Middle East Historiography: Did We Miss the Cultural Turn?

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Abstract

In the late 20th century, a novel mode of historical research and writing emerged and soon acquired its distinctive label, "the new cultural history." By the first decade of the current century, some deemed cultural history to have achieved hegemonic status within the historical profession. Yet recently mounted retrospective assessments of this "cultural turn" have cast doubt on such triumphalist declarations. This is especially so within the field of Middle East historiography, in which cultural history *per se* has failed to achieve the status of an identifiable sub-discipline on a par with social, economic, or political history. This essay explores possible explanations for this conspicuous absence, focusing on the distinctive history of the Western historiography of the Middle East and the tendency of disciplinary mainstreams to "domesticate" their unruly "children."

In the late 20th century, a novel mode of historical research and writing, one informed by a variety of theoretical and methodological approaches associated with broader "post-modernist" and "post-structuralist" tendencies in the humanities, emerged and soon acquired its distinctive label, "the new cultural history."[1] By the first decade of the current century, some deemed cultural history, now sufficiently familiar to be shorn of its "new" designation, to have achieved hegemonic status within the historical profession.[2] Yet recently mounted retrospective assessments of this "cultural turn" have cast doubt on such triumphalist declarations.[3] Using these reassessments as a point of departure, this essay analyzes the impact of the cultural turn within Middle East historiography, highlights the most salient theoretical and methodological currents, indicates some remaining lacunae, and explores possible explanations for cultural history's apparent failure to acquire meaningful purchase within the field.

All of the readily available anecdotal evidence suggests that historians of the Middle East have "missed" the aforementioned cultural turn. First, scholarly overviews of cultural history's purpose and significance, whether found in the reassessments noted above or in primers on cultural history as a sub-discipline, reference Middle East historiography in cursory fashion or not at all.[4] Second, much recent scholarship on the Middle East displaying research interests and approaches characteristic of cultural history was produced *not* by historians but by practitioners of other academic disciplines.[5] Third and perhaps most significantly, a very small minority of historians of the Middle East describe themselves as cultural historians or characterize their scholarship in these terms.[6] When discussed at all, cultural history is usually adjoined with or subsumed within the field of social history. In what follows, I suggest that Western historiography of the Middle East has its own distinctive history, one that goes a long way toward explaining this general reticence to embrace cultural history as an identifiable sub-discipline on a par with social, economic, or political history.

First, however, it is necessary to present my working definition of cultural history. At the most obvious topical level, cultural history entails analyzing the production and consumption of cultural phenomena. At a deeper level, it is informed by a particular conception of culture as a historical phenomenon. Prompted by the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz,

this conception assumes culture to be contextually specific yet more systematic, comprehensive, and omnipresent than products like tools or the arts and letters. In other words, culture is elemental. It is intrinsic to and constitutive of human beings, not just another discrete realm of social science research akin to "society" or "the economy."[7] Analysis based on such an understanding refuses distinctions between "high" and "low" culture and is more qualitative than quantitative, emphasizing subjective experiences of historical events and processes rather than attempting to uncover an objective "reality" underlying these phenomena. It is thus more inclined to analyze systems of signification on their own terms rather than as mere reflections of said reality. Hence, as new cultural history pioneer Lynn Hunt observed, "the central task of cultural history" is the "deciphering of meaning."[8]

Attempts to fulfill this interpretive task have also been informed by 20th-century Marxist cultural theory,[9] yet the work of a Marxist apostate, the French philosopher Michel Foucault, has wielded far greater influence. One obvious manifestation of Foucault's impact in Middle East historiography is the application of his observations on the relationship between discourse, the modern sciences, and the expansion of state power. These assertions have informed studies of military conscription and training,[10] state-sponsored "reforms" of health care,[11] and the design of urban spaces, all exercises in what Foucault called "governmentality," or the art and science of managing populations.[12]

