



Translation and the Political Economy of Global Knowledge Production The Case of Translating Contemporary Arab Thought

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Abstract

The translation of contemporary Arab thought has received scant scholarly attention in recent translation theory. This paper explores the status of translating contemporary Arab thought, offering a macro socio-economic analysis based on the basic assumption that translation forms a global system. Translation production and reception processes occur between asymmetric languages in an interdependent “world translation system,” organized by a core-periphery model with hypercentral, central, semi-central, and peripheral languages. The world-system has created an “international division of labor” in knowledge production, impacting the demand for certain languages and texts while neglecting others. The paper further examines the Arab nation’s position in the world-system, contextualizes knowledge production, language, and translation in its peripheral position which largely reflect its peripheral position. It scrutinizes the translation landscape of contemporary Arab thought English translations of books by eighteen contemporary Arab thinkers, analyzing volume, themes, publishers, and sponsorship. The paper employs reasonably straightforward theoretical-methodological approaches, with the Amazon website serving as the primary data source. The paper concludes that the characteristics of translating contemporary Arab thought are essentially a reflection of the Arab nation’s and Arabic language’s position in the global system and mostly confirm the characteristics of the world translation system.

Keywords: Contemporary Arab Thought, Center-Periphery, World-Systems Theory, World Translation System, Political Economy, Knowledge Production



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In contrast to the self-effacing classical Arabic sciences and philosophy, little is known about the translation of contemporary Arab thought and its refreshingly unprejudiced contribution to the global knowledge production system. Currently, the Arab nation counts over 430 million people spread throughout 22 countries, and Arabic is one of the United Nations' six official languages. However, the Arab world's contribution to the global knowledge production system remains detached from research and rather uncertain. The world's interest, or neglect, in translating contemporary Arab thought should be understood to be part of an international translation system. This system is hierarchically structured along the core and periphery which characterizes the socio-economic and political power relations at work among the different nations.

Historically, translation from and into Arabic went through constant fluctuations, with two distinctive eras: the Abbasid dynasty era which witnessed a vibrant translation movement into Arabic, during which the Caliph al-Ma'mun founded an academy called "The House of Wisdom" (Bayt al-Hikma) in Bagdad that featured a "massive collection of Greek, Persian, and Indian civilizations' translated and authored texts, manuscripts, maps, and other materials" (Algeriani and Mohadi 2017: 182; see also Versteegh et al. 2006); and the Toledo school era for translation from Arabic, in which a huge list of works, including a vast body of philosophical and scientific texts were translated from Arabic into Latin (Akasoy, 2011; Arráez-Aybar, Bueno-López, and Raio 2015). Whilst there has been a growing volume of rigorous scholarly works dealing with the different aspects of translating from Arabic into foreign languages, particularly into English, these writings are almost exclusively confined to the study of literary translation, linguistic aspects, or media translation. Meanwhile, research on translating contemporary Arab social sciences (or thought) has been hitherto widely neglected. This paper attempts to get to the root of this uncharted territory utilizing the world-system approach.

Translation and the World-System

The core-periphery model has been the subject of a growing volume of scholarly works within the field of translation and language studies (Heilbron 1999, 2000, 2010, 2020; de Swaan 2001; Heilbron and Sapiro 2007, 2016; Sapiro 2008, 2009; Cosma 2010; Pieta 2016; Budimir 2020). This basic dichotomy was developed within world-systems theory, a theory that is overwhelmingly considered as a historical socio-economic perspective that seeks to explain the workings of the global capitalist economy as a whole social system (Martinez-Vela 2001). Disparities in the world-system have created a global division of labor with asymmetrical power relations embodied in the different fields of communication between the Northern and the Southern nations. This being borne in mind, translation exchanges and flows between the core and periphery (which is undoubtedly assumed to be balanced and/or reciprocal) should be contextualized as a social system underpinning as it involves a network of agents and elements, including the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions, ideologies, power relations, and so on. (Tianmin 2006).

