Doctoral Studies in Egypt: An Introduction

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We have no choice but to train the next generation of African scholars at home. This means tackling the question of institutional reform alongside that of postgraduate education. Postgraduate education, research and institution building will have to be part of a single effort.

—Mahmood Mamdani (2011)

In recent years, questions of the inequality in knowledge production worldwide, or of the asymmetric spatial dimension of knowledge production, have received sustained attention (Burawoy 2015). In this context, it has been argued for the necessity of reaching a non-hegemonic model for social sciences and humanities, to provincialize them, in order to enable them to be more adaptive to the need of diverse societies (Burawoy 2005, Vessouri 2015 among many others). At the same time, the emergence of the global knowledge economy, international higher education’s most fundamental marker, together with the increased institutional isomorphism and worldwide massification of access to it (Meyer et al. 2007), provide a unified global platform in which the production of knowledge acquires a new dimension. In this context, the persistence of deep inequalities in the provision of tertiary education and research training, exacerbated by globalization, with brain drain and a disparity in research capacities does have serious consequences for the production of knowledge from the global South, and provokes reactions that posit the necessity of a rebalancing of knowledge production (hence the Mamdani quote). There are also opposite signs, such as the increased academic publications in Asia and Latin America, the augmented co-citation practices between “the West and the Rest” (Gringas and Mosbah-Natanson 2010), or the fact that in 2012 China expenditures on
research and innovation surpassed those of the European Union. The global epistemic power relations are, however, largely unchanged, and the field of knowledge production remains a highly unequal and uneven one, particularly when it comes to original and innovative knowledge produced through research.

Knowledge acquired a new centrality in the so-called knowledge economy, in which states compete in offering the most attractive conditions to produce research. This highlights the fact that research is never done for its own sake only; “Societal expectations are too big and all-embracing, interwoven with government priorities and policies that effect modes of financing in increasingly tighter and more sophisticated ways” (Nowotny 2016: 6). While some governments are investing quite seriously in education and knowledge, it seems clear that others pay only lip service to the necessity of having quality education and research, particularly in social sciences and humanities. The discourse on the profitability of research, in which knowledge is seen as the new critical national resource, with innovation as a goal, crucial to national economic growth (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004) has dire consequences in the regions of the world with more established research communities, but in the Arab world and in Egypt in particular it is coupled with a well-established understanding of science being an instrument for the development of the nation, while the social sciences and humanities are usually seen as relevant only for training needs of the next generation of teachers. The fact that these latter have at best an ancillary position in the current emphasis on science and research, particularly so in many developing countries, does not, however, hinder their potential for being fundamental instruments in enabling critique, nor their centrality in the construction of what appropriate knowledge is. Given the very restricted place granted to critical social knowledge within the knowledge economy, it seems thus necessary to look at the actual conditions of this knowledge production, understood here as both the knowledge produced and the conditions of its production. The role of the university in this context is more complex than ever, for even if much research is carried out in specialized research centers, and universities often in crisis cannot claim any unique role in the knowledge-making processes, they are still largely endowed with the training of research personnel, and the legitimation of research procedures and practices. Rather than being in crisis, universities seem to have acquired a new centrality, at least in the research training, in the knowledge economy.

Since its inception, the doctorate has been a key measure of knowledge acquisition and a formal credential necessary to access the field of scientific knowledge production à la Bourdieu; conditions of access and
markers of competence acquisition are central components of the sociology of knowledge in general (Swidler and Arditi 1994), and the doctorate is a crucial step in accessing the academic profession since its inception (see David Mills, this volume). In this economic and capacity-building endeavor, the doctorate has acquired a new pivotal role, with many national and international actors developing policies to enhance postgraduate education (Nerad 2012), which is then supposed to generate innovation, which in turn should bring some economic returns. “Postgraduate education and academic research are now global endeavors; not just nations but also supranational organizations, such as the United Nations (UNESCO) . . . , the European Union . . . , and the World Bank . . . , are developing policies to enhance the contributions of doctoral education to national and regional economic growth” (Nerad 2012). All this is happening in a context of globalisation, and this affects universities as well as the preparation of researchers (Altbach 2006, De Wit et al. 2017). Like the other levels of higher education, doctoral education is subjected to both external and internal forces that link it to the demands of the labor market; at the international level, this results in the well-known phenomenon of brain drain/gain (see David Mills, this volume).

