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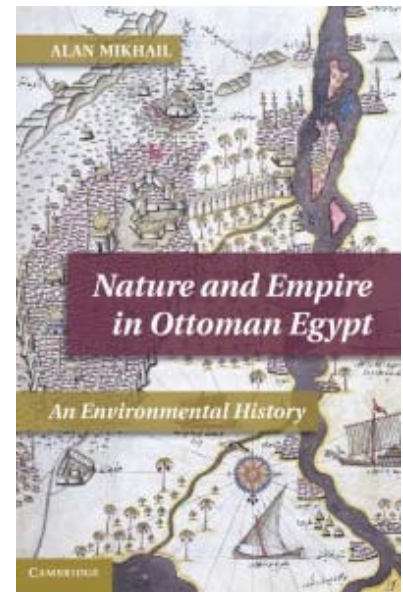
# Imperial Consequences of Things: An interview with Alan Mikhail

By Selim Karlitekin  
February 13, 2015

In this interview, Alan Mikhail discusses his own work on the environmental history of the Ottoman Empire, the wider intervention of environmental history, and the challenge of interdisciplinarity. The interview was initially conducted in person at MESA 2013 and elaborated electronically over the course of 2014.

Alan Mikhail, Professor of History at Yale University, is a historian of the early modern Muslim world, the Ottoman Empire, and Egypt whose research focuses on the nature of early modern imperial rule, peasant histories, environmental resource management, and science and medicine. He is the

author of *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) as well as editor of *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2013). His forthcoming article “A Dog-Eat-Dog Empire: Violence and Affection on the Streets of Ottoman Cairo” will appear in *CSSAAME* Volume 35, number 1 (May 2015) as part of a special issue on nonhumans and empire.



Selim Karlitekin is a doctoral student in the department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University in the City of New York.

Selim Karlitekin (SK): I want to start with your book, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt*. There you talk about a shift from the classical model of an empire that is highly attentive to the local to a modern bureaucratic state. The transition is a well-known one, but the way you tackle it is definitely not. Could you talk about this reconfiguration of the “political rule over peoples and environments?” Why is this important?

Alan Mikhail (AM): Yes, I was certainly interested in narrating, roughly speaking, the transition from an early modern political configuration to one that is something else, a transition, as you say, that has been narrated in many different ways before. What we call that something else – capitalism, modernity or enlightenment – is as vexing a topic in Ottoman and Middle Eastern history as it is in other historiographies. In the Middle East and elsewhere, it is pretty striking that this transition is almost always placed in the period between 1750 and 1850. So, yes, like many others, I was interested in this supposedly transitional moment, but I was not completely satisfied with the explanations on offer. They were largely political ones in the most basic sense: stories of European colonialism and/or various reform efforts in the empire, whether the Tanzimat or Mehmet ‘Ali’s projects of state in Egypt, the place that concerned me most because it was the most lucrative as well as one of most important provinces of the empire. There were also longer stories of endogenous change about more structural processes that were taking place in Egypt in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but these as well still revolved around the same set of issues — capitalism, modernity, literacy, class relations, modernization, and the rise of the nation state. As a student of Middle Eastern and Ottoman history, I of course was (and still am) interested in these kinds of questions. I wanted with my work to speak to the literature on these questions—questions again that the historiography of nearly all regions of the globe deal with in one way or another in the very same period. I wanted though to tackle this period of transition in a different way. So that’s a piece of it.

A major breakthrough for me came, not surprisingly, from the sources themselves. It was clear to me from reading the archival and published sources that the control and harnessing of natural resources was an important aspect of *political* rule in the Ottoman Empire. That was true in Anatolia, in parts of the Balkans, and in the Arab World. When I read courts records from Egypt, one of the main sources for Ottoman historians, I found endless amounts about water and water supply, grain, rural labor relations, and domestic animals, topics I became more and more interested in later on. These topics — things agrarian, environmental, ecological — were clearly economic and political. At first I found it curious that the sources we as a field have

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been using for decades spent so much time on topics that didn't seem to have a major place in the historiography I had grown up on. A disconnect. Something all over our sources, something clearly important to the time and place I was studying, seemed to be missing from the story. Ultimately I wanted to bring those two things together—older stories about political and economic transformation and the ecological perspective that I found right there in the archives.

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I was helped in doing this by reading about how these transitions from early modernity to that something else mapped onto other sorts of transitions. One of the most interesting for me was an energy transformation. That is, the history of how, when, and why societies largely built around a solar energy regime transitioned to fossil fuels. Strikingly again, we are telling histories of the period between 1750 and 1850. The historian Jack A. Goldstone in an article from 1998 suggested that instead of referring to “early modernity” we should think of the period from 1500 to 1800 as being characterized by the presence of “advanced organic societies” around the globe. One of the most salient features of the period, he and others argue, was that energy supplies, transport, food, and so on were based on an organic solar energy regime. This regime changed around the turn of nineteenth century in different places for different reasons. ‘King Coal’ took control. This very different sort of transition had been dealt with by environmental historians, yet the story had very little impact in Middle Eastern history. This is all the more striking given the enormous importance of oil in the twentieth-century history of the Middle East. So all of this was swimming in my head in the mid-2000s and influenced the way I thought about Egypt at the turn of the nineteenth century.

