

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY  
IRAQI STUDIES

Volume 4 Numbers 1&2 Pages 204-207

**MEMORIES OF STATE: POLITICS, HISTORY AND COLLECTIVE  
IDENTITY IN MODERN IRAQ, ERIC DAVIS (2005)**

Berkeley: University of California Press, 397 pp.,  
ISBN: 0520235460 (pbk), \$US29.95

*Reviewed by Orit Bashkin, Modern Middle East History,  
University of Chicago, USA  
E-mail: oritb@uchicago.edu*

Eric Davis has written a field-defining monograph. This innovative study explores questions relating to historical memory, state formation and nation building, and the relationships between all three in modern Iraq. The book can be placed within a broad trend in the field of Iraqi studies, represented in the works of Sami Zubaida, as well as Peter Wien, Nada Shabout, Hala Fattah and Sylvia Naef (to name a few), which have analysed the output of poets, female

activists, journalists, painters, novelists and 'ulama in order to complicate our understanding of Iraqi cultural politics and Iraqi nationalism. Using Gramscian concepts (especially 'hegemony' and the divisions between 'organic' and 'traditional' intellectuals), Davis's book carefully analyses how different intellectuals constructed various memories of the Iraqi nation, and how these memories were both appropriated and contested by the state. *Memories of the State* makes a number of important contributions to Iraqi and Middle Eastern studies; I will highlight the three major domains in which I see Davis's arguments as helping to bring about a paradigmatic shift within those fields.

First, the book gives voice to Iraqi intellectuals and traces their histories in the twentieth century. Davis analyses the intellectuals' activities in particular spaces (cafés, newspapers, cultural and literary magazines and writers' associations), political institutions (communist cells, political parties) and state institutions (various ministries of propaganda and broadcasting). This approach is especially useful with regard to the monarchic period, when, despite a repressive regime, a lively public sphere was able to sustain itself. Most significantly, Davis views the ways in which these intellectuals defined the historical memory of the nation, from the state-sponsored, exclusionist Pan-Arab memories to the subaltern and vernacular memories that offered a more democratic and inclusionary vision of Iraqi state and Iraqi society. As Davis convincingly demonstrates, at any given moment in Iraqi history, even under the most oppressive regime, there was not a single national narrative or a single memory of the nation, but rather competing memories advanced by state and opposition forces. Even within the state apparatus, differing national narratives were evoked. Thus, Davis deconstructs the writings of Iraqi Pan-Arabists and their ideological rivals in order to highlight their functions as both tools of the state's hegemony-building mechanisms and vehicles of resistance. In this context, I found Davis's examination of the cultural journals published under the Ba'ath extremely interesting (especially in light of Achim Rohde's recent work). Davis elucidates how intellectuals living in this era researched and anthologized works of writers and poets whose political visions differed sharply from that of the ruling Ba'athists, and in so doing were able to offer a critique of state policies from within the state's own cultural institutions.

The second contribution of the book lies in its approach to the study of Arab and Iraqi nationalism. The book deftly avoids the ever-so-comfortable divisions between Sunnis and Shias, Arabs and Kurds, by showing how the meanings ascribed to sectarian identities changed over time and were influenced by political parties, historical narratives, location and generation. The book also illustrates (especially in its very interesting chapters on Qasim and the Ba'ath) that, despite Iraq's sectarian and ethnically diverse makeup, a distinct Iraqi national identity came into being during the monarchic period and prevailed in the following decades. However, Davis makes a nuanced distinction between state formation and the formation of national memory. On the one hand, the existence of the Iraqi state and its viability is never called into question. On the other hand, the book presents the process of the formation of a national memory as ongoing and fluid. Building on theorists of modern nationalism (Hobsbawm, Anderson, Smith), Davis does not present a linear process by which Pan-Arab nationalism was developed in the interwar period and then radicalized after 1968. Rather he underscores processes of continuity and change and illustrates how Mesopotamian territorial nationalism was a key ideological element under Qasim and was later reconfigured under the Ba'ath; how Pan-Arab cultural constructs like the *Shu'ubiyya* return to prominence

at different stages of Iraqi history, and how militaristic and dictatorial narratives formulated under Qasim reappear under the Ba'th with much more vigor and deadly violence. In a sense, the book's immense scope enables readers to observe the ways in which events analysed in the first chapters of the book (like the 1941 coup) were invested with intense national symbolism after 1968. Furthermore, given the fact that most studies of Arab nationalism still tend to focus on the late nineteenth century and the inter-war period, Davis's exploration of Arab nationalism in Qasimi and Ba'thi Iraq begins an important conversation with works written by Lisa Wedeen, Joel Gordon and Adheed Dawisha on Arab nationalism and Arab culture under authoritarian and populist regimes during the second half of the twentieth century.

