
The Political Culture Approach to Arab Democratization: The Case for Bringing It Back In, Carefully

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The abuse and misuse of the political culture concept to “explain” Arab politics has been so egregious that it is hard to resist the temptation to consign it without further ado to the dustbin of political science. So many sins have been committed: gross overgeneralization (Patai), crude Orientalism (Pryce-Jones), Eurocentric chauvinism (Kedourie), anthropologic reductionism (Gellner), not to mention media sound-bites (“Shi’is are suicidal but Sunnis are homicidal”). In academic political science the “political culture approach,” much admired as part of the dominant modernization-political development paradigm in the 1960s, retreated with the decline of that paradigm under the onslaught of political economy, “statism” and corporatism, rational choice, and the new institutionalism. In Middle East political science, even though there is a certain time-lag in intellectual fashions, one can observe a similar shift in attention: Today, socioeconomic rather than sociocultural approaches seem to be enjoying the greatest favor, while institutional approaches have yet to receive the attention they perhaps deserve.

Until fairly recently the main dependent variable for students of Middle East and Arab politics was authoritarianism. Each explanatory approach to this condition had its own conventional wisdom. There were easy political culture explanations: fatalism, individualism, primordial chauvinism, a herd instinct, and more. Political economy explanations focused on the dependency of the “peripheral” societies on the developed “center,” the historic hegemony of wealthy elites, and the peculiar properties of oil-driven economies. Those who advocated “bringing the state back in” had no problem ascribing the authoritarian condition to the overdeveloped *mukhabarat* [national security] state. Economic and institutional approaches were even combined with the application of

the model of the "bureaucratic-authoritarian state," drawn from Latin America. Culture in general, and political culture in particular, seemed superfluous.

The crisis of authoritarianism sweeping across the Middle East since the 1970s, however, has forced political scientists to rethink their enterprise. The situation to be explained is now more complex than the seemingly permanent authoritarianism of the past. Experiments in liberalization, even democratization, are occurring in several countries. The conventional wisdom, in its several variations, did not predict these experiments; instead, it showed us why liberalization would be highly unlikely. Indeed, if we continue to adhere to such conventional wisdom, we would have to conclude that these liberalization cases are "exceptional" and likely to fail. It is, of course, quite possible that the liberalizing trends we have observed in countries such as Jordan, Yemen, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Morocco are only ephemeral; our conventional wisdom that explains the permanence and ubiquity of authoritarianism may be correct. But suppose, for the sake of argument, that liberalization is a more durable phenomenon. How, then, are we to explain it?

It is not my purpose to propose a general theory of liberalism for the Arab world. My more modest task is to ask whether the new liberalism can be adequately explained *without* invoking political culture. My answer is a somewhat reluctant "no": Despite its conceptual untidiness and empirical difficulties, political culture is an important variable; it cannot be reduced to other factors such as economics, institutions, or externalities; it is necessary for helping explain how authoritarianism is losing its legitimacy. The political culture concept, then, must be "brought back in"—but carefully. Obviously, the egregious abuses of the term must be avoided. Recently among political scientists there has been a "return" to the approach in general and an effort to address earlier weaknesses. Among Middle East political scientists too there are new efforts to rethink political culture in terms of an emerging "civil society." The attack on "Orientalism" led by Edward Said was unquestionably salutary, but a side effect was the discrediting of political culture analysis in general. Notwithstanding all the problems it poses for empirical analysis, it seems too important to be ignored. Without factoring in the complexities of culture, values, beliefs, ideology, and legitimacy, we risk being left with arid economic reductionism. This is not a claim for the uniqueness or exceptionality of Arab politics, nor is it a denial of the significance of other factors. I would merely suggest that we need—and can develop—more sophisticated, less biased formulations of political culture(s) in Arab politics that will help us understand the possibilities and limits of alternatives to authoritarianism.

