

Book Review:

Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East.

Dawn Chatty. *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East.*
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 350 pp.

Reviewed by Stacy Fahrenthold

In *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East*, anthropologist Dawn Chatty approaches the difficult issue of forced migration from a fresh comparative perspective. By combining a regional history of Middle Eastern involuntary migration with first-person interviews of displaced peoples and their descendents, Chatty overcomes the partisan tone that often accompanies discussion of this subject. Instead, she asks new questions about forced migration in the post-Ottoman Middle East, telling a story of human resilience in the face of dispossession. The text is divided in two parts. Chatty begins by outlining a complex theoretical model which allows her to make broad connections between four regional case studies of forced migrants: Circassian and Balkan Muslims, Armenian Christians, Palestinians, and Kurds. In the book's second half, she introduces these case studies, detailing the history behind each displacement before thickening the narrative with interviews and individual experiences. Juxtaposing the empirical with the personal, Chatty allows her subjects to narrate their own histories while lending her text nuance and depth, making it highly relatable for the introductory reader.

Chatty's selection of these particular displacements (Circassian, Armenian, Palestinian, and Kurdish) is important but requires explication. This text is not comprehensive in its geographical scope. Chatty considers parts of *Bilad al-Sham* and Egypt together on the basis of their shared Ottoman past. By delimiting her study thus, she demonstrates how Ottoman approaches to forced migration outlived the empire, manifesting in modern stories of displacement in the Arab Middle East. Both the culture of forced migrants and Middle Eastern legal norms demonstrate an Ottoman conception of multiculturalism that, Chatty argues, shapes society and politics until today. Borrowing from Sami Zubaida's discussion of "local cosmopolitanisms," Chatty links the development of ethnic and linguistic minority cultures to both the region's history of dispossession and the cultural accommodation that Arab states afford these groups (p. 4; Zubaida 1999). Chatty points to Ottoman precedents for such accommodation of difference (like the legacy of the *millet* system) (pp.45-8). She describes cultural hybridity among displaced minorities as a form of social resilience, a strategy for survival within this larger system. Similarly, states which host displaced peoples draft strategies for integrating their migrant minorities without demanding cultural subservience. Chatty calls this process "integration without assimilation" and points out that this approach to minorities is unique to the Middle East and linked to Ottoman precedent (pp.4-5).

Drawing on these two themes— resilience and integration— Chatty compares Circassian, Armenian, Palestinian, and Kurdish forced migrants within a single analytic field defined by its historical unity and its legal multiculturalism. Convergent models like this are typically reserved for voluntary movements; involuntary migrations are usually narrated as tales of divergence, as mass movements spurred by a cataclysmic event which propels people away from their homes. Existing historiography reflects this norm in its emphasis of themes like loss, exile, and emigrant nostalgia. Noting the moral, sometimes partisan tone that results from this approach in the involuntary migration studies, Chatty departs from divergence historiography and seeks agency among forced migrant groups (pp. 36-7). She focuses on resilience, social integration, and community cohesion— themes her participant interviewees report as more immediately relevant than the traumas of the past (pp. 132, 174, 176, 226, 227).

Chatty next develops a convincing history of forced migrations in the late Ottoman Empire through the long nineteenth century. She echoes Resat Kasaba's recent work *A Moveable Empire* in describing how the Ottoman state used involuntary migration as an administrative tool, to increase rural productivity, to stimulate commerce, and to regularize tax collection along the frontier (Kasaba 2009). But while she points out these early precursors, she nevertheless contends that something new happened by century's end. With the rise of ethnic nationalism, forced migration served a new ideological purpose. While the Empire's older relocation policies targeted non-sedentary groups among the Muslim majority, new political concerns about European intervention made displacement of religious and ethnic minorities an attractive political strategy. Similarly, new nation states emerging on the Ottoman frontier campaigned to "unmix" their populations to match their visions of statehood, spurring large numbers of Muslims to flee for the Empire's southern provinces (pp. 60-74, 88).

