

# **Government and Politics of the Middle East**

## **C3 Identity**

### **1. Problematic of Identity: Given or Formed? Implications**

Are identities given or formed? If given, then identity is constant. But all evidence points to the fact that identities (of individuals or groups) undergo shifts and changes across time.

### **2. Longitudinal Comparative History:**

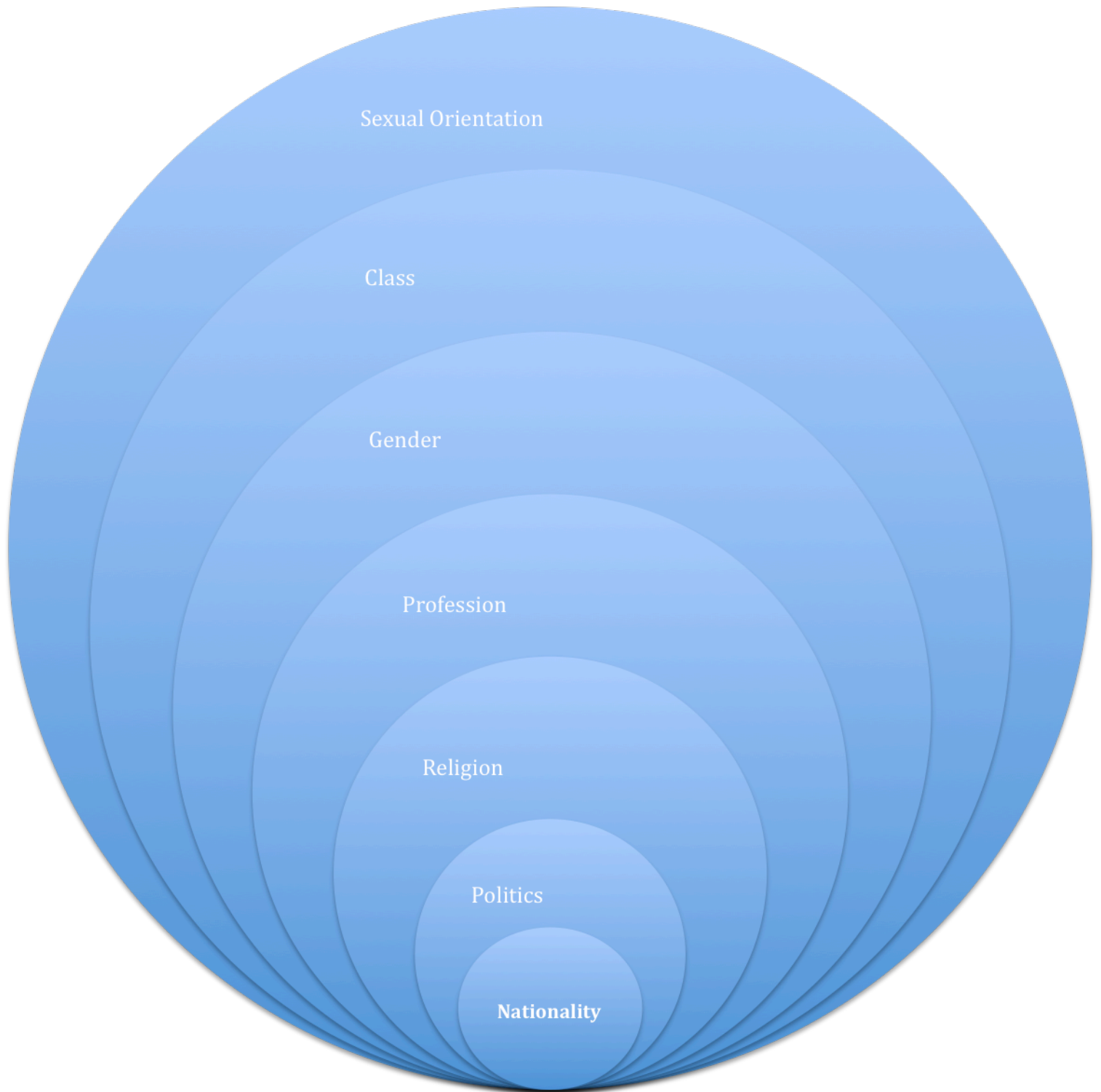
Why is it that the identity of individuals and groups during pre-modern times was far less susceptible to change than it is in modern times?

