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Entanglement, Global History, and the Arab Left

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During the heady 1960s and 1970s, a significant but understudied entanglement took place between the Arab Left and peers in other parts of the world. Arab revolutionary thinkers and political activists traveled to Europe, Latin America, and Africa, read "Euro-Marxist" theory, and generally took inspiration from the global New Left that was emerging from student protests and splinters from established Communist parties in many parts of the world. Conversely, revolutionaries traveled to the Middle East and met with, sometimes even trained with, Palestinian guerillas and other leftist groups. The meeting, exchange, translation, and mutual influence that tied the trajectory of people and movements together took place on ideological, social, and organizational levels.

The New Left during the Cold War is an example of a topic in the history of the Arab Left that we cannot conceptualize fully with the tools and paradigms of national histories and area studies. Such topics highlight that the tangled histories between people, ideas, movements, and states inside and outside of the region cry out for a global approach. Indeed, most contemporary scholarship on the Arab Left attempts to embrace global history in various ways.[1] In this short essay, I outline some of the theoretical and methodological challenges of going global. I stress that as scholars of the Middle East we can take a cue from the methodological diversity and ingenuity of global historians who work with world-historical movements and shifts as the product of "entangled" and "connected" *histoires croisées*.[2]

During the 1960s, a global New Left took shape that in the Middle East crystalized most clearly in the Palestinian liberation movement. From the birth of the PLO in 1964, and particularly after the June 1967 Arab–Israeli war, Palestine emerged as an emblematic revolutionary situation that attracted solidarity and forged new connections and directions for activists. In Western Europe, the June 1967 war accelerated contacts between Arab New Left militants and the European New Left. When Arab communists and socialists split from their parties because of ideological disagreements or in protest against authoritarian practices, some of them moved to European capitals where they joined new intellectual and political milieus. The exchange that ensued involved translation of key texts from and into Arabic, economic transactions, mutual training, coordination between political groups, and the forging of friendships between leading political figures, thinkers, artists, and militants in locations such as Scandinavia, the UK, France, Germany, and Italy, but also beyond Europe.

The 1966 Solidarity Conference of the Peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America, also known as the Tricontinental Conference, spelled out a revolutionary agenda on a global scale, while simmering student protests and New Left parties entered the political scene in Europe. We know that the Tricontinental movement embraced Palestine from the

beginning, and that the nascent Palestinian movement took inspiration from the Tricontinental capital of Algiers and the networks of activists and militants from the internationalist anticolonial movement meeting there.[3] The Tricontinental meeting gave space for Palestinians to own and represent their struggle as a globally embedded revolution. Cuba's public campaigns played an important role in elevating the Palestinian cause to the status of a key global struggle. When these different revolutionary impulses began to converge, a global movement emerged displaying its own practices, literatures, modes of expression, ideologies, and signs. In the following decade, New Left groups implemented strategies derived from a global language of dissent. They were also met with an organized and powerful counter-revolution directed from Washington.[4]

Summarizing these complex, transnational linkages and reciprocal influences within the framework of area studies only works if one agrees that the history of the Left is by definition global. Moreover, we must stress the need for epistemic reflexivity in relation to the Left as an object of study. The Left was once clearly defined by the struggle to organize workers and peasants and improve their lives through parliamentarian or revolutionary means undergirded by some form of historical materialist theory. The struggle continues, but the ideological position of the Left is not so evident anymore. When the subject of emancipation is no longer clear, how should one continue to think about radical social transformation? Should the Left embrace identity politics—exemplified by political Islam and sectarianism in the Middle East—or hold on to historical materialism? Critical theory and contemporary Left movements and thinkers give different answers to this post–Cold War conundrum, not all of them infused with "Left Melancholia."[5] Despite splits and deep disagreements—witness contemporary debates within the Left about Syria[6]—the Left still shares many goals and purposes, including in the Middle East. However, the sense of dislocation from a previous age, when the Left was more clearly defined in moral, ideological, and political terms, appears to be a condition rather than a phase.

These uncertainties about the nature of the Left influence the problem space of scholarship today.[7] It is impossible to understand what motivates and frames histories of the Left without taking contemporary debates about the Left into account. During the Cold War, the perceived threat of Communism in the region motivated a large number of studies about the Arab Left. Others were motivated by their own political commitment to write sympathetic, Marxian accounts of the vitalism of this Left or the possible synthesis of Islam and Marxism.[8] For both sets of scholars, the Arab Left was a readily recognizable object of study during the decades of Arab socialism. They understood the term to refer to an often-divided but identifiable opposition of postcolonial leaders and revolutionary fighters and thinkers who reacted against royalist regimes, the Baghdad Pact, colonialism, Israel and its supporters, and other incarnations of what they saw as "Arab reaction" (*al-raja'iya al-'arabiyya*).

