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INSIDE AN EGYPTIAN UNIVERSITY

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An American at Al-Mansoura

For four months, I was a professor of social science at Al-Mansoura University, a provincial university located in Al-Mansoura, a city of 300,000 population, some two hours by car from Cairo. I felt like a curiosity – not as a Jew but as an American. American friends have asked how I felt as a Jew – one who had been a volunteer in the Israel Defense Forces in the war for the establishment of Israel – living in Egypt. Indeed, I enjoyed the graciousness of my Egyptian hosts, who, I believe, felt my affection and respect for them personally, for Arabic, and for Egyptian culture. I did miss a Jewish fellowship for worship, the Al-Mansoura synagogue having been closed for some twenty years.

Al-Mansoura, near the center of the Nile delta, is the commercial hub for

farming villages in the Governorate of Daqhaliyah. The village *fellahin* (peasant farmers) wander here among artisans and shopkeepers. The nearby textile center of Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra is more proletarian. Al-Mansoura's population is one fortieth that of Cairo, and it offers about that much of the capital's cosmopolitan character.

The campus of the University of Al-Mansoura stretches nearly half a mile along the Nile corniche, its western bounds. Half a mile to the east, the campus ends near a drainage ditch; across the ditch, water buffalo lounge in black mud and impoverished urchins play near their dirt-floored adobe homes. The College of Arts, occupying a corner of the campus, is reached through a single gate. The gate is flanked by five or six armed guards who salute the faculty smartly, half in

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submission, half in greeting. Occasionally, the guards check a student photo-identification card. Stepping into the campus quadrangle, I was a magnet for students bubbling with questions about America, politics, education, marriage, and not the least, about my thoughts of them and of Egypt.

The College of Arts has been housed in a former secondary-school compound since its formation in the mid-seventies. Professors and students wander among the offices, greeting one another, chatting over tea and coffee, learning about class and examination schedules. To pass an open door is to be hailed to a coffee ritual that will last about half an hour - were anyone but a visiting American to notice the time.

The registrar's office, just behind the mosque, maintains the daily roster. Staff and graduate students, some on government grants, record the time of their arrival and departure. Work between these times is less carefully monitored.

Graduate students in sociology lounge in the department office, advising undergraduates or maintaining a list of course enrollees. The status of these graduate students in a department not authorized to offer advanced degrees is as murky as their attendance is unpredictable.

An Order of Personal Ties

The campus librarian cares for some volumes in her small room. My colleagues at Penn have more books in their private collections. (My predecessor Fulbright appointee to Al-Mansoura wrote to the Fulbright Commission that he never saw a professor reading a book; the daily paper was their principal reading. Nothing changed during my stay.)

Most of the professors live in Cairo and commute to Al-Mansoura. A university bus for the faculty leaves the area between the Egyptian Museum and the Cairo Hilton at seven every morning but Friday, for the two and a half hour journey. Most members of the faculty slept in Al-Mansoura one or two, sometimes three nights a week, before traveling to teach at other provincial universities. Professors who stay the night in this delta town enjoy evenings in a cafe or a restaurant. I had nearly forgotten how to "go out

with the boys." We smoke, drink coffee, split sunflower seeds between our teeth, spitting the shells on the floor. The camaraderie is like that of an American bar, but with coffee and soft drinks.

My liaison, Dr. Magdi, negotiates assignments with me on a week-by-week basis. Payday is the day to begin discussing a paycheck, a matter made bearable for me by the Fulbright Commission's responsibility for interim provisioning. The commission has a "cost-sharing" arrangement, but, as of the time I arrived, had not received the university's contribution for the previous year.

Magdi invites me to lecture on topics of his choice. One week, it is a bit about Max Weber on capitalism and the Protestant ethic, with Christian dogmas revealed to incredulous students. Another week, I speak on Talcott Parson's ideas about the social system, personality, and culture. Then I describe the situation of American minorities - in fact, a capsule review of American Indian and black history from the fifteenth century to the present.

Each session's topic surprises the students as much as it does me. Magdi tape-records my every word for later transcription and distribution for examination study, hallowing my words beyond their merit. I have no reason to believe that any words ever went from tape to paper, but students energetically fill their notebooks, to be pored over, even memorized - errors, non-sequiturs, and all.

This spontaneous syllabus is not unusual. Al-Mansoura University could not publish a course catalogue that would correspond with the curriculum as offered. The newcomer stumbles between routines people take seriously and those merely on the books. What principle defines the important? I begin to see that bureaucratic disorder at the college is irrelevant, superseded by an order of personal ties. It is left to the outsider to discover the code for that personal order.

Once, I was summoned from the hotel to participate in an "ongoing" seminar to be chaired by the dean. It met the first week of the semester. Each succeeding week, as students were assembling, the dean's secretary announced the seminar's cancellation for that week. Students soon shrugged and accepted the de facto extinction of the seminar.

Honoring the Guest Lecturer

My lecture for Dr. Husni (an invented name but a real event) is scheduled for 2:00 p.m. With ten minutes to go, a graduate assistant reports that three hundred or so students are gathered in the lecture hall. Husni checks his watch, straightens his tie and his vest, and allows that we have not yet lunched. I wave his comment aside. He is serious: he beckons me along to the faculty dining room where a five-course meal is spread before us. At about 2:45, I mention the waiting students. We have not yet had dessert, I am reminded. Husni, chastising me for my rigidity, is not criticizing my personality. Mine is a social failing: the subtle correlation of lateness and professional prestige – how much delay is required of a visiting professor – has escaped me.

