Samuli Schielke


In this timely book, Samuli Schielke captures the anxieties that Egyptians have been experiencing at a time of radical transition caused by a combination of deepening capitalist social relations and revivalist Islam. This process of transition, Schielke argues, has created new hopes as well as frustrations and disappointments. In the nine chapters that this book is comprised of, Schielke traces developments over the past four decades and ends with an assessment of the January 25th revolution. In this ambitious project, Schielke weaves together diverse social phenomena such as religious revivalism, passion, desire and love with the experience of capitalism in the lives of ordinary Egyptians. A welcome aspect of the book is the dialogical method of inquiry, which allows the subjects of Shielke’s research to speak for themselves and remain present throughout the book. The open-ended conversations provide a lens for readers to understand the way Egyptians negotiate their choices in very difficult circumstances and navigate their daily lives by seeking normalcy and stability at a time of instability and change.

While Schielke focuses his research on the experience of one particular village in northern Egypt (he names the village Nazlat al-Rayyis) and its inhabitants over many years, his analysis and historical references situate the experience of his subjects in the broader trajectory of change that Egypt has been undergoing for decades now. The village as a small microcosm reveals the dramatic changes that Egyptian society has encountered: the rise of Salafism, the proliferation of capitalism and its impact on the villagers’ ability to sustain themselves, new aspirations and desires, the frustrations that result from unmet expectations, and perverse practices such as *wasta*—all these changes define the experience of neoliberalism in Egypt. Rather than seeing religion, the economy and emotional experiences as separate from one another, Schielke treats them as interlinked and thus requiring an analysis that explains how these factors shape one another. For instance, he explains the rise of revivalist Islam in the following terms:

> We cannot understand the significance of Islam in the contemporary world if we do not also understand the significance of modernist regimes of knowledge, the coexistence of different notions of morality and embodiment, the imaginaries of romantic love, the promises and menaces of global capitalism, the emotional attachment to nationalism, and
the frustrations and dead ends involved in all ideals and promises of good life.

One of the central themes in the book is the ‘nexus of religiosity, economy and other aspirational’ (p. 16) schemes that Egyptians have experienced in recent decades. Chapter 1 discusses the phenomenon of boredom, which became increasingly common among young men due to the contraction of public sector employment and the lack of meaningful jobs. Boredom is the result of unemployment and thus unrealized life expectations such as getting married; young men try to escape this by taking drugs or migrating. In chapter 2, Schielke explores how Egyptians negotiate morality in these times of change. He argues that what may appear as hypocrisy is indeed a strategy of dealing with complexity, which requires one to act differently and thus inconsistently in different circumstances.

Thus, ‘[m]orality in this sense is not only situational, unsystematic, and ambiguous; it also does not have clear boundaries’ (p. 56). It is in the context of this fluid morality that revivalist Islam enters to offer a grounding and sense of certainty, argues Schielke. In chapter 3 he discusses the rise of Salafism in Egypt in the 2000s as a response to the ambivalence that had prevailed in various parts of Egyptian society. In a very interesting way, this chapter relates the rise of Salafism as a response not only to the instability and uncertainty caused by global capitalism but also to positivist knowledge systems that shaped the education system in Egypt. In chapter 4, he explores the theme of love in the complex context of the rise of revivalist Islam, and capitalism as experienced through the power of western culture depicted in Hollywood movies. The villagers’ experience of love has become just as complex as the experience of moral life in a fluid context.

Chapter 5 explores the imperatives that capitalism inflicts on social actors and thus implicates them in the ways capitalism operates. He writes, ‘[T]he complex workings of economic desires, pressures, transactions, tricks and detours are a tactical business in which the elites are involved as much as the poor’ (p. 126). Existing socioeconomic actors and their beliefs, values, and ideologies mediate these experiences of capitalism. Schielke discusses how Egyptians negotiate the newly created expectations of a consumerist society. To understand what it is like to live and act under both revivalist Islam and capitalism, Schielke argues that we need to explore the existential concerns that motivate people’s actions.

In chapter 6, Schielke explores the existential concerns that motivate people to become committed to Salafism. It appears that in the absence of a mean-