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SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

TITOLO/TITLE: Questioning “Civilization”, “Reform” and “(Post)Modernity” in the Ottoman and Post Ottoman Space (XIX-XXI centuries)

PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/s: TINA MARAUCCI (University of Florence)
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DISCUSSANT: NORA LAFI (Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient - ZMO, Berlin)

ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):

The conception of the cultural and political developments in the Ottoman Empire and its successor states as the result of a unidirectional transfer from the West, this latter being understood monolithically as the essence of progress, has been a key that continues to exert considerable influence on the landscape of various disciplines. From studies centred on a political-historical perspective to literary-historical studies, the specificity of political and cultural phenomena in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman space has often been interpreted as a mere “import” of exogenous models and canons. Even though this paradigm has been repeatedly challenged in recent decades, it would be difficult to claim that the possibilities of rethinking the relationship between global changes and local phenomena have been fully exploited.

Taking a *long durée* perspective, this panel aims to gather insights from scholars across the humanities and social sciences to contribute to reflecting on the phenomenon of the circulation of cultural models. The aim is to highlight the agency of local actors in the appropriation, reworking and rewriting of institutions, concepts, literary forms, and moral and aesthetic values to achieve a more holistic approach to understanding phenomena in the MENA region between the 19th and 21st centuries, against the backdrop of general changes such as the transformation and collapse of empires, the construction of nation-states, the polarisation of the Cold War era and neo-liberalism.

Among the many interpretive keys that can be offered, proposals that reflect on these possible, but not exclusive, research questions are particularly welcome:

- 1) How can we make sense in the Ottoman and post-Ottoman space of the concept of racialisation understood as a dynamic concept with multiple declinations and outcomes shaped by the agency of both racialising and racialised identities?
- 2) How are “exogenous” cultural models and artistic expressions translated in the target contexts? Is it mere reception, rewriting or rather reinvention?
- 3) What are the archives of political and cultural practices that contribute to (re)shaping the structure and ideology of institutions, political organisations, and ideologies in the post-Ottoman space?

In a global context in which defensive identity-building mechanisms are re-emerging, often in the name of preserving an all-encompassing “rational worldview” charged with intense epistemological violence, we believe that this reflection can take up the threads of a debate aimed at rethinking the phenomena of intercultural contamination and hybridisation, providing new insights into the different declinations of concepts and phenomena such as “civilisation”, “reform”, “modernity” and “postmodernity”.

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PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS

Tina Maraucci (tina.maraucci@unifi.it) is Junior Assistant Professor of Turkish Language and Literature at the University of Florence. She is author of *Leggere Istanbul, Memoria e lingua nella narrativa turca contemporanea*, FUP Firenze 2020. She also published several contributions about Turkish contemporary novel in collective volumes and academic journals.

Nicola Melis (nmelis@unica.it), a specialist in Ottoman history, is an associate professor at the University of Cagliari, Sardinia, where he teaches the History and Institutions of Mediterranean Africa and the Near East. His current research concerns 1) the end of the Ottoman caliphate and 2) the idea of Ottoman Africa from the past to the present. Among his recent academic contributions are *The Abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate, 1924 Debates and Implications*, which he co-edited with Elisa Giunchi (Routledge, 2024), and *The Ottoman Africa and the Ottomans in Africa*, a special issue featured in *Eurasian Studies*, volume 21 (Brill, 2023).

Presenters

1) *Memorializing Ottoman Modernity: Sultan Abdülhamid II's Silver Jubilee of 1900*

Author: **Christine Kim**, Johns Hopkins University

On September 1, 1900, ceremonies for the silver jubilee of Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) were held throughout the Ottoman Empire along with the construction of numerous clock towers, fountains, and other monument-types to commemorate the sultan's twenty-fifth accession anniversary. While these celebrations came at a moment in history that saw a significant rise in visual competition vis-à-vis ostentatious pageantry and eclectic architecture across the Western world, the novel grandeur of these particular accession festivities speaks to the unique circumstances in which Abdülhamid found himself at the turn of the twentieth century—a period in which the sultan was working to fend off Western encroachment and refute the image of the Ottoman Empire as the "sick man of Europe." While contemporaneous examples in the West and European colonies provide insight into the reasons behind the adoption of novel forms of visibility, the imperial peacocking and self-representation of the Ottomans on the global stage must be contextualized regarding the historical circumstances facing the rapidly diminishing empire. The factors specific to the Ottoman Empire are crucial in understanding how various forms of visual culture were adopted, modified, or abandoned to visually mark Abdülhamid as the sovereign to establish the empire's place within a new modern age, moving away from the significant upsets, losses, and anxieties of the previous decades. This study will analyze

Abdülhamid's silver jubilee as a culmination of the sultan's aspirations for the next era of his reign within an increasingly hostile political environment to understand the ultimate successes and failures of the Hamidian Ottomanization and modernization project.

