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**Linda T Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East: The Circle of Justice from Mesopotamia to Globalization* (Routledge, 2013), 399pp, Pbk £29.99, ISBN 978-0415503624.**

Professor Darling's account of social justice and political power in the Middle East is first and foremost a cultural account. As such, it constitutes a major contribution to recent scholarly attempts at conceiving of and capturing Middle Eastern political and legal traditions regionally rather than religiously.<sup>1</sup> Without neglecting the Islamic dimension of Middle Eastern political culture, the author embarks on a long journey that traces the political and economic relation between Middle Eastern states and their societies from the third millennium BCE to the twentieth century. Her account relies primarily on an ancient Middle Eastern political concept that acquired its name during the sixteenth-century Ottoman Empire, but the roots of which can be traced back to ancient Near Eastern texts: the Circle of Justice.

The Circle of Justice encapsulates a relation of interdependence between the state and society that is fundamentally agrarian, but which, the author argues, has continued to inform political relations in the Middle East well beyond the advent of the modern state. In its shorthand form, which was actually written inside a circle, the Circle of Justice reads as follows:

No power without troops,  
No troops without money,  
No money without prosperity,  
No prosperity without justice and good administration. (p 2)

Rather than focus merely on the conceptual development of the Circle of Justice, the author tells a cultural story that studies the manner in which it was expressed, disseminated and implemented in Middle Eastern societies. The underlying assumption is that the Circle as a concept was embedded not only in political discourse but also in political culture. The author thus sets out to demonstrate that the Circle was far more than a literary idea known to writers and readers of courtly literature. It provided a description of real political

<sup>1</sup> In the preface to his seminal work on Middle Eastern law, Chibli Mallat asserts that Middle Eastern law as a discipline is emerging as a 'compelling continent'. 'The argument for Middle Eastern law', he adds, 'is an argument for incorporating Islamic law in its richer dimensions, both historical and geographic, while allowing for other significant traditions to also be recognized and eventually incorporated in the field of study', including 'similar religiously-defined laws' as well as 'state-produced law in Western fashion'. Chibli Mallat, *Introduction to Middle Eastern Law* (Oxford University Press, 2009) v-ix.

and economic relations between rulers and ruled, by which both Middle Eastern governments and peoples understood themselves to be bound. The author draws on a vast array of sources that form a compelling narrative in which the Circle is presented as both a philosophical concept articulated by thinkers and a legitimating instrument that rulers and advisers built into political discourse. Far more importantly, it is also shown to be a tool to redress injustice that both the state and society could use, and for which a number of mechanisms and institutions were developed and maintained over time. The author provides abundant examples of ritual and government processes to support her claim that the Circle continued to be employed by successive societies as a means of binding a ruler to his subjects and should thus be considered a fundamental political concept of the region.

To this very purpose, the author presents a chronologically structured account to emphasise the continuity of the Circle. The book is divided into ten chapters that, in addition to providing a general introduction to the Circle of Justice, address the manner in which its various elements came into play since the ancient Mesopotamian empires (with the Sumerians, Babylonians and Assyrians), passing through Persia, the Islamic Empire, Turkish, Mongol and Mamluk rule, the early-modern period and the appearance of the Ottoman Empire, and ending with nineteenth-century modernisation and the subsequent emergence of independent Middle Eastern states in the twentieth century.

In the first chapter, the author ably introduces her readers to the idea of the Circle, which she presents within the framework of the Near Eastern concept of state. Accordingly, the ruler, by divine blessing or appointment, was placed far above the elites and was the ally of the peasants against both the elites and outside forces. The ruler exercised authority over military and administrative personnel and had to make himself available to field requests from the productive classes of society. The Circle's concept of justice relied heavily on the ruler's accessibility: if the peasants were not guaranteed just conditions, productivity and therefore revenue would decrease, the army would be unsustainable and the ruler unable to exercise power. Inasmuch as cooperation between state and society was necessary for political stability, the Circle expressed a concept of justice that necessarily involved reciprocal obligations between inferiors and superiors. As the author notes at the outset, the 'balance' or 'equilibrium' (3) that the Circle embodied preceded political theorisation. Hers is therefore also an account of the actual institutions that allowed for justice to be delivered, the uninterrupted functioning of which explains the permanence of the concept of the Circle in Middle Eastern societies. The reader is immediately introduced to those institutions: state-supported irrigation systems, laws and revenue surveys that apportioned taxes justly, and different forms of petitioning mechanisms, including courts that heard and adjudicated complaints.

