

The economy by other means: The historiography of capitalism in the modern Middle East

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Abstract

The history of modern political economy, a major subfield within Middle Eastern Studies, is largely considered to have been eclipsed by the growing interest in the history and politics of identity in the 1990s. In this article, I explain the newfound academic interest in engaging with capitalism as a historical object in relation to the modern Middle East. I argue that the new rubric of “History of Capitalism,” which was forged in the context of the contemporary crisis of capitalism, has allowed historians to approach the economy anew with analytical tools drawn mainly from cultural history. Based on surveying this new body of scholarship on the modern Middle East, I suggest organizing it around three main themes: Economic Thought, Consumerism, and Infrastructure. After discussing the main research questions animating each of these categories, I conclude by highlighting the potential inherent in the historiographical eclecticism of this wave of interest in studying capitalist processes.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Historians explain the state of their field in terms of clusters of similar methodological and thematic choices that come to dominate the scholarship on history during a particular phase. The substantive and temporal boundaries of each of these historiographical turns are, necessarily, being constantly redrawn (AHR Forum, 2012). Most recently, Alan Mikhail and Christine Philiou enacted this ongoing debate in relation to the history of the Middle East, declaring that we are in the midst of an “imperial turn” centered on early modern Ottoman history. They argued that this development is motivated by a pervasive political concern about imagining a post-national future and is enabled by the popularity of world-historical frameworks and the hegemony of Edward Said’s critique of “culture and empire as inherent, monolithic, bounded, and fixed categories (2012, p. 735; Aksan, 2014).” Historians of the modern Middle East, who for the most part treat the 19th and 20th centuries collectively as a single temporal unit (i.e., the modern period), have

also relied on empire as a central category of analysis. Increasingly however, their analytical focus has centered on the history of capitalism, with empire serving as a prevalent, though not exclusive, backdrop.

In this article, I aim to interpret this newfound interest in capitalism among historians of the modern Middle East. Precisely, I argue that what distinguishes the new history of capitalism is its adoption of a primarily cultural history approach to explain how the economy is embedded within a larger social context. This approach entails “switch[ing] attention from the objects to the methods of study,” which translates into “a concern with the symbolic and its interpretation” (Burke, 2008, p. 3). Hence, the history of capitalism constitutes simultaneously a continuation of and a departure from an earlier wave of historical scholarship that focused on political economy and that occupied a central place within the field of modern Middle Eastern history between the late 1960s and 1990s. This earlier wave focused primarily on the intersection between political partisanship and government institutions on the one hand, and economic actors, especially workers and capitalists on the other. The new history of capitalism continues to engage with these themes in relation to capitalist societies but also departs from them to focus on subjects that are not self-evidently or exclusively economic, such as the histories of ideas and human experience. Most importantly, it treats these topics as integral to our understanding of the existence and maintenance of capitalist societies. This exploration of the new history of capitalism is organized around two main questions. First, why is the renewed interest in studying the economy specifically influenced by cultural history and preoccupied with capitalism at the expense of other economic systems? Second, in light of these methodological and thematic choices, how did particular historical accounts become thinkable?

2 | FROM ECONOMIC HISTORY TO HISTORY OF CAPITALISM

In 2012, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, the flagship journal of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA), published “A Discussion on the State of Middle Eastern/Islamic Economic History.” Each of the five senior historians and economists who contributed to the discussion provided one of two critiques to the state of Middle Eastern economic history. The first was a lamentation of the lack of studies that relied on quantitative analysis and economic theory, and the ensuing impossibility to integrating the Middle East into mainstream analytic economic research. Accepting this critique would entail finding new ways of extracting economic data from descriptive primary sources (Ergene, 2012) and, more importantly, repudiating the suspicious attitude that area-studies scholars harbor toward the “Eurocentric” social sciences (Kuran, 2012b). In opposition, the second critique contended that “[a] rethinking of economic history ... implies understanding institutions as imbedded in societal dynamics rather than disembodied instruments for ... responding to state or market imperatives” (Islamoglu, 2012, p. 537).¹ By asserting that the study of economy and society are inseparable, this argument captures a main trend within the social history of the Middle East.

