

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Shana Cohen. *Searching for a Different Future: The Rise of a Global Middle Class in Morocco*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. xii + 177 pp. \$74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-3351-7; \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-3387-6.

Reviewed by Lisa Taraki (Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Birzeit University, Palestine)

Published on H-Gender-MidEast (March, 2005)



Postnationalism, Globalization, and Identity: The Fragmentation of the Moroccan Urban Middle Class

This is a very timely book in that it tackles one of the most neglected issues in the study of the contemporary Middle East, namely, the life and times of the middle class in Arab cities. Even though the book examines the Moroccan middle class and is largely based on work carried out in Casablanca, it has wider relevance to the task of understanding the transformations—both structural and at the level of consciousness—wrought by global market integration and globalization in the cities of the Arab world. While quite a bit of recent scholarship has enhanced our understanding of the lives and struggles of the poor and the marginalized in Arab cities, we have yet to see sustained work on the making, lived reality, and prospects of the middle class, that amorphous stratum that has strangely eluded sociologists and anthropologists.

Cohen sets herself a clear task in this book: not only to theorize the emergence of a “global middle class” out of the remnants of the post-independence “modern middle class” or national petite bourgeoisie under global market integration, but also to provide empirical material to illuminate the subjectivities, dispositions, and aspirations of her subjects, the “young urban educated” in Morocco. Theoretically, Cohen’s work can be situated at the intersections of political economy, post-Marxist class theory, theories of post-nationalism, and psychoanalysis. She concocts a rich theoretical brew to tackle a phenomenon with structural, cultural, and psychological dimensions.

Briefly, Cohen argues that market liberalization in Morocco has transformed the role, structure, and consciousness of the urban middle class. The retreat of the state from its “modern purveyor role” has disrupted the link between self-identity through human fulfillment and developing the nation-state that was a mark of the modernizing post-independence era, resulting in a situation where alienation, melancholy, restlessness, and existential anxiety are the hallmarks of a young generation of educated Moroccans. Cohen argues that rather than mobilizing today’s urban university graduates fantasize about and plan for other futures through migration and consumption; the origin of the collective and individual experiences of these young people is a pervasive “loss of place and moment” for the actualization of self-potential (p. 33). Tracing the emergence of new urban social groups within a changing division of labor, she argues that regardless of the material and social differences separating the different components of the new global middle class, they respond similarly to the process of market reform; this suggests that we may be “witnessing the birth of a class that does not take transformation of the state as its objective, but rather pushes for a role in the global economy” (pp. 33-34).

The book’s four chapters and conclusion take us through this line of argumentation, buttressing it, along the way, with an eclectic theoretical repertoire and empirical matter derived primarily from government and other statistics, scholarly works on Morocco, the popular

press, novels, and a corpus of conversations and interviews with young, educated Moroccans compiled during the author's extended fieldwork in Morocco. Chapter 1 outlines the main argument of the book. Chapter 2 traces the formation of the post-independence "modern middle class," a class with a mission and a vision tied with the national project of the nation-state. Cohen argues that this class was central to the state's modernizing agenda: participation in modernity and inclusion in the "system of nations" "weighed on the legitimation and evolution of education, white-collar employment, and Westernized comportment" (p. 60). While individual fulfillment and emancipation was the battle cry of the modern middle class, which was created after independence, the state had failed, by the 1980s and 1990s, not only to lead national economic development but also to satisfy the middle class. The decline in the material conditions, status and political weight of this class was an inevitable outcome.

Chapter 3, which along with chapter 4, is the centerpiece of the book, takes us through the fragmentation of the national middle class into three distinct social groups: a relatively coherent group of bureaucrats and professionals, mainly in the public sector; a new, upwardly mobile and elite group of small-scale entrepreneurs and corporate managers; and a large and growing army of unemployed and "provisionally employed" or "insecurely employed" male and female university graduates. Chapter 4, appropriately entitled "A Generation of Fuyards," is immediately preceded by the argument that, while separated by their connection to the global market economy as well as different career and life trajectories, the members of this heterogeneous middle class share "a common alienation and a common subjective position in the world, forcing us to consider how much professional segmentation alone tells us about behavior and identity" (p. 105). This chapter then tells the story of the alienation and "disconnection" of the global middle class from the nation-state and political and economic elites, and analyzes the "new orientation toward the nonlocated social space of the globe" (p. 108). It may be appropriate to quote Cohen's assertion in more detail here: "The maxim ... that the state will shape better individuals for a better society, has fallen apart, so that the state is still held responsible, but individuals must manage their own advancement distinct from any notion of society. In this moment of historical transition between the nation-state and globalization, melancholia—the loss of an ideal, a past object of identification, and the subsequent internalization of this loss—becomes the psychic unifier of a seem-

ingly disparate group of people and a basis for social action" (p. 109).

How convincing is Cohen's analysis? I think that the strength of this work lies in its elucidation of the sources and course of the transformation in the composition, market position, life opportunities, career trajectories, and some aspects of the disposition of the Moroccan middle class in the era of globalization and market integration. It has wider resonance beyond Morocco as well, and in this sense is a new and important contribution to the understanding of contemporary social and cultural processes in cities of the Arab world and beyond. The work is less convincing, however, when it comes to analyses regarding social relations; consciousness; "connectedness," or lack of it, to nation, state and society; and the political role of this new middle class.

