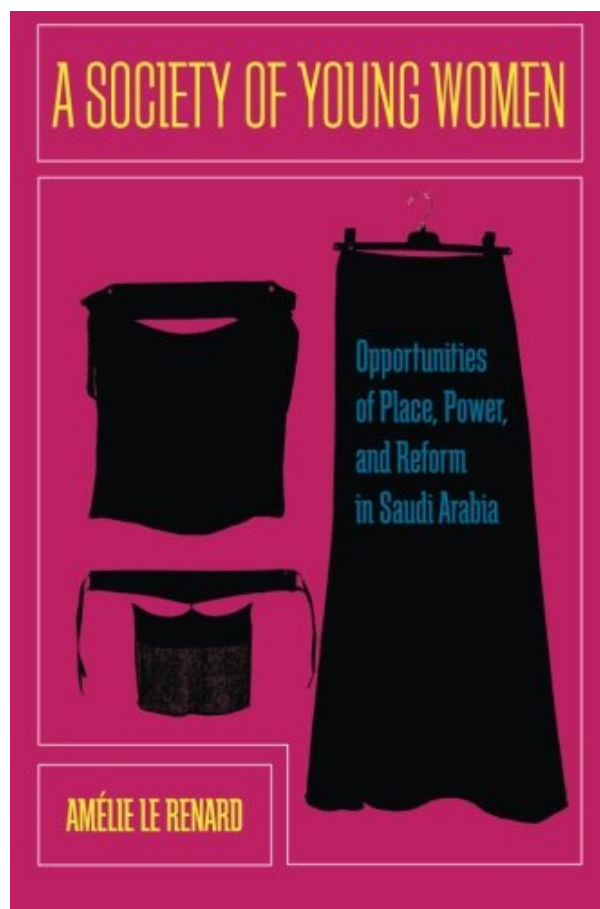


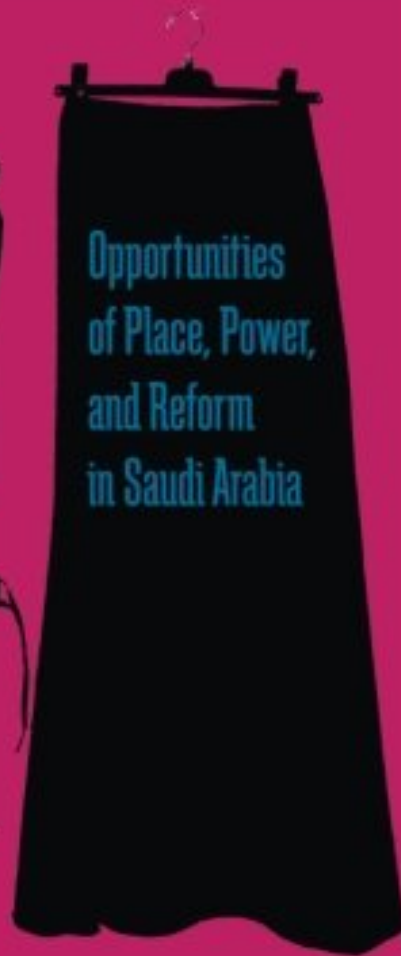
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OPPORTUNITIES OF PLACE, POWER, AND  
REFORM IN SAUDI ARABIA BY AMÉLIE LE  
RENARD**



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## Review

"By incorporating interviews with young Saudi women, this book takes its readers to places that visitors to Saudi Arabia usually cannot go and provides perspective on Saudi life that is not generally available. I recommend the book highly. Undergraduates as well as graduate students would find the book useful. It may also attract educated readers with an interest in Saudi Arabia and the status of women there."—Mary Ann Fay, *American Historical Review*

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"Amélie Le Renard's groundbreaking ethnography provides a richly layered look into the diversity of young Saudi women's lives in Riyadh. The book overturns ideas about Saudi society as closed or backward by highlighting how the production of homosocial spaces and the limitations placed on Saudi women's mobility are entirely modern conventions tied to rapid urbanization, oil wealth, and the presence of a large foreign resident population."—Neha Vora, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*

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Anthropology

About the Author

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The cities of Saudi Arabia are among the most gender segregated in the world. In recent years the Saudi government has felt increasing international pressure to offer greater roles for women in society. Implicit in these calls for reform, however, is an assumption that the only "real" society is male society. Little consideration has been given to the rapidly evolving activities within women's spaces. This book joins young urban women in their daily lives—in the workplace, on the female university campus, at the mall—to show how these women are transforming Saudi cities from within and creating their own urban, professional, consumerist lifestyles.

