

Mark A. Peterson, *Connected in Cairo: Growing Up Cosmopolitan in the Modern Middle East*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011. \$ 22.46 (paperback)

Connected in Cairo

Published in the *Public Cultures of the Middle East and North Africa* series by Indiana University Press (Paul Silverstein, Susan Slyomovics, and Ted Swedenburg, eds.), *Connected in Cairo* analyzes the public-ness and self-fashioning of elite social worlds. Key to this analysis is the role upwardly mobile and elite Cairenes play in facilitating the flow of goods, ideas, people, and capital in both directions—“down” to less affluent Egyptians and “up” to transnational corporations and commodity chains (p. 171). Mark Allen Peterson thus eloquently illustrates a sort of globalization from the middle, rather than “from above” or “from below.” His work argues for the importance of multiple co-existing forms of localization, themselves marked by strategies of class differentiation, that together shape the globalization of life in Cairo.

Peterson does an excellent job of decentering his own voice as a researcher while keeping himself in the ethnographic frame. Instead of struggling to define globalization, Peterson lets his interlocutors explain how it impacts them in ways big and small. While this does not have the explanatory force or satisfying reach of a more systemic critique, it does insist on the nuance and authority of each person's consumption practices. He writes in an easy, jargon-free style, often referencing influential theories only in the discussion following each ethnographic anecdote (for example, considering Pokemon consumption in light of Bourdieu's “symbolic violence,” p. 90). As a professor at the American University in Cairo at the time of his research, Peterson enjoyed similar levels of prestige as his interlocutors, and often explicitly draws upon the insights or suggestions of his graduate students to explore daily life as an affluent Cairene. In the vignettes framing his discussions of masculinity and femininity in contrasting café spaces, Peterson dramatizes his own role without ensuring a single reading of the event (pp. 143–44, 153, 159–160).

The introductory chapter leaves open the exact nature of globalization (or neo-liberal capitalism), as Peterson contents himself with providing “a contribution to theories about localization as a cultural process” (p. 4). Chapters on children's magazines and the Pokemon phenomenon of the early 2000s thoroughly situate Egyptian children's consumption of these items—and their accompanying accessories and discourses—within globalized commodity circulation. In the former chapter, Arabic-language children's magazines index and inculcate a regional identity that is itself changing in response to global flows of capital and international politics. In the latter chapter, foreign or local Pokemon items not only serve to differentiate students' social hierarchy, but spark an urgent debate amongst parents, teachers, and regional media on the effects of this “Western” fad's incessant drive to consumption on structures of desire.

In the chapters on private high school and college students, young people are described negotiating the intertwined terrains of gender roles, “Western-ness,” and “Egyptian-ness” in ways that recall Dick Hebdige’s work on subculture (1979). Students perform their affiliations through style, simultaneously investing those styles with narratives of authenticity. Here consumption is not only performative of class, just as wearing the *hijab* or the *niqab* are not only performative of piety (pp. 130–34), or criticizing adoption of “American” tastes is not only performative of national identity (pp. 104–110). The final chapter argues that some successful business owners valorize a particular narrative of entrepreneurship deriving in many ways from the cultures of the multinational corporations with which they work.

Like other recent texts engaging with affluent or upwardly-mobile class formations in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, *Connected in Cairo* explores elites’ tangled relationship to discourses of national identity that continue to draw upon assumptions and populist rhetorics from the post-independence era (Winegar 2006, Cohen 2004). Peterson provides a welcome alternative to narratives within both Egyptian and scholarly discourse that implicitly made more impoverished Cairenes bearers of authentic Egyptian-ness. He avoids framing this as a debate between ethnographers, however, by locating and interrogating moments when upper-class Cairenes engage with their own awareness of the discursive link between class formation and national identity (chapters 4 and 6).

The upper-middle and elite class formations that Peterson studies here are, of course, defined in relation to each other and to less affluent Egyptians; they are also defined in relation to their participation in regional or transnational production chains. Each chapter discusses strategies of consumption and deployment of consumption in daily life toward greater social and cultural capital. Peterson refutes the Adorno- and Huntington-inspired models of consumption his interlocutors sometimes invoke, instead depicting consumers as agents fitting each purchase into a creative narrative of identity. He also demonstrates that his interlocutors are immersed in the popular debates around the nature and effects of such consumption. Such debates structure the narratives that individuals can adopt about their own purchases and practices, but Peterson’s interlocutors reflect critically on these narratives even as they eagerly engage them.

As the title suggests, the arrangement of chapters takes us from the role of consumption in children’s self-fashioning to that of teens, college students, and finally successful adult entrepreneurs. This argues for increased attention to the pervasive influence of globalized commodities and symbols on the imagination of the self-as-consumer from an early age. This life-cycle approach could have looked more explicitly at generational differences as well, giving us more information on the change in subjectivation and self-fashioning strategies following Egypt’s entry into neoliberal capitalism in the 1990s.

In the introduction, Peterson draws upon recent work on cosmopolitanism to note that “at the level of practice, both the Cairene student at AUC and the Deltan villager are equally cosmopolitan and equally indigenous” (p. 12). In later chapters, that insight is obscured as “cosmopolitans” again become synonymous with members of an elite social formation, as in his use of “the cosmopolitan class”