The very basic premise of the world-systems approach is that the world is seen as one system with core countries representing the “developed” Western industrial countries and the periphery and semi-periphery, countries representing nearly all the non-Western countries. Within this system, there is a division of labor where the function of the periphery is to supply the core with raw materials and consume the core’s products (Sisman 2018). In this global system, the economy and the social structure in the periphery are conditioned by the development and expansion of core economies (Koo 1984). Core nations are often characterized by “well-developed towns, flourishing manufacturing, technologically progressive agriculture, skilled and well-paid labor, and high investment” (Chirot and Hall 1982: 85), while at the same time, the periphery is characterized by only a marked degree of producing some primary goods with their towns perished, labor became compelled in order to keep production costs low, technology stalled, labor remained unskilled, and capital was drained into the core rather than accumulating (Chirot and Hall 1982). It is posited, therefore, that this means that the core hinges on and highly needed peripheries from which to extract the surplus that fueled the expansion.

Position of the Arab World in the World-System

The Arab world has developed a kind of conceptual geometry that makes it possible to only occupy a peripheral political and economic position in the world-system even though it represents a significant source of raw materials, particularly oil and gas, and has vast land with a unique position on the world map that connects Asia, Africa, and Europe. Despite that, the Arab world still exhibits many of the classic dependency features in the international division of labor. Hinnebusch (2003) aptly remarks that many of the basic (and even peculiar) characteristics of dependency can be found in the Middle East economies (and the rest of the Arab world): they are mostly primary product producers, they fail to transform their raw materials into high-value goods, and their human capital remains underdeveloped. The whys and wherefores of less vital contribution to the production of global value by contemporary Arab nations are that they do not make sufficient investments in Research and Development (R&D). The Arab world still lags behind many nations in terms of investment in R&D. In fact, none of the Arab countries invests more than 0.8 percent of GDP in R&D (UNESCO 2016).

World-System and International Division of Labor

Division of labor is the lineal separation of work processes into several tasks, with each task performed by a separate person or group of persons (Encyclopedia Britannica, par. 1). On the global level, division of labor refers to the geographic concentration of economic functions whereby core countries are based on exploitative hierarchies such as capital and perform skill-intensive tasks while peripheral countries blatantly perform labor-intensive work (Hutchinson 2004). Miller (2016: 94) states that the “global system saw value-added and enjoyed in the Global North, where rich societies had become affluent through their colonial and international advantages. The global core imported ideas, fashions, resources, and people from the world’s

periphery and exported manufactures.” Despite the emergence of other advanced economies outside the west, the Western hegemony in knowledge production is still dominant. Core economies, through several institutional arrangements and international relations, try to assert and perpetuate the global economic hegemony by virtually monopolizing innovation and patents, and knowledge production at large.

International Division of Intellectual Labor

Knowledge production and scientific practices are usually perceived (or promoted) as neutral and independent from politics and the economy. In reality, however, several studies reveal that inequalities and power imbalances exist between different global geographies (Girvan 2007; Kwiek 2015; Demeter 2019). Demeter (2019) argues that science’s self-definition includes the assumption that science is a meritocratic pursuit in which power relations are insignificant. Nonetheless, both empirical and theoretical investigations agree that global science was and continues to be a distorted field that would weigh heavily in favor of strong, central agents. Imbalances in the global division of intellectual labor thus give rise to inequity, and they are fairly self-evident in several ways and spaces including academic publishing, science networks, international accreditation and awarding bodies, innovation, and patents. Core countries continue to dominate the world’s scientific efforts and employ the most complex technologies (Girvan 2007). The world’s top-ranked universities, research and development institutions, and top-ranked academic journals are located in core countries. Graham (2014: 285) asserts that

[a]lmost all mediums of information in the early twenty-first century are still characterized by huge geographic inequalities: with the Global North producing, consuming, and controlling much of the world’s codified knowledge, and the Global South largely left out of these processes.

