Hopeful city: meritocracy and affect in global Cairo

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Abstract

Contemporary forms of ‘world-class’ or ‘global’ city-making have displaced, excluded, and imperilled millions of urban inhabitants across the global South. This paper departs from conventional approaches in urban geography to understanding the relationship ‘global cities’ forge with those inhabitants, which focus on the displacement, resistance and inventive survival of the poor within the ‘informal city.’ Instead, it highlights more interstitial and less combative experiences. First, it explicates the presence of a group of Egyptians stripped of their ability to forge a middle-class life in the context of Cairo’s ‘global city’ project. Thereafter, rather than focusing on their propensity to engage in political mobilization – a dominant trend after Egypt’s 2011 Uprising – the paper utilizes eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork to argue that Cairo’s ‘global’ city offers up a semblance of inclusion to this excluded group. By extending a meritocratic promise that ‘global’ belonging is achievable through hard work, it keeps aspirational young men attached to a feeling of hope. The paper therefore shows not how ‘global’ or ‘world-class’ urban projects induce the resistance of wider urban populations, but how they secure legitimacy.

Key words: middle-class, global city, neoliberal rationalities, hope, affect, youth, urban margins
Introduction

In recent decades, Cairo has seen the large-scale construction of internationalised educational institutions, gated communities, glamorous office developments, new transport infrastructure, and upscale shopping malls and hotels that reflect the Egyptian government’s ambition to construct a ‘global capital city’ (Ghannam, 2002; el-Khishin, 2003; Sims, 2014). This ambition can be traced back to the 1980s and President Anwar Sadat’s economic ‘infitah’ (opening), and has gone hand-in-hand with drastic political-economic changes designed to liberalise Egypt’s economy. It is materialised in the ‘Cairo 2050’ vision, a design to create ‘Dubai on the Nile,’ to ‘modernise’ an ‘informal, crowded, degraded’ city and attract international investment and tourism (Elsheshtawy, 2006). The new urban developments have provided both speedy avenues for capital accumulation, and at the same time enabled the symbolic and material reproduction of a ‘cosmopolitan’ middle-class that made vast wealth on the back of economic reforms (de Koning, 2009; Peterson, 2011).

But millions of Egyptians are not included in this twenty-first century vision of urban life. Huge numbers have been displaced to make way for new urban developments, and pushed into overcrowded, informal living and precarious employment (Ghannam, 2002; Ismail, 2006). This has not gone uncontested. From everyday acts of ‘quiet encroachment’ (Bayat, 2009), to Egypt’s dramatic 2011 uprising (Chalcraft, 2012), Cairenes who have been imperilled by the global city project, and associated political-economic changes, are standing up to the inequalities and precarity which have been produced. However, in this paper I want to move beyond a dominant image of both Cairo and other ‘global’ cities across the global South that has pervaded recent global cities literature. This image depicts a bifurcated city, where the ‘cosmopolitan’ upper-middle classes in their securitized ‘world-class’ spaces exist side-by-side with the forgotten masses who are increasingly ‘unnecessary’ for neoliberal
growth, and who either engage in struggles over the city’s material resources, or find ways to generate a thriving, localised urban life outside ‘formal’ structures.

Building on aims of the new Cairo school of urban studies, the paper illuminates more interstitial experiences in contemporary Cairo (Singerman & Amar, 2006; Schielke, 2015), by switching attention to a precarious group that does not fit the ‘cosmopolitan’ middle-class vision. It also complicates understandings of how excluded groups interact with Cairo’s global city, by moving away from revolutionary streets and squares, towards quintessential places of the global city: employment fairs in international hotels, entrepreneurship events in exclusive urban gardens, and upscale shopping malls. It was here I found members of an educated group trying to access the aspirational middle-class life of the global city. Building on recent work in critical urbanism and affect theory, and switching focus to neoliberal rationalities that follow ‘global’ urban development, I argue that Cairo’s global city affects structurally excluded men with a powerful feeling of meritocratic hope that belonging is achievable. In doing so, I seek to shift urban studies in the global South away from a focus on material conflict, and demonstrate how world-class or global cities not only operate as sites of exclusion that stimulate the revolt of those they imperil. They also stimulate ‘cruel’ forms of aspiration and hope, producing the acquiescence of ‘ordinary’ urban dwellers (Berlant, 2011; Robinson, 2003).

The paper is split into four sections. First, it sets out how literature has approached those imperilled by contemporary city-making in the global South, before establishing two interventions. In the second section, I discuss the political-economic changes which have produced an Egyptian middle-class experiencing downward mobility and precarity, but simultaneously developing ‘cosmopolitan’ aspirations. The third section uses grounded ethnography to demonstrate how young Egyptian men chasing middle-class visions were affected with a prolonged feeling of hope that they can exercise future belonging in Cairo’s
‘global city.’ The conclusion summarizes the paper’s main findings, before discussing the implications for thinking through how contemporary cities, and capitalist formations more widely, continue to provide allure.

**Global cities, their outcasts, and the extension of hope**

Building on Sassen’s (2001) seminal thesis, urban geographers have analysed how governments across the global South have adopted the ambition to turn cities into ‘global’ or ‘world-class’ metropolises which symbolise their modern, globalized, capitalist development dreams (Dupont, 2011; Goldman, 2011; Ong & Roy, 2011; Ghertner, 2015). Following the contested blueprint of what that constitutes, this has involved providing an attractive environment to international capital, developing modern infrastructure, and erecting high-end residential and consumptive spaces. It has required the liberalisation of national economies; the privatisation of state industry, relaxation of import/export controls, retraction of state spending, and the opening of private property markets (Sassen, 2001; Harvey, 2005). Much literature has revealed how this has thrown millions into acute social and economic deprivation (Robinson, 2003). People who do not fit the ‘world-class’ vision are being thrown off land into homelessness or precarious dwellings (Davis, 2006; Ghertner, 2015), and pushed into low-paid service work, insecure employment or unemployment as growth concentrates in capital-intensive industries (Ray & Qayum, 2009; Standing, 2011; Sassen, 2014).