This environmental and economic history literature about energy and other things helped me to plot a trajectory through the sources I was reading. One of the most striking things one notices in reading through the records of public works in Ottoman Egypt is how their scale changed dramatically and, as it turned out for thousands, traumatically at the turn of the nineteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, we have enormous public works projects unimaginable only decades before. So again a very different set of environmental and political circumstances than what maintained in the eighteenth century. In my book *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt*, I focus on the construction of one of these grand public works projects—the Mahmudiyya Canal in the late 1810s. Part of that project was about increasing the independent sovereignty of Egypt against the Ottoman Empire. It was also about expanding the possibilities for trade in Alexandria by providing the city with copious and reliable supplies of water. The project also took aim at fighting the salinity of the western Nile Delta, at building seawalls to protect the canal, and at manipulating its current and siltation properties. I don't think you can separate out which of these efforts and processes were strictly political and which were strictly environmental. It's not clear where the border is — if there's one at all. The political and the environmental were and are the same.

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For all these varied thinkers, the point is clear. Trying to separate environmental processes and political projects assumes a false dichotomy.

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The story of the intertwined relationships between politics and the environment—in Egypt and elsewhere—is not a new one of course. Herodotus saw it. Wittfogel did too. Nasser understood it as well. Environmental historians, science studies people, geographers, and others have all been interested in these things for a very long time indeed. For all these varied thinkers, the point is clear. Trying to separate environmental processes and political projects assumes a false dichotomy.

So perhaps to answer your question more directly, I wanted to bring some of these insights and ideas into Ottoman history. That's the effort of the book.

SK: The Ottoman state and its intellectuals think of nature in the nineteenth century, roughly, as an obstacle in the way of progress, **terakki**. Marx in the *Gründrisse* talks about the transformation of limits into barriers as a central motive in the history of capitalism. What you term “an Ottoman imperial system of resource allocation,” more or less a state of equilibrium at the turn of nineteenth century,

becomes a barrier to the development of Egypt. Historians often repeat this gesture—they think in terms of barriers and backwardness. How do you think your book contributes to the historiography of capitalism in Middle East?

AM: There's a lot in your question. On the issue of barriers, there is indeed quite a strong strain of this sort of work in Middle East Studies. Some of it is in the modernization vein: "if only we had that technology, that dam, that industry." There is a belief in the power of technology and expertise to overcome natural limits—the limits of donkey and camel transport or the unreliable ups and downs of a river system. Part of the project of *Nature and Empire* and other work is to critique this idea that if we just have the right technology we can overcome any barrier. This obviously taps into a very old tension in the history of political thought—are there limits to resources that require management, allocation, and sharing, or are they limitless? Is there a fixed amount of wealth in the world, or is it potentially ever-expanding? Is infinite growth possible? Of course for most capitalists you can always have more and more. I don't think this is right. The technological version of this is that the right kind of technology will always get us out of our jams: "No need to curb carbon emissions; we'll find a way to geo-engineer our way out of the climate crisis," for example. This way of thinking is almost always wrong. First, there are the unintended consequences. All technologies thought to be panaceas produce their own problems—the Aswan dam is a textbook case in this regard. Second, these technologies almost always reproduce existing social tensions or disparities. Thus, they only reinforce the problems they were—at least, ostensibly—meant to solve.

Technology can also produce certain path dependencies that only become clear later. In other words, there are certain ways in which the very choices made about technology come to limit society. An example is the highway system in the United States. The thousands of miles of asphalt, the labor that went into clearing and leveling the ground, the enormous amount of material the infrastructure consumed, and so on. It's really hard to imagine changing this system in any sort of real way. Infrastructure only allows for certain possibilities of movement, action, politics, and thought. This is what the Chinese environmental historian Mark Elvin calls "technological lock-in"—societies set their infrastructure (in all the possible meanings of that word) in concrete and thereby shape their political futures. This is of course a way of getting us back to the artificiality of the nature-culture divide that Latour and many others question and that was raised before in the realm of the connections between politics and ecology. There is no nature box and no politics box. Public works and environmental infrastructure have a role in creating political and economic outcomes and vice versa. This is not environmental determinism. It's simply the recognition of the role of environmental factors—like economic, social, and cultural factors—in the shaping of history. The goal is to try to figure out the specifics of that relationship between environment and society—ecology and capital—in different times and places. There are many superlatively good examples of this work—Timothy Mitchell's on fossil fuels or Richard White's on railroads, for instance.