Connell and their colleagues (2018: 2) depict a comprehensive image of these disparities:

The global metropole accumulates data (in libraries, museums, botanic gardens, journals, databanks etc.), and most importantly is the site of the production of methods and theories (in elite universities and scientific societies, by specialized instrument-makers and mathematicians). Peripheral regions, by contrast, are a massive source of data, collected by travelers from the metropole (officials, missionaries, data-collecting expeditions), by local knowledge workers acting as informants, and now also by automatic instruments and remote sensing.

These inequalities are not only evident in hard sciences but also in social sciences and humanities. The modern social sciences are considered the sole creation of Western researchers and institutions. This status has provided Western academics with more social and symbolic capital than their peers in the global South. Connell (2007) closely examines how modern dominant social science leans toward the viewpoints, perspectives, and problems of metropolitan society while presenting itself as universal knowledge. In the words of Connell (2007: ix), this manifests itself in “relations, authority, exclusion and inclusion, hegemony, partnership, sponsorship,

appropriation-between intellectuals and institutions in the metropole and those in the world periphery.” Academic journals provide a clear illustration of this pattern, with the United States and the UK publishing more indexed journals than the rest of the world put together. Additionally, we shall point out that Western Europe performs fairly well, while the remainder of the world seldom appears in these rankings (Graham, Hale, and Stephens 2011).

World-System and World Translation System

To further our understanding of the process of translating, one must first examine how it is entangled with the power dynamics (economic, political, and cultural) between national states and their languages. Heilbron (1999) exclusively focuses on international book translation markets (with spatial and temporal limits) and tries to further explain the uneven international flows of translated books, rarely balanced or reciprocal. He emphasizes that “the various activities involved are considered interdependent and are therefore best understood as constituting an international or even a world-system” (Heilbron 1999: 431). The dynamics of this international translation system, according to Heilbron (1999: 432), are “based on a core-periphery structure, and the analyses of this world-system and the position that various language groups occupy within it is a precondition for understanding the role of translations in specific local or national contexts.” The significance of translations within language groups is shown to depend primarily on the position of the language within the international system. The position occupied by languages in the world translation system has an essential impact on the likelihood of translation taking place between specific (central or peripheral) languages, as well as on the translation strategies translators are likely to opt for in the translation of individual texts and text types (Zlatnar Moe, Žigon, and Mikolič Južnič 2019). This structure of the system “has come about through economic and political competition and compromise, in which trade-offs and power plays have produced the particular language ecology that we find in the world today” (Tonkin 2005: 201).

The world translation system is often found to display specific characteristics: it forms a hierarchical structure whereby language groups are structured as core, semi-peripheral, and peripheral. A language is considered more explicitly central in the world-system of translation “when it has a larger share in the total number of translated books worldwide” (Heilbron 1999: 433). Furthermore, changes in the international position of languages are by no means simple nor occur abruptly. Regarding publishing, for publishers outside the core, the decision to undertake and publish a translation from a peripheral language is always possible and depends considerably on the existence of its translation in a central language. Moreover, when a central language translates an author from the periphery, then usually their local recognition and fame are enhanced. As for the variety of possible topics translated, the more central a language is in the international translation system, the more genres of books are translated from this language (Heilbron 2010). It is inversely proportional; that is to say, there is an inverse relationship between the centrality of a language in the international translation system and the proportion of translations in national production.

Translation from Arabic into central languages goes in line with the characteristics of the international translation system. In a sense, whilst the Arab world has bequeathed to us a large volume of publications of all discursively based genres from central languages, there is very little translation from the Arab world into central languages. Arabic as a source language accounts for barely one in a thousand of all books translated into continental Europe. Arabic translations are almost materially nonexistent in certain countries in Central and Eastern Europe, like Slovakia, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, and the Baltic states (Deschaumes and Goffey 2012). Moreover, literary works tend to entirely dominate translation from Arabic into the European languages. At the same time, there is no evidence that other genres such as humanities and social sciences have increased over time, while the documental status of religious publications seems to rise. Translating the human and social sciences from Arabic represents less than 5 percent of translations in Europe. For instance, in France, the EU country that translates the most Arab authors, the human and social sciences represent only 20 out of 1065 titles (Deschaumes and Goffey 2012). It ensues, therefore, that modern and contemporary Arab thought represents a step backward—only a smaller part of the already small percentage of Arabic translations. It must be concluded that the inequalities in translation between the Arab world and the EU countries are a mechanical reproduction of the inequalities in people's movements between the shores of the Mediterranean (Deschaumes and Goffey 2012).

