

Research approaches

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Mass Culture and Modernism in Egypt began as my dissertation research. My plan was to write about concepts of the person in Egypt, and one of my sources was to be media, though this was not necessarily to be the primary focus of the research. At the outset, my plans were quite flexible. I was interested in the relation of local identity to practices associated with both foreign and 'classical' Islamic ideals.

My potential sources were eclectic. For example, I had hoped to incorporate a historical perspective through looking at late Ottoman-period Turkish-language manuscripts. In particular, I wanted to search for texts that made use of terms of appellation comparable to (or contrasting with) contemporary terms like *ibn al-balad* – literally 'son of the country', though the exact referent can change according to context, evoking various shades of locality in one situation, class distinctions in another, and national identity in still others. Sawsan el-Messiri, the anthropologist who originally analysed the term in the context of modern Egyptian identity, suggested that the term was not frozen, and had taken on a range of contemporary meanings in relatively recent historical memory. I had hoped to elaborate on her observation.

As often happens, once the research began, I changed my focus. Mediated culture is an inescapable part of contemporary Egypt, and yet writing on it was, and remains, astonishingly thin. The idea of trying to augment anthropological research through archival sources began to seem absurd in the face of the massive quantities of mediated material that were all around me. These materials were, of course, meaningful in various ways to my steadily expanding circle of informants and friends. But they were also characterized by historical depth, albeit not as great a depth as I had once hoped to explore through archival documents. In the end, my ethnographic material ranged from 1930s popular magazines and cinema to college students of the 1990s.

By default, the only modern medium that has really mattered in the study of Middle Eastern societies has been print. Not print as a medium of mass communication, but print simply as the vehicle for ideas that could be translated fairly unproblematically. Given the narrow range of Western academic interest in the Middle East (and to a great extent in all non-Western cultures), it has proven exceedingly difficult to think of Egypt as a modern society closely tied to the experience of mediated communication. The media in question are certainly not only, or necessarily even primarily, those that utilize print. Nonetheless the study of media in Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world has remained shackled by an academic division of labour that creates an implicit cultural divide. This is a variant of the sort of high/low cultural divides that have developed in the United States and Europe. In Middle East Studies, research and publishing agendas define low culture as pre-modern or 'folkloric', and high culture as literate and book-bound. The metagenres of Egyptian popular culture and broad media discourses on modernity employ a language of dichotomy – folk culture/high culture, traditional/modern, religious/secular, etc. But in the mass-mediated popular culture of Egypt and many other colonial and postcolonial societies, the purpose of such discourses has not been to reinforce cultural dichotomies. Rather it is to transcend them, or at least to create a hybrid form of modernity, conceptually linked to the local past, but fully conversant with imported technique.

Such binarisms have, of course, been fiercely criticized in American academia during the past two decades. The effect of such critiques has been to slowly recast research agendas, but also to facilitate an overall decrease in the institu-

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tional status of Middle East-oriented scholarship. There are many reasons for this, and certainly there are exceptions to the obsessive American preoccupation with characterizing the Middle East as a place sharply divided between pre-modern and 'westernized' elements – in other words as a place with no real modernity of its own. In short, at precisely the time when intellectual critiques of Middle Eastern Studies and Orientalism might have led to more effective and less rigidly channelled studies of the region, the American political and cultural establishment invested heavily in promoting an image of the Middle East as a threatening cultural opposite, particularly with the demise of the Soviet Union. I would argue that most new PhD's of the past two decades have been out of sync with the campaign of disinformation promoted by the American media and government. Hence there has been a steadily decreasing market for Middle East specialization within American academia. The mainstream of new Middle Eastern scholarship was reduced to a trickle. Consequently the capacity to explore such topics as the role of mass media in constructing modern culture is far less than it would have been if the demand for Middle Eastern specialization had been even a tenth as great as the demand for specialization in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Political and economic interests in those areas have led to vastly greater institutional investment in the United States.

