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Fiction, Film & Empiricism: Comparative Politics as Action and Adventure

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PATRICIA SOHN, SEP 29 2018

This year, I have the honor of teaching a course entitled, *Politics, Fiction, and Film*. The course was originally created by a senior colleague in my department who works in U.S. politics. It has since been taught as a course in a number of sub-fields. And, another senior colleague in Comparative Politics taught a politics and film class at another institution.

In Comparative Politics, where we typically endeavor to avoid the normative to say nothing of the fictional, works of art in novels, classic travelogues, and film have evoked a few important responses from my students thus far this semester. Those include a more profound awareness of issues involved in inter-regional and inter-cultural interactions in politics; greater attention to detail, whether in reading or in film; and enthusiasm for Comparative Politics, particularly those areas in which historical institutionalism and political sociology intersect. Political-ethnographer that I am, I approach these materials for the students in part as ethnographic materials telling us as much about the filmmakers (sometimes us, sometimes others) and their audiences as about the regions and peoples in question.

That is, rather than searching for accuracy in facts, we search for (empirically-grounded) themes of significance. Rather than searching for numbers, we search for patterns. Does it matter if the director was born in Iran; is Palestinian; or whether the film is a joint Israeli-Palestinian enterprise, or a joint U.S.-Afghani enterprise? Who is the intended audience? What are the patterns of presentation (in narrative, in substance, in formula, etc.)?

We began the semester with my own favorite theme, encounter between East and West / West and East with a focus on the Middle East. Reading the first half, or so, of Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley*, my students became engrossed in both the detailed and wide-world view of one mid-20th Century street corner in Egypt, as depicted by Mahfouz's Nobel-winning pen. This mid-20th Century Egyptian novel written in Arabic for an Egyptian audience presents in eloquent, simple, and sordid detail the elegant, educated people of the Alley; the poverty of the Alley in which some, with resultant life-of-lice, can only afford the water to wash their hair every two months; the antagonism to colonial British influence, as well as the excitement about the real opportunities available to those who choose to soldier-up and join the British Army as part of the World War II effort; that married guy who spends his life smoking and dealing in *hashish* and his well-known and ignored, but rather public, habit in young men; and the young woman, in many ways the main protagonist, who, on the one hand, runs after money in seeking a husband, and, on the other hand, seeks a lifestyle that will allow her regular showers and clothes more refined than slightly done-up burlap dresses. That is, *Midaq Alley*, because of its time and location of writing, brings into stark relief many issues of East/West tensions and coexistence in contemporary Comparative Politics to say nothing of unraveling a number of significant cross-cultural assumptions.

Contrasting this cultural detail at the micro-level to the – at first glance – superficiality of the film, *London Has Fallen*, had my students going over specific details of text and film in ways that would inspire any instructor. *London Has Fallen*, my students noted, works more at the macro-level of international relations and less so at the micro-level of the cultural detail seen in *Midaq Alley*. Nonetheless, my students noted the Iranian birth of the film's Swedish director, Babak Najafi. Some suggested that it is a typical *Ra!-Ra!* patriotic terrorism flick, while others suggested

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that the director inserts a few important twists into the typical Western version of the terrorism narrative. That is, the main terrorists come from Punjab, India rather than the Middle East; the film does not mention religion, per se, or Islam but only political motives; the few moments of *micro-level* include insights into the motivations of characters on both sides of the political spectrum; and, my students suggested, the film highlights a back-and-forth, tit-for-tat, almost reciprocal nature of terrorism as quasi- (and highly dysfunctional-) relationship.

The French film, closer to an art film, *Le Grand Voyage* (director, Ismaël Ferroukhi), was a harder sell. And, yet, having been presented with *Midaq Alley* and the shoot-'em-up-bang-'em-up, *London Has Fallen*, my students dug right into the inter-generational nature of the tensions, conflict, and coexistence between the traditional, rural, Moroccan Muslim father and the modernist, suburban, semi-secularist French son. As the father forces his son to drive him by car from France, across Europe and the Middle East to Mecca for *Hajj*, threatening the son's *Baccalauréat* exams, we see in geography and in conversation (which happens in at least four languages) a move from one important cultural and political world to another.

And, finally, *Inescapable* (director, Ruba Nadda) in many ways merges the formulas found in *London Has Fallen* and *Le Grand Voyage*. That is, we get a bit of action and adventure, a few chase scenes, and a few instances of explosions and/or gunfire. But we also get the detailed cultural (including art and architecture) and political context of old friends who are senior military officials in the Syrian police state trying to decide what to do with their enormous power, curtailed only by other senior military officials and almost by nothing else. We get a refreshingly old-fashioned, surprising, never-do-they-touch, melty romance between the main protagonists. And we get the inter-generational power issues of the 20-something Canadian daughter making the secret and not-so-brilliant call to go on her own to seek out her father's Syrian history and heritage. (The students also had recommended films, *The Black Tulip* and *Sand Storm*.)

Next week, we turn to five weeks of East/West focusing on Asia with selections from the classic travelogues, *The Travels of Marco Polo* and *The Travels of Ibn Battutah*, as well as the films: *Mongol: The Rise of Genghis Khan*; *Himalaya*; and *Silence* (with recommended films, *Once Upon a Time in Tibet*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*). We shall see what insights arise!

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