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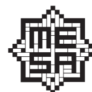

IN MEMORIAM

Kathryn Schwartz, Book Historian of the Modern Middle East

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Abstract

This article presents the contributions of Dr. Kathryn Schwartz (1984-2022), book historian of the modern Middle East. Her study of the origins and impact of the printing press in late Ottoman Egypt has challenged some long-standing assumptions in the historiography. She has also put into question the long-held belief that Ottomans banned printing. More broadly, her work has challenged Eurocentric approaches to this topic and has innovated by combining material and intellectual history.

Keywords: Book history; Manuscript culture; Print; Printing ban; technological change; cryptology

Dr. Kathryn Schwartz (1984-2022), historian of the modern Middle East, studied at King's College, University of Cambridge, UK, where she received an A.B. (2008) and an A.M. (2011), both in Arabic and Middle Eastern Studies.[1] She defended her dissertation, *Meaningful Mediums: Manuscript and Print in 19th c. Ottoman Cairo*, in the History Department at Harvard University in May 2015. Roger Owen (chair), Ann Blair, and Cemal Kafadar were the members of her committee. She was a graduate fellow at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies (2014-2015), and postdoctoral fellow for the Digital Library of the Eastern Mediterranean at Harvard University (2015-17). She was a research fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies in Toulouse, France, in 2017-19 and 2021-22, and was appointed assistant professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst in September 2018.

At the center of Dr. Schwartz's work lies her dissertation, recently made publicly available though it is unpublished (she was working on a book based on her dissertation under the title *Print and the People of Cairo, 19th c.*). Given its importance, we detail her contribution in the hope that it will be widely read,

[1] We thank Adam Mestyan for his comments. All remaining errors are ours.

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recognized, and fully integrated in future scholarship on the history of the modern Middle East. Kathryn Schwartz's dissertation examines the history of Ottoman Cairene printing in the nineteenth century and explores the reasons why Cairo was "the first Ottoman city to develop a sustained printing industry."[2] She shows that the Egyptian printing industry and economy largely grew from the manuscript culture and copying industry in Cairo. While scholars have interpreted the advent of print as one of the main factors for the development of cultural modernity in Egypt (e.g., nationalism, liberal ideas, and more generally the adoption of Western cultural norms), she shows that printing was originally adopted as a new technological tool that made access to and dissemination of traditional Ottoman culture easier and more efficient than did the existing manuscript copying technology. In other words, she emphasizes continuities that have not been acknowledged in the literature, which has tended to hypostasize the import of print technology. By paying attention to the beginnings of printing, to the resilience of manuscript culture, and to the different forms and technologies of writing that Egyptians continued to use, adopted, and developed in the nineteenth century, she is able to challenge an old assumption held by scholars to this day: that print was one of the main "causes" for the so-called cultural renaissance of nineteenth-century Egypt. She highlights, on the contrary, the economic, intellectual, and political reasons that led to the adoption of printing and argues that pre-existing intellectual and political activities caused printing to develop and to last, rather than the other way around. In short, Kathryn Schwartz's work has crucial implications for how scholars study the history of ideas in the Middle East. By paying attention to the historical overlaps between manuscript and print cultures, and to the meanings that Egyptians ascribed to these different means of writing texts, she challenges the narrative that puts printing technology at the foundation of modernization. Print was developed by the government and by for-profit printers and intellectuals, not as part of a plan to reform society and lead Egypt to modernity, as is most often assumed, but because the technology was a useful tool for governmental authorities to communicate with their subjects, a profitable one for private printers, and a practical one for intellectuals. Printing did not emerge in a vacuum: there already was a vibrant older technology, the manuscript industry. In the first half of the nineteenth century, Egyptians saw printing as merely another tool of communicating ideas alongside manuscripts. It was only in the late nineteenth century that the narrative emerged among Egyptians that printing was "a catalyst for modernity" and "a civilizing force."[3]

Kathryn Schwartz's work is particularly original because she writes intellectual history from the vantage point of those who printed or copied texts. In that sense, her attention to the producers of the material text, and to their economic and political constraints and motivations, changes our understanding of Middle

[2] Kathryn Schwartz, "Meaningful Mediums: A Material and Intellectual History of Manuscript and Print Production in Nineteenth Century Ottoman Cairo" (PhD Dissertation, Harvard University, 2015), 13.

[3] Schwartz, "Meaningful Mediums," iii-iv.

