

# Backwards in High Heels: Liberal Education at the American University in Cairo

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## INTRODUCTION

In his opening remarks to new faculty in the fall of 2000, the president of the American University in Cairo (AUC) suggested that operating an American liberal arts university in Cairo was analogous to dancing backwards in high heels. His point being that AUC must do everything an American university based in the United States does, but AUC has to do it in the context of its location in the heart of the Arab Middle East. My research examines the “milieu” (social, political, economic, and academic) of AUC as a combined ethnographic and geographic investigation. Toward this end, a combination of surveys and interviews of *AUCians*, and content analysis of university-related documents were used to clarify information and data at three scales of analysis. *Micro* scale data reveal a hybrid student population torn between the expectations of Egyptian society and career goals enhanced by an education at an American liberal arts university; *macro* scale data suggest a university held hostage by the structure of the global-political economy; while *meso* scale data reveal a faculty and an administration paralyzed by cultural politics.

## METHODOLOGY

During six months of fieldwork in Cairo, Egypt, I utilized a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. In order to gather information about students’ identities, I administered two surveys (N = 1186) to AUC students. The surveys included measures of self-assessed, academic, social, intellectual, and emotional capabilities. The surveys also served to quantify students’ college experiences and overall satisfaction with their college education. In order to add richness to the quantitative data, I employed several ethnographic methodologies. By attending classes, lectures, and other university functions as a participant observer, as well as conducting informal interviews, I gathered data designed to characterize the everyday on-campus

lives of students as they experienced an American liberal arts curriculum. In addition, content analysis of university archival material, including university documents (American University in Cairo 2000a, 2000b), as well as Arabic (Al Ahram 1998; Al Ahrar 1998; Al Akhbar 2000; Akhbar El Youm 2000; Al Hayat 2000; Al Osbou 2000) and English (El-Lozy 1998; Cowper 2000) language newspaper articles, contributed to an understanding of the local and global pressures placed on the university's curriculum.

### HYBRID STUDENTS AND SPACES

On a daily basis, AUC students move back and forth from the streets of the Middle East's largest metropolitan center to one of the region's most prestigious liberal arts institutions. Making this journey is like commuting to an oasis. At the *micro* scale of the individual, this movement challenges students to negotiate two culturally diverse places. On the one hand, balancing the expectations and demands of the American liberal arts curriculum with the expectations and demands of Egyptian society ideally, at least, reinforces the values of critical independent thinking embedded in the ideology of liberal arts. On the other hand, challenged by apparent contradictions on campus, students' identity and worldview remain rooted in local culture. Despite AUC's Western foundations, Arab cultural orientations are not being destroyed and replaced with American orientations, but rather a process of hybridization pervades the everyday lives of AUC students.

The research revealed some of the contradictions of life at AUC. Some of the contradictions are subtle, others are not. For example, after informing students that they are a privileged group, administrators encourage students to respect the customs and traditions of Egyptian society. At the same time, female students are barred from wearing the *nikaab* traditional dress. Students enroll in extensive English language classes, and complete their major studies in English. While this skill is a "gold star" on their resumes, it holds no intrinsic value. In fact, many students view speaking English off campus as disrespectful and arrogant. In required courses like Core Seminar, students are exposed to texts and ideas that challenge their traditional worldviews and reinforce individual achievement and critical thinking. In the same courses, lecturers make clear the limits of academic freedom and the foibles of democracy in civil society. In the end, as a result of exposure to these contradictory experiences, students develop a greater appreciation for the role of the individual and collective agency in the construction or maintenance of culture and society. Students consciously manipulate their hybrid identity by adopting an identity appropriate for a particular time and place. Throughout their tenure at AUC, students refine this skill as part of the socialization process.

*AUCians*, then, are hybrid people being educated in a hybrid place. The research suggests that the unique space and exposure to the American liberal arts curriculum does not destroy or erode students' identity. To the contrary, the curriculum reinforces students' cosmopolitan identity. Students' identity and learning is facilitated experientially through contradictions in their everyday lives. Students find no irony in their everyday lives because of sophisticated worldviews that allow for the negotiation of difference through the process of hybridization. This process of hybridization expresses itself in the formation, maintenance, and expansion of spaces within which multiple cultural identities encounter and transform each other. AUC students thrive in these spaces because they are predisposed to hybridization as they are part of the cosmopolitan class of Egyptian society whose members themselves occupy hybrid spaces within the country. Students struggle, however, when confronted by those elements of Egyptian society that do not have access to hybrid spaces, and are opposed to the imported values on which the spaces are created. The imported values, of course, reflect the modern forces of globalization.

