Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften / Austrian Academy of Sciences

AAS WORKING PAPERS IN SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY

Volume 16

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Band 16

ÖAW ARBEITSPAPIERE ZUR SOZIALANTHROPOLOGIE

ÖAW
Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften

AAS Working Papers in Social Anthropology /
ÖAW Arbeitspapiere zur Sozialanthropologie

ISSN: 1998–507X
doi: 10.1553/wpsa16
ISBN: 978-3-7001-6874-4

Wien 2010

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DAYDREAMS AND TRNSGRESSIVE WISHES IN CONTEMPORARY SYRIA*

John Borneman

Abstract:
Based on an analysis of dreams and daydreams of young Syrian men, this essay examines the fear of and desire for transgression of gender and genealogical taboos. Episodes of the use of Internet pornography, desires for humiliation, and anxieties about religious authority, violence, and sex suggest new kinds of global exchanges in intimacy, where the rules structuring paternity and gender no longer hold. The paper concludes with an argument about how a focus on the intersubjective, which accounts for the researcher in the situations studied, indexes wishes and fantasies about change, suggesting future communicative possibilities.

This essay presents three experiential episodes involving the activity of daydreaming and the state of reverie of young men in daily life that occurred during my ethnographic research in Aleppo between 2004 and 2006.[1] The episodes concern the use of Internet pornography, desires for humiliation, and anxieties about violence and sex, and point to the fear of and desire for transgression of gender and genealogical taboos among young Syrian men. The daydreams analysed are a particular subset of experiences from fieldwork encounters that take place precisely because of the co-presence of the anthropologist. They do not refer us back to a distinct "local experience"[2] of subjectivity, nor are they particularly interesting as products of dialogue or collaboration between the anthropologist and his interlocutors. Rather, they reveal the mutual imbrication of experience of both anthropologist and interlocutor and index wishes and fantasies about change, suggesting future communicative possibilities. They can form the basis for an alternative – third – understanding of a Syrian reality in which I also took part. I call this, following Thomas Ogden (1997: 9–11, 116–19), the experience of an "intersubjective third." In the final section of this paper, I suggest the benefits of this reflexive epistemology and the limits of an approach restricted to the depiction of public selves, opinions, or the so-called "Arab Street."

1. Episode One. Dream Collector

This first episode involves interaction in the fall of 2004 with a merchant in the Souk al-Atarin (Borneman 2007: 115–16).

> *Majid calls me a dream collector because I make a point of asking people about their dreams. Freud famously defined dreams as the "fulfillment of a wish," and I see them as windows into complex motivations, how people envision their world, and what they generally want from it.*

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* The present contribution is based on a paper presented at the Institute for Social Anthropology of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, June 9, 2010.

[1] The episodes used in this essay are taken from my recent book, *Syrian Episodes* (Borneman 2007), based on fieldwork in Aleppo, where I lived and did research in the ancient Souq al-Atarin and taught for a semester as a Fulbright Professor at the University of Aleppo.

[2] Although I do not follow Clifford Geertz's interest in isolating Syrian "culture" and the distinct subjectivities of the other, I nonetheless share his goal of thick descriptions, to make "it possible to think not only realistically and concretely about them but, what is more important, also creatively and imaginatively with them" (Geertz 1973: 23).

Dreams are especially important for recording wishes that people are most reluctant to express openly to themselves or to others. Most people I ask say they cannot remember their dreams. Majid's nephew, Mohammed, who assists him in the shop, says he remembers only the dreams that repeat. In one, he is licking a woman, sometimes even her feet. His uncle overhears him and says, "He asked for dreams, not nightmares!"

The next day when I ask Mohammed again, he says, "I dreamt of having a knife and using it on my uncle Majid." Mohammed also thinks by "dream" I mean simply what he wants, and whom he desires – whom among the customers that walk by he consciously desires. From his shop he yells after them: "Miss!" "Seniora!" "Fräulein!" "Mademoiselle!" "Seniorita!" "Madame!" Invariably the women he singles out are the older ones in the group, the grandmothers, who cannot believe this hunky, broad-shouldered twenty-year-old has his bright eyes on them, and then, as they walk away, he closes his eyes tightly and says wistfully, "My cup of tea."

I try to explain to Mohammed that I want not daydreams but dreams from his unconscious, from his sleeping hours, and he must remember or write these down as soon as he wakes. Majid dismisses my wish, "Mohammed only dreams during the day."

One late afternoon, as I prepare to leave his shop, Mohammed says, "I will dream for you tonight, perhaps not of women but of boys." I reply, "Let yourself go in your dream, Mohammed, perhaps dream of goats or sheep. I don't care."

"But I want to have a dream for you," he says.

"Don't," I reply.

The next day, Mohammed greets me with a dream, "I was swimming naked. There were lots of people: boys, girls, women, men. And the water tasted like blood. What do you think?"

"I don't really know, Mohammed," I say, "but perhaps you fear nudity, or the mixing of naked men and women, that it will result in violence."

