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Is It Time to Abandon 'Islamic Science'? Genres, Languages, Centers and the Problem of Periodization in Light of Recent Scholarship

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A monolithic notion of Islamic science overlooks the shifting influence of intellectual centers, the true breadth of practices and motivations and, the diverse political and political-economic trajectories of Islamic empires. It also fails to capture the dynamics between Western and Islamic geographies. Although a sense of the Islamic world existed long before the nineteenth century, the notion of “Islamic science” is a product of the 19th and 20th centuries. It is inextricably linked to the imbalance of resources—including symbolic resources—, stemming from Western domination of the modern capitalist world system. Islamic science is a category fundamentally born of violence—a reflection of the profound asymmetries and injustices blanketing Islamic countries, rather than a perennial intellectual designation. While much contemporary scholarship on Islamic science serves the struggle to recuperate recognition at the symbolic level, this moral focus risks obscuring the long-standing patterns of domination, which lie not in science itself, but in the global economic shifts from the 17th century onward. Indeed, many of the observations on as well as frustrations with Western science that we find in nineteenth- or twentieth-century Muslim authors have much earlier precedents. Most importantly, while tensions between utilitarian and intellectualist interpretations of knowledge existed long before Western hegemony, Western dominance recalibrated their significance and outcomes. Thus, for many Muslim actors who confronted encroaching Western powers, science played an ambivalent role. For some, it was something to adopt as a pragmatic tool for advancement in areas like arms, public health, and industry. For others, science attached to moral ends rooted in older Aristotelian and Islamic legacies and in different economic conditions. This inherent duality—science as both the perceived fruit of wealth and the perceived locomotive of development—lies at the heart of modern debates surrounding Islamic science. Thus, I contend that the more profound historical divide isn't between Islamic science and Western science, but between utilitarian and intellectual interpretations of science as they were transformed by the pressures of the capitalist world system. I will follow medieval, early modern and modern examples of this rift to suggest that instead of talking about Islamic science, we may be better served by focusing on the shifting ends and means of science.

Short Biography

My first book *Science without Leisure: Practical Naturalism in Istanbul, 1660-1732* (2019) explored the relationship between monetary inflation and natural knowledge in seventeenth-century Istanbul. My primary inspirations have been the materialist historiography of science, the emerging global history of early modern science and Pierre Bourdieu's *Pascalian Meditations*.

Currently, I am writing a short book, titled *The Science that Historians Made*, that deals with questions of scientific work, culturally specific and culturally non-specific features of science and the relationship between the twentieth century and the twenty first century.

I am also part of a research team that investigates notions of the natural and the supernatural in the Ottoman Empire. This is a multi-year project that has generous funding from the ERC.

Currently, I serve as the Faculty Director of the Penn's Middle East Center and am an elected member of History of Science Society's Council.

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