

Transitions

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The life-span of independent journals can be dicey affairs. Launching an international journal as graduate students at UCLA seemed decidedly foolhardy especially when radical journals were finding the 1980s a difficult decade to survive, culminating of course in the epoch-making changes of the end of that decade and the early years of the next. What should have been an opportunity for rethinking, renewal and reinvolvement often saw a headlong retreat on the left. However, this journal, along with a resolute handful of others, has not only survived, it has thrived. We celebrate twenty years of publication with deep appreciation for our readers, subscribers, and the work of our editorial associates and board members. We also mark a transition. With this issue we step down as editors, passing the baton to Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, our longtime editorial associate.

The origins of this journal go back to the late 1970s when the events of the Iranian Revolution, the second-wave Indian women's movement, and a reinvigorated anti-apartheid movement had begun to galvanize students on many university campuses across the U.S. It was also a time when a new generation of students from the Third World was entering US graduate programs in the Humanities and Social Sciences, a generation politicized by the anti Vietnam-war movement and the Chinese Cultural Revolution, witness to collapsing modernization projects and proliferating civil wars, deeply critical of the narrow na-

tionalisms of the formerly colonized states and the growing reach of US military and cultural hegemony. These concerns brought many of us into common conversations at UCLA, encouraged us to organize reading groups and then a week-long international conference on South Asia in 1980, develop an editorial board, and publish some of the papers from the conference in what became the first issue of the journal in 1981. Our normative arena of inquiry extended from South Asia westwards to Africa and the Middle East, a region with centuries of shared histories, cultures, languages and migrations. Colonial rule — particularly British imperialism and colonial dominance — transformed but by no means eliminated those shared histories, though professional area studies in the United States and Europe and nationalist historiographies in South Asia, Africa and the Middle East conspired to construct autochthonous models of social development, rather than present a more interesting and accurate picture of dynamically interlinked and co-evolving societies. This journal remains the only US university-based publication that consciously and consistently crosses the boundaries drawn by all three major "area studies" professional organizations of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Our vision has been to challenge the domains of academic specialization that are the result of the imbrication of social science inquiry within the matrix of European colonial priorities and the later exigencies of

American imperialism expressed since the 1950s in the area studies approaches prevalent in modern academia. The established frames of national and regional area studies have, by and large, excluded dialogue among people with shared histories not only predating colonial rule, but also of the experiences of colonialism and the specific varieties of global capitalism and modernity that came with it. Primary among our concerns has been the effort to overcome these legacies. This is not to deny the value of disciplined empirical or historical study of localities and regions but rather to challenge the stark oppositions and narratives of exceptionalism that thrive on an ignorance of history and knowledge of comparable empirical realities in societies separated by the accidents of political geography and constructed narratives of difference.

Ironically, even as the area studies paradigms came under scrutiny in the heartland of its production during the late 1980s and 1990s, models of inquiry that foregrounded the local and led a retreat into particularism rose to prominence originating often in the former colonies. Ultimately, the true legatees of area studies were to be the nationalist political elites and aspirant elites. In many countries of the postcolonial world the Eurocentrism of conservative European and North American scholars found an echo in a form of reverse Eurocentrism, a resuscitated Orientalism that held up fragments of the pre colonial past as symbols of the authentic untouched by the contamination of foreign, and not only "Western," ideas and influences, a pre-national national essence awaiting reclamation. As a form of radical conservatism, such indigenist tendencies elaborated on organicist conceptions of "pre-capitalist communities" and their exclusive sensibilities. Nurturing neo-nationalisms and providing sustenance to right-wing historiographies of all sorts that also emerged in this period, such models of exceptionalism became the stuff and substance of national-

ist educational schemes. Yet, this rediscovery of the particular and its essentialized difference, too, is a new form of metropolitan knowledge production and consumption made possible by the globalizing reach of capitalism. Against the current, our effort remained engaged with the systemic dimensions of capitalism even as we have sought to explore its cultural articulations. Retaining an engagement with socio-economic issues and concerns even when it has not been fashionable to do so has been a distinctive feature of this journal during the period of our editorship.

As we look back over events of the last twenty-plus years, the collapse of the Soviet Union stands out as a defining moment. For beyond the inroads of the expansive phase of capitalism and its aggressive penetration under US hegemony in the post-Gulf War period, the political horizon of the states in this region was abruptly remade by the unanticipated disintegration and dismemberment of the Soviet Union. The disappearance of the Communist parties in all but name from Eastern Europe left the traditional Left of South Asia, Africa and Middle East without survival strategies, a political space that has been rapidly taken over by the neo-fundamentalist and right-wing political parties. In some countries such as India and Pakistan, the official communist parties had been beneficiaries of Soviet patronage. Their ability to have an impact on national level politics has eroded along with the Soviet Union. Even where such formal and identifiable links were not visible, throughout the region there were variations of the Left which had drawn inspiration from the mere fact of existence of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and others states in Eastern Europe and Vietnam and China as at least symbolic alternatives to the dominance of global capitalism. That alternative does not exist any more. As this history passes from active memory we have attempted over the years to publish interviews, archival materials and essays on aspects of the history of the Left in

these regions, but much remains to be done.

Our final issue, Volume XX, a special double issue on the "Political Geographies of Fin-de-Siècle Capitalism" and "Iranian Immigrants, Exiles and Refugees," brings into sharp focus many of our on-going historical and theoretical concerns. Above all, it reiterates once more that no local or regional study is complete unless it takes into account the global integument within which the local or regional evolve and that globalization as a subject of inquiry is vacuous unless located in the varying political geographies of the uneven and combined development of capital on the planetary scale. We anticipate that many of the issues raised in the preceding twenty years will more than hold their own in the years to follow. With the gradual revival of interest in the themes that have all along animated this journal, we believe the time is ripe for it to continue to develop and strike out in new directions.

Twenty years is a long time to have edited and published a journal, taking into account the always minimal institutional support available to it. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* (CSSAAME) is now an established journal with a broad readership and subscribers worldwide. It is with some considerable confidence and expectation that we hand over the editorship to Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, who brings a wealth of activist and scholarly experience to the task. Born and raised in southern Tehran, in a neighborhood located between the bazaar and the Armenian and Jewish quarters, early in his life Mohamad became aware of oppositional, class and communal politics. These experiences have informed his commitment to a cosmopolitan and secular-left politics, a commitment that accounts for his involvement in the Iranian left and the anti-apartheid, Palestinian, and Latin American solidarity movements. Through political activism he became familiar with political debates ranging from dependency theory and feminism to post-Marxism and Subaltern Studies. As a

graduate student at the University of Chicago in the 1980s he brought these debates into the study of the Middle East by establishing the weekly Middle East History and Theory Workshop and annual conference, both of which are still continuing. At Illinois State University he has established a weekly multidisciplinary global studies seminar series that effectively combines social and scholarly commitments. Besides CSSAAME, Mohamad has published in *Radical America*, *South Asia Bulletin*, *Iranian Studies*, *Iran Nameh*, *Nimeye Digar*, *Strategies*, *Medieval History Journal*, *Mehregan*, *ISIM* and the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. He is also the author of *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism and Historiography* (Palgrave 2001).