1.1 Interpretation of Episode One

In retrospect, what was Mohammed trying to tell me in his reverie about living between fanta-sy and reality? Mohammed's uncle, Majid, initially dismissed what Mohammed told me as "day-dreams," and later, as "nightmares," meaning they were not dreams in the night that express the unconscious.[3] At the time I agreed with Majid, and asked Mohammed for a night dream. He did indeed eventually come back with a dream he had had the previous night, one where he was, first, in water, swimming – one might say that he was contained, not free or floating, yet in a flow – but this water was dangerous, it "tasted like blood." I must add here that water poses no danger to Mohammed. He is an excellent swimmer who prides himself on being the fastest in his family. The danger in the dream came from elsewhere, from the mixing of the generations and the two sexes. In other words, people were transgressing the two classic regulative social boundaries, which appear especially rigid for young men like Mohammed, but for adults are

[3] While night dreams have hallucinatory qualities and occur while asleep, daydreams are phantasies where something is consciously imagined while fully awake. Unlike night dreams, which involve re-pression and where the motive must therefore be decoded from a distorted message, "the content of these phantasies [in daydreams]," observes Freud, "is dominated by a very transparent motive. They are scenes and events in which the subject's egoistic needs of ambition and power or his erotic wishes find satisfaction." Daydreams share with night dreams the goal of "making the obtaining of pleasure free once more from the assent of reality" (Freud 1967: 120, 463).

essential structures of the everyday in Syria. So, in the dream, Mohammed is saying there is danger – symbolised by the water that tastes like blood – in the transgression of boundaries, especially those between women and men, but also between young and old. These are precisely the boundaries that Mohammed wishes to transgress, however, and in some sense which I, the unmarried, unattached adult stranger represent as transgressable. The fact that I represent this transgression in my own person and presence leads him to unconsciously symbolise these wishes in a dream he then remembers.

Mohammed's wish for transgression is also the subject of his daydreams, of his moments of reverie, which I had not initially acknowledged as significant. He imagines consciously killing his uncle with a knife or "licking a woman, sometimes even her feet." These daytime imaginings are truly phantasmatic and pleasurable, as Mohammed can safely entertain such thoughts since it is highly unlikely he would carry them out. And he can safely share them with me, the anthropologist who seeks an empathic understanding of his motivations. But Mohammed's nightdream, by contrast, is, as his uncle said, a nightmare, something he does not want to admit to himself and therefore feels compelled to repress; it expresses a horror scenario of conflict latent in daily life but in which the nightmare actually situates him. In real time, there is the risk of blood. Mohammed is aware of conflicts in the souk, and of latent tension between the Sunnite majority, to which he belongs, and the ruling Alewite clan, although he never verbally addresses these issues. In real time, the women whom Mohammed pursues are often the older types, ones who could be his grandmother. Once two young French girls did seem very interested in Mohammed and one of his cousins, they spent many hours over several days visiting them in the souk, and on their last evening invited them to a cafe. They asked me and a couple other older cousins to come along. In the cafe, Mohammed was so incredibly shy, totally unlike his aggressive salesman persona in the souk, that he could hardly bring himself even to talk to the girls with whom he had boldly flirted for several days.

One other important object to explain is the blood: where does it come from? What is its significance? Mohammed himself is not injured, and he does not see himself as injuring anyone, and the mix of people in the water are also not themselves generating the blood. These liquids, water and blood, have nothing to do with the father, or with the father's liquids – specifically, semen – and in this sense the substances he dreams of are not in the register of the Oedipal. They do not come about because of the presence of his father in mediating his relationship with his mother. The father or any symbolisation of him is in fact absent from the dream.

So we might assume that the water surrounding him, which he tastes, appeals to an oral register; it recalls that "oceanic feeling," what Freud identified as the register of the feminine. The water that tastes like blood is itself dangerous, for as much as Mohammed desires women, at base he fears being enclosed by them, or women come to symbolise his fears of social enclosure, perhaps because of his own personal phobias, but also because of the violence that might result should he act out his imagined transgressions. These tensions, between everyday violence and his own desires, fears, and phobias, are informed by the current sociopolitical context, by a formal calm undercut by an omnipresent anxiety about instability and change that shadows life in an authoritarian police state.

2. Episode Two. Pornography

This second episode is taken from an encounter in January 2006 (Borneman 2007: 209).

