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A Radical Journal of Geography

Book Review Symposium

Mona Atia, *Building a House in Heaven: Pious Neoliberalism and Islamic Charity in Egypt*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013. ISBN 978-0-8166-8917-0 (paper); ISBN 978-0-8166-8915-6 (cloth)

On Gender Politics, Transnational Geographies, and Ethnographies of Refusal

Mona Atia's new book is an exquisite pleasure to read. *Building a House in Heaven* is a beautifully written, intricate analysis of neoliberalizing processes in conjunction with Islamic charity practices in Egypt. It effectively explains Egypt's contemporary political-economy, and simultaneously—indeed, seamlessly—contributes to theorizing the state, the economy, and broader discourses of religion. Not only is the book important and exciting for scholars who specialize in the study of contemporary Egypt and Islamic charity, but it is also inspiring for thinking expansively and creatively across the fields of economic geography, development geography, and religious studies. It should be required reading for scholars exploring the intersections of political-economy and religion.

The book is a conjunctural analysis in Stuart Hall's sense of the phrase (see Hall and Massey 2012). It refuses to presume that the modalities of Islamic charity in Egypt are a result per se of neoliberal reforms, or that neoliberal formations are predetermined by Islamic charitable practices. The question at the heart of the book is how religious and capitalist subjectivities are *merging* to create what Atia terms "pious neoliberalism": "a new compatibility between business and piety that is not specific to any religion, but

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

rather is the result of the ways religion and economy are intersecting in the contemporary moment” (p.xvi). She challenges conceptions of charity that oppose it to economy, and instead argues that charitable acts *are* economic practices.

Islamic charities have become more necessary as poverty and inequality have grown in Egypt in recent decades. At the same time, charities have increasingly embraced market-oriented mechanisms for the delivery of their support and services. As faith-based social service organizations adopt individualizing notions of responsibility in which the poor are expected to help themselves, religious practices themselves are reshaped in line with principles of privatization, productivity, and efficiency. Along with the deepening marketization of the global political-economy, faith itself is increasingly expressed in the growth of private mosques, a rapidly expanding Islamic lifestyle market, and increasing numbers of private faith-based charitable foundations. Thus, rather than understanding the practices of Islamic associations as *alternatives* to those of Western development organizations, Atia demonstrates that Islamic associations have long been actively incorporating developmentalist principles into their work. As she puts it, her work highlights the *compatibility* between Islamism and neoliberalism.¹

Here I raise just three of the many questions that the book inspired in me. First, I am interested in the book’s relative neglect of gender politics. Although the epilogue effectively engages the feminist geographical literature on positionality and reflexivity, I wondered why these insights were left until the end. How did these ideas get added to

¹ Similar dynamics linking neoliberalizing trajectories with the quasi-statist growth of religious organizations are also evident in places beyond Egypt, including notably conservative faith-based organization in the United States (Hackworth 2012) and religiously-inflected business training methods in Indonesia (Rudnyckj 2010).

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

the mix when they did, and how might the overall analysis have shifted if feminist work was made more central from the outset? In my view, these are important questions because the gendering of pious neoliberal subject formations has clear consequences for the intersections of religion and political-economy. I would have been interested to see more attention to the ways in which the “compatibilities between faith and market” depend upon shared—or contradictory—gender ideologies, norms, subjectivities, and exclusions. What forms of masculine, feminine, or heteronormative subjection are internalized by pious neoliberal subjects, and how do these subjects figure in the landscape of Islamic revival? How have gendered expectations combined with notions of moral giving or social justice, and what are some material implications of who counts as a legitimate economic actor? To be fair, this focus would have led to a different book, but I am curious to know Atia’s thoughts about whether additional, vital insights could have emerged via a more overtly gendered lens.

Second, I am interested in migrants’ remittances and the transnational geographies of “pious neoliberal subjects”. At a few points the book notes the importance of migrants’ incomes from the Gulf in shaping emergent class-specific notions of pious financial practice. Specifically, upper-middle class youth who earned or received remittance income abroad began to forge new ethical standards that allowed them to justify holding onto their interest-earning bank accounts, a practice considered forbidden (*haram*) in Islamic doctrine. In order to purify the profits they earned as interest, they increased their alms-giving (*zakat*). At what scale are Egyptian migrant subjects doing their banking? Do they have bank accounts in both their home countries and the countries where they work? Do they feel the need to purify their profits regardless of

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

where the income is earned, banked, or remitted? If youth are receiving remittances from parents who are working abroad, are there generational tensions around banking and tithing ethics and geographies? The country in which a migrant works affects their banking and charitable giving beliefs and practices, and thus attention to these migrants could potentially further our understanding of the ways that economic subjectivities, behaviors, ethics, and pieties travel transnationally.

Third, the book is framed as an “ethnography of encompassment”. It focuses on the “processes through which governmentality (by state and nonstate actors) is both legitimated and undermined by reference to claims of superior spatial reach and vertical height” (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 995, quoted on p.xxxi). Egypt’s neoliberalizing religious and economic systems combine to produce and discipline the pious neoliberal subject. I wanted to know whether there are not also ethnographies of refusal that are possible and equally significant. Would the analysis change substantially if instead of emphasizing themes of encompassment and governmentality, the book sought to provide an ethnography of fissures and productive contradictions, ways that religious subjects challenge or confront privatization processes, for example? Might certain refusals of piety or neoliberalization matter tremendously for imagining and producing non-conforming, less disciplined, perhaps oppositional subjectivities? Is there a way for political imaginaries to begin to move beyond the trappings of pious neoliberalism? These are enormous questions, of course, but it is a mark of the book’s exceptional quality that it pushes us to grapple with them. Geographers, and colleagues in neighboring fields, owe Atia a major debt of gratitude for giving us such an illuminating and important work.

Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

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