

Schielke, Samuli. 2012. "Living in the Future Tense: Aspiring for world and class in provincial Egypt", in *The Global Middle Class: Theorizing through Ethnography*, Carla Freeman, Rachel Heiman, and Mark Liechty (eds.), Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, pp. 31-56.

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Chapter 2

Living in the Future Tense: Aspiring for World and Class in Provincial Egypt

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Foreword

As I am writing this in early 2011, Egypt is in a state of transition following the January 25 revolution. The sense of boredom and frustration that prevailed before 2011 has at least temporarily given way to an unpredictable mixture of pride, hope, and anxiety, and an immense degree of politicization. Many of the people whom I encountered during my research were nihilistic about their country, but have now become active in politics. Where the transition will take Egypt is impossible to tell at this moment. What can be said with certainty, however, is that the situation I describe in this chapter has been one of the key grounds of the revolutionary uprising. As Walter Armbrust (2011) pointed out in an early analysis, the January 25 revolution was directed against the humiliating and frustrating conditions of life that had emerged through the entrenchment of neoliberal economics and politics since the 1970s, a process that generated tremendous expectations while keeping the means to realize them limited to a privileged class. The Egyptian revolution has been a middle-class one insofar as it has been carried by a deep frustration caused by the elusiveness of the promises about a decent, comfortable, middle-class life. The success of Egypt's post-revolutionary governments will be measured on their ability to make the fulfillment of these promises less elusive.

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Some of what is written in the present tense in the following pages already belongs to the past. I have decided not to rewrite the chapter to make it up-to-date. Things are still changing too quickly to do that. The reader should therefore bear in mind the historicity of this chapter, which is describing not a lasting condition but rather a unique moment in a changing world.

At the Outskirts of the World

For several years, the Arabic satellite channel ART has broadcast all matches of the Champions League live. It has been an instant success in Egypt, a country where association football (soccer) has long been extremely popular, where major matches of the national league sweep the streets empty as people gather in front of their televisions, and where football enthusiasts show an encyclopedic knowledge of the players and matches of European football competitions. The Champions League has successfully become a part of this culture of football, and when major teams meet, cafés and homes are full of enthusiastic fans rooting for their European teams. Teams with Egyptian players are always especially liked, but so are any other teams that have a record of playing well and winning.

Sa'îd, a football enthusiast from the village of Nazlat al-Rayyis in northern Egypt, who is wearing a Tottenham training suit, emphatically argues for the importance of football: "Here in the village everyone is a football supporter. They support Egyptian teams, and everyone supports also European teams: I support Barcelona and Real Madrid in the Spanish league, Chelsea in the English league, Lyon in the French league, and so on."

Looking at the lively football fan culture in this village of fishermen and farmers, one has hardly the impression of a provincial existence. When the men (women never frequent cafés in the village) gather to watch a Champions League match, they consciously and enthusiastically participate in a global event that

establishes a virtual, worldwide community of supporters. But after the match is over, things start to look different. Still wearing the training suits and T-shirts of their favorite clubs and national teams (next to Egypt, Brazil, France, and Italy are especially popular), still excited or disappointed about the match, the men haven't forgotten that theirs is a different, less exciting, mostly disappointing share of the world. At another moment, when there is no football match running, Sa'îd speaks in less enthusiastic tones:

Here there is no middle, there are only poor people, and those who are well-off are thieves. The country is divided between

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those who are honest and don't know how to steal and those who are thieves and well-off. You know why I come here to watch football? I only watch football in order not to think. There are people who watch football because they really love it, but I just don't want to think. Just like people who take pills and hashish—if you talk to one, he is not there, he is happy and doesn't think about anything. And if his mother is sick or his family needs food, he doesn't care. He could only care if he had power over his situation. But you can only have power over your situation if you have money.

Even when interrupted by the intense concentration and excitement of a good football match, a much more prevalent mood among young men is a perpetual sense of boredom and frustration. Frustration (*ihbât*, in the sense of disappointed aspiration [*tumûh*], not in the Freudian sense of sexual frustration, which in Arabic would translate as *hirmân*, "deprivation") is a central topic when people tell about their life trajectories. It implies a sense of finding one's expectations not met, one's plans obstructed, one's aspirations disappointed; every day is marked by boring

stagnation as one looks forward to a better life but only encounters pressure (*daght*) and obstacles.

Why open an inquiry of middle-class aspirations with a story of people watching European football, when some of these people see themselves as just trying to escape from an oppressive reality? I want to look at the longing for a place in the middle of a society that takes as its point of reference an—imagined or real—standard of the First World (*al-'âlam al-awwal*). This is a highly ambiguous quest. It combines the compelling presence of a world of class and wealth, viewed through mediated images and ideal career trajectories, with a troubling absence of actual paths of success. The ambiguous nature of football fan culture characterizes this mixture of presence and distance well. The connection of the young men in the village to a wider world of possibilities through media and popular culture does not alleviate their boredom and frustration but actually intensifies it. As another young football enthusiast argues: “The more progress, the more boredom” (Schielke 2008b). In other words: the greater one’s expectations, the deeper the sense of stagnation.

But where does the desire, despair, and pressure come from? Poverty and oppression alone fall short of explaining the situation. The previous generations hardly had a greater scope of freedom, and they were generally poorer. Sa’îd offers a clue, although he does so through a negation. He claims that in Egypt, there is no middle class, only rich and poor. This

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is a very common claim, and yet it is hard to take at face value, given that a significant portion of Egyptians would describe themselves as “middle class” in some sense. And Sa’îd has as his main aim to become a part of the middle class, to live a life that is characterized by comfort (*râha*) and respectability (*ihtirâm*). His claim about there being no middle class is the expression of a widely shared and powerful

sense of aspiration, albeit a frustrated one. I will take a closer look at the nature of this aspiration, trying to understand what kind of an ideal of life it is directed at, what makes it so pressing, and why some solutions to pursuing this aspiration appear to be so powerful and compelling. With these questions, I foreground the issues of temporality and aspiration, which in my view are just as important as status and relative positionality when it comes to class and belonging. Rather than taking the middle class as a given social formation, I look at it as a promise, a pressure, and a claim—an imagined site and a standard of normality and respectability that directs people's aspirations and trajectories.