Method and Data Collection

A sample of 18 key contemporary Arab thinkers was selected (see annexed table) to carefully examine the characteristics of translating contemporary Arab thought in consideration of the world translation system. The authors were selected based on various criteria including intellectual contribution, originality, influence and recognition, publication and dissemination, impact on public discourses, reviews, and generational influence. The data included the number of books published in Arabic for each author, the number of books and percentages of English translations and available translations in other languages, as well as information on translators, publishers, and sponsors.

The data collection source was mainly based on the Amazon website database. Other websites, such as the publishers' websites, were also consulted in addition to information collected from the cover pages of the books. Amazon is not only an e-commerce site with different kinds of products but also one of the most important researchable databases for books of all kinds (mainly books in English). According to Poupaud and colleagues (2009), Amazon gives an accurate image of what is in principle available to the English-speaking world, particularly in the United States and UK. Additionally, any book entered into the Amazon database is permanently kept even if the book is out-of-print which gives an idea about the books available to English readers at certain periods of time. However, Amazon has some limitations because, originally, it was not designed as a database for translation research. There is no search option dedicated specifically to translated

books. Usually, if the translator appears somewhere, it appears as another author of the book and not as a translator.

Contemporary Arab Thought

Contemporary Arab thought is an expression that encompasses a variety of relevant issues. For the sake of simplicity, we define contemporary Arabic thought as all the intellectual output and knowledge produced (particularly in the form of books) by renowned Arab thinkers or intellectuals since the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. The knowledge and ideas produced are far from homogeneous; they reflect a wide range of social, historical, and political circumstances and social upheavals that have taken place in the Arab world since the second half of the twentieth century. These thoughts encompass intellectual architecture of modern society, vis-à-vis intellectual currents, trends, themes, and traditions such as Marxism, nationalism, liberal secularism, and political Islamism, among many others.

We can operate under an assumption that the failure of the post-colonial Arab state on all economic, political, and cultural levels has had a great impact on the formation of contemporary Arab thought. The political and cultural censorship, along with the lack of freedoms and democracy, have significantly influenced contemporary Arab thought. A plethora of criticism of religious thought and Islamic traditions has also had a large share of intellectual debates, particularly on the issue of modernizing Islamic discourse. At the same time, the Arab world has not been isolated from international political and economic influences which have heavily influenced Arab thought too. At this juncture, Abu-Rabi' (2003: xvi) points out that "the Arab world has moved from being dominated by colonial modernity to being dominated by global capitalism. This transition has engendered many political, social, economic, and ideological movements within the Arab world." Cumulatively, all of these factors have shaped Arab intellectual production.

More generally, contemporary Arab thinkers and their intellectual output can be institutionally classified into three main directions; first, those who might be called "radical transformists," who, according to Ballotah (1990: 3), "see nothing useful short of a cultural revolution. Arab culture in their views should be so changed that it will be fully remade." They call for discarding dogmatic religious views about life and the universe and call for deploring religious bigotry and embracing secularism, rationalism, and the advancement of science and technology. Second, those who might be called "reformists." They consider

...traditional Arab culture to be viable in modern times if only it is interpreted and understood better, and if certain aspects of its elements are developed in the light of modern needs and the experience of modern nations. Their major thrust is towards renewal rather than radical change. (Ballotah 1990: 4)

Third, those who might be called "traditionalists," who are mainly committed to Arab culture's religious aspect and seek revivalism and the eradication of all external cultural influences from Arab society, particularly Western ones for the sake of purity (Ballotah, 1990). This group does

not want to transform or reform Arab culture but to adhere to what they consider to be authentic Islamic origins.

It is crucial to comprehend this classification, examine how it relates to translation, and determine whether any particular categories are preferred to translation agents in both the source and cultures, and understand why certain topics are selected and not others.

