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## NEW REGIONALISMS

THE PARACHUTIST AND THE TRUFFLE HUNTER:  
ON GLOBAL, MICRO, AND MIDDLE EASTS

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# ABSTRACT

Scholarship on the political economy and history of the Middle East has recently taken a decisive shift towards thinking transregionally and globally, following trends in the humanities and social sciences more generally. For many working on the region, the “Middle East” as spatial container for historical analysis is no longer satisfying; to understand the region, we are compelled to look beyond its borders and beyond the containers that had long held (and sometimes even constrained) our analyses. In this short piece, I will try to reflect on the stakes involved in writing at different scales – to frame (and perhaps reframe) the question of “the global” in the writing of Middle Eastern history.

Drawing on the literature on global history, I suggest that thinking globally does not necessarily imply a globe-encompassing scale of analysis, let alone writing, but instead is a method – a sensibility – that attempts to collapse the boundaries of metageographical containers in an effort to trace histories of connection and circulation that have eluded the grasp of area studies frameworks. To be sure, there are some attempts in reading the Middle East from the perspective of a globe-encompassing scale; Adam Hanieh’s work is exemplary in this regard. For most, though, the goals are more modest: to read the Middle East from the vantage point of the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Sahara, and the Persianate world. This approach to the global has the virtue of destabilizing the geographical categories that we have come to rely on, even if it runs the risk of reifying analytical categories.

But part of what I want to suggest in this piece is that one does not even have to start from the premise of macro-level analysis. If destabilizing geographical and analytical categories is the goal of a global-historical approach to the Middle East, it may just as effectively be achieved through a microhistorical approach to the subject. Thinking at a micro-level scale does not necessarily imply limiting oneself geographically; there are plenty of examples of microhistories that unfold over broad canvases, in what is now called “global microhistory”. The principal strength of microhistory (which, like global history, is more a method or sensibility than a field) is its ability to destabilize grand narratives while forcing historians to rethink the analytical categories on which they rely – to force us away from transhistorical abstractions and into the historically-specific forms those categories take.

Thinking along different scales, then, holds the potential to generate new historical vistas, while forcing us to come to terms with our own conceptual blinders and categorical precommitments. If “the Middle East” as a region is unlikely to go away anytime soon, committing some of our time to thinking about questions of scale and category might at least allow us to reapproach many of the assumptions and narratives that have pervaded our writing.

The historian David Armitage once remarked that “We are all global historians now.”<sup>1</sup> Many of us may be inclined to agree: over the past two decades, historical writing has taken a decidedly global turn: we are now awash in histories of global trade and commodities, of ideologies and the political movements they manifested themselves in, and of empires and the circulation of personnel, institutions, and capital (to name but a few topics) within them. Although Middle Easternists have come late to the global turn, there has been an equal efflorescence of globally-inflected scholarship on the region.<sup>2</sup> Recent writing on contemporary and historical political economy in the Middle East in particular has taken a decisive shift towards transregional and global frameworks. Class formation in the Gulf, the money markets of the Middle East, state efforts at economic planning in different Middle Eastern capitals, and the histories of commodity booms – all of these bear the hallmark of distinctly global approaches to writing history, and to good effect.<sup>3</sup> For many writing within this tradition, the “Middle East” is no longer a satisfying category; thinking about these phenomena requires analyses that move beyond borders and regions – in many cases, ones that move to situate the Middle East within a global-historical framework.

But what does it mean to write on a “global” Middle East? Though many of us invoke the global in our writings, there is often little critical thinking about the category itself, let alone the work it is supposed to do. And that is precisely what I want to reflect on in this piece: what we mean by the global, why we aspire to a global scale in our writings, and what the stakes involved in “global” history might be for those of us who are at least nominally committed to the study of the Middle East. To give my reflections a little more grounding, I will anchor them in a more discrete theme, one that pervades Hanieh’s article but also takes up much of the scholarly agenda in thinking about the global: capitalism, which, alongside empire, dominates discussions of global history.

