁶ <https://medium.com/@CRA1G/the-evolution-of-an-accidental-meme-ddc4e139e0e4>

⁷⁷ <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/forever-alone>

Mahmoud at this point was judged by others – and at times even by himself – for the negativity and pessimism he exuded in group outings. He was considered ‘weak,’ no longer a mukāfih. Ibrahim was one of the people who judged him. In late 2015, even though he had also experienced many false starts in his pursuit of a good life, Ibrahim had a long-term plan. Remember how he had relocated to Cairo in early 2015 full of confidence that his entrepreneurial dream would be realised, only to leave again after two months because the job and living situation sapped his time, energy, and money. After that he also experienced numerous job rejections and failed attempts to find start-up funding. Every experience induced intense feelings of anger and sadness. Yet, each time he would overcome them by returning to the optimistic objects and discourses upon which he had relied. He reread about the success of his ‘idol’ Steve Jobs despite adversity (see Figure 6.2), immersed himself in English, asked either God, or successful entrepreneurs and career coaches, for guidance and help, who duly obliged, and even made a self-motivational PowerPoint outlining ways to maintain hope. Ibrahim returned to focusing on what he had done wrong in the past and what he could do better in the future. This enabled him to relocate a sense of hope, what he would describe as a sense of ‘power’ (qowa).⁷⁸

⁷⁸ For Ibrahim, Apple founder Steve Jobs represented someone who’s “eyes always tell me not to give up [his] dreams and there is always a way, and one day all dreams will come true” (adapted from one of Ibrahim’s Facebook posts). Jobs’ lack of education, “smartness,” “passion,” childhood adoption, and even his Syrian heritage provided inspiration to many Egyptians. He stood in moral contract to an Egyptian elite that made money through “stealing, giving bribes, utilising wasta, and trading drugs or weapons.”



Figure 6.2 - A picture Ibrahim kept on his laptop at home. This represents just one of the quotations he would use to maintain motivation (Source: author)

Ibrahim judged people like Mahmoud for ‘surrendering’ to the tough conditions. He passed a similar judgement on a friend in his village:

“Hossam has no job. He just sits in the shop all day. He sometimes skips it to smoke hashish. He is not happy at all. He wants to leave Egypt. He hates it. He didn’t try to apply for other jobs, because he knows he will be rejected. He thinks if he tries to develop himself someone who didn’t deserve the job will get it through wasta or bribes. I don’t agree with him though. He is very depressed. There is no benefit to being like that. I decided to take by reason, to earn it and not surrender. I have told him a lot not to surrender, but there is no hope. He could have tried to do something else but he took the easiest way, he has no fight, he doesn’t believe. He will probably stay in the shop his whole life.”

Thus, like Adel in the previous chapter, Ibrahim acquired moral value through his ability to be active and keep hope alive. He judged those who sat around, distracting themselves through smoking cigarettes and hashish, and complaining about Egypt.

However, in early 2016, Ibrahim's response was different. For almost a year, he thought he would travel to the UAE to work with his uncle who had promised him a job in the building firm in which he worked. Tellingly, familial *wasta* had come to his rescue after his many failed attempts within Egypt. Ibrahim spent that year, as well as thousands of pounds he took from his parents, taking two courses in order to acquire the necessary qualifications. Though Ibrahim was initially upset that he was leaving behind his entrepreneurial dream, he came to think that travelling to the Emirates would enable him to save money before returning to Egypt to open a start-up, as well as marry the girl he loved. However, at the last moment, the opportunity fell through. Though the details were hazy, his uncle had been unable to get him the position as he had promised.

Ibrahim was devastated. I was not in the country at the time, but he would not talk to me for a week afterwards. Describing the experience, he later said: "I became so fed up. I became annoyed all the time and smoked cigarettes. I even tried hashish." Ibrahim stopped reading, attending entrepreneurship events, and posting positive quotations on Facebook as he had been doing. Depression and apathy overwhelmed him. He would sit at home 'overthinking' about "how I can't achieve anything, how I haven't been able to achieve anything." This event closed up the future before him. Without travel, he would have to take a basic accountancy or sales job in his area, a job he had long resisted (see Chapter 3). This would kill any possibility of developing a start-up, drastically reduce his lifestyle trajectory, and even throw marriage into doubt.

When I next saw Ibrahim at his home in September 2016, he was a completely different person to the one I had known previously. His face looked tired and angry. In previous visits we had spent time looking at pictures from his entrepreneurship activities (for example the AUC start-up competition), and talking about Steve Jobs and his plans for a start-up. It thus constituted an atmosphere of positivity. But, on this occasion, we stood on his roof as he told me his friends had been right, there is no hope in Egypt. After previously rejecting them as excuses, he began railing against the *wasta* and corruption (*fassad*) in Egypt that turned powerful, creative youth like him into “slaves who *mashyeen fe dowama* (walk in whirlpool).” At one point he angrily told me a story he had heard from a friend:

“It is about a boy who loved a girl. He is a graduate of commerce. He had very good grades. His friend got a pass. Both applied to Bank of Egypt. His friend had *wasta* and got accepted even though he was a lot worse. He then stole the girl he loved. The boy is now working as a garage keeper. There is no hope...”

The only way to achieve a good life was to have *wasta*, or leave Egypt, he said. As he was telling me this story, my mind switched to the kinds of stories he used to tell me, about people who had ‘worked hard’ and found success.

Later, Ibrahim began telling me how he had questioned the existence of God during this period: “I haven’t prayed much, I felt that God is not with me, I don’t know why I am being punished so much because I worked hard and tried a lot but still failed.” As we talked on his roof, Ibrahim lit up a cigarette (which he was hiding from his family). I was shocked as this was a habit for which he had previously chastised young men in his neighbourhood as a symbol of surrender

and terminal stagnation. Now however, he said with a palpable sense of despondency, smoking was helping him to forget his troubles. Ibrahim had now become one of the ‘depressed.’

Both of these young men were stripped of that vital component of a meaningful life, namely the sense that “there is more to life than what exists for us in the here and now” (Jackson, 2011: xii). It underpins one’s impetus to carry on acting in the world. But now the affective atmosphere of the city (and in Ibrahim’s case the village), in their homes and their workplaces, had been transformed. They were now places that induced feelings of anger and depression, rather than enthusiasm and hope. The objects and discourses – such as self-help books, films, study materials, even religion – that used to induce hope had lost their original affective power. They were both ignored, but they also induced frustration. Instead, these young men interacted with stories and images that materialised their anger.

Late one evening, a couple of months into his unemployment, Mahmoud messaged me saying: “I’m so sad and angry, I’m reviewing my life from my shitty country to my shitty parents.” He then said: “to be honest I still doubt, maybe God is there, and it frightens me every time I think about killing myself. If I was sure that there is nothing on the other side, I would do it at once.” When I expressed worry and said “you can’t do that, you have a whole life ahead of you,” he responded saying: “I don’t give a shit about life, but the idea of hell frightens me, being mortal in hell.” Later in the mediated conversation, Mahmoud told me not to worry, because he was just “thinking aloud.” However, this signifies the emotional state he had reached by this stage of his life. A combination of his childhood abandonment, and his prolonged inability to secure a job brought forth moments of intense ‘depression’ (ikti’āb), most often expressed when he

was alone in his house.⁷⁹ When I met him a few days later, I tried to make him feel better by telling him he could still find a job (in an attempt to affect his emotional state). But, immediately, he shot back: “I don’t live as a human Harry. When we let our dreams go, we never get something back, even our simple rights to live as a human. What kind of human can live with less than US\$150 in a month (the salary he would get in a call centre), even your pets need more money. Harry, I’m 27 years old, I have nothing, I can’t afford myself, do you think I enjoy that, I cry every single day in my life, I am so sad, so upset, I can’t even do anything.” Mahmoud saw a future in which he would have to remain in his area surrounded by vulgar, ignorant sha’by people in a job he hated, and with a salary which would force him to send his children to the same public schooling he attended. This would only bring ‘darkness’, ‘nidāl’ (struggle), and depression. He knew this because that is what he had experienced.

These intense feelings led to outbursts of anger against structural inequalities, and the meritocratic myths these young men had been sold. By this point, they were far from being dupes who were invested in meritocratic notions of mobility. Instead of blaming themselves, they were, like Paul Willis’ working class lads (1981), criticising the idea that hard work can secure success. They were latching on to discursive frames that have long been in existence in Egypt, particularly since the 2011 Uprising. These frames materialised their anger, which was directed towards the prevalence of *wasta*, a lack of government support, and the hoarding of military power. One can see here forms of collective social consciousness, and perhaps the conditions for collective action arising. In the previous chapter, I showed how the existence of a moral economy of hope closed down these moments, but this time Mahmoud and Ibrahim had lost belief in this moral economy. What then stifles the emergence of ‘resistance’ now?

⁷⁹ “Ikti’ab” was a word used constantly to describe the emotional states following experiences which dashed their hopes. It is commonly used to describe intense sadness, thus differing from the more clinical definition one might find in a UK context.

It is eminently possible that Ibrahim and Mahmoud's anger could have been channelled into forms of protest. But, in a dejected post-revolutionary moment inside Egypt that has seen the swift return of a repressive security apparatus, there is a certain level of fatigue and fear. Second, these lower-middle class young men were not exposed to activist groups and frames. Finally, their parents expected them to get on with their lives, finding a job and preparing for marriage, and not engaging in protest. But furthermore, protest or resistance was not a long-term strategy for any young middle-class man. They would still be expected to engage in the pursuit of a respectable future.

