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Introduction

In November of 1993 I attended a swearing-in ceremony at the Egyptian Bar Association. A friend's daughter was to be inducted, and I was asked to join her and her mother at the Bar Association's headquarters in downtown Cairo to photograph the event. They were not a wealthy family, and a ceremony to commemorate their daughter having made it both through college and into the Bar was for them a momentous occasion. Unfortunately, in the view of the legal establishment it was just another first Tuesday of the month – the day when the swearing-in routine takes place and another group of unemployable lawyers is turned out into an unimpressed labor market.

Almost no pomp and circumstance were invested in the event – it was an absence of ritual where one was expected to take place. No attempt was made to tell the proud new lawyers what they should do, or when. Instead, the entrance to the swearing-in chamber was forcibly barred, and prospective lawyers and their families pressed against the door in a frantic mob. The guards were letting small groups trickle in, but no attempt was made to convey information about how the ceremony was to be organized. It was survival of the fittest, and my friends were simply not willing enough to engage in physical combat to be among the first into the room. Finally we gave up and had a cup of tea while waiting for the crowd to thin down.

The young woman who was to have celebrated her professional triumph lashed out in irritation: “This is like trying to get on the bus – they treat us like a bunch of peasants. Before you know it they'll be taking off their belts and whipping us. I thought this was a respectable place, and what do I find? Chaos.” While we were having our tea the girl murmured to her mother: “*Zahma ya dunyā zahma / Zahma wi-tāhū al-ḥabāyib*” (how crowded is the world; crowded and friends lose their way). Her mother

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smiled, and replied: “*Zahma wi-la-‘ad-sh’ rahma*” (crowded and merciless). I knew the next line, so I added: “*Mūlid wi-ṣaḥb-u ghāyib*” (a saint’s festival without the saint [the point being that everything was utterly chaotic]).

These lines were quoted formulaically, as one might a proverb. But “how crowded is the world” was no proverbial wisdom, or at least not the kind that comes from an imagined pristine folk culture. Rather, it was a line from a popular song – the sort spread by modern technology such as cassette tapes or a microphone in a nightclub. Reciting a verse from “How Crowded Is the World” was an ironic way of commenting on a frustrating predicament. Part of the irony lay not just in the words to the song, but in the singer, Aḥmad ‘Adawīya, who is scorned by the official media as hopelessly vulgar. The song first became popular in the late 1970s or early 1980s. The mother and her daughter in the Bar Association probably knew it from pirated cassette tapes sold in places such as al-‘Ataba al-Khaḍrā, a neighborhood located in a transitional zone between European-built downtown Cairo and more traditional areas. My friends at the swearing-in ceremony frequently recommended al-‘Ataba as a place to buy things cheap; the media often denounces it as a wild place where stolen goods are fenced and bad taste runs rampant.

Adawiya is rarely given air time on the radio or television. I knew him and the song quoted at the Bar Association not from a pirated cassette sold in al-‘Ataba, but from a film called *Sha‘bān taḥt al-ṣifr* (Shaban below zero, 1980). My friends probably hadn’t seen the film because women go to the cinema less often than men, and they could not afford a VCR to watch it at home. *Shaban below Zero* starred a popular comedian named ‘Adil Imām, who is similar to Adawiya and the neighborhood of al-‘Ataba in that most of his *oeuvre* is cited in establishment media as a symbol of vulgarity. The film was in fact a remake of a 1942 movie called *Lau kunt’ ghanī* (If I were rich). The original film from the 1940s was a light comedy which ended with the triumph of a new middle class. The 1980 remake of the film in which Adawiya sang “How Crowded Is the World” ended with the problems of its beleaguered characters unresolved.

This was the context of a brief invocation of a popular song: middle-class people feeling humiliated at the hands of an institution that is supposed to enable their upward mobility. They respond by reciting words from a song that the sort of people who control institutions such as the Bar Association, not to mention the establishment media, denounce. The song itself was bought and sold in a particular popular-culture context which included a range of potential associations of place and person also considered unsavory by the media. “How Crowded Is the World” occurred

in a film that reverberated with connotations of class; and finally, the film resonated with historical significance – comparative snapshots of the middle class separated by almost forty years.