Social history is the most encompassing subfield within the historical profession. Its practitioners draw on diverse, indeed eclectic, methods, and are continuously inventing new categories that enable them to historicize different aspects of society. Historians of the Middle East who were entering the field in the 1970s were receptive to Eric Hobsbawm's suggestion that “[e]ven those of us who never set out to call ourselves by this name [i.e. a social historian] will not want to disclaim it today” (1971, p. 43). By the 1980s, social history became the most vibrant area of studying the modern Middle East, with political economy constituting the thematic focus and dictating the approaches of many of these works. Archival-based histories of labor movements (Beinin & Lockman, 1987; E. Goldberg, 1986), class formation (Batatu, 1979; Batatu, 1999; Cuno, 1992; Gocek, 1996; Keyder, 1987), and business enterprises (Davis, 1983; Tignor, 1984; Vitalis, 1995) primarily focusing on the Ottoman Empire and Egypt reflected a growing commitment to debunking the orientalist foundations of modernization theory that were uncritically accepted by an earlier generation of historians (Issawi, 1966). The authors of these works were not necessarily historians by training but included also political scientists and sociologists. Their scholarship was part of a larger trend within Euro-American historical academic circles (Iggers, 2005), and partly coincided with the rediscovery of Karl Polanyi's critique of market liberalism at the end of the Cold War (Stiglitz, 2001).

Edward Said's *Orientalism* and its interlocutors quickly eclipsed this kind of social history (1978). As Zachary Lockman noted, "Marxian and political economy approaches came to be seen by many in the 1980s as too narrow in their insistence on the centrality of class as a category, too essentialist in their commitment to social structure causation, and too teleological in their positioning of large-scale and long-term historical trajectories" (2004, pp. 211–212). Not surprisingly, Said's influence among historians was most clearly manifested within cultural history. The most influential works in this tradition probed the complex politics of representation, language, and identity, at the expense of social structure (Badran, 1995; Deringil, 1998; Makdisi, 2000; Najmabadi, 1998; Thompson, 2000). Increasingly influential social histories also downplayed socioeconomic topics in order to privilege cultural questions such as reclaiming the lost voices of subaltern groups (Fahmy, 1997). However, just as the rise of cultural history overshadowed the formerly dominant version of social history with its focus on political economy approaches, it paved the way for a new kind of scholarly engagement with economic themes that will culminate in the history of capitalism.

The first signs of this change are to be found in the social history of labor. More than any other subfield, historians of labor movements engaged with the Marxian concept of class consciousness. Because their main concern was to excavate social structures and to restore the agency of workers populating those structures, they often engaged with the construction of cultural categories (Beinin & Lockman, 1987; E. Goldberg, 1986). It is not surprising then that it was those same scholars who, at the height of the hegemony of cultural history in the 1990s, endeavored to write histories that paid equal attention to both social structure and cultural meaning (E. Goldberg, 1996; Lockman, 1994). A clear example of this trend is Zachary Lockman's *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948* (1996), which sought to explain the history of the Arab and Jewish labor movements in Mandate Palestine through studying their mutually constitutive interactions. This attempt paralleled the efforts of historians of both Europe and the colonized world to reconcile cultural history with social theory but who were not necessarily committed to studying economic themes, such as William Sewell Jr. (2005) and Fredrick Cooper (2005).²

In the mid-2000s, the convergence of two factors was generating the momentum for historicizing capitalism using mainly cultural history methods. The first of these factors is related primarily to the global political climate and the state of the historical profession. American historian Louis Hyman notes that "the term 'history of capitalism' began to assume a currency in the historical profession sometime in the mid-2000s between the tech crash [of 2000–2002] and the Great Recession [of 2009–2010]" (2013). The generation of historians who were at the beginning of their academic careers during that decade were coming to terms with the waning of the "postwar liberal consensus ... regarding economic policy" (Interchange, 2014, pp. 505–506), while experiencing firsthand its effects of "mounting inequality, skyrocketing asset prices, debt levels [and] stagnating standards of living" (Interchange, 2014, p. 506). As a result, they became specifically interested in "understand[ing] capitalist dynamics" (Interchange, 2014, pp. 509). The experiences of historians based in the United States coincided with comparable—and related—economic upheavals and academic initiatives in the Middle East. For example, the year 1997 witnessed the establishment of the Ottoman Bank Archives and Research Center in Istanbul, 3 years after an economic crisis that caused the near-collapse of the Turkish national currency (Aydin, 2005). Similarly, in 2004, at the height of the program of economic liberalization in Mubarak's Egypt, a group of American and Egyptian scholars established the Economic and Business History Research Center at the American University in Cairo (Soliman, 2011; *The Chronicles*, 2013). Both of these initiatives created archives that would enable the reexamining of the history of capitalist transformations in modern Turkey and Egypt, and in the case of Egypt, bypass restricted access to state archives (Di-Capua, 2009, p. 335).

