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Global Dreams

Space, Class and Gender in Middle Class Cairo

Anouk de Koning

Global Dreams

Space, Class and Gender in Middle Class Cairo

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus
prof.mr. P.F. van der Heijden
ten overstaan van een door het college voor promoties ingestelde
commissie, in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit
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This book is dedicated to my grandmother Agnes (Sioe Tioe) Groothuizen-Lauw

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From early on the stories of my grandparents provided me with a sense of wonder and love for social history. I dedicate this book to my grandmother, Agnes (Sioe Tioe) Groothuizen-Lauw, whose own transnational trajectory and ability to move between worlds in an amazing down-to-earth manner taught me about a world in which everyone, when it comes down to it, is only human.

Notes on Transliteration

Since almost all Arabic words in the text are Cairene colloquial expressions, I have chosen a transliteration system that reflects local pronunciations. I follow the system adopted in *A Dictionary of Egyptian Arabic* by El-Said Badawi and Martin Hinds (Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1986). I have however simplified the transcription of the Arabic alphabet, in order to make it more easily accessible to readers who are not familiar with Arabic. I thus use:

- [s] for both س and ص
- [h] for both ح and هـ
- [t] for ط and ت
- [d] for د and ض
- [z] for ز and ظ
- [sh] for ش
- [kh] for خ
- [gh] for غ
- [ʕ] for ع
- [ʔ] for ء and for ق, in case the ق is replaced by a glottal stop, as in *'ahwa*.

Long vowels are represented by double vowels; doubled consonants are similarly represented by double consonants in English (e.g., *muhaggabaat*). Proper names and place names have been written according to their usual spelling in English.

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Unless indicated otherwise, all photographs appearing in this study were taken by the author.

Map of Cairo



Figure1: Map of Cairo

- 1 Downtown Cairo (West el-Balad)
- 2 Mohandisseen
- 3 Zamalek
- 4 Maadi
- 5 Fatimid Cairo

Includes new thoroughfares, ringroad and recent expansions (N.S.= new settlement). Adapted from Urban Development in Egypt (n.d. [ca. 2001]). Cairo: Ministry of Housing, p. 57.



Figure 2: Cairo on the banks of the Nile

Introduction: Young Professionals and the City

If we stop dreaming, we'll die,
If we insist, we'll be able to pass
If we cross once, it's done
If we shy back, it'll all be lost

A bit of endurance, a bit of enthusiasm
And the dream will have color and sound
If we stop dreaming, we'll die
If we insist, we'll be able to pass

Mohamed Mounir, 'If we stop dreaming, we'll die'
(From the album 'Open Your Heart')

In the course of the 1990s Cairo's cityscape has acquired a spectacular global touch. The luxurious five-stars hotels that rise high on the banks of the Nile speak of an incessant flow of high-end foreign visitors. The budding upscale gated communities, hotels, golf courts and foreign educational institutes in the desert around Cairo offer affluent Cairenes transnational products and experiences as well as a perfect, homogeneous social world that the mixed city with its high poverty rates, crowdedness and pollution cannot offer. This spectacular Cairo is one of the clearest expressions of three decades of economic liberalization, which entailed economic restructuring, the redefinition of the role of the state in national development, and an increased emphasis on the private sector and integration into global economic networks. These dazzling accretions have their counterpart in perhaps less spectacular, but equally significant changes in Cairo's middle class landscape. In this study, I look at the ways in which Egypt's economic and political reorientation has changed everyday life in middle class Cairo.

The cover photograph captures some of these changes in middle class Cairo. It shows the Cilantro coffee shop located across from the American University in Cairo's old city center. Upscale coffee shops like Cilantro have become central to the social lives of many young affluent Cairenes. Such coffee shops are mostly located in affluent areas like Mohandisseen, Heliopolis, Maadi and Zamalek. This Cilantro is the only upscale coffee shop in the Downtown area, which has been all but abandoned by young affluent Cairenes. The American University is the single reason for its odd presence. It presents a poignant reminder of the increasingly divided makeup of Cairo's urban landscape.

Located next door to Cilantro is a shop selling car parts, and next to that an *'ahwa baladi*, one of the numerous 'traditional' side-walk cafes that have an almost exclusively male clientele. Cilantro, in contrast, harbors an affluent mixed-gender public enjoying cappuccinos or cafe lattes with brownies rather than the *'ahwa mazbuut* [Turkish coffee with sugar] served next door. Hidden from view by the dark pane glassed front is a well-maintained minimalist interior. Most conversations are held not in Arabic, but in a vernacular of Arabic and English that has come to distinguish Cairo's young upper-middle class. Cilantro represents an upscale island in Downtown Cairo that is closed to the young passers-by, their keen sense of cosmopolitan fashion notwithstanding. The photo captures Cairo's disparate social realities, which are usually marked by spatial distance rather than proximity, and that have largely materialized in the form of class-specific neighborhoods.

On a summer evening in 2004 Ahmed, a lower-middle class law graduate in his late twenties, started telling a number of funny and outrageous stories about his new job as a personal assistant in a small company run by a wealthy lady.¹ He knew such stories would interest and entertain me and did his best to narrate his story in a spectacular way, with repetitions to drive home what he considered to be the most outrageous passages. A year earlier I had conducted a focus group interview with Ahmed and four of his friends. That night Ahmed once more showed himself to be an expert storyteller. He started filling me in on his adventures in the labor market since the last time we spoke. He left his former job at a law firm when he was refused a pay raise. His boss even told him that, rather than getting paid, Ahmed should pay him for the on-the-job training he receives. After a frantic search he took a job as a Jack-of-all-trades in a small company that distributed fresh produce to hotels in Sinai. Ahmed talked about his adventures on the nightly drives across the country and described the increasing demands made by his boss without any additional rewards. He finally resigned when his boss accused him of pilfering the storage area. He then got his present job as a secretary-cum-office boy in a small company. His rich boss orders him around, he said. She demands personal services that offend his sense of dignity, but at least he works in a clean office and earns his monthly 400 LE.²

"You can't imagine how spoiled [*mitdalla'a*] she is. The other day she ordered one of us

to go and fetch her some groceries. You should have seen what she ordered: luxury cheese, not the normal one, but imported; this specific brand product and not any other one. And four packages of L&M! That money could have bought a chicken, a good warm meal!” The theatrical indignation with which Ahmed told the story implied a public that would be shocked by such consumption behavior. It presupposed a shared common sense in which spending 18 LE on cigarettes, instead of the ingredients for a good meal was an amazing example of spoiled folly. Though I did not point it out during the interview, I smoked L&M and had stocked up on imported cheese. More importantly, these were in fact routine consumption practices among the more affluent Cairenes I had met in the course of my research.

Ahmed continued with a story about his one-time venture to Carrefour. At the time of its opening early in 2003, the hypermarket was the focus of much upper-middle class excitement, since it seemed to promise a renewed inclusion into First World consumption practices (see Chapter One). Carrefour is part of the exponentially growing elite shopping, educational and residential complexes being built in the desert around Cairo, far from popular interference. It belongs to the new conspicuously cosmopolitan city that has emerged in the course of the 1990s. As Ahmed pointed out, since Carrefour is located in the desert on the outskirts of Cairo, only people with cars can visit Carrefour. He had gone there with his more fortunate cousin, who had a well-paid low-level administrative job in a foreign company and owned a car. Ahmed went to visit Carrefour to look for a suit. He once again displayed his utter disbelief and disdain for routine up-market consumption practices. “I saw a suit that cost 500 LE and said ‘Thank you very much!’” On other occasions Ahmed had made sure to express his strong feelings about his own limited chances and ill fortune. In contrast, his stories about his spoiled boss and his dramatically re-enacted indignation at the prices of suits on offer at Carrefour demonstrated a mixture of moral offense and a sense of superiority vis-à-vis the sheer folly of people who clearly had their priorities all wrong.

Ahmed’s narrative performance touched on the core issues addressed in this study: the consolidation of divisions in the Cairene professional middle class in what has been called Cairo’s ‘new liberal age’ (Denis 1997). Ahmed’s tall stories, like others that will be told in the course of this study, express both the crude realities of social segmentation and disparate fortunes that have become characteristic of middle class Cairo, as well as the ways in which these social divisions are lived, conceived and contested. This study explores a middle class Cairo where some can say that “everybody has 10 LE to pay for a cup of coffee” and others tell tall stories about a wonderland of routine affluent consumption practices.

Ways of being in the nation

The last three decades in Egypt have witnessed the withdrawal of the state from its previous role as the prime agent of national development. The private sector has been singled out as the force that will bring development and prosperity to the country. This study concerns some of the everyday effects of Egypt's economic and political reorientation toward a liberal market economy that is integrated into the global conforms to neoliberal precepts. This reorientation, which started in the mid-1970s with the *infitaah* (open-door) policies, sped up significantly in the 1990s with the adoption of structural adjustment policies. It has allowed for a strong re-assertion of class differences, which had been comparatively muted under Nasser's Arab Socialism, when numerous institutions were created to foster a broad urban professional middle class. Cairo has seen the rise of a new bourgeoisie, as well as the growth of a relatively affluent professional upper-middle class whose members are employed in sectors related to the global economy. In the social landscape beyond these few more fortunate groups, real wages are in steady decline whilst the withdrawal of a whole range of government subsidies and services has made life increasingly expensive. These new divisions materialize in the urban landscape as new spatial and socio-cultural forms of segregation.

I examine some of the consequences of this reorientation and economic restructuring for Cairo's professional middle class. New lines of segmentation in schooling, the labor market and consumption increasingly give rise to new lines of division and new forms of distinction and thereby contribute to the still tentative formation of a distinct professional upper-middle class that inhabits Cairo's up-market spaces. These divisions and distinctions importantly rely on cosmopolitan capital: familiarity with Western repertoires and standards—for example, fluency in English—as well as the ability to participate in distinctive cosmopolitan lifestyles.

The economic restructuring that has accompanied this political and economic reorientation is underway in many different places around the globe. While it largely relies on similar neoliberal principles of faith, such restructuring takes divergent forms in different national sites (see Peck and Tickell 2002). Eastern European countries endeavor to effect a transition from their socialist inheritance to liberal market economies, postcolonial countries like Egypt are induced to reform their states, economies and societies along the precepts of structural adjustment, while European states trim their welfare packages. These changes crucially affect people's livelihoods, their aspirations and their ability to realize these aspirations. They reconfigure existing social hierarchies, as well as national narratives of progress and modernity.

Egypt's shift toward economic liberalization, greater integration in global economic and

legal networks, and a redefinition of the role of state has changed possible ‘ways of being in the nation’: dreams, aspirations and modes of belonging that are intimately personal, yet are significantly informed by the concrete distribution of resources and avenues of social mobility of specific political and economic regimes, as well as the larger narratives and projects that frame these everyday realities.

My exploration of changing ‘ways of being in the nation’ has been inspired by Lisa Rofel’s study of the intimate personal investments in larger national narratives of three generations of female factory workers in post-Mao China (1999). Rofel’s study examines the strikingly different ways in which the three cohorts that came of age under different politico-economic regimes negotiate post-Mao realities. Rofel argues that “their dynamic memories of their shifting relationship to the state and the powerful rhetorics of socialism led to divergent struggles over the meaning of their changing experiences of subalternity” (1999:7). Their subjective investments in particular national narratives and projects inform their engagement with China’s political and economic reorientation. I similarly explore such differential engagements with Egypt’s economic restructuring.

Such national narratives and personal desires are inevitably situated in imagined geographies of an unequal world marked by Western hegemony. They are significantly shaped and fueled by the persistent exclusion of postcolonial subjects from a Western modernity that produces those outside the West as its other. As Rofel argues, “to understand the passion with which modernity is pursued by people who have been made to live in a decentered relationship to Europe and the United States ...we must recognize specific histories of colonialism and socialism, as well as the contours of late-twentieth century global political and cultural economies” (1999:3). While such imaginaries of modernity take different shapes in different postcolonial locations and among differently positioned people, and while the terms of this modernity have been the subject of much contestation, postcolonial longings for ‘modernity’ remain significantly determined by global histories of imperialism and colonialism that have “enabled the West to distinguish itself as that history’s principle subject” (Rofel 1999:9).

I similarly address such combinations of discursive and material exclusion and longing and desire. While Rofel speaks of a longing for modernity, in the context of the Cairene middle class, such longing is more aptly captured by the term ‘First World.’ Cairo’s new liberal age, which is marked by a greater integration in ‘the global market’ and dependence on the West, notably the United States, has once again accentuated longing for First World inclusion and affluence. I explore the ways in which such longing for First World affluence and sophistication pervades the new national project and the up-market city that has emerged in its context.

Emanuela Guano (2002) explores the ambivalent seductions of the emerging neoliberal landscape of Buenos Aires for its middle class inhabitants. She argues that, notwithstanding

the marginalization experienced by large sections of Buenos Aires' middle class, the government's neoliberal project enthralled middle class inhabitants with the promise of Argentina's return to the First World. As Guano suggests, the seductive promise of 'return' was predicated on long standing narratives of exclusion of and desire for the First World. James Ferguson (1999) tells a related, yet contrasting story of the experience of economic decline among mine workers in Zambia's Copperbelt. He discusses the bitter experiences of the loss of modernity of cosmopolitan urbanites who saw themselves forced to leave the city and make a living in rural areas.

What these studies have in common is that they explore personal investments and desires, frustrations and disillusionment of people caught in economic and political whirlwinds of change. They look at the investments of ordinary people in larger stories of the nation, modernity and the good life against the background of changing economic and political structures and narratives. They recount the excitement that comes with the semblance of new possibilities or the fulfillment of old yearnings, but also the frustration and disillusionment that attends the disappearance of older possibilities and narratives. These lost promises in turn often take on a life of their own in nostalgic narratives.

This study tells a middle class story of economic liberalization in a country and a capital city that have been significantly shaped by the period after the 1952-Revolution that ended the rule of King Farouq and brought the Free Officers to power. This formative period was characterized by its own brand of socialism and national independence in which the state played a dominant role as the prime agent of national development. Cairo's middle class became central to material and ideological investments of the state. The open-door policies of the mid-1970s and the subsequent structural adjustment policies have redefined both national narratives and projects. Since these processes of restructuring lead to growing divisions within Cairo's professional middle class, they also give rise to highly differential middle class engagements with the narratives and realities of Cairo's new liberal age.

As I argue in more detail in Chapter One, the Nasser regime created a large urban professional middle class, which became a central protagonist of narratives of national progress and modernity. Now that the older Nasserite narrative and project are increasingly left behind in attempts to bring the nation up to speed with the global, dreams that were connected to the Nasserite emphasis on the urban professional middle class are increasingly countered by hostile realities. Meanwhile new dreams of a First World Egypt seem within reach to those young urban professionals who are able to negotiate the cosmopolitan realms of up-market Cairo. They are presented as the successful mediators between the 'local' and the 'global,' not unlike India's 'new middle class,' which, as Fernandes argues, is constructed as "the social group that is able to negotiate India's new relationship with the global economy in both cultural and economic terms" (2000b:91).

The small stories I tell of events, comments, experiences and impressions in middle class Cairo thus speak to a larger story of the change from a developmental to a neoliberal state; of a shift from a national economy dominated by public enterprises and state directives to a reliance on the private sector and integration into global networks. It is also the story of a capital city that was once the central site of explicitly national and regional projects and narratives and now seeks to capture transnational business and live up to cosmopolitan ambitions and global standards. These shifts do not imply a withering of the state. The state remains central, yet its presence, narratives and projects are redefined. The previous national developmentalist course, with the state as its dominant agent, has increasingly been replaced by policies that seek to reduce the national developmental role of the state and rewrite the earlier social contract between state and people, while aiming to bring the nation up to speed with the global.

Restructuring the middle class

Egypt's economic and political reorientation has been strongly felt among Cairo's professional middle class. The broad professional urban middle class that was fostered under Nasser has become increasingly divided between those whose cosmopolitan capital allows them to compete for relatively lucrative jobs in Egypt's transnational and up-market workspaces, and other graduates whose more localized qualifications have lost much of their previous value.³

As Walter Armbrust argues, in Cairo, being middle class is importantly figured in terms of education (1999). To be middle class is often taken to imply having an education, being acquainted with modern institutions and enjoying a clean life.⁴ In this study, I focus on middle class professionals, primarily those with a higher education and concomitant job expectations (whether realized or not).⁵ The share of professional and technical staff in the Cairo governorate labor force (which presents only part of the Greater Cairo metropolitan area) provides an indication of the size of this urban professional middle class. In 1999 this share was estimated at 31% (versus 19.2% on the national level) (UNDP 2001: 147).⁶ Armbrust and Waterbury argue that being middle class does not necessarily imply a certain minimum life-standard (Armbrust 1999:111, Waterbury 1983:262). This 'middle class' includes educated professionals who barely make enough to keep out of poverty. Incomes in the middle class range from a few hundred to thousands of pounds. The poverty of some middle class Cairenes does not contradict their middle class identification or the salience of their education and office jobs in social life. It rather reflects the precarious situation of large sections of the educated middle class, most notably poorly paid civil servants and unemployed university graduates.

Cairo's professional middle class has long encompassed significant differences in income, life standard and lifestyle. These differences are being reconfigured in Egypt's new liberal era. Segmentation in the labor market has given rise to new lines of division within the middle class. I explore these new lines of division and focus on the emergence of an increasingly distinct and exclusive professional upper-middle class.

Saskia Sassen has made the by now paradigmatic argument that economic globalization gives rise to an increasingly dense network of global cities that harbor the material nodes of control for spatially dispersed production processes and are production sites for the specialized business services that make such control possible (Sassen 2000; 2001). The urban sectors that are involved in such global co-ordination functions become increasingly disconnected from the surrounding economic landscape. This disjunction in the urban economy is accompanied by changing class configurations, and increasingly disjunctive urban geographies and modes of consuming the city.

Sassen's analysis of 'global city formation' addresses changes in the socio-economic landscapes of New York, London and Tokyo. The question is to what extent her analysis can illuminate processes at work in cities in the South. The global networks in which Southern cities are entangled are not only more diverse, but moreover place such cities "at quite the opposite end of the command and control continuum of global city functions" (Robinson 2002:547, *cf.* Dawson and Edwards 2004). Such dependent positioning has a long history. Cities in the South have often either been created as or been transformed into colonial cities that provided crucial yet dependent nodes in imperial global circuits (King 1990). Edwards and Hayes rightly argue that Sassen overstates the disjunction between the contemporary world economy and earlier colonial configurations, since "old imperial maps still influence the circuits of culture and capital, underneath and in tension with the 'new imperialism' of economic globalization" (2004:3). It is telling that Cairo's 'global movers' not only include multinational companies, but also, significantly, the development industry, international organizations and the semi-local NGOs they finance, as well as tourism.

Despite crucial differences in historical trajectories and contemporary position in global networks, Sassen's work does illuminate possible connections between economic globalization and the social and cultural transformation of the urban landscape of 'global cities,' whether North or South. Sassen argues that one of the central features of the socio-cultural transformations that accompany 'global city formation' is social and economic polarization, which particularly impacts on the middle classes (*cf.* Smart and Smart 2003). "There has been a generalized dismantling of the system that provided a measure of job security, health benefits and other components of a social wage to a critical mass of workers," she argues (2001:339). The "new industrial complex" also gives rise to a class of high-income workers that consists of professionals, managers and brokers who reap high

rewards for their labor, but do not have significant control of the large corporations for which they work (Sassen 2001:340).

Though the socio-economic context differs significantly, these new class configurations resonate with Cairene realities. My observations and those of many Cairenes suggest that Cairo has similarly experienced a growing polarization, which has had a strong impact on the professional middle class. This polarization is related to Egypt's economic restructuring and the endorsement of a private sector integrated in global economic networks. An up-market sector of internationally oriented companies and institutions has emerged in Cairo's urban economy. Those employed in managerial and professional positions in Cairo's more internationally oriented economy can be said to constitute the Cairene equivalent of the stratum of high-income earners discussed by Sassen. This up-market segment of internationally oriented companies and institutions offers relatively good wages and careers when compared to the meager pay of the oftentimes highly insecure private sector jobs or low-level government jobs on which many young professionals from less privileged middle class strata are forced to rely (*cf.* Abdel Mo'ti 2002:324-30, see my Chapter Three). While the latter might range from 150 to 1000 LE, wages in the up-market sector might start at 1000 LE, but can reach tens of thousands Egyptian Pounds. Many older professionals are cushioned from such segmentation by the continued existence of older economic structures, but younger professionals are confronted with a strongly segmented labor market and urban economy.

The emergence of a Cairene equivalent of this high-income middle class is the focus of the greater part of this study. I have chosen to call them upper-middle class professionals to highlight the significant differences with professionals from other middle class strata in terms of income, lifestyle and social worlds.⁷ Sassen argues that these high-income workers pioneer new consumption practices, which, because of their relatively high incomes, significantly affect the urban landscape of global cities (2001:341). Though some Cairene upper-middle class professionals do earn incomes that are comparable to those of, for example, European professionals, most earn incomes that are only high when compared to the wages of professionals elsewhere. The up-market segment of the economy in which they are employed has moreover been plagued by economic crisis. The consumption patterns and lifestyles of young upper-middle class Cairenes have nonetheless contributed to the emergence of new public spaces for consumption and leisure, as well as shifting axes of centrality in the city at large. It seems that Cairo's facilities and infrastructure increasingly cater to this professional upper-middle class, as well as to Cairo's far more affluent elites.

This study is based on twenty months of ethnographic research among young professional Cairenes. The fieldwork was carried out from September 2001 to February 2003, and from

May 2004 to July 2004. It included participant observation and interviews with differently positioned middle class professionals, mostly in their mid-twenties to early thirties.

The generation of middle class professionals that has entered the job market in the last ten years presents a vantage point for the exploration of contemporary Cairo. These relatively recent entrants into the labor market and adult life are starkly confronted with Cairo's contemporary segmentation of fortunes. New lines of exclusion and inclusion are strongly felt among those who can now look forward to the rewarding jobs in transnational companies and their local equivalents, as well as to the upper-middle class comforts they offer. They are even more pertinent for those young professionals who, in contrast, had hopes and expectations based on their educational achievements but now find themselves among the army of young unemployed, no longer expecting more than a small job with meager pay and long hours, even postponing their dreams of an independent life and the 'opening of a home' (starting a family). They are confronted with a labor market where real wages and opportunities in the government sectors are declining, in a context where there seem to be golden chances for the happy few who are able to speak English at a near-native level, have the right qualifications from the right college or university, and who quite literally embody the right social background.

Changing the subject

When I came to Cairo in September 2001 I initially set out to conduct social-historical research on Cairo's middle class. I had worked with life stories in my previous research in Surinam, and planned to do so again in Surinam. Before embarking on my fieldwork, I had listened to stories of Egypt's specificity, bolstered by films and music that time and again retold the country's story for its national and regional audiences. These were stories of a country where a national spirit and project had once thrived, but had decidedly fallen upon hard times. It however remained a country whose inhabitants had their own stories to tell about themselves and their place in the world, stories that drew much of their color and strength from the decades following the 1952-Revolution. I had explored (lower) middle class Cairo and had become acquainted with the intellectual Downtown spaces and the people who frequent them.

The young and affluent Cairenes I would meet on a trip to the desert in December 2001 presented me with a quite different Cairo. A young man I met at a party invited me to join him and his girlfriend on a desert safari with SaharaSafaris, an internet-based community founded in 2001, which brings people together for trips to the desert and more mundane social outings in the city. During the introductory meeting at a five-star hotel in up-market Zamalek, I encountered a crowd of elegantly and formally dressed Cairenes. After our desert safari I still had trouble placing these young men and women. They were

clearly more affluent than most people I knew, spoke fluent English and seemed polite and respectable, yet sophisticated and cosmopolitan. I was surprised by the casual, yet highly respectable character of their mixed-gender gatherings and the absence of obvious flirting in a group that was predominantly made up of young singles. In my experience such mixing was somewhat problematic and circumscribed in Cairo. The Downtown intellectual scene was known to stand out from other social spaces in the city for the leeway allowed to mixed-gender socializing, yet even there, such mixed-gender interactions seemed to contain a subterranean tension that would come out late at night when men had had too much to drink.

My acquaintance with people I had met on the trip introduced me to spaces in Cairo I had hardly known before. I soon found myself visiting upscale coffee shops on an almost daily basis and learned that these venues had become central urban spaces for the social life of many more affluent urban professionals. One of the organizers of the desert trip sent an email around with the participants' names, email addresses and occupations. It provided a first clue to the underlying logics of the stark divisions in Cairo's professional middle class. The participants had strikingly similar occupational backgrounds. They were almost without exception engineers, marketing specialists or personal assistants in companies with international sounding names.

Meanwhile I had conducted a number of interviews with middle-age middle class women. Access was difficult to negotiate and mostly did not lead to open contact. However much we talked, most women seemed to avoid addressing more personal issues: dreams, wishes or details of a life story. An elderly lady whom I had asked to act as an informant, once made this abundantly clear. After a number of visits and long talks, some of which I recorded on tape, she shared a personal detail of her life with me. She apparently surprised herself, and remarked: "Now you've got me, I have just told you something personal."

I soon decided to rely on the contacts I had established with young middle class professionals instead and follow up on the social divisions among young professional Cairenes that had roused my curiosity. It was easier to develop my contacts with these young men and women my age, since I could more easily fit in with their networks and activities and was able to speak to their interests and concerns. This meant that my research came to rely more on participant observation than interviews. My growing ease in spoken Egyptian Arabic, *'ammiyya*, was crucial in this respect.⁸ I conducted all research in *'ammiyya*, or in upper-middle class gatherings, in a mix of *'ammiyya* and English.

Young middle class professionals

While my participation in SaharaSafaris aroused my interest in divisions among young professionals, this research relies on a wide range of contacts with differently positioned professionals. Though I use the labels ‘lower-middle class,’ ‘middle class’ and ‘upper-middle class’ to intimate such differences in social background, financial situation and social worlds, it is important to note that these terms do not connote clearly distinct social positions or mutually exclusive realities. The processes of segmentation described in this study reconfigure the composition of Cairo’s middle class. Older social hierarchies feed into new divisions, and are significantly transformed in the process, while new lines of division and processes of class formation are still tentative.

When I arrived in Cairo, an Egyptian friend introduced me the leftist, intellectual Downtown scene that attracts artists, journalists and activists, and young people longing to be any of the former.⁹ I gradually came to know many regulars. The Downtown scene provided me with a substitute home throughout my fieldwork, helped me to understand the complex makeup of Cairene social life and provided me with a number of important initial contacts. Regulars frequently warned me that I should not mistake the Downtown scene for anything representing Cairo. I did not. The scene was known for its liberal social norms (particularly with respect to alcohol and mixed-gender relations), and the Downtown spaces provided many with an escape from mainstream society.

This Downtown scene gathers people from diverse middle class backgrounds. The scene was the home of many young lower-middle class Cairenes with intellectual or artistic aspirations and time on their hands since they were out of regular work. My Downtown contacts provided access to less privileged middle class realities outside of the scene. Shaker, a lower-middle class friend, introduced me to a number of his friends, including Ahmed, Fatma and Farida, whom I initially met for focus-group interviews on their experiences in the labor market, their educational trajectories and, more generally, their lives and expectations.

Salma, one of my leftist friends, introduced me to a married journalist, who, as she took care to emphasize, was not in any way connected to the Downtown scene. Nada became a close friend and a crucial informant. She found in me a willing companion for her many outings to coffee shops, films and shopping expeditions. She introduced me to her family, as well as to the other members of her and Salma’s *shilla*, all female journalists in a private newspaper. They were in their early thirties; some were married, some still single. All came from middle class backgrounds and had enjoyed a foreign language education.

My participation in SaharaSafaris activities introduced me to an emergent up-market Cairo. The group's fast growing membership mostly consisted of young upper-middle class professionals employed in multinational companies, consultancy and marketing agencies *et cetera*, i.e., the up-market segment of the urban economy. Most had attended language schools and were relatively fluent in English. I joined several desert trips and participated in formal and informal 'socials' that were regularly held in upscale coffee shops or restaurants in Cairo. While thoroughly familiar with cosmopolitan requirements and tastes, most members of this group tried to remain respectable according to Cairene class-specific norms. Many were religious, yet few were zealous or publicly judgmental of less observant Muslims (or Christians). They constituted part of a class that fits the upper segments of the labor market, the transnational workspaces and the media representations of Egypt's future generation (discussed in Chapter Three and One respectively), while most balanced the exigencies of what it meant to be proper middle class (see Chapter Two).

There are several Cairo-based internet-groups that organize forums and social and hobby activities for upper-middle class professionals, but SaharaSafaris was one of the best-known and most active groups. The recent booming of these internet-communities bespeaks the emergence of a new class-cum-generation looking for community. Meeting likeminded people, particularly of the other sex, seemed to present a crucial attraction of a mixed-gender group like SaharaSafaris. The SaharaSafaris email-list was used to organize a variety of activities in- and outside Cairo and provided a public discussion forum (in English).

Some SaharaSafaris-members became friends and informants. Some simply invited me along on outings and introduced me to their friends, while others offered to help me with my research. Much of this study focuses on the emergent up-market Cairo that I initially encountered through my SaharaSafaris contacts.

Almost all of these informants had graduated from university and were active participants in the labor force, even though some were un- or underemployed. While labor force participation is nearly universal among men, labor force participation among women varies strongly according to educational status and region. According to figures for 1998, some 88% of the unmarried women in urban areas with a university education participated in the labor force, compared to 40% of those with intermediate education. Of the highly educated women who were married, 66% were active participants in the urban labor force (Assaad 2002:24). This means that almost all urban unmarried university-educated women, and a significant share of their married counterparts, were employed or actively looking for a job. Employment and professional identities and aspirations were as much a part of these women's lives as they were of men's.

Most of my informants were not married at the time of research and lived with their

parents. Many also remained financially dependent on their parents. While this was obviously the case for those who were unemployed or worked in ill paid jobs, even more affluent professionals had to rely on their family to be able to afford their upper-middle class lifestyles. Many were actively looking for possible marriage partners with whom they could ‘open a home.’ Marriage required large financial contributions of the bride’s and groom’s family. Though some couples chose to sidestep the financial burdens of marriage by renting an apartment or having a simple wedding, most would wait until they were able to come up with the large sums needed for an apartment, the furnishings and the wedding. The groom’s side would mostly be responsible for the larger part of these investments, notably the *shabka* (engagement gifts), the apartment, part of the furnishing and the wedding, while the bride’s side would contribute the rest of the furniture and pay for the engagement party (*cf.* Singerman and Ibrahim 2003, Singerman 1997). Even for more affluent families, marriage presented a significant financial hurdle. Their class position and lifestyles required concomitant investments in their children’s future. They were expected to furnish the money for a spacious apartment in a respectable neighborhood and pay for a sumptuous wedding in one of Cairo’s many five-star hotels.

After marriage the husband was generally considered to be primarily responsible for the family income, while the wife was held responsible for household duties and care of the children. Nada (married, no children) earned over 2000 LE per month, but her husband insisted on giving her household money to pay for their daily expenditure. Her money was her own, and she could spend it as she saw fit, while his money paid the bills. Doing otherwise would suggest he was unable to provide for his family. However, the high cost of living obliges many families to rely on two incomes, and differences in pay between different jobs might give rise to other arrangements. For example, Hoda’s income was much higher than her husband’s modest earnings and the family had to rely on her, rather than his, income to pay the bills. Women’s employment after marriage was a topic of discussion and at times contestation among some of the prospective couples I knew. These contestations seemed to concern gender roles in the family, centrally the wife’s ability to combine outside work with her family duties and the husband’s ability to provide for her without her taking on a job. Many women take considerable time off or quit their jobs when children are born.

While my informants had diverse views on religious practice and differed with regard to their actual observance of religious duties, they were not involved in religious movements (see, e.g., Mahmood 2001; 2003) and more generally did not feel the urge to lecture on religion in the course of everyday interactions.¹⁰ Their stories, though often informed by basic religious beliefs, were not primarily narrated in religious logics or terms. Religious discourses and practices generally formed a taken-for-granted basis for social understanding and interactions.

Negotiating friendship and research

Forging ties of friendship rather than informant-researcher relationships proved to be a major condition for more intimate knowledge of middle class social life in Cairo. In contrast to the difficulties I experienced in finding informants, it was relatively easy to make friends. Whereas people often hesitated to work with a foreign researcher for abstract reasons, many went to great lengths to help me once I had stopped being that stranger and had become a friend or acquaintance. My frequent references to ‘friends’ rather than ‘informants’ throughout this study reflects the personalized nature of the relationships that have been instrumental to my research. Most people in Cairo have extensive personal networks. Such networks constitute the social capital that is crucial in getting a job, marrying or, in my case, doing research.

My initial interviews were often rather formal and missed much of the richness of social life or the narratives one might hear in other settings. Answers tended to be short and precise and the end of the interview was often taken to be the end of our acquaintance. However friendly and hospitable in other matters, many people seemed to have their doubts about being informants and putting their private lives up for research purposes, with the details of their private lives being examined as ‘examples of.’ Being a foreign researcher added an extra layer of doubt. I had been cautioned by stories about foreigners who turned out to work for foreign institutions with suspect motives.

Participant observation, in contrast, opened up a world of stories, gossip, performances and implicit knowledge and codes. While my reliance on personal relationships opened certain avenues of investigation, it at times foreclosed others. I was rarely able to set the agenda of discussions, or ask persistent follow-up questions or explanations. I learned much from informal discussions, fleeting comments, a trip to the city or a personal talk in a coffee shop.

I mostly participated in the social lives of these young professionals, which, in the case of upper-middle class Cairenes, primarily played themselves out in upscale coffee shops. My analysis therefore addresses both the public nature of these social lives, as well as the public spaces in which they unfolded. Most of my ‘informants’ took part in extensive, rapidly shifting social networks. While I stayed in frequent contact with a number of core contacts, other encounters were of a more temporary nature. These more fleeting encounters would last until networks changed and I lost sight of people who had fallen out. The fleeting nature of networks and the public character of my encounters lends this research a decidedly urban touch. It discusses a social life that is marked by “the continual brushing against strangers and the experience of observing bits of the ‘stories’ men and women carry with them, without ever knowing their conclusions,” which Wilson considers characteristic of

metropolitan life (2001:86). All these middle class Cairenes had stories and lives other than those in which I participated. This held particularly true with respect to family life.

Notwithstanding the importance of the family in the lives of my informants, their family backgrounds and family lives were rarely a topic of conversation or discussion. In my upper-middle class circles I seldom heard people publicly inquire into the social background of their conversation partners. However, much like public secrets, whispers about people's family, reputation or material worth abounded. This simultaneous absence and presence of the family reflects the ambivalent position of many unmarried professionals who live with their families until they marry. Since many do not marry until they are in their late twenties, early thirties, they spend a considerable part of their adult, working lives at their family homes, where their professional and independent status is partially negated by their filial position in the family.

Most of these unmarried middle class professionals tried to maintain a distance between their familial lives and their social lives outside of the family realm. As I argue in Chapter Four, maintaining a separation between familial and social life is a crucial strategy for single professionals who live with their parents until they marry and move out to establish their own home. Generational differences in attitudes and beliefs, especially regarding mixed-gender contacts and social and sexual codes, call for a separation between these different spheres. Introducing personal friends to family is likely to breach this separation and open an otherwise bracketed social life away from home to critique or questioning.

Besides participant observation I rely on extensive formal interviews on the topics that emerged in the course of my fieldwork. The personal networks I had established eventually enabled me to follow up on the insights derived from participant observation and informal discussions with more formal interviews and a number of focus group interviews. These more formal interviews concentrated on two themes: first, schooling and the labor market, and second, the leisure culture that had developed in upscale coffee shops and, more generally, negotiations of public space. Apart from the young middle class professionals who constituted the majority of my informants, I also interviewed a number of 'specialists': coffee shop owners/managers and waiters, teachers, older professionals and business consultants, as well as the editors of three English language magazines that target upper-middle class professionals.

Playing class in a divided landscape

Class differences are ever-present in Cairene social life. In the streets, class takes on the black garb of the women selling tissues on the sidewalk and the luxurious Cherokee-like cars that speed by. Peddlers walk between cars that are waiting for the traffic lights in an attempt

to attract the attention of the wealthy car-owners. In a society with such striking class differences one inevitably becomes used to seeing wealth and deprivation side by side. The more affluent are continuously confronted with and obliged by the services of less fortunate city-dwellers like the *bawwaab* (doorkeeper), cleaner, parking attendant, or hawker. These services are important constituents of upper-middle class comfort.

Yet, social worlds are to a large extent closed through physical distance and social segregation that take the form of mutually exclusive social networks and different places of residence, work and leisure. These forms of distancing are replicated in social interaction. A young upper-middle class man might, in a fleeting moment, enjoy talking to a lower class person like the mechanic or the driver and feel part of an undivided Egypt, learning how to be streetwise, a real man and *ibn balad* [son of the country]. Yet, further personal contact is rare.¹¹ Cross-class encounters often take place within a clearly hierarchical setting and often concern the provision of services. As I argue in Chapter Five, more affluent Cairenes often avoid indeterminate cross-class encounters, notably those in open public spaces, where their usual class privileges are not secured.

The everyday of class entails both situational performances of superiority and deference, belonging and non-belonging. Particular class performances determine in which parts of the city one can feel at home, and how one is seen and treated in different spaces on Cairo's class-segmented map. Places and spaces are littered with signposts of class, where some simply cannot feel at home because all the signs and interactions say they are not.

Pervasive combinations of class and culture, economic privilege and socio-cultural distinction mark Egypt's social hierarchies. Struggles over hierarchy and privilege have often taken the form of symbolic struggle over social and cultural worth (*cf.* Walter Armbrust 1996; 1999). The extent to which class and culture are thought to be mutually constitutive is reflected in the common terms middle class Cairenes use to talk about social differentiation. While *tabaqa*, the Arabic word for class, is often used in a more or less neutral way to refer to socio-economic groupings, the most common term to speak of social differentiation is *mustawa*, (social or cultural) level. *Mustawa* refers to loosely defined layers of social differentiation, including many factors other than economic position. To speak of someone as being from a low or conversely high social level infers feelings of status, hierarchy and worthiness. Tamer, a middle-class professional in his late twenties, for example explained that the incidence of flirting and harassment was much lower among what he reverently called people of a 'refined level,' *mustawa raqi*, which in this context denoted both a high class position and high level of cultural sophistication. Such remarks associate socio-economic privilege with cultural superiority, reflecting common assumptions of the intricate connections between the two. In upper-middle class circles, the English word *class* is used in a similar way. *Class* is employed to describe places, people and things thought of as elegant and distinctive.

The linguistic repertoire used to talk about ‘lower class’ habits and lifestyles similarly reflects a semantic universe in which class hierarchies imply specific cultural dispositions that are assumed to entail (a lack of) sophistication.¹² *Baladi*, literally ‘of the locality/country,’ can be used to describe all things and people that are considered local, and often, lower class. The term can also have positive connotations indicating an old-fashioned quality of food products, or, when pertaining to people, authenticity and steadfastness. The related term, *sha‘bi*, meaning ‘popular’ or ‘of the masses,’ similarly denotes things and people associated with the lower class—from *sha‘bi* neighborhoods to people, tastes and foods. *Sha‘bi*, however, does not carry the more positive associations of the term *baladi*.

Terms like *baladi* [local] and *sha‘bi* [popular] are central to middle class conceptions of Egyptian society and Cairo’s urban landscape. They invoke a landscape of ‘local,’ ‘vulgar,’ ‘mass’ and, at times, ‘authentic’ tastes, set against appropriate, modern and sophisticated lifestyles. These terms indicate the extent to which social hierarchies are figured in terms of explicitly localized versus more cosmopolitan orientations, as well as traditional versus modern dispositions. These divisions are often taken to run between the professional middle class and lower class others. *Bii’a* is a newer term that is similarly used to denote ‘vulgar’ habits and tastes. As I argue in Chapter Four, in contrast to *baladi* and *sha‘bi*, *bii’a* is largely used to refer to middle class rather than lower class others and therefore indicates shifting lines of identification and distancing.

Cairo’s everyday public life is made up of complex cross-class interactions. I wanted to be able to retain these frictions in the social landscape and the at times uncomfortable presence of other social realities. I participated in different middle class worlds and was never completely comfortable, nor satisfied with the experiences of any one subgroup. My shifting allegiances at times left me amused and stronger because of my wider social knowledge. At other times, the social differences I routinely bridged on a daily basis left me confused or angry. I however think that being uncomfortable and unsettled has been crucial to my exploration of the city as a contentious space inhabited by differently positioned urbanites. I not only explore some of the different social worlds Cairo harbors, but also the ways in which these social worlds always presuppose other realities as a constitutive outside.

Researching the city

What distinguishes metropolitan life from rural existence is the continual brushing against strangers and the experience of observing bits of the ‘stories’ men and women carry with them, without ever knowing their conclusions, so that life ceases to form itself into continuous narrative but becomes instead a series of anecdotes, dreamlike, insubstantial, ambiguous. Wilson (2001:86)

Living in Cairo requires extensive knowledge. Even moving through the city needs experience and savvy. What metros, buses, micro- and minibuses go where is valuable knowledge in the absence of clear mappings of transport through this large city. How to negotiate them at crowded times is yet another matter. For those who can afford them, taxis are easier, but one has to know the approximate going rates for different distances, since the obligatory meters are never used. If traffic is dense, the driver tends to consult the passenger on the best route, sharing responsibility with the customer for any delay. What to buy where is another vexing question in Cairo. Cairo has different shopping worlds with significantly different products and prices. These differences reflect and signify crucial social differences that cannot easily be breached without provoking social sanctions. At the same time, a skillful navigating of these different segments, styles and products can be highly advantageous.

Even more intricate is the knowledge needed to participate in urban public life, be it in the streets or in *‘ahawi baladi*, cafes or coffee shops. Where to walk and where not to walk through Cairo’s interactive streetscape, where to sit and where not to sit and how to go about doing so, requires thorough, partially embodied knowledge of social codes and Cairo’s social map. It is this kind of knowledge, the logics and savvy of urban life in Cairo that informs my exploration of Cairo’s middle class landscape. As a newcomer to the city, I slowly learned these codes and significations through advice and observation, trial and error.

Such knowledge is largely habitual and embodied, as I am forcefully reminded whenever I return to Cairo after period of absence. On returning to Cairo, I am appropriately greeted with the ubiquitous ‘Welcome to Egypt’ that I had largely learned to avoid. I no longer remember how to walk in the street, where and how to look and have forgotten the fine details of the dress code—fashionable and feminine, yet not revealing—which, apart from physical appearance, indicates a complex, class-specific belonging. During my eighteen-months stay in Cairo, I had tried to blend in in Cairo’s cityscape. In light of the persistency with which *agaanib* [foreigners/Westerners] are singled out, blending in entailed the promise of relative invisibility during my ventures into the city. On my return in December 2003, I had forgotten all these embodied rules. A friend commented that I had once again become a foreigner. When I asked her what had changed, she said she could not tell. My hair perhaps?

Such partially embodied urban knowledge informs this study. Codes and significations connected to being in and moving through Cairo's public spaces are always unstable and subject to misunderstanding, contestation, negotiation, evasion and even outright defiance (I am reminded of the young woman who once told me how she started smoking in the street. For women, smoking in the street is still largely taboo, notwithstanding the growing number of women smoking *shiisha* [water pipe] or cigarettes in public establishments. She said that she once saw two foreign women smoking in the street, and surmised that there was no reason not to do so. She now habitually defies the strong forces of social control with regard to women's public propriety by smoking in the street.) Notwithstanding the instability of such codes and social framings, these divergent attitudes often suggest a considerable degree of underlying concurrence on what would generally be seen as an appropriate code or interpretation. These assumptions about the codes of urban life are continually tested and fine-tuned in daily interactions.

I have explored the changing social, economic and cultural landscape of middle class Cairo from different vantage points. In Chapter Two and Three I look at two important institutions that entail important mechanisms of division for middle class Cairo: education and the labor market. In Chapter Four I explore the new urban spaces carved out for young affluent Cairenes, and the kind of urban presence they enable. In Chapter Five I discuss some of the logics of movement through the city as a way of exploring the footprints of social segregation in urban space. Throughout I approach the city as a contested space.

Such an exploration is always located in a specific Cairo. This specificity not only refers to physical and social locations, but also to mappings, codes and allowed and expected behaviors. Specific inhabitants bring particular areas and urban spaces into view, while they obliterate others. They seem to inhabit different cities. One becomes acquainted with specific ways in which urban spaces are inhabited and the city is imagined. Other social worlds figure mainly as constitutive outsides to the overriding logics of movement and signification that characterize a particular city. This study is located in middle class Cairo, often more specifically the Cairo of young middle class professionals who move in Cairo's up-market circuits.

Yet these different cities are located in overlapping spaces. As a consequence they provide grounds for incessant contestation and at times open conflict over spaces and places, and the ways these are inhabited and imagined. While much of this study focuses on a more affluent middle class Cairo, I have tried to retain a feel of the constitutive and often conflictive presence of other cities in these same urban spaces. As I explore the emergence of a young, upper-middle class Cairo, I also try to retain a sense of the underlying denials and conflicts that are the silent constituents of this city of apparent affluence and ease.

Narrating Cairo

Besides extensive participant observation, I often rely on people's stories about the city and its people. This reliance on stories seems appropriate in Cairo, city of hyperboles. To be a good performer was a highly appreciated quality in social gatherings.¹³ I watched numerous performances in which stories were acted out in colorful detail, with the necessary overstatements for what is lovingly called *effet* [zest, punch; from French].

Whatever the reasons for the popularity of such storytelling, stories provide important sources of information about society, politics and the economy. People know society through such stories, which often take on a hyperbolic quality in the course of their travels. Examples from my fieldwork are plenty. I think of the moment several, differently placed people told me about the new vacancies at the Egyptian Central Bank, which, as I was informed a few days later, turned out to be only for children of current employees. The news of a new trendy coffee shop that had just opened traveled equally fast through people's extensive networks. While these stories would often concern a person's experiences or social surroundings, they could equally relate to media celebrities or members of the elite, be it those in business or politics (*cf.* Abu-Lughod [2005] on women's engagement with the life of media celebrities).

The media are an important source of national narratives and imaginations. I have made extensive use of the work of Walter Armbrust (1996; 1998; 1999) and Lila Abu-Lughod (1995; 2004) on Egyptian television and film. They both analyze these media productions as important carriers of national narratives, and are part of what Lila Abu-Lughod calls a 'national pedagogy.' Abu-Lughod argues that "many hoped that television would bring viewers into the national fold, uplifting them and inculcating in them the values of the good modern citizen, values that tended to be those of an educated middle class..." (2005:233). While Armbrust (1996) analyzes the tenets of Egyptian modernism as they have been expressed in films and television serials, Abu-Lughod (2005) explores the way these media productions reflect shifting national narratives and projects and contend with the 'national' challenges of Islamic mobilization and globalization. She sees the impact of Egypt's neoliberal project in the increasingly glitzy and lavish decors and the affluent lifestyles portrayed in television serials. She argues that there has been a gradual loosening of associations of wealth with immorality, which had long been a central feature of such productions.

Following Abu-Lughod's and Armbrust's analyses, I have included several observations on television serials and commercials. Television serials, like the ones analyzed by Abu-Lughod, narrate social changes in Egyptian society within an overarching moral framework—Abu-Lughod's national pedagogy. Cairo's social landscape is often used to

stand in for the nation and different spaces in Cairo are often used to represent the economic and cultural differences that characterize the national community (*cf.* Abu-Lughod 2005). Commercials are less clearly related to the national pedagogy of the Egyptian media. They express new consumption possibilities and idealized lifestyles. In Chapter One I analyze a number of commercials to illustrate some of the central imagery connected to Cairo's new liberal age. Many of my examples derive from the televisual offer during Ramadan 2002, when I intensively followed Egypt's public channels. Ramadan broadcasting is of a relatively high quality and is fervently watched. The television serials that dominate Ramadan programming are part of specific Ramadan routines: after the breaking of the fast many families sit down to watch the much anticipated serials. These serials become the subject of much commentary in everyday life, as well as in the print media.

This study is significantly informed by the expertise and extensive knowledge on which diverse middle class professionals rely in their negotiations of Cairo's everyday realities. My understanding of contemporary middle class Cairo largely draws on their common knowledge, as well as the many stories they tell about their lives and those of others.

Many of the social changes that are frequently noticed and discussed in Cairo, have hardly found their way into academic studies. This can be partially related to their location in the middle class, a section of urban society that has remained understudied. Moreover, even if obvious to many of my well-informed Cairene friends, recent changes in Cairo's middle class are extremely hard to document by way of statistics, which are either absent, not accessible, notoriously inaccurate or not detailed enough to indicate the shifts discussed in this study.¹⁴ The recent date of most of these changes and the speed with which they reconfigure the existing urban landscape add another level of complication. The new divisions, lifestyles and urban spaces that are explored in the following chapters are part of an emergent urban landscape.

This study attempts to contribute to a socio-historical understanding of contemporary Cairo. It discusses the ways in which differently positioned people react to changing social and economic opportunities and obstacles, as well as the ways in which they engage more abstract, yet equally intimate changes in narratives and projects of the nation. It is a complex story that can never be complete, or true, yet whose telling is worth trying.

Itineraries

This study explores the ways in which processes of segmentation give rise to new divisions among young, middle class professionals in Cairo's new liberal age and explores how these divisions are reproduced within the urban landscape. It focuses on those Cairenes who, as university-educated professionals, depend on their educational capital for their livelihood.

The first chapter explores Egypt's new liberal age and its expressions in Cairo's urban landscape. It introduces some of the new imaginations of a Cairo with global aspirations and their materializations in the built environment.

The educational system and the labor market are primary fields for the production of these new socio-cultural divisions and distinctions. New lines of nobility based on combinations of educational, cultural and social capital increasingly differentiate those who are able to participate in exclusive, conspicuously cosmopolitan up-market circuits of consumption and production, from those who cannot. Chapter Two therefore discusses the imbrications of education and class in the making of Cairene social hierarchies. Shifts in the educational field reflect significant changes in society, economy and politics. A national project aimed at the creation of a broad, highly educated middle class has given way to a more competitive and exclusionary system of private schools that co-exists with increasingly decrepit public schooling. Not only has private schooling expanded markedly, it also has become one of the prime mechanisms of division and distinction in the professional middle class. However, many families cling to previous arrangements.

Chapter Three, which discusses the labor market, highlights the ways in which these educational qualifications become effective in Cairo's strongly segmented economy. The discrepancy of fortunes in middle class Cairo is most marked in the different shapes the private sector takes in the stories and imaginations of different graduates. For most university graduates who do not belong to the new 'labor aristocracy,' the private sector stands for low wages, insecure employment, disrespect, abuse and fears of harassment. Under the 1990s structural adjustment policies, they are increasingly targeted for reform. For more privileged graduates, significantly those 'with languages,' the private sector represents the possibility of a well-paid job, in a clean office with 'clean' people.

These new divisions and distinctions are imprinted on *and* elaborated in the urban landscape. Chapter Four and Five discuss the ways in which young upper-middle class professionals negotiate the city. In Chapter Four I discuss the changing landscapes of consumption, focusing on the phenomenon of the up-market coffee shop and the new privileged sociabilities that unfold in these coffee shops. These upscale coffee shops carve out specifically upper-middle class spaces in Cairo's urban landscape, which are marked by a great degree of class closure. I argue that such coffee shops allow for new matrices of belonging *and* distance. They thereby strengthen tendencies towards a slicing of physical and social space and a fragmentation of city life. In the last chapter I explore some of the footprints of social segregation in the daily life of the city by looking at the urban trajectories of upper-middle class women. I follow their high-powered routines that take them from home to work to coffee shops and explore what these trajectories can tell us about present-day Cairo. I argue that social segregation significantly takes place through significations and fears surrounding upper-middle class femininity. By way of conclusion,

I return to the changing and increasingly disjunctive 'ways of being in the nation' in Cairo's new liberal age.

¹ With a few exceptions, I have changed the names of the people who appear in this study.

² In 2002 average per capita income was estimated at some 560 LE per month (calculated from <http://devdata.worldbank.org>). The value of the Egyptian Pound (LE) fell significantly in the period of my research. In September 2001 the exchange rate was 4 LE to 1 €. It steadily rose to 5 LE/€ in January 2003, at which time the Pound was floated and the exchange rate jumped to 6 LE/€. It has continued to rise since. In summer 2004 the exchange rate had settled around 8 LE/€. Most wages have hardly increased despite the Pound's significant devaluation.

³ I use the term 'cosmopolitan capital' for those forms of cultural capital that entail familiarity with and mastery of Western cultural codes, as well as local cosmopolitan ones. Such cosmopolitan capital most clearly entails fluency in English and an ability to use the mix of Arabic and English common in upper (middle) class circles, as well as Western diplomas or degrees from educational institutes that are associated with Western knowledge, e.g., private language schools or the American University in Cairo. It also entails knowledge of the West, Western consumer culture, as well as, e.g., local cosmopolitan dress codes. Such cosmopolitan capital overlaps with, and oftentimes doubles as, locally distinctive cultural capital.

⁴ In Chapter Two I discuss the changing meanings of being middle class in Cairo more elaborately.

⁵ The Egyptian middle class is mostly taken to encompass both professionals and more affluent sections of the self-employed or owners of small businesses (see, e.g. Amin 2000:31-7, Abdel Mo'ti 2002, Chapter Five). Following Bourdieu, we might take the professional middle class to consist of those people who (nominally) base their middle class position on their educational, rather than economic capital, i.e., professionals, bureaucrats, administrative personnel, *et cetera*, rather than shopkeepers or entrepreneurs. Even though these kinds of capital are not mutually exclusive and a person might possess a combination of capitals, one can distinguish between fractions that primarily depend on one or the other form of capital for its reproduction (Bourdieu 1984:115).

⁶ Using income criteria, Amin puts the size of the Egyptian middle class at around 45% of Egypt's population based on figures of the 1986 population census. His definition of middle class encompasses anyone with an income between 300 LE and 10,000 LE per year, and thus includes not only professionals, but also, for example, owners of small manufacturing firms and holders of middle-sized farms. The 53% of the Egyptians had a lower income fall and fall within the lower class, while the 2 to 3% who at the time earned over 10,000 LE per year are counted as upper class (Amin 2000: 33-5). However, Assaad and Rouchdy argue that in the mid-1990s half of the Egyptian households was poor or on the margins of poverty (1999:11). These more recent estimates seem to imply a larger lower class and smaller middle class than Amin suggests based on figures from the mid-1980s, which would concur with the ongoing impoverishment signaled by Assaad and Rouchdy (1999:14).

