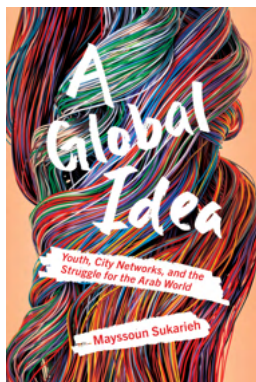

Book Reviews

Mayssoun Sukarieh 2023: *A Global Idea: Youth, City Networks, and the Struggle for the Arab World*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY and London.



Why do the same dominant ideas appear in radically different parts of the world? What are the material qualities of a particular place that determine its function in a global network of ideational transmission? These are some of the questions that Mayssoun Sukarieh addresses in *A Global Idea: Youth, City Networks, and the Struggle for the Arab World*, which intervenes in debates at the intersection of geography and development studies with relevance for the broader social sciences as well. Sukarieh's case study of ideational transmission concerns the 'youth development complex', which she defines as 'a diverse transnational network of state, private sector, civil society, and international development and aid organizations' (p. 4). She analyses three cities—Washington DC, Amman and Dubai—and their different roles in bringing youth to the fore as the preeminent object of development discourse in the twenty-first century.

The book's main argument is that when travelling the world—particularly from the centre to the periphery—ideas take up residence in particular locales with particular functions, within which they are transformed and passed on. Sukarieh challenges extant models of ideational diffusion, such as the Cultural Imperialism literature, which offer an overly unidirectional, top-down model. Instead, she illustrates that rather than traversing a flat terrain, dominant ideas cross particular political topographies which then recombine and reconstitute them. Here Sukarieh also shuns more bottom-up models of ideational diffusion—such as the Cultural Globalization literature—which she thinks do not sufficiently account for power asymmetries. Instead, drawing on the Global Cities literature, Sukarieh develops a materially grounded approach to ideas transmission, emphasizing how various urban centres—on both sides of the centre-periphery divide—can play different roles in the same system of domination.

In Washington DC, the modern youth development complex first coalesced around the idea that entrepreneurial training, business skills and new job creation could combat political and religious extremism among Arab youth. Sukarieh illustrates how, through close physical proximity, a system of revolving doors, and shared interactions with think tanks in Washington DC, US foreign policy interests were translated and repackaged into non-governmental organizational (NGO) programming and development speak. This cross-fertilization also materializes in the

city's urban fabric: most international youth NGOs eventually relocate to the US capital, even settling around the same street (Massachusetts Avenue). They do so to gain access to the networks of staffer circulation, 'brown bag' seminars and informal relationships. As one NGO professional from Jordan visiting DC describes it: 'in the informal chats during the coffee breaks at conferences, I get to learn the catchwords I need to use in my proposals for funds; I learn the language of power, in other words' (p. 42).

Amman plays a very different role in the global youth development complex, functioning as an entry point—a gateway—to the Middle East. With historically close ties to colonial and neo-colonial powers, Jordan has a kind of qualified sovereignty sustained by international aid dependency, making Amman fertile ground for the testing, translation and refinement of ideas that were previously used in US counterterrorism operations and attempts to spread moderate Islam. Jordan's particular legibility to foreign actors, Sukarieh notes, is inscribed in space. The city is divided between swanky and sanitized West Amman, ideal for NGO head offices, and low-income East Amman, where new programmes can be established and ideal subjects recruited. The result is that Amman has become 'a city of workshops', with so much development fund money coming into the city that NGOs report struggling to make use of it all efficiently (p. 48).

The ideational laboratory that is Amman has taught global youth NGOs some critical lessons. For example, youth empowerment has been indigenized in Amman's teaching programmes, and success stories like Bill Gates and Oprah Winfrey have been replaced by those of local business leaders. NGOs have also learned not to fret about non-uptake among local youth, because even though many recruits remain cynical about the economic pipe dreams they are being sold, they nevertheless keep coming back, given the dearth of alternatives. Meanwhile, local elites are recycling the youth development discourse for their own purposes, translating it into a language of meritocracy to justify the existing class divisions.

If Amman functions as a laboratory, Dubai is a site for scaling up, amplifying and further disseminating youth empowerment. Although Dubai might seem a surprising locus for youth empowerment, given that only 22% of the population is under 25 years old (compared to 54% in Jordan, p. 83), it is not local youth that are the intended addressees: for Dubai's policymakers, not only does entrepreneurialism and youthfulness resonate with their own aspirations, but the youth development complex is yet another way to make Dubai a regional—and indeed global—hub.

The attraction for international NGOs is that Dubai offers access to critical networks. For example, one NGO set up shop in Dubai to establish 'close physical proximity ... with Dubai political and business elites, who could support its project of expanding its programming across the Middle East' (p. 88). Many of these critical relationships are then replicated elsewhere: another NGO developed partnerships with multinational corporations in Dubai that were then easily reproduced in Morocco, where this particular NGO carried out much of its work (p. 100).

The primary value of *A Global Idea: Youth, City Networks, and the Struggle for the Arab World* lies in its detailed analysis of the intricacies of global hegemony-making. Without succumbing to a deterministic, top-down view of power, Sukarieh draws attention to the complex topographies of power and develops a compelling model of ideational diffusion that follows the passage of dominant ideas across a global terrain while uncovering how urban nodes and local elites exploit the streams

of ideas that come their way. The analysis is at its best when Sukarieh goes beyond the kind of descriptive data one can accrue from NGO websites to illustrate informal network-making through interview data.

At the same time, it would have been interesting to learn more about how local political actors such as the regimes in Dubai and Amman are appropriating the idea of youth for their own political ends, such as that of creating docile young citizens. After all, local regimes and local political institutions form part of the terrain that ideas have to traverse, yet they are mostly absent from the landscape that Sukarieh portrays. Also, the book generally omits how the particular notions of youth the author studies resonate with one of its key intended audiences: the youth themselves. On the other hand, these omissions provide interesting avenues for further research, and overall, this book is an essential contribution to the scholarship of ideational transmission. Scholars in multiple fields would therefore be well-advised to engage with it.

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