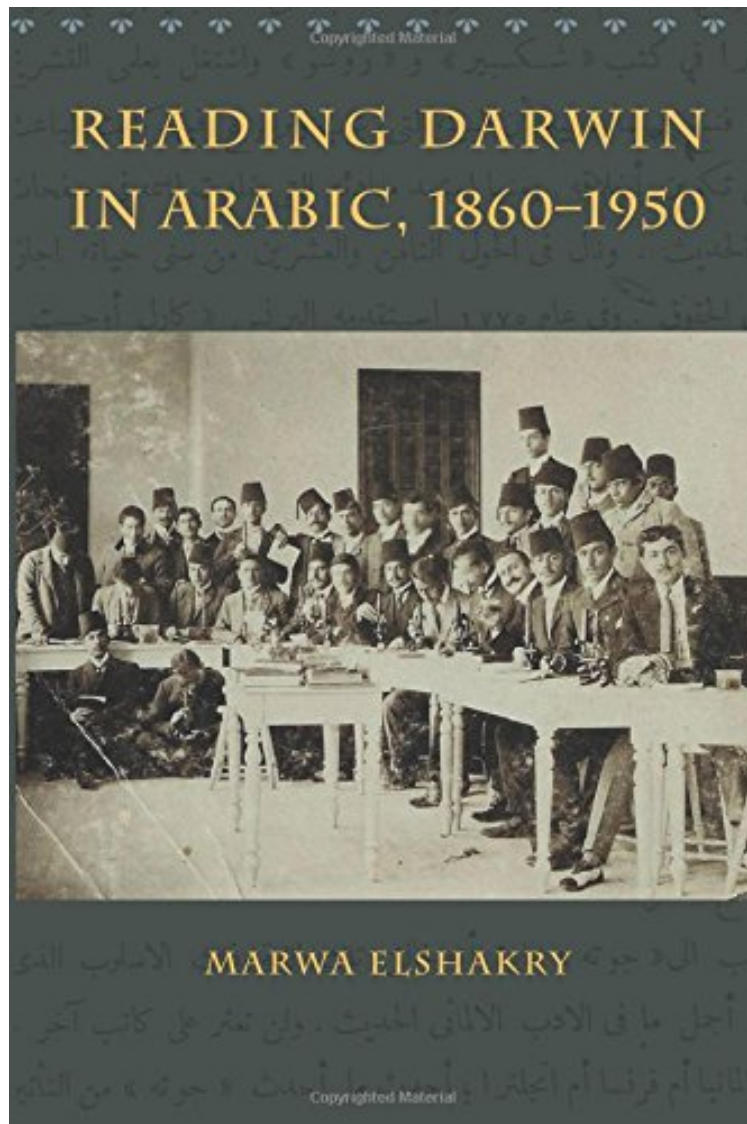


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Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950

Marwa Elshakry

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Marwa Elshakry : Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950 before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860-1950:

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. Sometimes lost in translationBy R. J. FarrerReading Darwin in Arabic by Marwa ElshakryWhen Charles Darwin published his On the Origin of Species in 1859, both lay and scientific readers immediately realised the significance of the publication for biology and theology. Darwin had delayed publication because of concerns about its impact on society and faith.Biologists saw it as a rich and well-

