

8-1995

Islam, the People and the State: Essays on Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East, by Sami Zubaida

Shahrough Akhavi

University of South Carolina - Columbia, akhavi@sc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/poli_facpub



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Volume 27, Issue 3, 1995, pages 355-356.

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayJournal?jid=MES>

© 1995 by Cambridge University Press

This Book Review is brought to you by the Political Science, Department of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

SAMI ZUBAIDA, *Islam, the People and the State: Essays on Political Ideas and Movements in the Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1989). Pp. 203.

REVIEWED BY SHAHROUGH AKHAVI, Department of Government and International Studies, University of South Carolina, Columbia

We are fortunate indeed to have Sami Zubaida's shrewd appraisals of a number of issues in contemporary Islamic discourse. The separate chapters stand on their own as independent essays written at different times and for different occasions. However, the common thread is the author's conviction that Islamist or "fundamentalist" ideas and movements in the Middle East in the last generation "can best be understood in terms of the concepts and assumptions of modern political ideas associated with models of the nation and the nation state" (p. ix).

In chapter 1, "The Ideological Preconditions for Khomeini's Doctrine of Government," Zubaida maintains that even a doctrine as apparently immune to the influence of Western models as Khomeini's *wilāyat al-faqīh* (guardianship of the jurist) relies upon presuppositions about politics that are the product of Western practices since the late 18th century. More specifically, Khomeini invokes that concept of "the people" (*al-nās*) but not in the generic or abstract sense that always pervades the word in the Qur'an, where Allah calls upon "the people" to believe, to be upright, and so forth. Rather, Khomeini gives the concept of *al-nās* a social and political imprimatur in a section of his 1970 book, *Ḥukūmat-i Islāmī* (Islamic Government) entitled "Awaken the People." There, he talks about the people as a social aggregate.

This view of the people with specific interests and orientations toward rule, power, and commitment, mobilizing in opposition to constituted authority, has nothing to do with the classic Islamic traditions but is the product of mass society and mass politics, themselves unknown in world history prior to the French Revolution. In short, Khomeini's argument in fact presupposes the modern context of the nation-state, whose mass publics are socially engaged, involved, and conscious. This pattern is all the more clear in the writings of Islamist modernists, such as ʿAli Shariʿati, who repeatedly and explicitly sought to work into his conceptualizations epistemologies endemic to Western social thought.

In chapter 2, Zubaida focuses upon the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and two more radical splinter organizations, as well as what he calls Islamic politics in Iran. He concludes that the differences between the Egyptian and Iranian scenes are not mechanically reducible to differences between Sunni and Shiʿi doctrines. Instead, he emphasizes that religion was institutionalized in Egypt and Iran in varying ways in relation to the development of the state in the 19th and 20th centuries. This is the explanation for the differences in these societies, not disembodied doctrinal divergences that are extracted from historical space and time. In this chapter, too, Zubaida argues that modern models of politics involving such phenomena as constitutional government, separation of powers, social justice, and even political parties (the Islamic Republican Party in Iran) are important for Islamist discourse.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the utility of class analysis for understanding the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and with the respective advantages of horizontal (class) and vertical (community) stratification approaches to understanding urban politics in the Middle East. Zubaida shows the discomfort that reputable Marxist scholars have exhibited with an unqualified definition of class in terms of relationship to the mode of production. By broadening their definitions of class to include proximity to the means of administration, or even the sharing of common attitudes, these analysts vitiate the parsimony and rigor of their propositions. Still, Zubaida notes, they have no choice if they wish to escape overdeterministic analysis—which they could not avoid were they to insist upon relation to the mode of production as the basis

for defining class. In particular, he notes the elasticity of the term, “petite bourgeoisie,” which has become a catchall category for groups as diverse as intellectuals, clergymen, government bureaucrats, and even downwardly mobile peasantry and rural artisans.

The penultimate chapter, dealing with popular culture, maintains that the latter has been a complex mix of syncretistic elements, as Islam, Judaism, and Christianity have all combined magical and orthodox, mythical and scriptural elements. Adepts of each of these religions will not infrequently avail themselves of symbols central to the other two because of the conviction that those symbols will bring blessings or protection to whoever appeals to them. Zubaida notes that popular culture has roots that both “ethical” (in Weber’s sense of having ends that are consummate) and “instrumental” (i.e., oriented to the efficacy of solutions to the people’s quotidian problems). The nation-state, for its own reasons, has tried to purify the syncretistic aspects of popular culture, as happened in Iraq in 1977 when Baghdad unsuccessfully targeted songs with foreign words; or, Zubaida may have noted, in Iran after 1979, when the regime abortively tried to uproot the popular celebration of the thirteen days of New Year—a pre-Islamic holiday. Certainly, the “fundamentalist” prescription is to try to discard the “non-Islamic” elements of popular culture. Zubaida argues that this is symptomatic of the fact that the popular support that such movements have managed to muster in the last generation is due more to the feeling, evinced by those participating in the movements, that they collectively comprise a solidaristic community; than to the belief that their participation is an expression of religious piety *per se*.

In his last and longest chapter, “The Nation State in the Middle East,” the author concludes his ruminations on the importance of seeing religiously based movements in terms of an overarching “political sociology.” We must not essentialize Islamist movements or thought but rather apply the same general conceptualizations to them that we do to movements in other cultural contexts. The point is that Islamic agents, institutions, and processes are subject to general social, economic, and political influences and must not be treated as *sui generis*. At the same time, this does not mean that the historical trajectory of Muslim communities will be the same as other communities in world history. Zubaida is not a historicist who believes in some linear evolutionary theory of development. Indeed, his theoretical position is that historical development is discontinuous across time and space. There is no such thing as “common, general patterns of development” (p. 123). As he puts it in his schema, “cultural specificity is accommodated, but not cultural essentialism” (p. 123). There is no such thing as a culture that is fixed in historical time. Rather, it is constantly being produced and reproduced every generation, and its particular content is strongly influenced by the environmental circumstances and historical “conjunctures.”

Unfortunately, considerations of space forbid further exploration of Zubaida’s arguments. For example, he disputes the assumption by class theorists that individuals who comprise classes entertain beliefs and enter into relations as a product of their economic status. Groups such as Lebanese Shi‘is in the 1970s or Iraqi workers after 1958 may have become politically influential because of economic pressures. But one could not derive this influence merely from economic variables. Instead, we would have to see the rise of these two groups in terms also of the interplay of social and political variables. In a theme that pervades this book the author states “social entities are not given to politics having been formed by social processes elsewhere; as political forces and concepts, they are formed through the political process itself” (p. 88). This forceful caveat against economic reductionism will hopefully be taken up by researchers in detailed studies of the Lebanese Shi‘is and Iraqi workers to validate this proposition. Meanwhile, we can only express our thanks and admiration to the author for providing us with so much food for thought.