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Diana K. Davis, Edmund Burke, eds. *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2011. xiv + 286 pp. $59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8214-1974-8.

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Imaginaries are not made of words and thoughts only, but out of very practical, material things as well. As Edmund Burke III argues in the preface to this book, "What made environmental orientalism and the 'rule of experts' possible were the new energetic conditions of modern times. The production of environmental imaginaries (capitalism and the modern state as well) grew out of this epochal transformation in human energy regimes" (p. xi). Energy regimes–the old one, until nineteenth century, which was based solely on the renewing annual cycle of the sun, and the new one, which brought into the human sphere the enormous wealth of fossil fuels–are the unseen thread running through human history. This is an excellent beginning for every history book.

Diana K. Davis continues the opening of the volume by reminding us that imperial environmental narratives shaped the discipline of ecology as it was forming during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, not only in Europe's colonies but in the empires' cores too. Some of these narratives became so deeply rooted and embedded in the ecological science, that environmental orientalism in the Middle East and North Africa has hardly been investigated systematically for "the hidden relations of power rooted in its very specific forms of knowledge production" (p. 4). Still, this book shows a more complex and elaborate image than the "classical" (anti-)orientalistic paradigm juxtaposing cruel cunning "Occidentals" against helpless native "Orientals."

The volume's first chapter, by Priya Satia, describes how Arabia–a term which during the early decades of the twentieth century mostly referred to today's Iraq–was imagined by British colonial officers as a country out of space and out of time and therefore was considered a perfect testing ground for new military technologies (Satia focuses mostly on the airplane). New technologies were meant to meet specific cultural needs of the modernizing British society, through "development" of the newly conquered lands. Developmentalism, therefore, was not a post-WWII invention implemented primarily in Africa, but was already present in the politics and the administration of interwar Iraq. The restoration of the cradle of civilization in Iraq–which was perceived as a wild, barren, devastated land, declined from its historic glory–provided the stage for the birth of a British "new man," indeed a whole new humanity (p. 33). Altogether, then, interwar Iraq can be seen as the first in a series of colonial modernization projects which were undertaken in so many places in Asia and Africa during the twentieth century.

A somewhat different kind of restoration is presented by Diana Davis in her chapter about French settlers in North Africa. For the French living in Algeria, it took only a few decades during the nineteenth century to perceive the restoration of the allegedly ruined environment back to its ancient Roman prosperity and fertility as a key element in their collective colonial identity. This environmental mission was part of a wider narrative of the French settlers, in which they saw themselves as the legitimate heirs of the Roman Empire, and hence legitimate rulers of North Africa. This narrative, in turn, supported the French in dispossessing local people in Algeria (and later in Tunisia and Morocco, too) from their property, confiscating their forests and pastures, changing centuries-old agricultural methods and traditions. Altogether, Davis argues, looking to Roman examples and claiming Roman heritage helped guide the settlers in their war of conquest, in developing agricultural improvement plans, in forcing nomads to become sedentary, and in constructing their distinct colonial identity as "Latin Africans" (p. 75). This special feature made French colonialism in North Africa unique: the belief that the "degraded" environment there could relatively easily be

brought back to its former productivity "sets the French experience with nature there apart from the vast majority of European colonial experience with nature around the globe" (p. 76). Rather than taming a new, wild environment, the French in North Africa saw themselves as heirs and restorers of an ancient Roman landscape.

Complementing this attitude to North Africa, George R. Trumbull argues that geographic and economic representations of the environment–especially water–operated as categories of knowledge. This knowledge "ultimately served to open up the Sahara as a reimagined, utilitarian space for new, technological forms of empire": road paving, drilling, extraction, and irrigation. The French colonists, however, "neither knew all, nor encompassed all, nor permeated all" in what concerns the vast deserts of the region (p. 88). While in more temperate regions misunderstanding the environment may cause surmountable problems in the long run, in a rocky desert such misunderstandings can become lethal very quickly. Therefore, the French who strove to colonize the Sahara soon had to deal with the great contradiction between the imagined desert they had in their minds ("a pack of lies," Trumbull quotes Suzanne Normand and Jean Acker's statement from 1957, p. 106) and the real desert they met.

