

SAYI 36 • 2010

# OSMANLI ARAŐTIRMALARI

THE JOURNAL OF OTTOMAN STUDIES

*Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman  
and Middle Eastern / North African Studies*

A Tribute to Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj

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# Where Are the Ottomans in the Historiography of the Twentieth Century Fertile Crescent?

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In his 1982 article, “The Social Uses of the Past: Recent Arab Historiography of Ottoman Rule,” Rifa‘at Abou-El-Haj upbraided western scholars for dismissing Arab historiography of Ottoman rule as non-existent or highly suspect.<sup>1</sup> He called for an examination of such scholarship in the context of the historical moments it was produced and drew our attention to the social uses of Ottoman history as a field of study in and of itself. Historians, he insisted, are very much a product of the class alliances, power blocs, and their relationships to their past. Rifa‘at was making a plea to take Arab historiography of the Ottomans seriously as he was criticizing its nationalist underpinnings.

I would like to turn the lens on us, on our discipline as historians of the Ottoman Empire and the Modern Middle East in the American academy. I locate the way in which the questions we ask about the Ottoman Empire’s imprint on the twentieth century Middle East is embedded in the social, political, and disciplinary agendas of the last twenty years or so, that is to say, in the post-Cold War era and the attendant discourse on globalization.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Rifa‘at Abou-El-Haj, “The Social Uses of the Past: Recent Arab Historiography of Ottoman Rule,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14 (1982): 185-201.

2 For an insightful analysis of the Ottomans in the historiography of the Cold War, see Nathan J. Citino, “The Ottoman Legacy in Cold War Modernization,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 40 (2008): 579-97.

In particular, my analysis will focus on the historiography of the transition between the late imperial state and the colonial/nation state. What I offer is in no way a systematic survey of the literature, but some thoughts on its direction by someone who began her professional life in the academy at the height of its disillusionment with the modernization theory paradigm and has lived to see some of this paradigm re-conceptualized under the wide and ill-defined umbrella of modernity. My interest is in tracing the trajectory of intellectuals on the left, particularly the secular left, who took unto themselves the task of challenging the modernization paradigm dominant in the academy until the 1970s. I do not address the large scholarship on the transition from late Ottoman to post-Ottoman Middle East that continued to function within the Weberian paradigm and focused on the relationship of religion to modernity and the development of modern bureaucracies.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the recent historiography of the legacy of the Ottomans on the twentieth century Middle East has attempted to save that legacy from the blinkered view of nationalist historiography. It has sought to dispel the rather simplistic view of the Empire as being the heart of the political and economic underdevelopment of the region. Part of this historiography has its antecedents in the vigorous challenge mounted to modernization theory in the wake of the sixties and seventies transformation in the social sciences, and part of it is the result of post-Cold War developments that began in the 1990s.

The first part of the paper focuses on the crucial decades of the 1970s and 1980s. I argue that scholarship in these decades chipped away at the dominant paradigm of liberal modernization theory within the field but did not mount an effective challenge to the nationalist paradigm. What it did challenge, however, was the liberal definition of nationalism as carried by an urban-based elite. I offer some thoughts on why this scholarship, so

3 The work of Şerif Mardin on religion in late Ottoman and early Republican Turkey is testament to the sophistication of such an approach to the study of modernity. Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Society in Modern Turkey* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006). For the use of the concept of “rationalization of bureaucracy” see Carter Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Sublime Porte 1978-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) and by the same author, *Ottoman Civil Officialdom: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

critical and questioning of narratives of modernization, fails to account for the less progressive and more problematic aspects of nationalism.

The second part of the paper asks whether the questioning of the nationalist and statist paradigms that dominated recent scholarship has taken place by integrating Ottoman and post-Ottoman modernity within a neo-liberal paradigm. I focus on the 1990s and 2000s, a period that heralded two trends in our field, the incorporation of elements of post-colonial approaches and the re-emergence of what sociologist Jeffrey Alexander has called neo-modern approaches in the social sciences.<sup>4</sup>

The challenge to the modernization paradigm within the field of Middle East studies in the United States came at the historical conjuncture during which national and international developments played a crucial role. Nationally, the ascendancy of the New Left provided an alternative intellectual paradigm to Soviet communism with its emphasis on state socialism within national boundaries. Not only did the New Left and its various intellectual networks develop alternative approaches to the study of working class history and political revolution, it allowed for the integration of the study of culture into historical developments in a more sophisticated and less dogmatic framework than traditional Marxism. The impact of these changes was felt across the breadth of the social sciences and was reflected in the ascendancy of the study of social history, literary studies, and political economy.