As young Saudi women are emerging as an increasingly visible social group, they are shaping new social norms. Their shared urban spaces offer women the opportunity to shed certain constraints and imagine themselves in new roles. But to feel included in this peer group, women must adhere to new constraints: to be sophisticated, fashionable, feminine, and modern. The position of "other" women—poor, rural, or non-Saudi women—is increasingly marginalized. While young urban women may embody the image of a "reformed" Saudi nation, the reform project ultimately remains incomplete, drawing new hierarchies and lines of exclusion among women.

- Sales Rank: #907009 in Books
- Published on: 2014-06-25
- Released on: 2014-06-25
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x .80" w x 6.00" l, .66 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 224 pages

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Amélie Le Renard is a sociologist at the National Center for Scientific Research, Paris.

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Some wore T-shirts with English language slogans like "Anything boys can do

By Gayle Kimball

A French postcolonial and poststructural feminist ethnographer, Amélie Le Renard interviewed over 100 young Saudi women in Riyadh from 2005 to 2013. This methodology reacts against belief in universal systems such as an essential patriarchy. The urban women viewed themselves as modern and different from the backward village woman, as they move in their "parallel city" of females with its own amusement parks, schools, and mall floors. These spaces without male supervision give women a certain freedom to show off their styles. Le Renard found their acts of rebellion against the morality police and strict segregation of the sexes was for the most part minor and expressed in their appearance such as short colored hair, make-up, allowing some hair to show, wearing jeans under their abayas. Some wore T-shirts with English language slogans like "Anything boys can do, girls can do better" and "Peace and love and freedom." Some wore shoulder abayas not attached to the head, embroidered with sequins. Consumerism is valued, such as carrying a Gucci handbag. Some non-conformists secretly communicate with young men on the telephone or social media. Books by American psychologists are best-sellers.

As is true of other highly sex-segregated spaces, such as British boarding schools or Afghanistan, some young people engage in homosexuality until marriage. Even married couples can't do much more than go to the mall for fun and many marriages (nearly a fifth) quickly end in divorce, so the focus is on "homosociality" for recreation. Girls on campus walk holding hands. As in Afghanistan, some young women dress like boys under their abayas. These tomboys are called buyat, frequently seen on university campuses in what can be considered a youth subculture, and some are lesbians in buya-cute (feminine) couples.

Most of the young women Renard interviewed didn't protest having to veil, thinking of it as showing respect to the holy shrines in their country, such as Mecca. Some did enjoy foiling the morality police (CPVPV), running away from them, ignoring their commands, or giving them a false name if stopped. One of the CPVPV police told a student, "You have pretty eyes, cover them," she replied, "You are so rude! It's up to you to look away!" Only a minority of the younger generation of women were Islamists and she heard frequent criticism of Islamic rules in private conversations. However, women are reluctant to claim rights seen as Western and liberal. A 28-year-old journalist said, "For liberals, there are no limits. I think we need to keep our identity." But she criticized the "rigorists" as "closed in on themselves, whereas the world is open." They regarded King Abdullah as a reformer who encouraged women's employment in opposition to

”rigorist” Islamists. Contraceptives are available to married women, enabling them to pursue education and careers.

The government Council of Senior ‘Ulama issues fatwas governing daily lives with an emphasis on covering their bodies—including the face, and avowing contact with men outside of family life. These policies developed from the Islamic Awakening of the 1960s, enforced by the religious police. Some young women protested their lack of freedom, such as a 28-year-old mall employee who told her, “There is no freedom here, everything is forbidden. . . you cannot even express your opinion.” Females must have their male guardian’s permission to go to school and work and are expected to accept their parent’s choice of a husband, although Renard interviewed women who had refused proposals.

