



Decentering the Center: Dialogues with Zeynep Çelik

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Review of Susan Slyomovics, ed., *Ordering Imperial Worlds: From Late Medieval Spain to the Modern Middle East*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 328 pages, 14 b&w illustrations, 49 color illustrations. ISBN 9781399517867. In this volume of essays in honor of Zeynep Çelik, scholars engage with her rich corpus on built environments of the Mediterranean. Utilizing transdisciplinary and often innovative methods, they draw on diverse voices across space and time to interrogate the idea of empire.

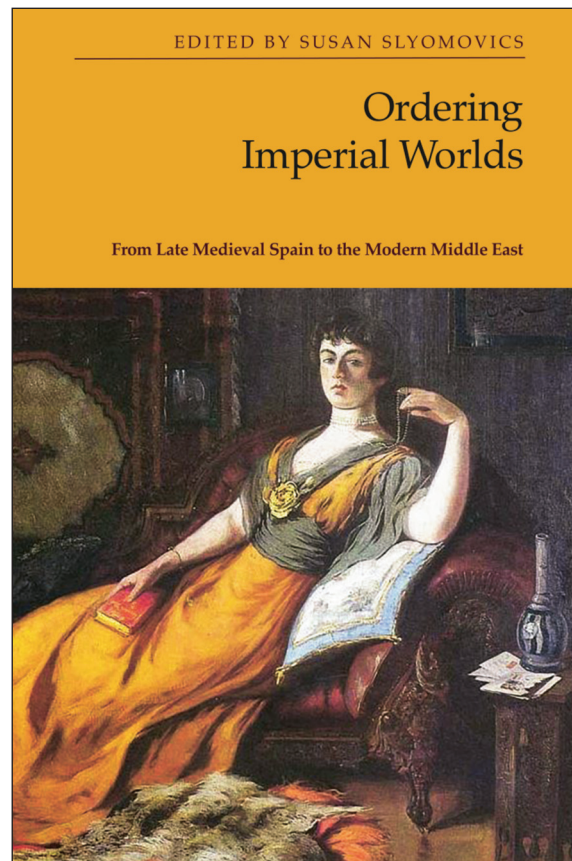
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How do empires order the varied worlds over which they claim political, intellectual, and historical dominion? What kinds of structures and narratives do they craft in support of their claims, and how are they resisted, contested, dismantled? These kinds of questions are broached in *Ordering Imperial Worlds*, a volume of essays in honor of Zeynep Çelik, Sakıp Sabancı Visiting Professor of History at Columbia University and Distinguished Professor Emerita at New Jersey Institute of Technology. A specialist in Ottoman and North African urbanism and architecture, Çelik is known for her rich corpus on built environments of the modern Mediterranean. In 2019, the Center for Near Eastern Studies at UCLA recognized Çelik with the Giorgio Levi della Vida award for excellence in Islamic studies,

established in 1967 by Center founder Gustave E. Grunebaum to honor the life and work of that Italian Jewish scholar. As recipient of this endowed prize, Çelik organized a conference in May 2019 at UCLA entitled ‘Perspectives on French Colonial and Late Ottoman Cultural History.’ Inspired by her work and reflecting her transdisciplinary methods, scholars from Turkey, France, Algeria, and the US presented papers which Susan Slyomovics subsequently collected and edited in this festschrift volume.

Ordering Imperial Worlds, explains Slyomovics, acknowledges the dynamic circle of intellectuals in architecture and Islamic studies in the University of California system, one that was continually enriched by emigrés — among them Çelik and her advisor at Berkeley, Spiro Kostof, both from Istanbul. The volume offers ‘a sustained critical reflection on cross-cultural exchanges across the Mediterranean’, the focus of Çelik’s life work. A rich lineup of interdisciplinary essays combines methods and perspectives of ‘social, cultural, and urban history, as well as collective political memory’ (234). The book is divided into three parts: ‘Unbounded Methodologies’, ‘Variations on Late Ottoman Culture’, and ‘Chronologies and Spaces of Containment’. Many of the authors employ a comparative framework and juxtapose viewpoints, bringing together diverse



voices in and across space and time. A key aim is to interrogate notions of empire, teasing out new stories ‘from below or sideways’ (Clancy-Smith, 79) to reveal imperial complexities, contradictions, and limitations; and proposing alternative periodizations and geographies that set the stage for new histories. In fact, a fitting subtitle for *Ordering Imperial Worlds* might have been ‘Decentering the Center,’ to paraphrase Clancy-Smith (77).

Çelik has long been interested in parallels, intersections, and dialogues between modern Ottoman and European projects for the built environment (for example, Çelik 2008). She has also explored the interest in antiquities among 19th-century Ottoman intellectuals and ruling elites: part of a reflexive historical and political process that paralleled similar efforts in other empires. Modernization and antiquities went hand-in-hand, integral to forging new imperial and national identities. Ottoman elites began to patronize heritage more visibly, sending the message that they were Europe’s civilizational competitor, guardians of the heritage of classical antiquity and other periods. Laws regulating archeology and heritage, excavations, and related institutions were implemented in remote provinces, symbolically integrating them into the imperial identity (Çelik 2011: 446; Çelik 2016: 4). Ottomans also sought to halt Europeans’ seizure of antiquities, while countering the charge that their empire lay literally and figuratively in ruins, the result of neglect and mismanagement.

