Forum

The Political Economy of Arab Cultural Underdevelopment: The Case of Lawrence E. Harrison

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"A person who knows only one country basically knows no country well."

– S. M. Lipset

"Imagination is more important than knowledge."

– Albert Einstein

Lawrence E. Harrison pins the blame for Arab-Islamic underdevelopment on a set of cultural dysfunctions. Among those that interest me are "submissive collectivism rather than individualism" and the hostility to 'innovation,' 'change,' and 'dissent'; "isolationism" not just toward non-Muslims but even internally, placing an "emphasis on family, clan and ethnic cohesion rather than broader relationships"; and "clerical interpretations ... that have ... transmitted fatalistic dogma, ... permitted adoption of scientific and technological advances from outside but closed the door to the liberalizing cultural forces that made these advances possible."[1]

Well, the Saudis *do* "believe that oil was a gift from Allah ... It was a reward for their devout belief ... Ever thankful, they see no reason to deny the teachings of the Koran." As for importing western know-how without the values that come with it, the Saudis also believe that "God has given them oil wealth which is to be translated into money as a means by which they can

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modernize. But one should never interfere with the other"[2] – as if one can buy a television set without the manual that tells you how to use it.

Harrison adds that Muslims treat 'wealth' as a "gift of fate, chance, or natural-resource endowment" and thus have a 'progress-resistant' culture that "discourages punctuality and saving and is characterized by a high degree of mistrust beyond the family or clan" and where "advancement comes through connections."[3] This is also true given how Sheikh Ahmed al-Yamani, the controversial Saudi oil minister, eventually got fired for trying to convince the royal family not to engage in 'barter deals' for western military and civilian technology. In the Saudi mindset, paying for technology in oil made more sense because it "wasn't as if they were paying ... with real money. It was only oil that would otherwise have stayed in the ground."

The opposite is the case, as al-Yamani was at pains to explain, for millions of "barrels of extra oil would be floating around the marketplace, feeding the glut and helping to depress prices even further."[4] Not to mention that such deals were done without OPEC's knowledge, let alone approval, further weakening it over the long-run. However, Harrison has no cause to deduce that this is why "[i]ts oil wealth notwithstanding, Iraq is clearly an underdeveloped country with a tiny industrial and technological base, a rudimentary infrastructure and a largely uneducated, unskilled populace."[5] Political economy is the chief culprit here and is of the kind that afflicts even democratic, western 'oil' economies, thanks to the 'Dutch disease.'

This term was coined after the *de-industrialization* faced by the Dutch economy following the oil boom it experienced in the 1970s and 1980s.[6] Investments were siphoned away from productive sectors to the oil sector – easy money, guaranteed returns. It also pushed up the value of the currency, pricing Holland's non-oil exports out of international markets. With already preindustrial undemocratic countries, what results is a *rentier* economy managed by a rentier *state*.[7] This is, to get to the rub, why it is no coincidence that "the good Lord didn't see fit to put oil and gas reserves where there are democratic governments," to quote former Vice President Dick Cheney, when he was CEO of Halliburton back in 1996.[8] Oil revenues turn the logic of 'no taxation without representation' on its head.

With oil rents the state can afford to bribe the people with their own money, while real economic development through industrialization would risk democratization as the state loses control of people's livelihoods. Not surprisingly, then, as the distribution of wealth becomes a matter of patronage and hypocrisy, any semblance of a *work ethic* is strangled in the cradle – another of Harrison's 'justified' complaints about Arabs and Muslims. Even non-oil Arab economies suffer because they get hard currency from

their migrant workers in the Gulf. And, after all, catering to the tastes of Gulf Arab tourists is easier than going through all the trouble of building and managing production lines when one has to deal with a never-ending maze of contradictory laws, prohibitive taxation, corruption, and emergency laws that allow immediate confiscation.

The private sector is simultaneously bought off through cronyism, thereby preventing the emergence of an independent capitalist class that has a vested interest in the rule of law, stable property rights, and political as well as economic liberalization.

Imagining Development

As for fatalism, here is a not-so-humorous anecdote. A friend of mine once got into a debate with a shaykh in a mosque about the 'black cloud,' the smog from which Cairo is increasingly suffering. The shaykh said this is *ibtila'*, a punishment from God for our impiety and that, therefore, it was amoral to fight against it by trying to reduce pollution levels.[9]

The Arabs' and Muslims' cosmological perspective on time, however, is not derived from the Qur'an *per se*, but is derived from the ancient frame of mind that was then imposed upon it. As grand and powerful as Greece and Rome were, their peoples – including philosophers, priests, and kings – could not guard themselves against illness, rapid aging, and, more generally, the elements. That is why the impersonal forces of nature were personalized and understood to be vengeful deities. Out of this flowed an entire way of life and code of ethics by means of which humanity was afflicted by 'excessive' desires and cautioned to practice 'moderation' lest one unduly sin against the deities, who themselves were subject to fate – a common perspective in Antiquity stretching from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to the Greek tragedies.