Popular culture features in the lives of most Egyptians and, to some extent, in all of the Arabic-speaking Middle East.¹ Academic disinterest in mass-mediated popular culture of the region is therefore puzzling. Something like a “postmodern condition” in which reality and images blur into each other, perhaps even define each other, has come into being under our noses. This cannot be the same postmodern condition as pertains to the West. Or can it? So far academics have made only the most minimal attempt to analyze the phenomenon or even to comment on it.

The chief barrier to studying Egyptian popular culture is that it is commercial and oriented toward an Arabic-speaking market. Commercial culture is sometimes depicted as erasing authentic non-Western cultures, and in Egypt the dilution of local culture by Western influence is, in fact, a common element in both artistic performance and critical opinion on the part of layman and expert alike. But to interpret Egyptian popular culture either as a straightforward imitation of the West or, conversely, as cryptic resistance to hegemonic power, would as often as not lead one to misunderstand the character of the art. A concern with Egypt’s relationship to the West is one of the defining characteristics of Egyptian popular culture, yet blind adoption of Western culture has never been an unambiguous or uncontested feature of modern Egypt.² At the very least, as Appadurai and Breckenridge note, “every society appears to bring to these [popular] forms its own special history and traditions, its own cultural stamp, its own quirks and idiosyncracies” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 1988, 5).

The commercial nature of Egyptian popular culture automatically excludes it from the incipient canon of “Third World” cultural productions which is defined by Western scholars in metropolitan institutions, and tends to include only works that make sense to monolingual audiences in that context (Ahmad 1992, 78–81). Many of the works slotted into the Third World canon are postcolonial, critical of the West, and endorse nationalism as the only effective strategy of potential resistance (Jameson 1986).³ This implies either that the only difference between works selected and those not selected is aesthetic sophistication – as if attributions of sophistication or naiveté were unproblematic – or that works not selected are rejected on some unspecified ground (Ahmad 1992, 107).

Critics who point out the metropolitan character of the “Third World

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literature” category, however, offer no satisfactory alternative. For example, Aijaz Ahmad’s alternative bypasses texts produced and consumed by people in non-Western cities but ignored by academics. What he has in mind, instead, are “genres which are essentially oral and performative, sites of production located at a great remove from the great cities, entire linguistic complexes as yet unassimilated into grids of print and translation” (*ibid.*, 80–81). Ahmad’s non-metropolitan text, in other words, is folklore, which in an Egyptian context is a nonstarter as an unclassified site of resistance to either colonial or postcolonial nationalist hegemony. Since the 1950s such “oral and performative sites of production” have been part of the Cairo University curriculum. The process of classifying Egyptian folklore – whatever the character of the folk texts themselves – fits comfortably within a nationalist discourse. To search for uncontaminated texts “located at a great remove from the cities” would be pointless; an archive for such material exists already.

In Egypt the texts that have received the least academic scrutiny are not the primordial utterances of the noncolonized, but those produced and disseminated in the new media: cinema, television, radio, cassette tapes, lowbrow magazines. Much of this material is implicated in nationalist and modernist discourses, but both the arbiters of metropolitan Third World canons and their critics consider it unworthy of comment.⁴ Consequently only a tiny fraction of Egyptian films, for example, are shown in the West, and usually those selected are least representative of what most Egyptians like to watch. If these films are shown they are usually classified with other “Third World films,” many of which are made under radically different conditions.⁵

The issue is not whether the texts selected – electronic or otherwise – are good or bad. Much of what is read and taught as Third World literature written in English by Indians and Africans, for example, deserves to be read; many of the North African films with which Egyptian cinema is often unfavorably compared are excellent. The distinction between what we experience as Third World culture and non-Western texts excluded from the canon is not always strictly a differentiation between “works of art” and “vulgar commerce”; there is also a differentiation between non-Western artists with privileged access to more lucrative markets (not to mention the capital and training that permit access) and those without such access. The distinction between works produced with an eye on metropolitan audiences or markets and works made to be consumed outside the metropole is important, at least for anthropologists, who generally claim to have some interest in how others interpret and interact with the world.