Alongside my parachutist’s approach to reading the literature on the history of “global” capitalism, I want to suggest the potential of an altogether different scale of thinking and write: the micro, or that of the truffle hunter.<sup>4</sup> Though the two seem incongruous, at least in terms of scale, microhistory and global history share similar ambitions: both utilize scale to destabilize analytical and geographical categories that national and regional frameworks had deeply inscribed. As a method, or at least a sensibility, microhistorical approaches to writing the history of capitalism offer a particular vantage point on an unwieldy category, and allow us to think through the means by which it anchors itself in time- and place-specific practices, vocabularies, and imaginaries – and in so doing, point to the limits of the region as a spatial container for historical processes.

## ■ The Global Middle East

But first, the global – and the place of the “Middle East” (however dissatisfied we might be with the category) within it. Perhaps the most popular notion of the global in writings by historians and political economists (and the one that Hanieh’s piece implicitly draws on) is that of global as globe-encompassing. Within that framework, the global is a scale of analysis that is supra to the nation and region. It is an accumulation of all of those, a jigsaw puzzle-like picture of the world, in which states fit together into regions, and regions into the globe – and in which each shapes the other. This is what allows Hanieh to make the claim that the regional and the global scales are jointly-formed and co-constituted – that they “emerge as particular (spatial) instantiations of global processes that they themselves help constitute – they are produced by, and simultaneously produce, the global itself.”<sup>5</sup>

This particular notion of the global – as globe-encompassing, and always locking arms with national and regional scales of analysis – is what we have come to expect in writings on the history of capitalism. Though these came to the fore with the association between global history and globalization (itself closely related to capitalism) the literature long preceded discussions

of globalization. Arguably beginning with the work of Braudel, the literature on the history of capitalism has long eyed the broader geographies that fed Europe's industrialization; Wallerstein's *The Modern World System* and Eric Wolf's *Europe and the People Without History* illustrate very clearly the global contours of that literature.<sup>6</sup> Though the approaches to the topic were many, their punch lines often involved some variation of one of two refrains. In one, the emergence of industrial capitalism in Europe necessarily involved the economic peripheralization of the Middle East, Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The other is also a story of divergence, but of a different sort: of paths not taken by Asian or Muslim societies, and capitalisms not realized because of their inability to overcome different combinations of political, environmental, and institutional barriers.

And yet, many self-identifying global historians readily concede that globe-encompassing works do not constitute the entirety of the field – nor are they supposed to. The promise of global history, many argue, does not necessarily lie in the production of grand narratives hitched to large-scale frameworks. Rather, the premise has been to generate a discussion surrounding the myriad ways in which one can move beyond containers of nation-state, region, empire, and civilization – an historiographical arena in which historians could produce and discuss histories that crossed boundaries, connected spaces, and grappled with movement in ways that other frameworks could not easily accommodate. Here, the global is less a spatial category than it is a method or a sensibility; it is a commitment to reading and writing that thinks consciously about questions of scale, and (often) privileges the study of mobile people, goods, and ideas. In a sense, it is an approach to historical writing that draws inspiration from the discussion on globalization, but without the theoretical or political baggage that comes with it. Moreover, it is a conversation that quite explicitly sets itself in opposition to the Eurocentrism that characterized much of the older world-historical literature.<sup>7</sup>

The results that this approach to the global yield is often much more modest than anything globe-encompassing, though no less insightful. For historians of the Middle East, it has generated altogether new arenas for reading the history of the region – most significantly, the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds. As far as spatial configurations of the Middle East go, these new frameworks have helped decenter the towering place of Istanbul, Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, and Beirut from the narratives of Middle Eastern history, and supplement them with other, less obvious nodes: Aden, Basra, Bombay, Karachi, Marseilles, Muscat, Sicily, Tunis, and Zanzibar, to name but a few. If one were to include the Sahara and the Persianate World as arenas of Middle Eastern history – and why not? – we can add Bukhara, Isfahan, Samarkand, Tehran, and Timbuktu as well. The Middle East thus becomes much broader than the strictures imposed by region; it is a region that historically opened up vistas onto much broader worlds.

