

BOOK REVIEWS

## Television and Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists

**Wazhmah Osman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2020). Pp. 288. \$110.00 cloth, \$28.00 paper. ISBN: 9780252085451**

Reviewed by Zeynep Sertbulut , Department of Anthropology, Haverford College, Haverford, PA, USA ([zsertbulut@haverford.edu](mailto:zsertbulut@haverford.edu))

In February 2020, the United States announced its withdrawal from Afghanistan, after almost two decades of war. Anthropologist Wazhmah Osman could have anticipated the Western narrative that followed. Put simply, the ubiquitous portrayal of the situation suggested that if the US left, Afghanistan would turn into a “failed state.” This problematic narrative implies that all good things—such as democracy, modernization, and women’s rights—come to Afghanistan from the West. What’s more, Afghan people, when left to their own devices, constantly “fail” to progress due to their “backwardness” and “resistance to change.” The image of Afghanistan as “a failed state” and Afghan people as “incapable of advancement” is so firmly entrenched in Western discourse that there is no room for deviation from these intransigent understandings.

In *Television and Afghan Culture Wars*—the first in-depth ethnography of television and ongoing cultural contestations in Afghanistan—Osman reminds us that those who view Afghanistan through Orientalist clichés miss something critical about the country: many progressive Afghan people have been actively involved in projects aimed at modernizing and democratizing their country throughout history. To illustrate this, Osman turns the lens to Afghan television, which has been a large part of both international development and local modernization projects in Afghanistan, and retells the country’s past and present in a way that places Afghan people at the center of the narrative. Drawing on extensive fieldwork (2008–2014) with a wide range of television producers and consumers, Osman highlights the motivations, desires, and initiatives of progressive Afghan reformers and activists who aspire to “build a better Afghanistan” (p. xi). A historical overview of Afghanistan’s twentieth-century reform projects, with an emphasis on both the initiatives of Afghan reformers and British, Russian/Soviet, and American interventions, sets the tone for subsequent analysis of development projects and the agency of Afghan media producers. Such a reorientation of inquiry illustrates that Afghanistan, rather than being stuck in time and forever unchanging, as predominantly understood in the West, has always been “on a continuum of change or swinging pendulum of culture wars,” just like any other country (p. 41).

One of this book’s significant contributions is Osman’s provision of a theory of transnational media flows relevant to the Global South, particularly to states subjected to imperialist ambitions. Arguing that “globalization alone cannot adequately describe the structural imbalances, power disparities, or cultural and ideological issues of the media worlds” she is studying, Osman contends that scholars must pay attention to cultural imperialism as a conceptual framework to account for the power dynamics that permeate contemporary “international communication flows, processes, and effects” (pp. 64, 65). She posits the terms “development gaze” and “imperialist gaze” to distinguish collaborative,

benevolent development projects from top-down, exploitative, and duplicitous ones (p. 87). In the context of Afghan television, this distinction reveals that international donor aid to the Afghan media sector does not just promote capitalism or the free market; it also creates robust and diverse television programming that resembles a “public service model of television” (p. 114). Within this fragile yet vibrant “media world,” Osman finds that the vast majority of Afghan producers fall under the development gaze.<sup>1</sup> Despite being caught in expansionist economic and political arrangements, many are still motivated by “a desire to create a more just future for Afghan people out of the chaos, bloodshed, and ashes of its current dismal state” (p. 137). Osman’s theorization provides a new framework for understanding media in places like Afghanistan in a way that accounts for power imbalances in transnational communication flows and the agency of local media producers.

Osman’s nuanced and well-researched book also broadens our understanding of what it means to make mass media and what media means in a “perilous state.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the book, Osman reminds us that Afghanistan is a politically fraught context that has suffered four decades of war. This foregrounding of the context allows Osman to highlight the constraints Afghan television producers deal with, such as working in a war zone, dealing with imperialist interests and government censorship, coping with warlords, and facing the threat of violence every day. It also illuminates how such a fragile context affects the motivations of Afghan producers, as well as audiences’ expectations of television programming. For instance, despite facing a wide range of local and international constraints, Afghan media producers take bold steps to televise “gory scenes of violence” to remind the public about the horrors of the war, engender debate, and expose power abuses by warlords (pp. 139, 142). Similarly, Afghan producers, particularly women who dare to appear on television despite backlash from local conservative groups, are determined to create their own representations of Afghan women in media to counter the global circulation of their image as one of pure victimhood. Osman finds that, by taking such brave steps in the hopes of achieving peace and unity, Afghan television producers—both men and women—meet the demands of traumatized Afghan audiences, who “want television to bring justice and retribution to local and international warlords” (p. 22). In such a context, Osman therefore argues, television becomes a vehicle for “providing a semblance for justice, debate and healing,” and “has the potential to underwrite democracy, national integration, and peace” (p. 3).