In the absence of alternative avenues, I will show in the remainder of this chapter how these young men continued to dispel their depression and anger through, cruelly, the same objects and discourses of atomised hope which had generated these emotions. They returned again and again to the same objects, discourses, and places in their everyday activities, not because they retained belief, but because it was the only means through which they could sustain 'continuity' and 'keep on living' (Berlant, 2011). It is in this way, through affect, I argue, that their continued compliance is secured.

Without hope there is no life

On November 4th 2015, three months in to his unemployment, I met Mahmoud at 9am to make the long journey to Nasr City, an upper-middle class neighbourhood in eastern Cairo, to meet his uncle's friend who owned a publishing house. Mahmoud had heard he might have a job, but Mahmoud thought his uncle just wanted to get rid of him, so did not expect much. When we got in the microbus, I asked Mahmoud about a job (as a 'box boy' for a supermarket) for which he had applied a few days earlier: Mahmoud had arrived to find 'uneducated' people

applying for the job. He was quickly told by the manager that he was overqualified. Customers would treat him like he was uneducated, and he would have to work for tips, which Mahmoud would find embarrassing. I then pointed out a closed-off tunnel in the street, asking what it was. Mahmoud replied in a frustrated voice: “it is supposed to cross over to the other side of the road, but it’s closed. They want us all killed instead.” Mahmoud then suddenly said he hopes the job his uncle’s friend would offer is good, because the journey every day from his home would be long and expensive.

Mahmoud then started telling the story of when he tried to find his father. He was 16, got his clothes together and travelled to Imbaba where he knew his father had a house. He knocked on the door but there was no response. A neighbour then told him they had moved. He gave his clothes to the neighbour to keep because he could not carry them all the way back to his house. He walked around for a while, thinking what to do. He then got a call from his father, who told him to never come looking for him again. Mahmoud had no money to get back to his home, so had to walk the five hour journey. With tears in his eyes, Mahmoud said: “I just wants to ask my father why?” We then talked more about his family, before arriving in Nasr City. Before meeting his uncle’s friend, Mahmoud wanted to visit a training centre at which he had done another soft skills course two years earlier. As we walked, he recollected how he had come here every day. He loved it. There was a teacher called Noura who was amazing. She was a graduate of AUC and refused to speak any Arabic. Mahmoud wanted to see her again. He told me not to tell her he was unemployed though, because she would be disappointed. He asked me to put the CV he was carrying inside my bag. When we arrived, Mahmoud asked the receptionist if Noura was there, but was quickly told she had long since left the organisation. Mahmoud then hesitantly asked how much a normal course costs, 800LE (US\$100) per level was the reply. He could never afford that.

When we got outside Mahmoud got a call. His face suddenly went red with anger, but he kept calm and polite, saying: ‘no problem sir’ over and over. After he put the phone down, Mahmoud exclaimed “mother fucker!” His uncle’s friend had cancelled, 15 minutes before they were supposed to meet. He told Mahmoud to come on Sunday, and then said no, Monday, then again no, Tuesday. He finally told Mahmoud to call before to confirm. Mahmoud was angry and humiliated. He exclaimed: “I am cursed!” I said I was sorry, but he replied, “I am used to it now, this disappointment, it’s not new.” After a few moments of silence, Mahmoud suggested we go to the CityStars shopping mall close by.

As we started walking, Mahmoud said: “I just want to do my own project, to break the barrier that tells us we can’t.” He then switched back to talking about the soft skills course. They had to do an entrepreneurship project at the end. His group took it very seriously, making GPS watches. He had travelled to Port Said to find out how much import taxes would cost, printed a 3d design, and even made a mock-up of the watch. His group were in the top three, and got to go on an entrepreneurship workshop, where they had to come up with a ‘serious’ business plan. Mahmoud then showed it to me. He still kept it on his phone and carried it with him. He had done the accounts perfectly, he said, no mistakes. He and another man had wanted to establish the company for real, but the others thought it was too big a risk, so nothing happened: “I wished they had taken the risk,” he nostalgically said “I think in life if you don’t take risks you never get anywhere, Bill Gates started from nothing and look where he is now.” Another problem, he went on to explain, is how hard it is to access money in Egypt. You have to be rich to get a loan. Mahmoud quickly switched to telling me about another project he had been working on recently. He had made a comprehensive business plan for a restaurant, which

incorporated an excel spread sheet working in detail through expected expenditure and revenue:

“I have come up with a name called Big Ben Burger (see Figure 6.3). It would serve the same burgers I made you for 14.50LE, and then cheaper burgers for 4LE, the more expensive is handmade and also better quality meat. It will be cheap, so sha‘by people will come, but it will be different from what is there already. A mix of people will come. I will have hotdogs too. People now just think about making money quickly, but I won’t think about that for the first year, I will make 1LE, but I will build customer loyalty and after that I will start to make money. I have done very precise plans for it.”



Figure 6.3 – Mahmoud’s British-inspired company logo (Source: Mahmoud)

As Mahmoud was talking, he saw a plane flying overhead, and shouted out: “can’t you take me with you!”

We then arrived at the mall. Mahmoud knew the shop he wanted to find, Virgin Megastore. He had been here many times before to look at the products. On the way he excitedly commented on how fancy the mall was (see Figure 6.4). Walking past one shop he pointed out: “one day I hope I get money to buy clothes here” (coats were worth 15,000LE (US\$1875)). We entered Virgin and headed straight for the high-definition flat screens. The average price was 20,000LE (US\$2500) – Mahmoud’s highest salary to date had been 1,400LE (US\$175) per month. As we stood there, Mahmoud began to smile and laugh to himself, before saying: “doesn’t this feel so good,” followed by a brief pause, “just the thought of one day having it, it makes me very happy.” I questioned whether this was really a satisfying or frustrating experience. He responded: “It depends if you are positive or negative. If you are negative you will find it frustrating that you will never have these things. But if you are positive it will give you hope that one day you will be able to afford it. That something will happen to help you do it. The key is thinking positive Harry.”



Figure 6.4 – City Star's Shopping Mall (Source: author)

We then decided to get some food. I wanted to treat Mahmoud to food inside the mall, but he refused. He could not afford it, so wanted to eat on the street outside. As we were leaving Mahmoud saw a gumball machine, and asked if I wanted one. It was the only thing he could afford, he remarked while laughing. Upon exiting, Mahmoud claimed he would come back one day and buy everything. On the microbus home, Mahmoud started talking about girls, which was another of his favourite topics: “I want to meet girls, but I don’t know how to go up to someone on the street. I saw a guy try in the street and he was rejected. I felt sorry for him.” We then joked about going up to girls feeling good in your head, but turning out badly. When we left the bus, Mahmoud began excitedly telling me, as he had told me many times, about the “amazing” sexual encounter he had had with a girl in university. He dearly loved this girl, and still kept a bank note on which she had written: “I will be yours forever.” She was now married and had a baby.

Three weeks later, on November 23rd, Mahmoud and I were in the microbus again travelling to the same neighbourhood. He wanted to apply for one of 200 government jobs released by the General Authority for Investment and Free Trade Zones. He would submit his CV for one of 70 accountant positions. When we met, Mahmoud immediately said, while laughing, he has no chance of getting a job: “there will be an army of people there!” He told a story about the state water company, which had advertised two accountant positions a year before. Mahmoud said two million people applied for them. You had to pay 20LE to apply, so Mahmoud thought it was a scam to make money. When we got into the microbus I asked Mahmoud about call centre jobs. They are “crap,” he responded, explaining it was because of their non-fixed salaries and hours. He also stressed, again, that it is not his field. He studied business administration and accountancy. He needed a job he could find stability in, so would refuse to take another “temporary” job. Compared to this, the government provided fixed shifts and job security, although salaries were bad: “my uncle left for 10 years to travel to the Gulf, and still kept the job,” he explained. Mahmoud then mentioned an employment fair he had attended a few days earlier. He applied to all the non-customer service jobs: “I hope I get something,” he said without much confidence. In the microbus, we also talked about companies discriminating against where people went to university. Mahmoud said they have a right, because people from private universities are more qualified. If he owned a company he would do the same. Mahmoud used the example of his half-brother, who learns accountancy techniques of which Mahmoud has never heard, to justify this. Mahmoud then suddenly defiantly said: “I think I’ll do something illegal to get money, maybe smuggling, I won’t do anything that hurts anyone, but I want to do something illegal.” He then immediately switched: “I need to travel, at least I’ll be rich. I can’t feed myself here. I am 26 and take money from my aunt, it’s humiliating.” By this point we were walking up to the Authority building. Mahmoud looked up to the planes overhead and said, “I want to grab on to one, can’t they just take me away.”

We switched our attention to the application process. Mahmoud was told to take a ticket and wait outside the gates, along with around 200 others (see Figure 6.5). He took ticket number 850 for that day. The application process would be open for 10 days in total, suggesting many thousands would be applying overall. Other prospective applicants had travelled similarly long distances, both from inside and outside Cairo. Mahmoud helped one who could not read to work out what positions were available. However, he had not come with a CV or photos, so Mahmoud said he would have to get them and come back tomorrow. While we sat on the wall waiting for Mahmoud's number to be called, we got talking to other applicants. Some were working as self-employed lawyers or in small shops, and all longed for the stability and prestige that would come with a government job. Everyone repeatedly expressed that they believed they had no chance of being accepted. Many made jokes that the jobs had already been decided through *wasta*. This application process, they stated, was administered only to project an image that the government was helping unemployed youth. One man asked if I worked. I said I am still a student. He asked if I get money from the government: "I get a scholarship to do research," I responded. He then quipped: "in your country they give you money, in ours they slap us on the back of our necks!"