A historiographical shift constitutes the second factor. Explaining the rise of the history of American capitalism, Sven Beckert argues that the interdisciplinarity of the new history of capitalism is a reaction to the prevalent "sense of impasse and isolation feeling" that historians of business, economy, and labor experienced in the 1990s. The growing influence of cultural historians translated into a dismissal of quantitative methods, the weakness of workers movements in the United States deemed labor history unappealing for the new generation of historians, and "studying businesses and the white men who ran most of them was perceived to be somewhat retrograde" (2011, p. 319). A similar shift could be seen within Middle Eastern history and is best exemplified by the works of two scholars of

modern Egypt, Robert Vitalis and Timothy Mitchell, both political scientists by training. Even though their scholarship is dissimilar, reading it side by side highlights the critical junction in which the history of capitalism became thinkable within Middle Eastern studies.

In “The End of Third Worldism in Egyptian Studies,” Vitalis provided a powerful critique of dependency theory and related Marxian paradigms that had dominated the histories of political economy being written in North American universities. Instead of the “unusually blunt and unsophisticated set of ideas about interests, preferences, psychological states” that resulted from these approaches, he advocated “an open-ended inquiry into the organization of capitalist institutions” that was consistent with the approach adopted by the economist Bent Hansen a few years earlier in his comparative study of Egypt and Turkey’s economies (1996, p. 26; Hansen, 1991). In effect, Vitalis suggested that capitalism should not only be studied from the standpoint of those who struggled to upend it, such as anti-colonial nationalists. While Vitalis rejected the premise underlying much of the history of political economy as narrow and unsound, Timothy Mitchell deployed postcolonial theory to historicize the category of “economy” itself. In *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-politics, Modernity*, Mitchell treated the building blocks of social and economic history, most importantly the “economy,” as an artifact that was constituted through two intertwined processes: a cultural construction based on the production of abstract meaning and a material construction based on real practice. The “economy” in this reading became an object that was always incomplete and consequently in constant need of being redefined and reproduced (2002). Although his argument may have been intended to locate a new way of speaking about the cultural and the material without separating them, Mitchell’s influence was most visible in inspiring historians interested in capitalism in the Middle East to adopt the tools of cultural history.

In the following pages, I examine a wide range of recent scholarship on the modern Middle East. I argue that this ongoing scholarly wave expanded the scope of studying capitalism historically by drawing on the tools and concerns of cultural history to address ostensibly non-economic subjects that it deemed integral to the historical experience of capitalist societies. In an attempt to distinguish the most significant scholarly contributions of this literature, I organize the remainder of the essay around three themes: Capitalists and Economic Thought; Middle Classes and Common Practices; and Subalterns and Infrastructure. These three, admittedly broad, categories are intended as a first attempt at systematizing the growing and diverse scholarly engagements with the history of capitalism in the modern Middle East. I conclude with reflecting on the promise and limitations of this line of research.

3 | CAPITALISTS AND ECONOMIC THOUGHT

Until recently studying economic thought was unpopular among historians of the modern Middle East, especially when compared to their peers who studied the early modern period. The latter group agreed that there was no significant corpus of intellectual writings focusing on the economy until the end of the 18th century. For them, studying economic thought entailed searching for and systematizing economy-related ideas that formed an integral part of broader political and administrative texts that addressed more general social contexts. For example, some historians of the early modern era read religious manuscripts or chronicles while paying particular attention to economic themes in an attempt to highlight Islamic justifications for innovative economic strategies (Gran, 1979) or to sketch an Ottoman “economic mentality” (Kafadar, 1986). Others mined official laws and bureaucratic memoranda in order to uncover the unarticulated logic that underlay state economic policy (Ermis, 2014). By contrast, historians of the modern period had access to 19th- and 20th-century specialized writings on political economy. However, they did not pay sufficient attention to these writings since most of them were translations from European languages, and therefore, considered derivative.