Political Culture Revisited

Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* (1963) was a major step forward in American political science, as Inglehart and others have noted, notwithstanding its flaws.¹ It marked an obvious advance over the old impressionistic "national character" analyses. Philosophically, in a tradition going back to Plato and Tocqueville, it sought to provide empirical grounding for the idea of "community" as a determinant of political performance. Their study offered new support for the proposition that a constellation of habits and attitudes marked by mutual trust was an essential condition for the development of associational life, political participation, and a loyal opposition. A torrent of debate and criticism raised serious methodological questions about *The Civic Culture*. The use of individual survey data to depict a society's political culture was faulted. The study was heavily criticized for proposing a direct causal linkage between political culture and democratic stability. Critics also raised the problem of ahistoricity inherent in a "snapshot" of attitudes at a single point in time. The authors themselves later accepted the validity of some of these criticisms.

Partly as a result of these criticisms the "political culture approach" faded during the 1970s and 1980s. Its retreat was also due to the decline of the larger political development and modernization paradigm in which it had been embedded. Ambiguities in the political culture concept were exposed. On the one hand, if political culture constellations were essentially permanent, how could they account for change in the dependent variables of stability and democratization? On the other hand, some political culturalists assumed or implied that attitudes and habits would in fact be easily modified by the forces of modernization; and yet empirical observation failed to show that more participant, inclusive political cultures were actually emerging. In the ensuing paradigmatic struggles, political economy, dependency, and the state pushed aside political culture approaches.

But the basic proposition of *The Civic Culture* is, if anything, even more central in comparative politics today—as we witness a certain "wave" of democratization around the world—than it was three decades ago. And, as we shall see, it rests at the heart of the contemporary debate about civil society and political liberalization in the Arab world. Some of the newly ascendant approaches do not seem to account satisfactorily for these outbreaks of liberalism. Dependency and statism, for example, would appear to predict the opposite. Rational choice and political economy approaches do better, but rational choice can offer only arbitrary utilitarian explanations for the values to be maximized, and economicist independent variables don't appear to discriminate between contradictory political outcomes: Economic crises can give rise to democratic experiments and also

kill them. And the causal connection between economic and political liberalization is hardly less problematic than that between the "civic" culture and democratic stability.

Perhaps these conundrums help account for what Inglehart calls "the renaissance of political culture" in mainstream comparative politics. "Renaissance" may be too expansive a term, but there does appear to have been a modest movement toward rehabilitating the political culture approach. Elkins and Simeon conceive of political culture as common assumptions (about order, causality, goals, communal identity, the political sphere, and the trustworthiness of others) pertaining to collectivities, not individuals, and they distinguish between the term as a descriptive category and as explanation.² Used in conjunction with structural factors, political culture has a residual explanatory function. Political culture—especially as a single factor—is not likely to "explain" dependent variables as general as stability, democracy, or authoritarianism. But it may help explain why certain institutions (such as legislatures) function as they do. Noting the distinction made by Brian Barry between sociological (or cultural) and economic approaches, they suggest that economic categories like self-interest and utility are shaped by cultural configurations.

The same point is developed by Wildavsky, who argues that the political preference configurations essential for rational-choice analysis are rooted in political culture and not simply exogenous "givens."³ Conflict may arise as different subcultures in a given political system clash over issues. In the same vein, Berntzen and Selle argue that "qualitative knowledge of the content of politics," by which they mean the historical cultural or ethnographic context, along with external structural factors, are essential to knowing "what is really going on."⁴ Similarly, Lane stresses the importance of disaggregating "culture" into subcultures and locating them precisely in the social structure.⁵ For students of Middle East politics, concerned as we must be with multiple cultures within or across state boundaries, and within or between elites (as well as masses), the point would seem to be obvious. The problem, rather, is to avoid the excessive generalizations that marked political culture studies in their heyday: artificial dichotomization between "traditional" and "modern," the oversimplification of "subject-parochial-participant" classifications, and the application of a single "culture" to a whole nation. Laitin's rejoinder to Wildavsky, while stressing the complexity of culture(s), notes that people with strongly opposed views can share a culture, while people from different cultures can have similar views. Taking the view (held by Geertz and Gramsci, among others) of political culture as a control mechanism, Laitin urges that we see it as a set of symbols that "constitute a political resource that can be effectively exploited by political entrepreneurs."⁶

