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REVIEW ESSAYS

The Study of Classical Islamic Learning: Knowledge, Empire, Imperialism

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Ahmad S. Dallal, *Islam without Europe: Traditions of Reform in Eighteenth-Century Islamic Thought*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2018. Pp. 440. US\$34.95 (paper).

Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. Pp. 392. US\$40.00 (cloth).

Elias Muhanna, *The World in a Book: al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018. Pp. 232, 11 b/w illus., 14 tables. US\$27.95 (paper).

Shihab al-Din al-Nuwayri, *The Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition: A Compendium of Knowledge from the Classical Islamic World*, trans. and ed. Elias Muhanna. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 2016. Pp. 352. US\$18.00 (paper).

In the four decades since Edward Said's *Orientalism* was published, the humanities have decisively changed direction.¹ In virtually all of today's humanities subdisciplines, one may encounter discussions about the Western representation of non-Western people and traditions. The controversy surrounding Said's study has never settled either: Said, it is alleged, can only make his case by restricting his argument to English, French, and American Orientalism; he completely overlooks German Orientalism, which in its formative years was not linked to any colonizing projects.

Despite these controversies, some of *Orientalism*'s more radical implications have not yet received the attention they deserve. In part, these implications concern what one may label the genealogy of academic knowledge more generally. A first notable

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978).

feature is that Said was inspired both by Marxist critiques of ideology and by Michel Foucault's genealogical critique of modern human-scientific knowledge; but *Orientalism* never really succeeds in reconciling these Marxist and genealogical strains. As a result, Said wavers between analyzing Orientalism as ideology (which is by definition false) or as a "discourse" in Foucault's sense (which is by definition true). Another shortcoming that has become more clearly visible over the years (but that could, in fact, have been noted almost immediately) is Said's exclusive concern with the sovereign power of imperialist states. This preoccupation not only downplays non-Western agencies and powers but is also unduly restrictive: Foucault, famously, goes far beyond the narrow focus on power as sovereignty, that is, as located or institutionalized in states and as formalized in laws. Instead, he sees power as emerging in any social relation and analyzes different modalities of power as linked to different forms of knowledge.²

Descriptively, one of the questions left open by Said's critique concerns the premodern Islamic sciences. Said presents Orientalism as Western literate knowledge that depicts non-Western actors as oral or illiterate native informants; but what about the status of local traditions of learning and the authority of local scholars? How exactly does premodern Islamic learning relate to modern Orientalist knowledge? Do they, in turn, allow for a genealogical analysis of their own?

One relatively understudied, but historically very widespread, formation of these premodern Islamic sciences is encyclopedic learning. Obviously, encyclopedism is a phenomenon of a much wider presence and interest, witness, for example, Pliny's *Naturalis historia* in Roman antiquity and Diderot's *Encyclopédie* in Enlightenment Paris—to say nothing of the *Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, the fictional Chinese imperial encyclopedia described by Borges that guided Foucault's exploration into the ultimately arbitrary and contingent foundations of every knowledge order. Earlier studies tended to depict the rise of encyclopedism in the Islamic world as a sign of stagnation: after the initial creative impulse that led to innovative work in philosophy and the sciences, they argued, Islamic learning entered a "scholastic age," in which compilers merely summarized and reshuffled what was already known.³ This picture of a postclassical degeneration of Islamic learning has been brandished Orientalist by later scholars; but similar pictures of a stagnant and derivative knowledge culture appear in the study of encyclopedisms elsewhere, like the Roman empire.

2. See Michel Foucault, *The Will to Know: The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage, 1978), pt. 4, chap. 2.

3. See, e.g., F. E. Peters, *Aristotle and the Arabs: The Aristotelian Tradition in Islam* (New York: New York University Press, 1968).