Çelik takes up this story in her lead essay on Jerusalem during the crucial transition from Ottoman to British rule, painting an evocative portrait of this highly symbolic city as a site of imperial competition. The British followed paths already established by the Ottomans — for example, preserving segments of the historic walls and reordering the areas around Jaffa and Damascus gates — but their interventions were radically different in terms of ‘impact and scale.’ The British portrayed themselves as liberators of the holy city and the Arab nation, pledging to protect sites sacred to the three world religions. ‘Saving the walls of Al-Quds’ was high on the agenda of Mandate officials: this meant erasing signs of Ottoman modernity, building picturesque complexes in an Arts and Crafts aesthetic, and isolating the historic core via greenbelts. Throughout Çelik deftly interweaves political and religious discourse, noting that the British Mandate ended more than seven centuries of Muslim control of Jerusalem. That was openly celebrated in the Western press, for example, in an etching of Edmund Allenby’s entry through Jaffa Gate in December 1917 entitled: ‘Cross Replaces Crescent in Holy City for Which Crusades Fought and Died’ (34–37).

Jerrilynn Dodds takes up this theme in her essay on 13th-century Christian-ruled Iberia (the sole premodern essay in the book). She engages in close visual analysis of select frames of the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*, poem-songs commissioned by Alfonso X

in the early 1270's shortly after the suppression of Muslim (*mudéjar*) revolts in Castile and Aragon. In the vein of Amy Remensnyder, Dodds portrays the Virgin Mary not only as a holy figure revered by both Muslims and Christians, but as an agent of colonial conquest: a 'frontier authority' to whom Muslims were made to submit (67).

Heghnar Watenpaugh juxtaposes urban histories of Aleppo by Kamal al-Ghazzi, Ardavazt Surmeyan, and Jean Sauvaget, written during the French Mandate (1923–1946) in dialogue with the same networks of intellectuals and institutions and, to some extent, with each other. Addressed respectively to Syrian, Armenian, and French audiences, Watenpaugh argues that these histories reflect different understandings of the city's present and future. While affirming the value of all three texts, she notes that translation (or rather, the lack of it) means that 'colonial narratives ... continue to eclipse local narratives — indigenous or non-colonial' even 'in the wake of powerful critiques' (125).

This volume is also about absences — voices not recorded, places not mapped — and how scholars can recover them. In a nuanced reading of Muhammad al-Saghir ibn Yusuf's chronicle of a shipwreck off the Tunisian coast (1762), Clancy-Smith goes beyond histories of disasters and large-scale maritime commerce to craft a different kind of narrative from a 'land-and-sea perspective' (77). The shipwreck provides a window onto early modern Mediterranean politics from the viewpoints of the ruling Husaynid dynasty (1705–1956) and groups that have historically been on the margins — notably, 'water specialists' on coastal massifs, estuaries, deltas, islands, and islets who engage in fishing, cabotage, and scavenging in the 'submerged marketplaces' of wrecks. She also explores the chronicle's afterlives in manuscripts and translations by Tunisian and French protectorate officials. Noting the 'intimate collaborations' between scholars and their 'Arabophile' patron (79), French resident general René Millet (1894–1900), she suggests that 'another kind of colonial encounter might have been possible' (98). Clancy-Smith spins a story like a spider spins its web, following threads for a while, then connecting them back and outward to larger threads. As such, she provides a model for how scholars can 'ferret out strange stuff and poke around in unlikely places and times for bewildering objects and unexpected persons' (95).

Clancy-Smith's search for 'multiple, yet webbed temporalities and periodizations' and 'entry points' (98) recurs throughout the book. Individuals from different time periods and places 'speak' to each other at and through particular sites, artworks, and texts and also across the essays. Clock towers and lighthouses, prisons and maps become historical actors, inscribing boundaries yet remaining fluid, shaping identities and memory. I want to close this review essay with two examples. The first is Marc André's rich essay on Montluc prison in Lyon, where resisters of the Nazi occupation

were incarcerated, tried, and deported. The prison's walls and security apparatus were strengthened when Algerian prisoners arrived after 1958. Following Nora (1997), André portrays the prison as a *milieu de mémoire*: a dynamic space and 'living mechanism' that generated dialogue and solidarity between opponents of fascism and colonial abuses in Algeria (261). Living memory and graffiti led some Algerian prisoners to imagine and place themselves within 'a genealogy of resistance fighters'; for the French Left, the prison became the focus of protests against the execution of Algerians, police raids, and other abuses of power that brought back memories of the German occupation (269). Yet as so often happens, the transformation of Montluc into a national memorial obliterated these heterogeneous memories: focusing exclusively on victims of the Nazis and erasing links to the Algerian War.

My final example is Burçak Özlüdil Altın's account of Lucien Libert's medical tour of the eastern Mediterranean (1911–1912). She argues that the psychiatrist's daily experiences — the people he met, the weather, sounds, his physical and sensory perceptions of 'active sites', all filtered through the 'framework through which he saw the world' (including Orientalism) — influenced his account of insane asylums as well as his academic writings. She reconstructs his itinerary in italics, linking his reactions and responses to Ottoman lands with stages in the journey (239). Significantly, she also inserts herself into the story. '*Our paths crossed, a hundred years apart, in Üsküdar, Istanbul,*' she writes, '*as he climbed a run-down street toward the Toptaşı Asylum on an autumn morning in 1911. This asylum brought us together. He was 29, I was 32*' (235). Altın reminds us that we, too, are historically situated actors in continuous dialogue with our sources, sites, and texts; and with the individuals, living and dead, who shape our encounter with them.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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