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SK: As an environmental historian, I wonder if you could talk about how interdisciplinarity works for you. In Middle East Studies, there seems to be a certain resistance to such things as the field is heavily charged with politics. Studies of Ottoman infrastructure, for example, such as they exist, are often about testing whether or not these structures signify modernity. This work doesn't really think deeply about the objects themselves.

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This is easier said than done in a meaningful way. But if we want to work on certain topics, in other words, if we take certain topics on their

We all of course talk about interdisciplinarity a lot – less than we used to I think – but to actually do it is a little more difficult. It means talking to people who are not, in my case, historians and certainly not Middle East historians. This is easier said than done in a meaningful way. But if we want to work on certain topics, in other words, if we take certain topics on their own terms and follow them where they lead us, we have to go beyond standard ways of looking at the politics, economics, and social formations of the Middle East. For me, I was interested in rural histories and thinking about how those histories connect to larger issues in Ottoman imperial history. What do rural peoples do? Well, they have complicated and variegated lives, interiority, subjectivity, and so on, just like everyone else. That is obvious. Much of their day-to-

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day labor consists of growing food, tending fields, dealing with their animals, trading, and ensuring the health of their community. How does this sort of daily drudgery of rural life connect to the Ottoman Empire? Taxation is one of the ways clearly. And we have lots of excellent studies of that in Ottoman historiography. For me, I came to see that a focus on irrigation was another way to link together countryside and imperium. And it was really this turn to irrigation that pushed me to read work far outside of Middle Eastern history. Reading this work of course set me off in all sorts of other directions as well. The point is that if I wanted to understand irrigation and water systems I had to try to learn about these things in depth. Middle East Studies was not going to help me in this regard. That's fine, and reading beyond the field would be a regular and unsurprising thing to do. Still, I think we often miss opportunities to connect the wonderful work of our field to other disciplines and historiographies.

For example, one of the things that has always struck me is that we have a lot of really great economic histories of the Middle East, but this work often — not always, but more often than not — is not engaged with economics in any kind of real way. Again, there are important exceptions. And no doubt it takes time to learn some math, macro-, and microeconomics, never mind the effort of trying to figure out ways to connect some of this work to our field. I just co-taught the article by William Sewell on Marc Bloch and comparative history. In it he talks about testable hypotheses and makes the point that historians often do not put forth rigorous ways of doing comparative history. We adopt language in which a comparative element is present, but nothing that could be taken as a testable hypothesis. In other words, why this outcome from a set of conditions and not another? We come up with a story and go with it, without considering possible alternative histories and why our explanation is better than the rest. One can take this sort of thing very far. Of course, we use comparative language all the time and can't treat every statement as a testable hypothesis. Still in Ottoman history and in Middle East Studies more generally, we often say things like — and I'm certainly guilty of it — this merchant's holdings were more than another's. Okay, but how much more? Why is this significant? Is it different from the majority of merchants or what? Did this change over time? What's the context for this statement and is it actually significant to the story we're telling? These sorts of things are difficult to do, but we need to deal with these questions seriously to understand what it means to say things like “more” or “significant.” I'm getting a little far afield here. The point is that we obviously have to be rigorous in our work. Rigorous empiricism — this we're good at. But also rigorous with our comparisons and in reading other fields to see if or how they are relevant for us—we're less good at this. It's hard! The example of economics and testable hypotheses is simply one of the ways of possibly doing this kind of comparative interdisciplinary work, which was your question.

Let me bring this down to earth a bit. I just wrote a book called *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt*. It's about the history of human-animal relations in Egypt between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries and how this helps us to understand some of the enormous changes that occurred in the empire over that period. Why animals? Well, first, they were all over my sources. Everywhere! Second, I had read Richard Bulliet's work on animals and saw that there was much of importance one could say about and from the Middle East through this kind of work. So I had examples and lots of empirical meat. This was at first simply an observation. But there was so much empirical material that eventually I understood that this must be of real significance to the world I was interested in — back to the issue we raised earlier about starting from the sources. In any case, I began reading everything I could about animals. Animal studies as a field is a vibrant one. Like any field, it has its specific shape and history, limits, and possibilities. So my initial questions came from Middle East Studies and my sources. Reading work in the field of animal studies made me see another set of questions, made me realize how Middle East Studies was different from most of the work in animal studies, and how we could make an intervention in this and a few other related fields. Specifically, the economic component was missing from much of the literature on the history of animals and human-animal relations. In Ottoman history, we're lucky to have a very deep empirical source base. In my case, I was lucky enough to find registers detailing animal populations village by village in Egypt, price data, work accounts, and

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so forth. So this was one way the Middle East story was different. It allowed for an economic history of animals in human societies, something, again, a lot of the animal studies literature does not deal with. So for me, given my specific interests and expertise, this was a way both to contribute empirically to our knowledge of the Ottoman Empire and to try to make an intervention both in Middle East Studies and fields beyond.