Figure 6.5 – Outside the General Authority for Investment and Free Trade Zones (Source: author)

In response to the air of hopelessness that followed these conversations, each would shrug their shoulders and say: “lāzim na‘mil illy ‘aliyyna” (we have to do our duty). The second half of this phrase, left unspoken here, is “w’ rabina heya’mil al ba’y” (and God will do the rest). Mahmoud’s block was suddenly called in, after we had waited more than an hour. He came out five minutes later having submitted his CV. Immediately after we left, Mahmoud said he was proud he had come, and that he felt hopeful, before going on to note: “if I get this Harry I will convert to Christianity (he thought I was Christian), so pray to God to help me, it would be amazing if I got this.” Mahmoud expressed happiness that he had come and applied, as well as excitement at the prospect of acceptance, even though he had previously thought he had no chance. I asked him why people come despite thinking it was concluded by wasta, and that their chances were so remote. Mahmoud replied: “they come because they hope, they need to

hope. Egyptians are experts in hoping for unhopeful things, aspiring for things which can't be aspired after. If we didn't do that we would die." He then repeated that he actually would kill himself, but he was scared of God's punishment.

Leaving the area we walked past the Pepsico factory nearby. It prompted Mahmoud to say: "I wonder if I can apply my CV here?" He asked security, but they told him to apply online. He quickly became annoyed: "why don't they just let us apply here!?" We then walked through this upper-middle class area. Mahmoud said he wants to live here. He noted that they collect the rubbish unlike in his neighbourhood. He then pointed to a flat with a wide balcony: "I want to live there," before seeing a very young man driving a car, "that's crazy!" he exclaimed. We walked past an empty plot being used as a rubbish tip. Mahmoud bellowed: "why don't they build a building on that and give me a small flat to live in!" We then went to get a microbus. Mahmoud wanted to go for a beer with me, but I had to meet someone else, so he went home.

During the month in Cairo in November 2015, I would spend many days with Mahmoud like these. On six occasions we made the same journey to Nasr City, each time in search of future job or scholarship opportunities. We went twice to his uncle's publishing house, to two employment fairs, the government recruitment day, and to an Aiesec (a global youth volunteering organisation) overseas volunteering event. These trips began to feel like outings. Simply moving around the city, away from his house and area, which were places that induced frustration, instead generated for Mahmoud a sense of 'prospective momentum,' both distracting him from his despair and reopening the future (Miyazaki, 2004). But during these days, Mahmoud's emotional state would undulate between euphoric hope and frustrated despair. Thus, though we spent much time discussing his plight, depression, thoughts of suicide, and complaining about the injustice of Egypt's labour market and society, we were

also moving around the city locating moments that opened up the future, looking for new jobs and opportunities, going to the mall to imagine what items Mahmoud would buy in the future, talking about the entrepreneurship project he was planning, and discussing girls and sex.

Mahmoud was actively seeking out experiences and topics – through encounters with certain objects, discourses, and places – which extended affective intensities that might fill him with what Kathleen Stewart (2007) labelled a ‘surge of vitality.’ In particular, he would do this whenever he experienced or thought too much about the despair that his continued stagnation was generating. One of his favourite topics was sex. He would often want to talk about previous sexual encounters, porn he had watched, and encounters he was planning with women. This bred much excitement, and represented a realm in which, discursively at least, he could exert masculine power and feel a sense of intimacy. However, it was a topic that also introduced frustration, due to his inability to make much contact with women, and the love that he had lost in the past.

Mahmoud would also switch to topics or practices that imaginatively opened up the future. After the humiliating experience of the cancellation of the appointment with his uncle, Mahmoud rapidly switched attention to the entrepreneurship project he had been planning. He was engaging in a temporal reorientation of knowledge, an effort to immediately foreclose his humiliation and shame. Every time he discussed this project with me, his face lit up and his voice filled with enthusiasm. On some days he would send me pictures of food he had cooked in preparation for the restaurant. He loved the project because “at least it is one thing I chose to do,” in contrast to the jobs he had been forced to take. But when I talked to him about the project on one occasion, he said he knew it was not realistic. Nevertheless: “it makes me feel good to plan it.” It was at this point that Mahmoud used the metaphor with which I opened this

chapter. He knew he would never reach a dignified life, but he kept engaging in this practice because it felt good. Imagining that it could happen one day was preferable to “waiting for death.” It repetitively enabled him to deflect attention away from his current stagnation and dispel the depression that built up as a result.

Thinking of desirable items he wished to buy performed a similar role. Very often, when we were speaking about a frustrating experience in the labour market, Mahmoud would suddenly switch to discussing a product he had been looking at. On countless occasions we would go to either a mall or a shop to look at products. He described the mall as a place that “helps me release the frustration that builds up in my life outside.” When I asked why, he responded: “because I can distract myself from everything by looking at all the products I want to buy, like clothes, or a laptop.” In the mall, he would walk around the glitzy corridors, entering his favourite shops to get a closer look at the products. He would then either discuss them with me, or speak to the shop assistant about the item’s specifications. Through this activity, Mahmoud was adding items to his ‘wish-list’ for the future, which he also kept with him on his phone. Being in the mall made him feel hopeful that one day he would be able to afford these icons to success. Again, on one occasion, Mahmoud said he knows these items are not within reach: “I just like to pretend I’ll buy it, I’m a sick person, it’s like motivation... I only like to mess around, it’s about feelings mate.”

Mahmoud’s trip to the General Authority for Investment and Free Trade suggested he was also using applying for jobs for the same purpose. Though he had no expectations of being accepted before travelling to Nasr City, he still enjoyed the act of applying. Calling on religious divination (although he was a self-described atheist), the moment of submission defied doubt and brought forth hopeful visions of acceptance. Mahmoud, again, right after this event

described how people who had applied were hoping for acceptance, because without hope they would ‘die.’

Mahmoud’s definition of death was illustrated during another of our trips to Nasr City, to the Aiesec volunteering event. We met an old friend of his from university, who was working in two jobs as a cashier and microbus driver earning only 1700LE (US\$210) per month, and slowly saving money towards marriage (although Mahmoud scornfully suggested he would never save enough). This friend told Mahmoud to give up his ‘crazy dreams,’ to settle in a job and start saving. His friend, now 33, described how he used to be like Mahmoud, but have given up his dreams. On the journey home, Mahmoud saw a billboard advertising an exclusive new compound, claiming: “I need that one day.” I attempted to say that he does not, but he quickly retorted:

“yes I do Harry, if I bring up children they need to be surrounded by good people, and need to be sent to good schools. If I accepted what my friend accepted they would continue to exist in the same shitty situation as me, the same struggles and I would regret that I had them, and then their children would be the same, it is a cycle. I refuse to be part of that and give up like him. I would rather die trying than give up now and accept a shit future...I will never give up. He works two jobs and only gets 1700LE, he can’t afford anything with that life.”

In this late stage of youth, Mahmoud is being judged for not settling. However, he could not emotionally give up and accept this ‘shitty life.’ At this point, he considered ‘death’ preferable. Mahmoud judged his friend for accepting such ‘death.’

Mahmoud was also seeing a woman by this point, whom he had met at the GTO course.⁸⁰ She was also putting pressure on him to accept a low-end job and stay in it, as she wanted him to save money so they could get married. She did not care about raising her standard of living. She stressed that many Egyptians tolerate tough conditions. But Mahmoud refused. He could not raise children in this environment, he would not be able to be a respectable father and husband. He might not even be able to save enough money for marriage. Mahmoud's inability to accept his position was therefore highly gendered. He was unable to accept his inability, as a man, to provide what he considered a good life. Mahmoud retained higher aspirations, perhaps finding them more painful to let go. This woman was now focused on marriage. She did not have a mobile life, and was waiting on this man to enable her own prospective momentum. Mahmoud still had some licence to roam around the city, and like others, defy the will of parents (in his case his aunt) and frustrate his partner (Ghannam, 2013). His inability to "settle down" was creating a sense of frustration for this woman at her own stagnation.

Hopeful city?

In each of these examples, the city continued to create an affective atmosphere that repetitively produced hopeful openings for the future (see Chapter 4). Entrepreneurial discourses are eternally optimistic, and the continued presence of open recruitment processes by the government, and within employment fairs, offers up the meritocratic potential of future acceptance. The mall is a place I did not discuss in Chapter 4, but it is certainly designed to affect a feeling of hope within its clientele. In Cairo, it acts as a vivid signifier of upper-middle/upper-class consumer lifestyles, and the city's global ambitions.⁸¹ Aesthetically, its

⁸⁰ The GTO course acted as a place for more than one couple to establish relations, however these couples have since separated due to rejections from the women's families.

⁸¹ Mona Abaza (2006) estimates that 20% of Egyptians can afford to shop in malls (still 3 million people in Cairo), however it might be far less, particularly in CityStars where products replicate European pricing.

cleanliness, cool temperature, and vacant walkways form a blunt juxtaposition to the dirty, stifling, overcrowded streets outside. It is also emblematic of an intensification of consumption as a class signifier (de Koning, 2009). The first mall was built in 1989, and there are now around 25 in Cairo, each with varying degrees of exclusivity. They arose out of a combination of land speculation from private investors – including wealthy Egyptian families – but also more and more from Gulf real estate companies wishing to reproduce the region’s extravagant malls, and as a result of a ‘global’ urban modernisation project headed by the state (Ghannam, 2002). There are also rumours that the army is involved in construction, and even evidence of mall building being used as an avenue for money-laundering (Abaza, 2006). Furthermore, shopping malls map on to the consumption trends picked up by Egyptians living in the Gulf, suburbanisation processes in Cairo, and pre-existing class schemas.