But geographical research highlighting these destructive effects has overwhelmingly gravitated towards the urban poor. The ‘middle-classes’ are viewed as the protagonists of ‘global’ urban development, and the liberal economic transformations that come with it. Whilst in the global North there now prevails recognition that middle-classes are facing
stagnation (Hage, 2003; Heiman, 2015), in the global South research remains focused on populations who have experienced socio-economic rise, and who are able to acquire modern, globalized markers of middle class-ness (Caldeira, 2001; Liechty, 2003; Fernandes, 2006; Mercer, 2014). It adopts Weberian and Bourdieuspired approaches to theorising this slippery concept, viewing ‘new’ middle class-ness as both socio-economic status and aspirational category emerging from forms of international private-sector employment, internationalised education and sociability, and global forms of consumption. It also demonstrates how ‘global’ urban spaces enable the reproduction of those markers, in part through excluding the poor.

The dual focus on the urban poor and upwardly-mobile middle-classes produces a depiction of a divided city, with the walled off middle-class beneficiaries of capitalist development inhabiting a distinct city from the masses who increasingly live ‘informally.’ While this produces powerful imagery, it glosses over more interstitial experiences. The first aim of this paper is to highlight the production of ‘in-between’ middle-class groups experiencing decline in the context of global city-making. This builds on work which has complicated the notion of a coherent, large, rising middle-class in the global South (Credit Suisse, 2015; O’Dougherty, 2002). Scholars have pointed to the emergence of groups, built on “populist, modernist, bureaucratic, state-driven economic policies of mid-20th century states” (Heiman et al. 2012: 14), that struggle to pursue a middle-class life as public-sector jobs, affordable housing, and government subsidies have been stripped away (Davis, 2010).

Many educated groups, including those outside major urban centres where growth has concentrated, have been pushed into un/under-employment as capital-intensive industry fails to generate large numbers of permanent white-collar jobs (Wade, 2004; Jeffrey, 2010; Mains, 2012).
The article’s second aim is to uncover a different kind of relationship that global cities develop with those they imperil. Moving beyond political-economic analysis explaining the production of displacement or precarity (Davis, 2006; Standing, 2011), recent work has explored how contemporary city-making induces resistance (Dikec, 2018) – understood as acts that disrupt structures which are productive of power inequalities (Seymour, 2006). Resistance to the inequities produced by and within ‘global’ cities ranges from worker strikes and protest, to quiet encroachment and more everyday forms. A recent trend has been exposing how urban metabolisms – the material construction of cities – open the space for struggle over material resources that sustain livelihoods, such as housing (Holston, 2008), amenities (Bayat, 2009), and infrastructure (Lancione & McFarlane, 2016). However, moving beyond resistance, other scholars have examined how the urban poor find ways to generate a thriving urban life (Simone; 2004; Thieme, 2017). These scholars emphasize the generative possibilities of the uncertainty and precarity thrown up by contemporary urbanism: in that they engender the adaptive capacity of the poor (Cooper & Pratten, 2015).

In current research, global city-making is viewed as something to be resisted, or absent from the daily lives and imaginations of the urban poor residing in the informal city. Yet some recent work has grappled with people’s acquiescence to their displacement by modern developments (Harms, 2012; Melly, 2013). In studies of the poor, it is the limiting of aspiration which is assumed to legitimise ‘global’ cities (Thieme, 2017). Symbolic struggle over their employment and lifestyles is assumed to be defunct due to the sustained disconnection between capital and labour – where capital is accumulated without massive labour requirements (Schindler, 2017). Instead, the urban poor fight for a stake in the city’s metabolic configuration. But Ghertner (2015), writing about slum-dwellers in Delhi, examined how the ‘world-class’ city operates as an object of aspiration, as people adopt its aesthetic classificatory schemes. Ghertner’s argument adds an urban dimension to work
discussing how processes of globalisation and technological change have increased the cosmopolitan longing of ordinary people, even though they lack the means of fulfilment (Weiss, 2009; Schielke, 2015).

Echoing focus on resistance, Ghertner (2015) argues that this process stimulates political demands for inclusion, in this case for upgraded housing. But the stimulation of aspiration can also operate as an avenue for securing legitimacy, if one believes dominant structures will fulfil it. Guano (2002) and de Boeck (2012), in Buenos Aires and Kinshasa respectively, have both argued that global cities extend materialities and discourses of inclusion, opening themselves up, their spaces, knowledge, jobs, and products to be observed by people beyond those who belong. De Boeck (2012) argued that the progress and modernisation promised by Kinshasa’s urban development extended hope to the population:

“although many urban residents in Kin know that they will never have a right to this new city, the hope that this naval image engenders, the hope for a better future, for new and more advantageous ways to cruise through life and navigate the city, simply proves to be irresistible.” (276)

This paper extends these insights to Cairo, and brings them into conversation with urban studies’ take on the global city. But it also moves beyond their predominant focus on aesthetics. I adopt a more grounded approach to hope, focusing on the individual pursuit of the employment and lifestyles of the ‘global city.’ Hope is defined as a feeling of ‘prospective momentum’ (Miyazaki, 2004), a “sense that one may become other or more than one presently is or was fated to be” (Jackson, 2011; xi). Ghassan Hage (2003) argued that the extension of hope to a population is essential for a nation-state to govern in the face of
entrenched inequalities. Thus, present inequalities, exclusions, and displacements enacted by global city-making can be legitimised through extending future hope.

