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Studying Middle Eastern Societies: Imperatives and Modalities of Thinking Comparatively

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J. Callignon and John Smith, "Smyrne"
(editor's collection)

**Studying Middle Eastern Societies :
Imperatives and Modalities of Thinking Comparatively***

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CURRENT DEBATES ABOUT THE STATUS OF MIDDLE EAST STUDIES are informed by an assumption that separates 'area studies' from 'global studies,' and 'area specialization' from disciplinary or theoretical orientation. Arguing against such separation, I propose that a resort to comparative perspectives may help bridge the divide. To this end, I discuss imperatives and modalities of thinking comparatively in the context of the Middle East, and their implications for bringing other areas into comparative inquiries. Focusing on illustrations from Middle East social studies, I attempt to think through my own, albeit limited, experience of comparative research within the Middle East region.

Area Studies

It has now become commonplace for critics to suggest that mainstream Middle East Studies has been suffering from at least three major drawbacks: first, parochialism (that is, we are talking among ourselves, outsiders do not know about us); second, a disposition against theory (that is, our studies are largely descriptive and empiricist); and finally exceptionalism (which ghettoizes scholarship about the Middle East by suggesting that the Middle East is a unique beast and does not fit into studies informed by conventional social science concepts and perspectives).

One should not exaggerate the extent of these problems. There are scholars who do go outside the Middle East to look back at it with different eyes. We also have those who have contributed to theorizing, like the earlier proponents of modernization theory, the theory of the 'rentier state,' or the more recent post-colonial debates (following Edward Said's work). Scholarship on gender and women's studies seems to be a more dynamic field. Indeed, a recent volume edited by Mark Tessler attempts to demonstrate that things are not that bad by putting together pieces of work which combine area knowledge with social-science concepts.¹

The fact, however, remains that our social studies do in general suffer from those disadvantages. It seems to me that other regions' specialists hardly read our social-science work. At Oxford, I was struck by the fact that my Venezuelan colleagues had not even heard (and those who had, would not

* This essay is a slightly modified text of a lecture delivered in the Symposium to launch a program on the Comparative Studies of South Asia and Middle East, University of California, Santa Barbara, 23 March 2001. I am grateful to Professor Dwight Reynolds and Garay Menicucci for organizing this symposium, and to Eric Denis with whom I have discussed some of these ideas. For more information regarding this new program see the website of UCSB, Middle East Studies Program.

¹ Mark Tessler, et al. (eds.) *Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). I have a sense of unease with this otherwise well-intended and worthwhile collection. It is as if the contributors have been asked to write pieces that mix theory and case studies for a *special occasion* (a conference and a book) after which they are to go back to their usual approaches to scholarship!

bother to investigate) about the notion of the 'rentier state,' despite the fact that Venezuela is an OPEC member and its economy is in this sense similar to those of the Arab OPEC countries. We have a sizeable body of work on Islamism, but little theoretical contributions, to my knowledge, have emerged from this emphasis.¹ In addition, the mainstream perspectives, say, on democratization, civil society, or political culture in the Middle East are still dominated by 'Middle Eastern exceptionalism,' the central core of which is religio-centrism. Thus, the region's authoritarianism is attributed to its main religion, Islam. Of course, exceptionalism is not limited to the Middle East. We have also 'American exceptionalism,' 'European exceptionalism,' or the 'peculiarity of the English.' But in the case of the Middle East, unlike others, this characterization often leads to the isolation and marginalization of the region from the mainstream social-science discourse. (Indeed, these worries about the status of Middle East Studies are reflected in a number of regional journals, including *Middle East Reports*, *MESA Bulletin*, and *Arab Studies Journal*).²

But does the solution lie in transcending Area Studies altogether? It is clear that Area Studies do offer certain significant comparative advantages; it is here where detailed knowledge about regions is produced. An ideal area specialist would know about various spheres of his or her area, including history, religion, geography, language, literature, and social and political matters. Such familiarity with multiple domains (and even better, multiple countries in a given region) places the scholar in a far more advantageous position to address social questions, if only we remember how these different domains of social life influence each other, or how nation states increasingly affect one another. In addition to being part of a network of experts in a particular region, the area specialist is familiar with different local languages pertinent to the study of the region, and often conducts fieldwork to acquire intimate knowledge. Although this strength seems to be sadly eroding as scholars become more and more single-country and single-subject specialists, nevertheless, those comparative advantages remain.