Yet until fairly recently even anthropologists resisted analyzing material outside the incipient metropolitan canon on methodological grounds. Mass media fit poorly with a discipline that saw its main contribution coming from participant observation of people considered primitive. Fortunately these methodological prejudices have been questioned, although not abandoned outright. As Talal Asad notes, anthropology is still largely concerned with “nonmodern” peoples – a tendency which has somewhat marginalized the discipline (Asad 1993, 19–24). By implicitly assuming the premodernity of their subjects anthropologists are left with a methodological bias toward orality. Consequently a recent review of the state of the art in anthropological approaches to mass media began with a disclaimer: “There is as yet no ‘anthropology of mass media’” (Spitulnik 1993, 293), and later noted that “recent developments [in the anthropology of mass media] have been criticized for being still too theory-driven, biased by populist agendas, and merely unknowing rediscoveries of earlier approaches in communication research” (*ibid.*, 299).⁶ It is common for anthropological analyses of media to carry a heavy theoretical superstructure, but no references to non-Western literature or bodies of popular culture (mediated or not), no sense of what dialogue or lyrics are like, and no attempt to convey any sense of the conditions under which popular culture is made or consumed. “*Mūlid wi-ṣaḥb-u ghāyib*” as Ahmad Adawiya would say – a saint’s festival without the saint, or in this case textual analysis without the text.

A problem in writing about Egyptian popular culture is that the audience does not discuss it as an academic might. Its social significance is masked by the mention of names: names of entertainers and the performances associated with them, of lines from films or songs, or titles of well-known works, which are used in everyday life as a kind of shorthand for the narrative or text in which they occur. Invocation of such texts may occur in oral contexts, but cannot be understood strictly in terms of orality, nor in purely local terms.

This does not mean that talk of popular culture is reducible to a code language of textual fragments – people quoting Ahmad Adawiya in the Bar Association, for example. People also engage in direct conversation about a given film or television show. But even direct conversation about popular culture assumes familiarity with key texts. When I engaged Egyptians in conversations about popular culture such interaction was “synthetic” in the sense that I, an outsider, initiated them. But such conversations could only make sense after I had learned something of the

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names that dominate any exchange on popular culture, and something of the structured rhetoric that informs both the texts behind the names and the way the names are deployed in social interaction.

But to focus entirely on such discussions would give the impression that the social context of popular culture is circumscribed – that popular culture is like a ritual that somehow recapitulates the social order in certain well-defined situations. The names of entertainers can be mentioned in almost any context to make a point. My friends and acquaintances in Egypt did this by drawing upon an enormous corpus of works with which they grew up: Egyptian films, Egyptian films originally written for the theater, Egyptian films based on Egyptian novels, Egyptian films based on foreign novels, foreign films, Egyptian films based on foreign films, Egyptian films based on Shakespeare, Egyptian versions of contemporary Western films, Egyptian remakes of Egyptian films, Egyptian films that laced references to earlier Egyptian films into their narratives, actors whose screen personae were based on an accumulated corpus of stage, film, and television performances, songs that adapted Western genres to Egyptian tastes, songs that took a Western soundtrack and replaced the words with Arabic lyrics – the permutations of influences and transformations are endless. To approach anything remotely like a “native” ability to understand how Egyptians deploy their common stock of imagery and personalities requires a familiarity with popular texts that is more like what Orientalists do with medieval texts – relating them to each other, comparing them with other textual traditions, juxtaposing them, classifying them – than like the anthropologist’s fantasy of spending a year with “informants,” “picking up the language in the field,” and relying on “theory” to do the rest.

Egyptian popular culture has no up, no down, no beginning or end. We can start with Adil Imam and eventually find ourselves in al-‘Ataba; we can start with *If I Were Rich* and end up with Adawiya. With minimal effort we can even wend our way to the Bar Association, which suggests that the hypertextuality of popular culture implicates what is conventionally known as high culture, as well as the officially (and academically) despised categories of non-metropolitan low culture. This does not, however, mean that the mad hypertextuality of popular culture is without structure. *If I Were Rich* and *Shuban below Zero* implicate each other – are variations on the theme of modernity gone wrong. In the earlier film it is put right again, but not in the later version. Both films imply an ideology of modernity inherent in their own narratives and constructed through numerous other narratives and an increasingly pervasive institutional

structure. Together the films exemplify a broad distinction between two periods in modern Egyptian history. They are, on one hand, from around the turn of the century (when modernity began to be a pressing concern in Egypt) until 1967, and on the other hand, after 1973.