This is not just a spatial reframing: it has implications for how we read the history of capitalism in the region itself. By situating these narratives in transregional arenas rather than “the Middle East” as such, we allow ourselves to write a history in which the Middle East is not a passive recipient of the forces of global capitalism, but – as Hanieh urges – a co-creator in that process. Reading the history of capitalism from these spaces allows us to move away from the established frameworks of imperial political economy that have shaped the literature on the subject. As useful as they've been, those narratives have done a lot to seal Middle East off as a separate container of world history, cordoning off many of its connections to Europe, Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. When those connections do appear, they are often in the form of diplomatic ties, beholden to the shifting winds of politics. And in almost all cases, they are thought to be ancillary, or even incidental, to the economic development of the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> For those looking to write a history of capitalism that connects spaces – that realizes the vision of the “global” that global historians have long advocated – the discussions of imperial political economy that have framed so much of the literature have shown their limits.

A more robust space from which we can read narratives of global capitalism in the Middle East might be its marketplaces – its souks and bazaars. By situating ourselves in the marketplace, we can open up a more robust transregional arena, connecting the maritime marketplaces of the Indian Ocean and Mediterranean, and charting the circulation of goods, of people, and of ideas around these littoral spaces. Immediately, this serves to destabilize the notion of any coherent Middle East; in this conception the terrestrial economy is bound up in the oceanic marketplace, and entangled in markets and marketplaces in other parts of the world, through the movement of people, goods, and money. Instead of a confined sense of region that bursts at the seam when presented with the flows and circulations that characterize the marketplace, we can arrive at a more supple spatial framework for reading the history of capitalism in the region.

More importantly, though, a shift to the marketplace as the principal locus of the history of global capitalism in the Middle East allows us to think more closely about the ways in which merchants, bankers, ship captains, laborers, and other economic actors – but also, importantly juridical actors – grappled with capitalism, not as an abstract concept, but as an historically-specific phenomenon. In the transregional marketplaces of the Middle East, economic actors actively thought about and engaged with questions of value, commodification, contracting, property rights, labor, and more. They produced writings on marketplace exchanges, wrote manuals of commercial practice, penned legal opinions that grappled with the changing rights and obligations of economic life, and articulated their own conceptual vocabulary for describing the forms of production and exchange that took place around them. The marketplace was thus a site of intellectual history – of the ideational processes that are just as much a part of the history of capitalism as the material flows themselves.

This has implications for what we understand the grand narratives of the history of capitalism in Middle Eastern. Seen from the maritime marketplace, this history reads less like a narrative of divergence than it does one of convergence. Actors in the transregional marketplaces straddled multiple worlds, tapped into global flows of goods, drew on a variety of institutions and forms, and actively engaged with the technologies their Euro-American counterparts, many of whom they entertained extensive commercial relationships with. Capitalism thus reads as a “global” co-creation in which economic actors in the region were among the principal protagonists. For Euro-American capitalism to have any resonances in the region, it had to be vernacularized – actively domesticated into in the grammars, lexica, and spaces of the transregional marketplaces of the Indian Ocean, Mediterranean, and Sahara. It is only by taking a distinctly “global” approach to the history of capitalism in the region that we might fully appreciate this.

And yet, for all of their promises, global approaches to writing history present considerable challenges and pitfalls. As much as they destabilize regional analyses, they run the risk of reifying the very categories on which they’re based. One potential critique is that “global” histories take contrived geographical categories (like the Middle East) and simply replace them with other, equally contrived categories – the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, or even “the globe” itself. Whether this critique manages to upend the project of global history in its different guises is unclear, but it does point to the epistemological difficulties involved in thinking beyond region.