⁷ Though 'upper-middle class' is my term, 'upper-middle class' [in English] or 'middle-upper class' (reflecting the Arabic term *it-tabaqa il-mutawassita il-'aliya*) does have some currency within circles I would characterize as such.

⁸ Differences between the spoken, explicitly localized language, *'ammiyya*, and written, standard Arabic, *fusha*, are large in Egypt. While I grew comfortable in *'ammiyya*, my understanding of written standard Arabic has remained more limited. Ghada Tantawi helped me to review some of the Egyptian literature on the middle class.

⁹ 'Leftist' describes a range of political positions in Egypt, including those of communists, revolutionary socialists, the Tagammu' Party and some nasserists (*cf.* Abdelrahman 2004b). I use it for the loose networks of people who are involved in leftist political activism.

¹⁰ Since it was mostly assumed that people are believers (be it Muslim or Christian), common differentiations referred to degrees of religiosity rather than belief per se. The most commonly used taxonomy distinguished between a believer (*mo'min*),

a religious person (*mutadayyin*) and a fanatic (*mutashaddid*).

¹¹ Nada once pointed out that the possibilities for cross-class interactions vary according to gender. She argued that her husband could more freely engage in cross-class contacts in public space than she could (see Chapter Five). Middle class women are, however, more likely to engage in such interactions at home, with cleaning ladies and others who provide a range of services to middle class homes.

¹² Since these are central terms in Egyptian social life, most research on Egypt discusses these terms at length (see, e.g., Armbrust 1996:26-7, Singerman 1997:11-4, Ghannam 2002, Schielke 2002).

¹³ The social importance of talk in Cairo is brilliantly shown in Sonallah Ibrahim's *Zaat*, a critical novel on 1980s Cairo (2001 [1992]). The life of the main character, Zaat (Self), a married civil servant in her thirties, revolves around the ability to come up with a good story so that her colleagues will finally pay attention to her. She scrutinizes the lives of her husband and son for events that allow for such impressive stories to be told. The concrete consequences of the events for her family members seem of minor importance.

¹⁴ The highly segmented nature of Egyptian society and the concomitant significant class differences limit the usefulness of aggregate data at the national and even local level. The labor force participation of women, discussed earlier, provides a good example. In 1998, participation of urban unmarried women with intermediate education was estimated at 37.3%, compared to 88% of those with a university degree (Assaad 2002:24). In light of these vast differences, national figures not only have limited explanatory value, they can even obfuscate the existence of opposite trends in different segments.

Trends in the Greater Cairo region are likely to differ significantly from other regions, whether rural or urban, because of the longstanding concentration of socio-economic and political resources in the region. Such divergence between Cairo and the rest of Egypt are crucial to this study. Neoliberal policies and 'global city formation' have likely furthered this concentration as is, for example, evidenced by the high concentration of private schools in the area. In 1999/2000, 66% of the private secondary schools was concentrated in Greater Cairo, versus merely 28.5% of their public counterparts (calculated from Ministry of Education statistics).



Figure 3: Nile City Towers

These two towers along the Nile Corniche north of Downtown are striking emblems of neoliberal Cairo. In an essay on the high rise tower as a 'sign of modernity,' King argues that the massive high rise tower...is now being used by China and other countries in Asia...to transform what used to be known...as the 'Third World'...into the 'First'" (2004: 17). These 33-story Orascom headquarters make a similar statement about Cairo.

The Orascom Group, one of the largest business holdings in Egypt founded by the Sawiris family, develops a wide range of increasingly transnational activities in the cement industry, construction, tourism, real estate, and ICT. While it is an important player in the Egyptian economy, Orascom also operates in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Democratic Republic of Congo and a number of countries in North Africa.

Promotional photos, Orascom Construction Industries, <http://www.orascomci.com> (Accessed 13-02-2005)

1

Dreams of a Global Cairo

History, present and future

'Dreamland' read a big neon sign sitting on top of tall buildings that had turned gray because of years of air pollution. The image of a promised dreamland hovering over the less than edifying apartment buildings of upscale yet congested Mohandiseen seemed to express much of the complexity and ironic qualities of my research. Dreamland is an exclusive gated community located in the desert, with its own golf course, a theme park and other 'world-class amenities,' only a short ride on the new highways from Mohandiseen (see Mitchell 1999). The sign seemed to capture many of the longings and desires for another, globally appropriate and up-to-date Cairo, amidst urban realities that continuously refuted such dreams. Yet, when I soon after tried to capture the image on film, it had disappeared. Most likely its disappearance did not have a specific cause or meaning: one advertisement was merely replaced by another. However, the disappearance did bring to mind the troubles of Ahmed Bahgat, the business tycoon behind Dreamland, Dream Park, the Dream satellite channels, as well as a vast range of other business ventures. He had been barred from traveling abroad out of fear that he might follow other businessmen who had fled the country while they had large outstanding, non-performing loans furnished by Egypt's public banks.¹

Egypt has long been a highly centralized country. Almost all major state institutions and most major economic activities are concentrated in the capital. Cairo's centrality to the Egyptian nation-state is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that in colloquial Egyptian, the name for the capital city and the country are one and the same: *masr*. Neoliberal reforms and the quest for integration into the global market entail a recasting of Egypt's present and future, which primarily takes place through Cairo's real and virtual landscapes. In this chapter I explore Cairo's changing landscape in Egypt's new liberal age.

In the context of what Abidin Kusno (2004) calls 'nationalist urbanism,' life in capital cities is often made to stand in for the life of the nation. Large investments in the urban landscape of these capital cities are made in order to represent national ambitions. From another vantage point, Sassen (2001) argues that cities have gained importance as the nodes of coordination and control of dispersed global production. They harbor materializations of the global that are increasingly disconnected from the rest of the urban landscape. This centrality has in turn led to a what Neil Smith (2002) calls a 'new urbanism' in which cities compete to capture a share of global business. Smith argues that this 'new urbanism' is an important rationale behind massive state investments in infrastructure and showcase projects. Dawson and Edwards, more generally, argue that it is important to attend to the dialectical relationship between what they call "economic global city functions" and "political global city functions" in the "cultures of globalization," a dialectic meagerly addressed in Sassen's work (Dawson and Edwards 2004:2).

Visual media are germane carriers of new national imagery. Whereas the urban reality of the metropolis of an estimated eleven to fifteen million proves itself far from malleable, the imagination of the city embarks on a steep flight. No impurities here, no cracks that show what lies beneath. In the realm of imagination, a perfect, globally appropriate Cairo is being fashioned. This new Cairo can measure up to the sophistication and elegance of old, but rejuvenated Europe, while the new Egypt embodies global standards of professionalism and technological prowess. Sherif Arafa, the director of *Mafia*, a movie widely claimed to be the first Egyptian action movie that could match Hollywood standards of glitter and speed, keenly captured the logic of such re-imagining of the city/country in a television interview broadcasted during Ramadan 2002. The presenter, Mahmoud Saad, who described *Mafia* as a film with American ideas and muscles, asked Arafa why he had depicted the secret service headquarters in *Mafia* in a manner "far more developed than our normal places." Arafa responded, "I do not have to film what is there in reality. We have to see something respectable and sophisticated, because this is the place that controls Egypt's national security."

The urban landscape of the capital also bears the imprint of Egypt's new national project. Cairo's cityscape has transformed rapidly in the 1990s and the beginning of the new century.

Private sector and state initiatives have been directed at the creation of a globally appropriate city that can cater to transnational business and the lifestyles of affluent Cairenes (see, e.g., Ghannam 2002, Stewart 1999, Mitchel 1999, Yousry et al. 1998). These efforts materialize in investments in infrastructure and the building of new-economy production sites, such as the new Media City and the ICT-complex, as well as housing and leisure facilities for those employed in these sectors, both foreigners and nationals. The ring road circling the city has been completed; gated communities have sprouted up along the highways that form new axes of centrality in the expanding metropolitan area. A new private university seems to open its doors every year. Cairo's landscape increasingly caters to those groups who fit the neoliberal project and whose relative affluence allows them to leave their mark on the landscape in the form of consumption practices and uses of urban space. These inhabitants of up-market Cairo include not only wealthy elites, but also many of the upper-middle class professionals who staff the up-market cosmopolitan workspaces.

However, Cairo's refashioning is ever incomplete and at continual risk of being subverted. Rather than giving rise to a new city, it creates pockets of privilege and exclusivity in a wider social landscape where earlier, often downgraded formal arrangements combine with more informal ways of coping with scarcity. It is a city made of dreams of First World affluence, set within a larger urban landscape that seems to become increasingly removed from such dreams of affluence and First World membership.

In this chapter I first examine the shift away from the Nasserite project in the mid-1970s. I then turn to Cairo's new liberal period, characterized by structural adjustment policies, emphasis on the private sector and integration into global economic networks. I ask what new national narratives and imaginations accompany this shift to neoliberal policies and explore concomitant changes in Cairo's landscape.

Economic liberalization and Egypt's social contract

Cairo's new liberal age has meant a significant shift away from the Nasserite developmentalist project. This political and economic reorientation originates in the mid-1970s with Sadat's *infitaah* [open-door] policies that initiated a gradual liberalization of the economy.

In the years following the 1952-Revolution the state assumed an increasingly central and dominant role in the Egyptian economy, particularly after the nationalizations that followed the 1956 Suez Crisis.² The new Nasser-led regime initiated agrarian land reforms that significantly reduced the landed properties of the largest landowners and redistributed part of the sequestered land (Jankowski 2000:148-9). Under Nasser's strongly centralized and authoritarian regime, Egypt embarked on an ambitious program of industrialization geared towards import substitution. Cairo's citizens benefited from greatly improved access to educational and health facilities, as well as an exponential growth of jobs in the new

public sector industries and the expanding state bureaucracy. Many of these policies were geared toward the creation of a large urban middle class (Abdel-Fadil 1980). In the early 1960s Egypt officially became a socialist state and the state became the dominant actor in the national economy, as well as the main employer. In the early 1980s over half of the non-agricultural workforce was employed by the state (Richards and Waterbury 1996:184).

Jankowski argues, “economic disparities did decrease from 1952 to 1970; the social opportunities available to many Egyptians expanded over the same period. The Nasser era left a legacy of commitment to ‘the people’ and to socioeconomic egalitarianism which many Egyptians recall with fondness” (2000:152). The Nasser period in turn created its own class hierarchies (Abdel-Fadil 1980, Moore 1994). It most significantly gave rise to a new bourgeoisie, which “could be defined as those officials who by virtue of their managerial positions and special skills ‘owned’ the means of converting public into private resources, together with their allies in the private sector” (Moore 1994:122). Moore (1994) and Abdel-Fadil (1980) moreover note that there was a large measure of social continuity with the pre-revolutionary period, since relatively privileged families were well placed to capitalize on new avenues of social mobility in and through state institutions.

In 1969 Janet Abu-Lughod wrote that the city seemed to be in a process of ongoing homogenization. The older elite presence in the city had been decimated, while “consumption patterns, ways of dress, and leisure time activities which were once the prerogative of a somewhat Westernized middle class have been diffusing down the social structure. One rarely sees the *jallabiyah*.... Almost no women are veiled.” Differences between different urban neighborhoods were rapidly erased, she argued, and Downtown shops that sold prestigious foreign goods began selling the same locally produced goods sold in other places. “Rarely now does one see the pretentiously overgroomed; but rarely does one see really destitute persons” (J. Abu-Lughod 1971:238-9).

Towards the end of the 1960s it became apparent that many of the ambitious aims and programs of Nasserite developmentalism would prove untenable. Waterbury writes that, in the context of economic stagnation in the late 1960s and 1970s, “the goals of extending basic services to all Egyptians had to be quietly abandoned,” along with some of central tenets of the Nasser regime (1983:223). “The abandonment is, in effect, the abandonment of the socio-economic inclusion of the ‘socialist’ phase, coupled with the official tolerance of policies of benign neglect of basic welfare programs, and the acceptance of growing inequity in the distribution of income and in the quality of social services” (*ibid.*). Yet, the Nasserite social contract between the state and the populace that promised welfare provisions in exchange for political passivity was not easily abandoned (Jankowski 2000:187ff.).

It would not be far-fetched to argue that the contemporary Egyptian nation and state were fashioned under Nasser, even if opinions of his reign range from adoration to

vilification. Many of Egypt's most cherished cultural accomplishments derive from this period, as do many ideas regarding the state, the nation and citizenship. Despite a shift towards economic liberalization from the mid-1970s onwards, and the concomitant erosion of the Nasserite social contract, this social contract remains a central framework for state policies and popular reactions to such policies. It is still a crucial yardstick for public and private discussions of the state and its policies, and continues to inform imaginations of the relation between the state, the nation and its citizens.

After Nasser's death Sadat embarked on a course of economic liberalization and rapprochement with the West. Under the label *infitaah*, 'opening,' a number of new laws was set down, which "on the one hand attempted to make Egypt a more hospitable environment for international capital; on the other, gave the local private sector more freedom domestically and more encouragement to work in collaboration with foreign enterprises" (Jankowski 2000:171). The late 1970s and the early 1980s were a period of relative prosperity, not so much because of the expanded private sector or foreign presence in the economy, but because of a surge in revenues from external resources: oil, the Suez Canal and tourism, as well as increased sums of Western, especially American, foreign aid and the sizable remittances of the estimated 1.5 million Egyptians working in the Gulf states (Jankowski 2001:173). Working in one of the richer Arab states became the major way to increase family incomes for the educated and uneducated alike. As Ibrahim wrote in the early 1980s, "finding employment in a capital-rich country has...become the dream of many Egyptians—spanning the entire class and age structures of the society. The quick money and dazzling consumer goods it can buy became a central part of the 'Egyptian national imagination'" (Ibrahim 1982:49).

The *infitaah* gave rise to a stratum of nouveaux riches that was able to capitalize on the opening of the economy to foreign investors and foreign goods and the expanded leverage granted to the private sector. These were often top-level bureaucrats who could use their control of state enterprises to ensure favorable starting positions in the newly invigorated private sector. Old and new elites—the aristocracy of the pre-revolution years, the military technocratic elite of the Nasser period, and the commercial *nouveaux riches* of the *infitaah*—started to converge in a new upper class (Ayubi 1982:403). At the same time, labor migration created new divisions within the existing professional middle class between those who were able to work for extended periods abroad and significantly improve their family's economic situation, and those who were unable or chose not to leave their comparatively ill-paid jobs in Egypt.

In everyday life the *infitaah* materialized first and foremost as an opening to imported luxury consumption goods.³ Wealth and conspicuous consumption were once again on display in the streets of Cairo. At the same time, inflation steadily eroded real wages of salaried

workers in Egypt. Food subsidies provided the major buffer against rapid impoverishment; expenditure on food subsidies grew from less than 8% in 1970 to a staggering 60% of government expenditure in 1980 (Jankowski 2000:174). As Jankowski states: “with instant fortunes being made at the top and inflation eroding incomes at the bottom, urban social cleavages widened under the Opening” (*ibid.*).

Max Rodenbeck writes that in 1980s Cairo a new cosmopolitanism began to flourish. “International chain stores, high-tech discos, theme restaurants and shopping centers appeared,” catering to tourists and burgeoning strata of affluent Egyptians. “Television aired Hollywood serials and ads for air-conditioning, air fresheners and fresh air in the form of condominiums on the Red Sea and Mediterranean coasts” (Rodenbeck 1999:244). Outside middle class areas, discontent grew as more and more youths found that the withering of Nasser-style institutions and the ‘open door’ to the private sector and the West left them to face a grim future. “Looking for a source of hope, Cairo’s disappointed, left-behind youth found a simple message plastered now on walls all over the city. The message said, ‘Islam is the solution’” (Rodenbeck 1999:245).

The reliance on sources of income from workers remittances, tourism, oil, the Suez Canal, and foreign aid left the Egyptian economy highly vulnerable to fluctuations in the world economy and increasingly dependent on the wishes of foreign donors, most notably the United States (Abdelrahman 2004a, Mitchell 2002). In the 1980s the drop in oil prices diminished possibilities for labor migration to oil rich Arab countries. In 1990 the Gulf crisis moreover led to the immediate return of many labor migrants from Iraq and some Gulf countries. Though labor migration resumed in the early 1990s, the chance for labor migration to other Arab states never returned to its previous level (Abdel Mo‘ti 2002: 336-8).⁴ The shortfall in revenue in the 1980s led to rising foreign debts to the extent that debt servicing became threatened. At the end of the 1980s, after a number of partial and hesitant attempts at macro stabilization and structural adjustment, the government could no longer avoid accepting an extensive IMF/World Bank structural adjustment package.

Neoliberalist faiths

In 1991 the Egyptian state began implementing a structural adjustment package that included financial austerity measures, a depreciation of the exchange rate, elimination of price controls and subsidies, and public sector reform and privatization (Kienle 2002:144ff.). These policy measures were aimed at transforming Egypt into a liberal market economy integrated into global economic networks.

Neoliberal tenets proclaim the superiority of the global market as an allocating and regulating force in economies and societies around the world. Julia Elyachar argues that

“globalization developed into the catchword of a highly successful neoliberal agenda that asserted the inevitable refiguring of state regulatory regimes to increase the profitability of global financial capital” (2002:493). According to Comaroff and Comaroff, capitalism has acquired a messianic quality (2000:292). The free reign of the global market is said to bring about higher affluence for all who dare to brave global competition, while failure to do so spells inevitable economic slowdown.

Such analyses and prognoses become self-fulfilling promises as they influence policies of state and non-state actors on local, national and global scale. States around the world rewrite their laws and redesign their budgets and national economic policies with various degrees of pressure from international organizations such as the WTO, IMF and World Bank to conform to global standards of neoliberal economics. As McMichael argues, states are thus transformed into institutions “that conform to the virtual reality that drives globalization, geared to securing global circuits of money and commodities and governed by consumer-citizens” (1998:96). Paradoxically, these neoliberal politics and new regulatory regimes are presented in terms of apolitical scientific rationality and efficiency; they exist “as a form of ‘metaregulation,’ a rule system that paradoxically defines itself as a form of *antiregulation*” (Peck and Tickell 2002:400).

For ‘developing countries’ such as Egypt with state debts that skyrocketed in the 1980s, such policies were commonly implemented under pressure from the IMF and the World Bank and were framed as structural adjustment packages. Such by and large standard packages are generally comprised of “privatization of public assets, severely reduced social expenditures, wage reduction, currency devaluation, liberalization of trade and investment laws and export enhancement” (McMichael 1998:107, *cf.* Veltmeyer et al. 1997). Such a restructuring of economy and society is implemented at different scales and by different institutions, notably international organizations like the World Bank and IMF, the state and NGOs. Haney’s (2000) discussion of welfare reform in Hungary provides a good illustration of the formation of such coalitions. Haney discusses how, under Western guidance, need-based discourses were introduced to replace earlier welfare arrangements that were primarily based on worker’s entitlements to welfare support. She explores the way social scientists were co-opted by Western donors to produce a new social-science discourse that rendered Hungarian society in the need-based terminology of reform programs, and to follow up on these new descriptions with policy recommendations. Haney argues that this overhaul of the foundations of Hungarian welfare provision entailed a significant redistribution of resources on the ground and introduced new disciplinary welfare practices.

While couching discussions of development and growth in terms of specific macro-economic indicators, neoliberal discourses and policies largely avoid questions of both international and national inequality that shape the reform packages and determine the outcomes of these reforms (see Nederveen Pieterse 2002:1033 and Mitchell 1999; 2002).

Neoliberal arguments depend on the assumption that a) globalization will bring wealth to a country and b) that this wealth, which might initially be concentrated in privileged hands, will eventually trickle down to the masses of the population. Both principles of faith might be seriously questioned. As Nederveen Pieterse (2002) suggests, global integration seems to go hand in hand with growing global and domestic inequality (*cf.* Veltmeyer 1997:66).

Jankowski argues that in the course of the 1990s, “the patron state gradually relinquish[ed] responsibility for both the management of the economy and the social welfare of its citizens” (2001:192). Structural adjustment programs not only entailed the state’s withdrawal from social welfare provisions, but also the establishment of the internationally funded semi-governmental Social Development Fund, which was meant to ease Egypt through the pains of structural adjustment (see Chapter Three). It moreover entailed significant state subsidies to the private sector in the form of massive loans to businessmen from public banks, tax holidays for business ventures, and investments in infrastructure that benefited new production sites (Mitchell 1999; 2002).

The actual implementation of these reforms has been partial at best. Privatization did not gain momentum until the end of the 1990s. Despite international prescriptions and governmental policies to the contrary, civil service employment has grown steadily (Assaad 1997). Governmental policy seems to be directed at the gradual weakening and erosion of Nasserite institutional arrangements rather than their outright abolishment. State institutions often informally charge considerable sums for officially free services, whether in the form of private lessons at all levels of schooling or in the self-provision of medical inputs and payments for treatment in nominally free hospitals. The story of the educational system discussed in the following chapter provides perhaps the best illustration of this balancing act. In spite of two decades of discussions about the introduction of school fees, access to education through university remains nominally free. Yet qualitative downgrading of public education and informal and formal privatization have, *de facto*, resulted in starkly rising costs of education and the creation of a dual educational system.

Even if a comprehensive critical account of the past two decades of economic restructuring and neoliberal policies in Egypt has yet to be written, the record seems rather grim. Egypt’s performance was initially hailed as a textbook example of IMF-reforms, and macro-economic indicators were cited to demonstrate the success of the reform: a low inflation rate, a significantly reduced state deficit and foreign debt, as well as reasonable growth figures. However, as Timothy Mitchell convincingly demonstrates, on closer examination these figures tell a more sobering story of the short-lived influx of speculative financial flows and financial injections, which lead to a building boom geared toward a small section of affluent Egyptians instead of reinvigorated production or the expansion of exports

(Mitchell 2002:273ff.). These subsidies to the private sector did not reap the expected benefits. The most painful reminders of this failure are the abandoned construction sites and high-profile cases against businessmen who are prosecuted for their failure to service outstanding public bank loans.

Mitchell (2002) and Kienle (2002) claim that social inequality and poverty rose in Egypt throughout the 1980s and suggest that these have likely become more pronounced in the 1990s as a consequence of the structural adjustment policies. They moreover argue that neoliberal reforms have resulted in the further concentration of wealth in the hands of a few with powerful resources and state connections. Available statistics do indeed indicate rising levels of poverty and social inequality.⁵ Assaad and Rouchdy tentatively conclude that a quarter of the Egyptian population is poor by any standards, while another quarter is on the margins of poverty (1999:11). Unemployment has significantly increased and real wages have decreased throughout the 1980s and 1990s (see Assaad 2002, Awad 1999). This situation is likely to have worsened considerably since the start of the twenty-first century. Since 2000 the Egyptian economy has experienced what some have called an ‘economic slowdown’ and others an ‘economic crisis.’

The Nasserite contract between state and society still looms over government policy. Notwithstanding the government’s neoliberal policies and commitments in the context of structural adjustment policies, official statements continue to rehearse the government’s commitment to the poor and goals of social equality. As Lila Abu-Lughod argues, “supporting privatization and multinational corporations does not sit easily with a governing elite’s self-justification in terms of continuing rhetoric of national development whose keystone was social development and the wider social good” (2005:18-9). Despite its structural adjustment commitments the government regularly claims the success of governmental job provision schemes.⁶ The extension of food subsidy programs in 2003 and 2004 represents a similar digression from set policies.⁷ The widespread disaffection of many Egyptians after years of economic crisis and inflation has forced the government to resort to state interventions that were supposed to be a thing of the past.

Some commentators blame the lack of economic growth and the far from positive effects on human development in the 1990s on the partiality of the implemented reforms (*inter alia*, Allan and Waterbury 2001:226-9). Adams echoes the theory of a trickle down effect when he claims that increased levels of poverty and income inequality are typical of early stages of development and will decline in later stages (2000:267-8). Such analyses avoid addressing the crucial pitfalls of optimistic claims about forms of development that rely on the private sector, reduction of the state’s social expenditure and integration in the global market. The question remains: how will Egypt capture the global labor market? And even if macroeconomic stabilization is achieved and national wealth grows, who will benefit? What

kinds of jobs will be generated and for whom?

Processes of neoliberal restructuring, which significantly attempt to ‘globalize’ national economies, reconfigure existing distributions of resources and avenues for social mobility and give rise to new class configurations (*cf.* Öncü and Weyland 1997, Sassen 2001). It is crucial to interrogate the ways in which social stratification and unequal allocation of resources determine outcomes of neoliberal policies, as well as the ways in which these policies, in turn, restructure matrices of privilege. The neoliberal neglect of issues of inequality is connected to what Neil Smith (2002) has described as a shift from an emphasis on social reproduction to production, where macro-economic track records have replaced social indicators as signs of development. In the process, attention to inequality is replaced by a focus on poverty (Nederveen Pieterse 2002), earlier conceptions of social rights are increasingly translated into discourses of need (Haney 2000) while public provisions are replaced by charity handed out by NGOs.

Picturing an other Cairo

Narratives of structural adjustment emphasize ‘negative’ policies: withdrawal of the state from both economic and social interventions, budget cuts and the abolishment of barriers to ‘open markets.’ These narratives fit stories of the withering of the nation-state in an era of globalization. However, such portrayals downplay the crucial role of states in the creation and guaranteeing of ‘market conditions’ and the implementation of neoliberal policies (Sassen 1998, Chapter Ten). While the Egyptian state has been curtailed by the ‘transnational governmentality’ of international organizations and internationally funded ‘local’ NGOs (Ferguson and Gupta 2002), it has retained an important role in managing these non-state actors and their policy prescriptions (Abdelrahman 2004a).⁸ The state moreover remains a central arbiter of allocation of resources (*cf.* Mitchell 2002), the major employer in the formal sector, and the provider of crucial public goods, even if they are of low quality. The state also remains ubiquitous as a police force that controls and regulates society. In addition, the social contract between state and population remains an important frame for popular expectations and demands vis-à-vis the state, even if the latter does not live up to these expectations. As Lila Abu-Lughod suggests, the nation-state continues to provide the primary context for the everyday lives and social imaginations of most Egyptians (2005:26).

I stated earlier that the government’s neoliberal agenda is far from clear-cut, and that somewhat oblique references to social development are a constant element of government speeches. Nevertheless, this agenda has significantly altered the allocation of resources, as well as the foundations of national developmental policies. Egypt’s neoliberal agenda can be said to entail re-imaginings of the nation, its development and its future. Who is the

rightful heir of such new imaginations of the nation and who can, as a result, lay claim to its affections and resources?

Egypt's re-fashioning seems to parallel trends in other postcolonial nations that were once allies in the non-aligned movement. As Fernandes argues with respect to India, "if the tenets of Nehruvian development could be captured by symbols of dams and mass based factories, the markers of [Rajiv] Gandhi's India shifted to the possibility of commodities that would tap into the tastes and consumption practices of the urban middle classes" (2000a:614). In Egypt, the heroic images of the recaptured Suez Canal and the Aswan Dam had similarly been symbolic of the newly independent nation and the developmental state. After the demise of Nasserism such imagery changed. Sadat, in contrast, envisioned Egypt's future in terms of consumption and affluence, notably expressed in his assertion that "the goal of every Egyptian should be to have a car and a villa" (Ibrahim 1982:49, *cf.* Ghannam 2002:28ff.). The *infitaah*, iconic of Sadat's presidency, was associated with the unprecedented influx of foreign luxury consumer goods (see, e.g., Ibrahim 1982, Ayubi 1982).

Whereas the urban professional middle class, symbolized by the engineer and the doctor, had been one of the main protagonists of Nasserite Egypt, young upper-middle class professionals employed in the technologically advanced offices of internationally oriented companies seem to have become iconic of new national narratives and projects. Young upper-middle class professionals, equipped with the latest fashions and technology, are the ones who can match global standards and can staff transnational workspaces. They fulfill a similar symbolic function as the Indian 'new middle class,' which, according to Fernandes, is constructed "as the social group who is able to negotiate India's new relationship with the global economy in both cultural and economic terms; in cultural terms by defining a new cultural standard that rests on the sociosymbolic practices of commodity consumption and in economic terms as the beneficiaries of the material benefits of India's 'new economy'" (2000b:91). Following Fernandes (2000a), I turn to advertising to explore some of the imagery of the new, globally appropriate nation and its protagonists.

Watching television in Spring 2002, I was struck by an unusual commercial. The images were beautiful and enticing and presented a stark contrast with the lower quality of most mainstream television. Though I no longer recall the text of the commercial, the images remain as a clear example of the mixture of dreams and denials that marks a longing for a global Cairo. The camera zooms in on rows of fit, light-skinned, straight-haired young men and women in business suits. They stare confidently into the camera toward the future from behind flat-screen monitors in the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a major prestige project of the Egyptian government that was largely funded by foreign donors. This sweeping commercial advertised the Future Generation Foundation, which was set up by president Mubarak's son, Gamal Mubarak, with the stated goal to develop Egypt's human resources

in light of competition in the global economy.⁹

The solemn yet luxurious and technologically advanced setting provides the backdrop for youthful, good-looking professionals, Egypt's *Jil al-Mustaqbal*, Future Generation. This representation of Egypt's future generation reproduces most dominant lines of privilege within society. Their business suits speak of Western professionalism, while their fair complexions are important indicators of local elite backgrounds. Significantly, this future generation does not feature *muhaggabaat* [veiled women]. They are apparently not suited to Egypt's representative present and projected future. This exclusion mirrors official media policy. On Egyptian television, one might encounter a seductively veiled Bedouin girl in a music video or tourist advertisement. Television serials often feature a warm and inviting mother wearing an inconspicuous head covering. They are the necessary but marginal reminders of Egypt's exoticism and the comforts and safety of the private realm. Modern Egypt is however most commonly portrayed as secular.¹⁰

Portraying a clearly optimistic message about Egypt as heading towards a bright, globally sound future, the subtext is too obvious to ignore: only certain people are part of the future generation that will take Egypt into this kind of future. During an interview with Ahmed's *shilla*, a group of young lower-middle class men who had recently graduated from university, I asked who were getting all the good jobs. "*Shabaab il-musta'bal*" [the youth of the future] was their short but resolute answer.¹¹ These young men had few doubts as to their own situation and chances in life and were outspoken about the more general distribution of fortunes in contemporary Egyptian society. While a new Egypt was being fashioned in front of their eyes, they were bitterly aware that they were not included in its design. The commercial reflected their daily experiences and observations: the big cars driven by people their age, advertisements for jobs for which they would not think of applying, or the luxury goods in fancy new malls that might present a seductive promise but were clearly not within their reach. All this in a context in which, as one of the young man kept repeating, he could not even buy himself a new sweater. Whilst this commercial obviously presents an image of Egypt's wished for future, it also testifies to the refusals, displacements and silencing entailed in its creation.

During Ramadan 2002, Egyptian TV-channels featured other beautifully shot commercials portraying a similar dream of a clean, affluent and globally appropriate Egypt. Many commercials spoke of harmonious and affluent family life, which could be had if one were to use a specific oil or ghee in food preparation. Upper-middle class appearances and lifestyles that feature cosmopolitan standards and commodities have become central in such portrayals of the good life. As Fernandes argues, "the notion of 'abroad' in middle class discourses operates as a sign of a desire for class-based privilege" (2002a:614).



Figure 4: Commercial Egypt Telecom

From left to right:

1. Feluccas on the Nile with the Imbaba bridge in the background
2. Woman calling at the balcony of a downtown apartment
3. Inside the apartment
4. Man calling in coffee shop
5. Supporters of the national football team ('One Voice')
6. Video-conferencing between headquarters and construction site ('One Family')
7. Exotic touches of a Nubian performance ('One Soul')
8. Shots of people using the phone, in this case an old *sha'bi* fruit seller
9. After a phone call, the man and woman shown earlier run out to meet at the Imbaba bridge ('One World')
10. The camera zooms out from the bridge to the banks of the Nile and, eventually, the world

Stills from commercial Telecom Egypt, by Bates Equity
<http://www.batesequity.com/web/index.html>

While upper-middle class cosmopolitan lifestyles have come to represent common advertising ideals, television commercials also portrayed and spoke to less affluent consumers. An Ariel commercial, for example, employed the tested formula of door-to-door visits in popular [*sha'bi*] areas, where faithful female consumers are rewarded with a locally sensible gift, in this case golden coins. Egyptian state television also features many humorous commercials playing on well-known television epitomes of *sha'bi* characters. The characters, themes and phrases of these commercials are most readily taken up in everyday humor. Another striking series of oft-repeated commercials commissioned by a governmental body demonstrated the detrimental effects of large families versus the progress to which families with few children can look forward. They are part of the media's larger pedagogic mission (*cf.* Abu-Lughod 2005). This diversity mirrors the diverse languages of advertising that Rajagopal (*n.d.*, see also Rajagopal 1999) discerns in India's television-landscape. Different viewers are educated differently into national consumer citizenship.

A commercial for the national telecom company, Telecom Egypt, spoke eloquently of the new national project in which the local is brought up-to-speed with the global (see Figure 4). After a birds-eye view of Cairo and a shot of feluccas on the Nile (1), the commercial takes us into the heart of Cairo. On the rhythm of upbeat music, the camera takes us on a visually exhilarating flight along reminders of the old glory of Downtown Cairo. A young, fashionably dressed woman talks on the phone in her Downtown apartment (2, 3). An equally smart young man, presumably her husband, talks on his mobile phone in an upscale coffee shop (4). This set-up of the commercial's main story line is followed by a fast sequence of images that shows different uses and users of telecommunication, from videoconferencing between lavish modern headquarters and a construction site (6) to an old *sha'bi* fruit seller who is shown using an old telephone (8).

This sequence is set within a nationalist framework. It includes images that do not have a clear relation to telecommunication, but are meant to evoke national sensibilities: supporters of the national football team (5), a young girl in a green, countryside setting and a Nubian dance performance (7). Throughout, short sentences appear that remind the viewers of national unity: 'One Country,' 'One Voice,' 'One Soil,' 'One Family,' *et cetera*. We then return to the young woman in her apartment, who receives a phone call from the man in the coffee shop. In the next shot we see them running towards each other on the Imbaba bridge with the wide-open space of the Nile in the background. They meet and hold hands (9). The words 'One World' appear and the camera zooms out until we see the globe (10), which in turn transforms into a dot in the Telecom Egypt logo. The commercial ends with a female voice saying "one network brings us all closer: Telecom Egypt."

The Telecom Egypt commercial is featured on the website of the Egyptian advertising agency that produced it, Bates Equity (www.batesequity.com). The site includes a case

description, which states that the major problem faced by Telecom Egypt was its bad public image. The company was perceived as “old, unfriendly and of poor quality. The company embodies every public sector cliché.” The commercial aimed to improve Telecom Egypt’s standing in the market, attract investors, upgrade the brand image and establish strong ties between the brand and the customers, as the only company that “brings all Egyptians together.” The site claims that the campaign was a big success. It was chosen as the best campaign of Ramadan 2002 by *Business Monthly* and a track study showed that it had successfully projected Telecom Egypt’s new image as “modern, pride of Egypt and the leader in communications.”

The commercial invokes images of a united nation that is modern, up-to-speed with and connected to the world. It emphasizes global standards and connections *and* the nation and national unity. Mazarella observes a similar conjunction in Indian commercials. He argues that the “promise of membership for Indians in a global ‘ecumene’ of world-class consumption was uttered in the same breath as the claim that globalization was in fact all about recognizing and acknowledging the cultural specificity of Indian desires” (2003:34-5, *cf.* Fernandes 2000a). In both cases entrance in the ‘global ecumene’ is significantly mediated by the nation.

Mazarella (2003) analyzes the making of an Indian commercial for a new mobile phone package of a well-known local brand. He follows the arduous attempts of the creative staff to intimate locatedness, while maintaining a sense of global standards and social distinctiveness and exclusivity. The client turned down a number of suggestions for such ‘localization’ out of fear that an image of provinciality would accrue to the brand. It was finally decided to sell the product by focusing on Bombay, figured as “a collective space of aspiration and transformation” (Mazarella 2003:50). The Egypt Telecom commercial similarly uses Cairo’s urban spaces to portray Egypt’s ‘modernity.’ While nostalgic and exoticizing shots of the countryside and a folkloric dance performance symbolize spaces outside Cairo, Egypt’s modernity is located in Cairo’s urban spaces.¹² The manner in which these urban spaces are portrayed and the choice of protagonists speaks of the inclusions and exclusions in such imaginations of a globally appropriate Cairo. Even though different urban callers feature to suggest national unity, the commercial focuses on two young, fashionable and affluent protagonists.

The choice for the Downtown area is paradoxical, since it has become a predominantly (lower) middle class center, all but abandoned by the very same class portrayed in the commercial. All the signs of the newly affluent classes are located elsewhere, in upper-middle class areas like Mohandiseen, Heliopolis, Maadi and Zamalek. Yet, these areas were apparently not imaginative enough and could not represent Cairo’s stature and sought-after elegance. In contrast, the Downtown area, with its turn-of-the-century French architecture, forms an ideal stage for a refurbished Cairo, that is, after the blemishes of actual everyday

life have been removed. Shots that avoid the less suitable shops, traffic, inhabitants and less than immaculately white facades present Downtown Cairo as a rejuvenated, gentrified inner city, which intimates a European rather than American cosmopolitan locatedness.

The choice for the Imbaba bridge is even further removed from everyday realities. The bridge where the eventual meeting takes place actually links two lower class areas on both sides of the Nile: Imbaba and Rod El-Farag. Affluent Cairenes like the couple portrayed in the commercial would never cross this bridge wedged between these two notoriously lower class areas. The image of the bridge seems to speak to European rather than Cairene sensibilities. It evokes common Western gentrifications projects that build on nostalgia for an industrial era left behind for a post-Fordist future. Egypt can hardly boast of such a turn-of-the-century industrial past. The commercial erases the inequalities that have characterized Egypt's insertion into the world economy in order to present not only a desirable present and future for Cairo/Egypt, but also a fashionable sanitized industrial past. Guano argues that a similar "historical cannibalism" characterizes the development of a gentrified 'First World' waterfront in Buenos Aires. "As a 'timeless paradise,' Puerto Madero is certainly not a place anchored to its past as the former river port of Buenos Aires – a place whose natural element, even in its heyday, was more likely to be seaweed than French champagne." She quotes one of the involved architects as saying "the only nostalgia in the new waterfront of Buenos Aires is the longing for a future that is another country" (Guano 2002:189).

The Egypt Telecom commercial has a nearly irresistible charm. It is, however, based on an erasure of the actual everyday life that plays itself out Downtown. Its virtual erasure of popular claims to the city echoes and foreshadowes actual physical, social and cultural displacements.

In contrast to commercials for consumer goods, the commercials of the Future Generation Foundation and Telecom Egypt not only sell an image of their company/project, they also project a vision of Egypt's present and future. These two institutions can be said to be emblematic of Egypt's new liberal age. Telecom Egypt is a public sector company that used to have a national monopoly, but in the context of Egypt's privatization policies must transform itself in a private sector player in the competitive field of information and communication technology. The Future Generation Foundation is a NGO which aims and programs are closely related to the state's neoliberal policies. They represent important features of Egypt's economic and political restructuring: the privatizing public sector company that is obliged to compete in global markets, and the NGO that aims to help take Egypt into that same global market. In these commercials Cairo is reprocessed to appear as a clean, world-class city, inhabited by '*Jiil al-Mustaqbal*,' the 'Future Generation' marketed by Gamal Mubarak's foundation. As I argued, both projections of a world-class Cairo/Egypt carry an unmistakable subtext of exclusion.

A similar dynamic can be observed in Egyptian commercials that portray upper-middle class lifestyles and affluence. Such commercials suggest inclusion through the simple act of buying products, from the attainable, yet to many foreign yogurt drinks, to the prohibitively priced apartments and villas in the *compounds* [gated communities] surrounding Cairo. These commercials not only address upper-middle class consumers who have the financial means to engage in conspicuous consumption, but also less prosperous classes who might be enticed to aspire to such lifestyles. They suggest that an upper-middle class lifestyle can be attained through the purchase of certain consumer goods marked as upper-middle class. The elegance and affluence of up-market Cairo seem almost within reach.

Emanuela Guano (2002) suggests that such a mixture of inclusion and exclusion is characteristic of the market and neoliberal policy. These commercials serve as ambiguous invitations to exclusive and distinctive lifestyles that are only available to a small segment of the population, and, as I will argue in the following chapters, are anchored in embodied privilege. Try to be this way, the invitation reads, even if you will never make it, because this is Egypt's future. A similar tension pervades the courses offered by the Future Generation Foundation, discussed in Chapter Three. These courses that teach English language, computer and presentation skills are not likely to lead to longed-for jobs in good companies. These are the rightful domain of those who embody the new Egypt, who speak a flawless mix of Arabic and English and possess the necessary connections and cosmopolitan capital. Like the courses, the imagined Cairo and the future Egypt entice and seduce. They offer a semblance of openness and inclusion in an exclusive, elegant promise, yet carry a subtext of displacement and denial. It is in the urban landscape that we can glimpse some of the actual frictions that accompany the creation of this up-market Cairo.

Global city imperatives

As Öncü and Weyland argue in the introduction to their volume on globalizing cities, “office towers housing multinational corporations, transnational banks, world trade centers and five-star hotels, once the exclusive hallmark of a small number of ‘world cities’, now signify the integration of almost every major metropolis into global capitalism” (1997:1). The signs of the turn to neoliberalism and the global market are similarly inscribed in the landscape of Cairo. The banks of the Nile are increasingly dominated by five-star hotels and modernistic office buildings that house up-market companies and visitors (see Figures 2 and 3). Such obvious convergences in urban landscapes around the world speak of the emergence of a circuit of interconnected global spaces in a wide variety of locales. Yet, following Öncü and Weyland, we might ask how this ‘global’ has been localized in these diverse urban landscapes. And how are prevailing social stratifications and lines of inclusion and exclusion redrawn “as pivotal actors pursue their political visions by inscribing them on to the physical space of

the metropolis?” (1997:2). As Dawson and Edwards argue, the ‘global city’ can be analyzed as “one articulation of urban space among others, competing for traction” (2004:4). In what follows, I examine Cairo’s quest for the global and explore the disjunctive urban landscape that has emerged in its wake.

Neil Smith argues that the concentration of production on the metropolitan scale has given rise to what he calls “a new urbanism” (2002:434). This new urbanism entails competition among city governments to capture a share of global business and ameliorate their city’s ranking in ubiquitous indices of global city hierarchy. Jenny Robinson similarly argues that the ‘global city’ has become a regulating fiction.

It offers an authorized image of city success (so people can buy into it) which also establishes an endpoint of development for ambitious cities. ... Global cities have become the aspiration of many cities around the world; sprawling and poor megacities the dangerous abyss into which they might fall should they lack the redeeming (civilizing) qualities of city-ness found elsewhere. (Robinson 2002:546; 548)

This ‘quest for the global’ generally involves a major shift in resource allocation towards infrastructure and showcase projects, as well as subsidies to global corporations to entice them to locate or remain located in a particular city, subsidies Neil Smith pointedly calls ‘geobribes’ (2002:427-8). Robinson argues that the ‘global city’ has been translated into a ‘regulating fiction’ that promises new urban wealth, and threatens with a global disconnect (2002, *cf.* M.P. Smith 2001). With respect to postcolonial cities, or cities of the South, such showcase projects can also be seen as an attempt to intimate the country’s move from Third to First World status, as King has argued with respect to China’s frequent use of the high rise tower to signal its renewed global presence (King 2004, Chapter One).

An article by Egyptian city planner El-Khishin exemplifies such ‘global city’ logic. El-Khishin argues that Cairo better speed up its quest for global city status in order to secure vital resources for its financial health. He considers the following features of contemporary Cairo’s infrastructure conducive to such a bid for global city status: “a multi-million dollar National Museum, a Stock Exchange Complex, a new French university, a smart/hi-tech research park...the inauguration of the second and third subway lines, and a ring road.” He moreover mentions as positive assets the “exclusive residential estates [that] have sprung up around the city,” as well as the fact that “entertainment, leisure and international events have been served by the construction of an Opera House, a US\$200 million Media City, a ‘City Stars’ shopping mall and residential complex, a ‘Dreamland’ theme park, four world-class golf courses [and] four new five-star hotels...” (El-Khishin 2003:129-30). This list reads like an upper (middle) class itinerary. The celebration of these specific amenities highlights the intimate connection between this quest for the global and Cairo’s upper and upper-middle classes. It also illustrates the irrelevance of the majority of the city’s spaces and inhabitants

to a globally appropriate Cairo and displays a worrying absence of concern for questions of social equity, even survival.

Farha Ghannam argues that Cairo's urban landscape became the object of such a search for the global in the late 1970s (2002, see also Ibrahim 1987). President Anwar al-Sadat wrote in his 1974 'October Paper' that he intended to create "a city that fits its international position through providing it with the necessary infrastructure, modern communication systems, and the facilities needed for work as well as economic and touristic activities," (cited in Ghannam 2002:29). Saad Eddin Ibrahim writes that "Sadat wanted to develop Egypt along a Western-style" with Western aid and under Western guidance. "If [in the late nineteenth century] Paris and Rome were favorite models for [Khedive] Ismael, Los Angeles and Houston were favorite models for Sadat (1987:214). As Ghannam argues, the construction of a modern capital suited to the more external orientation of the *infitaah*-period not only entailed new construction and the upgrading of the city's infrastructure, but also intervention in 'popular' areas in central locations. This could involve extensive renovation programs in areas that were considered of historical significance and tourist importance. The other strand of this 'urban renewal' was the removal of the inner city 'slum' of Bulaq, which presented a sight unfit for the Cairo envisaged by the President. It entailed the clearance of a whole "backward, isolated, and 'uncivilized'" area to make way for modern buildings, work, leisure and residential spaces, catering to affluent Cairenes and still absent, but undoubtedly eager foreign companies (Ghannam 2002:29-33). The removal of Bulaq and the subsequent relocation of its inhabitants to social housing at the city margins was justified with recourse to the national interest, development and modernity (Ghannam 2002:33-8). The cleared area has however remained empty and functions as a parking lot (Ghannam 2002:39).

The quest for a globally appropriate Cairo has continued in the decades that followed. Interventions geared at the creation of a globally appropriate Cairo in the 1980s and 1990s coincided with neoliberal economic restructuring and attempts at integration into the global market. The government played an active role in the restructuring of the urban landscape. As Yousry et al. argue,

To adapt the investment environment to globalization trends and to provide economic space for investors in the new global market, the Egyptian government...[acquired] extensive foreign technical and financial assistance ...to upgrade the infrastructure and transportation and communication networks of Cairo to enhance its target role as a world city. (1998:277-8)

In 1975 a central agency took on the task of upgrading Cairo's infrastructure, aided by World Bank expertise and financing. Massive investments were made in roads, flyovers and

a ring road. At the end of the 1980s, the first of three subway lines was completed; the second was completed in the late 1990s. The agency also worked towards upgrading public utilities and communication networks. (Yousry et al. 1998).

Meanwhile the historical ‘popular’ areas of medieval Cairo and the even older remaining parts of al-Fustat, Cairo’s urban tourist highlights, are in a continual process of restoration and beautification. Some of Cairo’s central spaces have similarly received a facelift, which mostly entailed the removal of informal entrepreneurs and the creation of open spaces in Cairo’s crowded landscape. Midan Ramsis, the square adjacent to the central railway station, used to be notorious for its chaotic and maddening traffic of pedestrians, hawkers, buses, taxis and private cars. At the end of 2003, the bustle of the Midan Ramsis had been curtailed and controlled. This primary gateway to the city for visitors from other cities and the countryside used to teem with hawkers selling cheap commodities to the new arrivals, while numerous taxis and minibuses stood waiting to take them to other parts of the city. These largely informal activities have been ousted from the square and replaced by granite walkways and the green and golden decorative fences and lampposts that are standard features of such inner city beautification projects. The empty spaces left by the hawkers and drivers present eloquent monuments to state efforts at *tagdiid* and *tagmiil*, the renovation and beautification of the city. Such beautification efforts are mostly focused on central representative spaces and often leave the immediate surroundings untouched.

Yousry et al. note that “most public and private investment has been used to upgrade Cairo’s infrastructure and to improve the environment of those who are involved in globalization trends. The move towards globalization has been at the expense of the middle- and low-income groups on fixed earnings” (1998:305). In 1993, over half of all Cairenes lived in what the government designated as ‘degraded areas.’ 81 such areas were marked for clearance and their inhabitants were to be relocated in new housing projects at the margins of the city, repeating the earlier grand plans for Bulaq.¹³ While investment in transportation projects in 1992/1993 amounted to LE 153,8 million, only LE 10 million had been assigned to the upgrading of these ‘degraded’ areas, a fraction of the government’s own estimate of the LE 336 million needed in that same year (Yousry et al. 1998:282; 300).

This drive to create a globally appropriate and inviting Cairo entailed an obvious and spectacular convergence with other major cities in the world in terms of spatial organization, built environments and class-based cosmopolitan lifestyles and consumption patterns. It has resulted in the emergence of an exclusive, up-market Cairo that caters to its affluent citizens with conspicuously cosmopolitan products and spaces. It has also created new forms of disjuncture and has augmented social segregation in the urban landscape. As Smart and Smart argue in their essay on urbanization and globalization, “many interventions in



Figure 5: Fatimid Cairo
Al-Ghuriyya Street in
Fatimid Cairo, next to
al-Azhar
Photograph by Jakob
Lindfors and Mostafa
Wafy

cities have been seen as efforts to make them more hospitable to the professional middle-class as well as international investors and tourists, usually at the expense of the poor and minorities” (2003:273). Available statistics indicate increasing social inequality within Cairo as compared to the rest of the country, paralleling general tendencies towards social polarization observed in ‘global cities’ (cf. Sassen 2001). In 2000, Cairo was estimated to have by far the most unequal income distribution in Egypt.¹⁴

The massive investments in Cairo’s infrastructure have done much to improve living conditions in Cairo. Electricity and water supply have become far more reliable. Whereas the waiting times and baksheesh needed to get a phone line used to be legendary (Rodenbeck 1999:230-1), telephone connections can now be installed in a matter of weeks. The major infrastructure-plan to improve traffic inside and around Cairo has been completed. The two metro lines provide crucial means of public transport for many Cairenes. A ring road

and inner city highways now connect 6th of October-city, the major site for new economic showcase projects like the Media City and the recently inaugurated ICT-complex, with diverse outlying parts of Cairo. This new infrastructure ‘incidentally’ connects different up-market areas of Cairo, significantly speeding up movement between these outlying areas, including the new cities and *compounds* in the desert. Though it has done much to improve the previously notorious traffic situation, these fly-over bridges and highways have also created the conditions for a further disjunction between the spaces of up-market Cairo and less affluent parts of the city. One can now move from one part of up-market Cairo to the next, without having to descend into the disorder, crowdedness and poverty that characterizes Cairo’s poorer spaces.

Spatializing exclusivity

Emanuela Guano’s discussion (2002) of the hegemonic effects of recent urban development projects in Buenos Aires tells a story that could equally concern Cairo. Against the backdrop of a mounting economic crisis, many once solidly middle class inhabitants are reduced to poverty. The middle class of Buenos Aires has been sharply divided between a minority of upper-middle class professionals who were able to profit from new service economy occupations, and an increasingly impoverished majority that suffered from the withering of state employment and public services. As a consequence, “a new Buenos Aires materialized to cater to the small upper middle class and, above all, the upper class that were reaping the fruits of neoliberalism” (Guano 2002:184).

One of the features of this new neoliberal landscape is a growing spatial segregation that offers ‘safe distance’ from the growing population of slum dwellers. Guano argues that such spatial segregation is accompanied by a transnational spectacularism manifested in opulent shopping malls and a redeveloped waterfront. According to Guano, these spectacles of transnational consumption are part of a bid for neoliberal hegemony. While they obviously cater to the affluent upper-middle and upper classes, they also address a less affluent middle class public through a “simulacrum of inclusion” (Guano 2002:185).

The neoliberal promise to return Argentina to First World standards enthralled middle class inhabitants. While many were critical of the neoliberal program of the government, they also reveled in the new urban sites that were perceived as signs of a renewed inclusion into the First World. As Guano rhetorically asks,

How would porteño flâneuses and flâneurs resist the fascination of Puerto Madero’s [Buenos Aires’ redeveloped waterfront] display of a First World affluence that only few enjoy, but that, as President Menem kept promising, would one day trickle down to the whole population? The sensory proof of this success was, and still is, out there for everybody

to look at, walk through, touch and smell. Who could deny this evidence of triumphant success? (Guano 2002:189)

Guano argues that these neoliberal reforms feed into longstanding narratives of exclusion from and desire for a First World that many middle class people felt to be rightfully theirs. As in earlier times, these desires were largely expressed in terms of imported goods and lifestyles (2002a:184). The spectacular sites Guano discusses are taken as materialized proof of a return to world-class standards. These are the visceral embodiments of a transnational modernity that allow for, and for most remain limited to, acts of imaginary consumption (Guano 2002:202-3). Like the commercials discussed earlier, the power of malls and gentrified real estate lies in the suggestion of inclusion to an exclusive reality: elegant, fashionable and First World, as well as elite and restricted.

We can similarly read Cairo's transforming landscape as caught in such longing and desires for the reterritorialization of the First World. Social hierarchies have long been figured through degrees of cosmopolitanism and familiarity with the West. As I argue in the following chapters, such cosmopolitanism and 'the outside' [*barra*, often meaning the First World or the West] have once again taken on marked significance, not only in the labor market where cosmopolitan capital provides access to relatively well-paid jobs, but also more generally in social life, where such cosmopolitan capital signals upper-middle class belonging.

In December 2002 the opening of a French hypermarket on the outskirts of Cairo was a hot topic in my upper-middle class circles. Seemingly everyone was talking about Carrefour, located close to the exclusive *compound* [gated community] Qattamiya Heights in the desert outside up-market Maadi. Maha, an upper-middle class friend, excitedly invited me to come along to see the new hypermarket-cum-shopping mall. We would pay a visit to one of Maha's friends who worked at the City Mall, the official name of the greater complex that housed the Carrefour hypermarket. We visited Carrefour in the early weeks after the opening, when talk about this new transnational site had started to gather.¹⁵

After we managed the congested traffic of inner-city Cairo, crossed the eight-lane Munib Bridge and continued for a few minutes on the highway, we arrived at what for the moment had become one of Cairo's hotspots. A huge square hangar-like building rose before us out of the desert. It was flanked by a large parking lot. The ample parking lot was a necessity since the complex was located at distance from the city along a crossroads of highways, and was only accessible by car. Its location promised an exclusive public, since car ownership is largely limited to more affluent segments of the population.

