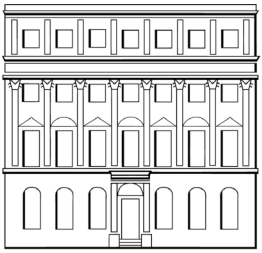

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Review of Jonathan Parry, *Promised Lands: The British and the Ottoman Middle East*

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JONATHAN PARRY, *Promised Lands: The British and the Ottoman Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), xvii + 480 pp. ISBN 978 0 691 18189 9. £40.00

The entanglement of empires and the mentalities of those involved in such exchanges have been the focus of many studies in recent years.[1] Seen through this lens, regions of multicultural engagement, such as the Ottoman Empire, have become major research areas. These studies test and refine concepts like geopolitics, international law, and Orientalism and demonstrate their impact on the local and transnational context.[2]

Jonathan Parry's book *Promised Lands* is another exciting contribution that connects the mentality of British actors in the Middle East with British geopolitical engagement in the Ottoman Empire during the first half of the long nineteenth century. The impact of British mentalities on broader European politics has been described and analysed recently;[3] Parry now offers a history of Britain's oriental politics from Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 to 1854, the first year of the Crimean War.

The author offers a multifaceted description of individual actions in the Ottoman territories and explores the global impact of different perceptions of these areas. The title of the book, *Promised Lands*, is a biblical reference. The plural form emphasizes the diversity of the region, which is often oversimplified as the Middle East (p. 3). But the title carries a second connotation. Most of the actors, despite dire conditions, were motivated by their hope of improving the regions through their personal efforts and by exporting the boons of (Western) civilization (pp. 380–1). They believed they were destined to recreate the Promised Land.

Adopting a history of mentalities approach, Parry outlines the lives, career paths, and cultural endeavours of many actors linked

[1] E.g. Martin Thomas and Richard Toye, *Arguing about Empire: Imperial Rhetoric in Britain and France, 1882–1956* (Oxford, 2017).

[2] E.g. Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850* (Cambridge, MA, 2016).

[3] E.g. Andreas Rose, *Zwischen Empire und Kontinent: Britische Außenpolitik vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Munich, 2011).

to the Ottoman Empire. Most of the twelve chapters of the book are divided into subsections, each of which is narratively structured around one person who was active in a particular region and at a particular time. The author describes their biographical background, political activities, and thinking, embedding their actions in the broader picture of local and transnational politics. The use of publications and personal, business, and diplomatic papers written by actors in very different positions provides an interesting insight into the interconnections between political actions and distinguishes the study from many works that draw only upon diplomatic and military documents.

Parry weaves a mostly coherent story from the records of many different individuals, institutions, and companies within a complex context. He highlights not only political negotiations but also the crucial role of economic relations (for example, pp. 309–17), religious perceptions (for example, pp. 239–48), and the impact of archaeological findings on narratives in London as well as on individual careers (for example, pp. 290–7). Rarely has the entanglement of microhistory and political history been illustrated in such detail. Yet the author's modest claim to present only the history of how Britain saw the Middle East (pp. 12–13) turns out to be an understatement, for he integrates many facets of the local context into his narrative, even if only the British are represented in the primary sources.

Throughout the book, the author presents a mostly chronological story, shifting the geographical focus in each chapter. The first chapter is centred on Egypt during and after Napoleon's invasion. It highlights the internal disputes among British actors, as well as their primary objective of defending India against a possible French assault (pp. 22–45).

The second chapter frequently shifts perspective between various British military and diplomatic personnel and representatives of the Levant and East India trading companies. The chapter continues the story of Egypt in the years following the first British intervention, describing the changing coalitions and explaining the British stance in the Egyptian civil war of 1801–12 (pp. 46–57). Later, the focus shifts towards the Red Sea and the pursuit of alternative routes to India, intertwined with the assertion of trading interests (pp. 57–66).

The third chapter delves into the Eyalet of Baghdad. It meticulously describes the power struggles in this Ottoman province and British and Indian efforts to counterbalance French and Russian influence in the region. The stories of two consuls also show how various local groups like the Arabs or Wahhabis were viewed differently by British men on the ground, who valued them not only as pawns in the British power play, but also in a moral context (pp. 80–110).

Chapter four remains in the same region but advances to the 1830s. Britain's main antagonist in the region changes from France to Russia, and Mehmet Ali's impact on British thinking about the Ottoman Empire is explored. Consul Taylor's story exemplifies how British officials tried to keep different powers at bay and improve regional economic development (pp. 111–43).

In chapter five, Parry returns to Egypt and the British relationship with Mehmet Ali. This chapter explores the relationship between Britain and Egypt through economic connections, the protection of Christians, modernization attempts, and the export of ancient cultural assets from Egypt. The chapter also illustrates Jeremy Bentham's philosophical view on Egypt and Ottoman rule, and his impact on British thinking about the region (pp. 144–61). In the later subchapters, the focus shifts to Syria and how the brutal suppression of the rebellion against Mehmet Ali shattered the British image of him as a benevolent despot (pp. 161–73).

Chapter six discusses British involvement in the Oriental Crisis (1839–40) and the reactions to the Tanzimat reforms, which placed high expectations of modernization on the Sultan. It also explains the reasons for the joint intervention against Mehmet Ali (pp. 174–205).

Chapter seven narrates the story of the Anglican mission in Syria and Kurdistan, showing how its efforts were restricted by contestations from Catholics and Ottoman officials, given that Protestantism lacked the status of a millet. Parry describes many attempts to establish lasting contacts with the different sects in the region, as well as the failure to maintain such connections (pp. 206–48).

The theme of protection is picked up again in chapter eight, which is set in Lebanon and particularly addresses the British reaction to the persecution of Nestorians by Kurds. It also investigates the power struggle between Consul Rose (later the assistant ambassador) and

Ambassador Canning, intertwining these stories with the establishment of Henry Layard as an important new actor who worked with different local groups for his archaeological excavations (pp. 249–77).

Chapter nine continues this narrative in Constantinople with Canning as the main protagonist. It explores his efforts to counterbalance Russian influence and establish judicial fairness in Ottoman courts while British consular jurisdiction was expanding (pp. 278–90). In the last subsection, Layard becomes the central figure. Despite becoming a British national hero through his achievements in archaeology, he lost the favour of Canning, who felt his sponsorship was underappreciated by Layard and the wider public (pp. 290–7).

The British influence on trade routes taken by Indian steamships, and British and Russian mediations in the conflict between the Ottoman and Persian Empires, are the subject of chapter ten. Here, Parry illustrates the penetration through trade, but also highlights how British trade relied on local networks and how both the Ottoman Empire and Egypt were able to restrain British efforts (pp. 298–333).

Chapter eleven returns to Egypt and demonstrates that cooperation with France became possible once joint economic interests in the region became strong enough. Despite differing political goals, France and Britain supported the new Khedive Abbas I in similar ways in Constantinople, initiating large infrastructural projects such as the construction of a railway from Cairo to Suez (pp. 334–55).

In chapter twelve, the intellectual pilgrimage of the book concludes in Jerusalem on the eve of the Crimean War. The ongoing disputes over the holy places in Jerusalem, Russian protection of Orthodox Christians, and the refugees of the revolutions of 1848 who escaped to the Ottoman Empire are examined as major factors behind the war. The author further explores the outcome of the war, the 1856 Treaty of Paris. According to Parry's analysis, the formal inclusion of the Ottoman Empire in the Concert of Europe did not significantly change international law, but was intended to undermine Russia's symbolic demands. Rather than enhancing respect for Ottoman sovereignty, Westerners interfered more frequently in the empire, which led to increased antagonism with the Muslim population (pp. 356–72).

In the conclusion (pp. 373–404), Parry ties together the many threads he has presented and provides an overview of the impact of

the events described on further developments in the region through to the period of decolonization. In this broader context, nearly all British actors were primarily reacting to 'great European wars' and the actual or perceived 'imperial ambition' of other major powers (p. 403). There was no master plan, but every action triggered long causal chains with a life of their own. Within the time frame of the study, these chains were mostly beneficial for the British. Looking beyond the First World War, however, suggests the opposite. Thus Parry argues that for as long as the British were merely power brokers in the regions, they were able to establish good connections with local groups and outmanoeuvre imperial rivals. Problems arose when they began governing the regions themselves (pp. 399–402).

Overall, Parry's work demonstrates an excellent combination of modern history of mentalities and classical political history, offering significant insights into Ottoman history. The book is primarily based on British sources and acknowledges nearly all significant English-language secondary literature concerning the Ottoman Empire, the British Levant trade, and Franco-British diplomacy and foreign politics. The depth and breadth of Parry's knowledge are impressive. He almost always succeeds in connecting the changing local contexts with the intellectual, political, and economic aspirations of his protagonists within the broader currents of international power politics. He examines the impact of cultural endeavours in archaeology and the powerful imaginings and reimaginings of the biblical and ancient world, which fostered dreams of improvement for the Near East. He also shows how these aspirations often clashed with those in the imperial centres.

Nonetheless, the analytical reasons for the selection of some regions and the exclusion of others remain unclear. Parry's narrative framing of a pilgrimage may partly justify the areas of research. However, some stories, like the excursions to Abyssinia, do not fit within this framework. As Parry acknowledges, given the vast amount of historical sources, a historian, while selecting interesting stories, must also 'try to produce something coherent' (p. 405).

More importantly, however, the study is based exclusively on English-language literature and sources. To use the example of German alone, this limitation means Parry did not consider similar

or complementary studies such as the one by Johannes Berchtold on the British consular justice system.[4] My own study of protection in the Ottoman Empire could also have enriched Parry's conclusion with regard to Layard's additional diplomatic efforts.[5] In terms of sources, Parry thus excludes diplomatic actors from other major powers, like Austria, who were significant brokers in the Ottoman Empire. As Parry himself admits, no Ottoman or Egyptian sources are included; we can assume this has skewed his perspective considerably.

Parry's book is an extensive and detailed study of a vast area and time period, providing in-depth insights into the lives and actions of numerous British, Indian, and Ottoman individuals. Their remarkable stories might have been forgotten if Parry had not chronicled them. However, while reading the book, I often wondered about the motivations behind the actions of these individuals and questioned the overarching thesis of the book. Parry seldom analyses his protagonists' actions, and his conclusion primarily serves as a summary and also a survey of the next hundred years. If Parry's main point is to show that Orientalism is more complex than Edward Said suggested and to reaffirm the principal-agent problem, these insights are not particularly new in this field of study.

In this sense, Jonathan Parry has written a brilliant book that engagingly tells and arranges the stories of nearly forgotten areas and individuals, often employing intriguing metaphors. However, a slightly larger focus on analysis and more daring theses could have elevated this already great contribution to a truly magnificent level.

[4] Johannes Berchtold, *Recht und Gerechtigkeit in der Konsulargerichtsbarkeit: Britische Exterritorialität im Osmanischen Reich 1825–1914* (Munich, 2009).

[5] Wolfgang Egner, *Protektion und Souveränität: Die Entwicklung imperialer Herrschaftsformen und Legitimationsfiguren im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2018).

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