Keywords: Abdülhamid II, silver jubilee, ceremonies, modernization, Ottomanization, monuments

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2) *Discussing the idea of civilization in the Ottoman Arab press: the case of Aḥmad Fāris Šidyāq's al-Ġawā'ib (1861-1884)*

Author: **Francesco Cargnelutti**, University of Trento

One of the most influential Arabic gazettes of what has been described as the "golden age" of the Ottoman press, between 1860 and 1876, was al-Ġawā'ib. This was edited in Istanbul by Aḥmad Fāris al-Šidyāq (1805/6-1887) between 1861 and 1884, and, according to Fīlīb dī Tarrāzī (1865 – 1956), "had a great circulation in the West and the East, and acquired a wide fame that no other paper had acquired since the appearance of the Arabic press". The success of *al-Ġawā'ib* depended in part on the backing of different donors, including the Ottoman government, which understood the utility of a periodical which could publish official notices and analysis sympathetic to its political line, but also on the figure of al-Šidyāq, who had established himself as a protagonist of the reform of Arabic language and literature. The gazette offers an essential perspective on the public debates that characterised the second part of the 19th century, including the idea of civilisation (*tamaddun*). Following a trend established in the previous decades by other authors writing in Arabic, al-Šidyāq embraced the idea of progress but in a critical way, often rejecting those European conceptualisations that relegated the non-Europeans to the savage condition. This paper aims to analyse Šidyāq's discourse on *tamaddun* and its interconnection with his defence of the Ottoman Empire as a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic polity that could reach the civilisational condition.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Nahda, Arabic press, civilisation, public debate

Francesco Cargnelutti (francescocargnelutti@gmail.com) graduated at the University of Trento in Political Sciences and International Relations. During his university years, he worked as a full-time contributor for a local newspaper. In 2015, he decided to take a year-off to learn Arabic in Tunisia, where he later worked on the research for his MA thesis on the political thought of Rached Ghannouchi, leader of al-Nahdha party. In the meantime, he worked as a teacher of Italian and as a freelance journalist for the radio, websites and newspapers. In 2018, he started working for the Fondazione per le Scienze Religiose (Fscire) and the following year he began his PhD research on the debate around the caliphate in the Arab press in the last four decades of the 19th century, focusing on the work of 'Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi (Aleppo 1855-Cairo 1902). He obtained his PhD in October 2023. Since then, he has been working as post-doc within Fscire embarking on a new research project on the political thought of Ibn Zafar al-Siqilli (1104-1172).

3) *The "failure" of printing to travel to the early modern Middle East: reexamining narratives of circulating modernity in the context of global book cultures*

Author: **Nir Shafir**, University of California San Diego

Print technology was not widely adopted in the Middle East until the late nineteenth century. Instead, nearly all written texts were copied by hand, that is, as manuscripts. The supposed "failure" of print to transfer or move from Europe to the Middle East has been a topic of constant speculation and discussion since the seventeenth century. In many ways, it represented not only a failure of circulation but also a failure of Middle Easterners/Muslims to accept modernity. Given the symbolic weight of print, scholars have focused their attention on identifying the social or cultural obstacles that obstructed the transfer of this supposedly irresistible

technology with self-evident benefits: Muslim jurists were against a Christian innovation; the scribes organized against a threat to their livelihoods; readers enjoyed the aesthetic value of handwriting. None of these, however, can be easily confirmed or verified. Often, they are false. Instead, a simpler explanation may provide the best explanation: print was expensive, and manuscript technology provided the most economically flexible (and non-commercialized) way to organize the reproduction of texts. This economic explanation has been overlooked by historians, however, because the commercialized model of printing in Western Europe has been taken as the norm against which the rest of the world must be measured. However, by widening our scope of technologies of textual reproduction to a broader global perspective—especially in the case of East Asia—we can more accurately understand how manuscript technology continued to flourish in the Middle East for so long after the introduction of typographic printing from Europe.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, modernity, printing, manuscripts, global history, history of technology

Nir Shafir (nshafir@ucsd.edu) is an assistant professor of history at the University of California San Diego whose work focuses on the Ottoman Empire/Middle East from 1200 to 1800. At UCSD, he teaches graduate and undergraduate classes on the history of the early modern and medieval Middle East, the history of science, global history, and historical approaches to disinformation, misinformation, and propaganda. He is an occasional contributor and editorial board member of the Ottoman History Podcast and served as its editor in 2018. His first book is titled *The Order and Disorder of Communication: Pamphlets and Polemics in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Empire* and is coming out with Stanford University Press in 2024.

