

Simon Bromley, Rethinking Middle East Politics (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994). pp. vii, 203.

In this seminal book, Simon Bromley, a lecturer in International Political Economy at the University of Leeds in Britain, successfully questions some of the prevalent yet theoretically impoverished accounts of political change in the Middle East. Bromley, who in his previous book entitled *American Hegemony and World Oil* (1991), had provided a Marxian account of the role played by oil in the materialization of US postwar hegemony, utilizes the same theoretical framework to explain the nature of political and socio-economic development in the modern Middle East. He lays out the basic claim of his book in the following way: “by focusing on the historical character of surplus appropriation, by detailing the specific social relations which have governed these processes and by considering their pattern of reproduction and transformation by social forces, we can explain a very large part of what appears to be significant about the development of the modern Middle East” (pp. 3-4).

In his first chapter entitled “Understanding the Middle East,” Bromley critically reflects upon two schools of thought which have tried to explain why the West and the Islamic world have had different historical trajectories. He first challenges the assumptions of the “culturalist” approach which maintains that the Middle East is “peculiar” on account of such factors as the unitary nature of Islam, its opposition to democracy, the tenacity of sub-national and supra-national identities, and the inherent resistance of Pan-Arabism and Islam to the nation-state system. Armed with a historical materialist perspective, Bromley finds fault with these theorists essentialist and ahistorical conceptual frameworks as well as their reification of Islam and Arabism. He devotes a good part of his critique to Max Weber and such present day epigones of him as Bassam Tibi and Ernest Gellner. According to Bromley, the Weberian tradition represents an ambiguous departure

from the culturalist approach because of its flirtation with some materialist forms of argumentation. Yet, while he maintains a Weberian-style theory of a sterile Muslim society characterized by unvarying features (i.e., patriarchal domination, frustrated development of rational and capitalist forms of economic praxis), he fails to explain the intricate nature of state formation in the Middle East.

Any reader experiencing an urge to dismiss Bromley's Marxian methodology on account of its doctrinal predilection would do themselves a disservice by not reflecting on his radical, yet sober and cogent mode of analysis. Writing in contrast to traditional Marxism, Bromley does not treat the state as a mere appendage to capital. While subscribing to Marxism's general theoretical framework, he advocates the need for utilizing an empirically open methodology to explain the historically specific forms of capital accumulation and state formation in different societies. The reader gets a taste of this mode of analysis in chapter two, where Bromley discusses the metamorphosis of the Middle East from tributary empires and nomadic hinterlands into nation-states incorporated into the modern international system. In chapter three, he takes issue with those theorists who emphasize the role of oil and Western imperialism as instrumental in the development of social formations in the Middle East. Bromley maintains that the advocates of the *rentier* state thesis have placed too much emphasis upon the role of oil at the expense of neglecting "the internal organization of these societies before the discovery of oil and having relegated the impact of other forms of surplus extraction in shaping modern political development" (p. 96). Bromley maintains that an adequate theory of state formation is one which considers (a) the relation of the state to those social relations which govern the material reproduction of the society; (b) looks at the position of the state in the global economic system; and (c) takes into account the activities of those

classes and social forces struggling to reproduce and to transform the configuration of wealth and power (p. 105). Utilizing these criteria, he proceeds in chapter four to demonstrate the extremely uneven process of state formation in the Middle East by providing succinct case studies of Turkey, Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Iran.

In his final chapter, Bromley puts forward a number of theses regarding Islam and Arab nationalism. Among these are: “the relative absence of democracy in the Middle East has little to do with the region’s Islamic culture and much do to with its particular pattern of state formation” (p. 169); “the politics of Arab nationalism are more an effect than a cause of the difficulties of state formation in the Arab Middle East” (p. 174); “Arab nationalism has been more a tool of than an obstacle to state formation” (p. 177); “Islamist groups are competing *for* (access to) state power and they therefore seek to oppose the configuration of specific regimes rather than the state *per se*” (pp. 178-179); and “clerically prescribed Islam does not and cannot offer an alternative *social system* to capitalism” (p. 181). Needless to say, the latter proposition can be considered as an antidote to Samuel Huntington’s alarmist essay concerning the “clash of civilizations.”

While this reviewer finds himself in general agreement with Bromley’s contention that Middle East politics may be “particular” but not “peculiar” (in the Orientalist sense) and while I sympathize with his critique of those who attribute an essential and inviolable autonomy to culture, I still have a number of apprehensions about the book. Bromley’s overhasty dismissal of the theory of an Asiatic mode of production as having “precious little theoretical or empirical warrant” is not convincing. He is also not very persuasive in his critique of the works of Ernest Gellner (whom he describes as “the most formidable exponent and developer of Weber’s legacy”) on Muslim society.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, despite considering the process of state formation to be his *central* analytical

question, Bromley totally ignores the following troubling questions regarding the genesis of state formation in the Middle East: How have non-capitalist configurations of power and authority been able to reproduce themselves?; How have the ruling elite been able to anchor their political praxis on imperial and statist traditions of statecraft? What accounts for the personalization of power and/or its sacralization in the Middle East?; What role have different ideologies and normative values played on bestowing or withholding legitimacy from those in power? How do we account for the ascendancy of different ideologies in different time periods? Finally, how has modernity impacted the process of individual and collective identity formation in the region? The reader cannot help but feel that in his quest to dismiss the essentialist and ahistorical views of the culturalist camp, Bromley has glossed over, downplayed or simply ignored an entire set of cultural issues which, while problematic, are still central to any discussion of state formation in the Middle East.

Despite these misgivings, I believe that this book deserves to be on the reading list of any graduate level course dealing with the political economy or social history of the Middle East.

Bromley's book can now be added to the works of such leading scholars of Middle East state formation as Talal Asad, Caglar Keyder, Fred Halliday, Roger Owen, and Sami Zubaida.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more impressive critique of Gellner see: Sami Zubaida, "Is there a Muslim society? Ernest Gellner's sociology of Islam" *Economy and Society*, 24, no. 2 (May 1995): 151-188.