> *In the early evening I join Majid in his shop in the souk. We gather his nephews together and walk to a new restaurant in an old villa that has been renovated on the edge of the souk. Actually, I very much enjoy the nephews, but more so one-on-one than as a group, when their behavior is ritualised and inevitably directed toward each other. All of them got new cell phones in the last year, and one shares with me the video clips he has downloaded onto his. His latest find is of a woman wearing high heels stomping on the genitals of a naked man lying on his stomach. "Aaayyy," I say, "please keep it for yourself. It pains me just to watch." He chuckles and pushes another, similar clip in my face. I ask him if he identifies with the man or the woman in the video. He simply laughs.*

2.1 Interpretation of Episode Two

The man in this scene is Mohammed, again, who since Episode One has been serving his compulsory army duty, but during my visit was visiting Aleppo on furlough. Much is changing in Syria given the new ubiquity of cell phones and sexual imagery, as well as personal access to the Internet. My first time in Aleppo, in 1999, there was one Internet cafe, and nobody I knew had Internet in their homes. In 2004, there were about five Internet cafes and a few people had Internet connections at home. In 2006, all the middle class families I knew had home Internet connections, leading to the closing of one of the best known Internet cafes downtown. It is well known that the growth and expansion of the Internet worldwide has facilitated an intensification of the circulation of sexual imagery. Today in many places the Internet also serves as a medium for setting up sexual liaisons, dates, or even marriages, that is, it facilitates already occurring social activity and exchange.

Equally if not more important, however, is the way the Internet facilitates privacy and new individual consumption patterns; it encourages reverie, specifically in the domain of sex. It frees sexual activity from many of its social contexts and controls, putting these controls in the hands of individuals, while also changing the nature of sex itself by promoting auto-sexuality and fetishes. Such sexual activity lends itself uniquely to reverie because, as Ruth Stein (1998: 594–95) writes, sex offers a "distinct feeling ... of stepping out of so-called 'everyday mentality' and habitual modes of functioning." Sex, then, although both banal and repetitive, nonetheless creates the possibility for an experience that is a respite from the everyday in its phenomenal qualities of excess, enigma, abandonment and intensification of self, and immersion in the other. Internet sex differs from actual sex not in that it substitutes a phantasmatic object for other forms of sexual connection, but that on the Internet the phantasmatic object is merely an image – it allows a greater disconnect between materiality, the real, and the imagined. We might characterise Mohammed's interest in this situation of extreme heterosexual excitement, where the woman's sexuality is represented only by her high heel, and the man's sexuality by his testicles, as an attempt to create an experience of aliveness that will disguise and partially substitute for the absence of such a sense in his everyday routines (Khan 1978). Mohammed, in other words, is showing me this image in an effort to feel vital and alive by finding a comparable and substitute experience and relation to the intimacy he deeply desires but feels is unobtainable socially.

It is incontrovertible that today pornographic images on the Internet are influencing the desires of young men and women, in Syria as elsewhere in the world. The question is how to understand this, what kinds of transformation of self and its relation to others is taking place? In 1962, the anthropologist Geoffrey Gorer (1962: 193) argued that only with literate societies does pornography appear, and by pornography he means "the description of tabooed activities to produce hallucination or delusion." Obscenity, Gorer maintained, can be found in many non-literate societies, but obscenity is social, it has to do with the sharing of sexually indecent or offensive depictions. It is, as Robert Stoller (1985: 90) writes, "a planned assault on an audience." Pornographic literature, by contrast, is to be read in private, and is therefore an enjoyment without the need for an audience.

This distinction between the obscene and the pornographic helps make some sense of Mohammed's experience of the sex video. Above all, unlike with obscenity, which he uses in front of everybody, he does not share his pornographic experience widely, and therefore it tends to isolate him in his reverie. This relative isolation from the social makes his experience of pornography subversive. Masud Khan (1978: 221) makes this case for pornography generally: it "neither draws upon nor extends the reader's imagination and sensibility; it offers him/her a limited world of omnipotent verbiage, insinuated and fabricated as somatic events, with their built-in faked climaxes and orgasms, at which the accomplice can feel both complacent and excited." The wish to feel both complacent and excited is a very modern one, which Khan explains in the following historical narrative, "With the industrial revolution and the advent of scientific technology in European cultures, man began to consider himself neither in the image of God nor of man, but in that of a machine which was his own invention; and pornographic écriture and imagery try to make of the human body an ideal machine, which can be manipulated to yield maximum sensation" (226). Its one perhaps positive effect, he argues, is to "transmute rage into erotic somatic events" (223).[4]

Over thirty years have passed since Khan wrote this, and today on the Internet it is not merely or mostly words but above all images, montages not mediated by written folklore or mythology, that circulate for private consumption, that simulate erotic somatic events. Syrians generally, outside of the Alewite sect, are deeply religious people, though not as pious as most people in other parts of the Arab world. But one effect of the secularism nourished by the Ba'thist regime of Hafez el-Asad has been to challenge religious dominance at the local level, including in the domains of gender and sex. It also directly limited, often forcefully, expressions of religiosity in public and private, often creating the resistance it was attempting to eliminate. It was not Mohammed's generation, however, but those of his father and grandfather that experienced the brunt of this force, including the response to the Islamist uprising of the late 1970s, organised by the Muslim Brotherhood: the 1982 massacre in the city of Hama. At that time, the Aleppian souk where Mohammed's family works was also surrounded by tanks and attacked. This massacre remains a strong collective memory for Mohammed, though he is discouraged from bringing it into speech (Borneman 2009). There is talk of a rapprochement between secular and religious forces under the leadership of

[4] Khan (1979) builds on Freud's thesis that the fetish develops out of an Oedipal dynamic in which it serves as a substitute for the mother's penis that the boy once believed in but does not want to give up. Rage is a reaction to a central castration anxiety: the boy's dread of and rage at his father's penis, and frustration at the futility of his efforts to satisfy his mother and soothe her fears that he will abandon her. If, in light of his (failed) attempt at restitution, his mother does not provide him with sufficient space for emotional and developmental needs, he ends up surrendering to her moods and seductions. Consequently, he creates a space for himself as a separate self in reverie that feeds off primarily masturbatory fetishes.

