

EDITORIAL FOREWORD

This issue examines the power of categories, both historically and in contemporary scholarly and public discourse. Whether focused on medicine in colonial Algeria, the varied meanings of the word “mamluk” in Ottoman Tunisia, discursive constructions of the “Jewish refugee,” gender as an analytical category in academic writing, or another topic, our article and roundtable authors push us to consider how categories have shaped modes of life and politics, and how they shape our scholarship.

The first section explores interactions between the state and various social forces. In her article “Expressing Entitlement in Colonial Algeria: Villagers, Medical Doctors, and the State in the early 20th century,” Hannah-Louise Clark examines the process of state-led medicalization in colonial Algeria and how rural villagers in eastern Algeria, in their demands of the French colonial state and its representatives, adapted and challenged the legal and medical categories as well as administrative technologies that were meant to subdue them. She argues convincingly that scholarship has been far too focused on petitions and political resistance by indigenous urban elites to French colonial power, in its bureaucratic and military manifestations. Lost in the bifurcation of “dominant” and “subject” societies are the stories of “ordinary” Algerian Muslims and Saharan Jews who engaged the state and its public health policies to find relief from disease and, in the process, challenged local authorities. These villagers, she writes, “responded to the expansion of the state and its medical rhetoric with ‘medicalization from below,’ by seeking the protection of doctors, not only from disease but also from the state itself.” “Top-down measures,” she goes on, “served as a locus of self-articulation for villagers of all different religious and legal categories, who began to speak back to the state and make demands that served their collective interests.”

M’hamed Oualdi’s article, “Mamluks in Ottoman Tunisia: A Category Connecting State and Social Forces,” moves us to neighboring Tunisia and the 18th- and 19th-century interactions between the central Ottoman state and the provinces through the mediation of mamluks. Oualdi seeks to rethink the understanding of mamluks as slave soldiers who separated the sovereign from a potentially rebellious society that he deemed unreliable. This understanding has led to questionable conclusions about the absence of credible constraints on Muslim rulers and thus a lack of political revolution in the Middle East akin to the kind that guided Europe’s trajectory away from monarchy. Oualdi’s methodological choices open new interpretive possibilities. “Considering the archive a subject of inquiry rather than only a source of content,” he uses registers, letters, and historical chronicles to “analyze how the categorization of mamluks [including by mamluks themselves] changes from one type of historical source to another, and what these changes reveal about the relationships between a provincial society and its subjects.” Oualdi argues that the slaves-cum-servants who served the Tunisian beys were in fact deeply embedded in society through familial, social, and economic networks, and bridged rather than split state and social forces. The article pushes us to reconsider how we imagine Islamic state–society relations, the relationship between center and periphery

in the Ottoman Empire, and the traditional characterization of slavery in Islamic lands as primarily military and thus different from the system that prevailed in the Americas.

In the final article of this section, “Nadir Shah’s Peculiar Central Asian Legacy: Empire, Conversion Narratives, and the Rise of New Scholarly Dynasties,” James Pickett analyzes a “curious narrative” that persisted in Central Asia during the 18th–20th centuries according to which the conquering Turko-Persian monarch Nadir Shah Afshar was converted from Shi‘ism to Sunnism at the hands of a group of Bukharan ‘ulama’. This narrative emerged out of Nadir Shah’s actual attempt to establish Shi‘ism as a fifth juridical school of Islam, part of a broader effort of diplomacy with the Ottoman Empire and imperial integration. But the memories of this event that emerged later proved critical to the establishment of several scholarly dynasties and to their persistence until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Challenging the assumption that the Afsharid Empire was merely a “passing depredation,” Pickett contends that it not only catalyzed “a long 19th century of city-states throughout Eurasia and the Indian Subcontinent,” but also “directly led to the rise of new scholarly dynasties and indirectly set the stage for the changing political-religious landscape that framed the memory of Nadir Shah.” Indeed, the period of Nadir Shah’s reign gave rise to sectarian differentiation and genealogies that colonial systems of knowledge would later harden.

The second set of articles in this issue focus on Jewish political movements in national (principally Israel) and/or international contexts. Shayna Zamkane’s article, “Justice for Jews from Arab Countries and the Rebranding of the Jewish Refugee,” looks at the efforts of World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries and its successor, Justice for Jews from Arab Countries, to gain recognition as refugees and compensation for Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Jews dislocated largely to Israel after 1948. At various points, these efforts have been opposed by the Israeli government and ardent Zionists—MENA Jews among them—because of the widespread association of the category “refugee” with passivity and its dichotomous relation to the nationally vaunted *‘oleh* (immigrant) in Zionist contexts; and they have been opposed by left-leaning MENA Jewish scholars, who have viewed them as part of a cynical Israeli state-led attempt to nullify the claims of Palestinian refugees. Zamkane suggests that these critiques, however valid or invalid, share an inability to escape a Zionist discursive framing of the status of MENA Jews. She attributes the current “success” of Justice for Jews from Arab Countries to “the organization’s ability to extricate the term ‘refugee’ from a Zionist discursive context and to apply it within the framework of international law and human rights.” In contrast to the nation-state context, the international legal domain has proven a fruitful venue for MENA Jews’ refugee rights claims, which “challenge traditional Zionist narratives of redemption and progress.”

Focused on a different Jewish political movement, Netanel Fisher’s “The Fundamentalist Dilemma: Lessons from the Israeli Haredi Case” examines through the case of Israeli Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, what he and other scholars identify as “fundamentalism.” Whereas Israeli Haredim were long considered largely apolitical, Fisher contends that their demographic growth, spatial expansion, and, concomitantly, growing integration into Israeli society since the 1980s has given rise to new forms of political engagement. He is particularly interested in Haredi responses to two “fundamentalist dilemmas”: how to go about participating in a secular political system that one rejects on principle; and whether and how to sustain radical principles, especially

after gaining political power and the responsibility of governing a whole society. Fisher identifies a range of responses articulated by Haredim. His main conclusion is that, “opposite to a commonly accepted assumption that fundamentalists’ integration into secular politics causes them to moderate, the more political power that fundamentalists accrue the stronger is their tendency to promote their religious agenda.” Yet, as Fisher also points out, “fundamentalists often restrain their expansionist instinct when having to take nonfundamentalist reactions into consideration.”

This issue’s roundtable highlights the significance of gender as an analytical category to historical praxis. We bring together a group of historians focused on a range of themes—development, the environment, agency, the body, labor, internationalism, sovereignty—whose work is situated within gender history. As Beth Baron, who led up and introduces the roundtable, points out, gender history is “where some of the most innovative work in history today is being done.” The essays here make this clear. But, as Baron also points out, “There seems to be a sense that now that the feminist battle has been fought (and presumably won), gender blindness is acceptable, and a small rearguard can be left to define and defend the field.” This roundtable, titled “Gendering Middle East History,” is a call to scholars in history and other fields to reflect on this critique by asking how gender analysis fits in to and can enhance their own work.

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