No less important for the two decades of the sixties and early seventies was the prominence of Third Worldism as an internationalist ideology that integrated the revolutionary movements in Europe and the US to the larger struggle of national liberations in the colonial world. It is within this context, for example, that the remarkable work of the Hull Group in England that came out in the early seventies, challenged the hold of the Orientalists like Gibb and Bowen and Von Grunebaum among others.<sup>5</sup> More impor-

4 Jeffrey Alexander, "Modern, Anti, Post, Neo," *New Left Review* 210 (1995): 63-101.

5 The group, met at the University of Hull, produced the *Review of Middle East Studies* (first issue 1975), a journal that presented devastating analysis of Orientalist scholarship. It influenced a generation of scholars of the Modern Middle East whose formative years were in the 1970s and early 1980s. Among its contributors were Talal Asad and Roger Owen. For an excellent account of these years see Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East, The History and*

tantly, Third Worldism was the framework through which the New Left could challenge the heroic narrative of the modernization paradigm in its western and to a lesser extent Soviet iterations. The national and the national liberation movements were sparked by neither a liberal middle class or by a working class. Nor were they all peasant movements.<sup>6</sup> The spike of interest in studying revolutions, social movements and peasant societies in our field in the 1980s was in large part the result of this conjuncture. More importantly, this period saw the inception of studies that sought to elaborate theories of simultaneous capitalist development on a global scale that imbedded developments in Western Europe (articulated as the center) with the colonized or dependent third world (articulated as the periphery).<sup>7</sup> Binghamton's Fernand Braudel Center, home to Immanuel Wallerstein, was a major player in this development.

The publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* came at the end of the seventies and served to further the paradigmatic shift in the study of the Middle East. Said's work has had its salutary and less salutary effects on the field. Among its salutary effects was the author's insistence that categories of knowledge are constructed and are grounded in relations of power, a view that introduced Foucault and his work to a new generation of scholars of the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> Its more immediate impact was to ground modernization theory within discursive communities of colonial officers

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*Politics of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Lockman does not attribute to Third Worldism much influence. Within the left in the American Academy, there was much discussion about the implications of anti-colonial struggles on Marxist analysis. This is particularly evident in the articles published in the *New Left Review*.

- 6 Robert Malley, *The Call from Algeria: Third Worldism, Revolution, and the Return of Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) remains one of the most cogent and insightful analyses of the promise and limitations of Third Worldism in Middle East politics. For the link between Third Worldism and the New Left, see Gerard Chaliand, Immanuel Wallerstein, and Diane Johnstone, *Revolution in the Third World* (New York: Penguin Books, 1978).
- 7 Immanuel Wallerstein, *World System Analysis: An Introduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). The book offers a summary of his views.
- 8 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin classics, 2003). It is difficult to remember at this point in time, when Foucault's ideas have become so ubiquitous that it was only in 1970 that the first of Foucault's works was translated into English. The bulk of his work was translated in the late seventies and eighties.

in Europe and within the field of area studies in this country, a field tightly bound with producing usable knowledge within the context of the Cold War.

The fields of Ottoman and modern Middle Eastern history were not unaffected by these changes. Although peasant societies had been subject of some studies in the sixties, these were often framed within modernization paradigms.<sup>9</sup> The seventies and eighties incorporated new Marxist and dependency theory theoretical insights into the study of the social history of the Middle East. Peasants, laborers, pastoral nomads were now incorporated in research agendas. While the study of notables continued to dominate the works on urban society, there were serious attempts to go beyond this urban patriciate. Ground breaking work in the study of political economy that questioned both Marxist and liberal assumptions of stagnant peasant and urban production presented a direct challenge to the modernization paradigm. What is significant for our purposes about this new reworking of Middle Eastern history is that while it did challenge the modernization paradigm by trying to devise a counter grand narrative of development, the narrative it devised was linear. It was either framed in terms of dependency theory or some variant of it. While the liberal modernization paradigm had foreseen underdevelopment as a stage on the way to an eventual panacea of western style social order, the alternative narrative saw underdevelopment as a component of western expansion and an essential part of capitalist development.