Finally, at a time when there is much debate in both academic circles and popular culture that “TV is dead,” Osman’s poignant analysis of the Afghan media world demonstrates that TV is not dead, but indeed flourishing, in Afghanistan—not just as entertainment, but as a crucial platform for debating issues vital to Afghans, such as women’s rights, ethnic divisions, and foreign interests. In such a fraught context, television is not just a source of pleasure and escape: by offering diverse sections of Afghan society a space for public debate and reflection, it also becomes “a sort of equalizer” and, therefore, “has the potential to underwrite democracy, national integration, and peace” (pp. 3, 124).

In short, this timely book intervenes in dominant narratives on Afghanistan and the transnational circulation of media, demonstrating the vigor and agency of progressive Afghan producers entangled with imbalanced global flows of communication and entertainment. Osman’s argument also expands our understanding of what it means to produce television and what television means in a perilous context. It will garner the attention of students and scholars in global communication and media, development studies, Middle Eastern studies, and gender studies and will make an excellent addition to many undergraduate and graduate-level syllabi. We are fortunate to have this groundbreaking work as a

<sup>1</sup> Faye Ginsburg, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Brian Larkin, *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).


<sup>2</sup> George E. Marcus, *Cultural Producers in Perilous States: Editing Events, Documenting Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

source at a time of increasing efforts to decenter dominant narratives, as it introduces a more diverse array of voices and perspectives into the curriculum.

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## Egypt's Football Revolution: Emotion, Masculinity, and Uneasy Politics

**Carl Rommel (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2021). Pp. 294. \$55.00 hardcover. ISBN: 9781477323175**

Reviewed by Tamir Sorek , Department of History, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA, USA ([tjs6787@psu.edu](mailto:tjs6787@psu.edu))

*Egypt's Football Revolution* is an excellent ethnography of Egyptian football culture during an extraordinary and dramatic historical period. The book is based mainly on extended field-work and interviews conducted non-continuously between the late 2000s and 2019, informed by reviewing football coverage in Egyptian media in those years. Although it is not the first scholarly study of contemporary Egyptian football, it is unprecedented in its depth, breadth, and analytical rigor. While the book covers various sub-spheres of fandom, its core plot is the rise and fall of the Egyptian fan groups known as the Ultras, which took place in tandem with the rise and fall of Egypt's democratizing dynamics. Through the parallel examination of the dynamics in football and the series of regime changes, the book details the convoluted, multifaceted, and unplanned relations between football fandom and politics.

The Ultras are known in football scholarship as informal or semiformal fan organizations consisting of young working-class men, usually with an anti-establishment orientation and transgressive tendencies, which have become part of the European football landscape since the 1960s. They resemble English "hooligan" groups that emerged earlier, but the Ultras have developed an articulated stand against commodified and media-saturated football. In their Italian model (which has been adopted in some other Mediterranean countries), they might also have a radical right-wing or left-wing political orientation. This context is important for understanding the uniqueness of the localized version of the Egyptian Ultras and their relation to *siyāsa* (politics), powerfully illustrated in the book.

Rommel studied the major Egyptian Ultras groups, Ahlawy and White Knights (cheering for the two Cairo rivals, Al-Ahly and al-Zamalek, respectively), both founded in 2007. They shared many of the characteristics of their prototypical European predecessors, including lower-class grievances and an anti-commodification stand, but unlike them, they claimed to be "apolitical," namely, to represent an imagined Egyptian national consensus. Throughout the book, there is an evident tension between this self-labeling and the undeniable political contingencies of the Ultras' action and rhetoric. As the book illustrates, the emotionality of football rituals is a fertile ground for political exploitation by various actors, and the Ultras have inevitably become part of this power struggle.

Rommel's major metaphor in reference to Egyptian football is the "bubble." The late Mubarak era, so goes the argument, was dominated by sentiments of frustration and despair and in those years Egypt's international success in football (three consecutive African championships in 2006, 2008, and 2010), provided "exhilarating happiness, boisterous pride, a rare sense of possibility, and collective feeling of victory" (p. 10). It was not only international