

# Of Cities and Their Mores

*By Denis Bocquet*

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**What do late nineteenth-century Berlin and Cairo have in common? The German historian Joseph Ben Prestel accepts the challenge of comparing these two cities in order to interrogate the boundaries between Europe and the Middle East, as well as orientalism's assumptions.**

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*Reviewed: Joseph Ben Prestel, *Emotional Cities. Debates on Urban Change in Berlin and Cairo (1860-1910)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 222 p.*

Comparative approaches to history have, for several decades, been the subject of profound debate. At issue is the cross-cultural validity of analytical frameworks, the ability of scholars to be competent in multiple domains, and the appropriateness of greater levels of generality. Joseph Ben Prestel's recent book, though it avoids addressing these methodological issues head on, proposes an innovative approach, the primary mechanism of which is the thematic juxtaposition of compatible archival materials relating to different realities, yet which, in the way they echo one another, elicit curiosity and thought. Through this method, Ben Prestel is able to propose parallel interrogations, the main effect of which is to challenge the force of orientalism's most persistent paradigms, while raising the question of the cultural character of morality and gender identities.

By using as its entry point the perception of various sources of urban excitement and the imposition of social norms for controlling emotions, the book also aspires to propose a displaced reading of a newly defined urban modernity in the late nineteenth century. Joseph Ben Prestel is committed to connecting his approach to recent trends in urban global history, with namely

the work of Pierre-Yves Saunier and Shane Ewen as reference points.<sup>1</sup> He seeks to make good on Dipesh Chakrabarty's advice that one should abandon historiography's eurocentric tendencies by undertaking comparisons that displace centers of gravity and that critique paradigms of reference, including their implicit cultural biases.<sup>2</sup> Echoing recent trends in Ottoman historiography,<sup>3</sup> Ben Prestel suggests that a comparison of Berlin and Cairo makes it possible to discuss clichés about the modernization of North African and Middle Eastern cities that are occasionally still in circulation, which imply that they developed according to a logic of westernization. As for the history of emotions, the work of Daniela Saxer, Monique Scheer, and Ute Frevert serve as his frameworks,<sup>4</sup> as do various historical studies that have contributed to turning emotions, conceived "as social practices" (p. 14), into historical objects. The justification for this unusual comparison of two cities seen as belonging to different cultural realms is found in Muhammed Nasir, an Egyptian who taught Arabic at the University of Berlin and who, upon returning to Cairo at the turn of the century, published a short psychological treatise in which he drew upon his Berlin experience to analyze mechanisms of social and cultural change.

## Urban Excitation and Morality

The book is organized into chapters that alternate in their focus between Berlin and Cairo. The first deals with Berlin and specifically the question of morality. Joseph Ben Prestel, drawing on numerous essays, brochures, and articles from the mid-nineteenth century, analyzes the place of thinking about mores (*Sitte*) in discourses about the social cohesion of a rapidly growing city that was experiencing the effects of industrialization and rural flight. Whether discussing Moritz Lazarus' publications on the theme of morality and the concept of *Völkerpsychologie* or the bureaucratic echoes of these ideas advanced by the statistician Hermann Schwabe, Joseph Ben Prestel offers a precise description of the interaction between normative visions of society and the behavior of populations. He traces the emergence of prostitution studies, and particularly the suspicion in which authorities and moralists held insincere love,

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<sup>1</sup> Shane Ewen and Pierre-Yves Saunier, eds., *Another Global City*, New York, Palgrave, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> On this topic, see Nora Lafi, *Municipalités méditerranéennes: les réformes urbaines ottomanes au miroir d'une histoire comparée*, Berlin, Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2005, 373p.

<sup>4</sup> Daniela Saxer, "Mit Gefühl handeln: Ansätze der Emotionsgeschichte," *Traverse*, 2007, no. 2, p. 15-29; Monique

Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice? (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History?) A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion," *History and Theory*, 2012, 51, p.193-220; Ute Frevert, *Gefühlswissen: Eine lexikalische Spurensuche in der Moderne*, Frankfurt, Campus, 2001.

which they feared could destroy society's foundations. While these moralists never doubted that regulated and supervised prostitution belonged to the realm of social rationality and did not constitute a genuine danger, the rise of marriage agencies, personal ads, cancan performances, and the dubious encounters to which the latter could lead were identified, however, insofar as they belonged to a realm of unbridled emotion, as factors of social dissolution. In accounts by Prussian moralists of this emerging world of unconventional behavior, Joseph Ben Prestel notes how often the argument of their supposedly French character was employed. French stimulations, accessed through the intermediary of magazines and performances, having to do with sex, pleasure, entertainment, and especially the insincerity of human relations distorted Berliners' sentiments, as the authors cited by Joseph Ben Prestel, as well as Prussian policy reports (which constitutes the core of the archives he consulted), were constantly complaining.