Global city-building in the global South comes with drastic political-economic and discursive changes (Singerman & Amar, 2006; Ong & Roy, 2011). One of these underappreciated changes is the extension of neoliberal rationalities (Kanna, 2011; Bröckling, 2016). Across the urban global South, there are attempts by policy makers, development practitioners, and the private sector to promote entrepreneurialism, and construct modern, meritocratic labour markets (Pow, 2002). Their extension within ‘global’ urban spaces, I will argue, affects feelings of hope within young educated unemployed men who aspire for the employment of Cairo’s ‘global city.’ Current exclusion is legitimised, based on an elusive promise that inclusion will come. To frame the analysis, I use theorisations of affect, which are left out of Guano and de Boeck’s analyses. Affect theorists have argued that emotion comes into being through the ‘encounter’ between between subjects and the objects, places, and discourses they interact with and inhabit (Stewart, 2007; Anderson, 2009; Navaro, 2009). Directing emotions in particular ways is one mechanism through which unequal power structures are sustained. These insights have been utilised by urban scholars to examine how cities are built, governed, and lived through particular affects (Thrift, 2004; Anderson & Holden, 2008; Schüll, 2012).

Before going on to describe how Cairo’s global city is lived by a segment of ‘excluded’ residents through hope, the following section plots the historical emergence of a precarious Egyptian population chasing an elusive middle-class life. The paper’s analysis stems from eleven months of ethnographic fieldwork collected over a two-year period from the summer of 2014. I followed young public university graduates as they struggled to secure good jobs; attending employment fairs, training courses, and entrepreneurship events, engaging in self-study and applying for jobs, and relaxing in cafés, shopping malls, and their
homes. Some were from Cairo’s lower-class areas and some from cities in the delta and beyond. Though from different areas – Cairenes often judged those from the provinces – my interlocutors were all part of a precarious group chasing globalised middle class-ness, with those from the countryside moving to the city in search of better work. Rural-urban migrants represent an under-recognised precarious group in Cairo, and other cities in the global South. Conversations were conducted mostly in Arabic, and I quickly developed a close relationship with several young men. Reflecting some of the arguments in the paper, my presence also became an object of hope. Hanging out with a ‘foreigner,’ practicing English, and receiving help with scholarship or job applications offered prospective social mobility. The paper focuses on one man from outside Cairo, but his story is reflected in many others. It highlights particular masculine trajectories and aspirations, which do partly overlap but also differ from those of women (Ghannam, 2013). Research is needed on how the processes discussed affect Egyptian women.

**Egypt’s aspirational ‘middle-class’ poor**

Ibrahim grew up in a village two hours northeast of Cairo, with a population of farmers, low-level government employees, factory workers, and informal traders. His parents, like those of all my interlocutors, benefited from the socialist-era reforms of Gamal Abdel Nasser, which expanded access to education, secure public employment – Ibrahim’s father worked as a school teacher – rent-capped housing, and subsidies for food and fuel (Rutherford, 2008). These reforms established a notion of middle class-ness (tabqa-mutawasita) built on non-manual employment, education, and belonging to national culture and modern Islamic codes (Armbrust, 1999). Samuli Schielke (2012) noted that middle class-ness must be understood as both an in-between social state in which distinction is pursued
from those below and above, and an aspirational category or claim to the ‘centre.’ Establishing middle class-ness as an aspirational claim, rather than a given social formation is central to understanding my interlocutors as ‘middle-class.’ For Ibrahim’s generation, this Nasserist route to middle class-ness has been ruptured. In the 1970s under what was labelled the infitah (opening), Anwar Sadat initiated a process of economic liberalisation that would carry on discontinuously for decades under the rule of Hosni Mubarak. State-owned industry was privatised, internal/external commerce and entrepreneurialism encouraged, the property market was liberalised, and tax exemptions on company profits put in place. Furthermore, government recruitment halted and subsidies and price controls cut in order to implement IMF austerity measures (Kienle, 2001).

Some in the upper-echelons of the Nasserist middle-class and pre-existing elite managed to accumulate huge amounts of money through importing (often luxury) consumer goods, internal trade, property investment, as well as Gulf migration (de Koning, 2009; Peterson, 2011). Yet, many in the middle-class faced precarity as rapid inflation – a direct result of import dependence – reduced the reach of government wages. For those growing up in this middle-class, though public education has continued to expand, its quality has drastically declined, as well as access to secure employment. The percentage of graduates entering the government declined from 70% to 20% between 1970 and 1996, and the formal private sector failed to take its place due to the concentration of growth in capital-intensive construction, tourism, and commerce industries (Assaad & Krafft, 2014). Youth unemployment is now concentrated amongst those graduating from higher education. Asef Bayat (2011) discerned the emergence of a ‘middle-class poor’ in Egypt (see Schielke, 2015), a large population of educated young people pushed into overcrowded informal neighbourhoods, and low-skilled, low-status, insecure employment. This relative middle-class upward and downward-mobility has been highly spatialized. Neoliberal avenues of
growth have concentrated in Cairo, and smaller towns and cities have been heavily impacted by declines in manufacturing and government jobs.

Upon graduating from the Faculty of Commerce at a provincial government university in 2012 – a faculty now infamous as one of the country’s ‘kólyyat al ša’b’ (faculties of the people) due to overcrowding and poor quality – Ibrahim’s father expected him to work as an accountant in a nearby industrial town that provides employment for many in the region. However, Ibrahim refused. He considered this town an “‘abr l’al ša’b” (tomb for youth). He had seen his brother-in-law become “depressed” in a similar job due to a low salary that caused difficulties with family expenses, long hours, and the constant threat of being laid off. All of my interlocutors looked up to a future, embodied in parents, relatives, and friends, of struggles to adhere to norms of respectable masculinity and middle class-ness in low-paid, insecure, low-skilled jobs, such as in call centres, domestic law, and outdoor sales. They also wished to escape neighbourhoods which had become overcrowded, dirty, and noisy, full of uneducated ‘ša’by’ (lower-class) people, and which had poor infrastructure and services.

