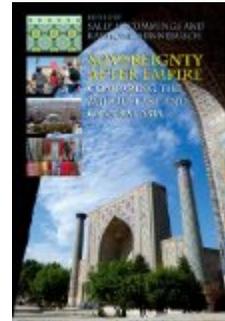


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sally N. Cummings, Raymond Hinnebusch, eds. *Sovereignty after Empire: Comparing the Middle East and Central Asia*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. xii + 396 pp. \$105.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7486-4304-2; \$37.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7486-6855-7.

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Commissioned by Seth Offenbach



*Sovereignty after Empire*, edited by Sally N. Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch, emerges from a related conference and subsequent workshops on how “the end of empire,” being one of the “main transformations in international politics in the twentieth century,” has affected the Middle East and Central Asia comparatively, with respective postcolonial sovereignty as an “independent variable” in the successor states explored (p. 1). Readers are informed that, whether after the First World War, Second World War, or Cold War, imperial and colonial “hierarchy gave way to anarchy” under a “Westphalian state system,” a concept “taken to mean freedom from penetration of policy processes by external actors” (pp. 1, 334). The two regions, referred to as MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and CA (Central Asia), which the editors contingently accept as geospatially authentic terms, are said to have had “a continuous civilizational area during their pre-modern history, united under Islamic empires in which nomadic tribalism and Turkic peoples played pivotal roles and Islam was the undisputed religious identity” (p. 4). Subsequently, “absolutist sovereignty gave [European] imperial powers leverage to colonize,” in the process establishing subservient elites, who, after achieving sovereignties of their own, operate mainly “neo-patrimonial regimes mixing bureaucratic structures with rent-lubricated clientelism” and seeking durable “stateness” in a global order increasingly defined by world cities, multinational postcolonial superstates like India and China, or the “informal empire” of the United States, wherein “nation states are under siege” (pp. 6, 333, 1). Three “axes” of discussion follow: theory of empire, comparative studies, and case studies.

For historians who are curious about the book’s

value, intradisciplinary considerations perforce come first. If the aforementioned species of scholar comes in two main varieties—theoretically minded lumpers and empirically insistent splitters—the book is most likely to interest the former. Yet it has major weaknesses that are likely to disappoint, at times exasperate, all professional historians, and its frequently overconfident but unsubstantiated theorizations could mislead students. Simply put, the editors are caught between unifying theorization and disparate historical actualities in the areas touched on. For example, they rhetorically presume that “we accept that sovereignty be willed and owned by the people” (p. 7) without closely analyzing the temporal provenance of such assumptions, how far they might be anachronistic or in some ways Western conceits in themselves, while omitting material/economic, related institutional, intellectual, class, cultural, dynastic, sociological, or anthropological factors peculiar to the regions themselves. Instead, political science abstractions must do, serving, at best, as a reverse stimulus of knowledge-based responses by readers.

Too many of the chapters simply acknowledge the impossibility of common thematic coherency, nor within the space allowed do they present much discussion of tricky actualities, moving on instead to expound on such typical concerns as “stateness deficits,” “legitimacy norms,” and occult invocation of “the Westphalian state system,” so perfunctorily as to reduce the latter notion to a presumptive cliché rather than to challenge its acceptance by political systems theorists, as events in the Middle East continually seem to do. Those moments and currents in Ottoman and subsequent Middle Eastern experience that are worked into the discourse are invariably

contestable on vital empirical, contextual, and current historiographic points. References to key aspects of the latter frequently seem little more than pseudo-erudite leg showing: commonly understood social, economic, and cultural particularities, and current exploratory trends are invariably given short shrift; imperialist mentalities, praxis, and deeds, up to and including those shaping current affairs, are almost wholly ignored, other than to reject the idea of a “sharp break” with the colonialist past (p. 2). The latter is a good idea particularly in opening onto a critical exploration of comparative nationalist, Islamic political, dynastic conservative, or other counter-modernist or antimodernist dialectics, struggling with undercurrent material shifts in society and economies, but this is not followed up.

