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Building Societies: America's Middle Eastern Projects

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Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt by Maha Abdelrahman. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2004. 228 pages.

Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo by Julia Elyachar. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005. 279 pages.

What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building by Noah Feldman. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004. 154 pages.

Reading "Legitimation Crisis" in Tehran: Iran and the Future of Liberalism by Danny Postel. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004.124 pages.

America in the Middle East

On July 4, 2006, members of the American community living and working in Cairo gathered to celebrate their country's independence day. U.S. Marine Corps members in Hawaiian shirts joined sunburned families in singing patriotic songs as Pizza Hut and Baskin-Robbins vendors sold their wares. Even in Cairo's oppressive heat and smog, a small chunk of America seemed to have been transplanted into the heart of the Middle East's greatest metropolis.

Such an illusion was hardly lost on the U.S. ambassador to Egypt. Francis Ricciardone headed what had been the United States' largest foreign embassy until the Baghdad branch recently became the largest foreign embassy of any nation anywhere in the world. In between Ha-

waiian music and "The Star-Spangled Banner," Ricciardone addressed the crowd. He spoke of his morning meeting with then-U.S. attorney general Alberto Gonzales, who was in Cairo to meet with Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak. Gonzales had reiterated the importance of Egypt's relationship with the United States and thanked Mubarak for his partnership in building democracy in Egypt and across the Middle East. Ricciardone also thanked the members of the United States military who were stationed in Egypt for supporting their fellow soldiers a few hundred miles to the east in Iraq and for helping to promote the American democratic model whose anniversary was being celebrated that day.

America promotes its model of liberal democracy across the Middle East in far more serious ways than by throwing holiday parties in Cairo. In addition to grand political and military gestures, the United States spends billions of dollars each year promoting social and cultural programs that affect Middle Eastern societies and their inhabitants' lives.

In recent books, four diverse writers approach various facets of these efforts. As sociologist Maha Abdelrahman describes it, a key component of the American project in the Middle East is the promotion of *civil society,* most notably in Egypt. Her critical study explores various meanings of the term, particularly as it is defined by the nongovernmental organizations that work to promote it. By combining economic, political, and historical data with keen analysis, she shows both the tumultuous history and problematic effects of this phenomenon.

Whereas Abdelrahman prioritizes data in portraying the inner workings of the American project in Egypt, Danny Postel takes a broader view and writes in a more anecdotal, journalistic style in his book on leftist politics and Iran. He is primarily concerned with how American leftists should approach the issue of Iran and its relationship to American power. Partly because the American project has not been as influential in Iranian society as it has been in Egypt, Postel's account is more theoretical. This makes it more readable at times, but the points that he makes read primarily as initial steps in raising the sort of questions that the other studies grapple with more successfully.

Noah Feldman combines these two approaches in his ethical reflections on American attempts at nation-building in Iraq, in which he played an advisory role. Feldman is a legal scholar and a frequent contributor to the *New York Times Magazine,* and he does a fine job of blending the analytical approach of this first persona with the rhetorical style of the second. By focusing on Iraq, the most ambitious American

project in the Middle East, he takes on what is in some ways the most challenging task that faces these four authors. He succeeds in offering reasoned critiques and original ways of thinking about American power in the Middle East.

Equally original is Julia Elyachar's contribution to these questions of America's role in the Middle East and ways to analyze it. Like Abdelrahman, Elyachar focuses on NGOs in Egypt. An anthropologist, she studies the social and economic effects of NGOs that fund craftsmen in Cairo. Her ethnographic account is the most local in scope and does the best job of giving the reader a sense of the Middle East itself. Abdelrahman focuses on the Middle East but is more concerned with the data it provides, whereas Postel and Feldman approach the Middle East only as it relates to their primary discussion of America. Although Elyachar focuses on Cairo and a particular community of craftsmen, her critical discussion of the economics and social order that lie behind what she observes is first-rate and a valuable contribution to the questions with which all of these books are concerned.

Read together, these four books raise a series of important insights, difficult questions, and sharp critiques. Although they raise more questions than they answer, the questions that they ask—regarding how these different efforts are related, how the ideals that they promote are defined, who defines these ideals, how such programs are carried out, and how they affect peoples' lives in Cairo, Baghdad, Tehran, and beyond—are thought provoking and certainly need to be asked more frequently.

