

History and Society of Iraq between Hanna Batatu and Ali al-Wardi⁽¹⁾

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The writings of Hanna Batatu and Ali al-Wardi have profoundly shaped our understanding of the society and history of modern Iraq. Batatu's and al-Wardi's distinct methodologies have significant implications on our understanding of the history and politics of present day Iraq. Writing in the late 1970s at the height of Ba'athist power, Batatu's history of the Iraqi Communist Party and its liquidation by the Ba'athists, exhibited a faith in the ability of popular mobilization to forge a change in society. Ali al-Wardi had no such faith. He saw the politics of the 1920 rebellion, claimed by nationalist historiography as the birth of modern Iraqi nationhood, as mired in allegiances to sect and tribe. Al-Wardi's ethnographic approach led him to assert that the cultural personality of Iraqis precluded the assimilation of non-communal forms of sociability.

Iraqi Society Iraqi History Class Sect Tribe Modernity

1 This study is adapted from a lecture titled "Society and History in Iraq between Hanna Batatu and Ali al-Wardi" which was originally delivered by Dina Khoury on October 20, 2016. It was delivered for The Arab Council for the Social Sciences' (ACSS) second Hanna Batatu Lecture, to honor the life and work of the late Palestinian historian, Hanna Batatu.

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This paper is a reflection on two different approaches to the study of Iraqi history and their implications for our understanding of present day Iraq. The scholarship of Hanna Batatu and Ali al-Wardi profoundly shaped our study of the society and history of modern Iraq. Drawing on Marxist class analysis, Hanna Batatu traced the development of Iraqi society from a pre-modern one based on tribal and communal loyalties, to a modern class society in which allegiances to class and to political parties co-existed and sometimes replaced older more traditional allegiances. By contrast, Ali al-Wardi drew on the sociological thinking of Ibn Khaldun as well as on the works of Durkheim and American social psychologists. He understood the history of Iraq not as a linear progression from pre-modern forms of social organization to modern ones, but as a continuous struggle between *hadara* and *badawa*, between the cultures of urban settled life and the primordial allegiances to tribe and sect⁽³⁾.

Hanna Batatu's book, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq*, is considered by many as the model of how to write the modern history of the Arab world.⁽⁴⁾ At more than 1200 pages, the book is a study of the development of modern social classes and political movements in Iraq from the late 19th century until 1976. Originally intended as a history of the rise of the Communist Party, the 1958 revolution, and its aftermath, Batatu expanded on it as he was given access to more sources and visited Iraq in the 1960s and early seventies to do more research. Published in 1978, the book, together with Edward Said's *Orientalism* —published the same year, marked the emergence of a critical analysis of the study of the modern Middle East from two Arab scholars steeped in the language of the western social sciences and humanities. The result, for scholars from the Arab world studying the Middle East in the United States, was profound. It allowed us to think and write against the prevailing scholarship in the US that viewed Middle Eastern societies as

caught between tradition and modernity: a Middle East continuously falling short of attaining a western model of development. This narrative of the modern history of the Arab world was, in the 1970s and 1980s, decades that saw war and the bankruptcy of our own post-colonial governments, what we had been told by Arab commentators as well. Said's book, as is well-known, offered a powerful tool to critique this view of the Middle East as it did for all Western scholarship about the non-western world.

Unfortunately, Batatu's history of modern Iraq had much less of an impact on the academic study of Middle East, although it remains a premier source for anyone attempting to write the history of Iraq. In fact, when it was released many graduate students thought that there was nothing more to be said about Iraq, so detailed and thorough was his study. Some of its parts were beautifully written, it showed great empathy and understanding of the people that shaped the history of the country. It is this aspect of his book that has remained its enduring strength. Unlike most writings on the politics of the Middle East, Hanna Batatu's book represented a people's history of Iraq. Although he systematically explored the impact of class, status and large structural factors in the making of Iraqi modern politics, his book is a history of a people struggling, and often failing, to shape their own political future. There were, in 1978, as there are now, very few books in either English or Arabic that provide this perspective of a people engaged in making their own history for over a century. In that respect, he is closer to the writings of British leftist historian E.P. Thompson, who wrote the history of the British working class, than he is to the work of political scientists or historians who study of the formation of political parties.⁽⁵⁾ He interviewed a number of Iraqis, he drew on a unique set of sources, including the police files of the Iraqi state, and poetry, popular songs and proverbs to bring alive the worlds of the protagonists that filled the pages of his monumental book.