Similar problems in such an arid climate also occurred in Egypt. In an article going back to records from the seventeenth century, Alan Mikhail shows how "controlling, sharing and using water both necessitated and fostered cooperation" between peasants, local bureaucrats, and the central government of Egypt (p. 116). While peasant and imperial interests were not always similar, the "cooperative and contested negotiations over environmental resource management" shaped a kind of environmental imaginary that included "notions of community, responsibility, precedent and resource allocation" (p. 116).

Precedents, it seems, were central to the Ottoman system, as "the Ottoman state attempted to prevent environmental change from dictating its imperial rule" (p. 127). Such reliance on tradition is probably a central element in environmental systems rooted in the old energy regime. In this aspect, Mikhail's article is unique, as it is the only one in this volume investigating a society which functioned totally within the old energy regime, lacking any fossil fuels.

This huge difference between the old, pre-fossil fuels energy regime, and the new one, which is based on the burning of fossils with all its benefits–becomes evident by reading the next chapter, in which Jennifer Derr tells the story of the first Aswan Dam, built in 1902, using novel techniques and new machinery, unavailable in the seventeenth century. The 1902 dam, Derr argues, was a central element in configuring Egypt as a British colony, shaping Egyptian agricultural geography. Building and maintaining this great technological structuret enabled the rulers to shape–largely in their imagination, but to a certain extent also practically–an agricultural geography "made of fixed and passive crops, water usage patterns and irrigation infrastructure," devoid of any human actors. Here is an early example of how people and their labor become redundant within the new energy regime. In a similar vein, this project, "intended as a demonstration of humankind's ability to harness science to manipulate the environment," (p. 151) makes an excellent example of the way modern colonialism was linked to new methods of energy usage.

The 1902 Aswan dam was only the first in a series of attempts at irrigating the Egyptian desert. After the construction of the much larger Nasser dam in the mid-twentieth century, the Mubarak regime initiated yet another project meant to make the Egyptian desert bloom: the "New Valley" project. In her chapter about this grandiose initiative, Jeannie Sowers shows how three different "story lines" shape contemporary environmental discourse in Egypt: the first official story line is one of ecologic-demographic crisis, seeing a rapidly growing population in need of food and water supply; a second is one of experts who see water scarcity and water pollution; and last but not least is the fact that while the official stories are governmental ones, most of the recent land reclamation was done by private farmers and big agribusiness companies (pp. 160-161).

This is actually a particular case of a universal phenomenon: Egyptian reliance on large-scale infrastructure and state-driven development planning, Sowers argues, was based on the faith in modernist development schemes which were prevalent during the twentieth century across the world, including collective projects in Stalin's USSR and the Zionist projects of irrigation in Israel (the latter is discussed in one of the following chapters).Taken together, the three chapters about Egypt give a good diachronic view of the development of environmental perceptions in this country fed by the Nile over the past four centuries until today, after the ousting of Hosni Mubarak and the establishment of a new regime.

The environmental perceptions and the social impacts of another large irrigation project are examined

in the chapter written by Leila Harris about the Harran plain in southeastern Turkey. In this chapter, Harris shows how different environmental imaginaries do not always diverge one from another, but may sometimes also converge.

Environmental actors–whether citizens, states, NGOs, or businesses–do not act in a void, but rather in a changing, dynamic sphere, influenced by various factors. Environmental narratives, therefore, also "need to be assessed, evaluated and understood in relation to key contextual issues," that is, not only as stable, unchanging positions, but as evolving and changing with time (p. 194). Harris shows how both farmers' attitudes towards the irrigation projects and their actions changed over time, not always contradicting the views of central planners but also adopting parts of it, in a "hybridized" manner (p. 204). Harris thus breaks the simplistic (and too frequent) habit of framing agricultural-environmental changes within the pattern of local farmers versus a central government. Harris summarizes her chapter arguing in favor of "a contextual approach, attentive to social, cultural and economic processes as crucial for interpreting the complex mapping of narratives and imaginaries" (p. 208).

