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Keith David Watenpaugh: Being Modern in the Middle East

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ONE

Introduction: Modernity, Class, and the Architectures of Community

> They hold a refracted mirror in front of that which is civilized out of which a caricature of its obverse essence stares back.
> —Siegfried Kracauer, 1971

On the evening of 2 January 1910, Fathallah Qastun, a newspaper editor in Aleppo, one of the most important cities of the Ottoman Empire, addressed the inaugural meeting of the Mutual Aid Society. Simply titled "Becoming Civilized," the text of the speech, complete with parenthetical notations of spontaneous applause, was published in Qastun's own Arabic-language newspaper, *al-Shaʿb* [The People]. Qastun began his speech by asking: "Why have we not yet become fully civilized and in particular, why have we not borrowed more from Europe?" He answered his own question by arguing:

> I say we have not become fully part of Western Civilization because we have only taken from it what is in conformity with the traditions and customs of the various races which make up our state. This has caused both material and cultural harm. . . . For if we just copy Europeans, we will disavow our origins and acquire an antipathy toward our [past]. Instead, we should follow them as closely as possible in the way in which they protect their own race and homeland. We should strive to protect our noble language and ways just as they protect their languages and ways.[1]

Beyond distinguishing between the mere reproduction of the superficial trappings of European manners and fashions and the complete adoption of the bases of what the editor would later call "true civilization" (*al-madaniyya al-haqqa*), the most striking feature of this lecture is Qastun's conclusion that incorporation of the "essence" of the West and not just its material culture was vital to the survival of his society. Moreover, the preeminent threat was not only that West (although it clearly remained a pressing concern), but rather, in his estimation, an *irrational* attachment

[1] *al-Shaʿb* (Aleppo), 3 January 1910.

to tradition and custom by his fellow citizens prevented them from joining the ranks of the "fully civilized."

The content of Qastun's speech was not especially unique in 1910: questions about civilization, political legitimacy, social reform, the place of the peoples of the Ottoman Empire in the passage of history, and, ultimately, what it meant to be modern had become commonplace in the few short months since the Revolution of 1908 and were being asked in the several languages of the Eastern Mediterranean—Ottoman Turkish, Arabic, Armenian, Greek, and Ladino—on the pages of newspapers and from podiums throughout the region. The Revolution of 1908, also known as the Young Turk Revolution, ended the autocratic and paranoid rule of Sultan Abdülhamid II and led to the reinstatement of the quasi-liberal Ottoman Constitution of 1876. Unlike the prerevolutionary government, which had generally proscribed such forms of association and made the publishing of private newspapers difficult, if not impossible, the new régime, dominated by the reform-minded officers and bureaucrats of the Ottoman Committee for Union and Progress (CUP), the so-called Young Turks, had created an atmosphere in which civil society flourished, and voluntary associations and newspapers had become the most visible manifestations of the full measure of change.

As important as the content of the speech was its audience. The lawyers, bureaucrats, bankers, petty capitalists, high school teachers, doctors, agents of European and American companies, fellow journalists, and others who sat in rows of straight-backed chairs while they listened to Qastun employ a novel political and historical vocabulary to conjure a vision of the beguiling and dangerous aspects of the West were members of a distinct new urban middle class that owed its existence to the material, economic and political transformations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The men, dressed in coats and trousers of British wool, French cravats, and starched white collars, and the few women, faces uncovered, wearing linen blouses over corsets, tailored skirts, and Italian felt hats, had gathered, in part, to make sense of the rapid and accelerating change of those last few decades. But they had also come, in what was their leisure time, to see and be seen, enjoy an evening's entertainment masquerading as education, revel in one another's company, socialize, gossip, make business deals, scout out potential mates for their children, and, moreover, reinforce those particular cultural and social bonds that distinguished them from the city's poor and its "old social class" of Sunni Muslim *aʿyan*, a politically and culturally tenacious semifeudal landed elite.

Some had traveled by automobile to the society's hall, located on a wide, straight thoroughfare in a recently built district far beyond the narrow streets and blind alleys of Aleppo's walled old city; most had walked or taken a streetcar from their single-family homes and flats in a suburb

nearby, their way having been lit by gas streetlamps. The warm glow of electric light bulbs illuminated the proceedings and allowed the discussion that followed the talk to pass well into the evening. Many of those in the hall—filled with the smoke of machine-rolled cigarettes of American and Turkish tobaccos—were graduates of local Christian missionary or Western-style state schools, and a few had attended university in Istanbul, Beirut, or even Europe and the United States. They knew foreign languages, usually French, learned in the course of their education, but also as a necessity of doing business in a marketplace increasingly dominated by commerce with cities like Marseilles and Manchester. Those in government employ had mastered bureaucratic Ottoman Turkish in addition to Arabic.