Let me put it another way, if I ask my colleagues in other fields if they can name one book in Middle East Studies, it's almost always the same title: *Orientalism*. For good reason, of course. But we have to say this was not written by someone in Middle East Studies. So one of our most important books in the field—perhaps *the* most important—was not written by someone in the field. This is not it of course. Some know Timothy Mitchell's work (perhaps it's a Columbia thing!) and there are others, but the point stands. We are a big field and this is the situation. One of the ways we can make the field speak to larger historiographical debates is by engaging literatures like environmental history, economic history, or empire. Not simply to borrow, but to be critical. By reading other fields we can see the ways in which we can read our own material anew and read theirs anew as well through the lens of our sources and the questions of Middle East Studies. I am of course not the only person saying this. The anthropologists are a great example of reaching beyond Middle East Studies. Perhaps this has something to do with the fact that the Middle East has been central to the shaping of the discipline of anthropology in unique ways very different from the place of the Middle East in history or other disciplines. In the end, the payoff for seriously trying to enter other fields is large. It takes some work, of course, and there are bound to be obstacles along the way, but it's all worth it.

SK: One thing that comes to my mind is the insularity of Middle East Studies. There is a certain resistance to theory in our field, thick description in favor of analysis.

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Very practically, I think part of the answer lies in the fact that we never had the kind of collectivity that existed with Subaltern Studies — a group of scholars working together around a set of issues and meeting regularly to discuss them in focused ways.

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AM: I don't know if I would say there is *resistance* to theory in the field. We've had various waves of work that engaged different theoretical moments. There was the gender and sexuality literature of the eighties and nineties. A lot of that was engaged with questions outside of Middle East Studies and was very theoretical in its own ways. Postcolonial Studies has, for the most part, missed us (or we've missed it!). It's always striking to me that Subaltern Studies came out of peasant studies and labor and working class history in South Asia. We have a strong tradition of labor and working class history in the Middle East, along with lots of excellent studies of peasant histories. Yet, we haven't had anything akin to Subaltern Studies—an explosion that rocked scholarship in multiple fields. Why is that? It's worth thinking about some more. Very practically, I think part of the answer lies in the fact that we never had the kind of collectivity that existed with Subaltern Studies — a group of scholars working together around a set of issues and meeting regularly to discuss them in focused ways. They also had the journal. We never had anything like that. Maybe *MERIP* or Talal Asad's and Roger Owen's *Review of Middle East Studies* from the seventies come closest to that sort of thing, but these are obviously very different.

It would be interesting to do a comparative study of area studies fields. Some people are doing this. For us in Middle East Studies, it does seem to me that the straightjacket of "area studies" is tighter than in South Asian Studies. Few people begin in Middle East Studies and then migrate out. Again, many exceptions—Asad, Mitchell, Saba Mahmood, come to mind but there are many others too. We have some introspection to do as a field. It's useful. Obviously, my generation of scholars couldn't be doing what we are doing without the work of scholars in previous generations of Middle East Studies — we're standing on the shoulders of giants. I think a big difference though is that many of us are also committed to having an effect on our respective disciplines. And, again, this is largely the outgrowth of previous scholars banging on the door of the disciplines to let Middle East Studies in. It also has to do in part with the denouement of area studies. In any case, we're in the disciplines like never before. Now we need to prove we belong. So I think some of the work on gender and sexuality, environmental history, secularism, and so on is part of this effort. The questions are formed around conceptual issues. Being trained in a discipline is important and helps us to place the Middle East on the larger agendas of various fields. The Middle East has a very important story to tell about, for example, the environment. Whether it is the kind of work Sam White does in his book *The Climate of Rebellion* or Bulliet's work on animals. Empire is another way this can be done. There are many ways.

SK: Exactly. One of the problems I see with some of the literature in Middle East Studies is the reduction of Marxist methodology to a checklist, formulas, stages, modes of production. As Rosa Luxemburg showed, capitalism cannot do without its predecessors. I think your book is a brilliant exploration of the formal subsumption of capital, the ways in which older and newer forms become coarticulated. In the book, the word capitalism only appears in two quotes, and you do not mention Marx. I don't think this is at all a deficit, but I do wonder about your take on Marxism and Marxist history. There is of course a huge tradition of Marxism in Middle Eastern history.

