

SPECIAL SECTION

Culture Concepts in Political Struggle

Introduction

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The culture concept is at the core of some prominent political struggles in the Middle East. In contests over land, human rights, religious expression, material culture, development, and even economic policy, advocates shore up moral authority, co-opt or delegitimize opposition, and constitute new collectivities by drawing on the multivalent possibilities contained within the culture concept in its various historically constituted regional and global formations. As a concept that can mean both the sum of a people's customs, traditions, ideas, etc., *and* the best that humans have thought and said, it contains powerful means for creating solidarities, differences, and hierarchies. Although notions of culture have long been a feature of politics in the region, most notably in nationalist movements and in the civilizing missions of colonial powers and nation-states, their proliferation and commodification over the past thirty years is notable and deserves analysis.

This collection of papers¹ provides a fresh angle for understanding contemporary political struggles in the region, particularly as these relate to the challenges and opportunities nation-states and their subjects face from sub- and trans-national social movements and commodity circuits. Each paper examines the use of culture concepts to acquire, maintain, or challenge power in an environment of shifting relationships between politics and capital. They explore how different groups of people engage with political-economic processes by highlighting notions of culture and attaching them, often through processes of objectification and

commodification, to political projects. Finally, the papers ask how different constructions of the culture concept and contexts of its invocation enable or disable certain kinds of politics.

Three papers consider processes of state or state-like economic development or power formation, especially concerning the relationship between religion and politics. Jessica Winegar examines attempts by the Egyptian Ministry of Culture to create a notion of national high culture as part of a civilizing mission that challenges contemporary religious practice. In a useful contrast, Lara Deeb and Mona Harb analyze how Hizbullah administers and curates public spaces like a former Israeli detention center and an ecotourism site to foster a “*hala islamiyya*,” or “Islamic milieu,” and to inscribe its understandings of history, culture, and politics on the landscape. Ahmed Kanna investigates how being “cultured” in Dubai has become stripped of associations with local heritage or regional identities, and instead means properly cultivating oneself to a state of receptivity to the neoliberal multinational corporation. In contrast to Kanna’s paper on the use of “culture” to erase local cultural identity, two other papers examine how Middle Eastern minorities appeal to dominant Western notions of authentic and progressive culture to advocate for group recognition. Through analysis of a documentary that poses Innu and Amazigh figures in a relation of “similarity-in-difference,” Paul Silverstein scrutinizes the ambivalent embrace of self-primitivizing notions of culture in Amazigh political claims by which Berbers strive towards a self-determined future. Amahl Bishara examines whether technologically networked mediums for Palestinian Christian cultural activism recreate reductive forms of culture, or enable an open-ended notion of culture that can be a profoundly local tool for working towards justice.

Although anthropologists like Lila Abu-Lughod² have criticized the culture concept for the ways it reduces and objectifies complex practices and creates difference, these papers suggest that these aspects of the culture concept render it particularly attractive for those making political claims and undertaking institutional projects. As Michael Brown, Rosemary Coombe, George Yúdice and others³ have argued, “culture” has become a compelling resource with which states and social movements advance their agendas in the most recent period of capitalist, technologically fueled and mass mediated globalization. This has certainly been the case in the Middle East, where regional elites and Westerners use notions of retrograde or traditional cultures in civilizing missions and to lay claim to resources. Meanwhile, minority groups and activists have rallied international allies by formulating an idea of their culture as authentic, progressive, oppressed, and

so on. Transnational religious movements and media have helped shape all of these struggles, in part because concepts of national culture often chafe alongside notions of supra or sub-national ethnic or religious cultures that are gaining political traction.

One cannot assume that the three main Euro-American constructions of the culture concept identified by Raymond Williams—a process of development, a way of life of a particular group, and a body of artistic or intellectual works—have the same meaning or history in the Middle East.⁴ The region has had its own versions of the culture concept connected to particular histories of religion, capitalist class formation, national politics, and academic fields such as history, anthropology, and folklore. Further work needs to be done on these genealogies, with particular attention to the interactions among the Middle East, Europe, and other regions that led to different formulations of the culture concept arising in and travelling among these different places.⁵

The papers in this collection suggest significant transformations of the culture concept in particular locales, but also the resiliency of older formulations. Yet the implicit concept of culture around which activists mobilize does cluster around familiar Western definitions, especially when activists deploy culturalist arguments on a world stage in mediated forms. Groups make a claim to having universal value by highlighting what their specific culture has to offer world heritage. Culture is linked to nature in ways which assert autochthony and even an environmentalist ethic. Some Palestinian Christians claim to be stewards for Christian history, as “living stones” maintaining a presence in the place of Christianity’s birth. Berbers represent themselves as stewards of nature, while Hizbullah’s proposed ecotourism park promotes intimacy with and protection of the natural world.

The culture concept might also be delineated by what it is defined in opposition to. Cultural activists and promoters sometimes define culture in opposition to violence, and this move is related to the ways these actors position culture in relation to religion, especially Islam. Egyptian elites see cultural institutions as key to guiding the population into a “proper” practice and positioning of Islam, and to stemming Islamist violence. A few Palestinian Christian activists acquiesce in stereotypes of the Muslim Middle East as inherently violent, and intimate that their cultural values distinguish them from the violent tendencies of the rest of their society. A film about Berber identity likewise drastically diminishes the place of Islam in Berber social life. As critics of the culture concept have pointed out in other contexts, culturalist arguments sometimes mask socioeconomic or racial hierarchies,

as well as global political-economic interconnection. However, just as some activists utilize culturalist arguments to suggest their belonging in a liberal, Western-dominated multiculturalist realm, other activists in these same movements make more radical demands for material equality or social justice by using culture as a means of engagement or inquiry.

Even as culture is often defined in opposition to violence and/or religion, for state and state-like cultural producers, violence cannot necessarily be isolated from culture, whether producers hide these connections or embrace them. In Egypt, it is an open secret that Cultural Palaces report to state security. Hizbullah cultural producers, quite distinctly, affirm a resistance culture that has been cultivated in the landscape.

These developments suggest that in tackling the question of how culture concepts operate in the Middle East, we need to first think about how the categories of “culture,” “politics,” and “religion” are deployed, as separate, intermeshed, or contingent. When are religious boundaries staked out in cultural terms? What is the relationship between concepts of culture and economic restructuring? How are formulations of the culture concept objectified materially and visually? Scholars of the Middle East should work to trace the multiple ways that culture is enlisted in political struggle, rather than assuming culture as an apolitical background to “real” politics. ✂

End Notes

¹These papers were originally presented in a panel we co-organized for the 2008 American Anthropological Association meetings in San Francisco. The panel was co-invited by the Society for Cultural Anthropology and the Middle East Section of the association.

²Lila Abu-Lughod, “Writing Against Culture,” in Richard Fox, ed., *Recapturing Anthropology* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1991).

³Michael Brown, *Who Owns Native Culture?* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2003); Rosemary Coombe, “Legal Claims to Culture in and Against the Market: Neoliberalism and the Global Proliferation of Meaningful Difference,” *Law, Culture and the Humanities* (2005):32-55; George Yúdice, *The Expediency of Culture: Uses of Culture in the Global Era* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁴For an overview of these dimensions of the culture concept, and an insightful discussion of how they were taken up and changed in a related setting (Bengal, India), see Andrew Sartori, “The Resonance of ‘Culture’: Framing a Problem in Global Concept-History,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47(4):676-99, 2005.

⁵It is also important to investigate the histories of the various linguistic terms that are used to communicate notions of culture in different parts of the Middle East.