Contemporary Arab Thought in the West

Contemporary Arab thought and internal intellectual debates about society and politics in the Arab world do not seem to have captured the interest of publishers and readers in the West. According to Daifallah (2012: 5), “the large volume of intellectual production and debates has seldom been presented to western readers. The English language literature on contemporary Arab thought is generally characterized by dearth.” Abu-Rabi’ (2004: 7) also asserts that “the field of contemporary Arab thought is still virgin territory, unmapped by studies in English.” The way the West perceives Arab thought has been influenced by the existing power dynamics between the two. According to Corm (2015: xii), “the rich [Arab] thought has generally been marginalized in academic works and the media.” He adds that “contrary to the predominant image portrayed in the media and by some academic research since the 1980s, Arab thought is complex, varied, and vibrant. Indeed, it has vigorously responded repeatedly to numerous historical challenges” (Corm 2015: 2).

Analysis and Discussion

What might pique our interest at this point is putting the theoretical framework discussed above into practice. Let us exhibit a clear outline of the way the analysis is structured; it is mainly around three questions: how many (books) are translated and to which languages? Which authors and which texts were translated and why? Who published or sponsored the translations and why?

How Many (Books) are Translated and to Which Languages?

Insofar as the world translation system is concerned, the volume of translation flows from peripheral languages to the central languages is very small. It should be noted that, according to Jacquemond (1992), major flows of the global translation streams are flowing mainly within the Northern nations, while the flows between the Southern nations are almost non-existent, and the exchanges between the North and the South in both directions are characterized by uneven exchanges. In terms of the volume of translation, the data on which this paper is based shows that the case of translating contemporary Arabic thought is no exception to the world translation system. We will discuss below what was translated of contemporary Arab thought into English and other languages.

Translations into English

As a lingua franca, English is nowadays the most central language in the international translation system. Taking our cue from de Swaan (2001), English, plays a “hyper-central” role. The biggest respective shares of translated books in the global market are translations from English. UNESCO figures indicate that English was the source language for an average of 41 percent of all translations in 1978–1980 (UNESCO 2016). This proportion may have been as high as 49 percent in 1987 (Venuti 1998) and 55 to 60 percent more recently (Heilbron 2010). The same thing applies to the other direction, the hyper-central language will translate much less from peripheral and semi-peripheral languages. Translations account for only 2 to 4 percent of books published in the United States or the UK (Pym and Chrupala 2005; see also Pym 1992, 2016); while at the same time, some peripheral languages translate more than 30 percent of the published books into their languages. A substantial gap exists between the volume of translation of contemporary Arab thought into English and what is translated from modern and contemporary Western thought. According to the data, an Arab thinker can have a maximum of three books translated into English out of 14 books originally authored in Arabic (about 21 percent), and the average percentage of translation of all authors is around 10 percent of their total works originally authored in Arabic. While, on the other hand, many Western thinkers have had their entire works translated into Arabic including works of both social and natural sciences. Not only that, but many works of Western thinkers were retranslated as well. It is worth noting that the absolute number of translations from Arabic does not say a lot about other factors such as reception and influence in the target language, which do not appear to be highly celebrated outside the very narrow circles of a few specialists in academia. This contrasts with the Western thought, which has had a significant influence on shaping Arab thought in the social sciences and humanities.

Translations into Languages Other than English

In addition to the English translations which we have referred to in the above discussion, the data sample on which this work is based includes all available translations into other languages by the same authors. It should be assumed that exploring translation into languages other than English would provide evidence to advance our understanding of the global translation system, particularly the translation flows between peripheral languages per se or with between semi-peripherals. Translation exchanges between Arabic and other peripheral languages have received scant attention in translation research. To diversify and corroborate this claim, the global translation system shows that translation between peripheral languages at best achieves a weak representation of the system, and translation from one peripheral language to another is usually done through an intermediate language, which is often English, or other central languages such as French and German, which usually determine what is to be translated between the peripheral languages themselves.

