

Research approaches
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According to classical Western social theory, the institutions, networks, and projects of civil society operate in a pluralistic, continuously contested public civic realm. Distinct from either the government's coercive bureaucratic functions or profit-seeking private businesses, often conceptualized as a buffer between states and households, civil society represents a third, non-governmental, non-profit, voluntary sector of modern society. Viewed differently, the civic realm is a zone where culture interacts with politics and economics. Recent research shows that rates of civic activism – of joining, communicating, demonstrating, donating, organizing, and participating in events and projects that affect community services, public opinion, and national politics – vary across countries and across time. The question is whether cultural 'traditions' explain why the civic sphere is more vibrant in some places and periods than others.

It is important to distinguish a moral economy or 'primordial civic realm' from modern civil society. Historically, Middle Eastern communities provided themselves with collective water supplies, dispute management, schooling, way-stations, market-places, sanitation, policing and other municipal or community services through mechanisms including waqf, zakat, sadaqah, ta'awun, guild, tribal or ad hoc initiatives. Although states forever strove to centralize legal practice, religious tithes, and private bequests, individual and collective projects reflecting a mix of Muslim piety, political competition, and economic rationality were a centripetal force. In the case of Yemen, philanthropic and community mechanisms for funding and maintaining collective goods, grounded in a pre-capitalist social formation, gave towns and regions relative autonomy from imams and sultans. Religious endowments (waqf) supported independent seminaries where scholars and judges were at least sometimes free to contradict 'official' versions of sharia by, for instance, writing rationales for spending zakat (religious tithes) on local projects (tribal, artisan, and Jewish communities also marshalled a meagre surplus for essential services). It is also important not to romanticize what was a zone for contestation of the allocation of very scarce resources.

Times change, and with them the parameters for civic projects. Almost everywhere in the Middle East, governments have captured endowments, zakat, and education, offering in return public-sector sanitation and infrastructure. Currently there is a veritable explosion in

Researching Civic Activism in the Arab World

numbers of Arab NGOs, formal organizations that register with the government as non-profit fund-raising bodies. Nowhere in the Arab world (if anywhere), however, has the expansion of civic space been a V-shaped opening, smooth and regular. With the waxing and waning of economic fortunes and with greater or lesser government success in co-opting autonomous initiatives, exigencies and outlets change. My research on twentieth-century Yemen documents three quite distinct periods of civic animation. In the modern enclave of late-colonial Aden, class-based labour syndicates and merchant's associations filled expansive public spaces both physically and metaphorically – the streets, salons, schools, publications, legal loopholes, and access to Yemeni and British public opinion. A second efflorescence of civic activity, the Yemeni self-help (ta'awun) movement, peaked in the 1970s when recycled migrants' remittances financed country roads, primary schools, mechanized water retrieval, and the first electrical generators in many cities, towns, and villages. Activism in the '90s has been characterized, on the one hand, by unprecedented overt partisanship, formal political organizing, publishing, and holding of public events; and, on the other, by significant growth of the charitable voluntary sector whose projects include emergency relief, welfare programmes, health clinics, informal and parochial education. The sudden, rapid expansion of political space after unification and its constriction after 1994, together with deepening economic crisis prompted particular responses from various segments of urban and rural society. Different movements have been reactionary or progressive, resisting or inviting commercial markets and/or central political authority. Civic activism tends, then, to be episodic, opportunistic, and contingent, as people act on concrete local circumstances.

If culture is a constant, it cannot explain such wide discrepancies. Of course activism is

expressed in Arabic, with ample references to local, Yemeni, or Islamic tradition. Yet what an array of 'traditions' to choose from – a treasure-chest of symbols, customs, and sayings for special occasions. Whereas in an era of road-building, ranchers adapted tribal auto-taxation mechanisms to hire bulldozers, in other times tribes resort to roadblocks to hold the antagonistic state at bay. 'Declarations of public opinion' issued by conferences and available on newsstands mix republican, tribal, sharia, Greek, socialist, historical, and internationalist phrases and concepts in a real, literal contest of public discourses. In lieu of old forms of social capital formation, charitable donations are solicited in the name of a 'new tradition', the formalized jama'iyya khayriyya, or welfare society, as distinctly modern as commercial Islamic banks.

Looking at civil society as a series of projects or initiatives rather than a collection of 'civil societies' has methodological implications. First, studying civic activism is at least partly an archaeological venture of digging around architectural sites and unearthing documents. Who built the mosques, schools, public spaces, clinics, and clubs? How are they used? Maintained? What is the documentation, and how or where is it published or preserved? What, in other words, is the output of civic activism, what material traces are left?