Next comes a chapter on Cairo devoted to emotions, mores, morality (*aql*), and particularly to sexuality's social dimension and sexual control. Joseph Ben Prestel is primarily interested in the emergence of a new middle class with new dress habits, signs, and codes. On this basis, he discusses the civilizational relationship between the geographic and cultural areas often defined as the Orient and the West. By calling attention to the impasses to which this excessively rigid dichotomy often leads, he succeeds, while sidestepping its theoretical dimension, in dismantling its static character. By analyzing how figures like Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Ali Mubarak related to modernity, rationality, and the religious realm, Joseph Ben Prestel seeks to decipher the complex paths of modernity understood as a process, rather than as a reservoir of rational postures. As for women, the author emphasizes how much the construction of a new rationality among the middle classes relegated them, for the same reasons as the rural masses, to a category defined as unsuited for modern rationality. Thanks to precise archival work on geographic and sociological shifts in prostitution, he shows the extent to which the police was charged with protecting the boundaries of social respectability, employing tolerance or repression depending on whether the reputations of respectable families or neighborhoods were at stake. Referring to Liat Kozma's work on the social negotiation of virginity, Joseph Ben Prestel also analyzes the gynecological exams that families required of girls who had run away from home, which are also found in police archives. Official opinion on the integrity of hymens thus obtained (or purchased) could serve as a social stamp of approval on the marriage market. These archives also bring to light the negotiations engaged in by married women (who were unable to receive or buy virginity certificates) from so-called respectable families who were found working in brothels. Despite numerous obstacles, these women made use of rhetoric to obtain morality certificates from authorities (they had entered houses of prostitution by mistake, they were unaware of a neighborhood's bad reputation, there had been a misunderstanding, and so on). These passages, drawn from original archives that police offices deposited with Egypt's National Archives, are unquestionably among the book's most fascinating.

Next we return to Berlin, and notably to Friedrichstrasse and the urban excitement resulting from its intense traffic. At the same time, Joseph Ben Prestel tells the story of the neighborhood's physical transformation, as well as that of urban practices that developed between the 1870s and the turn of the century, notably theater, walking, and commerce. In a dynamic engagement with the work of Georg Simmel, the author, by exploring archival material on prostitution and newspaper articles and essays on the street harassment that women suffered on the part of Berliner men, examines the creation of social categories and inflexions in normative discourse. He details the police's (and public opinion's) perplexities in the face of women's changing attitudes, dress, and trajectories, which blurred the boundaries between so-called respectable women and prostitutes. Some very interesting passages are also devoted to the practices of the morality police, and to those of male predators who passed themselves off as its members in order to sexually blackmail women found in the streets in dubious circumstances. The end of this chapter, which is fascinating from the standpoint of the history of emotions, is dedicated to psychiatric theories of urban excitement in early twentieth-century Berlin. This leads Joseph Ben Prestel to make conclusions about the connection between nation-building and emotional control: "For most contemporary authors, the control of oneself was a necessary precondition for political participation in the German body politic" (p. 105). This insight, which connects the history of emotions to a history of popular sentiments as contestation and potentialities for revolt, would clearly have merited further exploration and could have been tied, by way of its Cairene echo, to the book's ambition of challenging orientalist paradigms and their inertia.

## Cities and Irrationality

In the following chapter, we are back in Cairo, during the period of British colonization. The author presents a panorama of colonial conceptualizations of the supposed inferiority of the Egyptian character, which justified, according to this ideology of domination, their alleged need to be administered. Lord Cromer, Britain's consul general from 1883 to 1897, was particularly prolific and explicit on this topic. He provides much of the evidence for reflection on the roots of orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, as it relates to emotions. While discussing themes such as the rise of alcohol consumption in a city undergoing complete transformation, music and musical venues, and belly dancing and the locales where it was performed, Prestel returns, particularly when discussing the neighborhood of Azbakiyya, to the themes of emotional sincerity and cheating as potential forces of social dissolution. The figures of the seductress, the oriental dancer, and the nightclub hostess are analyzed by way of publications that denounce them as threats to family values, not because they reject prostitution or adultery, but because men might fall in love with women who see these bonds as no more than a source of profit. Some wonderful passages are devoted to examining the condemnation

of these phenomena as evidence of a loss of Egyptian male rationality as well as, ultimately, in Joseph Ben Prestel's estimation, a threat to the fundamental values of patriarchy.

