
Charles Tripp has written a remarkable book that provides historical depth and rigorous insight into the long arcs of protest in the Middle East and North Africa. Ranging from Morocco to Iran and from the nineteenth century to the ‘Arab Spring’, Tripp dissects the pathways of popular resistance to authoritarian power. Mixing country case-studies with reflections on the nature of violence, authority and symbolism, he demonstrates how they have for decades undermined the edifice of autocracy in often surprising and effective ways. At a time of profound regional upheaval and great uncertainty over the general ‘direction of travel’, the book provides a timely and highly original insight into power and politics in the modern Middle East.

At the heart of the book is the study of the ‘politics of resistance’ in all its political, economic, social and cultural forms. These include ‘novels, plays, poems, films, the visual arts’ that form ‘part of the narratives of everyday life that give meaning to encounters with power’ (p. 6). Tripp argues cogently that ‘understanding the main dynamics of contentious politics means paying attention to the vocabularies that create the basis of new solidarities, the performances that escape and challenge the everyday ordering of power’ (p. 7). These are brought out vividly in the book’s final chapter on ‘art and power’ complete with a striking selection of posters and graffiti from Palestine, Iran, Lebanon, Algeria and Turkey, as well as accounts of the authorities’ heavy-handed and ultimately self-defeating responses: ‘Censorship is the tribute that ruling authorities pay to the unsettling power of art’ (p. 305).

A particular strength of The power and the people is its multidisciplinary approach to the study of the patterns of contestation that have so powerfully shaped the region. Tripp contextualizes the dialectic relationship between power and resistance within broader processes of political and historical development. The case-studies embedded in each chapter make for poignant reading as the participants in earlier struggles against colonial oppression themselves become the targets of organized resistance by newer generations of activists. The description of the importance of history in shaping and reshaping state-building narratives in Algeria and Israel is especially telling: ‘Resisting particular versions of the past that help to underpin regimes of power in the present becomes mired in political struggle as the links between power and knowledge are laid bare’ (p. 221).

Recent developments in the Arab Spring have emphasized the importance both of sites and strategies of resistance and of the visible contestation of public space. Tripp gives historical depth to the iconic images from Tahrir Square in Cairo beamed across the world in February 2011. He demonstrates how similarly cathartic public ‘denials of authority’ paved the way for revolution in Iran in 1978, but in other contexts—in Iraq in 1977 and Iran (again) in 2009—failed to trigger far-reaching change. In suggesting reasons for the divergence of outcomes, which considering developments after the book’s publication now apply also to post-2011 Egypt, Tripp draws attention to ‘the centrality of the performance of the political authorities to project and reinforce their own credibility’ (p. 71). His accounts of the successful ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and the failed attempt to unseat the Al-Khalifa ruling family in Bahrain offer gripping insights into the violent relationship between power and resistance in practice.

* See also Sally Cummings and Raymond Hinnebusch, eds, Sovereignty after empire: comparing the Middle East and Central Asia, pp. 1515–16.

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In his conclusion, Tripp recounts how ‘Completing the manuscript of this book during the year 2021 was a strange and sobering experience’ as the regional uprisings gave ‘the generic term “resistance” a human face, linked to tales of exceptional courage and resistance’ (p. 309). Nearly three years after the fall of apparent ‘presidents for life’ in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, the mobilization of powerful counter-revolutionary forces have undercut initial gains in all the transition states. Vested political and economic interests have proved far harder to dislodge and the revolutionary momentum that surged across the region in 2011 has dissipated in the failure of successor regimes to deliver quick political or economic improvements in daily life. Yet Tripp ends by observing how ‘even in those cases where the expectations generated by active resistance have been disappointed, the experience, stories and historical memory of a politics of struggle can lay the groundwork for a cycle of resistance.’ This, he adds, ‘is not only virtually impossible to eradicate but may provide the repertoire for new generations of defiance’ (p. 317).

Many books have been written about the Arab Spring. Few have been able to pinpoint or capture the zeitgeist that swept so quickly throughout the region in 2011. By doing so in such a readable yet comprehensive manner, The power and the people looks set to become required reading for scholars and practitioners alike. The Arab Spring may have evolved into a messy and protracted set of political and economic transitions whose outcome is far from certain, but the memory of the individual and collective acts of resistance to authoritarian power will surely form the cornerstone for the next phase of popular mobilization.

