

***The elusive truth –
Current struggles about past intellectual and technical activities in Islamic societies***

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In scene 12, Bertold Brecht makes Galileo Galilei rebuke his student Andrea Sarti:

“Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes.”

In scene 13, Brecht allows Andrea to remark:

“The aim of science is not to open the door to infinite wisdom, but to set some limit on infinite error.”

These two quotes capture marvelously two major aspects of the current struggles in public spaces like museums, popular books, videos or the Internet about past intellectual and technical activities in Islamic societies - the desire to glorify or to deny those activities wholeheartedly and the lack of knowledge and serious effort on both sides of the inimical camps in regard to their self-chosen domain of story-telling.

1001 Inventions and *Sultans of Science* are two among many exhibitions on this theme, in particular in Great Britain, Saudi Arabia, the US and the various Arabic Gulf states, but also in France, Germany, Turkey and now also in Sweden and Norway. These two and others that I visited in London, Istanbul and Paris are of profoundly variable quality in content, message and design, depending on whether and if so in which capacity academic experts and professional designers were members of the team that planned, designed and executed each single one of them. In my talk, I will discuss some of the features that these exhibitions share and some that set them apart from each other. I will also pay attention to some of their critics, since I think that the latter's often embarrassingly uninformed certainty that Muslims never contributed anything of their own to human knowledge or progress that is worthwhile to be remembered and exhibited is merely the negative twin of glorifying such contributions beyond the pale.

In an effort to explain the interconnectedness between glorification and denial, I will briefly summarize the difficulties that academic historians of science in Islamic societies faced and face in their professional struggles to recover, interpret and theorize the sciences and technologies of past Islamic societies. I hope I will be able to describe clearly the limits we believe we erected during the last four decades against "infinite error".