

Marwan M. Kraidy. *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016. 304 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-73708-2.

Reviewed by Hatim El-Hibri

Published on H-Levant (September, 2017)

Commissioned by Ghenwa Hayek (Assistant Professor, Modern Arabic Literature, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago)

The current cynicism commonly holds that the optimism that spurred and was spurred by the Arab uprisings has primarily turned out to be for naught. This perspective is understandable, formed as a hindsight more than a half a decade after 2011, in a political moment when most of these countries are now defined by continued repression, or worse. Yet this cannot be the whole of the story, and critical scholarship that aims to reckon with the emergent social formations and cultural output of that period has had to develop new theoretical and methodological perspectives to account for it. In that vein, Marwan Kraidy's *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* represents a landmark in the literature on media and the Arab uprisings, and in the study of media and the politics of the body.

Kraidy brings into focus the significance of corporeal symbolism in modern political discourse through an examination of its ubiquity in the contexts of the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Syrian uprisings and their aftermath. The book intervenes in contemporary discussions of the activism of the period in a way that decisively leaves aside media-centric and instrumentalist accounts, allowing for a more serious consideration of the mediation of ruling regimes and the activisms that oppose them. Kraidy centers his focus on the

resistant performance of the body in regimes of power that aim to order the relationship between the embodiment of the ruler and the ruled. In doing so, he also clears significant ground for the study of media and culture in the region, signaling the need for a more robust theoretical engagement with affect, embodiment, and the communicative practice of everyday life in contemporary media landscapes. The book thus contributes to the study of the politics of culture in the Arab world and beyond by linking digital and social media with the presence of bodily imagery found in a wide variety of cultural forms.

The book opens with a concise explanation of its concept of creative insurgency, which is followed by a series of short essays grouped into five thematic parts. For Kraidy, creative insurgency is a heterogeneous set of practices that take the making of media (broadly understood) to be a visceral political act aimed at undoing a ruling order. Creative insurgency is understood to operate in two key tempos: a gradual mode, in which the legitimacy of the ruler, regime, and social order are whittled away, and a radical mode, in which direct attacks and inversions are staged. Both modes are said to be confrontations of the powerful by the people who suffer beneath them, whose "creativity" is less that of hip marketing and me-

dia firms than it is a kind of making-do with the cultural resources found in the lived media surround. From the ingenuity and rhetorical inversions of protest slogans to the improvisation of pots as helmets by protestors seeking some measure of protection from regime forces, the creativity is of the kind born of both political necessity and talented individuals or collectives.

In Kraidy's account, creative insurgency also consists of a confrontational encounter between three kinds of bodies or modes of embodiment: the self-contained, erect classical body (typical of rulers and their monumental self-projections); the heroic body of self-sacrificial individuals who exceed their own physical limitations for the cause (either intentionally or unintentionally); and the Bakhtinian-like grotesque body that undoes the human, leaks fluids, and claims abjection as the disavowed truth of coercive bodily order. Kraidy's discussion of the body as itself a medium of expression is informed by communication and media theory that investigates the performativity of speech, phenomenology, and interdisciplinary theoretical conversations about the body politic.

This conceptual framework ties the book's five parts together. Each of these parts is in turn composed of a series of short essays that elaborate on these concepts in light of rich empirical data collected from a variety of contexts. Some parts focus on just one object or national context, while others are comparative. The essays primarily focus on Tunisia, Syria, and Egypt, and while they could be read or taught separately, the resonances that emerge between them reward the complete reading. These five parts each pursue the objective of thinking with the body into the experience of injustice, investigating a central question through the material. Some of the actors who appear, such as Mohamad Bouazizi and Aliaa Al-Mahdy, attained notoriety (and infamy) in global and domestic spheres, although well-known figures are by no means the only ones discussed. News images of self-immolation, scandalous blog

posts, graffiti, online video of puppet shows, and satirical comics are but some of the material examined. The language of gradual and radical insurgency, and of heroic, revolutionary, and grotesque bodies proves to be productive, in that the book avoids the pitfall of reducing these diverse phenomena to mere instances of an abstract conceptual structure. As the book demonstrates, these categories are not rigid and exclusive, but defined by their entanglement. Some acts are shown to embody both radical and gradual temporalities, such as Al-Mahdy's naked, and at times scatological, protest art. Although the book presents a nuanced analysis of the specific contexts it investigates, it also speaks to broader debates about the formation of publics in a way that will be of interest to the non-media and non-area specialist.

The Naked Blogger of Cairo's considerable depth, breadth, and analytical clarity open up avenues of inquiry, but the cost of coherence is a reluctance to fully explore two significant theoretical directions. The book's engagement with theories of biopolitics, and the relationship of media and embodiment, suggests promising directions for future research. While it matters greatly that sovereignty is given human form and many creative insurgents sought to cut off the king's head, the literature utilizing the concept of biopolitics (or governmentality) has often sought to critique those techniques and practices by which populations are managed as large groups—not simply the microphysics of disciplinary practice, but techniques for managing and acting on collective life that need not be primarily concerned with the formation of subjectivity or imaginaries. However, this sidelining of a broader engagement with the implications of the biopolitical is understandable, as the critical project of the book is inspired by the desire to understand the spirit that animates subversion. The second critique that could be raised is that the book's concise theoretical engagement with the politics of affect, embodiment, and media phenomenology could be more fully

articulated. Although the first chapter opens the door onto a phenomenology of media practice, use, and reception, the book's analysis is primarily confined to images of the body and textual invocations of bodily metaphor. The book's project may have been taken further by engaging with theorizations of embodiment and media found in performance studies, feminist theory, queer theory, anthropological approaches to the body, or disability studies. These at-times overlapping intellectual formations might have suggested a different approach to the texts analyzed, and of what is being contested by creative insurgents. Rather than diminishing its contribution, however, these two critiques speak to the fruitfulness and novelty of the book's approach. As an entry in the renewed interdisciplinary attention paid to the culture of the body in the region, the book signals the impoverished nature of accounts of media and the Arab uprisings that have tended toward more dematerialized and disembodied conceptualizations. Like the creative insurgents referenced in the book's title, the body is made inescapably present.

The Naked Blogger of Cairo creates promising new possibilities for the study of media, power, and public culture, and productively signposts the way to a new terrain for research. As an account that stands in the wake of the Arab uprisings, it also serves as a reminder of the possibilities that are to be found in even the most intractable of moments.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-levant>

Citation: Hatim El-Hibri. Review of Kraidy, Marwan M. *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World*. H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. September, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=49380>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.