Hence the emphasis on wealth as a gift from the deities or nature, as well as the downplaying of savings, investments, and entrepreneurial 'spirits' as contrasted to the importance of familial wealth, passed down and accumulated from one generation to the next. Much the same holds true of Muslims, once you disaggregate their experiences along non-theological lines. Something that helped Malaysia and Indonesia become East Asian Tigers was something that the colonial powers imported into their Islamic domain, namely, *time-sequencing*.

Museums are one example, invented by colonial administrators eager to visually illustrate the lack of development that led to many of these once-great past civilizations falling under the West's purview. In the case of South-

east Asia, these colonized countries began to gain a sense of their history, and therefore national identity, *from* these imperial categorizations. There was even a time-sequencing of maps, comparing and contrasting these places before and after they were occupied, thereby creating a "sort of political-biographical narrative of the realm."[10] Museums and maps thus became part of their 'fictive,' but nonetheless *effective*, national narratives, helping them become substantive nation-states with the desire to put the past behind them and head off to something new and 'better.'

This did not mean disowning or doing away with Islam, just understanding the religion in a new timeframe. Being decoupled from a supposed pristine past made it easier to appreciate their position in the world and how they relate to 'other' culture spheres in a productive manner, without blindly aping western fashions or outright rejection. Progress, moreover, does not just depend on a predisposition toward the 'forward march of time,' but clarity over *what* exactly is marching forward in time – the nation-state, a cultural pan-region, or a sacred community of global proportions.

If people hunker themselves down into the tiniest of socio-political units – city-states, neighborhoods, mountain tops, villages, clans, tribes, families, and even individuals – one can imagine what the consequences will be for 'trust' in the wider community and 'selfless' collective action on its behalf (i.e., capitalist property relations and civil society). The culture of mistrust and parochialism, here, is the *consequence* and not the cause, the end result of a quite rational 'self-help' strategy calculated by individual agents up against the 'structure of anarchy,' to (deliberately) borrow phrases from realism.

Paradoxically, tiny social formations – tribes, villages, sects – within this grand framework are sustained and legitimized as part of this larger context. If one is part of such a large extended family, why does one need to have a nation-state in command of its borders and natural resources? This is a sort of archaic version of John Naisbitt's "Global Paradox": as the global economy becomes more and more important relative to the national economy, smaller units – specifically the individual – do not become dwarfed at all but rather gain in status and significance.[11]

And the world of Antiquity and the Middle Ages was far more globalized than we think. Even Harrison admits that Islam a 'millennium ago [was] a leader of human progress,' without wondering what *bankrolled* this. The taxes levied on trade in spices, silk, precious stones, gold, silver, textiles, and other goods traveling westward from the Far East. With Christopher Columbus and Vasco de Gama, the Muslims lost their central

position and had to contend with a Europe that had the added bonus of the New World with all its raw materials. But, critically, the people who controlled the entry of this trade by sea to Europe, the Mediterranean – the Italian trading states – also lost their pivotal position and went into the same downward spiral.

Italy *used* to be at the hub of European civilization, and the absence of the 'Protestant' work ethic among these Catholics did not prevent them from funding the Renaissance, thanks to commerce.* One person who saw it all coming was Machiavelli, penning his *The Prince* to 'Prince' Lorenzo de Medici in a desperate attempt to get him to marshal 'Italy's' remaining strength and unite it into a single country, as was taking place in Spain and France. His pleas fell on deaf ears because Prince Lorenzo would have none of it. The whole outlandish notion of 'Italy' and Italian nationhood was well nigh *unimaginable* to someone of his disposition, as was true of practically everybody in Italy at the time. Why else would the great Italian nationalist Massimo Taparelli d'Azeglio say, just *after* the Italian republic was established: "We have created Italy. Now all we need to do is to create Italians"?[12]

Accumulated States

Something else the Muslims had going for them at the societal level was a pronounced *lack* of feudalism, a tremendous brake on any kind of progress. If a handful of people own everything, the land and the people on the land, then there is no incentive to improve agricultural productivity and maximize sales. This is an oligopolistic market in which rivalry was resolved through the first-ever cartel system in history – fixing prices and wages, further cemented through *patronage* (noble marriages) – and without an impartial, independent state to check their monopolistic excess, since the feudal barons *were* the state.

The competitive drive characteristic of capitalism – atomistic competition – is absent. In addition, the monopoly on education, even literacy, by the aristocratic and clerical classes creates an anti-work culture among the educated, which works further against the modernization (mechanization) of agriculture and technology and even science. Contrary to Marx's technological view of the developmental stages of human history, feudalism is a product, first and foremost, of *war*.

After William Duke of Normandy conquered England in 1066, he had a real estate census compiled, *The Doomsday Book*, to divide the land between his generals. Apart from greed, the point was to control the land

and, with that, the Anglo-Saxon masses, to keep them under control through their dependency on the landlord to sell their produce and prevent them from moving through serfdom. (Russia only began to industrialize after serfdom was abolished in 1861). These generals later became the nobles, the landed aristocracy. Much the same process took place on the European continent following Charlemagne's failure to resurrect Rome's glories through his Holy Roman Empire, which was not Holy, Roman, or even an Empire.

This trajectory of accumulated social formations never took place in Muslim history because the second caliph, Umar, had the foresight to *not* divide the spoils of Iraq, following its liberation from the Sassanid Empire, among his troops. Instead, he decreed that the conquered lands were *waqf*, held in trust for charitable purposes, and thus could not be bought or sold. Terrified of the consequences, he spent most of his reign trying to reign in his provincial rulers, using Iraq as a model for everything that would follow, even mandating the continued property rights of the previous (non-Muslim, non-Arab) landowners.

What resulted from this was a 'competitive' economic system with none of the stagnation imposed on society by feudalism. There was complete freedom of migration (no serfdom) with collective ownership of land by clans, and massive avenues for non-agricultural wealth thanks to policed trade routes within the vast reaches of the Muslim 'empire.' (Can we even use that term if the conquerors stop themselves from cashing in on their conquests and controlling the land and population?) This is the exact opposite of the situation today that Harrison so bemoans.

The catch – and there always is one – is that feudalism, despite its many socioeconomic ills, gave birth (in the long-run) to parliamentary democracy, originating as it did in the Magna Carta. The King of England was almost a figurehead who could only go to war if the nobles agreed to drag out their knights to fight with him, and cajole them to fund it all by the taxes they collected from the peasantry. Gunpowder changed a great deal of this, knocking down the nobles' fortifications and picking off their knights at a great distance, but by then the international market had come into being thanks to the voyages of discovery and colonization. Nobles fought back against the centralizing tendencies of the gunpowder revolution by becoming 'capitalists,' investing their money abroad in commerce, agriculture, and industry. Democracy was saved and capitalism was born. But geography was a major factor here, as well.

Tyrannical monarchs riding high on their theologically ordained divine rights could always confiscate the property of any would-be aspiring capi-

talist, and many did. But in that case, the average European entrepreneur could move shop to a neighboring European state that encouraged capital. Europe, after all, was divided into many, many states of varying sizes and kinds – republics, city-states, principalities, nation-states, and the occasional empire or two. The accidents of history had denied the Muslim world that advantage, for it consisted of vast empires at precisely the same time that the gunpowder revolution enabled the sultans to centralize authority around themselves.

It is not a coincidence that landlordism emerged in the Muslim world just at the time of the Seljuk Turks, and after them the Mamluks and Ottomans. As the Turks were busy conquering already Muslim lands, predominately Arab and Persian, they chanced on the feudal solution to control their subjects, who were their former masters. Things got worse with gunpowder and even worse than that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with the emergence of the international marketplace. With a feudal system in place for political, imperial objectives, it would not do to open up new centers and sources of wealth to compete with the foreign-appointed gentry. So instead of mechanizing agricultural production and moving into manufacturing, the Ottomans imported manufactures in exchange for primary goods that were supplied by exploiting the peasants even more.

This is *dependencia*, but of a self-imposed, self-inflicted kind, not one where the foreign imperial powers create a lumpen-bourgeoisie out of Third World capitalist riffraff or export their own capitalists there to set up *comprador* states. This pattern, moreover, has absolutely nothing to do with religion because it took place everywhere outside of the European sphere. Long before petro-dollars and the Dutch disease, Chinese emperors and their mandarins were busy strangling the life out of the merchant class, specifically to prevent rival centers of wealth and power from emerging.