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‘Is Israel today in the grip of youthful exuberance, an adult’s hubris, or the blindness of old age?’ Diana Pinto writes that this question ‘haunts’ her. It is a question that anyone with an eye on the current affairs of the Middle East will have come across in some iteration. Like an academic travel guide, Pinto’s Israel has moved begins and ends in Tel Aviv’s Ben Gurion airport and chaperones the reader down the contentious Highway 443 that crosses the Green Line on its way to Jerusalem; then on to East Jerusalem, the Old City of Jerusalem and finally into Israel’s newly found ‘place’ in the high-tech world of cyberspace.

Pinto’s analytical eye, coupled with her deft use of language, provides a new perspective on Israel’s view of itself. Pinto suffuses what could otherwise be considered gentle musings on a journey with a comparative style of analysis that exposes important truths about modern Israel. In addition to metaphors, she creatively and carefully uses symbolic ideas to reveal her insights. In one instance, the grammatical syntax of passive verbs helps her explain Israel’s view of itself as a threatened state always obliged to react to the provocations of others and their desire to annihilate it, and now ‘the victims of Israel’s military or police actions, in this view, are simply collateral damage of aggressions perpetrated against the Jewish state by their own camp’ (p. 157).

The second half of the book is concerned with a ‘triptych of metaphors’ that aims to describe different aspects of modern-day Israel: the aquarium, the bubble and the tent. These refer respectively to the country’s brand of multiculturalism, isolationism and religious protectionism. Of these, the aquarium metaphor is the weakest. Though both the aquarium and Israel have ‘all types and sizes of highly colored fish [each] turning rapidly away to avoid the others’, Israel has many qualities, but the ‘utter silence’ (p. 106) of the aquarium that Pinto evokes is not one of them. The bubble as a metaphor originates within Israel,
as a nickname for Tel Aviv itself, but Pinto uses it to describe what elsewhere she calls the nation’s ‘autistic’ national character. Here she refers to the bubble as encasing the ‘mentality of a population that seeks to live far from the region’s madding crowd by avoiding local interaction’ (p. 121). The tent, though, is where Pinto comes into her own. She describes ‘an Israel that is both strong and threatened’ and carefully dissects a people who are constantly at pains to define what membership of their group looks like. This chapter includes Pinto’s excoriating response to an Israeli government minister’s speech on religious conversion and the Jewish gene, which is as refreshing as it is strident.

One of the most valuable assets of this book is the astute observation of several nuances of Israeli society that academics rarely share: the small tensions and symbols that resonate with those who live in the country, and give rise to so much of its national character, but which are rarely acknowledged as even noteworthy in the international sphere. One example: if one were to visit Israel without knowing that ‘wearing a knitted kippah … usually denotes nationalist inclinations’ (p. 39) one would be at a severe disadvantage when trying to understand the subtler cleavages within the country.

Pinto has written this book twice: first in French, then in English. Owing to this, some word choices raise questions, particularly for an author who chooses her phrases so carefully. When she reflects on her use of the adjective ‘titanic’ as being influenced by western culture, or ‘concrete’ as having a double meaning in relation to the logic of Israeli settlers, one would assume she had similarly balanced all such choices, but when she describes the town of Modi’in as ‘legitimate’ despite being within the Green Line, one has to question whether it might be better to use a less legalistic word. Some incorrect transliterations from Hebrew—Israel is colloquially referred to as Ha’Aretz rather than Eretz—also mean passages lose some potency and accuracy, but the writing itself is so inviting and flows so well that this is easily forgiven.

Harvard University Press has done well to publish such an accessible book on such a complex place. This book provides a portrait ‘from within’ that gives a flavour of the politics of a society and state that continually perplex the international community. Pinto acknowledges the limits of a book covering current affairs in a country that in her words is ‘constantly living on a razor’s edge’ (p. 181). She partially answers her own haunting question by suggesting that Israel ‘fuse its biblical past with its globalized future’ (p. 158). Her own position is clear. She remains an advocate of the country’s ‘earlier modesty and … humanistic values’.

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Sherko Kirmanj’s book seeks to shed light on the vexed issue of Iraqi identity. Since the 2003 American invasion, Iraq has witnessed horrific levels of inter-communal violence and, although the security situation may have somewhat improved in recent years, the fundamental divisions among Iraq’s various ethnic and sectarian communities remain a central characteristic of Iraqi politics. Despite the significance of the ‘politics of identity’ in Iraq, the author points out that there is relatively little academic scholarship ‘on the question of Iraqi identity in general and the process of national integration in particular’ (p. 12). He further notes that those works that do exist are generally limited in chronological scope or restricted to developments within a specific community. It is this gap in the literature which Kirmanj sets out to rectify in two ways. First, he provides a grand historical narra-
tive concerning the issue of identity formation (and degeneration) which encompasses the entirety of Iraq’s modern history. Second, he approaches the question of identity and, indeed, contested identities, from a communal rather than state-orientated perspective.

