

M. ALPER YALCINKAYA. *Learned Patriots: Debating Science, State, and Society in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 315 pages. Cloth US\$50.00 ISBN 978-0-22618420-3.

This interesting book is both informative and dispiriting. The author provides a comprehensive discussion of the nineteenth-century Ottoman discourse on the importance of science to Ottoman society. The problem was that neither Arabic nor Turkish had an exclusive word for “science.” Instead from the outset the parties to the debate had to use some variant of the Arabic word *ilm* that generically means knowledge, and in the Islamic context it meant *religious* knowledge. As such, religious knowledge was taken to be the highest, most profound and ethically correct knowledge available to humankind. Beyond that, Islamic religious scholars contrasted that knowledge to the “foreign” or ancient sciences (meaning the Greek tradition). And as Yalcinkaya shows us, all the way to the early twentieth century, defenders of “useful knowledge” or the new “needed knowledge” (meaning the applied and modern sciences) had to offer subsidiary arguments that this “new knowledge” contributed to both the well-being of society and the moral quality of the individual.

Unfortunately the author gives us only a hint of the historical context during which the Ottoman education system and especially the madrasas (seminaries), took over the model of education established in the eleventh and later centuries by the Arab ‘ulama’, the religious scholars. As we recall the madrasas were totally devoted to the “religious” or “transmitted sciences,” meaning Qur’anic exegeses, hadith studies, Arabic grammar and genealogy, some mathematics, and with the highest esteem given to the study of Islamic law, the shari‘a. No natural philosophy or natural sciences were allowed.

Consequently, it was because the Ottomans thoroughly took over and institutionalized this form of education, based essentially on rote memorization, that no graduates of the madrasas were prepared for scientific inquiry as practiced in Europe—and this hundreds of years after the scientific revolution. The madrasas failed to produce a cadre of “scientists” (for which there was no Turkish word), and due to external pressure, it was only diplomats, bureaucrats, and “science appreciators” who called for the importation of the European-based sciences, technology, and new learning.

This is why the book’s focus is on the occasional appearance of Ottoman scholars or bureaucrats rather than indigenous scientists who rose to champion the new “knowledge.” For it was only those who had visited or been trained in Europe, or perhaps trained in the Ottoman Military Academy

or Ottoman School of Medicine, who had sufficient familiarity with the new sciences and saw them as the indispensable new and needed knowledge that could rescue the Ottoman state and Empire from its slow drift downward.

The story told by the author is largely about these aspiring bureaucrats and job-seekers who, with their greater or lesser understanding of the modern sciences, jockeyed for state positions, sincerely hoping that their understanding of the new knowledge could be introduced to Ottoman society, through the use of new textbooks, or more effectively, by introducing new institutions of higher education, most of which failed. Perhaps the most ambitious of these was the proposal to create a *Darülfünun*, an Ottoman styled university, but which only materialized in the first years of the twentieth century.

As mentioned, defenders of the new knowledge faced a great deal of opposition from those who suggested that this new knowledge could be dangerous to the youth and harmful to the Empire. The opposition had to be reassured that this new knowledge would not corrupt its possessors, especially the youth. It is clear that the prime motivation for all this self-reflection came almost wholly from the competitive international context within which it was plain to Ottoman observers that a major reason for the West's ascendancy and domination was its great abundance of science, technology, and new learning.

The debate ended inconclusively with pro-science and anti-science expostulators presenting convoluted arguments about whether education had to be basically religious (Islamic), whether there was once a Muslim contribution to the new sciences, whether such masters of the new sciences could be real patriots, and so on, all of which barely advanced the discussion. Yalcinkaya needs to dig deeper into the religious and philosophical contexts that so inhibited nineteenth century thinkers from making more profound arguments than they did for the pursuit of modern science. For other scholars have long noted an interesting temporal comparison between Turkey and Japan in the early twentieth century: both hoped to modernize and acquire modern science, yet only the Japanese succeeded, leaving many scholars puzzled about the Turkish case.

This could be a useful supplementary book for history of science courses yet it is the author's greater knowledge of the social sciences than the history of science, especially Middle Eastern science, that weakens its appeal. A case in point, apparently unknown to the author, is the arrival of the telescope in Ottoman lands in the 1620s. It generated no interest among Ottoman astronomers who might have used it as a new discovery machine and served to reform Arab-Islamic astronomy. In a word, the Ottoman nineteenth

century discussion of the role of science in society remains flat-footed, barely cognizant of its previous history.

The young Turks championing the modern sciences lacked what Europeans always had, namely, the idea that there are objective techniques and logical means for getting at the truth, what the Greeks (and Newton) called natural philosophy. Such a position assumes that whatever is found out using such means transcends religious and “denominational” boundaries. The new Turks had to convince the traditional knowers (ulema, Turkish; ‘ulama’, Arabic) that there is such a thing as objective knowledge of the natural world (and how it operates), and such knowledge transcends “good and evil,” so that we do not have to question the religious commitments or moral standing of such seekers after truth. These deep philosophical questions elude the writer, who otherwise gives us a valuable starting point. ✂

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HODA A. YOUSEF. *Composing Egypt: Reading, Writing, and the Emergence of a Modern Nation, 1870 – 1930.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. xv + 245 pages, footnotes, bibliography, index. Cloth US\$65.00 ISBN 978-0-8047-9711-5.

Composing Egypt is an impressive feat of sociocultural historical research, uncovering how practices of reading and writing cultivated at the turn of the twentieth century enabled Egyptian men and women to mediate their interactions in a modernizing world. This book breaks new ground in its unprecedented focus on literacy. Drawing heavily on the emerging field of literacy studies, it is also novel in its application of literacy as a “multiplicity of situated reading and writing practices bound by historical processes, social power structures, and cultural discourses” in understanding the intellectual, political, and cultural movements that arose prior to, during, and after the British occupation of Egypt (5).

Hoda Yousef explores the discourse on and practice of what she terms “public literacies,” arguing that reading, writing, and related practices were employed by all Egyptians, even those who were technically semi-literate or illiterate, through the use of petitions, scribes, and participation in communal readings of printed materials like newspapers and periodicals. The evolving nature of access to literacy allowed Egyptians to take part