The concepts of normality and respectability are associated with quite specific markers: higher education, a position as a civil servant or as a formal employee, a reasonable income, a house or an apartment of one's own, a classy interior, a marriage to a respectable family, command of English, possession of a range of goods such as a computer, an automatic washing machine, or a private car, and last but not least a "refined" (*râqî*) habitus expressed in one's styles of dress, socialization, language, and religiosity. And yet "middle class" is not simply a social formation that fulfills these markers. Instead, these markers communicate the possibilities of social status, and as such are constantly in movement and notoriously relative (see Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Bourdieu 1984). Goods in Egypt, both conspicuous and inconspicuous ones, gain their value as markers through complex relationships that involve elite tastes, global fashions, mass production, installment plans, the art of necessity under conditions of poverty, and much more. What counts as higher education and refined habitus in one context can fall far short of the minimum in another. What appears as a powerful, high-status good can be quickly surpassed by new, more powerful goods. More than clear criteria of being middle class, these are diffuse markers of aspiration.

Actual class distinctions in Egypt are highly complex, and there are different

and at times incompatible articulations of “middleness,” to which I will return below. And yet the aim to belong to an imagined middle of a society, a key component of which is the aspiration to a First World standard of living, has become shared by vastly more people than have the material and habitual means to achieve a middle-class existence (whatever

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its criteria may be). It is this global middle class *in spe*—real by virtue of the reality of people’s aspirations, imagined by virtue of their unfulfilled nature—whose pressure and frustration I explore through the case of provincial Egypt.

What I am presenting is mainly a men’s perspective in a thoroughly patriarchal society where providing income and being in charge of a family are necessary conditions for being a “man” (*râgil*) in a social sense. It is therefore also primarily (but not exclusively) men who see themselves as responsible for generating the money necessary for social ascendance through, for example, migration. Middle-class aspiration among women in Egypt gets articulated differently, most notably via the centrality of marriage as a path of social mobility and the much greater concerns about reputation, styles of religiosity, and dress (see Schielke 2008a; cf. Jones, this volume). I do think, however, that it can be safely claimed that the overall pressure to advance and the search for “the good life” by belonging to an imaginary middle are shared by men and women alike. While the trajectories involved are strongly gendered, there is a shared sense of what it means to live a good life as a respectable member of society.

I did fieldwork in Nazlat al-Rayyis, a large village of fishermen, farmers, and

civil servants¹ near the Mediterranean coast in the Nile delta, and in the inland² informal settlements of Alexandria, where workers and civil servants live physically near but in other respects rather far from the affluent Egyptians who inhabit the waterfront for two months every summer. Although much research has been done about the dramatic inequalities of wealth and power in the city of Cairo (see, e.g., Kuppinger 2004; de Koning 2009; Abaza 2006; Singerman and Amar 2006; Singerman 2009), even that research, with its nearly exclusive focus on Cairo, is strongly part of the split that renders Cairo, along with the Red Sea and Mediterranean beach resorts and the waterfront of Alexandria, overly visible and “the provinces” (*al-muhâfazât*; also called “the regions,” *al-aqâlim*) nearly invisible (but see Weyland 1993; Hopkins and Westergaard 1998; Hopkins and Saad 2004; Zâïd 2005). My aim is not to do away with this centralist split; it, just like the global inequalities which it partly reflects, is a fact of life, and an important one too. Instead, I try to look at it from the point of view of the aspirations of people who stand at the “outer” poor, or provincial, side of the class divide and look up with a mixture of admiration and frustration at the metropolitan centers of the nation and the world. These places are not the most marginalized in the political and economic map of Egypt (those are likely to be found in the south of the country). Still, those who live in them will always be reminded about their provincial status: aware of

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the world of possibilities accessible through media, fashion, and consumption, which appear at times seemingly within their grasp and yet are mostly inaccessible.

¹ Fishing is the traditional economic backbone of the village due to its proximity to Lake Burullus. The public sector is a major employer because the village hosts a number of schools attended by children from the neighboring villages and hamlets.

² Alexandria is split into two socially distinct parts: the more affluent and metropolitan seaside (*bahri*) and the poorer and provincial inland (*qibli*).

Middle Classes, Old and New

With some important exceptions (e.g., Sonbol 2000; Zâyid 2005; Abaza 2006; Winegar 2006; de Koning 2009; Singerman 2009), the issue of class has been rarely problematized in the more recent social scientific studies of Egypt, and apparently much of the Middle East, where a strong focus on religion and political movements has often rendered class troublingly invisible. A part of the problem also lies in the elusive nature of class, especially middle classness.

The middle classes (called in Arabic *al-wasat*, "the middle/center," or *al-tabaqât al-wustâ* or *al-tabaqât al-mutawassita*, "the middle classes"—importantly in the plural—and one also hears the English term *middle class*, which in its Egyptian usage refers mainly to the upper-middle class) are an elusive category that includes various socioeconomic and symbolic positions, some of which lie extremely far apart, such as old artisan and merchant families; civil servants in both the badly paid wider ranks of the public sector and its privileged parts, such as the military, security, the oil industry, and the Suez Canal; employees in both middle and upper positions in the private sector; shop owners and small- and middle-scale entrepreneurs; and wealthy land-owning farmers. Add to this the claim expressed by Sa'îd that due to the growing inequality caused by economic liberalization, there is no middle class in Egypt (any more), and the confusion is perfect.

In the current age of global capitalism, there are several senses of middle class (just as there are different senses of class in general, to which I will return). Here, I focus on two. One is the "new" middle class embodied by entrepreneurs and employees of private sector companies with global tastes and, increasingly, global standards of living and English private educations, who are highly visible in both national and international media and are often celebrated as the key to the progress of developing countries in becoming part of the First World. This "new" middle class

is actually not entirely new. While it partly draws upon the new wealth generated through the economic liberalization policies that began in the 1970s, it also partly represents a continuity of older middle classes and urban bourgeoisie, who have been successful in tapping into new sources of income and status. The work of, among others, Leela Fernandes (2004) and Anouk de Koning (2009) has vividly shown the ways the “new” middle classes establish a normality of relative wealth, progress, and cosmopolitan belonging to the First

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World by systematically rendering invisible those who do not have access to this First World normality. This construction—often physically implemented through urban restructuring and other spatial regimes (Srivastava, Zhang, this volume)—of a world of a globally connected upper-middle class not only excludes other, less affluent senses of middle-class aspiration, it also implicitly denies their existence by relegating them to an invisible “outside.” There, they appear as an unstructured mass of annoying and dangerous riffraff. In the jargon of the affluent Egyptians, that diffuse “outside” of the neat First World islands has come to be referred to as *al-bi'a*, the vulgar environment (implying primarily the lower-middle classes, not the very poor) that has to be kept at a safe distance (Sonbol 2000:201; de Koning 2009).