So, the defining traits of post-Cold War capitalist globalization, and how they denote changes or continuities in world systems, and how they have been advanced, embraced, or otherwise negotiated—for example, in such critical milieux as Egypt from Gamal Abd’al-Nasser through Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak to the present; or in Arab socialist Iraq, Syria, the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen and/or Yemen Arab Republic; or Saudi Arabia; or the Arab emirates of the Persian Gulf—are conspicuous by their absence, as is Iran in its entirety, along with dissident sub-state or supra-state actors, including Palestinians and Shi’is, who have shaped the dynamics of regional politics so much. It is evidently sufficient, in a passing nod to Edward Said and his disciples, to accept that Britain and France “grossly violated regional identity” while the Ottoman empire “neither exploited its periphery nor privileged an imperial race” (pp. 15, 13). Both propositions, made by Dominic Lieven, are eminently engaging hypotheses but, typically for the book, remain largely unsubstantiated by supporting source-work, with the reader required to accept them on credence.

Perhaps it is unfair to evaluate a book in terms of what it omits rather than includes but the latter aspect is cumulatively egregious. Zionism and the goals, character, and policies of the State of Israel demand inclusion, particularly on how far they are either themselves settler-colonialist or post-colonially liberated. Palestinian experience per se is conspicuously absent yet is crucial to regionally related debates on sovereignty and territoriality. The same could be said for Lebanon, particularly on sectarianism and sub-state political affinity as a regional factor, while the 2003 Iraq war seems to have been dispatched to an ill-lit corner of the salon, forgotten under very large but tasteful seat-covers. Middle Eastern inter-

state diplomacy, statecraft, and systemic and ideological competition are wholly overshadowed by tacit assumptions that Middle Eastern political relations function only in relation to past colonialism and current postcolonial forms of dependency under a Western international order. So many endogenous realities, noted already, slip by, along with references, useful to students, to the copious current literature concerned. Too much of essence to the region and its interactive place in the world is passed over: so what, one might ask, remains?

The book does contain some very good and interesting individual chapters. Fred Lawson traces economic continuities in late Ottoman Anatolia and the early Turkish Republic, contrasting them with contemporaneous disjunctures in Syria and Iraq. Mohira Suyarkulova explores the former Soviet republics of Central Asia as reluctant sovereigns, divorced by the European republics of the USSR, in ways confounding predictive Sovietological orthodoxies on the Muslim Central Asian challenge to the Soyuz. David Lewis goes further into how the latter reality stemmed from the USSR’s nativization of cadres in phases under Joseph Stalin and Leonid Brezhnev: a process hostile to so-called feudalism and bourgeois nationalism alike, but one that merely reproduced clannish affinities in new party-constructed form. These provided the basis for post-Soviet authoritarianism, especially under the poverty and uneven development bequeathed with indecent haste by Boris Yeltsin. Laura Adams shows how cultural representation, within politically permitted forms of expression and performance in Soviet Central Asia, whether in high European or local genres, served as crucible and transmitter of a transcendental Soviet culture which was explicitly anticolonial as well as antitraditional. Wojciech Ostrowski usefully analyzes economic rentierism in former Soviet Central Asia. Muriel Atkin examines particulars of Tajikistan’s evidently more marked colonial experience at the hands of the USSR, and the various institutional, developmental, and material deficits and potential for political violence this left behind.

Overall, the chapters mentioned above will serve as useful comparative primers on Soviet and Central Asia to historians of the Middle East. Once again there seem to be glaring omissions, albeit some strictly in Europe—Chechnya, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia. Also, Afghanistan’s experience of Marxist-Leninist rule, Soviet intervention, and the resulting “stateness” deficits that precipitated Western invasion could well have been touched on. Of course, these cases might undermine the editors’ determination to be upbeat, affirming that in for-

mer Soviet Central Asia “no minority has to date asked for a separate state and no ethnic group has adopted violent irredentist policies” (p. 343). With the comparably mysterious absence of Kurdistan from consideration, and having been compiled before the so-called 2011 Arab

Spring and current Syrian civil war, the latter insight seems a little blinkered, albeit in keeping with the volume’s topical and interpretative limitations, especially on the Middle East.

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