

Book Review

**Avenues of Participation: Family,
Politics, and Networks in Urban
Quarters of Cairo**

By Diane Singerman. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995, 272 pp.

Singerman's work calls for the field of political science to redefine its notions of political participation in the context of developing societies.

Determining the efficacy of the state's distribution of public goods and measuring the degree of popular participation in political activity are two of the five components of political development in the literature on which young political scientists have cut their teeth for several decades (Almond and Verba, 1963). Singerman is not challenging these notions, but rather marking the territory opened for her research on the informal economy and the so-called household politics since the earlier works of development theory gained ascendancy.

Arguments regarding the importance of the informal economy have been made earlier with regard to Egypt, notably by such scholars as Mahmoud Abdel-Fadil (1975, 1980), John Waterbury (1983), Robert Mabro (1974), Abdel Khalak and Tignor (1982), and Ibrahim Oweiss (1990). Other research examining the household level of the economy has been done by Homa Hoodfar (1988, 1990), with whom Singerman has collaborated, and by such CEDEJ participants as Nadia Khouri-Dagher, Ragui Assaad, and others (*Egypte Recompositions* 1988).

This informal economy is entwined deeply with the processes and arguments over privatization, democratization, the impetus for and effects of labor migration, and the growth of nongovernmental organizations. Singerman's observations on the vitality of the informal sector is based on the degree and character of activities in a popular Cairene quarter—activities that surely represent pragmatic and thus “rational” social, economic, and political behavior. Because many strategies of the *sha'bi* community she describes in rich detail are paralleled in other Middle Eastern contexts, this study should be of interest to political scientists, anthropologists, economists, and sociologists who work outside of Egypt, inasmuch as the work provides a detailed response to earlier assumptions based on the notion of the reproduction of a culture of poverty.

One implication of her work is that the *sha'b* of her sample, and therefore others of this class, are doing much better economically than we might have anticipated after reading Waterbury's earlier work (*Egypt: Burdens of the Past, Options for the Future* [1978]) or those of Unni Wikan (1980, 1985). They are supplementing lower-paying public sector incomes with second jobs, trading activities, or by participating in a family-owned business. They are able to save through community associations (*jam'iyat*) for such substantial one-time expenses as weddings. On the political front, they manage to find jobs through informal networks, negotiate for marriage partners, obtain means and opportunities for migration abroad, resist taxation, and secure needed protection or intercession from politicians through these same networks.

Another important implication is that the Cairene lower- and lower-middle-class residents studied by Singerman, although they may be absent from the official state-delineated record of progress, nonetheless are able to create opportunities for themselves that may mitigate economic pressures that the state cannot solve. This situation, in turn, implies the presence of a stop gap, or a safety valve, for political and eco-

conomic frustrations put in place by popular need, creativity, and resourcefulness.

The troubling question is whether all this activity, hardly new to those who study the Middle East, is actually a form of political participation as Singerman suggests, or whether this activity is prevalent despite elite political participation or in opposition to it. Do *sha'bi* economic endeavors really prevent resentment arising from exclusion from the "formal" political processes? Might they not add to the rising expectations that other analysts of revolutionary situations document?

To the reader, the most interesting aspects of the book were found in the respondents' detailed oral accounts, which chronicled the workings of employment networks, marriage planning, the use of *wāṣṭah* (personal influence) and patronage, and popular response to governmental inefficiency and corruption. The more irritating aspects of the work may have been due to its adaptation from its dissertation form, which resulted in a repetition of theoretical premises and of the author's intentions. Although other works dealing with similar neighborhoods, such as el-Messiri (1978) or Early (1993), might have inspired more lively portraits of respondents, they were not really utilized. Allusions to the works of Hart, Havel, Mainwaring, Graziano, and Hellman set up a dialogue between Singerman and mainstream political science—political economy that may be too concerned with gradations of existing theories. The discussion may tantalize readers familiar with these sources, but, in the end, is Singerman claiming more than the existence of autonomous activity and the potential for organization on the part of the *sha'b*?

She discusses Havel's notion (1985) of a "political space" gained by the popular classes and by a blurring of public and private sectors (a long-standing discussion in Egypt). She comments that Graziano (1975) does not see ideology as forming a part of clientelistic exchange and counters that popular political beliefs are grounded in a material context, which is the basis of her contribution. However, any direct discussion of particular political events are omitted, such as the rise of Islamism and popular reaction to it, the problem of western economic intrusions into the Egyptian economy, and popular opinions of current Egyptian politicians (except as patrons for individual goals). Singerman's main concern, then, is not ideology. She may have been "playing safe," for we know that the *sha'b* hold and express political opinions. Hence, there is a somewhat ahistorical veneer to this description of the inner workings of a popular community.

Singerman contributes a fairly strong description of the operation of PVOs (private voluntary organizations) as part of her assessment of the distribution of public goods. PVOs have been analyzed, once again by others, including Denis Sullivan (in Oweiss 1990) and Robert Bianchi (1989). In one example, Singerman describes the interaction of a PVO and "her" community in providing services, including a day-care center where demand outstrips services and a plan to provide additional grant funds conflicted with teacher—employee concerns. We learn important lessons

here about the levels of interest affected when women's changing status heightens the need for PVO involvement.

Some readers may be concerned about the study's scope and Singerman's ability to provide an outsider's insider view. She has recorded a wealth of information in her study. Her bibliography reflects attention to many relevant studies of Egypt (although not all) and theoretical works on other Third World studies. She does not claim to represent all of the neighborhoods of Cairo, but has examined thoroughly the workings of a particular neighborhood at the household level. Variations may naturally be found in others of the same city. Others who have completed neighborhood studies (familiar to many former students of the American University of Cairo and often inspired by Tim Sullivan), like Nadia Adel Tahir, have noted the difficulties in making accurate estimates of income and earnings. As she noted in her monograph on social identity (*Cairo Papers in Social Science* 9:4, 1985), clerks and janitors earn unrecorded tips, and teachers earn tutoring income. Families may collect unreported amounts from working sons or daughters or may make money from selling black market items. Singerman notes the latter sort of income and observes other exchanges. One can only wonder about the accuracy of her respondents' reportage. In fact, she discusses various estimates of the informal economy's size at some length, and we should probably be careful about extrapolating from her data or from Abdel Fadil's (on whom she relies), as her sample, though well documented, is limited in the context of Egypt's large population.

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