The Politics of Culture: Hybrid venues

Mona Abaza, The American University in Cairo

Summary

Interest in the "politics of culture" has risen with the phenomenon of globalization, which for some has been associated with "promotion or invention of difference and variety," and for others with Americanization. Since the late 1980s, a large body of literature concerned with global versus indigenous knowledge has developed posing questions about the role and weight of "local truth" in the global cultural condition. While some see globalization as a process of hybridization which still needs to be theorized, others see that it has given rise to a growing movement that asserts the "right of difference". Abaza uses the case of Egypt to show how these developments are reflected in the cultural sphere. She states that the Egyptian case shows a process of hybridisation of tastes, life styles and consumer habits that is coupled with reinventing traditions. She examines the above in light of the following phenomena:

1. Official "enlightenment" campaigns versus the "dark Islamists" i.e. the confrontation between the government and the Islamists, undertaken through the government's co-optation of a significant section of the secularists. The struggle seems to be over obtaining a monopoly over cultural readings, which are re-interpreted, but claimed as the only authentic and legitimate one. The results, the author claims, is that each camp seems sees the other as intolerant and a war seems to ensue between secular fundamentalism and religious fundamentalism.

2. The politics of censorship, intellectuals and the state. The Egyptian government has lately been using religion to inject doses of religiosity in all cultural and political spheres. Like in several other Middle East countries, religious witch hunting has escalated in Egypt spreading an atmosphere of terror against writers, novelists, film directors, artists and intellectuals who criticize the use and abuse of religion.

3. Sub-cultures, vernacular culture and new media. The author studies the new phenomenon of cyber politics through the increasing and instrumental use of facebook and other cyber spaces, which witness the circulation of important topics in discussion groups, which she believes is a novel way of disseminating knowledge. Moreover, the ways in which cyberspace has been used to mobilize people to exercise passive resistance or to organize demonstrations is highlighting the growing insignificance of political parties as the new cyber platforms provide rich counter - knowledge and information from a variety of political stands.

4. The re-organization of city spaces. This includes the "walling off" of communities, through the establishment of condominiums, gated communities, islands of luxury, or shopping malls. These, she claims, have become a model for the projects erected by emerging Egyptian capitalists. She contrasts the situation in Cairo with Beirut and Dubai showing the impact of the latter two cities on the new urban reshaping of the new satellite cities and uptown Cairo and the moving away from the traditional city centers. While the old "Downtown Cairo" or Wist al-Balad has been depopulated from its well-to-do middle classes, professionals, medical doctors and technocrats and is no longer the shopping center of Cairo, at the same time there is the simultaneous repopulation and claiming of the area by the sha'abi or popular masses as well as emerging private endeavors of artists to revive art and culture in downtown Cairo.