Hafez's son, Bashar el-Asad, who took over after his father's death, on June 10, 2000. But the Internet revolution being experienced by Mohammed largely bypasses this rapprochement and the influences of secular and religious forces altogether.

Mohammed is a Sunni Muslim but he also comes from a family of merchants, and since childhood his immersion in the rationalising practices of economic activity, his adaptation to the modular relation of customer to seller and the commodity form, is perhaps his dominant mode of relating to the object world in the everyday. This mode of relating has nothing to do with Allah or Islam or religious experience. In interactions with me, Mohammed would frequently switch into a mercantile mode if I showed any interest in objects in his shop, and the next day he would express regret or embarrassment about having put pressure on me to buy things.

The mercantilism of the everyday and Mohammed's daily involvement in commodity exchange with customers embeds him in social networks that make the experience of viewing pornography in the souk less isolating than Gorer or Khan might assume about the reading of pornographic literature at home. His activity is less as private reader than as viewer in a network of erotic image exchange. If he is isolated, it is only from some of his immediate kin and in his auto-erotic sexual practices. At the level of fantasy, he is fully "wired," as we say –– he did indeed obtain these images electronically from some anonymous others and he shares these images with me, and likely with select other boys and men.

He discovered the activity of downloading pornography in free time with his army buddies, with whom he relates in what he describes as a very relaxed atmosphere. Once he completed basic training, he explained to me that in the barracks he had little to do but sit around, smoke the narghile, and play cards. The food is cheap and bad, however, so out of sympathy for him, Mohammed explained to me, his commanding officer lets him and others take frequent, relatively long, unscheduled leaves. Smoking the narghile – an activity that used to be largely restricted to adult males but is now practiced by both women and men across generations – is for Mohammed a habit. In the souk he gathers the coals and lights the water pipe ritually around three in the afternoon. It disposes him to what Wilfried Bion (1962) calls an "unconscious state of receptivity," that is, he frequently gives himself over to reverie, and the narghile helps sustain this state. This reverie does not take him in the direction of contemplating god, piety, and the sacred, however, but to imaginings of sex, domination, and humiliation. In this way the downloading of pornographic images is an activity that feeds Mohammed's various dream states freed from a strong reality principle, allowing him to remain complacent about his reality and to be excited simultaneously.

That Mohammed did not respond to my question with whom he identified on the video, the female sadist or her male victim, suggests an emotional ambivalence. Mohammed probably identified with the entire situation and its ambiguity. On the one hand, he probably empathised strongly with the male victim. His father and grandfather are very successful businessmen, but gentle men, not tyrannical fathers; over nine months in my nearly daily presence I never once heard them raise their voices to their sons. Among his more than twenty first-cousins, Mohammed is known as the one with the biggest heart, always helpful and giving to others; yet he is frustrated by imagining a life permanently tied to his family and the shop in the souk. From this basically passive position, Mohammed probably empathised with the man who is getting his balls stepped on by a sexy lady.

On the other hand, knowing that his language is filled with obscene foreign words and that his humor tends toward the lewd and risqué, I suspect he found the aggression of the castrating woman

funny and titillating. The world in which he works – his twelve-hour, six day work weeks in the souk – is totally male except for many of the customers. His large family, like the other proprietors in the souk, does not allow female members of the family to work with or even visit them on the job. Most of his female kin, including his mother, stay at home; those who work do so for other employers in other parts of the city, certainly not in any of the many traditional Aleppian souks.

These women – grandmothers, mothers, sisters, sisters-in-law, aunts – cook for the men at night and take care of them all day on Fridays. They compete for the attentions of the men and boys. In Mohammed's family, they have much power in the domestic sphere, and his emotional dependence on them produces aggression against them. But they do not control the money that comes in, nor do they, as I mentioned, accompany their male relatives in the public sphere. Power over their sons or brothers is solely through seduction and emotion, and that is usually sustained through the cultivation of an oral tie: the love of cooked food. Some men I know in Aleppo continued eating their mother's food many years into their marriage. Their wives have no chance for loyalty in this sphere; their best hope for attachment is by producing sons, the earlier in a marriage the better. So, for Mohammed, the woman in the video expressed his aggressive feelings in a way similar to the taste of blood in his dream in episode one. She made, in the words of Robert Stoller (1985: 90) "excitement out of boredom [by] introducing hostility into fantasy." The desire to humiliate is an essential theme of erotic play, but what is significant in this case is that Mohammed was humiliating himself, not the woman. The video-woman with heels was admittedly going to extremes to get some attention, inverting the usual male/female romantic hierarchy by playing the active role. But also, the man in the video was being punished, and Mohammed thinks this punishment plausible if not also pleasurable and deserved, above all for fantasies of transgressions that might subvert women's power over him.

