





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Neoliberal reform discourse in Egyptian higher education

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The global neoliberal discourse on Higher Education (HE) reform has become dominant in both the developed and developing worlds. The paper tackles the Egyptian HE reforms that have been produced in line with the global neoliberal discourse through the World Bank's (WB) funded reform projects. Through Foucauldian discourse and genealogical analysis, the study questioned, troubled, and de-naturalized the inevitability and persistence of the neoliberal discourse in Egyptian HE. Far from being deterministic and rational, the process of transfer of the global neoliberal discourse to Egyptian HE was embedded in the interaction of a number of discursive and structural selectivities as captured by the Strategic Relational Approach. On one hand, privatization, cost-sharing strategies, and quality assurance systems constituted the major policy reforms produced by the neoliberal discourse. On the other hand academic freedoms, university autonomy, and equitable access to HE have been discursively disallowed, de-problematized and excluded. The 25th of January revolution represented a discontinuity that threatened the collapse of the neoliberal discourse while the crushing of the revolution perpetuated and reinforced the neoliberal discourse reflecting a mutual relationship between neoliberal and authoritarian discourses and governmentalities.

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Introduction

In the past two decades, Higher Education (HE) systems in both the developed and developing worlds adopted similar measures of privatization, commodification, internationalization, and Quality Assurance (QA). Such convergence in the reform policies, despite different contextual factors, can be attributed to the hegemony of the global neoliberal discourse. In comparative education literature, “policy transfer/travel” refers to the transfer of educational policies from one system to another (Bridges, 2014). What transferred, however, are not specific projects and policy interventions but the political discourse behind those measures (Ibrahim, 2010). In this context, International Organizations (IOs) play a crucial role in the process of transfer by organizing the global discourse on HE (Shahjahan, 2012).

The paper tackles HE reforms in Egypt as one of the developing countries where reforms were guided by the global neoliberal discourse. As argued by Farag (2010):

The (reform) package echoes a worldwide recipe: Egypt, or rather its ruling elite class, considers itself as one of the countries that must follow the universal trajectory of educational reforms, and that such a destination is best reached with the support of foreign agency funding and expertise (p. 288).

The transfer of such discourse was possible with the increasing influence of the World Bank (WB) on reforms that began in the late nineties. The WB has a major role in constructing and propagating the neoliberal discourse as ‘an undisputed influential actor in education, often more so than UNESCO’ (Klees et al., 2012, p. xvi). In 2000, the government of Egypt organized a national conference on HE with the aim of drawing a Higher Education Reform strategy (HERS). Six national projects came out of the conference, bundled under the name “Higher Education Enhancement Project HEEP” and were funded and supported by the WB. And while the project ended in 2008, institutional, organizational, and discursive changes have continued in the same direction.

In investigating the neoliberal discourse on HE reform in Egypt, the study adopts a Foucauldian methodological framework that is guided by his notions of discourse and genealogical discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972, 1984a, 1984b). It aims to question, trouble, and de-naturalize the inevitability and persistence of the neoliberal discourse in Egyptian HE. In this context, the study shall attend to the enabling conditions that permitted the emergence of the neoliberal discourse, the ruptures and discontinuities that threatened its collapse, and the institutional, organizational and discursive effects produced by such discourse. By analyzing the historical and contingent enabling conditions that allowed the transfer of the global neoliberal discourse to Egyptian HE, the study aims to make its truth effects visible, to show that it is a discourse among other alternative discourses, and thus to allow for the emergence of counter-discourses. Foucauldian discourse approach is also combined with insights from Jessop’s strategic relational approach (Jessop, 2001; Verger, 2014) where the concept of structurally inscribed strategic selectivities is employed in understanding the structural factors that selectively and strategically enabled or constrained the emergence and acceptance of the neoliberal discourse in Egyptian HE. Moreover, the governance of Egyptian HE represents an interweaving between neoliberal and authoritarian discourses and governmentalities captured under the term ‘neoliberal authoritarianism’.

Methodological and conceptual framework

Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). For Foucault, discourse is not restricted to linguistic signs that represent reality but rather

constitutes practices that produce objects, subjectivities, power relations, knowledge, and truths. Discourses are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault, 1972, p. 49). Such constitutive and productive power of discourses is more elaborated through the ‘regimes of truths’ articulated through discourses. Regimes of truths exert ‘a power of constraint’ on other alternative discourses (Foucault, 1984b). FDA thus aims to identify how discourses come to be seen as the natural, evident, and inevitable truth while excluding other discourses.

Foucauldian genealogy is the analytical tool to historically trace the emergence of dominant discourses. Based on the concept of ‘descent’, genealogy ‘disturbs what was previously considered immobile’ (Foucault, 1984a, p. 82). Instead of looking for the origins, it analyzes the ‘conditions of possibility’ of discourses (Foucault, 1984a) and thus shows that the ‘emergence’ of discourses is far from a natural, rational, and linear but a contingent process that is allowed by the combination of economic, political, social, and cultural forces. While discourses emerge through ‘collisions of contingent forces’, it ‘gains dominance and then looks to be predetermined and is legitimized by its apparent inevitability’ (Prado, 2000, pp. 37–38).

