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## Book Review: *Youth and Education in the Middle East*

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*Youth and Education in the Middle East: Shaping Identity and Politics in Jordan* by Daniele Cantini (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016). £77. ISBN 978-1-78-453247-5.

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Fueled by petrodollar subsidies and remittance income, as well as by the human and financial capital brought by inflows of refugees from Palestine, Iraq, and now Syria, higher education in Jordan has experienced remarkable rates of growth. Whereas at independence in 1946 the country boasted only one secondary school and a few dozen university graduates educated in Baghdad, Beirut, Damascus, and Cairo, by the late 1970s university enrollment rates compared favorably with those of wealthy countries in the West. Successive cohorts of university graduates from the neighboring Arab states, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Eastern as well as Western Europe, and the United States laid the foundations for a burgeoning and remarkably cosmopolitan intelligentsia.

The growth in the numbers of graduates continued even after the Jordanian economy stagnated in the mid-1980s and the devaluation of the Jordanian dinar in 1988 raised the cost of studying abroad. However, the higher education sector as well as the intelligentsia it produced took on an increasingly “national” character with the explosive growth of large public universities after 1980. With the onset of neoliberal reforms in 1989, private universities proliferated and the University of Jordan (which had first opened its doors in 1963) underwent fundamental change. The size of its student body grew rapidly from a few thousand strong in the mid-1970s to over forty thousand in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the course of this expansion, student politics were transformed, shifting from broad-based sympathy for the Jordanian Communist Party and the Baath Party, to a tribally mediated Hashemite loyalism or varying strands of political Islam—most notably those promoted

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by the regime-aligned Muslim Brotherhood and its party political offshoot, the Islamic Action Front.

Cantini's *Youth and Education in the Middle East* throws light on the changing experiences of students caught up in the University of Jordan's ongoing transformation. It is based on two periods of fieldwork in Jordan, initially for an extended period in 2003–5 when the author was enrolled as a student of Arabic at the University of Jordan, and subsequently as a visitor in 2012. While youth activism in Jordan—as in other parts of the region—captured the academic imagination during the Arab Uprisings, it has most often been framed within a context of youth unemployment and of frustrated political expectations. As a result there have been few studies of young Jordanians that capture their everyday practices or the realities and aspirations that motivate them. By contrast Cantini's book focuses on the lives of students while at university and beyond. It documents their transition to a prolonged and at times fraught search for secure employment, charting their experiences not only against the backdrop of a stagnant labor market, but also within the harsh constraints imposed by gender inequalities and societal pressures to conform.

One of the most informative aspects of the book is its discussion of the University of Jordan as a site of social stratification. Here Cantini combines his careful study of higher education policies and university documents with ethnographic observation in the classroom. For example, he describes in detail how the most prestigious fields (medicine and engineering) as well as the sciences are taught in English and with more participatory, engaging pedagogical styles. By contrast, the lowest prestige fields, such as the humanities and Shari'a, are taught in Arabic and are burdened by highly didactic teaching styles wherein professors tolerate little dissent or student participation.

Admissions are also marked by institutionalized inequity. A policy of *makrumat* (dispensations) allows students selected by the Royal Palace to be admitted even if their *tawjihi* (high school exam) results would not normally allow entry to a public university. Information on the proportion of admissions accounted for by this route is not publically available however. Cantini also describes the increasing importance—with the neoliberal reforms of the universities—of a parallel system of fee-paying admissions (the so-called *ta'lim muwazi*) wherein the grades required for acceptance are reduced in return for the payment of higher fees, sometimes multiplied by a factor of up to four times. According to the university's own documentation, the highest percentage of admissions accounted for by this parallel system are into the top-rated

faculties, to the extent that in the faculty of medicine only 40 percent of students are admitted competitively.

It is in the discussion of the university as a social space that Cantini's sensitivity and skills as an ethnographer come to the fore. He points out that nowhere in Amman is there a social sphere where young people can interact relatively free of social regulation—even in the university and in the transition to paid work profound societal pressures come to bear. "It is difficult to appropriately convey the sense of suffocating control experienced by girls and boys alike. This is further aggravated by the fact that Jordan is a small country, where it is not difficult to understand the social and geographical origin of casual interlocutors" (93). The case of one student he describes highlights her search for a job after university as confronting the reality of the "privileging of personal connections over qualifications; the weight of family expectations on student trajectories especially on women" (118). More often than not, the students whose cases are documented by Cantini have had to settle for work opportunities other than in their chosen professions and to accept a lower than expected wage. In this context it comes as no surprise that many graduates dream of liberation by emigration.

In the penultimate chapter, on student activism, Cantini raises the question of the university as a potential ground for political dissent while also documenting the extent of government control over student affairs. For example, the head of the *da'irat shu'un al talaba* (the department of student affairs) is a member of the armed forces. The student council of eighty has only half its members freely elected while half are appointed by the university senate; the president of the council is appointed and Cantini documents an unwritten agreement between the politically active students and the university administration that enforces a mutual understanding that the regime will not tolerate strong dissent on campus. Nevertheless Cantini also documents increasing instances of student unrest and promising organizational initiatives such as Thabatouna that he argues are creating a wider space for student politics and the beginnings of a new "citizenship consciousness."

Cantini approaches his material with an engaged but open mind, and is prepared to challenge prevailing stereotypes of contemporary Jordanian society. Thus he parts company with legions of political scientists who view Jordanian politics through the lens of a rigid divide between Jordanians of Palestinian origin and Trans-Jordanians—descendants of the pre-1948 inhabitants of the East Bank. Cantini argues instead that the two groups are in practice heavily intermingled; the "real" divide is not Jordanian/Palestinian but rather rooted

in “access to spheres of influence” and access to the patronage disbursed by the state through its agents within the university.

Despite the acuteness of his observations of student politics within the University of Jordan, Cantini’s focus on the micro-practices of university life means that he does not give sufficient attention to the larger societal structures in which they are embedded. As a result, his book offers little that can elucidate the two key conundrums posed by the trajectory of higher education in Jordan: Why has an ostensibly Western-aligned and modernist monarchy been content to allow Islamist currents such a wide scope within the University of Jordan and within higher education more generally? And why has a regime intent on the neoliberal restructuring of its economy not acted sooner to curtail the runaway growth of the university sector and the additional burdens its graduates have posed on a labor market already marked by unusually high levels of graduate unemployment?

Despite these lacunae, Cantini’s ethnography is a richly textured one enlivened by the length of his engagement with the University of Jordan. Whereas the opening chapters are rather stiff and formal, with long excerpts from official documents, the later chapters are animated by a wealth of ethnographic data and acute observation of student lives. Cantini’s book contributes to a small literature on the anthropology of education in Jordan—such as the ethnographic work of Fida Adely on a girls’ public school—and is a welcome addition to the limited literature in English on knowledge production in the country.<sup>2</sup> The book is likely to become recommended reading for anyone interested in the politics of youth in Jordan, and in the anthropology of education in the Arab region as a whole.

2. Fida Adely, *Gendered Paradoxes: Educating Jordanian Women in Nation, Faith and Progress* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).