A more impactful critique, though, is that global histories tend to reify many of the analytical categories that historians rely upon, even as they suggest new spatial canvases within which they unfold. And here, capitalism is perhaps the best example: global histories of capitalism tend to begin with a notion of capitalism as a transhistorical abstraction against which different societies can be measured or assessed. We then end up either with diffusionist narratives in which capitalism spreads outward from places in which it is already worked out, alongside comparative analyses in which societies either meet the criteria for being capitalist or fall short of them. Even

global-historical works that avoid treating capitalism as a transhistorical abstraction often treat its constituent concepts – labor, price, property, etc. – as stable, coherent, and mutually legible across geographies and cultures. Whether a global-historical framework is suitable for the interrogation of these categories is unclear; the broader the scope, it seems, the more stable the categories have to be in order to bear the analytical weight that spatial breadth places on them. For those interested in interrogating analytic categories, a better move might be to go small – paradoxically, in order to make large claims.

## ■ The Micro Middle East

There is nothing intuitive about the notion that micro-level scales of analysis can do the work of disrupting large-scale geographies and categories. In fact, the notion seems anathema to the entire field of microhistory, or at least to those who are outside of the field. For practitioners of microhistory – also deemed a sensibility rather than a method, much less a field – that is precisely what the approach aims to do. From its outset, the discussion surrounding microhistory took on questions surrounding the relationship between the micro and the macro – that is, how one used a micro-level study to address macro-level questions, processes, and phenomena. Debates in microhistory revolved around issues of the exceptional versus the typical, the ability to engage in comparison, and perhaps principally, how micro-level studies can destabilize the analytical categories that animate larger-scale histories. The micro, then, was never conceived of as an end in its own right; it was always a pathway to the macro.<sup>9</sup>

Seen this way, the goals of microhistory are in no way orthogonal to those of global history; in some respects, they line up quite nicely with one another. More recently, there has been an attempt to join microhistory with global history, in a nascent discussion that practitioners have come to call “global microhistory.” Within this discussion, the “global” in global microhistory principally involves attention to crossings, connections, and circulations rather than the “globe-encompassing” variety. This often involves tracking mobile individuals, though at times, global microhistorians take a single case to tackle broader issues in global history.<sup>10</sup>

If microhistory has not made as much of a splash in the historiography of the Middle East as it has elsewhere, it is not altogether absent.<sup>11</sup> Middle Eastern microhistories have taken several different forms, and have generated vastly different pictures of the region. Many approach the microhistorical case as a study in – an instantiation, or reflection, of – the grand narrative. Others, however, have sought to use the micro as platform from which they could puncture, disrupt, or otherwise interrogate broader categories or grand narratives – notions like literacy and the *nahda*, for instance, or gender relations in early modern rural towns.<sup>12</sup> With few exceptions, though, none of the Middle Eastern microhistories (and, to be sure, there are not very many) do much to interrogate the category of the Middle East as such. The spatial units through which we understand the history of the Middle East – empire, region, nation, and city – tend to remain more or less stable in the literature, even as at least one scholar uses the microhistorical lens to interrogate the uneven processes by which some of these spatial units came into being.<sup>13</sup>

It may be that microhistory has less to tell us about the spatial categories we use to write the history of the Middle East – or really, of any other region – than it does the analytical categories historians of the Middle East write with. Take capitalism, for instance (as the old joke goes: please!) – or, to be more specific than capitalism, which many would already concede to be too abstract a category, the concepts that animate it: wage labor, market economy, private property, or class, to take just a few examples. If historians are always already inclined to think of these as processes that unfold over time rather than static concepts, microhistorians might take it one step further and ask, what do these concepts look like on the ground? How are concepts like price or wage labor, or

even the marketplace, understood by the different actors who participated in the economic arena? And how did their actions set in motion the very processes than animated, and indeed conjured up, those concepts? Rather than take for granted the notion that price, labor, property, class, etc. are concepts that can travel and translate across time and space, microhistory allows us to see how different actors produced their own notions of labor or marketplace, and maneuvered within – and fought over – their own understandings of price and property. The picture of capitalism that we'd be left with, then, becomes far more textured: historically contingent, of course, but also historically specific in its forms and ideologies, rather than replicable across space and time.