In the months since the Revolution of 1908, the partial lifting of censorship meant that they could glean from their afternoon papers a less filtered view of their society and the wider world than had previously been the case; they could also follow spirited debates between editors of different papers, sometimes vicious arguments, and personal attacks by journalists on one another or those in positions of authority. The telegraph, which had already been in use for several decades, brought much of that news, but the introduction of a modest telephone network added even more. Bookshops carried domestic journals in the several languages of the empire, and magazines, full of advertisements and imported directly from Paris, London, Rome, or Vienna, made them aware—at about the same time as their Western counterparts—of the availability of consumer goods, musical instruments, and labor-saving devices, as well as *au courante* European fashion and cuisine. Equally consumed were serialized novels and poetry—in their original and translated versions—and cutting-edge scientific, medical, and literary journals. Local boutiques and department stores, some owned or managed by members of Qastun's audience, made certain that these items were readily available. Most recently, images of the world beyond the city had come in the form of an outdoor cinema set up by a local representative of the Pathé Frères, weather permitting, in a gated public park.

While Qastun's *al-Shaʿb* may have been just one of the dozens of new newspapers of Aleppo, and the Mutual Aid Society indistinct from the hundreds of other European-style benevolent and cultural organizations taking shape in the cities of the region, collectively, the organizations, newspapers, seemingly familiar patterns of consumption, forms of sociability, and ways of thinking of the people who inhabited those new spaces or inscribed their thoughts on newsprint bespoke a fundamental cultural and political turn in the contemporary history of the Middle East. For the first time in the lives of anyone in that room, they could *imagine* connecting the ideas being expressed, discussed, and debated to what they would have considered the actual material and moral progress of their commu-

nity. This optimistic connection was not only a function of the restoration of liberal constitutionalism and the reintroduction of electoral politics by the revolutionary régime; rather the adoption of new technologies that increasingly collapsed space and time, the seeming embrace of secular citizenship by the Young Turks, the knowledge of organizational and intellectual tools like public opinion and nationalism, and the growing cultural and economic penetration by the West in various forms meant, for members of the emerging middle class, the possibility of changing their society and their role in it to such a degree and in such a fashion as to make it, in the way they understood the concept, *modern*.

However, progress had come at the price of short-term political instability and a breakdown of customary social and religious hierarchies. Not only did war continue the territorial erosion of the Ottoman Empire, but Qastun, his listeners, and his readers were keenly aware of the horrific pogrom of the prosperous Armenian community of the nearby city of Adana in April 1909 during a short-lived period of counterrevolution. Eventually engulfing rural communities in the northern tier of the province of Aleppo, the violence, in which Ottoman officials, soldiers, and religious students played a part, underscored how fragile and unstable the new order truly was; that the perpetrators of the violence had as yet escaped punishment by the Young Turks added to the anxiety of those in the room. Tensions between liberal reform and brutal reaction would continue to beset the empire as it stumbled into World War I (1914–1918) and was then broken apart altogether at the behest of European states in the postwar period.

In posing reflective questions about civilization and the West, adjusting to rapid technological change, responding to the draw of European aesthetics and fashions, and balancing the revolution and liberalism with the possibility of mass atrocities and ferocious communal violence, the emerging middle class had come face to face with the reality of being and becoming, to borrow a phrase from Harry Harootunian's study of interwar Japan, "overcome by modernity."[2] For critics like Qastun there was no doubt that "we," primarily but not exclusively his middle-class listeners, had already embraced modernity and were in the process of becoming *just as modern* as Europeans while at the same time retaining their own unique identity and way of life. Consider his enumeration of successful moments of claiming modernity, from the second night's continuation of the speech:

> The most beautiful thing to take from the Westerners is the science of industry as it is the basis of all advancement and the foundation of civilization. . . . the

[2] Harry Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan (*Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

> cultivation of the mind with science and law [also puts us] on the path of true civilization. Indeed we have established schools in all the corners of the kingdom, even villages have places of learning to instruct children in the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic, moreover we have taken from the Europeans the cultivation of women. . . . We are nearing the summit of modern civilization, Europeans are amazed by our enterprise and our vigor. . . so much so that some have bowed their heads as if to say: he who wishes to attain real civilization let him follow the example of the Ottomans.[3]

By liberating Western civilization from Westerners, Qastun asserted that actual and understandable material and historical circumstance—primarily industrialization in the West and the reactionary autocracy and cultural backwardness of the Ottoman *ancien régime*—had created a temporary disparity. Casting blame in such a way, and centering reform on concrete issues of commerce, education, and industry, he also betrayed the overarching interests of his audience. These were not starry-eyed idealists conducting discussions of liberalism and political economy in the abstract, but instead many were businessmen and white-collar professionals, including members of his extended family, for whom interest rates, tariffs, monetary policy, official corruption, and nascent industrialization were the pressing realities of daily life.

