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Review of Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula

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As is widely known, the establishment of the Morsi government in Egypt produced a furious backlash within that country and throughout the region. Well-placed sources in Egypt told Kepel that the military allowed the Brotherhood to win the elections to better expose and then radically suppress the organization. When the Brotherhood floundered in its attempts to govern, the military overthrew Morsi in a move that was urged and financed by the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia. Conversely, in Tunisia, there was a different outcome, as the toppling of the dictator led to the establishment of a democratic government which included the Brotherhood-linked Ennahdha Movement (from *al-nahda*, “the revival”), more moderate Islamists, and secularists. Kepel states that Tunisian prime minister Hamadi Jebali somewhat shockingly told the public that his own Ennahdha party “had abandoned the totalitarian legacy of the Muslim Brotherhood, which had been modeled on Communist organizations” (p. 122).

While Kepel’s interpretations of key events are often controversial and subject to disagreement, he presents his analysis with the confidence and verve of one of the world’s leading commentators on this region. His work is insightful but complex and filled with the often-nuanced theoretical debates of Islamist extremists. A core theme of this work is the importance of the Muslim Brotherhood’s influence on other newer political parties and movements. The book is also critical of United States president Barack Obama, whom Kepel sees as too optimistic about the Muslim Brotherhood embracing democratic values. This critique may be overstated since the US has long been criticized for advocating democratic elections right up until the time when a political leadership is voted in that Washington does not like. A policy cannot really be called “democracy promotion” if the US responds to free elections with punishment when Islamists are elected. Obama’s efforts to overcome this legacy were understandable even if they did not yield hoped-for results. Kepel also strongly criticizes President Donald Trump’s erratic amateurism, but these barbs are more well-earned. Some sadness may nevertheless occur in various Middle East-

ern regimes over Trump’s departure, due to his tolerance of regional corruption and total disinterest in democratic reform.

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Beyond Exception: New Interpretations of the Arabian Peninsula, by Ahmed Kanna, Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020. 153 pages. \$125 cloth; \$19.95 paper; \$12.99 e-book.

Reviewed by Andrew Gardner

The coauthors of this brief book are all ethnographers — Ahmed Kanna and Neha Vora are American anthropologists, and Amélie Le Renard is a French sociologist. Scholarship concerning the peoples and societies of the Arabian Peninsula seems to arrive at an ever-increasing rate, but amid that spate, these three mid-career scholars comprise the leading and, undoubtedly, most influential ethnographers concerned with the peoples of the contemporary Arabian Peninsula. Their monographs dominate scholarly conversations on multiple continents, and to have all three of these luminaries thinking in concert is more than simply a treat: through elected positions, tenure track appointments, book awards, a robust stream of ancillary publications, and a cosmopolitan academic footprint, these particular scholars’ proclamations are most certainly a bellwether of what lies before us as scholars, researchers, and readers concerned with the contemporary world. Anyone concerned with the Arabian Peninsula should most certainly listen carefully to what they have to say.

Beyond Exception is not a book that presents research findings. Instead, in the seemingly endless aftermath of anthropology’s reflexive turn (now three decades old), this is a book about lessons learned in conducting ethnographic research mostly presented elsewhere. The organization of this book is unusual. The two introductory chapters that commence the book are coauthored by

all three ethnographers. Three subsequent chapters are individually authored essays in which each scholar reflects on the ideas, pre-suppositions, and stereotypes that they initially brought into the field and then trumpets their success in disabusing themselves from the baggage they accumulated at some of the world's leading educational institutions. Although more recent episodes occasionally percolate through these discussions, most of the ethnographic fieldwork driving these reflections occurred more than a decade ago. The book concludes with another co-authored chapter that distills the arguments and significant waypoints of its trajectory. This structure allows Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora to maintain their individual perspectives while also enabling them to collaboratively elucidate a militant critique directed at the very foundations of the liberal arts.

Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora's critical antipathy is directed at something they identify as "exceptionalism." Before we turn to their definition, however, consider some of the basic empirical facts that frame many of our attempts to analytically grapple with the societies of the Arabian Peninsula: this region is one of the most arid parcels of land on the globe; rich in subterranean hydrocarbon resources, the Arabian Peninsula contains several of the wealthiest nation-states in the world; the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are some of the world's most urbanized regions, and the cities there are brimming with architectural creations and astonishing plans that reach for the superlatively exceptional in the global economy of attention; with unparalleled proportions of foreign workers relative to their respective citizenries, these states are demographically unique, at least for the time being; the nation-states of the Arabian Peninsula are also some of the most enduring manifestations of authoritarian political regimes, mostly built upon a monarchical iteration of a deeply historical tribal form of social organization. It is against this empirical and commonsensical backdrop that the authors seek to build their claim that there is *nothing* exceptional about the Gulf Arab states. Indeed, I departed the book feeling scolded for believing, purveying, or even intimating that the above facts might be factual starting points for our scholarly conversations.

Because of that, and because the term *exceptionalism* is bandied about with increasing frequency as a critical epithet, I specifically sought more clarity as I read this book. What precisely did this exceptionalism consist of, at least in the minds of these three ethnographers? Perhaps as a testament to my own intellectual shortcomings, that clarity was not forthcoming. Indeed, in my estimation, their definition of this conceptual hobgoblin seemed to shape-shift throughout the book. Early in the book Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora mention exceptional places, exceptional spaces, and then exceptionalist tropes faced in the field (p. 3). Exceptionalism is sometimes a singular discourse and sometimes presented in the plural. The authors sniff exceptionalism in a constellation of different representations commonly found in concepts and ideas familiar to any reader of this journal. Rentier state theory is one of those concepts, for example, but the authors' critical quarry is not to be limited to one particular set of ideas nor reinforced with argument or evidence. Instead, Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora grandiosely assert that "exceptionalizing frameworks influence *every* aspect of knowledge production for ethnographers, their interlocutors, and the built environment itself" (p. 7, emphasis added).

Mulling over this impact, and in my attempt to better grasp the threat of the conceptual hobgoblin that looms over all contemporary scholarship about the Arabian Peninsula, I began to pay more attention to their verbs. This exceptionalism naturalizes things that Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora believe should not be naturalized. It erases some things and oversimplifies others. At one point, the authors note that this exceptionalist discourse prevents the inhabitants of cities from defining those cities as they wish (pp. 20–21). Exceptionalism produces symbolic fields and hierarchies, props up ideas the authors see as problematic, and contributes to constructing images of the Gulf they disagree with. It stabilizes reductive categories, it implies disconnected temporalities, and all sorts of ideas and stereotypes are implicated via "the continuing use of the exceptional and the spectacular as tropes in ethnographic writing" (p. 125).

Attention to these verbs helped me better envision the central purpose of this book. The indictment of the exceptionalist hobgoblin is, for these authors, a foregone conclusion — it is the premise the book commences from. No contravening evidence or arguments are considered. Instead, the authors' mission is to help the rest of us see the ideas and paradigmatic fragments that give oxygen to the hobgoblin they have identified. By eradicating these ideas from intellectual circulation, the hobgoblin will suffocate. Based on their substantial ethnographic experiences, and their success in eradicating these ideas from their own thinking, these authors envision themselves as uniquely poised to lead the crusade against the exceptionalist hobgoblin's source of oxygen. They are volunteering to help lead efforts to police our intellectual conversations and thought.

