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On Charles Issawi and His Last Book

FATMA MÜGE GÖÇEK
University of Michigan

Cross-Cultural Encounters and Conflicts, by CHARLES ISSAWI. (Studies in Middle Eastern History) 150 pages. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998. \$27.50 (Cloth) ISBN 0-19-511813-8

It is with great sadness that I review this wonderful work because its author, Charles Issawi, is no longer with us; this was the final book he published before he died. The nine articles that comprise the volume were all written during the last two decades of his life. Even though many were published in various journals and edited volumes, as collected together here, they reveal the depth and breadth of knowledge of this most distinguished scholar.

Only at the peak of a long and distinguished academic career can one observe, write upon, and document the large societal patterns that Issawi discusses in this volume with great insight. Under the overarching theme of how "some of the world's major cultures have perceived, and interacted with, each other in the course of the last thousand years" (p. 3), the articles range from the production, dissemination, and encounters of cultures (chs. one and two) and the linguistic domination that cultural penetration brings (ch. eight), to the roles social groups such as the Greeks (ch. six) and the legacies various empires such as the Ottoman empire (ch. five) have played in the Near East. The impact of political ideas on societies are masterfully portrayed in what the costs of the French revolution were (ch. seven), and how Western perceptions of the Orient changed after the eighteenth century (ch. nine). We are also given insightful analyses of two historical figures who played prominent roles in the formation of perceptions about the Near East: Shelley (ch. three) and Ibn Khaldun (ch. four).

The most significant clue about how a scholar acquired such wide ranging interests is found in the "Introduction" of the volume. Issawi states:

I grew up in a Westernized, Christian, Syrian family, in the cosmopolitan but essentially Egyptian, city of Cairo. From early childhood I was deeply conscious of the differences between *'Frankish'* (European) mores and ways of thinking and behaving and local ones. Ours was a multilingual family in which Arabic, French, and English were spoken. I was educated in foreign schools (mainly British, but also French) in Cairo and Alexandria and went on from there to Oxford. Later I served in the United Nations Secretariat in New York.

Let us add here that Issawi concluded his academic career as an esteemed scholar at the Near Eastern Studies Department of Princeton University. It is indeed Issawi's wide-ranging experiences in different cultural contexts that often conflicted with one another that inform his scholarship; Issawi tries, like many of us, to unravel the intricacies of the cultural tensions he observes and attempts to sort out the role played by structures like the Ottoman Empire, social groups like the Greeks, ideas like the French revolution, and thinkers like Ibn Khaldun.

The first article, aptly titled "The Clash of Cultures in the Near East," provides insights that are especially pertinent in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, which Issawi did not live to see. Unlike most studies on the tension be-

tween the Near East and the West that trace the roots back to the nineteenth century at best, Issawi takes a much wider historical scope and starts some two-thousand years ago with the Greeks and their attempts to Hellenize the Near East. Following Arnold Toynbee's characterization, he states that the two-fold reactions to Hellenization were the "Zealot and Herodian" (p. 9); while the former reacted by resisting Hellenization, the latter accepted it. Issawi traces this dual pattern of resistance and reform through the nationalistic era to contemporary condition, whereby Westernization replaces Hellenization, and Islamic fundamentalists emerge as the neo-Zealots and state elites as the neo-Herodians. Even though the failure of the state elites in delivering adequate reforms to their societies has strengthened the fundamentalists, Issawi states, the Western influence on the Near East is here to stay. Issawi paints the two sides here with too broad a brush stroke and overlooks the elements of reaction and reform that can easily be found all along the spectrum of social groups in the Near East; yet his comparison of Westernization with the preceding historical process of Hellenization provides us with a deeper insight into the human condition.

The other articles similarly provide unique perspectives on little understood social phenomena. In "Empire Builders, Culture Makers, and Culture Imprinters" (ch. two), Issawi asks what causes one culture to dominate at the expense of another. After reviewing all the major world empires, he identifies emigration into empty or thinly populated lands and religion as the two major factors. "Shelley and the Near East" (ch. three) undertakes an exquisite analysis of Shelley's works to reveal this prominent figure's propagandist caricatures and oversimplification of the Near East at times, and idealized Platonic depictions at others. We get to see Shelley as a human being who, like ourselves, is full of contradictions, a quality we often tend to overlook when we make quick single-minded judgments on past historical figures. Issawi's succeeding study "Ibn Khaldun on Ancient History" (ch. four) likewise undertakes a meticulous analysis of the sources Ibn Khaldun used in his popular *Al-Muqaddimah* as well as his much less known *Al-Ibar*. We learn that the former, written without access to sources, is much less incisive than the latter, which was produced when Ibn Khaldun had access to large libraries and government records. Issawi concludes that only with an adequate study of *Al-Ibar* can we fully understand Ibn Khaldun's thinking and knowledge.

"The Ottoman Economic Legacy" (ch. five) presents us with another understudied topic. After meticulously reviewing the Ottomans' interpretations of science, technology, and economics, Issawi concludes that the Ottomans initially revealed "a profound lack of interest...and distrust in economic matters" (pp. 93-4), and advocated instead government intervention in the economy to implement public interest, a tendency that continues to this day. Even though this stand started to change in the nineteenth century, the lack of economic learning from neighboring Europe in the preceding three centuries has been hard to overcome. In the next study, "The Greeks in the Middle East" (ch. six), we learn about a social group that did indeed play a significant economic role in the Near East during the same time period. Even though the Greeks were active in business and industry as bankers, tax farmers, and members of the industrial labor force, in the professions as physicians, and in government service as public servants, all

"were shattered by the disastrous war of 1918-1922" (p. 113) and their economic contribution failed to sustain itself in the Near East.

Issawi focuses on the understudied relationship between the political and the economic in "The Costs of the French Revolution" (ch. seven) as he reveals through statistical information how during and after the French Revolution the loss of human and intellectual capital due to revolutionary violence, increasing state costs as a consequence of overcentralization, and the harmful effects of social upheaval on foreign trade and agriculture might have actually cost France its prominence in the world order. Another dimension of this loss is analyzed in "The Struggle for Linguistic Hegemony, 1780-1980" (ch. eight) where Issawi traces how the balance between the prominence of the French and English languages was altered at the expense of the former. Even though French was "the language of revolution and the inspiration of national liberation" (p. 136), commerce, operating together with industry and empire, tipped the scale in favor of English, which went on to become the dominant language of science, business and technology.

The final study, entitled "Change in Western Perceptions of the Orient since the Eighteenth Century" (ch. nine), reverts to the earlier theme of changing cultural perceptions. Issawi traces how economic and technological development as well as religion and the status of women became the blueprints through which Europe judged the Orient. Even though Japan, India, and China underwent major transformations that favorably altered Europe's judgment, the lack of such large-scale transformations in the Near East did not alter the European perceptions, and "the image projected by the region remained essentially unchanged and hostile" (p. 149). Issawi's concluding sentences to this chapter and also the volume are very telling: "In recent years, we have witnessed the revival of radical Islam in many countries, and the cultural and political clash with the West has intensified. And so the story of the age-long conflict continues."

Issawi thus leaves us with a historical observation that both underscores the complexity of the relationship between the East and the West, yet one that is also depicted in confrontational terms. Even though such a dichotomy focusing on differences rather than similarities between the East and the West reproduces the portrayal of the Near East as 'the other' and should therefore be avoided, the breadth and depth of the historical analysis Issawi undertook to provide his readers with novel insights into the Near East will be sorely missed.