The spatial ramifications of a microhistorical approach to the study of capitalism in the Middle East are not insignificant, either; we end up with a different image of the region than the one we started off with. By sticking close to the ground, we allow the categories that we interrogate the space to move; the actors, objects, and discourses that animate these histories carve out their own spaces, and chart their own geographies, disrupting the narratives of the emergence of nation-states – to say nothing of the methodological paradigms that privilege them. By resisting the urge to constrain the space within which concepts are worked out – to allow for the possibility that notions of economy, society, and politics can be worked out in different places, in conversation with one another – we might begin to interrogate the utility of the spatial categories and approaches that dominate the grand narratives of the Middle East.<sup>14</sup> This, if anything, might be the principal promise of a “global microhistory” – not simply to track mobile individuals, but to allow their itineraries to conjure up different notions of political, economic, or social space. These may ultimately lead us to a “Middle East” that looks surprisingly similar to the one we already work within, but will more likely force us to reckon with spaces that are often broader than and also smaller than the region. From the perspective of the micro scale, then, we are forced to think more closely about the category of the Middle East itself, and its ability to accurately capture the historical phenomena and processes that we are ultimately interested in explaining.

## Reflections

To repeat David Armitage's dictum that I began this piece with: “we are all global historians now.” But, that word – “global” – it doesn't necessarily mean what we think it means. Far from a commitment to an analytical framework that seeks to encompass the entire globe, the literature on global history instead seeks to use scale to interrogate phenomena, processes, and narratives that had been limited to nation-states or regions reinscribed by area studies frameworks. By widening the aperture, we can produce new historical vistas – and in doing so, we allow ourselves the opportunity to come to terms with our historiographical precommitments and blinders. One might also achieve a similar effect by narrowing the lens, and scaling down, which allows the opportunity for a closer interrogation of the conceptual abstractions that large-scale histories often rely on. The two, I've suggested, are not at all at odds with one another. Despite the differences in scalar orientations, the two share the same goal: to disrupt our understanding of the processes that we had long framed within political boundaries – the nation-state, empire, and for our purposes here, region.

What does this mean for those of us who work on the Middle East – an historiography that is lacking in both global and micro-level approaches? By thinking through the issue of the history of capitalism in the Middle East, we can see where the promises and pitfalls of “global” thinking lie. Thinking along different scales might not ultimately do away with the category of the Middle East altogether, nor should it; there are, after all, plenty of discussions for which the category is eminently suitable. However, by shifting our lenses – by widening, narrowing, connecting, and tracking – we might at least be able to come to a closer understanding of what work the category can and cannot do for us, and perhaps a better sense of the processes and narratives that have

served to reinscribe it over time. A global approach to Middle Eastern history, then – whether that global is globe-encompassing, transregional, or even microhistorical – holds the potential to force us to come to terms with our precommitments to the region, both as a spatial unit and as an arena for the historical processes that we are interested in. At times, the Middle East will seem like far too small of a category to think with, while at other times it may seem a little too broad and abstract; at no point, though, will it suffice on its own – at least that much is clear.

Are we all global historians now? Hardly. But again, it may depend on what we mean by it.

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## Endnotes

1 “Are We All Global Historians Now? An Interview with David Armitage,” *Itinerario*, No. 36 (2012): 7–28. The quote is often misattributed to the late Christopher Bayly, who said something similar, but referred to world historians instead.

