

BOOK REVIEWS

WALTER ARMBRUST. *Martyrs and Tricksters: An Ethnography of the Egyptian Revolution*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019). Pp. 311. \$27.95 cloth. ISBN 9780691162645.

Although there are now many studies of the Arab revolutions, few articulate revolution with relations of class, gender, religion, and global politics as expertly as Walter Armbrust's second monograph. Grounded in insightful media analysis and thick ethnography, *Martyrs and Tricksters* entwines local histories with global realities while taking seriously not only the revolutionary heroes that star in most academic studies, but also those who are pro-regime. Taking a chronological approach to the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the book begins with an ethnography of the initial eighteen days and it ends in the wake of the 2013 Raba'a Massacre. Despite its chronological organization, the book is not concerned with causality. Instead, it investigates what happens in the space of a social and political void from which there is no apparent exit. One of its major strengths, then, is its intentional focus on the ambiguous and unintentional, capturing the confusion and uncertainty of experiencing a revolution in real time. Another strength is the breadth of the book's analysis, which weaves Ramadan serials, memes, YouTube videos, television talk shows, Facebook posts, and music (*mahraganat*) together with first-person accounts of demonstrations. Most broadly, *Martyrs and Tricksters* reveals the relevance of the Egyptian revolution to contemporary global politics, providing an important case study of how unthinkable realities can emerge from globalized neoliberal crisis.

One of the book's major contributions is establishing liminality as a useful concept for understanding revolutions. Drawing from Victor Turner's theory of ritual process, the first chapter defines liminality as a characteristic of all transitions between normative states through which different possibilities can be entertained (3). Because liminality is dangerous, it is usually managed by conventions and rituals to ensure *expected* transition (e.g.,

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social rites of passage). A revolution, in contrast, is an unforeseen transition, a passage through liminality that lacks clear control of the process or a conventionalized conclusion. If this liminality goes on too long, the initial period of *communitas* ends and social fragmentation and crisis ensue. Viewing revolution as a form of liminality allows us to see its utopic (or “heterotopic” in Armbrust’s terms) aspects as well as its unintended and schismogenetic ones, the ways it can normalize and spread deviant patterns that had previously been unthinkable. As the book’s ten chapters (plus prelude and postscript) demonstrate, these patterns include the emergence of new unsavory political agents and unimaginable violence.

A second key conceptual tool running throughout the book is performativity. Drawing from Richard Schechner’s performance theory, performance emerges from areas of contingency – such as periods of liminality – through which human actors exercise some degree of agency. But Armbrust makes an important intervention here by evaluating how the scope of this agency is governed by material and social parameters (17). For example, the second chapter emphasizes that spatiality is crucial because it both inspires and delimits revolutionary action. By untangling the ways neoliberal precarity has been inscribed into the urban fabric of Tahrir Square, producing it as a “non-place,” Armbrust explicates that the conventions that “frame” the space of liminality (the sphere of “play” in Schechner’s terms) are physical – spatial and material. This dialectical analysis distinguishes *Martyrs and Tricksters* from other studies, most of which focus only on the neoliberal causes of revolution. As this book makes clear, neoliberal policies both underpinned the outbreak of revolution and delimited revolutionary performance, spatially and materially informing the extent of protestors’ agency.

Martyrdom is the book’s primary performance frame. Starting in chapter 3, Armbrust describes the ways it was inscribed in Tahrir as a performative idiom beyond commemoration. Further connecting performance and liminality, martyrdom in the context of the revolution was about the suspension of death as a rite of passage. Keeping the martyr alive – a liminal suspension between life and death – was a primary way of making political demands and thus central to continuing revolutionary mobilization. Historicizing martyrdom in Egyptian political struggles (including Islamist and anti-colonial), he suggests that what makes martyrs powerful is their ambiguity: they facilitate political performance by provoking contention over whose lives are grievable. Subsequent chapters analyze various aspects of these ambiguities in relation to the regime’s attempts at nationalist commemoration (chapters 3 and 5),

gender and female martyrdom (chapter 4), and class divisions (chapter 6). Thus, these chapters connect the liminality of the martyr as a type of performance to the liminal crisis of the revolution more broadly.

Chapters 7 and 8 focus on the Maspero Massacre of 2012 and the Raba'a Massacre of 2013. Armbrust examines these events to clarify how the crisis of liminality fuels a schismogenesis that manifests in the form of deeply polarizing and violent politics. By analyzing various discursive resources deployed in this polarization, including the mainstream media, social media, and a Ramadan serial, he demonstrates that the groundwork for these massacres was laid prior to 2011. These chapters ultimately set the stage for the book's primary example of schismogenesis: the rise of the political trickster. Extending the view of the trickster beyond its typical treatment as a character of folklore, mythology, and literary studies, chapter 9 focuses on media personality Taufiq 'Ukasha to show that the trickster is also a dangerous political type that can gain real power during liminal periods. Through a mixture of populist language, laughter and buffoonery, the grotesque, heroism, and conspiracy theories, 'Ukasha became a leading figure in the "corrective revolution," eventually replaced by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's own brand of tricksterism.

More broadly, Armbrust asks why "trickster politics" – embodied not only by 'Ukasha and el-Sisi, but also by Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Nigel Farage, Silvio Berlusconi, Miloš Zeman, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – are so pervasive at this historical moment. In chapter 10, he argues that globalized neoliberal precarity has become a form of permanentized liminality, but one devoid of the potential for revolution. The global perspective of *Martyrs and Tricksters* makes it a must-read, foundational text not only of the 2011 Egyptian revolution but also of a present historical moment of rising populism and right-wing politics. The book closes with a brief analysis of *mahraganat* (festival music) that offers some healthy skepticism toward the "silver-lining" argument – the notion that even if a revolution is defeated, things will never go back to the way they were before – that dominates much of the scholarly and popular discourse on the Arab revolutions (239). Instead of offering another silver lining, *Martyrs and Tricksters* makes a compelling case that the defining feature of this historical moment is its pure contingency – the absolute uncertainty toward what will emerge from the void of neoliberal crisis. Indeed, as the book powerfully illustrates, sometimes what emerges "is the monsters rather than the angels we hope for" (247). ✂

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