AM: Only two times? And no Marx?! I didn't know that. To your question—to be reductionist, I would say that I basically agree with Marx. His thought was part of the basic way I was trained as a historian. Marx was in the water for me in graduate school at Berkeley. Some of my teachers entered the field at the height of the at least sometimes Marxist debates around social and cultural history. Marxian ideas of history were so imbedded in my intellectual formation as to be almost unnamed. History from below, peasant histories, labor, structure/agency: it was all there. I think my work is clearly inflected with a Marxist sensibility, if even unstated, as you point out. This comes through in my treatment of animals as capital, my focus on the abstraction of certain forms of labor, and on my treatment of the state. I don't consider myself a card carrying Marxist but the ideas are clearly influential in my work, so much so that they're perhaps sometimes invisible. I don't think I've read Marx since graduate school. I guess that's clear from my bibliography in *Nature and Empire*, though I do have an epigraph from Marx in my animal book. It goes without saying that Middle East Studies—and indeed the discipline of history as a whole—has been influenced much for the better I think by its engagement with Marxist ideas.

SK: Well, as we were talking about before, I think one of the major differences between Middle East Studies and Subaltern Studies is the latter's critical engagement with Marxism. Their work transformed theory.

AM: Yes, exactly. Why the difference? An important difference is that the Subaltern Studies collective was responding individually and as a group to the inadequacy of scholarship in explaining their experiences. They were reacting to specific ways in which the history of South Asia was being written from a colonial perspective. Many of these scholars were grounded in the Indian educational system and often in the political movements of their universities. They, like all of us, had a tactile feeling for their history and didn't see this reflected in the Cambridge School brand of colonial history. So they started working on topics that spoke to them and that were missing—peasant histories, untouchability, gender, workers, violence. That is how the work began. The theoretical work came a bit later. It developed out of a concern about how their history was being written. Also, I think their critiques of empire hit at a moment when the Soviet Union was collapsing. There was a sense that the world of nations built up out of the old empires was up for grabs and their work, self-consciously and not, tapped into that interest.

The tradition of labor or Marxist history in Middle East Studies has a very different lineage. There were some scholars in Turkey and some in Egypt who were writing political work and history, all the while engaged in the exigent political struggles of their day. These Turkish and Egyptian scholars were largely writing in Turkish and Arabic though, and so couldn't reach the audience those writing in English could and indeed eventually did. They also didn't have something as formidable as the Cambridge School to fight against. In any case, perhaps we're again in a moment where this kind of intertwined scholarly and political engagement is reemerging, though it's not clear to me this has very much to do with Marxism as such.

SK: One of the problems facing scholars of the Ottoman Empire has been the availability of sources.

AM: Well, yes and no. Ottoman historians enjoy a surfeit of sources compared to lots of other historiographies, South Asia included. But, yes, sources can sometimes still be an issue, especially for those working on the twentieth century. Accessing archival sources about the twentieth-century Middle East is an enormous problem. This is all about politics of course. Whether it's the history of Armenians in the early Turkish Republic or any of the Arab wars of the twentieth century, we don't have the sources. In Egypt, for example, there are essentially no archival materials after 1940. So if we agree that we have to theorize from our sources, this presents a major problem. Again, the

situation with the early modern period and the nineteenth century is very different. And twentieth-century archival sources are not completely absent of course (interestingly the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf seem to be untapped frontiers here), but the difficulties are legion.

SK: *Nature and Empire* was amazingly good at showing how the Ottoman Empire became enmeshed in the flow of Nile, the minutiae of the Egyptian countryside, in the everyday relationships of peasant cultivators to their immediate local environments. Would you speak a little to the problem of state-centrism in Ottoman history? There seems to be a sort of naive acceptance of archival sources as being only emanations of the state, as unmediated facts of imperial power. So could we talk about how ecological approaches can reorient the question of the state?

AM: Yes, there is often a kind of state-centrism in our field. Partly, that has to do with the fact that until recently, well maybe still, we had very strong states in the Middle East—whether the Ottoman Empire or Mubarak’s Egypt. That obviously affected and will continue to affect scholarship on the region. But it’s not so simple of course, and I am obviously not saying that one can speak about the whole of the Ottoman Empire from the thirteenth century to the twentieth and Egypt in the ‘80s and ‘90s as somehow equivalent. For me one of the most interesting and pressing questions—one we need to continually ask—is what was the Ottoman Empire. What was it in a given place at a given time? It changed over time and from place to place. The empire in Egypt in 1587 was neither the empire in Sofia in 1587 nor the empire in Egypt in 1588. In my work, I often argue that Egypt was the most important region of the empire. This was for a variety of reasons. It was the most lucrative province of the empire, had the second largest city, maintained important administrative and intellectual connections to Istanbul, and was the hinge of the empire in North Africa, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Indian Ocean. But even in a place such as Egypt, like in all imperial provinces, there were places untouched by the empire. What do I mean by “untouched?” When you read certain chronicles produced in Egypt during the period of Ottoman rule (I’m thinking here of Shirbini’s famous *Hazz al-Quhuf*, for example), there is very little—sometimes no—mention of the empire. No imperial officials, no annual tribute, no Istanbul, no sultan. Where is the empire? How can we call this place “Ottoman?” What about it, if anything, was “Ottoman?” We might turn to the court records of a town or region, and there we might find plenty pointing to the presence of the empire. But still, what was going on with these places that seemed to go in and out of the empire, or that were sometimes Ottoman and sometimes not? Were they Ottoman? And what might that mean in such cases? There is a great article by Alexander J. Motyl entitled “Is Everything Empire? Is Empire Everything?” I don’t think everything is empire. The state—back to your question about state-centrism—is not always there. The Ottoman state and most early modern states were sometimes there and sometimes not. Part of our job is to figure out these relationships for different places and peoples in different times. How did certain groups and places negotiate their relationship to the state? How did particular practices bring people in to or out of the state? Where, how, why, and when did particular imperial entanglements happen? Figuring out answers to these sorts of questions has obviously been generative of massive amounts of historiography in Ottoman Studies and other fields.