To overcome this impasse, historians of economic thought had to reconsider the relationship between translation and originality. Deniz T. Kilincoglu’s *Economics and Capitalism in the Ottoman Empire* is a clear example of this approach (2015). His study documents the production of economic knowledge in Ottoman Turkish in the 19th century, especially during its most active phase under sultan Abdulhamid II (r. 1876–1909). Focusing on both the

content and the form of this specialized knowledge, Kilincoglu shows how the process of translating economic ideas from European languages was not intended to be literal. As a result, a particular Ottoman synthesis that combined immediate imperial policy concerns and elements of an Islamic discourse emerged. This synthesis about what capitalism was and how policymakers and citizens could best address it was constantly evolving owing to the various written forums in which it was being produced and disseminated, such as scholarly textbooks and serialized newspaper articles. The rapid disintegration of the Ottoman Empire in the post-Hamidian years might have been accompanied by a flourishing of parallel syntheses of economic thought on smaller, more regional, scales throughout the Middle East. In addition to Ellis Goldberg's exploration of the ideas of Egyptian economists Joseph Nahas and Muhammad Fahmi Luhayta (2004), Sherene Seikaly carefully examined specialized outlets of economic thought such as the journal *al-Iqtisadiyyat al-'Arabiyya*, which was first published in 1935, and the radio program "The New Arab Home," which aired on the Palestine Broadcasting Service in 1940–1941. As a result, she uncovered a little-known utopian vision "built on the foundations of private property, investment, self-responsibility and the accumulation of capital" that was propagated by the Palestinian business community under British rule (2016, p. 17). What is most noteworthy about 1930s and 1940s Palestinian economic thinkers was their insistence on the autonomy of economics and their commitment to capitalist ideals, which coincided with the defeat of the struggle for Palestinian independence and the subsequent impossibility of creating a Palestinian national economy.

Extending the search beyond scholarly works that are deliberately organized around economic thought reveals significant contributions that would otherwise be classified under business or intellectual history. For example, in his study of economic nationalism, AbdelAziz EzzelArab compares little-known competing proposals for the creation of a "national" joint-stock bank in Egypt on the eve of the British occupation (2002). Although the proposed banks would fulfill different missions, one commercial, the other agricultural, the cases for both were made publicly because their advocates sought to raise funds from potential shareholders. As such, these calls became vehicles for the public debate over the desirable course for capitalist development in Egypt. The same periodicals that published explicit economic ideas, also published works of literature that provide us with surprising and meaningful insights about how capitalism was understood during the same period. Elizabeth Holt's original study of the intersection of literature and finance explains how the new form of the serialized novel was coterminous with the new financial markets of Beirut and Cairo. Hence, as she puts it, "[t]he Arabic novel of the late nineteenth century performed a technology of time, hope, and fear subtending fictions of capital meted out on the installment plan" (2017, p. 137). Yet just as members of the business community and bourgeois intellectuals played out their different visions for the future of capitalism in the public sphere, so did those who lived in the context of capitalism but sought to upend it. Anarchist and socialist activism in Alexandria, Beirut, and Cairo during the late 19th and early 20th centuries are the most visible examples of this phenomenon. Drawing on a diverse array of sources including state archives, newspapers, and unpublished personal papers, Ilham Khuri-Makdisi reconstructed global networks of radical middle-class intellectuals and labor organizers who formulated imaginative critiques of capitalism. While her findings do not include comprehensive economic programs, she exposes multiple sites in which ideas about capitalism were articulated and put into practice such as Alexandria's Université Populaire Libre, the curriculum of which included courses on workers' negotiation and strike strategies (2013). In short, the intellectual engagements with capitalism have come to form a key component of the new history of capitalism.

4 | MIDDLE CLASSES, COMMON PRACTICES

Unlike the study of economic thought, which was not popular due to its presumable unoriginality, understanding the urban middle class has traditionally loomed larger within the history of the modern Middle East. However, this specific interest was markedly more visible in the social and cultural histories of nationalism, urban spaces, and modern experiences (Ryzova, 2014; Watenpaugh, 2006). Historians of political economy usually relegated the relevant middle-class segments to passive roles lurking in the background of the ongoing struggle between the livelier historical

agents, namely, the capitalists and the workers, or, in studies of the countryside, the landowners and the peasants (Baer, 1982; Beinin, 2001). This condition was consistent with the Marxian view of the petite bourgeoisie as being “neither fish nor fowl; they are mostly poor but they are poor *capitalists*. They may, from time to time, ally with the Left, but ... their allegiance is fundamentally unreliable as they have a foot in both camps and a desire themselves to become large capitalists” (Scott, 2012). The cultural history core of the new history of capitalism presented a justification for a novel scholarly interest in how the different segments of the middle class experienced and produced capitalism, especially through tracing the growing awareness of a distinct middle class status and the transformation of consumer tastes.

