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Educational Debate in Egypt

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Egypt
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The discourse on education in Egypt uses key terms such as reform and crisis. It is rare to find a society that is satisfied with its educational system. What seems important here is to analyse that which is considered as related to education. In other words, to what extent education is considered among the major causes of societal problems or, as the magic solution to these problems.

On the one hand, educational policies are mainly guided by socio-economic orientations and the Egyptian case is nothing but the illustration of the irreconcilable social choices that may emerge in a neo-liberal context. On the other hand, this debate is embedded in what seem to be competitive cultural choices and the educational debate often borrows the terms of identity. The Islamic idiom here plays the role of a common language, but it does not imply any prior agreement on the meaning of the key terms of this language. Finally, the ongoing educational debate takes place in a society characterized by a high rate of illiteracy. The latter subject is discussed less passionately than other topics. This has to do with the social interests which are directly affected by education rather than by its absence; it seems that those who share literacy and who are concerned by the struggle over central values, seem also to share a common view on those who are excluded from education. They are commonly perceived as an obstacle to Egypt's successful entry into the twenty-first century.

One can identify three points in this debate. First, it seems that those who produce knowledge about education are very little concerned with the relationship between their own critical discourse and the knowledge they have acquired via schooling. The only type of discourse that gives room to such a testimony seems to be autobiographies. But this kind of literature shares another feature of the 'objective' discourse. It is the assumption that the past is always better than the present. Here again, one may wonder about this vision of history based on steady regression. Finally, as for the participants in this public debate, we note the absence of some of the main actors: schoolteachers are hardly present, as if being only part of the problem.

Reconsidering Polarities

It is quite simplistic to reduce the debate to the familiar opposition between two options setting tradition against modernity, or even allegedly secular against religious views of the world. This goes for trends within the State's apparatus itself. Supporters of the social agenda of neo-liberalism perceive education as a way to correct some side-effects of economic liberalization. They are more concerned with social exclusion than poverty and they call for the partial withdrawal of the State and the introduction of an economic rationale; they may belong to Islamic or to secular trends as well. Those who defend education as a means of class restructuring do stress the view of education as a social right and the role of the State as guarantor. Here also, cultural options are not homogeneous. When it comes to social choices, the extreme views, either neo-liberal or exclusively state-centred, are quite marginal and there is room for consensus on the centrality of education in realizing competing objectives ranging from equality to the formation of a highly qualified elite. There is a common concern about both development and identity whatever their definition is, and the educational debate shows similarities in antagonistic opinions.

Overestimation of the role of schools seems closely related to the self-perception of the Egyptian elite. What seems more difficult to understand is the fact that Egypt is often per-

ceived by its elite as characterized by millennial continuity, while being constantly threatened by civilizational invasion. The quest for identity does not seem to create tremendous problems in the daily life of millions of Egyptians, while the debate on the identity of Egypt is the most recurrent. One of the issues of this latter relates to educational programmes; it seems that language, history, civil education and religious programmes are subjects of passionate debate, while mathematics does not arouse the same interest among intellectuals.

Despite the importance of educational reform as a ritual theme, the educational issue in Egypt was reshaped in the 1990s. This is essentially due to re-islamization, which acts more as a common reference than as a homogeneous trend. It may take the form of an oppositional trend but some of its aspects contribute to the preservation of the social order. Rather than perceiving these processes of re-islamization as stemming solely from the Islamic movements, it seems possible to relate them also to the official discourse of the State.

Schools did not represent one of the major issues in the debate on re-islamization, till this debate centred on political violence. This suggests that daily and common practices of re-islamization, including those directly related to education, were not perceived as a political threat or as a challenge to the dominant values before the confrontation between the State and the participating component of the Islamic trends.

On one hand, political violence is perceived as a by-product of the educational system. According to the defenders of this view, this has to do with the kind of pedagogic authority exercised within the school. It is said to be undemocratic and based on obedience. The role of school is reduced to a mechanical transmission of knowledge, which is said to be memorized without any criticism nor any reflection on the values that stand behind it. For some, educational programmes do not stress the civic and universal values and carry an extremist view on religion. For others, these programmes are intentionally Westernized and it is the lack of their Islamic component that prompts the demand for religious knowledge.

