

Book Presentation

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In Egypt, as in many other parts of the formerly-colonized world, numerous tensions and conflicts revolve around gender issues. Women are often caught between the pursuit of modernization, attempts at liberalization, a pervasive nationalist rhetoric of 'authenticity', processes related to Islamization and on-going imperialist encroachments. Those women who are actively engaged in contesting existing gender relations and social injustice are particularly vulnerable to being stigmatized as anti-nationalist and anti-religious. Indeed, contemporary women activists in Egypt have increasingly been accused, particularly by Islamist movements and conservative nationalist forces, of collaborating with Western imperialism by importing alien ideas and practices and disseminating them throughout society.

But how do the women themselves perceive these tensions and conflicts? How do they cope with accusations of being 'Westernized'? What do 'the West' and 'authenticity' mean to Egyptian women activists? These and many other questions were paramount in my mind when I embarked upon PhD research on which my recently published book is based.<sup>1</sup> My own involvement in the Egyptian women's movement (from 1992 to 1994) provided the initial impetus to pursue academic research. Yet, my specific focus and interests grew out of a sense of disenchantment with depictions of secular constituencies in much of the literature on the Middle East. If not omitted altogether, secular constituencies tend to be essentialized (those who are not Islamist) and portrayed in a homogenized manner (thereby glossing over political, social and cultural differences within secular constituencies).

#### Redefining secularism in Egypt and the Middle East

My research, then, reflects the pursuit of several aims. On one level, it presents the attempt to problematize and re-define the notion of secularism in Egypt and within the wider context of the region and the 'Muslim world'. In addition to exploring the range of interpretations, politics, lifestyles and beliefs of one specific secular-oriented constituency, the book provides a detailed ethnographic account of the context, content and political significance of contemporary women's activism.<sup>2</sup> This is mainly achieved through an analysis of interviews with more than 80 members of women's groups and individual activists. In these interviews, questions pertaining to women activists' goals and motivations, their political outlooks and affiliations, their activities as well as allegiances and animosities were asked. In this context, women's activism cannot be analysed without contextualizing it in the wider political culture in which it takes place. Therefore, a range of factors was explored, such as the historical and political development of the Egyptian state and its relation to the women's movement, the role of Islamist constituencies and the political left, as well as international organizations and agendas. All these elements, in one way or another, have an impact upon the forms, content and discourses of contemporary women's activism.

But what is actually meant by 'secular-oriented' activists? Initially, a working definition was used referring to those who advocate a separation between religion and politics, which does not necessarily denote anti-religious or anti-Islamic positions. Furthermore, it was expected that secular women activists do not endorse *shari'a* as the main or sole source of legislation, but that they would also refer to civil law and human rights conventions as frames of reference for their struggle. However, the research findings indicate that this definition glosses over a great level of

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variation in terms of understandings and manifestations of secularism among Egyptian women's activists. Rather than juxtaposing secular with religious, the research reveals the continuum of religious and secular beliefs and practices in women's every day lives.

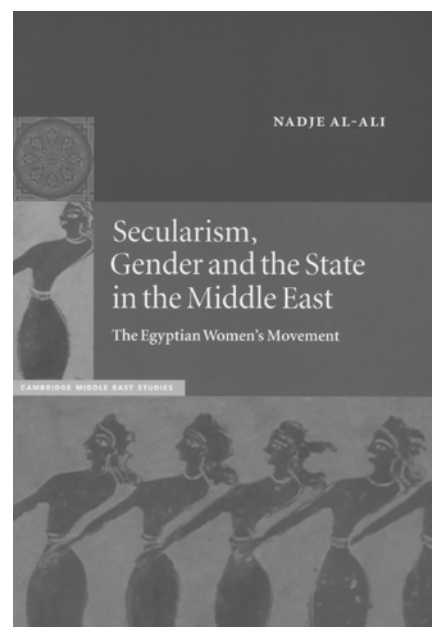
Often, as in my own assumptions prior to fieldwork, non-religious frameworks of political action are presumed to derive from comprehensive worldviews and doctrines, like socialism, or specific documents, such as the international convention of human rights. Many of the leftist-nationalist activists interviewed explained that they would still take a Marxist approach in their analyses. However, most emphasized that they had moved away from earlier certainties concerning the direct relationship between economic exploitation and women's liberation. Their own experiences within the political parties and with their 'progressive' husbands at home changed their outlooks in a way that, today, they argue for the necessity of an independent women's struggle. A number of women interviewed stressed that their values and concepts were not based on a specific doctrine or on the international declaration of human rights, but emerged out of the various experiences of collective and individual struggle. As Hania K.,<sup>3</sup> a member of Markaz Dirassat Al-Mar'a Al-Gedida (The New Woman's Research Centre) told me:

*Islamists solely use the text and this is their framework. Their judgement of the value system comes through the text. My frame of reference is based on certain abstract concepts, such as egalitarianism, humanism, human rights, pluralism, tolerance, etc., which have come from my everyday experiences. Of course, these concepts did not come out of a void, but emerged from different schools of thought. However, I do not uphold a certain ideology, because it would reduce the forms of oppression and the complexity of reality. My values and concepts are as much part of my personal development as they grew out of collective struggle. (p.146)*

In this context, Hania K. and other activists complained about the tendency among Western scholars conducting research in Egypt to dismiss individual everyday experiences and the capacity to creatively synthesize from various value systems. Human agency is mainly framed in terms of collective ideologies – whether secular or religious – and very little space is given to individual improvisation and resistance.

#### Overcoming the culturalization of political issues

Throughout my analyses of the notion of secularism and the political culture in which the Egyptian women's movement is embedded, I attempt to achieve a further goal, i.e.



to transcend notions of cultures being bounded entities and to acknowledge the entanglements and creative encounters between and within cultures. Being of mixed cultural background myself (Iraqi-German), I have been extremely sensitive to and saddened by the essentialized rhetoric of 'us vs. them'. I do, of course, understand the historical and current power relations, colonial and neo-colonial configurations and imperialist policies upon which these notions and sentiments are based. Yet, to my mind, neither orientalism nor 'occidentalism' – essentialist constructions of the West – appear to be constructive ways forward.

Unfortunately the attempt to legitimize their struggle and defend themselves against charges of 'aping the West', often results in women activists reproducing essentialist notions of 'our culture' vs. 'Western culture'. For Egyptian women activists, the notion of 'cultural specificity' becomes more than a tool in the attempt to demarcate themselves from 'the West'. It is also employed to affirm positively one's own culture, somehow homogenized and defined as a monolithic entity, thereby discarding cultural differences within Egypt among different social classes, generations, gender, rural and urban people and so forth. Yet, there is also evidence to the various ways in which some women attempt to overcome the prevalent 'culturalization' of political issues. Randa K., for example, is one of numerous women who believe that the notion of cultural specificity is used as a tool by men to reinforce their power over women. Raga N., on the other hand, deeply despises the eclecticism and selectivity of intellectuals and political activists when deciding what is universal and what is not. As she states: 'We scream: "Our values!" when it clashes with existing power positions, but when it is beneficial to the same group, they adopt it, despite it being Western.' (p. 213) Against the backdrop of these and many other views expressed by the women I talked to, this book is as much about unsettling a rigid East-

West divide and its implications as it is about secular Egyptian women's movement and the political culture it is embedded in.

By focusing on one specific, yet heterogeneous, segment within postcolonial Egypt, namely secular women's activism, I hope to unravel many of the tensions and conflicts that mark the complex processes of decolonization and continue to shape contemporary political culture. Egyptian women's activism today is very much shaped by the fear of transgressing the norms and values deemed permissible within the national fabric. The question of identity is as central to their activism as concrete struggles over women's rights and aspirations. Much is at stake for secular women activists as their rejection of Islam as the only possible framework for political struggle and nation-building evokes suspicion and doubt about their belonging within the indigenous landscape of 'traditions' and 'authenticity'. ◀

#### Notes

1. My main fieldwork took place in Cairo in 1995 and 1996 over a period of 14 months. I have since then returned several times. In addition to gathering data through interviews and conversations, I participated in many activities and events organized by various women's groups and networks. I also visited several projects run and organized by women activists, which aim at improving the living conditions of women from low-income areas in Cairo.
2. My use of the term 'women's activism' rather than 'feminism' is related to the fact that many of the women I interviewed reject the label of 'feminist' for pragmatic and ideological reasons. The English term 'feminism', evokes antagonism and animosity, and sometimes even anxiety. A great number of women seem to have internalized the way feminists are being portrayed in prevailing Egyptian – but also European and North-American discourses, namely man-hating, aggressive, possibly obsessed with sex, and certainly Westernized women. The resistance of many Egyptian women to identify themselves with feminism is not only related to its negative image in society, but it is also linked to the conviction that it detracts from 'larger issues' such as imperialism, class struggle and Zionism.
3. All names have been changed.

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