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History as a Discursive Process: the case of the middle-eastern narrative.

James Gelvin's history of the Middle East is a narrative characterized by a linear progression to modernity, defined by processes of Western economic and ideological encompassment.¹ In his book *The Modern Middle East: A History* (2008), Gelvin begins by charting the extensive periodization of late antiquity with the materialization of the Ottoman empire as the dominant empire in the region. He then continues through the periods characterized by Western economic imperialism, World War I, and closes with the contemporary period.² In comparison, Michelle Campos in *Ottoman Brothers*, and Daniel Monterescu in *Jaffa Shared and Shattered: Contrived Coexistence in Israel/Palestine* offer alternative representations of history through systems of emergent processes and contingent historical actors.³ Campos and Monterescu both include the influence of outside forces, but the regional concentration of their narratives is located in Israel/ Palestine, whereas Gelvin's history covers the entire region of the Middle East and North Africa. Campos would reject the classification of her analysis according to the regional boundedness of Israel/Palestine because part of her argument is about the permeability of imperial space in the Ottoman empire. Campos, in *Ottoman Brothers*, focuses her historical narrative on the 1908 revolution, occasionally expanding her periodization. *Jaffa Shared and Shattered* is a much more contemporary narrative of the Middle East, and

¹ For a more extensive discussion of encompassment, refer to LiPuma's work on modernity in Melanesia (2001)

² Gelvin, James. 2008. *The Modern Middle East: A History*. Fourth Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press

³ Campos, Michelle. 2010. *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Monterescu, Daniel. 2015. *Jaffa Shared and Shattered: Contrived Coexistence in Israel/Palestine*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Monterescu fixates his analysis on contemporary Jaffa, balancing synchronic ethnographic analysis with necessary diachronic historical material.

In *The Modern Middle East*, Gelvin's localized focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is framed by his conception that "the only way to understand Middle Eastern history is to place that history within its global context."⁴ Subsequently, the world system is necessarily implicated in his analysis and representation of the conflict. Gelvin traces three phases of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: beginning in 1882 with the arrival of Zionist immigrants into Palestine, the progression into second phase as indicated by the war of 1948, and the third phase which was ushered in with the signing of the Oslo Accord.⁵ The chapter is positioned at the end of a section that is framed by the effects of World War I on the region, and comes in right before a section that looks at the Contemporary period. Gelvin represents the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the creation of the Israeli state as inevitable by placing it at a turning point leading to the next periodization in the book while maintaining that the involvement from outside world powers, such as Great Britain, and world events, such as WWI, were central to that progression from the nationalist movement to statehood.⁶

Gelvin ignores intra-communal complexities and historically contingent moments of rejection and tension in regard to Western encompassment, because he represents the Zionist and Palestinian communities in the region as monoliths placed in opposition to one another.⁷

Campos' narrative in *Ottoman Brothers* "analyzes the historical relationship between Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Palestine in their shared spaces through the lens of daily life in which

⁴ Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 260.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 230-257

⁶ Gelvin, *The Modern Middle East: A History*, 230-257.

⁷ Monterescu, Daniel, *Jaffa Shared and Shattered*, 36

communal civic boundaries were formulated, negotiated, upheld, and transgressed.”⁸ Similarly in *Jaffa: Shared and Shattered*, Daniel Monterescu methodologically responds to analyses that “misrecognize intercommunal dynamics and underestimate social networking across ethnic divides. [They] tend to foreground exclusion and disenfranchisement, and as a result are often oblivious to professional collaboration, residential mix, and other factors that nourish and vitalize plural urban societies.”⁹ Campos also pays specific analytical attention to the liminal historical actors of Sephardim and Mizrahim Jews, because these actors complicate constructions of ethnonationalism and refute historical representations that conflate ethnic and religious affiliations with movements of nationalism. In the chapter, “Ottomans of the Mosaic Faith,” Campos provides examples of ideological differences amongst subgroups: Ottoman Jews supporting Zionism and Ottoman Jews rejecting Zionism. This further complicates perceived ideas that conflate religious orientations with ties of nationhood.¹⁰ Campos provides examples of Ottoman Jews locating support for Zionism within their position in the Ottoman body politic, and conceptualizes accepting Jews seeking refuge from persecution as compatible with Ottoman hospitality and tolerance.¹¹ In another section, Ottomanism necessarily excludes support of Zionism, and Campos includes a quote of Ottoman Jews pronouncing that, “Before everything we should live Ottoman lives... We are Ottoman and nothing else.”¹²

Campos and Gelvin’s differing analytical approaches to the Young Turk Revolution are also evocative of varying models of representing history. Campos conceives of the Young Turk Revolution in 1908 as a critical case that complicates historical inevitability and analyses framed

⁸ Campos, Michelle. *Ottoman Brothers*, 17

⁹ Monterescu, Daniel, *Jaffa Shared and Shattered*, 19.