The author then proceeds to employ the Circle as an interpretive tool that proves to be surprisingly far-ranging. Darling guides us through the manner in which successive Middle Eastern states sought legitimation by guaranteeing good administration and prosperity. Although the idea of justice itself differed from society to society, its administration continued to be informed by the agrarian nature of the state well into the modern age. The Circle proved to be a notion broad enough to incorporate new and different elements, including increasingly stratified social structures or the establishment of treasury functions, without ceasing to explain justice. The author carefully traces the evolution of social structures and the manner in which the Circle as a concept was developed to accommodate them by thinkers and rulers alike. Thus, because Assyrian rule was based on a citizen army, the Circle was employed by the state to emphasise the protection of the weak from the strong; to the contrary, Persian rulers would focus on the protection of the mighty by Persian rulers, owing to the fact that the army formed a separate warrior class. The author thus demonstrates how, within the Circle, justice could be presented to imply the preservation of social balance or the consolidation of a more hierarchical order.

The broadness and versatility of the concept of the Circle of Justice is well captured by the author and is reinforced by her methodological approach, which traces the continuity that marked the political and economic relations between state and society, while equally allowing for the gradual transformation of those relations to be expressed. This can be said particularly of the emergence of the Islamic Empire, which the author tactfully addresses within the framework of a Near Eastern political tradition that doubtless evolved as a result of Islam, but that likewise permeated the nascent empire in ways that the author's analysis of the Circle as a cultural phenomenon sheds an extremely interesting light on.

The author pays particular attention to the manner in which the Near Eastern concept of state and its Circle of Justice pervaded Islamic political development. By 'decentering Islam in the history of this development' (64), she conjures an account far richer in historical terms. Rather than refer exclusively to Islamic theology, which suggests a sharp break between the era of the revelation and what came before, the author focuses on the real challenges that arose with conquest and the need to implement Islam on an empire-wide scale. The early-Islamic political thought that had developed in a nearly stateless society had transferred responsibilities, including the responsibility to guarantee justice, to the community as a whole. However, the reader is reminded that the experience of the first century demonstrated that the caliphal mode of governance was ill-adapted to a 'multi-continental and multi-cultural empire' (51). It is in the process of the reintroduction of those responsibilities at the state level that the values encapsulated in the Circle would resurface; institutions would expand to accommodate the concept of caliph as king or emperor in ways not always com-

patible with Islamic theology. What is most interesting in the author's account is her emphasis on the popular demands that were placed on the caliph to accept the responsibility for providing justice, even as *ulemas*, that is, Muslim legal scholars, continued to shun or seek to limit state power. Pre-Islamic mechanisms for checking injustice—such as land surveys, bureaucratic control of taxation and the ruler's accessibility to petitioners—were thus incorporated into Islamic governance, and, despite the condemnation of purists, earned general acceptance. This is further corroborated by the author's account of the manner in which histories written in the ninth century evolved to incorporate the pre-Islamic past as a vital part of the story of the foundation of Islam. As 'universal histories' (60) emerged, that past became the common heritage of all Muslims and allowed for the best accomplishments to be claimed. Pre-Islamic concepts, including the Circle of Justice, were thus legitimately carried into the Islamic present.

Notwithstanding a legitimization process that turned the Circle into a maxim of governance, the author does not ignore the long controversy about the nature of the Islamic state that was never fully resolved or the competing juristic (legal *fiqh*) and bureaucratic claims it resulted in. However, her analysis transcends theological concerns: inasmuch as the just nature of the ruler's behaviour continued to be an object of consensus, the author once more demonstrates the extent to which political interdependence was culturally embedded in Middle Eastern society.

That the ruler's obligation to deliver justice continued to generate consensus among both officials and society is illustrated by a wealth of sources, including court literature in the form of advice, documented popular demands for the redress of grievances and a succession of mechanisms that were enacted to ensure the accessibility of the ruler. The author provides substantial information on specific procedures, drawing from surviving documentary evidence in the form of petitions and responses by rulers, both ancient and modern, in addition to inscriptions in secretarial manuals and other sources. What emerges is a fascinating history of a Middle Eastern petitioning tradition encompassing a vast range of practices, which the author rightfully places at the heart of the political culture represented by the Circle. The author thus recalls that the *mazalim*, or acts of injustice for which the ruled sought redress, mainly concerned their relationship with the state. The *mazalim* courts that existed in one form or another in Islamic societies operated outside the jurisdiction of Islamic law and represented the institutionalisation of the ruler's duty to right wrongs of oppression.

Despite the myriad mechanisms that guaranteed the accessibility of the ruler and his court, Darling is careful not to imply that the Circle of Justice was consistently and satisfactorily enacted throughout Middle Eastern history.

Rather, hers is an integral account in which the Circle as a concept coexisted with the Circle's enactments, and when deemed necessary was invoked in the form of advice, or even censure, to check or de-legitimate power. Thus when the productive classes experienced significant upheaval during the rapid economic and technological transformation of the late Ottoman period, the Circle became a rebuke to state inadequacies and appeared in a stream of advice works aimed at rulers to critique the injustices done to peasants.