We entered a spacious, clean and light hall that seemed to be insulated from reminders of Egypt's poverty and dust. One side of the main corridor was occupied by a long row of

Carrefour cashiers desks. Along the other side of the corridor, a number of upscale shops seduced passers-by with premium goods in enticing window displays. These stores included Timberland, a sports shop selling Nike and Adidas, as well as a Mobaco shop selling elegant, locally produced clothing. Visitors who tired of shopping could take a break in the Cilantro coffee shop with its modern, minimalist steel and leather décor. Though the food court and the children's play park Magic Land were not yet open, Carrefour was already a complete shopping experience, set apart from the more ambiguous social landscape of the city.

The excitement generated by Carrefour could not have been about the products on offer. Up-market supermarkets like Metro and Alfa-market had been catering to cosmopolitan tastes for some ten years. Nor was it because of the promise of a clean, even antiseptic environment, which is a major feature of most up-market establishments. A large part of the thrill seemed related to the mere idea that a French formula for shopping/living had come to Cairo, providing for an unusual shopping experience. It was the latest manifestation of what Guano has described as “the free market with its tantalizing promise of participation in the privileged Western modernity to be found in the northern hemisphere—still so distant from the south of the world” (2002a:197). At least that was what many curious customers seemed to expect in the first weeks following the opening. The location added to the allure of this shopping experience. Since the complex was set apart from the city, a trip to Carrefour could provide the feel of a visit to a foreign country. A huge sign over the Nile on the newly extended Munib bridge said: “Carrefour, only 5 minutes away,” inviting those still lingering in the city to taste the newest edition of First World inclusion. Maha's friend enthusiastically told us that it was a wonderful place, not only because it was still so new and clean, but also since its public was so select. “Only *clean* people come here,” she told us emphatically. Complete, exclusive, perfect.

Carrefour is part of a conspicuously cosmopolitan Cairo of affluence and ease. Up-market circuits of consumption have come to dominate up-market districts like Zamalek, Mohandisseen, Heliopolis, Nasr City and Maadi (*cf.* Abaza 2005). At the beginning of this new century, Cairo is marked by a high degree of segmentation in the spheres of production and consumption (*cf.* Amin 1999). Most Cairenes must consume the products and services provided by informal markets of consumption and leisure that accommodate to their limited buying power. They have to seek out the sparse remaining benefits of the Nasserite subsidized system and buy cheap Chinese imports. Still many find it difficult to make ends meet and must budget the *fuul* and *ta'miyya* they consume each morning.¹⁶ At the same time, the urban landscape speaks of the existence of another Cairo that began its boom under the *infitaah*, the open-door policies initiated in the mid-seventies.

Gated communities are built in the desert around Cairo, the Cairene streets are filled with luxury cars and the up-market area of Mohandisseen is steadily replacing West il-

Balad (literally: Downtown) as city center for those who can afford it (*cf.* Armbrust 1998). As a result of the declining quality of government services and the simultaneous existence of relative affluence among segments of Cairo's middle and upper classes, Cairo has witnessed a duplication of social services and institutions (*cf.* Amin 1999). This has resulted in an ever-growing number of private 'language' and 'Arabic' schools, private institutes and universities, as well as private hospitals.¹⁷ In these same districts, spotlessly clean supermarkets like Metro and Alfa-market offer the commodities necessary for first-class lifestyles: locally produced products that suit the taste of 'refined consumer,' as well as their costly imported counterparts. Here one can find fancy boutiques that, unlike shops in the once chic but now 'popular' Downtown, are not stuffed full to economize in space. They present their products as pieces of art, inviting the shopper to linger around while the personnel stays politely in the background, at hand when help is needed. The clothes that are presented in this refined way may be either Western imports or 'made in Egypt'—*export quality*. Then there are the innumerable up-market coffee shops and restaurants, which can now be found on nearly every corner in these up-market districts.

The prices of the products on offer in this 'other' Cairo sharply exceed those of other establishments. To illustrate, tea in a *'ahwa baladi* [male-dominated sidewalk café] costs anywhere between 0.5 and 1 LE, whereas an up-market coffee shop charges minimally 5 LE (excluding 5% taxes and 12% service charge).¹⁸ These up-market circuits offer a comprehensive range of products and services that share comparatively high prices and an emphasis on First World standards and quality. They represent Cairo's "reterritorializations of the metropole" (Guano 2002:183).

Carrefour then is merely another addition to the expanding landscape of up-market Cairo. It still caused excitement, while most other malls in the city had ceased to do so. None of my upper-middle class acquaintances ever suggested a visit to a mall, except for practical purposes. Their newness had apparently already worn off. They were no longer able to convey a feeling of renewed inclusion into much desired First World consumption and lifestyles. The fast incorporation of malls, coffee shops and up-market restaurants into the daily lives of affluent Cairenes signals the consolidated and normalized nature of such reterritorializations of the First World. This conspicuously cosmopolitan Cairo has become the self-evident backdrop of the lives of affluent Cairenes.

These up-market circuits intimate a sense of transnational belonging and project a seamlessness and self-evidence that denies the existence of other, less elegant and comfortable realities. Like in Buenos Aires, they seem to tell a "story of transnational modernity whereby the privilege of the few strives to become the pride of all" (Guano 2002:203). Yet, unlike Guano's arguments with respect to Buenos Aires, these cosmopolitan spaces hardly address disenfranchised middle class Cairenes.



Figure 6: Metro supermarket in middle class Rhoda



Figure 7: Gamaa'it id-Duwal Street, Mohandisseen

Attempts to seduce larger sections of the Cairene middle class to get with the neoliberal program are piecemeal. The commercials discussed earlier offer conspicuous examples, as do the governmental exhortations to learn ‘English’ and ‘computer’ discussed in Chapter Three. While, for example, foreign fast-food restaurants and less exclusive malls (Abaza 2001b) offer experiences of cosmopolitan consumption that are accessible to a less affluent public, most of these cosmopolitan spaces are turned into themselves, located in up-market areas and are exclusively meant for those who can afford to be part of an up-market cosmopolitan public. Cairo’s polarized income distribution maps unto increasingly differentiated lifestyles and spaces. The unfamiliarity of many affluent Cairenes with the details of the everyday lives of less affluent neighbors is matched by an unfamiliarity of large parts of the urban population with these conspicuously cosmopolitan lifestyles and spaces. The exclusive, spectacular global city primarily takes shape through new forms of social and spatial segregation.

Cairo’s geography can be read as an accumulated material inscription of successive political regimes and changing forms of social inequality, a material archive of histories of power, class, distinction and segregation (see Stewart 1999 for such a reading of Cairo’s landscape, and Caldeira 2000 for Sao Paulo). Cairo harbors a wide range of economically and socially distinct areas, from the old upper class areas of Maadi, Heliopolis and Zamelek to old middle class areas like Shobra and Munira, which have become associated with a lower-middle class. Newer areas like Mohandisseen and Nasr City house an ascendant middle-class, while the gated communities around Cairo are becoming a favorite destination for upper (middle) class Cairenes.¹⁹ Half of Cairo’s population are estimated to live in *‘ashwaa’iyyaat*, unplanned or informal lower-class areas that are marked by the large degree of informality of housing construction and the livelihoods of their inhabitants (Bayat and Denis 2000:197).

While there are large differences between the socio-economic and, as many Cairenes would insist, cultural characteristics of these urban areas, each area harbors a wide range of inhabitants. Even an upper class area like Zamalek has lower class inhabitants and *sha’bi* shops and cafes, while an old *sha’bi* area like al-Hussein houses some very wealthy businessmen (Singerman 1997:11). Cairo in that sense resembles cities like Mumbai and Delhi, which have wealthier and poorer neighborhoods but where, according to Fernandes, “such distinctions have historically been interrupted by the presence of squatters...and street entrepreneurs such as tailors, shoe repairmen and hawkers...who were generally located in the wealthier neighborhoods to provide services to their middle- and upper-class residents” (2004:2420). Fernandes argues that these spatial patterns are increasingly left behind for “urban aesthetics based on the middle-class desire for the management of urban space based on strict class-based separations” (*ibid.*). Bayat and Denis note a similar

tendency towards spatial segregation expressed in the parallel growth of exclusive gated communities and *‘ashwaa’iyyaat* in Cairo’s peripheries (2000:199, *cf.* Denis 1997).

As in earlier times, new class configurations take spatial forms, reconfiguring Cairo’s public and private spaces. The most conspicuous of these spatial expressions are the exclusive gated communities that have been built in the desert surrounding Cairo.²⁰ Gated communities—*compounds* in local parlance—promise lush green gardens and light, comfortable and elegant housing, varying from apartments to villas, amidst the stillness of the desert. They provide an escape from the crowding and the pollution of the metropolis, the scarcity of affordable, yet appropriate houses in ‘respectable’ areas and importantly the intrusions of those belonging to lower ‘social levels’ (*cf.* Kuppinger 2004). First developed in the United States, such fortified suburban enclaves have become an increasingly common feature of urban development in cities around the world. The considerable body of literature devoted to subject signals a trend towards “the total segregation of spaces, the fortification of the middle and upper classes and the increasing neglect of older public spaces along with the lower class residents who populate them” (Kuppinger 2004:40, *cf.* Low 2001).

Ayse Öncü discusses the ‘myth of the ideal home’ that motivated many middle and upper class inhabitants to search out housing in such socially homogeneous suburbs around Istanbul. Öncü argues that in the course of its transnational travels, ‘the ideal home’ acquired the privilege and moral authority of a universal truth and thereby became a ‘global myth,’ a transitional embodiment of ‘the good life,’ much like many of the up-market products, services and experiences discussed in this study. This global myth significantly informed middle class ways of life in Istanbul. Suburban housing has overtaken the erstwhile prestigious urban apartments with a Bosphorus-view as a marker of social distinction. Öncü argues that such suburban housing enticed Istanbul’s middle classes for specific reasons. “What...became the focus of their desires was the homogeneity of a life-style cleansed of urban clutter—of poverty, of immigrants, of elbowing crowds, dirt and traffic—a world of safe and antiseptic social spaces” (1997:61). Öncü notes that advertising rehearsed one central narrative. It invoked nostalgia for an imaginary clean and green Istanbul of the past, which was followed by a narrative of Istanbul’s subsequent decline and pollution, and the suggested solution: housing in one of the new suburbs on the outskirts of Istanbul.

Cairene *compounds* are similarly advertised as a socially homogeneous, clean, spacious and green dreamland (Kuppinger 2004). These gated communities with ‘world-class amenities’ are genealogically linked to Heliopolis and Maadi, two upper class areas that were constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century in then still distant areas north and south of the city. They were built as private sector projects with foreign financing, targeting foreign residents and to a lesser extent, local elites (Aga Khan Award 1984: 108-110).

The holiday resorts on the North Coast and Red Sea can be seen as the most direct predecessors of Cairo’s *compounds* (see Cole and Altorki 1998). Built in the desert, these

holiday resorts present spacious, completely controlled surroundings. While the owners are absent for most of the year, the villas and apartments are continually serviced by a range of personnel, most importantly the *ganayni* [gardener], who is responsible for the perpetually green and flower-filled gardens in the desert. Entrance is only for those carrying a carnet. In these resorts, one can choose to enjoy the sea in a bikini since those who do not know how to cope with respectable nudity are kept at bay. In these islands in the desert, affluent Cairenes can realize their in Cairo impossible dreams: they can keep out the dust, the noise and the mass of people associated with these disagreeable realities of urban life. These are materializations of dreams destined never to come true in the huge metropolis.

Nostalgic stories have it that this is the way things used to be in elite neighborhoods like Zamalek and Heliopolis, that is, before the crowds intruded and elite privileges were eroded under Nasser (*cf.* Denis 1997). Though these districts are still marked as elite areas, they have become increasingly crowded, as villa after villa is torn down to make place for tall apartment blocks. The holiday resorts and *compounds* present an escape from what Cairo has become for the elite: a place they can only to a limited extent control and form according to their ideas of taste, sophistication and good life. They represent an ultimate bid for perfection. They are insulated from their direct surroundings; gate control creates a perfectly peaceful and socially homogeneous green haven inside their walls. This is a clean, ordered Egypt inhabited by affluent people, without reminders of the other Egypt that is so annoying in its persistence not to be so. This Egypt might be a foreign country to most Egyptians, but it feels like the only right one to its inhabitants: an Egypt that is not a Third World country. Needless to say, gates are the precondition of these sanctuaries.

Eric Denis argues that these *compounds* signal the disappearance of the social mixture that was characteristic of Cairene life in the 1960s and 1970s. "Cairo's new liberal age in the 1990s echoes pre-1952 tendencies when chic and exclusive suburbs, such as Heliopolis, developed on new terrain away from a city which was too common and too difficult to reform" (Denis 1997:10). Caldeira argues that such fortified spaces represent a significant political shift, since these "new spaces structure public life in terms of real inequalities: differences are not to be dismissed, taken as irrelevant, left unattended, or disguised in order to sustain ideologies of universal equality or myths of peaceful cultural pluralism. The new urban environment enforces inequalities and separations" (2000:331). In the span of a few years Cairo's built-up area is said to have doubled largely as a result of the spread of such *compounds*, as well as adjacent hotels, private hospitals, foreign schools, and amusement parks (Mitchell 2002:273). Yet for the moment these *compounds* are still relatively insignificant in terms of inhabitants. Many villas and apartments stand empty, bearing testimony to the limited numbers of Cairenes who can actually afford to live in such insulated, exclusive places (*cf.* Kuppinger 2004). These *compounds* are perhaps the most complete expressions of widespread attempts to create the perfect surrounding for a

clean, organized, classy and exclusive life amidst the chaos, crowdedness and poverty of the metropolis.

Global dreams?

Egypt's recent neoliberal reforms can be portrayed as largely 'negative' interventions: budget cuts, reduction of state intervention in the economy and society, and the erosion of the social contract established under Nasser. Yet these 'negative' policies are intimately connected to new narratives of national progress and concomitant investments, significantly figured through participation in the global market. Cosmopolitan upper-middle class professionals can be said to be the protagonists of these new stories of national progress, a globally appropriate Cairo its natural home. These new national imaginations pervade the commercials of Telecom Egypt and the Future Generation Foundation, which portray a seamless, globally appropriate, even First World Cairo. These visual messages can gloss over actual urban practices and lives. They come to imbue Cairo with an inviting world-class aura, yet carry an unmistakable subtext of exclusivity and exclusion. Similar dreams and desires materialize in Cairo's up-market circuits. The *compounds* in the desert around Cairo present the most perfect materializations of such dreams, devoid of annoying reminders of Egypt's other realities

Such dreams of the global are related to economic globalization and neoliberal reforms that aim at integration into global networks, as well as to the related processes of global city formation, whether these are caused by the increased importance of cities in global economic networks or by the related 'quest for the global' expressed in urban showcase projects. As Guano (2002) argues, such projects are significantly informed by long standing feelings of exclusion of and longing for First World affluence, sophistication and membership. King notes that references to 'global,' 'international' or 'world' standards often actually refer to an imagined First World that consists of the lifestyles and consumption practices of only the most privileged sections of affluent, mostly Western countries (2004:133). Sites like the exclusive *compounds*, the new Carrefour hypermarket or the numerous up-market coffee shops intimate inclusion into such First World consumption practices and lifestyles.

As I argue in the following chapters, these cosmopolitan consumption practices and lifestyles double as localized class projects. The virtual closures and displacements in the commercials have their counterparts in material forms of closure and displacement in the urban landscape. Neoliberal policies render the previous developmental Nasserite social contract increasingly obsolete. Its now seemingly stale dreams of national development that would include increasing numbers into the gathering speed of the nation, have been abandoned. Large sectors of the population are relegated to the margins of narratives of national progress, and the urban areas they inhabit are largely left to their own devices.

Meanwhile state and private sector projects give rise to sites that claim global standards and can compete with First World locations in elegance and luxury. Such dreams of a global Cairo are reserved for a minority of the city's inhabitants. As I argue in the following chapters, this search for the global gives rise to an increasingly divided urban landscape and disjunctive matrices of belonging.

"If we stop dreaming, we'll die," sang Mounir, addressing a public struggling to hold on to their dreams of something better in face of adverse circumstances (see the epitaph of the Introduction). These dreams significantly differ from dreams of a life of affluence and ease in conspicuously cosmopolitan Cairo. The question is whose dreams count.

¹ The Egyptian private sector is dominated by large business groups, many of which are family-owned (Mitchell 2002:282-6). Bahgat and Sawiris are among the most known of these big business families. These family conglomerates flourished with the open-door policies and profited from a range of subsequent financial subsidies to the private sector. During the 1980s and 1990s they diversified their activities. They notably moved into the production and provision of upscale goods and services for what, as Mitchell argues, cannot be more than five percent of the population (*ibid.*).

² For this short overview of twentieth century Egyptian socio-economic history, I largely rely on James Jankowski's informed overview (2000).

³ In the mid-1970s consumption goods made up one-third of total imports, versus a mere ten percent in the late 1960s (Jankowski 2000:173).

⁴ Richards and Waterbury (1996) suggest that labor migration did actually pick up again after the Gulf War, and that Libya has provided additional employment opportunities. However they also argue that labor migration was not sufficient to keep pace with the growth of the Egyptian workforce (1996:385). In 2002 openings for labor migration were commonly perceived as being extremely limited, especially in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. People claimed that Asians were hired for jobs that did not specifically require Arabic because they were supposedly many times 'cheaper' than Egyptians or other Arab labor migrants. Moreover, a growing number of local professionals now fill the vacancies that in earlier decades were the exclusive domain of Arab migrant workers (*cf.* Abdel Mo'ti 2002:336-8).

⁵ Income inequality seems to have become particularly pronounced in cities (Adams 2000:267-8, see also UNDP 1999:160 and UNDP 2001:158). The incidence of poverty seems to have increased rapidly during the 1980s and at a slower rate during the early 1990s. Even though rural poverty rates remain higher than urban ones, urban poverty appears to have increased more rapidly than poverty in rural areas (Assaad and Rouchdy 1999:14, *cf.* Adams 2000).

⁶ See, e.g., Fatma Farag, 'Back to the dust,' *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue 544, 26 July-1 August 2001).

⁷ See, e.g., Gamal Essam El-Din, 'Subsidise or Die,' *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue 661, 23-29 October 2003) and Sherine Abdel-Razek, 'Bearing the Burden,' *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue 686, 15-21 April 2004).

⁸ The state might be seen as both an imagined entity and a set of concrete institutions (see Hansen and Stepputat's [2001] introduction to their edited volume). As Mitchell (1991) and Ferguson and Gupta (2002) argue, state practices produce the idea of the state as an encompassing, superior entity, separated from, and above, society. Ferguson and Gupta argue that such imaginations of the state as above and beyond, and as the representative of the larger social good are increasingly diluted by forms of transnational governmentality, particularly the growing importance of local, yet transnational NGOs.

⁹ The same imagery featured on the website of the Future Generation Foundation (see figure 5). The Foundation optimistically echoes IMF-policies that suggest that eventually, greater integration into the global market will bring improved life standards for everyone. According to its Mission statement, the foundation will "contribute to Egypt's economic growth and global competitiveness efforts" by "helping in upgrading local corporate culture." These upgraded human resources "will translate into greater fiscal well-being for the nation at large, a leading role in the regional economy, and a strong position on the global market" (<http://www.fgf-egypt.com/english/foundation/fgf14.asp> [accessed July 2003]).

¹⁰ As Lila Abu-Lughod writes, "while the everyday forms of piety that are so much a part of life in Egypt are occasionally reflected in the popular serials—older characters or simple peasants are sometimes shown praying or using religious phrases—the new forms of piety are never portrayed. One never sees the young in the cities asserting an Islamic identity..." (1993:399). The *higaab* is the most common sign of such Islamic identities. While there is a growing offer of religious programming (Quran

recitations, religious sermons and programs and religious television serials), religious programs are clearly set apart from other types of programming (*ibid.*, cf. Abu-Lughod 1993; 1995). The result is a portrayal of modern Egyptian everyday life as largely secular and often relatively affluent, in which only older and more 'traditional' people engage in religious practices.

¹¹ This is a probably unwitting reworking of the official name, *Jil al-Mustaqbal*, The Future Generation.

¹² Such imaging of modern Egypt through Cairo's urban spaces and its more affluent inhabitants is a standard feature of Egyptian media productions (see Abu-Lughod 2005).

¹³ Evictions and clearance have met with resistance from the inhabitants. Recent attempts to remove 'slum areas' in Cairo are described in Bayat and Denis (2000) and have been reported in *Al-Ahram Weekly* (see, e.g., 29 October - 4 November 1998; 12-18 November 1998; 28 June - 4 July 1998 [<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/>]).

¹⁴ In Cairo, the richest twenty per cent were estimated to have 6.5 times the income of the lowest twenty per cent, compared to 4.9 times in 1995. Whereas the Gini-coefficient for Cairo in 1995 was 33.7, in 2000 it had risen to 39, the highest in the country (UNDP 2001:158; UNDP 1999:160). According to 'human development indexes' (a combination of indexes for health, education and income), Greater Cairo has three out of five highest and three out of five lowest scoring areas in the country (UNDP 2003:44). Actual social inequality might be considerably higher than the quoted statistics indicate. Egyptian income distribution statistics are rather unreliable, as Bartsch has noted. He found that half of the country's consumer expenditure was missing from the statistics on which these income distribution figures are based. Most of the missing expenditure is likely to belong to a small section of affluent consumers (discussed in Mitchell 2002:286-7).

¹⁵ It also made the two most important English-language weeklies, *Al-Ahram Weekly* and *the Cairo Times*.

¹⁶ *Fuul* (a paste of broad beans) and *ta'miyya* (falafel) constitute the cheap daily breakfast of a majority of Egyptians.

¹⁷ 'Language schools' are those private schools that teach most of the curriculum in a European language: mostly English and French, but also German. 'Arabic private schools' teach most of the curriculum in Arabic.

¹⁸ These are the prices current in 2002. In 2005 the prices of many goods and services had gone up by 30-100%.

¹⁹ Cf. Bayat and Denis 2000, which includes a maps of Cairo that details the distribution of educational attainment in Cairo

²⁰ Besides these exclusive *compounds*, there are also new housing projects in the desert that cater to less affluent Cairenes. Some privately built gated communities cater to middle to upper-middle class Cairenes with a higher building density and a large share of high-rise apartment buildings, rather than villas (Kuppinger 2004). Public housing projects offer affordable housing to lower-middle to middle class Cairenes. From the mid-1970s onward, the government has tried to divert Cairo's population growth to new cities in the desert around Cairo (Stewart 1999:140). While the relatively nearby Sixth of October City has been successful, more outlying cities have not attracted the predicted numbers of inhabitants. These cities suffered from lack of facilities and their distance from Cairo and the lack of good transportation made them unattractive for people whose work and social lives remained located in the city. The latest public addition to Cairo is New Cairo, located at the outskirts of Nasser City. New Cairo mainly features spaciouly laid out apartment blocks, which, though generally considered 'far away,' offer affordable housing to (lower) middle class Cairenes (cf. De Koning 2001).



Figure 8: Cartoon 'An excellent unemployed person'

Finally you've succeeded at your central exams with high grades and you will fulfill your dad's wish. You'll study engineering and become an excellent unemployed person!! (The son is holding a certificate that says 99%)

2

The Education of Class

Life stops in Cairo. The streets and cafes are emptier than usual, no new films are released and no big events are scheduled. The country holds its breath and families pray. It is the time of the *thanawiyya 'amma*, the central exams that conclude the high school trajectory and determine admission to university. This is the moment the fates of tens of thousands of seventeen and eighteen-year olds are decided. The whole country is geared towards creating the best study atmosphere for the examinees. State television broadcasts revision programs for hours on end. Months in advance, family visits are arranged in such a way as to give the youngsters a quiet study environment. Many parents seem as engaged and anxious as their children, persistently admonishing them to study more and harder.¹

In Cairo, schooling is a central repository for emotional and financial investments. It holds the promise of social mobility, not only in terms of careers and life standard, but also social status. The educational system is also a symbol of a certain state, society and nation, at least in the Egypt that still remembers, albeit with mixed feelings, one of the ultimate symbols and achievements of the 1952-revolution: free education for all through university. In the 1950s and 1960s education became the main route to social mobility, a secure career and middle class status. The move toward a dual educational system in the course of the 1980s and 1990s speaks of another Egypt.

From the 1970s onward, the declining quality of the governmental educational system and the turn towards economic liberalization led to the rapid growth of private education from kindergarten to university and beyond. This trend seems to have accelerated in the 1990s, with the establishment of four private universities, numerous private higher institutes and a growing number of high schools that offer British and American diplomas. The educational system that once offered social mobility and a secure future, a ticket out of family fortunes and a pre-ordained life trajectory, now works to consolidate such family fates. While education remains a major route to social mobility, such social mobility no longer has its earlier collective, inclusive character. It has taken on an individual quality and strongly depends on one's family background (Abdel Mo'ati 2002:334-6).

The story of education highlights crucial changes in Egyptian society and its distribution of chances, hopes, dreams and frustrations. Some families try to stop the seemingly inevitable downward social mobility through investments in their children's education, while others attempt to consolidate acquired wealth by adding cultural to economic capital. Education is still the repository of hope for many who, in light of the lack of other options, remain believers in the rewards of a good education in spite of alarming indications to the contrary.

In this chapter I examine the intimate connections between education and class. I first turn to some of the meanings of being middle class in Cairo, which are centrally figured through education. Education is also one of the most heavily contested sites of economic and political reorientation. Previous national developmental policies were geared toward the creation a broad, educated urban middle class (see, e.g., Abdel-Fadil 1980). New national policies and narratives emphasize global standards and excellence, to which only a minority of the large urban middle class can aspire. I explore the ways education has served as a central mechanism for processes of segmentation in Cairo's middle-class. The dual nature of the educational system articulates, consolidates and strengthens processes of segmentation in Cairo's professional middle class. These divisions in turn become highly significant upon entrance into a labor market where only internationally oriented companies seem to offer financially rewarding jobs. Cosmopolitan capital has been a crucial marker in these processes of segmentation, as I argue in the subsequent discussion of new modes of distinction that characterize the still tentative formation of a distinct professional upper-middle class.

Being middle class in Egypt

Hearing about my research on the Cairene middle class, a number of my contacts wryly remarked that there is no longer a middle class in Egypt. There are only the poor and the wealthy. On an intuitive level this image strikes quite true. Cairo's streets are inhabited by

people trying to make a living in a wide array of informal occupations, often servicing fellow city dwellers at the other end of the income spectrum. The disjunction of fortunes in present-day Cairo has become obvious to all. Particularly new entrants into the labor market and adult life are confronted with new lines of social segmentation. Three decades of open-door policies and economic liberalization and privatization have enabled some to look forward to rewarding up-market jobs in the internationally oriented segment of the urban economy, which require cosmopolitan capital, and often, connections. For many others, these changes have left a bitter legacy. They might have had high hopes and expectations based on their educational achievements, but they now find themselves among the army of young unemployed. I would argue that the observations about the demise of the middle class do not imply a disappearance of a social middle or a growing irrelevance of the category. They rather highlight the social polarization within Cairo's professional middle class: the impoverishment of the majority of those who consider themselves and are reckoned to be middle class, while a minority seems to live in affluence.

Notwithstanding the observation on the demise of the middle class, and the very real downward life standards it highlights, the category 'middle class' remains ethnographically salient in Egypt. Armbrust insightfully sketches what it means to be middle class in Cairo.

[Middle class] does not correlate with a material standard of living. There are, however, certain attitudes and expectations commonly associated with a middle class ideal. 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 labor. 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. (Armbrust 1999:111)

As Armbrust argues, middle class identification hinges on education. It is intimately connected to the Nasser era, which saw the democratization of education and the exponential growth of a state bureaucracy that provided office jobs to graduates of higher educational institutes. Under Nasser, new educational policies promised free access to education through university, and a guaranteed government position after graduation from a higher institute.² Education and an office job seemed to be within reach of all families who could support their children through university. Being educated became a widely shared aspiration. Enrollment at all levels of education tripled between 1952 and 1970 (Mina 2001:32).

The engineer became the hero of the Nasserite developmental project. Moore argues that in the course of the 1950s, the Nasserite regime increasingly relied on engineers to run

the burgeoning state apparatus and public sector. The prestige of the engineering profession concomitantly soared. Even when industrialization stagnated and a surplus of engineers undermined the solidity of this professional career, its prestige remained (Moore 1994:43-4). A middle-aged woman from a relatively well-known family fondly remembered the Nasserite promise of educational access and social mobility. She rehearsed the commonly evoked image that “even the son of the *bawwaab* could become an engineer.” The figure of the *bawwaab*, the doorman who mostly lives with his (and at times her) family in the dark, musty rooms on the ground floor of middle to upper class apartment blocks, is often used to symbolize the lowest of the low. The image of the son of the *bawwaab* who becomes an engineer symbolizes the emergence of new avenues for social mobility and the existence of an élan of social justice in the Nasser era. With a keen sense of irony, she however added, “he might become a brilliant engineer, but that does not mean that I would allow him to marry my daughter.” Her ironic comment indicates some of the tensions between the existence of new avenues for social mobility and the continued importance of family backgrounds and older social hierarchies. “Just imagine I would have to sit with his parents, the *bawwaab* and his wife, on an equal footing,” she continued.

In the 1960s seemingly everyone could dream of a middle class life, conceived of as a modern and, above all, clean [*nidiifa*] life. Cleanliness, *nadafa*, is an evocative term that can encompass anything from hygiene and order, to the non-manual, and the ‘social level’ of a person. Cleanliness is intimately tied to being or aspiring to be middle class. Being middle class implies a safe distance from menial and socially degraded jobs and the expectation of a stable yet modest living standard. It first and foremost symbolizes the promise of being free from the grime and dust of lower class existence.

If we reckon by these locally significant standards, the middle class has continued to grow even after the turn to economic liberalization in the mid-1970s on account of the higher levels of participation in higher education. While the country still has high illiteracy rates and large numbers drop out of the basic educational trajectory, it also has a relatively high percentage of students in higher education, about twenty percent of the college-age population.³ The parallel existence of high illiteracy and significant college attendance provides an indication of the differences between Egyptian working-class and middle class realities and aspirations. Yet, as Amin argues, the growth of the middle class has been accompanied by a growing discrepancy between expectations of a middle class life and often less hospitable realities (2000:36-7). While middle class remains a pertinent economic and socio-cultural category in Cairo, large parts of the educated population see their standard of living decline and many recent university graduates have a hard time finding a job, let alone a decent, well-paying one that corresponds to their educational achievements. The professional middle class has become increasingly segmented in terms of individual wage-earning capacities, as well as cultural capital and lifestyle, the latter often inextricably tied

to the former. Education has been one of the central mechanisms for the articulation of this segmentation.

The education of the nation?

The business of education

[E]ducation has stopped being the state's responsibility...This responsibility has shifted to the private sector: foreign schools and private teachers...[T]he story of free education in Egypt has become a balloon floating in the air to cheat the people into believing that the state is still taking its responsibility seriously, while the state has done nothing to change the situation of the educational system. This has led the businessmen of education and private schools and private teachers to expect that this status quo will remain, and has convinced the Egyptian families and guardians that there is no other way than dependence on private lessons...We have succeeded to establish an educational system that doesn't teach anyone and it has become every family's right to search for its children's deliverance in the way that suits it!

Salama Ahmed Salama (*Al-Ahram*, 27 August 2003) (my translation)

The fate of the public education system, and the consolidation of a parallel private one, regularly stirs up heated debates in and outside of the media. The above indictment of the government by Salama Ahmed Salama, one of Egypt's most respected commentators, captures many of the sentiments that were routinely expressed in private and public debates about the status quo of the educational system. These debates focused on the rights to free education, the dismal quality of public schools, the fortunes parents are forced to spend on private lessons and the incessant growth of private education highlighting the de facto dual nature of the educational system. These debates reflect not only the beleaguered state of public education, but also its continued importance to imaginations of the nation, as well as intimate, personal investments.

Public education was scarce at the beginning of the twentieth century, especially at the secondary level, and tuition fees limited access to more affluent families. Even though primary education had been declared compulsory and free of charge in 1923 and secondary education had become free of charge in 1950, democratization of education only took off during the 1950s and 1960s (Cochran 1986). Besides public secondary education, there were foreign private schools that taught most of the curriculum in a foreign language, mainly French and English. From 1934 onwards, these foreign language schools were brought under the increasingly encompassing supervision of the Ministry of Education and had to adopt government curricula. They did continue to teach a major part of the curriculum in foreign languages.

After the 1952-Revolution, public education was dramatically expanded. Though the quality of education differed considerably, a number of reputed state schools in Cairo and Alexandria came to represent the apex of learning in society. In a system dominated by public schools, some continued to rely on private schools with their more exclusive school population and foreign-language curriculum as a route to distinction for some.

Max Rodenbeck writes that during the 1970s, “the state discovered it could no longer afford its revolutionary pledge to educate, heal, house, feed and employ the masses...For lack of any policy, state services began to privatize themselves. With schools working two or even three shifts a day, and classes averaging eighty students, teachers made up for their dismal salaries by giving private lessons on the side” (1999:231). The predominance of state schools started to wane as the educational quality of state education decreased. Against the backdrop of a worsening economy in the late 1970s, the government began to stimulate private investments in education. While expenditure on public education was in decline, private education boomed (Nuweir 2000). At the same time, worker remittances were flowing into the country, giving considerable financial leverage to parts of the population. Domestically, the *infitaah* brought affluence to those who were able to profit from the increased leverage allowed to the private sector and the opening-up of the country to imports. A growing number of Cairene families was therefore able to pay for private schooling. The open-door policies were moreover a first indication that the country would be slowly but steadily integrated into global economic networks and that the once all-encompassing state would cease to be so. It would no longer provide the main professional career paths and no longer present the main standard for all Egyptian affairs. From the 1970s onward, the educational system increasingly developed into a dual system in which overcrowded state schools provided education to a large majority of students, while the minority who could afford the tuition fees was educated in private schools (*cf.* Mina 2001:36-7).

The emergence of numerous private counterparts to public schools is matched by a widespread informal privatization in educational institutions. The informal privatization of state services that took off in the 1970s (Rodenbeck 1999:231) seems to have become ubiquitous at in the twenty-first century. As Salama Ahmed Salama’s indictment suggests, education has become big business on all levels of society. Private lessons are the most common form of such informal privatization. They are generally considered one of the gravest symptoms of the failure of the educational system and present a serious drain on family resources (UNDP 1998:36-7; *cf.* Assaad and Rouchdy 1999:26).

Many of those working in education have become entrepreneurs. It is often not so much their wage as their position that counts, since it provides opportunities in the lucrative market place of shadow education where private lessons have become standard practice.⁴ I even heard of private schools where the teachers’ contract was implicitly based on such a marketplace understanding: a low wage in return for a wealthy clientele willing to pay

large sums for their children's success. In public schools and less prestigious private schools teachers earn a pittance (around 200 LE) and have no other option than to turn to private lessons to augment their income. It is often claimed that they do not teach well or do not cover the full course material in order to force pupils to take private lessons to make up for the missing subjects. Due to a restrictive admissions policy, access to university education requires increasingly high scores on general secondary exams. The need for high exam scores fuels the reliance on private lessons.

While the choice for private over public education seems to have become common in more affluent circles first, it soon became a common aspiration in middle class circles as well, particularly in Cairo. In 1999/2000, 20% of the Cairene *thanawiyya 'amma* students were in private schools, versus 8.5% nationwide.⁵ Nada, a professional in her early thirties from an affluent middle class family, enrolled in a private language school at her mother's insistence. In the late 1970s her father did not see the need for private education, and did not think it important for Nada to receive foreign language education. Marwa comes from an economically modest background, yet attended a French language school. She was in her mid-twenties and worked as a journalist at a French-language weekly. She recounted how her parents, both teachers with a modest income, were accused of showing off when they decided to send her older sister to a French nuns' school in the early 1970s. However, when Marwa entered the same school in the early eighties, education at private language schools had already become a common pursuit among middle class families.

The French Catholic school trajectory was not uncommon in families with high qualifications but modest salaries. Considering their tight budget, Marwa's parents made a clever choice. The French Catholic schools were and still are among the cheapest language schools and generally enjoy a good reputation. Such an educational trajectory seems to have led to a strong position in the labor market in the 1990s, when foreign companies entered the Egyptian market and new local private companies demanded people who had a private education and were fluent in foreign languages. The near-native French and reasonable English skills of these young graduates of modest middle class origins were in high demand.

I frequently heard stories about the erstwhile prestige and excellent facilities of a few select public schools that only admitted those with high scores on their primary or preparatory central exams. These stories of excellence have now given way to a general feeling that all government education is beyond redemption. In the late 1970s, Mostafa, from a lower-middle class family, could count the son of a minister among his classmates at a public high school. Such a mixed class presence in public schools has become virtually inconceivable in contemporary Cairo. The feeling that educational quality had been caught in a relentless downward spiral was widely shared. It concerned first and foremost public

schools, which were thought to be beyond redemption with their large classroom sizes, the double shifts and, at times, under-qualified teachers. The possibility of attending public schools was hardly discussed in middle class circles. Such a choice would only be made in case of dire need. Public schools have become imaginary repositories for inadequacy, suffering and even vice for those able to avoid them.

However, feelings of decay also color discussions about private schools. Though the quality of education in older private schools might similarly have declined, such feelings of decay seem to be primarily related to the importance given to receiving the best education, which is connected to the fierce competition in the labor market and to the effectiveness of education as a mechanism of social distinction. The newest private schools located along the desert roads leading out of Cairo, pointedly called ‘investment schools’ to emphasize their ‘for-profit’ character, are the latest bid for excellence. They offer American or British standards of teaching and curricula, as well as foreign or international diplomas, not to mention countless social and sports activities. With tuition fees reaching tens of thousands of Egyptian Pounds, such schools can leave even upper-middle class families feeling underprivileged and unable to keep up. A 38-year old professional from an affluent upper-middle class family said that, whereas in her time attending a reputable language school had been a must, nowadays schools with an American or British system and degrees have become de rigueur. While the former schools largely work with state curricula and conclude with the standard general exam, the latter schools grant ‘international’ diplomas, like the IGCSE, that have limited validity in the national setting (see Figure 9).

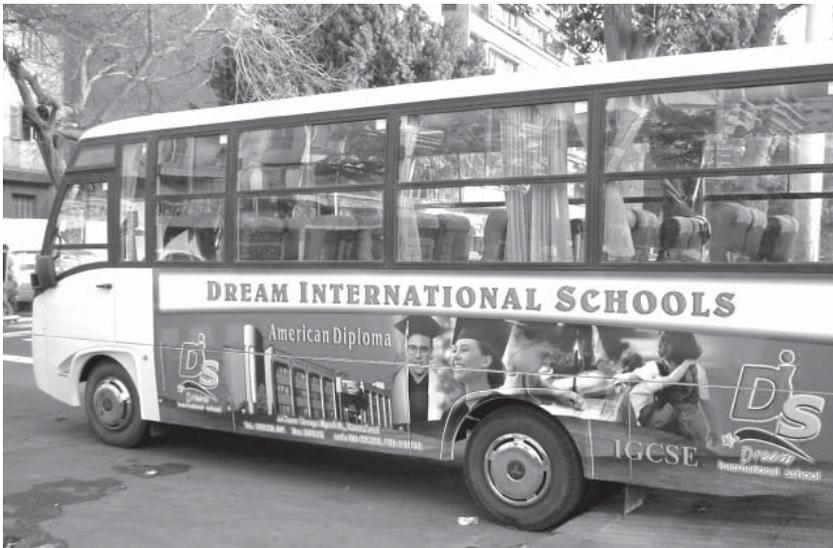


Figure 9: Dream International Schools bus parked in Manyal, a middle class neighborhood close to Downtown Cairo. Dream International Schools is located in Dreamland, a gated community next to Sixth of October City. It advertises with an ‘American Diploma,’ the IGCSE.

Pre-university language school trajectories have become decisive for chances in Cairo's segmented labor market, and have become important markers of social distinction. The differences between those with and without private language education represent only part of a larger hierarchy in which not pre-university, but university education plays a major role. Graduates of the private American University in Cairo (AUC) generally occupy a stronger position in the labor market than those with public degrees, while graduates with foreign degrees are even more sought after. However, since the tuition fees of private universities are beyond the reach of most families able to afford language schools, most pupils of private language schools, including most of my upper-middle class informants, continued their education at a public university.

While public pre-university education seems to have lost most of its former standing, the contestation over the value of prestigious state education versus an expanding private offer still continues at the university level.⁶ Past differentiations among public secondary schools have lost much of their salience, yet public university education remains strongly differentiated. The faculties of engineering, medicine, pharmacy and political science and economy, as well as certain language departments, are considered to offer high quality and prestigious education. The general exam scores required for admittance to public universities have been raised year-after-year to limit enrollment at the overcrowded universities. Prestigious colleges like medicine and engineering now require scores close to 100% (see Figure 8). Such high scores in turn rely on the quality of education received and the expenditure on private lessons. Admittance to these more prestigious colleges is therefore likely to strongly correlate with family income.

In the course of the 1990s this internal differentiation reached new heights after the top state universities, Cairo University and Ain Shams, opened 'language sections' in the faculties of law, commerce and political science and economics, where the same curriculum is taught in English or French. Since they generally require a previous 'language education' and charge tuition fees, these language sections are highly selective. They represent the relatively affordable public counterparts of private universities, with better educational facilities, a more select public and a higher social standing than their crowded 'Arabic' counterparts. With respect to these language departments, Amin argues that "a new divide is thus created within every college between those who can and those who cannot be integrated in the modern global system" (1999:17-8).

Lines of relative nobility

Private language schools were often assumed to produce a certain type of person. The choice of a particular school would thus be a choice for a specific mindset and should reflect the emphasis on certain values within the family. A young mother told me that even

the Arabic teacher at her sons' private language school was a graduate of a private language school. Though graduates of state schools would seem better suited for the job on account of their reputedly superior knowledge of Arabic, the school insisted on employing a graduate of a private school because of the latter's 'social level.' According to this woman, "the school was afraid that a public school graduate might teach the children bad words and manners." Her words bring to mind Bourdieu's observation that diplomas are not merely entitlements to a domain of expertise, but also 'patents of nobility' (Bourdieu 1984:142). In Cairo, names of primary and secondary schools are widely known signs of belonging and distinction. They function as important indicators of not only a person's educational achievement, but also of his or her 'social level' and concomitant 'cultural level.' In recent years, schools that offer British and North American diplomas have overshadowed the erstwhile prestigious older schools. The existence of yet more exclusive and expensive institutions and degrees has created new lines of 'true distinction.'

While divisions and distinctions among young middle class Cairenes rely on a multitude of privileged capitals, schools are without doubt a central site for the realization of distinctive cultural capital, particularly the cosmopolitan capital required for up-market jobs.⁷ I use the term 'cosmopolitan capital' for those forms of cultural capital that entail familiarity with, and mastery of, Western cultural codes, as well as local cosmopolitan ones. Such cosmopolitan capital most clearly entails fluency in English, as well as Western diplomas or degrees from educational institutes that are associated with Western knowledge, for example, private language schools or the AUC. It also entails knowledge of the West, Western consumer culture, as well as, for example, local cosmopolitan dress codes. Such cosmopolitan capital overlaps with, and oftentimes doubles as, locally distinctive cultural capital. It is mainly through attending a prestigious language school that one can reach the near-native command of English crucial for employment in up-market companies. In private language schools, students moreover acquire informal cultural capital such as familiarity with the upper-middle class vernacular, distinctive ways of dress and tastes, as well as the right comportment, choice of words and self-confidence.

Such an education generally requires significant financial investments. The majority of those employed in the upper segment of the labor market are therefore from relatively affluent families. Such relative affluence was often connected to either prolonged periods of labor migration to the Gulf, successful careers in the upper ranks of the state apparatus or successful private sector ventures inside Egypt. Such family backgrounds provide them with diverse kinds of capital that conspire toward a comparatively secure career path in the internationally oriented upper segments of the urban economy (*cf.* Mina 2001:89, footnote ***). Children of comfortable families can then go on to find jobs as engineers, marketing specialists, business developers or project managers in development organizations, or they

might work in relatively well-paid secretarial or as administrative positions in up-market companies. They are the exemplary *awlaad naas*, children of good families, their bodies and language speaking of the high capital investments made with respect to their futures.

The effectiveness of private schools is attested to by the relative success of friends and acquaintances from professional middle class families with modest incomes who had visited relatively inexpensive French Catholic schools. Lacking much of the privileged economic, social and cultural capital that is imparted by more affluent family backgrounds, they nevertheless succeeded in attaining good positions in the labor market because of their fluency in French and familiarity with elite cultural codes and lifestyles. In the 1990s such fluency was still scarce, while many new jobs required such skills.

Private schools have become a crucial site for what Bourdieu calls 'reconversion strategies,' the strategic capital investments families make in order to retain or improve their class position (Bourdieu 1984:125ff.). Such strategies provide a central dynamic behind the ever-growing market of private educational institutes. Bourdieu argues that,

the reconversion of economic capital into educational capital is one of the strategies which enable the business bourgeoisie to maintain the position of some or all of its heirs, by enabling them to extract some of the profits of industrial and commercial firms in the form of salaries, which are a more discreet—and no doubt more reliable—mode of appropriation than 'unearned' investment income. (1984:137)

His observations with respect to 1970s France seem equally relevant to contemporary Cairo. Families that gained significant amounts of economic capital through private business ventures have commonly resorted to such reconversion strategies. These families constitute part of the clientele of the expensive new schools that offer foreign diplomas at school fees pegged to the Dollar.

These 'new rich' reconversion strategies are a prime source of symbolic contestation for professional middle class families that have less economic but more cultural capital. The new affluence of previously lower class families has been a central concern of more established families that are confronted with declining incomes as a consequence of inflation and the large financial obligations brought on by the need to pay for private alternatives to public facilities. The universities and schools that offer the newest, most exclusive and by far most expensive degrees were often the target of derisive comments. On several occasions, middle class parents claimed that these degrees were worthless since they were merely bought with the financial muscle power of the new rich. These worthless diplomas were contrasted with their own children's 'real' diplomas, gained through dedication, talent and hard work. Some also expressed their indignation at the lower social origins or lack of education of the parents.

The devaluing of new diplomas and graduates from less highly educated, non-professional families can indeed be seen as a defense of the vestiges on which the social position of these professional families is founded, as Bourdieu argues. However, this symbolic struggle also draws on middle class ideals of education and culture, which are central to a long-standing national modernist discourse. In his study on modernism and mass culture in Egypt, Walter Armbrust argues that such ideals of education and being cultured are part of a dominant ‘conservative modernism’ in which the enlightened and modern, yet still authentic middle class is the main protagonist. This middle-class protagonist, conversant with both tradition and modernity, typically engages in a coalition with less developed but steadfast Egyptians, and in the process, elevates them from their authentic, yet essentially backward state (Armbrust 1996:100; cf. Abu-Lughod 2005:60). The scorn of those who want to buy into such ideals and lifestyles without the hard work, discipline and proper family backgrounds is equally tied to such modernist discourses. The ‘undeserved’ riches and privileges of the *nouveaux riches* threaten to overturn the widely shared ideology of national progress and betterment through a combination of education and sophistication.

Strategies

Most middle class families can hardly afford to engage in this rat race for the best educational qualifications, but neither are they willing to give up on their children’s futures. Mona’s story exemplifies the intense efforts and strategizing of families caught in this dilemma. Mona is a fulltime mother and housewife in her early forties. Her father was a high-ranking civil servant, her grandfather an affluent trader. Mona attended an erstwhile prestigious private school and graduated from a good department at public university. After working for a few years as a teacher, she decided to stay home and dedicate herself to the upbringing of her three children. The family is among the oldest residents of a (upper) middle class district in Giza, the part of Cairo that is located on the left bank of the Nile. Mona herself lives in a newer, more mixed district. We often met at her elderly mother’s house, which showed the signs of a decaying living standard since her husband died. Her mother told me stories about her youth, growing up in a state-of-the-art building, among bigger and lesser stars of Egyptian society. And about Mona’s father, decency embodied in this hard-working and fair official. Now the fortunes of the family have somewhat turned. Though Mona seems to be living comfortably, she clearly cannot match the social status or living standard of her parents and grandparents.

We frequently discussed the ins and outs of the education system in Egypt, a subject in which Mona had become expert. She emphasized the pains she takes to motivate her children and help them do well at school. For the education of their children, she and her husband chose an ‘Arabic private school,’ rather than one of the more prestigious ‘language

schools.' While most subjects are taught in Arabic, extra attention is paid to English. She explained that they would not be able to pay for the private lessons were her children to attend a language school. Whereas Mona can tutor the children in her own field of study, she would not be able to do so if the subjects were taught in English. Sending her children to public schools was not an option either. She mentioned wryly that the Minister of Education talked about raising the level of education to that of *barra*, the outside (read: the West), yet public schools have up to 80 pupils in a classroom. The only schools offering a level comparative to 'the outside' are "the language schools *illi bi-dollaar* [with tuition fees charged in dollars] and who has that kind of money?" Her children thus visit an 'Arabic private school' through the preparatory level. They then continue in a state high school.

Many parents who cannot afford a language school prefer the educational trajectory Mona has chosen. They pay the more modest sums for Arabic private education through the preparatory level, after which their children apply for a public secondary school. Several people argued that 'Arabic' secondary private schools are actually worse than governmental ones. They are seen as catering to those pupils who did not score well in the preparatory school exams and are therefore not eligible for a place in a governmental high school.

Mona keeps reminding her children: "it is up to you to study. We are offering you the best opportunities we can, but if you don't seize them, we cannot do more." And her children know, and study. They know they do not belong to the class in which futures are guaranteed by not only the best education, but also the important safety net of economic capital, which can buy a place in a private university irrespective of central exam results. That is why in Mona's family all eyes were focused on Ahmed. Her eldest was the center of attention since he was entering his central exams. In case he did not manage to attain a score close to 100% on his exams, he would have to choose one of the lesser colleges and with that, an unpromising future. With its limited financial means, this family has to rely on its persistence and its professional background with its firm commitment to and esteem for advancement through education. Speculation about his future was ongoing. His parents had decided that Ahmed should become a medical doctor but they had also begun to consider pharmacy, another top field, as a concession to the market-oriented zeitgeist. Since many pharmacists eventually start their own businesses, pharmacy combines the advantages of a long exclusive study trajectory with the free market-promises of entrepreneurial wealth.

Many young parents who experience scarcity in the labor market are even more anxious about their children's future chances. Since the free market of schooling is ever active and lucrative, there is now a wide ranging offer for parents who believe it is never too early to start working on their children's educational careers. Recently, there seems to be a flurry of expensive kindergartens (KGs) that employ qualified staff who speak English, French or German, so that the toddlers are stimulated properly and become familiarized with

'languages' from the earliest possible moment.

A friend trained her one-year old daughter in French. She paid the rather standard fee of 500 LE a month for the French language crèche that should gain her daughter admission to a good French language school. Another friend wanted to get her six-year old son a private teacher to playfully introduce him to English, his third language besides French and Arabic, his two mother tongues. At her German-language crèche, yet another friend's five-years old cousin was being prepared for the entrance IQ-test that should gain her admission to the German School. The German School has gained the reputation of producing disciplined, hard workers, even though, as several people told me, many families consider French schools more appropriate for women since they are assumed to produce a more feminine and delicate personality. The pressure for admissions to the German school has risen to such heights that even those with clear ties to Germany are no longer assured of admission. These stories are far from exceptional. They are emblematic of a larger trend in which only the best education is good enough in light of expected and feared cutthroat competition for the scarce pool of good jobs. As will be discussed in the following chapter, more and more qualified graduates 'with languages' enter the labor market, while there seem to be ever fewer jobs. As a group of affluent upper-middle class professionals noted, "Nowadays even graduates of the American University have a hard time finding a job."

Despite considerable differences in historical trajectories and present life standards, the three families discussed above are part of the upper segments of Cairo's professional middle class. But who knows whether they will be able to guarantee their children a similar position? They all depend on their professional qualifications for their livelihood and have no businesses that can employ their children irrespective of their academic achievements or the condition of the labor market. They therefore invest heavily in their children's education, in the hope that this will provide them with an edge in an ever more competitive job market.

These worries about guaranteeing a similar life standard for one's children seem far removed from the troubled mind of Hossam, a forty-year old academically trained government employee. When he married, he still had a job in tourism and was making a good living, but after the Luxor-attacks, the tourists stayed away and the sector went into a slump.⁸ He was offered a government job as one of the last beneficiaries of the increasingly watered-down governmental scheme of guaranteed employment. He embraced the secure government employment despite the low rewards (with several bonuses he earns around 400 LE per month). When we spoke, Hossam bitterly recalled that he and his wife had once considered enrolling their son in the American School. Now the additional financial burden brought on by his recent divorce obliged him to take his son out of the public language school that he once saw as a temporary compromise. He said he could no longer pay for his son's

private lessons and the occasional ‘voluntary’ presents for the teachers. Hossam’s father supplements Hossam’s meager government salary with the money he managed to save from the time he worked in the Gulf. Still Hossam’s monthly income does not allow for more than basics. He wondered out loud about the prospects of his son’s generation. If he can hardly make a living now, how would they? While we were discussing the importance of schools in determining a child’s future, he sharply brought my analytic wanderings back to its real life drama. “But what if I know what to do to give my son a good future but simply can’t afford to do so?”

The emergence of a dual educational system in which those who can afford it educate their children in private schools, while others must send their children to overcrowded public schools with underpaid teachers, has contributed to growing divisions within Cairo’s professional middle class.

Of ‘having a language’

‘*Ma‘andush logha*’ has become a common expression in contemporary Cairo. “He doesn’t have a language” is the literal translation, evoking associations of muteness and inability to communicate. It means that the person in question does not speak any language but Arabic, or, more specifically, does not speak English. But it often implies much more. He will not be able to cope in present-day Cairo, or, he can forget about his chances for a proper job. In her study of lower-middle class graduates in Cairo’s labor market, Barsoum quotes a young female graduate as saying “if you do not know English, it is as if you do not know how to read and write” (1999:62). The ‘possession’ of foreign languages, particularly English, has come to denote a major split within society. It divides the educated middle class between those ‘with’ and those ‘without’ language; between those who attended *madaris loghaat*, language schools, can look forward to working in the upper segments of the labor market, and are generally born and bred in the ‘better’ families, and those who are none of these things, *illi ma‘anduhumsh logha* [who do not have a language].