But, as Jason König and Tim Whitmarsh warn, one should not mistake the encyclopedist's rhetoric of conservatism and compilation for an epistemic reality.⁴ A less judgmental, and potentially more fruitful, approach is to ask what motivated the rise of encyclopedism in particular settings. It has been argued, for example, that the attempt to collect and unify knowledge in imperial Rome was an effort to overcome the social and political (and, possibly, epistemic) fragmentation of the late Republic.⁵

That is, there may well be a link of sorts between encyclopedic knowledge and the power of empire; and in *The World in a Book*, Elias Muhanna sets out, among others, to explore this link. He does so by focusing on Egyptian-born Shihâb al-Dîn al-Nuwayrî (1279–1333 CE), author of a massive thirty-one-volume encyclopedic work, the *Ultimate Ambition in the Arts of Erudition* (*Nihâyat al-arab fî funûn al-adab*). Earlier, Muhanna had published an accessible, and indeed attractive, abridged translation of this work. In *The World in a Book*, he studies al-Nuwayrî as a representative of a far broader Islamic encyclopedic tradition. By focusing on this work as a whole rather than on specific bits of information contained in it, Muhanna tries to reconstruct al-Nuwayrî's undertaking as a coherent intellectual project.

Arabic encyclopedism, Muhanna argues, flourished between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries CE in the Mamlûk empire spanning Egypt and Syria. The same era also witnessed an unprecedented flourishing of Arabic lexicography. Al-Nuwayrî was attached to the Nasiriyya *medrese* in Cairo, founded in 1303 CE. After retiring from his position in the Mamlûk administration, he devoted his life to the *Ultimate Ambition*, which eventually covered topics ranging from cosmology to human beings, animals, and plants, including the dynastic history of the Islamic world. The historical section is by far the longest of the work.

Al-Nuwayrî's work is less concerned with knowledge (*ilm*) in the strict sense than with erudition or *Bildung* (*adab*)—an ideal of literary and civilizational refinement as much as factual knowledge, and, as such, also a source of social distinction. But, Muhanna argues, the *Ultimate Ambition* often transcends the conventional boundaries of *adab*: clearly, it is meant to entertain as much as instruct. Hence, it also includes tales from popular story collections, biographies of famous singers, and discussions of, for example, the question of which of the Prophet's companions had the best sense of humor.

With his focus on the interaction between encyclopedic knowledge and Mamlûk politics, Muhanna goes beyond earlier studies of the social history of late medieval

4. Jason König and Tim Whitmarsh, "Ordering Knowledge," in *Ordering Knowledge in the Roman Empire*, ed. Jason König and Tim Whitmarsh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–39.

5. See the studies discussed by König and Whitmarsh, *ibid.*, 10.

medrese culture. As al-Nuwayrî's case shows, *adab* was not only a mark of social distinction; it was also seen as the qualification for a job as a scribe in government. Encyclopedists and governmental bureaucrats, Muhanna argues, were engaged in broadly similar tasks of gathering bits of information, collating sources, and synthesizing diverse bits and types of knowledge. Thus, Muhanna's insightful study also gives a glimpse of the close interconnections between medieval Islamic learning and premodern political power.

Alongside *adab*, however, there also was "science" or scientific knowledge (*'ilm*) proper. The classical Islamic world knew an opposition, not so much between faith and reason, but rather between what were called the "Islamic" or "traditional" (*naqliyya*) and the "ancient" or "rational" (*'aqliyya*) sciences. The former covered phenomena specific to Islamic revelation and the Arab language, such as *sarf* and *nahw* (respectively, very roughly, the *morphology* and *syntax* of Arabic), Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsîr*), jurisprudence, the study of the Prophet's sayings (*hadîth*), and speculative theology (*kalâm*); the latter included, among others, philosophy (*falsafa*) medicine (*tibb*), and astronomy. It may be debated whether the rational and the traditional sciences constituted two distinct paradigms, as Kuhn would call them; in any case, the distinction between them was not absolute, witness Ibn Khaldûn's famous attempt to develop a "science of civilization" (*'ilm al-'umrân*) that tried to redefine the traditionally Arab science of historiography in terms of the Aristotelian four causes.

