## Pensée 2

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Given limits of time and space, I offer here an appraisal of what I see to be an important new trend: a number of scholars across disciplines and generations have taken what we have learned from the era of deconstructionist cultural analysis in the past twenty-five years and inaugurated an era of "reconstruction." Some have moved beyond the "cultural turn" to consider how cultural forms of power interact with other forms of power—social, economic, political. They are finding new answers to the question, "How did colonialism matter?" Others have taken the next step, to reconstruct a new language of historical analysis free from Eurocentric assumptions of difference and superiority.

Tim Mitchell's *Rule of Experts* (2002) perhaps marked the apex of the cultural turn in Middle Eastern studies, with its aim to deconstruct economics, the last remaining social science to claim a material base outside of the realm of representation. As Mitchell unmasked the universalist pretensions and binary assumptions of economists who aided the exploitation of Egyptian peasants, he approached the dim view of European state builders offered by historical sociologist Charles Tilly, in his much-quoted article "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" (1985). The meeting of postmodernization sociology and postdeconstruction history was nowhere more pivotal than in Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000). After deconstructing Marxism in the first half of the book, Chakrabarty proceeded to propose a new, non-Eurocentric language of history based on local knowledge (such as that of the South Asian widows and jute workers he studied) and elaborated conceptually through South–South comparisons.

Middle Eastern history has had no coordinated subaltern studies movement, but the efforts of individual scholars are inching toward a new, postcolonial, historical grammar. Scholars in several disciplines have begun to seek more nuanced and causal explanations about legacies of colonial rule by reintegrating cultural analysis with other modes of analysis. British mandatory Palestine has generated much innovative scholarship; I am particularly struck by Niall Ó. Murchu's cogent application of general models of state building to demonstrate the limits of cultural explanations for British policy. In his draft article, "The Colonial Tax State in Palestine," he has explained British bias as an adaptation of late-colonial ideologies of rule that sought cheap administration, social conservatism, and economic growth. The British met these goals in Palestine by maximizing customs taxes on the settler Jewish population and reducing direct tax collection (and revenue spending) on the Arab population. Colonialism made a difference, then, in the calculations of tax collection and expenditure that would never have been made in the metropole. Ussama Makdisi in *The*

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*Culture of Sectarianism* (2000) found a colonial difference in the transition from Egyptian to Ottoman rule in mid-19th-century Mount Lebanon. Institutional weaknesses magnified the influence of European diplomats and missionaries, who supplied the political language that produced a new culture of sectarianism among a people who had formerly intermixed.

Historians of women and gender have made a particular contribution to our understanding of the colonial difference, and to a new grammar of historical analysis. Afsaneh Najmabadi analyzed the construction of new discourses within a specific institutional context in *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan* (1998), which examined the political uses made of a story about girls sold into slavery for payment of taxes at the outset of the 1906 constitutional revolution in Iran. She showed how Iranians invented, through performance in new institutions like parliament, a political language that produced local meanings of specific concepts like "vote" and "civil" courts, and of more abstract terms like justice, constitutionalism, nation, and popular sovereignty. In their studies of Iranian and Ottoman cartoons from the same era, Janet Afary and Palmira Brummett likewise demonstrated that Middle Eastern political actors freely appropriated European terms for their own political purposes. These studies pierce the illusion of European cultural hegemony even as they also suggest that anxiety about cultural and political sovereignty tipped the political balance toward conservative and patriarchal political powers. Although it does not treat the historical period of colonial rule, Suad Joseph's edited volume *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (2000) reveals how today's unequal hierarchies of citizenship are a cultural and institutional legacy of colonialism. The ascendancy of political attitudes that endorse unequal rights for woman is rooted in colonial powers' reliance on landed and religious elites. The volume represents, in my view, the most intelligent and provocative revision of liberal theories of civil society, democracy, and citizenship in the Middle East.

By retrieving political and social processes that shaped local knowledge, scholars have begun to revise our understanding of European influence on Middle Eastern political culture since the 18th century. Butros Abu Manneh, for example, traced the influence of the Naqshabandi Sufi order's reformist ideas on the authors of the 1839 Gülhane decree, sometimes called the Ottoman bill of rights, that launched the tanzimat reforms (*Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire*, 2001). Historians of a generation ago had viewed the decree through modernization lenses, as merely an imitation of European secularism. Once we recognize that the roots of the Ottoman tanzimat were profoundly local and authentic, our vision of the entire era of reform necessarily shifts from a narrative about deluded elites and recalcitrant religious reactionaries to a narrative about dialogues within Islam and among indigenous political actors who confronted complex political situations not unlike those found in Europe. Similarly, Ariel Salzmann in *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire* (2004) stripped away the Tocquevillian categories of governmental analysis, which have underpinned all subsequent views of the Ottoman ancient regime

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as doomed by its decentralization. In her novel study of maps, commodity markets, and administrative registers from the 18th century, she instead found a potentially viable, federalist path of state building that was interrupted by European intervention.

These and other historians are returning to the kind of interdisciplinary problem solving that once placed the discipline at the center of public debate. In 1958, David Landes published *Bankers and Pashas*, on French bankers who gouged Egypt's Khedive Isma'il with high-interest and risky loans in the mid-19th century. Rather than impose a binary or modernizationist grid upon the bankers' letters, he queried with curiosity and compassion into their minds as they portrayed themselves as working for the good of Egypt. Long before Edward Said constructed a genealogy of European "Othering" as an enduring cultural habit without clear cause, Landes rooted bankers' recourse to double standards against Egyptians to their institutional context in the 1850s, when old norms of banking practice began to crumble. Histories like this, which combine cultural and social analysis in context, advance our understanding of past injustice and open the possibility of redress. Landes proudly noted in his preface to the book's 1979 edition that his research had helped Egyptians, enabling them to reduce compensation paid for nationalizing the Suez Canal Company. I find much potential in the nascent movement of reconstructionist history to restore clarity, agency, and the possibility of reconciliation in the divided world bequeathed to us by the imperial era.

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