



Sorry, academia is not relevant to the system!

By Hanan Badr

As I was intensively writing a paper on critical incidents in journalism, I found myself engulfed in a historic one. It gave me a sense of humility and reminded me of how vulnerable humans are. Not that I need any reminders of my vulnerability as a female academic mum seeking tenure in a niche field combining communication & journalism studies and the Middle East studies.

Berlin on the verge of a shutdown! After all cultural and educational institutions announced closing, the pandemic transcended jokes about toilet paper and pasta. I find myself rushing into my office with large IKEA bags in the early evening to get the BA and MA thesis and countless term papers I need to grade from the home office in the next weeks. I have been through the Cairo 1984 riots as a kid, the 1992/3 earthquakes and their aftermath, the post-Tahrir Revolution curfew, and now Corona. Something was in the air and it felt a little apocalyptic, but also poetic.

The global disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic made me discover two things the hard way. First, a force majeure will shatter my carefully crafted plans of travel, my long-term appointments, and the myth of eternal growth. I had booked tickets, secured a visa, and arranged babysitting preparing for my planned -now postponed- Kluge Fellowship at DC.

The other sobering fact I discovered when the pandemic started was that academia was not critical to the system (system relevant in German), at least not for the German system, and not initially. Teaching, not research, was added later to the list of professions that are eligible for the emergency daycare. While I do admire Germany's cool-headed policies in controlling the pandemic, not including academia as a profession relevant for society felt like a slap on the face. My lifework of teaching and research in the past 15 years was suddenly not considered important to society. Teaching students, future journalists, and media experts seems not to be important enough for the state to recognize the need for academic mums to apply for the emergency daycare. As a non-tenured academic living and working in Berlin, I am feverishly working to root my academic profile in my new home. Coaching programs describe my late decision to move from Cairo to Berlin, with an intermezzo of Arab Spring turbulence, as a broken biography instead of unique tri-lingual expertise and exposure. Lacking a social network of relatives and people, and not being eligible for even brief daycare means giving up the most valuable thing: time.

Imbalances in academia

Initially, I had a central thought: How do academic mums and dads with kids under 10 years cope with home office while looking after themselves and loved ones in this difficult time? While I know this sounds like a luxurious problem compared to real hardships for the unemployed, homeless, sick, and other less fortunate, lacking solutions to create time for the workload that does not end at 5 pm caused distress for lots of scholars and their families, ours included. Weeks later, finally, someone finally said it. Only a journal as big as Nature is taken seriously when it states the obvious: Women academics will suffer the most during the crisis because lacking time to finish writing projects will block their advancement. The author said exactly all I wanted to say!

While I found salvage in Aisha Ahmad's article "Why You Should Ignore All That Coronavirus-Inspired Productivity Pressure" I oscillated between mindful meditation and frantic checks of my to-do-list. Talking with colleagues it was a relief to know that I was not alone. But still, a circulating meme gave me a bitter-sweet smile, and only parents among my friends' list liked it.



Source: Marina Neagu

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10157430673393823&set=a.10150590571768823&type=3&theater>

Eventually, I learned how to stay productive, although I know it is ok not to be during a pandemic: my husband working in a corporate environment had binding working hours, I had the flexible ones. I often stayed up until 4 a.m. finalizing the writing or grading I could not finish while juggling other tasks during the daytime.

Dosing pandemic news

Many days I was so drained, and it felt like heavy fog on my head until I learned to limit my initial corona-obsession in my micro-world. I avoided the statistic driven media

coverage of Covid-19 which dehumanized people and distorted contexts. It did not even count the cases proportionally to the national populations. Only slowly did media start covering issues like poverty, inequality, and consequences of savage deregulation, instead we, individuals, carried the weight of acting responsibly.

