

Anma Yazısı / Necrology

In Memoriam Mehmet Genç*

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On March 18th, 2021 Mehmet Genç, an eminent Ottoman economic historian passed away. Together with Ömer Lütfi Barkan and Halil İnalçık, he is considered to be one of the founding fathers of Ottoman economic history.¹ It can be said that, with his demise and thanks to his work, the age of the foundation of Ottoman economic history has now come to an end and the discipline has emerged as an indispensable part of world economic history.

Genç's so-called "tripot model" is considered to be the most comprehensive and well-understood model of the Ottoman economy. This was confirmed by the well-known Dutch economic historian Wantje Fritschy, who told me in a conference in Italy that she had started to learn Turkish in order to read Genç in his own language. Her reasoning was simply that comparative history of European public finance has to incorporate Ottoman public finance, which cannot be comprehended without Mehmet Genç and to understand Genç truly, one should read him in his own language.

In 1974, I was a Ph.D student at the University of Pennsylvania. The thesis committee had insisted that my thesis should be read and approved by an international authority first. They suggested Ömer Lütfi Barkan. I returned to Turkey and managed to persuade him to supervise my work. He told me to write a preliminary report and to see him in one year's time.

A year later I went to Istanbul to his office with my completed report. He

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read it. Said, “fine”, and then called someone to come to his office. A few minutes later a man in his late thirties entered with a big smile. That’s how I met Mehmet Genç for the first time. After introducing us to each other Barkan said to him:

“I am quite old and may not see the completion of this young man’s thesis. If that’s the case, then I want you to supervise it”.

Then turning to me he continued:

“If I cannot continue supervising your thesis, you should do everything he says as if I have said it.”

This is how Mehmet Genç was formally made my teacher. It was the decision of the greatest authority of Ottoman economic history.

Five years later Barkan passed away. I had completed my thesis one year before and had it approved by the committee at Penn. Meanwhile, Mehmet Genç was chasing perfection. With Barkan’s demise, he stopped writing his thesis altogether. I understand perfectly well why he did so: there was nobody else left capable of judging his work and he was not going to be examined by someone less qualified than himself. Rejecting the usual, established norms and procedures of an academic career, he simply continued his research. To its credit, the Faculty of Letters of the University of Istanbul conferred him with an honorary Ph.D in 1996. He had certainly not asked for it, it was bestowed.

The main question he was after, pertained to the European industrial revolution and how it affected Ottoman industries. Naturally, he was expecting serious decline in Ottoman industrial performance that was facing the full force of the industrial revolution. Although Ottoman archives are very rich and contain some 400 million documents, they are state archives and look at economic phenomena mainly from the perspective of the state. Consequently, he could not find reliable long term industrial production data. Instead, he decided to look at taxes paid by the Ottoman industries. Since he was expecting declining industrial performance, taxes paid by these industries should also have declined.

But his research yielded totally unexpected results. After examining tax data of nearly all the major industries he ended up getting flat lines! Yes,

years' of research yielding just flat lines! It was as if Ottoman industries were operating behind a powerful protective shield and were not affected by the industrial revolution at all. As fellow researchers, we can well imagine the frustration and bewilderment he must have felt. Inevitably, he succumbed to a severe depression but then recovered and did return to the archives to determine why his data were yielding such strange trends. His perseverance led to the discovery of the *muaccele* component of the *malikâne* system and he succeeded to finally observe the actual industrial trends.

Next came the discovery of the *esham* system. Combination of the two systems was tantamount to the discovery of the *modus operandi* of the Ottoman public finance from 1695 until the nineteenth century. It pointed out to the remarkable ability of the Ottomans to reform their public finance in response to military crises. There is no doubt that it was this ability behind the longevity of the Ottoman state. Indeed, the period 1695-1921 known as the “era of decline” actually lasted for more than 200 years. He often compared this protracted “era of decline” to the entire life span of the Soviet Union that had lasted merely 70 years in comparison.

He was invited to the Soviet Union during the 1970s. Upon his return, we met in Üsküdar. Enjoying the nice weather and the superb view of the historical peninsula, I asked him about his observations of the great power to the North. He replied in two words:

“Perfect failure”.

Surprised, I asked for the details. He then began a long explanation that was reminiscent of the Ottoman economy. I remember thinking, perhaps a little unkindly:

“He is so imbued with the Ottomans that he sees them in everything else”.

Eventually, I couldn't help remarking:

“What you are describing is just like the Ottoman economy”. When he replied affirmatively, I said,

“But we all know how the Ottoman empire ended”. He said,

“This one will end too, but neither I nor even you will see it!”

As a matter of fact we both did. He had erred not in substance but in timing.

So, back in the 1970s when it was commonly thought that the Soviet Union would only end as a result of a nuclear war and a global catastrophe, Mehmet Genç knew that it would simply implode because it was a “perfect failure”.

Discovery of esham has important implications from the perspective of modern Islamic economics and finance as well. This is because, it enables the state or the private sector to raise funds from the public without the rate of interest. Thus, if modernized, it would be the perfect instrument for public borrowing in the Islamic world. Notwithstanding this fact, the insistence of Islamic countries not to apply it for contemporary public borrowing calls for further research.

After the double institutional discovery of malikâne and esham just explained above, Genç unleashed a comprehensive synthesis. This was nothing less than a thorough explanation of the entire Ottoman economic doctrine. Briefly referred to above as “Genç’s Tripot”, the model is composed of three principles: provisionism, fiscalism and traditionalism, which he argued acted as a sophisticated system of co-ordinates. During our many discussions of the model, I had suggested that he should add waqfs as the fourth leg to it. He did not reject the idea and eventually came up with a superb paper.² As the title of the paper indicates, he seems to have thought seriously about moving on to a four legged table from the tripot!

Another very important argument of this paper needs to be mentioned here. He has argued that while taking an important decision, Ottomans always examined it according to three criteria:

- 1) It should be useful to the state
- 2) It should be useful for the public
- 3) It should not harm anybody.

As any economist would recognize, we see the origin of the concept of Pareto Optimum here. Indeed, these criteria suggest that as we take one by one decisions each one of which is useful to the state and or to the public, WITHOUT harming anybody, we approach to the optimum. I think, Genç has informed us about what we should call the Ottoman optimum!

Finally, I am also convinced that his model can be hugely important for Byzantine historians. It is inevitable that there should be significant

continuity in the economic institutions of these two empires that have ruled over the same geography for so many centuries. Thanks to the Genç model, Byzantine economic historians can now study the quite well-known *modus operandi* of the Ottoman state, which they can then take as a hypothesis to discover the much less well-known *modus operandi* of the Byzantine state.

While I am putting an end to this obituary, I am filled with overwhelming sadness. While I have lost a marvellous teacher and friend, economic history has lost a giant.

Notes

- 1 Some might argue that other great names such as F. Köprülü, H. Sahillioğlu and M. Kütükoğlu should also be included in this list. But Köprülü was a legal and institutional historian while Sahillioğlu and Kütükoğlu focused on specific subjects. None of them attempted an overview of Ottoman economic history.
- 2 Mehmet Genç, “Klasik Osmanlı Sistemi ve Vakıflar” (The Classical Ottoman System and Waqfs), *Vakıflar Dergisi*, 42, Aralık 2014.