Throughout the twentieth century, knowledge of foreign languages has been a sign of distinction, indicating high social status and origins. Previously, elite repertoires focused on France and all things French. In the first half of the twentieth century, some elite families spoke French as their mother tongue. Upper class women were often educated in French Catholic schools, while men either enrolled in French or English language education (Baraka 1998). The choice of foreign languages in upper and upper-middle class families did and still does show a gendered division of labor with respect to linguistic capital (Abécassis et al 1997). French has long been seen as the language of culture and sophistication, particularly suited for the education of sophisticated wives and mothers. Though English has become

the uncontested language of work and socializing in upper-middle class circles in the course of the 1990s, many still consider a French education the most appropriate training for girls.

Everyday conversations in a wider middle class are still heavily inflected with French words—with Egyptian pronunciations and conjugations—that indicate sophistication and class. *Plage* is used for beach instead of the Arabic *shatt*; *merci* and *coiffeur* have become part of the Egyptian dialect. Whereas some French loanwords have become commonplace in wide sections of society, other words are specific to middle or upper-middle class circles and function as indicators of such class membership. In many middle class circles one addresses aunts and uncles, and, more generally, relatives and acquaintances of an older generation with *oncle* and *tante*. In lower-middle class circles one uses the Arabic *ummi* and *abuuya* [my mother, father] to speak of one's parents. In upper-middle class circles, this is generally seen as unforgivably lower class and crude. Here, one uses the Arabic conjugations of *mama* and *papa*: *mamti* and *babaaya*.

While the currency of French loanwords signals past elite orientations, English has increasingly become the dominant language of distinction in everyday life (*cf.* Amin 1999: 21-2). English has become pervasive in Cairo. State television includes an English language channel, which broadcasts in French in the slow daytime slot. English language radio stations and a large number of English language magazines cater to those with a modicum of knowledge of the language. That English also signifies modernity and sophistication to many Cairenes 'without a language' is indicated by its iconic visual presence in Cairo's urban landscape. English shop names are ubiquitous and signs often boast names written in Latin script. That they are frequently misspelled does not diminish their apparent effectiveness as indicators of modernity and sophistication.

In 2002 an upper-middle class professional started a discussion on the (English language) SaharaSafaris email list about the dominance of English during group outings. He wrote:

I noticed that most of the people on this trip spoke English more than they spoke Arabic. To be honest, I find this shameful. It's not that I do not say a single word of English when I speak, but I feel really ashamed that I do so. I mean we are—after all—Egyptians and should be proud of our mother tongue. We seem to be proud to say loudly that we do not read Arabic books. It's like we are saying it's way below our social level to read in such a common language and that we should differentiate ourselves from the rest of the Egyptian society.

Other contributions to the online-discussion on the SaharaSafaris list similarly urged their audience to retain and use Arabic, and to resist the onslaught of English, even though one contributor pragmatically noted that the use of English in daily communication had simply

become a fact of life. One contribution stood out on account of its elaborate discussion of the relation between language, identity and class. The author argued that the knowledge of Arabic and European languages enables people like the members of SaharaSafaris to play a pivotal role. Being Egyptian and speaking Arabic, they are endowed with the virtues of the Egyptian heritage: “charity, respect, honor, generosity.” Yet they are also conversant with foreign, i.e., European languages and cultures and therefore know the positive qualities of these ‘other cultures,’ “professionalism, hard work, punctuality,” and can therefore combine the ‘cultural blessings’ of both. The author situates herself and her upper-middle class audience as a possible vanguard that appreciates its cultural heritage yet is open to the accomplishments and virtues of the West. Her comments resonate with the modernist narratives, discussed earlier.

Notwithstanding this public debate on the importance of language with respect to national identity, not knowing ‘Arabic’ was mostly taken to be a fact of life within my upper-middle class circles. As Haeri (1997) argues, not knowing ‘Arabic’ is a common trope in Cairo’s upper-middle class.⁹ It means having a limited knowledge of *fusha*, classical and written Arabic, rather than *‘ammiyya*, the common spoken language in Egypt. Such limited mastery of *fusha* significantly entails a lack of familiarity with written Arabic.¹⁰ In a reaction to Haeri’s article, Hamel argues that this eagerly avowed lack of knowledge of classical Arabic can be seen as a procedure “for reproducing their own symbolic capital and reinforcing a dominant language ideology which produces a kind of ‘declassement’ of the official language. Investing in one’s linguistic capital...implies both imposing distinct discursive practices and reproducing the attitudes which assign a high value to them in the market” (Hamel 1998:354).

Speaking a mix of colloquial Arabic and English has become part of a distinctive upper-middle class normalcy.¹¹ Haeri rightly notes that in Cairo’s segmented labor market, upper- and upper-middle class occupations generally require bi- or multilingualism, rather than excellent knowledge of *fusha* (1997:800). Amin concurs: “multinational firms naturally show a preference for employing those who can express themselves well in a European language and this gives a premium to these languages over Arabic...[T]he national language comes gradually to be looked down upon, together with things or persons that are in one way or another associated with it, whether teachers, schools or consumer goods” (1999: 21). Fluency in English has become the mark of a certain kind of professional: one raised in language schools who works and socializes in upper-middle class environments in which a mix of Arabic and English is the norm. ‘To have a language’ has become a sign of inclusion into specific upper-middle class circles, as well as distance from less privileged Cairene realities.

English functions as a sign of distinction not only between those ‘with’ and ‘without

a language,' but also between those with a differential command of English. One evening Maha invited me to come along on an outing. Most people had arrived already, but we were still waiting for Hisham, another friend of Maha's. Hisham made a dashing entrance with a charming narrative performance in English that centered on his reasons for being late. As soon as Hisham had greeted us, one of the other men started bombarding him with questions in an unusually aggressive way. Hassan interrogated Hisham about his life story and the origins of his language skills. Hisham was indeed surprisingly fluent in English, even for this multilingual milieu. He spoke not the lingua franca English with the usual Egyptian tongue, but an English that seemed to belong to a native speaker. His choice to speak English, instead of resorting to a mix of English and Arabic, was also unusual. "Where did you learn to speak that way," Hassan asked him in a commanding tone.

I was surprised by Hassan's aggressive attitude. His attack on Hisham transgressed the rules of polite and cheerful conversation common in such upper-middle class circles. On previous meetings, Hassan, a professional in his late thirties with a highly lucrative job in the private sector, had always performed the role of the chaperone and generous gentleman. It seemed strange that he would feel the need to act so aggressively towards Hisham, who was at least ten years younger and, in that sense, no match for Hassan. Maha later told me how upset she was. She said she knew that some people thought Hisham was somewhat showy, but said that he was really a very kind, friendly and devout person. She did not understand why Hassan had reacted so aggressively to him and had so crassly broken the common rules of friendly social interaction.

Whatever the precise reasons for his aggressive questioning, it significantly focused on the origins of Hisham's English. Language skills and use are an important form of social distinction. Fluency in a particular English is commonly taken to be a sure indicator of a high social and cultural level, and of elite origins. Hassan's questioning soon reduced Hisham to the manageable level of a 'boy' who had merely acquired his seemingly superior language skills in a British school in one of the Gulf-states. The evening could continue as normal, and Hassan returned to being his amiable self.

The hybrid vernacular of Arabic and English common in upper-middle class circles seems comparable to the 'Hinglish' spoken by their Indian counterparts (Fernandes 2000a). Like the colloquial mix of Arabic and English, 'Hinglish' involves the use of English words, short phrases within Hindi sentences and conversations. It might also entail longer shifts between Hindi and English (*ibid.*). That such similarities exist is striking in light of the radically different local histories of English. While English had been introduced during Egypt's relatively short colonial period, it did not attain the dominance or establish itself as a national language as it did in India. Even though English is taught in all schools, a fair degree of mastery of the language is largely limited to those who have attended private schools.

The ubiquitous presence of English among upper-middle class Cairenes and in Cairo's upscale spaces bears testimony to the extent of the transformations brought about by Egypt's economic and political reorientation. A certain command of English is one the clearest components of the cosmopolitan capital that is crucial with respect to up-market jobs. English has become the provenance of a relatively privileged segment of urban society and functions as a main marker of new lines of division and distinction.

Fernandes argues that "the scope of this particular form of hybridity in the formation of 'Hinglish'...transforms it from a cross-class to a specifically middle class phenomenon"(2000a:621). In Cairo, English has never been a cross-class phenomenon. The contemporary vernacular of English-Arabic is therefore likely to be even more class-specific than the Hinglish discussed by Fernandes. It is moreover largely particular to younger generations. Language schools have educated a generation drawn from more diverse social origins than the upper class, thus giving rise to a relatively broad stratum that is fluent in English and uses a class-specific mix of English and Arabic in work and leisure. Divisions based on language skills tend to reflect a number of other divisions: whether one is familiar with and connected to the significant outside, eligible for up-market jobs, or a consumer in up-market venues.

In light of the class-based character of multilingualism, Fernandes rightly criticizes overtly celebrative readings of the subversive potential of hybridity. She argues that such assumptions "[do] not interrogate the ideological and material conditions that constitute the production of conceptions of hybridity...[H]ybridity in contemporary urban India is inextricably linked to the class-based cosmopolitanism of the urban middle classes" (Fernandes 2000a:622).¹² Though I do not want to discount the creative and imaginative potential precipitated by the increased salience of different cultural global flows (Appadurai 1990), it is important to interrogate the ways in which these different flows interact with local hierarchies, and come to constitute local forms of privileged capital and social distinction. As David Morley argues, "each form of 'cultural mixing' or hybridity...will be inscribed in its own specific geography of power" (2001:442). In Cairo, the ability to mix and blend likewise depends on being familiar and comfortable with *barra*, a First World abroad that is predominantly figured as the West (see Chapter Four). Such familiarity and access is largely exclusive to young Cairenes from affluent backgrounds that have followed upper-middle class educational and professional trajectories.

In the first years of the twenty-first century, Cairo has seen a boom of English-language magazines directed at an Egyptian audience. The emergence of magazines that target an all-Egyptian audience in English is one the clearest expression of the existence of a segment of the population that identifies itself with and through English. *Campus Magazine: The Voice of Our Generation* was founded in 2001 by a young Egyptian who wanted to create a magazine

for young people in an “edgy language.” *Campus* and a newer publication, *The Paper*, target young upper-middle to upper class Cairenes, whom they dub ‘The New Generation.’ As *Campus*’ senior editor explained in an interview, *Campus*’ target public consists of young Egyptian professionals between 18 and 35 who are fluent in English, well educated and travel, “mainly AUC-ians [students or graduates from the American University in Cairo] and people who have been living abroad.” The editors of both magazines explained that one has to use English to attract such people, “who would never read anything in Arabic.” As the editors of *The Paper* emphasized, “If you have the choice between *Cleo* [an English-language lifestyle magazine] and *Kalaam in-Nas* [an Arabic-language equivalent], you would read *Cleo* first. It’s easier and it just has more prestige and class.”

Both magazines portray their public—intermittently defined as the A and B-classes, those educated in elite institutions or abroad, people who have traveled, the coffee shop public—as the future leaders of the country.¹³ The magazines however decry their public’s ignorance and complacency towards the country’s troubles. The editors of both publications said that they wanted to wake this ‘new generation’ up from its complacency, and encourage it to think about its societal role. The editors of *The Paper*, for example, said, “we are trying to get our readers to think and acquire general knowledge. The problem is that Egyptians do not read.” And later, “our generation is going to take over, and we have all these new things in the country. These changes should be accompanied by new mentalities.” The senior editor of *Campus Magazine* similarly expressed a wish to create awareness among the future leaders of the country. The magazine playfully teases its audience with its presumed ignorance. In its rubric ‘Campus Spy’ the magazine “sets out to test the general knowledge of our affluent Egyptian youth, the future of our country, with questions about geography and figures of recent Egyptian history,” with the expected hilarious results.

The editor said that *Campus* has also reached less affluent Egyptian youths from Shobra (an old (lower) middle class area) and students of Ain Shams University who consider the publication “cool.” She argued that “they try to read our magazine because they want to better themselves. It gives them the opportunity to interact with us *in an indirect way* and learn from us” (my emphasis).

Campus Magazine is distributed free of charge in a large number of upscale venues in upper-middle class areas: up-market coffee shops, clothing, book and gift stores, and gyms.¹⁴ *The Paper* is similarly distributed free of charge in some Cairene coffee shops. These distribution networks indicate the intimate connection between ‘the new generation’ targeted by these magazines, and Cairo’s upscale geographies.

When I brought up the subject of English with the editors of *The Paper*, they immediately mentioned that they were aware of their language mistakes. “But,” they added, “we never wanted to become like the *Ahram Weekly*. We speak to people who are not native speakers.”¹⁵ Though written in English, *Campus Magazine*’s frequent use of Egyptian slang similarly

locates the publication in upper (middle) class Cairo. English has become the thoroughly local, distinctive language of this relatively affluent segment of urban society.

Upper-middle class contestations

New lines of segmentation in education and, as I discuss in the next chapter, in the labor market reconfigure older configurations of social stratification. While *Campus Magazine* and *The Paper* address ‘a new generation’ and processes of segmentation emphasize divisions between those with and those without cosmopolitan capital, older hierarchies and distinctions remain central to contestations over class membership. In my upper-middle class circles I regularly heard comments about the invasion of specific venues by *nouveaux riches*, which was taken to have lowered their ‘level.’ A friend regularly claimed that persons of whom she disapproved were likely from *nouveaux riches* backgrounds. The educational strategies of newly affluent families regularly became the subject of scorn in older middle class families.

As I noted earlier, the figure of the *nouveau riche* has provided a major focus for contestations over true class membership. The term *nouveau riche* (in upper-middle class circles the French term is mostly used, rather than the Arabic *il-aghniyya ig-gudaad*) gained currency after the *infitaah*-policies of the mid-1970s and 1980s. When ‘lower’ strata gained wealth and indulged in conspicuous consumption, old values of civilization and educational achievement seemed to be dwarfed by money. More established middle and upper class families felt out competed by these new elites. Their dismay focused on the unsophisticated and showy ways of these newly rich families.¹⁶

The *nouveau riche* was a prime character of the cinematic imagination of the 1980s. Walter Armbrust argues that the figure of the *nouveau riche* has had several lives in Egyptian history (1999:119). Armbrust notes the similarities between earlier critiques of the war profiteer and negative portrayals of his more recent counterpart, the *infitaah nouveau riche*. Though the character of the *nouveau riche* seems to have lost some of the salience it had in the cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, *nouveaux riches* still appear with frequency in popular television serials (see Abu-Lughod 2005:203, Armbrust 1996). During Ramadan 2002, the popular serial ‘Ayna Qalbi?’ (Where is my heart?) featured the stories of two Cairene families, one of a decent middle class background, struggling to keep up a middle class life standard after the husband died, the other, a new rich family whose wealth had been gained through betrayal. The *nouveau riche* family did not have any ‘culture,’ as one would say in Egypt, and family life was dominated by constant bickering. The only daughter regularly sneaked out on dates with her boyfriend and bullied her father into keeping quiet since she in turn knew about his extramarital affairs. The father was dressed in colorful mismatched suits and routinely used *sha‘bi*—i.e., ‘lower class’—language.¹⁷ This serial revisited the

well-known battle between the beleaguered values of education and refinement and the monetary violence and cultural destructiveness of the *nouveaux riches*.

The professional upper-middle class is drawn from diverse origins, among others from families that would be considered *nouveaux riches*. Yet within my upper-middle class circles, the allegedly obvious contrast between vulgarity of *nouveaux riches* and the sophistication of good families hardly seemed to hold true. I found it almost impossible to distinguish the *nouveaux riches* from those of ‘good’ family backgrounds without specifically knowing their family histories. Mona Abaza argues that references to the *nouveaux riches* have become “a floating category” (2001b:117). Among young professionals, they indeed seemed to serve mainly as internal class critiques. Depreciating references to the *nouveaux riches* continued to rehearse long-standing lines of social stratification and distinction and reiterate some of the central tenets of the Egyptian modernism discussed earlier. At the same time, the combination of a comfortable family situation and private school attendance seems to have contributed to the relatively homogeneous acquisition of upper-middle class cultural capital, particularly of the cosmopolitan capital and lifestyles that provide access to up-market Cairo.

Cosmopolitan cultural capital like fluency in foreign languages and familiarity with cosmopolitan codes has come to signify upper-middle class belonging. Such privileged capital is often assumed to imply good family backgrounds, which in the eyes of many remain crucial to ‘real’ class membership. These assumed correspondences allow those with excellent mastery of upper-middle class codes to claim such social belonging, even in the absence of concomitant family backgrounds.

On a SaharaSafaris trip I was struck by the presence of a man in his early thirties. Tareq was tall and fair skinned. While he spoke a British English that was largely free of the common Egyptian accent, he was also well versed in light-hearted Egyptian Arabic. He controlled gatherings with his well-placed jokes in this informal and playful language. His appearance seemed to radiate self-confidence. Among the most important qualities that lent such power to his appearance were his confident manner and his facile integration of Egyptian high-class and foreign repertoires. His light skin could indicate Turkish descent, which would signal a long membership in Egypt’s absolute elite or, equally prestigious, a Western lineage.

Nihal was among the women charmed by Tareq’s rather formidable presence. She had started seeing Tareq on a regular basis after returning to Cairo, but their relationship turned out to be ill fated. She told me that many of the details of Tareq’s life were not as glamorous as they seemed. He was not such an *ibn naas* [son of a good family] as we had imagined, she reported gloatingly. She found out that his family did not live in a prestigious area, but in a mixed middle class neighborhood. Tareq told her that he had always paid his own

way through life, in contrast to most upper-middle class professionals. Even though he was now finishing a higher degree at a foreign private institute, he had graduated from a public university.

Nihal said that Tareq always took care to dress in distinctive ways, to have an impressive car and the latest laptop, even if he could not afford these symbols of prestige. He would tell her that appearance was all-important. His immaculate command of up-market repertoires, appearance, dress, attitudes and language were crucial to his highly successful performance. Nihal surmised that he wanted to prove himself. He was a self-made man but did his utmost to hide it. Nihal argued that there were many men like him, ambitious social climbers from modest middle class backgrounds who pretend to be otherwise.

Over the course of a year, Nihal kept me informed of new developments in Tareq's life. She eventually saw her misgivings about him confirmed when Tareq married a 'typical *muhaggaba*' after a short engagement period. His marriage to a young woman with all the qualities of the ideal upper-middle class housewife symbolized the shallowness of his progressive performance and his interest in her as a professional woman. Marriage showed where his real roots lay, she concluded.

For all intents and purposes, Tareq actually did present an upper-middle class ideal: employed in a multinational, fluent in both local and global repertoires, hard working, with male prowess, yet a real gentleman. He successfully implied that he was from an elite background by the self-confident way he carried himself. Yet, Nihal charged that Tareq bluffed to hide his more modest, yet 'respectable' middle class background. In the end, his 'true' background showed itself in his partner choice: he was not the enlightened elite person that he pretended to be, but merely one of the many outwardly progressive but in truth conservative male professionals who think it well to go out with and engage in intimate relationships with their female colleagues and friends, but eventually choose to marry a prototypical housewife. Tareq's class act included ease and comfort in mixed-gender sociability, progressive attitude towards gender roles and imperatives of feminine modesty and chastity. However, in Nihal's eyes, his 'traditional' marriage showed his true, more modest, belonging.

Nihal's analysis of Tareq's 'class act' seems rather well researched. It exposes some of the logics of distinction in upper-middle class circles. Appearance and language skills are generally taken to be sure indicators of social level and concomitant family background. Successful presentations of the self play on these indicators, as not only Tareq's, but also Hisham's story illustrates. Tareq's presentation of a high-class self and Nihal's analysis of his strategies moreover highlight the continued importance of family background as the ultimate arbiter of true class membership.¹⁸ Such family backgrounds are often taken to imply a certain level of sophistication and a true adherence to cosmopolitan, i.e., 'progressive' attitudes with respect to gender.

Nihal's story about Tareq illustrates the complex politics of class membership in upper-

middle class circles. It shows the efficacy of cultural capital as a mode of distinction and sign of a certain class belonging, but also highlights the fragility of such claims to class membership, as family background remains an important measure of the validity of such claims.

Investments

This chapter has examined a moment in a longer process of shifting social, economic and cultural hierarchies, in which old and new divisions and distinctions merge in uncertain ways. While many Cairenes complain that “it is only money that matters these days,” new forms of cultural capital have become highly effective in the creation and suggestion of difference. Much of this cultural capital could be termed cosmopolitan capital, since it entails familiarity with, and mastery of Western cultural codes, as well as local cosmopolitan ones. Language is one of the clearest signs of the efficacy of this new kind of cultural capital, not only in the labor market, but also in the distinctive lifestyles and transnational aspirations and belonging that pervade Cairo’s upper-middle class. This is most clearly illustrated by the emergence of magazines that address their Egyptian public in English.

Private language schools are important sites for the acquisition of such formal and informal cultural capital. The nominally free public education system, emblematic of the Nasserite developmentalist project, still turns out large numbers of graduates, but a majority of its graduates find that their diplomas have lost much of their value. The rise of a dual educational system since the 1970s has significantly contributed to divisions among Cairo’s graduates, which, as I discuss in the following chapter, map unto a highly segmented labor market.

The realm of education shows the multiple refractions of ‘the private’ after three decades of gradual liberalization combined with an ongoing erosion of public facilities and services. Privatization manifests itself in inexpensive, but low quality private schools that offer a meager alternative for the increasingly notorious public schools. These schools are often ‘investment opportunities’ that target a large, but impoverished lower-middle class. At the other end of the spectrum, ‘the private’ comes back in the form of the conspicuous consumption of foreign diplomas in well-equipped new schools with swimming pools that are located next to luxurious compounds along the highways in the desert. Privatization also rules within educational institutions, where the market for private lessons flourishes and almost anything seems to be for sale. The field of education seems to be one of the few sectors for profitable investments in economically slack times, given that it feeds on the hopes and fears of Cairene families.

In the context of her discussion of adult literacy classes in rural upper-Egypt, Lila Abu-Lughod notes that given the dismal quality of public schools and the high unemployment

rates among graduates, “the question that needs to be asked is whether...all the efforts toward schooling are actually worth it” (2005:70). She however points out that few rural families asked themselves these questions, given the scarcity of land and the continued, if meager benefits of a degree in the formal labor market. Moreover, education still garners respect and remains central to the ‘national pedagogy’ expressed in the media and government curricula (Abu-Lughod 2005). The competition for qualifications and jobs in middle class Cairo has the feel of a rat race with everyone scampering for limited opportunities for good futures. This widely shared structure of feeling might turn out to be more accurate than optimistic neoliberal assumptions about the benefits of human resources in the competition for a share in the global market.

This rat race fuels ever-greater investments in private schools and tutoring. While these investments have unsure returns, for many families they present the only option in light of Egypt’s foreseeable future. These investments signal an acknowledgment of the intricate connections between a dual school system and a segmented labor market. They speak of lines of relative nobility that keep moving up. They also express a stubborn insistence on being middle class. It is an insistence on a life free from the dust, an old promise that few can or want to forget.

¹ In recent years their ordeal has been lengthened as the central exams have been spread over the last two years of high school. The Egyptian system provides six years basic education [*ibtidaa 'iyya*], followed by three years preparatory education [*'daadiyya*]. Each educational phase is concluded by a general exam that determines access to the next level. Those with lower scores at their preparatory exams are assigned to vocational secondary education, those with high scores can continue general secondary education [*thanawiyya 'amma*], which, again depending on the scores at the concluding general exam, gives access to university (cf. UNDP 1999).

² A law stipulating this employment guarantee for university graduates was promulgated in 1961, a second law in 1964 extended this right to holders of degrees of higher institutes and secondary technical education. This right has been effectively abrogated through a gradual increase in the waiting period for a guaranteed job, from ten months in 1982 to five or six years in 1987 and thirteen years in 1995 (Tourné 2003:22ff).

³ According to official figures, which tend to overstate actual school attendance, overall enrolment in basic and secondary education was 42% in 1960 (women only: 32.1%); in 2000/2001 it had risen to 86% (women only: 83%) (UNDP 2003:125). The enrolment in higher education (universities and higher institutes) went up from 6.9% of those between 17 and 22 in 1970 to 20.2% in 1996 (Galal 2002:2).

⁴ The specific arrangements of the classes depend on the financial circumstances of the pupils, and range from government sanctioned additional classes for little money to private lessons in groups and individual home visits by teachers. Prices vary according to the 'social level' of the school and its pupils, the qualification of the teacher and the perceived importance of the subject he or she teaches.

⁵ Sixty-six percent of the private schools were located in Greater Cairo (taken here to be Cairo governorate and urban Giza) versus merely 28.5% of the public schools (calculated from Ministry of Education statistics).

⁶ Until the mid 1990s Egypt had only one private university, the American University in Cairo (AUC). Even though talk about allowing private universities to operate in Egypt had been prominent since the late 1970s, the establishment of private universities long remained a touchy political issue (Waterbury 1983:241). However, this 'affront' to Nasserite educational and developmental philosophy was ratified in the mid-1990s. In 1996 four new private universities were authorized. In 2003 a French and a German university opened their doors. These private universities are all located on the outskirts of Cairo.

⁷ I employ Bourdieu's notion of different forms of capital to disaggregate social hierarchies and sources of privilege and power. I explore the ways in which different forms of capital combine in the constitution of divisions within the middle class. Bourdieu distinguishes three 'guises' of capital: "*economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalised in the form of property rights;...*cultural capital*, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of educational qualifications; and...*social capital*, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalised in the form of a title of nobility" (1986:243).

⁸ In 1997, 58 foreign tourists and four Egyptian policemen were killed in an Islamist attack at a Pharaonic site in Luxor.

⁹ Haeri notes that "such speakers often comment on how 'bad' their 'Arabic' is and describe their knowledge of it as quite limited because of the kind of education they received" (1997:799).

¹⁰ Such statements are made within an Arabic language context and denote relative, rather than absolute unfamiliarity with *fusha*. The actual extent of this unfamiliarity seems to differ considerably among these professionals. Where some have trouble reading or writing Arabic, others are actually quite comfortable in written Arabic.

¹¹ Professionals who had been educated in French or German commonly used the same mix of Arabic and English, except when all persons present had followed similar educational trajectories. In these settings they could indulge in the French-Arabic or German-Arabic pidgins of their school days.

¹² For a similar critique, see Friedman (2003).

¹³ A number of upper-middle class professionals used 'A- and B-classes' to talk about class in Egypt. These terms derive from marketing terminology. O'Daugherty similarly notes that middle class Brazilians use these terms to talk about class (2002:97). The use of such terms indicates familiarity with marketing discourses and the growing importance of these discourses for imaginations of society. It signals the extent to which income differences and the related ability to consume are seen as distinguishing characteristics within Cairo's upper-middle class. Such comparisons appeared to be limited to more affluent sections. Only A- and B -classes were mentioned, which both fall within the upper-middle class qua income and ability to consume. Those who used the terminology seemed to employ 'A-class' primarily for those who can engage in lavish cosmopolitan consumption, for example, frequent travel abroad.

¹⁴ While distribution was initially restricted to Cairo, since 2003 the magazine has also been distributed in a small number of locations in Alexandria. *Campus Magazine* is entirely paid for by numerous advertisements of companies that are clearly interested in targeting this apparently lucrative market segment.

¹⁵ *Al-Ahram Weekly* is the weekly English language publication of the state-owned Al-Ahram media corporation, which also produces Cairo's most widely read daily newspaper. The *Weekly* is generally written in a rather quaint and complex English.

¹⁶ E. Anne Beal discusses contestations among Jordanian elites with 'old' and 'new' money. These contestations were similarly fueled by the opening up of possibilities for labor migration to the Gulf states and domestically by the increased leverage for new commercial or industrial enterprises. Beal argues that these contestations were primarily couched in terms of a contrast between the 'restrained' lifestyles of the older elites and more conspicuous consumption of those with 'new money' (Beal 2000). In Egypt, such contestations similarly focus not so much on affluence per se (though the sources of wealth of the nouveaux riches are often discredited), but on the way one spends one's disposable income. However, education and social origins were also important points of contestation, reflecting the continued importance not only of Egyptian modernist ideas about the importance of advancement through education, but also of family backgrounds and histories as markers of true class membership.

¹⁷ The family was financially dependent on the mother, played by the lead actress Yousra, who toiled for a minimal wage as a governmental building inspector. Yet, its apartment and lifestyle expressed upper-middle class affluence. In one of the early episodes, the son asked his mother: "mama, will we ever have a villa in Marina?" This is hardly a question a struggling middle class family can ask itself. Marina is one of the most exclusive resorts along the North Coast, where property ownership is restricted to the most affluent members of society. This portrayal of a suffering middle class family was clearly far removed from everyday realities. This euphemistic portrayal of actual middle class life standards is part of the wider set of common media practices discussed in Chapter One, which portray a seductively clean and affluent Cairo/Egypt.

¹⁸ The centrality of family background is expressed in many of the commonly used terms to identify and classify persons, centrally among them 'the big family' and *awlaad naas* [children of good families]. Aristocratic hierarchies still linger on in the references to big families and their aristocratic titles. Even though aristocratic titles were abolished after 1952, it remains important to be able to claim a *bey* or *basha* in the family.



Figure 10: Website Future Generation Foundation

<http://www.fgf-egypt.com/> (accessed 23-5-2003)

3

The Logics of Reform

Stories of the labor market

I had met many young men and women who recounted their hardships in the labor market, heard numerous stories about the difficulties of finding even half-way decent jobs, and had sat with groups of youth in sidewalk cafes who seemed to have nothing else to do with their lives. Yet, it was a two-hour meeting with five young men in February 2003 that left an indelible impression on me.

I had asked a lower-middle class friend of mine to arrange an interview with some other graduates who were struggling with the harsh realities of Cairo's labor market. He contacted Ahmed, the law graduate whose narratives figured in the Introduction. At the time Ahmed worked long hours in a small law firm for the meager sum of 250 LE a month. On the day of the interview Ahmed turned up with four other young men, friends from the days they were students at the Faculty of Commerce at Ain Shams University. The young men in their mid-twenties looked very proper, dressed in an unmistakably lower-middle class style of casual dress one might expect to see on young accountants. With the exception of Ahmed, the lawyer, they had graduated six months earlier and were presently unemployed. Though Ahmed often took the lead in the discussion, the contribution of one of his friends most evocatively expressed their shared predicament. "I was an excellent student and look at me now," he said again and again, pulling at his jersey. "I simply want to be able to buy a new sweater."

The discussion soon became emotionally charged. The five of them were by and large in full agreement. One could speak for the others about their experiences in the labor market, the feeling of being cheated out of a promised fate, the despair mixed with cynical notes about their lives, the government and the shady practices of people they encountered in their search for a decent living, from the boss in a small copy shop to the tycoons who fled the country, leaving behind huge unpaid debts. Their stories and words come back throughout this chapter, vocally representing the feelings and experiences of numerous young unemployed university graduates.

After we finished our meeting they showered me with questions about the possibilities of working in Europe. They all wanted to go away, if only they could get the chance to do so. Yet they did not seem to have the faintest idea what to expect or how to go about it. Except for Ahmed, I did not get the chance to meet these young men again. When I tried to arrange another meeting, Ahmed told me they had all taken on small jobs, once more working twelve hours a day for a pittance. Ahmed himself was still working at the small lawyers' office, making long hours as before.

In this chapter I explore Cairo's segmented labor market. I first examine some of the dilemmas of the less privileged graduates who are largely excluded from the domain of up-market companies and likely to become the target of reform programs. Acquiring the cosmopolitan capital that seems so crucial with respect to up-market jobs has become a common pursuit. Yet, the new divisions that reserve up-market jobs for a 'labor aristocracy' do not open up just because one is equipped with English or computer skills. Next I turn to the up-market segment in which this new labor aristocracy is employed. I argue that even this up-market segment of the urban economy has begun to show cracks.

Segmented fates

These young men, whom I call Ahmed's *shilla*, are part of a large cohort of young, unemployed graduates. As Karine Tourné (2003) notes, in the 1990s the ranks of the educated expanded, while diminished possibilities for labor migration and the return of labor migrants, as well as limited public sector hiring further decreased job opportunities that had already been insufficient for over two decades.¹ The swelling numbers of unemployed graduates captured the nation's imagination. These young unemployed graduates were unable to make the transition to adulthood, most notably married life. There were not enough affordable houses for newly married couples and no income to pay for the rent and provide for a family. These graduates, doubling as involuntary bachelors, were figured as a 'lost generation,' prone to vice and extremism (Tourné 2003).

Cairo's labor market also harbors other stories. Notwithstanding the rampant unemployment among university graduates, there is a segment of the urban economy that

offers decent and, at times, extravagant incomes. Certain professionals find work as managers or professionals in the up-market segment of the urban economy, which consists not only of multinationals, but also of large Egyptian corporations organized along the same lines as their multinational counterparts, for example, the large mobile phone companies and the commercial banks. It also includes agencies that provide business producer services to the former, NGOs with foreign funding and private establishments that provide professional services to an affluent clientele, for example, doctors in private clinics or architects (*cf.* Abdel Mo'ti 2002:324-30).

Saad Eddin Ibrahim already noted the beginnings of such segmentation in the early 1980s (1982:52-3; 1987:225). In the following decades it has become an organizing feature of the Egyptian labor market. It is difficult to delineate this up-market sector in terms of sector, company size or ownership. The up-market segment is comprised of companies in different sectors (though generally the 'global growth sectors' of ICT, consultancy, business producer services, development and the like), with local *and* foreign ownership. Lines of segmentation also run within companies and institutions, since most up-market companies also employ less privileged employees who provide all kinds of support services for the professional staff. The wages of these low-ranking employees are generally similar to or only slightly higher than wages outside up-market pockets. Even governmental institutions increasingly display such segmentation. What distinguishes up-market jobs is the kind of professional they are seen to require: professionals with cosmopolitan capitals and skills, as well as specific social backgrounds. Such privileged professionals can command concomitant wages. An educated guess would place the relative share of the upper-middle class around fifteen to twenty percent of Cairo's professional middle class, and some five to seven percent of all Cairenes.²

Whereas the oversupply of labor drives wages for educated personnel far below living wages, this segment functions according to rather different scales. Wages tend to be three to five times higher than those paid in formally similar occupations in other sectors of the formal economy, but the difference can go up to twenty times. A secretary in a small office would commonly earn around 250 LE, whereas an executive secretary in a large company might easily earn 2500 LE, just as an engineer in a small business would usually earn 500 to 1500 LE and an engineer in a multinational or local up-market construction company would expect to earn 5000 LE.³

In this chapter I sketch the everyday dilemmas faced by some recent university graduates of diverse social and educational backgrounds in the labor market. I explore their highly divergent experiences, as well as the different logics and arsenal of common sense they use when faced with the question of jobs and careers. These young professionals are perforce experts at market analysis and career planning. With high unemployment and an economic

landscape that is changing at a rapid pace, knowledge and connections can provide a vital edge. It is this knowledge, however partial and placed, that informs this chapter.

This chapter does not tell a full story. Such comprehensiveness is marred by a lack of detailed data on a macro level, as well as an immense diversity on the ground. I explore stories of experiences in the labor market and try to explicate what these different examples tell about the world with which one is confronted as a young university graduate in contemporary Cairo. I rely on the narratives of professionals who expect a secure career in a ‘good company’ and for whom government offices have become a distant and unattractive specter, as well as the stories of those professionals to whom such government jobs seem rather attractive in light of an confusingly and frustratingly insecure and unrewarding private sector. These stories paint a picture of the labor market that undoubtedly leaves out more subtle distinctions and continuities that defy otherwise clear lines of segmentation. They often seem rather fantastic, leaving the sense of wild, sensational happenings, a world of good and evil, of golden mountains and decay. Their hyperbolic quality reflects the narrated quality of ‘the labor market,’ which for many consists of a few personal experiences and many fantastic stories.

Remedial courses

“We’ve become professionals in taking courses. I’ve had enough; I want to work! But there is no work at all these days.” Fatma and Farida, both recent university graduates, were recounting their experiences in the labor market. Though they come from professional middle class backgrounds, they did not attend the private language schools that are crucial sites for the acquisition of not only the required fluency in foreign languages, but also the more elusive informal embodied cultural capital that signals belonging in Cairo’s upper-middle class. After taking a number of courses in ‘*ingiliizi wa computer*’ [English and computer], they felt they were still left with nothing, no work in sight, and a whole generation running, like them, to obtain the now ubiquitous English language and computer skills. “We need a revolution *ba’a*,” Fatma concluded, barely joking. They clearly did not see many chances for even halfway acceptable jobs at a time when the private sector had begun firing people, small companies went bankrupt or simply disappeared shortly after they were established, and even the government was no longer employing people, that is people without *wasta* [one who deploys influence on another’s behalf, i.e., connections (plural: *wasaaayit*)].

The importance and ubiquitous nature of *wasta* in all kinds of social dealings is often taken as a sign of the contemporary pervasiveness of *il-fasaad*, corruption. One needs connections to gain admittance to reputable schools, to get things done in the bureaucracy and for jobs in the government or the private sector. When one has a job, *wasta* remains crucial for promotions, bonuses and lucrative deals or even merely getting paid or retaining

one's position. Any kind of job requires *wasta* these days, Fatma and Farida argued. For want of such good connections, what you need most is *sabr*, endurance, they said. Their stories intimated what such *sabr* might mean: doggedness in the quest for a job and once found, resilience and resignation to endure the bad treatment, long working hours and low pay.

In order to improve their chances on the labor market and simply to keep busy and have a reason to leave the house, Fatma and Farida had been searching out courses offered by governmental and semi-governmental institutions, chief among them the courses organized under the umbrella of the Social Fund for Development, which was set up to provide a safety net for those who would be negatively affected by Egypt's structural adjustment policies (Assaad and Rouchdy 1999:45ff., Elyachar 2002). The Social Fund offers vocational conversion courses for unemployed university graduates. These courses mainly target graduates whose degrees have little currency in the labor market, for example, literature, business, social work and law, that is all but the most highly regarded and sought-after degrees in medicine, engineering, politics and economy, and pharmacy. The participants receive a small wage during the three-month study period. As Ahmed scathingly remarked, these courses are actually referred to as job opportunities to give the impression that the government is successfully tackling high unemployment. I heard stories of people going from course to course—accountancy, photography, raising rabbits—as an alternative to a job. After completing a course, participants can apply for a loan to start a small project.

Beside this range of governmental courses, there are the apparently high quality courses offered by the Future Generation Foundation chaired by Gamal Mubarak, the president's son and a strong proponent of further economic liberalization and participation in the global market. 'Gamal' has become a strong political force in his own right, and has significantly tightened his grip on government policies in the course of 2003 and 2004.⁴ Despite President Mubarak's insistent denials, Cairo has been rife with speculation about Gamal's position as the heir-apparent to the presidency.

The Future Generation course for recent graduates, which teaches English language, computer and presentation skills, is meant to bring the future generations up to speed with the global economy. "Working for a better tomorrow," it says on the website (see Figure 10). "They have nice goals, but who can indeed find a job with these courses," asked Fatma with a sigh. According to her, the major problem was the scarcity of jobs, particularly those sought-after jobs in multinationals or large local companies where one would use these newly acquired skills.

'*Ingilizi wa computer*' are on the lips of hordes of unemployed graduates who look to these remedial courses for salvation, hoping to miraculously transform from one of the countless unemployed with heavily devalued diplomas to a fast moving, fancily clad professional like those advertised widely by the Future Generation commercial (see Chapter

One). The Future Generation optimistically echoes IMF and World Bank policies that suggest that, eventually, greater integration into the global market will bring improved living standards for everyone. According to its Mission Statement, the foundation will “contribute to Egypt’s economic growth and global competitiveness efforts” by “helping in upgrading local corporate culture. With a private sector driven economy, this will translate into greater fiscal well-being for the nation at large, a leading role in the regional economy, and a strong position on the global market.”⁵

As Fatma’s comments indicate, the question is whether its graduates can indeed find a job usefully employing their new skills, not to mention a job in a multinational or local up-market company. The labor market is not nearly as open and transparent as the Foundation’s program seems to suggest. The embodied distinctions and divisions that reflect old and new class configurations do not easily give way simply because a person is equipped with ample English language and computer skills. Ghada Barsoum (1999) similarly argues that job prospects are inextricably bound up with family background and education, and that the middle class has become divided between *awlaad naas*, children of good families, who can monopolize jobs in the up-market segments, and others who do not have the right kinds of capital even to apply for such jobs. Lines of relative nobility have already been drawn and are constantly being raised because of increased competition over a limited number of good positions.

Farida does not expect that she will be able to capture one of these prize jobs. The jobs she has had were all in small semi-formal private companies and invariably came with starting salaries in the range of 150 to 250 LE and, as she said, lack of any rights and “strange people.” Barsoum reports that for female graduates of less privileged backgrounds, informal work relations and small company size were among the main problems of work in the private sector. The common lack of recognition of their educational accomplishments and related social standing, as well as fears of sexual harassment in the small and informal offices were central issues for these female graduates (Barsoum 1999:83ff.). Farida says she has given up on the careers she used to imagine for herself. If she accepts a job at all, she only does so to be able to pay for another course. It is her way of ‘refusing social finitude’ (Bourdieu 1984:144, see below).

Entrepreneurial spirits

University graduates continue to capture the national imagination, albeit no longer as the admirable protagonists of an educated, developing nation. They are rather portrayed as a source of problems, frustrations and possible deviancy (Tourné 2003). This group, which most readily embodies the problems of the shift from the earlier Nasserite developmentalism to the contemporary neoliberal project, is targeted for reform. Instead of waiting for

the government to provide them with a job and a modicum of middle class life, young graduates are expected to turn to the private sector. According to official government policy, not the civil servant but the entrepreneur should be their role model (Tourné 2003:19). This emphasis on self-help and the incitement to become an entrepreneur have become common exhortations in countries where international organizations and governments try to rewrite previous social contracts.

In a move away from large-scale development projects that centered on the state, international organizations have increasingly begun to rely on NGOs as ‘partners in development.’ Shifting the site and agent of development accords well with neoliberal precepts that advocate “a diminution of the state and a disengagement from the terrain of economic activity” (Elyachar 2002:496, *cf.* Abdelrahman 2004a). Elyachar labels these programs “antidevelopment development packages,” since they are founded on a rejection of earlier development policies and are designed and marketed as the opposite of state-centered development. Accordingly, NGOs, which are presented as the representatives of the community and ‘civil society,’ become preferred partners, rather than the state, which is represented as anti-people (Elyachar 2002:495).

In the context of such anti-development philosophies, international organizations like the World Bank began hailing the informal sector, previously seen as the epitome of economic and cultural backwardness, as “the vanguard of entrepreneurial savvy in the global age” (Elyachar 2002:496). As Elyachar argues,

key aspects of the practices whereby vast sectors of the urban poor have traditionally sustained themselves had been abstracted and modeled into an antidevelopment development package in programs geared towards the informal economy.... Yesterday’s backward cultural practice becomes something to be admired and perhaps even taught to *recalcitrant downsized public sector workers and their children*. (2002:500, my emphasis)

Elyachar argues that the Egyptian government was quick to appropriate the mantra of micro-enterprise. “The Egyptian state [thereby] appropriated an agenda that had begun as a way to bypass and overcome the corrupt essence of the Third World state” (2002:502). Under the guidance and with the financial backing of international donors, a number of NGOs and semi-governmental bodies was established to offset some of the negative consequences of structural adjustment (Assaad and Rouchdy 1999, Elyachar 2002; 2003). The largest of them, the Social Fund for Development, is organized as a separate agency funded by foreign donors, yet the state has a strong say in its management and policies.

The Fund directs as much as half of its funds to training programs and loans for unemployed graduates who want to start up a business (Assaad and Rouchdy 1999:64-6). Such micro-credit programs were presented as a panacea for social problems. Egyptians,

particularly the socially significant army of unemployed graduates, are discouraged from sitting back and waiting for the government to help them. They are expected to take their lives into their own hands, using the start-up capital provided by one of the funds for a small project.

While no independent evaluation of the efficacy of Social Fund loans to young graduates-turned-entrepreneurs has taken place, Assaad and Rouchdy seriously doubt that these loans have indeed brought any significant sustained job growth, despite the Fund's claims of success. "Unemployed graduates who have no labor market or entrepreneurial experience are very unlikely candidates for success in a highly competitive small business sector," they argue (1999:86). The high rate of defaults on these loans is an ominous sign (*ibid.*).⁶ Ahmed said he had considered applying for a loan of a few thousand Egyptian Pounds, but found that he needed "half of the country to guarantee for me, while those people [referring to the business tycoons who defaulted on their loans] take three million and escape the country." At the time of the interview the scandal of the lost billions in loans to big businessmen had just reached another peak. Throughout the 1990s, the private sector had been 'stimulated' by huge loans to a small number of big businessmen. These loans were furnished by public banks, often without proper collateral. These two kinds of loans were part of the same program of structural adjustment: privatization and liberalization. The funds set up to provide a safety net for the onslaught of privatization in the labor market were supposed to furnish small loans to the lesser gods of capitalism (Elyachar 2002); the parallel massive loans to private capitalists were meant to boost the private sector. The latter, however, mainly resulted in a temporary construction boom of luxury housing and resorts, as well as a high rate of defaults (Mitchell 2002).

A new entrepreneurial mindset is meant to replace a supposedly deeply ingrained and increasingly pathologized Egyptian tendency to rely on the state (Tourné 2003). Whereas the prestige of state employment was part of a national development drive, the emphasis on entrepreneurship is part and parcel of Egypt's insecure and dependent integration into global circuits of capital and labor. Going beyond governmental and international development discourses, the twin-figures of the corrupt and loan-defaulting business tycoon and the graduate hazarding a business undertaking as a way out of unemployment and a lack of future perspectives might better capture everyday realities faced by un(der)employed graduates like Ahmed and Farida.

In 2002 a popular Ramadan television serial addressed the issue of loan-defaulting businessmen, and more generally, elite affluence and corruption. *Amira fii Abdin* (Amira in Abdin) told the story of a woman from a wealthy entrepreneurial family who is forced to leave her lavish villa with swimming pool after her husband and son-in-law flee the country with a large sum of money they had borrowed from public banks. Amira then returns to

her old apartment in Abdin, a *sha'bi* neighborhood in Cairo. While the police search for the escapees provides the backdrop, the serial focuses on Amira's rediscovery of the good character and community spirit of Abdin's *sha'bi* and lower-middle class inhabitants. In line with euphemistic portrayals of Cairene realities, Abdin appears as a sober, yet clean and comfortable place, and the apartments in Amira's building are spacious, well maintained and stylish.

While the serial addressed the burning issue of corruption of businessmen and their abuse of public funds, it focused on Amira's life after her 'return' to Abdin. The serial narrated the redemption of the leading upper class character by her rapprochement with the less affluent, yet morally untainted and authentic Egyptian salt-of-the earth. As Lila Abu-Lughod argues, many television serials feature the *ibn il-balad* [son of the country] who typically lives in one of Cairo's old lower class quarters. This character embodies Egyptian authenticity at a time when national identity seems threatened by 'globalization' and an equally transnational Islamism (2005:151-3). The serial could be read as a story of national healing, re-establishing the Egyptian modernist pact between the classes that has long been a central tenet of Egyptian modernist discourse (see Chapter Two). It attempts to re-integrate a wealthy entrepreneurial elite that has been tainted by numerous scandals into the class-divided yet united nation. It however significantly avoids addressing the larger underlying issue of socio-economic disparity in Egypt's new liberal age.

Lila Abu-Lughod argues that Egyptian serials have increasingly appropriated the lavish, glitzy aesthetics of American soap operas like *Falcon Crest* and *The Bold and the Beautiful*, which were shown on Egyptian television in the 1980s and early 1990s. Similarly, in advertising and music videos, media genres that are not tied into Egypt's national pedagogy, upper class lifestyles increasingly come to constitute not merely ideals, but normalized standards. Abu-Lughod sees the adoption of lavish sets and the glitzy portrayals of affluent lifestyles as an aesthetic counterpart to Egypt's new political-economic realities (Abu-Lughod 2005:206-7). She argues that these lavish portrayals were generally framed in a larger storyline that associated wealth with (moral) corruption, rehearsing earlier denunciations of the *nouveaux riches* (see Chapter Two). She, however, detects "a loosening of the clear moralism in some glitzy serials of the late 1990s in which the message about the immorality of money is totally overwhelmed by the tempting displays of consumption and undermined by the fact that the bad characters are never truly punished" (2005:209). A leftist friend argued that the Egyptian media display a more comprehensive trend toward rehabilitation of the vilified figure of the big businessman. He may very well be right.

Back to the dust

“If the government passes you by, grovel in its dust,” goes a well-worn Egyptian saying.⁷ A government job, however base, is better than any other job. Government jobs have long promised a secure and relatively comfortable life. While a government job was a right for those with an intermediate and higher education during the Nasser period, the saying reflects an even older period, when government employment was highly coveted, yet difficult to attain (see, e.g., Abdel-Fadil 1980:9). As Fatma Farag notes, the saying seemed to have lost its salience with the advent of the open-door policies, the state’s renunciation of its patronage role with respect to job provision and welfare arrangements, and a growing emphasis on the private sector.⁸ In the early 1980s Waterbury declared the civil service to be “the employer of last resort” (1983:262). Yet, against the backdrop of demonstrations against the implementation of age limits for new government employees, Fatma Farag comments that these days, it is “back to the dust.” Large numbers are once again competing for government employment.⁹

Government employment has become attractive again for those young graduates who seem destined to linger in the lower regions of the middle class (*cf.* Tourné 2003). Several people told me that they would know when the government had advertised its job openings in the newspaper, because the streets in the Qasr Al-Eini district where most government ministries are located would be flooded with young people carrying plastic file cases. Compared to the ill-paid, insecure employment in the private sector, government jobs seems to offer a good alternative, despite the extremely low wages, which have declined to a fraction of what was already a modest real value in 1981 (Assaad 1997:92).

Besides the often meager pay, government employment offers iron clad job security, insurance, pension schemes, and short working hours. The short and often flexible working hours allow male employees to have one or several jobs after hours in addition to their government job. For women, they present few obstacles to the household chores and familial responsibilities they are expected to shoulder. Government offices are moreover commonly perceived to be at least safe and respectable for women, in contrast to more capricious private sector settings.

Ahmed’s *shilla* was similarly positive about government employment. In light of the insecurity they repeatedly experienced in their small private sector jobs—pay that may come months late, if at all, getting fired on the spot—government employment seemed like a good option. After recounting their adventures in the labor market, filled with stories of insults and extremely poor wages, Ahmed concluded: “with these kinds of jobs, you cannot do anything. Since you cannot save a single penny from your wages, you cannot even start thinking about marriage. You cannot start a project. With the little money you earn and the long working hours, you cannot even decide to give up on the future and simply live your

life.” The young men of Ahmed’s *shilla* shared similar experiences from their six-month search for work, which had yet to yield tangible results. The small jobs they did manage to get were often so ill paid that, after subtracting the money spent on transport and food during the twelve-hour workday, they were left with almost nothing. One of the young men remarked that he would be left with less than the 100 LE pocket money he received from his father when he was unemployed.

This comment reflects some of the reasons for the enormous importance of the family in the lives of many graduates. For many unemployed graduates, the family provides a crucial safety net. Family networks moreover present the most important *wasawayit*, the major route to possible jobs, and if a job is secured, some capital to finally start a family.

Despite their poor position in the labor market and the limited prospects for change, many young graduates seem hesitant to accept jobs far below their educational achievement. Dina, a graduate of a private four-year institute of business administration, regretfully told me about one of her experiences. She once accompanied a female friend with intermediate education to a very luxurious private hospital—“five stars, employing mostly foreign doctors!”—that was rumored to have some job openings. As it turned out, the hospital offered two kinds of jobs: men could work as handymen or security guards, women as housekeepers. Dina said she had not been looking for a job herself, but merely came along to support her friend. However, the manager that came to meet them ignored her friend and offered Dina a job as a housekeeper. She told him she had graduated from a private institute and could not possibly take the job. He assured her that they employed many graduates in similar jobs, but Dina insisted. “It’s just impossible. I would feel shy. What if some of my fellow students would see me? What if I would be bossed around? I would get angry.”

Her reaction is reminiscent of Walter Armbrust’s (1999) description of what it means to be middle class in Egypt (see Chapter Two). Armbrust argues that the essence of being middle class lies in the ability to avoid socially degrading, menial work, where one is moreover obliged to obey others. Not to mention the social shame. *Sum‘it il-beet*, her family’s reputation would be at stake, Dina continued. Though she argued that she wants to work and contribute to the tight family budget, she felt she does not have a “real need.” She added that it might be different for young men. Though many women work to complement the family income, providing for the family is primarily perceived to be the husband’s responsibility. Accepting a job in a low-status profession might be excused in light of a male graduate’s need to ‘open a house’ (start a family) or his responsibilities for providing for his natal family. When it comes to girls, there are no such excuses. The family who sends its educated daughter out to work in a menial and socially degrading occupation would be seen as either very needy, or irresponsible, immoral and greedy.

Despite her clear arguments against accepting such a job, Dina still reminisced about

the excellent working conditions and pay at the hospital. She depicted the hospital as the pinnacle of cleanliness, transparency and fairness, with clear working hours and paid overtime, as well as insurance and allowances for transport and the mandatory uniform. The hospital's rule against employing family members of current employees struck her as a symbol of fairness and clarity. When I asked her what she planned to do instead, Dina said that she was waiting for her *wasta* to come through. One of her uncles is a state employee and promised to get her a position in his office in due time.

The issue of 'menial jobs' came up in other conversations as well. Ahmed's *shilla* pointed out that while they had studied hard in high school and university, a plumber earned more than them "without any diploma whatsoever." The figure of the plumber is one of the highly charged characters in middle-class social memory of the *infitaah* [open door]. In the late 1970s and 1980s numerous craftsmen found well-paid jobs in other Arab countries, which led to a shortage of skilled workers and rising fees. The construction boom that resulted from migrant remittances being invested in real estate exacerbated the shortage (Richards and Waterbury 1996:128). Professional middle class people had difficulties paying for these technical services and stories spread about simple craftsmen making fortunes, buying themselves a way into the world of the respectable middle classes by way of middle class houses, cars and even wives.