However, the data reveals a pattern of translating contemporary Arab thought into other peripheral languages that differs from what the world translation system suggests. There appear to be some works translated from Arabic into some peripheral languages without the need for a

central intermediary language. This phenomenon could be explained by considering other common factors that connect these peripheral languages together, such as religion. The data shows that almost all translations from Arabic into other peripheral languages were into the languages of non-Arab Islamic countries, such as Turkish, Persian, and Indonesian, especially for Islam-related topics. Despite cultural, social, and economic disparities, Arab and non-Arab Islamic countries have a common religious past that is still valid today. Consequently, it is anticipated that prevailing Arab intellectual debates—particularly those concerning Islam and modernity, as well as broader discussions on Islam and contemporary politics—will continue to attract the attention of non-Arab Islamic countries. Conversely, while not entirely absent, translation activities in non-Islamic peripheral countries remain extremely limited. With the shortage of translation databases from Arabic, it is hard to construct a comprehensive picture of the status of translation exchanges from Arabic into other peripheral languages.

Which Authors and Which Texts were Translated and Why?

Studying translation from Arabic at the author and topic levels is likely to provide some insight into the eminent problem of “which authors and which texts?” It is then crucial to look at the issue from several angles to try to understand why certain writers and topics (or texts) were translated but not others. There are so many internal and external determining factors. No one can doubt the vital role of the internal factors which usually include the author’s accumulated symbolic capital in their community and outside, the networks between the author and the translators, the publishers, the universities, and funders (or sponsors). Another important element is related to the author’s focus and career trajectory. For example, some Arab thinkers probably wrote in foreign languages more than they did in Arabic. This element is akin to the author’s professional path and position within the research community. While some Arab thinkers were highly focused on writing for the Arabic-speaking public and paid little attention to the foreign audience, other authors took a different path by focusing on publishing for a global audience (Brahimi 2018). Those that cater to a foreign audience have typically spent enough time living and working in the West. The external factors are mainly related to translation policies in target languages, which are typically influenced by power dynamics between the two languages and the local translation market in the target language. In the instance of translating from Arabic translation politics could include, for example, orientalist conceptions about Arab society as viewed by some Western agents and the extent to which this influences their selections for translation from a peripheral language like Arabic. The data shows that there were several translations of controversial titles such as the topics on the relationship between Islam and society and the issue of the restoration and revitalization of Islamic discourse. Telling examples are those of Nasr Hamed Abu-Zaid and Muhammad Arkoun, where both are adequate advocates disposed to call for a rebirth of Islamic discourse that challenges what might seem to be a question of conventional interpretations of Islamic traditions. The imbalanced power relations between the North and the South have long been reflected in the nature of the selected texts for translation in terms of genres and topics. Dominant cultures tend to select texts that meet the preconceived notions of the Southern cultures, which are seen as grossly

exotic, stagnant, backward-looking, absurdly primitive, and violent, or as Faiq (2004: 4) succinctly puts it: “the Arab and Islamic cultures, which despite serious radical changes in their politics and socio-economic realities, are still seen through the eyes of a fixed system of representations.” In other cases, translations are being reframed (for example, Baker 2010) or manipulated to serve political agendas in which dominated cultures translate all kinds of texts from dominant cultures. In terms of reception, Jacquemond (1992: 44) states that “Southern cultural production that reaches the North via translation hardly finds readers outside the very narrow circles of ‘concerned’ readers and specialists, whereas the Northern cultural production that Southern readers receive is much broader.” Despite the fact that the status of translating social sciences and humanities differs from that of translating literature in terms of audience and reception, it appears that they share the same politics in terms of the selected topics as that of literary translation. It is noticeable that translating controversial issues about Islam and critics of Arab reason is compelling. According to the data, about 20 out of the 34 translated books by the selected authors have dealt with themes very much related to the study of Islam, particularly the understanding and interpretations of Islam in the modern world. In fact, the term “Islam” appears in more than two-thirds of the translated book titles. The interest in the philosophical understanding of Islam by Western academia, specialists, and publishers has a variety of causes and interpretations, which may be traced back to a series of political developments in the Arab world. The rise of political Islamic movements, particularly Jihadist movements, and the ramifications of this rise on the international political scene are among the most important factors. Indeed, Western interest in Islam, particularly modern Islamic movements, has been growing since the late 1970s. The development of the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt, the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and Jihadists in Afghanistan were major factors that drew a lot of attention from the Western media and academia. Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the war and subsequent invasion of Iraq, September 11th attacks, ISIS, and what followed the so-called “war on terror,” which is mostly connected with Islam, were all key turning moments in world politics regarding the region. Sayyid (2009: 86) summarizes the West's recent interest in Islam:

Since at least the 1990s, there has been a huge growth in interest in the Muslim presence in Western plutocracies. Part of this interest has been due to series of moral panics which have centered on the figure of the Muslim. The mobilization of Muslims as Muslims has raised questions about national identity and belonging. Increasing interest is also due to how the security threat—as posited by the “war on terror”—has been focused on the Muslim question as a means of reconfiguring the liberal-democratic contours of Western plutocracies.

It is not straightforward to assert that the volume of translation from Arabic has increased because of these developments; precise data is required to support or contradict this claim. However, in terms of content, there appears to be an increasing interest in Islam-related topics among translated books. As we previously stated, several factors influence the volume of translation across language groups, which are often governed by a structured world translation system. This system has

remained relatively unchanged despite huge changes in transnational communications in terms of translation and knowledge production.

Who Published or Sponsored the Translations and Why?

It is perhaps worth noting that publishers have an important role as a forum for the selection, production, and distribution of translations. They are deemed as an obvious factor determining whether a translation will be produced. Their job is motivated by a multitude of factors, including financial and symbolic ones. Sapiro (2008: 154) states that “publishers play a major role in the international circulation of books, in their original language as well as in translation. A sociological approach to translation, considered as a social practice, thus needs to consider this category of agents.” According to the data, books translated from Arabic were mostly commissioned not in response to natural market demand from the target language (English), but rather in response to a desire from the source language (Arabic) to promote its own intellectual production and culture, that is, promoted by Arab agents (the author, the translator, the research institution, and so on). This is fairly self-evident from the sponsorship of most of the translated books.

The data also shows that translated books were published by two main types of publishers: private and university presses. Some well-known publishers such as Routledge, Verso, Bloomsbury, and Saqi Books are among the private publishers. What is noticeable here is that Saqi Books has the biggest share of the translations presented in the list (5 books out of 34 books). Saqi Books, based in London and founded by a Lebanese family, focuses on the promotion and publishing of translated works from the Arab world, advancing the promotion of cultures and dissemination of knowledge. Unsurprisingly, the maximum number of translations made by this publisher emphasizes the fact that translations from Arabic are supply driven. We also note that some translations were published jointly by Western publisher and the Arab publishers (e.g., the I. B. Touris, which has now been acquired by Bloomsbury), and The Center for Arab Unity Studies based in Beirut, which has been one of the most important research centers in the Arab world since the 1970s, where most contemporary Arab thinkers have their works published through the support of this center. It is therefore not surprising that some books published by this center are those translations supported by this center; this includes the works of Mohammad Abed Al-Jabiri.

Notably, a number of the translations of contemporary Arab thought were produced by prestigious university presses including Yale, Princeton, Cambridge, and the University of California. University presses are academic publishers specializing in publishing academic books and journals. Most university presses publish without the purpose of profit-making and they usually work as an integral part of a large research university, usually located within well-established universities in Western academic institutions. The university or some external grants usually subsidize the publications. Intellectual works from the South published by academic presses in the North are usually issued and promoted by specialized research centers within these academic institutions. For example, there is a series of translated books published and sponsored by a joint project of Yale University Press and the MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University titled the *World Thought in Translation Series* that aims to introduce selected

intellectual works from various cultures to English-speaking audiences (Yale University Press, n.d.). This project has translated several works including the works of some Arab authors such as Rachid Ghannouchi and Nasr Hamed Abu-Zaid. The financial support for the translation and publication of this series is a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York. This is another example of the supply and demand sides of translating contemporary Arab thought and the kinds of sponsorship it receives. Unlike the economic forces that influence the translation market in the West, translation in the Arab world is mainly based on not-for-profit initiatives. Although the data shows that around 70 percent of the translations were published by private publishers and 30 percent were published by university presses, both are commissioned based on grants and financial sponsorship.