Notwithstanding the weaknesses of the political culture approach in its heyday a generation ago, many political scientists today feel that the concept

cannot be abandoned altogether. They also have made some specific proposals for remedying these earlier deficiencies. It is possible, therefore, that political culture may also deserve to be brought back in to the analysis of Arab politics. But before we jump to that particular conclusion let us look briefly at the uses and misuses of political culture in the literature on Arab politics. Then let us examine the current interest in "civil society" and "democratization" in the Arab world from an enlightened political culture perspective.

Applications to Arab Politics

In the problematic epistemological relationship between political science and "area studies" one would have thought that "political culture" would be the indispensable linking concept. The gap between global generalizations and regional particularities would be bridged through careful empirical analyses of the given regional context in such a way as to enhance the explanatory power of general propositions while avoiding the blind alley of regional "exceptionalism." It is unfortunate, therefore, that the treatment of political culture in the Arab world has lagged behind general work on this subject as well as applications to other regions, notably Europe. While we shall mention below a number of notable exceptions, we have not moved as far as we should have beyond the level of long-discredited "national character" approaches. Political science on the Arab world has yet to produce a watershed study equivalent in theoretical importance to what Almond and Verba's *The Civic Culture* did to advance the study of political culture in general. A new generation of Arab-world political scientists is indeed rightly guided in its rejection of reductionist biased and ethnocentric readings of what Said called Orientalist political culture, but we should be careful not to throw out the political culture baby with the Orientalist bathwater.

Writers on political culture in the Arab world fall, it seems to me, into two categories: the reductionists and the empiricists. The reductionist "school," of which "Orientalism" is a big part, is the oldest and—notwithstanding the attack of Said and a new generation of scholars—the most influential, having seeped into the popular, and policy, discourse. The empiricists, to my mind a more interesting and diverse group, represent a salutary advance over the reductionists, but their work still suffers to some extent from the weaknesses of the 1960s.

"Reductionist" Approaches

The reductionist approach, whose practitioners have mainly been philologists, historians, anthropologists, and essayists, is given to grand generalizations.

It begins but does not end with Islam. The Islam presented by major scholars like von Grunebaum, Lewis, and Gellner is a disembodied essence, oddly disconnected from history, seemingly unadaptable to changing circumstances. To be sure, their Islam is (unto itself) complex, but its political implications are fairly simple: Both textually and historically it supports authoritarianism by rulers and submission by followers. Islamic political culture (in the reductionist presentation) permits no autonomous public sphere, no separation of the spiritual and temporal.

Then there are the Arabs. Jacques Berque is one of the few non-Arab scholars with the erudition and immersion to produce a profound presentation of Arab culture: He reveals the complexities of "the unitary and the plural."⁷ Eschewing the too-broad generalization, the historian Albert Hourani describes multiple and changing Arab cultures over time.⁸ Hourani is remembered as well for an oft-quoted characterization of "Levantine" culture: "To be a Levantine is to live in two worlds or more at once without belonging to either. . . ."⁹ The implied political consequence is instability.

Lesser analysts, however, have slipped into reductionist stereotyping, sometimes unwittingly. In his well-known book, *The Arab Mind*, Patai evokes Ibn Khaldun: "The Arabs are least willing of nations to subordinate themselves to each other, as they are rude, proud, ambitious, and eager to be the leader."¹⁰ From there he examines (among other things) child-rearing practices, "the spell" of the Arabic language, "the Bedouin substructure of the Arab personality," shame, honor, the "fahlawi" personality, the "Islamic component of the Arab personality," "extremes and emotions, fantasy and reality," "conflict proneness," and hatred of the West. If national character approaches have long since been discredited in political science they linger on in some of the other disciplines. Fouad Ajami, starting from Orientalist assumptions, goes beyond simply elaborating the image of a closed Arab-Islamic culture immune to Westernization and asserts that Arab culture has become hopelessly pulverized by the West. The result? A collective desire "to escape from politics, to entrust it all to grand schemes."¹¹ Communalism and sectarianism, he declares, prevail over integration and progress; Arab Muslims are yearning for a Mahdi rather than democracy (but Islamism probably won't bring cultural coherence); the Arab citizenry lacks the institutions and "habits of mind" to become more than "sheer spectators" in the political drama.¹²