The first aspect of these analyses has to do with the concept of the global. Cohen calls this heterogeneous social mass the "global middle class," yet fails to show its global character, beyond the clear attempt to locate the emergence of this class within the trajectory of globalization or to show how its practices and values are deeply affected by globally circulated symbols and commodities. So while one can accept her contention that there has been a declining relevance of territory and citizenship (p. 8), or that the various components of the middle class share the same loss of connection to the social space and existential purpose of the nation, and find themselves thrust upon a noncontained and amorphous market (p. 12), it is more difficult to understand how the alienated educated Moroccan, shunning political participation, emerges as "a social actor within the nebulous arena of the globe" (p. 19) or to know the social and political expression of "a new orientation toward the nonlocated social space of the globe" (p. 108). Globalization has indeed affected the opportunities, practices, sensibilities, and politics of the middle class, but it is not clear how much it has made middle-class subjects participants in global politics or sociabilities, or possessive of a "global" consciousness. Moreover, most of them live within the boundaries of the state and demand that their national markets—however globally integrated—absorb their labor. Using the term "globalized" or "globally oriented" to refer to this class may have avoided some of these issues of language and analysis.

This leads to another issue of interpretation in the book. By insisting on the sameness of the existential condition of the different sections of the middle class, Cohen forces her unique analysis of the alienation and

disconnection experienced by the unemployed and provisionally employed upon all segments of this class, resulting in some contradictory analyses. For example, she quite successfully portrays the enthusiasm, dynamism, and positive dreams of the upwardly mobile (and truly globalized or globally oriented) entrepreneurs and managers, who, as she states, “view themselves much in the same way intellectuals saw themselves in the aftermath of colonialism, as dynamic and forward-thinking” (p. 99). One wonders what happened to alienation and melancholy as the hallmarks of the new global middle class. A related problem, which also pertains to the issue of concepts and analysis of differentiation between social groups, concerns the way in which Cohen juxtaposes the post-independence “modern” middle class against the contemporary “global” class. One suspects that the continuity, over the various historical moments, in social and cultural attributes of these middle strata has been obscured or flattened by Cohen; she shows, very convincingly in chapter 2, for instance, the very “global” qualities of the post-independence-era middle class when it came to the social valuation of occupation, values, dress, and comportment.

One of the strengths of the book lies in the richness and depth of the portraits of young people and their lives presented throughout the book. Cohen succeeds in conveying the “unconnectedness” and atomism of the individual young women and men, and does so in their own words, which, no doubt, is consistent with her analytic project. But one is nevertheless struck by the absence of a social context, a social frame within which to understand and appreciate these young people’s lives. So while there are references to networks of family and friends in the excerpts from the interviews and conversations between the author and the youth, these networks and social relations are not foregrounded by the author and do not form the backdrop against which the individual lives are presented. They also do not seem to have figured much in the general analysis presented in the book. However, there is enough in the book itself to alert the reader to the possible relevance of social networks to the lives of middle-class subjects, thus rendering more problematic the themes of nonlocatedness, alienation, rootlessness, and loneliness. In fact, Cohen describes, on more than one occasion, the webs of social relations, both familial and those based on friends, that sustain middle-class individuals in their search for security and sociality. I think that a better appreciation of these social networks and relations would have enriched the book and made it less one-dimensional. I am not arguing that Cohen’s basic

thesis is wrong, but that it could have been nuanced by searching for elements of stability, rootedness, and localism in the lives of her subjects, rather than neglecting them in her analysis of subjectivity and consciousness.

Finally, and on the question of the political role of the global middle class, I find that Cohen’s analysis could have been more nuanced. In keeping with her central thesis, she is rather categorical on the political prospects of this class: “Politically, the disconnection of all three groups from the nation-state leaves both a project of national development or ... change without the middle class as a primary agent. Their professional position and existential distance also leave local economic and political elites without the middle class as an ally” (p. 13). One wonders if everyone would agree with this assessment, particularly the alleged apolitical character of this class. Cohen herself gives ample evidence of collective political action by unemployed university graduates, albeit in the framework of agitation for jobs and not within organized political parties and movements. In this regard, one finds that Islamist activism is glossed over in the book, with the author remarking that it does not seem that young educated urban men and women participate actively in Islamist parties beyond the university (p. 20). Furthermore, it is not clear that all segments of this class are alienated from economic and political elites and cannot be their allies. Co-optation by these elites of entrepreneurs and managers as well as even part of the state bureaucracy and NGOs is a means of building alliances, and it has not been shown decisively that this is not occurring or possible in Morocco.

This last point brings me to another shortcoming of the book. While it is an urgently needed addition to the literature in the sociology and social history of the Arab city, it exists in strange separation and isolation from a highly relevant and growing body of literature on another part of the Middle East. I mean here the work of anthropologists, sociologists, and others on urban Turkey, where many of the issues taken up in this book are discussed. The early volume by Ayse Oncu and Peter Weyland, followed by Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayse Saktanber’s book of essays, are only two examples.^[1] Nevertheless, there is much in this book that is fresh, and the daring excursions into theorizing also give the reader much to think about.

Note

[1]. Ayse Oncu and Petra Weyland, eds., *Space, Culture and Power: New Identities in Globalizing Cities* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1997); Deniz Kandiyoti

and Ayse Saktanber, eds., *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-gender-mideast>

Citation: Lisa Taraki. Review of Cohen, Shana, *Searching for a Different Future: The Rise of a Global Middle Class in Morocco*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. March, 2005.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10362>

Copyright © 2005 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.