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There was of course an older historiography in the Arab World (and in other former Ottoman territories) that presented the early modern history of the region as if the Ottoman Empire never existed. Books and books adopted only that one view from the sources—a society with seemingly no traces of empire. Some of these historians were nationalists but, importantly, not all of them. At the same time, there is also a strand of Turkish nationalist historiography in which the Ottoman Empire seemingly never included the Arab world. Magically, the Ottoman Empire just happened to coincide with the borders of the Turkish Republic. On the other end of the spectrum, we have an approach to Ottoman history in which the empire seems to be responsible for anything and everything that happened within its borders. Well, those chronicles we mentioned—Shirbini and others—don’t seem to bear this out. The point is that the Ottoman Empire didn’t fit either of these characterizations. As with most things, the truth lies somewhere in between and was constantly a moving target.



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This brings us then to the utility of the ecological approach. In the introduction to my animal book I say explicitly that we should think of the Ottoman Empire (and other empires) as ecosystems. What do I mean? An ecosystems-approach to empire foregrounds the connectivities of empire. The idea is that even the smallest of changes in one part of the system can have consequences very far away or for the system as a whole—consequences even for places and peoples outside of the system. Ecosystems, like empires, are about figuring out the sets of relationships that allow the system to function. This approach is not meant to be a totalizing theory but rather to shift our attention to mutual constitution and maintenance rather than simple flows of power.. In other words, in thinking about imperial relationships we may trace those that connect to the state, but we might also find whole sets of relationships that operate outside of any connection to the capital or imperial officials or the court. Moving in and out of the state, if you will, helps to illuminate its capacities and limits and opens up whole other worlds Studying irrigation was for me one of the ways to do this kind of work. Irrigation is grounded in a specific place, embedded in that space—a space of infinite difference from all others spaces. No two environments are the same. You can never step in the same river twice. However you want to say it, the particulars matter. This is another insight we can borrow from ecology.

Still, what happened with each particular irrigation canal or ditch or embankment had imperial consequences. If for any reason irrigation in Egypt did not maintain, fields would become barren, agricultural production would ebb, commercial and imperial shipping networks would suffer, people could starve. A very small rural place in Egypt could have important consequences for people and places in North Africa, Anatolia, and beyond. I was interested in how these “minor” rural locales had wide imperial consequences. I was interested in how they functioned within and as part of the Ottoman state’s bureaucratic ecosystem. I was interested in what they revealed the early modern imperial state to be. In this way then, I tried to bob and weave between, borrow and benefit, but not be held back by the two historiographical traditions I outlined above: the Ottoman Empire did not exist in the Arab World and it was responsible for everything. I also wanted to present an empirical description of how things operated on the ground in real ways—an understanding of the ecology of irrigation in Egypt. Mine was a very small contribution, and I’m of course not the only person doing this sort of thing. We are collectively trying to figure out these connections of empire, trying to wrap our heads around the dizzy of the history of the Ottoman Empire. And, again, always in my mind is the question, what is empire? What was the Ottoman Empire in that particular place at that particular time? What was it for peasants tilling their fields in the south of Egypt? Often the empire was a way for them to fix their embankments. That’s what it was. Empire provided the resources to fix irrigation infrastructure and was sometimes a venue to make claims that made these repairs happen. That’s it. That’s what the Ottoman Empire looked like to these imperials subjects. This relationality will obviously look and be different in different parts of the empire. The exciting thing now in Ottoman Studies is that we have a set of studies to think about these things in many different ways. It’s a good moment.

SK: Let’s talk about another essential absence in Ottoman historiography and history writing more generally—animals. Where are they? They are everywhere in the archive as you’ve mentioned, often more present than humans, but they don’t appear very often in the stories we tell of the past. We do seem to be witnessing an ‘animal turn’ in the humanities at the moment. But there are lots of skeptics, both critical and traditional historians, who do not seem to want to share historical agency with nonhumans. So, what is at stake here? Why this resistance to the animal?