Just like, for example, the Aristotelian classification of theoretical, practical, and poetic sciences, the medieval Islamic ordering did not know any near equivalent of the humanities; but classical Islamic learning may be called predominantly philological insofar as it primarily studied texts or "reports" (*khabar*). It should be noted that neither these forms of learning nor the scholars practicing them were sanctioned by Qur'anic revelation or local rulers; rather, they appear to have been legitimized primarily by the existence of a corporate body of *'ulamâ*, or "learned men," which was largely, though not entirely, autonomous from rulers and from local patronage. This leads to a number of questions, as yet largely unexplored, concerning the complex relation between epistemic and political authority.

* * *

Traditionally, the study of the Islamic sciences and scholarship has focused on the formative centuries and on pioneers up to and including Ibn Sina (Avicenna) in the East and Ibn Rushd (Averroës) in the West. A widespread view of the history of Islamic learning is that, after an exciting period of discovery and innovation, in which, among others, philosophy and the other sciences became available in Arabic and the four orthodox Sunni schools of law (*madhâhib*) were formed, Islamic learning entered

into a period of scholasticism, stagnation, or slumber. The slogan conventionally associated with this alleged stagnation is that “the gate of *ijtihād* [or independent juridical judgment] is closed.”⁶ One institutional factor often adduced in accounting for this development is the rise, from the eleventh century CE on, of the *medrese*, or “college of law” (or, in more optimistic representations, the precursor of the modern university), in which speculative theology and the rational disciplines allegedly were replaced by a focus on jurisprudence. The *medrese* does indeed seem to have led to a further institutionalization of learning and to a professionalization of scholarship.

The eighteenth century, that is, the period immediately preceding the new and transformative military and other contacts with Western Europe, has traditionally received a particularly bad press in this respect. In works by foreign Orientalists and local modernists alike, the Islamic world of this period has consistently been depicted in terms of cultural stagnation, political despotism, and sexual indulgence and effeminacy; it was wakened from this slumber only by a Western Prince Charming, whether in the guise of Napoleon’s 1800 invasion of Egypt, of colonial rule and imperialism, or of the modern rationalism embodied in science and technology.

In recent decades, this image of stagnation has been heavily criticized, and has come to be seen for what, to a large extent at least, it was: a legitimization both of foreign rule and of local modernizing nationalist movements. In *Islam before Europe*, Ahmad Dallal hopes to dispel the image of a stagnant eighteenth century once and for all; but he also takes issue with the other extreme. Against the dominant image, some earlier scholars have made overenthusiastic claims about early modern reform, or even about an “Islamic Enlightenment”; but scholars like Khalid el-Rouayheb have criticized such claims: as he observes, these are generally based on discussions of the traditional rather than the rational sciences.⁷

Dallal now presents a far more detailed discussion of the eighteenth-century traditional sciences, thus nicely complementing el-Rouayheb. Spanning a larger geographical range and based on a larger basis of textual evidence than many earlier studies, Dallal’s study argues that the eighteenth century was one of the most lively and creative periods in the intellectual history of the Islamic world. This intellectual ferment, moreover, reached from the shores of the Atlantic to the banks of the Ganges and affected the learned elites and the illiterate masses alike, Dallal argues. Earlier claims concerning eighteenth-century changes, he argues, were based on rather more restricted,

6. Wael Hallaq, “Was the Gate of *Ijtihād* Closed?,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 16, no. 1 (1984): 3–41.