The book's second half narrates the history of four displacements that arose from this peculiar set of circumstances in the late nineteenth century. After border struggles in the Caucasus and Balkan mountains, the Ottoman authorities rushed to accommodate new waves of Muslim refugees, often doing a bit of political calculation in the meantime. "For the Turks, we were a weapon," asserts one of Chatty's Circassian interlocutors, explaining how his people were resettled in Jaulan in order to pacify the troubled area (p. 91). Meanwhile, the Ottoman state actively displaced other groups because of persistent fears of nationalist uprising. The Armenian expulsions that peaked during World War One serve as a particularly grim example (pp. 154-60). Chatty's last two case studies—the Palestinian and Kurdish disposessions of the twentieth century—come after the Empire's disintegration. But she maintains that the unique geopolitical conjuncture of this late Ottoman moment set the stage for later displacements. An Empire imperiled, the rise of ethnic nationalism, and European interventionism form a triad of regional circumstances that accompanied mass displacement.

Chatty's most interesting findings, however, lie in how attitudes about cultural accommodation have given contemporary Circassian, Armenian, Palestinian, and Kurdish migrants a ready set of strategies for integrating into Arab society. She illustrates how displaced minorities maintain their local cultures while simultaneously claiming legal space within the host state. Evidence of cultural resilience abounds in Chatty's interviews: in Circassian Welfare Societies operating in Syria and Jordan, in language lessons offered by the Armenian Church, in PLO scholarships for displaced Palestinians, or in Kurdish patronage networks operating across national borders. Involuntary migrants build new types of communities through transnational institutions like these; they create opportunities for social advancement while mitigating the threat of cultural annihilation. Chatty develops a correlation between the growth of ethnic welfare institutions and successful migrant integration post-displacement (pp. 167-174). However, she leaves only implicit comparisons between her cases and instead prompts the reader to draw his or her own conclusions about resilience strategies common to displaced peoples regionally.

Likewise, examples of legal integration are abundant, and Chatty demonstrates how migrant minorities identify themselves in relation to their host states. She finds that Arab states integrate minority groups in an *ad hoc* manner which mirrors older Ottoman approaches. Linguistic and cultural conformity is not typically required, nor is the process of integration standardized across all minority groups. This attitude has resulted in the integration of compact minorities through a preservation of difference, where different ethnic groups maintain distinct legal statuses within a multicultural mosaic (p. 294). On the other hand, this cosmopolitan milieu does not undermine the fact that in a political order defined by national citizenship, the presence (or absence) of documents determines whether migrant minorities succeed as part of a wider society. Chatty most clearly illustrates this idea when discussing the Kurds. Left without a state of their own, she describes how Kurds living in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria face very different obstacles in seeking citizenship. Even within Arab states, ethnic minorities face a variegated documentation regime. In Syria, for example, some Kurds enjoy the rights of full citizenship, while others remain *bidoon*, or

“without papers,” and are therefore not entitled to the same rights and protections (pp. 266-274).

Displacement and Dispossession will quickly become an important teaching text in History, Policy, and International Studies classrooms, especially as American universities accommodate the pressing need for expertise on issues like statelessness and forced migration. Chatty's insistence on linking Ottoman attitudes about forced migration to the twentieth century is fresh and interesting. She does not assume a vast rupture between Ottoman and post-Ottoman approaches to population policy and finds instead a deep continuity between the displacements of the imperial era to today's ongoing dispossessions. Her work is a useful introduction to the topic, but in her reach the debates surrounding cosmopolitanism as an analytic are lost. Including explicit, working definitions for terms like “cosmopolitanism” and “multiculturalism” and a brief discussion of the controversy these ideas generate would add greater nuance to Chatty's already quite impressive book (see Hanley 2008). That said, *Displacement and Dispossession* goes the distance in explaining forced migration in the modern Middle East. As such, it is well suited for the undergraduate classroom and lays a serious foundation for further research on post-Ottoman Arab societies.

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Bibliography

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