The first book-length academic engagement with the history of consumption in the modern Middle East was a collection of articles edited by Donald Quataert (1999). The volume contained several case studies focusing on diverse objects of consumption such as food and dress, mostly in 18th and 19th-century Istanbul. It constituted, according to the editor, “an initial Ottomanist foray into this world of consumption,” which was already being scrutinized by historians of Europe, North America, and East Asia since the 1980s (p. 3). Within the same volume, Suraiya Faroqhi contributed a brief provisional survey of Ottoman sources that lend themselves to this, then nascent, line of study. Faroqhi explained that although consumption was “an authentically economic phenomenon,” it “impinge[d] on the social and cultural realms” since “by consuming—or ... by declining to consume—people express cultural preferences, project self-images, and compete for status” (1999, p. 15). Thus, her case for researching the history of consumption identified a common theme that would appear repeatedly in subsequent histories of capitalism.

The new wave of studies of middle class consumerism focused either on changing trends within fixed urban locales or on certain commodities and their movement between different geographies. Toufoul Abou-Hodeib's article “Taste and Class in Late Ottoman Beirut” is an illuminating example of the first trend (2011). Departing from histories that focused on middle class intellectual articulations of how the Beirut middle class distinguished itself from other classes, Abou-Hodeib investigated the notion of taste in multiple contemporaneous sites: French consular trade reports revealed what cheap industrial products were flowing into a middle class consumer market in late 19th and early 20th-century Beirut; newspaper advertisements pointed to how the desirability of these imported commodities was being justified, and court records included hints of how individuals ascribed value to the same material objects. As a result, she defined the boundaries of an urban middle class through a research process that took into account both the rise of industrial capitalism and the agency of individuals who found their place in society through the seemingly banal activity of consumption. In addition to taste, scholars have used consumption habits to illustrate the ambiguities of the experience of colonialism. In doing so, they shed light on how individuals engaged with capitalist processes on a local level. Nancy Reynolds's work on commerce and decolonization in Cairo in the 1920s–1950s is a case in point (2012). Reynolds was primarily concerned with dissecting the colonial and anti-colonial logics that imposed mutually exclusive identities on the city's residents rather than in providing a systematic treatment of capitalism or class. Yet the focus on urban commerce in itself exposed revealing dynamics about the prominence of class awareness in the political sphere. For example, shoe manufacturers developed a marketing strategy that emphasized simultaneously the patriotism implied in buying shoes manufactured in Egypt rather than imported from Europe, and the association between wearing shoes and upward social mobility.

Discoveries about capitalist processes are often secondary objectives for studies of urban classes and their habits. On the other hand, histories of commodities are more likely to engage purposefully with the debates on capitalism. For example, Relli Shechter studied the ways in which tobacco was produced, marketed, consumed, and regulated in Egypt over a long period of time spanning from the middle of the 19th century to the end of the 20th (2006). Recently, the scholarly interest in the history of commodities has increasingly focused on one aspect of this history: circulation. This focus is consistent with the increasing popularity of empire as a unit of analysis, and with the growing influence of intellectual and social histories of law. In *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800–1900*, Julia Clancy-Smith viewed the trans-Mediterranean circulation of gunpowder, hashish, and migrants “as special economic niches within a single but structurally diverse economic system” (2011, p. 161). Johan Mathew went a step further in his study of trafficking in the Arabian Sea to assert that the persistence of outlawed commercial

activities in the 19th century, such as the trade of arms and slaves, was a constitutive element of the expansion of capitalism under British imperial hegemony (2016). These studies of contraband exemplify the convergence of the histories of empire and law, providing a framework to better explain how uneven intra- and inter-imperial jurisdictions functioned (Schayegh, 2011) and to critique triumphalist narratives of capitalist expansion, such as Timur Kuran's *The Long Divergence: How Islamic Law Held Back the Middle East* (2012a).