Scholars studied the political economy of underdevelopment, focused on class analysis and attempted to understand the failure of a viable independent national bourgeoisie to develop. They were less interested in nationalism as a politics of identity than an ideology propagated by certain elites for class interests. Their most important target was the Oriental Despotism model of political development prevalent among social scientist during the Cold War. Haim Gerber's *The Social Origins of the Middle East*, re-worked the title of Barrington Moore's *The Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship*, and located the origins of underdevelopment

9 Gabriel Baer's ground-breaking work on the social history of Egyptian guilds and Middle Eastern peasantry was crucial for the new generation of scholars trying to write a different kind of history of the peasantry; Gabriel Baer, *Egyptian Guilds in Modern Times* (Jerusalem: Israel Oriental Society, 1964) and *Fellah and Towns-men in the Middle East: Studies in Social History* (London: F. Cass, 1982).

in the particular make up of agrarian class structure in the late Ottoman Empire.<sup>10</sup> Çağlar Keyder's work, *State and Class in Modern Turkey*, argued for peripheralization of the Ottoman Empire through the emergence of a "comprador" bourgeoisie less committed to independent nation building and connected to international capital.<sup>11</sup> The internationalism that underlay this outlook took for granted the existence of the nation state and did not view it as inherently oppressive and homogenizing. To put it somewhat superficially, what was most problematic about the nation state in the Middle East was that the wrong classes were in control of it. Writing in the midst of radical national politics and the internationalism of Third Worldist movement, this generation of scholars was not opposed to the idea of the state as a redistributive body, even as they were aware of its oppressive political and security apparatuses. They were thus focused on the formation of that state and its Ottoman antecedents.

Scholars who wrote on the Arab world, particularly the Fertile Crescent, were equally interested in examining the social origins of the modern nation state. But their excavation of Ottoman traces within the colonial context was central in the perpetuation of analyses that linked the Ottoman legacy with the colonial one. As a result, their approach to the Ottomans was very much a product of their verdict on the nationalist elites who dominated the politics of the inter-war period, most of them products of class dynamics that had emerged during the late Ottoman period. This elite was more interested in perpetuating its economic and political interests that were firmly tied to the colonial powers as it was to the Ottomans before them.

Two examples, drawn from magisterial studies of Syria and Iraq, directly address the question of Ottoman legacy on the political economy of the colonial/national states. Hanna Batatu's *The Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements in Iraq* (1978) traces the transformation in class structure and tribal allegiances under the influence of the modernizing reforms of the Ottoman Empire, the expansion of trade and the rise of a class of Ottoman educated elite who challenged the hegemony of the old urban

10 Haim Gerber *The Social Origins of the Middle East* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1987); and Barrington Moore, *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, reprint 1993).

11 Çağlar Keyder, *State and Class in Modern Turkey* (New York: Verso Books, 1987).

elite.<sup>12</sup> Batatu locates the origins of modern Iraq in the reforms of Midhat Pasha and finds these reforms to have eroded the traditional tribal structure. Writing from a Marxist perspective, he views the Ottoman contribution to the disintegration of tribalism and the beginning of the formation of class structures positively. He places the blame on the colonial structures that seem to have halted the formation of a modern Iraqi nation state by resurrecting and institutionalizing tribalism. His is a history of nation building written against the colonialist policies of the British and in celebration on the emergence of the Iraqi Communist Party that supported the 1958 revolution. His handling of the Sharifians and their supporters who had led the Arab Revolt is ambiguous. He sees them as nation builders dependent on the most oppressive sectors of elite society. It is the recently urbanized working classes that provide the vehicles for emancipatory national politics. The work of Peter Sluglett is equally critical of the nationalism of the Sharifians as they are of British colonial policies that they see as laying at the root of the inequalities of wealth that led to the Revolution.<sup>13</sup>

Philip Khoury's two books on Syria, *Urban Notables and the Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1860-1920* (1983) and *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (1987) remain to this day important benchmarks for much of the scholarship of late Ottoman and mandate Syria.<sup>14</sup> While not directly challenging the modernization paradigm that dominated the field of Syrian studies, Khoury is quite critical of the French colonial policy in Syria. His first book elaborates on the Weberian analysis of Albert Hourani, of an urban patriariate that dominated the politics of the Fertile Crescent until the end of World War II. However, Khoury's analysis links these notables to the political economy of colonial administration and sees them as a bulwark against French sectarian policies. Arab nationalism during the Great War was an ideology