The most radical rebels are the few women who lead the driving campaign since 1990, leading to the Women2Drive campaign organized in 2011. The majority of the activists are from wealthy families and lived abroad, criticized as tools of dangerous Westernization. Some other rebellions occurred, such as female students protested their university conditions in Abha in 2012, resulting in injuries to 53 of them, inflicted by CPVPV, police, and campus guards.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Hanging Out in Shopping Malls With Young Saudi Women

By Etienne RP

Saudi Arabia is arguably the most important country for America’s diplomacy in the Middle East. So you would think vast resources would be devoted to knowing Saudi Arabia better, and that social scientists would contribute to the task by providing insights as to where Saudi society stands and where it is heading. But books on Saudi Arabia based on serious ethnographic work are very hard to find. A recent book by two American anthropologists surveying how U.S. scholars research and teach about the Middle East does not refer to one single study on Saudi Arabia in its bibliography, and does not even list the country in its index. Meanwhile the two authors go off on some long rant about alleged censorship weighed on researchers working on the Palestinian question—no doubt an important issue as well, for political and human rights reasons, but one that has already been well-researched by Western anthropologists and local social scientists alike. In this context, American scholars and the general reader interested in Saudi Arabia turn to the French to provide them with first-hand descriptions of everyday life in Saudi Arabia’s capital city. Pascal Menoret’s *Joyriding in Riyadh*, which I reviewed on this website, presented an excellent ethnography of young men venting their frustration and boredom by doing car stunts on the road. Menoret’s study was able to yield surprising results, the most striking being (in my opinion) the seeming prevalence of homosexual relations, or homosocial courtship rituals, between car-driving outlaws and their crowd of young male supporters. What Menoret did for Saudi young men, providing a unique perspective into their life world, Amélie Le Renard achieves it for the opposite sex in *A Society of Young Women*.

Why is Saudi Arabia completely off the map for American anthropologists? What gives the French an edge in completing fieldwork in Saudi Arabia? I can think of no particular reason. Both countries are involved in the ongoing war against Daech and threatened by international terrorism. Access to the field is equally difficult for American and French nationals. They are always suspected of acting for the police or the security forces, and people won’t confide to them easily. Islamic institutions are reluctant to grant them access. They face material difficulties—they have no choice but to live in the costly international compounds reserved for Western diplomats and expats, isolated from the rest of society. The war on terror, and the United States’ military presence in the region, has added a new layer of suspicion and restriction on their activities. Security has become a serious concern: most Westerners cannot have access to the Bedouin hinterland, and their circulation in the main cities is closely monitored by the state’s security forces. These difficulties are even compounded for women researchers. They have to abide by Saudi society’s rules: they have to wear the hijab or the abaya, they cannot drive their own car, and they are more exposed than men to close monitoring and external censorship of their research. Their access to informers is limited by the



restrictions on mobility and the lack of public spaces in which they can meet Saudi women. Language may also be an issue, for male and female researchers alike: the Peninsular Arabic spoken in Saudi Arabia, especially the Bedouin dialect, is quite different from the modern standard Arabic taught in the language departments of Western universities.

Upon reflection however, there may be reasons why French social scientists do it better on the Saudi terrain. There is a long tradition of 'études arabes' in France, and 'l'orientalisme' still designates a legitimate scientific pursuit untainted by post-modern denunciations à la Edward Said. French social scientists may also differ from their American counterparts in their relation to the state and its institutions. In the United States, most if not all anthropologists resist the idea of contributing to the national interest as defined by policymakers and diplomats. The mere thought of having their work read and discussed at the Pentagon or in Langley sends shivers down their spine. Private and public universities are jealous of their autonomy, and social science departments see any interference by the state on their research agenda as an attack on their academic freedom. By contrast, French universities are public institutions supervised by the Ministry of Education and Research, which can provide broad orientations and set priorities on their research programs. Of particular interest for researchers specializing in the Middle East (Proche-Orient in French), the French government supports a network of public institutes for study and research in all fields relating to the ancient and modern civilizations of the region. These French research institutes abroad are placed under the aegis of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research). Its members are used to discussing the results of their research with French diplomats working in the local embassy or at headquarters. This is considered by the persons involved as a source of mutual enrichment, not as an interference in academic affairs that American researchers are so prompt to denounce.