The failure of radical regimes in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Algeria, and Egypt to liberate themselves from foreign control and transform their societies, and the concurrent failure of democratic Left groups and currents to unite around a project with a common vision, led to the demise of the Arab Left as a strong signifier from the 1970s. When the Cold War gave way to liberal hegemony in the 1990s, the confusion over what exactly constituted a universally valid position left of center constrained those who identified with the Arab Left. It also constrained the historiography of the Left. As a result, the problem space

of "the Left" transformed markedly from tropes of inspiration, development, and threat, to tropes of absence, decline, impotency, nostalgia, self-flagellation, despair, and even ridicule. Some Arab leftist intellectuals contributed to this rearticulation of the Left in autobiographies and essays written in the 1980s and 1990s. They wrote *mea culpas* about their tactical and ideological mistakes, and related the demise of the Left to *takhalluf* (underdevelopment), *ta'akhkhur* (cultural backwardness), and the failure of Arab societies to educate the masses, a discourse that dates back to debates after the *naksa* in 1967.[9]

What kind of histories of the Left do we write today, at a time when the Arab uprisings have forced us to rethink popular struggle, mobilization, and the state in the region?[10] There may be a crisis of the Left, but it is different from that of the 1990s. Historical materialism has indeed ceased to function as the master framework for the global Left. At the same time, protest movements are reshaping dissent and resisting transnational counterrevolutions by new means and in new ideological registers that draw on and reinvent classical doctrines.[11] These political and theoretical struggles leave their mark on scholarship. As I have already suggested, they seem to advance global histories, pushing us to examine transnational alliance and entanglement of movements and ideas inside and outside of the region.

The global turn should not surprise us. Since the 19th century, historical materialist readings of politics and society propelled mass mobilization for change in all corners of the world. Criticizing the ruling liberal political-economic order became the basis for a global movement and a new political subject: the leftist. Being on the Left either meant class identity or cross-class solidarity. The claims leftists advanced varied but always involved an element of resistance against the dominant, liberal world order. Millions of peasants and workers enrolled in labor unions and socialist, communist, and anarchist parties, while millions took on a leftist identity in their professional, intellectual, artistic, and political work, including solidarity work.

If historical materialism united the leftist family, many things also divided it. As formerly semiperipheral regions of the world became increasingly integrated into the world system during the age of high imperialism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, national and regional Lefts emerged with very different and often opposed interpretations of the original creed. The global Left may therefore deserve its name but it is also, and has always been, fragmented and diverse. This is the case not just because leftists in Sudan and France, for example, have disagreed on strategy and ideology, but also because they have had very different experiences of modernity. Area studies provides a deeper understanding of local contexts that can render these variegated experiences intelligible for historians, which is crucial for widening the panorama of historiographical investigation and moving beyond Eurocentric histories.[12]

Global histories sometimes risk losing the depth provided by granular, local studies. At the same time, as I have argued here, the breadth of a global perspective is necessary simply because the Left in a Middle Eastern context is and was global in three related ways: ideological and theoretical inspiration helped shape communist, socialist, and anarchist movements and how they interpreted their own situation; states in the region formed material and strategic partnerships with the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China; and, just as importantly, strong links between individuals and movements across borders produced what Edward Said called "traveling theory," interpretations of imperialism, justice, and social reform that transformed as people embedded and reinterpreted

them in a Middle Eastern context.[13] If we as intellectual, political, and social historians want to produce locally embedded global histories of the Left, we have to travel with these people and follow them out of our comfort zones if necessary.

NOTES

[1]See, e.g., Elizabeth M. Holt, "'Bread or Freedom': The Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA, and the Arabic Literary Journal Ḥiwār (1962–67)," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 44 (2013): 83–102.

[2]Sanjay Subrahmanyam, "Connected Histories: Notes Towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia," *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997): 735–62; Wolf Lepenies, ed., *Entangled Histories and Negotiated Universals: Centers and Peripheries in a Changing World* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2003); Michael Werner and Bénédict Zimmermann, eds., *De la comparaison à l'histoire croisée* (Paris: Seuil, 2004).

[3]Jeffrey James Burne, *Mecca of the Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[4]Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the PLO, and the Making of a Post–Cold War Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[5]Razmig Keucheyan, *The Left Hemisphere: Mapping Critical Theory Today* (London: Verso, 2016).

[6]See special issue of the online journal *Muftah*, "Syria and the Left," 5 November 2016, accessed 29 December 2018, https://muftah.org/special-collection-syria-left/.

[7]I use problem space in the sense promoted by postcolonial theorist David Scott as the complex of statements, propositions, resolutions and arguments offered in answer to largely implicit questions in a particular time and space. "David Scott by Stuart Hall," conversation in *BOMB magazine* 90, 5 January 2005, accessed 29 December 2018.

[8]Maxime Rodinson, *Marxisme et monde musulman* (Paris: Seuil, 1972).

[9]Manfred Sing, "Arab Self-Criticism after 1967 Revisited: The Normative Turn in Marxist Thought and Its Heuristic Fallacies," *Arab Studies Journal* 25 (2017): 144–90.

[10]For an overview of recent scholarship on the Arab Left, see Sune Haglolle and Manfred Sing, "New Approaches to Arab Left Histories," *Arab Studies Journal* 24 (2016): 90–97.

[11]See Miriyam Aouragh's contribution to this roundtable.

[12]Marco Meriggi, "Global History: Structures, Strategies, Open Problems," *Annals of the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Economics, History and Political Science* 52 (2018): 35–44.

[13]Edward Said, "Travelling Theory," in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 226–47.