Malls are in many ways exclusive places, particularly in Cairo where security guards attempt to keep out young sha‘by men who are imagined as a threat, particularly to upper/middle-class women. However, they are also open to more than those who are able to afford the products. Malls are actively built to attract not only shoppers. According to the managing director of Al-Futteim, the firm behind one of Cairo’s biggest malls, people come for “eating and drinking in giant food courts and using the facilities such as ski slopes, cinemas and entertainment centres for children” (Wall Street Journal, 2014).⁸² In the social sciences, malls have long been conceptualised as hyperreal, theatrical places which offer up “transitory participatory pleasure” to those who inhabit them (Harvey, 1989: 91).⁸³ In different contexts, researchers have noted

⁸² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/cairos-hottest-import-shopping-malls-1402430917>

⁸³ Walter Benjamin, writing on the Paris arcades – which foregrounded the modern mall, posits that these consumer dream-houses placed people in a “dream-like state”. The utopian visions of material abundance therein – what Benjamin terms wish-images – veil the “material scarcity and exploitative labour that form the structural course of societies based on class domination” (Buck-Morss, 1991: 118). They provide a “momentary, fleeting experience of fulfilment dimly anticipatory of a reality that is not yet” (ibid. 111).

how poor people frequent malls in order to hang out in a modern, sanitised place (Abaza, 2006; Schindler, 2007). Geographers have conceptualised this activity as an act of transgression (Schindler, 2007; Mittleman, 2004). However, as I stood next to Mahmoud, this did not seem an appropriate reading. Mona Abaza (2006: 216), writing about the poor's inhabitation of Cairo's malls, states that these places "might encourage a feeling that one can participate in a better world, even if merely by window-shopping." The mall generates an atmosphere of possibility, offering up aspirational objects for viewing and for play. Viewing desirable items induces an affect upon the body that is felt as anticipation and satisfaction.

For Mahmoud, encountering the aesthetics of the mall, and the commodities therein, enabled him to imaginatively transfer himself into a future dream-world in which his consumption and lifestyle desires would be realised. It provided a feeling of intense satisfaction, reintroducing momentarily a feeling of hope for something to look forward to and desire, to a present and future in which – he was perpetually reminded – there was nothing to wait for. A similar sense was affected when he dreamed up an entrepreneurial project, and when he submitted his CV for a desirable job. However, in each of these cases, it is insufficient to look at these places of the hopeful city, in other words at the objects, discourses, and places and the affective intensities generated by them. This was not a linear process of object 'affecting' subject. Mahmoud expressed countless times open disbelief in his ability to establish a start-up, find a good job, and afford the products he desires. But he kept going back to these objects, discourses, and places, not out of belief, but because of the visceral bodily shifts they affected within him. They repetitively enabled him to *feel* better on a day-to-day basis. Vincent Crapanzano (2003) states that hope intrinsically defies doubt, particularly when we yearn for something. Thus, in the moments of applying, planning, and staring at products, Mahmoud was able to defy doubt and enjoy the feeling of renewed hope and excitement. His compulsion for

the feeling enabled him to disavow cynicism and keep coming back. These activities thus turned into a way of coping, of carrying on and staving off the feelings of depression he now felt in his home, or as he walked the streets. Mahmoud once even described hope as a drug, which allowed the ‘hopeless like me’ to carry on.

The cruelty lies in Mahmoud’s attempts to escape his depression through the very forms of hope that had caused it when he realised they were false. The only solution to his depression was returning to these hopeful, yet harmful objects. Affecting himself with a feeling of hope through imagining the realisation of an entrepreneurial dream as he designed a logo, or consumption dream as he stood in front of his icons of success, sustained the feeling of depression that engulfed him as a result of their absence. In this sense, these objects enacted an affective atmosphere that induced hope when in their presence, and one that induced its opposite in their absence. Mahmoud, by retaining an attachment to these objects, was actively sustaining the conditions that enabled his depression to flourish. Echoing Berlant (2011), Mahmoud continues to hold on to this cruel form of hope because the alternative of letting go of these “scenes of his desire” is too much to bear. It would lead to a life not worth living.

Mahmoud’s ability to describe the instrumental nature of these activities undermined the very act of hoping itself, as it brought forth his ultimate disbelief. When planning his project, he tried to ignore the problem of money, to imagine ways in which it might come. Without that ability to expel doubt he would find no pleasure. But, on occasions his body was not able to receive the hopeful affect. The act of planning made him feel worse, because it reminded him of his current stagnation. Thus, Mahmoud said to me he was not very good at being hopeful in general: he was too depressed and negative. He wishes he had more hope. He said others were able to do a better job of “lying to themselves.” It is certainly true that the others expressed far

less reflexivity regarding their attempts to hang on to hope. As was often the case for Mahmoud, this would have destroyed the pleasure of hoping itself. However, the same drive to perpetually recreate possibility acts upon many of these young men. I will now describe how this effected Ibrahim and Mostafa during their periods of stagnation.

Everything is still possible

During his months of apathy, and before I met him in September 2016, Ibrahim messaged me one day. After many weeks of negative discussions over WhatsApp, he now asked for help on an application for a scholarship to take a Master's at Bradford University. The scholarship was designed to "aid students in financial hardship due to the fact that they are from a country that is in crisis as a result of the political situation, war, natural disaster etc." He had come across it while looking on a Facebook page advertising opportunities for study abroad. In the following days, Ibrahim set his mind to filling out the application form and writing a cover letter. Following submission, he immediately said to me: "after applying I feel more motivated (mutahamis) again." I asked him why: "because I now think there is a way again, there is an opportunity for me." A feeling of excitement had briefly replaced his sense of apathy and depression, through his encounter with the application form. It became an object of hope, affecting in him a reconnection between the present and a desirable future.

Ibrahim thought his chances were '70%,' because he did not have an International English certificate. When I asked why he thought his chances were so good, he replied: "because I am a positive person, I like to think positively, and also I filled out the application well." Ibrahim was practicing the positive thinking he had been taught by Steve Jobs: "the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do." He also knew two

people, both engineering graduates, who had obtained scholarships to study in Turkey, and took hope from them. Ibrahim's family were also very encouraging. They made a du'aa (request from God) for him to be accepted. Thus, nobody told Ibrahim he might be rejected. Hope was secured through calling on recognizable objects and discourses of hope. He did not hear negativity. Ibrahim would now focus on applying to multiple scholarships. If he applied for many, he said: "it makes sure of a high percentage of being accepted in one at least." This practice temporarily reintroduced a sense of hope. Again, it is necessary to focus on the role of scholarships in that they hold affective qualities of hope. However, Ibrahim was desperate to escape his feeling of apathy and frustration. This had led him to seek out this "object," which enabled him to live on by keeping alive the scene of his desire.

Ibrahim was not alone in locating hope through scholarship applications. Mostafa, briefly introduced in the previous chapter as he entered the flat during my final days, has applied and been rejected from 18 foreign scholarships in the past few years. Mostafa considered that travelling abroad would "completely change [his] life." In November 2015, he was working in a 'temporary' call centre job, and saw before him depression and struggle if he remained in Egypt. Obtaining a scholarship would enable him to either obtain a good job in Europe, or return to Egypt and obtain a high-status job or open a business. The last scholarship for which he applied was the Chevening Scholarship, a UK government diplomatic effort to help 'young leaders and professionals' across the world undertake a Master's degree in the UK. I recently discovered another person had obtained this scholarship. She was part of the upper-middle class group interviewed in Chapter 3, having studied at the American University in Cairo, and before that at an expensive international private school. This gave her a very different profile from Mostafa's free Arabic public education at one of the 'kullyāt al sha'b' (faculties of the people).

Each new rejection instigated intense feelings of ‘depression’ for Mostafa. He would do nothing and not speak to anyone for a few days. However, despite his numerous rejections, Mostafa did not stop trying. He continued to search on his laptop through Facebook and Google every two weeks for scholarships to which he can apply, before focusing his mind on the application and fulfilling its requirements. Mostafa is now again in the process of applying for the Chevening. When I pressed Mostafa on why he continues to apply, he answered:

“It’s like when someone falls into a deep hole and is trying to reach the top to get out. Every time you get near the edge you fall again, so I think what is better for me, to keep trying or to stay in the hole? I decided to not stop trying because one time I might succeed to get out. If I stay still I will kill myself...I don’t mean kill myself literally, but when you live without a goal or target, or hope, you will live like a dead person. I cannot imagine myself to live like an animal, to eat, drink, and sleep, or like most sha’by people, that’s all they do. So I search for a source every time to find inspiration again. A source means hope, anything that can make me dream and therefore renews the hope inside me”

Although Mostafa does not quite express the same reflexivity as Mahmoud, he makes clear that his decision to carry on is an attempt to sustain the bodily feeling of hope in itself. It is this feeling that allows him to continue ‘living.’ Social death would constitute living without a target, and without the feeling that comes with it. This reflects Michael Jackson’s (2012) notion that having something to look forward to, which is different to the here and now, is a vital component of life. It also reflects some of the notions of social death utilised before in the social sciences. Bourdieu (1990) describes social death as a life lived without being known and recognised, being insignificant. He focuses on those experiencing chronic underemployment,

poverty, and neglect. For these young men, giving up on their dreams meant giving up on the pursuit of recognition. Another young man described his fear of ending up like a friend. This friend used to be motivated, but now stays at home all the time, and just goes out for cigarettes. He was described as “not really living.” This fear would also be discussed as a fear of becoming ‘accustomed’ (muta’wid) or permanently distracted by daily needs. Egyptian youth, Mostafa said, start with high ambitions, “of working in a high position, travelling abroad, and over time their dreams get smaller and smaller. Eventually they start to focus on opening a house (marriage), and accept where they are.” Mostafa’s global disposition leads him to view sha‘by living as akin to animal living.