### GLOBALIZATION AND THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

From the previous discussion, the process of hybridization is directly observable at the *micro* scale through the everyday lives of students. The *macro* scale of global capitalism, however, influences the process. Global capitalism and the elements of this system represented by "the West" act like a magnet influencing the movement of a compass needle. Foreign demand for American higher education is driven by the structure of the global political economy – a system based on capitalism and increasingly associated with the English language.

AUC embodies many of the forms of globalization. The university, for example, has adopted strategies similar to those used by transnational corporations that operate at a global scale (i.e., a lack of commitment to particular places, labor forces or governments). The university has an economic interest in promoting capitalism. As an institution, it accepts the argument that globalization is inevitable and that national governments should not intervene to regulate the global market place. Finally, AUC is a landscape through which people, information, ideas, and images not only "flow" but also are created and organized.

The research further revealed the students' desire to be connected to the global economy. Student interest in the AUC Employment Fair, and the types of employment opportunities it represented, indicates the role *AUCians* are cast to play. Their role is one of human capital designed to meet the needs of

foreign-owned corporations and to facilitate international relations. Because of their hybrid status, students understand the world as a global economic and political system. They treat the “system” as background without losing sight of the fact that it is integrally constitutive of their everyday lives and futures.

Based on my interpretation of the research, is this a form of internal neo-colonialism? The answer is yes, giving an ironic twist to the notion that education has been used for imperialistic domination rather than creating independent thinkers. What is needed to maintain the hegemony of capitalism are creative, independent, value-free thinkers (i.e., engineers and computer scientists). In that sense, AUC is feeding globalization. Answering in the affirmative also confirms the status of education, and in particular liberal education, as a building block of capitalism. Similarly, cultural hybridity and the educational systems it produces, or the educational systems that produce the hybridity, become the products of resistance and accommodation to capitalist systems. The research suggested that the practice of capitalism is itself an expression of hybridity.

The research supports the hypothesis that AUC encourages growth without development. While AUC does not actively promote underdevelopment, it is guilty of perpetuating class exploitation within the country. That is, the university has presented itself as neither a model of social change, nor a change agent itself. Instead the university pursues the path of least resistance, the status quo, or the educational middle ground that is increasingly American in name only. The results of this study suggest that globalization is holding both AUC and Egypt hostage.

### THE GHOST OF LIBERALARTS

The research reveals that AUC adapts its curriculum and policies to accommodate local cultural orientations and demands. As expressions of an educational philosophy or ideology, AUC’s curriculum and policies offer insight at the *meso* scale. Elements of the process of education articulated at this scale filter or mediate between global capitalism at the *macro* scale and daily life at the *micro* scale. Mediation requires a fine balance between too much local adaptation, which might produce students who are less likely to engage in transforming those features of themselves and society they feel are in need of change (i.e., corruption, pollution, prejudice), and not enough local adaptation, which would undermine the very foundation of an American liberal arts education (i.e., the right of every qualified citizen to pursue higher education as a means of improving their quality of life). The question then becomes, how would one characterize AUC’s curriculum? Is the curriculum part of an educational system that rejects local cultural orientations in favor of

a rigidly “American” educational framework? Or, does the university incorporate local cultural demands at the expense of “liberal arts?”

AUC clings to the notion of liberal arts but is unwilling to challenge local norms. When government censors canceled a campus play, the university made no public appeal. Rather than confront the government on the infringement of the liberty of liberal arts, the university accepted the local decree. This indicates that the university mediates or filters new or controversial ideas for a closely monitored Egyptian society. The arrest of an AUC professor is another case in point. The arrest sparked little public debate about freedom of speech and the promotion of civil society.

The research also investigates the “capitalistic principles” or policies that reflect a concern for “what works” and what is marketable. This approach is at the expense of a critical pedagogy – one that challenges norms by empowering individuals to right social injustices. AUC’s stance is clearly political. The university has eschewed Edward Said’s (Said 1999) warning at a 2000 AUC commencement address to keep open the gap between the contemporary academy and society. Instead, AUC maintains uncomfortably close links to those outside the university who manipulate policy and gnaw at the fabric of liberal arts. In the end, the university becomes an ideological filter for the local experiences of everyday life and the reality of the world-system.

## CONCLUSION

The ethnographic and geographic observations as a participant observer at AUC reveal that students are self-conscious, elite, cultural hybrids, comfortable in the hybrid geographic spaces of the campus. Viewed in global context, the university’s success is due to the continued hegemony of global capitalism. Without global capitalism, AUC would have no inherent regional value and no students. Finally, AUC sacrifices many of the ideals of “liberal arts” to accommodate local cultural orientations. By doing so, the university becomes a cultural crossroads meeting the regional and international demand for human capital. To do otherwise would be to risk the university’s privileged status in the country and in the region. In the end, the university continues to dance backwards in high heels in an attempt to bridge local-global ideological fractures, thus insuring its own future success.

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