The transitional years between 1967 and 1973 were tumultuous. At the earlier date, 1967, Egypt experienced a confidence-shattering defeat at the hands of a foreign power (Israel), which caused Egypt and the Arab world to reexamine, although not necessarily to abandon, the cultural assumptions through which their modernity was constructed. At the end of this transitional period, in 1973, Egypt reestablished its honor on the battlefield, but military respectability coincided ironically with the twin shocks of regional power shifting away from Egypt toward the oil-producing Arab Gulf countries, and what many saw (and still see) as economic surrender to the West – forced adoption of a market economy known in Egypt as the *infīṭāḥ*, or Open Door. Before 1967 Egypt, in its own estimation and in the opinion of many outsiders, seemed to be on an inexorable path to modernity; after 1973 the pace of change has, if anything, accelerated, and yet it has become more difficult to discern a unifying logic beneath the transformations.⁷

Modernity, apparently inevitable before 1967 and beleaguered after 1973, is the key to mediated popular culture. What is modernity in Egypt? In the West modernity emphasized discontinuity as a means of clearing the ground for more rational forms of society – what Harvey (1989, 16) calls “creative destruction.” Egyptian modernity is also avowedly rationalist, but puts a greater emphasis on maintaining continuity with the past. In the twentieth century, mass media has been an important means for disseminating modernist ideology in Egypt. One reason for this is the organic association of modernity and nationalism. As Benedict Anderson put it, “the growth of what might be called ‘comparative history’ led in time to the hitherto unheard-of conception of a ‘modernity’ explicitly juxtaposed to ‘antiquity,’ and by no means necessarily to the advantage of the latter” (Anderson 1991, 68). But it is precisely the invention of modernity that makes it possible to imagine a history separate from cosmology – a necessity if people are to start thinking in terms of what Anderson calls an “imagined community” sharing a defined space through human history. In all societies the radical changes of modernity are to some extent balanced with the conservative, backward-looking character (or fabrication) of nationalism. This has been recognized for some time, as we can see from the following statement made by Joshua Fishman in 1972:

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It is quite apparent . . . that there is a built-in dialectic within nationalism, a quite inevitable tension between its major components. Most obvious is the tension between the requirements of modernization and those of authentication. The one emphasizes the instrumental uniformities required by modern politico-operational integration and is constantly straining toward newer, more rational, more efficient solutions to the problems of today and tomorrow. The other emphasizes the sentimental uniformities required by continuity-based sociocultural integration and is constantly straining toward purer, more genuine expressions of the heritage of yesterday and of long ago.⁸

(Fishman 1972, 20–21)

More recent writers retain Fishman's basic formulation of nationalism, but with somewhat different emphases.⁹ Consequently, when an Oxford-based Egyptian literary critic – an immigrant to the West – writes about the “modern Arab litterateur” outside the metropole in an Arabic-language journal published in Cairo, he does so in distinctly nationalist terms:

[The litterateur] represents on the one hand – in his capacity as an educated man – a point of departure in the path of change, indeed, a point in which is crystallized the desire for renewal and modernization and for a change in the life of the community. On the other hand, however, the litterateur – in his capacity as the faithful guardian who preserves his literary and linguistic heritage – represents the desire for stability and conservatism . . . and it is possible for us to say in a very general way that the development of modern Arabic literature is the development, or transformation, of the position of the litterateur generally from the extreme of continuity and conservatism to the extreme of transmutation, change and renewal.

(M. M. Badawi 1984, 100)

Modernity's close relationship to nationalism makes the “conservative radical” to some extent a generic feature of all contemporary societies. But of course modernities of different societies also have unique features. In the case of Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world this unique relationship between modernity and nationalism appears most clearly in language.

