

The Middle East without Space?

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One of the first ways that many scholars of the Middle East encounter the region is precisely through the lens of “region” itself. Our ability to know the Middle East as a region today, we learn, is a complicated inheritance of imperialism, Orientalism, and Cold War area studies scholarship.¹ To study the Middle East as the “Middle East,” in other words, is to be necessarily positioned within a contested and unequal field of knowledge, one whose contours are both historically and geographically specific. Much of the best research and teaching within Middle East studies continues to demonstrate that knowing *about* the region—and the world more broadly—is closely entwined with the politics *of* the region. The interdisciplinary spatial turn within Middle East studies has been and continues to be so fertile precisely because of that reflexivity.

In this essay, however, I argue that in order to continue to develop the spatial turn in Middle East studies, scholars should spend more time thinking through the genealogy of their conceptual vocabulary. In particular, one limitation of the spatial turn has been the very ubiquity of “space” as a key conceptual category. Engaging with the history and geography of “space”—as a concept, an object of analysis, and one way of organizing knowledge about the world—would enrich our ability as scholars and teachers of the Middle East to articulate a more complicated and compelling account of why the region matters today.

My essay is organized in three parts. First, I sketch out some of the ways that Middle East studies scholars generally theorize space, highlighting some of the theorists upon whom they frequently draw. Second, I offer a different way of conceptualizing space that mobilizes geographers’ discussion of place. Finally, I turn to three recent monographs to show some of the ways that thinking in terms of place and connection can connect their empirically and theoretically rich arguments with new perspectives and insights.

The spatial turn in Middle East studies, as Amy Mills and I recently argued, has drawn upon a wide range of influences, approaches, and methodologies. While some of the most spatially inflected work in Middle East studies emerged in a relatively small number of academic institutions, no single source exists.² Scholars of the spatial turn have drawn upon a wide array of theorists to conceptualize “space,” including the work of David Harvey, Saskia Sassen, Edward Soja, Michel de Certeau, and Michel Foucault. Arguably the single most central reference, however, is Henri Lefebvre’s *The Production of Space*, in which he argues that space is simultaneously mental, social, and physical.³ This argument has provided a suggestive theoretical reference for Middle East studies scholars, particularly those researching the dynamics of urban life in the region.

However, the richness of Lefebvre’s work also poses two linked challenges. The first is analytical: using Lefebvre to describe the spatiality of all social life can overly simplify the complexity of the world. For example, to what are we referring when we talk about “urban space”? Is it the work of planners and architects, the concrete, brick, stone, and

steel of a city's buildings, the volumes of air within those buildings, those buildings' environs, or the ineffable experiences of people of the city? While these elements *can* be empirically connected, relying on "space"—even Lefebvre's spatial triad—as the primary lens of analysis can elide the different histories, meanings, and politics at work in shaping everyday life.

The second challenge is conceptual. Our (over)use of "space"—and Lefebvre in particular—as a key conceptual reference can obscure the fact that "space" has its own history and geography. Just as Middle East studies scholars have come to recognize the "Middle East" has its own history and politics, we should recognize that "space" has its own history, politics, and geography. Rather than assuming that "space" is the natural background against and within which life is lived, we might ask how and why the concept of space has emerged. As Michael Curry argues, the invention of "space" as a concept was "dependent on the development of a particular set of technologies . . . used for the storage of knowledge, or of what we might today prefer to call information."⁴ Recognizing the history of "space" opens up two fascinating lines of inquiry. First, what are the technologies, such as Geographic Information Systems, zip codes, systems of latitude and longitude, which facilitate the produce and organization of knowledge in and of space? Second, what would it mean to analyze the Middle East without reference to "space"?

It is for this reason that thinking in terms of "place" is a powerful complement to the spatial turn. Places are made through connection—connections between people, buildings, natural resources, places, environments, stories, even dreams. But just as they are made through connections, places are also made through the absence of connections—the exclusion and expulsion of people, the destruction of material landscapes, and the declaration that certain groups, practices, and ideas do not belong. In the process of place making, people create routines and habits, and establish a set of actions that are possible in that place (and, by extension, actions that are not possible).⁵ Places, then, can be understood as products of historically specific articulations of social relations, connections, and networks, what Doreen Massey has called "place as meeting place."⁶

Thinking in terms of connection also opens up a different way of thinking about what Bruno Latour has called "the tyranny of distance."⁷ After all, for distance to exist as a meaningful category, we must have a version of space—a grid within which and against which distances can be marked off. But as we all might recognize at an intuitive level, spatial proximity is not a guarantee of social intimacy. Understood in terms of connection, these geographies are not measured in terms of big/small or far/close but in terms of the intensity of connection. How do particular connections come to matter in the way that they do? What are the places that are formed through those connections? And how do those places—and the contested connections that make them—constitute distinct geographies?