3 Hadara means Urbanism as opposed to Badawa which means Tribalism.

4 Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements in Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978).

5 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (USA: Vintage Books, 1966).

Background: Batatu and al-Wardi

Hanna Batatu was an outsider to Iraq, a displaced Palestinian who first became interested in the country when it began to take center stage in Western diplomacy upon joining the Baghdad Pact at the height of the Cold War. Ali al-Wardi was an Iraqi born in 1913 and raised in the Kadhimiyya quarter in Baghdad to a lower middle class family, and educated at the American University of Beirut and at University of Texas where he obtained his doctorate in Sociology in the 1950. Ali al-Wardi's life spanned the most momentous developments of modern Iraqi history. By the time of his death in 1995, al-Wardi had witnessed the creation of the state of Iraq, a revolution that transformed it from a monarchy to a republic, several coups, a dictatorship, three wars, and an embargo. That he survived and was able to remain in the country is, in no small measure, due to his refusal to take an openly oppositional stand to the state and his insistence that the social sciences should remain critical and distant from ideology and politics. The closest he came to a public criticism of the state was in a very well attended public lecture he gave in Baghdad in March of 1991 just after the end of the Gulf War and the suppression of the Iraqi Intifida. He addressed ways to rebuild Iraqi society after the disaster of the war and the violence of the uprising and chastised the regime for its adventurism and recklessness.⁽⁶⁾

Although he was one of the founders of the Department of Sociology at the University of Baghdad in the fifties, he chose to retire in 1972, at the beginning of the state's attempt to fit the social sciences into the mold of Ba'athist ideology. He continued to publish in the popular press and give academic lectures, but he felt sidelined by the 1970s by the more rigorous and systematic research and writing of a younger generation of social scientists. They were more adept at navigating the pitfalls of at the increasingly narrow range of topics they could broach in Ba'athist Iraq.

Unlike Batatu, al-Wardi was not a systematic thinker or researcher. His narrative style is impressionistic and combined his choice of western social science theory and Islamic text to prove his assertions with little explanation on his method of selection. His writing is accessible, often sharply critical, and didactic. It is perhaps because of this style, a style for which he was criticized by Iraqi social scientists writing after the 1970s, that we often fail to place his work in historical context.⁽⁷⁾

Ali al-Wardi's early work from the 1950s, was written in the tradition of the intellectuals of the Nahda and of social scientists from the beginning of the twentieth century. He chose selectively and sometimes superficially from the sociologists of the US, in this case sociologists McIver and Mead, as well as Durkheim, and attempted to utilize their methods to read his society drawing on the work of Ibn Khaldun. Like them, his work was written not for specialists but for the educated public. How can we, he asked, use western categories of social science to understand ourselves? How can we use their critical and "scientific" methods to arrive at a less idealistic and utopian reading of our past and present? And finally, how can we avoid borrowing uncritically from them but adapt their methods to a re-reading of our own historical texts and traditions?

Ali al-Wardi's greatest enemies throughout his life were what he called *al-mithaliyya* and *tubawiyya* in thinking.⁽⁸⁾ The first mode of thinking has plagued traditional reading and writing of history and of politics in Iraq and the Islamic world. It was characterized by moralizing and the imposition of strictures and predetermined judgment that precluded scientific and critical thinking. He condemned the utopianism of modern politics of the left as being grounded in aspirational thinking that did not account for the realities of Iraqi and Arab society. When he was invited to Egypt in 1962 to partake in a project

6 Salam Shama', *Majalis al-Wardi: al-doctor Ali al-Wardi, majalisahu wa ma'arikahu al-fikriyya* (Damascus: Markaz al-Naqid, 2010), Ali Hussain al-Jabiri, *Ali al-Wardi: al-Sira wa al-'ara'* (Baghdad: Bayt al-Hikma, 2002), Ibrahim Haydari, *Ali al-Wardi: Shakhsiyatahu wa afkarahu al-ijtima'iyya* (Cologne: Dar al-Jamal, 2006).

7 See for example, Salim Ali al-Wardi, *'Ilm al-Ijtima' bayna al-mawdu'iyya wa al-wad'iyya: Munaqasha li minhaj Ali al-Wardi lidarasat al-mujtama' al-Iraqi* (Baghdad: Matba'at al-Ani, 1978).