A key principle in genealogical analysis is the search for discontinuities, ruptures, transformations, and interruptions. While traditional historical analysis looks for continuous and linear developments, genealogies trace the existence of moments of discontinuities, ‘breakdowns and resistances’, and ‘instances of interruption’:

Genealogy does not pretend to go back in time to restore an unbroken continuity that operates beyond the dispersion of forgotten things...it is to identify the accidents, the minute deviations-or conversely, the complete reversals-the errors, the false appraisals, and the faulty calculations that gave birth to those things that continue to exist and have value for us (Foucault, 1984a, p. 81).

Central to Foucault’s conceptualization of discourse is the ‘materiality’ of discourses (Olssen, 2014). Materiality can be understood in two ways: discourses as being embedded in material enabling conditions and social structures (which can be traced using genealogical analysis), and discourses as having real, ‘lived’ and material effects. In this sense, discourses are productive practices that construct truths, policies, institutions, and subjects. Instead of looking for origins, hidden meanings, or intentions, FDA shall attend to the material effects and consequences of discourse. Guided by the above principles, the study—in its examination of the emergence and adoption of the global neoliberal discourse on higher education reform in the Egyptian case—seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the enabling conditions that allowed the emergence of the global neoliberal discourse on HE reform in Egypt?
2. What are the material impacts—in terms of both included and excluded policies, institutions, standards, and structures—produced by the neoliberal discourse on HE in Egypt?
3. What are the major discontinuities, ruptures, and transformations that threatened to break its hegemony in Egypt? And what are the effects of such discontinuities?

The study depended on previous historical and research literature that documented HE reforms in Egypt in answering such questions.

Strategic relational approach (SRA). In order to account for the enabling conditions that allowed the emergence of the neoliberal

discourse in Egyptian HE, the study combines insights from Jessop's SRA (Jessop, 2001) with FDA. While the Foucauldian conceptualization of discourse is embedded within material, structural and extra-discursive dimensions, it is argued that the interaction between the discursive and extra-discursive dimensions is still unclear and under-theorized (Hardy, 2010). In this sense, the study employs Jessop's structurally inscribed strategic selectivities (Jessop, 2001; Verger, 2014, pp. 21–24) in understanding the structural factors that selectively and strategically enabled or constrained the emergence and acceptance of global reform discourses in Egyptian HE.

The combination between—allegedly—different theoretical frameworks have been conducted in previous literature. Grimaldi (2012) proposed a framework for investigating policy enactment that brings together Foucault's discourse and archeological analysis with Jessop's SRA and Stone's Structuration theory. The synthesis of semiotic and structural dimensions and the combination of different theoretical frameworks is also proposed by Sum and Jessop (2013) in their transdisciplinary approach to Cultural Political Economy (CPE). CPE brings together insights from Jessop's SRA, state theory, and political economy, Gramsci's studies of hegemony, and Foucault's work on discursive formations and dispositives. Foucault's discourse and dispositive analyses were incorporated to extend and enhance Jessop's SRA. Initially, SRA was developed as a framework for explaining the relationship between structure and agency. Instead of bracketing structure or agency, SRA is meant to account for their dialectic relation. This is achieved through examining both structural and agential selectivities where 'structures are studied in terms of their structurally inscribed strategic selectivities and actions are studied in terms of (differentially reflexive) structurally oriented strategic calculation.' (Jessop, 2001) Structurally inscribed strategic selectivities refer to the set of opportunities and constraints imposed by social structures. Agentic selectivities, on the other hand, refer to the differential capacities of agents in perceiving and exploiting structural opportunities and constraints. In Sum and Jessop (2013), selectivities were extended to include discursive and technological selectivities. Foucault's discourse analysis (archeological and genealogical analysis) was deemed beneficial in examining discursive selectivities while his dispositive analysis was employed to investigate technological selectivities.

Literature review

The neoliberal discourse on HE. Neoliberalism refers to a set of 'political economic practices' where the role of the market is maximized and extends to all realms of social life. The role of the state by turn is re-defined as facilitating and providing institutional support for the well-functioning of markets (Harvey, 2005) In a Foucauldian sense, neoliberalism is not confined to a set of particular economic policies but rather constitutes a moral system, an art and rationality of government, and a mode of governance that 'produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behavior, and a new organization of the social' (Brown, 2003).

As a 'hegemonic politically imposed discourse' (Olssen and Peters, 2005) with productive powers, neoliberalism has significantly altered roles, structures, systems, values, identities, and subjectivities within HE. Neoliberal reforms refer to the adoption of new public management (NPM) techniques that lead to commercialization, competitiveness, internationalization, privatization, and marketization of HE. Universities are encouraged to be managed like successful private sector companies through the introduction of market-driven reforms such as performativity and accountability measures, accreditation and quality assurance systems, and results-oriented management (Olssen and Peters, 2005). With the reduction of state direct funding, universities, as

quasi-market corporations, are urged to engage in income-generating activities, strengthen their ties with industries, and compete for external grants (Slaughter and Rhoads, 2004).