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Eastern intellectual history. She also contributes to demystifying a scholarly paradigm that has recently started to be revised by prominent historians of ideas: that of a decline of Islamic thought followed by a nineteenth century "renaissance." Dr. Schwartz provides a new and important lens to this revision by focusing on the material aspect of intellectual life – an innovative and welcome initiative. In this vein, the second chapter of her dissertation, "The Reinvention of Ottoman Printing," provides an important revision of the conventional historiographical argument that Ottoman sultans banned printing and that "Ottoman adoption of print technology was delayed, destined, and equivalent to the European experience in its effects."[4] This argument was expanded in her important article "Did Ottoman Sultans Ban Print?"[5] in which she overturned the much-repeated claim that the Arab world was traditionally hostile to printing due to a ban on printing by a sixteenth-century sultan. Dr. Schwartz pursued that claim back to the early modern sources on which it was based and found them to be very slight – just one European traveler reported the existence of this ban. On the contrary she argues from a careful analysis of all the surviving official documents that there never was such a ban. But she also ponders why the notion of a ban proved so long-lived and argues that it served the assumptions of the two dominant strands of historiography – European accounts that emphasized Eastern inferiority, and Egyptian nationalist accounts which hailed the arrival of printing in the nineteenth century as the dawn of a new modern era for which they sought credit. This article won a prize from the journal in which it appeared and merits being assigned to students for its brilliant detective work as well as its field-transforming conclusions.

In her dissertation Dr. Schwartz also examines carefully the impact of the French invasion of Egypt (1798-1801), arguing that "just as the Egyptians adopted aspects of French textual culture, the French incorporated aspects of Ottoman communication into their procedure."[6] Strikingly, she argues that the durable success of printing under Mehmed Ali's government printing was rooted in its links with the highly developed manuscript industry. Rather than constituting an abrupt turning point, Cairene printing adopted features of the manuscript industry such as private commissions of imprints and the sale of printed books in the manuscript market.[7] Next Dr. Schwartz studies the private for-profit printing industry through two families of printers, the Kāstalīs and the Shāhīns, and their overlaps with the governmental printing industry. She also traces the emphasis on lithography, which presented distinct advantages: this method of printing by image transfer could easily mimic the look of manuscript and was also less costly and allowed easier reprinting than printing by movable type. By the mid-nineteenth century, the commercial presses in Egypt focused on shorter, ephemeral works and introduced advertising and other new sales techniques, while government printers printed the long texts of the literary and religious canon, from which little profit could be made. The rise of print

[4] Schwartz, "Meaningful Mediums," 7.

[5] Kathryn Schwartz, "Did Ottoman Sultans Ban Print?" *Book History* 20 (2017), 1-39.

[6] Schwartz, "Meaningful Mediums," 155.

[7] Schwartz, "Meaningful Mediums," 168.

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culture in Egypt followed different patterns from those of early modern Europe; it was shaped by its own local context and was therefore "uniquely Ottoman in its nature."[8]

Dr. Schwartz's contribution is all the more impressive that she was not granted access to the National Archives of Egypt. She turned this constraint into a blessing. She explored a trove of manuscripts and printed books held in libraries in Europe (the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France) and the United States (including the private collection of Mohamed B. Alwan of Belmont, Massachusetts). She focused on these texts themselves (e.g., their authors, dates of production, content, and colophons). This innovative approach led her to delve into a material and intellectual culture in a way that brings to life Cairo's networks of books, the characters who printed or copied and sold them, and then the public who read them. She combines literary and aesthetic sensibilities with attention to economic processes (e.g., what was the book market like? what was the cost of printing?) and the materiality of books (e.g., how did technology change the material aspects of the book, such as its format or the layout of the page?).

Kathryn Schwartz's passion for the study of language and technology reverberates in her two articles on cryptology, "Charting Arabic Cryptology's Evolution" and "From Text to Technological Context: Medieval Arabic Cryptology's Relation to Paper, Numbers, and the Post." Using Mrāyātī et al.,[9] a transcription into typed Arabic of Arabic cryptologic treatises composed between the ninth and fourteenth centuries and discovered in 1980 in Istanbul's Süleymaniye, she charts the evolution of medieval Arabic cryptology which she links to various bureaucratic developments. Cryptology became "an administrative fixture with the development of ʿAbbāsid government offices" and a "predominantly official science,"[10] and then reflected the militarization of the Ayyubid dynasty (1171-1250) and the Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1517). During these three dynasties, cryptology had academic foundations (especially through the combination of philology and mathematics – i.e., combinatorial and statistical analysis), poetic applications (with short, enciphered poems), and was also used as "a covert administrative tool" for espionage.[11] As in her other work, she includes a comparison with Europe, underlining overlaps and similarities rather than stark ontological differences: "Cryptology's European evolution originated after scholarly investigation, developed through courtly life, and was rejuvenated through wartime pressures. Arabic cryptology's progression responded to similar stimuli."[12] She expanded on this article (which won *Cryptologia*'s Best Undergraduate Paper in 2009) in her 2014 article, where she examines the preconditions for medieval Arabic cryptology in the sustained production of paper, the regional medieval postal service, and algebra, thus moving as her title

[8] Schwartz, "Meaningful Mediums," 446.

