



## Colonial Aftermaths: Gender, Geopolitics and Hegemony in the Middle-East

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**Colonial Aftermaths: Gender, Geopolitics and Hegemony in the Middle-East**, by S Salem, Cambridge University Press, 2020, pp.312, Hbk. £75.00, ISBN: 9781108491518

**Embodying Geopolitics: Generations of Women's Activism in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon**, by N Pratt, University of California Press, 2020, pp.328, ISBN: 9780520281769

### Reviewing the Post-colonial

This review discusses two novel contributions to a post-colonial understanding of geopolitics in the Middle-East: “Anticolonial Afterlives in Egypt: The Politics of Hegemony” by Sara Salem and “Embodying geopolitics: Generations of women’s activism in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon” by Nicola Pratt. Both books analyse the economy, rules, political institutions, societal dynamics and popular resistance through a post-colonial lens, showing the importance of what Bhambra (2014) calls connected sociologies. That is a historical approach that seeks to avoid universalist and Eurocentric claims about history, following instead those mutually constructed events that constitute world politics, including postcolonial hierarchies, forms of resistance and interconnectedness. Although the books take a different approach to studying socio-political transformation in the Middle-East – with Salem’s book using hegemony as a framework and Pratt’s discussing embodied gender politics – the books also speak to each other in beautiful ways.

Salem’s book proposes to combine Gramsci’s theory of hegemony with Fanon’s post-colonial insights, to gain a better understanding of anti-colonial politics in Egypt and how these politics continue to be relevant today. Placing Frantz Fanon, Avery Gordon and Antonio Gramsci in one room (or one book), the book embarks on a historical journey describing Egypt’s political and economic trajectories between the 1952 and 2011 revolutions. Salem’s understanding of hegemony – the moment when a particular social force goes beyond its narrow interests to universalize their project, creating consent among other social forces and subaltern groups (41) – tries to understand the material and ideological underpinnings of hegemony in a post-colonial context. The main argument of the book is to understand how President Nasser was able to construct a hegemonic bloc during his rule after decolonization, while other subsequent ruling elites failed to build consent for their political agendas, resulting ultimately, and inevitably, in the 2011 revolution. Here Frantz Fanon enters the room as Salem analyses how the ruling elites should be understood in their colonial context as a colonial bourgeois class. The ruling elite in Egypt not only failed to create consent for their neoliberal political agenda but were also deeply colonial and tied to transnational capitalist elites rather than national groups or interests.

In *Embodying Geopolitics*, Pratt foregrounds women’s activism in Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan, giving a new dimension to geopolitics and the current debates about gender. Similarly, to Salem’s book, *Embodying Geopolitics* commences and grounds itself in the post-colonial context of these countries. The colonial politics, and subsequently the decolonization processes, have had a great impact on historical and contemporary understandings of gender. Explaining the concept of embodied geopolitics, Pratt argues that “*a feminist geopolitics is concerned with the embodied dimensions of geopolitical processes, writing the experiences and agency of ordinary women (and men) into international politics.*” (3) Based

on empirical fieldwork of interviews with women in the aforementioned countries, Pratt uses personal narratives to understand women's activism and embodied performances of gender as manifesting in multiple shapes and on multiple scales in relation to geopolitical developments and dominant structures. In the colonial context, the European idea of liberating women was advocated as the basis for the modern sovereign state, placing female bodies at the centre of colonial claims to cultural differences, sovereignty and modernity. Haunted by these colonial politics, this has put women in a complex position where they are supposed to balance the fluid and contingent expectations of being modest-and-modern: being visible in public and educated while not openly challenging male authority or resembling 'Western immodesty'. The narratives in the book present an image of the embodied heterogeneous experiences of women's activism through geopolitical events and multiple forms of resistance. Furthermore, the book shows how this activist work has challenged binary understandings of power and focusses on how women themselves have negotiated expectations of modesty, respectability, authoritarian and oppressive regimes, as well as the continuous violations of Arab sovereignty by Western powers and post-colonial influences that have all constituted obstacles for the legitimacy of women's activist work.

Empirically, the books are very different, yet could potentially complement each other: it is through the examination of the political economic developments of Egypt described by Salem, that we can better understand how these translated into the everyday practices of activist and resistance movements and vice versa how these activist groups, in turn, influenced government decisions and conditions for hegemonic politics.