3. Episode Three. "The religious people see this and hate it, but they cannot turn it off"

My third episode is from a late evening in 2005, in a hammam with Basil, a very secular, Alewite man, advanced student of law and international relations at the time. He proposed to go to the hammam quite late at night, and I readily agreed, as I thought it would be an adventure. But when we got there, Basil said he came only because he had run out of cigarettes. He was interested only in buying cigarettes and smoking, not in going into the baths themselves, and he refused to go further than the waiting room. He proposed I go in, however, and he would wait for me in the area where one cools off. The events below follow conversations and interactions I had in the baths, described in the book, while Basil waited (Borneman 2007: 79–80).

> *Basil is whiling away his time, drinking tea, watching television, bored, I am sure, but not much bothered by that, and he still has not smoked though he now has cigarettes. He reiterates his dislike for Syrian tradition. On the television is one of the ubiquitous Arab MTV-like stations, which is playing an Arab rock video that Basil says is the first import from the new Iraq. The lead dancer is a tall, leggy blonde (dyed hair, of course), and the camera darts back and forth from her legs to her long golden hair. When it pauses in the middle, she shimmies her ample breasts. The scenes of the video are cut to a quick tempo, and they become most frenzied in the whirr of her hair, which she aggressively and wildly flings around like the spin cycle of a washing machine. Nearly all such videos focus on a romantic encounter of man and woman. In this one, the leggy blonde is there to be seduced by the lead singer, a man, of*

course, who is older than her, fat, and remains fully clothed except for the few top buttons of his shirt that reveal a hairy chest. She – this modern, fully made-over figure – is the point of identification for the audience; she is the audience to be seduced by the singer and his love ballad. In other words, Tradition is to seduce the Modern.

"This is the new Iraq," declares Basil, with an ironic chuckle. "The religious people see this and hate it, but they cannot turn it off. They like to watch it, but it makes them angry. That is our problem. There is no in-between. Either this, or tradition. I hate Syrian tradition, especially the traditions that divide the sexes."

3.1 Interpretation of Episode Three

This episode brings us another step closer to seeing how attention to reverie, attention to inattention, contributes to understanding the relation of fantasy to a sense of reality in contemporary Syria. One of the things that Basil cannot have and wants is also what Mohammed cannot have and wants: freedom to converse with women his own age. What I had relegated to whiling away time and boredom was actually a state of absorption or pre-occupation, which led to Basil's amazing insight about the inability of traditional cultural frames to help him incorporate the seductions of the modern, and about the ambivalence produced in what he calls "religious people," who detest these seductions but are unable to say no to them.

Basil's framing brings to mind a conversation I had in 2006 with a young soldier on furlough from the army. I met on a bus from Homs to Aleppo (Borneman 2007: 204). He was studying to be an imam at the prestigious al-Azhar University in Cairo, and because of this study, he explained to me, and because he is Sunni Muslim, he had just spent two months in the brig. "But what was the actual offense?" I asked. He explained that the authorities discovered some email addresses of foreigners in his address book. Soldiers are forbidden contact with foreigners. He reminded me, jokingly, that our conversation is prohibited. I asked him about al-Azhar University, and he said he liked it very much; the authorities are very relaxed, he can travel a lot in Egypt. He asked me if I knew Pamela Anderson. "From Baywatch?" I asked. "She is," he said, "our Greatest Temptation."

Basil wants intimacy with women – public dating, touching, friendship, romance, Great Temptation – but he is not demanding sex, at least not immediately. In this wish, he is not so different from the several generations of uncles and brothers-in-law older than him, even though much has changed in the conditions of growing up in Syria in the last thirty years. And much has changed in the last decade. For one, there is the intensified exchange of images discussed in Episode Two, which not only encourages fantasies about the ideal human body manipulated to yield maximum sensation, but also the transgression of the sexual and generational boundaries that regulate the social. This new circulation of images and the wishes that grow out of their consumption are accompanied by anxieties about thoughts of transgression. These anxieties remain largely unspoken, and there is no institution at present able to allay the accompanying unease.

