## BOOKS & ARTS

# The changing face of Arab culture

**Studies of the differences between people can shed light on the rise of Islamism in the Middle East.**

**The Middle East: A Cultural Psychology**
by Gary S. Gregg
Oxford University Press: 2005. 472 pp.
$45, £26.99

**Robert Springborg**

It makes one feel like an intellectual fossil to encounter a book that harks back to a subdiscipline that is now virtually extinct, but which was still in vogue when one was a graduate student. Cultural psychology flourished in the wake of the Second World War as a result of desire to understand totalitarianism. Following in the intellectual footsteps of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, scholars interested in the Middle East and North Africa sought to document and explain the details of the region's cultures and what they viewed as its distinctive personality types. Daniel Lerner's landmark study, *The Passing of Traditional Society* (Macmillan, 1958), was the definitive statement of the cultural, personal and developmental consequences of the clash between tradition and modernity in these regions.

But by the late 1960s, such works were criticized for their ethnocentrism and for having ignored global and national systems of economic and political power. At the same time, the appearance of studies that seemed hostile to Arab Muslims left the field of cultural psychology, at least in its Middle East variant, open to accusations of racism. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (Routledge, 1978) administered the *coup de grâce*. Except for some interesting investigations by Arab scholars, such as Hisham Sharabi and Halim Barakat, who sought to understand patriarchy and other aspects of cultural psychology that they saw as characteristic of the region, the field largely died out.

The spread of rational-choice theory from economics into other social sciences ensured that the disappearance of cultural psychology was not lamented. It is the sameness of people, regardless of their culture, that now dominates. We are all global citizens driven by desires to maximize various utility schedules, with variation in those schedules being the only possible area within which culture might be attributed status as an independent variable. The human, in short, was largely written out of studies of development, a field which itself began to disappear in the 1980s as even systemic differences between the developed and developing worlds were deemed irrelevant.

S. VANNINI/CORBIS

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt highlights the region's mix of the traditional and the modern.

It took Islamist-inspired political violence, especially suicide bombing, to rekindle interest in the particularities of the Middle East and North Africa. For some years explanations have been sought in the theology and practice of Islam, in the consequences of the region's failed economic and political development, and in the impact of Western policies on the region. It is only now, however, that we have the first major study that draws on cultural psychology to address the issue of whether the cultures and individuals of the region have identifiable particularities, and, if so, whether they may account, at least in part, for Islamism and other sociopolitical phenomena.

This is a much-needed and noble effort. Resuscitating a moribund subdiscipline that is based on the premise of difference rather than similarity between peoples is important, not least for serving as a check on other social-science approaches. We need to see if human difference can serve as the foundation for rewarding intellectual enquiry, rather than descending into crude national stereotyping. Gary Gregg claims in *The Middle East* to be aware of this trap, but some readers may feel he has fallen into it. While I am neither so critical nor so dismissive, I do have reservations about the structure of his argument and the evidence presented to support it.

Taking the issue of evidence first, the overall impression is that it may be insufficiently representative. Gregg's fieldwork experience in rural Morocco seems to have tilted his perspective towards that country and rural areas in general. This tendency is reinforced by his reliance on anthropological work, which has also been conducted primarily in rural areas. Yet the Middle East and North Africa have urbanized more rapidly than any other areas of the globe, and most of their citizens now live in cities.

Gregg also draws heavily on characters in the novels of Egyptian author Naguib Mahfouz, for example, to provide illustrations of stages of personal development. That Mahfouz's characters are often overdrawn and clearly created to personify idealized types is but one reservation about the appropriateness of using such material to elucidate a particular psychological model. It is disappointing that Gregg has not included evidence that is more relevant. Pioneering psychologists and psychiatrists began plying their trades in the Middle East and North Africa in the late 1940s, so we are now into the second and even third generations of these professionals. They could provide a veritable treasure trove of case-study

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material. It might also be instructive to know how they have theorized about personalities and how those theories might differ from those of practitioners in other settings.

A central proposition of Gregg's book is that discontinuities and outright failures in the region's economic and political development have had negative effects on the psyches of large numbers of its inhabitants, causing them to turn to fundamentalist Islam. But this assertion also goes largely unsupported by directly relevant data — even though the case histories of young Arabs, including those who have turned to religion and violence, are accessible and have been drawn on by other authors interested in the link between personal circumstances and political violence.

The structure of Gregg's argument seems questionable in at least two important regards. First, his contention that the Middle East and North Africa constitute a coherent cultural area can be challenged. He admits that there are subregions, including North Africa, the Gulf and the Nile Valley, but he de-emphasizes the differences between them. The absence of the Levant as a distinct subregion is one shortcoming. The more vital question of whether a Beiruti and a dweller in the Moroccan High Atlas, for example, inhabit the same cultural space is largely unanswered.

A second problem has to do with his use of the dichotomy between the traditional and the modern. He repeatedly warns that this duality is an oversimplification, but much of his argument is nevertheless based on discontinuities resulting from people having to inhabit these two divergent worlds, or moving from one to the other. His argument about the region being a distinct cultural area is based heavily on the legacy of traditional patterns of agriculture and desert nomadism, as if the region had not changed since Lerner wrote his seminal work in the 1950s.