### **A Post-colonial Encounter of Hegemony, Or: what Would Happen if Fanon, Gramsci and Gordon Would Meet**

Empirically, Salem's work focusses on understanding the geopolitical and economic developments in Egypt and the role of the ruling elites. The book is ordered chronologically and starts with the period of decolonization and Gamal Abdel Nasser's aspirations of an Arab socialist politics and a nationalist control of the country's political economy. Major pillars of his policies could be characterized as anti-colonial projects, such as the nationalization of the Suez Canal and the building of the High Dam in Aswan. With these anti-colonial projects, aligning with the political aspirations of an independent, socialist and nationalist Egypt, Nasser was able to execute his policies by both consent and coercion, creating a hegemonic bloc. Two important geopolitical events, the 1967 defeat and the 1973 war, respectively, mark the end of Nasserism and pan-Arabism and the birth of the new neo-liberal politics of Egypt. Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat, clearly trying to get out of the Nasserist shadow, introduces the *infatih* policies, privatizing the economy in line with the international neoliberalist project and encouraging foreign investments. In Salem's imagined conversation between Gramsci and Fanon, the *infatih* project can be characterized by two connected phenomena: Gramsci's interregnum, a time of fluidity and movement, where a hegemonic frame is unstable, and Fanon's concept of the dependent bourgeoisie.

Salem's use of Fanon's writing on the bourgeois elite proposes that the bourgeoisie is not only an economic ruling class but also reproduces colonial ways of producing knowledge and capital. Because of these colonial ties, dependent bourgeoisies can never succeed to establish hegemonic consent beyond their own elite. In Egypt, the privatization of the economy and the dependency on foreign investments such as USAID, the IMF and the World Bank (see also Kandil 2014; Mitchell 2002) had great influence on Egypt's geopolitical policies and domestic funding choices, such as land redistributions, cutting of subsidies on public services and basic needs. The erosion of public education, health and administrative

sector that was so important to Nasser's hegemonic project, now resulted in widespread corruption and a lack of social mobility for Egypt's working class. Those critical of Egypt's geopolitical policies or workers rioting against the cutting of subsidies were violently suppressed, dissidents imprisoned and coerced into submission. The hegemonic politics of Nasser, already crumbling after 1967, now rapidly fell apart. Once down this road, Egypt did not find its way back. The government's loyalty to the neoliberal elite resulted in economic policies that promoted further liberalization through international institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. This was not only true for Egypt but is a broader issue for post-colonial states that struggled with economic reforms, pressured by their bourgeois elites into more privatization, dependency on export, the cutting of social services and public expenses and the reduction of wages. After Sadat, driven by the new elitist class that emerged in the 90s, finance became the key sector for economic reforms and foreign capital investment mainly from the Gulf pushed Egypt further down this neoliberal economic path. The government and the financial upper class became increasingly reliant on coercion to maintain their dominant positions, through police brutality, corruption and the policing of everyday lives and disputes, leading to the uprisings in 2011.

### **Beyond Modernity and Modesty: Narratives of Women's Activism**

Salem's work provides us with novel insights on the intertwining of geopolitical events and anti-colonial politics to understand the creation and decline of hegemonic politics in Egypt. Yet, Salem's work engages only with the efforts of local activist groups, resistance and the engagement of the Muslim Brotherhood as part of the historical analysis and not as an in-depth empirical study of contesting national ruling elites. Pratt's work, building on a deep empirical account of resistance and activist work through women's narratives, provides a complementary and interesting understanding of how geopolitics are embodied, playing out in everyday lives and creating multiple practices of resistance. Pratt shows how between post-colonial expectations of modesty and modernity, state feminism and geopolitical events, women had to negotiate their own ways of doing activist work. Specifically, after decolonization, state feminist policies often had an anti-colonial motivation, signalling the progressive character of the new regime and incorporating women into the nationalist and socialist aspirations through employment and education. Simultaneously, states clung to personal or family laws that confirmed gender inequality, and women were still expected to perform modesty and not to challenge the state's authority. New social and political movements resulted from geopolitical developments, such as the 1967 military defeats against Israel opening up opportunities for women's activism to challenge gender norms, engage in nationalist struggles and extending their domestic roles into the public sphere (84). Similarly, geopolitical events such as the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and Palestinian refugees connecting with local activists in Lebanon and Jordan in their political struggle, pushed the aforementioned boundary of 'female respectability' as women participated in leftist and nationalist political movements.

