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ROUNDTABLE

Small Is Beautiful

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In scholarship on the Middle East, as on other regions of the world, the sort of social history that climaxed from the 1960s through the 1980s, and in Middle East history through the 1990s—that is, studies of categories such as "class" or "peasant"—has been declining for some time.[1] The cultural history that replaced social history has peaked, too. In the 21st century, the trend, set by non-Middle East historians, has been to combine an updated social-historical focus on structure and groups with a cultural–historical focus on meaning making. Defining society *against* culture and policing their boundaries is out. In is picking a theme—consumption or travel, say—then studying it from distinct yet linked social and cultural or political/economic angles. This trend has spawned new journals like *Cultural and Social History*, established in 2004, and has been debated in established journals and memoirs by leading historians of the United States and Europe.[2]

Middle East historians have not lagged behind. In 1991, Albert Hourani, while affirming that "now we are in the age of 'social history,' the study of economic relationships and the deep structures of society," added a note that—although formulated from a humanist rather than cultural-turn viewpoint—in a sense presaged later sociocultural historical combinations: "something is missing. Somewhere in our writing of history we need to show historical processes as reflected in the minds of individuals."[3] A decade later, Israel Gershoni and Ursula Woköck built on but went beyond Hourani and, pointing to recent texts like *Beyond the Cultural Turn*, diagnosed a "return to the concrete," a "view [of] culture more as a practice or agency than as a coherent, highly integrated system of symbols and meanings."[4] This view and the related affirmation that "'the cultural' and 'the social' are mutually constitutive" has de facto been adopted by some Middle East historians.[5] Think of chapter 4 of preeminent social historian Joel Beinin's landmark *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East*, as well as of studies of families, cities, consumerism, nationalism, and sectarianism.[6]

However, a number of factors have limited the development of modern Middle East sociocultural history. For one thing, the powerful presence of states and of often anti-imperialist ideologies in the 20th-century Middle East has not simply, and understandingly, affected scholarly interests, but at times tempted historians to focus on a somewhat narrowly defined "political."[7] Relatedly, political history was dominant in our field longer than among other historians. Most important, in Middle East history, the 1980s and early 1990s were marked by debates originating in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

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Contrariwise, by the mid-1970s some non-Middle East historians developed a keen interest in ethnographic methods and in the 1980s and 1990s engaged in intense conceptual debates about structure and meaning and about "the social" and "the cultural."[8] These debates caused many to adjust their research and constituted the bedrock for the present sort of sociocultural history.

There is no point in rehashing those debates. Still, updated Middle East social history—let's call it sociocultural history—would profit from a discussion of methods and concepts, building on insights gained by their non-Middle East counterparts. Microhistorians, for example, have helped to modulate and question various master narratives; this matters to Middle East history, where master narratives of nationalist ideologies and the state remain powerful.[9] Moreover, microhistories and historical ethnographies provide insight into everyday life practices and/or meaning making, which could be better developed by Middle East historians.[10] And there is oral history, which has helped tackle two other problems that Middle East historians are facing. Some non-Middle East historians—initially those working on Britain and the United States—have used it to balance out a focus on elites that is still tangible in our field, and African historians in particular have leveraged it to deal with a relative dearth of written sources.[11]

These approaches involve taking a very close-up look at the past. That is just as well. For small-scale studies—or at the very least very specific case studies—can carry great weight if they are well executed, as famous works like Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* proved decades ago and as even global and transnational historians are stressing these days.[12] Small is beautiful: this saying perfectly encapsulates the present need to probe our historical master narratives.

NOTES

[1]Statistics seem to confirm that impression. A search of the Index Islamicus database on the titles of articles in scholarly journals in history for key social history categories yielded the following results for, respectively, the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, and 2010–13: "Class": 111, 167, 110, 34; "Worker": 60, 147, 164, 37; "Notable": 13, 34, 18, 6; "Peasant": 47, 81, 42, 3; "Nomad": 44, 67, 60, 5. However, the search terms "gender' and "women"—which are related to yet distinct from the above categories—yielded 24, 477, 549, 135; and 556, 1844, 1872, 420, respectively. Source: http://search.proquest.com/indexislamicus/advanced?accountid=13314 (accessed 4 January 2014).