With the global market, this social order was frozen in place. The state and its attendant feudal elites monopolized exchanges with the outside world. Even *within* the European sphere, this pattern replicated itself in southern and eastern Europe. In Spain's wars with France, the French eventually won because they could raise more money from taxes levied on industrialists than the Spanish emperor could steal from the gold and silver of South America. Spain had to make up the difference by borrowing money from European banks, falling into a debt spiral, exactly the same fate suffered by the Ottomans and Egypt under the ancestors of Muhammad Ali.

As for religion and culture, they were *re*fashioned to bolster the *new* order. Just as states outside of northwestern Europe were becoming increas-

ingly centralized under the impact of gunpowder and dependency on the world market, so were religious institutions in the service of the state. Ivan the Terrible pulverized the Orthodox churches in Russia and bribed off the remaining priests with the gold earned from conquest and trade with the West.

In China, officialdom began the religious codification of Confucianism, something Confucius himself steadfastly opposed – hence the contradictory debate about Confucian values and East Asian economic success. In the case of Islam, it was specifically in this period that 'legal scholars' and the problems associated with clerical interpretation really begin to emerge in both Sunni and Shi`i circles. One Arab-Persian reaction to this Turkish intrusion was the development of *madrassas*, jurisprudential schools of thought and actual colleges representing these judicial groups. (Even the cherished Shi`i *hawza* system began in the Seljuk era).

This was a defensive move, since the Seljuks' were perceived as religiously ignorant, impious nomads who had recently entered Islam and were still under the influence of their former pagan ways. It was during this era that the semi-official "uniform" of the shaykh/imam came into being, a badge of identity against both the ignorant rulers ***and*** the masses. And so state authorities fought back by buying off many of these self-same legal scholars[13] as well as through Sufism. To give another not-very-amusing anecdote, I was watching television (in Egypt) once during some nationalist event and found a singer saying that being patriotic means "not looking up because it makes you tired."

This is a famous Egyptian saying: he who looks up (has ambitions for betterment) becomes tired. (On another occasion I heard the self-same expression used in a religious song.) In other words, Sufi asceticism, otherworldliness, and "acceptance of fate," not to mention its goal of annihilating the self and *individualism* (into insignificant drops of water in the sea), was latched onto by the powers that be.

Revolutionary intellectuals like Ali Shariati have catalogued how the Seljuks, Mongols, and Pahlavis used Sufism to prop up their feudalism. He also pointed out a side-effect of Sufism, namely, "pessimism concerning human history, *progress*."[14] So, what was true of theology was also true of the spatial-temporal dimension of progress, and for good "political economy" reasons. And the rest, developmentally speaking, is history.

* Special thanks are due to John Swanson on the parallels between Italian and Islamic history.

Endnotes

1. Lawrence E. Harrison, "The Culture Club: Exploring the Central Liberal Truth," *The National Interest*, no. 83 (spring 2006), 95.
2. Jeffrey Robinson, *Yamani: The Inside Story* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 139.
3. Harrison, "The Culture Club," 91.
4. Robinson, *Yamani*, 272.
5. Harrison, "The Culture Club," 95-96.
6. See Alan Richards and John Waterbury, *A Political Economy of the Middle East*, 2d ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 14-18.
7. See Hazem Beblawi and Giancomo Luciani, eds., *The Rentier State* (New York: Croom Helm, 1987).
8. Greg Muttitt, "The Price of Democracy," *Oilwatch Resistance Bulletin*, no. 63 (Sept. 2006). Online at www.carbonweb.org/showitem.asp?article=209&parent=39#backto4.
9. This is actually a completely un-Islamic position. A Muslim once asked the Prophet (PBUH) if taking medicine could fight the fate of God. The Prophet responded that the medicine was also part of the fate of God.
10. "Census, Map, Museum," in Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991). Online at www.haussite.net/haus.0/SCRIPT/txt2001/01/a_censu.HTML, 5.
11. See "Global Paradox by John Naisbitt: A Book Review by Scott London." Online at www.scottlondon.com/reviews/naisbitt.html.
12. Quoted in Shashi Tharoor, "E Pluribus, India: Is Indian Modernity Working?" *Foreign Affairs* (Jan./Feb. 1998). Available online at www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/53614/shashi-tharoor/e-pluribus-india-is-indian-modernity-working, 1.
13. See Roy P. Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985), 89-91.
14. Ali Shariati, *Marxism and Other Western Fallacies: An Islamic Critique*, trans. R. Campbell (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1980), 38.