Imperial Encounters: Reconsidering Ottoman and French Modern Projects in the Nineteenth Century

In the nineteenth century, French colonial cities in Algeria and Tunisia as well as provincial Arab towns within the Ottoman Empire witnessed urban transformations such as the construction of clock towers and public squares. Railroads and telegraph lines crisscrossed arid landscapes, and ports connected the littoral fronts. In Zeynep Çelik’s *Empire, Architecture, and the City*, the motors of communication and technology spearheading modern imperial projects provide a dynamic connection for an impressive comparative work on the French and Ottoman empires. While not attaching to a strict narrative of nationalist-motivated expansion, the book attempts to uncover the connections between two Mediterranean imperial projects through changes in urban space. By so doing, Zeynep Çelik complicates the history of imperialism and its connection to modernity.

*Empire, Architecture, and the City* offers an expansive account of changes within the built environment in key provincial Arab cities under Ottoman rule as well as French colonial rule in the urban centers of Algeria and Tunisia from the French invasion of Algeria in 1830 until the onset of World War I. The overall structure of the book thus establishes a critical dialogue between the expansionary period of French colonial presence in North Africa with the impact of Ottoman Tanzimat reforms (1839-76). Most significantly, these reforms initiated the reshaping of Ottoman urban spaces, as Çelik herself explored in *The Remaking of Istanbul* (1993) and in *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations* (1997). Each chapter of *Empire, Architecture, and the City* focuses on various levels of urban transformations. She skillfully guides the reader through discussions of transnational arteries of railroads, river highways, and telegraph lines, large-scale colonial urban interventions, the visual reordering of cities through the construction of public squares and monuments, and finally to the colonial performance through public ceremonies. The book takes a macroscopic view of urban topographies, engaging in discussions on several Ottoman Arab urban centers, including Baghdad, Mosul, Damascus, Beirut, Haifa, Jaffa, and Aleppo as well as the French colonial cities of Constantine, Algiers, Tunis, Bizerte, Sfax, Tlemcen, and Bône. Çelik draws upon a range of existing studies and approaches to Ottoman and French imperialism to frame her use of vast archival and visual sources (periodicals, almanacs, photographs, urban plans, and architectural designs). Addressing the internal logic of modern empire, Çelik traces the ways that Ottoman and French authorities utilized the combination of technology and communication to assemble urban infrastructure, public parks, theatres, schools, hospitals, administrative buildings, ceremonial display, squares, clock towers, train stations, and ports in order to represent imperial power through a reinforcement on the urban fabric. The combination of technology and communication articulated the language of modernity through notions of uniformity, regularity, and monumentality. Despite the commonalities of the two
imperial experiences Çelik is mindful of the divergent ways in which these projects resonated in French Algeria and Tunisia as well as in Ottoman Iraq, Palestine, and Syria.

The narrative logic of the book reflects the complexity of urban transformations, combining macro and microscopic views of the same locations but from different vantage points. Çelik weaves together multiple examples of urban textures from the significance of urban locations in a global or transnational context, to plans for refashioning public space for individual display, leisure, or consumption, to architectural proposals reflecting shifts in aesthetic and imperial ideological considerations toward either French or Ottoman “indigenous” populations. In the French case, she documents how the occupation of Algeria and Tunisia revealed an ideological shift over time from an initial policy of assimilation during the Second Republic to a more racialized logic of association, imposing submission toward “Muslim society.” From the Ottoman perspective, the Hijaz Railroad project, begun in 1900, is a compelling example utilized throughout the book. Although not entirely completed, the railroad was declared as a “Muslim project” to foster a pan-Islamic yet Ottoman identity. Designed to crisscross the Ottoman Arab provinces to Mecca, the railroad epitomized ideological and political agendas of a modernizing state (p. 35). Çelik refers back to the Hijaz project throughout the book after introducing the construction of lines and bridges in chapter 1. By the end of the book the interconnectedness of transnational modes of communication swell to a ceremonial stage for a performance of imperial power and a sense of belonging.

Çelik privileges the built environment and visual culture. Visual materials ranging from city plans and maps, to period postcards and sheet music covers, to drawings and architectural proposals provide the reader with ways to decipher the imperial projects. These images make the book an invaluable visual resource for undergraduate and graduate classroom use as well as of interest for a variety of readerships. The first section of the book uses periodicals and postcards, two sources that underline the technological and communicative capabilities of empire to convey a sense of presence both within peripheral locations as well as the imperial center of Paris or Istanbul. Çelik does not address the distribution of these visual objects whereas considering the distribution and the use of these objects would have addressed the marriage between technology and communication, a stated and overarching theme of the book.