5 | INFRASTRUCTURE AND SUBALTERNS

The emphasis on middle class lifestyles and the circulation of commodities that sustained them often runs the risk of obfuscating the reality of increasingly complex imperial, and later, state bureaucracies (Jakes, 2012). Thus, it is worth noting that parallel to this trend is a vibrant conversation about state-enacted infrastructures and the individuals who imagined and negotiated their future. In this context, infrastructure is approached in two overlapping ways. The first is studying the technology of physical infrastructure and the politics around its construction and operation. In some instances, this interest paved the way for engaging histories of the environment. The second approach is to treat the repertoire of state laws and institutions as a moral infrastructure that sometimes facilitates and sometimes disrupts the activities of private economic actors. In both of these cases, reconstructing infrastructure as the matrix of capitalism is often a first step toward capturing the experience of inhabiting, and often subverting, this same infrastructure.

Surprisingly, recent studies of physical infrastructure seldom focused on capitalism as a main object of analysis. Several, however, have used techno-politics and economic development as a means to explain modern state building. Saudi Arabia has emerged as a popular site for the study of this dynamic. Michael Christopher Low demonstrated how Ottoman government efforts to achieve water security at the turn of the 20th century in the Hijaz unwittingly set the stage for the discovery of oil reserves in subsequent decades (2015). The connection between the scarcity of water and the abundance of oil would, according to Toby Jones, define the tension underlying the Saudi modern state-building project (2010). A connected body of literature focusing on infrastructures of communication and transportation attempted to explain how material technological advances redefined, often in unintended ways, modern politics, and individual experience (Cole, 2016; Minawi, 2016). Ronen Shamir deployed Actor-Network Theory to show that electrification in mandate Palestine was a central factor in dividing the space and its inhabitants along ethno-national lines (2013). In other words, he controversially argued that the economic impetative of technology is what determined the explosive politics between Jews and Arabs in the interwar period (Hudson, 2015; Jakes, 2015a). Treating technological determinism more imaginatively, On Barak challenged what has become a basic premise of scholarly explanations of capitalism: the modern sense of time (2013).³ In *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt*, he implicitly accepted the ubiquity of capitalism as a global phenomenon facilitated by imperial hegemony, while demonstrating that the steamships, railways, and telegraph lines that were meant to promote capitalism through "social synchronization and standardized timekeeping" had actually led to the emergence of " 'countertempo' predicated on discomfort with the time of the clock and a disdain for dehumanizing European standards of efficiency, linearity, and punctuality." Comparably, Ranin Kazemi has shown how the modernization of physical and legal infrastructures created the conditions for frequent food shortages and famines in Qajar Iran (2016). Thus, the failed aspects of technology came to characterize the culture and future imaginings of capitalism.

Studying capitalism primarily as the result of institutional, especially legal, developments is an extension of a long-established tradition that informed earlier studies of political economy. Nevertheless, the new scholarship is distinctive mainly because it engages with the recent, far-reaching revisions of hitherto established histories of modern law and colonialism. André Raymond's 1973 publication of his doctoral thesis on artisans and merchants in 19th-century Cairo established *shari'a* court records as the primary source for writing the social and economic history of the early modern and modern periods in the Middle East (Hanna, 1997; Kuran, 2010; Marcus, 1989). However, the utility of these sources diminished drastically in the Ottoman center and Egypt starting in the middle decades of the 19th

century. Therefore, published economic legislations and colonial sources became the main sources for writing histories of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴ It was only in the 1990s with the discovery of part of the archive of the Istanbul-centered Nizamiye court network, and the Cairo-centered administrative and judicial councils (*majalis al-siyasa*) that a new history of commerce became possible (Rubin, 2011). For example, in 1999, Rudolph Peters, one of the main authors of the new legal history, edited a special issue of the journal *Islamic Law and Society* on "The Legal History of Ottoman Egypt," which featured the first article-length study of the merchant courts of 19th-century Egypt (J. Goldberg, 1999). The discovery enabled historians of the early 1800s to extend their research to examine the transformation of merchant experiences under the rapidly centralizing modern state of the mid-century (Ghazaleh, 2013). Similarly, historians of the late 19th century laid the foundations for an alternative history of capitalism in the modern period; one that places the emphasis on late Ottoman reforms and decenters the presumed novelty of colonial policies at the turn of the 20th century (Chalcraft, 2004; Cheta, 2014). In conversation with this effort to reconstruct the legal infrastructure is a growing scholarship that aims to interpret the colonial logic of governance through dissecting its physical infrastructural projects, and placing them within the context of imperial expertise. Martin Bunton's *Colonial Land Policies in Palestine, 1917–1936* traces the reinvention of the property rights regime under the Mandate and finds the process to have been "ad hoc and makeshift, multidirectional and inconsistent, even contradictory," yet, at the same time, to have been decisive in determining the success of Zionism (2007, p. 27). Another illuminating example is Aaron Jakes's analysis of British rule in Egypt, which combines the use of intellectual accounts, peasant petitions, government records, and business documents to explain how public works and financial schemes simultaneously transformed the ways in which capitalism developed and anti-colonial ambitions were imagined (2015b).