Beginning with the formation of the Iraqi state in the early 1920s, Kirmanj highlights factors which served to integrate Iraq’s various communities into a shared national identity as well as those which served to divide them. He notes, for example, that in the 1930s and 1960s anti-imperialist Iraqi patriotism helped to unite many communities and that the post-1958 regime of General Abdul Karim Qasim endeavoured to make symbolic gestures towards recognizing the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of Iraqi society. However, he quite correctly observes that ‘no institutional and practical measures were taken to foster closer ties between the Kurds and the Arabs or between the Sunnis and the Shiites, beyond the fight against imperialism’ (pp. 122–3). At the same time, he points out that those political parties that did provide a venue for national integration, most significantly the Iraqi Communist Party, were gradually weakened and suppressed. The tendency towards national disintegration was further exacerbated in the aftermath of the 1963 Nasserite–Ba’athi coup d’état. This event paved the way for the creation of a highly ethnicized (Arab) and sectarian (Suni) Iraqi regime which served to alienate both Kurds and Shi’is. This process of degeneration climaxed with the 1991 uprisings in southern Iraq and in Kurdistan. Unlike anti-imperialism in earlier decades, antipathy towards the regime of Saddam Hussein ‘was not strong enough to unite the opposition’ (p. 187). Anti-Ba’athi political organizations were not ‘national’ in the 1980s and 1990s; rather they reflected ethnic and sectarian constituencies. Kirmanj continues by remarking that post-2003 Iraqi politics continues to be highly communalized. Again, Kirmanj brings the reader’s attention to the persistence of ethnic and sectarian divides in Iraqi politics, remarking that ‘Iraq’s history repeats itself, with the sectarian/ethnic groups changing positions’ (pp. 226–7). The book’s final chapter is perhaps its most interesting. It examines Iraqi textbooks and demonstrates that Iraqi history has been interpreted by various communities in multiple and contradictory ways. This, Kirmanj argues, has meant that Iraqis lack a shared national memory which could serve as the basis of an integrated Iraqi national identity. As he writes near the end: ‘The lack of common memory and of a shared destiny have contributed significantly to Iraqi communities’ questioning or undermining each other’s roots and origins’ (p. 252). He concludes that while reconciliation is possible, it will involve Sunnis acknowledging and atoning for past injustices.

Kirmanj’s argument runs counter to those scholars, both in the West and in Iraq, who proceed from the assumption that Iraqi identity, in an expansive and inclusive sense, existed, at least in its rudiments, prior to the formation of the Iraqi Kingdom in 1921. It is also critical of those scholars who have sought to emphasize historically contingent factors such as the failings of Iraq’s British and, more recently, American rulers or the long dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in providing a context in which communalism has flourished. In contrast, Kirmanj proceeds from the assumption that no meaningful sense of Iraqiness existed prior to 1921 and that no single regime or factor can account for the failure of the Iraqi project. This is not to suggest that he rejects the idea that pre-existing communal identities have influenced the evolution of Iraq’s political identity. On the contrary, Kirmanj’s theoretical understanding of ethnicity and nationalism is deeply influenced by the work of Anthony D. Smith, a scholar who has long endeavoured to highlight the role of pre-modern ethnic communities and shared memories on the formation of modern national identities. Kirmanj regards Arabness and Kurdishness as well as Sunnism and Shi’a as identity alternatives with deep historical roots. This theoretical perspective is one of the work’s strong points, although advocates of the modernist approach to nations and nation-
alism may take issue with it. It suffers slightly from an over-reliance on secondary sources, though this is perhaps a function of the work’s broad scope. Nevertheless, the work is to be commended for endeavouring to provide a broad and comprehensive narrative that helps to explain the current state of Iraqi politics.

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Sub-Saharan Africa


This is an interesting book. As it proclaims in the subtitle, it is a deliberate attempt to challenge, from a heterodox perspective, current orthodoxies on the relations between business, government and growth.

