

# Antipode

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)

### **From Thick Description to the Future of Egypt**

*Islamic Ethics and the Spirit of Neoliberalism* is not the title of this brilliant book, and I think I understand why now. Ever since working with Mona Atia when she was a graduate student at the University of Washington in Seattle, I have been urging her to consider making more of the parallels with Max Weber's famous treatise on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. And there remain a number of important points of comparison, including a key one highlighted in the book relating to Weber's reflections on Protestant protestations against time-wasting. These, Atia argues, clearly have their echoes in Egyptian Islamic televangelism calling the faithful to take responsibility as individuals for profitable personal time management. "The similarities", she concludes on page 195, "between the rhetoric of neoliberal Islamism and Weber's analysis of the Protestant ethic in relation to 'productive' capitalism [are] startling." But this compelling point is made in a footnote, and it is not the main thesis of the book at all. Instead, Atia offers readers a distinctly non-Weberian analysis of the intersections of neoliberalization, religious transformation, and a whole host of cultural dynamics ranging from the most intimate cultural politics of gender and self-formation in Egypt to global

# Antipode

## A Radical Journal of Geography

geopolitics and associated discourses and debates over post-Arab Spring, post-Washington Consensus dissensus.

As a materialist-feminist-postcolonial intervention the book also offers welcome relief from the rather repetitive recent deliberations in critical geography over how best to mix macro Marxian analysis of neoliberal structural forces and political-economic reforms with more micro investigations of the contextual contingencies and cultural complexities amidst which actually existing neoliberalization processes are at once constructed and contested. Rather than rehash another literature review or abstract restatement of such tensions, and rather than just talk about the need for more empirical work on the ground, Atia takes us to the empirical grounds with ethnographic care, linguistic fluency, and rich area studies knowledge that is all at the same time elegantly theorized. The critical care here is for adequately representing and analyzing the overdetermination of affect, economy and ethics rather than for using “care” talk as an exit from following the money and combining radical political economy with attention to diverse social power relations. And the fieldwork that supports all this representation and analysis is care-full indeed.

From her detailed description of the landscape overlayings represented by the Rabi`a al-`Adawiyya Mosque complex, to her savvy self-reflective account of discovering a directory of Islamic NGOs in Cairo, to her summary of the contradictions presented by the concatenations of Islam and capitalist consumerism in Cairo’s shopping malls–City Stars’ Santas, food courts and Islamic charity tables, for example–Atia repeatedly uses a mix of archival documents, street-level neighborhood observations and evidence from ethnographic encounters to great analytical effect. In fact the book is for

# Antipode

## A Radical Journal of Geography

the same reason an excellent model to use for teaching qualitative methods. Rather than “code the data” in vain (sometimes inane) emulation of hard science hypothesis testing, Atia shows us that the data is always-already overcoded and that the important work of fieldwork therefore involves carefully situated and self-reflective efforts to decode it, however incompletely. Her description and analysis of the space and time for giving at the start of the third chapter is an especially impressive example in this regard.

First she takes us with her to the floor of the mosque with its dark green carpet:

“As a visitor, I am allowed to sit on one of the chairs. Every first Tuesday or Thursday of the month, upward of 200 women swarm into the mosque to receive their aid. They must first attend a brief sermon [*khutba*] given by one of the Quranic reading-group leaders [*da`iya*] and then perform the noon prayer. The look of dread is apparent on many of their frowning faces, sweat dribbling down their black *abayas* [loose traditional cloaks], as they kneel on the ground, waiting impatiently. After the prayer, the women’s names are called out one by one, and each woman must present an ID card to the Hagga, sign on the line indicating her monthly aid amount, and verify the address and number of children.” (p.55)

This is thick ethnographic description at its best. But, with apologies to Clifford Geertz (1973), I would argue that it also quickly becomes smart, theoretically-informed, description too: illuminating social and economic tensions in the Mosque, suggesting that funding more than faith brought the women’s attention to the sermons, and proceeding analytically to see through their “look of dread” into the grafting of morality, economics

# Antipode

## A Radical Journal of Geography

and gendered subjectivity formation within what Atia describes as the neoliberalization of *zakat*—the age-old collective alms-giving practice and pillar of Islam that has been transformed today, according to the book’s main argument, into a tool for inculcating entrepreneurialism and individualized self-responsibilization:

“The veiled recipients attended prayers, listened to sermons, and followed the orders of the Hagga because they knew that the *zakat* committee members had discretion over how strict or lax they were with respect to contingencies for aid. The women thus performed such technologies of the self and complied with invasive social research practices that investigated the details of the situation home life and neediness.” (p.56)

The analyses of pious neoliberalism proceed like this throughout the book. As such they also continue into some provocative reflections in the conclusion about the aftermath of the Arab Spring in Egypt. Just as pious neoliberal charity administrators emphasized efficiency, planning and productive development in their interviews with Atia, she notes that the young revolutionaries of Tahrir Square and other sites of urban uprising used similar language and ideas. The book ends up by arguing in this way that significant neoliberal continuities have persisted from the end of the Mubarak regime through to the military coup that subsequently removed Morsi himself from office. “The revolutionaries did not get the kind of secular technocratic government many envisioned”, argues Atia. “But they did get a technocratic government nonetheless. Even after the 2013 ousting of Muhammad Morsi, one point of continuity was that Egypt would continue to be ruled by

# Antipode

## A Radical Journal of Geography

‘experts’. Pious neoliberal subjectivity played an important role in both the Egyptian uprising and the political aftermath” (p.163). This gloss on Timothy Mitchell (2002) on the “rule of experts” in Egypt suggests in turn that pious neoliberalism has now become an important part of expert common sense in the country, so entrenched in the ruling order that it has endured to enframe a series of leadership agendas through all the seasons of Arab Spring, Summer, Autumn and what might now be described as a very a brutal Winter.

What comes next for Egypt seems especially hard to tell amidst all the current turmoil and suffering in the region more generally. But as Western pundits continue to use orientalist stereotypes to argue that Islamic countries need globalization to counter their supposed backwardness, Atia’s arguments about pious neoliberalism provide an important reminder that many Islamic traditions have already been radically remade in and by market mechanisms. For the same reason, they are also of equal importance as the foundation for her own next steps as a researcher (funded by a NSF Career grant) examining poverty mapping in Egypt. As global agencies and NGOs seek to get more poverty reduction bang for their development buck, and as they do so in part by replacing military targeting with aid targeting practices that are all about ROI, Atia’s awareness about where such neoliberal investment ideas come from and already go in Egypt appears especially important indeed.

### References

Geertz C (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

Mitchell T (2002) *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity*. Berkeley:  
University of California Press

*Matthew Sparke*  
*Department of Geography*  
*University of Washington*  
*sparke@uw.edu*

*October 2014*