Such notions are then vulgarized for general consumption, often for political purposes. Elie Kedourie, in a book written for a pro-Israeli think tank, asserts that ". . . there is nothing in the political traditions of the Arab world—which are the political traditions of Islam—which might make familiar, or indeed intelligible, the organizing ideas of constitutional and representative government."¹³ David Pryce-Jones caricatures the received wisdom in a 400-page "interpretation" of the Arabs that blames

Islam, tribalism, a shame-and-honor culture, and a total inability to be Western for the lamentable condition of Arab politics: "At present, an Arab democrat is not even an idealization, but a contradiction in terms."¹⁴ One could cite other examples but to no useful purpose.

"Empirical" Approaches

The "reductionist" treatment of Arab political culture offers some wheat and a great deal of chaff. The insights of a Berque or Hourani resonate with independent empirical observation and other informed analysis, and the sense of contemporary political culture incoherence that most of these writers depict is hard to gainsay. Valid conclusions, however, can sometimes be reached for the wrong reasons. Two factors stimulated the attempts by social scientists to specify the contours of Arab political culture more precisely and empirically. One was a healthy skepticism about traditional epistemological premises and methods. The other was the path-breaking work on political culture in comparative politics, discussed above. But how successful these attempts have been is another matter.

Reviewing political culture approaches to Middle East politics, Ben-Dor is somewhat dissatisfied with the state of affairs, but perhaps not dissatisfied enough.¹⁵ He rightly observes that the political culture "movement" in comparative politics was unfocused: Themes exposed in *The Civic Culture* were not consistently developed in subsequent work, notably Almond and Verba's collection, *Political Culture and Political Development* (1965). Not surprisingly, therefore, the scope of Middle East political culture scholarship (as Ben-Dor sees it) is capacious, including textual studies of Islam; anthropological "findings" about personality traits, socialization, and language; and structural studies focusing on families and elites. The generalizations on Islam and politics he finds (correctly) to be somewhat impressionistic.¹⁶ He notes (without comment on their validity) Morroe Berger's (1964) generalizations about the primacy of family and other primordial units, the hostility, lack of trust, formality, and political quietism of the Arabs. Waterbury's study of Morocco¹⁷ is cited as a contribution to our knowledge about factionalism and clientelism. But there are more questions than answers: How do alleged negative attitudes toward government vary from place to place, class to class, and sect to sect? What precisely are the bases of solidarity groupings? What exactly are the political implications (if any) of the so-called honor and shame culture? In what way does culture affect political participation? And in what way does it support (or retard) democratic legitimacy? In the Arab world we are a very long way indeed from being able to specify and empirically test a formal model, with correlation coefficients, as Inglehart does for the European and Anglo-Saxon countries.¹⁸

Far away as they may be from quantifying the impact of Arab political culture(s) on a range of political outcomes (such as legitimacy, stability, or democratization), the empirical social scientists have improved upon the more reductionist and Orientalist formulations (even if they are better at questions than answers) in several ways. One is their consideration of social and cultural change. Leonard Binder, for example, in one of his earlier essays (during his "political development" period) looks beyond the texts to ask (following Karl Deutsch) whether social mobilization will increase the pressures for traditionalism or radicalism. What will be its effects upon minorities, irredentism, and "sleeping nationalities"?¹⁹ Dankwart Rustow, more historically knowledgeable than many Middle East political scientists, was able to portray the cultural milieu of specialized elites in Turkey, thus moving the analysis beyond global country-level generalizations.²⁰ He also made a conceptual contribution by proposing that the investigation of political culture be focused on issues of identity, authority, and equality. Clement Henry Moore's old but still valuable study of North Africa, while not quantitatively rigorous, offers insightful contrasts between the "rationality" of the Tunisian "political formula" compared with the emerging institutionalized tradition of Morocco and the artificial "order" of Algeria disconnected from an incoherent political culture.²¹