Civil Society

Egypt has received an average of $1 billion per year from the United States since the 1970s, according to Abdelrahman. In her 2004 study, *Civil Society Exposed: The Politics of NGOs in Egypt,* she looks at the various agencies—such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)—that are responsible for administering this aid. USAID's operating goal is to aid Egypt according to American principles, including privatization and decentralization, that have dominated Egypt's economy over the past several decades and left it largely in shambles today. Such principles have guided U.S. aid to Egypt out of a belief that, as Abdelrahman puts it, "all that is needed to empower the poor is help to organize themselves, which would automatically assist

them in mobilizing sufficient political resources at the local level to change the relevant power structures" (67).

This oversimplified belief and these flawed economic principles have been primarily couched in terms of civil society, the subject of Abdelrahman's book. Part of what makes civil society so popular an idea when it comes to American efforts in the Middle East is the multitude of meanings that the term can have. The "elusiveness" of the civil society discourse, Abdelrahman suggests, is in part "responsible for its growing popularity. The less precise the concepts are, the easier it is to employ them to serve particular ideological purposes" (29).

Abdelrahman prefers Marx's definition of *civil society*[1] as not "merely an aggregate of individuals; it is the sum of the relations in which these individuals stand to one another" (21). To this she adds Antonio Gramsci's view that "civil society reflects the sum of ideological-cultural relations, including the spiritual and intellectual spheres, which for the sake of avoiding economic and cultural reductionism are differentiated from the economy and the State" (22). In focusing on the Iranian context, Danny Postel offers as a definition the Iranian political theorist Ramin Jahanbegloo's view that civil society is "a space which stands in necessary opposition to the state [and] is a check on the arbitrary and authoritarian tendencies in Iranian society" (78). Noah Feldman calls *civil society* a "notoriously slippery" term but suggests that "its existence depends upon a social agreement, reached through a combination of belief in the power of words and mutually reinforcing self-interest, which reduces the need for violence to resolve the problems of complex transitions" (73).

Promoting civil society in Egypt is worth billions of dollars to the United States for several reasons. Civil society is believed to be the stepping stone to liberal democracy. If true, this would make it a relatively inexpensive way to help Egypt become democratic. By funding programs that promote civil society in Egypt, the United States hopes to promote democracy indirectly. The thinking is that as more Egyptians have access to this civil space, more will participate in society and thus bring Egypt closer to the American democratic model. A more democratic Egypt will then serve as an example to other Arab societies.

In the festive rhetoric that was displayed at the 2006 Fourth of July party, the Egyptian regime is a partner in promoting democracy. According to this assumption, U.S. financial aid to Egypt helps stabilize its supposed partner in democracy, the Egyptian state. But at the same time, in promoting civil society projects as a way of empowering Egyp-

tians, USAID and other groups assume that this sort of empowerment is largely lacking in Egypt. Since civil society by definition is a sphere apart from the state, U.S. aid to Egypt is also meant to counteract a state that limits the empowerment of its people. The same U.S. dollars thus support the state (because it is an ally in democracy) and promote civil society projects (because they will lead to the democratic empowerment that is currently blocked by the state).

Abdelrahman is skeptical about such assumptions. In her view, they fail to account for the existing power structures in Egyptian society, for Middle Eastern politics, and for the region's relationship with Western powers, particularly America. She argues that American notions of civil society and its relationship to democracy cannot simply be applied to the role or nature of civil society in other countries. Moreover, even if there are similarities between the nature of civil society in America and Egypt, they do not necessarily mean that an American style democracy can be built in Egypt.

Critiquing the Project?

As the books under discussion make clear, the problematic logic behind American projects in the Middle East is not limited to civil society reforms in Egypt. Whether these four authors are examining civil society promotion in Cairo, nation-building in Baghdad, or threats of war in Tehran, each looks critically at these projects and their challenges. At times, it may seem too easy to criticize projects that often seem to ransack the economies that they aim to reform, enhance the power of the authoritarian rulers that they intend to displace, and all but destroy the nations that they try to rebuild. Yet what if there existed even a small chance that American projects could make a positive difference? Given such a possibility, one hardly wants to risk being overly critical.