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

13 Peter Sluglett, *Britain in Iraq* (London: Ithaca Press, 1976) reissued with a new title, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

14 Philip Khoury, *Urban Notables and the Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1860-1920*, reissued (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), and *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).



embraced by notables who felt threatened by the centralizing policies of the Young Turks. The dominance of this class of the rural political economy and of nationalist politics meant that the French had to accommodate their demands. After an initial period of hostility, the notables reached a *modus-vivendi* with the colonial power. They become spokespersons for a moderate liberal nationalism in exchange for the maintenance of a social peace with lower classes. Unlike Batatu, Khoury is less interested in the development of mass politics during the interwar period and the failure of this elite to deal with it, than he is in understanding the roots of the weakness of the politics of the notables. His is a more whiggish interpretation of history, more interested in why this urban notable class was incapable of implementing a liberal constitutional form of nationalism. French colonial policies played a role, but the ultimate culprit is a form of patronage politics that had its economic and institutional origins in the Ottoman period.

The Batatu and Khoury books are as sweeping in their coverage as they are in their assumptions. Their ambition was to explain the links between political economy and national state formation. Although they come at their material from different methodological and political perspectives, their normative stance was that the nation state is a viable vehicle for the distribution of resources, equalization of disparities in wealth, and the organization of human society.

This view of the possibilities of the nation state came under severe stress beginning with the 1980s and translated into new kinds of scholarship in the 1990s. Among leftist intellectuals, the disillusionment with the post-colonial national states, the disintegration of the national liberation rhetoric that accompanied the rise of Third Worldism, the rise of Islamist movements and the Iranian Revolution led to a deep intellectual crisis. The fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of violent forms of ethnic nationalism undermined the belief in the emancipatory potential of national movements.

Within the critical scholarship in the academy, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the authoritarian nature of corporatist states in much of the Third World, deprived intellectuals of alternative models to capitalist development. New categories of analyses recast the modernization paradigm. In sociology, Talcott Parsons has been resurrected and his analysis of modernization reworked and integrated with Habermas' work on the

public-sphere.<sup>15</sup> Thus the funding for projects on the historical origins, or lack thereof, of public spheres and civil societies became the staple for the SSRC, ACLS, and various funding organizations.<sup>16</sup> Among leftist intellectuals Hannah Arendt's work has become a particularly useful tool for the criticism of nationalism, dictatorship, and discourses on human rights.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, scholars use Foucault's indictment of modern forms of institutional power to deconstruct the linear historical narratives of nation state building by both liberal and Marxist scholars.<sup>18</sup>

15 The crisis on the left in the late eighties and early nineties is reflected in the pages of the *New Left Review*. As leftist intellectuals struggled to grapple with the implications of the new world order, they also attempted to develop paradigms that would allow them to assess the globalization and the Washington Consensus debates critically.

16 The response of social sciences to globalization is perhaps best exemplified in the "Human Capital Initiative" initiated by the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies, which focuses on "the development of intellectual capital on a global scale." It attempts to link social science professionals across the globe to attempt to understand "local situations in relationship to global, transnational and international trends and impacts;" *Items - Social Science Research Council*, 52/2-3 (June-September 1998) on <http://www.ssrc.org>, accessed April 5, 2010. At the center of this new paradigm is the shift to the language of NGOs, a language that jettisons the older social categories of class (peasant, worker, etc.) for the more dubious category of "human." Deeply involved in questions of humanitarianism, which Craig Calhoun, the president of SSRC, defines as a new kind of cosmopolitanism, a great deal of the funding for projects on and in the Middle East are viewed as part of what is known in the language of humanitarian NGOs as "capacity building." See for example a project funded by the Ford Foundation and administered by SSRC which seeks to "initiate regional and social science forums and to create collaborative networks among scholars in and on the region on topics such as public spheres, new media, higher education and the politics of culture;" <http://www.ssrc.org/programs/middle-east-north-africa-program/> accessed June 14, 2010. For one of the many critical assessment of humanitarianism see Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998).

17 The Journal *Telos* devotes a great deal of its pages to a critique of liberalism and neo-liberalism. It draws on the work of as varied scholars as Foucault, Arendt, Carl Schmitt, and Agamben.