Popular culture has been linguistically important in Egypt because it has historically been a qualitatively different vehicle for establishing national identity than official discourse. The two – popular and official discourse – have always been conceptually distinct. In both Egypt and the West modernity began with a rediscovery or reinvigoration of classical languages. Europeans tried to write classical Latin rather than “vulgate Latin” or the local dialects they spoke, but eventually discarded classical languages in favor of more practical (and more easily learned) standardized vernaculars. Using vernaculars greatly amplified the effect of print technology and became a powerful force for European nationalism. But in the case of Egypt and the Arabic-speaking world the classical language is intrinsic to the practice of religion, and cannot be consciously and publicly

discarded. Theoretically the national vernacular of all Arab nations is translocal: classical Arabic, albeit a somewhat “modernized” (grammatically streamlined) variant of it. Europeans tried to write like Cicero; Arabs tried to emulate the Qur’ān (with the understanding that attaining full qur’ānic eloquence was beyond human capability). But unlike Europeans, who discarded their classical model of linguistic eloquence in the wake of the Reformation, Arab writers continued to insist on classicism as a literary ideal, although in practice modern “classical” style varies considerably from region to region and continues to evolve. Parallel to the ideologically and culturally justified adherence to “classical vernacular” a standardized and locally referenced spoken vernacular developed. Mass media were important in establishing this shadow vernacular, precisely because of their imported character: there are no clear conventions to adhere to in the new media as there are in writing. Hence in modern Egypt we are dealing with two “national vernaculars,” one rooted in classicism and deeply valued, but hard to learn and territorially ambiguous; the other colloquial, easily understood and highly practical, but a hard sell in terms of prestige. In practice styles of expression are much more complex than this binary model suggests, but ideologically the distinction remains.

After the early 1970s the carefully constructed balance of modernist transformation through a classicist vehicle, and nationalist imagination in a local vernacular, began to come undone in Egypt. The contrast between the 1980s vintage film *Shaban below Zero*, in which a popular but officially disapproved performer sang the lines my friends at the Bar Association quoted in a moment of frustration, and its 1942 predecessor, *If I Were Rich*, illustrates the distinction between pre-1970s modernist popular culture and more ambiguous later productions. In the original film the problems of modernity were neatly solved through the intervention of an educated aristocrat who not only had money, but also the know-how to run modern institutions. *If I Were Rich* ended with everybody returning to their rightful places: happy workers dance in the streets, and the educated aristocrat marries an educated girl from a poor and traditional Egyptian neighborhood – the perfect merger of high and low culture in the service of modernity.

The more recent *Shaban below Zero*, like its 1942 predecessor, throws its characters into a whirlwind of problems typical of modern life. But this time there is no educated aristocrat to appear as *deus ex machina*. There is no image of a successful middle class. The erasure of the middle class – the focal point of modernist and nationalist ideology – is in fact the most

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striking theme in *Shaban below Zero*. The 1942 film ends with everyone living happily ever after; the 1980 film ends with the protagonist – a bureaucrat and the educated heir to the modernist tradition – taken to prison in manacles.

Putting films such as *Shaban below Zero*, and singers such as Adawiya, in a wider social and artistic context makes an invocation of “How Crowded Is the World” in the Bar Association comprehensible. The film and the singer are emblematic of a time when the old formulas of popular culture no longer seem as meaningful because the institutions and ideology they sought to buttress no longer seem entirely plausible.

Popular culture, properly contextualized, reveals much about the state of contemporary Egypt. In this case the hiccup of disgust expressed by my friends’ quotation of a vulgar song at a polite occasion gone sour was prescient. In May 1994, a few months after the swearing-in ceremony at which my friend’s daughter was inducted, the Bar started agitating for a general strike when ‘Abd al-Ḥarīth Madanī, one of their members, was tortured to death for defending Islamists in court. The state responded to the threat of a strike with mass incarceration of lawyers. Tear-gassing and imprisoning lawyers might well be a popular move in postmodern America, but one should keep in mind that it is very nearly the last thing we should expect to see. In Egypt it actually happened, and the event was far from popular. The crushing of the Bar Association was, however, an indicator of the growing irrelevance of the ideology and institutions associated with Egyptian modernity. So, for that matter, is the rise of the nonsynthesizing popular culture of Ahmad Adawiya and Adil Imam. “How Crowded Is the World” has a definite appeal, at least when one’s symbolic entry into the middle class resembles nothing so much as trying to get onto a crowded bus.