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The Multiple Renaissances: Revival, Temporality, and Modernity across the Eastern Mediterranean, 1700-1900

Elisabetta Benigni | ORCID: 0000-0002-7057-3256

Associate Professor of Arabic Literature; Dipartimento di lingue e letterature straniere e culture moderne; Università di Torino, Torino, Italia

elisabetta.benigni@unito.it

This collection of essays explores the trajectories taken by texts, individuals and ideas across the geographic and intellectual space of the Eastern Mediterranean during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries. Moving the concept of Renaissance away from its traditional chronological canonization, which corresponds to the early modern period, the volume challenges established approaches for the study of modernity in non-European regions and particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean. The title of the issue, *The Multiple Renaissances*, deliberately engages with the idea of renaissance-revival, here used in the plural form and intended as a mobile concept that travelled across languages, periods and places.

The essays contained in the volume draw on recent studies that recast the Mediterranean in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries within a complex web of internal debates and transregional appropriations,¹ rather than looking at it as a “site of a derivative and defensive modernity”.² Overall, the volume aims to show how a *regime d'historicité*, characterized by ideas of resurgence, cultural, linguistic and religious reforms, new perceptions of temporality and antiquity, circulated across the Mediterranean, the Ottoman Empire and adjacent regions at that time.³ This *regime d'historicité* gave rise to a stream

1 Some examples of a global and comparative approach to the concept of renaissance/modernity can be found in: Schildgen, Zhou, Gilman. *Other Renaissances*; Wollaeger, Eatough. *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernism*; Levi. “The Nahda and the Haskala”, and “Before Global Modernism.”

2 Hamzah. “Foundations of Religious Reform (*Islah*)”. 2.

3 On the concept of *régime d'historicité* as the relationship of a society with its time and the past, and its experience of being-in-time, see Hartog. *Régimes d'historicité*.

of renaissances that overlapped with, and sometimes responded to, the mainstream and univocal narrative of the birth of modernity.⁴

It is common knowledge that during the nineteenth century the concepts of rebirth, regrowth and reordering were particularly vivid in the writings and imaginaries of Muslim and Christian intellectuals in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, as testified by the use of semantically related words such as the Arabic *nahḍah*, the Italian *risorgimento*, the Albanian *rilindja*, or cognate words such as the Turkish *tanzimat* or the Arabic *taraqqī* or *taqaddum*. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that these nineteenth-century reformist debates, and subsequent cultural and literary developments, rather than emerging in total opposition to the past, were deeply engaged with the intellectual legacy of the eighteenth century.⁵

For the Ottoman Empire and the Mediterranean, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represented an important *longue durée*, during which these regions undertook major movements of social, cultural, religious, political and linguistic reform.⁶ Yet, this was also the period during which the Ottoman Empire and the Mediterranean started to be considered areas of stagnation and quintessential examples of a belated and peripheral modernity.⁷ A classic example of this contradiction can be found in European travel literature: the eighteenth century was the moment when Western and Northern European *literati* travelled extensively through the Italian peninsula, Greece and the Ottoman Empire, describing them as places embodying a glorious past and a decaying present. How do we escape this historiographical contradiction in the representation of the birth of modernity?

4 A call for a new approach in the study of modernity in the Eastern Mediterranean Arab-speaking regions was expressed by Gran. *Islamic roots of capitalism*; Schulze. "Das islamische achtzehnte Jahrhundert" and "Was ist die islamische Aufklärung?"; Sheehi. *Foundations of Modern Arab Identity* and "The 10-Point Nahda Manifesto"; Khuri-Makdisi. *The Eastern Mediterranean*. esp. 3, 8-9. For an overview on recent scholarship see Hamzah. "Foundations of Religious Reform (*Islah*)". 2-4.

5 Among the works that underlined the important connection with the eighteenth-century intellectual legacy see Schulze. "Das islamische achtzehnte Jahrhundert"; Gran. *Islamic roots of capitalism*. More recently, see also Reichmuth. *The World of Murtada al-Zabidi*; Kilpatrick. "From Literature to Adab"; Dallal. *Islam without Europe*. For a critical overview on the scholarship on the eighteenth-century Islamic or Ottoman Enlightenment see Sariyannis. "The limits of going global" and Hamzah. "Foundations of Religious Reform (*Islah*)".