Foucault's anti-positivist assertion that "there are no 'natural' intellectual objects"[13] has also been fruitful, inspiring a number of studies that historicize putatively stable, universal, and value-free phenomena, thereby revealing them to be normative and highly contingent historical constructions. Most notable in this vein is a recent wave of innovative and provocative scholarship exploring the historically constructed nature of sexuality.[14] Khaled El-Rouayheb has persuasively argued that using the term homosexuality to refer to same-sex desires and practices in the pre-modern Arab-Islamic world is an exercise in anachronism, conflating or erasing numerous "distinctions not captured by the concept."[15] Joseph Massad has effectively extended this effort into the modern period, arguing that much of the historical and cultural discourse at the core of the fabled *Nahda* or modern Arab intellectual renaissance was characterized by apologia for and denial of expressions of same-sex love and desire found in the classical Arabic literary tradition.[16]

Yet the figure who has left the most indelible mark on Middle East historiography is the literary theorist Edward Said. The subject of Said's *Orientalism* is, of course, the problematic history of Western scholarship on the Arab and Islamic worlds. Elements of this seminal text's core argument have thus served as enduring cautionary admonitions to those who would venture into the field of Middle East Studies. Chief among these are Said's assertion that Orientalist scholars routinely selected anecdotal evidence to construct essentialist, reductionist, and ahistorical arguments about the "timeless essence" of Arab-Islamic civilization.[17]

Drawing upon Said's contributions to post-colonial studies (as well as the work of Foucault, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Derrida), Timothy Mitchell has begun the process of illuminating the shared, troubling history of the social science disciplines and imperialist/colonialist projects, ultimately problematizing the very objects of these disciplines. Others have continued this effort, often tracking the evolution of this relationship via the analysis of Western and local discourses of development.[18]

Orientalism's influence is also visible in environmental history, a growing sub-field of Middle East historiography. Said's observation that Europeans constructed the Orient as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, [and] remarkable experiences,"[19] is echoed in Diana K. Davis' concept of the "environmental imaginary" – the "constellation of ideas that groups of humans develop about a given landscape" – and in Priya Satia's work on imperialist imaginaries of "Arabia."[20]

Another foundational premise of cultural history, the belief that "linguistic practice, rather than simply reflecting social reality, could actively be an instrument of (or constitute) power,"[21] has been reflected in the proliferation of source materials used by Middle East historians. Social historians of the Middle East traditionally relied on state archives, particularly court records and, to a lesser extent, probate inventories. The gradual complication of positivist certainties has yielded new readings of these sources and the incorporation of others previously deemed too "literary" and thus "secondary." Chief among the latter are biographical dictionaries, chronicles, legal codices, medical treatises, various genres of *belles lettres*, and mass media.

Middle East scholars have also begun to examine another form of state archive, the museum. Such studies, mounted chiefly by art historians, have analyzed museums as sites for the articulation of various forms of collective identity via the selective presentation of archaeological artifacts,[22] the representation of the state's official history,[23] and as concrete manifestations of the "nationalist project."[24] Other sites of officially sanctioned historical memory have attracted scholars interested in their commodification and consumption as tourist attractions.[25]

Consumption studies, which explore the various meanings ascribed to the sale, purchase, and use of goods and services, is one form of culturally inflected research that has established a presence in the field.[26] Among the most notable efforts to date are studies of the cigarette industry in Egypt,[27] material culture in early 20th-century Jerusalem,[28] and the consumption of mind-altering substances in early-modern Iran.[29]

Analysis of the cultural norms and social sanctions surrounding the latter phenomena have played a role in the study of marginality, a state experienced by (or ascribed to) segments of the population who fail to conform to a variety of legal, cultural, or aesthetic norms.[30] Thus, in addition to those who partake of forbidden substances, the marginalized can include ethnic and religious minorities, migrants, the visible poor, entertainers, prostitutes, criminals, homosexuals, various other practitioners of perceived immorality, and the physically and mentally disabled.[31]

