




4-25-2017

M. Alper Yalcinkaya, *Learned Patriots: Debating Science, State, and Society in the Nineteenth–Century Ottoman Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Toby Huff
thuff@fas.harvard.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Huff, Toby (2017) "M. Alper Yalcinkaya, *Learned Patriots: Debating Science, State, and Society in the Nineteenth–Century Ottoman Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 76 : No. 76 , Article 19.
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol76/iss76/19>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu.

M. Alper Yalcinkaya, *Learned Patriots. Debating Science, State, and Society in the Nineteenth –Century Ottoman Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Toby Huff

It has been known for some time that the glory days of science within the Muslim world occurred between the late tenth and the end of the thirteenth century. Other outstanding astronomers, mathematicians, physicians and philosophers have appeared in the centuries since then, but no revolutionary developments occurred like the 11th century revolution in optics pioneered by Ibn al-Haytham (d. 1040/2). A great many resources were devoted to astronomy but aside from some minor technical innovations, no revolution in astronomy occurred. Over time the burst of energy stimulated by the translation from Greek into Arabic of seminal works in science and natural philosophy between 750 and 950 C.E. dissipated. Some observers have suggested that it was the autocratic ways of the Ottoman Turks who became the dominant ethnic group across the Middle East after the conquest of Mamluk Cairo in 1515. While that is probably an exaggeration, it is true that the Ottomans scarcely measured up to the earlier advances in Arabic-Islamic science.

Other scholars have given us glimpses of seventeenth century Ottoman science and the exceedingly cautious assimilation of elements of the European scientific revolution which also illustrated the fact that the Ottomans had little interest in the work of Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and Newton.

Now we have this new work, *Learned Patriots*, which sheds light on the nineteenth century debates taking place mainly in Istanbul. This interesting book is both informative and dispiriting. The author provides a comprehensive discussion of the many nineteenth-century Ottoman discussions of the importance of science to Ottoman society. The problem was that neither Arabic nor Turkish had an exclusive word for “science.” Instead from the outset the parties to the debate had to use some variant of the Arabic word *ilm* that generically means knowledge, and in the Islamic context it meant religious knowledge. As such, *ilm* was taken to be the highest, most profound and ethically correct knowledge available to humankind. Beyond that, Islamic religious scholars contrasted that knowledge to the “foreign” or ancient sciences (meaning the Greek tradition). As Yalcinkaya shows us, all the way to the early twentieth century, defenders of “useful knowledge” or the new “needed knowledge” (meaning the applied and modern sciences) had to offer subsidiary arguments that this “new knowledge” contributed to both the well-being of society and the moral quality of the individual. For the view persisted that the “foreign” sciences were inherently unIslamic.

Unfortunately the author gives us only a hint of the historical context during which the Ottoman education system and especially the medreses (Islamic colleges), took over the model of education established in the eleventh and later centuries by the Arab *ulama*, the religious scholars. As we recall the madrasas (using the Arabic transliteration) were totally devoted to the “religious” or “transmitted sciences,” meaning Quranic exegeses, hadith

studies, Arabic grammar and genealogy, some mathematics, and with the highest esteem given to the study of Islamic law, the shari'a. No natural philosophy or natural sciences were allowed in. Consequently, it was just because the Ottomans thoroughly took over and institutionalized this form of education, based essentially on rote memorization, that no graduates of the medreses were prepared for scientific inquiry as practiced in Europe, and this hundreds of years after the scientific revolution. The medreses failed to produce a cadre of "scientists" (for which there was no Turkish word), and due to external pressure, it was only diplomats, bureaucrats and "science appreciators" who called for the importation of the European-based sciences, technology and new learning.

This is why the book's focus is on the occasional appearance of Ottoman scholars or bureaucrats rather than indigenous scientists who rose to champion the new "knowledge." For it was only those who had visited or been trained in Europe, or perhaps trained in the Ottoman Military Academy or Ottoman School of Medicine, who had sufficient familiarity with the new sciences and saw them as the indispensable new and "needed knowledge" that could rescue the Ottoman state and Empire from its slow drift downward.

The story told by the author is largely about these aspiring bureaucrats and job-seekers who, with their greater or lesser understanding of the modern sciences, jockeyed for state positions, sincerely hoping that their understanding of the "new knowledge" could be introduced to Ottoman society, through the use of new textbooks, or more effectively, by introducing new institutions of higher education, most of which failed. Perhaps the most ambitious of these was the proposal to create a Darülfünun, an Ottoman styled university, but which only materialized in the first years of the twentieth century.

As mentioned, defenders of the new knowledge faced a great deal of opposition from those who suggested that this new knowledge could be dangerous to the youth and harmful to the Empire. The opposition had to be reassured that this new knowledge would not corrupt its possessors, especially the youth. It is clear that the prime motivation for all this self-reflection came almost wholly from the competitive international context within which it was plain to Ottoman observers that a major reason for the West's ascendancy and domination was its great abundance of science, technology and new learning.

The debate ended inconclusively with pro-science and anti-science expostulators presenting convoluted arguments about whether education had to be basically religious (Islamic), whether there was once a Muslim contribution to the new sciences, whether such masters of the new sciences could be real patriots, and so on, all of which barely advanced the discussion. Yalcinkaya needs to dig deeper into the religious and philosophical contexts that so inhibited nineteenth century thinkers from making more profound arguments than they did for the pursuit of modern science. For other scholars have long noted an interesting temporal comparison between Turkey and Japan in the early twentieth century: both hoped to modernize and acquire modern science, yet only the Japanese succeeded, leaving many scholars puzzled about the Turkish case. This could be a useful supplementary book for history of science courses yet it is just the author's greater knowledge of the social sciences

than the history of science, especially Middle Eastern science, that weakens its appeal. A case in point, apparently unknown to the author, is the arrival of the telescope in Ottoman lands in the 1620s. It generated no interest among Ottoman astronomers who might have used it as a new discovery machine and served to reform Arab-Islamic astronomy. In a word, the Ottoman nineteenth century discussion of the role of science in society remains flat-footed, barely cognizant of its previous history.

The young Turks championing the modern sciences lacked what Europeans always had, namely, the idea that there are objective techniques and logical means for getting at the truth, what the Greeks (and Newton) called natural philosophy. Such a position assumes that whatever is found out using such means transcends religious and “denominational” boundaries. The new Turks had to convince the traditional knowers (ilmiyye, Turkish; ulama, Arabic) that there is such a thing as objective knowledge of the natural world (and how it operates), and such knowledge transcends “good and evil,” so that we do not have to question the religious commitments or moral standing of such seekers after truth. These deep philosophical questions elude the writer, who otherwise gives us a valuable starting point.