But the region has changed dramatically since that time, raising the question of the extent to which the traditional continues to clash with the modern and thus accounts for personally disruptive discontinuities. Gregg states that young high-school and university students typically have illiterate parents, as if the region were witnessing its first generational wave of secondary and post-secondary education. In reality, many countries in the region are now into their third, fourth or even fifth generation of university-educated youth. The connection between today's youths and their camel-herding forbears, if indeed that's what they were, is pretty tenuous. Cultural psychology should long ago have abandoned this hoary old duality and come up with explanations of contemporary cultures and the personalities of which they are constituted that rely more on the present than on some hypothetical past.

Despite these frailties, Gregg's book has much to recommend it. The publishers are to be commended for producing a book in a discipline widely considered to be passé, but which deserves reconsideration. Gregg provides an encyclopaedic review of the cultural-psychology literature while seeking to reintroduce individual variation as an important variable for understanding the key issues of our times. He raises the important question of the impact of oppression, war and violence on large numbers of residents of the Middle East and North Africa, and provides a useful agenda for future research. ■

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# Feathered friends

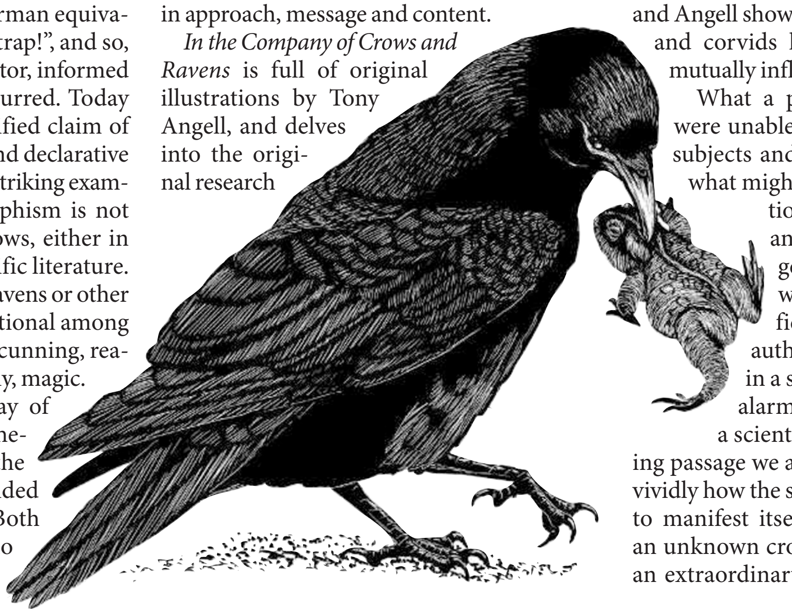
**In the Company of Crows and Ravens**
by John R. Marzluff & Tony Angell
Yale University Press: 2005. 408 pp.
$30, £18.95
**Crows: Encounters with the Wise Guys of the Avian World**
by Candace Savage
Greystone Books: 2005. 120 pp.
$20, Can$27

**Alex Kacelnik**

Konrad Lorenz claimed that a tame crow called Hansl, returning after a long absence with a broken digit, said the German equivalent of "Got him in a blooming trap!", and so, by repeating the words of its captor, informed Lorenz how the injury had occurred. Today we would see this as an unjustified claim of the use of referential language and declarative autobiographical memory. This striking example of projective anthropomorphism is not unusual when dealing with crows, either in popular culture or in the scientific literature. People who live around crows, ravens or other corvids often see them as exceptional among animals, possessing qualities of cunning, reasoning, deception and, frequently, magic.

I can think of no better way of becoming immersed in this phenomenon — and enjoying the experience — than that provided by these two beautiful books. Both have been written by people who know and love these animals, and who use every opportunity to introduce, in lucid but accessible language, up-to-date ideas from behavioural ecology and evolutionary biology. Both are beautifully illustrated and produced, and this adds to the pleasure of sailing easily through them. Indeed, they are as gripping and difficult to put down as any good work of fiction. They mix scientific research with fables, poems and mythical stories ranging from Scandinavia to Mexico and Australia. The ground they cover overlaps to some extent, but there is sufficient extra material in each to make it worthwhile to buy both, as they differ in approach, message and content.

*In the Company of Crows and Ravens* is full of original illustrations by Tony Angell, and delves into the original research published over many years by John Marzluff. Marzluff and Angell put forward the notion of cultural coevolution, and they suggest that corvids are the clearest example of a culturally coevolved wild organism. They even hypothesize that the very existence of human culture as we know it may have been influenced by corvids. They write, for instance: "Ravens scavenged from large animal kills in the Pleistocene and quickly learned to exploit the foods gathered by early human hunters and fishers. Fending off scavengers may have favored people with a culture of living in groups." By referring to many published studies, ranging from these ancient interactions to the present-day association between crows and the agricultural and urban environment, Marzluff and Angell show how the destinies of humans and corvids have been intertwined and mutually influential.



What a pity, then, that the authors were unable to resist the charm of their subjects and have on occasion fallen to what might be called 'corvidean exceptionalism'. Not only are some anecdotal observations used to generalize concepts beyond what can reasonably be justified, but, in a few cases, the authors seem to have indulged in a suspension of disbelief that is alarming in a book popularizing a scientific matter. In an embarrassing passage we are told: "Tony Angell recalls vividly how the spirit of a good friend seemed to manifest itself in a crow." It seems that an unknown crow appeared and behaved in an extraordinary fashion for two days until

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