Danny Postel captures this intellectual juggling act particularly well in his *Reading "Legitimation Crisis" in Tehran: Iran and the Future of Liberalism.* "Let's face it," Postel writes: "It's just plain uncomfortable for leftists to say anything that sounds like it could also come out of the mouth of George Bush or Paul Wolfowitz" (23). Complicating the matter further for American critics are the complex politics of Middle Eastern countries themselves. Taking Iran as his example, Postel argues that Western leftists do not know enough about Iran and the struggle for democratic empowerment there. If they did, he suggests, they would be

in a better position to support Iranians who share their ideals. For Postel, part of the Western left's problem is its persistent focus on fighting U.S. imperialism. In Iran, Postel argues, it is often the right wing that is most fervently anti-imperialist. This "can run an interference pattern on the ideological compasses of many leftists" (25).

Postel makes these provocative arguments in a small book that is styled as a political pamphlet. He writes in a less formal, more provocative style that reflects his background in journalism and leftist politics. This makes his book highly readable, but at times his arguments are less substantial than one would hope, especially since his main points bring a valuable perspective to these issues. For example, rather than focus specifically on civil society, Postel offers a varied set of definitions for what *political empowerment* means in the Iranian context. Postel describes the struggle of Iranian liberal reformers in loose terms as one based on "democracy, feminism, pluralism, human rights, and freedom of expression" (26). "A triumphant Iranian liberalism," he argues, "would involve dismantling the entire apparatus of the reigning political order and constructing a dramatically different one" (37).

Such a definition shares commonalities with the promotion of civil society in Egypt as Abdelrahman describes it. However, there is a striking difference between Postel's almost unfettered optimism and Abdelrahman's more nuanced and critical approach. Perhaps this is simply a difference between political pamphlets and scholarly analyses. Perhaps, too, it has to do with the fact that Postel's definition is formed as more of an abstract goal, whereas in Egypt these goals have already been turned into action, with results that give their observers reason to respond more skeptically. Postel's list of ideals is hard to argue with in theory, but as the other three books show, it can be difficult, if not impossible, to impose these ideals in a foreign society. As the Egyptian case suggests, civil society is often promoted through economic aid that also shores up the very state whose excessive power it is designed to counter. Moreover, the Iraqi case suggests that dismantling the state to make possible the empowerment that it stifles may be the most direct approach to promoting democracy but also the most disastrous.

Iraq

In *What We Owe Iraq: War and the Ethics of Nation Building,* Noah Feldman tackles the ethical issues that have been raised by the most

prominent American project in the Middle East. Feldman, now a professor at Harvard Law School, served as a constitutional adviser to the Coalition Provisional Authority during the writing of the new Iraqi constitution. For someone who was once deeply enmeshed in the nation-building project in Iraq, Feldman is rather critical.

He portrays the nation-building project in Iraq as disastrous but nonetheless supports a narrower version of the idea. For Feldman, it is in America's interest to intervene in other nations (using military force if necessary) when those nations would otherwise pose a threat to the United States' security. A crucial aspect of Feldman's argument revolves around his belief that nation-building in Iraq or elsewhere need not be carried out in Iraq's or any other nation's (except the nation builder's) interest. "It should be sufficient," he argues "if our objectives *coincide* with the interests of other peoples or nations, and if we adopt appropriate means to achieve them. Our objectives themselves need not be motivated by anything other than our own needs" (21–22, italics in the original).

The logic behind U.S. aid to Egypt might seem less contradictory if it is looked at from Feldman's perspective. Rather than try to decide whether U.S. efforts in Egypt are chiefly aimed at supporting the Egyptian state or building civil society, Feldman would likely argue that the former is obviously the priority over the latter. Supporting the Egyptian state is in the United States' security interest, so it is a worthy goal by Feldman's standards. The civil society projects that this aid also funds are merely an instance of the way that U.S. interests are "coinciding" with the interests of Egyptian citizens. This beneficial side effect is convenient for diplomats to mention at holiday parties but should not necessarily be considered to be the United States' primary goal in Egypt.

Although Feldman defends the United States' legal and moral rights to nation-build in the interests of its own security, he is much more critical of the notion that imposing the American model on other societies is a worthy secondary goal of nation-building. In Feldman's view, there are no grounds for assuming that the American model is preferable to or can be successfully implanted in another society as part of a nation-building project. Arguing that "we do not really know how to build a nation any better than do its citizens," he urges the abandonment of "the paternalistic idea that we know how to produce a functioning, successful democracy better than do others" (70–71).