Secondly, we can read texts and public displays. In contemporary Yemen the plethora of newspapers, tabloids, and pamphlets reflect a wide range of opinion and constant competition between the government, political parties, and others for the hearts and minds of an ever-growing reading public. One can fill weekly calendars with seminars, conferences, and meetings, or attending court trials and town council sessions – all scripted scenes open to observation, participation, and contention. Publications and events document dominant and dissident discourses, positions, and projects. Legal defence of newspapers

against allegations by the press prosecutor's office is a drama acted out in the press, the courts, in journalists' and attorneys' syndicates, and in human rights organizations.

One case study of tribesmen building roads or activists defying censorship is interesting; in the aggregate, such acts can transform material and political conditions. Thirdly, then, the study of political culture requires comparative use of ethnography, close reading of first-hand accounts by anthropologists, development consultants, human rights monitors, and other outside 'participant observers' as well as 'native' reports. Mapped geographically and arranged chronologically, case studies help show how and why rates of activism vary from one place or season to the next.

Research in Arabic for publication in European languages is partly a translation exercise. Decisions about what to transliterate or abbreviate are crucial: should one render jama'iyya khayriyya as such, or as a welfare society, or as an NGO? Nowadays there is often the further choice of accepting a given English version of an Arabic name and correcting its spelling or wording. In addition to the important question of what to call things, however, is a further issue of the unit of analysis. It is one thing to research non-governmental organizations and quite another to document clusters of activity within spheres such as education, social welfare, legal practice, or publishing that may be nationalized, secularized, privatized, or reinvented depending on national politics and economic circumstances. Current conditions in Arab countries are hardly conducive to widespread formal political participation, but we may nonetheless discover ways in which civil society constitutes a buffer against authoritarianism and deprivation. ◆

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The 1998 Prince Claus Awards

The Netherlands' Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development granted its Prince Claus Awards to 16 artists and intellectuals who have demonstrated exceptional creativity, courage, and commitment in their work in the domains of culture and development. The 1998 winners have proven the capacity to bring about fortuitous change in their surrounding environments and thus deserve the recognition and encouragement given by the awards, which are a means to make the otherwise little-known efforts of these individuals recognised world-wide.

The Prince Claus Fund, in addition to the awards, offers funding, produces publications, stimulates world-wide cultural debate, and supports activities and initiatives which emphasize innovation and experimentation.

The Principal 1998 Prince Claus Award was awarded to the Art of African Fashion represented by three leading figures in that field: Alphadi (Niger); Oumou Sy (Senegal), and Tetteh Adzedu (Ghana). Thirteen other Prince Claus Awards were presented to individuals from the world over. Three of these merit special mention here:

Redza Piyadasa

Redza Piyadasa (1939, Kuantan, Malaysia) devotes himself both to the practice and to the theory of art. During the sixties and seventies he filled a serious vacuum, at a time when there was scarcely any debate on the subject of art history or art criticism in his country. Partly due to his persistent efforts, the situation is now quite different. In his many publications, both in English and in Malay, in his countless articles in the Malay press and also in his work as an artist, he examines the contexts of art and their significance for the construction of artistic traditions and artistic values. His interest is centred on modern Asian art, which he places in relation to traditional Asian art forms and Western contempo-

rary art. Piyadasa's art, such as the collage-like 'Malaysian Series', which he has been working on since 1980, and his art criticism are his answer to neo-nationalistic, Islamic, and globalization currents in Malaysia, which have threatened to marginalize minority groups and alternatives.

Nazek Saba Yareb

Nazek Saba Yareb (1928, Jerusalem, now based in Beirut, Lebanon) is an academic, literary critic, essayist, novelist and human rights activist. She is concerned in human relations, seeking to stimulate a better understanding of other people and other societies. Her literary and academic work reflect this concern. Culture and art are essential in the rebuilding of a country emerging from a terrible civil war (1975 - 1992). It is in this light that one should see Nazek Saba Yareb's commitment to the Baalbeck Festival in Lebanon, which reopened in 1997. She works wholeheartedly and with unflagging energy in order to help her country regain its place on the international cultural map. The themes in her works include: women's issues, marriage, religious fanaticism, minority identities. Through communication between people and cultures, Yareb has stretched out her arms and created new perspectives for Lebanese culture, a new vision for the future of its people.

Rakshan Bani-Etemad

Rakshan Bani-Etemad (1954, Tehran, Iran) was one of the first women to make films after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. She is now the foremost female director in her country, enjoying both national and international renown. Bani-Etemad extends the boundaries of officially permitted imagination. Her work appeals to women in her own country and beyond, subtly researching and presenting womanhood and moving people's hearts and minds. While never alienating the mainstream audience, her films have a distinctly female perspective, a strong sympathy for the feminist cause and a preoccupation with female sensibility and the role of women in love and society. But Bani-Etemad does not want to be called a feminist, since she fears being confined by ideology. She is first an artist, and she needs the freedom to explore and explain positions that may not be placed high on the feminist agenda. The result is a true change of attitude through art. ◆

*For further information on the 1998 laureates, please consult Prince Claus Awards, published by the Prince Claus Fund, The Hague, 1998.
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