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Spotlight on Kevin Funk: Rooted Globalism

Interview and Commentary by Ken Chitwood

Is there a class of cosmopolitan, elite actors who have shed their national identifications in favor of more global notions of being and belonging? This is the question taken up by Kevin Funk in his new book *Rooted Globalism: Arab–Latin American Business Elites and the Politics of Global Imaginaries*. A fellow in the Committee on Global Thought, lecturer in the Department of Political Science, and affiliated faculty member of the Institute of Latin American Studies at Columbia University, Funk has delivered a work of immense value to scholars interested in the study of Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America and the Caribbean. While the Arab-Latin American elites he spoke to are predominately not Muslim, Funk's book sheds fresh light on the landscapes of interconnection between Latin America and the Middle East and the economic, political, and social orders that animate them.

Based on extensive fieldwork and a convincing set of relational interviews with politically influential Arab, or Arab-descendant, businessmen in countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, Funk uses the titular concept of "rooted globalism" to capture elite lives that are simultaneously local and global, transnational and national. It is this focus on the simultaneity of their lives that allows Funk to represent the often-sidelined narrative of complex relations between Latin America and the Arab world (one of many South-South axes deserving more attention in academic and public understandings of the late-modern world).

In the interview that follows, I ask Funk to further reflect on some of his book's contents, themes, and provocations and address some questions that might be particularly relevant to the LACISA community.

You focus less on religion in the book (p. 92) – and have even gone so far as to write that when it comes to marked growth and Latin America's commercial relations with the Arab world, "business and religion do not mix" (p. 140) – but what did you glean along the way about the religious identifications and connections of those you interviewed?

Just to clarify, I write that it is "at the level of many popular stereotypes" that business and religion are often argued not to "mix" (108). As I cite in the book, a version of this notion is also present in the *Communist Manifesto*, in which Marx and Engels argue that the bourgeoisie "has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation." And in their place, it is said to have "substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation" (109).

The story I tell through the book is a more nuanced one in which religion occasionally appears, among my interlocutors, as part of the complicated mixture that defines their "classed" intersectional identities and worldviews. Notably, religion per se was not commonly invoked directly by my interviews — who mostly consisted of Arab-descendant business leaders in various sectors. There are exceptions, such as a Muslim Iraqi-Brazilian interlocutor who, while I was conducting participant observation, would retreat to his office throughout the day to pray on a special rug. He also happened to be the leader of an Islamic-focused trade association in Brazil and has published academic research about the global halal market.

Notably, most Arab-Latin Americans — especially those from earlier migratory waves — belong to Christian families, and many of the active adherents among them attend the same congregations as their non-Arab-descendant counterparts. For the latter, religion as such does not mark them as "Others" within their respective Latin American societies, and again, direct references to religion by my interlocutors were relatively infrequent.

Yet I argue that even when religion was not mentioned with great frequency in my interviews, it is still present, and forms part of the milieu of interregional ties and identities that I interrogate in the book. Indeed, Brazil is the world's biggest exporter of

halal meat, and many of my interviewees mentioned the (economic) importance of halal certification. One of them, from Chile, also noted the difficulty of convincing compatriot capitalists of the need to overcome their Orientalist biases that impeded them from "exporting to these Muslims," as he put it (119).

There has long been an appreciation for the role of business and trade, merchants and markets in the spread of global Islam. How does your book add to our understanding of how global capitalist flows, trade networks and the like contribute to the contours of the global *ummah*?

Given that most of the figures with whom I interacted are not Muslim, and most Arab-descendant Latin Americans are Christians, this issue arises only obliquely in my analysis. Though it is notable in regard to the question that the aforementioned Iraqi-Brazilian interviewee referred to possessing a kind of commercial spirit "in [his] blood" (136).

What I do analyze in greater detail is the extent to which Arab-descendant Latin Americans in general are frequently "Othered" for their perceived business acumen, but also that they sometimes ascribe to themselves a commercially based diasporic identity. I thus highlight instances in which, for example, Lebanese-descendant Latin American business elites in general—of different religious backgrounds—portray themselves as possessing an inherent commercial mindset. This is precisely what is being invoked in the case of an Argentine-Lebanese trade organization whose office featured a large mural that depicted Phoenician merchants and a trading ship (further, its website noted that the Phoenicians were "traders par excellence" who "crisscross[ed] all the seas of the Old World, exchanging goods, art, and culture" [126-127]).