7. Khalid el-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). This work was reviewed by Michiel Leezenberg in this journal; see *History of Humanities* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 189–92.

and indeed incomplete, approaches. Thus, basing himself on the study of networks of scholars, John Voll has argued, famously, that a new interest in *hadīth* studies emerged during this period—an interest that linked such apparently diverging scholars as Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb, Shāh Wāliullāh, and others; others have even argued that this rise of new *hadīth* scholarship amounts to a paradigm shift in Islamic learning.⁸

Dallal takes issue with such sweeping claims, preferring to study the contents of writings rather than the structures of networks. He discusses authors as widely divergent ideologically and geographically as Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb on the Arab peninsula, Shāh Wāliullāh on the Indian subcontinent, and Uthman dan Fodio in sub-Saharan Africa; but his main hero is undoubtedly the hitherto relatively neglected Yemenī scholar Muhammad ibn ‘Alī al-Shawkānī. Both Shāh Wāliullāh and al-Shawkānī were fierce opponents of the Wahhābī movement; but like the Wahhābīs, they emphasized the importance of *ijtihād* as opposed to *taqlīd*, or slavish imitation, mostly interpreted here as the adherence of a school of law (*madhhab*) or a following of a shaykh, or Sūfī leader. Dallal argues that this rising interest in *ijtihād* in the eighteenth century reflects a new conception of both individual and textual authority (with legal texts acquiring authority only through the agency of *ijtihād*); he also interprets the rise of *hadīth* studies during this period as aiming at restructuring if the standards of intellectual authority, rather than as a sign of imposing moral conformity among the believers, as has long been done. Thus, he argues, al-Shawkānī promoted *ijtihād* or individual reasoning, not only for ‘ulamā but even for “ordinary Muslims,” that is, members of the illiterate masses. He defended this bold move by introducing *barā’a*, or the original human state of innocence or (ritual) purity common to all humans, as a principle of *ijtihād* alongside the Qur’an and Sunna.

Despite his seemingly comprehensive overview, Dallal does not really explain why he focuses on these particular authors rather than others, nor does he discuss in detail how much influence they had in practice. Curiously absent in his account, as in many other discussions of this period, is Mawlānā Khālid Naqshbandī, the founder of the Khālidīyya branch of the Naqshbandī Sūfī order, who not only was a strongly anti-Wahhābī reformer in his own right but also founded a branch of Naqshbandism that acquired enormous societal and political influence during the nineteenth century.

The eighteenth century was also a period of unprecedented political and military upheaval in the Islamic world: the Ottoman empire suffered a number of decisive—and,

8. John O. Voll, “Hadith Scholars and Tariqahs: An Ulama Group in the 18th-Century Haramayn and Their Impact in the Islamic World”, *Journal of Asiatic and African Studies* 15 (1980): 264–73; Albrecht Hofheinz, “The Islamic Eighteenth Century: A View from the Edge,” in *Islam in der Moderne, Moderne im Islam*, ed. Florian Zemmin et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2018): 234–53, esp. 248.

as it turned out, irreversible—military setbacks; on the Iranian plateau, the Safavid empire collapsed in chaos and violence; and the Indian subcontinent witnessed the gradual disintegration of the Mughal empire and the hesitant beginnings of British colonial rule. It is an open question whether any link between these developments and changes in the order of knowledge can be established; but Dallal lays an important part of the groundwork for such an analysis.

The most remarkable recent reappraisal of classical Islamic learning as a whole is undoubtedly Wael Hallaq's *Beyond Orientalism*, a self-proclaimed sequel to, and radicalization of, Said's original work. Hallaq's argumentation is rather more theory driven than Said's: it owes as much to the archaeology and genealogy of the sciences and to analytical-philosophical frameworks like Speech Act Theory as to his own area of specialization, the history of Islamic law. Hallaq argues, with some justification, that the continuing polemics surrounding Said's book only touch surface phenomena and overlook the more important (and broader) underlying structural themes. Said himself, he writes—likewise with considerable justification—fails to back up his critique of Western knowledge of the Orient with an analysis of the knowing subject and the figure, or function, of the author. As a result, he remains stuck in vague talk about the “influence” of particular Orientalist authors, instead of systematically exploring the conditions of possibility and, as Speech Act Theorists call them, “felicity conditions” of Orientalist knowledge at large. How is it possible, he asks, that Orientalism, with its unique connection to philological knowledge and imperialist power, came into existence at all? And why was it only developed in the modern Western world?

