

The Middle East: Global, Postcolonial, Regional, and Queer

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The dislocations associated with modernity have driven scholarly, literary, and philosophical inquiries in various directions since the 19th century: Marx's materialist critique, Ranke's historical empiricism, Baudelaire's *flâneur*, Simmel's studies of urban anomie and alienation, Durkheim and Weber's sociology, and so on into the 20th and 21st centuries, and now reflected in this issue of *IJMES* on queer studies. Although there are vast differences among them, they share a compulsion to explain what appeared as massive reconfigurations of time and space. The proliferation of subjective possibilities was pegged to an acceleration of the former and compression of the latter; accordingly, on our radar appear the bourgeois, middle class, and worker in the long 19th century and gay, lesbian, and transgender in the late 20th, two moments of rapid globalization and subject proliferation. We are to believe that in the fullness of time all will be free and all will be good. However, in the here and now some must be unfree and some bad. The modern distinction between free and unfree, good and bad, subjects relies heavily on uninterrogated assumptions about the spatial origins, temporality, and trajectory of modernity.

In this limited space, I'd like to unpack this account of our modernity through a self-indulgent reprise of arguments from my recent monograph, some reckless discipline hopping, and a dash of speculation about queer humanistic futures (not necessarily in that order). I will make four points that reflect what I understand to be the critical spirit of queer "theory," by way of which I will draw out its significance for Middle East studies.¹ First, there has been a recent convergence of disciplinary concerns around the inadequacies of 19th-century analytical units. Second, historical paradigms based on these units are in need of fundamental revision. Third, such a revision, which has begun, demonstrates that cultural, political, and territorial boundaries that once seemed fixed are fluid and constantly in flux. Fourth, the queer subject is always partial, only a potentiality, an opening onto other worlds yet to come.

There are now a number of scholarly works emphasizing a revised geography of modernity with more players, over and against the Eurocentrism of diffusionist theories standard to world history.² Nearly all of them intimate a "discovery" that history simply could not have worked as posited in theories of modernity without ignoring significant dimensions of the global—the very condition of theorizing humanity. What this latest recognition of the failures of the theoretical in relation to the facticity of history elides or even disavows is precisely the theoretical and subjective bases of historical knowledge production that puts Europe at the center of explanations of change.³ The order of distinctions governing a permanent sense of progress and enabling various kinds of politics of life is buried again. In other words, it was not simply that a failure of historical methods left blind spots in the map of modernity, but, as Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued, the very compulsion to order the past in relation to a rapidly evolving present constituted history as a disciplinary formation that presupposed and reproduced

a normative subject.⁴ Hence, the stakes involved in regarding modern history as global are far greater than suggested by calls for a more inclusive narrative, wherein all are still marching if not to the same beat at least toward the same goal. The intersection of queer theory and regional studies might offer an opening between the global and the postcolonial, such that moving beyond Eurocentrism does not stop at a recognition of multiple modernities or plural sites of the same modernity with their proliferation of subjects, good and bad.

“Queering” Middle East studies is not an entirely new undertaking. As many have noted, the problematization of scholarly representations of the Arab and Muslim Other began even before the much-trumpeted turning point marked by the appearance of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. However, that claim is often forwarded to demonstrate the self-correcting mechanism within a particular scholarly tradition, running along the lines of “all we need is better history.” The spirit of the critique that queer studies in its current incarnation embodies requires far more than scholarship that exposes biases or privileges primary sources; it demands a simultaneous tending to paradigmatic problems inherent to a tradition and interrogating subject positions in relation to the larger political economy of knowledge production.⁵ In other words, the positionality of a subject in geopolitical space is not only germane to critiques of 19th-century representations of the world. The disciplines that were indeed born in that era did not somehow magically leap forward into a time-space of knowledge free of oppressors and oppressed. As Walter Benjamin noted, “The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘emergency situation’ in which we live is the rule. We must arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this.”⁶

The queerness of “the Middle East” as region animates recent critiques.⁷ In Engsens Ho’s work of historical anthropology, *The Graves of Tarim*, the region as product of an imperialist imaginary is altogether dislocated and made unfamiliar. His mapping of an Arab Sufi diaspora materializes nothing short of another world history, emphasizing genealogies, regional crossings and connections, mobility in time and space.⁸ Within and across the interstices of empires and nation-states, queer subjects were and are continuously rendered unintelligible or made legible in and for particular normalizing projects. Thus a robust analytics that can locate, even if only traces of, a queer subject must necessarily employ terms different from those of hegemonic discourses. In *Working Out Egypt*, for example, the queer subject I traced in relation to the emergent hegemony of “effendi masculinity” within colonial modernity reveals two ostensibly divergent figures: the *khawwal* and the *futuwwa*.⁹ Establishing their shared ground of queerness was significant to relocating the national history of Egypt within an international frame and in a global set of processes that engendered techniques of subjection and modes of subjectivation, illuminating a power over life that was presented again as a life of power. It was also significant to giving an account of “Egypt” that demonstrated its historical specificity while avoiding the trap of exceptionalizing it as a failed “liberal experiment” or worse still a typically Arab predicament. The Middle East was and is entangled in a web of global power relations; consequently, the formation of good and bad, free and unfree, subjects, as well as the deformation of others, always already implicates us as area studies “experts” in a queer relation to the object of our analysis.

Many have recently demonstrated the political stakes involved in ignoring the liberal presuppositions of our analytical categories. Saba Mahmood, Paul Amar, and others have taken up the question of norms in relation to local biopolitical regimes and a global

condition of permanent war.¹⁰ These interventions, more than demonstrating how the intimacy of subject and object in liberal feminism or human rights discourse can easily envelope the analyst and overwhelm her analysis to align it with security and emergency states, mark out a queer space of being that sits at strange and disruptive angles to various hegemonies.

The failure to recognize our own queerness engenders epistemological closures that limit imaginative horizons and unwittingly reproduce the hegemonic social and political terms of particular moments, differentially distributing insecurity, vulnerability, and death within and across borders. Queer utopian futures are and must be thought in relation to history, while history in order to be generative of those future possibilities must be envisioned as open-ended, non-linear, plural, and always potentially queer.

NOTES

¹“Theory” does not adequately capture what is more like a constellation of critical stances that have expanded and morphed over the last two decades. The orbit of criticism has centered on different objects as the political universe threw out new targets, from gay marriage and neoliberal reforms to permanent war and “homonationalism.”

²See, for example, R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997); Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); Christopher Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Linda Colley, *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh: A Woman in World History* (New York: Pantheon, 2007); and Prasannan Parthasarathi, *Why Europe Grew Rich and Asia Did Not: Global Economic Divergence, 1600–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

³Catherine Hall makes this argument in her review of Bayly’s *Birth of the Modern World*; see <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/420> (accessed 10 January 2013).

⁴Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁵In this sense, Zachary Lockman’s *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) is quite queer. See also Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 2000); and Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

⁶Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257. It is not surprising that most of the articles in this special issue are by literature scholars, the tradition wherein the subject and subjectivity are most central and Benjamin is more likely to be read.

⁷Michael Gasper et al., *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012).

⁸Engseng Ho, *The Graves of Tarim: Genealogy and Mobility across the Indian Ocean* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006).

⁹Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁰Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005); Paul Amar, “Turning the Gendered Politics of the Security State Inside Out?,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 13 (2011): 299–328.