Mostafa’s friends have expressed their doubt about his chances of success directly. One told him he was afraid Mostafa would become depressed again, and restated how difficult acceptance is. But Mostafa simply told his friend in response: “I will be depressed anyway if I don’t try, I have no other choice.” Mostafa has even developed doubts about the preference for private university graduates in the Chevening scholarship himself. However, after each rejection he would ritualistically refocus on what he had done wrong. When I asked him about this, he replied: “I have to blame myself, because if I just look at the hard circumstances, I would not be able to keep my goal alive.”

Mostafa knew his activities, and these objects, are injurious, but he carried on anyway. He continued to put himself through periods of pain and depression, because the alternative of accepting his present social and spatial world would produce more pain. He retained an attachment to this cruel form of hope not out of belief, but because of affect. The affect upon his body produced by the scholarship enabled him to maintain continuity of his “sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world” (Berlant, 2011: 24).

He even reengaged in a process of self-blame out of necessity. Mostafa has now resorted to not telling friends or family about his activities, in order to avoid “kalam mohbaT” (depressing words). He therefore created a privatised affective place of hope, dispelling objects and narratives which would introduce negativity. This also meant rebuking the moral pressure he was beginning to face to move on with marriage. Instead of marriage, Mostafa invested much of his modest work salary in two cheaper evening courses offered by the AUC (he has spent 10,000LE (US\$1250) to date). These courses were geared towards improving his chances of acceptance.⁸⁴

Ibrahim was swiftly rejected from the scholarships to which he had applied. He descended back into apathy and anger, which were on show in the September 2016 meeting described above. A week after our meeting, Ibrahim took an office assistant job in his industrial town, something he had sworn he would never do. He was under pressure from his family to start earning money and save for marriage. But after another two weeks, I saw a quotation on Ibrahim’s Facebook: “Life is a #DREAM, in a #Dream you can be whatever you want.” This reflected the inspirational quotations I had seen before. When I spoke to him he told me the post means “everything is still possible,” “but it will take time” he added: it was “50/50.” Ibrahim had made another plan to save money for a start-up, and had started studying English, and praying to God again. He was also going to do an advice session for university students in the town, about how to build a start-up and secure an HR job. He said giving this session may help renew

⁸⁴ A common assertion in literature on Arab men is that difficulties in affording marriage are a source of intense frustration (Singerman, 2007). However, for these young men, at this stage “opening a house” was considered a symbol of stagnation and immobility rather than mobility and respectability. It would secure undesirable social positions (jobs and lifestyles), that would not fit a middle-class disposition, as they would have to redirect resources towards it. Again, this inability, either to afford marriage, or to accept preparations, is highly gendered. It forces women into extended periods of waithood to start a “home.” This inability to accept these standards of middle-class living might not last.

his own hope for the future, as it would remind him of the “good days when I was very active and enthusiastic about things.”

Ibrahim was actively leaving his state of apathy and returning to the meritocratic promise he had come to know as false just a few weeks previously, forgetting narratives that told him his dream was impossible. These actions, again, demonstrate the attachment Ibrahim had forged to the discourses extended to him in the hopeful city. But it is not an attachment to the discourses themselves, rather to the intimate sense of hope they had brought forth. He wished to feel that feeling again, and foreclose his intense depression. This shows how it is the affective dimension that renders these discourses so powerful. Ibrahim was re-enlisting in these promises in order to keep alive a sense of hope that his dreams could be realised, without which he could not carry on. He had developed an attachment to promises that were hurting him, because the alternative of letting go was too much to bear. Most cruelly perhaps, in this pursuit of affective solace, Ibrahim turned into an active reproducer of these promises for others who would come after him, starting the cycle again.⁸⁵ Becoming a ‘teacher’ fed his own sense of entrepreneurial selfhood relative to others.

Conclusions

To end, I would like to return to a discussion of compliance in the lives of these young men. I started the thesis by questioning Bourdieu’s notion of symbolic power, which rests on a congruence between one’s subjective expectations and objective chances (Burawoy, 2012). This is incidentally the kind of society Mostafa craved, where people are given the power to

⁸⁵ Young & Jeffrey (2016) discuss how young educated unemployed Indian men make money through establishing private training centres, thus contributing to the problem.

do what they want. However, Bourdieu himself has argued, along with others, that contemporary capitalism is creating evermore situations of mismatch. This, as Chapter 3 argued, has become the case for many in Egypt's falling middle-class. For these young lower-middle class men, living where they are breeds intense dissatisfaction.⁸⁶ Recent urban transformations in Cairo, as around the world, have fermented aspirations for global urban living (Ghertner, 2015). These young Egyptian men were over a number of years exposed to what Appadurai (1996) terms other 'possible lives' in a city which offers up international private sector employment, exclusive gated community living, modern consumption styles, and international mobility to some. This exposure took place as they moved around the city (attending university activities, employment fairs, training courses, and prestigious events), communicated with those who live it (teachers, friends, family, or indeed foreign researchers), and as they engaged with mediated forms inside their homes. At the same time, the lives of many in Egypt's middle-classes have been devalued symbolically, if not materially (see Chapter 3). Theirs is a life not considered fitting for those with middle-class status, it is rather a sha'by life. They are pushed into insecure, low-paid, low-status jobs that render the possibility of ever affording the increasing costs of marriage, a good quality private education, and appropriate consumptive signifiers, extremely difficult. This set of historically-constituted conditions produces a particularly acute and painful disconnect between expectations and chances for these young men at this stage of early adulthood.⁸⁷

For Ghertner (2015), this democratisation of consumerist aspiration in the context of 'world-class' city making in Delhi stimulates attempts by the urban poor to exercise claims on the city. They are claims that only become intelligible through the hegemonic discourses of the 'world-

⁸⁶ Samuli Schielke (2015) points to a paradox of living in poverty in contemporary Egypt, that while materially people may be materially enjoying more, the experience is emotionally more defeating.

⁸⁷ I have described in previous chapters how this pain is specifically gendered, classed, and age-specific.

class' city – thus they reproduce hierarchical class and caste schemes – yet they are still able to demand participation. Laurence Ralph (2015) notes a similar phenomenon of claims-making in the context of Chicago's gang members who, despite injurious pasts, work to improve both their individual and collective lives through the act of dreaming. Both lay bare how individualised, often consumerist, aspiration can be formative of collective claims for improvement. However, as I have shown in previous chapters, these forms of collective claims-making seen in Delhi and Chicago have been foreclosed in Cairo by an architecture of meritocratic hope which keeps people tied to the individualised possibility of future participation and social mobility.

But by this stage in their lives, after repeated rounds of rejection and prolonged stagnation, the meritocratic illusion was shattered for these young men. Overwhelmingly, they no longer blamed themselves, rather the structural conditions. They became mired in the conscious foreclosure of possibility. This again opened up the possibility of collective claims-making, as shown by the language they used, of 'youth' being actively unsupported or treated unjustly. This space is kept open, particularly as they continue to refuse to adapt to the social position they have been able to reach – as many do, including Mahmoud's friend – and give in to the pressure exerted by those around them to settle down and prepare for marriage.⁸⁸ This in itself is an act of gendered defiance, against a system that is delivering so little to them, and against familial pressures. This refusal stems from emotional compulsion, an inability to live with current reality, to live in a state of social death. An important consequence of this is the emergence of frustration for women who face delayed marriage.

⁸⁸ In the case of Willis' working class lads (1981), their distrust of meritocracy contributes to their acceptance of low-level jobs.

This refusal led these men to recoil back into atomised discourses and practices of meritocracy. In the absence of a collective avenue, their anger and depression was dispelled by imaginatively returning again and again to the same forms of hope that produce their exclusion and feeling of pain. They were continuing to comply with this meritocratic system, not because they believed in it, but because they could not bear the loss of the feeling that the scene of their desires had affected within them (Berlant, 2011). It was an affective attachment that led to reinvestment. I therefore use the word compliance, because it is a term that does not necessarily require the belief of the participant (Scott, 1985). These young men develop an affective attachment to these forms, even though they induce so much pain, because the alternative of letting go is unliveable. In a dejected post-revolutionary moment, where prolonged complaint is disallowed, there is no alternative pathway for hope.

Chapter 7 Conclusion

Class, affect, and meritocracy in Egypt

In May 2015, Egypt's Justice Minister Mahfouz Saber was asked in a television interview whether the son of a garbage collector could be appointed to the judiciary. Here was his reply:

“The son of a garbage collector will not become a judge, because he is not brought up in the right environment for this profession. Even if he becomes a judge, he will come across many problems and will [end up] quitting...The rubbish collector must have done a great job raising his son and helping him obtain a degree, but there are other jobs that would suit him better.”⁸⁹

Saber emphasised the need for judges to come from a ‘respectable environment’ (be’a muhtarama), both financially and morally. Saber’s comments caused public uproar, and led to his resignation. The event brought to mind other cases of discrimination in Egypt’s labour market. Abdul Hamid Sheta committed suicide in 2003, at the age of 25, after being rejected from a job as a commercial attaché in the diplomatic service. Having scored higher than many others on the entrance exam, he was rejected because he came from a poor peasant family. The Foreign Ministry explained that Sheta was ‘socially unsuitable’ (ghīr munassba igtima‘iyya). Sheta jumped off Cairo’s Qasr al-Nil bridge, an act interpreted by many journalists and commentators as a show of strength against discrimination of the poor.

