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Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire: A Comparative Social and Political History of Albania and Yemen, 1878-1918

Isa Blumi
Istanbul: The Isis Press, 2003
(211 pages, bibliography) $20.00 (paper)

Reviewed by Alexis Wick

This stimulating little book is like a breath of fresh air in the peculiarly stifled field of late Ottoman history. Although the discipline has seen a surge of path-breaking innovations in the conceptualization of the Ottoman Empire in its last two centuries (the names of Ariel Salzmann, Butrus Abu Manneh, Ussama Makdisi, Eugene Rogan, and Selim Deringil, among others, immediately come to mind), there has paradoxically been scant discussion of the theoretical implications of this new work. One need only point to the remarkable fact that review essays or historiographical analyses of recent publications in late Ottoman history are exceedingly rare. Isa Blumi, a historian of the Ottoman empire specializing in the Balkans and Yemen, should thus be commended for launching a frontal offensive in these uncharted waters, despite the author's own trepidations about "tak[ing] on his superiors" with "such open challenges" (194).

Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire is a felicitous marriage of important historiographical discussions of the Ottoman Balkans and Yemen with original historical narratives anchored in extensive archival research. At its heart is a commitment to insert questions of agency into the static social and psychological structures represented in the existing historiography, thereby emphasizing the *possibilities*, rather than the restrictions, of identity. As he rereads archival documents in this light, Blumi produces a story of Yemen around the time of World War I; of the social and political world of border communities in the Balkans and the local impetus for educational reform; of the tribulations of the Albanian diaspora in Switzerland; of the dress codes of the pluri-religious population of the Malësore; of state attempts to impose a homogenized Islam upon the practices of Albanian Muslims; and of autobiographical writings by Albanian soldiers. These narratives are both rigorous and empathetic, and they subvert elitist assumptions by attempting to account for those multitudes who are excluded by the overwhelming "gaze of the state" (43) and the "tyranny of sociological categories"

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(23). No longer is it sufficient to appeal to incongruous analytical shortcuts such as "tribe," "religion," "ethnicity," or "sect" in order to explain people's behavior, or to read state documents without a sense that they too are lived ideological practices in order to understand social circumstances. It is now time to confront "capital" questions with discussions of "provincial" cases, to integrate "marginal" histories into central epistemologies.

Blumi's versatility in the use of sources, both primary and secondary, is truly amazing, drawn as they are from multiple archives (located in Albania, Austria, France, England, Germany, Italy, Turkey, Switzerland, and the United States) and written in an impressive variety of languages (including Albanian, Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, and Turkish). The sources themselves are problematic, as they mainly come from archives produced by states intent on silencing precisely those voices that Blumi seeks to hear, but for this very reason the use that is made of them is all the more impressive. The author demonstrates his mastery over the subtlest requirements of his trade: the discovery, reading, and interpretation of historical documents and texts, all of which require both critical sophistication and an acute eye for detail. More generally, this book epitomizes the qualities for which this young scholar's work is already known by readers of his numerous articles and, especially, his dissertation (submitted to New York University in 2005): theoretical rigor, historiographical scope, and archival thoroughness. If one adds to that his dedicated political engagement, both in academia and beyond it (whether in his journalistic writings, public lectures, or work in post-war Kosova), the result is exemplary historical scholarship that seeks a better future for all in light of the past.

Rethinking the Late Ottoman Empire is divided into ten chapters dealing with widely diverging subjects and places, but the various pieces come together as a coherent totality with an overarching theme: the release of history from the tyrannical gaze of an omnipotent "state," in the effort to give voice to, or at least document and narrate the stories of, "history's silenced millions" (80). The emphasis in this phrase is added to underline the active verb; Blumi reinforces the "deliberateness" of the exclusion by suggesting that scholars "have been careless and disrespectful of the responsibility playing with humanity entails" (194). He does this by focusing on the dynamism of local historical actors, thereby returning agency where it belongs, rather than following the biased epistemological lenses produced and enforced by the state (whether colonial, imperial, or national, European or not) that "obscure the multiplicity of local actors engaged in the representation of social existence" (15). In this way, Blumi distances himself from both traditional historiography (whether imperialist, nationalist, or state-centered) and mainstream public discourse by rejecting precisely what they have in common: static terms of analysis, which seek to create narratives that are compatible with Western categories of knowledge (influenced especially, when it comes to the Islamic world, by the discourse of Orientalism) but which in reality limit their potential for understanding the complex dynamics of historical processes.