8 This is a critical stance that al-Wardi took shape with his early work *Wu'ath al-salatin: Bahth sarih bi tabi'at al-insan min ghayr nifaq* (Baghdad: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1954) which he published soon after his return from the US. He continued to use this critique in his other writings, his lectures and interviews on television and radio.

to develop an Arab sociology, he dismissed the effort as utopian and as an attempt to impose a unity of an Arab world marked by diverse societies. His last great work, in fact his most systematic engagement with a study of Iraqi society and history, is a multi-volume history of Iraq called *Lamahat ijtima'iyya min tarikh and al-Iraq al-hadith* (Glimpses of the Social History of Modern Iraq) in which he spelled out his approach to the study of Iraqi society.⁹ He published it between 1968 and 1975, roughly the same period that Batatu was finishing off his own book on Iraq.

Batatu was fascinated by revolution in general and more specifically the Iraqi revolution of 1958. Batatu's attention to revolution was a result of the kind of questions that were being asked by the academic community in the US during the 1950s and 60s.¹⁰ Social scientists sought to explain the success of the Chinese and Cuban Revolutions as they did the rise of anti-colonial movements. At Harvard, where Batatu studied, sociologist Barrington Moore, explained the rise of democratic and dictatorial regimes in the West, Russia and China by arguing that these were the products of the strengths and weakness of peasant and bourgeois classes in these societies and the particular class alliances that developed to forge the political system. Where peasant societies were weak, forms of democratic rule developed, where they were strong, political modernization took on dictatorial forms as in Russia and China.¹¹ It is this neo-Marxist approach to the study of social and political change that most influenced Batatu's study of the rise of modern political movements and parties. It also allowed him to explain why the Iraqi middle class failed to forge a social democratic alternative after the revolution in Iraq.

Batatu's Contribution

Batatu attempts to answer three questions in his book: What were the forces that led to the transformation of Iraqi society from a predominantly agrarian and tribal society into a modern one? How do people divided along communal, class and ethnic lines come together

to forge political change? Finally, what explains the specific political order that the revolution created?

Batatu analyzed Iraqi society around two central concepts: that of class and that of status. Drawing on the work of both Marx and Weber, he posited that social stratification in traditional Iraqi society was based on forms of ownership, particularly land ownership, and on social status; i.e., on one's position within a social hierarchy that was based on tribal and communal forms of social cohesion as well as political clientage. In the first volume of his work he traced the transformation of the traditional Iraqi social order from the late nineteenth century until the end of the monarchy. Iraq's old social classes, as Batatu called them, were transformed by Iraq's integration into the global market economy and the introduction of modernizing reforms in Ottoman Iraq. He followed the transformation of tribal shaykhs into feudal owners of land and allies of the monarchy as he did of tribesmen into impoverished peasants and migrants into eastern Baghdad. He traced the rise of a new class of merchants and industrialists under the monarchy and connected them to the formation of nationalist parties, particularly to the Nationalist party of Ja'far abu Timman, the Independence Party and the National Democratic Party. Finally, he discussed the system of political clientage instituted by the monarchy and dominated by officers who had come with King Faisal into Iraq.

Batatu concluded the first part of his book by making two major assertions. First, that by the end of the monarchy, the old social classes and status groups had developed in ways that allowed for the beginning of social allegiances based on common interests that cut across tribal, regional and communal divisions. He gave two examples to support his conclusion. The first was the National Party of Ja'far Abu Timman that brought together merchants and urban middle classes, as it created the first labor organizations in the 1920s from various regions in Iraq as well as from different sects. The second example was the alliance of large tribal landowners with the monarchy after the Gaylani coup of 1941, an alliance that exhibited

9 Ali al-Wardi, *Lamahat ijtima'iyya min tarikh al-Iraq al-hadith* (Baghdad: several presses, 1969-78).

10 Batatu reflected on this point in a conference held at the University of Texas, Austin on the tenth anniversary of the publication of his book. See: Robert Fernea and William Roger Louis, *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited* (Great Britain: I.B. Tauris, 1991).

11 Barrington Moore Jr., *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

class-consciousness (what Marx called a class for itself) in the face of the threat posed by the military. The second assertion Batatu made was that the end of the primacy of this ruling elite was inevitable given the inability of the monarchy to compromise and accommodate the political and social demands of the parties representing the middle and lower classes.

