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ROUNDTABLE

A Discussion on the State of Middle Eastern/Islamic Economic History

Introduction

BOĞAÇ A. ERGENE
Department of History, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vt.;
e-mail: bergene@uvm.edu
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The purpose of this roundtable is to discuss the major methodological and theoretical challenges involved in economic research in the context of Middle Eastern/Islamic history. We asked scholars representing a diverse spectrum of training and specialization to reflect on the state of the field (or the sub-fields with which they are familiar) and to comment on its (their) strengths and shortcomings. The participants had the opportunity to read all papers and modify their own contributions accordingly. The result, we believe, is a focused and critical conversation that reflects the plurality of opinions and approaches in the field. Outside of conference panels and small-scale workshops, exclusively methodological and theoretical exchanges in Middle Eastern/Islamic economic history are rare. We hope that this forum will stimulate further conversation and research on the issues discussed here.

Aside from specific points raised by individual participants, the discussion converged around two common themes. One involved the challenges pertaining to the proper approach to inter-regional comparisons and the ways in which economic, political, legal, and cultural institutions determine long-term economic development. In particular, the conversation hovered around some of the key ideas proposed by Timur Kuran in several influential articles and a recent monograph. The contributions by Huri İslamoğlu, Şevket Pamuk, Jean-Philippe Platteau, and Maya Shatzmiller, in this regard, represent the responses of scholars with substantial research experience in different contexts to Kuran's characterizations of the general economic trends in Middle Eastern economic history and the factors that influenced them.

The second focal point of our discussion concerns source use and approaches to empirical research. The participants generally agree that the field of Middle Eastern/Islamic economic history is underdeveloped in specific types of research orientations. Shatzmiller, Kuran, and my own contribution point out the dearth of quantitative research in particular. I suggest that this situation is related to the nature of available historical sources and to the prevalent attitudes toward them among researchers. Platteau and I also reflect on the tensions involved in the researcher's attempts to contextualize his/her information and the methodological problems pertaining to historical interpretation,

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which are relevant to the efforts of generating data sources that could be utilized in novel and creative ways.

As both Shatzmiller and Kuran suggest in their contributions, these two general areas of discussion are closely related. Our ability to test the validity of broadly formulated historical hypotheses, such as those formulated by Kuran, is dependent on our success in producing reliable and factually based comparative scholarship, which, in turn, can be accomplished only by finding better ways to utilize available sources in our research.

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