CHICAGO JOURNALS

Comparative and International Education Society

Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt by Greg-
ory Starrett. Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1998. 308 pp.
$22.00 (paper). ISBN 0-52020927-3.

The dearth of theoretically fine-tuned and richly textured critical studies of formal
mass schooling in Egypt, the Middle East, and the Muslim world in general makes
Putting Islam to Work a valuable contribution to the field. This work goes beyond
modernization paradigms that polarize Muslim societies and their educational insti-
tutions into false dichotomies of modern versus traditional, secular versus religious,
or progressive versus backward. Gregory Starrett, an anthropologist by training,
argues that throughout the century the Egyptian state, in its race to "progress,"
has sought to centrally administer both economic and moral development. He
deftly demonstrates how the state's ministries of education and information (re-
sponsible for the media) have attempted to manage public morality through con-
trolling religious discourse, the former through incorporating Islam as an aca-
demic subject in the school curriculum, the latter by putting out its own Islamic
publications for public consumption. Instead of homogenizing Islam, however,
these policies have contributed to the rise of fragmented and contested discourses
of Islam in the public sphere, resulting in the growth of new types of (Islamist) po-
litical opposition groups and an upsurge of consumers in a burgeoning market for
Islamic goods and services.

The present situation, according to Starrett, has come about largely due to a
historical process that he labels the "functionalization" of religion or the state's
"putting [Islam] . . . consciously to work for various types of social and political
projects" (p. 10). Centrally organized and administered mass schooling (and not
the older type of religious school run by the religious establishment) has been para-
mount in this process. From the period of the British occupation of Egypt (1882–
1922) to the present, educational planners have ventured into religious education
to ensure that religion is packaged and delivered to the public in a way that rein-
forces national planning and state policies. This has occurred through the novel use
of the school textbook, which "objectifies" religion or limits religious knowledge to
"a defined set of beliefs" (p. 9).

Starrett does with textbooks what anthropologist Brinkley Messick does with
legal documents in his acclaimed work *The Calligraphic State* (Berkeley and Los An-
geles: University of California Press, 1993); both show the causal relationship be-
tween new textual representations of Islam and widespread social change. Messick
documents how nineteenth century Ottoman reforms transformed Islamic law
(*shari'a*) from "a flexible and multivocal tradition of Islamic legal scholarship . . .
into a closed, self-contained, and relatively rigid set of 'modern' legal codes"
(p. 127) and discusses the implications of this transformation for social institutions
such as schools and the courts. Similarly, as Egypt adopted the European-style text-
book, which simplified and delimited fields of knowledge such as Islam, the newly
schooled public began encroaching on the role of the religious establishment by
participating in religious debates and producing religious tomes.

The concepts *functionalization* and *objectification* of religion are the prevalent

tropes throughout the work, and it is through them that Starrett makes a contribu-
tion to what, for lack of a better term, we will call "post-modern" theories of school-
ing. Drawing on knowledge/power theories advanced by Gramsci, Foucault, Marx,
and Althusser and taken up by Timothy Mitchell in his important work *Colonising
Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), he argues that while the
school may indeed be an instrument of pervasive state power, cultural and social
reproduction, and an institution that orders and controls populations, it is also
"an engine of tension and contradiction . . . [with] ambiguous and unpredictable
influence" (p. 24). The state, as much as it may try, can never control or predict the
outcomes of schooling; examples abound of anticolonial resistance movements led
by the educated elites. Social movements, however, in this postmetanarrative age,
are often subtle and fragmented, and include discourse struggles that penetrate the
civil society where, as Starrett observes in the case of Egypt, citizens "quietly and
privately [use] the social and intellectual technologies of the modern state to create
an alternative to it" (p. 13); the Islamization of Egyptian civil society is a case in
point.