One of the sanctions most frequently applied against such unfortunates is the forced exclusion from public spaces, a practice that has recently drawn the attention of Middle East historians.[32] In fact, urban space is the common unit of analysis for a wave of recent scholarship by historians, anthropologists, human geographers, and art historians. Influenced to varying degrees by the cultural turn's "spatial" counterpart,[33] these works examine contested "narratives of place" produced by voluntary and involuntary migrations to and from urban spaces,[34] modernist fantasies of urban planning and social engineering,[35] class and gender segregation produced by the neo-liberal reordering of urban space,[36] the role of space in contingent processes like the formation of the nation-state,[37] and the relationship between urban space, politics, and consumption.[38]

Yet several subfields of cultural history remain poorly represented or completely absent from Middle East historiography. Particularly striking in this regard are the history of the body and disability history,[39] research vectors closely linked to the study of marginality. Another related field, teratology or the study of "monstrous" physical abnormalities, has received considerable attention in early-modern and modern European historiography.[40] This current of cultural history, which sometimes verges on the fetishization of the bizarre and the grotesque, is perhaps, for reasons stated below, deemed too delicate for Middle East scholars to explore.

There has also been a relative dearth of visual or pictorial studies, with few Middle East historians answering "the call for a cultural analysis capable of decoding a specific language of images."[41] Given the many large collections of late 19th- and early 20th-century

photographs now available, this is perplexing. Similarly, the histories of sensory experiences and emotions have yet to make their appearance in Middle East historiography. Scholars have recently begun to study the relationship between masculinity, athleticism, and modern politics,[42] yet the cultural history of sport remains underdeveloped. And finally, given the region's long and painful experience with undemocratic governance, why has the culture of authoritarianism loomed so small in the historiography? To date, only two monographs have attempted to engage with this issue.[43]

Conclusion: Did We Miss the Cultural Turn?

As noted at the outset of this essay, I contend that the context in which Middle East histo-riography came of age has rendered some of cultural history's distinctive features unpalatable to many. First, there is cultural history's "nihilistic strain," the propensity, attributable largely to the influence of Michel Foucault, to view all human identities, practices, and relationships as "culturally conditioned."[44] For some, this tendency threatens the effacement of "all reference to social context or causes,"[45] the displacement of "our gaze from the poor and powerless"[46], and ultimately "evading politics,"[47] a potentially irreversible "turning away" that would "foreclose" a return to previous positions and intentions.[48] In this way, some Middle East historians may perceive the adoption of a cultural history approach as the certain abandonment of social history and all of its associated commitments – feminism, human rights activism, social justice for workers and peasants, the Palestinian cause, anti–imperialism, opposition to American foreign policy, etc. Cultural historians, of course, would argue that the shift from the "objective" (material) to the "subjective" (interpretive) is informed by a desire to uncover the experiences of the oppressed and the marginalized. Yet in a field so sensitive to contentious contemporary political issues, such concerns provide a powerful motivation to shun identification as a cultural historian.

Second, there is cultural history's seemingly whimsical research spirit, a penchant for "novelty and innovation"[49] expressed via the "endless search for new [and unusual] cultural practices" like "carnivals, cat massacres, or impotence trials."[50] Robert Darnton, one of the "Founding Fathers" of the new cultural history, aptly summarized this disposition through his definition of the sub-discipline's core objective, "capturing otherness."[51] Given Edward Said's now canonical pronouncement that western scholarship on the Middle East was long premised on a spurious construction of the Orient as a place "absolutely different … from [and inferior to] the West,"[52] pursuing Darnton's research agenda is fraught with potential peril. Few, if any, among us wish to be accused of "cultural essentialism" and thus be "branded as Orientalists."[53] This begs the question: Does the mere acknowledgment of, let alone an abiding research interest in, "difference," however defined, expose cultural histo-rians to such accusations, to being tarred with the same brush as the likes of Raphael Patai and Samuel Huntington?

