

The Evolution of Scientific Knowledge in the Eastern Mediterranean under European Colonial Rule. Local conditions and global contexts of intellectual encounters

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Encounters between Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean have frequently been studied in recent years. Yet, few studies have focused on academia as a major field in which these encounters took place. This conference investigates the approaches of Arab scholars to intellectual schools and academic institutions in Europe and works out the impact of these encounters on the evolution of scientific knowledge in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Two narratives can be identified in the existing literature that aim at interpreting echoes and impacts of European thought in Arab scholarship; both narratives fall short, however, in understanding the original and at times ambivalent developments of Arab scholarship in the context of social transformations and reform on the one hand, and European colonialism on the other. Several studies have interpreted Arab-Muslim debates on reform and renewal as a ‚modernization of Islam‘ that closely followed European experiences. In contrast, other studies placed a particular focus on attempts to ‚islamize modernity‘ that stood in explicit distinction to the essence of secular modernity. Both narratives share the assumption of an essentially European modernity with universal validity.

This conference provides alternative interpretations of the emerging fields of Arab scholarship; it puts an emphasis both on local conditions and global contexts that shaped the establishment of academic disciplines and institutions in the late 19th and early 20th century. The contributions investigate the historical entanglement and social and cultural similarities between Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean that can be observed in the development of academic knowledge and institutions. While European domination and colonial rule were key factors shaping Arab scholars concerns and premises, local experiences of social change and conflicts framed these scholars' approaches to society and nature.

The conference focuses on two fields of investigation that will add innovative insights to the existing literature of Arab-European encounters:

1. Which social and politico-cultural transformations were at the basis of the establishment of various academic institutes and institutions of higher education?

Pointing to institutions such as the Société de Géographie d'Egypte (1875), the École des Beaux Arts in Cairo (1908) or the Majma' al-Lugha al-'Arabiyya in Damascus (1918/19), the local contexts of these institutions and their responsiveness to changing concerns and ambitions in society shall be worked out.

2. How were the newly emerging academic disciplines linked to changing social discourses and political visions – and how did the quest for cultural authenticity and the confrontation with cultural domination of European colonial powers impact on intellectual thought and academic research of Arab scholars?

By following this line of investigation and building on original research, the conference aims at contributing both valuable historical case studies and new theoretical perspectives on intellectual encounters in times of social transformation and colonial rule.

Researchers are invited to send their abstract before February 9, 2013 to Dr. Goetz Nordbruch gn@sdu.dk or Dr. Thomas Scheffler scheffler@orient-institut.org