6 For an overview on the concept of reform for the Islamic world, see Dupont. "*Islah*: le réformisme musulman moderne".

7 For a discussion on the decline-thesis and related scholarship, see Kafadar. "The Question of Ottoman Decline"; Sadji. "Decline, its Discontents and Ottoman Cultural History". 1-40. For the European views on the decadence of the Ottoman Empire and the Southern Mediterranean, see Laurens. *Les Origines intellectuelles de l'expédition d'Égypte*; Dainotto. *Europe (in theory)*.

Recent decades have seen an increase in works aiming at redefining the category of modernity, especially for areas outside of Western Europe such as Southern Europe, the Ottoman Empire or beyond. These works set out to question the idea of modernity as a product solely of Western Europe and the French Enlightenment. In the search for alternative frames to the concepts of belated or failed modernity, scholars proposed replacements such as multiple, alternative, tendential, interrupted or porous modernity.⁸ Despite these efforts, however, the methodological conundrum remains unsolved: is modernity a universal category or is it possible to conjugate it in a multiplicity of languages? And if so, how did political ideas, emotions and imaginaries travel across different linguistic and social communities throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

In recent years, new paradigms and methodologies have also emerged in scholarship on the Ottoman Empire, helpful tools in the effort of drawing a new cartography of the renaissances for the Eastern Mediterranean and, in a broader scope, for non-European areas. The new approaches are characterized by some recurrent features that can be summarized as:

- A comparative reading of the sources in contiguous and coexistent languages such as Arabic, Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Persian. This is well exemplified, for instance, in the practice of looking to the parallel cultural and political developments during the period of the so-called *Nahḍah* and the Turkish *Tanzimat*. Moreover, since many Ottoman intellectuals were also embedded in a multilingual atmosphere, new scholarship looks at the link between communicating texts and the intellectuals' networks across contiguous regions and languages in the Empire.⁹
- A different extension in time of the concept of modernity: instead of focusing only on the nineteenth century, the new scholarship emphasizes the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as an inescapable part of the subsequent developments in the field of literature, politics, religion and intellectual trends in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰

8 Eisenstadt. "Multiple Modernities". 199-218; Gaonkar. *Alternative Modernities*; Chambers. *Mediterranean Crossings*; Schifirnet. "Tendential Modernity". 22-51.

9 Some examples of works that adopted this approach are those by Strauss. "The Egyptian Connection"; "Who Read What in the Ottoman Empire". 39-76; "The Greek Connection". 47-68; Guth. *Brückenschläge*; Hill. "Revisiting the Intellectual Space of the *Nahḍa*"; Booth. *Migrating Texts*; Ceyhun. "Entanglements between the *Tanzimat* and *al-Nahḍah*". Khuri-Makdis. "Ottoman Arabs in Istanbul". 159-182.

10 Haykel, *Revival and Reform in Islam*; Sariyannis. "The limits of going global"; Hamzah. "Foundations of Religious Reform (*Islah*)". Dallal. *Islam without Europe*; Sadji. "Decline, its Discontents". El-Rouayheb. *Islamic Intellectual History*. See also the article of Topal in this volume.

- A new paradigm for studying the region's past that avoids the binary dichotomy between nostalgia for the Empire, coupled with a focus on the damages of colonialism and, conversely, a teleological tale of progress from decline and decadence to a modern, Westernized, sovereign nation-state. These new approaches complicate nineteenth-century historiography by scrutinizing how the two realms of empire and nation-state were balanced and were not exclusive.¹¹
- A shift of the focus away from liberal intellectuals, previously seen as the foundational figures in the rise of a modern self, in order to shed light on different models of intellectuals, such as theologians, mystics and an entire spectrum of in-between figures who do not fit in the Manichean divide between the “modern” and the “traditional”.¹² At the same time, new attention had been given to the persistent circulation of manuscripts, the consumption of cheap books and the rise of private presses.¹³

Drawing on these emerging approaches, this volume seeks to contribute to the debate with five essays. Each of them looks at the theme of ‘Multiple Renaissances’ and of the travelling of texts, people and ideas from a specific perspective. The hope is that the variety of topics presented will offer a broad panorama for the analysis of the period in question.