The literature pointed to the detrimental effects of the neoliberal discourse on university values where the role of universities is instrumentally reduced to economic development, students are constructed as customers, knowledge is cherished based on its monetary value, and faculty members are turned into de-professionalized employees (Gburi, 2016; Giroux, 2010, 2015; Olssen and Peters, 2005). Universities once served as instruments for social and political change are now undermined into economic tools that mimic business managerial strategies and serve market demands (Brown, 2016; Giroux, 2015; Hao, 2015).

Neoliberal authoritarianism. While the concern over the authoritarian nature of neoliberalism has been raised in liberal and democratic societies, it is of higher relevance while tackling neoliberal reforms in an illiberal and developing country like Egypt. The term 'neoliberal authoritarianism' (Bruff, 2014; Bruff and Tansel, 2019) has been coined in the literature (under different names) to denote a combination between political authoritarianism and neoliberal governmentality. Bruff (2014) pointed to the rise of 'neoliberal authoritarianism' in the post-2007 era where neoliberal policies are increasingly imposed on nations in an authoritative and coercive manner. Ryan (2019) rejected the 'periodization' inherent in Bruff and Tansel's argument concerning the historical specificity of coercive processes of neoliberalization after the 2008 crisis. Alternatively, Ryan (2019) indicated that neoliberalism has been combined with authoritarian rationales since its birth. In addition, arguing for the novelty of authoritarian imposition of neoliberal policies in the North would risk taking a Eurocentric stance that ignores the experiences of various countries in the Global South where neoliberal programs of structural adjustment have been coercively implemented by authoritarian and unelected officials (Ryan, 2019).

The relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism can be specifically detected while examining the neoliberal discourse on HE. The relationship between neoliberal universities and democratic values has been a major concern expressed by Giroux (2015, p.6) as 'the authoritarian nature of neoliberalism and its threat to higher education as a democratic public sphere'. Universities as democratic spheres for free and critical deliberation of ideas and as vehicles for social justice, transformation, and equity are threatened by the overwhelming influence of marketization and economic rationales. This is perceived as 'facilitating the oppression of academic institutions in authoritarian countries' (Tutkal, 2023). Moreover, academic freedoms are constrained under neoliberal governmentality as academics become under the constant oversight and control of managers who seek to conform to quality assurance audits. Hierarchical and principal-agent modes of governance have replaced traditional collegial and democratic modes of governance based on professional autonomy, peer evaluation, and academic freedoms (Olssen and Peters, 2005; Ward, 2012). Academics' freedom of research is also constrained by Government Research Evaluations and research priority areas determined by commercial interests (Gburi, 2016; Giroux, 2010; Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015; Morrish and Sauntson, 2016). In authoritarian regimes, neoliberal reforms can be introduced to HE systems as a way of increasing the state's control and grip over universities. Forrat (2016) showed how Russian support to research universities in line with neoliberal reforms was a way to contain potential anti-regime student mobilization. An authoritarian government may resort to market-driven reforms in HE not only to increase financial resources and reduce public

funds but also to alleviate political risks and decrease the costs of direct repression (Forrat, 2013).

International organizations (IOs) and global discourses on HE. IOs with an active mandate in education play an important role in organizing and disseminating global education discourses. In this regard, the WB has a major role in constructing and propagating the neoliberal discourse as ‘an undisputed influential actor in education, often more so than UNESCO’ (Klees et al., 2012, p. xvi). Despite discontinuities, failures, crises, and attempts to incorporate humanistic dimensions, the neoliberal discourse persists as the hegemonic imaginary and rationality in guiding the WB’s vision, approach, recommendations, and interventions in education generally and HE specifically (Adhikary, 2014; Collins and Rhoads, 2010; Klees et al., 2012; Robertson, 2008). Despite the absence of explicit mention of neoliberalism in any of WB’s policy documents, neoliberal principles of liberalization, privatization, and deregulation continue to guide its recommendations. Recommendations include institutional differentiation, the introduction of user fees, governance reforms in line with corporatist management, adoption of quality assurance systems, competitive funds, and linking education funding to outputs.

A major strand and construct in the WB’s neoliberal discourse is human capital development. The theory of human capital development stresses the role of education in producing skillful labor for the economy (Moutsios, 2009; Beech, 2009). HE has an instrumental mission in increasing human productivity and thus enhancing economic development and national competitiveness in the global knowledge economy. The WB’s adherence to the neoliberal discourse has been proposed as the root cause for its reductionist and instrumental approach to education based on human capital development (Adhikary, 2014).

Notwithstanding the hegemony of the neoliberal discourse, the rights-based discourse proposed by UNESCO offers an alternative (albeit marginalized) global discourse on HE. The rights-based discourse calls for a holistic view of the roles of HE where they should not be reduced to job training and economic development but rather include a wide array of political, economic, and social roles (Beech, 2009; Mundy and Madden, 2009). This stems from a comprehensive approach to human development that is based on the fulfillment of human rights. In such discourse, there is room for considering the role of universities in pursuing truth and contributing to human knowledge development. Universities, as organizations for political and cultural socialization, are also crucial in the inculcation of democratic values, fostering citizenship education and nurturing critical inquiry. Accordingly, HE should be defended as a public good and basic human right based on principles of equity and social justice. In addition, academic freedoms and institutional autonomy are prioritized by the rights-based discourse as essential values for university functioning. Finally, it refuses global policy blueprints that fit all contexts and rather adopts context-sensitive solutions (Lebeau and Sall, 2011).

