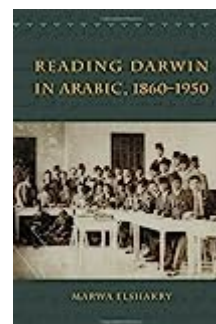


Marwa Elshakry. *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. 448 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-00130-2.



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At the turn of the twentieth century, Cairo's Khedivial College was far from being an isolated place. Myriad globalizing currents passed through its halls of learning and shaped the ways in which colonized Egyptians imagined themselves, others, and world affairs at large. Darwinism (or *darwaniya* in Arabic)—that is, the idea that all human beings are the product of biological evolution and thus share a common genealogical ancestry—was no exception to the globalization of Egyptian identity negotiations, let alone that of the College itself and its student body. Salama Musa, a prominent and controversial Egyptian public intellectual who graduated in 1907, recounts in his memoirs that a curiosity for “evolution” and desire to “emancipate” Arabic culture led him to continue his studies in western Europe.[1] Such travels, Musa reasoned, permitted him to offer Egyptian society a remedy for its “colonial predicament” and perceived backwardness (p. 242). Musa, in other words, sought out the power of scientific knowledge to overturn Western racial prejudice vis-à-vis Egyptians and facilitate decolonization.

Salama Musa was one of many public intellectuals to grapple with *darwaniya*, make it accessible to Arabic-speaking publics, and contribute to the global field of Darwinist thought (or *al-madhab al-Darwini*).

In her excellent book *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950*, Marwa Elshakry unearths both the migrations and subsequent transformations of Darwinism into Arabic, from the establishment of Beirut's Syrian Protestant College to the eve of Egypt's Free Officers Revolution. Social Darwinism, Elshakry reveals, was a “traveling theory.”[2] Thanks in large part to growing information networks, Arabs of various political persuasions, religious faiths, socioeconomic backgrounds, and linguistic dialects not only engaged with *al-madhab al-Darwini* via translation, but they also transformed it in ways that made it a useful concept for identity politics, nationalisms, and anticolonialism.

In particular, the introductions to *darwaniya*, which coincided with the high times of both European imperialism in the Arab world and Ottoman reform, offered Arab thinkers an avenue in which to counter imperial culture with one of its own discursive weapons: science. Understanding the role that scientific development played within the “imperial way of seeing” and ideas of Western superiority more specifically, Arabs contended that a reconnection with science would facilitate a much-needed renaissance (or *nahda*), challenging the imperial politics of difference in the process.[3] Indeed, the most noteworthy scholarly contribution that Elshakry

offers is a historicization of the origins of a key discursive argument in favor of Arab decolonization: "Western progress in the modern era could not have been realized without the borrowing of knowledge from Arab civilization."⁴

As Elshakry demonstrates, public intellectuals integrated *al-madhab al-Darwini* into political strategies of Arab decolonization. Influential figures, such as Ya'qub Sarraf, Faris Nimr, Shibli Shumayyil, and Muhammad 'Abduh, translated Darwin's politico-scientific contributions in order to challenge scientific racism. Strict Westernization and the condemnation of Arab cultures, they concluded, would not suffice because this meant Arabs would surely remain the subjects of imperialism and objects of Orientalism. Yet, as Arab public intellectuals debated the extent to which some degree of Westernization threatened Arab culture, most came to understand that the key to political and cultural decolonization was the elimination of perceived civilizational divisions between Arabs and the "West."

More specifically, many Arab intellectuals argued that religion, contrary to the beliefs of leading French Orientalist Ernest Renan and many others, was not incompatible with science.⁵ Egyptian mufti Muhammad 'Abduh, for instance, consistently claimed that Islam was a "friend of science" since it encouraged the juxtaposition of reason and belief (p. 177). This was evidenced by the fact that medieval Arab Muslim thinkers had made foundational contributions to myriad scientific fields, such as algebra, astrology, and medicine. Furthermore, from the 1880s onward, Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, Isma'il Mazhar, and others humanized Arabs by contending that contemporary evolutionist thought itself was "not new." Instead, Darwinism was merely "a reformation of medieval Arabic ideas" (p. 33). Western superiority, as a result, was undeniably indebted to Arab cultures. Contemporary Arab inferiority, thanks to the revelations of Darwinist thought, was therefore not static, but could be overcome from within.

By unearthing and promoting the connections between the Arab world, universal science, Darwinism, and the "West," Arab public intellectuals sought to decolonize global Orientalism. This, Elshakry skillfully demonstrates, "was the real value of viewing Darwin in Arabic" (p. 305).

Reading Darwin in Arabic also joins a burgeoning body of literature that examines the ways in which Egyptian thinkers adopted a contrapuntal imperial logic toward black Africans as a means to imagine the civiliza-

tional superiority of Arab cultures.⁶ Race, the book explains, was also an Arabic construct and thus the topic "of deep concerns to Arab readers" (p. 88). But one gets the impression when reading Elshakry that Egyptian racial constructions of black Africans were predominantly one-dimensional. Were arguments against the Egyptian dehumanization of black Africans marginalized from Arabic public spheres? To what extent did Egyptians and the Arab world at large debate the hypocrisy of such a "mentality"? Did they apply *al-madhab al-Darwini* to Arab-African relations in the same way as they did to Arab-European relations?

These questions deserve answers. Nevertheless, Marwa Elshakry's *Reading Darwin in Arabic* is a tour-de-force. Without question, Elshakry has made an invaluable contribution to the global and cultural histories of decolonization.

Notes

[1]. Omnia El Shakry, *The Great Social Laboratory: Subjects of Knowledge in Colonial and Postcolonial Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 62; Salama Musa, *The Education of Salama Musa* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 81.

[2]. Edward Said, "Traveling Theory," in *The Edward Said Reader*, ed. Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 195-208.

[3]. Paul Kramer, "Power and Connection: Imperial Histories of the United States in the World," *American Historical Review* 116, no. 5 (2011): 1348-1391.

[4]. For various ways and times in which this argument has been articulated in English since the advent of World War II, see Nabih Faris, *The Arab Heritage* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944); Rom Landau, *The Arab Heritage of Western Civilization* (New York: Arab Information Center, 1972); Albert Hourani, *A History of Arab Peoples* (New York: Warner Books, 1991); Jonathan Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2010); and Jim al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom: How Arabic Science Saved Ancient Knowledge and Gave Us the Renaissance* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

[5]. For more on Ernest Renan, see Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[6]. See, for instance, Eve Troutt Powell, *A Differ-*

ent Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Press, 2003).
Mastery of the Sudan (Berkeley: University of California

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