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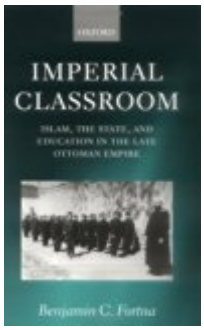
**Benjamin C. Fortna.** *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. xv + 280 pp. $74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-924840-7.

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Gendered Critique and Orientalist Critique

*Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* by Benjamin Fortna breaks new ground in the study of education, Islam and modernity in Muslim societies, presenting an exemplary model of post-Orientalist scholarship. Throughout this engaging and lucidly written volume concerning the growth and character of state sponsored preparatory schools (*idad*=) during the reign of the last Ottoman Sultan Abd=lhamid II (1876-1909), also known as the Hamidian era, Fortna methodically topples long-held notions about the role of Islam and the centralized state in modern educational development. The bulk of historical narratives on educational transformation during the late Ottoman Empire and beyond perpetuate notions of Muslim societies as passive receptors of secular educational paradigms imported from the West, of Islam representing a regressive social force, of the *Ulama* (the Muslim scholarly class) as either largely resistant or uninvolved in processes of educational transformation, and of the hegemonic state as unproblematically engineering social change without resistance. Fortna, however, portrays a much more complex, nuanced, and integrated picture.

Drawing on a wealth of primary source materials including school disciplinary records, state financial records, student petitions, internal government correspondences, education yearbooks, and photographs, as well as a range of secondary sources in English, French, German, and Turkish, Fortna demonstrates that "modern" French-modeled preparatory schooling underwent not only significant expansion during Sultan Abd=lhamid II's reign, but a thorough "Ottomanization" and "Islamization." He thereby calls into question the dominant modernist narrative in post- Kamal Ataturk historiography in which Islam has been "perversely downplayed" (p. 24), largely as a result of the "frequently bitter controversy between the competing religious and secular claims to contemporary culture in the post-Ottoman states" (p. 14).

Fortna unravels dominant perceptions regarding the secularizing and westernizing effects of the famous Education Regulation of 1869

(*Maarif* Nizamnamesi). The Regulation, enacted during the Tanzimat period (1839-76) but largely implemented with significant modifications to it during the Hamidian era, served as a blueprint for a centrally organized and controlled network of schools and represented the Empire's first attempt at "a highly rationalized and centralized state school system" (p. 113). Through attention to a variety of elements such as school architecture, classroom wall maps, teachers, and Ministry of Education personnel who included members of the *ulama*, Fortna shows how the state tried to construct a specifically "Ottoman" system of public education with a strong Islamic reference.

In an effort to address the shortcomings of much Orientalist scholarship that essentializes Islam and treats Muslim societies as anomalies in human history, Fortna dedicates an entire chapter to expounding the concept of "chronological convergence" or "world time." He demonstrates that educational developments of the late nineteenth-century Ottoman state corresponded to similar, independent phenomena in other regions of the world. In particular he examines how moral education, so central to the Hamidian educational policy, also made up a vital component of the "new" schooling developing simultaneously in diverse places such as Central Asia, Russia, Japan, China, the United States, France, and Egypt (pp. 35-41). Fortna makes a tremendous conceptual contribution to the study of "new" or "modern" education by situating it away from Europe or the West and showing the regional, religious, political, and cultural diversity with which modern mass schools came into being at a paticular moment in states throughout the world.

While Fortna persuasively and adroitly grapples with questions regarding the place of indigenous politics, culture, and Islam in state education, his treatment of the nature of the state is somewhat less rigorous. Fortna does not engage in a sustained way with theories of power or the state, nor does he sufficiently elaborate on the type of alternative conceptions of the state that he proposes. He seems to be arguing against a notion of the centralized state as exerting total hegemonic control and cautions against being "carried away with the raw power of the state" (p. 21). He calls for a more nuanced understanding of how power and state polices get negotiated, resisted, and diffused.

In an uncharacteristically cavalier manner Fortna dismisses the contributions of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu to the study of state power and education. Fortna notes that under Foucault's influence, "some would see schools and think of them as prisons" and "Bourdieu see[s] education as domination which involves complicity between those who possess and those who submit to the various forms of power, resulting in the effacement of the individual in the institution" (pp. 21-22). Fortna demonstrates the existence of student resistance to school-based authority and disputes the "quasi-monstrous" or "mechanistic role" (pp. 21-22) of the state in engineering socio-cultural and political change, but could have benefited from a more careful reading of Foucault, particularly with regard to his notions of micro-relations of power and the pervasiveness of resistance at every level of social intercourse. Similarly, Bourdieu's concepts of social reproduction, cultural capital, and habitus could also have served Fortna in refining his argument with regard to how the state attempted to create a new educated elite and forge in its students an Ottoman Islamic identity. Despite these shortcomings, he raises essential points about how, even within highly centralized states with supposed uniform education systems, individual schools are often highly differentiated and become the sites of power struggles.

On the question of gender, a topic I would be remiss to ignore not least as this review is for H-Gender-MidEast, it is important to note that the study does not contain a conscious or deliberate gender component. It would be unfair to criticize a work on this basis alone for no piece of scholar-

ship can cover all aspects of a subject and satisfy the curiosities of all potential readers. However, it is worth noting that while Fortna astutely weaves the Orientalist critique into his narrative--an indication of the success of the critique spearheaded by Edward Said and others to reach and influence diverse scholarly communities--he does not engage, even at a basic level, with a gendered reading of the material. For example, in his discussion of the emergence and expansion of Ottoman state boarding schools from the mid-1880s, he contends that the state wanted to take child-rearing out of the hands of the parents who represented a "world of ignorance" and use state schools to stand *in loco parentis* (p. 234). I strongly suspect that "parents" were not the problem, but that "mothers" were. There exists a critical mass of literature dealing with Islam, gender, family, modernity, and the state in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that demonstrates mothers were perceived by those men involved in social and political reform as being, among other things, unhygienic, undisciplined, ignorant, and overly coddling of their children. Moreover, their practices were not conducive to raising modern citizens and certainly not soldiers. Men involved in social and political reform grappled with ways of modernizing motherhood to enable women to positively contribute to state reform objectives.

A more general observation which applies not only to this work but also to scores of other education studies is that to an overwhelming extent boys' education falls under the rubric of ***Education***, writ large, while girls' education typically constitutes a separate and consciously labeled subject of study. This particular work deals entirely with preparatory schooling for boys, yet at no time does the author highlight the significance of this fact, neither by asking questions about the construction of, and resistance to, a seemingly male enterprise and identity formation nor by probing into where the girls were. The gender shortcomings in this otherwise fine study illustrate the need for advocates of gender approaches to more effectively reach different circles of scholarly communities and persuade them of the efficacy of gendered readings of history and society. While immeasurable strides have been made in the study of gender and Muslim societies in the past two decades, the gender critique does not appear to have had the same reach as, say, the Orientalist critique. This may be due to the fact aht gender studies--and gender critiques such as the present one--are often located in specialized programs and journals where experts are preaching to the converted, so to speak. I cannot help but wonder if writing this review for a gender listserve in itself contributes to the very problem of limited and specialized outreach that gender studies needs to overcome.

To conclude, despite whatever critical reflections this work generates, it represents a truly outstanding example of post-Orientalist scholarship. Fortna's development of concepts such as "chronological convergence"; his attention to morality as a component of the global development of mass education; his insights into agency, the contested nature of state planning, and local forms of resistance to authority; and his critical and innovative interpretations of school architecture, artifacts, and curriculum make this work not only a significant contribution to Ottoman studies, but a model--with some gender caveats--of how to approach the social history of education.

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