These stories were readily taken up in the 1980s cinema. Exemplary is the story of Ali's educated middle class family, portrayed in 'Love at the Pyramids Plateau' (1984). Ali's sister is courted by the neighborhood plumber who owns a new car and a luxurious apartment. The family's discussion about the proposed marriage is emblematic of the social changes that were taking place in the early 1980s. When the mother comments that the uneducated suitor cannot match their family's standing, Ali cynically remarks: "no, he is not of our circles, he is of a much higher standing." His mother has to concede: "with your money, you become your bride's sultan."¹⁰

In the course of the 1990s the good fortune of craftsmen seems to have worn off, with the construction sector in a slump and fewer chances of work in the Gulf. The days are over when the emblematic plumber would demand 10 LE before agreeing to enter the house, let alone examine the problem, yet his figure still lingers in the collective imagination as a sign of all that went wrong with the struggling graduate.¹¹ The figure of the successful plumber remains a symbol for the plight of the government employee who still looks to education as a guarantee of middle class status and lifestyle, in a society where the value of a degree has been severely eroded and the fortunes of less educated others defy older narratives of hierarchy and worth.

The young man's comment about the plumber was met with general agreement. He seemed to be speaking for all those who entered their educational career with high hopes of moving up or at least reproducing their sober middle class status and life standard, and

now find themselves in a rather hopeless situation, with not even a minimally paid or half-way steady job in sight. Ahmed continued: “While we were at university, we still had hopes. They told us: ‘If you work well, you’ll do well in life.’” “But if a plumber or a construction worker earns that well, why don’t you try one of these fields,” I asked. My question drew an immediate and sharp response. “I didn’t study for all these years to do that. How are you going to marry once you do such a job?” As Dina and Ahmed’s *shilla* mentioned, besides personal expectations and vested social identities, marriage was a main reason for not accepting such jobs. Most people consider a comparable social and educational ‘level’ (or a slightly higher one for men) a crucial prerequisite in a match. Lack of such equivalence is generally believed to spell trouble in marital life.

However devalued the qualifications of many lower-middle class graduates in the labor market, their educational status remained an important aspect of their social identity and aspirations. Their status as graduates seemed to guarantee a modicum of respectability and a middle class aura, even if that was all it offered them for the moment. In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu discusses the consequences of diploma inflation that resulted from the ‘democratization of schooling.’ His comments under the heading ‘The cheating of a generation’ resonate with the disillusionment of Ahmed’s *shilla*.

The collective disillusionment which results from the structural mismatch between aspiration and real probabilities, between the social identity the school system seems to promise, or the one it offers on a temporary basis, and the social identity that the labour market in fact offers is the source of the disaffection towards work, that *refusal of social finitude*... These young people, whose social identity and self-image have been undermined by a social system and an educational system that have fobbed them off with worthless paper, can find no other way of restoring their personal and social integrity than by a total refusal. (Bourdieu 1984:144)

Such refusals of social finitude take on a different shape in the Egyptian context where, in light of the absence of social security provisions, remaining unemployed is an option few can afford. They first and foremost take the form of an insistence on middle class qualifications and status, even when it does not bring the material rewards of some more working-class options. Some graduates choose to remain un- or underemployed rather than seeking employment in menial jobs that require one to leave behind the safe walls of the office, the guarantee of middle class respectability.

How one deals with such disillusionment upon entrance into the labor market seems to depend on one’s family situation and, as I noted earlier, gender. A more comfortable family situation allows unemployed graduates to fall back on their parents, and hold out for better job openings. Assaad argues that educated workers are generally much more likely than their uneducated counterparts to wait for a more regular job (2002:35). A more solidly

middle class background also increases the social price of accepting socially degraded jobs, because of the greater social embarrassment involved. It seemed that first generation graduates from more working-class families had less qualms about, and were obviously less able to avoid, accepting such jobs as a temporary solution. Mohamed, a law graduate, works in one of Cairo's first upscale coffee shops. He said that he has been working for ten years in the job that he initially considered a temporary solution. Like Ahmed, he found out that a law graduate needs at least ten years before being able to earn an even mediocre income. Because his family could not do more for him than they already had by putting him through university, he decided to accept a lower-level service job.

Even though further research is needed to explore such strategies, one of the options for un- or underemployed graduates like Ahmed and Mohamed are the low-level service jobs opened up by the growth of up-market consumption spaces. Their association with new forms of consumption and leisure, marked and marketed as Western or First World, elevates these jobs from their more lowly 'local' counterparts. The foreign titles, names and associations, and the higher standing of the public that is served, have a cleansing effect on jobs that are otherwise marked as clearly lower-class and are generally seen as unacceptable for a university graduate. This elevation parallels distinctions between, for example, administrative jobs in large, multinational companies and those in smaller private sector companies or government bureaucracies, but is more ambiguous and does not generate a similar degree of incommensurability in wages and status. The upscale coffee shop, which is the subject of the following chapter, provides a prime example of such a 'cleansed' workspace. Several waiters in coffee shops stressed the importance of being able to talk with and understand upper-middle class patrons. The highly educated, yet lower-middle class graduate seems ideally suited for such jobs. The lower middle class graduate servicing his more privileged colleagues from university is one of the most telling expressions of disjunctive fates within the educated middle class.

The cleansing names and purported distinctions that set these lower service jobs apart from their low-status counterparts are fragile and easily contested. A friend who lived with his family in a more 'popular' neighborhood had a hard time maintaining this crucial distinction in front of his family and neighbors. He plays percussion and is regularly seen carrying his drums. He once told me that he was exasperated by the lack of understanding and backwardness of his neighborhood, which leads to a misreading of his musical ventures. "Umm Ahmed, the local vendor, told my mother, 'Your son is a *tabbal* [tabla-player, the tabla is a small Egyptian drum].'" Tabla-players generally have a bad reputation. They are expected to work 'behind a female dancer,' accompanying her on tabla and picking up the money that is thrown on stage. Such work is seen as highly disrespectful because of its associations with public expressions of sexuality, even prostitution. "They simply do not understand that I am a *tabbal* for Western music and that I am carrying a djembe, not a

tabla,” he said. “My mother even started asking me to cover my djembe with a blanket.”

I asked Ahmed in a later meeting whether it was true that he and his friends would not accept more menial jobs. “It depends on what I would earn,” he said in a pragmatic tone of voice. While dictates and dreams regarding a proper life still linger among Cairo’s professional middle class, young graduates like Ahmed and Dina are confronted with a less than hospitable labor market that forces them to question their expectations and options. Mohamed, the waiter, said he is not sure he would put his son through university. Ahmed similarly commented: “if you ask for somebody’s hand, they will say, ‘OK, you are a graduate, but do you have a skill?’” It remains to be seen whether Mohamed and Ahmed will indeed choose to educate their children differently, since university education still accords status, even if a minimal one, and remains a commonly shared dream among middle class Cairenes.

Higher education has long been the road to social respectability in Egypt’s highly class-conscious society. A degree freed one from the obligation to work directly for others, in the worst case in people’s houses. Providing personal services or working as a cleaner is generally associated with a distinctly low standing, which moreover obliges one to demonstrate deference and a submissive attitude. As Dina said, she would feel ‘shy’ working as a hospital cleaner. She would feel ashamed if any of her old classmates were to witness her social downfall. Moreover, patients could boss her around as a servant, somebody with a lower status, not conscious of or not caring about her family background and the sacrifices her family made to get her a good education. Even if, as one can hear frequently in Cairo, it seems that money is all that matters these days, education still carries social value and continues to guarantee a minimum social standing. Irrespective of wages, a manual worker belongs to another class than the unemployed university graduate. While the latter still embodies the promise of a future middle class life, the former has settled for less. Yet, harsh realities oblige many to consider other options.

Embodying excellence

The segmentation of fates in Cairo’s labor market is most marked in the different shapes the private sector takes in the stories and imaginations of graduates. For the young men in Ahmed’s *shilla*, and for Dina, Farida and Fatma, the private sector stands for low wages, insecure employment, disrespect, abuse and fears of harassment. More privileged graduates, significantly those ‘with languages,’ have grown up expecting a job in the upper segments of the private sector. For them, the private sector represents the possibility of a well-paid job in which they may make use of their education, in a clean office with ‘clean’ people. In the eyes of many young middle class people, multinationals have become synonymous with good pay, fair chances and rewards, as well as a clean working environment. Some who could only

dream of working in such a company, like those in Ahmed's *shilla*, longed for the fair pay: to simply get paid *add ma ashtaghal* [equivalent to the work I do]. Those with experience in multinational companies praised their fair systems and investments in human resources.

The private sector has been designated the engine of national affluence, economic growth and job creation in governmental and international projects. In recent years the emphasis has shifted from the formal private to the informal private sector, reflecting a growing awareness of the inability of the formal private sector to bring about promised job growth. 'Social capital' and the vitality of the informal sector are euphemistically celebrated as the major assets of Southern countries—repositories of resourcefulness and self-help—and have been given a pivotal role in development (Elyachar 2002; 2003, Fine 2000). It is not hard to see that such euphemisms are at least in part a façade for a lack of job growth and want of the promised redistribution of wealth. This shift is accompanied by a weakening of commitments to sound working conditions and the abolishment of protective labor legislation in the context of liberalization programs.¹² It justifies and even glorifies a scramble for the lowest standards in economic life: labor markets without labor protection or state responsibility for the provision of minimum standards.

The 2001 UNDP country report on 'globalization' stands out against other such reports by its recognition of existing social inequalities and its warning that processes of 'globalization' will only exacerbate these inequalities. Based on global analyses and without mention of specific studies or figures with respect to the Egyptian situation, the report suggests, "In Egypt, as a developing country, globalization, by definition, will help integrate only a small elite into the process of production and capital accumulation of the global economy. These few beneficiaries, or the labor 'aristocracy', enjoy a higher standard of living that that attainable by the average income level" (UNDP 2001:101-2). The picture that emerges from the labor market for young graduates is indeed one of a segmented field with on the one hand a small segment of relatively well-paid and prestigious jobs in up-market companies and on the other hand the secure, but financially unrewarding government employment and insecure, semi-formal private sector jobs with low pay.

The bifurcation of the educational system and the rise of a new segment of professional and managerial jobs in internationally oriented companies have led to increasingly tangible divisions between a privileged upper-middle class and other less fortunate middle class strata (*cf.* Abdel Mo'ti 2002:338-9). Different forms of capital contribute toward the privileged social and occupational trajectories of young professionals working in this up-market segment of the urban economy. In the previous chapter I argued that schools were crucial in the articulation of divisions and distinctions in the professional middle class. The relative affluence of some groups allowed them to send their children to private schools and provide them with the financial means to engage in up-market consumption

practices, thereby helping their children secure up-market jobs and lifestyles. While the cosmopolitan capital imparted by private language schools is a crucial asset in the labor market, a foreign or AUC-degree provides an even stronger position in the labor market. Baher, for example, said that when he came back to Egypt after attaining an MBA-degree abroad, he was offered a job in each of the five companies where he had presented himself. In none of the job interviews did the prospective employers feel the need to follow up on his specific qualifications, his motivations or skills.

Privileged educational and concomitant cultural capital, primarily in the form of cosmopolitan capital, is a crucial marker of upper-middle class trajectories. After graduation, social capital becomes decisive. The *wasta* [influential contacts] and good social references provided for by more privileged family backgrounds and networks constitute crucial social capital. Though up-market jobs are also advertised in newspapers and the Internet increasingly plays an important role in the mediation of jobs in this segment of the job market, many up-market jobs are mediated through class-specific social networks. *Wasta*—influential contacts that provide access to much coveted jobs—and *ma'rifa*—being part of networks that provide vital information about, for example, job openings—are crucial in the search for such up-market jobs.

While *wasta* is surely the most direct way in which family background becomes operational in the labor market, an applicant's social background also works its magic in less tangible ways. Several people told me that up-market jobs rely as much on perceived 'social level' as on official qualifications. Presentation, language and appearance are crucial in job interviews. Employers often take these qualities as sure indicators of the 'social level' of a candidate. Barsoum reports that recruitment agents speak of "a '*kashf hay'ah*,' a trope borrowed from the army, where the army doctors physically examine new recruits to see if they are fit" (1999:65). A well-informed friend told me that in his workplace, a large NGO with foreign funding, both hiring and promotion partially depended on fluency and flawlessness in English. A heavy Egyptian accent was counted as a serious flaw and a sign that one does not really belong in such an up-market workplace.

A classy appearance and 'being presentable' are vital in the job search of both men and women, especially since they are taken to indicate a high 'social level' and concomitant family background. Based on interviews with recruitment agents, Barsoum argues that "the requirements of the ideal candidate constitute a full package." Family background can be taken as a sure sign of having a language and the proper appearance, just as a proper appearance or fluency in English is a sign of the *bint naas* [daughter of a good family] (Barsoum 1999:77). One particularly savvy woman with experience in a number of private companies told me that employers would routinely ask a job applicant to come back for further interviews to find out whether the applicant was able to afford several stylish outfits.

Another woman told me that coming by car to an interview and dressing in expensive suits were preconditions for many of up-market jobs. Many young graduates depend on family support for such symbolic assets. These stories suggest that apart from providing the right educational, cultural and social capital, the family plays an important role in furnishing one with the ‘starting capital’ needed to present oneself as an eligible candidate for up-market jobs. Such dependence continues after graduation. Many up-market jobs do not pay enough to provide new entrants into the labor market with the sums needed for upper-middle class lifestyles. Many young professionals still receive their monthly pocket money and rely on their families for major expenses. “Who do you think pays for these cars,” several friends asked me, pretending to be exasperated by my naiveté.

An upper class or ‘foreign’ appearance presented significant embodied capital in the job market. Karim cynically remarked that he got his previous job because his former boss wanted fair skinned people like himself for window dressing. Nihal similarly told me that her uncle, a successful surgeon, was asked to appear in an advertisement for the private hospital where he worked because of his European looks. Tamer noted that the call centers of Egypt’s two mobile phone companies generally employ people who look (and sound) like *awlaad naas*. As I was told, employing professionals with a ‘classy’ appearance advertises a company’s ability to employ high-class personnel and intimates a class standing necessary to attract clientele from similar class backgrounds. The hiring of foreign staff points to a related concern. I heard a number of stories about foreigners who were employed in private schools, despite their lack of the required teaching qualifications. The presence of foreigners not only adds to a school’s prestige, but is also taken to indicate a higher level of proficiency and a truly cosmopolitan educational offer. According to a young woman, such a valuation of the foreign represents a typical Egyptian trait: *‘u’dit il-khawaaga*. She told me that the term refers to an unqualified preference for everything foreign over local alternatives. “A foreigner always has the best views on things, even if he understands nothing at all,” she added cynically.¹³

This concern for what Karim called ‘window dressing’ has a strong gender component. The presence of non-veiled women in an office is generally taken to signal modernity and a high class standing. The commercial for the Future Generation Foundation, discussed in Chapter One, significantly featured only non-veiled women. It represents common realities in Cairo’s up-market companies. Up-market workplaces generally stand out because of the overwhelming presence of non-veiled women and the conspicuous absence of *muḥagabaat*. A woman’s decision to take up the veil often seriously diminishes her chances in up-market companies. Though the rising number of upper-middle class women who choose to wear the veil has had some effect on the previously solid associations of veiling with a lower class status and a lack of modernity (see Chapter Five), veiling is still considered problematic in many of these spaces, where intimations of an elite background and cosmopolitan belonging

are of utmost importance. Dalia, for example, mentioned that at the commercial bank where she used to work, a female employee who decided to wear the veil was transferred to the back office. She was no longer allowed to represent the bank vis-à-vis its clients.

Cairo's segmented labor market valorizes specific forms of privileged cultural capital and social backgrounds, and thereby significantly reproduces and strengthens existing class divisions. It however also substitutes earlier more fluid divisions with solid lines of segmentation. These lines of segmentation divide those who can apply for up-market jobs from other middle class Cairenes who lack the necessary cosmopolitan and social capital to do so. As I discuss in the next chapter, these divisions are imprinted in the urban social landscape and contribute to the consolidation of increasingly distinct and distant social worlds in middle-class Cairo.

"But I didn't go to a language school," said Tamer, a professional in his mid twenties, when I discussed some of my research findings with him. "And I didn't get my jobs through *wasta*." His parents, both middle class professionals, moved back to Egypt after years of having worked in Saudi Arabia. At the time Tamer was past the age to enroll in a language school. Like Mona's children (see Chapter Two), he therefore attended a private 'Arabic' school and public secondary school. He says he was always eager to improve his language skills, which helped him in his search for better jobs. After his commerce studies at a public university, he started out working with ones of his relatives, earning 400 LE per month. He was able to take the place of a friend as an accountant at a private foreign institute, improving his wage to 700 LE. After a few years, he found another job through the Internet, working as an office manager at a five-star hotel. Shortly after he had started his new job, the management made it clear that he would be fired if his performance did not improve. In the end he managed to keep his job, but when I met him a year later he was again thinking of looking for another position. He wanted a job that would give him more opportunities to 'realize himself'.

Tamer's story defies clear-cut divisions between upper-middle class jobs and other jobs available to young graduates. He straddles the borders of Cairo's segmented labor market. Tamer said that since he comes from a middle class background, he cannot accept menial jobs and live in a *sha'abi* neighborhood and cope with a low life standard like a lower class person might. "I can't accept work as a taxi driver or craftsman, or work for a mere 500 LE. But I can also not do everything I want to do. I want to live at a better level, have a better car. A peasant might not have these ambitions, but a middle class person needs both a certain life standard and social level." He said he feels suspended between heaven and earth, in what according to him, is a typical middle class predicament.

Looking beyond the frayed and messy border areas where individual stories always seem to refute more general trends, lines of segmentation seem rather robust. It seems highly

unlikely that young professionals from modest backgrounds like Ahmed and his friends, or even the securely middle class Tamer, will ever get prize jobs in the stock exchange, commercial banks or development agencies. Those professionals who are employed in these jobs belong to what can be justly called a 'labor aristocracy.' Those eligible for such jobs are in the rule *awlaad naas*, children of good families, who possess a combination of formal and informal privileged capitals as a result of their family and social background, economic affluence, proper 'language' education and membership in more privileged circles. Their language, movements and bodies speak of another world: of the private clubs that provide the playing grounds for much of their childhood and of the private language schools they attended. They speak an embodied language of cultural competence and cosmopolitan savvy that cannot easily be imitated or achieved by resolve.

Since the worlds of privileged *awlaad naas* and less fortunate graduates hardly meet, asking about the differences often led to speculative answers. Differences were moreover assumed to be so great and obvious that it often seemed nonsensical to inquire after them. As a human resources consultant said: "Those educated in language schools will most likely have a different education, more westernized. They master a specific language. If I go to a company and they speak Arabic, I feel I am in a different world." Going around with young professionals working in the up-market segment indeed feels like entering a different world. Judging from the holiday resorts, fancy cars and affluent lifestyles of those comfortably belonging to the upper-middle class, Egypt has accrued significant wealth in the last two decades.

Cracks

Yet, at the beginning of the century even the up-market segment of the labor market has begun to show cracks. In the mid-1990s the influx of foreign companies and the growth of private local ones, as well as the massive building boom gave rise to a relatively exclusive segment of the labor market for these *awlaad naas*. In recent years competition among applicants has grown fiercer, while many up-market companies downsize. In 2002 I heard numerous stories of people working in development organizations and marketing companies who did not receive their wages on time or were forced to accept a permanent wage reduction of fifty percent. Many companies were 'letting go' of those employees they could easily fire, while some with more sturdy contracts were told that it was in their own best interest to leave, taking with them a reference letter, a three month grace period and/or a sum of money. If they refused to leave, there were more informal ways of making sure they would eventually leave 'voluntarily.' I was told about wage reductions, doubled workloads, pestering and impossible assignments in Egypt's far South. As a corporate lawyer put it: "Because the law is always on the side of the employee, employers have to

do all kinds of things to get rid of them [their unwanted employees].” Many upper-middle class professionals complained about their jobs, but few dared to speak out or take the even more radical step of quitting.

One of the clearest signs of the increased competition for a limited number of up-market jobs is the run on better qualifications and higher degrees discussed in the previous chapter. Many professionals I know were taking an extra degree or courses, particularly MBAs, or were contemplating doing so. A large number of institutes, many affiliated with European or American universities, offer different packages to earn such credentials. As Tamer noted, these extra degrees require large investments for which one often has to rely on family support and they have no guaranteed returns.

Fernandes (2000b) discusses the harsh realities of restructuring and retrenchment that lie behind idealized portrayals of India’s affluent new middle class. An initial period of high wages and apparently abundant chances for managerial staff in multinationals was followed by a period of retrenchment and restructuring that led to wage reductions, increasing job insecurity, as well as casualization of much up-market employment.¹⁴ In response, middle class professionals began to accept temporary, informal contracts in the hope of subsequently moving to a more stable job. Like their Egyptian counterparts, many try to improve their position in the labor market by earning new credentials and skill acquisition.

Heba’s story about her brother’s misfortune is indicative of the hard times that have befallen some up-market professionals. Heba’s brother is an engineer like his father. He is in his late thirties and has a family to support. Heba emphasized her brother’s fluency in English and his many contacts with foreigners to clarify his slot in the labor market. After his graduation in the early 1990s, when the building boom was at its peak, he immediately found a job as a civil engineer in a big contracting firm. After their father died, he tried to revive his father’s small contracting firm, but he went bankrupt as a result of the suspension of payments by their biggest client: the government. He then took a job in a Lebanese company where he earned 3500 LE. When at the end of 2002 his request for a sizeable pay raise was refused, he quit. I asked around and found that an engineer with his years of experience could indeed expect to earn 5000 LE. Heba’s brother gambled and lost. After a few months without work he was forced to accept another job with a much lower pay and longer hours. One where, as Heba pointed out, overtime was not paid but coming late was sanctioned by wage deductions.

For the moment it seems unlikely that many unemployed upper-middle class professionals will turn to government jobs. Salaries in the upper segment of the labor market start around 1500 LE and the lifestyles of those who qualify for these jobs are concomitant. Even better paid and more prestigious government jobs generally pay far less than their private sector equivalents. During an interview about the labor market, a human resources consultant in

her early thirties expressed her surprise at the continued interest in government employment. “Some people of a somewhat lower class still look for government jobs, can you believe it?” The corporate lawyer similarly said she would never consider working in the government bureaucracy. Her secretary earns 250 LE per month plus a 100% bonus, she said, more than the salary of a government employee with a degree. Like public schools, government offices have become a distant, less than pleasing reality, the government employee an outmoded character. Most people of her ‘class’ could not imagine working in such spaces.

In contrast to most of the state bureaucracy, certain domains within the state apparatus do carry prestige, particularly those branches that carry out central state functions that cannot be taken up by the private sector, such as foreign affairs, the judiciary, some parts of the media, and the petrol sector. Though the pay tends to be less than in comparable private sector jobs, wages in these elite pockets far outstrip those of other government employees. Such jobs moreover convey a certain prestige and generally entail good career opportunities. Besides, as an employee in the ministry of foreign affairs said, “it is not really seen as government, the level of the people is different.” Several upper-middle class professionals who chose such privileged governmental careers told me that friends and colleagues with more lucrative private sector jobs pitied them. A graduate of a French language school said that her kind of people would never think of applying for such government jobs. She works as a journalist in a foreign language department of *Al-Ahram*, the biggest state media enterprise. She said she likes her job, which provides ample opportunities for lucrative side jobs, besides the relatively modest pay of some 1000 LE per month. Yet she said she is seen as stupid for burying herself in a government job while she could earn so much more outside.

Besides these long-standing elite sectors within the government bureaucracy, new pockets of excellence with highly qualified and generally more privileged employees are created in those places where the government must offer quality services. I heard stories of such pockets of excellence within media institutions, a number of ministries and the Central Bank. Randa, an upper-middle class professional in her early thirties, used to work at the Ministry of Economics, in the minister’s office. She told me that the floor they occupied at the ministry stood out from the rest of the building by its state of the art furniture and excellent maintenance and facilities. It was not government, she said. “The ministry has two parts: the old part, where there is no work and people do not have a good education, and the other part, where they hire young, good people with fresh ideas to do the important jobs.” The latter constitute the elite of the ministry and are paid out of separate funds furnished by international organizations, at rates comparable to equivalent jobs in the private sector. When I asked her what kind of people they employ, she said: “people with a financial or economic background, perhaps with an extra degree. They all come from good families, are

fluent in English and have attended language schools. We have to maintain certain standards to avoid the spirit that is dominant in the government bureaucracy. They want people from comfortable families to deliver a certain presentable image.”

Similar discrepancies characterize Egypt’s Central Bank. Alaa, a Central Bank employee in his mid-thirties, pulled out a pay sheet that detailed to the penny how much money he had earned in that month. It amounted to 234 LE, but with bonuses and incentives he usually receives up to 800 LE. Alaa has been employed at the Bank for eight years. He comes from a modest lower-middle class background, attended public schools and lives with his family in a poor neighborhood. He was lucky to get the job, he said. He was hired because he managed to obtain strong *wasta*. In 2000 the Central Bank stopped hiring people. When they started hiring again at the end of 2002, they only recruited people ‘with languages’ and computer skills. Alaa’s new colleagues, many of whom are young women, start with a base salary of around 800 LE. They are assigned air-conditioned offices with matching ‘respectable’ furniture and new computers and may even be sent to the United States for further training. Alaa’s office in contrast contains a jumble of furniture. At the time, air-conditioning had recently been installed. This good fortune came about through lucky coincidence: an aunt of one of his colleagues works in facility management and took pity on her nephew.

The differences in pay, career prospects and work conditions within the Central Bank and other such governmental institutions echo the segmentation of Cairo’s labor market. Yet as Alaa cynically remarked, “the people we get are still second choice. The ones with really good qualifications and *wasta* go to the more prestigious commercial banks with better pay.”

Refusing social finitude

This chapter tells a middle class story of a country that once, for better or for worse, was one of the leading countries in the non-aligned world and served as an example for newly independent developing states (*cf.* Gupta 1992), and now has turned towards the neoliberal precepts of private sector agency and the global market.¹⁵ It is a story of a city that dispenses segmented fates: of new lines of nobility that entitle a minority of professionals to relatively rewarding private sector jobs at the upper end of the spectrum, while most face a labor market that offers salaries far below a living wage since the supply of educated personnel far outnumbers the available jobs. What can anachronistically be labeled as the Nasserite middle class, civil servants and lower-middle class graduates, have become emblematic of those segments of society that are in need of reform.

In this and the previous chapter I have charted some of the negotiations and contestations that characterize the process of social change set in motion by Egypt’s political

and economic reorientation. Despite processes of disenfranchisement and enfranchisement that increasingly divide Cairo's professional middle class, old promises and expectations are not easily relinquished or forgotten. Whereas macro-economical analyses highlight the misallocation of educational resources that leads to degree inflation and 'human capital' gone to waste, personal stories illustrate the persistent investments in certain social identities and expected futures, as well as an unwillingness to relinquish established social rights. Some do not understand why people still queue for government jobs, but many less privileged job seekers find such jobs rather attractive in comparison to a private sector that, in their experience, often equals exploitation, insecurity and disrespect. It seems that not a generation, but much of the Nasserite middle class that refuses social finitude. In light of internationally advocated neoliberal policies, large strata of the Cairene middle class should acquiesce to the artisan occupations, insecure employment and a general financial austerity that supposedly befit a country like Egypt. Many resist relegation to such 'Third World standards.' Their stories are reminiscent of the bitter stories of cosmopolitan urbanites in Zambia's Copperbelt (Ferguson 1999), who have no choice but to turn to rural areas to eke out a living as impoverished peasants, but remember the promises and excitement of their previous urban lives.

Many of the stories of schooling and the labor market breathe nostalgia. Gordon (2000) reports that in Cairo, nostalgia for the Nasser years has been growing. Since most Cairenes have not consciously lived these years, it is first and foremost nostalgia for a time that is not the present. As Gordon argues, nostalgia for the Egypt of the 1950s and 1960s feeds on "political cynicism, uneven development, glaring social inequities, unfulfilled material expectations, and the vise of radical Islamist and state violence" (2000:177). It is, to quote Susan Buck-Morss' reading, "nostalgia for a world that was supposed to be," rather than for the more complex, and often less attractive realities these modernist dreams spurned (1995:23). This nostalgia is reinvigorated by the continual replaying of the now classical movies of the Nasser period, which remind Cairenes of an Egypt that first and foremost existed in hopes and aspirations, rather than everyday realities.

Zhang similarly argues that the pervasive nostalgia for the Mao era in China can best be understood as a critique of a present in which urban workers are displaced "onto the social and economic margins of an increasingly marketized society" (2002:325). As Zhang notes, "this selective process of remembering, forgetting, and reinterpreting the socialist past is an important component of social struggles in late socialist China" (2002:326). She quotes one worker as saying, "in those days we did not have much, but everyone was equal" (*ibid.*) These words mirror the comments of the educated owner of a business in Downtown Cairo, who said that in the Nasser years "we had nothing, but we were happy." As Buck-Morss argues, the collective desires that were expressed in modernist dreams can

provide powerful alternative stories, perhaps as much as religiously inspired dreams of a better society have done in the past decades. In affluent circles, yet another nostalgia has taken hold. For some, not the Nasser period, but the pre-revolution royal era of aristocratic lifestyles and privileges has become the object of longing, fantasies and imitation.¹⁶

The segmentation in the labor market discussed in this chapter finds its counterpart in Cairo's consumption and leisure spaces. The cosmopolitan lifestyles and relative affluence of young upper-middle class professionals employed in up-market companies has created a market for new leisure and consumption practices. The upscale coffee shops that are discussed in the next chapter carve out spaces for young upper-middle class professionals in Cairo's urban landscape.

¹ Whereas unemployment was nearly non-existent among those who could at most read and write, it was extremely high among those with an intermediate degree, and remained considerable among men and women with a higher education. The available statistics show an increase in the numbers of highly educated unemployed men between 22 and 35 from 10% in 1988 to 16% in 1998. Among their female counterparts there was an increase from 18% to 26% (Amer 2002:232). Overall unemployment was predominantly concentrated in the younger generations, among new entrants into the labor market (Assaad 2002:34). Assaad, however, also argues that unlike other regions, Greater Cairo has actually experienced falling unemployment ratios (2002:26). He does not specify how this decline is distributed with respect to educational status. Though such a divergent trend in metropolitan Cairo would be important with respect to the present study, a lack of further data makes it difficult to draw any conclusions. These figures cover the years before the economic slowdown that set in after 2000. During the years in which this study was conducted, the situation might very well have worsened considerably.

² It is difficult to indicate how large this up-market segment is, since it includes the managerial and professional staff of both local and foreign, large and small companies. An assessment of the size of the professional middle-class would require detailed and reliable statistics on income distribution among university-educated Cairenes between 22 and 35. The number of employees in foreign enterprises hardly captures the size of this up-market segment. Despite a significant growth in the number of people employed in foreign enterprises, their total was estimated at a mere 0.15% of the total number of employed persons nationwide (from 0 in 1976, to 10,000 in 1986 and 23,000 in 1996) (UNDP 2001:97). The percentage of students in private secondary general education might provide a better indication of the share of the upper-middle class in Cairo's professional middle class. In Greater Cairo 20% of the students in secondary general education attended private schools in 1999/2000, versus 8.5% nationwide (calculated from statistics of the Ministry of Education). These numbers would indicate that the relative share of the upper-middle class lies between 15 and 20% of Cairo's professional middle-class, and around 5 to 7% of all Cairenes. These estimates concur with Mitchell's estimate that only five percent of Egypt's population can afford to engage in the consumption of upscale goods and services (2002:286-7).

³ In 2002, 1000 LE was equivalent to 250€, devaluing to 200€ towards the end of the year. Average per capita income was estimated at some 560 LE per month (calculated from <http://devdata.worldbank.org>).

⁴ See, for example, *Al-Ahram Weekly's* report on the 2004 conference of the NDP, the ruling party. It discusses Gamal Mubarak's dominance in the NDP, his increased influence on policy directions and his outspoken preference for economic liberalization and further integration into the global market (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/709/fr1.htm>).

⁵ <http://www.fgf-egypt.com/english/foundation/fgf14.asp> (accessed July 2003)

⁶ Cf. Abdel Malek in *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue 611, 7-13 November 2002) for similar doubts about the efficacy of the Fund.

⁷ *Laww faatak il-miirni, itmarragh fi turaabu.*

⁸ Fatma Farag, 'Back to the dust,' *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue 544, 26 July-1 August 2001). Whereas 'dust' obviously refers to the saying, it also evokes some widely shared associations with government employment: dusty offices overstaffed with listless employees. Since government employment is so widely associated with bad pay, severely overstaffed offices and stagnant careers, an ironic reading would moreover suggest that all these job seekers fight for is dust.

⁹ Despite the *de facto* abolishment of employment guarantees and stated intentions to curb, or even downsize the bureaucracy, the number of civil servants has continued to grow steadily. Assaad argues that this growth is mainly due to the greater persistence of older, mostly female civil servants in government employment. This greater persistence is not sufficiently compensated by a lower rate of hiring (2002:45).

¹⁰ 'Love at the Pyramids Plateau' (1984) is based on a short story by Naguib Mahfouz that was published in 1979. The film addresses the problems of Ali, a university graduate who works in the government bureaucracy. He comes from an educated family and his neighbors respectfully address his father with *effendi*, the now somewhat archaic title for the educated. He falls in love with a new colleague of his, but they cannot get married because of his dire financial situation. The film tells the story of their struggle to remain true to their mutual love, despite adverse circumstances.

¹¹ Ten Egyptian Pound was a significant sum at that time, i.e., before subsequent rounds of devaluation, when, as is often said, "the pound still meant something." People often mention that the Egyptian Pound used to equal the British Pound or US Dollar. The devaluation of the Egyptian currency vis-à-vis these major currencies is often taken as a sign of Egypt's decline and diminished international standing.

¹² In 2002 the Egyptian parliament accepted a new labor law that grants employers in the private sector more extensive rights to fire employees. The law does not apply to civil servants, leaving their iron job security intact. While this 'liberal' labor legislation abrogated many of the legal protections of the older Nasserite law, the freedom of independent collective organization, strikes or bargaining remains severely curtailed (Fergany 1998).

¹³ Cf. Armbrust (1996:225 n.6). I also heard of a related expression that similarly equates being a foreigner/Western with a higher level of expertise. *Il-agnabi bitaa'na* literally means 'our (Western) foreigner,' but is used in the sense of 'our own expert.'

¹⁴ Fernandes (2000b) attributes this overhaul not only to the economic slowdown that resulted from the Asian crisis, but also to the dampening of initial overblown expectations among multinationals, based on inflated estimates of the untapped middle class market in India. The retrenchment in Egypt's up-market sector might similarly be related to overly optimistic ideas about Egypt's market for luxury consumption goods and services. This was clearly the case with respect to the downturn in the construction sector. Its large-scale investments in luxury housing projects affordable only to a small affluent elite did not reap the expected results (Mitchell 2005).

¹⁵ Since the effects of economic and political reorientation differ markedly for differently positioned people, it is important to emphasize the vantage point from which one tells such stories. Eileen Moyer's work on street workers in Dar es Salaam, for example, shows that while large parts of the educated middle class inhabitants experience declining life standards and the children of state employees have a hard time reproducing their parents' middle class life standard, Tanzania's 'liberal era' has brought new chances in the urban informal sector for rural-to-urban migrants, who were previously banned from the city (Moyer 2003, see, e.g., also Zhang 2002 and Anagnost 2004, who discuss the differential impact of China's late socialist phase). While this might be an obvious point, the specific locatedness of stories of enfranchisement and disenfranchisement is, for example, lacking in Mbembe and Roitman's discussion (1995) of the 'crisis of the subject' in the wake of the collapse of the Cameroonian state, which implicitly tells a clearly middle class story.

¹⁶ This nostalgia has fueled the publication of a bilingual magazine devoted to pre-revolutionary Egypt, *Masr Al-Mahrousa/ Impressions of Egypt*, which mainly features photo-articles of Egypt's lost elegance. Kuppinger discerns a play on a similar nostalgia for the comfortable, elegant and elitist pre-revolutionary times in advertisements for Royal Hills, a gated community on the outskirts of Cairo (2004:48). Colonial and imperial histories seem to provide important inspiration for affluent lifestyles in a wide range of postcolonial and postimperial settings and can be said to constitute one of the distinctive, privileged styles of First World spaces across the world. This style rehearses specific local colonial and postcolonial trajectories, as King argues with respect to Indian compounds, whose names refer to, for example, Oxford or Cambridge (King 2004:133).



Figure 11: Cilantro coffee shop near the AUC

4

Class and Cosmopolitan Belonging in Cairo's Coffee Shops

On a weekday in Summer 2004 I had arranged to meet with Amal and Miriyam at the Retro Café in Mohandisseen for an interview about coffee shops. In the course of my research I had become thoroughly familiar with up-market coffee shops like Retro, which have become an essential part of the daily routines of many upper-middle class professionals. Such upscale coffee shops have changed the urban fabric of central up-market neighborhoods. These are *coffee shops*, always referred to in English, never to be confused with *'ahawi baladi*, the male-dominated sidewalk cafes for which Cairo is famous. Different coffee shops have become spatial orientation points, as well as social markers of a certain belonging. A new and distinctive leisure culture has emerged in and around these coffee shops, centered on, but not exclusive to, young single affluent professionals like Amal and Miriyam. The spread of these coffee shops is a relatively recent phenomenon. Coffee shops started appearing in the mid-1990s in central affluent districts like Zamalek and Mohandisseen, as well as in outlying Heliopolis and Maadi. New coffee shops open regularly, crowding certain streets and turning formerly residential areas into lively Downtown hot spots.

This chapter examines the formation of upper-middle class spaces, lifestyles and sociabilities in Cairo. The emergence of exclusive up-market spaces and lifestyles, set apart from the surrounding urban landscape by cosmopolitan references and comparatively steep prices, reconfigures lines of exclusion and inclusion in everyday interaction. I examine everyday forms of belonging in the public spaces of the city by focusing on upscale coffee shops. I first explore some central features of these coffee shops. I ask how the ‘First World’ formula of the coffee shop has inserted itself in the highly contested domains of leisure and urban public life. I argue that these coffee shops have succeeded in creating a protected niche for mixed-gender socializing outside of the purview of the family in a wider social landscape where such public mixed-gender socializing is more contentious. I then move on to ask what kinds of belonging are intimated and induced by upscale venues like the coffee shop. Coffee shops reconfigure matrices of familiarity and ease, as well as discomfort and distance.

Café Latte

Café Latte: Espresso soothed by a generous pour of steamed milk and topped with a whisper of foamed milk.

(From the menu of the Cilantro coffee-shop chain, October 2002)

I found Amal sharing a table with our common friend, Miriyam. Randa, another friend of theirs, soon joined us. All three are professionals in their early thirties, employed in the internationally oriented segment of the economy. Like the other women at Retro, they were wearing tight cotton pants or jeans and equally tight shirts, which nonetheless heeded the red lines of public decency, covering everything but the arms. The small café with its art, earth tones, and modern wooden furniture was designed to give a contemporary, yet warm sense of comfort and home. Jazzy music, including global hits like the Bueno Vista Social Club and Norah Jones, provided the finishing touch. Before we launched into our discussion, we chose some salads and sandwiches from Retro’s extensive offer of ‘creative food’ (Amal’s term) and placed our order with one of the young waiters dressed in the Retro uniform: black jeans and a blue polo shirt that carried the name of the café.

Our discussion soon converged on the importance of coffee shops for women. “Coffee shops were able to gather girls from their houses and the club,” they said. “Before, we did not have places where we could spend time after work.” The overwhelming presence of women in most coffee shops indeed presents one of the striking features of the social life that unfolds in them. In these upscale coffee shops both veiled and non-veiled women often constitute more than half of the customers. Many single professional women like Amal and Miriyam have taken to spending much of their time in coffee shops like the Retro Café.

Half an hour into our discussion, the interview was interrupted when two other friends joined our table, and a constant stream of other friends and acquaintances arrived and was

enthusiastically greeted. Retro's social life had swung into full gear now that the offices were out. Our conversation veered to the playful mix of tall stories and entertaining news typical of coffee shop socializing. The relatively small Retro Café had a large number of regular visitors, like Miriyam's *shilla*, who visited the coffee shop on a semi-daily basis to meet up with friends and acquaintances. Amal knew the names of all the waiters and was friendly with the owner of the coffee shop. She explained that Retro is much like her second home.



Figure 12: The Retro Café Photograph published in *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue 674, 22-28 January 2004).

Spectra Café is another popular venue, located only a few streets away, behind the well-known Mostafa Mahmoud Mosque in the heart of Mohandisseen. It is stylishly decorated with simple wooden furniture and is divided into two parts. The quiet front part offers seating to small groups; the back room offers space to larger groups in American diner style, with wooden benches that seat six people around a table. Television sets soundlessly screen the music videos featured on one of the new Arabic music channels, while similar Arabic and Western pop hits provide the musical background.

I mostly visited Spectra in the daytime or early evening to meet a female friend or acquaintance. Despite the spaciousness of the coffee shop, we often had to wait outside for a table to free up. We would choose a table in the front part of the café and order a salad or sandwich. Spectra was reputed to serve good and relatively inexpensive food. The menu

consists of a wide range of burgers, salads and sandwiches, including the ubiquitous Caesar Salad and Club Sandwich. In the evenings, the back room fills up with a younger crowd that primarily comes to socialize in groups.

One evening I had an appointment with Tamer, the professional who featured in the previous chapter, to talk about coffee shops. When I arrived, I found him sitting in the back room with his sister, a female friend and two male cousins. The space was already packed with young mixed-gender *shilal*. I greeted Tamer, who introduced me to the others. When I moved in next to one of his cousins, everyone turned silent. Tamer's sister came to me and asked me to move further away from my neighbor. He is a very religious person, she said, and did not feel comfortable with me sitting next to him.

After a while I was alone with Tamer and his female friend, and we had the chance to talk about coffee shops. Tamer explained it used to be shameful for young people to hang out in cafes. "Now, even if dress codes have become more modest, there is more freedom," he argued, referring to the simultaneous popularity of the veil and the coffee shop among young upper-middle class women. Tamer's comments concur with Abaza's observation that the "islamization of public space in the 1990s coincides with survival strategies taking the form of a 'relaxation of norms' among youth, within an Islamic frame of reference" (2001b:118). The public at Spectra seemed to confirm his observations. Spectra attracted significantly more *muhaggabaat* than, for example, the Retro Café. Tamer's friend, who covered her hair with a scarf, gaily told me that the *higaab* [veil] was simply obligatory for Muslims.¹ Yet that did not mean that her lifestyle was that different from her female peers without *higaab*. She shortly after drew my attention to a music video that zoomed in on three long legged, sexily clad girls who were dancing seductively to please their viewing audiences. "My favorite," she said.

In the course of my research I gradually became familiar with Cairo's up-market leisure geographies. Whenever I would meet with upper-middle class professionals, I was directed to one of these up-market coffee shops. Some people liked the homey, but slightly kitschy interior of the different Roastery branches. Others preferred the fresh modernism of Cilantro, all stainless steel and metallic shine with cubist leather pillows in primary colors, or the stylish and hip but cozy Retro Café. The rapid growth of this segment of upscale venues has allowed for diversity and choice. While each specific venue had its proponents and detractors, on another level they functioned as interchangeable spaces that were equally part of the larger scene of upscale coffee shops.

The itineraries of upper-middle class professional friends and acquaintances generally included only unambiguously up-market venues, while they excluded the growing number of less exclusive coffee shops in malls (see Abaza 2001b). These coffee shops were unmistakably set apart from other venues and their immediate surroundings by their Western style,

immaculate cleanliness and the strikingly perfect maintenance of the interior, as well as the air-conditioning that generated a constant comfortable climate. These features seemed to be part of the implicit laws and minimum standards that must be observed in order to attract a certain clientele and maintain an upscale status. Well-trained, polite, young and fashionable looking staff and waiters were similarly of prime importance, as were style and suggestions of First World belonging, for example in the form of references to coffee shops in the United States or European coffee traditions. A strict selection of the socio-cultural 'level' of clientele and a careful guarding of appropriate behavior was also prerequisite. Personnel was instructed to watch out for breaches of propriety: a too intimate one-on-one between two lovers, a stolen kiss. If allowed to pass, this behavior would soon ruin the establishment's reputation and scare away other patrons.

Magazines like *Campus*, *The Paper*, but also the *Al-Ahram Weekly*, regularly reported on new up-market venues and trends, as did glossy lifestyle magazines like *Enigma* ('The International Arab Magazine of the New Millenium') (see Figure 15). They thereby publicized and, in a sense, constituted an up-market, cosmopolitan Cairo. Coffee shops, in turn, invariably stocked these and similar English language publications, thereby confirming that they belonged to up-market Cairo.

A restaurant review of the Retro Café expressed surprise at the coffee shop, its menu and patrons.

"Who are these kids, where do they come from?" asked my [intellectual] friend...As the Egyptian intelligentsia cower downtown at increasingly overpriced, drab looking haunts...an altogether new genre of dining has hit the metropolis—one that peripatetic individuals used to seek out in Manhattan or Paris. Forget all that, a taxi ride to Mohandessin suffices... Retro Café is a vision from Greenwich village, an up-market buddy of Central Perk, the coffee shop (does it really exist?) where the Friends of the famed TV show hang out. Only it is classier, in terms of ambiance and décor and food. All of the clientele were hip, each in his or her way—even the hijab-clad Amr Khaled nouveau devotees.²

I was similarly amazed by these coffee shops, as were Cairene friends who were not acquainted with these spaces. The hip Western styles of most coffee shops, the American menu of Café Lattes with or without flavor, Caesar Salads and Club Sandwiches, and the prominent English on the menus of local establishments seemed out of place in Cairo's urban landscape. The mixed-gender clientele and the casual and routine mixed-gender sociabilities of the coffee shop were even more striking. In contrast to my sense of wonder, social life in coffee shops was mostly marked by an aura of self-evidence and normalcy. Coffee shops and their exclusive public formed the self-evident grounds for the social life

of upper-middle class friends and acquaintances. Despite their recent appearance in Cairo's leisure geographies, many coffee shop patrons acted as if these spaces had always been there, leaving previous lives and routines but a vague memory.

Even if they largely rely on cosmopolitan referents for their distinctiveness and success, up-market coffee shops speak to class-specific Cairene desires and dilemmas. The originally American formula of the coffee shop inserts itself in locally significant and highly contested domains of leisure and sociability and urban public life. Coffee shops have had an almost revolutionary effect on the social life of young affluent Cairenes. They have come to constitute an urban scene with conspicuously cosmopolitan styles that allows for new upper-middle class routines and sociabilities. In the following I explore the way this transnational format creates spaces of cosmopolitan belonging, which double as local class projects, and are negotiated within Cairene sensibilities regarding mixed-gender sociability.

From the club to the coffee shop

Coffee shops are emblematic for an emerging upper-middle class presence in Cairo's landscape. They carve out public spaces for new upper-middle class lifestyles and modes of sociability. The daily nature of visits and the considerable degree of acceptance within a broad upper-middle class are features that distinguish coffee shops from other leisure spaces. While an explicitly mixed-gender public has long been one of the hallmarks of middle class and elite leisure venues, such venues were often defined as family spaces or tended to serve a more exclusive public. Moreover, such leisure was often conceived of as a special outing rather than everyday routine. Coffee shops particularly stand out on account of the casual, everyday character of women's public socializing. Unchaperoned mixed-gender socializing and the presence of single women in leisure venues are often surrounded by suspicions and restrictions. Such concerns tie into broadly shared notions of marriage as the single legitimate context for non-functional mixed-gender contact and the need to control young single women's movement and (sexual) behavior in order to guard both her own and the family's reputation (see MacLeod 1991, Ghannam 2002).

When I asked people about the reasons for the popularity of coffee shops and the increased acceptability of such mixed-gender public leisure, most mentioned media influences. Many considered influences from abroad (*barra*, i.e., the West) central to the 'greater freedom' of coffee shop social life. The media were seen as instrumental in this respect, particularly the increasingly numerous and popular Arabic satellite channels. 'The dish' shattered the government monopoly on television programming, and more generally, its politically significant control of information. It opened a window on a more globally up-to-date visual and music culture, as well as a whole range of consumption goods and desires.

I would, however, argue that the popularity of coffee shops and the mixed-gender leisure culture of young affluent Cairenes have to first and foremost be located in the context of the socio-economic changes of the last decades. Many of the women and men who frequent up-market coffee shops belong to the new sub-class of upper-middle class professionals, whose cosmopolitan capital and social references enable them to earn relatively high salaries. These professionals inhabit class-specific workspaces where casual mix-gender relations, a mix of English and Arabic and cosmopolitan references are the norm. Having embarked on a professional career, many have grown used to spending much of their time outside the familial sphere. Their social networks have outgrown specific neighborhoods, the school and the club. A rise in marital age and what seems to be a trend to frequent and early divorce in the upper-middle class have created a situation in which many upper-middle class women and men live for prolonged periods with their parents while having a large degree of financial and personal independence. They do not yet have responsibilities towards husband, wife or children, but neither do they have their own space to entertain guests or more generally conduct a social life away from family supervision.

For many of these young Cairenes, the home can therefore only partially function as a space for privacy or the unfolding of a personal life that corresponds with their adult status in work and social life. As a result, much of their personal social life plays itself out in public spaces, specifically in up-market venues like coffee shops or restaurants.³ A single professional in his late twenties jokingly explained why he had to stay home on the first day of the *'iid* celebrations, despite his travel plans. His mother had begun to complain that he acted as if his home were a hotel, he said.

Whereas only more affluent Cairenes can afford spending time at such relatively expensive places as upscale coffee shops, young men and women of other strata also engage in mixed-gender socializing in public spaces. Unemployment, low wages and a lack of suitable housing have made marriage a difficult accomplishment for most (lower) middle class youth. This is one of the causes of the rising marital age in the last two decades (Rashad and Osman 2003; Osman and Shahd 2003; Singerman and Ibrahim 2003). Like their more affluent counterparts, many therefore experience a liminal period of extended adolescence or partial adulthood living at their parents' home. At the same time, there seems to be a partial relaxation of restrictions on public mixed-gender socializing, allowing engaged couples somewhat more room to meet and get to know each other—with or without cognizance of the family (*cf.* Abaza 2001b).

Walking the city one cannot help but notice the importance and frequency of public mixed-gender socializing among less affluent youth. Romantic couples are a pervasive presence in Cairo's public spaces. Most striking is the ubiquitous presence of 'limited income' couples in public parks and on the banks of the Nile. This colonization of public

space for romantic and intimate encounters seems ironic in light of the extensive vice laws proscribing intimacy in public. In the last ten years Cairo has seen the rise of a large number of shopping malls, some of which target a broader middle class public, though most target more affluent consumers and are located in Cairo's up-market districts. In an article exploring the significance of malls in the reshaping of public space, Mona Abaza argues that the Cairene malls provide new spaces for "social interaction, for shaping lifestyles and needs for consumption, a space for youth and the new professionals...Malls are ideal places for mixing, for flirting" (2001b:118-9). These malls have created protected and respectable urban spaces for mixed-gender socializing under the innocuous heading of shopping.

Concerns and dilemmas that are by and large shared by a majority of young Cairenes thus find class-specific expressions in Cairo's increasingly segmented cityscape. In contrast to their less affluent counterparts, upper-middle class professionals possess the capital to create 'respectable' and comfortable solutions for these dilemmas within the urban landscape.

Cairo's social and sports clubs can be seen as the most important predecessors of upscale coffee shops. Informants almost invariably said that, previously, their social lives had revolved around the club. Social and sports clubs have long formed the primary focus for the social life of middle and upper class families. In Nadi ig-Gezira, Nadi il-Maadi and Nadi is-Seid, to name a few of the most illustrious and exclusive clubs, children would play a range of sports and hang around with age mates, while other members of the family socialized. The clubs have always welcomed a public made up of all ages and both genders. They are considered safe and respectable for women's socializing since they are marked by a family atmosphere and a high level of social control. They are moreover sealed off from the outside world by fences, while membership cards guarantee social closure and a degree of social homogeneity.

From the late 1970s onward new types of places began to appear that catered to young middle class Cairenes in need of their own spaces for their outings. The first places of this kind were the various branches of Wimpy, a fast food restaurant. More affluent Cairenes could also visit the more expensive Italian restaurants that appeared in the 1980s. With some embarrassment, a friend told me that there had been times when Wimpy was *the* place for young couples to go out on a first date. This, at the time, exciting First World venue elicits embarrassment now that such materializations of the First World have become more widespread and sophisticated. After a period of single reign, Wimpy was joined and eventually out-competed by Kentucky, Pizza Hut and McDonald's. With the expansion of coffee shops and restaurants offering more sophisticated options, the fast food chains have lost much of their appeal as places for socializing. Coffee shops that offer an American style choice of coffees and light dishes, and restaurants like Chili's (TexMex) and Johnny Carino's

(Italian-American food) have become preferred meeting places for young Cairenes who can afford their comparatively high prices. In the meantime, private clubs stopped being prime places to spend leisure time for most young professionals carrying membership cards. Many report that they stopped frequenting the club when they entered university.

The shift from the family atmosphere of the club to the more generation-specific coffee shop reflects a number of important features of this new up-market leisure culture. Access to clubs is restricted to members. In order to become a member, one needs recommendations from sitting members and a considerable sum of money. In the 1970s a modest middle class income could procure membership in one of the moderately prestigious clubs. Nowadays membership in these mid-range clubs has come to require large investments, while the more prestigious clubs are out of reach to all but the wealthiest families. However, membership extends to all family members and can be transmitted to in-laws at relatively low cost. Club membership is thus first and foremost a family asset, comparable to the ownership of a furnished apartment or holiday home in one of the coastal resorts. Visits to a coffee shop require no such commitment or major investment but a steady cash flow that corresponds with the comparatively high monthly incomes of many upper-middle class professionals. They allow for a more individualized access based on financial means.

Clubs are moreover marked as family domain, even if some far corners would serve as hang out places for groups of young people. Nada, an upper-middle class professional woman in her early thirties, said that, when she entered university, she wanted to explore places other than the controlled spaces of the home, school and the club. "In the club there will always be a friend of the family controlling you." She anyway finds the atmosphere at her family's club, Nadi il-Ahli, suffocating, "very middle class, lots of *muhaggabaat!*"⁴ "My parents gave me the club. When I started working, I could leave the club behind and pay for entry in my own world," Nada continued.

The shift from the club to the coffee shop entails a move to a more generation-specific public and space. Even though young people are not the only ones who visit coffee shops, they do make up the dominant public and thereby define these spaces as their domain, in contrast to the familial atmosphere of the clubs. The coffee shop moreover provides a meeting space for relationships that have outgrown those of the club. Friends from work or university might not be members of the same club, or might not be club members at all. The exclusive openness of coffee shops fits the composite nature of the upper-middle class, where not all share family histories that would bring club membership.

