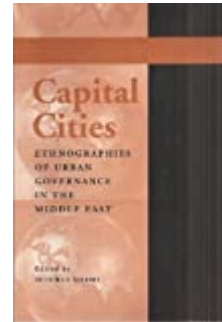


Seteney Shami, ed. *Capital Cities: Ethnographies of Urban Governance in the Middle East*. Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, 2001. viii + 243 pp. \$10.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7727-1379-7.



Reviewed by David A. McMurray (Department of Anthropology, Oregon State University)

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Beirut, Cairo, Jerusalem, Khartoum

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This is an interesting and useful collection of papers on how to study how things get done in Middle East cities. None of the tired, old, essentialist work of the “Islamic City” variety makes it in here. The same with the “Cairo the Magnificent” argument, with its highlighting of some timeless, homogenizing heritage. Instead, these articles summarize fieldwork research conducted between 1996 and 1998 (under the auspices of the Global Urban Research Initiative [GURI] coordinated by the University of Toronto) into the workings of state policy and urban social action (and inaction). Special emphasis is placed on the dense forms of articulation which have developed among all levels, from the international donor agencies on high all the way down through state and local agencies and institutions to poor neighborhood residents.

Seteney Shami provides a brief introduction to the volume. In it she justifies the city as a unit of analysis and then describes the more ethnographic and processual “urban crisis” approach of this collection, with its greater emphasis on micro-level case studies of the relationship

between the state and civil society (this processual relationship, which goes by the name “governance,” is what is being studied by GURI).

The first article by Roula Majdalani forms part of a first section devoted to the investigation of forms of urban governance in general. Majdalani, in very understated terms, describes the pressure on developing nations to adopt structural adjustment policies in line with the World Bank’s most important imperative: reduce the welfare state and privatize public services. If targeted cities do so, then they are on the road towards achieving “governance.” Not surprisingly, most still suffer, according to the donor agency literature, from a “crisis of governability.” A second step towards “governance” urged on developing states by donors involves the adoption of democracy and the development of civil society. The literature over the last twenty years has tended to measure this success in terms of the number of NGOs in a given country, equating such non-state actors with a vital civil society. Enthusiasm has cooled as of late, the author tells us, because the accumulation of NGOs does not correlate with meaningful local political and social developments.

Farha Ghannam's article completes the first section by taking up the question of whether the concept of "governance" is best adapted as an analytical or prescriptive device. She comes down on the side of its analytical use, citing its potential utility in analyzing specific capital city forms of governability where national and local governmental structures overlap. It is best thought of, she argues, as a way to conceptualize the complex relationships between various urban agents, national governments, global organizations, and limited resources. However, it is not helpful if it is held up as an ideal model used to advocate certain prescribed changes in cities that do not meet donor agency criteria.

Case studies of Middle Eastern capital cities follow the first section on urban governance. Montasser Kamal and Samer el-Karanshawy concentrate on a garbage removal project in the Sayeda Zeinab district of Cairo which was developed by an international NGO in partnership with one in the district. They examine the intricate hierarchy of actors involved in the project as well as the resistance and resilience of those both above and below. The articles are particularly good at laying out the dense interrelationships required to provide local services. In the process, the studies reveal how problematic it is to differentiate between state and civil society institutions, as well as how quickly NGOs become self-perpetuating entities more concerned with their own reproduction than with fostering local self-help initiatives.

The problem of who controls urban development projects in post-war Beirut and how it impacts neighborhood residents forms the next section. Both authors focus on the different types of alliances created to commandeer service delivery or compensation. Aseel Sawalha describes how various actors struggled to influence the outcome of a reconstruction project in the mainly Sunni Ayn Al-Mreisi district of the capital. Mona Harb El-Kak discusses another reconstruction project located in the Shiite districts of southwestern Beirut. In the face of deep distrust of the state's ability to deliver, sectarian alliances were formed between actors at different levels in the two sites. Both the powerful and the powerless understood such sectarian hierarchical arrangements to be the best way to navigate through the labyrinth of local, state, and international actors, agencies, and institutions.

The case of greater Khartoum forms the next section, with one article by Gamal Hamid on the politics of de-

centralizing administrative power. The state institutionalized decentralization in 1993, but did not provide sufficient resources for the different levels created (state, province, locality, base unit). The new administrative levels were also superimposed over traditional community structures which insured the kinds of problems illustrated by Hamid. In two of the three cases, local community organizations arose and eventually succeeded in providing needed services. In the third, the local voluntary organization and a governmental agency wrestle to a stalemate. Hamid's article reveals some of the ways clientelism develops to provide those on the fringes with access to government patronage.

Jerusalem comes under scrutiny next in Salim Tamari's article on the history of its administrative dismemberment. He accompanies this with a discussion of the impact dismemberment has had on the city's Palestinian population. Tamari includes particularly interesting sections on the ways the administration of Jerusalem has used zoning and annexation to dramatically alter the demographic character of the city. The author then traces the decline of the city's civil society. He argues it dates to the peace process and is due to the combined effects of Israeli efforts to reduce Palestinian claims to the capital, out migration of the city's Palestinian professional elites, and subordination of Arab Jerusalem's economy to that of Israeli West Jerusalem. The erosion of civil society has also led to a loss of civic consciousness and pride which in turn explains the general lack of concerted resistance on the part of the marginalized Palestinian population in Jerusalem.

Finally, a useful afterword by Ayse Oncu opens up the discussion of what works and what doesn't in the world of Middle East urban governance. The author echoes Majdalani and Ghannam in cautioning against looking to NGOs to create civil society. Urban governance, as the author nicely explains it by summarizing the findings of the various studies included in the collection, is not a prescriptive panacea for developing world cities, but a way of framing the analysis of the myriad processes involved in urban development, from transnational forces down to the neighborhood level. Close, ethnographic attention must be paid, as it is in these studies, to the specific context in which rivalries and alliances form between various vested interests. Perhaps most importantly, the distinction between "state" and "civil society" must be interrogated, not taken as a given.

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