If the upper, globally connected sense of middle classness involves inclusion and versatility with metropolitan tastes, language skills, well-paid jobs, and global movement, another, sharply different sense of middle-class belonging and aspiration has none of these. Grounded in the tradition of the once new middle classes based on public sector jobs, Arabic state education, and a strong modernist and nationalist sense of belonging to an avant-garde of national culture (see Ryzova 2004, 2008), this sense of middle classness is shared by a vastly greater number of Egyptians, who enroll at state universities that provide a low quality of education, aim for badly

paid public sector jobs that offer at least some sense of security, and try to make ends meet by combining public and private sources of income.

Paradoxically, as this “lumpen” middle class—based on deteriorating public sector jobs and state schooling—declines, it also grows and continues to exert attraction and the pressure to achieve. The established urban families that once depended on government jobs in public education and administration have in the meantime often moved up to the “new” middle class of the private sector and the privileged parts of the public sector. The government jobs that have been dramatically devalued in terms of money and prestige appear now within reach of ever-larger parts of the population. Rural farmers, fishermen, and craftsmen like Sa’id now expect that either they or their children can also have their share of the modernist dream of education, white-collar job, and relative comfort. This can be best seen in the enormous emphasis on education, which has gained an almost unquestioned dominance. Also, girls’ education, once considered a problem in many conservative milieus, is today generally considered a necessary part of gaining any social status, especially on the marriage market. As the school system, too, deteriorates and the quality of education appears more than questionable, parents are ready to spend a significant part of their income

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on private tutoring, which has become an indispensable albeit informal part of the educational system. This highly paradoxical development is not restricted to Egypt but appears to be taking place globally, making “middle class” emerge as the social status aspiration of ever-vaster populations, who thus come to claim a status and social position that may stand in dramatic contradiction to their material condition and the quality of their education (see, e.g., Liechty 2003; Freeman, this volume).



Figure 2.1: *Teachers and children during a break at a government school in Alexandria. Photo by S. Schielke.*

This is the sense of class and social status that most of the people I know either cultivate or strive for. Many of them are teachers, perhaps a characteristic profession of the class of underpaid civil servants. While their income is low (with the exception of those who manage to mobilize large-scale

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private tutoring) and their social status has significantly declined, they are always careful to show themselves as modern, cultivated, and civilized in terms of dress,

choice of jargon, preference for Salafi reformist or Islamist interpretations of Islam, and often a general display of intellectual superiority.

The class dimension of religion is an important element of this distinction. While religious orientations are not automatically class-dependent, subscribing to middle-class modernism is characteristically aligned with subscribing to reformist Islam, that is, an understanding of Islam as a clear set of rules rather than as a complex tradition of spiritual authority. Ever since its emergence in the nineteenth century, Islamic reformism in both its pietist and its Islamist activist variants has been centrally associated with urban middle classes with secular higher education who have worked to distinguish themselves from the more mystically oriented traditions of conservative rural and urban milieus. (Contrary to common assumptions in the Western media, militant Islamism is not a prerogative of the poor but of students.) However, currently, the spread of Salafi and Islamist movements in all social milieus (including the elites) is turning reformist Islam from a distinctive marker of education into a prevailing common religious sense across class boundaries, with consequences that are yet to be seen (see Schielke 2006).

Only a short distance from the “popular” (*sha'bi*) classes where they often come from and whose more or less aspiring children they teach at government schools, the civil servants’ sense of belonging to a middle class is thus most importantly dependent on a combination of a conscious display of modernism (most visibly expressed by the suits worn by civil servants at work) and attempts to acquire conspicuous consumer goods. The most desired of these is a private car, something that almost everybody in the upper-middle classes owns, but that is still out of the reach of most teachers and other ordinary civil servants.³

³ With the recent entry of cheap Chinese autos into the Egyptian market, the private car has now come within reach of a rapidly growing part of the population, and those who cannot yet afford one are learning models and prices by heart and discussing the advances of different models with great enthusiasm. These

For many decades during the royal and Nasserist periods, this “old” (back then, still new) variant was the hegemonic sense of middle classness: belonging to the progressive avant-garde of the nation and being distinct from the uneducated popular classes (who in fact could sometimes be wealthier than the middle-class civil servants—something that has become even more common in the wake of economic liberalization; Ryzova 2004, 2008). But while the lower-middle class of teachers and other civil servants may appear national and conservative while the upper strata of private sector employees and privileged civil servants may seem cosmopolitan, this is only so in regard to their financial and educational capital (based on

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private education and good English skills). The world is equally a concern for all of them, albeit in changing ways and with different relationships to the nation. And if nationalism appears as the guiding value for all but a few elites in Egypt, the nation is continuously being thought of in terms of an indispensable relatedness to global standards of modernity, civilization, and sophistication (Winegar 2006:17–22).

This sense of middle classness, with its reliance on the public sector and strong commitment to nationalism, is also strongly related to an ideology of modernism. Modernism, in its Islamist and secularist varieties alike, has always been very much about how to match the metropolitan examples around the world—mainly France in the early twentieth century, the United States since the 1970s, the Gulf states most recently. This is the class that once was seen as the “modernized” segment of Egypt and many other formerly colonized nations. Meanwhile, the aura of modernity of the old middle classes has become less bright, now that the new middle

displays of conspicuous consumption and modernism as markers of class belonging are also at work in China, where, as Li Zhang (this volume) illustrates, residential belonging has moved beyond the ability to afford real estate and relies more broadly on one’s ability to afford a certain lifestyle, especially one that includes a private car.

classes have occupied the privileged place of global connectedness, and the old middle class has become the most important milieu of Islamist movements (which are often mistakenly viewed as anti-modernist). And yet the old middle class continues to exert a strong pull, promising progress to all those sons and daughters of workers, farmers, small shopkeepers, and others who hope to take the step toward middle-class respectability and comfort.