The latest edition of Bill and Springborg's textbook on Middle East politics for the most part eschews sweeping cultural generalizations and wisely focuses on structures.²² Despite certain misleading phrases (such as "the genes of politics") and some tenuous historical propositions (such as the Prophet Muhammad as the model for today's "patrimonial" leaders), political culture is not explicitly advanced as an explanatory factor for contemporary tensions—indeed, the term does not even appear in the index or chapter headings. Social structure and political economy receive greater attention. Cultural content is less important than the *configuration* of social units like family, clan, sect, and client grouping. The balancing behavior and competition for "collective goods" among such groupings is what politics is all about, and the overarching, multifaceted dynamics of economic change ("modernization") intensify the uncertainty and the competition. In a loose sense, of course, this book—emblematic of the "political development" school of the 1960s—is "cultural" in its basic proposition: "the dialectical clash between the challenging forces of modernity and the persistent strength of tradition."²³ While the singular noun "tradition" might appear as the ultimate cultural reductionism, a closer reading of these "neomodernization" authors—who are not oblivious to two decades of often-valid criticisms of that paradigm—reveals a more discriminating and sophisticated depiction of enduring Middle Eastern political "realities." Certainly their work represents a significant advance over

the Islamic essentialism and national character stereotyping that unfortunately still dominate the public discourse.

In any inventory of political culture work by social scientists mention should be made of attitude surveys and micro-level, often anthropological case studies of ethnic, tribal, and sectarian communities. Both in their different ways aspire to a degree of specificity and empiricism absent in the nation-level studies. Attitudes and opinions, as measured by questionnaires and systematic interview data, may not be the best way of tapping into deep collective value orientations, but they are not perhaps inherently less valid than textual extrapolations or armchair speculation. Compared to other regions, empirical survey work on the Arab world is meager, but there is some and it is increasing.²⁴ Validity and reliability, not to mention interpretation, are often problematic, however; particularly when polling designs are polluted by "the authorities" or when the survey methods and even the identities of the poll-takers cannot be specified.²⁵ Lerner's groundbreaking work in the 1950s used attitude surveys to support an imaginative if flawed proposition about modernization and cultural transformation in which the mediating variable was the psychological property of empathy.²⁶ Marvin Zonis discovered on the basis of systematic interviews with a sample from the Iranian political elite a culture of cynicism that (rightly) suggested a certain hollowness in the legitimacy of the Shah's regime.²⁷ Farah brought together a number of studies from social psychology and survey research that empirically demonstrated an authoritarian socialization process and challenged conventional views about hierarchies of group identification in several Arab countries.²⁸ Saad Eddin Ibrahim directed a large-scale, cross-national survey of Arab public opinion that confirmed that Arabs remained deeply concerned about "all-Arab" national problems, but also discovered significant subregional variations.²⁹

Among more recent work is Suleiman's survey of young Tunisians' political attitudes. He finds not one but three distinct subcultures: Arab-Islamic, secular (French), and a "mixed" stratum that is (in Hourani's term) acutely "Levantinized."³⁰ A U.S. government information specialist, writing under the auspices of a pro-Israel think tank, takes to task both scholars who "underrate" and those who "exaggerate" the power or consistency of Arab popular opinion, and expresses moderate optimism (based on a private Jordanian poll) that there is an attitudinal change in Arab opinion toward acceptance of a compromise with Israel.³¹ In contrast, on the basis of a survey of professionals and academics in the Gulf during and after the Iraq-Kuwait crisis, Ismael and Ismael discern an antagonism between (regime) politics and popular political culture and conclude that the Arab state system "cannot be sustained any longer."³²