18 Foucault's article on governmentality as a new form of power has become a staple footnote in many works, covering the early modern to modern forms of power in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman Middle East; see Michel Foucault, "Governmentality," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, eds. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 87-104.

Last but not least, the field of post-colonial studies, in particular the subaltern studies, pushed scholars to question colonial construction of peasant societies.<sup>19</sup> More than any other intellectual trend, subaltern studies has alerted scholars to the fact that the nationalist narrative of history is the construction of nationalist elites firmly wedded to an Enlightenment paradigm of progress. By its very nature, they argue, this narrative erases other histories, including that of subaltern populations often less inclined to embrace the idea of the nation state, particularly a secular nation state. It is essential, they argue, to study communal and religious identities not as remnants of a past that should be erased but as viable options for organizing communities. Funding by SSRC, ACLS and NEH has gone to projects that sought a critical assessment of nationalism, whether through the emphasis on the constructivist narratives of nation building, or through the search for lost cosmopolitanism (often conceived of as the opposite of nationalism).<sup>20</sup> Studies of subalterns eschewed the political economy of peasants and working class; and increasingly more funding went into the reconstruction of “subjectivities,” or of representations of power, rather than its economic and institutional basis. In the field of Middle Eastern history, the 1990s saw a concerted effort to reassess the historiography of nationalism and examine Islamism, while during the last ten years, studies of citizenship, consumption, and cultural representation have been given primacy in funding and publication.<sup>21</sup>

19 Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Edward Said, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); and Ranajit Guha, ed., *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

20 The link between “cosmopolitanism,” humanitarianism, and the new global order was made by Craig Calhoun, historian and president of SSRC in a series of lectures; see for example his, “A world of emergencies: Fear, intervention and the limits of the cosmopolitan order,” on the crisis in Sudan delivered in 2004, see also his presentation at the Ford Foundation (a crucial funder of SSRC) entitled, “Rethinking the public sphere,” in which he discusses how our “prevailing notions of ‘public’ and ‘private’ have shaped the relationship between NGOs and the government, NGOs and the markets. He calls for working together to strengthen public access to media as well as to institutions that enable public discussion;” <http://www.ssrc.org/calhoun/lectures/> accessed June 14, 2010.

21 Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski, *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997). The book is one of many attempts to redefine nationalism in the Arab world.

How have the Ottomans fared in this melee? I would say that within the historiography of the Fertile Crescent, the Ottomans have been “saved” from Turkish and Arab nationalist historiography that saw Ottoman traces in the nationalism of the interwar period. The Empire has been restored to a modernity marked by vibrant citizenship defined through modern representations of power and contestation, modern educational system, an emerging public sphere, and modern patterns of consumption of culture and goods. At the same time, the desire to restore to history the voices of people who had been kept out of the narrative of national formation has meant that categories of sect, ethnicity, and tribe have been resurrected. Scholars who do so are quite aware of the colonial origins of these categories of knowledge and are anxious to deconstruct these categories. Ussama Makdisi’s work is one example.<sup>22</sup> However, few works have gone beyond the critical assessment of textual and representational components to the actual study of the institutional and the social underpinnings of such categories. I am thinking in this respect of Eugene Rogan’s work on the transition from late Ottoman to modern to colonial state in Transjordan, where the notion of tribe is grounded in the political economy of frontier as it is to relations to the Ottoman provincial authorities, of Martha Mundy and Richard Saumarez Smith’s groundbreaking book on forms of property and state formation in late Ottoman and post-Ottoman Transjordan, and finally of Max Weiss’ work on rise of Shi’i institutional identity under colonial rule.<sup>23</sup>

The Young Turk revolution and the Great War, crucial for our understanding of the transition from Empire to nation in the Fertile Crescent, remained very much a Turkish or Arab and not Ottoman phenomenon, viewed as a brief interlude to the rise of the Turkish or Arab/colonial nations. Until the 1990s the scholarship privileged the narrative of one

22 Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); and more recently Max Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi’ism and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010).