Transfer of the global neoliberal discourse to Egyptian HE

Using FDA to study the transfer of the global neoliberal reform discourse to Egyptian HE aims to pinpoint how the neoliberal discourse comes to be seen as the natural, evident, and inevitable truth while excluding other possible discourses. De-naturalizing and troubling the inevitability of such discourse is done by investigating the historical enabling conditions that permitted its emergence. The SRA is utilized to capture such historical enabling conditions through the concept of ‘structurally inscribed strategic selectivities’ which are structural factors that selectively allow or hinder certain discourses, ideas, and actions. Building on Verger (2014, pp. 21–24), there are certain strategic selectivities

(administrative and regulatory viability, political institutions, contentious politics, legitimation, crisis) that are contextual and contingent variables that mediate the reception of global discourses and ideas. While the global neoliberal discourse on HE reform (as propagated by the WB to the Egyptian government) represented a discursive selectivity that sets the limits for policy imaginaries, the above-mentioned contextual factors selectively and strategically allowed the emergence, adoption, and internalization of such discourse. And while differentiating between modes of selectivity, it is important to note that they are not mutually exclusive; discursive selectivities are not purely discursive but include structural dimensions and structural selectivities encompass discursive constraints and opportunities.

Administrative and regulatory viability. While considering global educational discourses, local policy makers tend to accept those ideas that are administratively and regulatory feasible and match their technical capacities, budgetary limitations, and time-horizons constraints (Verger, 2014). In this context, policy makers are more likely to borrow external policies if they are compatible with their past successful policy experience. In the Egyptian case, policy makers were willing to seek the WB’s funding and technical support to implement the HE Enhancement Project (HEEP) as they had a positive experience with a prior WB-funded project for the reform of faculties of engineering “Engineering and Technical Education Project” (ETEP). The WB piloted in ETEP some of the measures and tools that later became part of the more comprehensive HEEP such as grant-based approach/competitive funds and QA (Kohstall, 2012). Likewise, according to the Project Appraisal Document (PAD) of HEEP (WB, 2002), the Egyptian Ministry of HE had over 9 years of experience in administering the disclosed ETEP and thus would successfully utilize such technical expertise in carrying out the HEEP. In addition, some of the engineering professors that were involved in ETEP emerged as key players in organizing the debate and discourse on HE reform as well as in the planning and agenda-setting processes of HEEP (Kohstall, 2012). Finally, the expected role of the WB in funding and providing technical expertise for the Egyptian Ministry of HE was considered a guarantee for the administrative and regulatory viability of reforms.

Political institutions. The nature of political institutions (one-party, multi-party system, etc.) which prevail in a specific country affects the process and rules of the game through which global educational policies are accepted. In addition, the complexity, length, number of actors, and degree of participation inside the decision making process affect the possibility and easiness of taking major policy changes (Verger, 2014).

In Egypt, the political configuration facilitated the transfer of neoliberal reforms and endorsement of the WB-financed HEEP. At the time of reform, Egypt was a republic with a one-party rule thanks to the dominance of the National Democratic Party (NDP), which had both the president’s affiliation and parliamentary majority. This led to the absence of a real political debate and negotiation process over HE reform among different political parties, syndicates, and civil society actors (Kohstall, 2012). This is despite claims by both the Egyptian government and WB that the reform process followed a participatory approach. Such claims were supported by the creation of the National Committee for the Enhancement of University and HE (NCEUHE) which consisted of 25 members and was assigned by the HE minister to prepare the HE Reform Strategy (HERS). The HERS was later approved in a national conference that comprised over 1200 stakeholders (Said, 2010). While securing an

exceptional ‘participatory appearance’ in an authoritarian setting, the decision making process rather reflected a “fabricated national consensus” (Kohstall, 2012). This is evident in the composition of the national committee and the participating stakeholders of the national conference. The committee consisted of former ministers, officials from the Ministry of HE, university presidents, industry owners, and parliamentarians who belong to the ruling NDP (Kohstall, 2012, 2015). The reform was thus part of elite deliberation and excluded grassroots participation of the whole university society. Even in governmental documents (the Borrower’s report), the design of the HEEP was described as following a “top-down approach” (Rasmy, 2018). This was justified by the unpreparedness of the university society for the proposed reforms and the need to build the essential environment and culture for embracing reform and preventing resistance (Said, 2010). The way neoliberal reforms were initiated thus matched the literature on ‘neoliberal authoritarianism’ where neoliberal policies were insulated against political and social dissent (Bruff, 2014).