The shift from the nationalist old to the neoliberal new middle class very much reflects the shift in the way Egypt is governed and represented by its political elites. The century-old image of the modernist and committed civil servant as the ideal citizen has not been abandoned, but it has been complemented and problematized by the image of the successful and self-reliant entrepreneur or private sector employee. While these two images involve different markers of class and different senses of citizenship, they do share a history of nationalist modernism that is deeply involved in a constant comparison of Egypt with international standards of what it means to be a modern nation. The identification of the middle-class citizen with the nationalist project highlights a key temporal aspect of middle classness in its different formulations. The middle class, more than any other class, is oriented toward the future. It is less about being than it is about becoming, about aspiration to a place, so to speak, in the middle of the society, as a respectable person in relative comfort and with an optimistic future. This becomes especially clear when we look at the expectations of those who can hardly claim belonging to the middle class by any definition but for whom a middle-class life nevertheless appears as the guiding aim of their trajectories and dreams.

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Looking to the Other Side

Sa'ïd is a caterer for weddings, seasonal work of low status and unsteady and

unreliable income. Most of his friends work as fishermen at the nearby Lake Burullus. Others are teachers and civil servants. But they all have expectations for life that go much further. Their speech is saturated with the notion of advancement, be it in terms of money, social life, or politics. Advancement is also emphatically indicated in Sa'îd's apartment, to which he has recently moved with his wife. Usually a man's biggest investment in his lifetime, the apartment to which the new couple moves is a key site to display an image of the good life, even if it later may get worn down for lack of money for maintenance. It usually costs slightly more than people can actually afford, and the explosive cost of marriage and housing is a constant issue of lament and discussion among men. And yet it is rare to meet anyone who would be willing to compromise about the standards of

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the marital apartment. With a television set, decorative Qur'anic verses on the walls, a guest room with sofas and a glass table, a European-style dining table, a cupboard full of glasses and plates reserved for display, and a kitchen equipped with a refrigerator and modern household utensils, the apartment is not just about comfort. The functionality of many of these items lies less in their use value and more in their value as status goods. Appropriating a certain style is a tremendous concern for married couples furnishing apartments, and great effort and money are spent to acquire sofas, tables, silverware, glasses, and coffee sets whose primary function is to be shown rather than used, while items of more practical daily importance may be neglected if they are short of cash. Furnishing an apartment is first and foremost a conscious display of belonging and aspiration to a world of style, class, and wealth.⁴

⁴ Krisztina Fehérvári (this volume) identifies a comparable dynamic in regard to the family home in Hungary, where a new discourse of the normal is increasingly reorganizing residential living.



Figure 2.2: *Dining table used as a computer desk in a teacher's home in Alexandria.*
Photo by S. Schielke.

The ubiquitous dining table is an interesting marker of this aspiration. Almost all Egyptians I know prefer to sit and eat on the floor. The dining table remains largely unused, unsuited as it is for the Egyptian ways of sitting and eating. With the spread of private computers, it is sometimes turned into a computer table. Often, it simply stands empty. But whenever I, a rare European guest, have been invited to eat in Egyptian houses, the hosts have wanted to serve the food on the dining table. The same applies to other guests of honor, who are received with a formality that makes eating on the floor unsuitable and the dining table imperative. A friend of mine declined to sell his dining table in a difficult economic situation. Although to me it appeared to be a completely nonfunctional part of his apartment, for him it was too valuable to sell even when he was badly short of cash. The dining table is not

primarily there for dining, it is there to show class, and class means, among other things, cosmopolitan styles in eating and housing.

I say “cosmopolitan” rather than “Western” styles because the world of affluence and advancement to which people so much want to belong includes different sites that cannot be understood separately, and “the West” is only one of them. This aspiration for social advancement reflects a cosmopolitan way of looking at the world and positing oneself as potentially a part of it (see Pollock et al. 2002; Marsden 2007, 2008; Graw forthcoming). The moments in which people compare their situation with other places and aspire to reach some of their standards are not so much related to a specific place, but more to a wider imagination of the world, primarily a First World world of possibilities. This is the world of wealthy Egyptians in the capital and in the holiday resorts, of the rich Arab oil-producing states, of Europe and the United States, of the interiors of soap operas and

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films. This world, in the diffuse and exciting sense of that vast conglomerate of places and possibilities that surround and influence us, is at once omnipresent and painfully absent in the experiences of young people from provincial Egypt. This world is seen in the Champions League, in the risks and prospects of migration, in the imitation of global styles and standards of housing and dress, and in countless other moments of everyday life. And in every one of those moments, it is also out of reach.

One of the most powerful expressions of the frustrating presence and absence of a life with higher standards is the constant comparison of “here” and “abroad” (*barra*) by people in provincial locations. “Here” there is nothing, no chances, no hope, while “abroad” chances are abundant and life meaningful. In this imagined political economy of time where the metropolises enjoy a time of meaning and progress while the global provinces are left with an empty, boring time full of

nothing, migration appears as a solution over all others (Mains 2007; Graw forthcoming). This is true in the eyes of Sa'ïd and his friend Ibrâhîm, a man in his mid-twenties earning his money as a fisherman on the nearby Lake Burullus and, like Sa'ïd, a football enthusiast. They claim that boredom, a bad economic situation, and a general sense of pressure make migration inevitable.

Sa'ïd: Lack of work and the difficult economic situation make you bored. When you have money, you are not bored. When you have no money, you get bored because there is no chance of improvement. It stays like it is, or it gets even worse. You go to work if you have any, you go to the café, and every day is like the other. There is no hope of improvement. That's why everyone wants to get away. Either abroad, or inside Egypt to Alexandria or Cairo. They want to go anywhere to have a chance of advancement.

The discussion then moves to the topic of illegal migration to Greece and Italy on fishermen's boats, and the risk of death involved.

Ibrâhîm: The people are so desperate that they are ready to take the risk of dying to cross the sea. Their boredom, their unemployment, their lack of hope has gotten them so far. And the political pressure gives an additional share. In Egypt we have the worst government in the world, the worst! It gives the people no chance but puts more pressure on them instead. It gets people so far that they, out of the emptiness [*farâgh*] they are in, are ready to take the risk of dying on the way to get across the sea.

To "get across the sea" is to get access to a better life.

I will return to the specific pressures and promises of migration, but for the moment it is important to hold the image of being stuck in a provincial location and being forced to risk everything in pursuit of something that one imagines can be reached on the other side of the sea. The sea is a powerful geographical expression of a sensibility that characterizes the aspirations for a better life around the world. Geographic locations, and the obstacles that separate them, are invested with powerful expectations about the things they stand for. These locations stand for the economic, political, and personal possibilities that young people, mostly men, hope to realize in their lives. In this way Italy, France, America, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and the socially exclusive locations of Egypt—the North Coast, Sharm al-Shaykh, al-Muhandisin, Nasr City, New Cairo, etc.—are constantly a part of people’s lives in the village of Nazlat al-Rayyis, but in a frustrating, troubling way.

Mona Abaza (2006:51–52) points out that the countryside has been significantly transformed through the economic liberalization policies that began in the 1970s and that have gradually intensified ever since, mainly through cash-crop farming and labor migration to the Gulf states (see also Weyland 1993). While the profits of this transformation have not been equally shared—tenant farmers, for example, have clearly been on the losing end of the transformation, as have many civil servants and the fishermen who provide the economic backbone of Nazlat al-Rayyis—there is no doubt that the countryside has experienced a tremendous influx of money, consumerism, and aspirations for a middle-class lifestyle since the 1970s. If in the 1950s peasants would enter the provincial city for an annual fair or religious festival with a sense of awe and intimidation (see Qâsim 1996), today people of rural origin self-consciously move between the village, provincial cities, the capital, and at times abroad, and expect that the promises of progress and welfare, be they socialist or capitalist in nature, are theirs to share as well. And when they fail to get their share, they do not blame the promises. They blame corruption, nepotism,

privatization of public enterprises, greedy elites, impenetrable class barriers, failing government, America, and the Jews. In terms of the real economic and social resources of advancement and wealth, Egypt is dramatically split between the wealthy center of Cairo (including Alexandria and the beach resorts) and the neglected and stagnating provinces. Yet in terms of aspiration for a better life, Cairo is everywhere, and so is a First World standard of living, to which the affluent Cairenes have real access and which others believe should be theirs, too.

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The dining tables and sofas purchased for marriage, the counterfeit sports gear worn by Sa'îd and his friends, the Western business suits worn by underpaid teachers and civil servants, the mobile phones, computers, and laptops brought home by migrants—all are significant markers of a lower-middle-class aspiration to live according to the standards of the world. Regardless of their often sharply felt shortcomings in terms of quality and status, these goods communicate a desire to belong to the same wider world to which both the inhabitants of the global metropolises and the affluent Egyptians are seen to belong.

This is the ground of the despair Ibrâhîm articulates: the frustrated aspiration to the kind of standard of living and civil rights which he knows about, at times also encounters, but cannot reach in his own life. This “globalisation as absence” (Graw forthcoming; see also Ferguson 2006) could easily be, and often is, framed as a situation between the Third World and the West, the poor and the rich. At least in Egypt, however, it is more complicated: “the world” includes not only Europe and the United States, but also the Gulf states and the Egyptian upper classes. And the situation of many of the people who aspire to belong to that world is characterized not just by poverty but, perhaps more urgently, by middle-class aspiration.

Class as Belonging and Longing

Amid such complex distinctions and distances, it is difficult to determine the place of “the middle.” The world of the young upper-middle-class students and professionals in Cairo (see de Koning 2009) is so strikingly different from the world of the lower-middle-class students and civil servants in Egypt that it is questionable whether the notion of middle classness makes any sense at all. While all Egyptians routinely speak about the middle classes, people from the lower and upper strata often do not recognize the other strata as “middle.” When Daniela Swarowsky and I were screening the first part of *Messages from Paradise* (Swarowsky and Schielke 2009) in Egypt, occasionally some of the mainly intellectual or affluent middle-class viewers felt that we showed a marginal segment of poor villagers from the popular classes. This conclusion was striking, given that all of the people in the film were educated, some of them highly, and all had a firm modernist sense of middle-class distinction. But from the perspective of students at a private university, they appeared to be exotic and unspecific representatives of the mass of vulgar people somewhere out there on the margins.

What (or who), then, makes up the middle class? Is being middle class something essentially characterized by aspiration, or is there a substantial middle class out there to which people aspire even if they are not (yet)

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included in it? Is the middle class a group of people, or a structure of feeling? The answers are complex because there are different ways of belonging to and longing for class status simultaneously at work. While various kinds of people would describe themselves as “middle class” in the aspirational sense of claiming to belong (or at least hoping to belong) to the middle ground of good and respectable people with a reasonable level of education and income, at the same time they also exercise a sharp and sensitive perception of class habitus that relies not on aspiration but rather on status. Fashionable dress and a good haircut are never enough to become

refined, just like poverty will not stop a person from being recognized as an aristocrat. To clarify the relationship of aspiration and distinction, and the sense of the middle involved in these, it is important to look at the different ways in which a claim to being middle class can be made.

First, there are at least two different senses of the middle. Following one sense, people claim to belong to a harmonious and quite wide middle of society, though this claim may be contradicted by the realities of their life. Following another sense, they cautiously assess their position as compared to people above and below them, working hard to distinguish themselves from those below and in an ambiguous manner at once criticizing and imitating those above. In the first sense, being middle class is an imagined stable position in the center of society, a very positive even if unrealized category, as expressed in the valorized connotations of the Arabic word *wasat* (middle, center). In the second sense, being middle class is a precarious position in the actual social hierarchy, located in the more negative category of “in-between,” as in the Egyptian Arabic expression *fi n-nuss* (halfway, in-between). In graphic terms, the middle in the first sense is located at the center of a circle, while the middle in the second sense is located between two fields in a vertical alignment. This also implies different, parallel senses of class. In the vertical alignment, class is habitus in Bourdieu’s (1979) sense, a system and criterion of classification that can be very detailed and elaborate, especially when it comes to people that are seen to be immediately below or above oneself. Here, distinction becomes the key, and almost all people—possibly with the exception of people very high at the top and very deep on the bottom, although even they are likely to have some sense of inferiority and superiority, respectively—are acutely aware of their in-betweenness. But in the sense of approaching the center of a circle, class is an aspirational category of belonging which is also expressed in attempts at acquiring means of distinction, but which has an additional dimension: the hope or claim to belong to the

“good, normal people.” This is the middle not in the sense of being in-between, but in the sense of being in the center.