On a theoretical level this study offers exciting and original concepts for under-
standing the links between schooling and Islamization; however, the field research
component, particularly in schools and among educators and students, is surpris-
ingly weak. While the author is concerned with the history of government (public)
schooling and its role in the process of functionalization and objectification of reli-
gion, his limited field research took place at a small private English language school
in Cairo. It is not clear why Starrett picked this school and the small religion class
he chose to observe, because both seem atypical in a city where class sizes often
reach 70 to 80 students. Teacher pedagogies and student behavior in classrooms
vary tremendously depending on social class, location of school, school type, gen-
der, and class size. Uniformity of textbooks, as Starrett would no doubt acknowl-
edge, in no way translates to uniformity of classroom practices, methodology, or
interactions. Similarly, the chapter entitled "Growing Up: Four Stories" (pp. 154–
90) provides some theoretically relevant material about four Egyptians but lacks
contextualization and discussion about why these four subjects were selected: Do
they represent certain life patterns? How can we know that their experiences and
insights are not completely idiosyncratic? In addition, while Starrett provides rich
and textured content analyses of religion textbooks over time, he disregards or
minimizes three critical processes: textbook production; transmission; and recep-
tion. The paucity of gritty data about everyday school practice, haphazard life his-
tories, and inattention to the ways in which texts are constructed and received
means that notions of the functionalization and objectification of religion remain
semisubstantiated, although plausible.

Despite the above shortcomings, this book makes a number of important and
wide-ranging contributions. It elaborates on the nuanced, complex, and cryptic so-
cial impact of schooling, adds to the social history of Islam, and fills in important
gaps on the history of formal mass schooling in Egypt, particularly during the years
of the British occupation. Of most importance to comparative educationists, *Putting
Islam to Work* provides a new language and conceptual tools for critically interpreting

how "functionalization" and "objectification" of not only religion but of any subject that is delimited in school textbooks can alter public discourses and contribute to social change. In the case of Egypt, religion textbooks were at least partly responsible for unleashing a fragmented and contested notion of Islam into the public space, a phenomenon that is now beyond the control of the government or any single force. It is worth exploring how this process has played out in other countries and regions of the world.

LINDA HERRERA

Teachers College, Columbia University

Higher Education in India: Critical Issues and Trends by George P. Alexander. Gardena, Calif.: P & P Publishers, 1998. 203 pp. $15.99 (paper). ISBN 0-9653688-8-2.

This book provides rare insight into the complex issues feeding the crisis in higher education in India today, written by a scholar eminently qualified to do so because of his dual perspective both as an "insider" and an "outsider." A national of India who received his undergraduate degree there and who returns frequently to lecture and conduct research, he is also a scholar trained and based in the United States. It is through this multidimensional grid, then, that the author analyzes the complex issues and trends in education on the one hand, while realistically portraying cultural sensitivities and emotionally charged issues on the other hand.

Because Alexander goes beyond facts and statistics to reveal the underlying factors that give rise to these problems, he gives the reader an interesting glimpse into the Indian mind-set and cultural worldviews. After reading his description of the rich diversity of peoples that make up the nation of India, one has to agree with the author that there is no easy solution to the crisis in education. In a developing country like India, the problem is compounded by the multiplicity of races, ethnic groups, and cultures; the diversity of languages (380 languages plus several hundred dialects); and the lack of a national language to unify the people. In addition, given the widely divergent religions (Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Parsi, Buddhist, and tribal), each with its own cultural values and traditions, together with a hierarchy of castes that varies from region to region and among each ethnic group, it is obvious that there is no homogeneity.

The book has two parts. The first half opens with an overview of the critical issues and major trends and a graphic description of the existing points of tension. Succeeding chapters then give details: methods of financing education, education of women, education of the scheduled castes, wastage and stagnation, basic education, education of semiliterate adults, vocational education, and the language controversy resulting in the government-proposed three-language formula. In the second half, the book's last four chapters are more philosophical in nature, with the author bringing together various currents of thought with his own analysis and observations regarding the "Indianization" of education, the need for religious