What we see in a contemporary context, then, is a kind of economic prowess that is invoked by some Arab-Latin American business elites, in part, to assert their contributions to the "modernization" and "development" of their countries of residence. This form of cultural capital, as John Tofik Karam revealed in the influential book *Another Arabesque: Syrian-Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil*, is also strategically deployed to demonstrate that they can play a useful role for governments and private-sector actors

who seek greater exchange with the Arab world. Again, this story is inclusive of the global *ummah*, but is not reducible to it.

What might your argument "for the stickiness of place-based (and other) imaginaries" (p. 21) have to teach us about studies in Latin America or the study of Islam and Muslim communities in Latin America?

This is one of the book's main intended contributions, and it is a response to a common scholarly and lay argument—advanced by everyone from neoliberal intellectuals such as Hayek and Mises to many contemporary Marxist-inspired thinkers, nativists such as Samuel Huntington, and far-right political leaders—about capitalist identities. According to this very commonly invoked notion, economic elites are placeless, rootless, and unmoored in both material and ideational terms. Regarding the latter facet, I observe that this argument is often made without any accompanying empirical analysis (and, indeed, I note that it enjoys little empirical backing). In contrast, the story that emerges through my interlocutors is one in which "global" identities among economic elites have not simply replaced national, local, and other place-based ways of thinking, but rather that they exist together simultaneously, in complicated and entangled forms.

One of the implications of the conventional argument that global elites possess more or less unadulterated global class identities is thus that more particularistic imaginaries (such as those based on religion, but also including national belonging, ethnicity, and so on) simply are no longer salient. I reveal, instead, the extent to which religious and other interpretive horizons, in Latin America but also beyond, are mutually imbricated with class consciousness, global and otherwise.

Are these wealthy individuals involved in any kind of philanthropic efforts or making notable contributions to civil society, whether that be on the national, transnational, or global scale?

While my focus was on the economic activities of these actors, some of them were engaged in significant philanthropic and/or civil-society efforts. One of my interlocutors in particular—a Palestinian-Chilean business leader—was extremely excited to be

involved in the introduction of Palestinian-branded credit cards in Chile, in part because the issuing bank participated in philanthropic efforts in both Palestine and Chile. The same figure was also previously associated with a Palestine-focused NGO in Chile. Additionally, I recount the example of an Iraqi-Brazilian trade organization that also espouses for itself a social mission—for example, through participation in aid, reconstruction, and cultural projects. However, in general, these figures were mostly focused on profit-seeking economic endeavors.

How might scholars working on Islam and Muslim communities in the Americas think more deeply about the simultaneity of the global and the local in the lives of the interlocutors they study with, both past and present?

As the framing of the question suggests, what is important in my perspective is to think precisely in terms of "simultaneity." Much of the 1990s globalization discourse gave the sense that global processes were flattening, subsuming, and homogenizing the local. As I noted above, there is still a rather commonsensical (and perhaps nearly hegemonic) notion concerning elite identities along these lines—according to which global capitalists think in increasingly place-less terms, and that local particularity is becoming less salient. There are of course ways in which, say, global capitalism flattens, subsumes, and homogenizes. For example, the spread of free-trade agreements has further enshrined neoliberal logics in countries all over the world. Yet on-the-ground dynamics are often also very messy, nuanced, and complex, and this is precisely what I observe about elite identities—that place-less logics do not precisely replace, but rather coexist alongside place-based mental frameworks, including in the mind of the same individual. In the book, I develop the concept of "rooted globalism"—which is also the first part of the title—to precisely capture this convoluted reality.

What strikes me as important, then, is to avoid simplistic global-local binaries and instead embrace complexity by analyzing the productive tension that always exists between the local and global. In general, there is no "global" that is not constituted by local dynamics, and vice versa. Doreen Massey's classic piece "A Global Sense of Place" is extremely instructive in this regard, and I often assign it for that reason. An earlier article that I wrote—entitled, "The Global South Is Dead, Long Live the Global South! The Intersectionality of Social and Geographic Hierarchies in Global Capitalism" — also

grapples with this question of how to reconcile universalizing and particularizing dynamics, with a focus on Arab-Latin American identities and imaginaries. As I note here and, in the book, I find the framework of "intersectionality" relevant in this regard, for it pushes us precisely to think of the local and global in terms of simultaneity, complexity, and nuance.