Returning to Berlin to consider emotional control, the author examines, in the context of the *Lebensform* movement, the content of various guidebooks for fighting nervous disorders, such as those by the doctors Otto Nagel and Carl Sturm. When confronted with the emotions roused by modern urban life, the writer Wilhelm Bölsche, for instance, recommended geographical distance. Joseph Ben Prestel connects these movements in an original and convincing way to the garden city movement (*Gartenstadt Gesellschaft*) in Berlin and Germany more generally. This results in some lovely pages, in which the parallels drawn between the evolution of urban forms and the theorization of affects is revealing. The development of the peripheries of the German capital until the First World War is interpreted in light of the many debates concerning urban perversity. Interesting passages are also devoted to the development of a culture of physical exercise. From these, one sees the importance of references to the nation: "Reform movements in Berlin promised not only a cure for middle-class city dwellers, but also a way to turn them into ideal subjects of the German body politic. Yet, even within the middle classes, these practices were hardly a majority position" (p. 161). Joseph Ben Prestel thus qualifies the conceptual relationship between reform and nation, emphasizing the existence of numerous critiques of the limits of life in Berlin's garden cities, such as Frohnau, as remedies to urban nervousness.

The theme of reform (*islah*) also serves as the guiding thread for the book's treatment of Cairo at the turn of the twentieth century and for its consideration of the connection between urban territoriality and society. Joseph Ben Prestel, like Robert Ilbert in his work on the development of suburbs such as Heliopolis, tracks down in Arab-language newspapers, magazines, and essays contemporary authors' denunciations of "the rule of passions in urban civilization" (p. 165) and calls for urban forms that are less frenetic, as well as for more physical exercise. He also analyzes the growth of a—very urban—form of neo-rural literature, as seen in Husayn Haykal. Some very interesting passages are devoted to the Helwân-les-Bains baths and to the ideology connected to them, as well as to the development of an Egyptian conception of sporting practices, in contrast to the British colonial legacy of clubs conceived as enclaves.

The book's conclusion has great ambitions, announcing a global history of urban change. One cannot but agree with the author when he says "the preceding chapters have highlighted the limitations of a strict separation of urban history into 'European' and 'Middle Eastern' compartments. Once historians look beyond these labels, parallel processes in the two cities come into view" (p.189). These mirroring effects are highly suggestive. Often in the book, phenomena analyzed in the case of one city challenge conventional wisdom or historiographical clichés associated with the other. The archival material studied by the author is, in this regard, very suggestive. It leads him to examine both the universal value of the social use of emotions and the connection between discourses on emotions and nationalism. The conclusion also

emphasizes the view that different cities are comparable, which is all the better for our understanding of phenomena that are intimately connected with the functioning of urban societies and the ideologies shaping their transformation. Indeed, this is one of the book's most remarkable achievements. Joseph Ben Prestel is adept at never drawing unfounded parallels, even as he calls our attention to echoes that raise questions about the very nature of a society and the way in which these cities have been interpreted in more or less direct contrast to one another.

This book is fascinating, in short, with regards to its most obvious strength: its examination of archival material and a host of brochures, press cuttings, and essays, interpreted in order to call attention to the human, social, urban, national, and ideological mechanisms of emotions. The author's call for an urban history that could integrate this dimension in order to theorize a different approach to historical comparisons and a new phase in the discussion of orientalism's persistent paradigms is thus entirely welcome and persuasive. The comparisons drawn by the author are never reckless, but always lead to questions that challenge persistent dichotomies between cultural regions at every level. Our only regret concerns the book's relationship to French historiography. The contributions of historians such as Alain Corbin, Georges Vigarello, Pascal Ory, Dominique Kalifa, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Christophe Charle, and many of their colleagues and students to the theory and practice of social and cultural history, both as it relates to the history of the senses, sensations, sensibilities, and emotions and to the interpretation of archival material, which are closely related to those Ben Prestel uses, is neither acknowledged nor taken into consideration. Whereas the German inspiration for this prolific vein of French scholarship—notably Norbert Elias' thought—is often recalled in their work, the French inspiration of the wonderful pages discussed here is never mentioned.

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