Related to the growing interest in reconstructing material and immaterial infrastructures are attempts to locate individuals, especially workers, within or in relation to them. Reading labor legislations and economic policy debates, Ellis Goldberg brought child labor to the center of the story of Egyptian economic development from an export-oriented cotton producer to an adopter of import substitution industrial policies. To explain the centrality of child labor, hitherto unstudied by historians of modern Egypt, he introduced another practically unexamined category of economic analysis: reputation (2004). Hence, Goldberg linked the deliberate creation of the reputation of Egyptian cotton as the finest in the world to a particular mode of agricultural production that relied heavily on child labor in the early 20th century and that also constrained the making of a large body of skilled and literate workers under the post-colonial regime. Significantly, this examination of the conditions that maintained the prominence of child labor relied on understanding reputation not only as a financial asset, the value of which is tied to the necessary lack of perfect knowledge in markets, but also as a cultural product. Measuring the economic value of financial assets falls within the purview of economists. Recognizing that a financial asset, like reputation, possesses a cultural meaning opens up fresh possibilities for a new generation of historians of capitalism, whose research agendas privilege cultural questions. Hanan Hammad's *Industrial Sexuality: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt* is a remarkable example of what the latter approach can achieve (2016). Hammad reconstructed the process of creating an urban working class during the interwar years in al-Mahalla al-Kubra, Egypt's primary industrial town. Departing from earlier historians of labor movements in the Middle East who privileged the partisan and ideological struggles of organized labor, Hammad mined a diverse array of archival sources to capture the new norms of urban life that coincided with the construction and management of an industrial infrastructure. Thus, she connected modern notions of gender and sexuality to an essential aspect of modern capitalism, namely, proletarianization.

6 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Political economy is a well-established approach and topic within academic histories of the modern Middle East. World War II was still raging when Charles Issawi completed his first account of the economic history of Egypt in 1943 (1947).⁵ Fifteen years later, Egypt appeared as a backdrop for the activities of European financiers in David

S. Landes's influential *Bankers and Pashas: International Finance and Economic Imperialism in Egypt* (1958). The publication of Roger Owen's *Cotton and the Egyptian Economy, 1820–1914: A Study in Trade and Development* (1969) marked the beginning of at least two decades of energetic, original, and expansive histories of political economy informed by neo-Marxian approaches, such as E.P. Thompson's "History from Below," as well as Dependency Theory, and focusing on economic nationalism and workers movements, not only in Egypt but also in the Ottoman Empire, its successor states, and Iran. The interest in histories of political economy overlapped with, and, despite its dynamism, by the 1990s was eclipsed by cultural history. The crises of capitalism of the mid-2000s fueled a resurgence of interest in political economy. This time around historians interested in the economy as an object of study relied mainly on the tools of cultural history under the rubric of the "History of Capitalism."

However, the breadth and eclecticism of recent histories of capitalism poses a two-tiered problem. First, if capitalism is pervasive in the modern period, it could potentially become a hollow scholarly category. That is to say, any study of the modern period could claim viably to be about capitalism. By extension, studying the history of capitalism is not only disciplinarily fragmented but is also often illegible to its primary audience, namely, students of capitalism across disciplinary lines. As should have become apparent by now, the accumulation and refinement of knowledge about the history of capitalism that is emerging out of the conversation among historians, political theorists, and anthropologists, rarely overlaps with the debates among economists. One remedy that has commonly been suggested, especially by economists, has been the need for interdisciplinary work, by which they mean that historians would provide the general context and economists would provide the analysis through pursuing counterfactuals and establishing causal relationships (Hilt, 2017; Saleh, 2017). In other words, historians would provide the raw historical materials that economists would synthesize into systematic knowledge about capitalist processes.

