

gender, and political dissent. While biomedical examination is perhaps the most spectacular example of how the secular state claims its prerogative to reorder private life, this ethnography sheds equal light on mundane state interventions.

These interventions are both contingent and deeply embedded in the practices of everyday life. Mikdashi adapts Audra Simpson's concept of "nested" sovereignty to argue that religious courts, which handle personal status, primarily exercise sovereignty over sexual difference within different communities inside the sovereign secular state; analysis she grounds by tracing the impact of religious conversions on legal and social status within Lebanon's bureaucratic management of marriages and divorces. Secular sovereignty manifests in the process of both defining and disrupting the boundary between public and private realms.

Its sextarian logics inform even the attempts of Lebanese citizens to have a say over their own personal status, through strategic conversions, inheritance or divorce battles, feminist and queer secularist organizing, and even through their daily work in the state archive. To understand how some Lebanese people directly contest this system, Mikdashi introduces the idea of "evangelical secularism," examining how civil marriage activism and broader anti-sectarian efforts zealously champion secular culture as a remedy to religiously structured politics. These activists, including feminist and queer organizers, aspire to secular sovereignty, which obscures its role in sustaining the sectarian politics that they oppose.


*Sextarianism* stands out as a compelling narrative that guides readers through complex but urgent theoretical analyses. Having taught this book in both graduate and undergraduate courses, I find that Mikdashi's decision to shift the literature review and scholarly debates to the endnotes enhances its accessibility for students and wider public audiences.

This ambitious work has already sparked important discussions about the global reach of sextarianism. At the Middle East Studies Association 2022 conference, interdisciplinary scholars like Sherene Seikaly, Paul Amar, and Lara Deeb expanded on its relevance across studies of the Middle East and North Africa, global feminist and queer cultural studies, and political and legal anthropology. As Amar put it at the conference, "Mikdashi shows that queer theory is not some cute thing." Indeed, not cute at all. *Sextarianism* is as serious as the often-deadly consequences that the analytical slippages it addresses have wrought in Lebanon and elsewhere.

doi:10.1017/S0020743824000497

## Degrees of Dignity: Arab Higher Education in the Global Era

**Elizabeth Buckner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022).  
Pp. 264. \$40.95 paper. ISBN: 9781487528959**

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In *Degrees of Dignity: Arab Higher Education in the Global Era*, Elizabeth Buckner draws upon her extensive experience of living, teaching, and researching in various Arab states over a span of fifteen years, providing a nuanced exploration of the intricate interplay between global models of education and political factors that shape higher education in the Arab world. Employing comparative and multilevel analysis, she skillfully elucidates the broader policy landscape but also weaves in the personal experiences of individuals navigating the evolving

policies and opportunity structures in their lives, bringing a human dimension to what might otherwise be perceived as abstract or apolitical policies. In doing so, she relies not only on her personal experiences in the region but also on a growing set of critical literature on Arab states' higher education systems that have been increasing over the past decade.

Moving away from the often apolitical and technical literature on higher education policies in the region, Buckner notes how she avoids containment within a singular case study or ethnography. She aligns her approach with scholars who advocate for the use of theoretical and conceptual tools from a comparative education perspective. This perspective sheds light on both broad policies and their impact on real-life experiences that emerge from them. In the introductory chapter, she meticulously outlines the countries under examination, emphasizing the diversity stemming from their distinct encounters with colonialism, state structures, and economic circumstances. By focusing on three subregions—Egypt and Levant (Syria and Lebanon), Francophone North Africa (Tunisia and Morocco), and the Arab Gulf states (Qatar and the UAE)—Buckner underscores their differences and positions these cases within the global poliscap, enabling readers to discern alignments and disparities between them. For readers not acquainted with the region, this chapter serves as a reference point for navigating the rest of the book. However, using these regional analytical units does raise concerns over the possibility of falling into the limits of methodological nationalism. For example, while Buckner recognizes the connection between these countries, most alarming is her declaration, “I do not consider the peoples of the Arab Middle East and North Africa to have a common history” (p. 17). Something one can contest by examining how protests in Tunis in 2010 triggered uprisings across the broader Arab region. This connection may be linked not only to a collective sense of identity but also to the region's historical shaping, particularly in its interactions with colonialism and the subsequent emergence of independence movements.