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Second, the position from which one lays claim to middle-class belonging makes a difference. Given the complexities and contradictions of aspiration and distinction, the claim to belong to the good middle of the society requires different ways of dealing with contradictory reality. For the relatively well-off, neoliberal, new middle class it is easy in material terms to perceive themselves as being part of the ordinary good people in the center of society. The material markers of the good life are largely available to them. At the same time, their small number vis-à-vis the less well-off majority of the population troubles their claim to being the good, normal people. The exceptional character (in quantitative terms relative to the society at large) of the upper-middle-class lifestyle necessitates elaborate policies of spatial, visual, and cultural exclusion to maintain the wildly inaccurate claim that the upper-middle classes make up as much as 80 percent of the population, an assertion which some upper-middle-class Egyptians have quite seriously tried to convince me about. In their turn, the less well-off old middle class of civil servants and especially those who, like Sa'îd, possess no markers of distinction beyond aspiration itself, can more credibly claim to be the normal people. Yet at the same time their material and cultural claims to constituting the (potential) middle are much more precarious, based as they are on low-quality public education, badly paid public sector jobs, and modest private wealth. Either way, the “normality” of a way of life is a normative claim, measured by its power in becoming a standard of aspiration and not by its statistical distribution.

To summarize a very complex matter, I argue that class in everyday practice cannot be reduced to any single criterion or perspective, but consists of different elements that can have different significance. It is precisely this complexity which

allows so many different people to lay claim to being middle class while at the same time they are acting in a highly stratified society of countless but nevertheless specific and recognizable classes (in Bourdieu's sense of classifications). For the people in provincial Egypt featured in this chapter, however, it is clear that the middle class is an aspirational category in a double sense. To be middle class is to look forward to a better future and to work on the means of distinction and advancement to reach it. But for many people in Egypt, being middle class is also an unrealized dream, a sense of social being that is highly attractive, compelling, and unfulfilled.

Does it make sense at all to speak about middle classes, given the ambiguity of the term and the complex stratifications of class in a society like Egypt? I think that in certain cases it probably does not. It does make sense, however, to speak about middle classness insofar as it is a powerful ideal

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that informs the ways in which people describe their society, their position in it, and their possible trajectories. Middle classness is a direction and a claim as much or even more than it is a place in society. In this sense, to claim to be part of or to speak in the name of the middle is also to take the moral high ground toward both the ignorant poor and the decadent rich.⁵ This is one of the moments when the valorized position of the middle as the center of society (as opposed to its margins) is especially clear. But this moral high ground of critique is ambiguous. For one thing, the critique of the ignorant poor in the name of education and "consciousness"

⁵ Rihan Yeh (this volume) similarly explores the nuanced ways in which this moral middleness is negotiated through a story of a *tijuanense* resident who was able to overturn the decision of members of the elite in favor of a gentleman described as an "indigenous type." The subtext represents a moment in which a member of the middle class was able to wrest authority and power from the elite while also speaking for a figure who was otherwise incapable of representing himself in public.

(*wa'y*)—a key term of intellectual distinction—is often articulated by people who, in terms of their material conditions, are only marginally different from the “ignorant” they criticize. More strikingly, the middle-class critique of the elites is mixed with admiration and imitation in an intricate way.

As I was taking a walk on the waterfront of Alexandria with my friend Mukhtar, a teacher whose modest income only allows him housing in the much cheaper and less valued inland part of the city, he pointed at a boy standing on the balcony of one of the high-rise buildings facing the sea. “Does he have more right to stand there than my son?” he asked bitterly. Talking about the seafront, he often expresses a moral critique of the wealthy spending one month a year in an otherwise empty apartment, getting their money from questionable sources, and spending their free time in establishments featuring alcohol and prostitutes. Thus, he echoes Sa’id’s comment that everybody in Egypt is either poor or a thief. But at the same time, Mukhtar makes it clear that he would very much want to live in one of these high-rises on the waterfront, that the standard of living and the lifestyle of the wealthy inspire the ways he tries to realize a modest success for his family. The ambiguous role of the wealthy in the middle-class aspirations of those who are barely making it is in many ways analogous to the paradoxical role of the United States in regard to Egyptian nationalism and modernity: in one instance an enemy, a legitimate target of moral critique and opposition, in another instance a standard of progress and the good life to be admired and imitated.

Looking at middle classness as a (moral) claim, and the denial of other people’s claims implied in this claim, there is a risk of slipping into a comfortable position of moral judgment. In my own research, for example, I have long focused on the work of distinction and exclusion involved in asserting a middle-class status (Schielke 2006, 2008a). While I think that I have had a point there, in doing so I may have unwittingly been part of a wider undercurrent in the social sciences where

the middle classes are somehow the most despised of all people. While liberal political theory

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often celebrates the middle classes as the avant-garde of democracy and wealth, in more critical social scientific works there is much less sympathy (see, e.g., Bourdieu 1979) and sometimes even a kind of hatred (see, e.g., Biehl, Good, and Kleinman 2007:11) toward the middle class, its ideals of the good life, its aesthetics, its attempts to move upward. This, I think, is problematic, even suspicious given that most academics of our generation belong to the middle classes by any definition. The matter is more complex, less susceptible to such simple moral counter-hierarchies. Distinction implies aspiration, and exclusion implies belonging.

The “middle” in the middle classes denotes an aspiration for inclusion in the nation and the world, which is grounded in the awareness that there are others whose inclusion is more perfect and which is marked by attempts to distinguish oneself from the poor and the ignorant. “Middle” as a reality is forever elusive. But as a direction, an imagined site of good social normality (Fehérváry 2002 and this volume; Yeh, this volume), it is powerful.

Pressing Promises

To understand exactly what kind of life is associated with that imagined middle, and why that imagination is so forceful, almost inescapable, it is helpful to look at one of the most compelling paths to reach it: migration. The enormous urge toward migration, whatever the cost, among the less affluent middle classes and those aspiring to join them (as do Sa`id and Ibrâhîm) is first and foremost an attempt to realize some of this, to become part of an imagined, yet genuine middle.

