
REZENSIONEN | REVIEWS

Chris Gratien: *The Unsettled Plain: An Environmental History of the Late Ottoman Frontier*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022, 318 pp.

Reviewed by
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“The word ‘frontier’ uses historians before historians can use it”,¹ declared Patricia N. Limerick, suggesting that the term is too loaded to be harnessed by scholars in productive ways. The word has indeed very specific meanings and implications, particularly so in the American context, where it has long evoked a version of history writing that is very state centred, if not outright triumphalist and celebratory of the modern state’s expansion into “empty” peripheries. In the past few decades, however, those who study borderlands in general and the American West in particular have sought to disassociate frontier from its underlying implications in order to recover it and tap into its analytic potential. Informed by such historiographical debates, Chris Gratien’s recent book shows how historians can repopulate the concept of frontier with new historical meanings. The author’s choice of title, *The Unsettled Plain*, foreshadows the types of nuanced historical analyses presented to the readers in this excellent book.

The Unsettled Plain focuses on the region of Çukurova, a lowland that corresponds to parts of historical Cilicia and is located today in the Turkish province of Adana. The book provides a century-long history of the region’s political, economic, and ecological transformation from the late 1850s on. Cilicia was historically home to pastoralist populations, who alternated between the swampy lowlands during the winter and cooler highlands in the summer. A decade after the Crimean War (1853–1856) – the conflict that embedded the Ottoman Empire into the institutions of Western finance, politics, and infrastructure – the reforming statesmen in Istanbul led a campaign to bring under control its “unruly frontiers”, which until then had failed to provide manpower and taxation to the state’s war-making efforts. The Ottoman “Reform Division”, sent to conquer the region, was comparable to the larger push of modern states elsewhere at the time, seeking to transform their frontiers into zones of resource extraction in ways that lived up to mid-century expectations. The initiative aimed at not only sedentarizing the nomadic populations but also settling the Muslim refugees incoming from the Russian Caucasus, another theatre of frontier expansion and settler colonialism, which shows how interlinked these episodes had been. In deftly analysing these developments, Gratien’s account is far from being cel-

laboratory of Ottoman state expansion. On the contrary, he keeps a critical distance to the official discourses reproduced by archival documents while also seeking to uncover how the state's tunnel vision à la James Scott came to unfold in unforeseeable directions. Even if the statesmen from Istanbul initially saw in the swamplands of Çukurova an untapped agrarian potential that could even turn the region into a second Egypt, particularly so in the midst of a cotton boom due to the American Civil War, the fact that malaria-bearing mosquitoes thrived in the region's wetlands meant that the newly settled populations not only suffered from a very high mortality rate but also continued to press demands to be settled in the highlands. The newly established settlements accordingly failed to grow in size and production, contrary to Istanbul's initial expectations. Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, the Ottoman civilian administrator who had overseen the "conquest" of the region a decade earlier, for example, was hard-pressed to prepare the terms of an agreement that reintroduced the practice of transhumance as a sure way of protection against malaria. Similar to foreigners who visited the region and saw nothing but malaria, while the local visitors navigated the same ecology with ease, the Ottoman state was ultimately a foreigner who had to adapt to the local ways. This does not mean that the state failed to penetrate Çukurova; it certainly did. As Gratién shows, however, this did not necessarily happen in the terms dictated by bureaucrats alone.

Cevdet was also the translator of Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddimah* into Ottoman Turkish, a monumental work that came to define his world view, including Cevdet's belief in the miasmatic theory of disease. Not

unlike many of his contemporaries at the time, Cevdet saw settlement and agriculture as the ultimate solution in cleaning Çukurova's disease-ridden air and defeating malaria (literally "bad air" in old Italian). As Gratién argues, even though malaria was indeed an ancient disease, it was a host of the late nineteenth-century developments – capitalism, modern state, and warfare – that turned it into a modern epidemic. As such, malaria was borne out of a greater degree of human mobility facilitated by the connection of the region to railroad grids – the commercialization of agriculture that expanded circuits of seasonal labour – and the continued settlement of populations and urban/rural demographic growth. Yet, Gratién's account is wary of the historical narratives that project uniform outcomes. He instead shows how Çukurova in fact developed unevenly. Some settlements grew, while others staggered; some became more connected, while others still remained off the grid. The ownership of land and joint business ventures cut across categories of ethno-religious belonging. Local varieties of cotton persevered in the face of American strains of cotton, and the availability of quinine as the malaria medicine was fraught with stories of unequal access. As such, *The Unsettled Plain* is very attuned to the historical variations that are often flattened by the uniform trajectories of change, such as nationalism, globalization, peripheralization, and state formation.