Which of us are responsible for providing oxygen to this exceptionalist hobgoblin? Although their critique is fiery and pointed, Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora do not level their sights at any particular scholars or academics. Considering how commonplace these ideas are in scholarship, we should all be thankful for that, perhaps. In this sense their critique resembles Edward Said's, whose *Orientalism* (Pantheon Books, 1978) is mentioned often and is clearly a touchstone. Said mostly directed his critique at scholars who had passed away by the time of his book's publication and who were therefore mostly defenseless: Louis Massignon had passed away in 1962, Sir Hamilton Gibb in 1971, and Gustave E. von Grunebaum in 1972, for example. Unlike Said, however, Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora delineate no actual scholars who harbor or promote the exceptionalism they vilify. They vaguely implicate journalists at several points in the book (e.g., pp. 4–5, 80). There is mention of the exceptionalism perceived in the comments of an American administrator working in Qatar. Accusations are grounded in the anonymous gossip and perceived slights that some of the authors encountered at parties and informal gatherings or overheard in line at the grocery store. In one of the few examples that presents a glimpse of empirical experience along with its interpretation,

Le Renard describes an interview with a middle-aged woman in Dubai: the woman laments her inability to meet and befriend Emiratis while residing there with her small family (pp. 69–70). This longing for Emirati friends is critically assessed by Le Renard as a misguided quest for authenticity, an objective somehow informed by the exceptionalist hobgoblin to be vanquished.

In consideration of their luminary academic status, I was also curious about what the future of anthropology might look like under Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora's stewardship. Although it is the discipline two of them clambered through to reach the understandings they convey in this book, the horizons for anthropology are dismal. Anthropology's quantitative and positivist tradition has been entirely shorn from the authors' vision — the anthropology they will convey to the next generations of students will be entirely qualitative in nature. They have no use for any of the conversations or concepts anthropology developed in its first century of existence, and almost every citation in this book concerns material from or postdating anthropology's "reflexive turn." The empathy, compassion, and understanding with which anthropologists have long sought to cross thresholds of cultural difference is notably absent here: in the race-centered and activist-oriented rendition of anthropology the authors illuminate, the principal subjects of this book — White Euro-American expats — are undeserving of the understanding and dispassionate, empathic insight long integral to the anthropological prism. Indeed, Kanna, Le Renard, and Vora's indictment of exceptionalism seems to morph into an indictment of even pondering difference. I was left with the impression that the anthropology the authors envision would fight endlessly for the right to be different but would shirk opportunities to discuss, analyze, or speak to that difference in meaningful ways. Indeed, Gulf Arabs, for example, are almost entirely absent from the discussion here. In the legacy of the reflexive turn, this anthropology turns away from engaging otherness, and instead myopically trains the reader's attention on the anthropologist herself.

Upon concluding the book, I came to think of it as emblematic of a strange new mutation to American imperialism. In the 1960s, American academia cultivated a set of ethnocentric ideas in modernization theory and globally disseminated it through a constellation of lending schemes, development projects, and bilateral agreements. In the 1990s, American academia cultivated and distilled neoliberal ideology, and it was through the American higher education system that neoliberalism was deployed and implemented in policy environments around the world. The Middle East was deeply impacted by both of these American ideologies. Thirty years later, are we not again witnessing the imperial dissemination of another ethnocentric American ideology? Cloaked as decolonization, this package of ideas purveys ontologically American ideas about race, identity, belonging, and social relations across all cultural thresholds it encounters. It conveys what I have elsewhere called a uniquely American social prism. For a book focused upon the production of knowledge, it is difficult to overlook how central American concerns and understandings are here. Kanna's individually authored chapter, with an explicit focus on the articulations of class, sidesteps much of this critique, but strangely, this American social prism suffuses French Le Renard's individually authored chapter. Like their estimation of the White Western residents that they ceaselessly flog, and like these imperialisms of America's past, these authors express few, if any, doubts (p. 69).

In summary, the authors of this book seemingly have no interest in persuading readers of anything at all. The book is essentially an epistle to those who envision themselves as part of a political and social movement inspired by Antonio Gramsci, grounded in American academia, and notable for its puritanical and righteous clarity. It is from that angle, most of all, that we can see the deeply American pedigree of this book.

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