

Schumann, Christoph: *Liberal Thought in the Eastern Mediterranean. Late 19th Century Until the 1960s*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers 2008. ISBN: 978-90-04-16548-9; 335 S.

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„We are not of the East or the West; no boundaries exist in our breast: we are free!“ This is not a quote from Goethe’s „West-östlicher Divan“, it is a stanza of the „Chant of Mystics“ written in 1921 by Ameen Rihani, Lebanese, Arab, American, humanist, a traveller between worlds that now often are seen as engaged in a clash of civilisations. Universalism, humanism, liberalism, freedom to think, freedom to act: In our days, these notions are not easily associated with the Arab Middle East or, as it is called in this volume, the Eastern Mediterranean. Current analysis is dominated by themes like fundamentalism, islamism, authoritarianism, radicalism, and terrorism, and the glaring absence of their counterparts is explained sometimes in essentialist cultural terms.

This edited collection of papers sets out to challenge the „dominant narrative of absence“ (p. 173) by tracing the forgotten, multilayered and often ambiguous history of liberal thought and practice in the region. Starting with a loose definition and following in the steps of Hourani’s „Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age (1798–1939)“, it is addressing „a set of liberal ideas and themes [that] emerged as important during the era under investigation [...]: modernity (as opposed to tradition); progress (as opposed to stagnation [...]); constitutional rule (as opposed to authoritarianism); the demand for rights for marginalized groups such as workers and women; human civilization and democracy“ (p. 3). The volume is the outcome of a conference which was held in Erlangen in 2005, the latest of a series of encounters about the history of the Syrian region that was inaugurated by Thomas Philipp to whom the volume is dedicated. It will now, I hope, be continued by his successor on the chair of politics and contemporary history of the Middle East at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg, Christoph Schumann, the editor.

The volume contains thirteen contributions in three thematically organised sections. The first block addresses „the impact of the West“ in terms of mission and education but also the mandatory system and its contradictions. In a tragic tale of the „martyrdom“ of As’ad Shidyaq „for a liberal modernity he never witnessed“ (p. 25), Ussama Makdisi disentangles the notions of toleration, liberalism and secularism and their counterparts like paternalism, contempt of indigenous culture and even racism in the encounter of American protestant missionaries with early 19th-century Maronite-Lebanese society. Drama and farce apply to Peter Sluglett’s and Michael Provence’s presentations of different episodes of mandatory rule in Iraq and Syria. They highlight the gap between lofty ideals, great expectations and the realities of domination, military rule and coercion. In one way or another, the articles raise the central question that is asked explicitly by Provence, „what were the long-term prospects for ‘liberal’ state institutions in an atmosphere of profoundly illiberal rule“ (p. 53). The same dilemmas appear in Betty S. Anderson’s paper on the American University of Beirut. Whereas board and staff combined the stated aims of liberal education and critical enquiry with a policy of forced attendance of religious classes and a veto on political demonstrations, students reacted to the absence of democratic venues of participation in and beyond the campus in various ways. The comparatively liberal atmosphere of the Syrian University of Damascus is one of the main points of Abdul-Karim Rafeq’s short overview of its history. In his view, it was formative for a whole generation of political leaders of the post-independence era when liberal tendencies were curtailed in the name of more radical nationalisms.

The second section is entitled „Constitutionalism, revolution and liberal thought“. Anne-Laure Dupont provides a detailed analysis of the importance of the Young Turk revolution of 1908 in the writings of Jurji Zaydan and Muhammad Rashid Rida, two prominent „Syrian“ émigrés in Cairo of different religious and social background. In their intellectual trajectories, she highlights shifting notions of revolution (inqilab) and revolt

(thawra) and the variable configurations of religious vs. secular thought within nationalism, ethnic and religious pluralism etc. Ilham Khury-Makdisi's article concentrates on a network of radical thinkers organised around the journals of al-Nur (Light) in Alexandria and al-Hurriyya (Freedom) in Beirut before 1914. This focus allows her to re-evaluate the historical role of socialist, communist, anarchist and other radicalisms not only as a forgotten force in the „antichambre of nationalism“ (p. 151), but as alternate and mostly unexplored elements of a much more complex historical configuration of discourse and action encompassing levels from the local to the global. Another „transition“ period, that between the armistice of the Ottoman empire in 1918 and the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, is the topic of Hasan Kayali's article. He describes it as a time of upheaval, uncertainties and possibilities, very much like the aftermath of the constitutional revolution of 1908 in terms of expectations about freedom, liberties and the rule of law. Eyal Zisser dissects the writing of the Syrian constitution of 1930 as a contested discursive and political field that can tell us a lot about liberal thought and practice which is still relevant for the discussion of democratisation and political freedom in Syria today. Raghid K. al-Solh posits that lessons can also be learned from the experience of liberalism and nationalism in Lebanon under the mandate. He argues with Arend Lijphart that the functioning of a „consociational democracy“ depends on segmental autonomy, grand coalition, proportionality, and mutual veto.

The third section of the volume is dedicated to the analysis of „liberal thought and its ambivalences“. The importance of transcending categorial boundaries is highlighted by two thorough inquiries into the long-term evolution of a liberal thinker, Ameen Rihani (Christoph Schumann) and Sami al-Kayyali (Manfred Sing) respectively. Individuality is a social and intellectual construct, seldom more evident than in the interesting case of what Marilyn Booth calls „ventriloquized memoirs“. Such anonymous texts appeared in some Cairine journals in the early 1920s. They present themselves as authentic autobiographic narratives of personal experience in a

modernising society, in particular of women, and thus pretend to speak in the voice of those who supposedly cannot speak for themselves.

This paternalistic attitude towards women (in another article also towards workers) is one of the few points readers might feel disappointed about what the volume is offering: Though women and workers appear in several instances as objects of liberal or radical thinking, a reference to the contributions of these or other social groups to liberal discourses and practices is conspicuously missing. This is all the more striking as there are a number of thematic overlaps and repetitions in the different articles focussing on the mandatory regime. The volume contains several indices that allow to search for personal names, political terms, names of institutions, organisations, and periodicals. They point to the multitude of aspects addressed in this carefully produced volume which opens many ways for further discussions. Some are already well under way as the publication of a second volume of conference papers focussing on liberal thought and nationalism in the Arab Middle East is announced for spring 2010.¹

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¹Christoph Schumann (ed.), *Nationalism and Liberal Thought in the Arab East. Ideology and Practice*, London (forthcoming).