In subsequent chapters, Buckner offers a detailed analysis of specific policies such as admissions, quality assurance, privatization, internationalization, and knowledge production in higher education, providing a comprehensive examination of these policies across the different regions. When examining university admission policy (Chapter 2), Buckner demonstrates how the different countries have different approaches to admission, but in most cases, she concludes, what is evident is that admission policies are a political matter; sorting students and deciding their fate is very much a state affair. For example, in Jordan, “[a]dmis-sions policies are part of a larger political balance” that in exchange for accepting a significant number of Palestinians, the Jordanian monarchy has granted special privileges to East Bank Jordanians hailing from rural backgrounds (p. 71). In Chapter 3, she finds a common discourse in international organizations' development approach to the region, which views higher education institutions in the Arab states as constantly “lacking.” She explains such an approach led to the emergence of the quality assurance discourse, which is entwined and dependent on a continued sense of a “crisis in education.” Frequently, she explains, quality assurance initiatives neglect the political and structural issues underlying the higher education crisis and narrowly adopt a rational approach that naively assumes quality assurance can be resolved by merely increasing spending or adopting policies such as accreditation or even privatization.

In Chapter 4, Buckner focuses on the increasing role of privatization in higher education in the Arab states today, which she explains is part of a larger movement across the world. Buckner demonstrates that privatization in higher education has taken on different shapes depending on the region. In Lebanon, it had a historical presence, like in the American University of Beirut, and in the Gulf, as in Dubai's branch campuses. Regardless of its variations, privatization raises important questions regarding the fate of public education and the significance of the private university degrees that have a reputation of being “for sale” (p. 121). This is not to mention the dangers of further societal stratification when particular people can afford access to private schools while many others find it prohibitory.

In Chapter 5, Buckner takes on the internationalization of higher education policies, which in the region tended to address branch campuses in the Gulf; nonetheless, Buckner stretches the lens to include internationalization in the context of state-funded national institutions. Like many scholars of critical internationalization studies, Buckner finds that internationalization tends to be equated with Westernization and language policy that prioritizes English over the native language, which the institutions intend to serve. These policy changes certainly have an impact on the level of knowledge production, which is delved into in Chapter 6. As she does in the other chapters, she exposes how a rational approach to the idea of improving research outcomes ignores not only the day-to-day obstacles academics face but also the political conditions that constrain, for example, academic freedom and places them in precarious conditions.


The concluding chapter serves as a masterful synthesis of the book's overarching theme, skillfully advocating for a reevaluation of the technical approaches to studying higher education in the Arab region. Buckner convincingly argues against adopting a posture of superiority when studying higher educational institutions in the Arab states and challenges the notion of a deficiency in higher education systems and academics in the region. She persuasively advocates for a shift in perspective, urging scholars to reconsider concepts like excellence and emphasizing the imperative of localizing policies rather than indiscriminately importing recommendations from international development organizations.

While the book successfully navigates macro-to-micro perspectives, offering valuable insights into broad higher education policies, the comprehensive approach involving seven states does present a challenge. The risk of diluting the depth and richness of the material, particularly concerning the lived experiences of the diverse actors portrayed in relation to the examined policies, is an inherent trade-off. Even within a single state, various groups undergo distinct encounters with these policies, as evidenced by the variations in experiences related to factors such as gender. Overall, *Degrees of Dignity* stands as a significant contribution to the discourse on higher education in the Arab region. Buckner's work provides a refreshing and insightful departure from technical and Orientalist descriptions, offering a comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics that shape higher education in the Arab world.

doi:10.1017/S0020743824000394

## Latin American and Arab Literature: Transcontinental Exchanges

**Tahia Abdel Nasser (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022). Pp. 224. \$103.05 hardcover. ISBN: 9781399507127**

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In *Latin American and Arab Literature: Transcontinental Exchanges*, Tahia Abdel Nasser takes a decentralized approach to world literature by offering a comparative study between novels, travelogues, and memoirs written in Latin America and the Arab world from the 1960s to the present. The book, comprising five chapters, centers on examining exchanges between Latin America and the Arab world within Third Worldist networks, and focuses on reading Arabic literature within a transcontinental comparative framework.