You introduce the concept of "rooted globalism" and deal with concepts such as cosmopolitanism. Is your idea of rooted globalism at all in conversation with Kwame Appiah's notion of "rooted cosmopolitanism," wherein "the cosmopolitan mixes unfamiliarity and recognition. The cosmopolitan is engaged but always slightly uncomfortable, even at home…[and] the cosmopolitan's own world and its surroundings become themselves objects of inquiry and selfhood"? (*[Post]Colonialism and Cultural Heritage*, 118)

I cite Appiah briefly, mostly because of the similarity of our key terms — "rooted cosmopolitanism" in his case, and "rooted globalism" in mine. I also make quick mention of his lecture "There Is no Such Thing as Western Civilisation," which I find both illuminating and helpful for the ways in which it also pushes us to interrogate the complex intersections between the local and global.

More broadly, there is, of course, a large amount of literature on cosmopolitanism by political theorists and others. There is overlap between my work and Appiah's, as well as some other texts in this area, insofar as we are all concerned with how the local, global, transnational, cosmopolitan, and universal intersect. The uniqueness of my contribution in this regard, as I see it, is that I focus on the class dimensions of cosmopolitanism—that is, what would it mean for a particularly situated economic elite to think in global, or cosmopolitan, terms? My argument about the "stickiness" of place-based imaginaries also presents a skeptical (but not dismissive) rejoinder to some of the less nuanced accounts of global identity formation.

Anything else you think the LACISA Newsletter should know about your work?

It has been truly remarkable to witness the explosive growth in scholarship on interregional issues in recent years. It is very heartening to be part of this trend of increased attention to Arab-Latin American linkages, to which this very newsletter has

also contributed immensely. It has also been a pleasure to have the opportunity to engage with so many interesting works produced by scholars and thinkers in different parts of the world and to be part of these conversations, and I am excited to continue following new works in this research area!

One somewhat different aspect of my book is that I draw from my very specific focus on a particular population of Arab-Brazilian, -Chilean, and Argentine business elites to speak to a much broader set of concerns within the interdisciplinary milieu of global political economy, related, specifically, to global capitalist class formation and consciousness. I hope, then, to have made substantive contributions in both areas, and I would be happy to hear from readers who find the analysis to be of interest (or who disagree with my conclusions!).

What's next for your research and writing?

The book ended up coming out at a particularly interesting time, as Lula — the main political protagonist behind the recent "boom" period of Latin American-Middle Eastern relations — has returned to the presidency and the world stage, after several years in which, for a variety of reasons, these interregional linkages had lost a significant amount of steam. He joins, of course, a new crop of left-leaning leaders in much of Latin America, and it will be interesting to see to what extent the Middle East and Arab world figure in evolving regional foreign policies. One immediate project revolves around making sense of Latin American-Middle Eastern ties in a current global context defined by superpower tensions and warnings of a new "Cold War." I am particularly interested in interrogating, from a critical political economy perspective, the normative dimensions of contemporary Latin American-Middle Eastern relations, which are often framed by sympathetic observers as normatively positive and desirable. Yet given the extent to which, say, Brazil's booming trade with the Middle East revolves around agribusiness exports, which produce significant and deleterious environmental consequences at home (among other effects), there is room for more critical analysis of the implications of these ties, environmentally, economically, and otherwise. I also just completed an essay for *Latin American Research Review* that analyzes the latest scholarship on Latin American-Middle Eastern linkages, and I will continue to follow new works as they are released.

The other main project that I am currently working on also has to do with elite imaginaries, but in this instance focusing on the recurring elite desire to remake Rio de Janeiro into a "global" city. I focus, in particular, on the city's long-marginalized and downtown-adjacent old port area, sometimes referred to as part of an area known as "Little Africa," which is home to the remains of the world's largest slave disembarkation wharf (Cais do Valongo), Brazil's first favela (Morro da Providência), and repeated rounds of elite-led "modernizing" and "revitalizing" urban reform projects. I am working on a few articles and chapters on this general topic, which together form part of a larger book manuscript. There is not an explicitly Middle Eastern dimension to this project, though insofar as I am situating this analysis vis-à-vis the broader notion of "Global Rio," the presence of a very nearby traditional Arab enclave—known as Saara—is also of note.