

BOOK REVIEW

Paul Amar, ed. *Cairo Securitized: Reconceiving Urban Justice and Social Resilience*. Cairo: University of America in Cairo Press, 2024. xxxvii + 474 pp. Figures. Tables. Index. \$45.00. Cloth. ISBN: 9781649031716.

The Arab Spring and its afterlives have changed the global image of Cairo, the second largest city of Africa. While the “revolution” inspired much hope around the world regarding the emancipatory power of social media and subaltern activism, these optimistic accounts have long since abided. *Cairo Securitized* offers a compelling insight in the various struggles Cairenes have been engaged in since those 2011 uprisings. The last decade and a half have been an era of continued political instability, further increased usage of social media, a further colonization of the desert area around the city, where elite enclaves are built, and increased financial dependency from Gulf states rendering the expansion and transformation of the city possible.

The book is subdivided in seven sections, all with rather plain titles, which seem to speak to a more general readership, one that is not yet well versed in contemporary social science where multi-layeredness, ambiguities, and ambivalences rather than binaries set the tone.

The book comprises in total thirty-two chapters, which all are refreshingly short (between ten and sixteen pages), and most contain illustrations. Due to the volume’s focus on securitization efforts, the authors point at the racism and misogyny that such a program ironically sets forth. But above all, so all chapters almost unequivocally argue, the Egyptian state and its various institutions, ranging from its military apparatus to the National Council for Women, have a long-standing history of producing urban violence, even if their formal discourse is to render Cairo safer. We get snapshots of the myriad of social groups that have endured loss, suffering (stigmatization), exclusion, sometimes incarceration and even death due to the state’s efforts to securitize the city since the early twenty-first century. Individuals have bundled up with one another, congregated online and offline, and have stood up against the state, yet sometimes also against one another: thugs engaging in drugs while also controlling access to parking lots, Sudanese and South Sudanese migrants trying to assure private schooling for their children, assertive women playing with their sexuality online and offline, queer communities, and social media activists. All the chapters often contain internal references to other chapters within the book, enabling the reader to learn a lot about these social universes across the various subthemes of the book.

The drawback of short chapters is that topics are often too briefly touched upon. Some authors have tried to pack much history in their chapter, forcing them to be rather sparse with ethnographic evidence for their main arguments.

One may also regret the myopic gaze on Cairo. There is no comparison, no analogy nor any connection made with (scholarly literature about) other Egyptian or African cities. For example, as someone who carries out research in Kinshasa, I was struck by the various analogies between the sanitization projects of the British colonizers/early postcolonial Egyptian state and the Belgian colonizer state; or regarding the intimate entanglements of the thugs and the Kabila state, and even the political and economic elite. These are all well researched in African studies beyond Kinshasa as well.

Despite its shortcomings, *Cairo Securitized* comes at the perfect time, now more and more scholars rightly denounce enduring colonialism in the field of African studies. The book addresses this issue in several forms. First, it is published in Egypt (the American University Press in Cairo). Second, the editor, Paul Amar, situates the volume within a critique of a dominance of global north evidence and theorizing regarding urbanity and the future of cities. Writing in the “we” form, assuming that he speaks on behalf of all authors in the volume (even though the chapter is single-authored), Amar argues that “we feel that the time has come to listen to the megacities of the global south to that we can learn to think – and make new worlds – in new ways” (1). The third decolonial dimension is the activist agenda of the volume. The authors comprise a unique and compelling collective: more than half of them are scholars based in academic institutions (in geography, anthropology, urban studies, etc.) while the others self-identify as independent scholars or as activists. The latter explains the emotional language in certain chapters. It is clear that all authors care a lot for the Cairenes, and want to denounce the various waves of structural physical and symbolic violence they have observed, sometimes themselves have endured, and they and/or their interlocutors are still subjected to. Amar announces very ambitiously that their book “conveys the agency and specificity of a courageous city of scholar-activists, who apply, in new ways, rich and revolutionary traditions of urban and security studies, providing a set of resources for emancipation and transformation, a methodological and epistemological tool kit for thinking beyond securitization and toward an inclusive and empowering urban order” (5). Unfortunately, the latter is not upheld. An afterword, bringing together the main takeaways in terms of methodology and concepts to “think beyond securitization and toward an inclusive and empowering urban order” would have had the potential to turn this volume into a master text for the study of activist urban scholarship.

I nevertheless recommend this book to anyone interested in urban justice, security studies, and the social science of activism. I hope scholars will be inspired to publish similar volumes on other African megacities. It is indeed time to include activists in the scholarly representations of lives lived, endured, dreamed, and fought for in African cities.

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