I turn now to three monographs that provide three different examples of the complicated geographies that constitute the Middle East. I try to sketch out some of the ways that connection—and so place making—is already implicit in their work and might be more fully articulated. To pick these three is not to designate them as the only examples of spatial thinking in Middle East studies today. For reasons that I will explain shortly, however, I think they present a particularly good opportunity to develop a discussion of place, place making, and connection.

The first is Kimberly Hart's ethnography *And Then We Work for God*, an empirically nuanced and conceptually innovative account of the "social geography of piety" in western Turkey.⁸ Hart challenges the use of "rural/urban" as an effective way to distinguish between types of religious practice. Instead, she helps us to see how contested understandings of being Muslim are forged through connections over multiple spatial and temporal scales. These connections—whether transnational Sufi networks or different engagements with history, tradition, and the past—produce different forms of Islam, even between the two nearby villages in which she conducted research. Although Hart provides a compelling account of the connections that link people to their surroundings, she does not fully articulate how those connections produce multiple overlapping geographies of piety. Although she does not use "places" as a primary conceptual lens, Hart demonstrates that the place of Islam in Turkey cannot be understood through simple references to "rural" or "urban." Instead, the place of Islam is produced through connections that are variously made, contested, and transformed.

Focused on a different time and place, On Barak's *On Time* gives us a second way to think about the materiality of connection. He shows us how a specifically "Western" temporality—"a mode of organizing, schematizing, plotting, or keeping time"—intersected with a changing set of material technologies to produce a distinctively Egyptian "countertempo."⁹ Working his way through a variety of empirical cases, Barak helps us see how these temporalities also produced a specific geography. Referencing the "Middle East," he writes, "The geography [of the Middle East that] we now deem natural was produced by these technologies of transportation and communication."¹⁰ Barak's work shows us how two places—Egypt and the Middle East—were produced through a set of connections (in his case, material linkages such as railroads, tramways, and telegraph lines); and how those places were also connected to particular ways of knowing and experiencing the Middle East (i.e., Orientalism).

In their making, maintenance, transformation, and even destruction, connections are political. Berna Turam's *Gaining Freedoms* provides one compelling analysis of those politics in contemporary Istanbul and Berlin.¹¹ Turam's ethnographic account helps us to see how one of her key theoretical claims—that "freedom pertains to and is constituted by space"—is grounded in the world.¹² Turam's scholarship provides an intersectional account of the ways that social class, gender, and religion connect people unevenly in particular places, producing a complicated geography of inclusion and belonging. However, Turam's analysis is not a discussion of abstract urban space; it is deeply invested in the politics of particular places: Teşvikiye, the University of Freedom, and Kreuzberg. Precisely because Turam shows us the connections of people, identities, and lifestyles that come together in these districts, her ethnography is a compelling account of the contested practices of place making.

What would the spatial turn in Middle East studies look like without "space"? I see two primary benefits to pursuing that project. First, Middle East studies has a long history of reflecting on the conceptual categories and political genealogies that structure its disciplinary identity. More attention to the practices of citation that have shaped the spatial turn in Middle East studies helps to advance that conversation. Second, an expanded engagement with "place" as a conceptual category might open up new ways of thinking about the multiple connections that make place, including networked technologies, infrastructures, imagined links, embodied forms of inclusion and belonging, flows

of capital, and circuits of culture. In this moment when we confront a world increasingly organized in terms of bounded identities, insisting on the multiplicity of place should direct our attention both to the ongoing violence of particular geographies and to the possibility—however fragile—of imagining them otherwise.

NOTES

¹See Timothy Mitchell, "The Middle East in the Past and Future of Social Science," in *The Politics of Knowledge: Area Studies and the Disciplines*, ed. David L. Szanton (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2004), 74–118.

²Amy Mills and Timur Hammond, "The Interdisciplinary Spatial Turn and the Discipline of Geography in Middle East Studies," in *Middle East Studies for the New Millennium: Infrastructures of Knowledge*, ed. Seteney Shami and Cynthia Miller-Idriss (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 152–88.

³Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

⁴Michael Curry, "Toward a Geography of a World without Maps: Lessons from Ptolemy and Postal Codes," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95 (2005): 680.

⁵Michael Curry, *The Work in the World: Geographical Practice and the Written Word* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). See also Joseph Pierce, Deborah G. Martin, and James T. Murphy, "Relational Place-Making: The Networked Politics of Place," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36 (2010): 54–70.

⁶Doreen Massey, *Power-Geometries and the Politics of Space-Time* (Heidelberg, Germany: University of Heidelberg, 1999), 22.

⁷Bruno Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory: A Few Clarifications," *Soziale Welt* 47 (1996): 371–72.

⁸Kimberly Hart, *And Then We Work for God: Rural Islam in Western Turkey* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013), 7.

⁹On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2015), 7.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹Berna Turam, *Gaining Freedoms: Claiming Space in Istanbul and Berlin* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2015).

¹²*Ibid.*, 3. Her theorization of the spatiality of freedom draws on a range of scholars, but this particular formulation specifically cites the work of Saskia Sassen and Edward Soja.