These young men were also exposed to a different aspirational claim to middle class-ness. During the infitah, and 1990s structural adjustment, there was an effort to reorient Egypt away from the nation and towards the globe – predominantly the West. The Nasserist middle-class vision has been overlain by another, centred on “global connection, versatility, metropolitan tastes, language skills, and well-paid professional jobs in the private sector” (Schielke, 2012: 37). Celebrations of the ‘mowazafeen’ (government employees) have made way for “iconic images of young professionals in the hyper-modern offices of internationally-orientated companies” as well as entrepreneurs (de Koning, 2009: 37). Cairo has been at the centre of this transformation, as materially shown by the internationalised private educational institutions, modern leisure places, business parks, and expensive villas in gated communities.
which have sprung up in recent decades (Singerman & Amar, 2006). These places enable the upper-middle class to escape an increasingly dilapidated public education system, and crowded city.

These changes have stimulated alternative aspirations among those growing up in Egypt’s now precarious middle-classes. Bayat (2011) argued that the ‘middle-class poor’ “fantasize about an economic status that their expectations demand — working in IT companies, with secure jobs, middle-class consumption patterns, and perhaps migration to the West” (see Schielke, 2015). During university, Ibrahim joined an entrepreneurship outreach course run by a Cairo-based international organisation. This took him to two entrepreneurship competitions at the American University of Cairo (AUC), the country’s most exclusive private university. Ibrahim described how he had never seen such knowledge about entrepreneurship and the business world. From these activities, he dreamt of becoming an entrepreneur; to make a mobile app. Steve Jobs – about whom he read extensively online – became his idol. More immediately, he wished to work in HR for a multinational company. He compared his ambition to people in the village who sold mobile phone accessories. This was unrespectable work because it involved being on the street surrounded by ‘sha’by’ people. It also added nothing new to society. Ibrahim wanted to “make a difference to the world, to have [his] message heard and contribute to the development of mankind, not just work to get money, marry and have babies.”

Reflecting Ghertner’s (2015) observations in Delhi, but in the realm of employment, Cairo’s ‘global city’ ferments the aspirations of people situated far from it: through inducing encounters with its knowledges, spaces, and employment. In Ibrahim’s case, an international NGO – staffed by the upper-middle classes – entered the provincial education of the lower-middle class. Though entrepreneurship has been a dominant ideal for three decades, it has intensified in the aftermath of Barak Obama’s 2009 Middle East entrepreneurship initiative.
The entrepreneurship ‘scene’ is concentrated in Cairo, and incorporates donors/investors, platforms designed to provide supportive ‘ecosystems,’ and start-ups. It is focused on technology, or ‘scalable’ businesses. Entrepreneurship is presented as a powerful tool for decreasing youth unemployment in a context where the government and private sector are failing to generate jobs, and therefore provides a fashionable target for developmental funding (Elyachar, 2005). Promotion through training has been one manifestation of this.

Exposure to entrepreneurship took Ibrahim to a quintessential educational space of the ‘cosmopolitan’ upper/upper-middle classes. He observed and participated in the knowledge and aesthetics of ‘global’ Cairo. For other young men, aspirations to work in multinational companies, study or work abroad, afford private education for children, or live in a gated community stemmed from seeing adverts for gated communities on television or billboards around the city, and seeing a privileged relative or friend who had secured desirable jobs. For one man, hearing two Egyptians whom he was serving in an upmarket restaurant switch to English stimulated aspiration to learn English and get a better job. Cairo thus enacts proximity to upscale lifestyles.

Those living outside had to come. ‘Everything is in Cairo’ (kul hāga f’al Qahira) was the ubiquitous response from people when I asked why they had moved. Schielke (2015: 10) describes Cairo, for inhabitants of the provinces, as “a place to make money, to make a career, to make things happen – it is a centre of wealth, power, culture, and glamour. Cairo is the place to be, so to speak, in Egypt.” It is often referred to as ‘Masr’ (Egypt), because houses the largest companies, the best educational opportunities, and government administration. It stands in stark contrast with many other towns and cities which have entered states of decay in the aftermath of economic liberalisation. Schielke (2015) notes that many people are prevented from moving by the cost of living or their lack of connections. My interlocutors mostly relied on meagre salaries in what they hoped was temporary service
work in call centres, and cheap, overcrowded apartments. They also enjoyed the gendered privilege of movement. As Ghannam (2013) states, the early twenties is a life-stage for men in which a certain level of roaming is expected. Female migration was rarer, often constrained by the necessity of having to live with family.

These young men were therefore chasing a globalised vision of middle class-ness. Bayat (2011) argued that the discrepancy between cosmopolitan middle-class possibilities and precarious realities contributed to the dramatic events of early 2011 in Egypt, where millions took to the streets and eventually brought down the regime of Hosni Mubarak. Yet, since the coming to power of military general Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2013, an atmosphere of inertia has developed among Egyptians. Furthermore, my interlocutors were not involved in political movements. They instead spent their time and energy on locating jobs. I will argue in the next section that these men were offered hope for future realisation of their dreams through different engagements with Cairo’s ‘global city.’