23 Eugene Rogan, *Frontiers of the State in the Late Ottoman Empire: Transjordan, 1850-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Martha Mundy and Richard Saumarez Smith, *Governing Property, Making the Modern State: Law, Administration and Production in Ottoman Syria* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007) and Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism*.

particular version of the nation state at the expense of others and sought to explain its dominance. The 1990s resurrected the debate on the transition from Empire to nation state and highlighted the contingent nature of such transition. Books, articles, and conferences on the historical examples of the transition from Empire to nation became au courant. The Habsburgs, Romanovs and the Ottomans suddenly looked very relevant.<sup>24</sup>

Two works that focus on the transition between late Empire and nation state have most effectively undermined the nationalist narrative of the Ottoman Empire. Hasan Kayalı and Jim Gelvin's books on the 1908-20 period address some of the questions of transition. They challenge some of the approaches and conclusions taken by the earlier generation of scholars. Hasan Kayalı's *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* showed that the Young Turk policies were largely determined by a commitment to Ottomanism and Islamism and that their Turkification policies after the 1913 coup, viewed in the historiography of Arab nationalism as crucial in alienating Arab subjects, were ineffective.<sup>25</sup> While Ernest Dawn's work, published in 1973, had argued for the loyalty of the majority of the Arab elites to the Ottomans, Kayalı's argument, based on the examination of Ottoman and Arabic sources, brought the Ottoman perspective into play.<sup>26</sup> Not only did Kayalı's work effectively question the widely accepted narrative of Arab nationalism, it also challenged the Turkish nationalist view of the Young Turks as more Turk than Ottoman.

Jim Gelvin's book, *Divided Loyalties, Nationalism and Mass Politics at the Close of Empire*, is concerned with the tendency of historians to privilege the intelligentsia in their analysis of nationalism and eschew any attempt to study the mechanism by which it becomes an ideology of the

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24 Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen, *After Empire: Multi-Ethnic Societies and Nation Building, The Soviet Union, and the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997); and Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

25 Hasan Kayalı, *Arabs and Young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

26 Ernest Dawn, *From Ottomanism to Arabism: Essays on the Origins of Arab Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1973).

masses.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on the work of French historian Eugene Weber, he asks how Syrians became Syrians and/or Arabs.<sup>28</sup> He discovers that Syrians had several notions of national community that challenged that of Arab Nationalists dominated by Faisal and the Sharifians. Furthermore, unlike Khoury who focused on the elite politics of the notables, he argues for the vibrant popular nationalism organized by what he calls “communities of discourse” that were in opposition to the self proclaimed leadership of the “enlightened” intelligentsia.

Kayalı’s and Gelvin’s books presented a significant challenge to the historiography of Arab and Turkish nationalism. Both analyzed at length the Constitutional and Great War periods, stressing the contingency and the plurality of allegiances that existed among officials as well as wide sectors of the population. They laid the ground-work for Elizabeth Thompson’s book, *Colonial Citizens, Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*.<sup>29</sup> Thompson’s work is among the first of a crop of books and articles that appeared in the 2000s calling for a re-examination of the mandate system and the colonial order it instituted outside the paradigm of nationalist historiography. In particular, she questions the assumptions of Khoury, Batatu, and Sluglett who sought to highlight the failures of the constitutional order the mandate system built. By grounding her analysis in the late Ottoman period, particularly during the severe crisis engendered by the Great War in Syria, she brings the Ottomans into the construction of the colonial state in a different manner. The paternalistic order set up by the Ottoman reforms and their gendered definition of citizenship were severely challenged by the human losses of the war. The French colonial power attempted to transform the paternalism of the Ottoman order, but succumbed to the pressure of various Syrian constituencies and eventually limited the rights of women.

Bringing gender and social movement theory into her analysis, Thompson nevertheless shifts the category of analysis from class to public

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27 James Gelvin, *Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

28 Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1976).

29 Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens, Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

sphere, what she calls the colonial civic order. Although she is careful to parse out the way in which different social groups coalesced, negotiated, and participated in this civic order, her concern is with how these different groups negotiated with Ottoman and later French colonial authorities. In an interesting twist, the colonial state is re-written as a state that turns its subjects into citizens, granting them social rights as it negotiates and jettisons their political rights. What emerges from her narrative is not an unquestioning condemnation of the colonial order, as nationalist historiography had done, but a rather complicated picture in which different social classes make use, sometimes for the first time, of the rights of colonial citizenship to push forth their interests. The constitutional apparatus, the institution of social as well as political rights, and the existence of a limited public sphere should not be dismissed off hand as shams and vehicles for colonial policies and for the hegemony of “comprador” elites. Rather they should be reconsidered as vehicles for a viable if flawed civic order.

