

Cultural Encounter as
'Emergence': Rethinking
US-Arab Relations



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CULTURAL ENCOUNTER AS 'EMERGENCE': RETHINKING US-ARAB RELATIONS

This article uses the concept of 'emergence' to reconceptualise encounters between the United States and Arab societies in the twentieth century. It situates that work within the history of Middle East studies by explaining the different kinds of narratives that scholars have produced about the region, from orientalists such as H. A. R. Gibb and Bernard Lewis to modernisation theorists including Daniel Lerner and Manfred Halpern. While Lewis used 'emergence' to refer to a universal process of westernisation, this article associates the term with historical contingency and anti-determinism. It applies that understanding of emergence, first in a discussion of recent scholarship about colonial encounters in the Middle East and then in a description of the author's own research on US foreign policy during the Cold War. The article concludes that emergence, in its anti-determinist sense, is a valuable concept for understanding cultural encounters. Historians' contingent interpretation of past encounters challenges the notion that today's conflicts are culturally predetermined.



From my colleagues among the 2014 Michaelmas term IAS fellows, I learned about the many applications of 'emergence' as a concept for analysing complex change in which newly-observed phenomena exhibit different properties from their constituent parts. While this concept has proven useful in the natural sciences, its value to those of us who study modern history, and more specifically relations between the United States and the Arab world, is perhaps less clear. Yet during my time as an IAS fellow, I came to employ 'emergence' as an approach for re-conceptualising the US-Arab encounters addressed in my scholarly research and for situating that work within the history of Middle East studies. My fellowship coincided with the completion of a long-term book project about modernisation in US-Arab relations during the cold-war era. The context for this work has been dispiriting in the extreme, timed as it was with the disastrous consequences of the 2003 Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, the disappointments of the 'Arab Spring', the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State. Regional conflict is typically discussed in terms of monolithic cultural categories and attributed to the characteristics supposedly inherent to those groups. Such categories include Arabs and Israelis, and Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, but the 'clash of civilisations' between Islam and the West is assumed to be the most essential, irreducible conflict of all. As will be seen, emergence is most useful for the way it can be used to represent an emphasis on contingency in encounters between different cultures. Restoring contingency to accounts of past encounters calls into question the presumption that today's conflicts are culturally predetermined.

This article uses 'emergence' to situate my research on US-Arab relations within the Middle East studies literature and to explain its original contributions. These objectives can best be achieved by beginning with a classic book in the field of Middle Eastern history, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, first published in 1961 by Bernard Lewis. I begin with Lewis's concept of emergence, and then consider the same concept in a very different sense. Emergence offers a way of exploring the alternative kinds of narratives that historians of the Middle East have recently developed to understand historical change. As I stressed to interdisciplinary audiences while at the IAS, the interpretive function of narrative is an essential part of the historian's contribution

to understanding. He or she does not merely recover facts. As the US historian Thomas Bender explains, the plot of a historical account 'becomes itself an interpretation of society and the way it works', by presenting an 'image of society' to the reader which it 'crystallizes in narrative form' (Bender, 1986, p. 122). In describing a cross-cultural encounter, the narrative must also demonstrate the reciprocal influence of each culture upon the other, while taking into account the disparities in power that characterised colonial or neo-colonial relationships.

Lewis is well known as one of the leading British orientalist of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, he moved from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London to Princeton. He was Edward Said's principal antagonist and debating opponent during the intellectual battles over Said's work *Orientalism* during the 1980s. Later, Lewis advised Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon on Middle Eastern history in the run-up to the 2003 occupation of Iraq. For my purposes, Lewis is important for the way in which he understood emergence and used that concept to describe the process of modernisation in a non-Western Islamic society. His concept of emergence was quite different from, even diametrically opposed to, the definitions of emergence that I encountered in dialogues with other IAS fellows. For Lewis, the emergence of modern Turkey occurred as part of a linear, rational and largely predictable process over more than a century, by which the features of traditional Islamic society in the Ottoman Empire were transformed into those of a modern and westernised Turkish nation-state.

