

The Rise of the Egyptian Middle Class

During the 1970s and early 1980s, Egypt experienced swift economic growth resulting from a regional oil boom. Oddly, this economic growth hardly registered in Egyptian public discourse, which continuously claimed that the country was experiencing multiple economic, social and cultural crises. This book sets out to investigate this discrepancy and to offer a revisionist history of the period. It documents the massive socio-economic mobility in Egypt by analyzing relevant statistical data and ethnographic evidence, indicating the changes in the employment structure and the spread of mass consumption. Reli Shechter further examines a wide array of cultural resources, such as Egyptian academic writing, the press, the cinema and the literature, in which critics lamented “what went wrong” in Egypt. By doing so, he offers a local version of a wider, Middle Eastern and international story: the global formation of middle-class societies whose members strove for respectable lives with only partial success.

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The Rise of the Egyptian Middle Class

Socio-Economic Mobility and Public
Discontent from Nasser to Sadat

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For Amalia, Yael and Ella

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Acknowledgments

This book is the successful culmination of two earlier starts. In 1996/7, I spent an academic year in Egypt as a graduate student. I went to conduct research for a dissertation on the spread of mass consumption in Egypt during the oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s. For various reasons, I ended up with a different topic for my dissertation. However, this book benefitted greatly from the archival work done back then at the Egyptian National Library and Archives, the American University in Cairo Library, the Netherlands-Flemish Institute in Cairo (NVIC) and the Centre d'études et de documentation économiques, juridiques et sociales (CEDEJ). Most significant to the arguments made in this book was a comment I had received when presenting a paper at the 1996 Middle East Studies Association Meeting (MESA) on critical Egyptian neo-realist cinema of the "Open-Door" era. A commentator in the audience suggested that it would be a good idea to perform a critique of the critique—to question the opposition of film makers to the Open Door and social change in Egypt—a suggestion fully implemented in this book. So, I thank that commentator for his useful suggestion, hoping that he will read this book.

Then, I restarted this project in the 2000s as a comparative research on the impact of the oil boom on Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This research was originally sponsored by seed money from the Israel Foundation Trustees (2004–2005, AC2004/21) and later by a research grant from the Israeli Science Foundation (2006–2010, 57/06). I initially set out to write a book-length, comparative research on the

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making of consumer societies in Egypt and Saudi Arabia during the oil boom, only to realize that while the spread of mass consumption was paramount to regional social change, this change could not be fully grasped without an analysis of the concurrent occupational transformation in an age of fast economic growth. Therefore, I changed the focus of my analysis from the making of consumer societies in Egypt and Saudi Arabia to the making of middle-class societies in both countries. As my writing progressed, I reached the conclusion that the book project that I had originally envisioned was too big. First, I had to write a separate analysis of socio-economic change in Egypt and Saudi Arabia during the oil boom—since no such historical analysis had yet been done—and the comparison would have to be postponed to a later date.

This book, therefore, represents a long academic journey, much longer than I had initially anticipated, and the notion of “acknowledgment” here has two meanings: First, acknowledging people and institutions, and their contributions to the making of this book. Second, acknowledgment stands for a personal admission of the gap between my own planning and intentions, and their outcomes.

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Over the years, I have presented various parts of this project at seminars and in lectures in Israel at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, the Hebrew University and at Tel Aviv University; in the UK, at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, University of London), the University of Birmingham and the University of Oxford;

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In addition to the initial research done in Egypt, I augmented the research for this book at the Harvard University libraries, including the Widener Library and the Baker Library at the Harvard Business School; the University of Oxford, especially at the Middle East Centre Library at St. Antony's College and the Oriental Institute Library; the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies' library and the Center's Arabic Press Archives, both at Tel-Aviv University; at the Roberta and Stanley Bogen Library and Documentation Center, the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at the Hebrew University; the National Library of Israel and the Zalman Aranne Central Library at the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, especially its Elie Kedourie Collection.

My wife Michal was a constant source of emotional support during those days when writing this book seemed to be leading nowhere. Her partnership in taking care of our family has enabled me to concentrate on this task. Our daughter, Amalia, was born in the early stages of the research project leading to the writing of this book, and she was joined by her twin sisters—Yael and Ella—a year later. They all grew up with this book and experienced my own constant, if not always successful, search for balancing fatherhood and vocation. Their daily presence in my life and their ongoing love turned out to be tremendous sources of fortifying energy for my work, as well. I dedicate this book to them, even though they are still yet to distinguish between writing (academic) books and being an author.

Note on Transliteration

I have used a simplified *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) system for the transliteration of Arabic words, and the IJMES Word List of commonly used words, in which all diacritical marks were omitted except for the ayn and hamza. I have deferred to commonly used English spelling of Arabic words of places, names and titles and objects found in an unabridged English dictionary. I have also deferred to the self-spelling of names as used for example by authors, film-makers, politicians and by commercial enterprises, including in brand names. I have kept the letter jim in standard Arabic titles. I have employed the Egyptian gim for names, places and daily used objects.