Amélie Le Renard is a sociologist at the CNRS. Her research was supported by a state grant, and she benefited from an invitation brokered by the local French research institute at King Saud University in Riyadh. That doesn't make her a stooge in the hands of the French intelligence apparatus or a pawn in the neo-imperial ambitions of her home country. On the contrary, I would qualify her research as daring: politically methodologically, and culturally. On the political side, she makes it clear that her agenda is inspired by feminism, by post-colonialism and by critical studies. She complements a tradition pioneered by feminist scholars such as Leila Abu-Lughod or Saba Mahmoud, who have shown that Muslim women don't need to be saved from their culture or religion and have invented creative ways to talk back to power. She shows that post-colonial societies are no less innovative than Western ones in their handling of women issues and in their organization of public spaces. She challenges both Western discourse of women's oppression in the Muslim world and the Saudi authorities' reformist agenda that aims at integrating women into (male) society while keeping the two spheres separate. While she doesn't pretend to speak on behalf of Saudi women or Saudi feminists, she gives voice and agency to her female informers and provides theoretical concepts that may be mobilized in their daily struggles. She points out that Western support for causes supported by Saudi women is unevenly distributed: it focuses heavily on some issues and actors, such as female activists campaigning for the right to drive, while ignoring the silent protests of women mourning the arbitrary detainment or elimination of political activists.

Methodologically, she draws inspiration and uses tools developed by various strands of research in the social sciences. Erving Goffman and ethnomethodology help her analyze rites of interaction and the presentation of self in everyday life. Isaac Joseph and the Chicago school of sociology are mobilized to study the organization of public spaces based on the segregation of women from men. She proposes new concepts such as the "spatial economy of gender" that geographically distributes women-only places into an "archipelago of public spaces," closely monitored by the religious police and only loosely connected due to the limitation imposed on public transportation for women. She also refers to queer theory and Judith Butler to show that gender is something that is performed, acted out and sometimes played with. But it is on the cultural side that

her work is perhaps the most daring. Amélie Le Renard challenges common stereotypes about the Middle East. She points out that Westerners, and especially the French, are prone to strong reactions and even to moral panic when it comes to issues such as the veil or the gender segregation of public spaces. She tried to isolate herself from this cultural context by keeping the neutral position of the participant observer, lending an ear to her informers without prejudice or moral posturing. She also had to depart herself from French habits when she wrote her manuscript in English: as she points out, French and American scholars have very different ways of building narratives and presenting arguments.

I won't try to summarize the content of *A Society of Young Women*. Despite its scholarly apparatus, it is a very readable book. One feels sympathy for the young researcher as she negotiates access to the field and tries to establish a rapport with female informants. In part, her choice of terrain was born out of necessity: she did her fieldwork where she had access, while other places were off-limits for her as a woman and as a Westerner. So she hung out and met with friends on women's university campuses, in women's and mixed workplaces, and in the women's or mixed sections of shopping centers. She was also invited to friends' homes, in the space reserved for guests or within the women's quarters. She comes up with a rich harvest of facts and discoveries. One is struck by the fast pace of change in Saudi society: young women lead a very different life from their mothers' generation, and they have very different expectations and desires. Women-only spaces are places of relative freedom, allowing women to interact with their peers, but they also generate new inequalities and segregations: Saudi women who do not conform to the new canon of fashionable modernity, with elaborate make-up and designers' accessories, may feel ostracized and excluded. The shopping mall, in particular, stands out as a new theater of consumerist modernity: it is a place where women can perform their femininity and interact with others in elaborate rituals of sociability. It is also a closed, securitized space, very different in its nature from the open roads and outdoor places perceived by women as threatening and degrading (Paul Menoret's chronicles of road violence and macho posturing illustrates why).