There is no doubt that that approach is valuable. But, so is its opposite. In fact, the large-scale patterns that economists are keen on uncovering, and that often form their researches' end goal, are possibly a constructive starting point for the historian. For example, Bent Hansen's comparative study of Egypt and Turkey's statist policies and their effect on economic growth, equity, and poverty from independence in the 1920s until the 1980s is not only crucial for understanding these regimes' macroeconomic decisions but also is essential background for constructing arguments about societal choices regarding consumerism and their cultural meanings (1991). Comparably, Sevkett Pamuk's construction of the values of economic growth in the Middle East during the 19th and early 20th centuries (2006) and Mohamed Saleh's careful sampling and utilization of Egypt's population censuses of 1848 and 1868 (2013, 2015) are potentially indispensable for grounding qualitative historical research about the legal regulation of market practices, such as the state cooptation of guilds or the emergence of novel market-related professions.

In this article, I argued that the recent scholarship on the history of capitalism in relation to the study of the modern Middle East could effectively be organized around three broad categories. First, a growing number of studies are taking seriously economic thinkers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, who wrote in Arabic and Turkish. Uninhibited by questions of authenticity, those historians are interested in how knowledge about the economy was being constructed and propagated through linguistic translation and intellectual synthesis. Second, the focus on capitalism as a resilient historical process to be uncovered justified the interest in urban middle class consumers as dynamic historical agents rather than as passive individuals whose aspirations are inferior to those of wealthier capitalists and poorer workers. Attempts to follow commodities (including contraband) and merchants (including smugglers) have opened up new geographical configurations that were not conventionally studied by historians of the Middle East, most notably, the Indian Ocean.⁶ Third, recent breakthroughs in the social histories of law and institutions set the stage for the rediscovery of infrastructure as a useful category of analysis, and the reframing of the interest in workers around communal, rather than political, experiences.

Identifying these three focal points is not necessarily an argument for their analytical cohesiveness but rather follows from an attempt, *ex post facto*, to categorize the published scholarship. This process of categorization is meant to shed light on the growing interest among historians of the modern Middle East in historicizing capitalism. Additionally, while the value of interdisciplinarity cannot be overemphasized, its undertaking cannot be assumed to be universally feasible. Therefore, the continuous and systematic examination of the thematically and methodologically dissimilar

studies that seek to interpret capitalist processes broadly defined is necessary for the production, accumulation, and revision of knowledge, legible across disciplinary boundaries, about how capitalism has functioned historically in different geographies, the Middle East being only one example.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ In his contribution to this discussion, Sevket Pamuk offers an intermediate position, asserting that “religion and culture are not the primary factors determining economic development or its absence.” However, rather than warn against the cultural explanations of economic phenomena, his point is that “societies adapt and reinterpret culture ... when demands for change become sufficiently strong.” Therefore, his call for the study of institutional change is conditional upon an awareness of the continuously adapting cultural context of such change.
- ² While both books were published in 2005, many of the chapters had been published earlier; in the case of Sewell Jr., as early as 1988.
- ³ E. P. Thompson (1967) had made the now authoritative claim that the experience of industrial capitalism is inseparable from a particularly modern sense of time.
- ⁴ This statement does not apply to smaller urban centers, where *shari'a* courts continued to serve as the primary judicial forum. For example, Beshara Doumani's major study of merchants and peasants in 19th-century Palestine relies on *shari'a* court records from Jerusalem and Nablus for as late as the mid-1860s (1995). During the same period, *shari'a* courts records in Alexandria or Cairo would not contain similar economy-related entries. Comparably, Fahad Ahmad Bishara has shown the centrality of Islamic legal notions to the functioning of the Indian Ocean economy in the modern period.
- ⁵ Charles Issawi's *Egypt: An Economic and Social Analysis* was completed in 1943 but only published after World War II.
- ⁶ Interestingly, the study of the Middle East in relation to Central Asia and the Indian Ocean parallels repeated calls by scholars of Islamic history to rethink the geographical units that scholars have conventionally relied on. Two powerful examples are Marshall Hodgson's “Nile-to-Oxus” (1974) and Shahab Ahmed's “Balkan-to-Bengal” (2015).

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