

BOOK REVIEWS

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Alexis Wick. *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016, xiv + 259 pages.

Alexis Wick's book is an invitation to historians to reflect on the broader theoretical implications of a paradox: the Red Sea disappeared the moment it acquired the name by which it is still referred to today. By charting the Red Sea in the mid-nineteenth century, the British navy created a unified, homogeneous space out of what the Ottomans had until then called, among many other names, *Bahr-ı Süveys*, *Bahr-ı Kulzüm*, *Bahr-ı Mekke*, or *Bahr-ı Yemen*, according to the relevant context at the time; as the author points out, prior to the nineteenth century, records at the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives in İstanbul reveal "an absence of the category Red Sea" (p. 5). The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 completed a process whereby the Red Sea was transformed into an "extreme example of a sea on the way to somewhere else" (p. 21), a simple passageway linking the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and, as such, little deserving of scholarly attention. This academic neglect, Wick argues, is in stark contrast with the vibrancy of studies dedicated to the Mediterranean, which became a legitimate scientific object in its own right following Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (published in French in 1949 and in English translation in 1972). *Prima facie*, Wick's book—which roughly spans a period from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century—appears to "sketch a history of the Red Sea akin to Braudel's Mediterranean" (p. 13), and certainly the opening chapter, which is an elegant exploration of the Red Sea's physical attributes, religious significance, and role in the globalization of trade, is Braudelian in its geohistorical scope, with Braudel's work being recurrently referenced. This discussion, however, in fact proves incidental to the broader ambition of Wick's work, which is to offer a kind of *Begriffsgeschichte* of the "sea" as a central concept in modern history-writing.

Because of its theoretical ambition and its self-conscious attempt to elude—or, as Wick has it, "disturb" (p. 89)—the conventional paradigms and methodologies used in history-writing, this book is difficult to identify

epistemologically. Informed by nearly 350 bibliographical references in seven languages—including Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, and a number of European languages—touching on the fields of philosophy, history, linguistics, sociology, and geography, the work is often much more akin to a historiographical treatise than to a historical analysis. In seeking to address the broad question of how “history make[s] its subject” (p. 186), Wick engages in a careful critique of the discourses, assumptions, and practices that structure the historian’s craft, including “the separation between primary and secondary sources, and the attendant question of the archive” (p. 89); this is a stance reflected in the bibliography as well. While the book criticizes the paradigms in force in the history of the Ottoman Empire, of the Mediterranean, and of science, one of the author’s key concerns is to show that, in history, space is no more an objective category than is time: the author presents his work as “a historian’s echo to Johannes Fabian’s classic account of ‘how anthropology makes its object.’” (p. 4)

Throughout the book, Wick criticizes two main historiographical trends which put the sea at the heart of their analyses. The first one is the “new thalassology” advocated by Mediterraneanists such as Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell. Wick puts into question not only this trend’s basic premise, according to which the sea would constitute a “politically neutral” (p. 9) terrain, but also the alleged pioneering dimension of Braudel’s work, which inspired it. In particular, in Chapter 5—entitled “Thalassomania: Modernity and the Sea”—he traces the intellectual genealogy of thalassology from the classic works of Grotius and Hegel to those—which, while perhaps lesser known, have been equally influential—of Lt. Matthew Maury Fontaine and Alfred Thayer Mahan, all of which credited a special connection with the sea to what they presented as (Christian) Europe’s particular trajectory toward openness, freedom, discovery, progress, and of course modernity. Braudel’s masterwork is thus only the most illustrious avatar in a long tradition of scholarly production placing geography, and specifically maritimity, at its core. The second historiographical trend that comes under Wick’s scrutiny and criticism is the reverse image of thalassology, a trend that exhibits a clear “terrestrial bias” (p. 3) when dealing with Islamic civilizations. Ranging from quasi-philosophical productions like Xavier de Planhol’s 2000 *L’Islam et la mer* (Islam and the Sea) to Mehmet Genç’s empirically more solid *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Devlet ve Ekonomi* (State and Economy in the Ottoman Empire), this historiography has stressed, more or less explicitly, Islamic civilizations’ alleged disinclination for the sea. Whether they attribute this, as in de Planhol’s account, to Islam’s origins in the desert—“that most unaquatic of landscapes” (p. 59)—or, as in Genç’s case, to an interventionist, agriculture-oriented state economic policy, this historiography, taken together with the “new thalassology,” constitute

what Wick terms a “dual-helixed thalassocentric framework” (p. 62) that normatively opposes Europe and the sea on the one hand to Islam and the land on the other.