AM: It is empirically true that animals are everywhere. We have to take this seriously. This seems basic. Also, we are ourselves animals so in many ways the animal is a more capacious category for doing history than the human. Moreover, animal history is in many ways quite a natural progression in the history of doing history from below. For this tradition (as for Subaltern Studies), women, minorities, workers, the poor and peasants – any group that is which has been cut out of historical scholarship – became the central focus in understanding societies, cultural constructions, and political formations. We are now turning to the historical importance of the animals we’ve always

lived with. The added punch here—the “left-handed blow” as Erica Fudge, borrowing from Benjamin, terms the animal move—is the crossing of the nonhuman divide. Is this really qualitatively different from crossing a class, gender, linguistic, or temporal divide? Might I not have greater access to the worldview of the dog, hypothetically speaking, I’ve shared my house with for fifteen years than I do to a human living in a place I’ve never visited, speaking a language I barely know? Historians are wedded, consciously or not, to viewing humans as the only actors in history. That’s fine. We can write and have written and will continue to write histories about just humans.

But there are other agents in history too. Plenty of work in environmental history, animal studies, geography, and other fields points to the agency of nonhumans—be it a river, an earthquake, or an animal—to affect the world in which we live and in which our historical subjects lived. So what is historical agency? Must it involve intentionality? Does an earthquake have intentionality? Probably not. Did Columbus mean to kill 90% of the population of the Americas? Probably not. If historical agency involves both intentionality and having historical effects, then check both boxes for animals. Animals feel, think, remember. The scientific literature—most of it is about dogs, elephants, and chimps—is clear about this. Dogs experience emotion, create social bonds, and act based on premeditation. What is it that makes a human distinctive then? Is it language? No. Dolphins, dogs, elephants all communicate. The animal question, even if we don’t have definitive answers, challenges us in various ways, pushes us in many fruitful directions. These are not new questions. The Greeks, Enlightenment philosophes, and most serious thinkers in between contemplated the differences between humans and other animals. What was the nature of the human? What made him and her distinctive?

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One can work on animals in many different ways. You can study the economic history of animal labor in very empirical ways. How many foot-pounds of torque does an Egyptian water buffalo put out? As I mentioned, there is plenty of theoretical work on the constitution and definition of the human-animal divide. Derrida did a lot in this direction. There is work on animal emotions, animals and cities, animals in literature, in art, and on and on. Affective bonds, companionate relations, pet keeping—huge. For many humans in the world today – or in Europe and America, at least- their most intimate relationships are with nonhumans. Ten minutes walking around New York or London makes this very clear. Lots of people treat their dogs like children. It’s serious business. And I think we as scholars should pay attention to just how serious this is.

One last dog example. There are several breeds of domestic dog that cannot exist without humans. Eighty percent of bulldogs are born through caesarean-section because humans have engineered their heads to be so big they don’t fit through their mothers’ pelvises. It’s an amazing thing. We humans literally made these dogs possible. They can only be brought into the world through the mediation of humans. We do not need dogs in any vital political or economic bare life sense. So who then is the domestic animal here? The bulldogs or the humans? One could argue they have domesticated us, through their cuteness and affection, to birth them, feed them, and shelter them. They’re getting the deal!

SK: Your own work on animals in *The Animal in Ottoman Egypt* is not only about dogs, is it?

AM: No, not at all. Dogs are just one of three classes of animals I focus on in the book—domesticated laboring animals and charismatic megafauna are the other two. I was initially pulled in by the domestic animals—oxen, donkeys, cows, camels. They were the most common nonhuman animals in rural Egypt. The very reason I came to write the book was that I saw lots of these animals in the court records I was reading for my first book. They were there as rural capital—the ownership of animals was the most important source of peasant wealth in early modern Ottoman Egypt. Animals did productive labor, moved goods, and provided food and heat. I clued into these animals and started collecting as many documents and other kinds of sources as I could find.

There is a lot on dogs. Ottoman authorities supported dog populations in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Cairo and other cities. They put out food for them, provided them with water, and punished people who harmed them. Why? Dogs consumed garbage and hence were important for keeping cities clean. They also herded, hunted, and provided security. As I show, however, at the end of eighteenth century, ideas about hygiene, urban planning, and disease changed. Both garbage and dogs became a problem in Cairo. I trace this out to efforts that aimed eventually

to remove dogs from cities. The early nineteenth century witnessed several large-scale dog eradication campaigns in Cairo and Alexandria (and, again, in other Ottoman cities as well). These changing ideas and practices of course transformed the relationships between humans and dogs in the nineteenth century.

The last class of animals in the book are charismatic megafauna, “exotic” animals if you prefer. In this section, I show how older Indian Ocean networks that moved these animals between the Middle East and South Asia were transformed in the nineteenth century by the advent of new animal institutions such as zoos and schools of veterinary medicine. I also discuss the burgeoning global trade that served to funnel these animals to zoos in the nineteenth century.

