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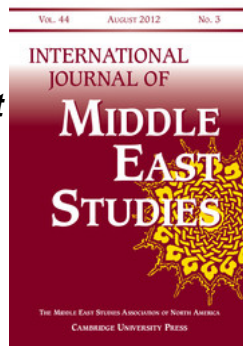
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Synergies between Middle Eastern Economic History and the Analytic Social Sciences

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Over the past half century, the scholarly literature on Middle Eastern economic history has grown substantially. By mining the surviving records of states and towns, scholars steeped in the region's languages have produced detailed studies of waqfs, guilds, taxation, government expenditures, monetary trends, production, land use, charity, and court systems, among many other topics. In carrying out their work, Middle Eastern historians can now draw on abundant publications that describe economic life in particular places and periods.¹

These achievements have tended to conform to the "area studies" research tradition, which places a premium on using original sources and on sensitivity to cultural particularities and meanings. Like other research traditions, its applications show variation. Within any subfield of Middle Eastern economic history, one can identify schools that differ in focus or interpretation.² Nevertheless, some generalizations can be made about the literature as a whole. I offer thoughts as an outsider to the area studies tradition, as a scholar whose entire career, including visiting appointments, has been spent in economics and political science departments, along with law and business schools. To serve this roundtable's agenda, my comments draw attention to unrealized synergies between, on the one hand, Middle Eastern economic history in the area studies tradition and, on the other hand, the analytic social sciences.

In carrying out research, area specialists necessarily depend on academic disciplines, which are fields that offer distinct ways to characterize, classify, and connect bits of knowledge. Middle East-related works in the area studies tradition draw heavily on humanistic disciplines and on "interpretive" segments of the social sciences. They tend to neglect the analytic social sciences, including both the heavily quantitative fields and those focused on refining causal analysis through a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques. They ignore highly relevant research programs in institutional economics, law and economics, behavioral economics, public choice, political economy, and applied econometrics.

An unfortunate consequence of this disciplinary choice is that in most parts of the analytic social sciences Middle Eastern themes appear infrequently, and Middle Eastern data see little use. Vibrant historical fields where the Middle East remains almost invisible include organizational development, financial development, the study of markets, and political modernization, to name a few that draw prominent contributions from economic historians focused on other parts of the world. Were Middle East studies to end its isolation from the analytic social sciences, economic historians of the Middle East would investigate a wider set of questions, collect a broader range of data, and generate richer hypotheses about the patterns of Middle Eastern history. In the process, their works would gain visibility outside the Middle East studies community. They would also achieve greater influence in shaping broad trends within the social sciences.

There are sound reasons, of course, to resist uncritical or unfiltered transfers to Middle Eastern contexts of propositions developed within disciplines dominated by scholars whose knowledge of the Middle East is superficial. The global predictions of mid-20th century modernization theorists were off the mark regarding the role of religion, and earlier historians who characterized Middle Eastern political history as a sequence of uniformly despotic regimes overlooked important variations as well as evidence of institutional dynamism. But we need to distinguish between intellectual skepticism, which is central to all sound scholarship, and the blind dismissal of influential literatures, which can be self-limiting. It is the latter pattern that is troubling. Contributors to Middle Eastern economic scholarship commonly dismiss huge areas of the social sciences as useless, even harmful.

Sometimes the lack of interest in the analytic social sciences is motivated by a desire to avoid Eurocentrism, or Orientalism, or some other source of bias. Another common pretext is the perception that the analytic social sciences produce theories unsubstantiated by data. Although the resulting detachment may protect the field from false generalizations, its harm to the learning process must greatly outweigh this benefit. Apart from depriving new generations of historians of useful skills, it constrains the questions they ask and the leads they pursue. It also reinforces the isolation of Middle East studies from the analytic social sciences, to the detriment of both Middle East studies and knowledge production in general.