Is it possible to uphold the strengths of mainstream Middle East social studies, but rectify its major drawbacks? This is a challenging task and I do not pretend to offer a solution. Nevertheless, I am convinced of one thing which might be relevant: not only do we need to produce nuanced, detailed, empirical knowledge about our region, but by doing so we should also contribute to social theory in general. This means that through studying aspects of Middle Eastern societies, we should also attempt to generate analytical tools and perspectives that go beyond the immediacy of the place and time of our case study. To achieve this goal, *comparative approach* becomes not simply an intellectual curiosity or preference, but an epistemological imperative. For comparison allows not only for generalization, but also for specificity, and it averts not only "the

¹ It was not until December 1999 that New York University's Sociology and Middle East Studies Departments organized a joint conference to explore how studies of Islamism can contribute to social movement theory, and how Islamicists can benefit from concepts utilized to study social movements.

² *Middle East Reports*, October-December 1997, no. 205; *Arab Studies Journal*, spring 1998; *MESA Bulletin*, July 1995 with Rashid Khalidi's presidential address; and *MESA Bulletin*, Winter 2000 containing a review article by Ian Lustick, "The Quality of Theory and the Comparative Disadvantage of Area Studies."

exaggeration of difference," but also the "claims of exceptionalism."¹ Inter-regional comparison may then be a strategic option.

Modalities of Comparison

What is a comparative treatment? The *Oxford Dictionary* defines 'comparison' as the "action or instance of observing and estimating similarities and differences." In a sense, comparison is intrinsic to the human psyche. We are constantly involved in matching things, ideas, events, or behaviors, often as a means of evaluating and making judgments. In this sense, 'comparisons' can lead as much to prejudice, glorification, and self-blame as to greater knowledge. The fact that President Sukarno of Indonesia, an anti-colonial leader, could praise Adolf Hitler for his Third Reich (or Third Kingdom, where "Germany sit[s] enthroned above all peoples in this world") may be surprising. But this "spectre of comparisons," as Benedict Anderson terms it,² illustrates how matching through an "inverted telescope" and aided by the power of imagination can utterly blur the nuances of real life. These instances point in some ways to the types of matching which Olivier Roy justifiably discards since they "tend to take one of the elements of the comparison as the norm for the other...never questioning the original configuration."³ Blaming this situation on "the problem of comparativism" in general, however, carries the risk of reducing the entire comparative exercise (as an epistemological tool) to commonsense analogies.

Here my focus is on comparison as a social-science methodological tool and, in this sense, it is far more complex. Comparisons are fundamental ways of producing knowledge, since they compel us to see hidden facts, problematize taken-for-granted observations, and ask questions that otherwise we would not have raised had we considered only a single case. For instance, looking at Egyptian Islamism from the Iranian perspective, we are immediately confronted with the question of why, unlike Iran where the clergy assumed the leadership of the Islamist movement, in Egypt it was the lay Muslim activists who held the banner of Islamism. And why, for that matter, was the leadership in Iran's post-Islamist movement during the 1990s transferred into the hands of lay intellectuals? Addressing these questions can reveal a great deal about both the nature of clergy-state relations and the public practice of Islam in these two countries. Here we look back at the case of Iran, reflexively, through the detour of Egypt. In such *reflexive comparative view*, the actual focus may be only one particular case such as Iran, yet the process inevitably allows us to learn more about the other case as well, even if this reflection was not our intention.

Precisely because of this reflexivity and to the extent that the cases permit, we may be able to generalize. Obviously, the higher the number of comparable cases, the more refined our theorizing enterprise may become. This is how Skocpol theorizes social revolutions; how Putnam conceptualizes 'social capital' by analyzing civic culture in northern and southern Italy; how Keddie

¹ Peter Gran, "Contending with Middle East Exceptionalism: A Foreword," in *Arab Studies Journal* (spring 1998): 7.

² Benedict Anderson, *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London: Verso, 1998).