**Hopeful City**

Simply being in Cairo was a source of hope for many. As Schielke (2015) states, Egypt’s capital is a place where things happen. As, one young man from Upper Egypt told me, “I am here because of the future…in Sohag the opportunities are set, you know that your level will not change, but in Cairo opportunities could open up tomorrow.” Cairo was unpredictable, a place where immanent transformation can occur, unlike the provinces. People would relay stories of friends who had moved and secured jobs in banks or big companies because of the risk they took. But moving alone was not enough. Both those who migrated, and those who grew up in lower-class areas of Cairo were constantly on the move in order to take advantage of the opportunities the city promised. This took them into contact
with various places: training centres offering to teach the skills needed to ensure success in Egypt’s internationalised private sector, employment fairs presenting jobs in multinational companies, and entrepreneurship events providing inspiration for budding entrepreneurs. These places formed part of Cairo’s ‘global city,’ located in upmarket areas, advertising its jobs, and offering the skills required to obtain them. I now analyse Ibrahim’s encounter with one of them.

The UN Fair

Ibrahim travelled to Cairo frequently following university, to attend courses and events he hoped would carry him towards his entrepreneurial dream. In October 2014, I attended a UN Fair with him and two friends, Mahmoud and Mostafa, whom he had met in a training course. This course, run by an American NGO, was part of a broader government and developmental effort to teach public university graduates the ‘soft skills’ they were apparently missing: CV writing, career planning, presentation and communication skills, English, time management, and interview techniques. The trainers, all privately educated Egyptians, taught participants to follow their passions, and work hard to make connections, acquire skills, or find start-up funding. If they did that, they would make it like they had. Coming to the fair was an attempt to do just that. They had come across it on Facebook. It was located in the Fish Garden in Zamalek, an exclusive neighbourhood in the centre of Cairo. The park ordinarily required a 15LE (£1.20) entry fee and would be visited by upper/upper-middle class Cairenes or tourists, but on this day, it was free and open to all. The Fair was designed to commemorate the successes of UN start-up beneficiaries. I arrived shortly after the 2pm opening, entering after having my bag checked by security. From 11.30am to 1pm there had been a closed event attended by government ministers.
The Fair had an extremely upscale feel, owing to its location and appearance. Ibrahim himself commented on its professional look. There were, though, visible separations. The people running the event and the UN stalls – outside some UN-supported microenterprises, were all either from Cairo’s upper-middle classes, or foreigners. One stall attendant was a German flatmate of mine doing a UN internship. These people, and their friends, would move freely both in front of, and behind, the stalls enjoying convivial conversations together. Another group, of which Ibrahim, Mahmoud, and Mostafa were part, was more restricted. They moved between stalls picking up leaflets and sometimes talking with stall attendants, usually in Arabic after initial attempts in English. This group had come to seek employment opportunities, build connections, and learn useful information. Their communication with the upper-middle class was mediated by a desk, restricted to questions about opportunities of working or project information. Stalls included start-ups benefiting from UN funding – ranging from date farmers in Upper Egypt to mobile app developers in Cairo, information stands on UN projects, NGOs offering various services such as ‘educational networking,’ and UN initiatives seeking volunteers. Many crowded around the Volunteering Scheme seeking to apply for jobs and the Scheme itself, only to be disappointed to learn it was not possible at the fair.

Mostafa excitedly collected any leaflet he could. He said he would benefit from reading the information they contained. By the end he had collected too many to carry, and so put a couple down initially, only to pick them back up after deciding he could not let them go. Amongst the leaflets was a monthly schedule of the US Embassy’s Information Resource Center, on which he had marked events he would like to attend: Business Planning for Entrepreneurs, English Conversation Club, and Introduction to Project Management. I left briefly to speak with my flatmate. She commented that attendees do not know how to have memorable conversations. They just come and ask if there are opportunities, and if so how to
apply. They do not show a “genuine” interest. I thought about Mostafa during this conversation. He did not show the necessary conduct to stand out or display a deep interest; performed qualities that are considered important. I then reminded myself that even with the “correct behaviour,” there were many other barriers preventing Mostafa from standing out compared to the privately-educated UN employees.

Our conversation was interrupted by Ibrahim, who called me over to listen to an “amazing story.” A young man from a poor neighbourhood was selling ice cream. He was ushered by an organizer to tell his story. He began, shyly, to say how he had been in prison for fighting someone with a relative in the police, but since leaving he had established an ice-cream business with UN funding. After expressing our congratulations and buying an ice-cream, we left. Ibrahim immediately said: “isn’t that amazing, he has turned his life around…he shows that if you do the right thing you can overcome anything.”

We continued on so that Ibrahim could exercise his plan. He was here to build connections and find funding for his start-up idea, currently a mobile application to help deaf people communicate. Ibrahim had learned he needed to do this to be a successful entrepreneur, at events about which he would talk to me. After one lecture by a well-known entrepreneur in Ibrahim’s university, he said: “it made me so happy, it was so helpful and motivating, I learned how to follow and develop the passion inside me; that makes me feel like I am flying.” Ibrahim had been told to utilize and expand his network, as well as search hard for the plentiful funding opportunities on offer. He also learned that entrepreneurs need to have passion, be risk-takers, hard workers, and to have unwavering belief. This was reflected in Ibrahim’s favourite Steve Jobs quote: “because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do.”

However, at the Fair Ibrahim found it difficult to bring up his project, so the majority of his effort went towards obtaining business cards of stall attendants. By the end he had
managed to get two – which he was very happy with. Following these activities, we joined the crowds at the stage to listen to the free evening concert, performed by Wust el-balad, a band popular amongst middle-class youth. As we listened, thoughts of entrepreneurial dreams lingered on.

Later, I spoke to these men about the day. When I asked Mostafa why youth go to this event, he responded:

“Most are looking for a chance or to see how they can improve themselves, how it can help them. They have a talent and dream. Today I told myself I can do everything I want to. Others go there for the free concert, you can see that, but there are others who have a goal and a dream. They take inspiration for their own projects”.

