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*Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman  
and Middle Eastern / North African Studies*

A Tribute to Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj

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# Empires before and after the Post-colonial Turn: The Ottomans

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Being historians we know all too well that to any members of our profession worth their salt, their field of study is “very special.” Ottomanists are no exception, even though in the present day and age, the notion that the Ottoman Empire is somehow unique and incomparable will make many – but by no means all – scholars smile. Nationalist historiography had assumed that this uniqueness and incomparability was axiomatic. But presently, with at least some representatives of our discipline beginning to question the basic assumptions of nationalism, approaches have changed and Ottoman history has become a legitimate subject for comparison, if that term is used in a very broad sense: Japan, the Ancient Near Eastern empires, Rome, Moghul India and most recently even imperial China all have emerged on the horizons at least of certain Ottomanists.

## **Entering ‘World History’ through a – vaguely – comparative approach**

Viewed from a different angle, scholars dealing with polities that often are quite remote from the Mediterranean basin, regard Ottoman history as a legitimate part of ‘World History.’ At the same time, Ottomanists interested

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in the ‘World History’ project are often quite aware of the Eurocentric biases that in spite of efforts to eliminate them still adhere to the ‘grand narrative’ of ‘World History.’ Perhaps initiatives on the part of Ottomanists and others who knock on the doors of the ‘World History’ palazzo vociferously demanding to be let in, will somewhat diminish this bias in the long run.

In our particular bailiwick an interest in relating to other fields of history is still relatively novel. During the 1960s and 1970s most historians dealing with the Ottoman world wanted to find new documents in archives or libraries and explicate them, drawing ‘intermediate’ conclusions whenever appropriate – later on Halil Berktaş was to coin the term ‘document fetishism’ for the attitude of scholars who took this approach to the exclusion of everything else. At that stage there doubtless was a certain amount of repugnance towards any kind of ‘opening up’ towards outsiders; and with a few distinguished exceptions, the attempt to interpret Ottoman history in terms of the ‘feudalism vs. Asiatic mode of production’ controversy of the 1970s unfortunately generated more heat than light.<sup>1</sup>

In my view one of the reasons for the relative failure of this originally quite promising debate was the fault of Ottoman historians: we simply had not provided enough ‘intermediate’ conclusions for historically minded sociologists and political scientists to work with. As a result – and contrary to the recommendations of Sherlock Holmes – there was a lot of speculation on the basis of but limited information. Moreover in the Turkish context many people interested in the ‘feudalism vs. Asiatic mode of production’ debate wanted to use the results as starting points for left-wing policy decisions; and in my perhaps biased view, this tendency to politicize an essentially historical debate soon led the whole enterprise into an impasse from which it never emerged.

In a totally different vein, attempts at general syntheses by historians steeped in the Ottoman archives also often turned out to be premature: both İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı and Mustafa Akdağ produced numbers of good

1 As contributions of unusual sophistication we may mention Halil Berktaş, “Tarih Çalışmaları,” in *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türkiye Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1985), 2456-78; and *idem*, “The Search for the Peasant in Western and Turkish History / Historiography,” in *New Approaches to State and Peasant in Ottoman History*, eds. Halil Berktaş and Suraiya Faroqhi (London: Frank Cass, 1992), 109-84.

monographs, but their attempts to write overall histories of the Ottoman Empire were much less successful.<sup>2</sup>

### **Furtive glances at other empires, especially the Moghuls and ancient Rome**

But in the later 1980s and early 1990s, the climate changed and some Ottomanist historians became more interested in the methods and results of people working in other branches of history. In this context Tosun Arıcanlı, then at Harvard, organized a series of conferences which brought together historians of Iran, pre-colonial India, and the Ottoman Empire. It was a fascinating experience. But no common publication came out of these gatherings, and organizational difficulties aside, the relative narrowness of the scholarly circle believing in the usefulness of such enterprises surely had something to do with the outcome: once the conferences were over, the participants – and their papers – went their separate ways.

Now, about twenty years later the situation is somewhat different: a recently completed series of conferences on the history of empires brought together a reasonable number of Ottomanist historians from Turkey and abroad with their colleagues working on Rome, Moghul India and early modern Europe. Some publications have already emerged; and others are in the offing.<sup>3</sup> However we must admit that systematic comparison of features in the sense once advocated by Marc Bloch is still quite unusual.<sup>4</sup>

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- 2 Mustafa Akdağ, *Türkiye'nin İktisadî ve İctimâî Tarihi*, 2 vols. (Ankara: Ankara Üniversitesi Dil ve Tarih-Coğrafya Fakültesi Yayınları, 1959-71); İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Tarihi*, 4 vols.; vol. 1: *Anadolu Selçukluları ve Anadolu Beylikleri hakkında bir Mukaddime ile Osmanlı Devleti'nin Kuruluşundan İstanbul'un Fethine kadar*; vol. 2: *İstanbul'un Fethinden Kanunî Sultan Süleyman'ın Ölümüne kadar*; vol. 3, part 1: *II Selim'in Tahta Çıkışından 1699 Karlofça Andlaşmasına kadar*; vol. 3, part 2: *XVI. Yüzyıl Ortalarından XVII. Yüzyıl Sonuna kadar*; vol. 4, part 1: *Karlofça Anlaşmasından (sic) XVIII. Yüzyılın Sonuna kadar*; vol. 4, part 2: *XVIII. Yüzyıl* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1947-59).
- 3 *The Province Strikes Back: Imperial Dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean*, eds. Björn Forsen and Giovanni Salmeri (Athens and Helsinki: Foundation of the Finnish Institute in Athens, 2008); *Tributary Empires in Global History*, eds. Peter Fibiger Bang and C. A. Bayly (forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan in 2011).
- 4 As a fine example see Marc Bloch, *Seigneurie française et manoir anglais*, ed. Mme Carpentier, preface by Georges Duby (Paris: Armand Colin, 1960).