Add to this the fact that the overwhelming majority of young Syrian men want to leave the country. Given the high level of endemic corruption and rigid social hierarchies that block occupational access and mobility, they see no economic future for themselves. The wish to leave one's country – true for both Mohammed and Basil – is a radical and desolate response to a sense of confinement and lack of opportunity. Syrians strike me as very patriotic about their country and chauvinistic about their culture. After reading on the Internet the first few pages of Syrian Episodes, where I

describe the experience of dust and clamor in the souk, two young men I got to know well sent me an email that reads in part, "We are shocked. I want to tell you something, Mr. John, which is, you didn't see anything about our great city, Aleppo. I think that you have to live ten years at least in our city to get an idea about what you were going to write about." Such civic pride in place and tradition is a general Syrian sentiment. But the traditions that they respect, including religious traditions, as Basil suggests, offer an inadequate and unsatisfying response to some of the siren songs of modernity that they hear and see. These modern seductions – wishes for romantic love, sex, political freedoms, and status consumption – are not outside Syria, even though some people may associate them with the West. They have already been introjected by Syrians, including by the political and religious elites. They have already become integral to the Syrian subject, which means that idolised internal voices are speaking to them about attractions and fantasies that they feel obliged to contain or repress.

4. The Intersubjective Third, Public Space, Opinion

To this point, my argument has been twofold: first, that paying attention to the intersubjective, to how knowledge of the other is obtained in fieldwork interaction (in this case, by the joint creation of an intersubjective third), can lead to insights about alternative senses of reality; and second, that attention to the phantasmatic (in this case, to daydreams and states of reverie), indexes domains of experience and wishes that are future-oriented and hard to access through more usual approaches to attitudes, opinions, and everyday life. In this final section, I want to briefly discuss why this kind of epistemology has been ignored in studies of the Middle East, and how it addresses some of the shortcomings of the study of shared public space or the "Arab Street."[5]

The notion that scholars can stand in an unmediated and disinterested relation to those things and persons they describe is now, at least in anthropology, generally dismissed as naive objectivism.

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[5] The Arab Street as a concept has a history, of course, becoming popular in the long period of decolonisation during the Cold War. Even before its popular dissemination, the street in its many references was essential to anticolonial and national independence movements in the 1930s and 1940s. It reached its fullest expression as opinion and action in the mid 1950s under the pan-Arabist leadership of Gamal Abdel Nasser, whose legitimacy stemmed in part from the way he could summon crowds, and not only in Egypt, to support revolutionary – socialist, anti-imperialist – goals. At one point "Nasserism" culminated in protests in six Arab countries – protests that opposed the official politics of their governments – in support of Nasser's resistance to the British, French, and Israeli attempt to retake militarily the Suez Canal.

In this same period, up until the 1970s, democratic socialist and communist movements acted to further local goals, such as the right to organise politically, to strike, to protest. Arab governments subsequently squashed these rival secular movements and imprisoned their leaders, tarring them as pro-Western. With this repression, the social forms in which analysts had understood opinion and action diversified and became more difficult to measure. Also, governments increasingly adopted official "anti-Zionist" ideology as a substitute for any real social programs (in the fields of transportation, education, or health, for example) to unite their disparate peoples. With the decline of Nasserism in the Middle East, some of the power vacuum was filled by Islamism in its two dominant forms, by the Gulf States, whose absorption of laborers, financed by their oil wealth, resulted in a steady flow of remittances back to home countries, and by the revolutionary Islamist ideology offered by Iranian leaders.

The Arab Street, then, was always associated with popular social movements, resistance, followership, and leadership. Since the death of Nasserism, however, the Arab world lacks any central leadership or resistance. It resembles a horde of brothers struggling with each other for ascendancy, with no single father or source of authority, each brother, or autocrat, unwilling to yield to the others. Islamist groups, which are largely directed against these formerly revolutionary but now autocratic, corrupt governments, replicate the pattern of the secular or monarchic authorities from which they try to

Edward Said was not the first scholar to make this important criticism of writers of the Middle East. In his words (1979: 21), the "strategic location [is] premised upon exteriority. What he says and writes ... is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact." That is to say, the Orientalist writes as if he is outside the Orient, whereas he is not. This criticism has frequently metamorphosed into another, however, into an accusation of Orientalism, – prejudicial outsider interpretations of Eastern cultures and peoples. This second point also draws its inspiration from Said (1979: 3, 6), from his argument that Orientalism is "a style of thought" that essentialises differences into "a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness."

The accusation of Orientalism, especially if leveled against what the intellectual historian Joseph Masad labels "Western, male, white-dominated" authors, has had the perverse effect of eviscerating the very possibility of a location for this sociological category of researcher's desires and interests within the East. For, if the researcher is Western and identifiably Male, his "strategic location" is no longer merely "premised upon exteriority" but in fact assumed to be necessarily always outside the East, and therefore through absence of any possibility of interiority incapable of a non-prejudicial interpretation of the East. Some analysts have indeed confused the premise of exteriority with an empirical location that is exterior. The anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (1991), for example, famously locates herself empirically as a "halfie," both inside and outside the East.[6] Masad (2002), for his part, both situates Western male desire as outside "the Arab world" while relegating the relation of his own location to desire to the closet. Moreover, he appears to exonerate perpetrators of sexual violence within Arab countries by claiming that such violence is a reaction to and product of Western discourses.[7]

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distinguish themselves. The use of the term "brotherhood" also suggests this line of interpretation at the linguistic level – as in Huquq al Ukhuwa (the rights of brotherhood) or as in Muslim Brotherhood, the greatest organised threat to these autocrats. Lacking a single authority or any distinct nationalist movements following the success of the anti-colonial movements, people have successively turned to pan-Arabism and Islam as surrogate totems.