Interviews with owners and staff suggest that the coffee shop concept was first introduced to Cairo by Cairenes from elite backgrounds who had been inspired by similar formulas in Europe or the United States. Coffee Roastery in Mecca Street, Mohandisseen, was claimed to be the first coffee shop of its kind. Shortly after its opening in the mid 1990s it began

to draw large crowds. Several people told me that the coffee shop soon became so popular that one had to reserve in advance to secure a seat, and that the street in front of the coffee shop would be crowded with patrons who could not be seated inside. Following this initial success, the number of coffee shops expanded rapidly in the late 1990s and has kept on growing since. Though almost all coffee shops are locally owned, they are clearly modeled on American counterparts, including their food and beverages. Almost all coffee shops offer a range of special coffees, as well as the ubiquitous Club Sandwich and Caesar Salad.⁵

Coffee Roastery and Cilantro, two of the biggest coffee shop chains, respectively started out as small outlets for specialty coffees and deli foods. By 2002 they had significantly modified their formulas to meet local preferences. Several branches across town provided comfortable and luxurious seating and had a broad menu of dishes and non-alcoholic drinks, though differences remained. “We are different from coffee shops like Roastery’s,” one of the partners in the Cilantro chain explained. “They serve hot food. Our system relies on fresh, ready-to-go food on the shelf. It allows you freedom over your time, you can see and choose; you are in control. No one bugs you about what you want. It gives an independent feel.”

With their increased emphasis on food, many coffee shops have moved closer to restaurants. The editor of *Campus Magazine* was clearly not amused by this ‘degeneration’ of the ‘original’ coffee shop formula: “a few years ago, there was only one coffee shop, Harris



Figure 13: Mecca Street with Coffee Roastery and the Retro Café

Café. It was exciting, European. But Egyptians have turned it into something else, smoking *shiisha* [water pipe] and eating, eating, eating. They do not get the idea of reading in a coffee shop or simply chilling out.” Karim, a professional in his late twenties, observed a similar discrepancy, though he was less judgmental about Cairene trends. “Coffee shops in Canada are like McDonalds [i.e., a routine and unremarkable, foremost functional visit],” he said. “In Egypt, we changed them to our form. Here, going to a coffee shop is an outing.”

Coffee shops are still set apart from proper restaurants by the fact that eating is optional and the atmosphere and seating arrangements are largely informal. The partner in the Cilantro-chain considered such informality a defining feature of their coffee shops. “We don’t want people to consider going to Cilantro as an outing,” he said. “It is a second living room; read, work, do anything you like.” Ismail, the owner of the Retro Café, expressed a similar idea. What for many patrons defined the coffee shop was indeed its café-like character: one can meet up with friends to have a drink without being obliged to eat, as one would in restaurants. Several people pointed out that frequenting a coffee shop was much less expensive than going to restaurants or five-stars hotels. As Karim put it, “drinking a coffee in a coffee shop is one of the best ways to spend 10 LE in Cairo. And who does not have 10 LE in Egypt?” When I insisted that not everyone in Egypt could afford to pay 10 LE for a coffee, Karim specified: “well, of course not *ibn il-muwazzaf* [the son of a civil servant].” These comparatively ‘soft prices’ (a term used by a waiter in a coffee shop) allow many to include the coffee shop in their semi-daily routines and are instrumental in establishing the coffee shop as a primary space for upper-middle class social life.

The number of coffee shops has increased dramatically since the late 1990s. The striking success of the coffee shop formula and the rapid spread of coffee shops and similar venues in affluent areas of Cairo evidence a widely felt need for such spaces and an eager public able to pay for consumption in such venues.

These upscale coffee shops are part of the larger up-market circuits of consumption and production discussed in Chapter One. They share the relatively steep prices, as well as the conspicuous cosmopolitanism. They are similarly part of a desired First World that touches ground in Cairo and becomes part of the everyday life of those who are affluent enough to move in up-market Cairo. In contrast to other parts of up-market Cairo, coffee shops are however specifically young spaces.

Contested modernities of leisure

Coffee shops have taken up new positions within local geographies of leisure around the world. The taste for cappuccino has become a potent global sign, signifying gentrified tastes in highly diverse local taxonomies of cultural distinction. While the kind of spaces coffee

shops constitute within local geographies of leisure, and the distinction conferred by the taste for café latte are eminently local matters, they lend much of their signifying potential, prestige and distinctiveness to their embeddedness in global flows (*cf.* Appadurai 1990; Guano 2002).⁶

In many colonial and post-colonial settings, cosmopolitan or ‘westernized’ elite practices have been taken to indicate modernity and sophistication.⁷ Such connections between cosmopolitan elite practices and ‘the modern’ and ‘the sophisticated’ have long been both common *and* contentious in Egypt. During much of the twentieth century, France provided central reference points for distinctive cosmopolitan practices and lifestyles, but in the last two decades France has been overtaken by the United States. Familiarity with foreign, ‘First World’ standards, consumption practices and lifestyles and local cosmopolitan equivalents has taken on renewed importance and cosmopolitan referents constitute common signs of distinction now that Cairo has ‘returned’ to the global economy and new media and communication technologies have facilitated access to global cultural flows (Appadurai 1990).

In his study of mine workers in the Zambian Copperbelt, James Ferguson (1999) argues that the ‘local’ and the ‘cosmopolitan’ present two locally available styles. A choice for one or the other reflects a specific stance within the local context. Adoption of a local style indicates allegiance to kin and local networks that connect a mine worker with his ‘hometown,’ while, conversely, the choice for a cosmopolitan style indicates a withdrawal from such networks into the more anonymous urban life. Following Ferguson, the ‘local’ and the ‘cosmopolitan’ can be said to represent local repertoires that are taken up in personal strategies and performances that signify specific choices, allegiances and modes of belonging in the local context.

In Cairo such choices are heavily inflected by the conflation of explicitly localized and cosmopolitan repertoires with specific class cultures (for example, *sha’bi* versus modern or chic). The fact that such cosmopolitan styles are de rigueur in up-market circles does not mean that such styles are absent among other strata. Cairo has consumption circuits that offer more accessible tastes of the cosmopolitan to a wider public. The malls discussed by Mona Abaza (2001b), fast food restaurants and cinemas all offer consumption experiences with cosmopolitan referents. What differentiates distinctive cosmopolitan styles and practices from more accessible ones is a matter of symbolic struggle and continual efforts at differentiation. However, whereas an explicitly cosmopolitan style has become mandatory in upper-middle class circles, such a style might be more ambiguous in other circles. An upper-middle class woman who wears tight jeans and a *body* [a body-tight shirt] is unremarkable and respectable. In other circles such a choice might be ambivalent at best.

Such cosmopolitan ambitions reflect postcolonial histories and predicaments. With

respect to Brazil's middle class, O'Dougherty argues that the social significance of the consumption of foreign goods extends beyond individual status concerns to include "the way these goods themselves seem to make modernity intimate" (2002:122). She writes that their desire for foreign goods has to be understood in the context of imagined geographies of the First and the Third World. She suggests that the availability of such foreign goods is taken as an indication of the country's condition and its in- or exclusion from the world stage (O'Daugherty 2002:130-1). Cairene cosmopolitan consumption practices must be placed in a similar context. Notwithstanding the transnational references of upper-middle class lifestyles, cosmopolitan repertoires are locally generated and derive their significance from desires for First World sophistication and inclusion, as well as from their function as class markers, both of which have long genealogies in Cairo (*cf.* Guano 2002).

In Cairo such cosmopolitan referencing not only intimates elite class membership and sophistication, it can also be taken as a sign of alienation and rootless Westernization, which is associated with moral looseness. The charge of Westernization has been around for over a century, and has primarily targeted the cultural and moral corruption of the upper class (Armbrust 1996, 1999; *cf.* Baraka 1998). In his 'Bourgeois leisure and Egyptian media fantasies' (1999), Walter Armbrust argues that the mixed-gender character of elite leisure practices—the mingling of women and men in public spaces—has long been a focal point for contestation.

[T]he beach, with its controversial mixing of partially dressed men and women in public...presents a zone of danger that media representing it share, symbolized by their treatment of women as the most contentious issue in East/West polemics. Beach representations always pointedly include women. If they did not, there would be nothing to say or represent, nothing to register the zone of social experimentation that they mark out and share. (Armbrust 1999:107)

Armbrust moreover notes that contestations surrounding leisure practices display a strong emphasis on class. He argues that middle class Egyptians should avoid both the pitfalls of lower class backwardness and the moral looseness and inauthenticity of the elites.

Leisure is not for the poor, and it is not healthy when the extremely wealthy indulge in it. The presumed decadence of both the poor and the rich brackets middle class identity. The poor are suspect because of their 'failure' to adjust their lives to modern institutions, the wealthy for a rootless cosmopolitanism at the other end of the socioeconomic spectrum. This failure 'to get with the program' is marked by presumed backwardness, and for the rich, by an inauthenticity tainted with foreignness. To be middle class is to refuse both extremes. (Armbrust 1999:112)

According to Armbrust, the terms of contestation over class, morality and authenticity have remained remarkably constant throughout the twentieth century. Yet what specific forms these contestations have taken over the last sixty years remains unclear. To what extent was Nasserite modernism able to pry notions of the modern away from damning images of the West and conceptions of rootless cosmopolitanism and to successfully recreate the modern as a field for a large progressive and authentic middle class? What role was assigned to mixed-gender sociability in this ‘modern’? State-produced films of the Nasser period give the impression of a successful localization of the modern, in which easy mixed-gender sociabilities in public spaces such as the university, club and the beach played a key role (see Armbrust 1996, Gordon 2002). I heard frequent comments on the comparatively liberal atmosphere of the 1960s and 1970s, the era before increased religious mobilization. These were times when, as was often mentioned, women did not wear the *higaab*, but the *mini-jiip* [miniskirt].

The iconic *mini-jiip* notwithstanding, it remains unclear what kinds of public mixed-gender socializing actually took place. The now classical films that portray an Egyptian modern were part and parcel of the modernist program. The question remains to what extent they represented practices that were common in large sections of the middle class. And what were the reverberations of Islamic movements and the subsequent increase in religiosity? How did religious mobilization influence mixed-gender leisure and women’s use of public space? Given the paucity of detailed socio-cultural histories of Cairo’s middle class, I can merely indicate that the new coffee shop leisure culture must be placed in this complex field of contestation over gendered norms of propriety, religiosity and Western influence.

Coffee shops and their affluent mixed-gender publics can be seen as the latest manifestation of distinctive cosmopolitan practices and lifestyles, negotiated within social and religious matrices of propriety. Critiques of these distinctive leisure practices significantly focused on the moral fiber of the women who took part in such forms of leisure. As I argue below, and in the next chapter, mixed-gender sociabilities in coffee shops are similarly the subject of contestations regarding the moral standing of female patrons.

The coffee shop formula that was pioneered by the Seattle-based Starbucks company seems ideally suited for the Cairene context (*cf.* M.D. Smith 1996). This ‘First World’ formula is part of global flows of distinctive cultural consumption, yet is not associated with ‘immoral’ spaces of alcohol and subterranean sexuality like bars or nightclubs. None of the coffee shops, nor equivalent up-market restaurants like Chili’s and TGI Friday’s sell alcohol. Notwithstanding their oftentimes conspicuously cosmopolitan lifestyles and consumption practices, many coffee shop patrons consider alcohol definitely *haraam* [forbidden (in Islam)] and therefore proscribed. The absence of alcohol contributes significantly to the

coffee shop's aura of respectability and its appeal to a broad upper-middle class public. Within upper-middle class circles, coffee shops have by and large succeeded at introducing a First World feel, while avoiding more damning associations of immoral Western nighttime leisure.

Maha Abdelrahman explores the rise of a world of consumption goods and services that are tailored to Islamic lifestyles and offer “practicing Muslims the opportunity to express their piety without necessarily having to abandon a consumerist life style which allows them to exhibit their affluence and enjoy the luxuries of middle-class consumerist culture prevalent in Egypt” (2005:4; see for an exploration of similar issues in Istanbul, Navaro Yashin 2002). Abdelrahman argues that this “new wave of Islamic consumerism” fits with the new generation of preachers like Amr Khaled, whose teachings focus on reconciling ‘religion’ and (affluent and comfortable) ‘life’ (Abdelrahman n.d., see also my Chapter Five). While they are not marked as particularly Islamic, coffee shops similarly negotiate religious prescriptions and desires for conspicuous consumption, and are, for many patrons, part of their own reconciliation of ‘religion’ and ‘life.’

All coffee shops lay claim to a sense of First World belonging. Their design and menu are modeled on American counterparts. Most coffee shops carry English names. English is also prominent on the menus, ranging from a simple English list (with typos) to a menu exclusively in English, describing the food and beverages in baroque terms. On the Cilantro menu, for example, Café Latte was described as “espresso soothed by a generous pour of steamed milk and topped with a whisper of foamed milk.” The use of English and the claims of direct or indirect links to American counterparts bestow a sense of cosmopolitanism and exclusivity on a venue, its food and beverages, and its clientele. In line with the menu, the common language used in coffee shops is the upper-middle class mix of Arabic and English characteristic of young upper-middle class professionals. It blends in nicely with the cosmopolitan decor and menu.

These choices point to the exclusive clientele coffee shop owners wish to reach. The partner in the Cilantro-chain said that they target people who have experienced similar venues and products abroad, “business executives, people who work in banks.” Yet such routines have made their ways into a wider constituency. Just as English (and a mix of English and Arabic) has become a local class language, cosmopolitan routines like having a Café Latte and a Caesar Salad in a coffee shop have been taken up by a less exclusive constituency and have become part of a class- and generation-specific everyday.

Going to coffee shops or a restaurant like Chili's is an intimate, bodily experience, which indicate one is at home somewhere. Whereas some would not be able to go without a good cappuccino in the day, others would regularly compare the seductive qualities of the

different chocolate pies on offer at different coffee shops. Coffee shops can thus be said to reshape bodily experiences of need and pleasure. They thereby also redraw mappings of enjoyment and relaxation and the urban itineraries that are based on such mappings. *Fuul* and *ta'mmiyya*, the daily breakfast of a vast majority of Egyptians, may then become 'oriental breakfast,' as someone put it in an invitation to the SaharaSafaris email-list.⁸



Figure 14: Café Latte at the Mint Café

Michael D. Smith (1996) argues that a taste for the specialty coffees in US coffee shops constitutes a new form of easily accessible cultural capital. In Cairo coffee shops introduce one major opposition: between foreign food and drinks, and local ones. The person who has developed a taste for anything from a cappuccino to a double espresso stands in contrast to those people who keep to their *'ahwa mazbuut* or *ziyyaada* [Turkish coffee with exact or extra sugar]. Distinction lies in this case not in the knowledge of and taste for the specifics of specialty coffees, but in the cosmopolitan referents of food and drinks, the venue and its clientele.

The American referents and genealogies of coffee shops and restaurants indicate the extent to which these spaces are tied into larger transnational geographies. As said, local configurations of cosmopolitan belonging have a long history in Cairo. In earlier times Europe, and particularly France, was the measure of all things elegant. Many of the shops catering to the upper (middle) classes of the time carried French names and sold the latest French products and fashions. At the turn-of-the-century, Cairo's exclusive department stores were modeled after the Parisian *grands magasins* (Abaza 2001b). Much like contemporary coffee shops, exclusive establishments like Groppi or L'Americain long conveyed a sense of cosmopolitan belonging and local distinction that, in contrast, had Paris

as their gold standard. However, France has ceased to be the measure of sophistication and cosmopolitanism. “Nowadays,” as a coffee shop manager said, “Middle Eastern youth want an American style.” Emanuela Guano (2002) observes a similar shift from an orientation toward French styles, consumption goods and architecture to American ones, with Buenos Aires changing from the ‘Paris of Latin America’ to the local version of Los Angeles or Miami. This shift reflects the increased dominance of the United States in the international arena and the prevalence of North American mass culture in global cultural flows. Coffee shops can also, more specifically, be seen as the leisure equivalent of the up-market workspaces of many coffee shop patrons, which are tied into global economic networks and aim to function according to ‘global’ standards. English has replaced French as the language of the elite and *café-au-lait* has been overtaken by café latte, American style.

Coffee shops convey a sense of cosmopolitan belonging through food, drinks and leisure culture. While sipping a vanilla-flavored café latte, one can reach into other sources of imagined worlds that are mediated through the global cultural flows of advertisements, films and music videos (Appadurai 1990), as well as by potential experiences abroad, and feel part of a transnational community of young coffee-shop-going, cafe-latte-drinking people. The prominence of English in names and menus, and the social life in upscale coffee shops signals the creation of divisions as much as communalities. While creating a sense of cosmopolitan belonging, upscale coffee shops and their patrons also distance themselves from the surrounding spaces and the majority of Cairenes who ‘do not have a language,’ i.e., do not speak English (see Chapter Two).

New spaces, new sociabilities

While coffee shops pay tribute to overseas connections, Cairo’s coffee shop leisure culture differs from social life in their Western counterparts. Whereas coffee shops in Western settings seem to be marked for limited activities and times of the day, Cairene coffee shops host a more encompassing leisure culture, including outings that are comparable to Western nighttime leisure. These are, for many, *the* spaces for social life outside of the family. As Mona Abaza notes, “the younger generation, through meeting in coffee houses, seems to have gained some previously unknown liberties. While the 1970s witnessed a growing policing and segregation of public space, which coincided with the ascendance of Islamism, the 1990s witnessed a growing availability of such reshaped spaces” (Abaza 2001b:118).

I would regularly visit coffee shops for personal chats with one or two friends, but would also join larger groups for outings on Thursday or Friday evening. On Thursday evenings particular coffee shops become as crowded as popular bars in Western cities on Saturday night. *Shilal* of young people socialize, show off the latest fashions and engage in endemic but subtle flirting. These gatherings mostly run until ten or eleven in the evening, when

many unmarried women are expected at home. Familial responsibility and accountability for a single woman's behavior generally does not cease when she becomes an adult or financially independent. Supervision of marriageable women is taken to be a fundamental part of the familial responsibility of keeping a daughter from going astray and protecting her reputation. Curfews were the most common form of family supervision, which, as a number of women argued, were primarily enforced to protect the reputation of the family in front of the neighbors.

Coffee shops can be seen as the leisure equivalent of the up-market workspaces of many coffee shop patrons. Ismail, the owner of the Retro Café, argued that coffee shops cater to 'new professionals' rather than families. He linked coffee shops to the new up-market workspaces, which he described as "*modern giddan*" [very modern] and very different from the "Eastern atmosphere" of the family. As I argued earlier, the prolonged liminal period during which many unmarried upper-middle class professionals live with their parents can be seen as one of the main reasons for the growth of this extensive public leisure culture. The relative affluence of many upper-middle class professionals enables them to conduct much of their social life in up-market venues.

The spaces of the coffee shop stand in implicit tension to the familial space of the home, particularly with respect to mixed-gender socializing. The family was generally assumed to determine the leverage for mixed-gender socializing. A number of professionals pointed out that they would not be able to meet their male and female friends at home. "If there is a sister at home, you cannot bring your male friends over," Karim said. Tamer elaborated: "the family would not like to have visits of boys and girls. *A'ab, haraam* [shameful, forbidden]. In a coffee shop, it is possible. The family would criticize things that have become normal in the coffee shop. At my previous workplace, there was no shyness [*kusuuf*]; men and women would interact freely. Most people were open-minded and didn't have any problems. In the street such behavior would not be possible. In other places it depends on the girl's appearance and the place itself." His comments sketch the divergent spaces that many single professionals inhabit, which have distinct social rules and norms. They also indicate the importance of coffee shops in framing upper-middle class public mixed-gender socializing as normal and respectable. The familial space of the home often does not allow for the casual mixed-gender sociabilities that have become the norm in coffee shops. However, neither do other, less exclusive public spaces like the street or, as will be discussed in the next chapter, venues that are not clearly marked as classy and are seen as hosting a more ambiguous public.

While some people would bring friends home to meet their parents, most maintained a separation between their 'public social' and 'familial' lives. As Baher said, "you have to be selective whom you bring home." He argued that the mobile phone has played an important

role in this respect. The possibility of privately receiving or making phone calls facilitates the division between family and personal social life. As Baher noted, “you do not want to get the parents involved.” Exceptions notwithstanding, most of my upper-middle class acquaintances would go to great lengths to separate the familial world of the home from the world of work and outside social life. Family lives were rarely discussed in coffee shop meetings, even though almost all unmarried professionals still lived with and financially relied on their parents. These other moments and lives were only vaguely present in the coffee shop, for example in the form of curfews that recalled the family’s supervision, or the whispered comments about somebody’s financial worth or illustrious family.

The issue of greeting is emblematic for the complex negotiations that surround mixed-gender sociabilities in coffee shops. Among men, greetings with a hug and kisses have become less common. There seems to be a shift away from this kind of physical intimacy among men; among women, it remains the norm. Between men and women, the bodily intimacy of a greeting with a hug and kisses has its own limits, which differ from person to person. Whereas some would routinely greet friends from the other sex in such a way, others would decline to shake hands for religious reasons or, particularly in the case of women, out of concern for propriety and reputation. Such changes in greeting practices speak to the redrawing of lines of mixed-gender sociability in up-market coffee shops. They, however, also indicate the limits of easy bodily contact between men and women. Such greeting was largely limited to spaces of the coffee shop, and even there, was considered problematic in its own right in light of religious and social prescriptions.

One day I visited the opening of a photography exhibit of a number of SaharaSafaris members. When I as usual greeted an acquaintance in his mid-twenties with two kisses on the cheek, I met with an unusually stiff response. Somewhat embarrassed, he introduced me to his parents, who had come along to see the opening. With his parents present our usual way of greeting had become inappropriate, an act he may have had to answer for later, after the family had returned home. His discomfort illustrated some of the discrepancy between the public social lives and home lives of many young professionals.

Upscale coffee shops can be said to constitute experimental spaces for a new class presence. In the spaces of the coffee shop certain selves and sociabilities can be lived far from familial intervention, intimacy can be experienced and professional identities remain intact. The spaces of the coffee shop also induce certain normative modes of sociability and certain public performances, which may or may not concur with a person’s views and practices outside of these specific spaces.

In coffee shops, patrons usually appeared to be completely familiar and at ease with the cosmopolitan setting and the mixed-gender company. They all seemed equally light hearted and appeared to hold similar moderately liberal views. Conversations would often reflect an

innocuous middle ground and tended to bar aspects of the life of those present that were either too 'liberal' or too 'conservative,' particularly in larger groups. These conversations would generally avoid contentious issues like alcohol, clubbing and premarital sexual relationships, while they simultaneously projected a certain general progressiveness towards mixed-gender socializing. Such normative performances were particularly common in groups of young single men and women, in part because such social meetings were routinely evaluated in light of possibilities for the almost universally sought after marriage. Coffee shops appeared to provide a safe middle ground, where people from diverse family backgrounds and convictions could meet and interact within a common framework of a cosmopolitan, yet respectable normalcy.

Many people argued that, despite appearances, such progressive yet respectable attitudes were not shared by all present. A number of my male coffee shop companions would occasionally frequent bars, a fact that was rarely mentioned in such meetings. Conversely, many of my single female friends in their late twenties and early thirties distrusted the progressive attitudes that many of their male friends and acquaintances adopted. They suspected that these men would not live up to such progressive views. Egyptian men might portray themselves as progressive, they argued, go out with female colleagues and friends and even engage in more intimate relationships with women who similarly had careers and a social life outside of the home. Yet, whatever their public performance, most if not all men eventually preferred a young, inexperienced wife who would be content to take care of her family and stay home attending to her husband's and children's needs.

Men can generally allow themselves more leverage in their social and sexual behavior. As Karin Werner (1997) argues in her study of Cairene university students, men have the ability to switch roles from the seductive or harassing male stranger, to the loving boyfriend, the strict fiancé, husband or brother, depending on their relation to the woman in question. They might be seductive lovers who, once caution has given way to love and the loss of chastity or even virginity, declare the object of their unremitting love unfit for marriage. Women have less room to maneuver. Their lifestyle choices and everyday routines mark them as certain kinds of women who have made certain moral choices.

Up-market coffee shops, restaurants and bars were taken to differ along axes of price and smartness, as well as the expected and allowed attitudes of their patrons and their 'social level.' While they do not need not to go together, high prices, modishness and permissiveness were generally assumed to combine in high-end places like Café Mo (see Figure 15). Such rankings do not reflect the diverse views of patrons with respect to alcohol use and casual mixed-gender contact. They do however correspond to perceived class differences with respect to such practices. Tamer echoed common notions when he located such attitudes along Cairo's class-segmented map. "In Heliopolis it is normal to have a boyfriend," he said. "They are more influenced by the outside, they are more *free*. In Mohandiseen, half

and half; in other areas, no way.” Or, as Maha explained, “the lower and upper classes do not have problems [with sexual relationships], not like us.” These comments resonate with Armbrust’s arguments about the specific nature of middle class leisure, discussed earlier. Many middle class people navigate between allegiance to ‘modernity’ and the specter of rootless cosmopolitanism, which Armbrust sees as delimiting proper middle class leisure activities (1999:112). Female propriety and respectability presented an important focus for the negotiation of these distinctive leisure practices.

Whereas female coffee shop patrons I knew would condone most coffee shops that were clearly up-market and classy, they did monitor these spaces for possible breaches of propriety and respectability. In Spring 2002 the recently opened Retro Café was the focus of much attention in my upper-middle class circles. It was praised for its coziness and unique ambiance, which owed much to its homey interior and the personal touches of the owner. Whereas other coffee shops and restaurants created islands of privacy where already existing *shilal* could socialize, the design of this particular coffee shop included a long table and a comfortable common sitting area, which were intended to allow for more chance encounters. Maha told me that she had stopped visiting Retro after a few visits. “This place gathers girls looking for relationships. Did you see how they crawl up to each other?” she said. For the most part, Retro’s public seemed to consist of young well-to-do professionals who displayed rather casual attitudes towards mixed-gender socializing. While Retro should have been comfortable for Maha in class terms, the public was a bit too *free* for her taste. Continuing to frequent this place would put her in an awkward situation. Would people think that she, by virtue of her presence, was also *that* out-going and easy, and, by implication, not very respectable?

The public mixed-gender sociabilities that unfold in up-market coffee shops are remarkable in Cairo’s public geographies, yet they have been rapidly incorporated in the daily routines of many upper-middle class professionals. The cosmopolitan, mixed-gender spaces of coffee shops had an embryonic presence in socializing practices, work and study spaces, as well as in imaginations of and desire for a First World. For many, coffee shops finally provided a public space for mixed-gender sociabilities away from the family, yet within the bounds of respectability. Commenting on what she called the “coffee shop frenzy,” the editor of *Campus Magazine* insightfully noted, “the coffee shop answered a lot of questions about outings.”

These mixed-gender sociabilities and performances of professional upper-middle class identities often appeared to be effortless and self-evident. This class-specific sense of normalcy and self-evidence relied on a series of exclusions, both those other Cairene realities outside of the coffee shop as well as the more familiar but possibly equally disjunctive other realities of family lives. As I argue below, such upper-middle class socializing is largely confined to the spaces of those coffee shops that are clearly marked for an affluent public of a certain



Figure 15 Photo feature on Café Mo in *Enigma*

The section 'Out and About' reads:

From Coffee to Dining. Café Mo, Cairo's newest hangout is a fabulous bland of coffee shops and restaurants. The first of its kind in Cairo, this cosy venue boasts a fine selection of coffees and an extensive menu with mouth-watering dishes, in an atmosphere of warm earth colours and dark wood. Café Mo is proving to be Cairo's number one choice. *Enigma*, February 2003

Photo features are a common item in Cairene magazines. The editor of *Enigma* said that they began to experiment with such montages because of the huge popularity of such features in Lebanon. Cairo now has a number of Arabic language publications that are entirely devoted to such society features.

'cultural level.' It is moreover sheltered from other judgments and modes of sociability by strong class markers, high prices and a door policy.

Coffee shops are part of larger up-market circuits of products, services and venues that have become seemingly autarkic realities within the city. They share the comparatively high prices and conspicuous cosmopolitan references. I was always struck by the seeming self-evidence with which these up-market circuits were inhabited. The conspicuous cosmopolitanism and striking comfort of most coffee shops, which differed markedly from surrounding, less upscale venues, was hardly discussed, let alone seen as peculiar or problematic. In contrast, their mixed-gender social life regularly became the subject of direct and indirect discussions and contestations. As I argue in the next chapter, the moral fiber of female patrons was central to these contestations. Their presence was subject to numerous qualifications and contestations.

Exclusivity and closure

Coffee shops are in principle open to any consumer willing to pay over 5 LE for a cup of coffee. Some argued that these 'soft prices' made coffee shops accessible to 'everyone,' in contrast to more expensive restaurants and hotels. Yet, 'being among like-minded people' was one of the main attractions of coffee shops and 'exclusivity' was crucial to their standing and success. I argue below that social closure is a precondition for the privileged cosmopolitan lifestyles and performances that unfold in these coffee shops.

Coffee shops are marked as proper for a certain public and certain modes of sociability. They enable specific upper-middle class performances and thereby play an important role in the creation and consolidation of upper-middle class lifestyles. To be a coffee shop patron one needs both the economic capital that allows one to consume in these spaces, as well as a more general familiarity with local forms of cosmopolitan consumption and embodied upper-middle class styles, including the elusive body language that signals belonging, ease and the right to be there. The platforms for these performances are actively and anxiously guarded.

Many visitors would not want to sit in and be seen in a place populated by *bii'a* [derogatory term for those of a 'lower social level'] with their unfashionable, cheap taste. All guests are assumed to be of a similar 'cultural level' and to observe a shared code of sociability and decency. In coffee shops high prices and/or a minimum charge keep out those who do not belong to the 'comfortable' class. Economic controls are often augmented by an entry policy. One coffee shop manager clearly considered such selectivity of utmost importance. "We have a door policy because we don't want *unqualified guests*," he said. He explained that by 'unqualified' he meant not dressed well, or appearing to be a 'troublemaker,' who makes noise and flirts.

As I argue in more detail in the following chapter, the fear of attracting those of a lower social level is not only based on the importance of guarding the class markers of a place, but is also stirred by the conviction that these others might not abide by the implicit rules of gendered sociability. Overwhelmed by the availability of young women, men might flirt or harass. Conversely, some women might come with the aim of picking up wealthy male customers. These fears echo assumptions about less exclusive leisure spaces with a mixed-gender public, which are thought to be market places for easy relationships. Mixed-gender sociabilities were assumed to be normal and respectable only for a certain class of people. Accordingly, venues were judged on the ‘level’ of their public and the extent to which their mixed-gender interactions were assumed to be respectable.

Most upscale coffee shops seem rather effective in keeping out those ‘who do not belong.’ This social closure creates a semblance of community and social control. In such a place one is afraid to overstep the boundaries of hegemonic sociality. As Miriyam and Amal noted, “the atmosphere forces a certain attitude. People will shy back from crossing certain boundaries.” This closure creates a certain class-specific normalcy, comprised of specific codes regarding mixed-gender behavior. Those coffee shops that succeed in reaching and limiting themselves to a ‘classy’ public thereby become safe spaces for women. In such venues a select company can engage in subtle, civilized flirting that is not likely to be seen as harassment, since they concern people ‘of a certain level.’ As will become clear in the following chapter, the class markers of a venue frame a woman’s presence as normal and respectable. In such classy venues going out and sitting in a place in the company of other women or even alone, wearing a skirt, a *body* [body-tight shirt] or a *cut* [a sleeveless shirt] is framed as part of a distinctive and respectable, class-specific lifestyle. The presence of these women conversely marks a particular establishment as up-market, exclusive and *class*.

It is not surprising that the coffee shop has replaced the private social and sports club—the previous stronghold of (upper) middle class socializing—as the focus of suitable and respectable social life. Coffee shops reproduce the club’s spatial and social closure. As I noted earlier, the entry requirements for coffee shops are rather different from those of a club. While club membership is first and foremost a family asset, access to the space of the coffee shop is individualized and rests on the financial means to consume, as well as a familiarity and liking for this specifically ‘young’ and cosmopolitan leisure culture. The coffee shop’s mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion are adapted to new divisions and distinctions within Cairene society and create a relatively homogeneous, predominantly young, and affluent public.

Whereas mixed-gender socializing in Cairo’s new shopping malls can operate under the innocuous heading of shopping (see Abaza 2001b), upscale coffee shops have succeeded in creating a protected niche for non-familial mixed-gender sociabilities in contentious

geographies of public leisure. They have been able to wrest such mixed-gender sociabilities away from associations with immorality and loose sexual behavior that cling to some less exclusive mixed-gender spaces. By way of their prices and their explicitly cosmopolitan connections, signaling distance from surrounding places and their gender norms, coffee shops create a safe and exclusive space for the leisurely socializing of mixed-gender *shilal* and the public lifestyles of young career women. The cosmopolitan lifestyles of these young professionals can only be lived and enjoyed in these closed-off places, where this normalcy is secured through the exclusive homogeneity of the clientele under the watchful eyes of the personnel.

Geographies of belonging

The fresh modernism of stainless steel and cubist leather in primary colors at the Cilantro across the street from the AUC contrasts starkly with the *'ahwa baladi* next-door (see Introduction and Figure 11). As said, the Downtown branch relies almost exclusively on the students of the nearby American University, which is the single reason for its location in an area otherwise devoid of coffee shops. Ismail, the owner of the Retro Café, said that choice of location centrally revolves around the public one wants to reach. He said that he could not introduce the coffee shop formula to, for example, Tanta, a large provincial center in the Delta. Even if it has the requisite “level of education and culture,” the city does not support the idea of mixed-gender coffee shop outings, he argued. The partner in the Cilantro chain was even more decisive: “Our formula is espresso-based and offers only healthy food. With respect to both, places outside Cairo are generations behind. We choose locations where you have people who appreciate our offer: those who work in offices, banks. We target highly paid executives.” Certain areas in Cairo had thus been educated to appreciate certain tastes and leisure practices, while it was taken for granted that the rest of Cairo, not to mention spaces outside of the capital, were not ready for such forms of leisure.

In Cairo's divided landscape, spaces are crucial markers of identity. Names of neighborhoods can stand in for specific class identities (*cf.* de Koning 2001). Eating certain food in certain places becomes a visceral way of belonging, as well as an obvious sign of class positioning and distinction.

For some, such choices became statements of political allegiance. An upper-middle class friend told me about his insistence of taking his affluent friends to *'ahawi baladi*. “Because of the good *shiisha*,” he said, but I suspect that he enjoyed challenging his friends' class borders and sense of belonging. Not every friend would accept, and he admitted that he would not dare to do so with most of his female friends and acquaintances. In the latter case he would opt for the safe option of the coffee shop. In the middle of a heated debate, one

of his friends remarked that he was not that elitist. “Didn’t I go with you to the ‘*ahwa* and drink *shaay koshari* [tea brewed with loose leaves, rather than a tea bag, the norm in middle class circles],” he argued. Two female friends from upper-middle class families similarly had an ongoing fight about venues. Salma was active in leftist politics. She would often tease Nada and tell her off for her outspoken preference for up-market coffee shops. This dispute did not concern their differing preferences for specific venues, as much as issues of political allegiance and solidarity, with up-market circuits representing the wrong side of the fence. When we met shortly after Nada had returned from three months training abroad, Nada moved quickly to avoid the usual haranguing. “Look,” she said, “I really do not feel like sitting with *bii’a* this time. Please! I just came back.”

These anecdotes of leftist upper-middle class friends who consciously challenged their friends’ senses of belonging and ease, illustrate the extent to which places in Cairo’s segmented landscape constitute important markers on class maps and function as signs of a class-specific belonging. For many less politically inclined upper-middle class professionals, visits to *sha’bi* venues rather represented outings that were almost as exotic and adventurous as a desert safari.

The immediate borders of these up-market spaces were primarily demarcated by contestations over taste and distinction, as well as class membership. These contestations regarding class and space were primarily framed in terms of the seniority and standing of a person’s family and his or her ‘level.’ They often focused on the encroachment of *bii’a* and undeserving *nouveaux riches* (see Chapter Two).

There is a rich linguistic repertoire for expressing assessments of distinction and merit, as well as lowliness and vulgarity. As I noted in the Introduction, *sha’bi* [popular, lower class] and *baladi* [local, authentic, lower class] are basic, yet ambiguous signposts in Egyptian readings of society. They intimate divisions between local and traditional, and more cosmopolitan and modern worlds. Though these terms remain crucial to imaginations of Egyptian society, I was struck by the currency of the term *bii’a*. When I asked Nada’s *shilla* about the meaning of *bii’a*, they explained that *bii’a* literally means ‘environment,’ but is commonly used to talk about anything “low class.” Hoda volunteered that friends of hers who had attended the American University in Cairo would say “‘*Eeh gaab il-bii’a da hina?*” [What brought this *bii’a* here?] to comment on ‘poor’ people who seemed obviously out of place in the AUC’s high-class environment. Nada added that *bii’a* was mostly used for people who tried to pretend they were from a higher social background than they actually were by adopting what they thought were classy looks or attitudes. *Bii’a* is thus used for people and places that are not really poor, but lack an upper-middle class sense of style and are considered to be of a lower ‘social level.’ Vulgar would be the best way to translate the meaning of the term. Unlike *sha’bi* and *baladi*, *bii’a* does not refer to the lower classes or their presumed habits, but rather to a ‘failed’ middle class.⁹



Figure 16: Beano's coffee shop in Zamalek



Figure 17: 'Ahwa baladi in Manyal

The discussion about the meaning of *bii'a* with this group of female professionals sparked another discussion about social snobbery and distinction. They described how those who had attended language schools would generally stick at university together and keep their distance from those who had gone to state schools. “You just would not feel comfortable with the others, and they not with you.” Such feelings of communality and ease, versus distance, unfamiliarity and even discomfort between those with a private language education and those who had attended public schools illustrate the potency of new divisions within the middle class. The shift from *baladi* to *bii'a* similarly reflects the relocation of symbolic struggle from the borders between the ‘educated middle classes’ and the ‘crude lower classes’ to divisions within the middle class itself. The clear and confident class-cum-culture differentiations captured by the dichotomy of *baladi* and, for example, *chic* have been replaced by more fickle distinctions in a highly charged continuum of tastes and styles. Space is a crucial arena for these contestations. Persons from slightly lower middle-class backgrounds who share some of the same urban spaces provide the most immediate class Other. Many of Cairo’s other spaces, products and people become an ever-present yet largely unknown, and almost unreal outside.

Cairo’s other spaces lend themselves to projections of all kinds of disliked features, ways of life and people—vulgarity, poverty, bacteria and dirt. At times it becomes the dangerous unknown on which all kinds of fears can be projected. Bayat and Denis (2000) argue that the *‘ashwaa’iyyaat*, the informal areas that house half of Cairo’s inhabitants, have been portrayed as a Pandora’s box of dangers. This other Cairo might also become a target for feelings of compassion, religious duty and inspired charity. A number of upper-middle class professionals tried to put their skills and social network to good use in a charitable project aimed at helping poor women gain an independent source of income. During Ramadan, others joined in the distribution of basic consumption goods and basic foodstuffs among deserving poor families in the medieval quarters of Cairo. They came back with stories of deserving, noble poor, as well as scheming families who merely posed at being poor in order to receive another charity package.

This other Cairo also comes back in the form of an exotic ‘local.’ *Baladi* products and people were recycled to represent exotic authenticity. Some coffee shops and up-market restaurants used elements of the ‘local’ to create an attractive ambiance. These stylistic elements were common in more exclusive up-market places that catered to a mixed public of expatriates and elite Egyptians. The exclusivity of the venues allowed them to safely introduce explicitly localized elements such as the *mashrabiyya* [lattice-like wooden screen], low seating arrangements and ‘oriental food,’ without any concomitant confusion over the distinctively up-market status of the venue and the level of its clientele. These places exemplified a local orientalism made possible by a significant distance from the crude

realities of the existing 'oriental' setting. This sanitized, exotic local has increasingly become a common style alongside the more usual cosmopolitan styles. It has become increasingly common in less exclusive establishments, particularly during Ramadan.¹⁰ The spread of this style has diminished some of its more flagrant orientalist portent.

Fear, disgust, concern and compassion can all be part of attitudes toward this other Cairo. These diverse attitudes however invariably implied unfamiliarity and distance. Such unfamiliarity seemed rather realistic and speaks of the social closure and exclusivity of up-market circuits. Yet, it could also be used to signal distance from less fortunate or even despicable realities. During one coffee shop outing with some of Nada's colleagues, a woman in her thirties made a point of recounting her accidental one-time venture into Dar es-Salaam, a lower class neighborhood. She said that en route to the center by car, she had lost her way and ended up in the crowded streets of Dar es-Salaam. It was only logical that she had been afraid, she said, but even the man who accompanied her had become nervous and wanted to get back to the main road as soon as possible. Nada told me afterwards of her annoyance with the story and storyteller. She has an aunt who lives in Dar es-Salaam and felt one could not be safer than in such a crowded neighborhood. She thought it typical that this woman came up with and elaborately performed such a story to make clear that she was far removed from such base realities.

On another coffee shop occasion I overheard someone say that he was from Shobra. I overheard the comment and asked him: "Really, are you from Shobra?" He replied with an indignant air that he was only joking. His body language conveyed a message that was at least as clear: Can you imagine, me being from Shobra? I felt that my question had been rather innocent. While the once affluent Shobra has become crowded and somewhat dilapidated, it houses a diverse population. However, I had clearly not understood the jest of his comment, and more generally, had not fully grasped the importance of such spatial markers and distinctions in upper-middle class circles.

The emergence of an up-market Cairo has redrawn and consolidated lines of social segmentation in the urban landscape. Many upper-middle class Cairenes have come to inhabit the same up-market circuits as Cairo's upper class, while less affluent middle class strata appear increasingly distant, old-fashioned, or *bii'a*. The borders of up-market spaces and publics become the focus of class contestations, expressed most frequently in depreciative comments on the encroachment of *bii'a* or *nouveau riche*. As I argue below, this segmentation of the urban landscape produces disjunctive matrices of belonging in middle-class Cairo.

Configurations of closeness and distance

As Saskia Sassen (2001) argues, the global touches ground and takes material form in major cities where the control functions for a dispersed production process are situated, thereby reconfiguring axes of centrality and matrices of closeness and distance. Such processes of global city formation give rise to a new geography “that explodes conventional notions of context and traditional hierarchies of space. They do so, in part, through *the unbundling of national territory*” (Sassen 2000:225, my emphasis). Sassen (2000; 2001) argues that central business districts in major cities around the world are more closely connected than any particular central business district with its more immediate surroundings. The ‘global spaces’ produced by a city’s position in global economic networks are more oriented to similar urban spaces outside the national boundaries than to the less global spaces next door (*cf.* Smart and Smart 2003). Space is dissected and reconfigured by the constant re-mapping of networks of shorter and longer span. Such dissection of space also entails specific configurations of closeness and distance, which depend on the ways in which specific people and places are situated in particular networks.

When we extend Sassen’s insights beyond networks of global finance and business producer services, we might identify numerous networks and concomitant matrices of connection and disconnection. A unitary concept of space is imploded in favor of an erratic, disjunctive crisscross of connections, not unlike the concept of disjunctive flows of images, ideas, capital and people proposed by Arjun Appadurai (1990). Such a reading concurs with Doreen Massey’s proposal to see place as “formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location” (1994:168). Flows and networks create diverse and overlapping configurations of closeness and distance in local socio-cultural landscapes. In Cairo diverse global flows come together in the formation of up-market circuits of production and consumption, which carve new lines of segmentation and segregation in the cityscape. In light of their importance as social spaces, coffee shops can be said to be central to such processes of re-mapping.

Benedict Anderson’s seminal work on the imagined character of communities offers one way to explore the socio-cultural aspects of such re-mapping. As Anderson argues, national imagined communities were forged through such media as newspapers, which created a (proto)national community of readers. They are products of specific practices that led to particular conceptualizations of community and the creation of certain matrices of belonging. He singles out the rise of print capitalism, and in particular, the growth of a newspaper reading public as one of the prime mechanisms for the imagination of national communities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The significance of th[e] mass ceremony [of reading the newspaper]...is paradoxical. It is performed in silent privacy. ...Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion. ...At the same time, the newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbours, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life. ...[F]iction seeps quietly and continuously into reality, creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. (Anderson 1991:35-6)

Anderson argues that the very private reading of the newspaper in the knowledge of others doing so at approximately the same time suggests simultaneity and communality, both of which are crucial to the imagination of national communities. But that communal reading in anonymity is not enough. The imagined community is grounded in daily life through the observation of others carrying similar symbolic goods or performing similar symbolic acts, which acts as proof of the reality of the community. This in turn creates “the remarkable confidence of community in anonymity.”

These two mechanisms crucial to the imagination of community—simultaneity in anonymity and verification in everyday life—can be usefully transposed onto Cairo’s coffee shops. The question is what kinds of belonging are created. Anderson’s analysis concerns the rise of national communities and the entrenchment of the imagination of sovereign, territorially bound nations through national media, institutions and symbols. In the case of such up-market leisure spaces as Cairo’s coffee shops, we might, in line with Sassen’s arguments, map out a multitude of partial imagined communities, overlapping and intersecting, of short and longer span.

Coffee shops like Retro, Bueno’s and Tobasco allow for the imagination of certain modes of belonging that are inflected by First World fashions and experiences and suggest membership in a cosmopolitan space that is local, Cairene and Egyptian, yet part of wider First World circuits and publics. Some have traveled abroad and taken part in overseas leisure cultures. Yet, one needs not have traveled to the West to be thoroughly familiar with these cosmopolitan spaces and routines. As the editors of *The Paper* noted, “go to a coffee shop and you will see two girls who do not look Egyptian and speak English, yet are Egyptians who have never traveled abroad.”

Emanuela Guano argues that Buenos Aires’ neoliberal landscape speaks to longstanding narratives of “the self and its relation to an elsewhere—its exclusion from and desire for a First World to which most of the middle classes of Buenos Aires felt an entitlement” (Guano 2002:184). In Cairo, a similar longing for First World experiences and inclusion is expressed

in the temporary excitement about new First World sites like Carrefour. The phrase ‘Now, in Egypt,’ which is often used to market goods and services with cosmopolitan referents or a foreign origin, evokes a similar combination of exclusion of and desire for First World sophistication.

“It is as if you are not in Egypt,” a woman in her thirties told me while enthusiastically recommending a bar in Mohandisseen. She was from a more affluent background than most people I knew and had lived in, and frequently visited Europe. The bar could indeed have been situated in hip London, Paris or New York, with its minimalist interior design, blue leather benches, soft lights and range of cocktails on offer. While the occasional bar or café still arouses such feelings of surprise and delight at the presence of a new First World venue in all too familiar Cairo, it seems to me that the opposite has actually become commonplace. Places like the upscale coffee shops, the up-market supermarkets that cater to cosmopolitan preferences and exclusive malls hardly elicit awe or excitement.

The conspicuous cosmopolitanism of up-market Cairo speaks of a sense of transnational cosmopolitan belonging, as do the ease and familiarity with which many more affluent upper-middle class professionals speak of sojourns abroad. Upper-middle class conceptions of a comfortable life often relate more to assumed First World standards and routines than those that mark the lives of their less fortunate neighbors. For these Cairenes, the contradiction between being in Cairo, and enjoying cosmopolitan lifestyles has largely ceased to exist. The paradoxical postcolonial combination of a sense of exclusion from, and longing for First World sophistication and inclusion is largely resolved by Cairo’s “reterritorialization of the metropole” (Guano 2002a:182). I would argue that coffee shops are prime places where, for young affluent Cairenes, such convergences are both normalized and secured. Take the words of the owner of the Retro Café. He argued that a coffee shop cannot have a ‘local’ menu. “The classes of the coffee shop want the things they see outside. If you choose a local décor, it will not be a coffee shop. These people want the other, more successful life, and find it here.” Coffee shops offer visceral experiences of a re-territorialized First World in Egypt. They allow for the imagination of a local cosmopolitan community characterized by a normalized and self-evident affluence and ease, which is simultaneously connected to *barra*, a significant outside that comprises a vaguely territorialized First World space of cosmopolitan people and products.

Though this *barra* is an imagined geographical trope, it is related to specific colonial and postcolonial trajectories and has to be situated in the context of past and present global structures of hegemony, inequality and exclusion, as well as the domestic inequalities that tie into these global structures. Whereas the United States acts as a trendsetter in realms of work, education and consumption, close-by Europe is the most important tourist destination and source of transnational friendships. The Gulf has been a common destination for upper-middle class professionals. Many visited or lived in the Gulf with

their parents, and the Emirates were seen as an attractive destination for labor migration. Discussions about working in Abu Dhabi and Dubai not only touched on the cleanliness and organization that presented such a contrast with Cairo's chaos, density and pollution, but also on the extensive first-class consumption opportunities. The knowledge of many of these professionals of 'Western' consumption goods and leisure venues owed much to such experiences in the Gulf.

As Anderson argues, imagined communities are created through an intermingling of fiction and reality, where daily life provides proof of the actual existence of community. Coffee shops provide ample chances for such verification, since they harbor a relatively exclusive public with cosmopolitan capital in oftentimes conspicuously cosmopolitan settings. Cairo's larger up-market circuits and the social worlds of many upper-middle class professionals similarly provide verification of the reality and normalcy of up-market lifestyles and standards. The hours spent with colleagues at work or the lifelong ties of family and friends that go back to the days of school and club, confirm the normalcy of upper-middle class lifestyles, wishes and expectations. This local, class-specific cosmopolitan normalcy and sense of belonging originates in and is continually confirmed by commonalities of class, lifestyle and personal networks.

This class-based cosmopolitan belonging is moreover firmly rooted in material, social and cultural configurations of social distinction and segregation. Being close, familiar with cosmopolitan lifestyles, and distant, disconnected from anything *sha'bi*, is part of a local class structure in which cosmopolitan capital presents a form of highly valued cultural capital that opens doors to the best professional jobs and social circles, and confirms that one belongs to a Cairo of relative affluence, ease and cosmopolitan elegance. The same skills and cultural expertise that allow one to participate in the social life of the coffee shop—the English-Arabic vernacular, the sexy and fashionable clothes or the more modest but equally stylish dress of some *muhaggabaat*, and the relaxed mixed-gender socializing—are those that firmly define a person as a candidate for up-market jobs and networks. Being a coffee shop patron means inhabiting an up-market Cairo of multinational companies, Metro supermarkets, and prestigious social clubs and *compounds*, where a decent living is measured along cosmopolitan standards that are at once local and global. As King argues, this 'global' mostly refers to consumption practices and lifestyles that are common to privileged First World spaces across the globe, rather than the actually existing complex 'First World' realities (2004:133). New cosmopolitan lifestyles and matrices of belonging come into being through an intricate convergence of local distinctive class cultures and transnational economic and cultural flows.

The spaces of the coffee shop provide an everyday, visceral confirmation of such cosmopolitan belonging, which is significantly secured through social closure. The

exclusivity of the coffee shops and clientele are guarded through financial and cultural barriers, which guarantee the undisturbed performance of upper-middle class sociabilities and secure the normalcy of upper-middle class life in Cairo. The space of the coffee shop is founded on and simultaneously creates new forms of social segregation, which are conspicuously justified through concerns over gendered propriety and modes of mixed-gender sociability. The ways in which class and gender combine to effect a high degree of segregation in public space is the subject of the following chapter.

I have argued that this local, yet cosmopolitan affluent community of coffee-shop-going professionals redraws maps of familiarity and belonging. Such communalities of cosmopolitan belonging come with their counterparts of distance. Following Saskia Sassen's lead on the unbundling and re-bundling of space resulting from global circuits of finance, labor, technology and capital, we could say that the class-based cosmopolitan belonging of the coffee shop gives rise to new configurations of closeness and distance, slicing up and segmenting Cairo's social landscape. As Smart and Smart note, "bodies may inevitably be located in particular places, but imaginations and loyalties need not be" (2003:275). Does such segmentation of the social landscape also lead to the unbundling of the national community in a political sense, as John Clammer suggests in his discussion of the new middle classes in Southeast Asia (2003:411)?

While class-based forms of cosmopolitan belonging do not seem to contradict feelings of national belonging, I would argue that they significantly reconfigure loyalties and familiarity within the abstract space of the nation, as well as the more concrete spaces of the city. Affluent Cairenes have the ability to opt out of national or public spaces and institutions that are increasingly under-funded, derelict and clearly not up-to-speed with First World standards and fashions, and to withdraw into their exclusive private counterparts. Consequently, different class-based worlds exist side-by-side in a divided space. It seems to me that what gives this normalcy such confident self-evidence is that it refers to local cosmopolitan criteria that are linked to imagined First World standards and lifestyles. Driving a new car or engaging in up-market leisure activities are part of such up-market normalcy, and therefore do not require a second thought. Whereas earning 5000 LE a month seems outrageous compared to most other wage levels in Egypt, it is part and parcel of a local class reality that intimates a transnational First World belonging.

Class differences and their urban expressions had been comparatively muted under Nasser's brand of Arab socialism, when numerous institutions were created to foster a broad urban middle class (see, e.g., J. Abu-Lughod's post-script [1971]). As Denis argues, the social mixture of 1960s and 1970s Cairo seems to rapidly give way to increased segregation in Cairo's "new liberal age" (1997:10). Contemporary Cairo has highly segmented life worlds, spanning the fields of work, consumption, housing and leisure. Such class-specific

cosmopolitan belonging embedded in an urban geography marked by social segregation contributes to a slicing of urban space and the social realities that inhabit the city. This is a city where some cannot even begin to imagine what it means to survive on a few hundred LE a month and where the fact that this is the lot of most Cairenes is for many not a matter of daily concern.

The space of class

Cairo's new upscale coffee shops have created a protected niche for non-familial mixed-gender sociabilities within contentious public geographies of leisure. They have been able to wrest such mixed-gender sociabilities away from associations with immorality and loose sexual behavior that cling to less exclusive mixed-gender spaces outside of the redemptive familial sphere. These up-market spaces bring together a wide range of upper-middle class performances and desires, yet also contribute toward the creation of distinctive upper-middle class lifestyles and practices.