Batatu and Social Revolutions

The second and third volumes of Batatu's book mark his major contribution to the study of Iraq. In it he detailed the birth modern political parties, the Communist Party, the only mass party in Iraq, and the Ba'th party. He studied the development of a new middle and a working class, and traced their politicization and alliances. It is here that Batatu's fascination with revolution and social movements as venues for Iraqis' ability to change their social and political lives is displayed. He built the narrative in this part around three critical and violent upheavals and he proceeded to construct the building blocks of his analysis to explain them. These upheavals provided what Sami Zubaida has called the political field, a space where the varied allegiances of Iraqis coalesce around a national project.

The first such upheaval was the *wathba* of 1948, a major uprising in Baghdad against the signing of the Portsmouth Treaty that tied Iraq to Britain in semi-colonial relation. The second was the *intifada* of 1952 that was marked by a series of demonstrations against the monarchy's refusal to reform the electoral law to allow a fairer representation of political opinions and interests. The *wathba* and the *intifada* marked the first time that the new politics of Iraq, the politics of popular mobilization, brought together alliances of different parties to fight for a common agenda. The alliance did not last long in either case and the uprisings were followed by periods of severe repression, particularly for the Communist party. However, both incidents provided the blueprint for the mobilization that would take place in 1958.

Batatu grappled with the question of why the 1948 revolution started out as a coup initiated by the Free Officers and not as a popular uprising that echoed the alliances between different classes that marked the *wathba* and *intifada*. It is here that he turned his attention to the social composition of the officer corps of the armed forces and their relationship to the wider societal trends in Iraqi society. Did the 1958 revolution represent a middle-class revolution, an argument that the Communist Party itself put forth to justify its support of Qassim? If the officer corps represented the new middle class of Iraqi society, why did its divisions along regional, kinship and sectarian lines seem unbridgeable? Why were the Free Officers so clearly drawn from areas north and west of Baghdad and predominantly Sunni?

Equally problematic for Batatu was the violence unleashed during and in the aftermath the Shawwaf rebellion in Mosul and the Kirkuk upheavals in 1959 at the height of Communist power in the streets. In both cases, the Communist Party was deeply implicated in this violence as its members mobilized the population along ethnic rather than class lines. It seemed that the whole edifice of his argument, that of Iraqi society as one moving from traditional forms of identification to modern forms of political organization was being put to a test.

Batatu was careful at all times to highlight the ways that kinship as well as community networks worked in the recruitment of Iraqis into the army and into political parties, including the Communist and Ba'th parties. As historian Eric Hobsbawm has said, one identity cannot be swapped for another like a pair of shoes. However, as Iraqi sociologists Faleh abd al-Jabbar and Sami Zubaida have pointed out, Batatu was never able to satisfactorily explain why and how communal allegiances were modernized and transformed.⁽¹²⁾ This is due in part on his insistence on seeing them as residues of older more traditional allegiances, residues that survive but would or should eventually disappear if national integration or what he called "coherence" were to take place. I shall come back to this point in the last part of this paper.

12 Sami Zubaida, "Community, Class and Minorities in Iraqi Politics," in *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, pp. 197-210, see also Faleh Abd al-Jabbar, "Nadhra fi manahaj Hanna Batatu," and Mahir al-Sharif " 'Awda ila abraz al-qadaya wa al-tasa'ulat," in Sayyar al-Jamil and Mazin Lteif, *Hanna Batatu fi siratahu wa manhajuhu wa tafsihirahu li tarikh al-'Iraq* (Beirut: Dar al-Rafidayn, 2015)

Al-Wardi and Iraqi Modernization

Ali al-Wardi, like Hanna Batatu, was interested in the question of modernization of Iraqi society. Like Nahda intellectuals, he posed the question in stark terms as a conflict between the old and the new and between science and utopianism. These are the terms he used in his works produced in the fifties on the Iraqi personality and on the nature of knowledge produced by the old Iraqi religious and intellectual elites.

I am more interested in his more systematic engagement with sociology, particularly his books produced between 1965 and 1976. The politics that informed the production of these books, can be understood in the title and dedication of the first. In 1965, al-Wardi published *Dirasat fi tabi'at al-mujtama' al-Iraqi: haly akhtalif al-arab 'an ghayrihim min al-umam, wa hal akhtalif ahl al-iraq and ghayrihim min al-arab* (Studies in the nature of Iraqi society: Are Arabs distinct from other nations and are Iraqis distinct from Arabs?). The book is dedicated "to those who love 'high' ideas who seek to apply it to all societies beyond the nature of that society and its circumstances. It is time that they descend from their ivory towers and take into consideration the realities of the society that they live in."⁽¹³⁾