### **3. Modernization**

Modernization, in all its facets (social mobilization, technological change, literacy, political development, industrialization and mass production), is responsible for diversifying values and providing a plurality of "identities" for individuals and groups.

### **4. Concentric Circles of Identity: Dynamic Nature of Identity**

In the modern world, each of us has multiple identities that are hierarchically arranged in order of those most immediate to our consciousness.



The question becomes: what makes one identity take precedence over another? One could be Arab, Muslim, Egyptian, physician, female, African in the 1960s, with Arab being the dominant identity, but then becomes Muslim, Egyptian, Arab, physician, female, African in the 1990s, where Muslim becomes the dominant identity. What is happening, in the this case?

## **5. Socialization and the State**

Virtually all analysts focus in this regard on the process of socialization that transmits values and conceptions of the self (i.e. identities) from one generation to the other. This occurs through agents of socialization. The more centralized these agents are (the more they are controlled by the state) the more guided and directed socialization would be.

In developing countries, the state figures prominently in the process of socialization. More importantly (in today's Arab world), identities have often been formed on the bases of opposition to the state. Some have clung to a secular-democratic, human-rights valuing Arab identity. Others have joined the Islamic opposition which privileges Islamic identity.

## **6. Arab Cases and External Challenges/Domination**

In addition to the prominence of the state in the Arab world, the impact of external challenges is most important as a set of factors that contributed to the formation of variations of Arab identities. Beginning with imperialism and colonialism, the implantation of the state of Israel, and subsequent political, economic, and to a lesser extent cultural dependency, most Arabs have been socialized to identify a constant encroacher: the West.

## **7. Elements of Identity**

If identity is fluid/dynamic, does this mean that the study of identity is futile since so much subjectivity comes into play in determining one's identity? The answer is no. The vast majority of a nation-state's population identify themselves with reference to elements that are more or less shared by that society. (See Barakat, p. 32)

*Our first task* as students of "identity" (or "social scientists) is to identify this set of essential elements which bring a society together, or which are imposed on society (e.g. by a state). This set of elements (shared or existing in a particular society) can be called an "identity profile." The identity profile of a given society includes language(s), culture(s), religion(s), historical experience (political, economic) and memory (psychological stance(s)).

*Our second task* as students of "identity" is to study and explain the pattern(s) of identity shifts; i.e. why certain dimensions of identity take precedence over others? Why certain dimensions are politicized and others not? And finally, what explains the timing of shifts?

## **8. Politicization of Identity**

According to Barakat, identity refers to shared essential elements which define the character and orientation of a people and affirm their common needs, interests, and goals with reference to joint action.

In order for us to identify how one identity supercedes another, we must look at how political, economic, and social experience imbued these different dimensions of Arab identity with enough meaning so as to make it the basis for joint action.

## **9. "Arab" Identity Profile: Analysis of Objective Elements**

The question of what forms the essence of Arab identity has been a subject of debate: is it Islam, Arabic (the language), or "Arab" culture (a combination)?

To be sure, identifying either factor as the principal "glue" for Arabs (irrespective of official nationality) is problematic.

### ***Common Elements***

- language,
- culture,
- religion,
- political history,
- economic history,
- historical memory.

### ***Divisive Elements***

The four principal divisive factors that we will focus on are:

- sectarianism,
- tribalism,
- nationalism(s),
- ethnicity,

(All of which have been exacerbated by colonialism)