This process was predictable because in the intellectual context of Lewis's day, the evolution of traditional into modern societies was thought to be universal. The characteristics of modern society – secularism, nationalism, industrialisation, statehood – were the culmination of a process of westernisation that was occurring in many other parts of the world in the contexts of decolonisation and the Cold War. Modern Turkey would inevitably come to resemble societies that had previously experienced modernisation. And so it fell to Lewis to explain the emergence of those features in the history of attempts to reform the Ottoman Empire and its transformation into republican Turkey over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He described this evolution as a natural and organic process. Part I of his book, the section that contained the historical narrative, he entitled 'The Stages of Emergence'.

Another aspect of Lewis's contribution that is relevant to a discussion of emergence is the interdisciplinary context of his research. Probably his most important colleague, the critic who proofed the early drafts of *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, was the German political scientist Dankwart Rustow, who studied the career of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish republic. With the rise of post-war area studies, historians, economists and other social scientists collaborated in examining what was assumed to be a multidimensional process of change that was universal but which unfolded in particular regional settings. Lewis (and H. A. R. Gibb, the Oxford don who emigrated to Harvard) presided over the birth of post-war Middle East studies in the English-speaking world. Interdisciplinary area studies took the place of an older, orientalist approach to understanding the region's societies and cultures.

The set of assumptions on which Lewis and other scholars of modernisation based their work came under sustained attack by the 1970s. While modernisation theory and area studies had been interdisciplinary, criticisms of these approaches have primarily been historical. I have already mentioned Said, whose work *Orientalism* situated Lewis in the long history of European representations of the Middle East as the 'Other', images that Said argued served to justify colonialism. According to Said, Europeans had converted disparaging 'textual and contemplative' representations of Middle Eastern societies into the 'administrative, economic, and even military' control of them (Said, 1978, p. 210). Said criticised Middle East studies as a repackaging of the old literary and artistic tradition of orientalism – that is, representations of

the Middle East as Europe's 'Other' – but in a new idiom, expressed in the jargon of American social science. For their part, Middle East historians used sources from the newly-opened Ottoman archives to show that modernisation in Turkey was not as neatly linear a process as Lewis had assumed. To be fair, Lewis had been among the first to research in these archives, and so helped to open the door to historical criticism of his own work.

For me, the most relevant criticisms are recent arguments that describe modernisation and development as historical artefacts of the twentieth century. The Swiss scholar Gilbert Rist, for example, has rejected the basic distinction between traditional and modern societies. Rist argues that faith in progress constitutes its own tradition in Western civilisation, particularly since the Enlightenment. He regards twentieth-century ideas about modernisation as evolving out of European colonialism through the League of Nations mandate system, the United Nations development agencies and the economic assistance programmes of the United States and the Soviet Union. Rist is particularly critical of modernisation theorists' historical outlook, which he argues '*replaced history with a philosophy of history*' (Rist, 2002, p. 102). Scholars of US cold-war diplomacy have similarly criticised modernisation theorists for associating American foreign policy with progressive historical change in the 'third world'. Historians such as Michael Latham (2000) and Nils Gilman (2003) describe modernisation theory as the overseas edition of American liberalism. But they criticise this version of liberalism for relying on violent campaigns of counter-insurgency and support for authoritarian clients in the Middle East, Vietnam, Latin America and elsewhere to enforce a world order favourable to the US. The idea of modernisation associated with US policies postponed democracy to the end of a process that valued most of all the establishment of anti-communist security and market economies open to American investment.

These historical criticisms are useful, as far as they go. But, as with Lewis, their account of modernisation remains a story exclusively about the West. Said describes orientalism as a closed, Western discourse. Critics of development such as Rist, Latham and Gilman see modernisation as the product either of the Enlightenment in general or of American liberalism in particular. For Lewis, as for his critics, modernisation was something that originated in the West, whether it was transferred to or inflicted upon other societies.