On the other hand, the debate addresses the question of Islamist propaganda within schools. It is said that there is an Islamist plot to direct young students to the faculties of pedagogy and to indoctrinate students in the schools through sermons and books, not to mention the conflict over the veil between some students and their families and the Ministry of Education. Unsurprisingly, both sides were quoting the same references: the individual's freedom and the shari'a. The effect of this debate was an eventual politicization of a practice which is not obviously a political one.

From Reform to Privatization

In the early 1980s a critical discourse on education emerged from within the highest level of the State. This discourse did not deny at first the legacy of the Nasserist Etat-Providence. But it pointed out the dysfunctional aspects of these orientations, especially the fact that so-called 'mass education' has affected quality, a controversy familiar to Egypt since the 1930s. This discourse underlined the fact that the

generalization of free schooling should be maintained along with access to higher education which should be more related to job opportunities.

Nowadays the agenda for policy reforms contradict former truths. Public provision of education is said to be largely responsible for existing inequities and inefficiencies associated with schooling in developing countries. This means that the pricing system should play a role in allocating educational services and that State involvement in this sector should be reduced. The neo-liberal agenda argues that governmental resources are not sufficient for expanding schooling and not equally allocated as for basic education, which concerns the majority and does not receive the corresponding resources.

The political concern was reflected in two practical orientations: reform and profitability. The aim of reform here is to rehabilitate public schools. Educational reforms were directed toward the renovation of school buildings, the modernization of educational programmes and the enhancement of teachers' skills and working conditions. This goes too for the implementation of a medical insurance plan for students and for the school nutrition programme in disadvantaged areas as an incentive. Analysts underline the fact that there should be an immediate impact of schooling on the daily life of students and their families in disadvantaged groups as they are allegedly unable to perceive the future prospects nor to invest time, money or energy in schooling on the basis of these prospects.

It would be oversimplifying to describe this concern as a retreat of the State. However, profitability of what is supposed to be a public service, raises constraints. The implicit rule here is that profit-earning or at least cost effective schooling has to be partial and gradual. It should remain at the margin of the public system and should be accepted at least by the people who are ready to pay for a public service which is perceived as being of better quality than the standard free service. In other words, profit-earning has to respond to – if not create – a solvent social demand. Policy makers seem convinced that when people have to pay they are more concerned about the rational use of public services.

Reform and profitability are competing orientations. Profitability in high-performing sectors may contribute to depreciating the other disadvantaged sectors which are in need of reform. The private sector's logic within public services has been gradually introduced in other sectors due to the claim that the paid services may raise funds in order to improve free services. This policy has contributed to the creation of a dual public system; if this logic has a limited effect in a sector like transport, the situation is different when it comes to education because it has durable effect on the structure of social opportunities.

With partial privatization within public schooling, come genuine private schools and their great variety. The new private schools range from the leisure-class schools to the ones for the lower middle class in so-called informal areas, from the allegedly modern schools according to Western criteria to the Islamic schools. Since the early 1960s, private schooling includes not more than 6% of the

total number of students. But this reduced proportion confirms the social selection, and evidence from field studies has proved that a great proportion of the students of the top faculties comes from private schools.

Concerning projections, some authors described the reform of educational programmes as a long-term selection process aiming to reduce future demand or at least to drive this demand to basic education. This could explain the reshaping of educational programmes, often described as lacking in critical thinking, abstract and disconnected with the environment. It seems that basic education programmes are now oriented towards a more operational profile to meet the needs of a majority of students who will be driven to work and not to study further, as basic education conceived as an ultimate educational cycle.

Surely, Egypt will continue to produce educated people, but it is said that the rate must be determined by the needs of a market which is also said to be a global one. One of the leit-motifs of the discourse holds that for Egypt education is a matter of national security. This statement is an accurate summary of the situation: on one hand it reflects a deep concern; on the other hand, it expresses the nature of this concern. As for national defence, internal security and the preservation of private property, education becomes one of the major attributes of the minimal State directly guided by a *raison d'état*. It will take time before the effective results of the neo-liberal orientations affect social practices which have their own tempo. Furthermore, neo-liberalism has to deal with its own illegitimacy and the deeply-rooted ethical perception of the State. Despite the neo-liberal orientations, the State still acts as if it were assuming full responsibility for people's welfare and asks them to respect the corresponding virtues of allegiance and patience, while protest movements continue to address the paternalistic State.

As for the cultural orientations regarding education, they are merely the combined effect of Americanization, Islamization and statism. Concerning social choices too, the present state offers paradoxical faces. ♦