The "ethnographic" approach to political culture typically involves the application of anthropological or historical methods to particular social

groupings. A fruitful recent example is the collection edited by Khoury and Kostiner, in which scholars examine the complex relationship between tribes and the development of the modern state in the Middle East.³³ An underlying concern of these writers is compatibility of identification between these deeply rooted structures and the newer, overarching state, with all of its demands. The legitimacy of the political order depends to an important degree on this congruence—or, in the Middle East, the lack of it. “Because the nominal nation-state has not met the challenge [of development],” writes one of the contributors, “society has resorted to its pre-national ties as a solution. . . . The ‘ethnization of conflict’ suggests that tribalism has been revived under a new cover and that it obstructs the process of state formation.”³⁴ In the same vein but more categorically, the editors of a volume on ethnicity in the Middle East make the following cultural assertion: “The Middle East is a congeries of ethnic communities, most of which are fated to coexist with others under the same political authority within the boundaries of the same territorial state.”³⁵ One of the editors states that the Middle East is generally similar to other Third World regions, except that “the salience of the religious definition of communal solidarity” is more acute. He concludes that modernization has exacerbated ethnic solidarities and conflict rather than erasing them, and that consequently ethnic solidarities are too strong to permit the management of conflict by assimilation, that is, developing allegiance to nonethnic symbols.³⁶ Coercive domination by the strongest ethnic group tends to be the prevalent pattern. Such observations rest on a certain image of Arab or Middle Eastern political culture, which in turn rests on an interpretation of a certain historical “reality.”

To try and derive such images and interpretations from empirical observation is an improvement over *ex cathedra* Orientalism or armchair psychology; yet there is still room for disagreement. Subjectivity, unwitting bias, conceptual reification, factual selectivity, and even hidden agendas may also play their part. Serious scholars can and do have honest disagreements. For example, contrast Barakat’s interpretation of roughly the same empirical materials with some of the writers discussed above. Arguing from what the dust jacket explains is “an Arab perspective,” he skillfully dispatches the national character reductionists.³⁷ Like several of the “ethnographers” just mentioned, he is sensitive to the pull of parochial subcultures and “primordial” loyalties; but he sees much more development in the “secular” sector than they do, and he ascribes much of the stagnation not to cultural factors but to structural political conditions—authoritarian regimes and their powerful external supporters. Reversing the explanation of the cultural reductionists who ascribe the lack of democracy to cultural factors, Barakat and many other Arab intellectuals blame the current sociocultural malaise—including stifled creativity, a “traditional

mentality,” the absence of “scientific and future-oriented rationalism,” the “subjugation of women,” and what Sharabi calls “neopatriarchy” (a deformed, authoritarian, dependent, imitative condition neither truly traditional nor modern)³⁸—on “a devastating condition of alienation” engendered by the Arab citizen’s exclusion from the political process.³⁹ Which comes first: the democratic chicken or the cultural egg?

Civil Society and Democratization

With the collapse of the Soviet system and the end of the Cold War came a wave of experiments in democratization around the world.⁴⁰ There has been as well a renewed interest on the part of comparative politics theorists in democracy.⁴¹ Although the Arab-Islamic world seems to some to be the major exception to this trend, even here there has been some cautious movement toward liberalization, if not democratization.⁴² In the search for explanations, some political scientists have returned to old concepts, among them political culture. A recent volume on political culture and democracy in developing countries celebrates “the return of political culture” after two decades of banishment at the hands of neo-Marxism and dependency theory.⁴³ Indeed, the larger paradigm of liberal political development and modernization may also be making a return, although with slightly different labeling. The concept of “civil society” has emerged as a key condition for democratization, and now a number of the most able political scientists of the Middle East are investigating whether the reality is emerging as well, and why.⁴⁴