The case of translating contemporary Arab thought reveals a pattern of publishing that differs from what Sapiro (2008) proposes, namely the economic dimension (profit) of symbolic goods, although symbolic capital remains important in the selection and promotion process, it is not economic considerations that have the greatest influence on translation and publication decisions in the case of translating Arab thought. Most of the translations reported in the sample used in this paper are funded by Arab public or non-profit entities, or by university presses in the West, which are mainly non-profit as well. Furthermore, some university presses' translations are supported by charity organizations through grants or endowments, rather than by direct funding from the universities themselves. This includes, for example, all the translations published by the Bloomsburg series *Contemporary Arab Scholarship in the Social Sciences*, which is coordinated by the Center for Arab Unity Studies and funded by the Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation, as well as many other translations funded by universities or foundations. This suggests that translating contemporary Arab thought is not strongly influenced by market economic forces. As a result, it is fair to conclude that translation from Arabic is supply-driven, that is, there is no natural market demand for contemporary Arab thought, and it is promoted primarily through financial assistance and grants from charitable foundations from the source language to the target language. This could also imply that if no sponsorship or financial support were available to translate these works, the size would be considerably smaller.

Conclusion

This paper has aimed at filling a gap in the literature concerning translating contemporary Arab thought. Previous studies on Arabic translation were, to a large part, limited to the study of translation into Arabic or literary translation from Arabic. The paper employed a world-systems framework to explore the complexity of the factors influencing translating exchanges from Arabic, examining the history and context of translation at the macro level between Arabic and other foreign central and peripheral languages. It investigates the socio-economic and political conditions that influence translating (or not translating) from Arabic, collecting data from various sources, of which the most important was the Amazon website. The analysis was based on the data collected about eighteen contemporary Arab thinkers. The data was collected around several

aspects: the number of books authored by each thinker in Arabic, the English translations for each thinker, information about translators, publishers, and data about books translated into languages other than English. The analysis was based on three major questions about the volume of translation, the authors and texts selected for translation, and the publishers and sponsors of the translations.

The number of translated books on contemporary Arab thought has been very few, especially if we compare what Arabs translate in turn from the West. The article also found that unlike translating into Arabic which is demand-driven, translating from Arabic is supply-driven. This means that there is no real market demand for target languages. This is evidenced by the financial sponsorship in producing these translations. Although the types of publishers varied between private and university presses, most of the translated books were translated with financial support and sponsorship from private or public institutions or through programs in Western universities, or through partnerships between Arab research institutions and foreign publishers.

As for the translated topics: the results showed a clear interest in the kind of topics pertinent to Islam. Western interest in Islam-related topics has various reasons, including the political dimension and the associated political economy and conflicts in the region. Most important has been the rise of political Islam since the 1980s, particularly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The data showed that among the titles translated, nearly 70 percent of their titles contained the word “Islam”.

This paper has shed some light on a new and perhaps a slightly more creative topic that was not previously investigated in a systematic manner, to our best knowledge. As can be gleaned from global knowledge production, Arabic translation history in the different periods is yet a topic that lacks systematic studies with relevant exhaustive data. Most of the Arabic theoretical presentations on translation appear to focus on translation into Arabic, literary translation, or descriptive and linguistic studies. Future research might weave its way through to comparative studies between what is translated from Arabic and other languages of, for example, other non-Arab Islamic countries as well as other countries from the global periphery. The heart of the problem is supply and demand and sponsorship which all require further in-depth research. Tracking the production and translation and the path of individual thinkers is another door for numerous studies. The paper revealed the weakness and deficiency in the existence of classified and reliable data about the Arabic translation movement which requires a considerable jump to immediate action, rather than rhetoric and substantial conscious efforts from concerned institutions to work on this topic.

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