[2]"*AHR* Forum: Historiographic Turns in Critical Perspective," *American Historical Review* 117 (2012): 698–813; Geoff Eley, *A Crooked Line* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 2005).

[3]Albert Hourani, "How Should We Write the History of the Middle East?", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 135.

[4]Israel Gershoni and Ursula Woköck, "The Return of the Concrete?," in *Histories of the Modern Middle East: New Directions*, ed. Israel Gershoni, Hakan Erdem, and Ursula Woköck (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2002), 281. A key work they cite is Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999).

[5]"Editorial," *Cultural and Social History* 1 (2004): 1. See also Peter Stearns, "Social History Present and Future," *Journal of Social History* 37 (2003): 9–19, one of his periodic stock-takings.

[6]Joel Beinin, *Workers and Peasants in the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), chap. 4, "Fikri al-Khuli's Journey to al-Mahalla al-Kubra." On families, see Jens Hanssen, "'Malhamé-Malfamé': Levantine Elites and Transimperial Networks on the Eve of the Young Turk Revolution," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011): 25–48; and Christine Philliou, "Families of Empires and Nations," in *Transregional and Transnational Families in Europe and Beyond*, ed. Christopher Johnson (New York: Berghahn, 2011). Farzin Vejdani is writing a study based on late 19th-century Iranian diaries. On cities, see James Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998), which is not

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least a fascinating case study of Damascus; Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1995); Jens Hanssen, *Fin-de-Siècle Beirut* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Nancy Reynolds, *A City Consumed* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012). Arbella Bet-Shlimon has recently defended "Kirkuk, 1918–1968: Oil and the Politics of Identity in an Iraqi City" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2012). Jacob Norris is writing a global history of Bethlehem. On the premodern period, see Dana Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013). On consumerism, see Toufoul Abou Hodeib, "Taste and Class in Late Ottoman Beirut," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011): 475–92; Cyrus Schayegh, "Iran's Karaj Dam Affair," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54 (2012): 612–43. On nationalism, see Peter Wien, "The Long and Intricate Funeral of Yasin al-Hashimi," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011): 271–92; and on sectarianism, Max Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

[7]Regarding Iran, see Cyrus Schayegh, "'Seeing Like a State': An Essay on the Historiography of Modern Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 37–61.

[8]Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985); Hans Medick, "Missionary in the Row Boat? Ethnological Ways of Knowing as a Challenge to Social History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987): 76–98; Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.

[9]Giovanni Levi, "Micro-history," in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. Peter Burke (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 93–113; Jill Lepore, "Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography," *American Historical Review* 88 (2001): 129–44; Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: the Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); David Sabean, *Property, Production and Family in Neckarhausen 1700 to 1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[10]Alf Luedtke, ed., *The History of Everyday Life* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Paul Steege et al., "Review Article: The History of Everyday Life: A Second Chapter," *Journal of Modern History* 80 (2008): 358–78. See also Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010). A recent ethnographically inflected work is Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Professing Selves* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013). Naghmeh Sohrabi is working on a historical ethnography of the Iranian revolution.

[11]Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006); Studs Terkel, *Hard Times* (New York: Pantheon, 1970); Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000). A Middle East monograph is Ted Swedenburg, *Memories of Revolt* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

[12]Ginzburg, *Cheese and Worms*; Bernhard Struck et al., "Space and Scale in Transnational History," *International History Review* 33 (2011): 573–84. See also Pierre-Yves Saunier, "Learning by Doing: Notes about the Making of the *Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*," *Journal of Modern European History* 6 (2008): 171–74; and Doreen Massey, "A Global Sense of Place," in *Reading Human Geography*, ed. Trevor Barnes et al. (London: Arnold, 1997), 315–23.

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