Given the changing nature of academic careers and global markets, the doctoral experience has changed from a process of academic reproduction, mostly modeled on the notion of apprenticeship, to one in which the student becomes a researcher, with a recognized role, ideally among a community of peers in which knowledge is produced within a multilayered structured learning process (Nerad 2012). A paradigm shift has been occurring at a number of doctoral programs around the world, a move away from the one-to-one, top-down, master-to-apprentice learning approach and toward a structured learning process that takes place within a series of learning communities that operate at multiple levels inside and outside the university (57–58). While internationally, actual practices are far from this ideal, as this volume attests to, it is important to recognize that the PhD experience has become truly internationalized, with increased student mobility, the institutionalization of English as a lingua franca, and a move toward increasing uniformity, however contested (Nerad and Heggelund 2008). Policies promoting the role of doctoral researchers and the doctoral phase as the creative moment need to be examined throughout, since they present at the same time isomorphic aspects and interesting divergences. At the same time, closer attention needs to be paid to the different contexts, which some of the international mobile postgraduate students come from, and this volume is a first attempt at offering a grounded understanding of the research environments in sending

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countries, and of the long-lasting consequences such an ecology has on the knowledge produced within the academy.

**Knowledge production at the doctoral level in social sciences and humanities in Egypt**

This volume aims at making an intervention in these ongoing debates in a branch of the sociology of knowledge, namely the possibility of non-hegemonic social sciences, also at the methodological level; the materiality of knowledge production; and the role of doctoral studies in the process of knowledge creation, by analyzing the actual conditions of knowledge production at the doctoral level in Egypt, focusing on the social sciences and humanities. Questions of what constitutes knowledge, how it is socially constructed, and of its institutionalization in society pertain to the very core of the sociology of knowledge; a still very valid point of departure for these debates is to be found in Berger and Luckmann (1966). Anthropology has also dealt with these questions, for example, by taking knowledge to be “what a person employs to interpret and act on the world” (Barth 2002: 1). When it comes to the much narrower sense of knowledge as an intellectual activity, linked with questions of institutionalization and legitimization, that I adopt in this work, anthropology has paid more attention to how knowledge is produced outside formal institutions, to showcase alternative, subaltern and pluralist epistemologies (De Sousa Santos 2014). Without denying the merits of such studies, it seems to me that the relevance of the university in modern societies as a key institution regulating access to the labor market and to differentiated forms of legitimacy and privilege, and its impressive growth, truly at a global level, calls for an analysis of its role also outside the developed countries. Formal institutions exist in most countries in the world, and their functioning is an increasingly recognized issue of analysis in the discipline, as I discuss in what follows.

The solution to the global inequalities in the production of knowledge could seem relatively straightforward: relocate and train scholars locally, with international standards, and let them create a more equal, locally attuned knowledge (again, the Mamdani quote). This is long overdue; the critique of “metropolitan writers who gloss Third World intellectuals, ignore their role as ‘situated local agents’ and see the ‘western center’ as the only site where contests over decolonization can now take place” as formulated in 1992 by Ahmed Ajaz (quoted in Herrera and Shami 1999: 2), has definitely not lost its relevance today. Recently, studies that seek to draw attention to the global politics of knowledge production (Bhambra 2014) have begun to appear, but they still tend to focus on a critique
of Western centrum. The difficulties in doing research and producing
knowledge from outside the global centers, however, are known since de-
cades, and cannot be underestimated; political, societal, and institutional
constrains, poor research infrastructures, lack of attention for locally at-
tuned research themes, among other factors, all contribute to making the
anchorage of research and knowledge production, particularly at the so-
cial sciences and humanities level, a difficult enterprise, as I will detail
below. This book intervenes precisely in this endeavor, taking up a point
formulated by Heacock and Conte (2011, that research environments are
not to be creatively imagined but grasped in their space-time existence;
it is a matter of defining the moving framework within which research-
ners move, full of constrains and yet not determining research or writing.
In order to understand the conditions for a knowledge produced outside
of the global centers, it is thus necessary to analyze closely environment
and infrastructures that shape, without determining it, the production of
knowledge.

As I will make clear in what follows, knowledge is intended here as
a broad concept that refers both to the content of the actual disciplines
of social sciences and humanities—such as issues currently discussed in-
side the academia, the contents of legitimate PhD theses, and appropriate
topics of research for young scholars—and to the general context within
which it is produced, that is to say, the university as an institution produc-
ing knowledge and providing the conditions for producing knowledge.
The research presented here has the objective of investigating which
structures and possibilities shape the actual knowledge being produced at
the doctoral level at Egyptian public universities, taking inspiration from
Timothy Mitchell’s analysis (2002) of the field of Middle East studies in
the United States, in particular from his analysis of the ways in which
humanistic and social scientific knowledge are related to political power
and economic extraction practices. Within Middle East Studies, an atten-
tion to the materiality of knowledge or its infrastructures has begun to
emerge; an excellent example is the thorough examination of the emer-
gence and development of Middle East Studies at US universities, which
includes a discussion of the political dimension of such studies and an
analysis of PhD theses in different disciplines, provided by Shami and
Miller-Idriss (2018). Such dynamics are of course at play in other parts
of the world as well, and are of particular interest in formerly colonized
countries, where forms of domination and of knowledge production in
postcolonial situations are particularly interesting to explore.