A quarter of an hour later, I refer to the students again. Having come for the day from the surrounding villages, they have nothing else to do. By 3:10, we leave the table, rinse the grease from our fingers, and stroll toward the classroom. Three times on the way, Husni encounters colleagues and pauses to chat. At 3:20, we enter the hall. The students fall silent, rising as a body; they do not take their seats again until we have assumed ours at the lecture table.

The table is neatly decorated with a white cloth and a small vase filled with artificial flowers. Husni places his hand on my shoulder: no coffee has been placed on the table for me. Not accustomed to sipping coffee during lectures, I have not missed it. A student is dispatched to order coffee. The coffee is duly placed before me, Husni introduces my lecture. I write my topical outline on the blackboard and begin speaking. After about three-quarters of an hour, Husni signals me to stop. The original lecture, scheduled from 2:00 to 4:00 is felt to be finished, apparently. The ritual is complete. The students have tarried for the distinguished lecturer, have been exposed to him. Students stand when we do. We march out of the room. The students file out after us. Photographs are taken. I feel charismatic.

Several excellent works by contemporary Western sociologists are available in Arabic translations. I never saw one of these outside the bookstore in Al-Mansoura. Some volumes of original research articles on such topics as the Egyptian social personality were consulted by the

faculty, but neither the translations nor these Arabic precis are read for examinations. For that purpose, professors mimeograph 50 or 60 pages of their lecture notes. These booklets are sold to students, who memorize their content. The profit from these sales supplements the professors' salaries. Since they are not subject to peer scrutiny, the lecture notes are often inaccurate.

An Academic Potemkin Village

The thinness of the subject matter makes the college an academic Potemkin village. A structure is in place, but serious content is elusive. Unlike the original Russian case, which involved creating a facade of village buildings to fool inspectors, there is no dishonesty involved. No more sincere and devoted men and women could be found than those on the faculty at Al-Mansoura.

The insignificance of subject matter is one instance of a general neglect of performance within organizations. Becoming a member of the organization (getting into college) is crucial. What one does as a member (as a student) is secondary.

Meritocracy vs. Personal Relations

I was approached for favors almost as soon as I stepped on campus: "Let me introduce my cousin Mohammed. Please take special care of him." To consider scholarship without considering the whole scholar, the person, is the essence of Western meritocracy. This impersonalization seems strange, foreign, and undesirable from an Egyptian point of view. Special treatment is a way of becoming more intimate, of considering the student's humanity. Such ties are expected despite Cairo's meritocratic policy declarations. A professor – or anybody – who has achieved social rank but refuses to be nepotistic is disloyal to the family that has nourished and protected him.

Ironically, resistance to considering one aspect of a person in abstraction from palpable reality necessarily implies resistance to the very subject I was invited to teach. Scientific sociology studies human societies, following the model successful in the natural sciences, by attending to a few attributes at a time, and searching out correlations among these attributes in a sample of occasions. My colleagues and students only reluctantly (if at all) separated the facts

surrounding a social event from their passion and moral response to it. To approach passion and morals as a cool object of analysis seemed even stranger to them. Demographic enumerating of persons by location, or sex, or age, seems to be the exception; this may be because counting populations looks concrete to them; they do not see its abstractness. But otherwise, "depersonalizing" evokes a moral resistance in Egypt.

One cold, rainy February day, a day to hug a space-warmer in a stone-floored room, a student's father asked me to tutor his daughter in English. In the course of our conversation, he mentioned his influence in Al-Mansoura. By English, he meant translating basic literary texts. Oppressed by the thought that he mistook me for a high-school language teacher, I hedged. A few days later, he took the direct action I later learned to anticipate. He cornered me, introducing a charming young woman 18 or 19 years old carrying excerpts from a novel. I agreed to review a few sentences. The father chaperoned the lesson. My refusal to continue, courteous though it was, offended him: English was the vehicle, but rescuing her from the mass of students was the aim.

The initiative in allying certain students with faculty mentors is not wholly that of students and their parents. Members of the faculty also solicit favors from students. A student with a car (necessarily a well-to-do student and always a male) is pleased to offer courtesy limousine service.

My efforts to work with graduate students were unproductive. The students would chat with me about their research but resisted any suggestions that they proceed with their work. Some members of the faculty devised arrangements to encourage them to work with me: they would prepare an essay on their work. But no essays were written. The faculty explained their resistance in terms of their struggle with English and mine with Arabic. But the real issue was my lack of any social connections that might help them.

Credentialing is central. Previously, social circumstances — especially class — determined one's career; now diplomas decide it. But the

significance of the diploma is not a triumph of the merit system: the diploma is evidence of belonging to a new "family," as well as of achievement. Credentialing is supported by personal vouching. As a "stranger," I could open no doors.

A Different Work Ethic

My American penchant for getting on with the job did not help my reputation with the graduate students. Finishing their dissertations meant that they would have to curtail their visits to the university to associate with professors from Cairo, to be a leader among undergraduates, and to receive a stipend. Such "secondary gain" for retarded progress is hardly unknown among American graduate students — but American departments are more successful at penalizing it.

Jean Jacques Waardenburg observed that the 1952 revolution changed the political context of Egypt, but not the social and economic context. Kinship is central to that traditional social context. In creating a university culture, students and teachers draw on their experience of living in families, particularly of the political aspects of interfamily life. Ideas of belonging and loyalty take center stage. Organizational productivity and performance take a back seat. The university does not simply function in place of the traditional kin groups — say, as a new path to a good job or sinecure. Its life is actually modeled on that of the family.

A university that recapitulates some characteristics of the family poses a social problem. Schools, like industries, are developed to get society's work done. As family-type arrangements, they become, instead, primarily a crucible for forming personal identities and personal ties among people; education takes a back seat.

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