Up-market circuits comprised of private schools, universities and hospitals, as well as shopping and residential areas, and leisure venues like the coffee shop have been crucial to the elaboration of new divisions within Cairo's middle-class. A certain segment of the middle class meets and mingles in the spaces of the coffee shop that largely exclude other segments of the middle class. They carve out public spaces for new upper-middle class lifestyles and modes of sociability and simultaneously inscribe the urban landscape with the new divisions in the middle class that were the subject of the previous chapters. The spaces of the coffee shop not only intimate cosmopolitan belonging, but also distance from other local realities. Such conjunction of connectivity and disjunction is, more generally, seen as one of the consequences of global city formation (Smart and Smart 2003:273-4). The lines of exclusion and inclusion in the new national narrative and project, discussed in Chapter One, thus find their counterpart not only in the urban labor market, but also in social segmentation and segregation in Cairo's urban landscape. Cosmopolitan references and ambitions are crucial markers in both cases. Global flows feed into local social hierarchies and come to inform new lines of division and forms of cultural distinction. These are imprinted in the urban landscape in the form of exclusive spaces with a large degree of social closure.

One of the hallmarks of these conspicuously cosmopolitan spaces and the privileged sociabilities they harbor is their mixed-gender character, which constitutes a seemingly self-evident up-market norm and comfortable class normalcy. However, as I argue in the next chapter, such upper-middle class gendered performances are fragile. This fragility becomes apparent in concerns over the possible presence of others who might not abide by upper-middle class standards of respectable mixed-gender socializing. It is however only shown in

full force when, in the course of the next chapter, we move from the coffee shop into the less class-specific spaces of the street.

¹ While *higaab* is used to refer to 'the veil' in a general sense, it also denotes a more specific form of the veil, the headscarf, as distinct from other forms of covering: the *khimaar*, the veil covering the upper part of the body, and the *niqaab*, the full body cover with face veil. The headscarf, often worn with tight yet covering clothes in matching colors, was the most common form of dress among upper-middle class *muhaggabaat*.

² Restaurant review by Nabil Shawkat in *Al-Ahram Weekly* (Issue 674, 22-28 January 2004).

³ 'Private' and 'public space' do not represent self-evident, discrete entities (cf. Ghannam 2002:91). The term public space can be taken to indicate a tendency towards accessibility, rather than a clearly defined and bounded domain. I use these terms to denote the spaces of the home versus more open, societal urban spaces. Different public spaces have differing rules of access and expected behavior, and carry differential symbolic significance. Coffee shops are public when compared to the private spaces of the home. While they can be similarly classified as public, the functional spaces of work and study constitute less contentious public arenas for mixed-gender contact than leisure spaces like the coffee shop. Compared to the 'public' spaces of work, where access is mostly restricted to employees, coffee shops constitute a relatively open space, nominally accessible to anyone who can afford to pay. They are however privately owned, protected from view and have numerous explicit and implicit entrance requirements. In this sense, they differ considerably from open public spaces like streets or parks, which I discuss in the following chapter.

⁴ Nada's annoyance with the dominant presence of *muhaggabaat* reflects ideas on class, rather than her own stand toward women wearing the *higaab*. Many of her friends and family members were *muhaggabaat*. At the beginning of the century more and more young upper-middle class women decided to take up the *higaab*. However, abstract associations of the *higaab* with a lower class public remain strong.

⁵ Restaurants that cater to the same young affluent public, like TGI Friday's and Chili's, are, in contrast, franchises of North-American chains.

⁶ In this sense the standing and popularity of Cairo's upscale coffee shops can be compared to that of the suburban housing in Istanbul discussed by Öncü (1997, see my Chapter One). She argues that the appeal and prestige of this type of housing partially derives from what she calls the 'global myth of the ideal home.' She however also points to the local impetus behind its popularity: a nostalgic narrative of the loss of an imagined green Istanbul, and a longing for social homogeneity and order.

⁷ Emanuela Guano, for example, observes that in late nineteenth century Argentina, "the localization of transnational dynamics—and especially the conspicuous consumption of European culture—played a pivotal role in legitimizing the elite of Buenos Aires as 'modern'" (Guano 2002:182).

⁸ This message invited a heated response from another member who rhetorically asked: "have we become foreigners?"

⁹ Mona Abaza notes that *bii'a* has eclipsed *baladi* as a derogatory term. In contrast to my argument, she states that the term is used to designate the bad taste of the lower classes (2001b:120, n. 13).

¹⁰ Abaza comments on a similar deployment of such purified popular traditions in Cairo's shopping malls (2001b:111).



Figure 18: Two women on Gamaa'it id-Duwal Street

5

Negotiating the City

Everyday spatial regimes in Cairo's public spaces

A TAXI driver kidnaps, robs, rapes, kills women and then cuts their bodies into pieces, puts the parts in several plastic bags and scatters them around Heliopolis and Nasr City.

This horror story has been spreading like wildfire amongst Cairenes over the past two weeks. Fortunately, it appears to be nothing more than a rumour. The Interior Ministry has issued a statement, published in most newspapers, which says the “rumours of a serial killer raping and killing women are completely groundless.”

Al-Ahram Weekly, 21-27 February 2002

During Spring 2002 a persistent story went around about a serial killer operating from a taxi in and around Heliopolis, one of Cairo's old upper-middle class districts. The purported killer was said to kidnap, rape and murder young 'well-dressed' women and mutilate their bodies. I received several emails describing these crimes in horrific detail. They included witness statements of cousins who could claim inside information as policemen and a victim's mother who had talked to her daughter on her mobile phone just before the fatal moment. The story became big enough for the government to react. It vehemently denied the factuality of the stories in national newspapers. Despite these remonstrations—or perhaps partially because of them—rumors kept spreading through email. At a certain point the emails stopped coming and the story died down. I heard and read several accounts

of the 'real' story behind the rumor. A friend's version said that these stories were based on a single incident that had nothing to do with serial killing. The killer had been caught and the case closed. A young man had been inspired by the incident and started sending emails reporting on new incidents. Though this version of events largely tallies with other reports, it is nothing like a 'conclusive' story.¹ I doubt there is one, or that it matters. The story, in its myriad forms, has become part of Cairo's reservoir of urban myths.

Internet, part and parcel of Egypt's 'new economy,' played a crucial role in spreading the story outside the purview of the official media. At the time of the rumor, in 2002, the majority of the regular email users was made up of young upper-middle class professionals, not incidentally the same group supposedly targeted by the killer. Such sensationalist stories, transmitted by word-of-mouth or through alternative media channels, were not exceptional. Cairo was often rife with rumors about the dealings of business tycoons, the plans of the government or internal strife in the ruling National Democratic Party. Not only the government's lack of democracy and shadowy tactics gave rise to such a climate of rumor, but also the spectacular 'undisciplined' capitalism of Egypt's new liberal age (Mitchell 1999). What else is one to make of the displays of vast wealth of unknown origins, the rise of imposing office buildings and residential complexes, or the vast number of luxurious cars in a country with so much poverty in the streets?

The content of the rumor and its persistence do however raise further questions. What is the significance of the fact that the alleged perpetrator was a (male) taxi-driver? Why did he supposedly single out young upper-middle class women? And importantly, why did the rumor show such tenacity, despite the government's widely published denials? What fears did it touch upon? In this chapter, I take up the issues that resonate in this rumor. I discuss the movement of young upper-middle class women in public space and highlight the everyday spatial regimes in which their urban trajectories are embedded. This will eventually take us back to the transformation of Cairo's urban landscape in Egypt's new liberal age.

Mobile lifestyles and spatial regimes

In Cairo I made the acquaintance of a number of high-powered young women who routinely move around the city from home to work to gym to coffee shop to cinema to concert before they return home to sleep, wake up early and once again cross half of the city to reach work. They were in constant contact with their friends over their mobile phones, coordinating where and when to meet, relatively indifferent to the surprisingly vast distances covered in order to socialize. While moving across the city, they were moreover connected to their families by frequent mobile phone contacts, reassuring those at home of their safety and good conduct, and informing them about their exact whereabouts. They

all had their nighttime curfews, which for most women ranged between 22.00 and 23.00 hours. As I was told, “We all have *shibshib* [slippers] at home.” This common expression conjures up the image of the metaphorical angry parent waiting for his or her child to come home, slippers in hand, ready to beat the transgressor for her disregard of the time limit. Irrespective of age, such family supervision remained an important feature of the lives of unmarried upper-middle class women who, almost without exception, lived with their families. Family supervision mostly entailed control of the time limits of their presence in public. What these women did in the time they were out of reach of their parents’ watchful eyes might have been the subject of worries and concern, but, as some friends told me, their parents had settled on trusting them.

Such energetic daily routines have become commonplace among young upper-middle class Cairenes. The presence of these young women in both professional and social public life has become normalized, even critical to upper-middle class lifestyles, which are marked by the mixed-gender character of contacts and places. Their presence is however a *fragile* one, lived out in closed class homogeneous spaces, with respectability and protection as the *sine qua non* of their ventures into public space.

This chapter attempts to read the urban landscape by exploring the ways specific people move through it. To walk the city with these particular urbanites allows me to bring out some of the logics implicit in urban life, to map the knowledge and the specific cartographies movement through the city presupposes.² I argue that the ways in which these young women navigate the city brings out the existence of specific everyday spatial regimes that frame social interactions in Cairo’s public spaces. These everyday spatial regimes are made up of ideas and norms regarding comportment, propriety and identity, which inform interpretations of a specific person’s presence in specific space/time contexts. They are importantly informed by gender and class hierarchies and framed by state control and surveillance. The state defines lines of legality and illegality with respect to social interaction in public space through, among other things, its prohibition of public intimacy and displays of sexuality. Both private guards and the omnipresent policemen and central security [*il-amm il-markazi*] publicly embody this state control and surveillance. They are instrumental in the state’s always incomplete attempts to enforce the private marital home as the single legal and proper space for intimacy.

These everyday spatial regimes have a wide purview and are hegemonic in the sense that they enforce certain interpretations of a person’s presence in a specific space and suggest certain modes of action. Yet such spatial regimes are neither unified, stable nor uncontested. They are made and remade in on-the-spot negotiations and are thus open for re-interpretation and reconfiguration in and through actual practices and encounters.

I have chosen to focus on the urban trajectories of women and thus to emphasize

contestations over femininity rather than masculinity in light of my greater access to and experience of women's trajectories. As Sudipta Kaviraj notes in his genealogy of public parks in Calcutta, social concepts that underlie movement through and the use of space are never fully verbalized or intellectualized (1997:83). Much of the logic and concepts that inform women's movement through public space was similarly not articulated, but rather constituted a form of embodied knowledge. While this chapter also relies on interviews, my arguments are principally grounded in participant observation. Since women's movement through public space is more circumscribed and rule-bound than men's, examining women's trajectories allows me to explicitly draw out the particular logics and mental maps of Cairo that inform their movement through urban space. The young women whose urban itineraries inform this chapter were all in their late twenties to early thirties and were more or less comfortably entrenched in the new professional upper-middle class.

I first turn to a short discussion of different models of upper-middle class femininity in contemporary Cairo. I then revisit the coffee shop with a focus on the ways in which gender, class and space combine in the constitution of the coffee shop as a 'safe space.' I then turn to the more ambivalent spaces of the street and explore the ways these women navigate these 'unsafe spaces.' After discussing the urban trajectories and specific everyday spatial regimes that frame them, I come back to some insights that can be drawn with respect to the changing features of Cairo's urban landscape. The trajectories of these women offer a complex picture of Cairo's public spaces. They show assumptions about the existence of class-specific norms of gendered behavior, which feed into measures of social avoidance and segregation intended to protect upper-middle class women. While the distinctive lifestyles of these women are guaranteed by class closure, gender in turn functions as an important justification of class avoidance and segregation.

Female, professional and upper-middle class

Cairo's up-market districts are dotted with coffee shops and restaurants that serve a mixed-gender clientele. An elderly middle class lady shook her head when I talked to her about this female public presence. Those frequenting coffee shops must be impolite girls or women, hiding their outings from their parents. No respectable woman would sit in a public place without the company, protection and control of her relatives. Her comments resonated with widely shared ideas regarding female propriety and mixed-gender socializing outside the purview of the family. As I noted in the previous chapter, socializing outside the supervised spaces of the home and for the more affluent, the club was often deemed less than respectable.³ Yet in certain segments of Cairene society it has become commonplace for young women to plan for a full day outside the family home engaged in both work and leisure, independent of familial supervision. As I argued in the previous chapter, casual,

daily mixed-gender socializing in public spaces has become normalized and accepted in many upper-middle and upper class circles. The emergence of spaces deemed acceptable and respectable for young women is crucial to these new routines.

The highly mobile and rather public lifestyles of these women have become valued cultural capital in parts of the upper-middle class. They constitute one of the positive models for marriageable upper-middle class women. However, these specific gendered forms of cultural capital are not uncontested. What constitutes the ideal upper-middle class marriageable woman is often the subject of heated debates. Class-specific forms of religiosity and modesty provide different, but equally attractive gendered models. These two models are not mutually exclusive. Many women tried to create their own blend, amidst constant wondering about and anxious discussions of men's preferences.

In the last two decades, the new veiling has been particularly prominent among lower and lower-middle class women, and less so among their upper-middle class counterparts (*cf.* McLeod 1991). Yet in recent years, many young professional upper-middle class women have also taken up the veil.⁴ Some women who donned the *higaab* stated that by doing so they were trying to come closer to God [*yi'arrabu min rabbina*] and starting on a road towards self-improvement (*cf.* Mahmood 2001; 2003). Others merely mentioned that it was a religious obligation to cover one's hair. In my experience, the choice to veil was not necessarily framed in terms of good versus evil, or moral versus immoral. It was often framed as a choice for a more religiously inspired lifestyle over a 'worldlier' one.

Though further research is needed to outline the diverse class dynamics behind this 'delayed' upper-middle class veiling, many people pointed to the influence of Amr Khaled, the wildly popular lay preacher who drew large middle and upper-middle class audiences to his weekly lectures and his religious programs on satellite television. In recent analyses Amr Khaled has been characterized as 'the preacher of the affluent,' since he specifically addresses upper-middle class publics and their lifestyle choices in an attempt to show them how to combine '*id-dunya wid-diin*' [the world and religion], as I was told by one of his fans (*cf.* Bayat 2002; Tammam and Haenni 2003). He is remarkably successful among young (upper) middle class women and devotes a large part of his lessons to 'female' concerns—the *higaab* being a central theme. In Summer 2002 he was banned from preaching in Egypt. Though the precise reasons for this ban remain unclear, his extraordinary success in this affluent and influential segment of society seems to have been an important rationale.

The women whose trajectories inform this chapter differ regarding their participation in religious activities and their choices with respect to the *higaab*. However diverse, this specific subsection does not include those who choose to move in strictly religious circuits and spaces. It moreover hardly includes those who regularly frequent more contentious and less 'respectable' places like discos and bars, which are marked by the use of alcohol and

their association with loose sexual norms. The upper-middle class women I came to know in Cairo are part of a mainstream that is consciously seeking a balance between an active public life, respectability and to differing degrees, religious prescriptions.

Negotiating respectability

Reading between the lines of the social lives that play out in Cairo's upscale coffee shops, one can discern a continuous concern and anxiety over the possibly problematic status of public mixed-gender sociabilities. As I argued in the previous chapter, coffee shops and their affluent mixed-gender publics can be seen as the latest manifestation of distinctive cosmopolitan practices. Such distinctive cosmopolitan leisure practices have a long and contentious history as markers of elite status. Critiques of cosmopolitan lifestyles and practices often centered on sexual norms and female propriety, which, as a consequence, are the focus of anxiety. The sexual reputation of a young woman is moreover of vital importance for her position in society and her chances of future marriage, as well as her family's reputation. These reputations were the stock subject of whispered gossip and constant concern. Coffee-shop discussions often touched on issues of respectability and virtue, especially in mixed-gender groups. Many marriageable women seemed eager to confirm their respectability in the face of possible criticism of their presence in such public venues, or of their appearance and lifestyle.

I particularly recall one meeting with a group of upper-middle class men and women. One woman brought up the subject of respectability in the humorous manner that characterizes many coffee shop conversations. Since none of the women were wearing the *higaab*, she could safely discuss the superficial grounds on which superior moral qualities were routinely attributed to *muhaabbaat*. She talked at length about examples of veiled colleagues and acquaintances who turned out to be far from respectable. "They do everything God has forbidden, but are seen as respectable and moral because they cover their hair." Such doubts concerning the moral worth of *muhaabbaat* were a common topic of conversations.⁵ This woman seemed to bring up this common discourse not so much to protest the ease with which virtues are ascribed to women wearing the *higaab*, but rather to stress that such virtues should not be automatically withheld from women who do not wear the *higaab*. She thereby publicly displayed her own concern about respectability, despite her unveiled presence in mixed-gender company.

Maha regularly discussed the fine lines she treads to safeguard her reputation and respectability. Yes to frequent phone and email contacts with possible dates, but no meetings with a man alone until they had formalized their relationship through plans for an engagement. She was involved in a drawn-out flirtation with a man she thought might make a suitable husband and repeatedly tricked me into coming along as a chaperone. Before and

after such meetings, and during quick time-outs in the bathroom, we discussed the thorny issues of female respectability and marriage. In his presence she made arduous attempts at impression management. She would, for example, comment negatively on some forms of conduct she thought he might consider inappropriate for women, like wearing a bathing suit, and would let her body speak the language of modesty. Her concerns and anxieties resonated with the concerns of many other single upper-middle class professionals. She was afraid that, despite his numerous contacts and outings with female friends, he would eventually prefer a veiled girl who would agree to stay home in order to concentrate on her role as mother and wife, a model of modesty and home-making. Their mutual exploration indeed ended in disagreement over women's employment. When he became outspoken about his preference for a housewife, Maha could not keep quiet and abandoned her attempts to appear as his ideal future wife.

Women generally have less room to juggle lifestyles and moral standards. They bear the brunt of the imperatives of respectability (*cf.* Werner 1997). Their presence in certain public spaces or company marks them as a specific kind of woman who has made specific normative choices. As Miriyam put it, "girls who know both the home and the outside world will be stronger. Men might ask: 'how did she get her experience?' But that's pure hypocrisy. Why should she be pure and he impure?" Karim similarly criticized such double standards. He argued, "there are guys who will go with girls to coffee shops but want to marry a girl who doesn't know the coffee shop. I do not see why her respectability has to depend on her outings." Their comments resonate with Farha Ghannam's analysis of gender and public space among the inhabitants of *iz-Zawiyya il-Hamra*, a lower class neighborhood in Cairo. According to Ghannam, "the attempts to control women's access to the workplace ... are not limited to the desire to control the female body and female sexuality. There is also a strong desire to control women's minds, the knowledge they have access to, and the kind of solidarities they may form" (2002:90). Miriyam's comments however also allude to skepticism toward women who do not remain within clearly demarcated borders of female propriety and respectability. Even minor 'transgressions,' in this case 'having experience,' suggest the possibility of more serious ones.

Such anxious but subtle debates about female respectability must be located in the safe space of the coffee shop, with its considerable degree of acceptance of women's public lifestyles. This rather exclusive context frames a woman's appearance and comportment as upper-middle class and thereby guarantees a certain interpretation of her presence in that space. Coffee shops are safe spaces of belonging, where social closure guarantees that women can be at ease [*bi-raahithum*] and free of unwanted looks and flirtations. They moreover legitimize a woman's presence by marking it as part of an upper-middle class professional lifestyle, thus framing it as normal and respectable.

The 'safe' space of the coffee shop

As I argued in the previous chapter, up-market coffee shops constitute safe and respectable places where upper-middle class Cairenes can engage in mixed-gender socializing. I now want to revisit the up-market coffee shops with an eye to the particular conditions and logics that constitute these coffee shops as safe spaces for women's outings. I explore the importance of internal and external borders and the anxieties that arise when these borders are breached by (the suspicion of) the presence of 'others' in these spaces.

Upper-middle class women have less maneuvering space than men in their choice of places to spend their leisure time. Though spending much time in public leisure spaces has become an important aspect of their daily routines, such outings are largely restricted to unambiguously classy places with a large degree of social closure. The trajectories of these women are invariably based on class maps: places that are safe for women are classy places. It is only in these places that they can be *bi-rahithum* [at ease] and dress and socialize as they see fit, without being annoyed or being seen as disreputable. In contrast, all women I asked resolutely dismissed the possibility of visiting *'ahawi baladi*, though some made an exception for the cafes that are part of the Downtown intellectual scene. As Marwa, a single woman in her mid-thirties, put it: "The *'ahwa* is a public place, but for a particular cultural level. It is only for men. People will refuse a girl sitting in a *'ahwa*. In our places, we are not strange. They are used to seeing women sitting alone. If you go sit in a normal *'ahwa*, everybody will look, and then someone will say something, someone will flirt."

Tamer sketched out a scale of venues along lines of respectability. The 'style of people' frequenting a certain venue was crucial to his judgment. He remembered a one-time visit to a "cheap" open-air coffee shop in Maadi. "The style of people was not that great, I did not feel comfortable. When I go out, I do not want to encounter some rancid girl, some *bii'a* that disgusts me. The atmosphere was definitely not *classy*. This is even a bigger problem for girls. I can't take my fiancée to some of the places I visit with my male friends. The places I visit with her have to have people of a 'clean' level, where everyone minds their own business and nobody looks at you in a non-respectable way or laughs really loud." The coffee shops located on Gamaa'it id-Duwal Street, a major shopping street and thoroughfare in Mohandiseen (see Figure 7), present a clear example of the places he would never visit with his fiancée. "In these coffee shops most of the girls are prostitutes. I can't go there with my fiancée. Others will think that she is not my fiancée, but my girlfriend. She will be seen as one of those girls." Nihal similarly said that she did not feel comfortable in Trianon, one of the upscale coffee shops on Gamaa'it id-Duwal Street (see Figure 1). Trianon clearly fell within the up-market segment of coffee shops, and several of my acquaintances regularly spent time there. Its location on a main street that was often negatively portrayed as the summer domain of 'Arabs'—tourists from the Gulf countries who generally have a bad reputation

among Egyptians—might have contributed to its ambiguous reputation. These negative portrayals of an expensive and classy venue like Trianon indicate the extent to which coffee shops are haunted by a specter of disrespectability, and illustrate the concomitant fragility of their reputations.

Karim had once entertained the idea of starting his own coffee shop and had clearly given the logics of the coffee shop a lot of thought. “I would need a female crowd, which in turn will attract a male crowd. You have to keep a place comfortable for women. It has to be closed, clean and part of the staff needs to be female. You need to keep a certain standard of people coming in. If a woman finds a man who harasses her, or a woman who looks like a prostitute, she will not come again because people might say that she could be one of them.” He recounted the ill-fated story of the Fashion Café, another coffee shop on Gamaa‘it id-Duwal Street. The owner of the Fashion Café had wanted to create a café with large windows that opened up to the street, “like cafes on the Parisian boulevards.” This idea proved fatal in the Cairene context. Karim said that the crowd that began to frequent the café consisted largely of men who came to meet girls. “People came who could create problems, who came to flirt/harass [*yī‘aaksu*]. Female patrons stopped coming, and another type of women started to come.” According to Karim, the closed design of most upscale coffee shops is crucial, since it hides patrons from the view of passersby in the street. “The *‘ahwa* does not have a door,” he said. “Coffee shops, in contrast, are closed. Not every passerby will see you when you sit there; you do not get influenced by other people. My girlfriend would not like to sit in a place where she would be seen and would have to hear comments. She would refuse to sit in the street. She prefers a safely closed place.”

Protecting women from view is an old theme in Cairo’s leisure architecture. Many older restaurants have a second floor where families or mixed-gender groups can sit hidden from view. As Karim’s comments indicate, visual protection remains an important feature of places that are considered appropriate for a mixed-gender public. This need for protection extends to the gaze of other patrons of a doubtful social level or social origins. Take, for example, Amal’s comments. “There are some places where a girl can sit on her own, here [Retro Café], Cilantro. These places are more Westernized. You have to see what kind of people you find in a place. For example, Maroush is just trash. The *shiisha* [water pipe] gathers low class people and upper class boys who want to pick up girls. People are always looking at you.” The venue she talked about, Maroush, is a crossover between a *‘ahwa baladi* and a coffee shop, located on the sidewalk. Maroush is an exception to the general rule that coffee shops with an upper-middle class public are closed off from views from the street. It atypically served not only cappuccino, but also *shaay koshari* [tea brewed from loose tea leaves, which is indexed as *sha‘bi*] and *shiisha*. It attracted a middle- to upper-middle class public that would equally frequent coffee shops. Yet Amal clearly disliked Maroush, not only because of it exposed its costumers to looks from the street, but more because of the ambiguous public attracted to

this crossover space.

Amal later returned to the issue of being looked at. She said that she would not ‘go in the water’ (swim in a bathing suit) if she did not feel sure of the social level of the others present. “They might be *bii’a* and *eat you with their looks*” (my emphasis). Nihal similarly emphasized the issue of being looked at and the ‘social level’ of those who look. She summarized the logics of the coffee shop as a safe space as follows: “A place has to have a certain standard, it shouldn’t be cheap. This guarantees your safety. It guarantees that our kind of people go. This is crucial with respect to the image of women in a certain place. If people look at me in a certain place, it is enough to make me wonder what they say about me. It makes me insecure.”

The look or gaze is central to comments and stories about coffee shops. It is a specific gaze that is viewed as problematic and even harmful: the invasive look of undeserving men directed at respectable and classy women. Public visibility is a central, yet highly ambiguous trope. As Susan Ossman argues with respect to Casablanca, “many youths hope that the spark of love will be lit by vision. In the street, at a social event, or at a friend’s house, the boy is typically expected to “see” (preferably at first sight!) that a particular girl is the one of his dreams.



Figure 19: Trianon Café at Gamaa‘it id-Duwal Street, Mohandisseen

She is and becomes his vision, and he hers” (1994:167-8). In Cairo I heard similar stories about the importance and potency of (first) sight, primarily from less affluent middle class Cairenes who did not engage in daily mixed-gender socializing. Though I would speculate that the ample possibilities for such socializing among upper-middle class Cairenes reframe the importance of ‘love at first sight,’ being seen certainly presented one of the attractions of the coffee shop.

The essential question, however, was who could be seen by whom. The recurrent references to “a certain standard of our people” and “our kind of people,” as well as the frequent negative mention of less classy others indicate the importance of ‘social level’ with respect to mixed-gender spaces. ‘Social level’ determined the interpretation of specific looks. A look might be part of an appropriate and desired visibility, or might be harmful and defiling, depending on ‘social level.’ Not being looked at by certain people was central to all discussions of coffee shops, and more generally, movement through public space.

Just as a look of a *bii’a* person can be harmful, those of classy others are invited, even desired. Yet, being seen was hardly ever discussed, except for in comments about the shallowness, vanity, opportunism and lack of respectability of those ‘others’ who made it their priority to be seen in the latest, hippest place. Wanting to be seen in order to find a partner was similarly the subject of silence and vilification. Even if many single women entertained the thought of meeting a future husband through their coffee shop socializing, such hopes were rarely mentioned. I did hear many critical stories and comments about those ‘other’ girls who only visited coffee shops in search of a good catch. The desire to be seen was apparently too contentious, and could evoke accusations of shallowness and, in the case of women, charges of disrespectability.

Besides the gaze, the specter of prostitution is a central theme in these stories about women’s presence in public leisure venues. They reflect a constant concern about the ‘level’ of the female patrons and the nature of the relationship between men and women in upscale venues. The specter of prostitution is indicative of the symbolic minefield that these young women negotiate in Cairo’s public spaces. The core of this ambiguity consists of the contrastive possible interpretations of a young woman’s presence in public. Does her presence indicate a disreputable openness to sexuality or is it part of a more respectable lifestyle and everyday routine?⁶ A similar ambiguity pervades public flirting in Casablanca. Ossman argues that the anxieties that surround public flirting routinely juxtapose morality and visibility (Ossman 1994:160). Public visibility can indicate (immoral) availability. As Ossman writes, “one of the problems posed by the new public encounters between young men and women is the lack of adequate paradigms for flirting practices. In the past, openly seductive women in public spaces were prostitutes, and this idea continues to color many people’s condemnation of those engaged in the *drague* [public flirting]” (Ossman 1994:163).

This ambiguity is fed by a continuous flow of rumors and stories that invoke a city

with an immense ‘illicit’ shadow existence. Every now and then I would hear stories of premarital sex, lusting girls (that young men were ‘lusting’ was taken for granted) or extramarital relationships, which were told in the form of gossip, rumor and occasionally personal confession. This fantastic underbelly of the licit everyday was frequently alluded to in comments on the discrepancy between people’s public face and their hidden, ‘illicit’ lives. Many people took an almost sardonic pleasure in the telling of such stories as a reminder that nothing is what it seems these days. The ‘real’ incidence of such audacious practices is hard to establish, but such stories do caution us not to take Cairo’s public face of propriety for granted. The hyped stories about the incidence of *‘urfi* marriages on university campuses, estimated in newspaper articles to concern between 17% and—a no doubt grossly inflated—70% of the student population, provide a good example of the widespread fear of a pervasive subterranean presence of transgressive behavior (*‘urfi* marriage is an Islamic customary form of marriage that is not registered by the state and often conducted without cognizance of the family) (Abaza 2001a).⁷

Wealth, social origin and class position guarantee certain interpretations of a woman’s presence in public. ‘Social level,’ which combines notions of class and culture, seems to be one of the central criteria in judging whether a certain woman is able to indulge in casual mixed-gender contact and play with features that otherwise suggest a lack of respectability. These assumptions imply that women (and men) from a high social level know how to conduct mixed-gender interactions properly, since it constitutes part of their respectable class normalcy. Similarly, wearing ‘naked’ [*‘iryaaan*] clothes need not indicate a lack of respectability as long as the good origins of the wearer are beyond doubt. These clothes are then framed as part of a respectable class-specific norms and lifestyles, as much as the stylish clothing of upper-middle class *muhagabbaat*. Their class markers protect these young women from being associated with girls from other social ‘levels’ who wear similar clothes and might be perceived as being *saayi‘a* [a bum, of the streets; in a more positive sense, streetwise] or even *illit il-adab* [literally: impolite; often a polite way of speaking about anything from loose morals to prostitution].

One of the ways to avoid confusion and contestation of this sexy-but-respectable self-presentation is to move in classy places, by way of classy means of transport. Such class framing defines these women’s public lifestyles and sexy appearances as normal and respectable. As I argued in the previous chapter, the anxiously guarded mixed-gender nature of the coffee shop allows for the performance of upper-middle class gendered identities—the leisurely socializing of mixed-gender *shilal* and the public routines of young career women—. The presence of women in turn marks a particular establishment as upper-middle class.

The gendering of public (and private) spaces and the spatial inflection of gendered conceptions of propriety in space present old, but recurring themes in urban landscapes. Bondi and Domosh’ analysis of the appearance of feminized consumer spaces in late

nineteenth century New York highlights the mutual imbrications of gender, place and class identity. They argue that:

The new identity of the nineteenth-century middle class woman, as consumer and upholder of cultural and religious norms, was inscribed into the physical fabric of the city, and that physical form reinforced the identity. ...[A]s portions of cities now accessible to women became associated with bourgeois definitions of femininity, women's bourgeois identities could be determined by their locations within the city. Definitions of femininity became interwoven with delineations of certain spaces within the city. (1998:279-80)

Late nineteenth century Cairo similarly saw the rise of such feminized consumer spaces in the form of '*les grands magasins*,' department stores for the Egyptian elites (see Abaza 2001b:103-4). Both Abaza (2001b) and Bondi and Domosh (1998) argue that shopping malls can be seen as contemporary examples of the expansion of consumer-oriented activities, which create controlled public spaces that are deemed safe and proper for women's public outings. Coffee shops similarly frame the public presence of upper-middle class women as appropriate and respectable.

In the streets, where up-market norms are not hegemonic and a clear class framing is absent, such self-representations may well be overturned. The same fashionable *cut* [sleeveless top] becomes minimally something out of place, but may also be seen as disreputable and taken to indicate easy morals, an open invitation to comments and even harassment. A young professional who was also a frequent visitor of the coffee shop scene told me of his annoyance with some of his friends. They insist on harassing women they perceive to be less-than-respectable. A girl smoking or wearing tight clothes in the streets would qualify as such in their eyes. "Shame on you!" he would tell them, "doesn't your sister dress just like her?" Such inversions indicate the extent to which social identity is framed and thereby significantly determined by specific spatial contexts.

Crossing the city

In contrast to the closed coffee shops, the streets are largely characterized by male entitlement.⁸ Women, particularly young women who are not accompanied by men, have a liminal and, as I argued earlier, ambiguous status. They are supposed to be on their way somewhere, have a clear destination and not linger for too long. Hanging around in the streets, especially on their own, is taken as an open invitation for men to make contact. As a consequence, most of my female acquaintances carefully planned their schedules and meetings to avoid time gaps during which they would have to spend time waiting in a public space.

One day I was walking on one of the busy Downtown shopping streets, when a passerby

angrily commented, “*Mish haraam ‘aleeki kida?*” [Shouldn’t you be ashamed of yourself?]. It took me a moment to recover from the shock. While I had grown used to *mu’aksaat* [flirts/harassment] when walking in the streets, I had never before been reprimanded in such a way. In my mind, I quickly went over my clothes: a knee-length skirt and a somewhat tight t-shirt with short sleeves; nothing out of the ordinary. The anonymous middle-aged man had gone and I could not demand an explanation. I looked around and saw myself surrounded by numerous examples of sexy and ‘naked’ clothing in the shop windows.

Still baffled, I continued on my way home and called Nada to ask her opinion. She was far from surprised. At first she suggested he was merely flirting. When I insisted that it had sounded more like a reprimand, she said, “then he must have thought you were not properly dressed. He must have taken you for an Egyptian.” I told her that I had heard that such ‘interventions’ used to be common in the early 1990s, at the height of religious mobilization, when people would accost others in the street and admonish them to better their lives and live up to religious prescriptions. I had, however, never experienced anything like it and had thought such interventions were a thing of the past.

Upon getting out of a minibus, a fellow woman traveler would occasionally pull down a shirt that had moved up, baring part of my waist. Such small gestures invariably reminded me of the bottom lines of decency for women in public and often left me slightly embarrassed because of my inattention to such important details. Yet, these benign, caring gestures seemed far from the man’s angry reprimand. “Well, there is a first time for everything,” said Nada philosophically. “That was a fanatic man from another time.”

It is difficult to capture and mediate the intensity and bodily felt character of interactions in Cairo’s public spaces, or the intense self-awareness of many women when they move through public space. Gillian Rose argues that women are constituted as explicitly embodied, located subjects. Many men, in contrast, enjoy a masculine illusion of freedom from the body and its inevitable locatedness. These differential forms of subjectivation give rise to specific experiences of space. She argues:

Women of all kinds are expected to look right, and to look right for a gaze which is masculine. ...The threatening masculine look materially inscribes its power onto women’s bodies by constituting feminine subjects through an intense self-awareness about being seen and about taking up space. ...Women’s sense of embodiment can make space feel like a thousand piercing eyes...it is a space which constitutes women as embodied objects to be looked at. (Rose 1993:145-6)

Rose’s analysis resonates with the experiences and stories of the women that are central to this chapter. While I take up the themes of the male gaze and female embodiment that Rose articulates, I explore the specific dynamics of ‘the gaze’ in the Cairene context and ask what

these particulars can tell us about the constitution of female upper-middle class bodies and gendered identities.⁹ What specific forms does such a male gaze take in specific contexts? What kinds of interaction and identifications does this gaze induce?

The male entitlement to look and judge is significantly qualified by class hierarchies. This was most clearly exemplified in a rather unusual case. My Egyptian roommate, a divorced woman in her early thirties, had adopted a very assertive manner in dealing with the lower class men who were marginally part of her daily life: *the bawwaab* and his sons, the waiter in our usual *'ahwa*. Ghada's assertiveness was meant to ward off attempts at control, critique or flirtation on the part of these men. Through arrogant verbal and non-verbal behavior, she would persuade these men that we were of a superior social status as educated professionals, and that they therefore did not have the right to interfere or even form an opinion about our lives. Our professional and class status, and of course my status as a foreigner, put our lives beyond their judgment.

At first I was impressed by her situation management and felt sympathetic to the problems she faced as a young divorced woman living on her own. Divorced women are generally expected to return to their father's house, care and control. Her living on her own was unusual and made her an easy target for suspicions of immorality and sexual permissiveness. Landlords are often hesitant to let apartments to single Egyptian women for fear of possible improprieties and concomitant trouble with the neighbors, as well as possible damage to their reputation. I later learned that Ghada's handling of the situation was not exemplary. Her assertiveness had lower class connotations that most middle class women would try to avoid. But then again, few of these women shared her predicament: a single woman living on her own, without even the protection afforded by wealth and a resonating family name.

Even if unusual, Ghada's story epitomizes some of the basic terms of contestation in public space: class hierarchies qualify a male prerogative to evaluate and judge women, especially in the case of single women who are not under the supervision of their male kin. Nihal, a single upper-middle class professional in her early thirties, similarly told me of her annoyance with the daily comments of the male *bawwaab* [doorman] about her appearance when going out, or the fact that she would occasionally return home late at night.¹⁰ The male prerogative to judge and comment was only partially staved off by her higher class status and the fact that he was a lower class employee. Gender and class hierarchies clashed in their contestation over entitlements to judge.

"Before going out I look ten times in the mirror to check my appearance. Will this do? Will I be left alone this time?" Nihal told me she would invariably ask herself these questions before leaving the house in the morning. Many women told me they ask themselves similar questions, going over the different places they would visit and the kind of self-presentation

required in them. Women's strategies in crossing the city depend on social maps of Cairo that indicate what to expect in certain places, and mark these places with a sense of ease and tension, safety and danger. Their choice of itineraries invariably displayed extensive knowledge of diverse urban spaces, as well as the specific logic that informed their movement through these spaces.

When venturing into places that are not unmistakably upper-middle class, many women take up a defensive attitude, planning how to cross these public spaces unscathed. They crucially imagine what they will look like in the places they will traverse. Depending on the trajectory, these women would choose to dress in specific ways: not too tight, not too revealing, not too much make-up for more popular or mixed areas. They would put on a certain attitude: eyes focused straight ahead, signaling detachment from the surroundings in an attempt to erect an invisible shield around them. Every step in the trajectory would be considered: What am I going to look like here? How do I present myself, what clothes do I wear? How are people going to perceive me when I walk, sit or eat here?

A young woman's presence is subjected to constant observation and judgments. Such judgments are based on looks, class markers and signs of modesty such as the *higaab* or loose fitting clothing. These markers are evaluated with respect to possible definitions of a woman's presence in a specific place at a specific time. Different styles of women's dress have become central to and iconic of different styles of femininity. As Secor (2002) argues with respect to regimes of veiling in Istanbul, specific attires allow for certain interpretations and interventions in public space and are therefore crucial with respect to the micro-politics of interaction in public spaces. Everyday spatial regimes thus take the form of a complex interaction of interpretations of the presence of specific women in specific public spaces at specific times, feeding on more general notions of propriety, class and gender.

Nihal told me of her one-time venture out to a disco, which was not clearly marked as upper-middle class. She felt embarrassed as soon as she entered. She estimated many of the women present to be *easy* with regards to sexual morals and suspected that some might be prostitutes. Despite her self-identification as a proper upper-middle class woman, she felt she was included in this group of loose women as a result of her mere presence, and felt tainted by the experience. A number of women told me similar stories, imbued with similar feelings. Some stressed the social repercussions of being seen in a certain place, whereas others emphasized their sense of embarrassment or even defilement by being identified as less than respectable. This sense of embarrassment can be elicited by anything from personal misgivings to subtle signs of others present, from benevolent teasing and flirting to concrete interventions. A woman may feel the presence of such interpretations because of the concrete actions of others around her. Such interpretations may however also be attributed to an abstract, imagined public. Regardless, the women to whom I spoke were all sensitive to such interpretations, which thereby constituted a strong form of social



Figure 20: Downtown Street



Figure 21: Street ib Mohandisseen

control.

The importance of spatial framing to the interpretation of a woman's presence in public became clear on one of my trips to Heliopolis. I had made an appointment to meet someone in front of Merryland, a large park with restaurants and cafes. The park is a clear landmark and seemed an easy meeting point. Something went wrong and I ended up waiting in the street by myself. Several men in cars stopped and stared at me. My premonitions were validated when one of them pulled out a large wad of notes and waved them at me. I realized that I had clearly chosen the wrong landmark.

Since prostitution is illegal, prostitutes do not usually stand out from the general female public. One would have to identify a woman as a prostitute by her contextual appearance in a certain space/time, like the girls in the lobby of a five-stars hotel whom Maha pointed out to me, with slightly too much make-up, their clothes a tad too tight. In the above case even my rather prudish outfit (long black pants and a simple blouse, hardly any make-up) did not shield me from the overriding framing of this place as a pick-up site for prostitutes.

Navigating the city thus requires extensive knowledge of the urban landscape. But no such mental map is perfect; one cannot rule out mismatches and embarrassment by mistaken identifications. Urban life is a process of negotiation and contestation, of indeterminate social interactions with unpredictable outcomes. Of course, one can try to rule out such mishaps through diverse preventive measures: going out by car, visiting only those places that are unmistakably classy. Such routines depend on the financial means to do so. As Armbrust notes in his discussion of going to the movies in Cairo:

Increasingly women who spend a significant proportion of their time in public, either by choice or by necessity, wear the *hijab*. Women from wealthy families tend to wear the *hijab* less often. They are, in any case, shielded from the public view by having greater access to technology (telephones, and especially automobiles rather than public transportation), and by virtue of the more exclusive institutions they frequent. (Armbrust 1998:421)

He cites the example of an expensive upscale cinema like the Ramsis Hilton theater. "In effect," he writes, "the theater itself functions as a kind of class-*hijab*. The Ramsis Hilton theater in particular is constructed and priced so as to exclude all but the wealthiest. At LE 7.50 to LE 20 the theater is too expensive for most people to attend...[O]ne can go to the theater by car, reach the top floor by elevator, then leave by the same route without ever being exposed to the street" (Armbrust 1998:427).

For others, "it is a matter of fitting in, of being invisible," as Marwa explained. Since she lived in a working class area, she had relatively extensive experience with a range of urban neighborhoods. She said that as a *muhaqabba*, she is able to blend in more easily.

However, her veil does not protect her from flirts and harassment in the streets. “You don’t do anything to look like somebody who can be picked up from the street. How can you feel safe like that,” she wondered. For many women, visibility or rather invisibility is a central issue, a feat that relies on a presentation of the embodied self as respectable and in place. However, as many women complained, there is nothing that will stop men from harassing women in the streets.

Mu^ʿaksa

Sexual harassment on Egyptian streets; women simply cannot walk in this country without being pestered by male voyeurs. ...Some of the language used on the streets to harass women is shockingly obscene and sometimes violent, with vulgar anatomical references becoming the pathetic norm. A friend of mine gags every time she recalls a male passerby who bestowed her with a list of the various sexual acts he would like to practice on her. Another colleague has had to endure the trauma of having a stranger on the street brush his hand against her hips. During Ramadan, crossing the street with a work mate to get to our office in Tahrir [Cairo’s major square, located Downtown], both of us dressed in formal suits loose enough to qualify as potato sacks, were still made to endure such derogatory remarks as “you have broken our fast.” ...Male harassers place the blame on women for evoking their own dirty sexual fantasies... [Yet] the problem is not in women’s attire, as demonstrated by veiled women far from being exempted from harassment in the streets. Their modest head garb does not ward off the hoodlums who literally ogle at anything, veiled or otherwise.

Shaima’a Bakeer, *Community Times*, June 2004 (my emphasis)

This excerpt from an essay in the English language *Community Times* reflects many of the sentiments and experiences surrounding *mu^ʿaksaat*. *Mu^ʿaksa* [pl. *mu^ʿaksaat*], from ‘to bother, hassle, annoy,’ is mostly used for encounters with a sexual overtone, and ambiguously denotes anything between flirt and harassment. The term carries an inbuilt tension: whereas a ‘*ya ʿasal*’ [hey, honey] in the street can push a woman to step up her pace, a ‘charming’ compliment in a closed-off, classy place will likely be perceived quite differently. This ambiguity was illustrated by an advertisement for Beano’s, a coffee shop in the heart of Zamalek, which advertised with the slogan ‘to go, to chill, to laugh, to chat, to flirt.’

For many women, *mu^ʿaksaat* represent one of the most common hindrances to their unscathed movement through public space.¹¹ The pervasiveness of *mu^ʿaksaat* in the streets of Cairo was often interpreted as a sign of societal decline. The stories of mothers who in their younger years could walk in the streets without being harassed were often used to illustrate the increase of social problems. ‘Sexual frustration’ [*ik-kapt ig-ginsi*] was thought

to be a major cause of the spread of *mu'aksaat*. Such sexual frustration was commonly thought to result from men's involuntary bachelorhood caused by the high costs of marriage. Some also took the pervasiveness of *mu'aksaat* as a reflection of the loss of such good national characteristics as kindness and decency. The harassment of veiled women was often mentioned to illustrate the extent of this decline. While the above article reflects the widely shared annoyance with *mu'aksaat*, it also raises important questions about the embodiment of upper-middle class women. How can the brush of a hand become a trauma? And what constitutes injury with respect to the bodies of upper-middle class women?

Discussions with young middle class men on the subject of *mu'aksa* resulted in a reservoir of witty comments and elaborate flirting techniques. In my experience, *mu'aksaat* [plural] are rather variable. At times they can be highly amusing, while the standard 'ya 'asal' [hey, honey] merely functions as a reminder of a constantly observant male gaze. *Mu'aksaat* can be seen as part and parcel of the social interactivity of the Cairene streets—a way of passing time, playful performances of masculinity and attempts to make contacts and possibly initiate relationships—as well as an obvious form of male social control (cf. Ghannam's discussion of *mu'aksaat* [2002:100]). In both cases *mu'aksaat* imply a male license to judge and comment on female passersby.

My upper-middle class friends instructed me that a middle class woman should staunchly ignore *mu'aksaat*, however playful, if she wants to safeguard her respectability. A couple of men who engaged in the occasional flirting concurred. *Mu'aksaat* are contacts that have no other aim than flirting, they argued, no other meaning than a sexual one. As I was told unanimously, polite middle class women should not respond, not even to defend themselves or chastise the man who dared to harass them, not to give him a chance to start a more prolonged interaction. To engage in conversation or respond to *mu'aksaat* was seen as tantamount to a certain openness to sexualized play, and was therefore something a respectable women should avoid.

The women who are the object of flirtations and harassment were ambiguously seen to carry part of the blame for *mu'aksaat*. She might be seen as someone one who invites this kind of attention, moving alone through public space and attracting the male gaze by her clothes or behavior. Mehta and Bondi's study of embodiment and sexual violence in Edinburgh argues that 'to be sensible' was a common denominator for women's spatial strategies, implying at least a measure of self-control and, concomitantly, an ambiguous responsibility in case of harassment (Mehta and Bondi 1999, cf. Pain 1997). In Cairo such partitioning of blame also resonates with views about the potential danger presented by a woman's contact with men other than her *mihrim* (husband, father, uncles and brothers). Such contact can wreak havoc by stirring up lustful feelings in naturally weak men (MacLeod 1991:83-4, Hoffman-Ladd 1987). In the context of a lesson on the importance of the *higaab*,

Amr Khaled argued that “one woman can easily entice one hundred men, but one hundred men cannot entice a single women” (cited in Bayat 2002:24).

Mu'aksa is a topic of society-wide debate and is experienced as a major nuisance and deterrent to women's ventures into public space. For those living in the 'other' Cairo, in the closed off places of up-market districts, *mu'aksa* comes to symbolize the streets *tout court*. They have never learned, have forgotten or are no longer willing to adapt to the Cairene streets, or to try to be invisible. As Marwa commented, “you get used to your privacy, comfort and being free from harassment. You then find it difficult to adapt once more to a certain attitude, to step down.” Many of those not willing or able to be invisible avoid the streets if they can. The question is who can afford to do so?

The public park provides another emblematic example of upper-middle class attitudes towards open, non-exclusive public spaces. I heard frequent complaints about the lack of green spaces in the city. Possible trips to the outskirts of Cairo or more outlying resorts were frequently discussed. A visit to a public park, however, was never mentioned as an option. When I explicitly asked Maha why this was so, she told me that public parks are too dirty and unkempt to visit. A group of young upper-middle class professionals remarked that coffee shops have become so important, because, unlike Europe, Egypt does not have public spaces like parks. When I objected that there were in fact many parks in Cairo, they said, “well, but we do not go there. They are polluted. You simply cannot go. The weather doesn't allow it, and the people that go there... It is not up to our standards. For people like us, there are the coffee shops. It is sad that these young people who hang around in parks do not have their own places.”

Many parks in Cairo are permanently or temporarily closed to the public. These seemed mainly meant to offer a nice view, a semblance of green and nature, to be enjoyed from outside the fence. Both closed and open parks were generally clean and well-kept, and were patrolled by guards who kept close watch for improper usage and (intimate) conduct. With fences, nighttime closures, and an entrance fee of 1 LE, the allegedly inevitable degeneration of the public parks had been stopped, even reversed. Young couples from less affluent backgrounds make up the majority of users of public parks. They serve as a public-private space for intimate encounters for these less affluent couples, as do the banks of the Nile. They can be seen as an inexpensive equivalent of the coffee shop.

The rather controlled and clean state of most public parks contrasts strongly with the alleged dirt that Maha offered as reason enough to never visit them. Not ruling out the likely cause of unfamiliarity with recent beautification efforts, I would argue that the upper-middle class avoidance of public parks reflects a more general tendency to avoid public spaces that are open to less privileged Cairenes. Such avoidance has its counterpart in the outspoken preference for class-specific and exclusive 'public' spaces like the coffee shop.

The uncontrolled presence of lower class others in a space that equally entitles all who are present threatens otherwise clear lines of hierarchy and deference. Such public spaces do not guarantee the usual respect and deference accorded to more privileged Cairenes in cross-class encounters. Upper-middle class Cairenes are moreover not protected from disrespectful looks; their privileged normalcy is not secured. The mere assertion of norms concerning propriety different from upper-middle class ones can question the meaning of an otherwise normalized meeting between male and female friends, or the connotations of an in other contexts appropriate and effective sexy outfit. Needless to say, public parks do not offer the protection from unwanted looks and, more generally, indiscriminate public visibility that was central to the earlier discussion of coffee shop as a 'safe space.'

As will become clear in the following discussion of public transport, purity and defilement are central issues with respect to women's movement in public space. As I noted with regard to the 'safe' spaces of the coffee shop, an improper gaze can constitute injury to the upper-middle class female body. The avoidance and barring of unwanted gazes are crucial upper-middle class strategies in public space. The *mukayyif* [air-conditioned autobus], with its elevated position above all other traffic and opaque windows, and the private car, which allows one to see without being seen, are prime examples.

"As if we are in a red bus"

The issue of transportation most forcefully brings out the fragility of these young women's presence in public space. Two common means of transport have come to symbolize the two extremes of experiences in public space: the bus has come to stand for forced proximity and possible harassment, while the car represents control, protection and absolute freedom of movement.

As Mehta and Bondi argue in their discussion of female embodiment and fear of violence in Edinburgh, "women *embody* discourse that constructs them as...vulnerable and physically powerless, particularly in the face of male violence, and as the object of aggressive male sexuality" (1999:77; emphasis in the original). This sexualized constitution of the female body underlies women's navigation of public space. In Cairo, this sexualized embodiment is reconfirmed through daily experiences of *mu'aksaat*. As the earlier reference to the traumatic nature of 'a brush of hand' and the discussion of the improper gaze have indicated, female upper-middle class bodies are easily injured and defiled. Looks and touches can cause injury to the female upper-middle class body, as well as a sense of defilement.

General comments about public transport show such assumptions about the vulnerability and preciousness of the female upper-middle class body. A woman should not get tired, should be at ease and free of the unwanted touches of other bodies. Whereas a man might brave these nuisances, a woman should never be forced to undergo the horrors

of crowdedness in an open yet closed space like the public bus, where one is condemned to the proximity of others and their unclean bodies, and worst of all, physical harassment. The cheapest 'red' public bus, charging 0.25 LE regardless of distance traveled, has become a symbol of the 'poor Egypt' as imagined by those who are not part of it. A friend told me that her colleagues tended to comment on *mu'aksa* by saying, "as if we are in a red bus." This phrase symbolized extreme instances of uncivilized harassment, thought to typically occur on this cheap type of transport. Most upper-middle class women told me that they had never and would never enter a public bus. The two acceptable means of public transport were the new *mukayyif* service lines of luxury air-conditioned buses (2 LE) and the metro, where the first two compartments are reserved for women only.

Stories of harassment in public transport abound. When the subject of public transport came up, so did stories of the dangers of the mini- or microbus, which invariably featured men waiting to harass women moving on their own. Hoda, a married professional in her early thirties, was adamant about the truth-value of stories in which women were kidnapped while taking a microbus, driven off to a remote place and raped. As we have seen, even the taxi, generally considered a safe means of transport, can become suspect. Cairo is generally said to be safe, yet fears of sexual violence, especially rape, were commonplace. The fear of sexual violence gives rise to effusive advice and warnings whenever a woman readies herself to leave a 'safe' space and travel to her next destination. Concerns about women's movement centrally focus on her unscathed passage through public space. Whereas rape is the ultimate desecration, even a look can harm and defile the pure, unsullied and properly sexualized female body.

The need to take public transport or move by foot in the streets exposes upper-middle class women to infringements on their established routines and preferred lifestyles. Hoda commented that she had to change her way of dressing when she moved house after her marriage. Now that she is taking a taxi from home to the metro station located in a popular neighborhood, she has stopped wearing tight clothes and obvious make-up to avoid being too visible and thus warranting comments. "You cannot wear professional clothes, such as a skirt, unless you have a car," she said. She complained that she is therefore not able to live up to the image of the professional career woman she would like to present. For many middle class women who can and even those who cannot afford it, the car has become an indispensable item. The car allows these women to dress the way they like and protects them from unwanted encounters. It allows them to be *bi-rahithum*, at ease. The second best thing is the taxi, a favorite, but expensive option for many non-car owners.

In contrast to the stories of danger and defilement that surround public transport, the car thus becomes the symbol for and guarantor of a perfect world of professional life, self-representation and respectable socializing. It provides a mobile framing of the self that

confirms a certain class standing, akin to the fixed spatial framing of the up-market coffee shop. As a man in his early thirties remarked, “a woman who takes a taxi still has a relation to the street. She will eventually return to the street and can therefore be flirted with. A woman with her own car can dress in whatever way she likes. Nobody will harass her.” The public lifestyles of young upper-middle class women depend on the financial means to sit in certain places and to take certain modes of transport—in short, to move exclusively in up-market Cairo. The car crowns attempts to create a controlled environment. It transports women unscathed and free of unwanted interventions from one safe space to the next.