The volume opens with the article “Political Reform as Religious Revival: Conceptual Foundations of Tanzimat” by Alp Eren Topal, which looks at the way the debates on the implementation of the *tanzimat* reforms were rooted in the late eighteenth-century and the early nineteenth-century discussions of the concept of *taǧdīd* (renewal). The second article, “Phanariot tongues: The Mavrocordatos Family and the Power of the Turkish Language in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire” by Nir Shafir, discusses an important, though unstudied, conversation manual in Turkish produced by Constatine Mavrocordatos, a Phanariot prince ruling between Bucharest and Istanbul. Through a careful analysis of the form and language used in the text, the author emphasizes the role of the Mavrocordatos family as part of the newly ascendant bureaucratic corps, the *kalemiye*, rather than as progenitors of the (Greek) Enlightenment in Ottoman society. The essay by Stephan Guth, “Morpho-semantic Evidence of Emerging Subjectivity in the Language of the

11 See for instance Hill. “Revisiting the Intellectual Space of the *Nahḍa*”; Mestyan. *Arab Patriotism*.

12 An exemplary study that went in this direction was Delanoue. *Moralistes et politiques musulmans*. Following in his line Chih. “Un soufi réformiste”; Mayeur-Jaouen. “The Small World of Ahmad al-Sawi”; Mestyan. *Muṣṭafā Salāma al-Naǧǧārī*. See also: Ringer. *Islamic Modernism*; Yaycioǧlu. “Guarding Traditions and Laws”.

13 Seesemann. *Sufism, Literary Production, and Printing*; Schwartz. “The Political Economy of Private Printing”. 25-45; Mestyan. *Arab Patriotism*; Ayalon. *The Arabic Print Revolution*.

Nahḍah”, focuses on the nineteenth-century emergence of an Arab subjectivity and how this is reflected in language formation, specifically in the coinage of terminology and in the morpho-semantic aspects of *Nahḍah* keywords. The essay points to the importance of the traditional philological approach combined with the history of concepts. Two essays, one by Luca Berardi, “They Call Them *Antika*”. Ottoman Travellers in Italy and the Idea of Antiquities in the Early *Tanzimat* Period”, and another by Elisabetta Benigni, ““Metempsychosis” and “marvelous affinities”: Re-Imagining the Past in the *Ilyāḍah* by Sulaymān al-Bustānī (1904) and in the *Divano di ‘Omar ben al-Fared* by Pietro Valerga (1874)”, look, in different ways, at the concept of antiquity and the appropriation of the past, which are some of the feature characteristics of modernity. Luca Berardi investigates the concept of antiquity and the interest in old monuments in the travelogues of three members of the Ottoman elite. The essay redirects and reverses the gaze found in European travelogues to the Middle East. Moreover, it suggests that these travels to Italy contributed to the shaping of a new perception of antiquity in the Ottoman Empire. Elisabetta Benigni examines the concept of history and the appropriation of the past in two translations, one coming from the Ottoman Empire and the other from Italy. Her essay sheds light on the way an imagined, syncretic and translatable past played an important role in familiarizing texts across the modern Mediterranean. Her work also proposes rethinking the geographical borders with which we currently approach the study of the nineteenth-century renaissances.

By putting at their centre the idea that pre-national societies are characterized by a multiplicity of currents, actors and developments across micro- and macro-geographical areas, which do not necessarily correspond to our contemporary canon, all the articles put aside conventional chronologies (and geographies) in the study of the modern Eastern Mediterranean and propose new approaches. Moreover, the articles have in common a focus on language, on the history of concepts and a philological approach to the study of texts. The authors’ methodology combines literary analysis with history and seeks to avoid grand narratives based on already established historiographical paradigms.

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