Thirdly, the book's use of sources is truly commendable. The book benefits from the important secondary literature produced by Iraqi scholars (mostly in exile) on Iraqi culture, politics and civil society. It thus helps to familiarize western audiences with the insights of important Iraqi intellectuals, historians and social scientists. Moreover, the book profited considerably from interviews Davis conducted with individuals who played key roles in both the production and the study of Iraqi cultural politics: Salih Ahmad al-'Ali, 'Abd al-Hamid al-'Alwaji, Raid Fahmi, Muhdhir al-Jaburi and Muhsin Musawi. The fact that Davis preferred talking to the exiled communist intellectual 'Aziz al-Hajj in Paris, to researching the Iraqi state's policies under its watchful eye, represents a very important (and courageous) ideological choice on his part. Finally, Davis has read, and analysed, an amazing number of journals, literary magazines and novels in order to clarify the ways in which Iraqi memory was produced and transmitted. This richness is helpful in two ways. First, readers get a sense of what Iraqis read and saw (Davis looks at painting and sculptures as well) in every period of Iraqi history. Second, this type of analysis exposes readers to the activities of secondary intellectuals – those who, albeit not noted for either originality or creativity, nevertheless transmitted and transformed the visions of the state and its prominent intellectuals.

A few minor criticisms are in order, however. First, as central as Gramsci is to the perception of the intellectual, Davis could have drawn on the insights of other theorists (such as Shils, LaCapra and Said). This would have helped the reader distinguish between secondary and prominent intellectuals. There is, after all, a world of difference between an intellectual of the stature of Muhammad Mahdi al-Jawahiri and an official working for a state-sponsored institution, in terms of the reception of their works, their contributions to the Iraqi literary canon and their roles in the production of Iraqi national and cultural memory. Similarly, Pierre Nora's conceptualization of 'memory sites', that is, spaces connecting the past and present, could have shed important light on the relationship between intellectuals and the spaces they both occupy and construct (museums, monuments) and the debates about the meanings of such sites. Second, we need to take into account the fact that intellectuals may revise their perceptions of their nation's historical memory. For example, as Davis himself notes, the poet Badr Shakir al-Sayyab was a communist in the 1940s and later became a Pan-Arabist, even under Qasim. Third, the tensions between state-produced, transregional, and local memories are critical to our understanding of Iraqi intellectual production. Consideration of the Arab context in which Iraqi Pan-Arabists wrote and published, and the differences between these Iraqis and their fellow Ba'this and Nasserites, as well as the attempts of the Ba'thi regime to enlist Arab intellectuals through a variety of festivals and cultural events, seem crucial from this vantage point. On

the other hand, the state's ideas were also modified and translated by various subgroups in Iraqi society. While I wholeheartedly appreciate Davis's nonsectarian viewpoint regarding Iraqi cultural politics, I do think that paying more heed to Shia religious intellectuals (such as Muhammad Husayn Al Kashif al-Ghita or Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr) could have illustrated how communist and nationalist concepts were modified within a Najafi context. Finally, and most importantly, historical memory is an important category but it always interacts with such forces as class, colonialism, imperialism, generation, sect and ethnicity and is shaped by such interactions.

To sum, this book opens up a whole new discussion about Iraq and its cultural politics. It is truly a remarkable achievement. In his poem 'Apology for a Short Speech,' the poet 'Abd al-Wahhab al-Bayati describes a poet who responds to the madness and violence surrounding him by employing his golden words, his grapes of wrath: 'I carry my heart in a suitcase//Like a dead child who drenched his cross with tears//Over thousands of treacheries and thousands of mean lies.' More than anything, the book, despite depicting an authoritarian culture and its historical memories, pays tribute to all those Iraqis with crosses and suitcases who wrote and published to counter those who produced thousands of treacheries and thousands of lies.