

Book Review: Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East: Liberalism, Modernity and Political Discourse

by Blog Admin

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*While much scholarly attention has been given to the intelligentsia in the West, a full analysis of the social role of intellectuals in the Middle East has been lacking. Covering a diverse range of key thinkers on the Middle East from Edward Said and Halim Barakat to Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi and Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi, **Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East** examines intellectuals' connections to social movements, street politics, and democracy and its prospects in the region. **Charles Tripp** finds that the volume combines many fascinating themes but is ill-served by its Index.*



Intellectuals and Civil Society in the Middle East: Liberalism, Modernity and Political Discourse. Mohammed A. Bamyeh (ed). I.B.Tauris

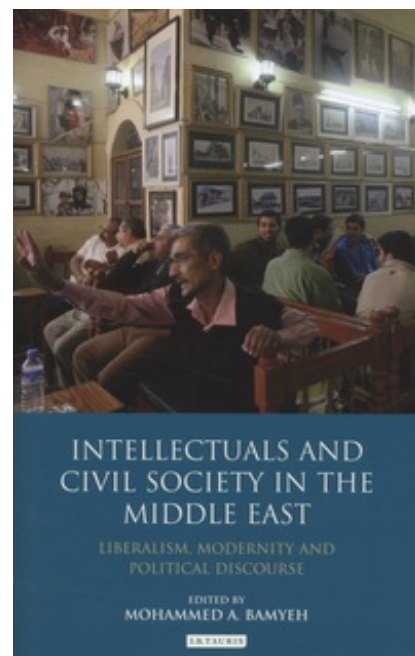
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This is an ambitious book that almost by definition cannot live up to the promise of its wide-ranging title. Nevertheless, this should not detract from its virtues since, collectively, it represents a serious attempt to grapple with the difficult questions of how best to assess thought as a political process and how to measure the impact of ideas on the shaping of the political. Through a number of chapters that range in time from the eighteenth to the twenty first centuries and that present very specific studies of very diverse intellectuals, the project seeks to explore the social nature of intellectual activity.

This is not simply yet another collection of the history of ideas, even if some of the chapters do tend towards this idiom. More importantly, the aim of the book, outlined with considerable skill and fluency by its editor Mohammad Bamyeh in the Introduction, is to examine the dialectical relationship between specific intellectuals and the social movements that produced them and which they in turn helped to shape. In particular, he focuses on the idea of the organic intellectual, someone who is a product of intellectual experimentation, not merely of a formal kind but often in the context of the everyday.

It is here, in the cut and thrust of debate in the public sphere that ideas and their associated practices come to encapsulate and stand for the aspirations of many. Paying attention to such processes and thus to the ways in which concepts and ideas are translated over time, from one country to another, but also into practice and back again, is a vital although often overlooked task. It seems to be a much more fruitful way of trying to understand the power of ideas than through the more conventional method of studying the dissemination of texts, the translation of the written word and the formation of ideologically defined party organizations. On the contrary, understanding the 'intimacy and distance' so well described by Edward Said when referring to his own and others' experiences, allows one to grasp the productive power of alienation – a process examined with considerable skill by Thomas Brisson in the chapter on Said himself and on Mohamed Arkoun.

It also obliges one to concentrate on the repertoires on which they draw and thus on the local knowledge that they have absorbed and that may determine the reception of their ideas. The chapters by Elizabeth



Williams on Nazik al-`Abid and that by Steve Tamari on `Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi bring this out extraordinarily well. They were two individuals in very different settings and epochs, with apparently little in common, yet their ability to draw together and to systematize aspects of the familiar, gave to their ideas a degree of recognition and legitimacy that could not easily be explained otherwise. It is this comparability of process that lends authority to these accounts, even if the authors of the particular chapters are not always explicit in drawing attention to this fact.

Throughout the book there is a theme that links many, perhaps all of the chapters, as important as the phenomenon of the organic intellectual itself. This is the public sphere, understood both as imaginative spaces that do not merely tolerate but also encourage exchanges of ideas, and the public spaces in which ideas are realized, articulated through practices. It is their interaction and mutual constitution that underpin the lives of the intellectuals represented in this volume. Some of the authors are more aware of this than others, but all, whether explicitly or implicitly, grapple with the various manifestations of such spaces. In doing so, they bring together the practical and the ideal that inform the intellectual project of the book itself.

This comes across powerfully in Elizabeth Williams's study of Nazik al-`Abid who founded the *Nur al-Fayha'* Society in the tumultuous and, it seemed at the time, promising setting of Damascus under the Sharifian administration. Working in combination with like-minded women and men, she articulated a set of ideas that helped to create a space for women's public engagement. In doing so, she drew upon already familiar repertoires of rights and equality and showed, through her society's activities, the full engagement of women in the public sphere.

Nearly one hundred years later, comparable processes are at work in the very different setting of early twenty first century Turkey. In her chapter, Fatma Tütüncü ably describes the ways in which Islamist women, such as Cihan Aktas, have succeeded in reorienting the debate about women in the public sphere. They have drawn upon the gains of an enlightened republicanism, but have used it to address the ways in which significant sections of the Islamist movement retains restrictive, patriarchal ideas about the gendered nature of the relevant public.

These and other chapters in the book, even if they are not explicitly engaging with each other, often succeed in addressing important common themes. It is this that gives coherence and weight to the book. It is all the more regrettable therefore that the book is so ill-served by its Index. In an edited volume that combines so many fascinating themes – indeed where these themes form the core of its rationale – it is lamentable that the Index provided merely lists the names of individuals referred to throughout the text. There is no effort to draw attention to linking themes, to organizing ideas or to the concepts that are so suggestive when manifested in such contrasting, yet comparable settings. This does not in itself detract from the substantial achievements represented by the chapters themselves, but it does make it considerably less useful for its readers.

Charles Tripp is Professor of Politics with reference to the Middle East, at the [School of Oriental and African Studies](#), University of London and a Fellow of the British Academy. His research interests include the nature of autocracy, state and resistance in the Middle East and the politics of Islamic identity. His most recent book is *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). [Read more reviews by Charles](#).