

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)

Author's Response

I would like to thank Heba Bou-Akar for organizing the “Author Meets Critics” session at the 2014 Association of American Geographers annual meeting from which these written reviews emerged; Katie Wells for organizing the written forum; and finally each of the reviewers for such generous readings of the book. They each offered insightful interpretations of the manuscript’s merits and absences, and I would like to take this opportunity to address just a few of the provocations offered in the reviews.

It is difficult for me to discuss the book without commenting on the massacre that occurred at Raba al-Adiwaya, as it was one of my primary field sites and I spent a great deal of time in the mosque’s *zakat* committee, hospital and adjacent community buildings that housed smaller Islamic associations. On my last trip to Cairo in June 2013, I was unable to visit the site, as it had become the campground for defending the soon to be ousted President Morsi. On 15 August 2013, the mosque became a battlefield, as security forces opened fire on protestors who had been camping-out there for 45 days. While Raba had clearly taken on new roles and functions, different from those that I describe in the book, the fact that it became a symbol of the Islamist movement in Egypt is telling. One crucial argument I made in the book is that the space

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of the mosque was a crucial site of community, whether the purpose was for prayer, social services, organizing, protest or contestation. New generations of social actors were moving charity and religious practice outside of the space of the mosque and into everyday spaces, and yet the mosque remained one of the most important spaces for everyday interaction. Three years after the Egyptian people demanded bread, freedom and justice in Tahrir Square, and one year after the reinscription of the military state, the spirit of both places has been obliterated in the name of security and stability. While it is difficult to remain optimistic about the future of Egypt, for me the events that ensued show most aptly the success of the Mubarak regime in creating a polarized society, one that would acquiesce to incumbent military rule.

Given the current political backlash against the Brotherhood in Egypt, I feel particularly chagrin that I did not engage more fully with the literature regarding transformations in the Islamic tradition and the politicization of Islamic associations. Chapter 1 was not meant to imply, as Moutaz read it, that the social justice paradigm of the 1960s was a “truer” model. But quite the contrary, my aim was to argue against the teleological reading of Islamic texts that was recited to me ad nauseam, and instead to show the malleability of Islamic economics to the prevailing political-economic paradigm at any given time. And it was precisely for this reason that my book focused on the current convergence of Islamism and neoliberalism. A more robust plethora of archival material perhaps would have strengthened this argument.

I do appreciate that perhaps in my attempt to theorize pious neoliberalism I gave it too much coherence. I am, however, grateful that I was able to present my ethnographic evidence in such a manner that readers are able to see the fissures and contradictions for themselves. As Silvey suggests, perhaps more attention to the “ethnographies of refusal”—of the fissures and political contradictions—would have allowed my fieldwork to speak more adeptly to the events

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that ensued during the Arab Spring. As Sparke so aptly put it, the turn against the Brotherhood and the return of military rule is not a revolt against moral policing and religiosity, but rather is an active reinscribing of the boundaries of religious authority and morality in Egypt. While it was certainly my intention to engage productively with the literature on neoliberalism, I am acutely aware of the backlash against the concept and therefore deem that my choice to center my contributions around the concept of “pious neoliberalism” dilutes the other principal contributions of the book. In this sense I agree with the reviewers’ observations that there are many missed opportunities to engage with other debates in the book, particularly around religiosity and gender.

There is certainly a gendered nature to pious neoliberal subject formation, and I found it interesting that Sparke read this quite centrally in the text while Silvey noted its absences. I experienced this gendering firsthand in my fieldwork, as a woman attempting to gain access to the male-dominated field of Islamic economics. I was forced to navigate the terrain quite sensitively, and this is why I explain the influence of feminist literatures on my interpretation and the layered insider-outsider dynamics that shape my analysis in an appendix. This gendered aspect of Islamic subject formation has been covered quite aptly by Saba Mahmood’s (2004) book, *Politics of Piety*, and the ensuing debates that highlight the complexity of Islamic subject formation amongst women in Cairo. To have a gendered analysis is not to simply study women but to comprehend how gender enters into the subtext. Although gender is not a primary axes of analysis, it is present. I also reckon that focusing more explicitly on the gendered nature of subject formation would have undermined what is already a multifaceted analysis of Islamic charity. Ultimately my hope is that the manuscript elucidates the relationship between the state,

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religion and economic practice in Egypt and paves the way for even more nuanced studies of Islamic charity in other contexts.

Reference

Mahmood S (2004) *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Mona Atia
Elliott School of International Affairs
George Washington University
atia@gwu.edu

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