

BOOK REVIEWS

ILHAM KHURI-MAKDISI, *The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860–1914* (Berkeley, Calif.: The University of California Press, 2010), Pp. 296.

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The Eastern Mediterranean and the Making of Global Radicalism, 1860-1914 traces the history of “the formulation and dissemination of radical ideas in and between the cities of Beirut, Cairo, and Alexandria in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth.” (p. 165) Through the study of radicalism, Ilham Khuri-Makdisi draws attention to two understudied characteristics of this region during the late Ottoman period, namely: the “plethora of ideologies, ideas, and practices that circulated in the fin de siècle in the Eastern Mediterranean” (p. 169), and the international web of networks that connected populations in this region with the rest of the world. The pursuit of these two arguments make *The Eastern Mediterranean* a thought-provoking project that aims at re-delineating the contours of late Ottoman history in the region by questioning the role of nationalism as the only dominant ideology in the period, while contributing to the *de-provincialization* of the history of the Arab world and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Scholars in the field have welcomed with enthusiasm Khuri-Makdisi’s choice of radicalism, as it presents a refreshing alternative to continued analysis of nationalist narratives at the expense of other contemporary ideologies. *The Eastern Mediterranean* is not, however, an intellectual history of radicalism in the Arab world for it does not examine leftist ideologies *per se*. Instead, it is a novel and detailed social and cultural history of the institutions, intellectuals, and movements responsible for formulating, introducing, and making radical ideas a crucial discursive element in the region at a time of reform. Hence, the study offers a broad working definition of radicalism as “sets of [leftist] ideas and practices that did not necessarily constitute an organized or official ideology” (p. 2), in order to concentrate on framing these radical ideas within the context of the “emergence and construction of new social configurations, categories, and classes” (p. 6)

Khuri-Madkisi begins her study with a first chapter dedicated to exploring the interconnectedness of radical intellectuals, movements, and

ideas in the changing world of the turn of the twentieth-century. In particular, the author looks at capital, labor, information, imperialism, and migration, as elements that foreground the “world wide web of radicalism” (p. 17). The study proceeds with a second and third chapter that analyzes the role of the press and theater as instrumental conduits to disseminate radical ideas in the region. Khuri-Makdisi examines two major publications based in Cairo, *al-Muqtataf* and *al-Hilal*, in order to describe how they covered and interpreted radical issues for a broad audience. After qualifying the necessary question of exposure to written texts and reading practices among popular classes in the late Ottoman period in order to establish “the fluidity between the written and the oral, the literate, the partial literate, and the non-literate” at a time of high illiteracy (p. 36), the analysis delves into the shifting attitudes of both periodicals towards socialist and anarchist ideas through time, to the point of “making them fit comfortably in the larger Weltanschauung of the *nahda*, which they were busily creating as well as reflecting” (p. 42). In her third chapter, Khuri-Makdisi moves on to study the multiple social roles of theater. To this end, the author examines plays, contemporary essays, and municipal archival records in Alexandria and provides a vibrant glance into the social, economic, and cultural negotiations and discourses behind the choice of plays that were mounted. This is a thought-provoking chapter in which Khuri-Makdisi depicts theater as a multifaceted institution that served many purposes: whereas the municipality of Alexandria regarded it as a “city maker,” that is, a venue to expose the modernity of the city and a powerful space for educating its urban masses, contemporary intellectuals viewed theater as a physical and discursive space from which to stage revolution against the ruling classes.

A key premise of *The Eastern Mediterranean* is that this was a time defined by the “emergence of a new social class seeking to carve out its own discursive space” (p. 44). Building on the works of Hisham Sharabi, Rashid Khalidi and Yves Gonzalez Quijano among others, Khuri-Makdisi explains how Arab intellectuals undertook the task of “translating” and “assessing the soundness” of Western ideas, “to see whether they could be applied to reform Middle Eastern societies”(p. 45). Furthermore, the author maintains that radical leftist ideas were political realities of the West that Arab intellectuals could not dismiss in their works, at the same time that they provided intellectuals with the necessary discursive space for contestation within their own societies. In spite of the author’s enthusiasm in describing the reformist projects of some of these intellectuals, seeking to clarify the parameters of these contestations, Salim Tamari pointed out in his review of *The Eastern Mediterranean*, that “Khuri-Makdisi does not posit a subaltern against an elite history but rather a hidden, layered, and complex network of intellectual discourse undertaken by a class of artisans and middle-class professionals” (*IJMES* 43 (2011)). Unlike other related works, such as Leyla Dakhli’s study

of Syrian and Lebanese intellectuals from 1908 to 1940¹, however, *The Eastern Mediterranean* does not aim at analyzing intellectuals as a class. Instead, it pursues a thematic analysis that enables the author to expand her research beyond purely intellectual formulations, and explore radical ideas among workers, a topic that Khuri-Makdisi examines in her last chapter. Perhaps the only missed opportunity in the book is the fact that by concentrating mostly on the work produced by intellectuals of radical leftist leanings, the study fails to explore the use of some of those radical tropes among other intellectual trends, particularly among Islamist reformists such as Rashid Rida, who in the 1910s dedicated an article in *al-Manar* to explore the Paris Commune.

Beyond introducing radicalism as a central discursive element among intellectuals of the *nahda*, *The Eastern Mediterranean* represents a significant contribution to “deprovincializing” the history of the region (Khuri-Makdisi, 168). Throughout her study Khuri-Makdisi demonstrates convincingly the cosmopolitanism and interconnectedness of individuals and discourses both regionally and internationally. In her brief analysis of three Syrian periodicals in Brazil, *al-Munazir*, *al-Afkar* and *al-Fara'id*, Khuri-Makdisi introduces the existence of a global readership that actively contributed to the formulation and dissemination of radical ideas between the Americas, Europe, and the Middle East. Khuri-Makdisi accurately notes the widespread use of the same articles among periodicals located in distant geographies, as well as the contributions of this global readership in shaping the content of periodicals, regardless of their geographical location. At a regional level, her analysis of the intellectual network around the Italian anarchist Pietro Vasai in Alexandria serves as a reminder of the role of Egypt as a regional center for European labor and of the Mediterranean at large as a space of migration away from a purely transatlantic context during that period.

In addition to the originality of its arguments, *The Eastern Mediterranean* contains a remarkable wealth of diplomatic and literary sources in Arabic, French, Italian, and English that enhance even further the value of this book. In short, it is an indispensable reference for those interested in late Ottoman history, Middle Eastern migration studies, and cultural history more broadly.

NOTES

¹ *Une génération d'intellectuels arabes. Syrie et Liban (1908-1940)*, Paris: IISMM-Karthala, 2009.