It is precisely around nineteenth-century modernisation and the failure of the state to continue to deliver justice in line with a well-established tradition that the Circle's legitimating role becomes most evident. The author argues that not until the advent of capitalism late in the century did the Circle cease to define political relations in the Middle East. Thus, as the Ottoman Empire embarked on military, fiscal and legal reforms to improve revenue collection and the health of its treasury, it was the political ideology of the Circle rather than Western rhetoric that was echoed in official discourse. However, as the author correctly notes, although many of the reforms that were introduced were validated by traditional formulas alluding to the provision of justice, they did not reinforce traditional social patterns. As a result, modernisation was increasingly identified with injustice, especially among the rural classes, while the ideological emphasis shifted from preservation of the social order to sound administration to enhance prosperity. However, the author argues that the Circle was not only used by the ruler, but continued to underpin the peasant resistance to heavier taxation that took shape in petitions as well as popular uprisings. What is most interesting in her account is the manner in which she captures the tension at the heart of the modernisation project, which manifested itself not only at the political level, with competing claims to legitimacy, but also socially, where popular demands were pursued through both traditional invocations of justice and modern institutions that emphasised equality.

The Circle of Justice was employed by the Ottoman Sultans to legitimate modernisation. It was also used by their opponents, including the revolutionary Young Turks, who claimed to find echoes of the ideas contained in the Circle in Western texts, and increasingly identified the Circle with constitutionalism as a check against the ruler's unbridled power. The shift of capitalist economic relations during the last quarter of the century meant that the Circle of Justice no longer expressed the actual relationship between state and society. However, the fact that the Circle continued to be invoked as an ideal by rulers, reformists and rebels alike bears witness to its cultural resonance. What is perhaps most interesting—the author states at the outset that the book's chapters build on the information in previous chapters—is the manner in which the reader is led to realise that modernisation only exacerbated ancient tensions over the role of the state, which the author is careful not to exclude from her account. That justice

was oft claimed outside the framework of state sovereignty, be it by purists or radical rebels, and that the justice provided by the Circle was occasionally dismissed as insufficient, are also part of the history of the Middle Eastern state and its political culture; the author weaves this into her account with great skill.

Although the Circle all but disappeared from political discourse in the twentieth century, the author convincingly argues for a sort of continuity between the notion of justice that had become an integral part of Middle Eastern political culture and the manner in which Arab socialism was both articulated and implemented—at least while the state could still afford to sustain it financially. The Circle as an ideal has continued to inform popular expectations, especially where traditional justice based on social balance has not been fully or successfully replaced by formal justice based on equality. According to the author, this can be seen in the emergence of political Islam under the mantle of social justice during the waning years of Arab socialism.

The author announces in the introduction that she has been accused of believing that Middle Eastern thought has not changed through the centuries, and of purveying an orientalist view of the ‘timeless East’ (10). She asserts in her own defence that, although the role in society and constituent elements of the Circle have changed over time, the Circle remains a fundamental concept. As a methodological instrument, the Circle certainly provides a broad enough framework to contain diverse relationships. It proves especially useful in interpreting the nature and extent of modernisation in the Middle East. However, it is also true that, despite a sense of justice that has pervaded Middle Eastern societies for centuries, the fundamental transformation of the relationship between the state and society that resulted from modernisation implied too deep a structural change that sits uneasily with the Circle. That the Circle continues to represent an ideal of justice may be true. However, the pre-modern ideal of social balance and socialism, for instance, do not rest on similar political foundations. It may be that the Middle Eastern state has failed to deliver, but modern attitudes and expectations have transcended the relationship of mutual reciprocity that lies at the heart of the Circle.

The author makes an important contribution to the cultural history of the Middle East: whereas many Western and Middle Eastern scholars continue to present Islam as the main, if not exclusive, guide to the exercise of power in the Middle East, Darling rescues a fundamental political concept, often dismissed as a literary diversion, and reconstructs the manner in which it has informed and checked the interaction between Middle Eastern states and their societies, before, during and after the rise of Islam. The claim that Middle Eastern law has emerged in recent years as ‘a new legal continent’<sup>2</sup> may be metaphoric,

2 Mallat (n 1) v.

but it is not hyperbolic. It marks 'the departure from a religiously marked law to a regionally defined discipline'.<sup>3</sup> The argument for such a discipline is to incorporate the Islamic legal tradition into richer dimensions. Darling's work constitutes a major achievement in that direction: *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East* traces the history of Middle Eastern political culture on the basis of an indigenous concept that was pivotal in shaping both governmental and popular attitudes.

The book is intended for students and general readers, as well as Middle Eastern scholars, and its structure reflects its didactic purpose. Every chapter begins with an introduction and ends with a conclusion in which historical developments are critically assessed. The chosen structure provides much clarity, especially in light of the daunting task of covering such a large period of history. The glossary provides definitions for essential Middle Eastern concepts and institutions that non-specialist readers will find useful. The extensive bibliography constitutes a precious anthology for any scholar seeking to further map out the emerging 'continent' that is the Middle Eastern political tradition.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, viii.