⁸⁹ <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/egypt-jobs-meritocracy-favoritism-judiciary-parliament.html>

This is the same bridge on which I had been walking with Gamal in late 2015, in the vignette with which this thesis began. On that night, Gamal judged the man who had jumped. His act was not a show of strength, but rather a sign of weakness. Gamal considered him weak for not continuing to work hard to reach a good life, and not having faith that hard work would be rewarded. This judgement, as the thesis subsequently demonstrated, stemmed from Gamal's investment in a discursive terrain of meritocracy that posits success comes with perseverance, no matter one's social background. In response to Saber's comments, former vice president Mohamed ElBaradei tweeted his disgust, stating that 'international rights charters guarantee freedom of choice of employment.' The British Ambassador also waded in, announcing that all are welcome to work at the British Embassy, including the garbage collector's son. The National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) rapidly prepared a draft law forbidding all forms of discrimination in employment, in line with Article 53 of the 2014 Constitution, which reads: "Discrimination and incitement to hate are crimes punishable by law."⁹⁰

The reaction to this event has been therefore to push further for the discursive implementation of equal opportunity and meritocracy in what remains a 'backwards,' classist society. Recruitment must be based on an individual's talent and credentials, rather than their social background, thus ensuring all have an opportunity to be accepted. Judging someone based on individual merit seems to represent a noble pursuit, but in this thesis I have examined the harmful effects enacted by the hopeful extension of meritocracy and fairness in a hierarchical capitalist system that continues to reward inherited privilege, as Saber's comments made clear. In this conclusion, I want to set out how the previous pages have answered the research questions articulated in the introduction. As I do this, I will discuss some of the contributions

⁹⁰ Even though the constitution (redrafted in 2014) calls for the equal treatment of all citizens, no specific directive or regulation addressing discrimination in recruitment existed.

towards thinking through the formation and experience of class immobility, and the continued stability of capitalist regimes, in Egypt and beyond. I will then end by posing some questions which can provide a blueprint for further research.

Mismatch in Egypt's middle-class

The first aim of the thesis was to analyse the historical emergence of an under-recognised 'falling' middle-class in contemporary Egypt. Chapter 3, through a series of life histories, and a Bourdieu-inspired approach to class reproduction, told the story of two middle-classes in Egypt over the previous 80 years. Through following their historical trajectory, I contributed to understandings of the emergence of 'new middle-class' populations in the context of neoliberal change in the Global South (Liechty, 2003; Fernandes, 2006; Zhang, 2010). Specifically, I revealed the importance of historically-owned rural land, historical cultural privilege, the legal and political remnants of state socialism, and international migration in their socio-economic 'rise.' I also moved away from a predominant focus on consumption, and instead highlighted how educational markers, and 'character' differences enable the exercise of a new form of 'open-minded' middle-class distinction.

However, the major contribution of this chapter was to highlight the historical emergence of an alternative middle-class population in Egypt, one which has experienced a socio-economic fall. I want to call for recognition and more exploration of alternative, less celebratory 'middle-classes' in the late-20th and early-21st century across the Global South (Hage, 2003; Jeffrey, 2010; Heiman, 2015; Hochschild, 2016). The chapter set out how a middle-class that was created out of a project of state-socialism in Egypt has faced increased precarity in the context of neoliberal transformations. The struggles of this group were in many ways a direct

consequence of the economic mobility of the ‘upper-middle classes,’ as capital-intensive growth, high-inflation caused by a trade deficit, and declining public spending left many struggling to hang on to the cultural markers of respectable middle-class living, a stable white-collar job, a good education, and a comfortable financial, and even moral, life.

Having established the historical emergence of this falling middle-class, the rest of the thesis delved into the lives of a group of young men attempting to make the transition from education to employment, with the aim of understanding lower-middle class life in contemporary Egypt. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how this group has developed a mismatch between their aspirations for a middle-class life, and their ability to reach them. This arose in part as a consequence of the recent fall in the socio-economic position of this middle-class population, whereby the jobs, wages, education, and housing they experienced and foresaw as accessible to them did not match their aspirations for middle-class ‘respectability’ and ‘comfort.’ But, crucially, I showed how this mismatch developed out of a simultaneous increase in aspirations among young lower-middle class men. They grew up with greater access to education and exposure to the globalised knowledge and employment, international mobility, and lavish consumption lifestyles of Egypt’s upper-middle classes, both those residing in Cairo’s ‘global city,’ and abroad in Europe and the Gulf. They therefore developed an aspiration, or dream, distinct from their parents, to ‘make a difference to the world,’ to be part of an imagined global circulation of knowledge, goods, and people (Ferguson, 2006).

I also described how the formation of these aspirations was gendered, as men faced increased pressure, and are given enhanced mobility, to chase their employment dreams, for example by moving to Cairo, or moving alone around the city. This is indeed exemplified in the focus in Saber’s interview on the son, rather than the daughter, of a garbage collector. It is the son who

is expected to secure the lifestyle of the family. Yet it is not only Egyptian men who develop ‘mismatches’ between their high aspirations and ability to reach them. I highlighted at different points how women are also developing aspirations for high-status jobs, and also develop a mismatch in relation to their marital or lifestyle dreams.

This mismatch represents a departure from the theory of class reproduction of Pierre Bourdieu, which rests on a correspondence between one’s ‘subjective expectations’ and their ‘objective probabilities.’ In contemporary lower-middle class Egypt, and perhaps far beyond this context, this correspondence is coming under threat. The fact that Saber was asked whether the son of a garbage collector could become a judge symbolises the contemporary breakdown of an Egyptian system of structured dispositions, for men at least. In the example discussed during the television interview, the son’s aspirations to become a judge developed out of increased access to university education. The aspirations of many ordinary Egyptians have been raised in recent years, at the very same time as corruption, structural unemployment, and political instability is rendering those aspirations harder to reach (Ghannam, 2002; Peterson, 2011). This mismatch is being replicated among diverse groups across the world, as a result of contemporary capitalist regimes not producing stable well-paid jobs, homes, and services, while at the same time increasing ordinary aspirations for a ‘good life’.

The remainder of the thesis, and the three main empirical chapters, were concerned with the consequences of this situation of mismatch among young middle-class men in contemporary Egypt. In the Introduction, I set out three research questions: what happens when a mismatch between classed aspirations and chances develops within young lower-middle class men in Egypt? What constitutes their lived experience of middle-class immobility? And, how is the

stability of Egypt's political-economic system maintained even when young middle-class Egyptian men are denied movement towards their classed, gendered, and aged dreams?

In chapters 4, 5, and 6, by applying affect to the study of class immobility among young men, and utilising eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork, I demonstrated how the lives of young lower-middle class Egyptian men can be understood through their everyday attempts to hang on to a feeling of hope for future mobility. I argued that they survived their classed and aged immobility through repetitively interacting, even when they did not believe in it, with a discursive and material terrain of Egyptianised meritocracy that filled them with hope. This terrain was continuously extended by certain labour market industries and institutions that constituted part of Cairo's 'global city.' I therefore demonstrated how Egypt's capitalist-authoritarian regime also survived in relation to these immobile young men, despite denying them access to respectable middle-class living, by continually providing them with a form of meritocratic hope. In the next section, I will work through the key contributions this argument makes to literatures theorising class, affect, and meritocracy in Egypt and beyond.

Meritocracy and hope among Egypt's 'elusive middle-class'

By exploring the difficult emotional journeys of young men in Egypt attempting to reach their middle-class aspirations, I call on conventional sociological approaches to class, and class immobility specifically, to recognise its emotional dimensions. The empirical chapters showed how a sense of mobility among these young men towards their aspirations for independent adulthood, globalised middle class-ness, and respectable masculinity was experienced through the presence of a feeling of hope: hope being defined as the feeling that arises out of the sense that one is headed towards the "scene of desire" (Berlant, 2011: 24). Returning to the language

of Bourdieu, when a seeming congruence between classed desires, and chances of reaching them existed, this was felt as hope. Conversely, in situations of mismatch between aspirations and chances which produce class, aged, and gendered immobility, hope might be lost. Throughout the empirical chapters I demonstrated how experiences which reminded these young men of their immobility, such as a job rejection, or a prolonged period spent in an undesirable, or undignified job, were felt through the emergence of frustration, anger, fear, and confusion in place of hope.

However, describing that young men who materially stand still in relation to their aspirations experience frustration, boredom, or fear, is not enough. By following my participants, I wanted to reveal how *waithood* as a prolonged condition is experienced as an oscillating emotional journey between hope and frustration. In Chapter 4, I showed how the dominant economic system that produces ‘*waithood*’ also peddles hope. Certain labour market industries and institutions, that in Cairo form part of a ‘global city’ – such as recruitment companies, training organisations, and entrepreneurship organisations – generate and extend a material and discursive terrain of ‘meritocracy.’ These industries and institutions incorporated international development organisations, the Egyptian government, and the internationalised private sector, and they were staffed overwhelmingly by members of Egypt’s upper-middle classes, as well as foreigners. I argued that this generation represented a new ‘rule of experts’ in contemporary Egypt (Mitchell, 2002), namely an advertised attempt to construct a ‘modern,’ transparent labour market that rewards individual merit – hard work, acquiring skills, and building a network – and destroy ‘backwards’ recruitment practices that reward family connections, and discriminate against people based on where they are from.

This shift reflects similar shifts in other contexts towards ensuring that employment outcomes are ‘meritocratic,’ and therefore ‘fair’ (Littler, 2013; Khan, 2012). As others have previously shown, I demonstrated how, rather than producing a level playing field, meritocracy provides a language that legitimises the privileged positions of Egypt’s upper-middle classes, by converting their inherited cultural, social, and economic capital – which were highlighted in Chapter 3 – into acquirable, individual character traits, qualifications, skills, and networks (Khan, 2012). Even though class prejudice continued beneath the surface, and in some places in public as Saber’s comments show, it is becoming less admissible openly in upper-middle class Egypt in place of an emphasis on deserved success. It renders privilege illegitimate, and shameful. But current literature on meritocracy concentrates on how it legitimises privilege, and also legitimises blame on an ‘undeserving poor’ (Wacquant, 2009). I wanted to move beyond this, to show how it has important ‘affects’ on those pursuing social mobility.⁹¹ Meritocracy possesses a hopeful quality. It affects people who are chasing social mobility with hope, as they encounter employment fairs, training centres, and entrepreneurship events that generate hopeful ‘atmospheres’ (Anderson, 2009).