This leads me back to emergence, which offers another way of thinking about the US encounter with Arab societies historically. A better historical understanding is urgently needed, I think, to make sense of the current moment in that encounter. What if we thought about modernity and ideas about social change as emergent phenomena? In other words, what if modernity was not just a feature of the West but was the contingent product of historical encounters between societies in specific contexts? As Timothy Mitchell writes of an earlier period, modernity 'had its origins in reticulations of exchange and production encircling the world' and so 'was a creation not of the West but of an interaction between West and non-West' (quoted in Ze'evi, 2004, p. 87). What if the outcome of those encounters could not simply be extrapolated from the characteristics of closed civilisational units called 'the West' and 'Islam'? This would be a very different kind of emergence from the determinist account of the modernisation process offered by Lewis and his contemporaries.

We already have examples of studies in Middle East history that reject the idea of modernisation as a teleological process or of modernity as an endpoint. They may not use the term emergence, but these studies portray encounters between European and Middle Eastern peoples as highly contingent. They reject the idea that historical outcomes can be predicted on the basis of characteristics that are supposedly inherent to the societies involved. By studying cross-cultural encounters using sources in European and Middle Eastern languages, they show how different

actors shared historical contexts and how both Europeans and Middle Easterners were changed as a result of those encounters. In these instances, cultural encounters produced new ideas and concepts of modernity that neither society could have produced in isolation.

Let me briefly cite three examples of this sort of contingent historical narrative. Lisa Pollard's book *Nurturing the Nation* (2005) explains how British justifications for colonial rule and Egyptian demands for independence each cited the role of women in Egyptian society. While the British pointed to the seclusion of women as confirming Egyptians' incapacity for self-rule, Egyptian reformers cultivated a nationalism that valued well-ordered households as the hallmark of modernity. In other words, the battle between those who justified and those who opposed British colonial rule in Egypt was fought partly on the terrain of women's rights. The Egyptian nationalist movement, which included women such as feminist Huda Sha'rawi, forced Britain to concede a limited independence in the 1920s, but the nature of Egyptian nationalism left women disenfranchised and relegated to the private sphere when independence finally came. As a consequence of the encounter between British colonialism and Egyptian anti-colonialism, the nationalist modernity that emerged in Egypt was highly gendered.

Ussama Makdisi's important book *Artillery of Heaven* (2008) features Arab Christians in nineteenth-century Lebanon who drew simultaneously from the influences of Ottoman imperial reforms and from the ideas of American Protestant missionaries. One such Arab Christian, Butrus al-Bustani, became one of the most significant figures in Arabic letters at the intersection of these two influences. On the one hand, he borrowed from American Protestants the right of personal autonomy and individual prerogative to interpret scripture; on the other, he took seriously Ottoman imperial reforms of the *Tanzimat* era that promised equality before the law regardless of religious sect. From these two influences, Bustani synthesised a commitment to individual intellectual freedom. But while Ottoman authorities resisted the idea that individuals possessed rights apart from their religious communities, American missionaries refused to accept Bustani as their equal. Neither of the influences on Bustani could, by itself, have produced his definition of modernity. Bustani's modern outlook emerged instead from a cross-cultural encounter.

A third example is Beth Baron's (2014) study of a largely forgotten episode in Egypt during the 1930s, when the Muslim Brotherhood alleged that a Muslim girl was abused in an orphanage run by British missionaries who allegedly tried to convert her. This incident became a national political scandal that led to restrictions being placed on missionary activity and helped to make the Brotherhood, only recently established in 1928, into one of the most influential forces in Egyptian society. Baron argues that Christian missionaries and the Brotherhood used similar strategies in competing for converts in the diverse and highly transient communities of the Suez Canal zone. As each side struggled to attract adherents, they turned to offering social services and mobilising political support as ways of increasing their influence. They attempted to encroach on one another's turf and imitated each other's organisational tactics. The modern style of religion shared by missionaries and the Brotherhood, an approach to building faith communities as mass political movements, emerged out of this competition, which transcended any easy distinction between 'Islam' and 'the West'.

These examples are studies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and focus especially on missionary encounters. It remains to be seen whether 'emergence' in this sense can be applied to understanding modernity in the cold-war period that is my focus, when superpower competition, the Arab-Israeli conflict and oil interests drew sharper lines across the Middle East. It is clear from my research, however, that US ideas about the Arab world in this period were not fully formed in the policy-making bureaucracy, American universities or think-tanks, but were made and remade at points of contact with Middle Eastern societies.