This familiar conundrum of historical studies regarding non-European peoples is compounded in the case of Blumi's research areas by a tendency on the part of scholars to read Ottoman documents too literally, thereby ignoring the basic methodological principle of interpreting sources in light of the ideological and discursive conditions

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of their production. This is imperative in the case of the highly charged bureaucratic discourse of an Ottoman state in the Hamidian and Young Turk era devoted to the projection of an imperial *mission civilisatrice*. For this purpose, Ottoman elites "used social typologies to create the necessary conceptual space between themselves and those they ruled," typologies of which historians should be extremely wary (47). The "backwater" regions on the periphery of the empire, such as Yemen and parts of the Balkans, were particularly targeted by this enforced "modernization," according to which the "civilized" imperial state apparatus was pitted against "savage," "tribal" local populations. Although this discourse has been exposed in recent years, thus shedding important new light on the culture of the imperial center, Blumi seeks to go one deconstructive step further in order to open vistas onto the worlds and worldviews of the periphery.

Throughout the volume, and despite the differing loci of concentration, the guiding concept in Blumi's analysis is what he calls the "*possibilities of identity*," as opposed to constraining elite definitions of identity. In this view, the categories describing collective identities (such as "nation," "ethnicity," or "tribe"), upon which so much of the literature on Yemen and the Balkans relies to explain the behavior of historical actors, are never written in stone, or even complacently dictated from above, but are unstable projects with perpetual possibilities that various groups (subaltern *and* elite) can exploit and participate in framing. This insistence on the "possibilities of identity" permits Blumi to extricate his analysis from the cognitive chains of both an Ottoman administration seeking to enforce its own version of state-centered modernity and an imperial Europe attempting to consolidate its hegemony. Thus, where the Ottoman state, like so many subsequent observers, sees "tribe" and "ethnicity" as the monolithic and decisive historical agents in these "backward" and "archaic" regions, Blumi finds multiple and dynamic loyalties and identities, which manipulated the ambitions of rival powers just as they exploited them.

The first two chapters outline the conceptual scope and theoretical starting point of the endeavor, and the value of the innovative methodology is evident when it is applied to particular historical moments. Indeed, the changing political alliances in Yemen in the early twentieth century were much more fluid and dynamic than is presumed by the conventional, static social typologies involving "tribes" and "religious sects." These categories simply do not allow for the interpretation of the rising ascendancy of the Sufi leader Muhammad Idrisi over territories and populations attributed to the Zaydi Imam Yahya along tribal or sectarian lines. Neither do they help in explaining the formation during World War I of the trans-sectarian anti-Ottoman coalition headed by another Sufi shaykh, Sayyid Muhammad Hasan, whose brotherhood had been a cornerstone of the pre-war strategy of the Porte in the region. Hence Blumi's stark conclusion: "Sociological patterns that have often been glossed over with typologies simplifying Yemeni (and generally Islamic) society into neatly identifiable units—city, country, peasant, tribes, Zaydi, and Shafi'i—prove to be highly fluid in their represented form" (80).

Similarly, the modalities of educational reform, a well-known field of predilection for statist "civilizing" ambitions, cannot be read as direct, univalent impositions of dynamic imperial centers over passive peripheries. While educational reform in

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the Ottoman Empire has been hailed as "modernization" or disparaged as "cultural imperialism," the underlying assumption remains that agency resided squarely in the center. The case of the *vilayets* of Manastir and Yanya examined by Blumi reveals, on the contrary, that the predominantly Albanian-speaking but pluri-religious population showed great prowess in exploiting the ambitions of rival powers to further their own local interests that often transcended religious affiliations.

Finally, and most importantly in light of current public discourse, Blumi demonstrates that the self-definition, culture, and politics of locals actors in the northern regions of Malesöre and Kosova bordering Montenegro were much more malleable than the logic of sectarianism, popular again today in reference to the region, allows—so much so, in fact, that it forced Austria, and eventually the other contending powers, to adapt to local realities and change their policies. Thus, not only is it clear with historical hindsight "that local Albanian-speaking communities would adopt certain ethnic, sectarian or political claims to suit the diplomatic capabilities of the various states seeking influence in the region," but this was already clear enough by the mid-1890s, when "formal affiliation to the Church was no longer necessary to win Austrian diplomatic support" (90, 92).

In sum, then, Blumi contributes to the provincialization of Eurocentrism and helps undermine elite narratives precisely by bringing questions from "peripheral" histories to bear on "central" theoretical discussions. A question that still remains unresolved, in this book as elsewhere, is the tension between a focus on local or even individual agency and an attention to more structural discourses and categories of knowledge, and how they combine and interact. In other words, and on another level, how does thought translate into practice, words into action? ♦

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