A common trait of genuine Orientalist scholarship—the research practiced by people who characterized themselves as Orientalist—was a belief in the consistent and overarching superiority of the West over the East. Many Orientalists held that Western economic institutions are indelibly superior to those of the Middle East across the board and irrespective of context. Fortunately, this is hardly a dominant view within mainstream historical scholarship today and certainly not among researchers who publish in respectable academic outlets. Hardly any active Middle Eastern specialist fails to appreciate the vast achievements of waqfs or the flexibility of the region's taxation systems. However, the commendable desire to avoid Orientalist bias has generated an aversion to judging, except in contexts where the Middle East appears to have outperformed Europe, such as that of scientific productivity in the early Middle Ages. The aversion makes the field shy away from identifying deficiencies, to say nothing of explaining their causes. It also leads researchers to avoid interregional rankings, even intertemporal comparisons, as though reporting weakness in one specific place, time, or context amounts to condemning an entire civilization.

Comparative research is fundamental to the study of economic development, which is a major concern of economic history as a whole. Were it to gain acceptance in Middle Eastern economic history, the field would play a more central role in rapidly growing discourses focused on explaining the sources of economic development through time.

Economic historians in the area studies tradition sometimes claim that economists, political scientists, and other analytic social scientists render comparative judgments casually, as an expression of taste or political bias. There are undoubtedly second-rate scholars for whom the charge applies, though they are not limited to a single cluster of disciplines. But in leading works of the analytic social sciences comparative judgments are always based on some carefully defined notion of efficiency. Thus,

respectable historical contributions typically distinguish between static and dynamic efficiency.

The task of explaining encountered cases of efficiency or inefficiency is another area where methodological differences come to the fore. An analytically competent economist, political scientist, or sociologist typically identifies empirically testable causal mechanisms that involve both intended and unintended consequences. The concept of unintended consequences was central to the Scottish Enlightenment of the 18th century and to scattered earlier works, including Ibn Khaldun's 14th-century masterpiece, which is analytic in a way that today's interpretive economic history generally is not. Insufficient attention to unintended consequences makes contributors to Middle Eastern history heap unqualified praise on economic policies that did serious harm over the long run. It is common, for example, to view fiscal creativity as evidence of unbridled economic strength; yet an adverse by-product was often the attenuation of incentives to innovate, invest, and accumulate. Also common is the neglect of unintended benefits. For all the costs borne by the local population, the commercial privileges that Ottoman rulers gave to foreign merchants had favorable long-term effects. Key legal reforms of the 19th century were motivated by a desire, induced by foreign successes, to extend the same opportunities to locals.

A basic reason for the prevalence and empirical significance of unintended consequences lies in information costs. One relevant context where such costs mattered greatly is governance. Indeed, in selecting, executing, and interpreting policies, states of the Middle East, like those elsewhere, have been constrained severely by information costs. Nonetheless, major strands of the Middle Eastern economic-history literature rest on the assumption that observed outcomes can be traced to state policies. Typically this state-centric approach is justified through state-produced documents housed in official archives, which are far more abundant than private documents.

Research shaped by data availability will distort results in any context. In the present context the effects are particularly troubling, because states of the Middle East were conspicuously shallow until the 19th century. They taxed and provided law and order while contributing minimally to production, trade, or the provision of public goods. An adequate understanding of Middle Eastern state policies requires attention also to private economic activity and to mutual interactions between the choices of public and private actors.

Although economic history is valuable in its own right, in interpreting past successes and failures it also provides guidance for the future. With the Arab uprisings that began in 2011, the Middle East has entered a period of heightened curiosity about why it lost global stature. This makes it an especially opportune time to reconsider the methods and substantive agenda of Middle Eastern economic history with an eye toward enhancing its intellectual impact.

NOTES

¹A few excellent examples are Shelomo D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: An Abridgment in One Volume*, rev. and ed. by Jacob Lassner (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999); Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine: Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700–1900* (Berkeley, Calif.:

University of California Press, 1995); and Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

²With regard to legal practices, for example, contributors differ on the practical implications of the choice of law granted to non-Muslim minorities. Compare Najwa al-Qattan, “*Dhimmīs* in the Muslim Court: Legal Autonomy and Religious Discrimination,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 31 (1999): 429–44, with Amnon Cohen, *Jewish Life under Islam: Jerusalem in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), chap. 6.