Most of these analysts would agree that civil society is an autonomous space between the domain of the state and society at large and that it has links with both. It is a structural concept whose hallmark is a plethora of voluntary associations. But it is a cultural concept too: As al-Sayyid puts it, there must be an “ethic of tolerance.”⁴⁵ When Norton speaks of “the vibrancy of civil society” in some Middle East countries, he is not just saying that they have many voluntary associations, but also that there are habits of cooperation and an acceptance of pluralism. Economic explanations alone will not do the trick; nor will reliance on exogenous political factors. From this Tocquevillian perspective the appropriate habits of the mind are deeply rooted—cultural—and they take time to grow. They do not vary with short-term changes in per capita income. In their empirical study of civic traditions in Italy, Putnam and his collaborators trace the origin of civic traditions (and democratic behavior) in northern Italy to the twelfth century and chart the growth of civic involvement from the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁶

If one is interested in understanding conditions such as legitimacy, liberalism, or democracy it is hard to ignore culture (and Tocqueville) even if

it is a residual variable after structural, economic, and exogenous factors. But if we decide to exhume the political culture concept in application to the Arab world (some would prefer to leave it buried), we must confront again old arguments. Some Orientalists would claim that the requisite "civic" associational structures and habits of mind certainly have not existed over time, nor do they now; on the contrary, there is an unbroken and unchanging cultural predisposition toward authoritarianism, submission, and fatalism.

But a respectable number of social scientists read "reality" very differently. Hermassi, for example, rejects the prerequisite of unbroken historical continuity, observing that the colonial experience created a kind of cultural *tabula rasa* in which civic culture can indeed take quick root.⁴⁷ He criticizes what he calls the Orientalist depiction of Arab-Islamic political culture as basically responsible for the lack of liberalism and democracy in the Arab world. Objecting to the "cultural essentialism" of Lewis, he observes that equally reputable scholars "have shown that in the Arab and Islamic world, the historic experience of freedom is much larger than a textual analysis would lead one to believe." He also challenges the Orientalist assumption of historical and cultural continuity in the Middle East state: "What they miss, he contends, 'is the obvious and profound discontinuity in the social formation of the Middle Eastern state introduced by colonialism.'⁴⁸ He goes on to argue that neither Islam nor Arab cultural patterns are inherently hostile to liberalism and democracy and, indeed, that democratic norms may be gaining importance as a source of political legitimacy. Similarly, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, on the basis of empirical investigations, is convinced that associational life is growing significantly throughout the Arab world and that a new civic space is emerging to curb the authoritarian *mukhabarat* (national security) state. Barakat (unlike some of the ethnographers) argues that a "progressive secular" future is possible, despite formidable obstacles. He cites Gramsci's observation on the double-edged character of civil society: ". . . at once the political terrain on which the dominant class organizes its hegemony and the terrain on which opposition parties and movements organize, win allies and build their social power."⁴⁹

The key question (except perhaps for radical and postmodern analysts) is how to deal empirically with civil society and political culture in general. Our survey of past and present applications suggests that there are no simple answers. Definitions are imprecise and elastic. Methods and evidence include everything from cerebral intuition and texts to historical narratives and quantitative survey data. It may be, as Diamond argues, that "the return of political culture" is welcome, and that it cannot be ignored in any attempt to explain the enlargement of democracy.⁵⁰ But in a book designed to fill part of the void on applications to the developing world there are only three Middle Eastern studies—Turkey, Egypt, and Israel—

of which only two are thoroughly indigenous political cultures and only one is Arab. The analysis of Egypt proposes that Egypt's current malaise is rooted in a deep antagonism between "modern instrumental rationality and indigenous value rationality,"⁵¹ the latter represented by the Islamist movement. While political Islam challenges the authoritarian modalities of "modern instrumental rationality," it refuses to accept the ethic of tolerance required for civil society, leaving Egypt with both an opening for and an obstacle to democracy. If the conclusion sounds familiar, so is the methodology: a qualitative interpretation of historical events and Islamist texts, with some emphasis on "Islamic praxis in the field of political economy."⁵² But the effects of Islamism on democratization or liberalization in Egypt or elsewhere need more careful examination than they receive here, and one wonders whether we have advanced much beyond the kind of work that was being done 30 years ago.⁵³

