How useful is neoliberalism for understanding cities in the Middle East?

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In her landmark essay on 'the Islamic city', Janet Abu Lughod critiques urban scholarship at the time she was writing (1987) for (1) producing generalizations about (Islamic) cities that were actually based on a limited number of cases, and (2) conceptualizing cities through form and function rather than process. Subsequent scholarship, learning from Abu Lughod's critique, has focused on the urban as a confluence of processes, and cities are no longer thought about in relation to a priori categories such as Islamic or Middle Eastern. Currently, most urban scholars emphasize the specificity of the particular cities in which they work, while still acknowledging the powerful influences of a range of exteriorities that are placed within the space of 'the global'. However, despite the cautionary tale Abu Lughod tells about generalization, many studies of contemporary cities in the Middle East and North Africa (hereafter, Middle East) have begun to privilege just one concept as a means of understanding the cities in the region: neoliberalism. Consequently, neoliberalism has become the glue that joins many contemporary Middle Eastern studies of urban space together. It is therefore pertinent to ask how useful is neoliberalism for understanding Middle Eastern cities?

Neoliberalism is not the easiest term to define. More general accounts can crudely be split into Marxist approaches that define neoliberalism as a class project that is for markets and against social welfare, and a poststructuralist variant in which neoliberalism is a governmental logic that operates through specific discourses, techniques and forms of subjectivity. While emerging from different philosophical lineages, there has nevertheless been rapprochement between the two genealogies in recent years, and scholars working in Middle Eastern cities draw from both lineages without necessarily distinguishing between them.

Neoliberalism has offered a theoretical framework through which to understand recent changes in cities across the Middle East. In particular, an understanding of neoliberalism as a process that promotes markets or market-like solutions to problems of governance usefully frames the privatization of state assets, the massive increase in Gulf-based investment in urban centres, and growing inequalities that have marked cities such as Cairo, Amman and Dubai. However, critiques of the uses of neoliberalism in other contexts suggest that these uses tend to reduce social life to economic processes, a problem to which Middle Eastern deployments of neoliberalism can also be susceptible. Some contextually specific problems also emerge. In seeking to explain the entirety of an urban milieu through recourse to neoliberalism, many analyses prioritise external or elite driven forces, diminishing a whole series of other actors in Middle Eastern cities and the actual governmental ensembles that have emerged. This is particularly problematic given the complexity of contemporary cities, and the diverse sources of inspiration that fuel contemporary urbanisation across the region.

Empirically, scholars have employed neoliberalism to produce compelling analyses of urban politics, large-scale (and sometimes smaller scale) residential and commercial developments, infrastructure, and forms of lived experience. Claims about neoliberalism are empirically buttressed through reference to particular kinds of spaces and analysis of particular policy and development discourses. However, by citing similar spaces across a range of studies, much writing about contemporary Middle Eastern cities focuses on the parts of the city which large, often transnational developers create both materially and imaginatively. [INSERT HARKER 1.JPG HERE]. While the developers' practices and visions of the city are partial, situated achievements, in analysis of them there is little sense of the contingency of actual practices, including their contestation and subversion. Furthermore, by repeatedly focusing on particular aspects of urban life, the broader cities themselves become somewhat simplified. A set of heterogeneous urban landscapes become homogenised through reiterative invocation of particular empirical phenomena in relation to neoliberalism. It is worth emphasizing that this isn't the result of any one particular scholar or study, but rather an effect of current trends in Middle Eastern urban studies more generally.

Politically, many critiques of neoliberalism in a Middle Eastern context are animated by a desire for more just or equitable cities. Such an ethos is often grounded in practices of work or activism which don't show up in published academic work, but provide an important context for understanding how individuals are seeking to challenge specific developments in the cities in which they live and work. However, often theorists using neoliberalism employ a thin account of politics tied to forms of action that reflect a particular set of interests, which are then resisted by those with different interests. What is loss from such accounts is a sense of politics as a field of contestation in which *many* different actors seek to reconcile differences in *many* different ways. City life in the Middle East is presented as a battle between elites and the masses, even as existing research has show that even in such contexts where there is a great degree of inequality (contexts, in other words, where a binary between powerful and powerless might at first blush seem useful), multiple publics are continually produced and sustained, often in creative ways.

To return to the titular question in light of these areas of concern, it is worth noting firstly that clearly neoliberalism is a useful concept. However, my argument is that neoliberalism is only useful in certain contexts, and only useful for saying certain things about contemporary change in cities. In contrast to accounts of neoliberalism as an all-powerful force, a more precise and modest conception is needed. Such an approach would make no theoretical assumptions about what happens in encounters between neoliberalism and other forms of practice. In the context of Middle Eastern cities, this would mean more precise studies of the mobilities of neoliberal thinking and greater attention to how such forms of critical reflection intersect existing governmental forms grounded in practices and legacies of colonialism, state socialism, autocratic rule and the political role of kinship. Such an approach also opens up space for processes and spaces where neoliberalism doesn't hold sway. Consequently, alternative analytic frames are concurrently needed to capture the complexity of cities in the

contemporary Middle East. Such alternatives are particularly important in the present moment because as research outside the region has demonstrated, the majority of urban residents in the global South craft viable urban lives in spaces and through practices that happen to the side of practices that might reasonably be subsumed within forms of neoliberal reflection. For instance, existing minor literatures on family, housing and religion as forms of urban practice in the Middle East disclose some of the complexities of contemporary urban existence that have emerged above and below and to the side of processes of neoliberal analysis and programming. Indeed, devoting greater attention to practices that go 'beyond' neoliberalism may well be a more productive means of promoting and accentuating more just and viable existences for the majority of urbanites across the region.

[Caption for Harker 1.jpg should read: Neoliberalism, Ramallah style?]