¹⁰ Campos, Michelle. *Ottoman Brothers*, 198-223

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 210

by WWI nationalism. In Gelvin's *The Modern Middle East*, the Young Turk Revolution is placed in a teleological progression to modernity. The Young Turk Revolution, the counter coup, and the subsequent cultural ripples are chronicled over the course of a single page and each movement of the particular historical moment, "embraced such European notions as the progress of nations, universal standards of civilization, and the division of the world into an 'East' and 'West'."¹³ In Campos' analysis however, during this pivotal moment of the Young Turk Revolution, the Ottoman Empire was not a "stagnant empire crumbling under its own decay."¹⁴ The dynamic characters and tensions in Campos' historical material provide an analysis that pushes back on post-World War I nationalist discourses of reimagining and reconfiguring narratives in order to present images of unity and historical cohesion, instead of complication and contingency.¹⁵ The historical contingencies that fill the entirety of *Ottoman Brothers* are a preliminary note for Gelvin; they happen within the context of the progression of constitutionalism, and its spread of mass politics before the historical significance of World War I was established as the "single most important *political* event in the history of the modern Middle East."¹⁶

In *Jaffa: Shared and Shattered*, individual cultural actors are seen as potential sites of transgression, rejection, tension, contradictions, and complication. For example: "some of Jaffa's Arab residents reject major chunks of the Palestinian national narrative, while some of the Jewish residents do not see their own trajectories as the metonymic celebration of the 'predatory'

¹³ Gelvin, James. *The Modern Middle East*, 156

¹⁴ Campos, Michelle. *Ottoman Brothers*, 249-250

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gelvin, James. *The Modern Middle East*, 165

nationalist project.”¹⁷ Monterescu positions historical narratives, such as hegemonic nationalist discourse and subordinate discourses, within Jaffa’s cultural framework and then uses an analysis that is sensitive to the tactics and strategies of Jaffan cultural actors in relaying internalized cultural modes of processing experience.¹⁸ Monterescu is modeling cultural politics, relationality of actors, and spatial heteronomy through a specifically Jaffan framework: “collective strangeness,” which he lays out as a “dialectic social and interactional form.” Collective Strangeness is “the social product of a binational third space whose hybridity is not temporary or individual, but permanent, shared, and embedded in the social structure.”¹⁹ Monterescu highlights reflectivity because of the analytical danger that “paradigmatic and national categories seep into sociological analysis.”²⁰

In *The Modern Middle East*, Gelvin offers a historical narrative that acknowledges the economic power dynamics between the Middle East and Western encompassment. But because Gelvin disregards historical contingencies and the analytical significance of cultural actors, he reifies notions of underlying economic and political power structures. Monterescu provides a quote, from the post-colonialist Edward Said, as evidence of a commitment to an analytical project that is methodologically framed in regard to contexts that cultural actors inhabit: “Our characteristic mode, then is not a narrative, in which scenes take place seriatim, but rather broken narratives, fragmentary compositions, and self-consciously staged testimonials, in which the

¹⁷ Monterescu, Daniel, *Jaffa Shared and Shattered*, 212

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 241

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 216

narrative voice keeps stumbling over itself, its obligations, its limitations.”²¹ Campos and Monterescu prioritize the complexity of history, the ways in which historical narratives are experienced by cultural actors, and how that experience is reproduced. The lasting significance of historians’ roles in meta-reproducing represented narratives in their writing process is demonstrated by comparing Gelvin, Campos, and Monterescu’s representations of the same region and their distinct and methodologically different analyses.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 238

Citations

Campos, Michelle. 2010. *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians and Jews in Early Twentieth-Century Palestine*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Gelvin, James. 2008. *The Modern Middle East: A History*. Fourth Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press

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