The uneven evolution of political culture studies provides us with a few epistemological lessons: (1) Avoid reductionist concepts and essentialist assumptions. (2) Disaggregate political culture: Look at subcultures (vertical and horizontal); look at elite cultures and mass cultures. (3) Political culture is a multilayered phenomenon, amenable therefore to "geological" study: Look at formal ideologies (on the "surface"), then at opinions (easily changeable), then at attitudes (less so), and finally try to plumb the deep structure of enduring collective values and orientations. (4) Focus on group identities, orientations toward authority, and principles of equity and justice. (5) Be methodologically multifaceted: Texts (from scripture and philosophy to newspapers, cassettes, and graffiti), despite their occasional misuse in our field, remain a fundamental (and fundamentalist) primary source; traditional historical narratives are indispensable, as are comparative case studies; interview and survey data should be more widely utilized.

The return of political culture to the study of Arab politics is, as W. S. Gilbert might have put it, a cause for "modified rapture." No Middle East area specialist (if only out of professional self-interest) would quarrel with the notion that culture is a good thing to know about: On a purely descriptive level, cultural knowledge no doubt improves political analysis in some intangible way. It is on the explanatory level that the concept seems at once indispensable yet problematic. It is important to specify what political condition or behavior one wants to explain. If asked to explain the decline of the U.S. automobile industry, economists might invoke models of supply and demand, factor costs, comparative advantage, and aggregate growth. If asked to explain General Motors' loss of market share, however, they might hire an anthropologist to analyze the "culture" of General Motors' management. Austere rational-choice models or macro-level economic variables may be sufficient to explain certain kinds of domestic and even

foreign policy decisionmaking. Structures and institutions (formal and informal) will help explain the powers of and constraints on politicians. But can economics or structures alone carry us far enough toward understanding those enduringly interesting dependent variables: legitimacy and stability, trust and effectiveness, authoritarianism and despotism, liberalism and democracy? Dogan remarks that "[p]ower, legitimacy, trust and effectiveness do not have identical meanings in London and Jakarta, or in Washington and Cairo."⁵⁴ Some comparative understanding of political culture surely is necessary to save us from egregious ethnocentrism. The discourse of Arab politics is, if anything, increasingly moral in tone and value-laden: There has been no "end of ideology." Today's debate over political Islam conceivably is no more than coded language for "pure" economic and political behavior. Is it old-fashioned to sometimes take things at face value—or is it prudent?

Notes

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Democracy in the Arab World: A Critique of the Political Culture Approach

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In the aftermath of the Cold War and the apparent worldwide embrace of the values and institutions of the victors, the virtually complete absence of liberal democracy in the Arab world seems quite remarkable. Political scientists do not ordinarily concern themselves with accounting for negatives—that is, with explaining what did not happen or is not there—for it is difficult enough to interpret what did happen without also trying to explain what might have been. Democracy is an exception to this general rule, however, because it is what might be called a "sentimental favorite" of Western social scientists. Most European and North American students of social and political life (almost all of whom, it should be noted, live and work in democracies) more or less secretly believe that the democratic states were victorious because they deserved to be. In other words, they believe that what was always self-evident to its beneficiaries—that democracy is the most desirable form of government—has now become apparent to the rest of the world as well.

Social theorists have failed to distinguish their normative biases from their analytical frameworks since social theory began; indeed, ethical values animate much truly important social science. Unfortunately, however, many of today's partisans of democracy have assumed not only that the superiority of democracy is self-evident, but that the converse is also true: A country's failure to embrace it is evidence of political perversity or moral obtuseness on the part of its citizenry. From this perspective, the inability or unwillingness of people elsewhere in the world to install and maintain democratic governments is to be explained by assigning some kind of handicap or immaturity to the people themselves.

In fairness, much of the literature examining the prospects for democracy in various parts of the world often does address what might be called