³ Olivier Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 8-9.

analyzes the phenomenon of 'fundamentalism,' or Eickelman and Piscatori 'Muslim politics.'¹

It goes without saying that useful concepts may emerge, not only from comparative work, but also from single cases. The notions of 'quiet encroachment' (non-collective and non-confrontational politics of redistributing social goods in the form of acquiring urban public space, land, urban collective consumption like running water, electricity, and so on, and business opportunities, locations, and labels) and 'street politics' (as conflicts which are shaped and expressed in the social and physical space of streets) emerged from my observations during the 1980s of the dynamics of Tehran's public space and the social actors who operate in such spaces.² After completing my single case study, I could see similar, though not identical, processes in Cairo, Istanbul, Dakar, and even La Paz. These later comparative observations (of differences) enabled me to enhance the conceptual possibilities in order to begin to generalize. I was then able to conduct worthwhile comparative cyber discussions around these concepts with urban specialists located in and working on India, South Africa, and Latin America.

It is crucial to stress that much of what is claimed to be comparable cases are *not*, in fact, comparisons. They are, rather, analogies. Analogy is the classic or common sense way of making comparison. Suppose I am a specialist on a certain country or city, and I exchange ideas with specialists of other cities or countries assumed to be comparable. I begin by describing how, for instance, Cairo slum communities are like this or that. My colleague may describe how in Tehran they are such and such, and a third person offers his observations on Sao Paulo. By doing so, we underline differences and similarities. What in effect we have collectively done is to juxtapose pieces of research through our conversations, or even in the form of more formal and structured seminars. Such juxtapositions may be useful in many ways, but they are not, strictly speaking, instances of comparison. They are analogies. Because these juxtapositions do not tell us from which conceptual stand other researchers are speaking, what methodologies they have utilized, or what local baggage their concepts carry, and therefore we do not really know what is being compared. Let me elaborate further on this point.

The historical or contextual roots of concepts and the local meaning that they may carry pose a challenge for this type of comparison. If an urban sociologist, say, from Brazil hears about Cairo's 'squatter settlements' from his Egyptian counterpart, he is likely to misunderstand the phenomenon. The Brazilian colleague would probably imagine tracts of *barrios* covering Cairo's surrounding 'foothills' supposedly invaded and seized collectively by peasants from scattered villages. He would probably think of urban communities with people organized in the neighborhoods with soup kitchens, active community

¹ Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge University Press, 1979); Robert Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton University Press, 1993); Nikki Keddie, "The New Religious Politics: Where, When, and Why Does 'Fundamentalism' Appear?," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 40.4 (October 1998): 696-723; Dale Eickelman and James Piscatory, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

² See Asef Bayat, *Street Politics: Poor People's Movements in Iran* (Columbia University Press, 1997).

organizers, and trade unionists linked to political parties. The truth is that almost none of these imaginations apply to Cairo's informal communities. Even counterparts in Tehran and Istanbul are considerably different in scale, in physical form, and in local arrangement.

It is perhaps due to this ignorance of local specific conditions and the emphasis on concepts often shared through analogies that Cairo's informal communities (the *ashwaiyyat*) are erroneously taken to be the breeding ground for the rise of violent Islamist groups during the 1980s. Instead of empirical studies, many local sociologists and criminologists in Egypt tend to invoke the concept of 'slums' formulated in the US. This is a model which has emerged in part from the studies of the poor immigrant communities in the 1930s, but more notably from studies of the current inner-city African-American ghettos, where joblessness and the decline of family structure are said to be responsible for crime and violence. Researchers borrowing this model of American slums assume a priori that Cairo's *ashwaiyyat* are urban ecologies that foster anomie, lawlessness, crime, extremism, and eventually Islamist violence. Nevertheless, an ethnographic look at Cairo's poor communities does not confirm this picture. The level of crime in the *ashwaiyyat* is not considerably higher than that in other areas. These communities shelter people with notably various levels of literacy, occupations, and income. The inhabitants exhibit a strong 'cultural capital of tolerance,' strong family relations, firm social control of children and the youth, and high hopes for the future. Cairo, after all, is probably one of the safest cities in the world.¹

Or take the notion of the bazaar. Middle Eastern ('Islamic') cities are usually identified by the existence of a grand bazaar next to a grand mosque in the center of the city. But the local variations on this notion are quite striking and pose a challenge for our analogies. If you ask a taxi driver in Tehran to take you to *the* bazaar, he will take you right there. In Cairo, however, the taxi driver will be confused by your question, wondering which *suq* (market) you have in mind. In Cairo, there is no such thing as *the suq*, meaning bazaar in the Iranian sense. They mean two different things in these countries. In Iran, the bazaar is not just a commercial complex, but also a political, social, and geographical unit with a distinct identity. We frequently hear what the views and decisions of the bazaar on this or that matter are (like Egypt's institution of *al-Azhar*). Such is not the case in Cairo's *Khan Khalili*. In short, although analogies often fail to check these kinds of mismatches, comparisons do not, because they derive from different kinds of practices.