Young men routinely state to me that the main—although not the only—reason to migrate is money. But “money” encodes a wider set of meanings; it is

strongly associated with the quite specific things money is needed for, commonly expressed with the phrase “building a life.” For a man, to build a life implies all the conventional responsibilities and assets that make a respectable man: marriage, an apartment or a house (a necessary precondition for marriage), and a reasonable standard of living. All this, in the imaginary evoked by “money,” is to take place in or near one’s place of origin, be it in a new floor of one’s parental house, a new house in the fields outside the village, or an apartment in a nearby city. Money evokes a sense of establishing oneself as a respected and wealthy man in the already existing web of family relations, moving upward but remaining connected, which significantly involves also willing financial assistance to less well-off relatives. Money evokes, in short, an ideal image of how advancement in a classed society should look like. But while there is some money to be earned even for the poor in Egypt, it is hardly ever enough to qualify

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as “money” in this sense of sufficient resources for social advancement. At the same time, money is absolutely indispensable in the informally privatized economy of the public sector, where clientelistic relations (*wasta*) and bribes are generally the only paths to good jobs. In this situation, where in order to move upward one first needs to have money, migration appears as *the* path over all others to a middle-class existence.

In fact most of the people who desperately desire to migrate are not living in utter deprivation. Those who most urgently aspire to a better life have usually already had some share of it. Even in a rural location like Nazlat al-Rayyis, there is some work, people have enough to eat, and child mortality and illiteracy rates have significantly dropped while the standard of housing has dramatically risen in a matter of a few decades.⁶ And yet everybody complains about the unbearable economic

⁶These assessments are all based on discussions with older people from the village.

pressure of rising prices, consumer debt, housing, marriage, education, and so on. While material conditions may have improved, economic pressure appears to be only increasing.

By any standards, people in a village and in an urban “popular district” (*hayy sha'bi*) in Egypt have generally many more things than they did some decades ago. Yet most of them are likely to complain that the economic situation has become much more difficult. While the standard of living for most people has risen, it is dramatically worse than that of the wealthier Egyptians living in the urban centers—a difference which people are acutely aware of. And while most Egyptians can now buy many more things than they could twenty or fifty years ago, buying these things is not something one chooses to do. In most cases, they are things one *must* buy—even if they may seem to be dispensable luxuries to an outsider. The unused dining tables, glasses, and coffee sets must be part of the apartment of a newlywed couple. Color television sets, mobile phones, and computers must be bought. Egyptians commonly find it strange that I do not have a car although I could afford one. If you can afford a car, you must buy one. Aspiration is not a choice. It is a necessity.

The same inevitable character also marks the necessity of migration, as Sa'ïd and Ibrâhîm articulate. Mothers encourage sons to migrate to make money for marriage, which is getting more and more expensive partly due to the migrants who can outbid other men on the marriage market. Just like one is not free to wish to marry or not, one is not free to want to go abroad or not. There is very little choice. Migration is inevitable, and that is why the inability to migrate is such a disaster for young men, that is why knowing that one may die on the way may still be preferred to the social death of failing to meet one's obligations.

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Herein lies the twist of the relation of migration and aspiration. While aspiration is strongly related to an ideal of belonging to a wider world of class and

style, migration does not usually have the direct aim of joining that world abroad to live in it in class and style. Instead, migration appears first and foremost as the path to realizing at home a life of class and style that may match that of the wider world. Migration is primarily (albeit not only) a strategy for being at home in the desired condition of wealth and respectability. It is about belonging to the wider world in the sense of class, not in the sense of geography. The question of migration thus becomes a question of the promises and pressures people face in looking forward to their trajectories at home. Where, then, lies the power of this pressure (daght)? What makes some things so inevitable?

This pressure depends not only on the limited means people have, but equally if not more importantly on their growing consumption. This is not to deny the enormous economic pressure people in a place like Nazlat al-Rayyis experience, and like them, people in the cities and villages around the country hope to realize a better life for themselves and their children. But the pressure here is toward social ascendance more than it is a struggle for survival. It is precisely the increase in consumption (and in the possibilities of consumption) that has brought along an increase in economic pressure. This can be best seen in the explosive increase of consumer and investment debt in Egypt. Small businessmen who in the past never took on debt now commonly finance their operations through credit. This is partly intentional, a policy strongly encouraged by international donor agencies, which promote debt as a form of empowerment (Elyachar 2005). Almost all consumer transactions beyond one's daily needs are financed by payment in installments. The system of *nuqta*, an exchange of loans paid in the form of wedding gifts, has rapidly expanded from a way to finance marriages into a much wider system of mutual credit. Every new television set and satellite dish, every new house and newly furnished apartment, even the new clothes people buy at the occasion of annual festivals are evidence not only of an increasing amount of consumption, but also an

increasing pressure of debt. Reliance on debt, in turn, is not just a matter of an acute lack of liquid funds. Also the wealthy upper-middle classes routinely depend on debt to live a lifestyle that suits their status. Rather, debt is a horizon of spending based not on what one has but what one hopes to earn in the future.

This is not to say that people wouldn't have gone into debt in the past as well. But what has changed, according to the accounts of small businessmen I know, are the reasons to go into debt. In the past, people were compelled to borrow money mainly to overcome acute financial problems, and there

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was something dishonorable about borrowing money if one's finances were solid, except for very specific occasions such as weddings. Saving, not borrowing, was the ideal way to fund investments (such as building a house)—a view further supported by religious sensitivities regarding interest in particular and debt in general. Today, the pressure of investment and consumption has increased to a degree that it is nearly impossible to finance a home through savings, and debt as a way to deal with contingencies is giving way to aspirational debt, a permanent way of living on installment credit.

This pressure to live bigger than one can actually afford is a central feature of the sensibility of living on debt and aspiring for a better future. Consumer debt is a form of everyday financial discipline that is explicitly directed at the future (see Appadurai 1996:66–85). The prospect of being able to repay one's debt is dependent on the expectation of growth and advancement. A future built on debt entails at once fantastic promises and unbearable pressures.

Are there alternatives? Rather few, if any. Religion may appear a likely way out of the race of progress, and the tremendous wave of religiosity that has swept Egypt, a Muslim-majority country with a large Christian minority, could be taken as a sign of people searching for a nonmaterial steadiness. And yet the way Egyptian

Muslims approach their religion carries the same sense of future orientation, with a strong pressure to become even more pious, a cultivated anxiety about not being good enough, of perhaps after all falling short of God's grace (Schielke 2009). Religion is definitely expected to provide a nonmaterialistic counterbalance to a greedy world, but in practice the idea of contentedness with the will of God is often overwhelmed by anxiety in spiritual just as well as in material terms. This was bothering my friend Mustafa when we met in a café in downtown Alexandria. He had recently started his career as a salesman in an import-export company, and he was making good progress establishing business contacts, but he could still sense nothing but pressure to get ahead.

