The discourse on education in Egypt uses key terms such as reform and crisis. It is rare to find a society that is satisfied with its educational system. What seems important here is the debate on what is or is not related to education. In other words, to what extent education is considered among the major causes of societal problems or, as the magic solution to these problems.

On the one hand, educational policies are mainly guided by socio-economic orientations and the Egyptian case is nothing but the illustration of this choice that may emerge in a neo-liberal context. On the other hand, this debate is embedded in what seems to be competitive cultural choices and the figures of local terms and the global terms of identity. The Islamic idiom here plays the role of a common language, but it does not impinge on the meanings of the key terms of this language. Finally, the ongoing educational debate takes place in a society characterized by a high rate of illiteracy, and the education controversy is familiar to Egypt since the 1930s.

One can identify three points in this debate. First, it seems that those who produce knowledge about education are very much concerned with the shift of the national discourse and the knowledge they have acquired via schooling. The only type of discourse that gives room to such a testimony seems to be autobiographies. But this kind of literature shares another feature of the ‘objective’ discourse. It is the assumption that the past is always better than the present. Here again, one may wonder about this vision of history based on steady regression. Finally, as for the participation in this public debate, we note the absence of some of the main actors: schoolteachers are hardly present, as if being only part of the problem.

Reconsidering Polarities

It is quite simplistic to reduce the debate to the opposition between two options: setting tradition against modernity, or even allegedly secular against religious views of the world. This goes for trends within the State’s apparatus itself. Supporters of the social agenda of neoliberalism perceive education as a way to correct some side-effects of economic liberalization. They are more concerned with social exclusion than poverty and they call for the partial withdrawal of the State and the introduction of an economic rationality, which may belong to Islamic or to secular trends as well. Those who defined education as a means of privileging social strata and to establish a social order as a social right and the role of the State as guarantor. Here also, cultural options are not homogeneous. When it comes to social choices, the extreme views, either neo-liberal or exclusively state-centred, are quite marginal and there is room for consensus on the centrality of education in realizing competing objectives ranging from equality to the formation of a highly qualified elite. There is a common concern about both development and identity whatever their definition is, and the educational debate shows similarities in antagonistic opinions.

One estimation of the role of schools seems closely related to the self-perception of the Egyptian elite. What seems more difficult to understand is the fact that Egypt is often per- ceived by its elite as characterized by millenaria- 

The discourses on education and health in Egypt are considered among the major causes of social problems and the magic solution to these problems.