

TO THE EDITOR

In response to the recent discussion of my book *Islamic Roots of Capitalism* (Studia Orientalia 101, pp. 279–295) by Andrei Sergejeff, I want to express appreciation and general agreement with the view of the continuing importance of the “1798 Watershed” as a problem in Egyptian history. I agree with the reviewer as well on the problems associated with modernization. I have reservations, however, about whether emphasizing the European colonialism of later years as a substitute would improve matters. What might need to be questioned is not just 1798 or modernization but the idea of a watershed in the way we use the term to mean a total rupture with the past.

The reviewer had several criticisms of my book from a theoretical point of view on discovering that the book was not a part of liberalism and Orientalism. He observed that it raised and answered questions in ways he found confusing. He also found several typos.

In the spirit of providing a bit of clarification, I could mention that the book was written in a context which encouraged social history and political economy. I deduce this may have been a source of confusion, judging from the reviewer’s announced frustration first at the association of capitalism and modernity, and second at the debates about orientalism that preceded his life time that he says he does not understand.

(Here I would recommend reading the article by Rifa‘at Abu’l Hajj in the book I co-edited with Dirlík and Bahl, *History After the Three Worlds*. It covers the rise of neo-orientalism in the years following Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. My impression about the US is that much of the younger generation was formed in this newer neo-orientalism and New Liberalism while being told otherwise.)

Several times the reviewer suggests that the book is claiming that x is new to the post-1760 period and that this is not the case; El-Rouhayeb in his 2005 article made the same point as well. This was not and is not likely in a political economy or social history book. What was meant by the term new was first the context of that time in a world historical sense and second on the level of Egypt the mixture of new circumstances which made older forms of knowledge and socio-economic practice new as a result of their new location. If one examines the transition to capitalism in dozens of countries from this period this is what one will also see, it is not just the case in Egypt. Merchant capital changes; scholastic knowledge changes as well.

The reviewer states that he is following an earlier essay by Dror Ze'evi (2004) on Egypt in 1798, one claiming that modernity comes to the Third World with the arrival of European colonialism, Egypt as a case in point. One wonders about such articles. One assumes that they do not intend to promote diffusionism as that is reductionist. One assumes they do not intend to promote European colonialism but if this is the case why do they often neglect the fact that colonialism in one form or another has been going on for centuries and that what was new about this 19th century colonialism vis-à-vis even the Ottoman occupation preceding it would need to be shown. Why is it never shown?

The reason why political economy focuses on the capitalist mode of production as the symbol of modernity and not on colonialism per se is that that was what was new and transformative everywhere. Many countries developed modern culture but were not colonies. Marx is brilliant here in his writing on merchant capitalism and modern capitalism.

Let us turn now to the issue of the 1798 watershed. In Ze'evi's essay about the subject, as in the one under discussion, it is apparent that what I wrote about it was for some reason ignored by both writers even though ostensibly my views on the subject were those under discussion. Moreover, although both Ze'evi and the current reviewer appear to have read the new introduction to the 1998 edition of *Islamic Roots* on the persistence of 1798, for some reason they do not include it in their summation of my argument.

What I argued is the following. It of course may be right or wrong as arguments go but I think it deserves some attention as the point of the article seemed to be my book and that subject. The persistence of 1798 is a natural outcome, I wrote, of the often rather defensive situation of students of the Middle East faced with the enthusiastic support on the part of most others for Hegel's paradigm of the Rise of the West, this paradigm requiring an Orient which would stagnate for them. My perception is that it is difficult to get a job in this situation if one chooses to oppose this paradigm and this is why students accept it. However, I also made the point that its use leads to abusing the subject of the Middle East and to damaging the education of students there as well as in Europe and the US. Many in Egypt in fact would call the 1798 paradigm neo-colonialist and they would object to it. This became apparent in 1998 when the French government wanted to celebrate 1798.

Another point raised by the reviewer is why is there no "modern edition" of *Islamic Roots* after 20 years. The answer should now be clear. From my point of view, the audience today is no different from the one that read it 20 years ago. It is still just as Hegelian. In my view, the reviewer is thus not correct to argue that the book is not well-received because it is behind the times or may have typos or may be schematic, most books have typos, the newer the field the more the typos, the book is not adopted because its paradigm contradicts that of Hegel's. The periodization it

offers is quite clear (1760–1860, breakdown of mercantilism, growth of the home market and the gradual appearance of the nation state in the age of Isma‘il) but it is, as alternatives go, one which can not be contemplated as long as the only meta narrative is that of the Rise of the West.

The preoccupation with the typos in place of a preoccupation with the argument is not a scientific response. My guess is that it is a reflection of the discomfort some readers experience on reading a book which questions the assumptions they hold. What they are experiencing could be called cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance has the consequence of making one want to dismiss what it is that is troubling one without actually confronting it.

That said, I would like to thank the reviewer for his efforts and if I get a chance to re-issue the book I will look closely at the several queries he raised. I did this before in 1998 with the review of Gabriel Baer and Fritz De Jong. This reviewer seems more accurate than they were in what he happened to spot.

I will close with an observation about one of the reviewer’s queries, the one that concerns Al-Tahtawi’s father. The subject continues to puzzle me. I lived in Al-Tahtawi’s house for a week in Tahta and read in his library as a guest of the family but I am still not clear about how to resolve the matter. The main and only detailed source in current use about this figure is that of ‘Ali Mubarak. ‘Ali Mubarak, I came to be familiar with in my work on Al-‘Attar. (To this day I do not know what to do with his claim in one volume that Al-‘Attar was born in Cairo and in another that he was born in a village in the Delta!) What Mubarak wrote about al-Tahtawi’s father can be interpreted in a couple of ways. He was said to have been poor and to have spent his life going from domicile(?) to domicile among his more affluent relatives. He was said to have been a multazim but his land was taken away from him and this was why he was poor. At times in the past 20 years I decided this man was in fact *faute de mieux* a minor merchant and at other times I thought it would be better to call him a multazim and skip the fact that he did not have any land. This is everyday life in an undeveloped area of knowledge. What would be helpful to the reader and the author would be if a reviewer who knew the subject and had some sort of vision of what to do, could suggest how this might be managed.

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