All of this is doubly ironic, for *Orientalism* and Said's other interventions into Middle East Studies were profoundly "cultural," in every possible sense of the word.[54] As a result, Said was accused of the very sin so frequently laid at the door of cultural historians, initiating a "pernicious retreat from engagement with … the realities of politics, economics, power and oppression, and an accompanying turn toward … the abstract, depoliticized and ahistorical analysis of texts."[55]

As should be clear from the above, for two decades or more, Middle East historiography has displayed various influences of the cultural turn. But the question remains: why is the term "cultural history" so conspicuously absent within the field? Perhaps this disinterest in, or aversion to, cultural history *per se* is, particularly for older, more established scholars, simply

an effect of "turn fatigue," the weary, jaded perception that the cultural turn and all subsequent theoretically inspired pivots are mere "fads" not worthy of the serious academic historian's attention. Or could it all be, quite literally, semantic? Perhaps cultural history is "there" but has been, like several of its predecessors, "domesticated," i.e., stripped of its singularity, tamed, and absorbed into the mainstream of social history.[56] In other words, to belabor the transportation metaphor appearing in the title of this essay, we quietly "made" the cultural turn, appropriated some of what we found in that "foreign country" where "they do things differently," and returned to our field's social history "superhighway," rarely acknowledging the fruitful diversion we had taken.[57]

Short Biography

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Notes

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[1] Hunt, The New Cultural History.
[2] See, e.g., Gershoni, 'The Theory of Crisis and the Crisis in a Theory', in Gershoni *et al.* (eds.), Middle East Historiographies, 51–52; Arcangeli, *Cultural History*, 29.
[3] See, e.g., Surkis, 'When Was the Linguistic Turn?', 700–722.
[4] Cook, 'The Kids are Alright', 755. In his *Cultural History*, Arcangeli mentions no historians of the Middle East. Said's *Orientalism* is mentioned in passing four times in Burke's *What is Cultural History?*, 48, 57, 63, 65–66.
[5] The most salient examples are provided by the work of political scientists Timothy Mitchell, Eric Davis, and Lisa Wedeen and the sociologist Salim Tamari.
[6] Between 1989 and 2012, not a single article including the terms "cultural turn" or "cultural history" in its title appeared in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, the premier journal in the field. http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=mes (accessed 2/11/13). Furthermore, according the Middle East Studies Association website's membership roster, of the 503 members who selected history as their primary discipline, only 15 cited cultural history as a "specialty" or "area of interest." https://mymesa.arizona.edu/directory.php (accessed 2/3/3013).
[7] This proposition is most clearly stated in Geertz's dictum, "Without men, no culture, certainly; but equally, and more significantly, without culture, no men." Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures, 49.
[8] Hunt, 'Introduction', 12. Peter Burke has drawn similar conclusions, identifying "practices and representations" and the "symbolic and its interpretation" as cultural history's chief concerns. Burke, What is Cultural History?, 3.
[9] Significant in this regard are Soviet philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's observations on the sociopolitical functions of discourse and the revision (or some might argue, restoration) of Marx's model of base and superstructure, expressed chiefly through Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony. For Bakhtin's general significance, see Burke, What is Cultural History?, 54. In Middle East scholarship, see Gelvin, Divided Loyalties and Z. Fahmy, Ordinary Egyptians. For a summary overview of Gramsci's concept, see Lears, 'The Concept of Cultural Hegemony'. See also, Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory'. The most pointed and critical engagement with hegemony appears in Wedeen, Ambiguities of Domination, 11–12.
[10] Fahmy, All the Pasha's Men, ix–x, 117, 126.
[11] Hatem, 'The Professionalization of Health', 75, 67.
[12] Hudson, 'Late Ottoman Damascus'.

[13] Hunt, 'Introduction', 7.

[14] See, e.g., Ze'evi, Producing Desire; Najmabadi, Women with Mustaches; Amer, Crossing Borders; Babayan, et al. Islamicate Homosexualities.

[15] El-Rouayheb, Before Homosexuality, 6.

[16] Massad, Desiring Arabs. These "constructivist" readings of same-sex desire and practice have been challenged, most explicitly in Habib, Female Homosexuality.

[17] Said, Orientalism, 96. The quote actually appears in Lockman, Contending Visions, 68.