Contentious politics and legitimation. Policy makers may resort to international organizations and adopt global educational policies in highly polarized, uncertain, and politicized situations as a way to legitimize their contested policies (Verger, 2014). In this context, global discourses are not embraced because of their perceived quality but because policy makers present them to the opposition in politicized situations as being “neutral”, “apolitical” and representing “best practices”. By neutralizing political debate, policy makers can use borrowed international models to implement their own preferred policies in the absence of local resistance (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006).

In Egypt, HE reform was discursively framed by policy makers as a technical issue that needed the neutral expertise of international experts. In this domain, members of the national committee of reform were sent on study tours to countries such as New Zealand in order to learn from their experience (Kohstall, 2012). Another illustrative example is the international symposium held in 1999 by the Ministry of HE and the WB where international experts were invited in order to present their expertise on reform to local stakeholders (Kohstall, 2012, 2015). As such, according to the Supreme Council of Universities (as cited in Kohstall, 2012), the national committee avoided controversial and political issues of reform for the sake of adopting technical solutions suggested by international experts. One of the imported new solutions has been the establishment of a National Authority for Quality Accreditation and Evaluation of Education which was built on international models of QA and was not customized to the Egyptian context (Frag, 2010). Likewise, the hegemonic role of the National Democratic Party, which was led by a coalition of neoliberal technocrats and businessmen, and the absence of a real role for opposition contributed to the de-politicization of the rhetoric of reform. In the same context, the reliance of the Ministry of HE on a number of engineering professors, who were part of the former project financed by the WB, reflected the technical orientation of the proposed reforms.

Crisis. Crises and moments of uncertainty that hit educational systems open the way for borrowing global reform discourses. Deteriorating quality of educational output, escalation of complaints from different stakeholders, and poor performance of educational systems in international rankings encourage policy makers to use such critical circumstances as chances for introducing policy changes and embracing global models (Verger, 2014). While moments of crises represent structural selectivity,

important discursive dimensions are crucial to be included pertaining to how crises are perceived, framed, and discursively constructed by policy makers. It is not the crisis per se that allowed the reforms, but it is the discourse of a crisis of HE that created the space for the reforms (Frag, 2010).

In Egypt, signs of crises in HE began in the late 1980s with the country facing an economic crisis as a result of the decline in oil prices (Emira, 2014). Through the 1990s, Egyptian public universities were suffering from overcrowding and deteriorating quality with the absence of the necessary financial resources to introduce reform (Said, 2010). Nasser’s socialist policies—that continued through consecutive eras—to expand HE have increased access albeit at the expense of quality (Holmes, 2008). Since the 1970s, the establishment of new universities was not accompanied by providing the necessary infrastructure and resources which led to the diminishing quality of university education over the years (Elsaid, 2015). In the Project Appraisal Document of the HEEP, it is mentioned that: “The Government acknowledges that it is confronting a crisis in the HE system....-The Government recognizes that there are real challenges to be faced in the sector” (WB, 2002). Framing HE crises in terms of congestion, over-centralization of governance, persisting inefficiencies, and low quality and relevance have turned attention to proposed reforms from the mere expansion of access to improving quality (Kohstall, 2012, Said, 2010).

Consequences: neoliberal policy reforms in Egyptian HE system

From a Foucauldian perspective, the global neoliberal discourse on HE reform is a productive practice that constructs truths, policies, institutions, and subjects. As such an FDA of such discourse shall attend to its material effects and consequences in Egyptian HE instead of looking for origins, hidden meanings, or intentions. The following lines will tackle a number of institutional, organizational, and discursive practices and reforms that have been introduced in the Egyptian HE as a consequence of the transfer and emergence of the global neoliberal discourse.

Privatization. Privatization of HE, institutional diversification, the introduction of user fees, and cost-sharing are at the core of the global neoliberal discourse on HE as propagated by the WB. Since the 1990s, Egypt has embarked on processes of privatization through the emergence of private universities as well as the introduction of cost-sharing strategies in public universities.

The official legalization of private universities through Law 101 for the year 1992 represented the end of the governmental exclusive provision of university degrees (with the exception of the American University in Cairo which has operated since 1919). In 1996, four private Egyptian universities began their operations and in 2002 two private foreign universities were opened based on a presidential decree (Elsaid, 2015). Although Law 101 stipulates that private universities are “essentially not for profit”, they are considered one of the most profitable businesses that sell their degrees to students (Frag, 2000).

In 2021, the number of private and not-for-profit (Ahleyya) universities reached 36 compared to 27 public universities (MOHESR, 2021). Despite the steady growth in the number of private universities, they still serve a small number of students compared to those enrolled in public universities. In 2006/2007, the number of students enrolled in private universities accounted for just 5% of all public university students (Fahim and Sami, 2011). However, the increasing rate of growth of student enrollment in private universities, which is much faster than that of public universities, signals the gradual retrenchment of the public provision of HE (Elsaid, 2015). Between the years

2014–2021, the number of public universities had a 17.4% growth rate, while the number of private and Ahleyya universities marked a 100% increase (MOHESR, 2021).