[6] Abu-Lughod (1991: 37, 46, 47) draws upon the idea that a style like Orientalism "fixes differences between people" in the same way "culture … enforce[s] separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy." She claims to unsettle these differences, largely because her location – a "halfie [of] mixed national or cultural identity" – is both inside and outside the Orient. Traditional anthropology, she argues, by contrast, is involved in othering, caught up in the relationship between the West and non-West, and implicated in "Western domination." In these criticisms, she generalises to "culture" Said's second point, of "Orientalism" as a "style of thought" that essentialises differences. But by positioning herself as both inside and outside the Orient, she both reinscribes the differences between the two and misses his first point, that this outside is only hypostacised, and as if location.

[7] To be sure, Masad (2002) is correct in following Foucault when he insists that there is no necessary logic whereby homosexual practices result in a gay subjectivity. However, it is incorrect to equate human rights activists with a coherent Western society that is opposed to an (unchanging, or highly resistant to change) Arab society. Arab societies, like others, are heterogeneous, marked by internal conflict and ambivalence about their own normative frameworks. His attack on what he calls "the gay international", is premised on an essentialisation of the positions inside and outside, reducing all experiential encounters to power alone, and assuming that the West's power is always superior to that of Arab societies. When Masad (2002: 37) argues that Western activists "incite discourse about homosexuals where none existed before," he mechanically applies a simplified version of Foucault (that naming alone constitutes a subjectivity) to a dehistoricised situation, while claiming to do the opposite. In this, he reinstantiates and stabilises the Oriental/Occident binary which was the subject of Said's critique. See the critique of Masad by Whittaker (2009).

One of the effects of the fear of the accusation of Orientalism is to avoid arriving at some understanding of a changing psyche or interiority among Arabs, and instead to focus on surface phenomena – opinions, the Street, public space. My attempt here has been to access this inner life through intimate exchanges at the conscious and unconscious levels – dreams, daydreams, wishes, the phantasmatic, or notions of selfhood not visible to or even denied by the actors themselves – of everyday experiences that are usually not paid attention to in research.

In studies of public space in Arab countries, of which there have been many, or inferences about "the Arab Street," there is often little concern for the actual sensual experience of these spaces. Arabs are either represented only through the material objects they produce, or in the spaces they move or the discourses about them, or, when Arabs appear as persons, they become overly rational people with little humor and an exaggerated imagination for violence, largely determined by interactions with Western domination. My focus on the relation of daydreaming to the Syrian sense of reality is meant as a contribution to rebalance the picture.

What of the Arab Street? First, a short anecdote: a Jordanian friend living and teaching in Australia visited me in 2008 in Princeton. She grew up in a small town in Niedersachsen in central Germany, was educated in universities in Berlin and Australia, and is now a specialist on Australian aboriginal kinship. When I mentioned I was writing about the Arab Street, she told me how her aunt, who lives in Pasadena near Los Angeles, recently complained to her that when she walks up and down the beautiful and clean street in her neighborhood, she meets nobody. But in Amman, Jordan, in each walk she would have been invited for coffee a half dozen times, heard all the local gossip of the neighborhood about kin and friends and neighbors, and had discussions about the news of the larger political world. On the street in L.A., there is no kinship, no politics, no sharing of information or opinion, no argument, no interest in agreement or disagreement. The street in Amman, to put it succinctly, is a vibrant space for encounter, conversation, interaction, for the formation of a public, while the street in L.A. is a fairly anonymous place of isolated monads where there is little communicative exchange.

I could repeat this comparison many times, and contrast the experience of streets in Aleppo, Beirut, Damascus, Cairo, Rabat, Tunis, Sana'a, with American cities – and the difference will hold up. So, why then does an empirical version of how the street is lived and experienced rarely enter into scholarly or journalistic interpretive frames? My argument is that the term "the Arab Street" is useful for projective identification: to attribute agency to a wide range of subjects either as what most Western observers wish were the case in their own depoliticised, apathetic streets, or, alternatively, as a metaphor to frame an intuition or imagination. The Arab Street is phantasmatic like the daydream, never really about the empirical street.[8]

Use of "the Street" is often justified as a substitute, the next best thing, for reliable macro-polling data in the Arab world that might be analogous to the West's notion of "opinion" or "popular will." (Although, of course, some of this data does exist, produced by Arabs themselves, like

[8] Both of these responses characterise the most widely read user of the street-as-metaphor, not an academic but journalist, the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, who, when not marketing his metaphor of the "flat world," hammers away on the Arab street as inflamed, radical, anti-American, anti-modern or not-yet-modern, afraid or unwilling to speak up, behind, catching-up, or, my favorite, a "frostbite victim thumb-wrestling with the hand of fate upon the scorching sands of international opinion." It is unlikely, however, that people like Friedman who write and talk with such authority about "the Arab street" would admit to free association and disregard for empirical reality.