All of these nineteenth-century developments had also "unsettled" the region, culminating, however, in the massacre of around 20,000 Cilician Armenians in mid-April 1909. In approaching this story of dispossession and displacement,

Gratien is interested less in explaining the outbreak of violence and more in describing in broad strokes its socioeconomic and ecological contexts. The author particularly highlights growing local competition for limited resources – that is to say, land and employment – as the appropriate prism to understand how processes of state formation, capitalism, and settlement had the potential to transform pre-existing socioeconomic fault lines into ethno-religious tensions. While this approach has its own merits, the book's diachronic focus also forces the author to frame this episode of violence in a historical continuum. A stronger emphasis on the political and socioeconomic ruptures brought about by the Constitutional Revolution of 1908 and the counter-revolution of April 1909 would have made the author's approach more grounded by introducing both the context for violence and the range of actors involved in the confessionalization of existing socioeconomic tensions.

Such a synchronic approach shapes the narrative more compellingly when the author shifts to the discussion of World War I. As Gratien shows, the Ottoman entry into the war not only "emptied" the region due to wartime mobilization but also brought an end to the Armenian presence in Cilicia due to the Armenian genocide. The policies of resettling Muslim refugees in their stead completed Adana's demographic transformation. The war also led to agrarian collapse in the region due to labour shortages and the ongoing Allied blockade, while Ottoman countermeasures illustrated the limitations of the centrally coordinated war economy (from provisioning to labour battalions), with scarcity quickly leading to war profiteering

and famine. Just as the war violently transformed the lowland, so too did it the highlands, where the construction works on railroad tunnels – seen crucial for the war effort – became the anthropogenic context in which a malaria epidemic struck. In the wake of the war, the scale of wartime destruction across the region shaped the self-serving colonial discourses of agrarian development that accompanied the arrival of the victorious French forces to Cilicia and the repatriation of Armenians. These developments fuelled both Armenian and Turkish nationalisms, informing further rounds of violence and humanitarian crises.

When all the dust "settled" by the mid-1920s, Adana emerged as one of the most important frontiers of scientific progress and economic prosperity in the eyes of the newly emerging regime in Ankara. Although ravaged by the war, much like elsewhere in the country, Adana still retained its agricultural allure, drawing in seasonal labourers, immigrants, and refugees. Seeking to capitalize on this potential, the Turkish state began to embark on Turkification campaigns; policies informed by interwar peasantist ideas; and efforts to eradicate malaria via mass testing, distribution of quinine, and increased use of insecticides against mosquitos. Becoming a testing ground for the nation's public health, Adana featured predominantly in such initiatives. The state's interventions ranged from oiling standing waters to planting eucalyptus to drain swamplands, complete with new irrigation works that were designed to prevent flooding. As the state sought to transform the lowlands, the highlands became gentrified as the new wealth started appropriating it as part of middle-class leisure. The pastoralists who

still inhabited the mountainous terrain, on the other hand, began to be romanticized as the ideal, unspoiled Turks.

This is a very well-crafted book, one that will surely satisfy the readers with the depth of its analytical, historiographical, and empirical engagement. I only found the last part of the monograph that deals with the post–World War I period to be a bit underdeveloped. Crammed into a single chapter, the post-Ottoman story unfolds in ways one would expect it to do so, largely within the narrative parameters of the new nation-state. Here, the author could have engaged more fruitfully with the analytic insights of those working on messy post-Ottoman transitions. I was also a bit surprised to see that Yaşar Kemal's *İnce Memed*, which was regularly alluded to throughout the book, was markedly absent from the discussion here. This is such a pity because this quintessentially post-Ottoman novel provides excellent hints on the emerging regimes of (abandoned) property and local politics in the early republican Çukurova. Such nitpicking aside, I strongly recommend this book. Gratiens interventions are well worth reflecting on for historians interested not only in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey but also in environmental history and borderlands studies.

Notes

- 1 Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century*, in: James R. Grossman (ed.), *The Frontier in American Culture*, Berkeley 1994, pp. 66–102, p. 75.

Janet Polasky: *Asylum Between Nations: Refugees in a Revolutionary Era*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023, 312 pp.

Reviewed by
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Le dernier livre de Janet Polasky est particulièrement bienvenu. Il s'agit d'un livre aussi bien politique qu'historien – comme le sont tous les livres d'histoire – qui assume clairement la première dimension. Le projet du livre, qui est défini dans son épilogue, est d'exhumer une histoire de l'accueil au moment même où, à l'échelle nationale, les frontières se ferment, parfois de manière matérielle par la construction de murs. Or, le dilemme auquel sont confrontés les « États-nations » aujourd'hui a montré leur faillite. Il est alors nécessaire de puiser dans l'histoire des expériences politiques de l'accueil de réfugiés pour rouvrir des possibles oubliés.

La question des réfugiés a jailli historiquement pendant l'Âge des Révolutions et Janet Polasky explore la manière dont la ville-État de Hambourg (chap. 1 à 3) et les cantons suisses (chap. 4) à la fin du XVIIIe siècle, la jeune République de Belgique (chap. 5 à 8) et les États-Unis (chap. 9) au début et milieu du XIXe siècle ont chacun répondu à cette question. Selon elle, l'échec actuel des États-nations, gripés par le nationalisme sécuritaire, peut être dépassé en repartant de l'échelle locale (ce qui est valable aussi pour d'autres problèmes globaux comme le réchauffement climatique).