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One Country, Two Worlds

CAIRO

I just had an interesting experience. I did an author's tour of Egypt, meeting with students at Cairo University, journalists at Egyptian newspapers and the Chambers of Commerce of Cairo and Alexandria to talk about the Arabic edition of a book I did on globalization.

Two images stand out from this trip. The first was riding the train from Cairo to Alexandria in a car full of middle- and upper-class Egyptians. So many of them had cell phones that kept ringing with different piercing melodies during the two-hour trip that at one point I felt like getting up, taking out a baton and conducting a cell-phone symphony. I was so rattled from ringing phones, I couldn't wait to get off the train. Yet, while all these phones were chirping inside the train, outside we were passing along the Nile, where barefoot Egyptian villagers were tilling their fields with the same tools and water buffalo that their ancestors used in Pharaoh's day. I couldn't imagine a wider technology gap within one country. Inside the train it was A.D. 2000, outside it was 2000 B.C.

The other image was visiting Youssef Boutros-Ghali, Egypt's MIT-trained minister of economy. When I arrived at his building the elevator operator, an Egyptian peasant, was waiting for me at the elevator, which

Egypt: between Nile and Net.

he operated with a key. Before he turned it on, though, to take me up to the minister's office, he whispered the Koranic verse "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate." To a Westerner, it is unnerving to hear your elevator operator utter a prayer before he closes the door, but for him this was a cultural habit, rooted deep in his tradition. Again, the contrast: Mr. Boutros-Ghali is the most creative, high-tech driver of globalization in Egypt, but his elevator man says a prayer before taking you up to his office.

These scenes captured the dichotomy I found throughout Egypt: While its small, cell-phone-armed, globalizing elites are definitely pushing to get online and onto the global economic train, most others fear they will be left behind or lose their identity trying to catch it. Indeed I was struck, after a week of discussing both the costs and benefits of globalization, by how most Egyptians, including many intellectuals, could see only the costs. The more I explained globalization, the more

they expressed unease about it. It eventually hit me that I was encountering what anthropologists call "systemic misunderstanding." Systemic misunderstanding arises when your framework and the other person's framework are so fundamentally different that it cannot be corrected by providing more information.

The Egyptians' unease about globalization is rooted partly in a justifiable fear that they lack the technological base to compete. But it's also rooted in something cultural — and not just the professor at Cairo University who asked me "Does globalization mean we all have to become Americans?" It goes deeper.

Many Americans can easily identify with modernization, technology and the Internet because one of the most important things these do is increase individual choices. At their best, they empower and emancipate the individual. But for traditional societies, such as Egypt's, the collective, the group, is much more important than the individual, and empowering the individual is equated with dividing the society. So "globalizing" for them not only means being forced to eat more Big Macs, it means changing the relationship of the individual to his state and community in a way that they feel is socially disintegrating. □

"Does globalization mean we just leave the poor to fend for themselves?" one educated Egyptian woman asked me. "How do we privatize when we have no safety nets?" asked a professor. When the government here says it is "privatizing" an industry, the instinctive reaction of Egyptians is that something is being stolen from the state, says an official.

After enough such conversations I realized that most Egyptians — understandably — were approaching globalization out of a combination of despair and necessity, not out of any sense of opportunity. Globalization meant adapting to a threat coming from the outside, not increasing their own freedoms. I also realized that their previous ideologies — Arab nationalism, Socialism, Fascism or Communism — while they may have made no economic sense, had a certain inspirational power. But globalism totally lacks this. When you tell a traditional society it has to streamline, downsize and get with the Internet, it is a challenge that is devoid of any redemptive or inspirational force.

And that is why, for all of globalization's obvious power to elevate living standards, it is going to be a tough, tough sell to all those millions who still say a prayer before they ride the elevator. □