In making this argument, the research moves beyond much current literature on class immobility. It is seen by many as a condition which holds within its revolutionary possibilities (Bourdieu, 2000; Harvey, 2002; Hochschild, 2016; Hage, 2003). Indeed, my interlocutors – immobile young middle-class men – were seen as some of the main protagonists of Egypt’s 2011 Uprising (Bayat, 2011). But, in following them around the city of Cairo, I uncovered an alternative cartography of hope, in shopping malls, employment fairs, and entrepreneurship events, far removed from the revolutionary places of squares and streets. I thus revealed how

⁹¹ By revealing this process as it is exercised within certain labour market places of Cairo’s ‘global city,’ I also criticised existing literature on ‘global’ or ‘world-class’ cities, which overwhelmingly views them as material and discursive places that exclude (and displace) wider urban populations. I showed that they also extend discourses and produce material landscapes of hope and inclusion (Ghertner, 2015).

capitalist regimes that deny people prospective mobility can maintain a precarious form of stability, through providing the experience of the possibility of mobility.

I made this argument by utilising the theorisations of affect, which reintroduces a transpersonal focus to the study of emotion. I want to posit therefore that affect can add much to our understandings of the way power is exercised. Previous ethnographic literature on populations experiencing waitness has uncovered how people maintain hope through mundane practices (Mains, 2012; Pedersen, 2012; Elliot, 2015; Jansen, 2015). But, this literature can possess a celebratory tone. By switching focus to the objects, places, and discourses which affect people with hope, I was able to examine how people are made to hope. I posited this as a form of power, exercised by labour market institutions, on groups experiencing prolonged waitness. It is distinct from Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power that rests on securing a congruence between people's classed aspirations, and their classed positions. Securing this congruence does not work in socio-economic systems which produce mismatches between where people are situated, and where they want to be. In this case, an alternative form of power is operationalised through attaching people to the meritocratic idea that future social mobility is possible through hard work. In other words, people are encouraged to be eternally future-orientated, hopeful subjects.

But in Chapters 5 and 6 I showed how this 'affective' form of power develops over time. This represents an important development to existing affect theory, which often remains temporally static. It does not examine enough the oscillating 'affect' of certain objects, places, and discourses, namely how their affect changes over time. Thus, these young men were not incessantly hopeful. They became angry, fearful, and confused when they experienced an encounter which reminded them of their continued stagnation. By following these young men

over many months, I revealed the diverse practices through which people who live prolonged 'waitness' and precarious situations cope. But this research is distinct from previous literature, because my interlocutors were more 'ordinary.' They were extremely active, constantly searching for jobs, trying to develop themselves, and plan their entrepreneurial projects. They were not 'inactive.' They also engaged in practices which distracted their minds, and practices which reintroduced a sense of forward momentum towards a better future. Yet, this relied on an injurious meritocratic moral economy that rested on continual self-blame. Chapter 5 therefore revealed something about how workers in various contexts who dream of better jobs cope with their prolonged immobility. They cope by making and remaking plans for the future, plans which rest on a sanctified notion of individual power. They cope through sustaining a discursive terrain that legitimises their failure.

Chapter 6 revealed how this is continues, even when belief in the possibility wains. It revealed the subject's need for hope, which in the lives of these young Egyptian men, could only be sustained through returning to meritocratic narratives. This account also made an important contribution to affect theory, which emphasises the linear 'affect' of objects on subjects. Subjects though can play a vital role in this process, because of an intrinsic need for 'hope'. In Chapter 6 I also complicated the affective form of power introduced in Chapter 4. In Chapter 4, young men were being affected with a hope that rested on conviction. But as they became more disillusioned through continued stagnation, they kept returning not because of active belief in the narratives of meritocratic progress, but through continued attachment to the feeling of hope they had previously induced. This reveals something important about the workings of power. I argued that this was compliance at work, rather than consent, due to a lack of belief. But it worked through emotion. Meritocracy, I argue, sustains its power and allure through its eternally hopeful quality.

Overall in this thesis, by examining the contemporary experience of class immobility through the lens of affect I have shown how waithood is survived through perpetually re-encountering a hopeful discursive and material terrain of meritocracy. My interlocutors constituted members of an elusive Egyptian middle-class. For this population, the country is producing a simultaneous expansion of possibilities, alongside the destruction of the foundations that enable them to be reached. This is a situation which is being replicated in other contexts around the world, and it is producing much anger. Yet a notion of meritocracy, which has also proliferated in Egypt in recent years, alongside the constant threat of state-violence, is enabling the maintenance of a precarious form of stability for the current capitalist-authoritarian regime. This is because meritocracy possesses a hopeful quality, it offers up the elusive good life to all those who work hard for it, no matter where they come from. Meritocracy keeps people attached, emotionally, to the possibility of future mobility and success, and removes the anger that emerges from present hardship. It is paramount to locate and render visible the places, discourses, and objects which are affecting people with, and selling, a false sense of hope for the future in different contexts. However, in this task, one must recognise that people who are being denied access to a dignified life for real, like these young Egyptian men, rely on this hope in their daily lives. As much as Egypt's regime might be surviving on hope, ordinary people are also surviving on the meritocratic hope that their lives will get better. Cruelly, this is the same atomised hope that sustains the regime which produces their difficult lives.

Looking to the future

I want to finish by posing some questions which have emerged out of this thesis for future research. First, the thesis examined a very particular life stage of these young men, in which they were afforded the possibility of hanging on to original hopes. It will be important to understand what happens as they transition to their late-20s and early-30s, and face mounting

pressure to marry. Will they adapt their expectations? Will they continue to find ways to reproduce hope? Will they become permanently ‘depressed’? Will they find some sense of mobility? Lauren Berlant (2016), in an attempt to describe an affective state beyond her notion of cruel optimism, recently introduced a notion of dissociation, that defines a state of “being in life without wanting the world.” This is a state – materially signified by the bodily “shrug” – in which people let go of the normative aspirational markers of the future they have been chasing, in favour of life in the durative present. It is a subjectivity shaped on one side by “suicide,” and on the other by a “life drive that is also, paradoxically, negative, in that it turns toward life by turning away from the world of injury, negation, and contingency that endure as a defining presence for biopolitical subjects.” Though I witnessed periods of disengagement like this, most notably in the case of Mahmoud, they were interrupted by the necessary reengagement in normative pursuits. For most of these young men, the transformation will not be so stark. They will marry, and therefore will be able to construct some semblance of a respectable life expected from them as men. Indeed many are already shifting their attention, after parental pressure, towards marriage. Yet, many will carry with them the injuries sustained in their stunted pursuit.

As I finish this thesis at the beginning of 2018, Mahmoud is in Dubai. Over the last year he held a job in a Lebanese import company, achieving an ‘amazing’ promotion, before being told two weeks later the company would be forced to close due to Egypt’s foreign currency shortages. This latest shock instigated a risky decision to travel to Dubai without a job offer in the hope he might secure better employment. He did this in part to speed up his marriage preparations with the woman he was seeing (Chapter 6). He is now working in a call centre handling taxi requests, and living in a dorm with seven other young Egyptians. Mahmoud tells me how he regrets his decision to travel. In October, his fiancé-to-be decided she could not

wait any longer for marriage, and left him. Mahmoud is 29 now, and, even though he has migrated, feels no closer to marriage or respectability. He still feels trapped.

Ibrahim was working in his job in a local company near his village when he got accepted to a job in Saudi Arabia. After preparing to travel, and leaving his job, the salary offered to him was suddenly decreased dramatically. He decided not to accept, and is therefore unemployed again. Gamal obtained a junior job in a law firm in Saudi Arabia, which was not the place to which he had originally wanted to travel. Like Mahmoud, he is extremely lonely, and is worried about becoming stuck – he still dreams of coming to London. However, having recently returned to Egypt for a family visit, he realises the financial and social mobility he has experienced. After talking for so long about finding a European wife, he is about to get engaged to a cousin in Cairo. Eslam is now working in a mobile phone shop in Cairo, living in a similar flat to the one described in Chapter 5. He still hopes to obtain a better job, but is now also engaged. Adel returned to Zagazig with his family and worked in a local accountancy office, not unlike the one he had originally left in order to come to Cairo. When I spoke to him a few months ago he was less hopeful of finding better because the economy is becoming worse. However, in the last few days I have found out he has returned to Cairo again to rejoin the call centre. Finally, Mohammed also got an opportunity to move to Saudi Arabia. Having discussed with me the pros and cons of moving (he was scared about being lonely, and having to remain there for the rest of his life), he is now working there and making preparations for marriage.