Daoud Kuttab or James Zogby.) Voices from the street, conventional wisdom goes, are necessary to contrast with the voice of government or of formal political institutions, which, in all Arab countries, being notoriously autocratic, prevent anything resembling an authentic process of opinion formation.

Accordingly, because the Arab subject has few public forums in which to express itself, he (the street is usually male) is often represented as angry but passive, repressed politically but aggressive personally (especially against Arab women), and irrationally anti-American and anti-Israeli if not anti-Western generally; or, alternately, among a small, sympathetic, but ultimately patronising group of analysts, the Arab subject is represented as rational, tolerant, motivated by justice (especially for the Palestinians) or by the tenets of Islam, someone who seeks voice in a democratic sphere. In either view, "the Arab street" is always phantasmatic, a purely subjunctive entity: what one thinks or hopes the "public sphere" in the Arab world would be if the undisclosed, popular wishes of the masses could be heard; the street is what cannot be seen or heard in public but if seen would nonetheless be analogous to Western notions of "public opinion."

"Opinion," however, does not have the same referent or hold the same value in the Arab world today as it does in Euro-American ideology. This is so not only because Middle Eastern tribal and religious loyalties are much more stable and consistent than comparable loyalties in the Euro-American world (where people choose and change religions, political parties, even gender), and therefore such belongings shape individual orientations in a way no "opinion" could capture; but also, because the assumed modes of Euro-American action and mobilisation – demonstration, resistance, voting, voicing abstract freedom – are not given the same valence in the Arab world.[9]

Much of the valence given to opinion in the West and elsewhere is due to its importance for democratic decision-making, for which there are very few forums in places where authoritarian regimes rule. In the West, the idea of democratic decision-making and autonomous opinion formation, extends well beyond the political sphere to decisions in the workplace, in schools, and even in families. In these settings, individual opinions are expected of people and indeed consistently produced. By contrast, such institutions in most of the Arab world do not demand of people opinions. They demand negotiation, obedience, compliance, but not opinions. Therefore, when analysts use polls, often along with formal interviews, to measure opinion regarding the various claims of anger, hatred, tolerance, or the like, their numerical representations of this subjunctive entity we call "the Arab Street" is the mere appearance of empiricism. Such analyses of opinion offer at best an indexical or mirroring relation to changing attitudes and loyalties, and lead to banal chicken-and-egg kind of assertions, basically that opinion either precedes or follows thought and action.

In sum, the Arab Street is indeed a very active place of sensuous exchange and argument and decision, but not of opinion formation. But that Street makes visible only the surface selves of people, their public performances. Processes of subject formation – the inner world, configurations of wishes, tastes, desires, unconscious loyalties or hatreds, repressions – are not readily graspable or on display in public settings. Access to these processes usually requires some degree of trust

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[9] I do not mean here to posit an opposition between indigenous Arab forms and Western forms, or, as in the work of many post-colonial scholars, to invoke the general dominance of the West's system of representation over the Orient. The West and much of what it represents are in fact already internal to large parts of the Arab world, as is Israel and its war on the Palestinians – in a way, for example, that Syria is not internal to the U.S. (Borneman 2003).

and inter-subjective play. An approach that relies only on objectived opinions as indices of public selves, or on observation of public spheres without more intimate participation by the researcher, elides the entire process of thought and affect formation, that which informs and motivates action and makes communication meaningful to the local actors.

This conclusion leads us back to the question of what the focus on daydreaming in the first half of this paper might contribute to understanding motivation and meaning. All social science and humanities disciplines are interested in what is culturally significant. And in the last twenty years we have had two world revolutionary events, along with many more localised dramas, that are forcing a restructuring of the culturally significant. I am speaking of the revolutions of "1989" ending the Cold War, and the near collapse of the world economic system in 2008. The two disciplines most authorised to analyse these events – political science and economics – largely failed to anticipate them (though, perhaps, most of the scholars in these fields would claim otherwise). This colossal failure of the models of social science in particular might lead us to take up less rationalist modes of thought, such as experiences of the intersubjective third, that stay closer to experience-near knowledge, affect, and meaning.

Attention to phantasma in states of reverie or dreams and its relation to the sensual experience of the everyday might better inform our understandings of the relation of subjectivity to public selves than the study of opinions or institutions divorced from the ambivalent meanings people invest in them. Especially in authoritarian states where the public is constantly being surveilled, relations between fantasy and reality are kept under cover, so to speak. Getting under this cover requires the kind of presence of fieldwork and the development of trust through acute listening (Borneman and Hammoudi 2009: 1–24, 259–272). More curiosity about what we do not know, and more refined analytical concepts that try to incorporate the phantasmatic and the limits of what we can see, might make both the Syrian sense of reality, and our own models of reality, more reliable indices of what the future holds.

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