It is important to note here the specific type of privatization implemented in an illiberal context where neoliberal and authoritarian discourses and governmentalities merge. Cantini (2017) argued that Egypt has transferred from essentialist state-centered socialism to a state-controlled liberalization and privatization. State-controlled privatization indicates the control and authority exercised by the Egyptian government over private universities whether directly through the Ministry of HE or indirectly through quality assurance and accreditation measures. Based on an ethnographic study conducted by Cantini (2017) in one of the private universities, he documented the state control over all of the university's daily activities including curricular development and organization of conferences and seminars. For the Egyptian government, private universities shall reduce pressures on public funds while making sure they produce 'depoliticized and truly scientific knowledge that is closer to labor market demands' (Cantini, 2017).

In addition to private universities, Egyptian public HE has witnessed a retrenchment of public expenditures in line with neoliberal practices of cost sharing. Since 1994–1995, universities' exclusive dependence on the state budget has ended by setting the government's contribution to universities' budget at 85% and giving universities the freedom to raise the remaining 15% (Emira, 2014). Accordingly, tuition fees were introduced in public universities under different programs including foreign language programs, affiliation programs, and open education programs. Affiliation programs were originally designed for students who have certain circumstances that prevent them from full-time attendance at universities. However, some universities use affiliation programs to raise revenues by allowing students with lower grade scores to enroll in these programs but with higher tuition fees (Meehy, 2015). Likewise, parallel specialized programs with higher tuition fees have been introduced in public universities where students are allowed to study in English or French language. Foreign language tracks are often attended by students from the middle and upper classes who are willing to pay higher tuition fees in exchange for lower class sizes and better educational facilities (Farag, 2000). In a similar manner, open education programs allow students who were excluded from HE to enter universities while paying fees close to the cost of their education.

QA and accreditation. The integration of quality assurance (QA) systems into universities is an essential component of the global neoliberal discourse where universities are urged to adopt business-like managerial practices including performativity practices, QA standards and accreditation, and results-oriented management.

The introduction of QA measures in Egyptian HE began with the launch of the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Project (QAAP) which was one of the six priority projects of the HEEP. The QAAP aimed to spread the culture of QA among different stakeholders in HE and to set the ground for both internal and external systems of QA throughout the three cycles of the project. The internal system of QA consists of QA units inside HE institutions (faculties), QA centers inside universities, and the Program of Continuous Improvement and Qualifying for Accreditation (PCIQA). QA units are mandated for conducting annual self-assessments for HE institutions with the aim of evaluating and ensuring the quality of academic programs and institutional governance. At the level of universities, QA centers help QA units in achieving their missions by providing technical

assistance, conducting human resource training, and supporting QA units in preparing for accreditation. Finally, the PCIQA is a national project that provides competitive funding for projects that aim to ensure the continuous improvement of HE institutions, to enhance academic and institutional capability, and to qualify them for accreditation.

The external process of QA and accreditation is conducted by the National Authority for Quality Assurance and Accreditation of Education (NAQAAE) which was founded according to the Law no. 82 for the year 2006. NAQAAE is established as an independent accrediting body for all educational institutions in Egypt including pre-university and HE. Its mission is to assure the quality of educational output, to maximize benefits from educational investment, and increase the competitiveness of educational institutions nationally and internationally. It is mandated with evaluating HE institutions and programs according to a set of standards that cope with best international practices in teaching and learning, research, and community service.

Despite the aforementioned institutional developments in QA, various criticisms were directed toward the system. The literature pointed to the lack of connection between accreditation and quality improvement. Being an accredited institution does not imply high-quality of educational outcomes, teaching effectiveness, or increased accountability (Khalil, 2017; Meehy, 2015). QA activities are reduced to following formal administrative procedures and "paper filing/documentation" (El Maghraby, 2012; Khalil, 2017).

The absence of participatory approaches and lack of university autonomy were also proposed as impeding the development of QA measures. Kohstall (2015) criticized what he named as "distorted internationalization" of HE where the Egyptian government adopts international reform mechanisms without providing the necessary conditions such as establishing a QA system without ensuring the financial, administrative, and pedagogical autonomy of universities. Similarly, El Assy (2015) elucidated the weak involvement of students in the accreditation process. NAQAAE standards on meeting student demands focused only on the technical rights of students as receptors of educational services (student services, student satisfaction surveys, and student preparation for the job market) while excluding their rights as partners in the HE decision-making process. As such, QA measures were seen as ways to legitimize and increase the government's grip and control on universities (Scholz and Maroun, 2015). This is in line with the literature tackling neoliberal HE reforms in authoritarian contexts where reforms are selectively adopted to maintain state control and are utilized to achieve authoritarian ends (Forrat, 2013, 2016; Tutkal, 2023).