Within the field of Iraq studies, the work of two young scholars, Orit Bashkin and Peter Wien, has done much to challenge the old Arab/Iraqi nationalist paradigm. Peter Wien’s work directly questions the widely accepted version of the Iraqi variant of Arab nationalism disseminated by Reeva Simon and Bassam Tibi.<sup>30</sup> Simon’s work links the neo-fascist tendencies of Iraqi Arab nationalism to its espousal by a group of Ottoman Iraqi military officers who had their training with or were influenced by German concepts of nationalism. Bassam Tibi traces the genealogy of the nationalism of Sat’i al-Husri, the foremost proponent of Arab nationalism in Iraq, to Fichte’s romantic view of German nationalism. Wien questions these assumptions, demonstrating that the model for Iraqi Arab nationalism drew on the example of Atatürk. In her book, *The Other Iraq*, Bashkin stresses the plural nature of Iraq’s intellectual and social landscape, thus implicitly undermining Tibi’s assertion that al-Husri’s nationalism was exclusive and neo-fascist.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Sami Zubaida’s work on interwar

30 Peter Wien, *Iraqi Arab Nationalism: Authoritarianism, Totalitarianism, and pro-Fascist Inclinations, 1932-1941* (London: SOAS/Routledge, 2007); Reeva Simon, *Iraq Between Two Wars: The Creation and Implementation of a Nationalist Ideology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986); and Bassam Tibi, *Arab Nationalism: A Critical Inquiry*, trans. and eds. Marion Farouk-Sluglett and Peter Sluglett (London: Macmillan, 1990).

31 Orit Bashkin, *The Other Iraq: Pluralism and Culture in Hashemite Iraq* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2008).

Iraq has stressed the cosmopolitan nature of popular culture that challenged the notions of the Iraqi nation as Arab and Sunni.<sup>32</sup>

The rehabilitation of the inter-war period in Syrian and Iraq studies has followed a larger trend in the academy that has attempted to locate historical antecedents to the presence of civic order and forms of participatory politics in the face of the failure of the corporatist state. The Ottomans have fared well in this search. Increasingly, the Constitutional government and the Great War period have come under scrutiny. Parliamentary and provincial representational politics were no longer conceived in terms of politics of patronage, but rather as preparation for the constitutional experiment that would appear in the colonial period.

These challenges to the nationalist paradigm have complicated our understanding of the transition from late imperial Ottoman society and politics to colonial/national society and politics. However, they have not been able to offer the tools to construct a cohesive alternative narrative of the social and political underpinnings of the development of nation state in the Fertile Crescent. Part of the problem lies in the difficulties of creating categories of analysis that provide alternatives to the older categories. What, for example, is the opposite of nationalism? Is it “cosmopolitanism,” “pluralism”? If so, how useful are these concepts in explaining change? Alternatively, is the opposite of a nation “sect,” “community,” or “tribe”? The problem with some of these categories is that they invariably take on aspects of essentialism that the new scholarship tries very hard to avoid.

The pitfalls that accompany our attempts to write the history of transition from late Ottoman to post-Ottoman outside the nationalist paradigm is evident in one of the most sophisticated books on the 1908-46 period written in the past five years. In his, *Being Modern in the Middle East*, Keith Watenpaugh analyzes the trials and tribulations of what he calls a “cosmopolitan” Aleppine modern middle class. I will not reproduce the many arguments of the book.<sup>33</sup> Rather, what interests me is its deployment

32 Sami Zubaida, “Community, Class, and Minorities in Iraqi Politics,” in *The Iraqi Revolution of 1958: The Old Social Classes Revisited*, eds. Robert Fernea and William Roger Louis (London: I.B. Tauris, 1991), 197-210, and “The Fragments Imagine the Nation: The Case of Iraq,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2002): 205-15.

33 Keith Watenpaugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class, 1908-1946* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).



of a variety of conceptual tools to challenge the nationalist as well as the traditional leftist narratives of nation formation and the author's deployment of neo-liberal concepts to define modernity. For example, the middle class is distinguished from other classes by its patterns of consumption (its relation to the global and local market place of ideas and goods) rather than in its place in relations of production. In an effective sleight of hand the author dispenses with this middle class's economic relations with other sectors of Aleppine society as he does with its economic links to the colonial order. His middle class is a creator and participant in a public sphere and is possessor of a clear subjectivity. For Watenpaugh, the study of the subjectivity of this middle class is a work of restoration, an attempt to give voice to that section of the class that has been neglected in the nationalist historiography in part because its allegiances could not be easily classified. And while he does a very good job of parsing out the variety of political ideologies of this middle class, including Islamism and fascism, the strongest sections of his book focus on what he deems to be the "cosmopolitan" middle class. Perhaps what doomed this middle class for anti-colonial nationalists is what Watenpaugh calls its "paradox of metropolitan desire," that is to say its commitment to a transnational modernity defined by the metropole, a commitment that allowed for its transfer to that metropole when nationalist states were formed.