As Wick reminds us, in the Ottoman Empire, the sea was “everywhere” (p. 1). Not only did the empire exert, at various points, some form of influence over six distinct seas—the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, the Black Sea, and parts of the Caspian Sea, the Persian Gulf, and the Indian Ocean—and not only was its capital of İstanbul “entirely maritime” (p. 2), but the traditional sultanic titles also included claims of sovereignty over land and sea (p. 60). The Red Sea itself was a vital bridge between the fertile lands of the Nile and the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina which they supplied. It also became, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the heart of a globalized trade in coffee stretching from Yemen throughout the Ottoman Empire’s vast lands (pp. 45–51). However, again, the point of the book is not simply to reverse the thalassocentric metanarrative by arguing that the sea was as important to the Ottomans as it was to the Europeans, but rather to reveal and challenge thalassocentrism as a central motif in the Western narrative of modernity.

In the two more empirical chapters of his book, Chapters 3 and 4, Wick proposes ways to circumvent this constraint. Chapter 3—entitled “Self-Portrait of the Ottoman Red Sea, June 21, 1777”—is built entirely around one document, a command to build ships referred to throughout the book as “Ottoman Document 227,” and ponders the matter of how to write a history of the Ottoman Red Sea when “the Red Sea” as a concept did not yet exist. The application of a methodology of “slow overreading” (p. 88) allows the author to highlight the “various spatialities and temporalities” (ibid.) operating in Ottoman perceptions of that space. While the construction of ships in an area devoid of the resources required for such an undertaking necessitated the transportation of supplies from as far off as the Black Sea or the Balkans, the particular wording of the document illustrates a concern with a variety of rhythms, ranging from “the immediate time of the command” to the “natural” (i.e., divine) time of “the dangers of navigation” to “the eternal time of provisioning the Holy Cities” (pp. 119–120). Chapter 4, “The Scientific Invention of the Red Sea,” focuses on Captain Thomas Elwon and Commander Robert Moresby’s 1841 *Sailing Directions for the Red Sea*, a document produced by the British navy within the broader context of the “saga of cartography” (p. 127) and credited by Wick as having shaped our current understanding of the Red Sea as a unified, self-sustained space. While this may *prima facie* seem a rather standard Foucauldian/Saïdian analysis of how Westerners imposed their “managerial understanding of space” on the previous “relational” one (p. 15), Wick underscores the

British reliance on local, native knowledge and experience (pp. 142ff.), which they openly acknowledged as superior in reliability to the “fixed data” they themselves produced. Hence, this British document aimed to homogenize and freeze in time a region that the Ottoman document presented as a fragmented space subject to different temporalities. The efficiency of Wick’s approach lies in his decision to juxtapose two different sources in two different chapters, rather than combine them in one chapter; however, the full potential of this methodology will need to be tested against more sources of the same kind.

A sophisticated and erudite book, *The Red Sea: In Search of Lost Space* belongs to a new generation of theoretically innovative texts which, while written by Ottomanists, invite all historians to “engage the practice of history writing through a sustained interrogation” (p. 7) of some of the basic concepts—here, the “sea”—which have guided our craft.¹ On occasion, the book’s theoretical density may give the impression that it has led to certain simplifications, such as the notion that still too many historians are driven by a positivistic “fetish of the defter” (p. 55). But this is a mere detail in a very important work which will easily appeal to scholars across humanities and the social sciences.

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Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu. *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press, 2015, xiii + 386 pages.

Contemporary debates on the origins of capitalism are closely related to Karl Marx’s illustration of the different paths toward capitalism. One of these paths is the shift from the feudal exploitation of unfree labor to capitalist exploitation of free labor. Marx illustrated this shift through an analysis of the dispossession of the peasantry, the commodification of labor, and the spread of

1 As an example, Marc Aymes also engaged with the practice of history-writing through a very thorough discussion of the notion of the province in *A Provincial History of the Ottoman Empire: Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2013).