Marginalized problems in the reform process, policy silence on socio-political issues

As elaborated, FDA shall attend to the effects and consequences of the neoliberal reform discourse in Egyptian HE. An analysis of those effects shall not be restricted to 'what is said' and infused with truth-value but what is cut out, excluded, and remains not only unsaid but also unthinkable within the limits imposed by such hegemonic discourse. Such limits suggest that only certain thoughts, structures, policies, problems, and solutions are possible, relevant, and thinkable. Thus a Foucauldian 'principle of reversal' implies that discourse analysis shall not search for what is said only but to what is excluded in the processes of 'rarefaction of discourses' (Foucault, 1984). By this understanding a discourse 'produces, limits, excludes, frames, hides, scars, cuts, distorts, and juxtaposes' (Olssen, 2014, p. 35). In the following lines, the study will tackle two socio-political policy problems that are de-

problematized in the neoliberal reform discourse on HE: academic freedoms and institutional autonomy, and equitable access to HE. However, the analysis shows how ruptures and discontinuities enacted by the 25th of January revolution allowed for a short consideration and emergence of such issues.

Academic freedoms and institutional autonomy. Despite shifts in governments' discourses and policies across the different policy eras of Egypt's HE development, lack of academic freedom represented a persistent common feature (Emira, 2014). Academic freedoms refer to the freedoms of individual members of the academic community to teach, to conduct research, to participate in university governance, and to associate. Institutional autonomy denotes the financial, academic, staffing, and managerial autonomy of universities vis-à-vis state and economic powers. According to the 2003 Arab Development Report, the lag in scientific development in Egypt can be attributed to the authoritarian environment in which universities operate including censorship, security controls, and bureaucratic obstacles (Kohstall, 2011). The existence of police forces on campuses, the presidential appointment of academic leaders, and restrictive legal frameworks produced a climate of fear where members of the academic community exercised self-censorship (HRW, 2005). However, academic freedoms and institutional autonomy were neglected and marginalized in the neoliberal discourse on HE reform.

Such policy silence on academic freedoms and institutional autonomy was interrupted with discontinuities, ruptures, and breakdowns in the neoliberal discourse on HE. For Foucault, discontinuities are 'mutations that suddenly decide that things are no longer perceived, described, expressed, characterized, classified, and known in the same way' (Foucault, 1970, p. 235). They are moments that question and trouble the inevitability of hegemonic discourses, make their truth effects visible, and threaten their breakdown (Van Cleave, 2012; Abby Newland, 2021). By this meaning, the 25th of January revolution is the main discontinuity that threatened the collapse of the hegemonic neoliberal-authoritarian discourse on HE reform by showing the inconsistencies and limits of such discourse while opening spaces for resistance and the emergence of counter-discourses. Through shifting the power/knowledge relations, the revolution allowed faculty members and students to raise their demands for freedoms, rights, and autonomy and hence contribute to the emergence of a rights-based discourse on HE reform. Faculty members and students, being crucial components of the wide social movement, sought to transfer the revolutionary demands to the university. University campuses hosted demonstrations calling for institutional reforms to regain university autonomy. In an attempt to contain such movements, the Egyptian government made some institutional changes that constituted major gains on the front of academic freedoms. The existence of police forces on campuses was ended, thus enforcing a 2010 judicial verdict that was neglected by pre-revolution governments. Faculty members were allowed to freely elect their faculty deans and university presidents as an alternative to the old system of appointment. Pre-revolution student unions and restrictive student by-laws were canceled and accordingly, new elections for student unions were held in March 2013 where various student coalitions were represented away from security intrusions (Cantini, 2021). Finally, the years from 2011 to July 2013 witnessed a surge in on-campus freedom of expression with increasing numbers of conferences, seminars, political clubs, sit-ins, and protests (AFTE, 2017).

From a Foucauldian perspective, while discontinuities constitute opportunities for transformation and breakdowns through

shifting the power/knowledge relations, they do not have deterministic effects as the result can either be the weakening and collapse or strengthening and persistence of dominant discourses (Van Cleave, 2012; Abby Newland, 2021). In the Egyptian case, the discontinuity of the revolution has the short-term effect of threatening the hegemony of the neoliberal authoritarian discourse while it resulted in the persistence and strengthening of such discourse in the long term. Gains on academic freedoms and student rights were quickly reversed with the return of the military to power in July 2013. With the rise in student demonstrations on campuses, the government employed both direct repression as well as institutional controls. Between the years 2013–2016, 1181 student arrests and 21 extrajudicial killings were reported (AFTE, 2017). New regulations were issued that considered universities' military facilities that fall under military jurisdiction. Arbitrary dismissals and suspensions were used against faculty members and students based on political affiliation. And while direct repressive tools decreased in the subsequent years returning to a state of normality that resembles pre-revolution years, the situation does not reflect an improvement in academic freedoms but rather the government's dependence on subtle legal and institutional controls as well as a status of disillusionment among revolutionaries (Cantini, 2021; Saliba, 2020). Legal and institutional controls included the reinstatement of the system of appointing academic leaders in 2014 giving the president the right to appoint university presidents and deans. Moreover, after dissolving the newly independent student unions elected after the revolution, the government sought to control the subsequent elections by excluding different student groups from participation (Saliba, 2020). For faculty members, the government employed new regulations to restrict their freedom of research, teaching, and movement. A new regulation was enacted that requires faculty members to have security clearance before any abroad travel for conferences, exchange programs, and post-graduate studies (Abd Rabou, 2015; Saliba, 2020). Consequently, university campuses are fully controlled by the government and constantly surveilled by security forces.