Comparisons are not *ex post facto* acts of considering similarities and differences *subsequent* to studies already completed. Rather they *begin* with certain research questions—questions that compel us to engage in thinking and acting comparatively. Comparing, then, becomes an epistemological imperative necessary to unravel analytical puzzles. In this practice the researcher, *simultaneously* working in two (or more) areas, would operate within the same perspective to look at the comparable cases, utilizing the same methods and

¹ For a more detailed analysis of these issues see Asef Bayat and Eric Davis, "Who is Afraid of *Ashwaiyya*? Urban Change and Politics in Egypt," *Environment and Urbanization* 12.2 (October 2000): 185-99.

conceptual tools. In effect, what guides the researcher as to the modalities of selecting cases and parameters are the research questions.

In this respect, I can think of two types of questions. First, there are questions that emerge from casual observations, or juxtapositions of two seemingly analogous cases that may lead us to delve into comparative analysis. For instance, in the early 1990s I would be asked by both Egyptian and Iranian friends when they should expect an impending Islamic revolution in Egypt since I was an Iranian who had observed much of the Iranian revolution and had now settled in Cairo as a sociology teacher. In the political context of that time, this question seemed rather plausible. So I began a comparative study of Islamisms in Iran and Egypt covering the 1960s through 1980s.¹ In the study, I tried to explain why Iran experienced an Islamic revolution without developing a significant Islamic movement, while Egypt experienced a pervasive Islamist movement that considerably changed society without going through a dramatic political transformation. This comparison, meanwhile, enabled me to make a few theoretical remarks about the relationship between social movements and social revolutions. To put it crudely, I suggested that strong social movements, as part of an active civil society, might avert revolutions, since their very existence causes change that offsets the appeal for a revolutionary transformation; pervasive social movements often transform the conditions of their own existence. Since this study was published in a non-regional journal and reprinted later in a theoretical volume on social revolutions,² it is possible that scholars from outside the Middle East also read it (perhaps in the same way that Lila Abu-Lughod's anthropological works on gender and Muslim women was based on the Middle East example, but traveled outside the region). In other words, a comparative study covering countries in the Middle East can provide possibilities for both theorizing and, by so doing, accessing specialists from outside the Middle East (de-ghettoizing).

The second type of question is perhaps more challenging. This kind of question is linked to certain hypotheses whose testing would necessitate comparative research. Take the following hypothesis: the absence of urban social movements (neighborhood-based struggles for collective consumption) in the Middle East has to do with the weakness of genuine party politics, the lingering legacy of populism, and the strength of kinship ties. I can find this correlation in Egypt. I might find more or less similar patterns in Iran also. Nevertheless, in order to test the inverted correlation (that is, with party politics and absence of populism we should expect some kind of urban social movement), I would need to bring in Turkey as counter-factual. Unlike Egypt or Iran, Turkey is a country with a fairly reasonable level of party politics and a relative absence of populism (as Kemalist populism has seriously been undermined), although kinship ties are still important. In other words, here, we have tried to find a case as similar as possible to Egypt, but with underlying differences that can help test the validity of our hypothesis, and open the way for possible theorizing.

¹ Asef Bayat, "Revolution without Movement, Movement without Revolution: Comparing Islamist Activism in Iran and Egypt," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40.1 (January 1998): 136-69.

² Rosemary O'Kane, ed., *Revolutions: Critical Concepts*, 4 vols. (London: Routledge, 2000).

Through this type of comparative work, we are able to address some crucial questions. For instance, is the 'rentier state' mainly responsible for authoritarian regimes in the Middle East? We know that this model was constructed on evidence largely taken from the 'rentier economies' of Persian Gulf oil states.¹ Yet, to validate this speculation, we need perhaps to bring Venezuela into the comparative equation as counter-factual evidence, since this country was one of the most durable democracies in Latin America, despite its rentier economy. In addition, we might still want to pose the commonly asked question of whether Islam and democracy are compatible. To address this point in a comparative manner, we need to know how Islam is perceived and practiced in different, selected, Muslim countries. Otherwise, simple analogies may erroneously assume a unitary Islam, perceived exclusively in doctrinal terms, supposedly shaping the political dynamics in the Muslim societies. In all of these examples, studies *begin* with research questions that in turn necessitate comparison, and guide the selection of the matches.