This formulation clearly shows that Hallaq's argument leans heavily on Foucault's genealogy of the modern Western *sciences humaines*, which systematically exposes the internal links between knowledge and power. But Hallaq has only a superficial knowledge of the latter's work, even though it is crucial to his own argument: he refers only to a handful of shorter articles rather than to Foucault's book-length studies. Below, we will see the consequences of his failure to grasp the more radical implications of a genealogical approach.

In earlier studies, starting with a 1984 paper contesting the idea that “the gate of *ijtihād* is closed,” Hallaq had conducted pathbreaking research in the history of Islamic jurisprudence. In a more recent work, *The Impossible State*, he claimed that the idea of an “Islamic state” is inherently contradictory, since the classical Islamic notion of government rests on the community of the faithful (*umma*) rather than on a sovereign ruler or state.⁹ The *shari'a*, he argued, protected the moral community against the

9. Wael B. Hallaq, *The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

state: it was less a revealed law than a “law of the people,” which precisely *curtailed* the ruler’s power. Clearly, he sees the classical *sharī’a*, as shaped by the medieval Islamic sciences, also as a viable moral option for today.

In *Restating Orientalism*, he expands these analyses into an argument concerning modernity as a whole, of which modern Orientalist knowledge, and the modern sciences more generally, are but one aspect. He argues, first, that the modern state, based on a concept of sovereignty, is a precondition for modern Orientalist knowledge, and for modernity at large; and, second, that the modern state has been *imposed* on the Islamic world, among others, by the reforming Ottoman empire and by Dutch colonial rule in the Dutch East Indies. In both, he argues, jurisprudence was canonized and appropriated by the state, while marginalizing the *sharī’a* as “backward” in the process. These analyses of modern reforms in jurisprudence are among the most consistently impressive of the book.

More problematic is Hallaq’s wider argument that the political sovereignty of the modern state is internally linked to the “epistemic sovereignty” of the modern sciences. Colonialism, he argues, was driven by a modern structure of thought rather than by technological innovation. This leads him to conclude that the modern state is inherently colonial; that colonialism is inherently genocidal (a sweeping claim that serves as the basis for a long indictment of Israel and Zionism); and that the modern sciences are complicit in this genocide. He then briefly sketches out an alternative: a revised Orientalism, he argues, should treat the traditions it studies as no less rational than the Western liberal one, except that they simply have a different notion of rationality. Such a claim can be defended by arguing that medieval Islamic learning does indeed constitute a paradigm or *epistémè* with its own standards of rationality, which can be neither reduced to nor strictly refuted by those of the modern humanities.

Hallaq’s argument is undoubtedly a suggestive and provocative one. His association of Orientalism with “structural genocide” may strike some readers as overstated; but that need not invalidate the suggestion of a link between knowledge and imperialist power. Here, I will leave aside its political *parti-pris* and focus on its methodological aspects. To begin with, Hallaq turns out to presuppose rather ahistorical conceptions of the state and the *sharī’a* and a remarkably modernist—not to say Salafist—conception of the *sharī’a* as a blueprint for all of human existence, which “regulated the entire range of the human order” (82). In fact, however, the premodern *sharī’a* had little or nothing to say about large parts of what today is considered law, like public law and the discretionary power of rulers, and about even larger parts of social life. Moreover, where it *did* make clear statements, such verdicts were often ignored in practice. Thus, in theory, the *sharī’a* called for severe punishments for adultery or fornication (*zīna*) and for homosexual intercourse between men (*liwât*); but in practice, these punishments were rarely if

ever implemented. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that Salafists started developing the idea of the *shari'a* as a blueprint, clearly in reaction against the then popular Marxism-Leninism, which likewise pretended to yield a “method” (*minhāj*) that covered the totality of human life. Likewise, Hallaq’s attention is too strictly, not to say almost exclusively, focused on the juridical dimensions of the Islamic tradition. Recently, Shahab Ahmed has argued that this juridical view of Islam fails to do justice to its mystical, literary, philosophical, and other manifestations, which over the centuries have been at least as important as *shari'a* jurisprudence.¹⁰