In contrast to Mostafa’s optimism, Mahmoud had been more sceptical. Throughout the day he had been noticeably disinterested. He also said most people come because “they are searching for hope (‘amal), motivation (tahmees), and maybe new ideas,” but he had not felt motivated: “I am fed up with speaking with people, I need actions, I am not pessimistic but I am realistic.” But for Ibrahim, like Mostafa, this event incited much hope. Hearing stories of entrepreneurial transformation, and obtaining business cards ensured the fair enacted a sense that his own dreams were realisable too.

**Atmospheres of hope**

The UN Fair, its location, aesthetics, upper-middle class inhabitants, and indeed the UN itself all signified Cairo’s ‘global city.’ Similarly, an international training course run by
upper-middle class Egyptians, an employment fair in an international hotel, and a glamorous shopping mall – all places frequented by my interlocutors – also represent the global city. The inhabitation of these spaces by men like Ibrahim cannot be interpreted using existing analytical framings in urban geography. Ibrahim was not exercising belonging as a member of the cosmopolitan upper-middle class. The difference between him and the UN employees was starkly represented in the ways they used the space, and their divergent cultural capitals. It could therefore be interpreted as a transgressive act, a traversal of spatialized class boundaries. Schindler (2007) has argued that poor people’s inhabitation of shopping malls in India represents a subversive act. But, this interpretation privileges the desire to seek out resistance. Rather, drawing on affect theory, I would argue that the spatial terrain of Cairo’s global city was inciting hope for these young men, by generating an ‘affective atmosphere’ of success (Anderson, 2009).

An atmosphere is a “ceaselessly oscillating foreground/background or, better, an immanent ‘plane’ (i.e. this is an in-between with a consistency all of its own)” (Seigworth, 2000: 232), which is constituted by transpersonal affects generated by the interaction of objects, discourses, and bodies. At the UN Fair, objects such as a UN leaflet, a US Embassy timetable, a business card, and an ice-cream seller symbolised successful entrepreneurship, and a global knowledge economy. For Ibrahim and Mostafa, encountering these objects induced feelings of hope. Coming to this place provided a sense of inclusion, of participation in the life of the global city. But it was the practices of viewing or hearing about inspirational projects, picking up leaflets and marking future events, and collecting business cards that enacted a sense of ‘prospective momentum’ towards belonging for real (Miyazaki, 2004).

This rested on the city discursively opening itself up as reachable, through extending a meritocratic fantasy. Talal Asad (2015) recently argued that privatisation and economic liberalisation have produced a ‘liberal incitement to individual autonomy’ in Egypt, a shift in
‘moral authority’ towards the ‘conscience’ of the autonomous individual (see Schielke, 2015). Various scholars have explored how this has manifested in the increased propensity of self-help literature (Kenney, 2015), entrepreneurship and empowerment programs (Elyachar, 2005; Atia, 2013), and private property (Simcik-Arese, 2016). It is also being proliferated in Cairo’s formal, private labour market. The government, development organisations, and recruitment and training companies are attempting to construct a ‘modern,’ meritocratic labour market and remove the infamous problem of ‘wasta’ (nepotism), and prejudicial notions of where people belong. This has involved organising employment fairs to bring graduates and companies together, ensuring open recruitment processes, and training graduates in searching for jobs through building connections, conducting interviews, writing CVs, and presenting themselves in ways that make them stand out.

Nowhere is this shift more apparent than entrepreneurship, which is presented as a tool for challenging an exclusionary ‘family business model’ dominating Egypt’s private sector (Elyachar, 2005). As a result there exist various ‘outreach’ programs, and entrepreneurship is part of ‘soft skills’ training programs. In September 2016, I met Noura, an employee of an entrepreneurship platform. She was an AUC graduate, more fluent in English than Arabic. Her father owned multiple companies. After discussing Cairo’s entrepreneurship scene for an hour, I admitted my scepticism that young men like Ibrahim would open a start-up because they lacked funds, knowledge, and connections. She immediately rebuked me, saying: “no, there is hope, you need to be more positive Harry! They are just doing things in the wrong order. You know they need a career coach. They just need a plan, a career plan and they will do it, everyone can do it if they do the right things, they are just doing the wrong things.” Noura then told me about Malcolm Gladwell, an author who had proven scientifically that hard work and taking the right actions can secure success. His writing had inspired her when she was a student. Noura then described how working at the platform had
made her more positive: “I was told by my dad I would take over the company only, but here I saw more ambition, it made me ambitious too. I saw perseverance that made me believe anything is possible.” She then repeated that I was too negative, and she wanted to make me more positive. She would send me a positive thought every day; today’s was “to be grateful.”

Looking around where we had met, it was easy to see why Noura was so positive. In the Greek Campus, formerly part of AUC but now an entrepreneurial ‘hub’ in the heart of Cairo – which required a membership card for entry – she was surrounded by Egypt’s most successful start-ups. The employees of these start-ups had certainly worked hard to succeed, to obtain funding, and build networks and know-how. However, through conversations with people, all graduates of elite private universities, there were various hints of the class position required: outside the fact “nine out of ten start-ups fail.” According to Noura, most start-ups rely on family funding in the pre-prototype phase as investors do not invest in “just an idea.” Furthermore, both she and others emphasised the importance of knowing investors. Yet they stressed it is impossible to generalize.