[9] Muḥammad Mrāyātī, Yaḥya Mīr ʿAlam, and Muḥammad Ḥassān al-Ṭayyān (eds.), *Arabic Origins of Cryptology*, 6 vols. (Riyadh: KFCRIS & KACST, 2004).

[10] Kathryn Schwartz, "Charting Arabic Cryptology's Evolution," *Cryptologia* 33(4) (2009), 299, 301.

[11] Schwartz, "Charting Arabic Cryptology's Evolution," 299.

[12] Schwartz, "Charting Arabic Cryptology's Evolution," 298.

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emphasizes, "from text to technological context." This allows her to ponder why cryptology originated in the Islamicate world, and how it developed and was practiced there. One factor behind the development of cryptology, she explains, was the "spread and abundance of paper." However, just as she masterfully showed in her dissertation, in this case too technological change was not enough to explain intellectual formations and the emergence of an official science. Indeed, the science of algebra was also "integral to conceiving of cryptology."[13] Above all she emphasizes, as she had in tracing the development of print in nineteenth-century Egypt, what she called "people's means, goals, and practices"[14] – in other words, their needs and intentions. She shows that spurts in the development of Arabic cryptology correlated with the lack of physical security in the transfer of information through the regional postal service under the Abbasids.

Kathryn Schwartz also paid attention to the socioeconomic context of private printing in Cairo in "The Political Economy of Private Printing in Cairo as Told from a Commissioning Deal Turned Sour, 1871." Going back to the Kāstalī family of printers, which she studied in her dissertation (Chapter 5), she focuses on a legal dispute between Mūsā Kāstalī and Shaykh Ḥasan al-ʿIdwī to pursue her argument about continuities between manuscript and print cultures by examining a "private printer's business practices."[15] Following the norm in the production of manuscripts, printed texts in the for-profit private printing industry were also commissioned, but a new element appeared in the printing industry – financial risk, given the multiplicity of printed texts and the unstable demand for them. At the heart of the political economy of private printing was the belief that the printed text "would appeal to many," which leads Kathryn Schwartz to suggest that "an earlier and deeper connection existed between print and mass cultural identity that has been acknowledged previously in studies of Egyptian collective belonging."[16]

In "Book History, Print, and the Middle East," she wrote a review of the scholarship on the history of the book in the Middle East, which emerged at the end of the 1980s, and explained how it was greatly influenced by conceptions of the early modern European experience of print. This review highlights the significance of book historians of early modern Europe, such as Natalie Zemon Davis and Robert Darnton[17] in particular, in viewing a text as "not merely a source for ideas and images, but as a carrier of relationships."[18] At the same time, Dr. Schwartz recognizes that the center of book history "remains located

[13] Kathryn Schwartz, "From Text to Technological Context: Medieval Arabic Cryptology's Relation to Paper, Numbers, and the Post," *Cryptologia* 38(2) (2014), 140.

[14] Kathryn Schwartz, "The Political Economy of Private Printing in Cairo as Told from a Commissioning Deal Turned Sour, 1871" *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49(1) (2017), 26.

[15] Schwartz, "The Political Economy of Private Printing in Cairo," 27.

[16] Schwartz, "The Political Economy of Private Printing in Cairo," 40.

[17] Natalie Zemon Davis, "Printing and the people," in Society and culture in early modern France: Eight essays (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), 189–226, and Robert Darnton, "'What is the history of books?' Revisited," *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007), 495–508.

[18] N. Z. Davis, "Printing and the people," 192.

