

5. “When Dissonance Becomes Unexpected Harmony: How Artists Are Re-Imagining Saudi Arabia’s Culture and Society”

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On May 16 this year, Associate Professor Sean Foley, from Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in the United States, made a presentation at Tokyo University for the course “Mediterranean and Islam Area Studies; Seminar I”, run by Associate Professor Namie Tsujigami.

A/Prof. Foley’s presentation explored how a new generation of Saudi artists treats culture as a vehicle to promote a broader discussion of the problems confronting their society in the twenty-first century. He argued that these artists – many of whom have no formal training in the arts – are not part of the Kingdom’s traditional intellectual elite, nor indeed are they the types of cultural producers most often examined by scholars and observers of the Kingdom. Rather, they are culturally-attuned, dynamic and ambitious young artists who seek both personal expression and a voice for the feelings and experiences of their generation, through the language of culture and using means and daring which the broader Saudi population often cannot easily express.

A/Prof. Foley noted that artists have been most successful at channelling these feelings when their work provides fresh ways of looking at controversial issues, such as women’s driving and religious extremism. In so doing, he explored how these artists have utilized social media and new technology to

promote their ideas.

A/Prof. Foley began his presentation by talking about the very ambitious, dynamic, humorous and – perhaps not surprisingly – controversial video “No Woman, No Drive”, the title a play on the famous Bob Marley song “No Woman, No Cry”. The video, released on October 26, 2013 by the Saudi production company C3, was a satirical criticism of the ban on women driving in the Kingdom. By releasing it online, it both gained immediate notice and was spread easily, and yet it also gained traditional media attention too, coming at the time of a protest by Saudi women over the driving ban. Foley showed how the video was at once a unique piece of work, transmitted by new online means, at yet also a continuation of a long dynamic of social criticism and agency by ordinary Saudis. This socio-political consciousness, indeed, is something typically missed in traditional scholarly assessments of Saudi Arabia, given the focus on more macro-level, and often state-centric, theories of Saudi state-society relations.

A/Prof. Foley went on to explore a range of artists and commentators in the presentation, including Abdunnasser Gharem, Ahmed Mater, Malik Nejer, Amy Roko, and Omar Hussein. In their own ways, these cultural producers are entrepreneurial; often their goals include to make money as well as to provide social commentary. But the latter is what is most important, A/Prof. Foley argued: these young Saudis disprove a number of myths about

young Saudis, including the assumption that nearly all are “bought off” by state rent distributions; that most are driven by mercantile or prestige concerns in their career rather than also seeking meaning and influence; and perhaps most important, that although the Saudi state is very durable, Saudi society is dynamic, and its culture is able to change, adapt, and manoeuvre in order to give themselves a voice. More than this, it is often overlooked or denied by observers that Saudi society is complex. Rentier theory, among other explanations, is often very simplistic, and yet Saudi culture is anything *but* simplistic. In fact, a key feature of it, shared to some extent across the Arab world, is an ability to hold a range of views and positions, some of which sometimes seem contradictory. Saudis, including youth, can simultaneously hold views that are both conservative and seeking change; they can harness technology without being defined by it; and they can critique the system in which they live, work, and are engaged without wanting to dismantle or destroy it.

In the latter part of the presentation, A/Prof. Foley showed several videos to illustrate the key points he had made. Beyond “No Woman, No Drive” – which obviously got many laughs, while also illustrating Foley’s arguments cogently – the videos critiqued extremist perspectives on martyrdom and terrorism, and the sources of conflict