Research agendas, if not the institutional prestige of Middle East specialists, are changing. However, new research agendas are not neces-

sarily leading to a more comprehensive consideration of the sorts of media I wrote about in *Mass Culture and Modernism*. This is because the impetus for the study of media in the Arab world stems from a growing concern for the transnational effects of 'new media' – the internet, fax, and satellite television. Interest in such phenomena is perfectly understandable up to a point. Computers and digital technology are changing the world; Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world are undeniably caught up in these changes. However, I believe that to focus on new media without relating them to the effects and constructed meanings of older media is short-sighted, and leads to a deceptive emphasis on globalization, and the hope (or, for some, the spectre) of a world without borders.

Globalization rhetoric is not innocent of politics. It tends to obscure relations of power between a metropolitan centre (Europe, the United States, parts of Asia), and a formerly colonized periphery. Flows of culture, people, and capital are in fact still structured in favour of the metropolis, despite popular and academic assertions to the contrary. 'The global constructs the local' has become a mantra of American academia, but 'the global' almost always privileges the activities of an Europhone elite. The 'new media' most amenable to globalization rhetoric – the internet and satellite television – were largely still on the horizon in Egypt when I did the fieldwork upon which *Mass Culture and Modernism* is based. They have since become far more prominent. But I do not believe the analysis of new media can be ade-

quately done without due consideration for the effects of media that do not easily fit the 'globalization' mantra.

An emphasis on globalization built through the effects of new media is deceptive because new media never eliminate old media. What actually happens in every case is that new media augment the old. The internet, the newest of the new media, is a metaphor for the way all media work in that it links texts often in non-linear relationships. Songs on cassette, films, celebrities, poetry, magazine imagery, books, and television are intertextual by nature. Communication itself is intertextual. To put it simply, the ability to link diverse texts in individualized networks happens apart from the internet.

The intertextuality of media – old as well as new – was an essential part of *Mass Culture and Modernism*. Often the 'content' of media is inseparable from its deployment in the social networks of everyday life. For example, Muhammad Abd al-Wahhab, the great singer and composer who died while I was doing my fieldwork, was a historical figure, but also a contemporary social reference point in 1991 for young people who felt compelled to justify their own tastes in music through him. I found that Ahmad Adawiyya, a singer of the younger generation, and for many a controversial figure of dubious taste, was linked in conversation to Abd al-Wahhab, a popular figure of an earlier era who, by the time of his death, was an icon of highbrow sensibilities. The two were not necessarily linked as similar figures – depending on one's attitude toward Adawiyya, the association might well be one of contrast rather than of similarity. But there was no question that Adawiyya made more sense in a network of intertextual references – to Abd al-Wahhab and to many others from many different historical periods – than he would have as a phenomenon relevant only to class and generational segments in 1991.

The rise of Adawiyya certainly is tied to the transnational processes that occupy the attention of American social science. He is a performer emblematic of the age of portable music – of a decentralized system of production in which cheap and easily pirated cassette recordings prevent the sort of market domination that Abd al-Wahhab built through the gramophone, cinema, and national radio broadcasts. And Adawiyya is also representative of a crisis of confidence in the institutional success of modernist and nationalist projects – a crisis of confidence that has contributed to the rise of the Islamist movement. This too is consonant with the globalist rhetoric of the moment. But it is also true that much of what makes Adawiyya meaningful in contemporary Egypt takes place well below the radar of the English-oriented transnational 'new media' that will very likely attract a growing share of scholarly attention in coming years.

The crisis of confidence in modernist and nationalist discourses of the older generations that *Mass Culture and Modernism* characterizes as having occurred since the 1970s is not a negation of modernity itself. My basic assumption in researching and writing the book was that modernity must be thought of as a plural process rather than as something that radiated from Europe. Despite the egregious underemphasis by Western scholars on Egyptian mass-mediated culture, throughout the twentieth century it has been a key factor in creating modernity in Egypt. I am confident that this omission will be corrected – that studies of mass culture and modernity in Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world will flourish in the near future. ♦

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