This entanglement of women's activism with nationalist struggles changed with the post-Cold War political and economic developments. Pratt describes how the rise of Western-funded NGO's has led to space specifically for women's rights demands and a gender agenda, disentangling women activists from nationalist struggles and popular movements. This NGO-ization of activism however, was criticized for promoting a Western-oriented agenda and de-politicizing social change (116). Women activists had to negotiate the Western NGO infrastructure that shaped issues such as funding, legitimization and the possibility of actually resisting hegemonic power relations, in the face of increasing authoritarian governments. Pratt describes empirically how resistance

and compliance work together in women's strategies of challenging gender norms, moving beyond homogenizing accounts of NGOs and binary understandings of women's activist work. These embodied experiences allow for a more complicated, yet full accounts of women's activism and the struggle over women's rights norms as an important site of struggle over geography (149).

Pratt's approach helps us understand better how gender was an essential struggle of the Arab uprisings in 2011. The final chapters of the book are devoted to the political transformations in the Arab world post-2010 and their aftermaths. Of the three countries used as case studies, Egypt stands out as the only country where a regime change took place. Egypt's uprising created on the one hand a space for women to demand political transformation, putting issues of bodily integrity and women's rights on the agenda while on the other, the uprising saw fierce violence against women who challenged dominant gender norms and the control over women's bodies ensuring 'female respectability' was used by political actors to maintain power and authority. While protests and women's rights demands occurred in Lebanon and Jordan as well, the exclusion and violence against women was less aggressive (199), and gender norms were reformulated rather than severely disrupted.

Pratt's book convincingly shows the importance of taking seriously the embodied experiences and narrated accounts of women themselves in understanding broader geopolitical and socio-political transformations in Arab countries. While she acknowledges that her book does not represent all women, it raises nevertheless the question of which bodies are excluded. Gender hierarchies intersect with other forms of oppression such as class (Mitchell 2002) and sexuality (Georgis 2013), which have an enormous impact on how gender activism is shaped and how gender is performed. What would have been the voice of those women who live outside the city, for example, the Egyptian women around Kafr el-Sheikh, Desouq, and other places in the Delta? We are left wondering how these women's lives in the countryside, have been impacted by their specific struggles when their husbands and sons leave Egypt to seek employment elsewhere, their resistance towards the government during land reform and other geopolitical contestations that affect those who live in a different socio-economic world in another particular way.

## Haunting the Digital

Both books commence in the post-colonial context of the Middle-East and explain how colonial power relations and histories are not 'in the past' but have continuous effects on contemporary politics. Salem's book concludes by reflecting on the development of Egypt's bourgeois elite and the absence of hegemony through the lens of haunting, or an understanding of how the colonial past and the politics of decolonization continue to haunt and shape political and economic developments in post-colonial states. The concept of haunting provides a new and valuable vocabulary that helps to understand how the colonial pasts is not done and over-with (Gordon 2008), but continues to shape and affect the present. Haunting as a conceptual framework offers a great potential to bring post-colonial histories and lingering aftermaths of oppression to understand contemporary politics. Unfortunately, Salem's work mostly embraces this literature at the end of the story, leaving little room for a broader analysis. Yet an interesting way of moving forward with the concept of haunting is to examine how post-colonial politics; gender activism and authoritarian state practices are shaped in the digital and cultural contemporary world. At this moment of writing, for example, Egyptian women have taken to social media to create more awareness about sexual violence against women, even calling it Egypt's digital feminist revolution.<sup>1</sup> Making women's experiences public through the digital sphere can be understood as another way of women's

activism going beyond the binaries and creating new avenues of protest challenging the taboos around sexual harassment and impunity of perpetrators. Women's digital activism provides new opportunities for challenging gender hierarchies and expectations, yet also proposes new challenges as the women are threatened with exposure or accused of 'putting Egypt in a bad light', invoking geopolitical motivations of keeping sexual violence invisible and Egypt's image of providing security for women intact.

Furthermore, as the concept of haunting finds its roots in cultural studies, taking inspiration in studying ghostly interventions through music, fiction, and film (Gordon 2008; Mbembe 2013), this could be an inspiration to deepen the framework of haunting and expanding empirical questions to multiple cultural and digital sites in society, and into contemporary political projects. Especially in Egypt, cultural and cinematic productions are important sites of political contestation, societal critique and nationalist sentiments (Mostafa 2017). How do contemporary digital infrastructures form important spaces for surveillance, propaganda, contestation and creating consent for political projects? How are they haunted by the inequalities and colonial traces that are often embedded in these digital infrastructures? Haunting the digital could be a promising endeavour that builds on these two historical works and places digital forms of politics in their post-colonial context.

## Note

1. For background see: <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/07/09/feature/society/where-do-survivors-of-sexual-violence-turn-the-case-of-ahmed-bassam-zaki/and> <https://egyptianstreets.com/2020/09/20/meet-nadeen-ashraf-the-student-behind-egypts-anti-harrassment-social-media-revolution/>

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