

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Philip Carl Salzman, *Culture and Conflict in the Middle East*. New York: Humanity Books, 2008, 224 pp. US \$34.98 hardcover (978-1-59102-587-0)

Culture and Conflict in the Middle East is an anthropological account of the propensity of the Middle East toward conflict; theorized in terms of culture derived from “balanced opposition,” whereby tribes and group loyalties create a complex interpretive horizon of inclusion and exclusion, friend and enemy, honour and shame. In terms of Huntington’s hypothesis of a “clash of civilizations,” this work is unambiguously in the Huntington camp, and opposed to postcolonial perspectives, including the work of Edward Said.

Characterizing the Middle East, or Islam, as a singular cultural entity is a potentially academically perilous endeavour, open to accusations of prejudice, ethnocentricity, and oversimplification. It is possible to construct ideal types of large-scale civilizations but the author must be meticulous in avoiding stereotypes.

Both Weberian *ideal types* and everyday *stereotypes* are distillations of messy empirical reality, which differ from each other in two significant ways. First, in constructing ideal types, the social scientist is always careful to preserve value neutrality — the ideal type is neither normatively nor emotionally evaluative. In contrast, stereotypes are used to confer a sense of superiority of self relative to the stereotyped other. Second, the sophisticated social scientist is aware that ideal types do not actually exist in their pure form. Any social order constitutes a complex overlapping of ideal types. Thus, a society characterized as “traditional,” “instrumentally rational” or endowed with a “spirit of capitalism” is, at best, only predominantly characterized by that ideal type. Such a spirit is always in conflict with other social forces, which the social scientist methodologically brackets. In contrast, stereotypes characterize societies in an all-pervasive manner.

The first four chapters of *Culture and Conflict* are a neo-Gellnerian account of how the Middle East is shaped by a dynamic of tribal loyalties. In this part Salzman makes every effort to follow the first rule of constructing ideal types. He explains how these tribal loyalties entail egalitarianism and high esteem for liberty. As these values have intrinsic worth, by emphasizing them Salzman presents himself as neither norma-

tively nor emotionally negatively judgemental. He appears unaware of the second potential pitfall, however, and tends to describe this culture in a manner suggesting all pervasiveness, though this weakness is less apparent in dealing with the past.

In the second half of the book, Salzman argues that this Arab Bedouin culture constitutes the key to understanding *current* conflicts in the region, especially the Arab-Israeli confrontation. Although the data used in the earlier chapters to describe balanced opposition is largely pre-1970s, Salzman wishes to argue that this culture is still all-pervasive and, in so doing, moves from ideal type to stereotype. Against the obvious objection that most Arab societies are no longer made up of Bedouin tribes, we read “scratch a townsman or urbanite, and under the patina a tribesman will often be found” (p. 181). In chapters 6 and 7, in which he compares the Arab world to the West, Salzman loses the perspective of disinterested observer, and the Middle East is described as essentially scientifically backward, driven by loathing for non-Muslims, especially Jews, and incapable of creating political systems based upon the rule of law.

Having described the culture generated by balance-opposition, Salzman could have made a more convincing, sociologically nuanced, case if he had argued that this culture is still *a* (one among many) significant force in Middle Eastern politics. Empirically this would make his extensive reliance on older data less problematic. Theoretically it would also have allowed him to develop a more nuanced and sophisticated description of the Middle East, characterized by complex forces pulling in many directions. Thus Salzman would not have argued that Palestinians are inherently driven by a tribal culture of balanced opposition. Rather, he could have argued that, for instance, Hamas is predominantly driven by this culture, while many of the leadership of Fatah are attracted to more abstract, less particularist, political principles. Such analysis could also be applied to singular actors. For instance, Arafat springs to mind as a complex political actor whose actions were influenced by both the ideal type balanced oppositional loyalties and more modernist views of political engagement.

The dangers of moving from ideal type to essentialist stereotype is apparent in Salzman’s account of the relationship between Islam and other faiths, which is described as driven by a *us* (*Umma*) versus *them* (infidels) dynamic (131-52). In this context he dismisses the well-known tolerance toward Jews, under the medieval Islamic world of *Al-Andalus*, with the emphatic claim that “there is nothing in the historical evidence to support the myth of a golden age of tolerance under Islam” (p. 158). Yet, the evidence he uses to support this assertion consists largely of

anecdotal 19th century travellers' tales. Rather than attempting to prove that Islam is inherently intolerant, a more sophisticated method would be to argue that the *us* versus *them* dynamic constitutes a significant force, among others, within Islam. Christianity is also characterized by a similar tension between forces of fundamentalism and tolerance. In the medieval world, the equivalent of the *Umma* was *Christendom*. Defenders of Christendom led crusades, while others preached tolerance. It could be argued that in the medieval period the Islamic world was more tolerant than the Christian, while currently the situation has reversed. However, neither was, or is, purely tolerant or intolerant. Taking a long historical view, both faiths are caught in a complex tension between forces of tolerance and fundamentalist intolerance, vying for supremacy.

There is substance to the ideal type outlined in the first chapters of the book. However, by sliding into stereotypical analysis, Salzman misses an opportunity to apply a potentially interesting ideal type in a convincing manner. More generally, by failing to handle ideal type analysis with due caution, *Culture and Conflict* has the potential to contribute to unjustified scepticism toward macro-theorizing.

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