What, then, is the logic behind the selection of comparable cases? What do we mean when we say that some cases are comparable, but others are not? How do we choose the pairs? We know that comparable cases should not be *identical* because they would otherwise cease to be analytical enterprises. Essentially, what makes two or more cases comparable is their ontological identity mixed with differences in their features. Hence, we are said to compare apples with apples, and oranges with oranges, and not oranges with apples. Nevertheless, this assumption may apply only at one particular level of comparison, at the level of 'appleness' and 'orangeness', so to speak. There may be many different levels of comparison. I would suggest that apples and oranges *are* comparable at a particular level ('fruitness')—both are fruits (ontological identity), with similar shape and size, sweet, but perhaps with different colors and tastes. The central issue, therefore, is not similarity or difference as such, but *relevance*—relevance to the research questions at hand. Similarity and difference matter, indeed they are fundamental, only because they determine the degree of relevance. For example, some might object to the comparability of Iran and Egypt to analyze their Islamist experiences. Iran had an Islamic *revolution*, but Egypt has an Islamic *social movement*; these are two different ontological realities. In a sense, Egypt should perhaps be compared with Algeria. Nevertheless, when I pose my central question as to why there was an Islamic revolution in Iran and an Islamic movement in Egypt, I am in fact operating at a different level of comparison—at the level of socio-religious change.² By doing so, I am trying to make sense of the logic behind these two different trajectories of Islamist transformation in countries that exhibit somewhat similar structural and cultural experiences. I want to see what all these different trajectories tell us about social movements and social change in general. It is clear that I have chosen Egypt, not Lebanon or Palestine, as a comparable match to Iran, despite

¹ G. Lucciani, ed. *The Arab State* (London: Routledge, 1990), introduction; and Hazem Beblawi and G. Luciani, eds. *The Rentier State* (London and New York: Croom Helm, 1987), introduction.

² Note how Janet Abu-Lughod compares Cairo with New York, a city which might be argued should be compared with say London or Hong Kong from the industrial world; Janet Abu-Lughod, "New York and Cairo: A View from Street Level," *International Social Science Journal* 42 (1990): 307-18.

the fact that they have also experienced some kind of socio-religious change. I do so because by definition selecting matches *as similar as possible* (but not identical) offers the most fruitful epistemological enterprise to address our points of inquiry.

Middle East and Beyond

What do these analyses say about the relevance of other areas in the world, for instance South Asia or Latin America, as comparable partners for the Middle East? In broad terms, the increasing integration of the world regions into the global capitalist economy tends to generate similar processes in the periphery. Currently, a great deal is said about the homogenizing impact of globalization. Much earlier, Karl Marx and others had pointed to the integrating and diffusing capacity of capitalism. It is true, the homogenization thesis is often exaggerated, since in reality global influences are mediated, negotiated, and modified by local cultures and histories, resulting in hybrid types and differentiation. In fact, it is these differences that are so vital for our comparative purposes. Yet, one cannot underestimate the increasing resemblance in social and economic structures (for instance, in urban processes and economic operations) as well as in social forces and types of struggles that the periphery, albeit unevenly, is experiencing. In addition to more general global factors, particular shared experiences may further increase the possibilities of comparative inquiries between two or more regions. For instance, the grounds for comparative studies of the Middle East and South Asia are further enhanced by these regions' many common experiences due to historical and contemporary connections and flows, through the travelling of ideas, religions, commodities, cultures, images (films), traders, workers, and pilgrims. The principal question, therefore, is not about the legitimacy of inter-regional comparison. Since not only are such comparative endeavors legitimate, they are, in my judgement, indispensable. The crucial question, rather, concerns our intellectual and logistical capacity to face the challenges of inter-regional comparisons. For instance, how common is it for individual scholars to know more than one field and language to compare meaningfully? To what extent is it feasible for a scholar to specialize, say, both in the Middle East and South Asia or Latin America? One way out of this handicap may be to arrange collaborative work between specialists of different fields or regions on specific comparative projects. Although feasible and preferable, this undertaking is still far from simple. To avoid misguided comparisons or simple juxtapositions, research partners need to begin by creating conceptual common grounds, identify the challenges of comparability, adopt identical methodologies, and espouse a uniform sense of the field. Ideally, this effort would represent a closely-knit and integrated team work accomplished by a group that thinks with one mind and sees through one lens.