The title and dedication speak to two concerns that informed his study of Iraq. The first is a warning against applying, without much research and analysis, abstract ideas generated by social scientist elsewhere to the societies we live in. al-Wardi was building on his earlier call to adapt and integrate methodology (what he called science) of the European social sciences to distinct realities of the Arab world and to Iraq. In that he was no different from the group of social scientists of the forties and fifties in Egypt and Iraq. He was, however, also addressing the new intellectual elite, brought on by the 1952 revolution in Egypt and the 1958 revolution in Iraq, who were recasting the history of Iraq and the Arab world within the ideology, at least in Al-Wardi's view, that linked imperialism, the old regimes, and underdevelopment. He was against any attempt to explain Iraqi society along class lines. Al-Wardi targeted as well those within Iraq who sought to merge the history of Iraq into that of the Arab nation. He argued for an Iraqi

exceptionalism. Within the Arab world, Iraq had its special historical trajectory, one in which the central struggle was and continues to be, not among classes but between *hadara* and *badawa* and the social values this struggle engenders.

Al-Wardi's work focused on the conflict between *hadara* and *badawa*, a conflict that extends to Iraqis' social personality that is marked by dualism that creates a form of disharmony (*nashaz*). In his use of Ibn Khaldun, al-Wardi subverted the meaning of his work. Ibn Khaldun was interested in the conflict between *hadara* and *badawa* as economic and as political systems. He saw the Bedouin takeover of urbanism as a creative and destructive force at the same time. Bedouins reinvigorated decrepit political systems until they themselves became acculturated to them. For al-Wardi, *badawa* was a state of mind as it is a force of constant destruction. *Badawa* was a set of social and cultural practices that survive in the cities as well as in the countryside and instill society with division and conflict. In the modern period, this struggle between *hadara* and *badawa* takes the form of a struggle between the new and old, between tradition and modernity (although al-Wardi rarely used these two words). This conflict is not a mark of a transitional period after which Iraqis free from this inner conflict move into an integrated modern society. Rather it is continuous and characterizes the core of Iraq's development in the modern period.

It is this constant struggle between *hadara* and *badawa* that is the mark of Iraqi exceptionalism. Iraq is a frontier between the tribal world of the Arabian Peninsula and the Shi'i political power in Iran. For much of its history, Iraq has experienced tribal migrations from the Arabian Peninsula that have upended the stability of settled life and threatened the economic prosperity of cities. The latest tribal migration, the one that has had the most impact on modern Iraqi history was the migration of the Anaza and Shammar in the eighteenth century, partly the result of the expansion of Wahhabi power. Iraq's position as a frontier between Shi'i and Sunni Islam and the position of the Holy Cities of Najaf and Karbala, has meant that it has been an arena of ideological conflict that has often developed into sectarian strife. The struggle between *hadara* and

13 Ali al-Wardi, *Dirasat fi tabi'at al-mujtama' al-Iraqi: Muhawalat tamhidiyya li dirasat al-mujtam'a al-'Arabi al-akbar fi daw'i ilm al-ijtima' al-hadith* (Baghdad: matab'at al-'Ani, 1965).

badawa and between two religious communities have created a set of social facts (here al-Wardi is drawing on Durkheim) that have historically determined Iraqis' social interactions as it has their psychological and social outlook. These social values have presented an obstacle against the development of a coherent Iraqi national society. Remarkably absent in all of al-Wardi's work is a serious attempt to engage the colonial experience of Iraq or to explain the role of the state in creating new social classes and new politics.

Al-Wardi was highly skeptical of the role of popular mobilization, revolution and rebellion in forging a coherent Iraqi identity. He was unable to analyze in a systematic manner the emergence in the 1940s and 1950s of mass movements. In the introduction to his multi-volume history of Iraq, *lamahat ijtimā'iyya min tarikh al-Iraq al-hadith*, al-Wardi reflected on the meaning of popular mobilization. He likened Iraqis' understanding of their own society to a pyramid, each side of which represents a facet of Iraqi communal identity and personality. Iraqis are able to look at one side of the prism and refuse to recognize the existence of the other. They are unable to see the multi-faceted and complex social facts as a totality, which is the only way to be objective and see beyond one's community. Otherwise, individuals remain in a state of social slumber (*tanwim ijtimā'i*). In the modern period, particularly the period after the First World War, Iraqi society is characterized by what he called popular enthusiasm (*al-hamas al-jama'i*). Although popular enthusiasm can mobilize people to fight against a conqueror or oppressor, it also leads to the limited vision and an absence of objectivity.

