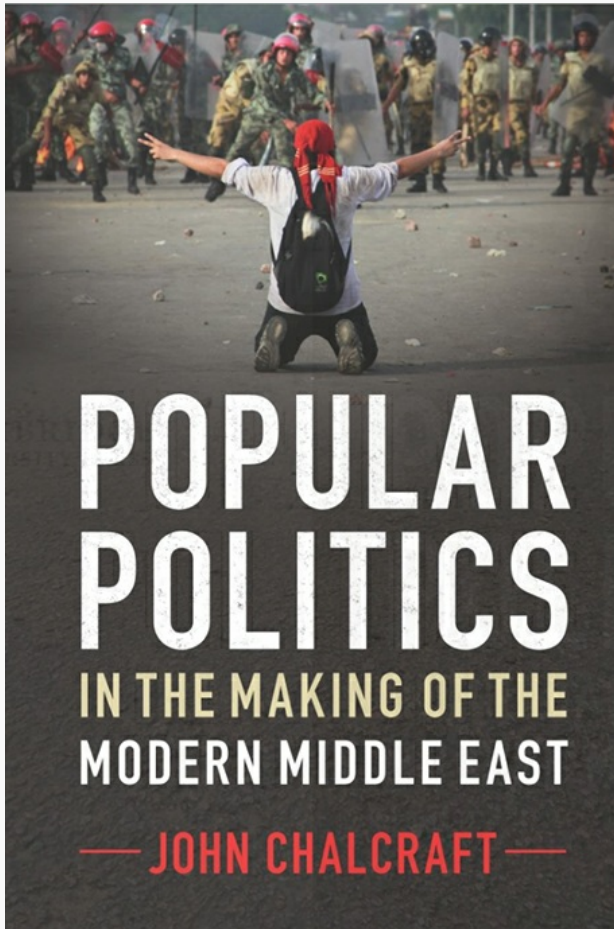


# Book Review: John Chalcraft's 'Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East'

[blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2016/11/11/book-review-john-chalcrafts-popular-politics-in-the-making-of-the-modern-middle-east/](http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2016/11/11/book-review-john-chalcrafts-popular-politics-in-the-making-of-the-modern-middle-east/)

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by Andrew Delatolla



*Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2016)

John Chalcraft's recent book *Popular Politics: In the Making of the Modern Middle East* sets out to accomplish two difficult tasks: first, the book provides a survey history of contentious politics in the MENA region beginning in 1783 Algeria, and ending with the 2011 protests in Egypt. Second, it provides an innovative theoretical framework that can be applied to the examination of contentious politics in general. In doing so, Chalcraft sets out his analysis by arguing that protest and revolution do not necessarily equate socio-political progress, as it is often conceived of in Western historiography; nor should we conceive of protest and revolution in the MENA region as being mired with violence and fanaticism, as often portrayed through a neo-Orientalist framework. Instead, Chalcraft seeks to rectify perceptions of contentious politics that are too often situated at one of these two extremes. Chalcraft is concerned with the means and consequences of contentious mobilisation and he takes great care to situate the events in their political, economic and social contexts; seeking an ever deeper analysis by drawing on the goals, strategies, principles and tactics of the leadership, organisations and identities involved.

Chalcraft's framework for analysis draws on a number of established theories to help explain the point of inquiry. He argues that explanations centered on Western interference, socio-economic change, or the processes and impact of colonisation are over-simplistic and deterministic; their use serves a particular and narrow set of interests. Instead, Chalcraft argues that there are specific forms of agency

related to ideas and intellectual labour, translocal appropriation, normative commitments, leadership strategies and contingent interactions. He therefore seeks a theoretical middle ground based on, the one hand, material and social history and, on the other hand, the socially constructed realities that uncover the enabling conditions of transgressive mobilisation.

Here he argues that there are three main enabling conditions:

1. 'failure and weakness of hegemonic incorporation', or the inability or unwillingness to allow for representation of those who had been excluded, politically or economically, in the past;
2. 'the desiccation of sites of articulation', the act of limiting public and private arenas used to voice discontent; and
3. 'the contraction of existing forms of hegemony at the level of the political community as a whole', the

tightening or centralisation of power to the extent that consent is undermined and the use of force becomes a tool to achieve societal submission (p. 8).

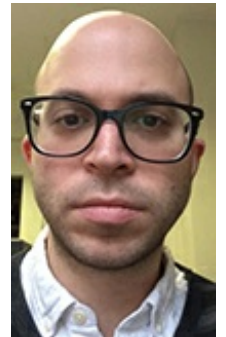
Dissimilar to Social Movement Theory and Dynamics of Contention, Chalcraft understands the importance of power-loaded contexts and draws from Gramscian aspects, albeit stripped from its economic determinism; a move that works well for the purpose of the book.

Chalcraft's thoughtful framework is applied throughout the book, which is divided into four chronological parts, each represented by a number of events, that are compared and contrasted. The first (1798–1914) highlights the growth of domestic agency in the collapse of dynastic and Islamic state that drew in European intervention. The second period (1914–1952), contending with the European colonial project, examines the rise of nationalism and the nationalist communities that were supported by reformist, defensive, and autonomist traditions. The development of which led to mobilisation, and ultimately national liberation, state permutation and social and economic changes. With this third period came the rise of authoritarian leadership and a period (1977–2011) defined, not by political stagnation, but the emergence of new centres of mobilisation taking form in revolutionary Islamism.

Written in a style that is clear and accessible, Chalcraft's book serves an important tool for scholars of the modern Middle East and of contentious politics. The book provides a great amount of detail regarding key moments that helped change the face and direction of politics in the region. Additionally, Chalcraft establishes a consequential framework for the study of contentious politics; helping to develop our understanding of, not only the MENA region, but one that can be applied to other global regions. By looking at the various power centres involved in the making and undoing of the structures and institutions of politics, it considers the domestic, regional and global ideological, political and economic contexts that influence decision making, leadership and mobilisation.

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