The core argument by Tim Kelsall and his collaborators (including David Booth, Diana Cammack, Brian Cooksey, Mesfin Gebremichael, Fred Golooba-Mutebi and Sarah Vaughan) is that industrial development is crucial for Africa’s future economic growth, and that in some circumstances this is better achieved by direct government intervention and support, including from party-controlled commercial enterprises, than by conventional liberalization and external investment promotion. Given the patron–client nature of politics in many African countries, described as ‘neo-patrimonial’, many attempts at government-led industrialization have been unsuccessful, often because political intervention and corruption have led to an inefficient distribution of resources and/or poor management. But Kelsall argues that there can be a potentially beneficial outcome provided rent-seeking is sufficiently centralized and controlled and the government’s vision is sufficiently long term, an approach he terms ‘developmental patrimonialism’ (outlined in detail in chapter one). He argues that this can exist where there is a strong, visionary leader; a dominant party; a top-down patron–client system; and a competent economic technocracy.

Like other recent books, Kelsall’s draws on comparisons with Asia’s development experience, but the bulk of the book concentrates firmly on Africa. He explores the validity of his paradigm briefly in relation to the historical experiences of Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya and Malawi since independence, showing that countries can slip from a benevolent developmental form of patrimonialism to a more damaging variety as leaders and circumstances change. The authors then provide more detailed analyses of industrial and development policy in four countries: Tanzania, Ghana, Ethiopia and Rwanda. These four chapters provide the most valuable and interesting part of the book, with the discussion going well beyond simple industrial policy to assess the overall relations between politics, business and development. Of the four, Kelsall rates Rwanda as the most successful in pursuing state-led industrialization, with a crucial role played by an investment company (TriStar, now Crystal Ventures) controlled by the ruling RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front). In Ethiopia too, he argues that state-led investment by the TPLF’s (the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front) endowment company EFFORT has been effective, but worries that the obsession with political control since the 2005 elections will increase the pressure for unproductive rent distribution to politically important groups. In Tanzania and Ghana, for all their relative economic success, he believes politics has driven short-term decision-making that prevented economic rents being used for productive investment or, in Tanzania’s case, even for effective poverty reduction.
The book provides an excellent and stimulating analysis of an issue of real importance for African development. Kelsall and Co. are trying to bring some intellectual rigour to understanding the complex range of experiences that African countries have encountered in their struggle to move beyond primary production and export as a basis for growth. But the book raises several questions that would benefit from further exploration.

First, much of the analysis revolves around the concept of ‘rent’, conventionally defined at the outset as ‘windfall gains or excess incomes that accrue to agents who operate in imperfect markets’ (p. 8). At various points in the text, however, it is used rather fuzzily to include (it seems) some forms of government revenue as well as profits of state-owned companies and simple income from corruption. Owing to this vagueness some of the analysis lacks clarity over exactly what rents the state is seeking, or failing, to control centrally. Second, it explores the various state structures, but less so the social structures which are reflected in the politics of each country. This is a critical difference from the Asian model that a number of African governments hold as the example they wish to follow. The population in Tanzania, Ethiopia and Rwanda remains dominated by poor rural subsistence farmers, occasionally producing a surplus of cash crops for market, but not on a scale to allow commercial accumulation. Though urban populations are growing, they do not yet dominate politically. As a result, there is no sizeable merchant, manufacturing or landowning class, and effectively a very small middle class. In these circumstances, political structures are designed to manage financial distribution, not wealth creation. Ghana is different; it has developed a more sizeable commercial and middle class, and also benefits from a well-educated diaspora. The political dynamics are therefore different. Though politicians focus on winning or retaining power at the next election, they also know they will be held to account at the one beyond, which puts a very different perspective on the management of rent, however you define it. Similar factors apply in Kenya.

Third, there is a wider issue over the conduct and fate of enterprises controlled by the party or military. Kelsall and Co. make valid points that such enterprises can bring significant benefit in supporting investments that are viable and beneficial but would never attract donor or private sector funding. There are plenty of examples, however, where in the longer term they can seriously distort economic growth and prove developmentally counterproductive. Kelsall has not included other cases, such as Zimbabwe, where the consequences have already proved disastrous. So whether the benefit proves lasting depends heavily on a country’s political evolution.

Finally, Kelsall addresses the delicate issue of the trade-off between civil liberties and growth, particularly in Ethiopia and Rwanda. He concludes that to stimulate growth at this stage of development some constraint on political or social liberties may be the lesser of two evils, though he admits that others may beg to differ.

Overall, this is a stimulating book, well worth reading for those also grappling with the policy dilemmas involved, even if not everyone will agree with all its conclusions.

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