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- 1 The topic of knowledge production in the Arab region is gradually becoming part of the research agenda, particularly after the publication of the 2003 Arab Human Development Report that denounced its dire conditions. Sari Hanafi and Rigas Arvanitis, building on previous projects initiated more than ten years ago, take up the challenge of explaining the reasons behind it, with the aim of providing an overarching and complex picture of the actual conditions of knowledge production in the region. This book seeks to explain the paradox of research being a consistently marginalized activity, particularly in the social sciences, against the backdrop of the emergence, in the last twenty years, of a pool of researchers actually trained on a par with their western peers by looking at the research environment, the most important subject of the book (p. 11). Importantly, the authors do not intend to carry out an evaluation, but to critically assess the role and dynamics of research (p. 14), focusing mostly on Lebanon, although Egypt and, to a lesser degree, also Jordan, the Maghreb and some Gulf countries are considered.
- 2 The major issue revealed in their researches, the authors write, is that “the cycle between research, universities and society has been broken” (p. 158), and this is the result of a fragmented, and small in scale, research landscape in each Arab country – an assemblage of fragile, somewhat disconnected and constantly under-resourced institutions (p. 161). Despite the theoretical availability of talent under the form of “thousands of leading scholars”, there “are no tendencies toward improving higher education by utilizing national intellectual resources” (Zahlan 2012: 165, quoted on n. 7

p. 21). A critical and reflexive analysis of the research environments in different Arab countries is therefore timely and necessary.

- 3 The book is divided in 10 chapters organised in two parts, including the conclusion, plus an introduction, ten pages of graphs and figures (appendices), the bibliography and a thematic index, which is very useful since many topics appear at different points in the book. The introduction sets the context to understand the importance of the researches presented in the volume, and explains in detail the methodologies used in the past studies that constitute the backbone of the book; the structure of the book is presented, perhaps a bit too quickly.
- 4 The first part of the book explores “Arab research dynamics”, and consists of four chapters: the first presents indicators and data on the research landscapes in some Arab countries. The second focuses on scientific publications, one of the most common indicators of research productivity. The third one provides an analysis of both the institution where most research is happening, the university, and an overview of the conditions of researchers, paying particular attention to the phenomenon of the research diaspora. Finally, the fourth is devoted to the practice of research in Lebanon, the main case study of the book.
- 5 The second part of the book examines the development of social sciences in the region, and includes five chapters. The first deals with what the authors define as the forms of compartmentalization of the social sciences, and attempts at describing their condition following the definition of sociology proposed by Michael Burawoy (pp. 216-219). The second and third chapter of this part deal with publications, analyzing the articles submitted to *Idafat, the Arab Journal of Sociology*, edited by one of the authors, and with the marginalization of Arabic language. The last two chapters present case studies, the first focusing on knowledge production about the Arab uprisings and the different citation patterns in the three languages analyzed (Arabic, English, and French), and the other on Lebanese social scientists publishing op-eds in national and international newspapers. The tenth concluding chapter links back to the introduction, and discusses the social environment of research in the Arab world, highlighting the need of analyzing its audiences and its goals.
- 6 The role of social sciences is one main theme in the book, which seeks to address the “absence of self-reflexivity” (p. 14) in this and other domains. The weak status, funding, and production in the social sciences is a given, with perhaps the Maghreb countries as exception. The authors note that most of consultancy work, policy oriented and generally foreign funded, is done in the social sciences, and little of it is published (p. 192), although they note that the funding structure in many countries is quickly changing (pp. 76-82), and it is changing what constitutes relevant knowledge. Moreover, social sciences suffer from a weak status due to their colonial origin, with some indigenous social science groups emerging only in the ‘70s. While this could be argued otherwise, it is undebatable that throughout the region there are two main forces delegitimizing social sciences – taking advantage of their two main weaknesses, the colonial origin and the question of foreign funding – namely “the authoritarian political elite and some ideological groups such as certain religious authorities” (p. 213). “Principled social scientists have been sent to prison, exiled or assassinated” (p. 214), and even when governments are not openly hostile, they pay little attention to social scientists who are not ready to offer themselves as problem-solvers. Religious authorities, from their side, “have often felt threatened by social scientists as the two

groups competed over discourse on society” (*Ibid*). This hostile environment is a major determinant in the decision to emigrate (p. 151-158). The “Arab revolution”, too quickly discussed, could not alter this situation, despite the role of disillusioned teachers and students in triggering it.

- 7 The authors present us a complex book, perhaps containing several books in one – and this is both a critique, since there is sometimes a lack of thread and of cohesion among chapters, and a recognition of its strength – it is a mine of information, sources and methodologies, and it is not difficult to imagine that it will become a necessary reference for any study in the field of knowledge production in the Arab region. Despite some confusion on the use of terms – while the reader is told that the book does not focus on “science”, “innovation” nor “knowledge economy” (p. 15), but only on how research is working, both science and knowledge recur often; moreover, it is not always clear whether the book deals with sciences *tout court* or only with social sciences – and the fact that some crucial themes, such as the role of postgraduate studies, are examined too quickly, this is clearly a seminal work, that paves the way for the opening of a field of study.
- 8 Apart from its offering a panoramic view of the state of research in Arab countries, an almost self-evident importance of the book is the fact that it clearly shows that knowledge is created, not a given, and necessitates infrastructures and environments, which can be improved in the context of international cooperation. It is worth noting that it was originally published in Arabic (Arvanitis and Hanafi, 2015), in an attempt at making these reflections available to the first public to which they are devoted to, namely the Arabic-speaking research communities, in Lebanon and beyond, to “trigger a wider reflection on the status of research in the Arab countries” (p. 14). Finally, its explicit discussion of methodologies encourages other researchers to use and challenge them in pushing further the reflexive, political, and sorely needed analysis of the role of research in this part of the world – in the belief that “the internationalization raises fewer problems in terms of incompatibility of the Western concepts that have been forged in specific contexts of the European nation states, than in terms of sociological and institutional environments and challenges influencing researchers in the global south” (p. 304).

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