So what should the diplomat or the practitioner take out from this book? The first lesson is that Saudi society should be approached like any other society, no less amenable than others to the tools of social science. Whereas most studies emphasize the conservative and reactionary nature of Saudi politics, Amélie Le Renard, like her fellow anthropologist Pascal Menoret, shows the "deceptive ordinariness" of Saudi Arabia. Like in any other society, young Saudi women have dreams and aspirations, while facing social constraints and political limitations. They wish to "realize themselves" or even to "blossom" in a way that is autonomous from family and relatively free from state interference. In a country where the number of female university students exceeds the number of male students, most educated women who do not work express a desire to do so, irrespective of their marital status or their level of income. The Saudi state, like most developed nation-states, forces people into various gender, class, ethnic and religious categories while claiming to promote equality between them. Its normative project of reform notably targets young Saudi women, in order to increase labor force participation, substitute local employment to foreign immigration, and enhance women's role in society. In the new neoliberal order, young Saudis are increasingly treated as individuals who must take charge of their own lives to succeed, gain education, build careers in the private sector, and thus participate in the country's development.

In this context, forcing some people into categories such as 'Islamist', 'Islamic', 'Salafist', or 'Wahhabi', and opposing them to 'modernists', 'reformers', or 'Westernized elites' will not lead the analyst very far. These categories make only a caricature of most Saudi men, and they do not apply to Saudi women. Better, in the ethnographer's opinion, to use words and categories that hold traction for the people themselves: adjectives employed by the interviewees include 'open-minded' (*mutafattihat*), 'free, or liberated' (*mutaharrirat*), 'rigorists' (*mutashaddidat*), and 'committed to Islam' (*multazimat*). Young urban women adopt lifestyles that are above all styles: wearing a Louis Vuitton bag or sporting designer shoes tells as

much about their identity that their attitude towards religion or their opinions about the political issues of the day. Like in any other consumer society, market segmentation gives the key to sales increase and determines how a message will pass through. If Western diplomats and opinion leaders want to address these young women, they should go beyond the small circle of women campaigning for the right to drive or blogging about female participation in local elections. Efforts at public diplomacy should address Saudi women on their own turf. Here Western influencers can find unexpected allies: self-help books are surprisingly successful, and so are texts and digital content aiming at personal development, psychology, and professional training. It seems that young Saudi women have their own priorities: removing obstacles to personal mobility may become one, but for purposes and through forms of mobilization that might at first appear surprising.

The last lesson is that investing in research on Saudi Arabia yields a high payoff. Western diplomats and business executives can no longer treat Saudi society as a black box. They have to open the lid and plunge into the country's social reality. Ethnographic studies may help them understand Saudi society better. In this way, they may come to the negotiation table in a better position to win deals, broker alliances, and foster partnerships. Getting to know the country better may also enrich an expat's daily life, and help him get the most from his stay in the Saudi kingdom. He or she should not expect too much from academic books, however. As pointed out, there are obvious limitations to the social scientist doing fieldwork in Riyadh, and most of the rest of the country can be considered as off-limits. The dry language of academia may discourage many readers, and they may prefer to turn to works of fiction or to travel books (there is also a rich collection of novels and narratives written by French former expats in Riyadh). This being said, I do believe that the French government does a big favor to the academic community, to foreign experts working on the Middle East, and to the broader public, by sustaining a network of social science research centers in the region and by helping young PhD students to complete their fieldwork in Saudi Arabia. Experts like Amélie Le Renard and Pascal Menoret are indeed first class, and their voice adds a valuable contribution to the public discussion on the region. The more their works are published by American academic presses and serve to influence the debates within and outside academia, the better it is for those who believe in fact-based and research-influenced decision-making.

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Women in a world of change.

By moorj

This is a peek into a world of women reaching out to find their place in a world changing so fast during the last generation it is hard to blend the old traditions with opportunities, increased wealth and traditional culture.

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