This view of popular mobilization permeates al-Wardi's analysis of the 1920 revolt against the British in Iraq. The revolt, according to al-Wardi, was not a nationalist and anti-colonial uprising that brought tribal leaders of the mid-Euphrates region together with nationalists based in Iraqi cities. Rather, it was primarily a tribal uprising fueled by the narrow self-interests of tribal sheikhs. To view the uprising as an indication of the first nationalist stirring, as many in Iraq claim, is a mistake.⁽¹⁴⁾

What does al-Wardi make of the 1958 revolution? al-Wardi felt sidelined by the revolution and he was fearful of what he calls "*al-ghawgha*", or mob. He felt marginalized as a scholar and as a public intellectual and addressed this feeling in postscript appended to a book on dreams published in 1959 right after the bloody events in Mosul and Kirkuk. He had, he said, been on the left during the monarchical period. There were few people who were reading his books in the time of revolution as their tastes had changed, he complained. The new age (*'ahd*) has brought with it new writers who are now catering to the people in power and to popular tastes rather than producing "objective" work.⁽¹⁵⁾ Besides feeling marginalized by the revolution, al-Wardi could not persuasively fit the emergence of the masses, *al-sha'b*, as an active agent in history within his framework for understanding Iraqi politics and personality. What are the forces of social change that portray the people in his analysis of Iraqi society as a constant struggle between *hadara* and *badawa*? In what political field does it develop if party politics is merely a reflection of this struggle? What role does the radical economic and political changes experienced in Iraq play in the creation of the masses? Because al-Wardi was so wedded to the concept of society as a perpetual field of conflict between two unchanging forms of social affiliation, it was difficult for him to explain the rise of mass politics.

For him, mass politics carried at all times the threat of being taken over by "*al-ghawgha*" which he equated, borrowing liberally from Marx, to the *lumpenproletariat*. The violence of the revolution, the enthusiasm of the younger generation, and the intensity of inter-party conflict of 1959, was a result in part of the nature of Iraqi society. The only way out of this polarization was for Iraqis to conduct politics through dialogue within a democratic framework that considers the interests of the majority. al-Wardi's pessimism led him to conclude that the political field under the monarchy was more conducive to democratic politics than the form of republican politics that emerged after 1958. It is a conclusion that found support within and outside Iraq after the

14 Al-Wardi devoted two volumes of his multi-volume book to the 1920 revolution. His study was a challenge to the new nationalist historiography of the revolution that saw it as a progressive popular revolution. His view generated a response from Sattar Jabr Naser, Hawamish 'ala kitab Ali al-Wardi "*lamahat ijtimā'iyya min tarikh al-Iraq al-hadith*" (Baghdad: Offset al-mina', 1978).

15 Ali al-Wardi, *al-Ahlam bayn al-'ilm wa al-'aqida* (London: Dar Kufan, 1994).

debacle of the 1991 war and the destruction of Iraq brought on by the Ba'th regime and by the US.

Discussion

What are the implications of Batatu's and al-Wardi's approaches to our understanding of Iraq today? Looking at their histories of modern Iraq in 2017, one would tend to find much in al-Wardi that helps in our understanding of present. Beginning in the 1990s, al-Wardi's works have been republished and widely circulated. There have been several lectures and symposia addressing his work.⁽¹⁶⁾ This revival of al-Wardi speaks to a wider questioning by the Arab world regarding the project of modernity and the post-colonial regimes that have ruled since the 1950s. al-Wardi's assumption that there is no progress towards national unity, and that Iraqi history is forever dominated by conflict between tribal and urban norms. Iraqi society appears to be torn by tribalism and sectarianism, its political discourse dominated by a discourse al-Wardi critiqued in a 1950s book (*wu'ath al-salatin*) about the utopianism and idealism of the language of religion in politics.