The book manuscript that I completed at the IAS portrays modernity in US foreign policy as the contingent result of encounters between societies. In this sense, it too might be described as an emergent phenomenon.

My research offers several examples similar to those cited earlier, but shaped by the post-war contexts of anti-colonial revolution, the superpower rivalry and a universal concern with pursuing economic development. One example has to do with the ways that American officials and intellectuals appropriated the legacy of reforms previously implemented by the Ottoman Empire, which prior to the Second World War had encompassed territories in Anatolia, Rumelia and the Arab Middle East. As previously described, Lewis thought of Ottoman-Turkish history in terms of the modernisation of a non-Western society. One of the architects of US diplomacy in the Middle East after 1945, an oil geologist and assistant secretary of state named George McGhee, went further. McGhee defended US policies, including regional defence and oil development, as the fulfilment of earlier, failed Ottoman reforms. He justified a strategic partnership with Turkey on the grounds of helping to complete the modernisation process, not only in the Turkish republic but also among the empire's oil-producing Arab successor states. McGhee took US diplomats on tours of imperial sites in Istanbul to familiarise them with the Ottoman legacy. He boasted that he 'practically preempted the Turkish market for historical books' while ambassador in Ankara and purchased an Ottoman-era villa on Turkey's Mediterranean coast. He donated both his Ottoman library and villa to Georgetown University (McGhee Library, 1984, p. vii). In addition, the social scientists who authored cold-war era modernisation theory, scholars such as Daniel Lerner and Manfred Halpern, cited Atatürk and the Ottoman-Turkish case to emphasise the ability of authoritarian elites to transform traditional societies (Lerner, 1958; Halpern, 1963). Lerner, Halpern and many other social scientists derived their understanding of the Ottoman Empire from the work of H. A. R. Gibb, especially his two-part book co-authored with Harold Bowen called *Islamic Society and the West* (Gibb and Bowen, 1950, 1957). Gibb's scholarship, in turn, was based on accounts written by Ottoman reformers from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Via Gibb, cold-war era social scientists therefore inherited Ottoman reform discourses, which were steeped in assumptions about imperial decline and the backwardness of the empire's Arabic-speaking periphery. In other words, I argue that American cold warriors transposed their economic agenda onto inherited accounts of regional underdevelopment. They repurposed the ideas of Ottoman reform from a century earlier. The ideas found in the writings of imperial reformers dovetailed with US policy interests. Regional decline created a need for US-administered modernisation, and Arab backwardness argued in favour of partnering with Turkey, the policy advocated by McGhee. Atatürk, who died in 1938, served US cold warriors as the archetypal authoritarian moderniser whose historical example could be replicated in Arab and other 'third world' countries. US ideas about modernising the Middle East therefore came not just from domestic liberalism or from cold-war strategy. Those ideas also emerged from encounters with the Ottoman past.

Another example concerns Iraq. Despite the 2003 invasion and occupation, there are few archivally-based studies of the history of US-Iraqi relations. One highly contentious question, given subsequent events, involves the degree of US support for the violent coup in which the Ba'th party first came to power in February 1963. Some analysts have argued that the US supported the Ba'th as an anti-communist modernising force against the country's well-organised communist party. Following the coup, the Ba'thist revolutionary guards, working from lists, arrested and killed thousands of Iraqi communists. My contribution examines the relationship between American cold-war policy and the longer-term conflict among Iraqis over how to define their state. This conflict was waged largely along ethno-sectarian lines. Sunni Muslim Arabs (who comprised much of the Ba'thist leadership) tended to define Iraq as an Arab state and looked favourably on joining a pan-Arab union; Shi'a Muslims, as well as ethnic