Çelik emphasizes the dialogue between the built environment and colonial urban expressions and policies, placing her study within a robust field of architectural, urban, and modernity studies and their relation to imperialism. The linkage between the history of modernity and imperialism is widely acknowledged and the book is firmly rooted in such an understanding. While referencing standard works contributing to the imagining of the late Ottoman Empire and separating Empire, Architecture, and the City from studies that tend to focus on specific geographic or urban locations, her cross-comparative study is a welcome addition. She builds upon works which use oceans, seas, and waterways as the starting point for examining a communication between empires. In other words, Çelik emphasizes a “dialectical process” (p. 3) that enables her to expose ideological similarities and differences between French and Ottoman authorities. On the one hand, this comparison allows for a dialogue with recent works that engage with the colonial aspect of the late Ottoman Empire toward provincial territories through education and administrative policies, urban transformation projects, and costume. On the other hand, Çelik is careful to highlight the distinct differences in both cases from approaches on ordering urban fabrics and public spaces, to ideological and religious influences on design, to racial thinking towards indigenous populations.

Such a comparative project relies upon the skillful use of sources and Çelik amassed a wealth of visual and textual documentation from collections in Istanbul and throughout France. In particular, Çelik’s comparative approach attempts to challenge an emphasis on imperial urban centers by redirecting the gaze toward peripheral locations. By so doing, she emphatically incorporates post-colonial theory’s engagement with rigid oppositional approaches, such as East and West, North and South, periphery and center. Her cross-comparative analysis attempts to destabilize such binaries though she acknowledges the lack of direct archival documentation. In response, Çelik deftly mines sources, such as Ottoman salnames, or almanacs, to respond to the absence. Another potential source for such a project are commercial directories such as the Annuaire Orientale. This source in particular provides commercial-professional profiles of Ottoman provincial towns, which would assist to flesh out transnational networks between the two empires. Yet, Çelik underscores the center and periphery connection, emphasizing shifts in architectural plans and spatial ordering, such as Haussmann’s Parisian project under Napoleon III and its transposition onto Algiers. In
this respect, she continues to position Paris as a primary influence, thereby reifying a binary that she seeks to nuance. Rather, privileging a transnational engagement with modern lifestyles, technologies, and practices, which recent works have done, would have further shifted the lens away from the idea of modernity as simply disseminating from Europe.

Throughout the book, Çelik concentrates on the visual ordering and articulation of a monumental and modern state in French and Ottoman peripheral locations, recognizing that the result is primarily focused on state officials and authorities. Consequently, emphasis on the physical ordering of space and attention to the mechanisms of distribution shadow the ways that individuals were coming to terms with the meanings of "the modern" or the way that modernity was spoken. The construction of museums, hospitals, theaters, parks, and squares represent imperial monumentality and presence. Yet, these spaces also imply different ways of being and congregating in cities and towns. Officials, authorities, and constituencies internalized, accommodated, and resisted such modern forms. Çelik offers one example of an act of resistance to imperial interventions in the Bedouin opposition to the Hijaz Railroad’s disruption of livelihood. Yet, had Çelik lingered upon the population of strollers, theatergoers, bureaucrats, patients, and workers, the urban would have gained the dimension of a lived city. In this respect, her depiction of the urban fabric remains stoic, and overlooks other sensorial realities of urban transformations. Future works might continue to build upon Çelik’s work by directing the gaze toward other senses in order to address modernity, empire, and the ways that individuals engaged with both.

Lastly, in the epilogue, Çelik ponders several questions which redirect the book beyond the stated chronological scope. Mainly, she introduces the topic of how the French and Ottoman cases engaged with racial ideology and cultural difference. In particular, she utilizes visual culture as a means to engage with the idea of Ottoman racism, a relatively small yet growing field, which hopefully will produce a more nuanced and critical understanding of difference in the early modern and modern Ottoman world. In particular, her reference to Reşat Nuri Güntekin’s popular novel Çalıkuşu (1922), and its racialized elements indeed underlines an Ottoman mentality of difference (p. 257); however, this minor reference falls short of the articulations of difference in the Turkish republican period, which would provide fodder for further inquiry. Although this line of questioning redirects the book away from the built environment, raising the question of the ways that racial ideology might impact architecture, Çelik alludes to the significance of historical inquiry beyond the mere burden of chronological distinctions and historical periodizations.

_Empire, Architecture, and the City_ is essential reading for scholars of the Ottoman and French empires and should appeal to a wide audience of varied disciplines beyond urban and colonial architectural history. Çelik’s examination of modernity and imperialism makes it a very compelling and contemporary read for thinking about the resonances of nineteenth-century imperialism in the twenty-first century. In this respect, Çelik’s honest contemplation on “the meaning of history for the world we live in today” (p. 273) forces the reader and the scholar to not place history in the past.

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