We are a far cry from the concept of the cosmopolitan middle class as "comprador" and perhaps not far from calling for a restoration of the plurality of the world this middle class flourished in, whether it was late Ottoman or colonial. There is in this narrative of the middle class nostalgia for the interwar period that infuses some of the most recent scholarship on the "plurality" and "cosmopolitanism" of urban society in Iraq and Palestine during the period covered by Watenpaugh. So great have been the disappointments of national liberation movements and the states they attempted to set up.

## Conclusion

What is one to make of this re-examination by historians of the transition between empire and nation in twentieth century Arab history? Does it bespeak a need to read backwards, to find antecedents of a plural, "cosmopolitan" cultural and political order which present day Syrians, Lebanese,

Jordanians, Iraqis, Palestinians, and Israelis in all their diversity could translate into a usable past? If so, it is a historiography that is as prone to the elisions and as normative as that of the earlier generation. There is great promise in the new historiography's deployment of new intellectual tools for its reading of the past and its openness to a re-working of that past in light of current events. However, while the earlier scholarship which sought to offer alternatives to the modernization theory paradigm and was motivated by the nationalist and national liberation struggles of the peoples they covered, it is not clear the extent to which the new scholarship is informed by the priorities and contemporary histories of the Middle East. Certainly, there has been a resurgence in the study of religion in politics, but this interest has not of yet been integrated into the study of social history and political economy of the late Ottoman and post-Ottoman Middle East in a consistent fashion. Part of the problem is the lack of a coherent narrative by which one can explain change in the Middle East in face of the attack on nationalist and statist narratives. However, another reason lay in the de-politicization of knowledge within the social sciences in the past twenty years. This de-politicization and professionalization is itself highly political and wedded to the acceptance of the underlying premises of current conditions of global inequality within the capitalist system.<sup>34</sup> In so far that the scholarship addresses these inequalities, it does so within the parameters of concepts such as public sphere, humanitarianism, migration, trans-nationalism, all relatively recent conceptual tools that are firmly embedded in the US and European academy, and have been resurrected at the height of American economic and political power. If they allow us any insight into the histories of peoples of early twentieth century Middle East, they do so with some limitations. To speak of cosmopolitanism, public sphere, citizenship in late Ottoman and early twentieth century Middle East, one has to be conscious that these terms did not exist at that time (the term for citizenship in Arabic is *muwatanah*, a term that has developed only in the 1980s), but that forms of participation, co-existence and certain civil rights did exist and that they bespoke a certain kind of modernity. This modernity was framed within a nationalist and/or colonial narrative and was implemented by state institutions and elites who were

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34 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The End of the World as we know it: Social Sciences for the Twenty First Century* (New York: New Press, 2003). Wallerstein sounded an alarm at this transformation and de-politicization of the social sciences.

firmly committed to the perpetuation of unequal relations of economic, social, and political power. The rush to dismantle the nationalist narratives, to find alternatives to these narratives without a clear alternative way of addressing issues of unequal social, political, and economic development, in other words, issues of hegemony, leaves much of this scholarship politically rudderless, without ability to provide a usable narrative to explain and affect change. What appears to be happening is that the dismantling of national is often being replaced by neo-modern narratives that eschew the more problematic, western centric teleology of modernization theory in its European and Marxist perspectives, but do not interrogate with equal zeal the links between communalism, sectarianism, tribalism, as well as a new kind of “cosmopolitanism,” all viewed as alternative modes of identity formation, with the development of late capitalism in its current form.<sup>35</sup>

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35 Craig Calhoun, the president of the Social Science Research Council, a historian of nationalism himself, has warned against the uncritical acceptance of the term “cosmopolitanism” and has urged that its use be grounded within the parameters of the development of national, local, as well as transnational constraints and institutions; see his “Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism,” *Nations and Nationalism* 14 (2008): 427-48.