and religious minorities such as Kurds, Turkmen, Yazidis and others sought to secure equality within an autonomous Iraqi nation-state. Iraq's communist party was the leading defender of Iraqi autonomy during the late 1950s and early 1960s. The US grew more concerned about communist influence on the military regime in Baghdad as elements of the army sought to defend Iraqi sovereignty and resist pressures to join the United Arab Republic, led by the Egyptian president Gamal 'Abd al-Nasser. In particular, the Iraqi military court, which ran televised show trials, began promoting the socialist vision of a modern, multi-ethnic Iraq and celebrating joint Arab-Kurdish participation in the communist-front, international peace movement. The US embassy in Baghdad followed the court's proceedings and communist-front activities closely between 1958 and 1962. It compiled lists of Iraqis who participated in the international peace movement from reading signed petitions published in the leftist press. Following the coup, these lists were apparently shared with the Ba'thists. My point is that US anti-communism was not simply applied to the Iraqi case. It emerged from the US encounter with Iraq, the conflict over Iraqi nationhood and the fundamental problem – one that remains unresolved – of defining Iraq as a state.

My final example is a biographical study of America's leading twentieth-century Arabist, William R. Polk. Polk taught at Harvard and later at the University of Chicago and served in the State Department during the Kennedy era. He has been associated with US modernisation theory, and indeed developed a concept that he called the 'New Men' to describe the social changes brought about in Egypt by Nasser's military regime. But from early in his education studying in Baghdad, Cairo and Beirut, Polk had been immersed in Arab debates about modernisation. He helped the Rockefeller Foundation to organise conferences of Arab intellectuals and sat in on their Arabic-language discussions. He interacted with leading Arab historians, such as the Egyptian scholar Muhammad Shafiq Ghurbal, a student of Arnold Toynbee. Ghurbal emphasised the role of military elites in promoting social change during the Ottoman period. While at the State Department, Polk maintained close relationships with Egyptian officials and with Nasser, inserting himself into debates among Egyptians about the modernisation of their country. He sided with regime insiders who conceived of Egypt's revolution in terms other than class struggle. Like them, he saw modernisation in terms of elite management of technical problems. In particular, both Polk and Nasser defined the crisis of modernisation in Egypt as a race between the rate of economic growth and that of the population. Polk shared Nasser's view of Yemen as having the most backward Arab society, whose development could be accelerated by Egyptian military intervention. Like Nasser, Polk also regarded the Muslim Brotherhood as the vestige of a traditional past and rural mentality that was destined to fade away. As a diplomat and academic, he collaborated with Nasser on plans to reclaim millions of acres of Egypt's western desert through nuclear desalination of sea water. In the years prior to the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War, Polk believed that a commitment to arms control and pursuit of modernisation could moderate the Arab-Israeli conflict. His 'New Men' idea was not simply the product of US modernisation theory applied to revolutionary Egypt. It also emerged over his career from interactions with fellow scholars and officials in the US, as well as with politicians and intellectuals in the Arab world.

My research and that of other historians emphasises the potential of cultural encounters to produce something new and unexpected. Whether we describe it as 'emergence' or 'contingency', recent accounts reject historical determinism. They raise questions about whether historical change can be reduced to the closed categories, such as 'Islam' and the 'West', 'tradition' and 'modernity' that we tend to fall back on in the face of historical complexity and that we have inherited from twentieth-century debates about modernisation and 'third-world' development. Emergence might well help us to explain the world we live in today, one that is both connected through technology and markets and divided by inequalities and ethno-religious conflict.

The stories we tell about the past matter because they tend to shape our actions in the present. Bender argued not only that historical narratives function as metaphors for how societies work but also that it was 'at this rather broad and almost metaphorical level that history enters the general culture – either as legitimation of the status quo or as a stimulus to social change' (Bender, 1986, p. 122). Emergence can demonstrate that cultural encounters occurred in specific contexts, which influenced their outcomes in unpredictable ways. Such encounters did not simply re-enact timeless cultural conflicts scripted by essential characteristics, nor did they proceed according to a universal development 'process'. Using emergence to think about cultural encounters ought to make us sceptical regarding our ability to predict, let alone control, the historical development of other societies through political and military interventions. That may be the best reason of all to embrace the concept of 'emergence'.



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