



BRISMES

British Society for Middle Eastern Studies

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Speech for John Chalcraft on the occasion of awarding him the BRISMES Award for Services to Middle Eastern Studies

It is a huge pleasure and a real privilege to present this year's BRISMES Award for Services to Middle Eastern Studies to Professor John Chalcraft.

John is Professor of Politics in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics. Yet his intellectual journey began as a historian of the modern Middle East, and throughout his career he has remained committed to recovering the histories, experiences and political agency of those too often overlooked. His scholarship has consistently illuminated popular movements and subaltern histories, revealing how ordinary people shape extraordinary historical transformations.

The range and depth of his work are remarkable. Through books such as *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon*, *The Striking Cabbies of Cairo and Other Stories: Crafts and Guilds in Egypt, 1863–1914*, and *Popular Politics in the Making of the Modern Middle East*, John has uncovered untold stories through meticulous research while developing path-breaking theoretical insights. More recently, in *From Subordination to Revolution*, he has drawn together decades of reflection on popular mobilisation, producing not only a powerful Gramscian explanation of how collective political action emerges and transforms societies, but also a theory of praxis. At a time marked by deep political, social and ecological crises, the book asks how people might move from subordination to collective agency, and how transformative political projects can be built in the world we inhabit today.

But John's contribution to Middle Eastern Studies extends far beyond his publications. He is not only a leading intellectual and first-rate scholar; he is someone who embodies the values that animate his work. He has never treated scholarship and political commitment as separate spheres. Whether supporting Palestinian rights, participating in trade union organising, or engaging in broader struggles for justice and equality, John has consistently brought his intellectual rigour and moral conviction to the political questions of our time.

I have had the good fortune to know John for more than two decades, and one of the great honours of my professional life was working alongside him when he served as Secretary of BRISMES and I was Vice-President. During that time, I saw first-hand not only his political commitment but also his extraordinary capacity for leadership.

Many of you will know part of the story. In 2019, after the BRISMES AGM voted overwhelmingly to endorse the boycott of Israeli universities in solidarity with Palestinian colleagues, more than half of the BRISMES Council resigned. Many of us were stunned by the scale of the crisis. Yet while others were reeling, John calmly reached for the BRISMES constitution, worked out the necessary procedures, and mapped a path forward.



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It was an unforgettable lesson. Here was someone deeply committed to radical political transformation spending hours poring over governance documents, constitutional clauses and procedural rules. John understood something important: transformative politics is not only made in moments of mobilisation and protest; it is also made through attention to the seemingly mundane institutional details that enable change to endure.

In that difficult moment, John helped secure not only the future of BRISMES but also helped steer it along a path of democratisation. The months that followed involved a tremendous amount of collective work, but they fundamentally reshaped the organisation and left it stronger, more representative, and more capable of acting on the commitments of its membership.

The impact of John's work can perhaps best be seen in the words of those he has mentored and inspired.

His former PhD student Mike Farquhar recalls that John was [I quote] "everything you could hope for in a mentor – dedicated and energetic and patient", someone who challenged his students intellectually while helping them achieve the highest standards. Mike concludes that John "made him as a researcher", but also introduced him to academia "as an ethical and political – not just intellectual – pursuit."

Another former student, Alia Mossalem, remembers how, during a PhD journey that coincided with marriage, revolution, motherhood and academic research, John's "close structured mentorship, dedication, genuine interest and constant reminder that life happens and a PhD should never get in the way" made it possible not only to finish but to thrive.

Marral Shamshiri-Fard recalls arriving at LSE with project that others had told her would be impossible to write: a history of the Iranian and Arab Left. John's response, she writes, was simple: he was excited. He encouraged her to "explore the roads less travelled", to follow the smallest rabbit holes, and to search for "the promises and possibilities in the past." Above all, he repeatedly asked a deceptively simple question: "What is really at stake?" Through that question, Marral writes, John taught her to think boldly and creatively, to write history from the margins and make those margins the centre, and to understand scholarship not merely as an intellectual endeavour but as part of a broader commitment to understanding and changing the world.

And John's colleague Sara Salem writes that she first encountered John through his scholarship on Gramsci and Egypt, work that was "invaluable" to her own intellectual development. Since then, she has witnessed "his thoughtful mentorship with students and colleagues, his tireless agitation at union and Palestine solidarity meetings, and his insights on what is happening in the world." She adds, with affectionate accuracy, that "if you know John, you know that any conversation with him is also a conversation with and about Gramsci."

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Taken together, these reflections reveal a consistent theme. John does not simply produce outstanding scholarship. He enables others to imagine bigger questions, pursue more ambitious projects, and connect intellectual work to ethical and political commitments. Few achievements leave a more lasting mark on a field than that.

John is a scholar of international distinction, a committed public intellectual, a builder of institutions, a generous colleague, and an exceptional mentor. He has enriched our understanding of the Middle East, strengthened our scholarly community, and inspired generations of students and colleagues.

For all these reasons, it gives me enormous pleasure to present the BRISMES Award for Services to Middle Eastern Studies to Professor John Chalcraft.

Congratulations, John.

Nicola Pratt

BRISMES President

On behalf of BRISMES Council

23 June 2026