4) *Transnational Theatrical Encounters: Burhanettin Tepsi and the Modernization of Ottoman Theatre.*

Author: **Dila Okuş**, Istanbul University

In the 19th century Ottoman Empire, the Westernization policy led to accelerated relations with Europe. This period witnessed increased mobility of theatres, with a rise in European troupes performing in Istanbul. Exposure to foreign plays in the Ottoman Empire prompted Ottoman theatre artists to travel to Europe, seeking to develop theatre back home. Burhanettin Tepsi was one such artist who played a pivotal role in this exchange. Observing foreign companies in Istanbul, he travelled to France in 1906 to study theatre and, upon his return, applied his newfound knowledge in Istanbul. However, his inaugural play, expected to contribute significantly to Ottoman theatre in the Western style, faced criticism. This criticism was exacerbated when he worked on a play by a local author, which was met with a hostile audience reaction. This situation sheds light on the distinct aspects of modern theatre in the East and West. This study analyzes Burhanettin's approach to integrating his European experience with Istanbul's cultural context, the space of negotiation between Western and Eastern influences in his theatrical endeavours, and the reasons behind the criticism he encountered.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire, Theatre, Burhanettin Tepsi, Westernization, Transnational

Dila Okuş (dilaokus@gmail.com) graduated from Boğaziçi University's Department of Political Science and International Relations. She holds an MA in Film and Drama from Kadir Has University, with a dissertation titled "Extra-Daily Stage Behavior: Actor Training at Odin Teatret". Her research focuses on acting theories and methodologies, the history of theatre and acting, and cultural politics. Currently, she is a PhD candidate in Istanbul University's Department of Theatre Criticism and Dramaturgy, with a research focus on acting in the 19th century Ottoman Empire.

5) *Making our own Tanzimat? Discussions on reform among Iranians in the Ottoman empire between the 1850s and the 1910s*

Author: **Sara Zanotta**, University of Pavia

During the second half of the nineteenth century, educated Iranians in the Ottoman empire began to discuss the need to reform the Qajar empire, inspired by the *Tanzimat* and the brief constitutional experience after the Constitution of 1876. Often living in Istanbul and in contact with Ottoman politicians and reformist circles, Iranian diplomats and political and religious dissidents – categories that often overlapped in one single person – appropriated the lexicon and concepts of the developments occurring in the Ottoman empire and sometimes re-interpreted them to make them more acceptable to the Iranian society. Based on Persian-language sources drafted by Iranians living in the Ottoman empire, especially pamphlets, newspapers and correspondence, this paper aims

to present an alternative view to the questions on reform and modernization in the Ottoman space from the perspective of the Iranian minority. First, it will present the specificities of the Iranian minority in the Ottoman empire, focusing on the largest one in Istanbul. It will show the public and private spaces and practices of interaction with the Ottoman political and reformist circles. Subsequently, it explores the effect of this interaction on the Persian-language political discourse and action. Iranian reformists appropriated words and concepts that were doubly exogenous in terms of European origin and Ottoman reinterpretation. From the 1858 pamphlet *Daftar-e tanzimat* to the establishment of the Iranian Committee of Union and Progress in Istanbul, the inspiration of the Ottoman experience on Iranian reformists is evident. However, this contribution also aims to ascertain whether this phenomenon should be perceived as unidirectional or, as I argue, whether the experience of the Iranian minority should also be considered a crucial part of the development of the political debates in the Ottoman empire.

Keywords: Iranian minority, Ottoman empire, Tanzimat, Reformism, Qajar Iran

Sara Zanotta (sara.zanotta01@universitadipavia.it) is a PhD candidate in Asian and African History at the Department of Political and Social Sciences of University of Pavia, Italy. Her PhD thesis examines the role of Iranian communities abroad in the Iranian constitutional movement between then 1850s and the 1910s. During her doctoral studies, she was a visiting PhD student at the Central European University in Vienna, at the Institute of Iranian Studies of the University of Bamberg and at the Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies. She holds a Master's degree in International Relations from the University of Milan, where she still collaborates with the courses of History and Institutions of Muslim Countries and Comparative Constitutional Law and is the deputy chief of the editorial staff of "Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie".