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**M'hamed Oualdi**, *A Slave Between Empires. A Transimperial History of North Africa*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2020, pp. 230.

Why is M'hamed Oualdi's book important for economic and social historians? First, it demonstrates that nineteenth-century Mediterranean society and economy were much more closely interlinked than many historians of colonialism and imperialism have supposed. Recounting the private, personal and public life of General Husayn, the book brings out many significant aspects of the social transformation that took place in nineteenth-century Tunisia, the Ottoman Empire and, ultimately, the entire Mediterranean.

Second, it shows how the profound economic changes in Europe directly and indirectly affected Mediterranean society. Slavery came to be viewed as intolerable in a civilized society. England abolished it in 1833 and Tunisia in 1846, within the framework of the well-known reform program under way since the 1830s. Apart from ethical and moral issues, the social changes wrought by capitalism played a leading role in the abolition of slavery: wage labour was a key factor in the capitalistic social order. Husayn argued that slavery should be outlawed for economic reasons, as a matter of efficiency: in fact, he shared a modern European-style capitalistic way of thinking. This shows how reforming élites in North African and Ottoman society actively promoted social, economic and cultural transformation, partially taking after that of Europe. The dominant ideas of liberalism, self-determination and nationalism were received on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Tunisian reformers, in fact, channelled their demands into nationalist and separatist claims following the French colonial takeover.

These movements demonstrated that nationalism was not strictly a post-World-War-I ideology but had its roots in the nineteenth-century local reform movement.

The personal story told in the book furthers our understanding of the trans-imperial economic relationships between the Mediterranean shores. As a Mamluk, Husayn helped to adapt “the local political culture from patronage and household connections to a more depersonalized administrative service” [11]. Playing a leading role in the internal reformist program in Tunisia, following the French conquest Husayn moved to Florence, where he represented the interests of the Tunisian state in a series of financial disputes beginning in the 1870s. With Husayn’s presence, Florence became a political centre for North African and Ottoman reformists.

Husayn’s business activities highlight the intensifying legal and financial connections between Europe and Tunisia before the institution of the French protectorate. The Mediterranean was a fluid society, inter-connected and with a host of lively social and economic networks. The author traces the story without hypothesizing a historical break between the pre-colonial and colonial periods; indeed, these are treated within the same time frame, which fits well with the purpose of the book.

The account of Husayn’s business operations sheds new light on the history of financial networks in the nineteenth-century Mediterranean. The author describes how Husayn borrowed from North African Jews in Livorno to lend to Tunisian friends in exile. Chapter II – *Husayn’s Wealth, how to build and protect an estate between empires* – shows how the new capitalistic framework of rules and order was extended in the Mediterranean societies.

Elite reformers like Husayn promoted the redefinition of public and private property. He had “no problem adapting to European bourgeois material culture and easily managed to amalgamate this culture with a North African-Ottoman way of life during the colonial period” [48]. After all, Husayn was also a profit-seeking businessman.

This material experience was pivotal to enable him, like other Tunisian

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landlords, to deal on an equal footing with the deputies and commissioners of the international financial commission (imposed following the default of 1867). They understood what the creditors wanted to do: exploit the insolvency to plunder local resources and assets in order to pay off the debt and extend their political and economic influence. It was important not to sell properties to creditors and Europeans. Husayn understood the modern meaning of ownership and its importance. New laws (the land laws of 1857) and bilateral agreements (with England in 1863 and Italy in 1868) redefined access to land for Europeans, Tunisians and religious minorities, which for the first time were legally entitled to own property.

M'hamed Oualdi uses Husayn's life and his estate ownerships to describe the bilateral flow of capital between the shores of the Mediterranean. While the outflow of European capital to the Muslim regions is a well-known phenomenon, it has long been overlooked that there was also a reverse flow, albeit a much smaller one, of capital from the Maghreb to Europe.

In conclusion, M'hamed Oualdi's book is a well-structured piece of research as well as pleasant reading, combining a personal biography with major historical events across the Ottoman and Tunisian world.

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