In terms of what the book is trying to do, like *Nature and Empire*, it aims to understand the transition from the early modern to something else, call it modernity if you like, in the nineteenth century. And along the way, it is of course trying to center the human-animal relationship as a motor of the history of the Ottoman Empire and early modern world more generally.

SK: Interesting.

AM: Thank you. I wanted, if you'll allow me, to return for a moment to thinking about some of the resistance to animal studies and Middle East environmental history that you asked about before. I'd point out at the start that we need to acknowledge that many scholars in the fields of Ottoman history and Middle East Studies have been very receptive to this kind of work. This is of course very nice for those of us working on these topics. Infinitely more importantly, it's indeed very exciting and inspiring to see the sizeable number of graduate students and more established scholars turning to environmental questions. Nevertheless, I still think you're right to identify a degree of reticence, even suspicion, on the part of some when it comes to environmental history. I can point to two completely understandable reasons for this. The first is the afterlife of a racist or colonial ethnographic literature that used environmental factors to “explain” things such as a purported “oriental lethargy” or “eastern sexuality” or the like. Colonial officials saying that the east was backwards because it was hot, that because Islam was a “desert religion” it developed certain familial politics or ideas about the afterlife, that certain kinds of politics only existed in the tropics, or that oriental despotism was a function of irrigation in China, Iraq, and Egypt. These racialized notions were often invoked, along with many other nonsensical ideas, in the service of projects of European political and economic domination. Such nefarious ideas still operate in both overt and unconscious ways so it's important for us to be aware of their power and to defend against them. I think for some then the kneejerk reaction is to reject out of hand ideas that try to connect nature to history, people to ecology. There are crude ways of doing environmental history as there are crude ways of doing most kinds of history. But there are also sensible and productive ways of thinking about the relationships between humans and the rest of nature.

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To bring the peasant back in, or the animal in at all, flies in the face of these modernizing paradigms that have dominated the Middle East and the field of Middle East Studies for quite some time.

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The second reason many are skeptical of environmental history has to do with the way the modernization paradigm became programitized in the Middle East in the twentieth century. One of the effects of seeking out a western bourgeois remodeling of Arab or Turkish or Persian society was to push peasants, never mind animals, out of the way. Lazy peasants (sound familiar?) held us back, the vagaries of the Nile were a problem for development, and so forth. The very word peasant became an insult. Nationalist discourses – not just in the Middle East – usually focused on cities, technology, and factories putting distance between the rural peasant and the nation. To bring the peasant back in, or the animal in at all, flies in the face of these modernizing paradigms that have dominated the Middle East and the field of Middle East Studies for quite some time. The challenge then I and others have tried to take on is to explain the potential benefits of environmental history both for furthering the work of the field and for pushing it in different directions.

SK: Related to this, what impressed me the most about your work was the profound sense of contingency throughout. Often with conceptual histories we are bound by the purview of the concept. It becomes a form of determinism in its own way, a yardstick that prevents the full flux of the past to be captured in all its complexity and messiness. Scholars often ask questions in ways that predetermine

their findings. They don't, in other words, let what they find lead them. But rather than just summarizing imperial decrees, you seem to be more interested in looking at specific forms of infrastructure and particular sites. In thinking about a research project, how does contingency work for you and how did it work for the empire?

AM: I went to the archives with the idea that irrigation would help me think about the connections between the local and the imperial, along the lines we talked about before. I went to the archives hoping to find some stuff about irrigation. That vague topic and a desire to work with both local court records in Egypt and imperial documents in Istanbul—that's what I had when I went to the field. I was lucky enough to find material—lots of material. Stories about breaking dams, peasants taking more water from canals than they were entitled to, work orders, court cases about dredging, and on and on. There was certainly a great deal of contingency in that I could have found nothing. There was also contingency in that a lot of what I did find set me off in new directions. For example, I found all these linkages between water and wood. It's so obvious to me now, and probably should have been obvious to me then, but I had never thought about the importance of wood to irrigation projects. It had to be collected from different parts of the empire—southwestern Anatolia and Syria mostly—and then be moved to forestless Egypt. An enormous affair—one full of contingencies, risks, and problems. I could give other examples too. Anyone who has worked in archives knows all the excitement involved, the surprises, the frustrations, and the joys. Ultimately we can only tell the stories we find. This, I suppose, is the ultimate meaning of doing history. It's a certain way of relating to our materials, to the archive. We have to be open to possibilities, to changing our mind, to wandering around in the sources, to getting lost, and to being wrong. We have to approach the archive with an open mind. That requires humility. It also requires time. The more time in the archives, the better. Some may disagree. I've heard it said that there are often diminishing returns the longer one spends in the archives, but I've never found that to be the case. The archives are always so generative of ideas for me. But, again, time: the older one gets and the more responsibilities one has, the harder it can be to spend the years needed sitting in an uncomfortable chair. But that's what we do.

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