More to the point, Qastun's acceptance of the underlying logos of Western civilization while asserting the ability of non-Westerners to resist the political and cultural hegemony of the West is the quintessential ambivalence at the center of the historical experience of modernity in the colonial and postcolonial non-West. Thus, in a telling paradox consonant with that ambivalence, the ultimate judges of whether Qastun and his audience had attained modernity were still external: the Europeans who "bowed their heads" and the "We" who were "nearing the summit of modern civilization" were doing so only after having crossed an axial barrier defined by the West, thereby folding themselves into a teleological narrative that had as its terminus the accomplishments of Western civilization.

The crossing of that boundary in the Middle East has often served as the organizing theme for historians of the Ottoman Empire's collision with modernity. Albert Hourani and Bernard Lewis, especially, assert the existence of a dialectical relationship between the commitment to modernization, which in this case means reaching a level of material and institutional equivalence with Europe, and a conservative reaction against modernity, in this context the ideation of the post-Enlightenment social and intellectual processes that led to the "rise of the West." This appears most clearly in Lewis's discussion of the *Tanzimat* period (1826–1878), during which the Ottoman Empire, when faced with overwhelming military

[3] *al-Shaʿb* (Aleppo), 5 January 1910.

threats from Europe, accelerated the process of defensive modernization, thereby opening the door ever more slightly to modernity. Reform was imposed from above, often on groups ill prepared for and suspicious of the new way. While the reforms produced cadres of *moderns*, the Ottoman Empire could never achieve modernity until it became a "real" European nation-state in the form of the Republic of Turkey, as reflected in the title of Lewis's most noteworthy book on the subject, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey.* The key moment in this process was not the reform movement of Kemal Atatürk's post-Ottoman régime as much as it was the sloughing off of the forms of an "Oriental" Islamic past. Far from challenging the linear master narrative of progress and the unfolding of human freedom underpinning the historical consciousness associated with Western civilization, Lewis merely wrote a portion of the Ottoman Empire's population into it, and in so doing he excluded the rest of the population, primarily Arabs, from it.[4]

What remains cogent in his analysis is the possibility that modernization can occur without a simultaneous commitment to modernity. In other words, the grand nineteenth-century projects of modernization in Egypt and the Ottoman Empire—often involving the incorporation of recent technological and bureaucratic innovations—did not necessarily flow from an ideological engagement with modernity on the part of the reformers themselves. Furthermore, in drawing a distinction between the phenomenon of modernization and the idea of modernity, Lewis creates a way to account for the obvious attraction technology exerts on Islamists, the customary elite, even the poor, without a concomitant belief in emancipation, secularism, or rational epistemology.

For Hourani, writing from the perspective of Arabic-language authors in his seminal *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, modernity followed from elite local-European interaction in the salons of Arabophile British and French expatriates and on the campuses of American missionary colleges. It was a consequence, as well, of journeys to the West by generations of Arab students and Muslim scholars.[5] The series of exchanges between the French intellectual Ernest Renan and Jamal al-Din "the Afghan" best exemplify Hourani's understanding of the dialectic. Jamal al-Din, an intellectual of extraordinary abilities, engaged Renan in a debate about the compatibility of Islam and rationality in which he argued that philosophy (West) and prophecy (Islam) arrive through different means at the same

[4] Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), and *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982).

[5] Albert H. Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), originally published by Oxford University Press in 1962. Also Donald M. Reid, "Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age Twenty Years After," *IJMES* 14:4 (1982): 541–557.

truth. As Hourani shows, there is little evidence that Jamal al-Din would have expounded these ideas outside of the relatively free discursive environment of 1880s' Paris. When he did so in a more limited way in Cairo and Istanbul, the Muslim religious establishment labeled his ideas tantamount to heresy and ostracized him.[6] Hourani, like Lewis, conceived the entry of modernity into the region from multiple points, culminating primarily in the broader adoption of a secular nationalism or nationalisms built within the confines of nation-states like Egypt. In emphasizing Arabism as the logical consequence of modernization, Hourani placed that ideology at the center of intellectual, social, and cultural change, thereby obscuring any discussions and movements otherwise unintelligible in the language of nationalism.