If the United States accepted Feldman's view that democracy can never be imposed on another society, it would have to reconsider the

civil society projects that it has designed around that goal, such as those in Egypt (which could potentially save it billions of dollars per year). In Egypt, however, the United States seems more concerned with stabilizing the state, democratic or not, than it is with promoting real democratic change, which could weaken the state itself. Feldman's approach renders nation-building projects suspect from the start and also lends a helpful air of skepticism to their less dramatic counterpart, civil society projects.

NGOs

Abdelrahman and Elyachar both do an excellent job of bringing such skepticism to their examinations of the Egyptian case. They agree that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) deserve special attention in any critique of American involvement in promoting new social and economic models in Egypt. Abdelrahman looks at the structure and operations of NGOs in Egypt, citing an official Egyptian government estimate that there were 15,000 registered NGOs operating in Egypt in 1996 and an unofficial estimate that places that figure at 28,000. Included in this figure are Islamic religious groups and Islamist political groups that presumably would not be invited to meetings with Alberto Gonzales.

Financially, the numbers are staggering. Elyachar cites a World Bank estimate that NGOs spent $10 billion to developing countries in 1998 and cites data that as of the early 1990s NGOs contributed more money toward projects in the developing world than did the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund combined. These donations are made in close cooperation with Western governments, which, according to Abdelrahman, "work hand-in-glove [with the NGOs] when it comes to formulating and executing policies regarding the amount of aid, its allocation and selection of target groups, as well as in jointly financing projects" (54).

This close relationship is not always a balanced one. In fact, "these NGOs almost always comply with the foreign policies of their national governments," according to Abdelrahman (54). This is confirmed when one considers the case of Egypt, where the government has been strongly encouraged to invest the country's financial resources in coordination with American interests in the country. In Abdelrahman's analysis, the United States' goals take far greater precedent in driving

Egypt's economic planning than do Egyptian interests. "It is clear," she writes, that the huge amount of aid that the United States channels to Egypt through a variety of NGOs "is dependent on Egypt's commitment to support U.S. policies and interests in the region" (104).

Because of these complex power dynamics, the NGO phenomenon is ripe for criticism. Abdelrahman focuses largely on the discourse that surrounds NGOs in Egypt, aiming to unravel some of the illusory ways in which civil society and NGOs are discussed and promoted. NGOs try to "alleviate the immediate suffering of the subordinate classes" (28), but from her critical point of view, this is a merely part of a larger goal of empowering these classes in the hopes that they will work for democratic change. By failing to address the root cause of these classes' suffering, though, NGOs are often "in danger of promoting class inequalities, contributing to reproducing the existing material hierarchies and helping to maintain the status quo" (28). This is as much a failing of the NGOs themselves as those who analyze them, according to Abdelrahman. She indicts other recent works on civil society for ignoring class and assuming that anyone would join such projects regardless of class concerns.

She does not directly address how she envisions her own critique might have an effect on the practical consequences of this debate, which is surprising because her work does an excellent job of critiquing the harmful effects that the limitations and misperceptions of civil society discourse have had on Egyptian society. Much of her critique's success derives from its focus on issues that have had and still have very real consequences in Egypt. Given this direct engagement, besides conclusions about how to reshape the scholarly discussion, can such a critique of NGOs and civil society projects in Egypt offer recommendations for how to reform these projects as well?

In *Markets of Dispossession: NGOs, Economic Development, and the State in Cairo,* Julia Elyachar makes a similar contribution to these debates through an ethnographic account of one Cairo neighborhood that has been affected by these issues. She combines a readable account of el-Hirafiyeen (literally, the town of the craftsmen) with a well-developed anthropological inquiry into markets and value. Her conclusions are generally similar to Abdelrahman's. They are a bit less forcefully argued but are presented in a local context, which makes for enjoyable reading.

Elyachar focuses on mapping the different actors that are working on reforming Egyptian society. She highlights the ways in which inter-

national organizations, NGOs, and the Egyptian state relate to one another. In her telling, one of the key players in this system has been USAID, which has been heavily involved in establishing NGOs that loan money to small craftsmen in the so-called informal economy and also in promoting economic policies that affect large-scale private companies.