In the Arab region, studies have begun to tackle the causes of limited
knowledge production, particularly after the Arab Human Development
Report 2003 provided a trenchant analysis of the shortcomings of the educational systems in the region. Early studies of the postindependence Arab university system already showed that teaching and research were from the outset clearly subordinated to the developing needs of the newly created states. The situation hardly changed with the advent of mass higher education and with the new technologies available. Some studies went as far as providing a list of the current problems facing research, and the issue is routinely debated in the media, as it has been through the history of the university in Egypt (in the next chapter I provide an overview of such debates); for example, a recent article focuses on the disappearance of research centers within the universities following the crackdown on foreign funding as an indirect consequence of the 2011 revolution (Al-Sayyid 2017).

To do research in the Arab region, particularly in the social sciences, is an “impossible promise,” to borrow the title of Rigas Arvanitis and Sari Hanafi’s book (2016), which collects over a decade of researches from the authors in different Arab countries. In their analysis, research is made an impossible promise by the persistence of political and societal control over knowledge production, the fear of touching religiously sensible issues, the uncertain status of academic freedom, and the configuration of the system as well as its perceived crisis. In the case of social sciences and humanities, there is a double impossibility, since to the impediments on research at large is to be added the poor consideration devoted to such disciplines. The dire picture is complicated, however, by the fact that higher education in the region is growing exponentially in both numbers and types of universities, particularly since the 1990s (Hanauer and Miller-Idriss 2011, Romani 2012 among many others), and its central role in producing knowledge is largely unchallenged (Hanafi and Arvanitis 2016). Doctoral student numbers are increasing, both those who study abroad and those who receive their education in the region, with very high degrees of mobility.

The present study focuses on the doctoral phase as a particularly significant one in the life of the institution, a crucial and formative moment in the production of knowledge, a true moment of passage between different statuses, the one of student, however graduate, and the one of scholar—as such, a liminal moment marked by a recognition of boundaries and taboos, as well as by rites of consecration. As I explain below, this research interest arose in the specific context of the 2011 revolution, seen as a moment of possibility—the object of study, at the time of project planning, being a liminal moment in the life of the institution within a broader moment of political change.
While doctoral studies exist in Egypt since a century, as I will discuss in Chapter 1, the actual conditions and modalities of doctoral education have been underexplored. It has been correctly noted that the university in Egypt has since its inception been caught between different polarities, some primarily political such as “Western imperialism (itself divided along competing national lines) versus various rival forces of internal nationalism” or “university autonomy versus state control”; another polarity has been rather socioeconomic, although has political and cultural aspects as well, namely elitism versus egalitarianism, restricted versus free and open education; and a final one is rather cultural, a polarity between “Western-influenced secular ideals versus religious ideals for the university and the society as a whole” (Reid 1990: 3). The university has always been a complex institution navigating through different and at times competing visions of knowledge, how to produce it, and of its use. Doctoral studies are a crucial component of this institution; yet, despite the prestige associated with being a PhD holder, and the competition to obtain it abroad, its importance for research is downplayed by many in the country, and is normally understood as a necessary qualification to obtain promotion into the professoriate. As I discuss in detail below, the liminal character, inscribed in the very process of obtaining a qualification, is downplayed by many as much as possible, and turned from a transformative moment into a moment of internal promotion. Having lived in the country for some years between 2007 and 2010, and having worked in universities, also in other countries of the region (Cantini 2016a, 2016b), I was routinely surprised by the absence of attention to the actual practices of training and research, with a discourse of crisis being taken as a given, when the university was generally rather present in discourses and practices, a rather central institution in official discourses and in the lives of several millions people, and in many cases as, I personally witnessed, a nonetheless functioning institution with dedicated and engaged scholars. In recent years, an attention to the ways in which state institutions function in different parts of the world has become a legitimate object of study for anthropologists, and I locate this work within this tradition (see Bierschenk and De Sardan 2014 for an overview). As I argued elsewhere for the university, doctoral studies could also be seen as a technology, a travelling model of governance and of organization (Behrends, Park, and Rottenburg 2014). This study intervenes in these debates by presenting an ethnographic inquiry into the university as a central site of knowledge production in Egypt, and into an increasingly crucial moment of knowledge production, the doctorate, an apt