Nihal sketched her paramount image of the young upper class woman: driving a Cherokee with closed tinted windows, air-conditioning on, moving between different places dominated by her own norms of respectability and sociability. This image rings quite true. The ability of many upper-middle class women to engage in their preferred lifestyle and specific modes of sociability and self-presentation depends on such class closure and control over their environment.

Even though classy places are the favored option for many, it is not one of preference alone. Many young women can live their independent yet reputable everyday routines only in up-market places. As Nada remarked after reading a draft of this chapter: “I now feel that I am literally paying a high price for my liberty, which is supposed to be granted anyhow.” By liberty she meant living along lines she (and her husband) set out, being able to go out with friends and dress in specific ways without having to face harassment and the embarrassment evoked by the sense that one is seen as, and thereby in a certain sense becomes, less than respectable. Miriyam similarly remarked that as a woman, “you have to pay for your independence.” She noted that the coffee shops that gave women the chance to spend more time outside of the house are eventually very costly. Both women obviously felt ambivalent about their constant need for what Armbrust has called a ‘class *higaab*.’

Moving around with these female professionals, the map of Cairo seems to shrink to include only those areas where their distinctive lifestyles are the norm: the up-market districts of Mohandiseen, Zamalek, Maadi, and Heliopolis. For some, spaces outside of this class-specific economy seem to be only a vague and distant reality. These other spaces are marked as dirty, full of bacteria and health hazards, uncouth people and *mu'aksaat*. Some of these spaces outside up-market Cairo, like the popular or informal housing sectors (*‘ashwaa’iyyaat*, see Bayat and Denis 2000), are places never to be visited, unless by accident, when one gets lost and is stranded in a popular area like Dar es-Salaam, full of unknown but lurking dangers.

Performing fragile identities

[The daughters of the high aristocracy] dreamt solely of a regular sojourn abroad, lived surrounded by electronic gadgets and refused to go out into the streets, afraid that the contact with all those poor drifting about the sidewalks would defile them. They would only go out by car, and then exclusively to closed establishments: restaurants, cinemas or beaches where they could be sure they wouldn't encounter any plebs.

They were right. Wherever they went, the atmosphere grew tense. Their beauty was almost impermissible. Even if the girls laughed very modestly, it looked like a provocation. When they pushed up their hair, the gesture would become erotically charged. The pointed breasts under their shirts inflicted more chaos than a machine gun. Their transparent cheeks seemed made to be kissed.

Rachid Mimouni (1991:88; my translation)

This passage is taken from *Une peine à vivre*, a novel about the life of a dictator in an unnamed country by the Algerian writer Rachid Mimouni. It describes the lives of women in a far more privileged position than the women whose trajectories have informed this chapter. Yet, it sketches a similar ironic situation in which elite fears and anxieties that surround less exclusive places and their inhabitants combine with the segmented everyday realities of a divided city. Elite norms increasingly clash with those of other city dwellers, thereby confirming the impossibility of 'going out in the streets.' As Mimouni writes, they were right not to go out into the streets. Even the simplest gesture could be 'misread,' creating confusion, inciting harassment and the defilement of otherwise pure and respectable embodiments of upper-middle class femininity.

Social avoidance and segregation are widespread phenomena in Cairo's socio-cultural landscape, in which both men and women take part. In this chapter I have focused specifically on young women to bring attention to the ways in which gender and class intersect in everyday spatial regimes. Their urban trajectories show the existence of privileged upper-middle class norms of gendered propriety in public space. These norms are secured through the social closure of up-market spaces. The itineraries of these women highlight social distance and segregation within the urban landscape and the fabric of city life. These are the footsteps of social segregation that play out against the more obvious maps of privilege and affluence, and exclusion and poverty inscribed in the built environment, most markedly in the form of the gated communities that now surround Cairo.

As I argued in this chapter, gender and class are invariably negotiated through the other's register. Male prerogatives to look at and judge women in public space can be partially mitigated by recourse to class hierarchies. However, most upper-middle class women I knew

preferred to resort to the more reliable strategies of class closure to secure their unscathed passage through public space. The trajectories of these women were invariably based on class maps. It is only in exclusive up-market places that they can be *bi-rahithum* and dress and socialize as they see fit without being annoyed or being seen as disreputable. This points to what seems to me to be a crucial contradiction at the core of these high-mobility lifestyles: their condition of possibility is social closure, the avoidance of any disturbance and the ability to avoid any unwanted contacts.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, De Certeau argues that movement through the city can be analyzed in terms of the spatial strategies of the powerful, which operate from an 'own' space, and the ephemeral spatial tactics of the powerless, which can only momentarily materialize in what he calls pedestrian speech acts (1984:37). The urban trajectories discussed here defy clear divisions of elites versus dominated, and dominant strategies versus momentary spatial tactics. De Certeau (1984:37) does recognize such complexities, yet binaries of domination and power remain central to his work. Moreover, as Mbembe and Nutall argue, he disregards the many conventions, rules and institutions of regulation and control that inform such pedestrian speech acts (2004:361). While these upper-middle class women importantly rely on class-specific 'own spaces,' and in that sense employ what according to De Certeau are dominant strategies, their movement through less class-specific urban spaces comes close to De Certeau's notion of tactics, which aim at creating fleeting room for maneuvering.

Tendencies toward social closure and segregation reflect a growing reliance on the creation of 'own' spaces that provide strategic bases for the unfolding of such dominant strategies. Gender is an integral part of the drawing of class boundaries and justifications of social segregation. In the context of her discussion of exclusive urban developments in Sao Paulo, Teresa Caldeira argues that the tendency to spatialize social distance is connected to "the inability [of more privileged inhabitants] to impose their own code of behaviour—including rules of deference—onto the city" (2000:319). Women's lifestyles are strongly predicated on class closure. Arguments about gendered behavior and the need for the protection of 'classy' women in turn come to legitimize such class segregation. Many of the women who featured in this chapter were concerned about harassment and those even worse things that might happen in public spaces that were not explicitly marked as upper-middle class and appropriate or safe for women. These fears concern non-upper-middle class public spaces and tend to have strong implicit or explicit classist undertones. They concern upper-middle class women and the mass of lower class men of whom they must be aware.

The attempts at closure discussed here must be located against the background of growing class differences and a larger trend towards social segregation in Cairo's urban landscape. As I discussed in Chapter One, the city is being transformed through seemingly unbound private sector initiative in combination with government attempts to bring the country up

to speed with the global. New forms of class closure are a main component of these new urban developments. Parallel to developments in other major cities around the world, Cairo has witnessed a flurry in the building of gated communities (in local terms: *compounds*) in the desert, providing members of the upper (middle) class with pollution-free, exclusive and prestigious housing. Next to these *compounds*, private hospitals, language schools and universities have sprung up, which advertise American or British standards, teaching methods and curricula, and grant degrees that are only partly valid in the Egyptian context. The new network of fly-over bridges, tunnels and highways that connects different up-market areas of Cairo allows one to move from one part of this 'other Egypt' to the next, without having to descend into some of Cairo's less palatable realities.

Teresa Caldeira (2002) argues that the fencing off of housing estates and the building of condominiums with surveillance and intensively patrolled malls signal an end to the ideals that were central to the modern city: open circulation, and the meeting of different strangers. A middle-aged professional told me she feels that Cairo is returning to its pre-1952 state. The majority of the populace suffers from poverty, is becoming increasingly conservative and "all covered up," while the happy few drink cocktails (or their non-alcoholic counterparts) on the beach. Egypt's new liberal age allows for the strong re-assertion of class differences, which expresses the growing gap between the haves and have-nots. The growing blatancy of class differences is likely to lead not only to social avoidance and segregation, but also to lingering social fear among the more privileged.

In many places increased crime rates seem to form the focus of social fears that accompany growing social inequalities (see, e.g., Low 2001, Caldeira 2000). In Cairo, property crime is perceived to be relatively limited and does not seem to form a major focus of such social fears. Class based cultural differences seem to provide an important rationale behind distance and closure. These assumed cultural differences are the focus of anxieties and give rise to a tendency towards social avoidance and class homogeneous spaces.

After this exploration of Cairo's urban landscape we can return to the rumor of the taxi serial killer. The rumor can be read as a dramatized version of the precarious status of the lifestyles discussed above. The taxi-driver-turned-killer represents any of these women's nightmares. He is the lower class person who provides the logistic means for their public lifestyles. In a sadistic twist he turns against the women he is supposed to serve, showing himself to be fatally dangerous. However, most telling are the frightened reactions and the extensive attempts of these women to warn their female friends and acquaintances, refusing to believe the public statements of the government to the contrary. The story of the serial killer clearly resonated with lingering anxieties about the fragility of their negotiations of public space.

¹ For a detailed discussion of the story see *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 28 February-6 March 2002. In the 14-20 March 2002 issue, a short item announces the arrest of the culprit who allegedly sent these emails (<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/>).

² I deliberately invoke De Certeau's legacy here. My analysis of city life through movement resonates with the methodology he proposes in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), but also differs in significant ways. I come back to these overlaps and differences in the conclusion of this chapter.

³ With respect to women living in the lower class area of iz-Zawiyya il-Hamra, Ghannam notes, "while women who often go to the market, the mosque, and government offices...are not restricted, their movement is closely controlled when it is motivated by socialization or is leisure oriented" (2002:101).

⁴ While people's reports on veiling are part of contentious and highly politicized analyses of the development of religiosity in society, they commonly converged on a recent increase of *muhaggabaat* in the upper-middle class. Changes in a number upper-middle class companies seem to confirm such an increase. Whereas *muhaggabaat* used to present a rare sight in most up-market companies and institutions, significant numbers of their female employees began wearing the veil from the late 1990s onward.

⁵ Ossman reports on similar critical stories in Casablanca (1994:125), as does Navaro Yashin with respect to Istanbul (2002:71-2). Such critical comments were not only made by people who were critical of the widespread adoption of the *higaab*. They were part of a common discourse about the assumed rise of hypocrisy in contemporary Egypt, which was apparently most eloquently captured by those who claimed a religious high ground, but turned out to be immoral. Some people also used such critiques to target literalist understandings of religion, which they saw as substituting higher religious values such as honesty and kindness with a narrow focus on, for example, covering.

⁶ Elizabeth Wilson's sketch of the dilemma of the 'public woman' in the nineteenth-century city highlights some of the central features of this ambiguity. As Wilson argues, "the prostitute was a 'public woman', but the problem in the nineteenth-century urban life was whether every woman in the new, disordered world of the city, the public sphere of pavements, cafes and theatres, was not a public woman and thus a prostitute. The very presence of unattended—unowned—women constituted a threat both to male power and a temptation to male 'frailty'" (Wilson 2001:74). This ambiguity remains a central theme in numerous settings, among others in contemporary Cairo. It pervades the ambiguous views of young upper-middle class women who—apparently unowned—move on their own through public space.

⁷ An *ʿurfi* marriage is contracted by the signing of a contract by the spouses in the presence of two witnesses and a third party overseeing the procedure. It is not registered by the state and can be contracted without cognizance of the family and without the extensive investments marriage usually requires (Abaza 2001a:20). *ʿUrfi* marriages are therefore often portrayed as barely licit forms of prostitution or pre-marital sexual relations. Abaza argues that "by means of *ʿurfi* and similar types of contracts, [youths] seek halfway solutions that at least ease sexual tensions. These are found in re-inventing an elastic code of conduct that still remains within the confines of what is thought to be 'Islamic' and therefore permissible" (2001a:21).

⁸ Streets in up-market areas like Zamalek and Maadi differ significantly from their lower class counterparts, as do shopping streets from big thoroughfares and more residential streets. Despite such significant differences, a dominant male presence and women's liminality are shared features of Cairo's street life. Streets moreover share a certain indeterminacy with respect to class. Some residential areas constitute marked exceptions to these gendered definitions of the street, while women peddlers who occupy sidewalks in central streets defy notions of women's liminality.

⁹ Feminist discussions of the objectification of women have largely focused on the abstract workings of a (heterosexual)

masculine gaze (for a discussion of feminist debates about the male gaze, see Rose 1993, esp. Chapter Five). Though I explore the particular ways in which women are constituted through a constantly observant male gaze, I do not subscribe to assumptions regarding the universality of the male gaze and the way it figures women. I agree with Elizabeth Wilson, who argues against those writers who project a monolithic image of women's presence, or rather, absence in the urban spaces of the late nineteenth century. Wilson takes issue with underlying assumptions of a pervasive and rather unchanging Male Gaze, inspired by Lacanian theory. She argues that the central point of contention is the question whether "urban space is so fundamentally constructed by gender difference that women are not simply disadvantaged but representationally excluded or even extirpated, or whether, rather, the city is a contradictory and shifting space which can be appropriated by women" (Wilson 2001:83). I concur with the latter reading and explore the specific ways in which these women become embodied in a range of public spaces.

¹⁰ The *bawwaab* [conierge or doorkeeper] is a central symbolic figure in middle class representations of the lower classes. The emblematic status of the *bawwaab* can be related to his continual presence in middle and upper class spaces, which makes him an ideal candidate for middle class representations of the lower class.

¹¹ For discussions of *mu'aksa*, see also Ghannam (2002:100) and MacLeod (1991:63).



Figure 22: Billboard advertising El-Gouna Resort

On 26th of July Street in Zamalek, a traffic policeman stands in front of a billboard that advertises El-Gouna Resort. The billboard features a picture of a surfer, and reads 'This summer, let Europe come to you.'

El-Gouna, an exclusive resort town on the Red Sea, caters to foreign and Egyptian tourists. It hosts a number of three, four and five-star hotels, has manmade lagoons, golf courses, a small town center with shops, and numerous bars, cafes and restaurants. Unlike resort towns like Hurgada and Sharm Al-Sheikh, El-Gouna has been created as a planned whole by the Orascom group. It is therefore able to present a perfectly controlled environment that is closed to anyone but tourists and personnel. Though it makes sanitized gestures towards its localization in the form of 'Arabesque' and 'ethnic' architecture, the extent to which it has been able to eradicate reminders of the actually existing Egypt seems unique (cf. www.el-gouna.com; Abaza 2005:39). The billboard entices its Cairene audience with a Europe that is waiting at a mere five-hour drive.

Conclusion: Global Dreams and Postcolonial Predicaments

Finding Our Identity. A Search For The 'Real' Egyptian Youth

It all started with a visit to Zizo's sogo2 [sausage] place in Sayeda Zeinab [an old popular quarter close to Downtown].¹...I...could not help but ask myself, "Does my occasional daring meal of Zizo's sogo2 sandwiches accompanied with sugar cane juice categorize me as a 'real' representative of the Egyptian youth population?"

[I] have had the privilege to experience things only a small and insignificant percentage of Egyptian youth experience, which definitely doesn't classify me as a fair representative of the Egyptian youth, so who is?...Based solely on my personal speculation, the 'real' representatives of Egyptian youth are those who belong to the middle income social class, who have been educated in public schools and universities, and are exposed to the different lifestyles of both the upper income social class and the lower income social class. Those who study day and night with the aim of bettering their life, yet graduate to accept whatever form of jobs that comes their way. Those who are most loyal to the country yet have completely lost faith in its development.

Let me tell you a story that will help explain my point further. A while ago I stopped by a gas station...I was catching up with some reading while I waited in line. One of the station workers came up to me and asked (in English), "What are you reading?" Quite taken aback I answered (in Arabic) that I was reading a Marketing book. Upon which he commented (in Arabic this time), "Oh really, so you're a student of commerce, like myself?" The country's sole chance of survival is through those who have had the privilege of leading a good life and have been given all the tools necessary to move this country forward (good education wealth, power and connections)...Isn't it ironic how the only social class that can ever develop this country is the only class that seems to know the least about it!?

The above article addresses the question of belonging in a country with divided fates. Against the background of an increasingly divided country, its upper class author asks: Who are the real Egyptian youths?

This excerpt reflects many of the themes that have been addressed in this study. It cites the shifting lines of inclusion into national projects and narratives, which assign a central role to young, affluent Cairenes like the author, who “have been given all the tools necessary to move this country forward.” Less privileged middle class professionals—according to her “personal speculations,” “the real representatives of the Egyptian youth”—are increasingly marginalized and “graduate to accept whatever...job comes their way.” To explain her question, the author recounts her encounter with an employee at the gas station. She was surprised not only because he turned out to be a student of commerce like herself, but mostly because he unexpectedly spoke English. Language has become one of the main indicators of the segmented fates of differentially positioned graduates and has become a powerful marker of certain class belonging. It has become a sign of the specific social worlds one inhabits.

The author’s quest to discover who represents the real Egyptian youth takes her to different places of Cairo’s segmented landscape, which stand in for the socially stratified nation. The city has long been central to projects, images and narratives of the nation. While Cairo’s up-market spaces increasingly constitute the insulated, self-evident background for the lives of young affluent Cairenes, other places in Cairo become icons of authenticity and difference. Sayyeda Zeinab thus harbors the authenticity of sausages and sugar cane juice—an authenticity in which even an upper class person in an adventurous mood can take part.

It is not surprising that the issue of belonging and national identity comes up in the contemporary context of glaring social inequalities, in a city in which new divisions have come to divide the once iconic middle class, and in which increasingly solid lines of segmentation and segregation carve up the middle class landscape. Yet, in my upper-middle class circles such questions were rarely the subject of discussion. As an upper class informant in the article put it, “realistically speaking, who will want to know more about problems she or he is lucky enough not to have?”

Reforming the middle class

After the 1952-Revolution, a newly broadened middle class was to be the carrier of the newly independent, just and modern Egyptian nation. In the course of the 1990s, state discourses emphasized the need to catch up with global standards in light of global competition. Parallel to the revision of the national project, the Nasserite social contract between state and population has gradually been rewritten. I have charted some of the negotiations and

contestations that characterize the process of social change set in motion by Egypt's political and economic reorientation.

Cairo's middle class had been the primary beneficiary of expanded public facilities and employment. In the last decennia redefinitions of the role of the state have entailed the significant downgrading of public institutions and facilities that were the exponents of Nasserite Egypt, and the concomitant rise of a wide range of private alternatives. The public segments of the labor market and education are said to have deteriorated irrevocably. For those who can opt out of public arrangements and institutions, this 'public' becomes a far off nightmare in its incarnations of the public bus, public offices and public schools. Privatization has also created new divisions within public institutions and has carved out class-specific spaces that are public, yet to which access is restricted. In Cairo's public universities, the top faculties and language departments provide more exclusive and privileged trajectories to graduates who have attended language schools. Government offices similarly harbor more privileged islands that employ upper-middle class professionals to do the jobs that cannot be entrusted to the overstaffed and underpaid bureaucracy.

Cairo's middle class has become increasingly divided between those who can afford to pay for private arrangements in all fields of life, and others who must resort to their often rundown and dwindling public counterparts. These divisions importantly take the form of more 'localized' versus cosmopolitan orientations and aptitudes.

While the public educational system, shaped by Nasserite policies, continues to educate a relatively high percentage of the population through university, the labor market no longer awards middle class lifestyles to its graduates. The system that was once created to produce a large urban middle class that would function as the main carrier of national dreams and aspirations, now produces superfluous graduates who can no longer be employed in an already overflowing bureaucracy. Un- or underemployed graduates may instead become the targets for reform. Special programs aim to direct them away from earlier promises, which have been taken up as personal aspirations and dreams, and into small business ventures. Yet, acquired social rights and personal investments in older national narratives are not easily put aside. Many governmental statements continue to include gestures to Egypt's previous social contract, while attempts at the abrogation of established social rights are widely denounced and contested by erstwhile beneficiaries. Even more significantly, individual and family strategies point to an insistence on becoming and remaining middle class, despite exhortations to invest in other trajectories.

These more 'localized' public educational institutions and degrees have their counterparts in the burgeoning exclusive private institutions that provide cosmopolitan skills and qualifications, which present crucial assets in the labor market. In contrast to a majority of young middle class professionals, graduates with languages, cosmopolitan

capital and *wasta* are able to obtain much-coveted jobs in the up-market segment of Cairo's labor market.

Cairo's middle class continues to harbor a wide range of economic situations and family backgrounds. However, processes of segmentation in the labor market give rise to increasingly unyielding social divisions between those who, with their cosmopolitan capital and comfortable family backgrounds, can aspire to jobs in up-market companies and institutions, and those whose more local qualifications and less privileged family backgrounds leave them to face an insecure, tight labor market that mostly offers unrewarding jobs. While some of the excesses of Cairo's new liberal age are exemplified by the twin figures of the loan-defaulting business tycoon and the unemployed graduate hazarding a small project, the more mundane image of a less privileged graduate servicing his fortunate peers in an upscale coffee shop reflects common realities in Cairo's professional middle class.

Such changes parallel increasingly restrictive national narratives that focus on competition in the global arena and the need to adhere to global standards and qualifications. The upper-middle class professionals with cosmopolitan capital who staff internationally oriented workplaces fit these national narratives as mediators between local and global, and as representatives of an Egypt that is up-to-date with the global. Their cosmopolitan capital carries important premiums in contemporary Cairo. It allows one to apply for up-market jobs, provides access to the up-market spaces that have expanded rapidly during the 1990s, and signals belonging in up-market Cairo.

Yet, the up-market segment of the economy where such cosmopolitan capital becomes effective remains limited in size and is, moreover, highly dependent on Egypt's fragile 'liberal' economic experiment. The economic crisis that has plagued the Egyptian economy since 2000 has exposed the fragility of this up-market segment, which has become the object of restructuring and retrenchment. Up-market restructuring and retrenchment, and the concomitant heightened competition for up-market jobs gives rise to a race for better and more exclusive qualifications.

Spatializing reforms

Cairo, Egypt's capital and major city, the economic, political, social and cultural hub of the country and its main node for transnational networks, is central to the materialization of Egypt's neoliberal project. Cairo's peculiar feel, with its skyscrapers, fancy cars and glimmer, reflect this central role. Up-market circuits of consumption and production—set apart by conspicuous cosmopolitan references and comparatively high prices—increasingly dominate more affluent areas of Cairo. These circuits are geared to and inhabited by a small section of the urban population. Upper-middle class professionals are among the inhabitants of Cairo's up-market consumption circuits.

Upscale coffee shops have become emblematic of a young, upper-middle class presence in Cairo's urban landscape. They allow for casual mixed-gender sociabilities in conspicuously cosmopolitan settings. Such coffee shops provide upper-middle class professionals with new opportunities for socializing, finding partners and other forms of networking and self-presentation. These spaces already had an embryonic presence in socializing practices, in work and study spaces, as well as in imaginations of and desire for *barra*, a vaguely territorialized First World space. Coffee shops have largely circumvented negative associations with the West in upper-middle class circles, heeding to religious sensibilities and gendered notions of propriety, while intimating a sense of First World inclusion. However, even in these conspicuously cosmopolitan, yet respectable spaces, morality, particularly female respectability, remains a central focus of anxieties and contestations. This focus on female respectability reemphasizes the centrality of the 'women's question' in longstanding discursive battles over modernity versus authenticity, colonial domination versus national liberation, and Western secularism versus an Islamic modernity (see, e.g., Ahmed 1992, Armbrust 1999, Abu-Lughod 1998).

Within upper-middle class circles, cosmopolitan ambitions and referencing seem to have become hegemonic in the sense that they have become both normative and self-evident. Such upper-middle class cosmopolitan lifestyles have in turn come to represent ideal lifestyles and even normative standards in commercials, music videos and movies that portray young, modern Egypt. This hegemony is shaped against the background of Egypt's integration into and dependence on diverse global economic networks, importantly United States development aid and World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programs.

The casual mixed-gender sociabilities that characterize social life in these upscale coffee shops are confined to such class-specific, closed and exclusive spaces. Public leisure spaces like the upscale coffee shop both express and constitute new forms of distance and segregation within the city. As I have argued with reference to the urban trajectories of young, upper-middle class women, class-specific gendered performances provide a central focus of upper-middle class social fears and provide important rationales for social avoidance and segregation.

Cairo's public space has become increasingly segmented as it maps unto a segmented income distribution. The previously outlying districts of Mohandiseen, Maadi and Heliopolis and their desert expanses along the three main highways out of Cairo increasingly constitute *the city* for many upper-middle class Cairenes. New forms of segmentation and segregation are imprinted on physical and imaginary maps of the city, while the desert becomes a new frontier where Cairo's affluence and cosmopolitan ambitions can be realized in the most lavish manner.

Questions of belonging in Cairo's new liberal age

Arjun Appadurai's essay on a world of disjunctive global flows (1990) has been the most influential anthropological statement on globalization. It offers ways of understanding the complex and disjunctive character of 'globalization,' and directs attention to the augmented role of imagination in a world of global flows of images and ideas. Yet, such global flows have to be located in global and local histories of inequality and dominance. They feed into local social hierarchies and are taken up as forms of cultural distinction, as I argued with respect to the up-market Cairo that has emerged in the last two decades. Now that Cairo has 'returned' to the global market, being connected, or conversely, being disconnected from *barra*, abroad, has become a major denominator of the different fates that middle-class Cairo harbors. New cosmopolitan lifestyles and matrices of belonging come into being through an intricate convergence of local distinctive class cultures and transnational economic and cultural flows. Social divisions that run through the professional middle class gather a certain segment of Cairo's inhabitants in exclusive conspicuously cosmopolitan spaces of work, consumption, leisure and residence. Since these spaces are largely closed off from Cairo's other realities, they are instrumental in establishing cosmopolitan referents and standards, as well as a sense of ease and affluence as normative and self-evident features of life in up-market Cairo. In this context, hybridity and cosmopolitan savvy carry an unmistakable subtext of class-based privilege.

Appadurai's essay moreover hardly pays attention to persistent global matrices of inequality and the related imagined geographies of a divided world. Tropes like the First- and Third World, development and underdevelopment, not only express existing global inequalities and disjunctures, but also frame national and personal projects and are repositories of deep fears and desires. These aspects of 'globalization' might be better captured by the 'abjection' James Ferguson sees as central to the contemporary African predicament: "the combination of an acute awareness of a privileged 'first-class' world, together with an increasing social and economic disconnection from it..." (2002:559; *cf.* 1999).

While structural adjustment policies trim state apparatuses and budgets around the world, governments turn to global markets. The wish to capture global business entails attempts to reform the urban landscape of major cities into global spaces that can live up to global standards of efficiency and luxury. Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2000), among others, has pointed to the rise of domestic inequalities under contemporary politics of neoliberal globalization. From another vantage point, Saskia Sassen (2001) has argued that economic globalization gives rise to growing disjuncture in the urban landscapes of major cities. Those parts of the city that function as command and service centers for economic global networks are

increasingly disconnected from national economies, and integrated into the global networks they service and coordinate. A major consequence of such 'global city formation' is social and economic polarization. As Jo Beall argues, "new exclusionary processes associated with global trends and pressures graft themselves onto existing dynamics of social exclusion that play themselves out locally" (2002: 50).

Egypt's political and economic reorientation and restructuring has resulted in changing dreams, aspirations and matrices of belonging. Since it redistributes privileges and redefines entitlements, ways of 'being in the nation' are reconfigured in highly diverse ways for differently positioned citizens. While those who can lay claim to the 'global' can dream of First World affluence and membership, others are confronted with adverse circumstances that act as reminders of their exclusion from Cairo's territorializations of the First World. Egypt's neoliberal project entails both a 'search for the global'—attempts to capture global business and reinvigorate the private sector through investments in infrastructure, showcase projects and a range of subsidies to the private sector—and policies that aim at the downsizing of state budgets and relinquishing of the state's patronage role in the context of structural adjustment policies. These twin components of the neoliberal project can be seen as prescriptions for an increasingly divided nation. While the search for the global entails the territorialization of First World spaces in the urban landscape, structural adjustment policies seem to spell out Third World futures for the surrounding social landscape.

Feelings of exclusion from and desire for First World affluence, sophistication and inclusion have long histories in many postcolonial settings. Anthony King captures some of the complexities of such feelings of exclusion of and desire for a First World. He quotes an advertisement targeting India's upper-middle classes, particularly non-resident Indians, with the promise that "men and women of the world may now [*sic*] feel perfectly at home in India" (2004:131). The Gouna advertisement that promises affluent Cairenes the possibility of a weekend trip to Europe on the Red Sea speaks of a similar ambiguity (see Figure 22). While such phrases claim India's and Egypt's exclusion from the First World, they simultaneously tell their audiences that 'the world' has arrived and claim that this exclusion is being overcome. Those sections of society that have been beneficiaries of economic restructuring, liberalization and integration into global economic networks are able to act upon such desires for a First World. They can inhabit Cairo's territorializations of the First World, which increasingly seems to negate such contradictions.

As a Southern global city, Cairo reproduces many of the features of earlier colonial cities. As King argues, "the inherently separationist structure of the colonial city and its asymmetrical power relations are being continuously reinvented, albeit in a new, internal colonialist form" (2004:142). In Cairo's new liberal age, such comparisons seem appropriate. Obvious convergences include the ubiquitous territorialization of a First World in the

spaces of up-market Cairo, most strikingly in the form of exclusive affluent spaces that are guarded against the city's other realities. The importance of cosmopolitan knowledge, skills and tastes reproduces similar lines of segmentation. Nostalgic references to colonial, and in the case of Egypt, aristocratic times seem to symbolize such concurrences.

The question is what is produced around and beyond this territorialized First World of up-market Cairo. I would provocatively say that it is the creation of new Third World realities. Koptiuch (1997) posits that a Third World is emerging in Western cities. We might similarly speak of the materialization of a Third World in middle class Cairo. It is a Third World in which social rights are rescinded and older national developmental narratives that have significantly informed middle class aspirations have been declared all but irrelevant. As Alyachar (2002) shows, redundant middle class professionals are urged to turn to informal practices and projects that were once figured as signs of tradition or lack of development, but now are promoted as paragons of capitalist savvy from below.

Many young professionals are thus forced to negotiate more complex ways of being in the nation than their more privileged counterparts. Older national narratives and promises are steadily rescinded, while the new choices faced by marginalized professionals have become rather bitter. While an exclusive First World presence offers them simulacra of inclusion, many are not ready to give up on expectations of a middle class life and to resign to 'Third World standards.'

In this study, I have offered an impression of the ambivalent and uncomfortable negotiations of Cairo's young marginalized professionals. A more in-depth study could illuminate a crucial moment in Egypt's ongoing shift from its previous national developmentalist course to the precepts of a liberal market economy, positioned in a dependent relation to dominant global actors like international organizations and Western governments. The urban landscape of the capital provides a primary arena for the materialization of this new national project and new forms of national citizenship. The ambivalent ways in which marginalized professionals inhabit the increasingly divided city might therefore provide a fruitful vantage point for exploration. The contemporary postcolonial predicament of these marginalized professionals can moreover speak to the experiences of other marginalized middle classes in the global South, particularly in those countries that similarly experienced a shift away from a strong post-independence national developmentalist course. Their contestations of neoliberal national narratives and projects may give rise to other national stories yet to be dreamt.

¹ In *Campus Magazine*, Arabic words are transcribed according to an informal transcription system that many Cairenes use in their English language email communications. The ʾain (ع) is represented by a 3, the heh (ح) by a 7, and the qaf (ق) by a 2. *Suguq* thus becomes *sogo2* and, e.g., *higaab* is written as *7igab*.

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Summary

Global Dreams. Space, Class and Gender in Middle Class Cairo

This study concerns some of the everyday effects of Egypt's economic and political reorientation toward a liberal market economy integrated into the global market and conforming to neoliberal precepts. It specifically examines shifting class configurations and their expressions in the urban landscape of middle class Cairo. This reorientation, which started in the mid-1970s with the *infitaah* (open-door) policies, sped up significantly in the 1990s with Egypt's adoption of structural adjustment policies. It has allowed for a strong re-assertion of class differences, which had become comparatively muted under Nasser, when numerous institutions were created to foster a broad urban professional middle class. Cairo has seen the rise of a new bourgeoisie, as well as the growth of a relatively affluent professional upper-middle class whose members are employed in sectors related to the global economy. In the vast social landscape beyond these more fortunate groups, real wages are in steady decline whilst the withdrawal of a range of government subsidies and services has made life increasingly expensive. These new divisions materialize in the urban landscape as new spatial and socio-cultural forms of segregation.

This study is based on eighteen-months of fieldwork in Cairo, from September 2001 to February 2003, as well as three-months of follow up research from May 2004 to July 2004 and was primarily conducted through participant observation and interviews with differently positioned middle class professionals, mostly in their mid-twenties to early thirties. It shows the emergence of new divisions within Cairo's professional middle class—specifically in the realm of education, the labor market and urban space—resulting from Egypt's reorientation toward a liberal market economy integrated in global economic and legal networks.

As I argue in Chapter One, the Nasser regime created a large professional urban middle class, which became a central protagonist of narratives of national progress and modernity. As the older Nasserite national narrative and project is increasingly left behind in attempts to bring the nation up to speed with the global, dreams that were connected to the Nasserite promotion of the professional middle class are increasingly countered by hostile realities. Meanwhile, new dreams of a First World Egypt seem within reach of those young urban professionals who are able to negotiate the cosmopolitan realms of up-market Cairo. Those who possess the cosmopolitan capital to staff up-market workspaces act as successful mediators between the 'local' and the 'global,' not unlike India's 'new middle class,' which, as Fernandes argues, is constructed as "the social group which is able to negotiate India's new relationship with the global economy in both cultural and economic terms" (2000b: 91).

In Chapters Two and Three, which deal with schooling and the labor market respectively, I argue that new lines of nobility based on a combination of specific educational, cultural and social capital increasingly differentiate those who are able to participate in up-market circuits of consumption and production, from those who cannot. The rise of a dual educational system has been crucial to these divisions. While the under-funded and often low-quality public education is shunned by all who can afford to pay tuition fees for private schools, prestigious private ‘language schools’ and, more recently, schools that offer American and British curricula and degrees have become crucial for acquiring these more privileged forms of educational, cultural and social capital. Their comparative affluence allowed certain families to send their children to private schools and provide them with the financial means to engage in up-market consumption practices, thereby helping their children on their way to up-market jobs and lifestyles. Upon entry into the labor market, the social capital that comes with family background and networks provided these ‘children of good families’ with excellent *wasta* (influential contacts) and good social references.

The bifurcation of the educational system and the rise of a new segment of jobs in the more internationally oriented sectors of the Egyptian economy have led to increasingly tangible divisions between a privileged upper-middle class and less fortunate middle class strata. What I call ‘cosmopolitan capital’ presents a crucial marker of these emerging divisions. Cosmopolitan capital comprises those forms of cultural capital that entail familiarity with, and mastery of, Western cultural codes, as well as local cosmopolitan ones. Such cosmopolitan capital most clearly entails fluency in English, as well as Western diplomas or degrees from educational institutes that are associated with Western knowledge. It also entails knowledge of the West, Western consumer culture, as well as, for example, local cosmopolitan dress codes. Language is one of the most significant components of cosmopolitan capital. The common expression ‘he does not have a language,’ i.e., he does not speak a European language, notably English, has come to imply a lack of future prospects and non-privileged class membership. Meanwhile, a mix of Arabic and English has become the common language of conversation among upper-middle class professionals. These professionals are targeted by the numerous English language magazines that have appeared in recent years. English, or, rather, this mix of English and Arabic, has become a thoroughly local class-specific language, which indicates belonging in upper-middle class circles and up-market spaces of work, consumption and leisure.

The discrepancy of fortunes in Cairo’s new liberal age is most marked in the different shapes the private sector takes in the stories and imaginations of different graduates. For many university graduates who do not belong to the new ‘labor aristocracy’ with cosmopolitan capital and the right family backgrounds and connections, the private sector stands for low wages, insecure employment, disrespect, abuse and fears of harassment. For more privileged graduates, significantly those ‘with languages,’ the private sector represents

the possibility of a well-paid job in which they may be able to make use of their education in a clean office with ‘clean’ people. However, the up-market segment of the economy is limited in size and is, moreover, highly dependent on Egypt’s fragile ‘liberal’ economic experiment. In the context of the economic crisis that has plagued the Egyptian economy since 2000, this up-market segment has become the object of restructuring and retrenchment. This retrenchment signals the fragile economic base of many upper-middle class jobs, and gives rise to a race for better and more exclusive qualifications.

Segmentation in the labor market finds its counterpart in Cairo’s consumption and leisure spaces. The cosmopolitan lifestyles and relative affluence of young upper-middle class professionals employed in up-market companies has created a market for new forms of leisure and consumption. In Chapter Four I discuss the upscale coffee shops that have become central to the social lives of many upper-middle class professionals. These coffee shops carve out spaces for young upper-middle class professionals in Cairo’s urban landscape. They provide them with new opportunities for socializing, finding partners and other forms of networking and self-presentation. Upscale coffee shops have created a protected niche for non-familial mixed-gender sociabilities in the more contentious public geographies of leisure. They have been able to wrest such mixed-gender sociabilities away from associations with immorality and loose sexual behavior that cling to less exclusive mixed-gender spaces outside of the redemptive familial sphere. By way of their prices and their explicitly cosmopolitan connections, which signal distance from surrounding places and their gender norms, coffee shops create a safe and exclusive space for the leisurely socializing of mixed-gender groups of friends and the public lifestyles of young career women. The cosmopolitan lifestyles of these young professionals can only be lived and enjoyed in these closed-off places, where upper-middle class normalcy is secured through the exclusive homogeneity of the clientele under the watchful eyes of the personnel.

The exclusivity of the coffee shops and their clientele is guarded through financial and cultural barriers. The space of the coffee shop can thus be said to be founded upon and simultaneously create new forms of social segregation. The cosmopolitan and exclusive social space of the coffee shop redraws matrices of familiarity and belonging. Communalities of cosmopolitan belonging come with their counterparts of distance, and increasingly render other spaces in the urban landscape unfamiliar and even unreal. Following Saskia Sassen’s lead on the unbundling and re-bundling of space resulting from global flows and networks, we could say that the class-based cosmopolitan belonging of the coffee shop gives rise to new configurations of closeness and distance, slicing up and segmenting Cairo’s social landscape.

In the last chapter I explore some of the footprints of social segregation in the daily life of the city. I discuss the urban trajectories of some young upper-middle class women who

spent much of their time in public spaces outside the purview of the family. Many upper-middle class women resorted to strategies of class closure to secure unscathed passage through public space. The trajectories of these young women were invariably based on class maps: places that are safe for women are upscale places. It is only in these places that these women can be *at ease*, dress and socialize as they see fit, without being annoyed or being seen as disreputable. This points to a crucial contradiction at the core of their high-mobility lifestyles: their condition of possibility is social closure and the ability to avoid unwanted contacts.

The itineraries of these women highlight social distance and segregation within the urban landscape and the fabric of city life. Gender is an integral part of the drawing of class boundaries and justifications of social segregation. Their trajectories show assumptions about the existence of class-specific norms of gendered behavior, which feed into measures of social avoidance and segregation intended to protect upper-middle class women. These are the footsteps of social segregation that play out against the more obvious maps of privilege and affluence versus exclusion and scarcity inscribed in the built environment, most markedly in the form of the gated communities that now surround Cairo.

Egypt's neoliberal project entails a 'search for the global'—attempts to capture global business and reinvigorate the private sector through investments in infrastructure, showcase projects and a range of subsidies—as well as policies that aim at the downsizing of state budgets and relinquishing of the state's patronage role in the context of structural adjustment. These twin projects can be seen as prescriptions for an increasingly divided nation.

Since these processes of restructuring lead to growing divisions within Cairo's professional middle class, they also give rise to highly differential middle class engagements with the narratives and realities of Cairo's new liberal age. Projects geared towards economic liberalization, integration into global networks and the creation of a globally appropriate Cairo feed into longstanding feelings of exclusion from and desire for First World membership. Dreams of a First World Egypt seem within reach of those young urban professionals who are able to negotiate the cosmopolitan realms of up-market Cairo. While some can live new dreams of First World inclusion, the dreams of many middle class professionals seem to become increasingly stale and out of reach. As older state projects and narratives are steadily abandoned, the choices faced by these disenfranchised professionals have become rather bitter. The First World that has reterritorialized in up-market Cairo offers them only simulacra of inclusion, and in the labor market, many are confronted with the more inhospitable realities of Egypt's new liberal age. Yet few seem prepared to give up on established expectations of a middle class life.

Samenvatting

Global Dreams. Space, Class and Gender in Middle Class Cairo

Deze studie bespreekt de alledaagse gevolgen van Egypte's economische liberalisering en pogingen tot verdere integratie in de wereldmarkt. Zij richt zich met name op veranderende lijnen van sociale stratificatie en de manier waarop deze tot uitdrukking komen in Caïro's stedelijk landschap. Egypte's politieke en economische koerswijziging, die midden jaren zeventig begon met de *infitaah* (open-deur beleid), kwam begin jaren negentig in een stroomversnelling terecht met het aannemen van een uitgebreid pakket aan beleidsmaatregelen in het kader van *structural adjustment*. Zij heeft in de afgelopen decennia geleid tot de groei van klassenverschillen die onder Nasser relatief bescheiden waren. Er is een nieuwe bourgeoisie ontstaan, evenals een relatief welvarende professionele hogere middenklasse die werkzaam is in de meer internationaal georiënteerde sectoren van de stedelijke economie. Veel inkomens buiten deze meer gefortuneerde groepen bevinden zich al tijden in een neerwaartse spiraal, terwijl de afbraak van een scala aan overheidssubsidies en -diensten het leven voor velen duurder heeft gemaakt. Deze nieuwe scheidslijnen zijn terug te vinden in het stedelijk landschap in de vorm van ruimtelijke en sociaal-culturele segregatie.

Deze studie is gebaseerd op achttien maanden onderzoek in Caïro van september 2001 tot maart 2003, alsmede een drie maanden durend vervolgonderzoek van mei tot en met juli 2004. Het onderzoek bestond voornamelijk uit participerende observatie en interviews met middenklasse professionals van verschillende sociale achtergronden die merendeels tussen de midden twintig en midden dertig waren. Het laat de opkomst zien van nieuwe scheidslijnen in Caïro's professionele middenklasse ten gevolge van Egypte's neoliberale koers op het gebied van scholing, de arbeidsmarkt en stedelijke ruimte.

Zoals ik in Hoofdstuk 1 aangeef, creëerde het Nasser regime een brede professionele middenklasse. Voor deze middenklasse was een hoofdrol weggelegd in vertogen over nationale vooruitgang en moderniteit. Nu het oudere Nasseristische nationale vertoog en project in toenemende mate plaatsmaakt voor pogingen om aansluiting te vinden bij een internationale standaard, worden de dromen die verbonden zijn met de Nasseristische nadruk op een brede professionele middenklasse steeds vaker ontkracht door een weinig gastvrije werkelijkheid. Tegelijkertijd lijken dromen van een Egypte dat zich kan meten met de Eerste Wereld binnen handbereik van jonge professionals die hun weg kunnen vinden in de kosmopolitische omgeving van *up-market* Caïro. Zij kunnen als succesvolle bruggenbouwers tussen lokaal en mondiaal fungeren, en zijn in die zin vergelijkbaar met de Indiase 'nieuwe middenklasse,' die volgens Fernandes geconstrueerd wordt als "the social

group which is able to negotiate India's new relationship with the global economy in both cultural and economic terms" (2000b: 91).

In Hoofdstuk 2 en 3, waarin respectievelijk scholing en de arbeidsmarkt centraal staan, stel ik dat er een nieuwe aristocratie is ontstaan die haar positie ontleent aan een combinatie van educatief, cultureel en sociaal kapitaal. In tegenstelling tot diegenen die niet over dergelijk kapitaal beschikken, kan deze nieuwe aristocratie deelnemen aan het up-market Cairo dat in de laatste decennia vorm heeft gekregen.

De opkomst en consolidatie van een tweedeling in het onderwijsstelsel heeft een cruciale rol gespeeld in deze sociale segmentatie. Vanaf de jaren zeventig begonnen diegenen die het schoolgeld voor particulier onderwijs konden opbrengen, het ondergefinancierde publieke onderwijs te mijden. Prestigieuze particuliere 'talenscholen' en, meer recentelijk, scholen die Amerikaanse of Britse curricula en diploma's aanbieden, begonnen daarentegen een cruciale rol te spelen in het verwerven van exclusieve vormen van educatief, cultureel en sociaal kapitaal. Relatief welvarende families beschikten over de financiële middelen om hun kinderen naar particuliere scholen te sturen en hen in staat te stellen deel te nemen aan het consumptiegedrag dat kenmerkend is voor de hogere middenklasse. Hiermee hebben ze hun kinderen op weg geholpen naar up-market banen en lifestyles. Op de arbeidsmarkt speelt het sociale kapitaal dat samenhangt met familieachtergrond en -netwerken een centrale rol. Dit sociale kapitaal voorziet deze 'kinderen van goede families' van uitstekende contacten en sociale referenties.

De tweedeling binnen het onderwijsstelsel en de opkomst van een nieuw segment van banen in de meer internationaal georiënteerde sectoren van de stedelijke economie hebben geleid tot het ontstaan van een in toenemende mate tastbare tweedeling tussen een bevoorrechte hogere middenklasse en andere middenklasse strata. Wat ik kosmopolitisch kapitaal noem is kenmerkend voor deze scheidslijnen in Caïro's professionele middenklasse. Kosmopolitisch kapitaal kan omschreven worden als die vormen van cultureel kapitaal waarin bekendheid met, en beheersing van Westerse en lokale kosmopolitische codes centraal staan. Zulk kosmopolitisch kapitaal omvat uiteraard de beheersing van de Engelse taal, en Westerse diploma's of een graad van een onderwijsinstelling die wordt geassocieerd met Westerse kennis. Het betreft ook een meer algemene kennis van het Westen, van Westerse consumptiecultuur en, bijvoorbeeld, lokale kosmopolitische kledingstijlen.

Taal is zoals gezegd een van de belangrijkste componenten van dergelijk kosmopolitisch kapitaal. De veelvoorkomende uitdrukking 'hij heeft geen taal,' ofwel, hij spreekt geen Europese taal, in het bijzonder Engels, is dit opzicht veelzeggend. Het niet 'hebben' van een taal impliceert vaak ook een gebrek aan toekomstperspectief en het niet behoren tot het meer bevoorrechte deel van de samenleving. Onder jonge professionals uit de hogere middenklasse is een mix van Arabisch en Engels de omgangstaal geworden. Een groeiend

aantal lokale Engelstalige publicaties richt zich op deze lucratieve doelgroep. Engels, of liever gezegd, een mengeling van Engels en Arabisch, is een bij uitstek lokale taal geworden, die specifiek is voor een bepaalde klasse. Het spreken van deze mix van Arabisch en Engels geeft aan dat iemand lid is van de hogere middenklasse en thuishoort in een up-market omgeving van werk, consumptie en vrije tijd.

Hoe zeer de kansen van hooggeschoolde jongeren uiteenlopen in Caïro's nieuwe liberale tijdperk blijkt uit de verschillende manieren waarop de privésector figureert in verhalen over en verbeeldingen van de arbeidsmarkt. Voor diegenen die niet behoren tot de nieuwe arbeidsaristocratie met kosmopolitisch kapitaal en de juiste familieachtergrond staat de privésector veelal voor lage lonen, een onzekere arbeidspositie, exploitatie, gebrek aan respect, en angst om lastiggevallen te worden. Voor meer bevoorrechte professionals, met name diegenen 'met talen,' staat de privésector voor de belofte van een goedbetaalde baan waarin werknemers gebruik kunnen maken van hun opleiding in een 'net' kantoor met 'nette' collega's. Het up-market segment van de economie waarin de laatsten werkzaam zijn is echter beperkt in omvang en is bovendien sterk afhankelijk van Egypte's fragiele neoliberale experiment. De crisis waarin de Egyptische economie sinds 2000 verkeert, heeft aanleiding gegeven tot herstructurering en bezuinigingen in dit up-market segment. Deze bezuinigingen laten de kwetsbare basis van veel van deze goedbetaalde professionele banen zien, en hebben geleid tot een wedloop om betere en meer exclusieve kwalificaties.

Segmentatie in de arbeidsmarkt heeft zijn tegenhanger in Caïro's consumptie- en vrijetijdslandschap. De kosmopolitische lifestyles en de relatieve welvaart van jonge professionals uit de hogere middenklasse hebben een markt gecreëerd voor nieuwe vormen van consumptie en vrijetijdsbesteding. In Hoofdstuk 4 bespreek ik de exclusieve *coffee shops*, gemodelleerd naar Amerikaans voorbeeld, die een centrale plaats hebben ingenomen in het sociale leven van jonge professionals uit de hogere middenklasse. Deze coffee shops bieden hen onder andere nieuwe mogelijkheden om vrienden te ontmoeten en een partner te vinden. In een omgeving waarin ontmoetingen tussen jonge ongetrouwde mannen en vrouwen vaak beladen en soms zelfs omstreden zijn, hebben zij een veilige niche weten te creëren voor een gemengd sociaal leven buiten de familiesfeer. Zij zijn er in geslaagd om een dergelijk publiek gemengd sociaal leven te ontdoen van de negatieve associaties met immoraliteit en seksuele losbandigheid die vaak worden toegeschreven aan dergelijke ontmoetingen in minder exclusieve publieke etablissementen. Met hun relatief hoge prijzen en kosmopolitische referenties scheppen deze coffee shops een afstand tot de directe omgeving en de normen ten aanzien van gender die daar van kracht zijn. Daardoor kunnen ze fungeren als een sociaal gezien exclusieve en veilige arena voor ongedwongen ontmoetingen tussen jonge vrouwen en mannen en de uitgaande lifestyles van jonge carrièrevrouwen. De kosmopolitische lifestyles van deze jonge professionals kunnen echter alleen geleefd

worden in deze afgesloten plaatsen, waar de normaliteit van de hogere middenklasse veilig wordt gesteld door de exclusieve homogeniteit van de cliëntèle en de waakzaamheid van het personeel.

De exclusiviteit van de coffee shops en hun cliëntèle wordt bewaakt door financiële en culturele barrières. De sociale ruimte van de coffee shop is daarmee niet alleen geworteld in sociale segregatie, maar creëert op zijn beurt ook nieuwe vormen van segregatie. Een gedeeld gevoel van kosmopolitische affiniteit heeft zijn tegenhanger in distantie: andere plaatsen in het stedelijk landschap en diegenen die met deze plaatsen worden geassocieerd, lijken in toenemende mate vreemd en zelfs onwettelijk. Saskia Sassen's inzichten met betrekking tot de fragmentatie en het opnieuw bundelen van ruimte ten gevolge van mondiale stromen en netwerken kunnen daarom ook op de klasse-specifieke affiniteiten van de coffee shop worden toegepast. Zij dragen evenzeer bij aan veranderende configuraties van nabijheid en afstand, en de fragmentatie en segmentatie van Caïro's sociale landschap.

In het laatste hoofdstuk verken ik de sporen van sociale segregatie in het dagelijkse leven van de stad. Ik bespreek de routes van een aantal jonge vrouwen uit de hogere middenklasse die veel van hun tijd in de publieke ruimte doorbrengen. Deze vrouwen gebruiken veelal strategieën van *class closure* om zich te verzekeren van een ongeschonden doorgang door de publieke ruimte. De manier waarop zij zich door de stad bewegen is gebaseerd op een sociale kaart van de stad waarin klasse centraal staat: alleen die plaatsen die overduidelijk behoren tot een hogere klasse worden veilig geacht. Alleen daar kunnen zij ongestoord en op hun gemak hun tijd doorbrengen zonder te worden lastiggevallen of voor weinig respectabel te worden aangezien. Dit wijst op een centrale tegenspraak in hun dagelijkse publieke routines: hun uitgaande lifestyles zijn afhankelijk van social closure en het kunnen vermijden van ongewenste contacten.

De manier waarop deze vrouwen door de stad bewegen toont de alomtegenwoordigheid van sociale afstand en sociale segregatie in de minutiae van het stedelijk leven. Gender is een integraal onderdeel van deze maatschappelijke scheidslijnen en is een belangrijke bron van legitimatie van sociale segregatie. De stedelijke routes van deze vrouwen brengen aannames over het bestaan van verschillende, klasse-specifieke normen voor gender-specifiek gedrag aan het licht, die op hun beurt voeding geven aan maatregelen om minder geprivilegieerde stadsbewoners zo veel mogelijk op afstand te houden. Dit zijn de alledaagse sporen van sociale segregatie, die vorm krijgen tegen de achtergrond van de aperte uitdrukkingen van privilege en welvaart versus uitsluiting en schaarste in de bebouwde omgeving, in het bijzonder in de vorm van de *gated communities* die Caïro tegenwoordig omringen.

Egypte's neoliberale project omvat een streven naar een verbeterde standing op mondiaal niveau—pogingen om mondiale bedrijvigheid aan te trekken en de privésector te stimuleren

door middel van investeringen in de infrastructuur, showcase projecten en een scala aan subsidies—alsmede beleid dat, in het kader van structural adjustment, gericht is op het afslanken van het staatsbudget en het terugbrengen van de patronagerol van de overheid. Dit dubbele project lijkt een recept voor een verdeelde natie.

Het proces van economische herstructurering leidt tot een groeiende tweedeling in Caïro's professionele middenklasse en geeft daarmee aanleiding tot zeer uiteenlopende houdingen ten aanzien van de vertogen en realiteit van Caïro's nieuwe liberale tijdperk. Projecten die gericht zijn op verdere economische liberalisering, integratie in mondiale netwerken en de creatie van een Caïro dat zich kan meten met andere wereldsteden raken aan oude verlangens naar Eerste Wereld lidmaatschap. Dromen van een Egypte dat zich kan meten met de Eerste Wereld lijken in toenemende mate binnen handbereik van die jonge stedelijke professionals die in staat zijn hun weg te vinden in het kosmopolitische, exclusieve Caïro dat in de laatste decennia vorm heeft gekregen. De dromen van vele minder bevoorrechte middenklasse professionals lijken daarentegen steeds verder verwijderd van de alledaagse werkelijkheid. In een tijd waarin oudere overheidsprojecten en –vertogen aan de kant worden gezet, worden deze professionals geconfronteerd met bittere keuzes. Zij kunnen slechts in beperkte mate deelnemen aan de Eerste Wereld die in up-market Caïro vorm heeft gekregen, terwijl velen op de arbeidsmarkt geconfronteerd worden met een weinig gastvrije werkelijkheid. Toch lijken weinigen bereid om hun hoop op een middenklasse bestaan op te geven.