Elyachar traces the ways that these neoliberal projects are run by NGOs in el-Hirafiyeen and their effects on its inhabitants and their social practices. In her view, the policies and reforms that the projects promote are not always in the best interests of the less well-off inhabitants of communities like el-Hirafiyeen and often run directly counter to the interests of the disempowered classes that they supposedly aim to empower. Borrowing from David Harvey's adaptation of Marx, Elyachar refers to an "accumulation by dispossession" that "strips individuals of their political identity and their psychic well-being as well" (30). In the Egyptian neighborhood that Elyachar studies, "the question of who captures the positive relational value produced among workshop masters in particular, and Egyptian popular classes in general, is a political issue with broad implications" (146). In her view, this aid project was supposedly carried out in civil society, free from state involvement, when in fact it involved people and organizations that were closely linked to the state.

Through international programs that are designed to promote financial and civil empowerment, craftsmen in Cairo are given loans and lessons about the market. In exchange, Elyachar argues, the state and its privileged classes are freed from their obligations to manage the market or provide for the poor. From an international perspective, this process is supposed to lead to the empowerment of the dispossessed and thus democracy in Egypt, but this development would likely run counter to the interests of those who benefit from the current structure. Elyachar hits on this inherent contradiction of NGO programs that promote civil society, concluding that "empowerment debt thus intensified the very aspects of market life that donors and outside observers cite as a reason why they must intervene in Egypt to reform the market" (211–12).

Based on her own analysis of Egypt's modern history, Abdelrahman makes a similar argument. Rather than achieve their stated goal of empowerment, the NGOs that are promoting civil society have more often than not merely reproduced existing power structures, she explains. According to her, NGOs in Egypt are controlled and often run by the state's massive bureaucracy, which has always been dominated by and

served the interests of the ruling classes. Outside observers may view civil society as an "idealized space where the weak are supposed to be fighting their battles for freedom and justice," but that space has actually "been hijacked by segments of the (petite) bourgeoisie who have found a niche in the growing sector of NGOs" (27).

In spite of or because of this convincing critique, readers are nonetheless left with questions. Given that empowerment debt and market promotion are contradictory and at times even harmful, what should their future role be in places like Cairo? Are such projects doomed from the start, or can they be usefully reconceived?

The Future of America in the Middle East?

The practical consequences of such questions seem clear as the American project approaches another July anniversary and America remains deeply involved in the Middle East. In unique ways, each of these four authors clarifies many of the problems that persist in American efforts to promote reforms in the region. From attempts to foster civil society in Cairo's neighborhoods to the massive project of building democracy in Iraq, these aid efforts are often based on questionable logic that leads to devastating results. Such problematic logic also dominates the way that Americans (even the critical leftists that Postel addresses) perceive and talk about the Middle East.

None of these books, however, offers a solution to these problems. In their scholarly studies, Abdelrahman and Elyachar urge their respective colleagues to engage more critically in debates over NGOs, civil society reform, and neoliberalism. This limited step forward holds out the hope that modest beginnings on the theoretical level can somehow produce meaningful and positive changes in the societies being studied.

Feldman and Postel address a more general audience but maintain a similar hope in the power of ideas. Feldman's ethical reflections on a process of nation-building that he was involved in suggest that he hopes that those who are tempted to embark on such projects in the future will be able to restrain themselves or at least proceed more carefully. Indeed, Postel goes furthest in summoning its readers to action, largely because he writes of Iran, the most likely candidate for future U.S. involvement.

The case of Iran serves as a reminder that although many aspects of the American project in the Middle East that are discussed in these four books are historical, there is no real end in sight. Books like these, then,

are all the more important for the questions that they raise. They largely stop short of answering their own questions, but each of these four authors prompts their readers into a deep skepticism about the motivation behind and chances for success of such projects. As America remains in the Middle East, continuing to celebrate and impose its liberal democratic model there, the great challenge of answering the difficult questions raised in these four important books is left to the reader.

Notes

1. One of the most informed and comprehensive of the many studies of civil society in the Middle East is Augustus Richard Norton, ed., *Civil Society in the Middle East* (New York: Brill, 1995–1996), 2 vols.