Some Iraqi intellectuals are now seriously reconsidering Ali al-Wardi's work as a social scientist. They have highlighted three aspects of his work that have endured.⁽¹⁷⁾ The first is his insistence on Iraqi exceptionalism; that is, his analysis of Iraqi society not as a variant of Arab society, or as a society in transition comparable to others in the world, but rather as a society with a distinct essence shaped by its specific historical dynamic. al-Wardi's understanding of Iraq provides these intellectuals with a critique of the kind of scholarship on Iraq produced under the Ba'th regime in the 1970s and 1980s which stressed the Arabness of Iraq and its anti-imperialist credentials as a Third World country. al-Wardi's new supporters find in his work a refreshingly critical and non-ideological understanding of history and of Iraqi society. His work has become a tool of revolt by some against the totalitarian and homogenizing ideologies of the past. His scholarship has also helped bolster an older narrative of Iraqi nationalism that was

violently suppressed in Iraq under the Ba'th regime: a nationalism that calls for an acknowledgment of Iraq's special unique social make-up as a multi-ethnic, multi-religious country in which no hegemonic ideology or historical narratives should rule. It is ironic that despite al-Wardi's deeply conservative view of Iraqi society, he is being revived as a liberal democrat. In reality, al-Wardi's project was not a liberal one. On the contrary, he was an anti-enlightenment thinker in that he did not believe in the inevitable progress of humanity and its perfectability. However, his was a renaissance (*nahdawi*) project because of his insistence on the need to create a present on "scientific" basis that is neither utopian nor idealistic.

Furthermore, the new interest in al-Wardi is a result of the fact that his history of Iraq—and we need to remember that he wrote it at the height of Ba'thist power—was the first to incorporate the Shi'a of Iraq into the narrative of the modern history of Iraq. He wrote what could be viewed as a counter narrative to the history of modern Iraq that was hegemonic from the monarchical period until the Ba'th, a story of modern Iraqi history that was written by the predominantly Sunni cultural elites drawn from the three main cities of Iraq. At another level, the revival in al-Wardi's work is due as well to his view of the conflict between *hadara* and *badawa* as a constant presence in the Iraqi social personality. It has helped explain, in a convenient short hand, the rise of the Takriti Ba'th, the retribalization of Iraqi society since in the 1990s, and the kind of the violence that has plagued Iraqi politics throughout the republican period.

Finally, al-Wardi's work has been particularly useful as a critique of the primacy of religion and its use in politics of the present. Al-Wardi was not a secularist; at least none of his works address the issue of secular government. Rather he had a deep understanding of Shi'i society, having born and raised in Kadhimiyya and maintaining his contacts with his neighborhood through attending social meetings (*majalis*) and frequenting cafes. In all of his books he drew on the Prophet, his cousin and Caliph Ali ibn Abi Taleb, the Hadith and the Quran, as he did

¹⁶ There has been a plethora of books and conferences on Ali al-Wardi after the fall of the Ba'th, particularly in view of the failure of political projects that have come after the American invasion and occupation. Also quite important is the importance that intellectuals place on the need to devise a new narrative of Iraqi history and the possibility that al-Wardi's work might provide guidelines to the project.

¹⁷ A conference at the American University of Beirut held in 2014 celebrated the 100th Anniversary of the birth of al-Wardi. A number of researchers gave papers on the methodology of al-Wardi and the relevance of his studies of Iraqi society.

on poetry and proverbs, to illustrate his points. He had the style of a traditional raconteur (*muhadith*) who can intersperse abstract concepts of the social sciences with quotations from religious texts. In other words, his work speaks the language that permeates public culture and politics in Iraq. Al-Wardi, however, was critical of the presence of religion in politics because he believed that it brought about a mind-set that was idealistic and uncritical. In other words, it was not conducive to democratic politics. As a result his work has been used to offer a critique of the current language of politics in Iraq.

In contrast to al-Wardi's work, Batatu's class analysis and his relative optimism in the project of modernity and Iraqi nation building appears incongruous in 2017. Although his book was translated into Arabic in the early 1990s and circulated widely as underground literature during the last decade of Ba'athist rule, it has not generated as much commentary by Iraqi intellectuals and social scientists as has al-Wardi. Batatu's Iraqi commentators have been social scientists and intellectuals on the political left who appreciated his rigor of analysis and the wealth of material he employed, but have offered some methodological and theoretical critiques. His book continues to be read for historical information, particularly because he enjoyed such wide access to sources that are now either lost or destroyed. However, his assessment of Iraqi society and his methodological approach to its study has not become part of the public debates on how to understand the Iraqi present. This is in part due to the destruction of the Iraqi state and Iraqi national cohesion. It is also the result of the specific moment of history that we find ourselves in.

Sectarian identities have been re-invigorated, in some cases invented, as have been tribal identities. People do not work along class and communal lines to forge allegiances to create a national project as Batatu has shown. In fact, the prospect of trying to explain politics in terms of class rather than community and sect seems quaint in the current climate of the Middle East. Welfare state systems that used to provide social services and education to their citizens and were the cornerstones of the claims to modern national citizenship, have become patriarchal corporations that

dispense charity to favored clients. This is an aspect of state building that Batatu did not address.