[18] See, e.g., Mitchell, Colonising Egypt and Rule of Experts; El Shakry, The Great Social Laboratory; Massad, Colonial Effects and Desiring Arabs.

[19] Said, Orientalism, 1.

[20] Davis, 'Introduction', 3–4. Satia, Spies in Arabia, 5.

[21] Hunt, 'Introduction,' 17.

[22] Zobler, "Syrian National Museums, 171–191; Watenpaugh, 'Museums', 187.

[23] Shaw, Possessors and Possessed, 83–107.

[24] Watenpaugh, 'Museums,' 186.

[25] Hazbun, Beaches, Ruins, Resorts; Noam Shoval, 'Commodification and Theming of the Sacred'; Daher, ed. Tourism in The Middle East.

[26] Middle East consumption studies effectively began with the publication of Quataert, ed. Consumption Studies and the Ottoman Empire.

[27] Shechter, Smoking, Culture and Economy, 'Reading Advertisements', and 'Selling Luxury'.

[28] Tamari, 'Jerusalem's Ottoman Modernity' and 'The Vagabond Café'.

[29] Matthee, The Pursuit of Pleasure; Grehan, Everyday Life and Consumer Culture.

[30] The first major effort in this field was Rogan, ed. Outside In.

[31] Fahmy, All the Pasha's Men, which studies the army as the modern state's quintessential institution for targeting "deviants" and "outcasts."

[32] Ener, Managing Egypt's Poor; Martin, 'Presenting'. An early and remarkable work in this vein is Bosworth, The Mediaeval Islamic Underworld, which documents the rhetorical association of street beggars and entertainers with criminality and various forms of mental and physical disability.

[33] For a summary overview, see Warf, et al. 'Introduction'.

[34] Mills, 'The Place of Locality', 383–384.

[35] Pyla, 'Baghdad's Urban Restructuring'.

[36] See, e.g., Makdisi, 'Laying Claim to Beirut'; de Koning. 'Gender'; Elsheshtawy, 'Urban Transformations'.

[37] Willis, Unmaking North and South, 6; LeVine, Overthrowing Geography.

[38] Reynolds, A City Consumed.

[39] Exceptions include Ghaly, 'Physical and Spiritual Treatment'; Richardson, Difference and Disability; Scalenghe, S., Disability in the Arab Ottoman World.

[40] For examples, see Arcangeli, Cultural History, 62–63.

[41] Arcangeli, Cultural History, 51. Initial efforts include Shaw's Ottoman Painting and Possessors and Possessed. See also Scheid, 'Necessary Nudes'.

[42] Sorek, Arab Soccer; Shihade, Not Just a Soccer Game; Jacob, Working out Egypt.

[43] Wedeen, Ambiguities of Domination; Davis, Memories of State.

[44] Hunt, 'Introduction', 10.

[45] Bonnell, et al. 'Introduction', 9.

[46] Sewell, Logics of History, 52. Quoted in Cook, 'The Kids are Alright', 763.

[47] Cook, 'The Kids are Alright', 750–751.

[48] Surkis, 'When Was the Linguistic Turn?', 702, 704, 710.

[49] 'Historiographic 'Turns'', 698.

[50] Hunt, 'Introduction,' 9; For similar comments, see Burke, What is Cultural History?, 3.

[51] Darnton, The Great Cat Massacre, 4.

[52] Said, Orientalism, 96. This essential and profoundly normative "difference" is a central motif of Said's work. See, e.g., op. cit., 12, 40, 43–45, 55–57, 72, 92, etc.

[53] Matthee, The Pursuit of Pleasure, 3.

[54] Said, Culture and Imperialism.

[55] This materialist critique was advanced the Indian literary theorist Aijaz Ahmad. The quote summarizing Ahmad's position appears in Lockman, Contending Visions, 212.

[56] Wilder, 'From Optic to Topic', 728.

[57] These phrases, so often used to evoke the unsettling spirit of cultural history research, are taken from L. P. Hartley, The Go-between, 17.

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