Hallaq’s normative perspective is even more problematic. Building on Western authors like Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, and John Gray, he calls his own position “communitarian”: he sees the premodern Islamic tradition as a worthy moral alternative for modern Western secular liberalism. In criticizing liberalism, he argues, his own appeal to medieval Islamic legal scholars is as legitimate as MacIntyre’s appeal to Aristotle or St. Thomas. This “Islamic communitarianism” was first developed by anthropologist Talal Asad.¹¹ The latter’s well-known genealogical approach to Western concepts of religion, however, leads to a remarkable asymmetry: whereas Asad genealogically approaches Western learning as a mere mask for power, he represents the Islamic “discursive tradition” not only as morally defensible but as essentially rational and free from problematic power relations.

In Hallaq, this asymmetry becomes even more explicit. He writes that the Islamic knowledge system is based on Aristotelian foundations and not on modern state sovereignty; hence, he claims, it is unfit in principle for a genealogical analysis: “the Islamic case study (on a par with the Aristotelian exemplar) . . . can never lend itself to a meaningful analysis of power/knowledge” (84–85). Only the modern Western sciences, he thinks, show an internal link with power—a link that has most extensively been studied in the context of Orientalism, but which he sees as a far more general phenomenon of the modern knowledge order at large.

Here, a misunderstanding emerges that is fatal to Hallaq’s argument. First, Foucault’s genealogical writings do not in fact present a general theory of the relation between knowledge and power; but neither do they restrict themselves to modern forms of power/knowledge. Thus, in his 1970 lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault gives a rather detailed genealogical analysis of the rise of knowledge and truth in ancient Greece, also

10. Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

11. See in particular Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, DC: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986).

discussing Aristotle's conception of knowledge.¹² Second, Hallaq, like Said and many others before him, restricts his attention to the sovereign power of states, whereas Foucault precisely explores the nonsovereign modalities of power (alternatively labeled "discipline," "biopolitics," "pastoral power," "governmentality," etc.) that he sees at work in modern disciplines like psychiatry, medicine, and political economy. *Pace* Hallaq, Foucault thus implies that *all* forms of knowledge, modern or premodern, may be analyzed as manifestations of a historically specific will to power. Medieval Islamic learning, too, may thus be analyzed as internally linked to particular forms of power; but those forms need not have the shape of sovereignty. Earlier authors, like Aziz al-Azmeh, had already made a start with more systematically exploring the links between classical forms of knowledge in the Islamic world and premodern forms of power; and Muhanna's and Dallal's studies further advance this study of the social history of classical Islamic learning.¹³ Although we still have nothing like a complete or comprehensive genealogical account of this learning, there is no good reason to believe that no such account *can* be given, as Hallaq asserts. Ironically, the very opposition he sees between the modern Western and premodern Islamic sciences in this respect may itself betray an Orientalist belief in a deep and unbridgeable epistemological or ontological cleavage between the Western and the Islamic worlds.

In short, a full-fledged genealogical study of medieval Islamic learning does not exist yet. But the mere fact that such an analysis can be given renders deeply problematic any historical or normative appeal to an "Islamic tradition," as appears in both Hallaq and Asad. The debate surrounding Orientalism, and surrounding the links between different forms of knowledge and different modalities of power, is given a powerful new impulse by Hallaq's study; but it is nowhere near concluded.

12. Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

13. See Aziz al-Azmeh, *Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies* (London: Croom Helm, 1986).