Batatu, unlike al-Wardi, did not believe that the diversity of Iraqi society condemned it to an exceptional kind of social and historical development. In other words, he did not believe in Iraqi exceptionalism. His initial interest in Iraq was born out of his desire to place the revolution of 1958 within a perspective comparative to revolutions elsewhere. His reliance on Weber and Marx among others was informed by the cosmopolitanism of displaced intellectuals of his time. Iraq's diversity, its tribal, communal and ethnic divisions were specifically Iraqi, but Iraqis like other people elsewhere in the world, were divided along comparable lines. This seems like a simple enough assertion to make, but it carries profound implications for the study of Iraq and of Middle Eastern societies more generally.

At the most elementary level, it allows an understanding of Iraq's modernization project, its successes and failures, as part of a global process of change that has affected societies differently. For example, a great deal of the literature on the politics of the Iraqi Ba'ath regime and the dictatorship of Saddam Hussain has portrayed them as either comparable to the totalitarianism of the Nazi and Soviet regimes, or as a manifestation of tribalism and sectarianism, essential and unchanging in the makeup of Iraqi society. In both these portrayals of the Ba'ath, Iraq becomes a country apart, incomparable except to the most extreme forms of politics, its society and history in need of special explanation, of special categories of understanding. As recent scholarship has shown, the Ba'athist regime was authoritarian but not totalitarian, violent but also willing to accommodate and reward others who were willing to work with it, whether they be Sunnis, Shi'is or Kurds. The Takriti Ba'ath used clan networks to maintain their power and favored the recruitment of people from their region not because of deeply imbedded and unchanging cultural traits but for very strategic and political reasons.⁽¹⁸⁾ This kind of politics of patronage is a variation of forms of rule that has characterized much of the world, from Communist countries to countries to authoritarian regimes in Latin America.⁽¹⁹⁾ It is not specific to the

18 David Baran, *Vivre La Tyranie et lui Suivre: L'Irak en Transition* (Paris: Mille et Une Nuits, 2004); Dina Rizk Khoury, *Iraq in Wartime: Soldiering, Martyrdom and Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

19 For an assessment of Soviet rule and of kin and regional networks of support for Soviet state policies see: Barbara Walker, "(Still) searching for Soviet Society: Personalized political ties and economic ties in recent Soviet historiography," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 43, 3 (2001): 631-42.

cultural tribalism or sectarianism of Iraqi society, but rather to more structural local, regional and international factors.

If we accept this as a basis of our understanding of Iraq, it becomes easier to explain the context which gave rise of sectarian and tribal politics in Iraq as elsewhere as part and parcel of a post-Cold War global shift in politics and global capitalism that has affected the world differently. This shift has been accompanied by the growth of religious movement in Europe and the US, the emergence of nativist rightist movements, and now in the US, the reworking of racial and regional politics that is taking an increasingly violent turn.(20)

Perhaps what makes Batatu's methodology important for us at present is not its class analysis, although it is important to reread Iraqi as well as Middle Eastern history within revisionist class analysis lens. The importance of his methodology is in his analysis of class and status as products of historical change. However, because Batatu was not interested in sect, he did not analyze it as a category that is historically constructed. He thought that traditional tribal allegiances will disappear. Neither sect nor tribe have disappeared, however. Scholars who have studied

Iraq in the last twenty years have argued that these two forms of political mobilization and identification have been newly reshaped and reused by political actors in the context of wars in Iraq that have rendered the state weak and created new allegiances among its people.

However, these realities and studies do not address the specifics of the rebuilding and mobilizing these loyalties; loyalties that two or three generations of Iraqis, particularly urban Iraqis led by residents in Baghdad, had thought unimportant to their understanding of citizenship. Hanna Batatu might provide us with some means of understanding these developments. Perhaps among the most important is a method to understand the current social structure of Iraq as made up of an aggregate of unstable transitional loyalties and fed by various interests, as well as the emergence of new social classes and new status groups that are born out of global economic transformations, perpetual war in the area since 1948, and other factors. Batatu thus offers a method to persuasively explain Iraq's modern history and its present without falling into the trap of its exceptionalism, in a politically useful manner.

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20 For a theoretical reassessment of global politics in the post-Cold war era see: Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004) and for the US see: Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion, Tolerance in the Age of Identity Politics and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

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