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in the study of typography [i.e., printing by movable type] in the West," and it seems that her entire body of work was animated by a desire to escape this framework. She shows that these "Eurocentric and typographic foundations of book history"[19] have weighed on the field of book history in the Middle East, where most scholars rehearse Eisenstein's argument that the European scientific revolution stemmed from a "communication revolution."[20] They have as a result too readily concluded that the absence of a sustained print culture until the nineteenth century explained a so-called intellectual decline, without paying attention to the thriving manuscript culture. As historians of the book in Europe put to rest Eisenstein's argument starting in the early 1990s, some scholars of the modern Middle East also questioned a decade later the concept of the "print revolution" as an agent of intellectual change. To our knowledge, Kathryn Schwartz's work was the first to engage with this question in such depth and breadth. Her sustained criticism of Eurocentric approaches can also be seen in "An Eastern scholar's engagement with the European study of the East. Amin al-Madani and the Sixth Oriental Congress, Leiden, 1883", which examines how the Egyptian al-Madanī (d. 1898) shaped European Orientalism, which involved not a one-way flow of influence but rather "required collaboration and exchange between easterners and westerners."[21]

After a brief focus on law and legal pluralism in "A Printer's Old Plea to Reform Legal Pluralism in Khedival Egypt" (2021a, with Omar Cheta), Kathryn Schwartz returned to the concrete study of Arabic printing with "The Official Urge to Simplify Arabic Printing: Introduction to Nadīm's 1948 Memo" (2022a). She argues there that the governmental project to reform Arabic writing in mid-twentieth-century Egypt sought to simplify the printing process, while safeguarding linguistic integrity, in order to facilitate greater literacy and dissemination of knowledge. She extends her focus on the interactions between technology and Arabic scripts down to the present, showing how the earlier urge to simplify Arabic has morphed into the opposite concern for maintaining the language's distinctive characteristics in the digital age. In "Egypt's State Periodical as a Tool of Governance, 1828–1839" (2024), she studied the first decade of issues of *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-Miṣrīya* founded by Mehmed Ali in 1828. She shows that this state periodical was a tool of state-building, published for administering the land and people of Egypt, and that it also created a community of select readers of government officials of various origins, ethnicities, and educational attainments. In line with the general argument she developed in her dissertation, she counters the conventional wisdom (among Egyptian and foreign scholars) that this official publication was "a milestone along the region's march toward modernity," and "an agent of change rather than a tool

[19] Kathryn Schwartz, "Book History, Print, and the Middle East," *History Compass*, 15(12), 3.

[20] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein. *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980.

[21] Kathryn Schwartz, "An Eastern Scholar's Engagement with the European Study of the East: Amin al-Madani and the Sixth Oriental Congress, Leiden, 1883," in *The Muslim Reception of European Orientalism: Reversing the Gaze*, edited by S. Heschel and U. Ryad (New York: Routledge, 2019) 39.

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that its founder wielded to promote change."[22] As a consequence, she sees the first 600 issues of *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-Miṣrīya* published in its first decade (1828-1839) as an entry into Mehmed Ali's government expansion. She observes, perhaps with reference to her own inability to access the archives, that "in the absence of scholars' regular and unfettered access to Egyptian state archives, the entries across *al-Waqāʾiʿ al-Miṣrīya*'s pages also serve as an intriguing alternative resource."[23] As in the rest of her work, meticulous attention to details such as logos, ornaments, prices, destinations, content organization, or the quality and size of the paper used, yield important insights for understanding the nature, goal, and political economy of a printed text. As she writes in the conclusion of *Meaningful Mediums*, "treating writing as an object of material and intellectual history is important because texts form the source base for scholarly research. Understanding the immediate purposes behind their creation informs the meanings of the words that they contain. Scholarly analysis that excludes such consideration is limited."[24]

Dr. Schwartz had a long-standing interest in creating digital databases that could facilitate scholarship in an area where access to printed collections required visits to multiple libraries in the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. For instance, with Adam Mestyan, she published "An Egyptian Shaykh's Literary World: Digitally Reconstructing Islamic Print Culture Through Mustafa Salama al-Najjari's Books, Cairo 1870" (2022c, with Mestyan), presenting a digital project which was brought to completion by Mestyan (2023). The unusually detailed information available in the inventory after death of the book collection of the Cairo intellectual al-Najjārī (d. 1870) includes prices and provenances of 480 printed books and manuscripts in the collection (i.e., where and when they were acquired). This digital dataset allows researchers to reach new qualitative and quantitative insights into the literary context of late-nineteenth-century Cairo.

Although her career was so sadly cut short, her dissertation and many publications promise to play a crucial role in the development of book historical approaches to the history of the modern Middle East.

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[22] Kathryn Schwartz, "Egypt's State Periodical as a Tool of Governance, 1828–1839," in *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Egyptian History*, edited by B. Baron and J. Culang (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 327.

[23] Schwartz, "Egypt's State Periodical," 328.

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