evidenced explanation of the sheer diversity of life forms while theologians and those committed to a literalist Biblical account of creation saw the theory as a huge and worrying threat. In the 150 years since publication western science has accepted Darwins account of evolution as broadly true. European and progressive Christian theologies have accepted the idea of an evolved flora and fauna, contrary to creationist views. Fundamentalist Christians (in the USA and Africa) and Muslims (especially of the Sunni Wahabi tradition) remain strongly opposed to any theory of human evolution which sees humans as merely a recent development of a long evolutionary lineage. Some Jewish orthodox groups also reject Darwin for this reason. Marwa Elshakrys book needs to be read in this context. The context needs to be further narrowed in both place and time. To be specific, and the author is highly specific, we are dealing with the reception of Darwinian ideas as they were modified and transmitted to an Arab-speaking audience in the Levant, and wider middle east, from 1860 to 1950. It is obvious that this book is aimed at a very specialist readership of historians of ideas and of science. A readership which might be interested in the impact of evolutionary thought in Arab scholarship from the end of the Ottoman era to the start of the anti-colonial struggle. Dr Elshakry points out that by 1870 Arab science in Syria and the Levant was beginning to recognise the strengths of northern European science and polity and noting its attendant power and influence. With Ottoman influence clearly waning, the local Arab-speaking elites began to show interest in reviews of western scientific and technical discoveries published in the local language. The most influential journal of the day was *Al Muqtataf*, (The Digest) which started in 1876. This reached a rarefied elite of mostly young men who were literate. About 95% of the population of the Levant was then illiterate. Those who read the early issues were both Muslim and Christian and some were probably agnostic materialists. They studied in the new Colleges and Universities of Beirut and Syria, many of these institutions were funded or influenced by American Christian missions or French Colonialists. Elshakry shows how ideological conflicts, that still exist in the middle east today, had their origin in heated debates amongst an intellectual elite of the 1880s. The same discussions between mystical and materialist thinkers span the last 150 years. The author makes clear that early debates, even within this tiny elite, were distorted and hopelessly confused by the poverty of the various translations into Arabic from English and German originals and the more fundamental problem that there is no Arabic equivalent of the word species, a significant term essential for a grasp of Darwins theory. In fact the first verbatim translation of the whole of *On the Origin of Species* into Arabic was in 1918, by which time the local pro and anti-Darwin debate had already become bitter and stylised. Why would an English idea, on a subject at the very fringe of Arab scientific interest, matter so much to Arabs of the late 19th and early 20th centuries? Elshakry says that the clue is to be found in a desire to modernise Arab thought and thus mimic northern European progress and power. But the debate was never firmly grounded because of two essential problems: 1) the special difficulty of trying to construct an interpretation of Darwins theory which would be congruent with the sacred teachings of the Koran. 2) A completely bowdlerised and distorted understanding of Darwin which went far beyond biology to attempt to embrace both the concept of evolution and the wish for social progress. (Or social Darwinism) As the biological understanding of Darwin faded or became incomprehensible because of poor translation and syntactic disputes, the metaphorical Darwin of Social Progress came to be a powerful force for Arab independence and revolutionary change. Elsewhere, Taner Edis, the writer on Islamic science, (*The Illusion of Harmony*, 2007) has described this futile pattern of argument as a form of Obscurantist cultural apologetics. There is an obvious problem with the thesis set out in *Reading Darwin in Arabic*. Given that the geographical area chosen by Elshakry has undergone cataclysmic change in the period discussed, it is extremely hard to determine what, if any, influence Darwins writings might have had for the populace as a whole. Firstly, the vast majority of Arabs in the Levant at this time would have been illiterate. They certainly would not have been reading Darwin in English or any other language. Nor is it obvious that the tiny elite that had read poorly translated versions of Darwin had much impact on the mass who could not. As Elshakry herself adds, it is unlikely that even the Arab elite shared the English obsession with the heritability of canine behavioural characteristics which so interested Darwin and the gentlemen of his class. Let us consider some of the important historical events in the Levant from 1880 to 1950: The Collapse of the Ottoman economy The land transfers to the colonial powers as sureties for loans The rise of the Zionist project in Palestine The First World War and the emergence of an Arab fighting force under Lawrence The post-war mandate, a type of colonial occupation, under Britain and France The Second World War and the stark awareness of colonial power The emergence of pan-Arab nationalism, socialism and Baathism The rise of Nasser The birth of Israel and the displacement of the Palestinian Arabs. Is it not likely that any one of these events would have had an immediate and dramatic impact on the ideas of the local people, whether literate elite or the landless day-labourer, of far greater significance than the distorted and misunderstood ideas of an obscure but wealthy English amateur biologist?

In *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, Marwa Elshakry questions current ideas about Islam, science, and secularism by exploring the ways in which Darwin was read in Arabic from the late 1860s to the mid-twentieth century. Borrowing from translation and reading studies and weaving together the history of science with intellectual history, she explores Darwins global appeal from the perspective of several generations of Arabic readers and shows how Darwins writings helped alter the social and epistemological landscape of the Arab learned classes.

"Rewarding. . . . Reading Darwin in Arabic is about more than its title suggests. It describes the intellectual ferment in Egypt as the country grappled both with Darwinism and colonial rule, and an Islamic liberalism shone briefly before being all but extinguished by the brutal ideologies of the twentieth century."