2 I should point out, too, that studies in “global Islam” witnessed enormous growth early on, especially in the wake of 9/11 and the so-called “war on terror.”

3 Some exemplary work in this regard includes Ahmed Kanna, *Dubai: The City as Corporation* (University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Alden Young, *Transforming Sudan: Decolonization, Economic Development, and State Formation* (Cambridge University Press, 2017); Adam Hanieh, *Money, Markets, and Monarchies: The Gulf Cooperation Council and the Political Economy of the Contemporary Middle East* (Cambridge University Press, 2018); Aaron Jakes, *Egypt’s Occupation: Colonial Economism and the Crises of Capitalism* (Stanford University Press, 2020); Amr Adly, *Cleft Capitalism: The Social Origins of Failed Market Making in Egypt* (Stanford University Press, 2020)

4 The metaphor of the parachutist and truffle hunter comes from Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, who remarked that every historian is a parachutist or a truffle hunter; “the former hangs far above the landscape of the past, looking for general patterns; the latter sink their snouts in the tiniest details preserved in archival documents.” Predictably, I have been unable to locate the source of this quote, which has been passed down through generations of historians, clipped from its origins.

5 See page 9 of Hanieh’s working paper, “Space, Scale, and Region: Thinking Through the New Dynamics of the Middle East.”

6 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, Vol. 3: *The Perspective of the World* (University of California Press, 1985); Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (Duke University Press, 2004), a useful summary of his multi-volume work; Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (University of California Press, 1984). I am explicitly not including the theoretical literature on capitalism or classical political economy, in which one sees discussions of economic imperialism in writings from much earlier on.

7 See also Maxine Berg, “Introduction,” in Berg, ed., *Writing the History of the Global: Challenges for the Twenty-First Century* (British Academy, 2013); “Introduction” in James Belich, Christopher Wickham, John Darwin, Margret Frenz, eds., *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford University Press, 2016)?

8 The literature on the economic history of the Middle East is slim, but illustrative of this tendency. None of the surveys of the topic include connections to other parts of the world; Africa only appears when North Africa is brought into the narrative, and Europe’s place is limited to its subjugation of the regional economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. See, for example, Charles Issawi, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* (Columbia University Press, 1982); Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800–1914* (Methuen & Co, 1981); Timur Kuran, *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (Princeton University Press, 2010).

9 See also Giovanni Levi, "On Microhistory," in Peter Burke, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991); Matti Peltonen, "Clues, Margins, and Monads: The Micro-Macro Link in Historical Research," *History and Theory*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2001): 347-359; "Introduction," in James F. Brooks, Christopher R. N. DeCorse, & John Walton, eds., *Small Worlds: Method, Meaning, & Narrative in Microhistory* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008)

10 On global microhistory, see also Francesca Trivellato, "Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?" *California Italian Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2011). A recent supplement to *Past and Present* gives a particularly useful sense of the conversation; see "Global History and Microhistory," *Past and Present*, Vol. 242, Supplement 14 (2019).

11 For a useful overview, see Laila Parsons, "Micro-narrative and the Historiography of the Modern Middle East" *History Compass*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2011): 84-96

12 See also Leslie Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of 'Aintab* (University of California Press, 2003); Dana Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford University Press, 2013)

13 Cyrus Schayegh uses the movements of a drug smuggler and others like him to tell us a story about how territorial boundaries are simultaneously made and subverted – of different patterns of territorialization that unfold alongside one another. Schayegh, "The Many Worlds of 'Abud Yasin; or, What Narcotics Trafficking in the Interwar Middle East Can Tell Us about Territorialization," *American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 2 (2011): 273-306.

14 In the historiography of the Middle East, Cyrus Schayegh's work is exemplary in this regard. He uses microhistorical studies of smugglers, businessmen, and thinkers, and moves between scales of analysis, to rethink the spatial categories by which we read and write the history of the region. Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Harvard University Press, 2017).