Residues of this dialectic, under the influence of 1960s' modernization theory,[7] continue to control discussions of modernity in the region. Moreover, as Deniz Kandiyoti observes about the prevailing trends in Turkish and Ottoman historiography on modernity, "The relative impoverishment of this field has not been altogether accidental. The polemical perspectives adopted both by apologists of Turkish modernization—Kemalists in particular—and by its critics have inadvertently limited our conceptual horizons by falling short of interrogating the notion of the 'modern' itself and charting its local specificities."[8] With a few notable exceptions, primarily scholarship on middle-class and elite feminism, her comments could equally apply to the historiography of the Arab Levant.[9]

Any account, however, that privileges a linear narrative of modernization or "Westernization"—and resistance thereto—can shed light on only larger institutional and political modifications; at the same time such accounts tend to reinforce Eurocentric prejudices about Arab and Muslim societies by putting the onus for change solely on the shoulders of Westerners and characterizing reform as a mimetic reaction to the West. To

[6] Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal ad-Din "al-Afghani,"* including a translation of the *Refutation of the Materialists* from the Persian by Nikki R. Keddie and Hamid Algar (Berkeley: University of California, 1968); Rudi Matthee, "Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and the Egyptian National Debate," *IJMES* 21:2 (1989): 151–169.

[7] Manfred Halpern, *The Politics of Social Change in the Middle East and North Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963). At the time, the inevitability of the rise of the "New Middle Class"—though not modernization theory per se—particularly in Egypt, was dismissed by, among others, Amos Perlmutter, "Egypt and the Myth of the New Middle Class: A Comparative Analysis," *CSSH* 10:1 (1967): 46–65.

[8] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Gendering the Modern: On Missing Dimensions in the Study of Turkish Modernity," in Sibel Bozdogan and Resat Kasaba, eds., *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 129.

[9] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Introduction," in Lila Abu-Lughod, ed., *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

move beyond that narrative (but not reject elements of it altogether), I seek instead in this work to capture modernity as a lived historical experience and explore how it has colonized local politics, cultural practices, and everyday life by bringing into the discussion a consequence of modernity: modernity draws and redraws boundaries of class, and, critically, the ideas, institutions, and politics associated with modernity have given rise to a uniquely modern middle class.[10]

Based on archival, literary, visual, and oral historical evidence in several languages, including, Arabic, Ottoman and Modern Turkish, Armenian and French—and an eclectic body of theoretical literature—I argue in this book that in the crucible of the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, World War I, and the imposition of colonial rule, a discrete middle class emerged in the cities of the Eastern Mediterranean that was defined not just by the wealth, professions, possessions, or levels of education of its members, but also by the way they asserted their modernity. To claim modernity, they incorporated into their daily lives and politics a collection of manners, mores, and tastes, and a corpus of ideas about the individual, gender, rationality, and authority actively derived from what they believed to be the cultural, social, and ideological praxis of the contemporary metropolitan Western middle classes. By *being modern*, members of this class distinguished themselves from the region's ruling Sunni Muslim oligarchy and subaltern class of urban and rural poor and evidenced how they conceived of themselves as a separate element of their society. Moreover, excluded by customary practices and political theory from structures of power, this class contested its exclusion and asserted its right to equality, citizenship, and political participation in the idiom of modernity. By being modern, its members declared their intention to take a preeminent role in the production of knowledge and culture, not just for themselves, but for society at large. The dedication to these ideas, praxis, and politics marks that middle class as both a distinct component and an unprecedented innovation in the social and cultural history of the Middle East, as well as a vital subject in the question of modernity in the non-West.

I trace not just what it meant to be modern for this class, but how the class's commitment to being modern shaped its attempts to create civil society and mold urban politics, the multiple ways it employed nationalism, history writing, and violence to make sense of the post–World War I

[10] A relevant example of this link, especially as it bears on questions of white-collar professionals, middle-class city people, and culture, is seen in Siegfried Kracauer's *The Salaried Masses*, trans. Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1998). Important to take from Kracauer is the idea that modernity constitutes a reproducible experience connected to worldview, consumption, technology, and taste as well as wealth, and in "the real world" it often has as much to do with ideas and attitudes as it does with material things and observable simulation.