Keeping the news to the necessary minimum to save the thin normalcy left in my life helped to give me a sense of control over whatever was left to control: little culinary victories, enjoying a flower on my desk, revisiting forgotten music, connecting with old school friends. This reminded me of a central scene in one of my favorite films *One Fine Day*, where Michelle Pfeiffer dismisses to be over-controlling, as accused by George Clooney. She defiantly corrects him that she is juggling diverse fields of her life, work, motherhood, wellbeing. To me, the metaphor of a juggler seems accurate at this point during the corona-crisis. I do not need more balls in my face, there are already enough up in the air. I do not need an additional corona uncertainty hovering over my head. But I have learned one more thing during Corona time: one of the Corona-imposed effects is that kids started popping up into professional video conferences, which did only cause some laughs, but also humanized colleagues and made me see a softer side I rarely see, for example, the vulnerable, the laughing or the emotional parent. When kids and work mixed, we normalized that family and work belong to the same vita, and that being a parent is human. We need to normalize that having baby breaks is nothing to be ashamed of, that especially young women, who have two and three kids can still

have a career, despite what their bosses and society think. No need to hide parental leaves in the CV. We need more children at workplaces to make them happier places.

“In Europe and advanced countries...”

One of the Occidentalism fallacies many Arabs share is that Westerners are superior in all that they do: discipline, work morale, and honesty. A famous character’s line from a 1990s Egyptian comedy blockbuster called “Terrorism and Kebab” summarizes this fallacy most: a man starts each of his sentences saying “In Europe and advanced countries this or that does not happen” referring to Egypt as a shadow of what it could be, as a negative case of what advanced countries are. Exposed to media coverage on COVID-10 and its consequences I know that people are people everywhere, rendering the advanced people into a myth. There is a country that has transparent laws and a country that does not. Even in Germany people lie. A father hid that he came from the German epicenter to admit his son to a treatment center for children. Eventually, the disease spread, and the whole hospital was evacuated stopping the treatment for more than 60 kids. This could have equally happened in Egypt, too. Images of pre-apocalyptic scare and empty supermarkets only rendered visible the bliss of stability and abundance in post-industrialized countries. In countries with limited resources and instability, we see pictures of chaos and fear every day. People are people everywhere!

Worrying for two homes: an old home, and one in the making

Having the privilege of bi-cultural socialization is enriching, but also doubles the worries. I worry about my family members who still live in Egypt. Eerie pictures of quarantined Cairene downtown neighborhoods where I grew up in, that was always buzzing with life, give me the chill. Egypt is one of the highest numbers of COVID-19 cases in Africa. Despite the daily phone calls to assure that my dad is well the rising numbers of asymptomatic cases and stalling tests seem alarming. Gradually the weight of this global pandemic weighs on me. As Aisha Ahmad wrote: “Global catastrophes change the world, and this pandemic is very much akin to a major war. Even if we contain the COVID-19 crisis within a few months, the legacy of this pandemic will live with us for years, perhaps decades to come. It will change the way we move, build, learn, and connect. There is simply no way that our lives will resume as if this had never happened.”

With the numbers of new COVID-19 cases decreasing in Germany, authorities are easing the regulations for childcare beyond system-critical professions (that obviously academics did not belong to) after almost 8 weeks of full kindergarten closure. On top of everything in my hands: writing, reviews, etc., I found myself immersed into the investigation of a 10-page document written in administrative German (Behördendeutsch) to decipher the regulations on the hows, whys, and ifs on returning preschoolers, to see whether it applies on my son or not. Another hour of invisible

labour. While no end of the conditioned lockdown is in sight, so far have learned a lot during the quarantine. If it was not so sad it would have been a privilege to tell my grandchildren someday that we survived COVID-19 amid other struggles of homemaking and layers of vulnerabilities.



Works Cited

Aisha S. Ahmad, Why You Should Ignore All That Coronavirus-Inspired Productivity Pressure

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-You-Should-Ignore-All-That/248366>

Alessandra Minello, The pandemic and the female academic.

https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-01135-9?fbclid=IwAR3DwKR3JGKv1pI7INUPLCujbsK_g-n7eX0IrobtTNlwZtDsFn2DjAqWquU