These conversations reveal the existence and reproduction of a meritocratic discursive terrain within Cairo’s global city – in this case its entrepreneurship scene – that posits that reaching its employment and lifestyles is dependent upon the autonomous individual, upon attitude rather than inherited privilege. Whenever a potential barrier arose during conversations, a solution was quickly offered and positivity restored. Funding can be found because “there are so many options!” and networks can be built. The entrepreneurship ‘ecosystem’ is designed to combat such barriers. Success becomes about personal characteristics: perseverance, passion, risk-taking, and hard work. This terrain certainly has transnational origins, but there are many Egyptian ideologies and discourses through which individual autonomy is generated. These ideologies are reproduced everyday within the ‘global city’ by the people performing, and seeing, hard work that leads to success.
Entrepreneurial and meritocratic discourses have been much critiqued for legitimizing the reproduction of privilege, placing blame on an ‘undeserving poor,’ and masking inequalities (Khan, 2012; Littler, 2013). Cairo’s entrepreneurship scene has itself been criticised for placing people in huge debt, and being dominated by the privileged.\textsuperscript{8} Indeed, social mobility in Egypt has drastically declined in recent decades (Binzel & Carvalho, 2016). However, meritocracy also has important ‘affects’ on those pursuing privilege, because of its hopeful quality. It offers up the promise of rewards to any individual, no matter their class, race, gender, or sexuality, who works hard to acquire the right skills, characteristics, and connections (Khan, 2012; Littler, 2013). While inhabiting places of Cairo’s ‘global city,’ Ibrahim, a member of an excluded group aspiring after globalised middle class-ness, was told repeatedly by members of the upper-middle classes that if he worked hard, took risks, and remained passionate he would reach his entrepreneurial dream and the vision of middle class-ness now dominating Cairo’s urban landscape. Similarly, others were told, in soft skills training and employment fairs, that Cairo’s high-status employment would open itself up if they improved their English, tinkered with their CVs, or wore the right suit. Hearing these discourses, seeing ‘proof’ of their success in ‘successful’ bodies, and acting them out produced an intense feeling of hope, making it seem like the global life they desired was within reach. Indeed, this was the explicit aim of these spaces. The program manager at the NGO told me the goal is to incite: “courage and conviction that something will come, even if the picture is mixed, that conviction that you will work on excel, English, instead of sitting on Facebook like they all do, not learning.”

Mahmoud’s scepticism demonstrates that this process is not automatic. As Anderson (2006: 736) states, the shape of the emotions induced by encounters is dependent upon the “affected body’s existing condition to be affected.” Mahmoud was slightly older than Ibrahim. He had had two more years of struggle to locate a stable, fulfilling job. This struggle
had brought forth many rounds of frustration. At this stage he needed something more tangible than information: he needed actions, not words. However, there were other spaces that induced hope. At the time, he was investing in a more affordable English course at the AUC, and was extremely hopeful this would lead to a job in a multinational company.

Conclusions

Ibrahim, along with my other interlocutors, represents a product of middle-class decline in the aftermath of Egypt’s neoliberal transition. A large group has been pushed into poor-quality government education, and thereafter low-status, low-skilled, low-paid private sector employment or extended unemployment. We might expect to see a downgrading of aspirations in line with this new socio-economic situation. But instead we see the stubborn raising of aspirations amongst this young population, as a result of socio-economic changes which have produced a powerful alternative vision of middle class-ness. We also might expect to see engagement in political mobilisation in its various forms, due to the mismatch between their globalised aspirations and chances of realising them. Perhaps we saw this in Egypt in 2011. But instead, I have intricately shown one mechanism through which resistance is foreclosed. Cairo’s ‘global city,’ as an assemblage of objects, discourses, and spaces, keeps these young men attached to the hopeful notion that its employment and lifestyles are reachable.

I have made several contributions in this paper. First, I have called for increased recognition of more interstitial experiences in global cities. This includes a need to recognize ‘middle-class’ populations (including rural-urban migrants) that do not fit the image of beneficiaries of capitalist development. In Egypt, a large youth population who are struggling to pursue a respectable middle-class life has been the product of recent socio-economic
transformation. Furthermore, there needs to be recognition of less acrimonious relationships that global cities develop with the vast populations they imperil or exclude. Urban geographers have tended to search for resistance against, or survival despite, expulsion from global city projects. This search has overwhelmingly taken place in ‘informal’ cities. While certainly important, this has had the consequence of neglecting how projects are legitimised to wider populations.

By returning focus to symbolic struggle, I have demonstrated how global cities might be offering up potential future inclusion, which operates through affect. By concentrating on some of the discursive transformations associated with neoliberal change in the urban global South, the paper demonstrated how places of Cairo’s global city regurgitate a promise that success – and global urban belonging – comes to individuals who exercise the right behaviours, subjecting people as hard working, aspirational, and hopeful job seekers. As a result, failure becomes the concern of the individual, rather than inherited privilege and structural constraints. This in turn legitimises present exclusions from the employment, lifestyles, and spaces of global cities. Everyone is projected as possessing the ability to achieve future inclusion. A longitudinal perspective on the lives of these young men demonstrates the cruelty of this promise.

**Coda: Cruel Hope**

Shortly after the UN Fair Ibrahim made a plan to take a temporary job in Cairo as a sales representative in a mobile phone shop, and use it as a base from which to save money, expand his business connections by applying for jobs and attending more events, and learn about company administration. This, he said, would help him develop himself. Successful entrepreneurs always took risks, and this was his. At this time, Ibrahim exuded not just hope,
but confidence about his future. He always talked about multiple start-up ideas he had in his head, or about things he had learnt during long hours spent studying entrepreneurship or English. He carried with him Steve Jobs’ autobiography, posting inspirational quotes on Facebook almost daily. Ibrahim compared himself to people in his village, who sat in ahwas (cafés) all day, smoking cigarettes and hashish, and complaining about the prevalence of wasta or bribery in the labour market. A consequence of the meritocratic discursive terrain was the emergence of moral hierarchies between those exercising behaviours of success, and those who refused. Becoming hopeless, refusing to try, and blaming factors outside one’s control became explanations for failure. Ibrahim instead acquired a sense of moral value and respect.