Back to the south, the Jordan river and its rift–as Ze'eb Jabotinsky justly claimed–is the axis and the connecting point of Palestine, and a central environmental feature in the geography of the region. Samer Alatout brings a comparative study of three plans for the development and the usage of the Jordan river from the 1950s. These three plans–the U.S. Johnston plan, the "Arab" plan, and the Israeli plan–referred to more than merely irrigation. While officially all were dealing with the question of water allocation, the three plans were based on three different environmental perceptions. Johnston's initial plan, based on "natural" gravity of the watershed, was aimed at depoliticizing water management while granting legitimacy to regional cooperation between Jordan, Syria, and Israel. The Arab plan argued in favor of granting the right to use water originating in "Arab" territories to states which are part of the primordial, supraterritorial Arab nation–Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. The Israeli plan, in contrast, emphasized the importance of the state within its international boundaries in distributing the waters within its borders.

The volume's last chapter, written by Shaul Cohen, focuses on national ideologies in the land west of the Jordan river. Cohen argues that unfortunately for both Israeli and Palestinian communities in this land, "there is only one question, and that is the national one" (p. 246). Environmentalism, therefore, exists publicly only within the particular national context. This is not to say that environmental voices are not heard, but that they are "measured against a metric of nationhood that can make them significant in symbolic ways, but politically lacking in power" (pp. 246-247). As Palestinian and Israeli environmental attitudes are subjected to competing national narratives, they almost automatically become not only different but even contradictory. The reason for that? "Neither community," Cohen concludes, "has attained the degree of security necessary for there to be a meaningful environmentalism, that is, a movement that engages environmental challenges without defaulting to security or identity concerns along parochial lines" (p. 259). With a bit of a hope for the future, he opines that perhaps when concerns about security and identity are addressed for both national communities, a shared imaginary of the environment can begin to emerge.

"What is an environmental imaginary? ," asks Timothy Mitchell in the volume's afterword (p. 267). Such imaginaries, he claims, are manifest not only by what people write or say, but by the things they do and the ways in which they act. The great contribution of this volume is probably exactly here, in examining not only writings or abstract ideas but practical projects through which human perception of the environment becomes manifest: irrigation systems, forests, airfields, court decisions, and manual labor. Imaginaries, in this sense, are very real.

Mitchell draws our attention to two important points. First, that we should remember that environmental imaginaries are not stable things; they can sometimes collapse quite suddenly, and give way to different and even rival visions. Second, Mitchell questions the perceived duality of "nature" versus "culture." The human methods and practices of dealing with the physical environment can, in his opinion, be referred to both as "natural construction" and as "cultural construction" (p. 271). In other words, taking into account the impact of humans on the environment, we should question the mere distinction between "natural" and "cultural." A better question we could ask is, what combination of human and nonhuman forces, "of the planned and the unintentional, of the freely imagined and the recalcitrant," makes the construction and strengthening of our knowledge about the common world possible (p. 272)? It is therefore not a coincidence that Mitchell chooses to conclude his afterword by referring to petroleum: the natural resource which became, in the hands of cultivated humans, the

most important factor in shaping our planet during the past century.

Altogether, this well-edited volume can be helpful both for scholars who would like to focus on particular geographic areas of the Middle East and North Africa, and for those interested in a wider view of this region's history. By questioning dichotomies built by "orientalist" and "postcolonial" scholars alike, the articles gathered in this volume offer a fresh and unusual perception of the region and its history during the past two hundred years. Taking into account the fact that the environment is always a human one, these questions should be asked not only by environmental historians, but by sociologists, anthropologists, and–even more important–political activists in this region as well. It is essential for understanding what is going on there.

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