Equitable access to HE. The global neoliberal discourse on education does not prioritize issues of equity and social justice. Klees et al. (2012) argued that the mentioning of equity in WB's education documents denotes empty rhetoric since it does not address the root causes of injustice and inequality. In addition, the WB's faithful commitment towards more privatization, market solutions, and reduction of public funds ignores evidence that shows that privatization negatively affects education equity (Klees et al., 2012). In line with the global neoliberal discourse, reforms in Egyptian HE excluded issues of equity and social justice.

Despite the continuity of the free provision of public HE in Egypt, access to HE is unequal and biased towards the urban and wealthy classes (Fahim and Sami, 2011; Osman, 2015). The level of income contributes to an unequal educational opportunity where more than 40% of students enrolled in public universities in 2005 were from the wealthiest quintile in society (Cupito and Langsten, 2011). Osman (2015) found that the chance of enrollment in HE for children of the richest 20% of the population is 7 times that of the poorest 20%. Geographical location constitutes another source of bias where the net enrollment rate in HE for urban populations is twice that for rural ones (Osman, 2015).

Issues of inequality and justice were, however, marginalized in HE reform initiatives. In this context, discourses about assuring the quality of public HE were separated from those about equity

(Farang, 2000). Moreover, arguments about the inequality of access to public HE are used to legitimize further privatization and expansion of cost-sharing strategies. Policy makers argue that state subsidies to HE reach the wealthy and middle classes rather than the poor classes and thus there should be ways to gradually abandon policies of free education for all citizens. Expansion of private universities as well as fee-based tracks in public universities is not accompanied, however, by strategies to mitigate their effects on equity such as loan, grant, or voucher systems (Fahim and Sami, 2011).

Legitimization of privatization through arguments about inequality in public education is refuted by the results of some studies. Buckner (2013) showed that Egyptian public education while being far from achieving equitable access, allows more access to women, rural students, and middle classes than to the wealthy and upper classes. This is because access to Egyptian public education is still governed by standards of meritocracy captured by scores achieved in the general secondary education while inequality indirectly results from the ability of middle and upper classes to invest more in private tutoring and hence achieve better grades. On the other hand, inequality in private universities directly results from admission criteria which depend on the ability to pay tuition fees. As such, access to private universities is biased toward males, urban inhabitants, and elite and wealthy classes. Buckner (2013) concluded that expanding public HE is more likely to increase inclusiveness while increasing privatization will exacerbate unequal access with wealth and geographical biases.

Conclusion

Through Foucauldian discourse and genealogical analysis, the neoliberal reform discourse in Egyptian HE was questioned, problematized, and de-naturalized. The study showed how the emergence of the global neoliberal discourse in Egyptian HE was not a linear, natural, or rational process but rather the result of the interaction of a number of historical, political, and institutional factors that represented the conditions of the possibility of such discourse. Jessop's concept of structurally inscribed strategic selectivities was utilized to capture how certain historical and contingent variables (administrative and regulatory viability, political institutions, contentious politics and legitimation, and crisis) facilitated and allowed the transfer of the global neoliberal discourse to Egyptian HE via the WB's funded reform projects. The methodological combination between Foucauldian discourse and Jessop's structural approaches has captured the interaction between discursive and non-discursive elements of Egyptian HE reform policies.

As a productive practice, the neoliberal discourse introduced institutional, organizational, and discursive practices and reforms in the Egyptian HE. Privatization, the introduction of user fees and cost-sharing strategies, and building systems of QA and accreditation constituted the major policy reforms that have emerged and persisted albeit ruptures, discontinuities, and transformations. Those reforms 'seem to indeed have some capacity to navigate hard times, to resurface as soon as there is the chance' (Cantini, 2021, p. 80) which reflects the persistence and hegemony of the neoliberal discourse. Just as the neoliberal discourse allowed for the persistence of some practices, it disallowed, excluded, and de-problematized socio-political problems mainly academic freedoms, university autonomy, and equitable access to HE.

The 25th of January revolution was the major discontinuity that threatened the collapse of the neoliberal authoritarian discourse on HE reform and allowed for the emergence of a rights-based discourse that prioritizes academic freedoms and student

rights. However, the defeat of the revolution through the military's return to power strengthens, perpetuates, and reinforces the hegemony of the neoliberal authoritarian discourse.

And while being constructed as apolitical reforms by both WB and subsequent Egyptian governments, HE neoliberal practices can hardly be separated from authoritarian consolidation and restitution. Under the term "neoliberal authoritarianism", the literature referred to the mutual relationship between neoliberalization and authoritarianism in the Egyptian case (Adly, 2021; Joya, 2020; Roccu, 2020; Tansel, 2019). And while neoliberal reforms in universities are believed to undermine democratic and civic values and hence promote authoritarianism, authoritarianism can also lead to neoliberal reforms which are used by governments to further surveil and control critical voices in students and faculty members (Tutkal, 2023). Breaking such a vicious cycle is only possible where university reforms are linked to social demands and macro-political changes which once happened in the aftermath of the 25th of January revolution.

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Competing interests

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Ethical approval

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Additional information

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