For many of these young men, after years of hard work, they remain trapped in a state of incompleteness and ‘stuckedness.’ However, others have found a semblance of mobility, though their lives remain scattered by blockages. For one man the story is notably different. Mostafa continued working for a while in his “temporary” job in Cairo, while applying to the

Chevening scholarship. During this time, he began doing a language exchange with a Dutch friend of mine. Through a series of referrals, this brought him into contact with a Dutch woman. They conducted an intensive language exchange over a period of several months, and fell in love. In July 2017 Mostafa proposed, and was duly accepted. At the same time, Mostafa began taking on private clients from his work in advising Saudi investors. When the company found out, he was fired, only to be rehired because of his success rate in the job. He negotiated continued access to private clients. Mostafa has therefore enjoyed a drastic change to his life trajectory. This was in large part enabled through my research activities. He now plans to move to the Netherlands after marriage, though he wants to do it alone rather than with his wife-to-be's help out of pride. Although it seems like he is enjoying material class mobility, many obstacles remain for Mostafa owing to his precarious socio-economic position. Life in Europe may prove to bring a series of difficulties. He was recently denied a tourist visa to visit because there was insufficient proof that he would return. If he reaches a semblance of a 'good life,' what does this mean for this research? Is he an exception? Will Mostafa then perhaps be used as an example to prove that success is possible?

These stories provide a blueprint for further research. It will be important to examine the continued efforts of these young men to sustain mobility in a world which continues to present encounters with immobilities. Specifically, I would want to examine how the experience of migration – particularly to the Gulf, which is an ambivalent place in the minds of young Egyptians, impacts upon the pursuit of existential mobility. Furthermore, though I have attempted to discuss the gendered aspects of the pursuits of these young men, research must also examine how young women experience this 'tormented pursuit' of a good life. What forms of hope do they rely on, and how do they navigate hopes deferred?

The thesis has examined how young men navigate precarious labour markets which induce prolonged waitness. The focus on their everyday practice throws up some important questions that could be explored further. First, the research highlighted the role of continually making and remaking plans as a way of surviving a precarious present. Plan-making provides a way of connecting the present and future, and managing the future's inherent uncertainty. Yet, plans often fail, and must be restarted. How does this process unfold over time? It involves taking hold of certain objects, a laptop, a business card, a marketing textbook in a practice of curation. Adopting the approaches of new materialism, it would be interesting to examine how these objects come to embody certain agencies. The thesis also threw up important questions about how the body is used to perform an aspirational identity. Performances such as wearing trendy clothing, perfecting one's English accent, or conducting oneself in a 'classy' way provide the sense that one is moving towards mobility. Yet, as Chapter 3 demonstrated, this can cause a split between body and mind which can be rendered visible by those who patrol access to desirable employment. Finally, the thesis has opened up important conceptual questions regarding affect, and hegemony and power. I have begun to examine the relations which determine the changing 'affect' of particular objects, highlighting the role of time and subjective need in this process. But affect theory needs to do much more to determine the ambivalence and oscillation that encompasses the relation between subject and object. Building on this, the thesis also examined one situation in which the exercise of power works through affect. I argued that this is not hegemonic, due to the presence of critique, but these young men were complying with a meritocratic system that harms them because of an affective attachment. I hope this provides a blueprint for further exploration of how power is exercised affectively.

To end, I want to briefly discuss the potential for radical change arising out of the condition of hopeful survival I have described. Contemporary capitalist regimes encourage the aspiration of

all, while not allowing more and more to fulfil those aspirations – both because capitalism relies on perpetual movement and growth, but also because of the widespread denial of access to movement towards a dignified life. This continues to ensure the production of anger, as people momentarily realise that their expectations are impossible to reach. It is this anger than can imminently be channelled towards creating something different.⁹²

However, what that something different can and will be remains an open question. The direction that this anger takes is a highly contested, contingent process. As Talal Asad (2015) states, this subjectivisation of morality makes it very difficult to develop a moral language to collectively criticise structural problems. However, there are countless occasions when this meritocratic myth *is* penetrated, and when anger is instead directed outwards. Yet, we have seen in recent years how this anger can head towards dangerous ends (Hochschild, 2016; Hage, 2003). In the West there is a general trend of anger being directed in racialized, classed, and gendered ways towards outsiders, “scroungers,” and even the “liberal elites” who call for more openness, and who succeed within the system. The discursive terrain of meritocracy plays an important, yet unrecognised role in this phenomenon, creating the language which allows it to thrive. Because people are invested in the belief that hard work secures success – and they perceive they are doing that – they become angry at people who appear to circumvent that through government help. All the while, the rich are able to sustain their privilege quietly, under the radar, through the veil that they have earned it without the need for help. Indeed, this deflection is orchestrated and exploited by those who benefit. The task therefore is to redirect people’s anger towards the systems which keep wealth and power in the hands of a few, and away from other “victims” of these systems.

⁹² Bourdieu stated that the “falling out of line” of aspirations and chances can “leave a margin of freedom for political action aimed at reopening the space of possibles” (2000; 234).

Amongst my interlocutors, I heard outbursts of anger against the continued prevalence of wasta or class prejudice in recruitment, against the terrible state of the economy, the corruption of elites who become rich through selling illegal products or stealing land, poor industrial planning, the dilapidated state of public education, and even in more racialized ways against Israeli collusion in Egypt's economy. There is though potential in these narratives for change. However, there are many dangers as well. Thus, these complaints, as I heard many times, might not be listened to by elites who are invested in discourses of meritocracy, and thus perceive them as excuses for personal failures. Complaints about public education are used to justify further privatisation – I even heard from some young men that those who could were justified in sending their children to private schools to avoid state education, which does not recognise that a hierarchical education system is part of the problem. Finally, complaints about wasta or prejudice can be utilised to in fact further entrench meritocratic discourses, through making recruitment fairer and more open.

Much deeper questions need to be asked in Egypt, and beyond, about who is able to secure success, to acquire the right skills, talents, qualifications, and connections, to find funding for entrepreneurship projects, or to obtain prestigious scholarships. Actions need to be taken to close the gap between what people aspire after, and what they are able to get. There are two ways of doing this, to promise less, or deliver more. For young men like Adel, or Mahmoud, the inequalities in access to education in a system that is becoming ever more stratified need to be addressed, and the number of dignified white-collar jobs needs to be raised. Yet, in general terms, this is a difficult debate in a labour market which is hierarchical. Thus, it is a noble (but impossible) goal to ensure that labour market success does not go to those with the most money in a social structure that is so unequal. However, there are more fundamental questions to

address. If everyone aspires to be a lawyer, many will be disappointed, even if there is a level playing field. Does that mean aspirations need to be limited? Should the goal be to realise a society where *everyone* is able to lead a dignified life, and to create the “objective chances” through which people can move towards self-realisation? It would be a good start to ensure all have access to a secure life, a job, an income, and a home. Yet so many crave more than that. Where then is the space to problematize the capitalised, classed, gendered, aged, racialized, heteronormative nature of individual dreams? Is it progressive to then redefine how success is measured? Would it be progressive for young men like Mahmoud or Ibrahim to redefine what it means to be successful adults, men, and members of the middle-class? These questions require much further discussion, but out of this research it is clear that a society in which so few make money off the back of the unfulfilled hopes of so many is unsustainable.

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Appendix

Table of key research participants

Name	Age (Jan 2018)	Education	Occupation(s)	Residence
Mahmoud	29	Faculty of Commerce (Arabic), Helwan University (2009)	-Accountant (student dorm) -Bank Teller -Call centre agent (mobile phones) -Kebab salesperson -Taxi customer service rep (Abu Dhabi) -Sales rep (mobile phones) -Data entry (electrical appliances) -Secretary (imports) -Taxi customer service rep (Dubai)	Faysal, Cairo
Ibrahim	28	Faculty of Commerce (Arabic), Zagazig University (2012)	-Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo) -Customer Service rep (mobile phones) (Cairo) -Office assistant, 10 th of Ramadan	Kafr al-Ghunaymi, Sharqia governorate
Adel	26	Faculty of Commerce (Arabic), Zagazig University (2014)	-Accountant (local tax office) (Zagazig) -Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo) -Accountant (local tax office) (Zagazig) -Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo)	Zagazig, Sharqia governorate
Eslam	26	Faculty of Humanities (Arabic), Sohag University (2014)	-Football player (Sohag) -Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo) -Customer service rep (mobile phones) (Cairo)	Sohag, Sohag governorate
Gamal	28	Faculty of Law (Arabic), Cairo University (2012)	-Clothing salesman -Legal assistant (unpaid)	Ezbet el-Nakhl, Greater Cairo

		-Master's in International Business Law, Cairo University (2015)	-Legal assistant (unpaid) -Legal advisor (unpaid) -Self-employed family lawyer -Legal councillor abroad (Saudi Arabia)	
Mostafa	26	Faculty of Commerce (Arabic), Mansoura University (2013)	-Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo) -Call centre agent – investments (Cairo)	Mahalla, Gharbia governorate
Mohammed	26	Faculty of Commerce (Arabic), Tanta University (2014)	-Tyre salesman (Zefta) -Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo) -Sales (Saudi Arabia)	Zefta, Gharbia governorate
Saami	30	Faculty of Translation, Al Azhar University (2009) Master's in Applied Linguistics International Islamic University Malaysia (2018)	-Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo) -English-Arabic translation (Cairo)	Abu Numrus, Greater Cairo
Mohamed	30	Faculty of Engineering, Mansoura University (2010)	-Computer sales start-up (Cairo) -Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo)	Shubra el-Kheima, Greater Cairo
Hisham	28	Faculty of Humanities (Arabic), Helwan University (2012)	-Tour guide (Cairo)	Helwan, Greater Cairo
Abanoub	28	Faculty of Humanities (Arabic), Helwan University (2012)	-Call centre agent (internet) (Cairo) -Call centre agent (internet) (Dubai)	Maasara, Cairo
Hani	27	Faculty of Commerce (Arabic), Cairo University (2016)	-Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo) -Outdoor sales (Cairo)	Haram, Cairo

Hashem	26	Faculty of Commerce (Arabic), Cairo University (2014)	-Call centre agent (mobile phones) (Cairo) -Customer service rep (mobile phones) (Cairo) -Customer service rep – outsourced banking (Cairo)	Downtown, Cairo
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