But despite his efforts, two years later in late-2016 Ibrahim was unemployed. Like all of my interlocutors over that period, he had experienced innumerable disappointments. He stayed only two months in Cairo because the job and living situation sapped his time, energy, and money, ultimately giving him the feeling he was moving further from his dream. Thereafter, he experienced numerous job rejections, failed attempts to find funding, and even futile efforts to move abroad. Every experience induced intense feelings of anger and sadness. However, he would overcome them by rereading about the success of Steve Jobs despite adversity, immersing himself in English, and asking either God, or successful entrepreneurs and career coaches, for guidance and help. He returned to focusing on what he had done wrong in the past, and what he could do better in the future, ignoring the fact that his poor government education, lack of connections, extremely limited economic capital, and cultural and embodied capital that marked him out as different to the cosmopolitan upper-middle class, prevented him from securing high-status jobs or a place in Cairo’s entrepreneurship scene. But this enabled Ibrahim to relocate a sense of hope, what he described as a sense of “power.”
However when I saw him in late 2016, repeated disappointment had taken its toll. Depression and apathy overwhelmed him. He had stopped reading, attending events, and posting positive quotes. He now realized his friends had been right, he did not believe in these quotes any longer. Instead he railed, after previously rejecting them as excuses, against the wasata and corruption that turned powerful, creative youth like him into “slaves who mashyeen fe dowama (walk in whirlpool)”: 

“I heard a story from a friend today, about a boy who loved a girl, he is a graduate of commerce, he had very good grades. His friend got a pass. Both applied to Bank of Egypt. His friend had wasata and got accepted even though he was a lot worse. He then stole the girl he loved. The boy is now working as a garage keeper. There is no hope…” 

The only way to achieve a good life was to have wasata, or leave Egypt, he said. As we talked Ibrahim lit up a cigarette. I was shocked as this was a habit for which he had previously chastised young men in his neighbourhood. Now though, he said, smoking was helping him to forget his troubles. A week after our meeting, Ibrahim took an office assistant job in his industrial town, something he had sworn to never do. He was under pressure from his family to start earning money and save for marriage.

Ibrahim had penetrated the meritocratic myth. Instead of blaming himself, he was blaming structural barriers that prevented him from achieving success. This realisation brought forth deep anger, and one could imagine it leading to openly resistant acts. But after another two weeks, I saw another quote on Ibrahim’s Facebook: “Life is a #DREAM, in a #Dream you can be whatever you want,” which reflected the inspirational quotes I had seen before. When I next saw him he told me the post means “everything is still possible”, “but it
will take time” he added: it was “50/50.” Ibrahim had made another plan to save money for a start-up, and had started studying English again. He was going to do an advice session for university students in the town, about how to build a start-up and secure an HR job. He said giving this session may help renew his own hope for the future, as it would remind him of the “good days when I was very active and enthusiastic about things.”

Ibrahim was actively returning to the meritocratic promise he had come to know as false just a few weeks previously. These actions demonstrate the attachment Ibrahim had forged to the discourses extended to him in the hopeful city. But it is not an attachment to the discourses themselves, rather to the sense of hope they had brought forth. He wished to feel that feeling again, and foreclose his intense depression. It is thus the affective dimension that renders these discourses so powerful. Ibrahim was re-enlisting in these promises in order to keep alive a sense of hope that his dreams could be realized, without which he could not carry on. This was replicated by all of my interlocutors, Mahmoud and Mostafa included, as they too struggled to locate mobility. They returned repeatedly to entrepreneurial projects, English, educational scholarships, and self-help to cope with continued stagnation in Cairo’s hierarchical, insecure labour market. One man who kept applying to the same foreign scholarship despite repeated rejections described how he could not give in because, if he did: “I will kill myself…I don’t mean kill myself literally, but when you live without a goal or target, or hope, you will live like a dead person.”

Their actions reflect Lauren Berlant’s (2011) notion of cruel optimism. She argues, in the context of the American poor, people form an optimistic attachment to a “cluster of promises” – intimacy, dieting, voting, a belief in meritocracy – that define the pillars of liberal-democratic ideas of the good life. Despite their continual breakdown in the context of neoliberal restructuring, Berlant shows how people keep reinvesting in them because “their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire” (2011; 24). These young
men had developed an attachment to promises that were hurting them, because the alternative of letting go was too much to bear. Most cruelly perhaps, in this pursuit of affective solace, Ibrahim turned into an active reproducer of these promises for others who would come after him, starting the cycle again.

More research needs to be done to understand how this story is played out elsewhere, among other precarious groups – and particularly women – in contemporary cities. It is the product of an urban-capitalist formation that promises a fulfilling future to all through extending a meritocratic myth, yet delivers precarity and stagnation to many as a result of structural inequalities. In the absence of alternatives, people experiencing class immobility rely on a form of meritocratic hope which makes accessing a dignified life more and more difficult, even if it shows itself to be harmful. But this is not a sustainable solution for long. As long as Egypt’s capitalist formation continues to offer up more than it can provide, it will continue to produce the kind of anger felt by Ibrahim.
This reflects quantitative analysis plotting the economic rise of the “global middle-class” (Banerjee and Duflo, 2008; Ravallion, 2009).

There is much critique of the notion that middle-class city-building is a “formal” process, in contrast to the informality of the urban poor (Mercer, 2014).


The failures of entrepreneurship as a development strategy have been much critiqued in development studies (Dolan & Rajak, 2016).

There are many other explanations for the events of 2011, which stem from the theorisations of contentious politics (Beinin, 2015).

Cities have a long history as sites of possibility, holding employment and lifestyles not available in rural areas. Some recent work, inspired by Simone (2004), has focused on the unpredictability inherent to urban life (Di Nunzio, 2014).

Noura was referencing the book *Outliers: The Story of Success* (2009).

References