It's a strange thought I have had in the last few days. I think that *qanâ'a* [conviction, contentedness] is all a lie. Everybody talks about it, but nobody is really content. Sure, faith [*îmân*] should be about contentedness with what our Lord gives us. I'm sure that in the age of the Prophet people were content. When you read the Qur'an it praises the grain, the dates—but it doesn't talk about chicken or meat. In those days people could be content with the simple gift [*ni'ma*] our Lord gave them. But I don't see anybody today really having that, everybody is under pressure,

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never content, always looking for something better. You can never stop and be happy with what you have reached. If I make 700 pounds [approx. US\$150] I am already worried about where I can get more. The only way you can stop and be content is to surrender like a beggar, stretch out your hand and let things happen to you.

While Mustafa believes that there was a time when Muslims were able to be

content with God's simple gifts, he does not see this happening around him, no matter how many religious phrases of patience and contentedness people may use. With this observation, he puts his finger on an important ambiguity of the Islamic revival that has found people searching for trust and guidance in a scripturalist reading of Islam: while the Islamic revival preaches contentedness, its emotional quality is marked by anxiety, a constant worry about one's share in the afterworld, a sense that one is never quite close enough to God. This anxious religious aspiration for contentedness shares a key sense of temporality with capitalist production and consumption. Both are based on the constant production of a sense of shortcoming, of an aspiration for a good life that is always only partly fulfilled, never to the degree of satisfaction..

Conclusion: Living in the Future Tense

What unites these moments of aspiration, frustration, migration, consumption, and credit is the temporality of the future (see also Koselleck 1989:349–75). Aspiring to inclusion in the world, to a place in the middle of the society, is in all its moments directed at things to come: money yet to be made abroad, installments yet to be paid, construction materials yet to be bought, houses yet to be built, a marriage yet to be arranged, wedding loans yet to be returned, children yet to be educated, private tutoring yet to be financed. Especially for those whose resources are limited, daily life becomes a breathless race to keep up with the demands of the future. The present is never good enough, and even if one may want to stop and be content, the pressure of debt and installments leaves little choice but to go on. Herein lies the troublesome ambivalence of aspiration for the imagined middle. Living in the future tense, one has the imagined good life always in sight but will never reach it, like in a famous Soviet joke from the age of the Cold War:

Comrade Khrushchev has declared that communism is already visible on the horizon. Question: What is a horizon? Answer: An

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imaginary line between earth and sky, which moves farther away as one approaches it.

This perpetually unfulfilled nature of the aspiration for a better life reflects both great expectations and optimism, but includes tremendous pressure and frustration as a result. It is this pressure of which Ibrâhîm and Sa'îd speak, one so strong that in order to have a chance in the struggle for social advancement, young men are willing to risk death—especially when the other alternative is the social death of failing to keep up with the pressure of upward mobility.

While in terms of the immediate trajectories, this struggle can be told as a story of class aspiration, I insist that we need to think about class belonging in relation to global belonging. Since the colonial period, and even more so in our time of global consumer capitalism, aspiration and social mobility cannot be accurately comprehended from an exclusively national perspective. Class is not simply about social position in a given society but also a matter of positioning oneself in relation to the compelling and powerful metropolitan centers of the world, both near and far. Following the same logic, the global is not an outside world of “flows” as opposed to a static locality, but an ascribed quality of those things that appear as metropolitan, powerful, and compelling. Both class and the global are thus intimately related to normative expectations and claims about the desirable conditions of life. Young Egyptians' aim to match the national and global standards of the good life entails a global claim for membership or, perhaps more accurately, equality (see Ferguson 2006).

For Sa'îd and Ibrâhîm, their support of European football teams does make

them members of a real global community of fans. But they are only marginally part of the consumption that the whole contemporary industry of Association football (soccer) has been designed to facilitate. A televised match on an illegal cable network and a counterfeit training suit are the best they can get. Connected to a global media event, they are highly aware of both their belonging and their exclusion, and the pressure created by the tension between the two. From their point of view, their experience is one of always having to settle for the counterfeit instead of the authentic: a corrupt travesty of a modernist school curriculum, secondhand leftovers of the metropolitan lifestyle of affluent Egyptians, Chinese imitations rather than Japanese original products, the mediated image rather than the real chances of America, and so on (Graw 2009). And they are acutely aware of a constantly disappointed but still pressing and powerful promise of a world of consumerist fulfillment just out of reach.

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The problem is not that their belonging and longing are illusory because of their aspiration's imaginary nature. Belonging is always a work of imagination. The problem is more complex. Football fan culture presents one of the many little daily escapes in which people engage in order to find a way to live a dignified life under conditions of great pressure. But these little escapes also inform the desire to be part of a world of class and wealth. They, too, become part of a horizon of imagination and potential action where certain paths appear to be so overwhelmingly better than others that there is almost no choice. Herein lies the troubling ambiguity of imagination as a social practice: what offers itself as a possibility and a way out also becomes a source of anxiety and unbearable pressure, and vice versa.

Acknowledgments

This chapter is based on a paper that was presented at two workshops: "Migration at Home: Migratory Imaginations and Imaginary Cosmopolitanisms in Africa and Beyond" at Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin, March 11–13, 2009, and "The Middle Classes: A Global Perspective" at the School for Advanced Research, Santa Fe, New Mexico, March 28–April 2, 2009. This chapter is strongly indebted to my shared work with Daniela Swarowsky on her documentary film project *Messages from Paradise*, which we shot in Egypt and with Egyptians in Austria (Swarowsky and Schielke 2009). Some of the interviews quoted here were originally conducted for the film, and many of the ideas were developed in our discussions during the production of the film and through feedback from the Egyptian audience that first saw it in December 2008. Inspired to a high degree by this shared work, I owe many of this chapter's key ideas to Daniela, as well as to the many Egyptians who have been willing to reflect with us about their own situation. I am also indebted to Mukhtar Shehata, Knut Graw, Jessica Winegar, and the participants at the two workshops at SAR and ZMO for their critical feedback and suggestions.