Most of the time, scholars are still ‘sniffing each other out,’ reading one other’s works and realizing that other empires confronted comparable challenges in similar – or else in totally different – ways.

Speaking on my own behalf, I don’t think that we need formal comparisons for meetings with historians in different fields to be fruitful; reading about the late Roman Empire or Moghul India has made me aware of many possibilities and challenges that I would never have noticed otherwise. To give a concrete example: recently the historian of Roman Anatolia Steven Mitchell and I have discovered that the alternation between centralized and ‘privatized’ tax collection was common to the Ottoman and Roman empires. But while the Romans of Diocletian’s time went from ‘privatized’ to centralized collection, the Ottomans from the later 1600s onwards moved in the opposite direction, with central control of the taxation process only resuming by fits and starts in the mid-nineteenth century. We still need to figure out why increasing military pressure on the imperial borders, which was the reason for revamping tax collection systems in the first place, brought about such different responses. On the other hand the discussions of J. H. W. G. Liebeschutz on the *Decline and Fall of the Roman City* and a casual visit to the excavated hillside houses and mansions of Ephesus, with their elaborate reception rooms have made it clear to me that both in the late Roman and the Ottoman empires, magnates tended to take over governmental functions, often on an informal basis.<sup>5</sup> In both empires formal institutions might therefore lose much of their previous effectiveness. Evidently we need to think more seriously about these questions than has happened to date.

### **Relations with European/American early modernists**

At the same time during the last twenty years or so, historians of early modern Europe have become aware that when they organize scholarly meetings about specific questions such as artisan mobility in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, first-person narratives, problems of historical periodization, the trade-pilgrimage nexus, cotton consumption and innumerable other topics, Ottomanist historians may have something to

5 J. H. W. G. Liebeschutz, *Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

contribute.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes this realization may mean simply ‘inviting the token Ottomanist’ – but even that gesture, in my opinion is a good sign, for it means that organizers and participants are now aware that there is more to human history than Europe and its former settlement colonies in the Americas and elsewhere.

How did this rapprochement between Europeanists and Ottomanists come about? As far as I can see, old-style ‘economic and social history’ has played a major role in bringing the two sides together. As Andrew Hess already in the 1970s remarked in his critique of Fernand Braudel’s work, privileging economic exchange as opposed to religion, politics, and culture involved emphasizing what Muslim and Christians of the Mediterranean world had in common, rather than the conflicts that opposed them.<sup>7</sup> In this context it is perhaps worth noting that Ottomanist historians never lost interest in economic exchange, perhaps because in their practical lives, they could not afford to do so. In any case one of the earliest instances of contact involved Fernand Braudel and Ömer Lütfi Barkan: when Braudel in the 1949 edition of *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* pinpointed questions about the Ottoman Empire and its demography to which he had no answers, Barkan responded in an important review article, and the 1966 revised edition of Braudel’s work shows that the author had assimilated the responses of Barkan and also of the French Ottomanist Robert Mantran.<sup>8</sup> Barkan then published in *Annales ESC*, and for a while he was a member of this journal’s editorial committee. Moreover when in the 1960s the editors of *Annales ESC* became interested in early modern institutions supplying food to their respective inmates, Barkan responded to their questionnaire with studies of Ottoman public

6 As one example among many, see *The Spinning World: A Global History of Cotton Textiles, 1200-1850*, eds. Giorgio Riello and Prasanna Parthasarathi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

7 Andrew Hess, *The Forgotten Frontier, A History of the Sixteenth-Century Ibero-African Frontier* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978).

8 Fernand Braudel, *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1949) (2nd ed. in 2 vols., Armand Colin, 1966); Ömer Lütfi Barkan, review of *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, *İstanbul Üniversitesi İktisat Fakültesi Mecmuası* 12/3-4 (1951): 172-191; Robert Mantran, *Istanbul dans la seconde moitié du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Essai d’histoire institutionnelle, économique et sociale* (Paris, Istanbul: Institut Français d’Archéologie d’Istanbul and Adrien Maisonneuve, 1962).

kitchens. Needless to say Barkan's interest in price history also indicated his close contacts to *Annales* scholars.<sup>9</sup>

Halil Inalcik, today at age 94 the 'honored ancestor' of all living Ottomanist historians, established and maintained his contacts with Europeanists in a different way. Much of his early work concerned the life and times of Mehmed the Conqueror (r. 1451-1481); and so his interlocutors were largely medievalists. In the 1950s Inalcik was unusual in that he was willing to consider Byzantine models, for instance in Ottoman taxation, a connection that a previous generation of Turkish nationalist historians had more or less ruled out of court. Soon Inalcik moved on to work on the 1500s as well, and similarly to Barkan in the 1960s he began to respond to wide-ranging questionnaires devised by Europeanists and others. One of his most influential articles appeared in the American *Journal of Economic History*, and dealt with the manner of capital formation in the Ottoman central provinces; *en filigrane* this article also pointed out why capital formation was one of the weak spots of the Ottoman economy.<sup>10</sup> More comprehensively Inalcik developed an interest in what he called the "Ottoman economic mind" and insisted strongly that the Ottoman Empire was located on the major trade routes of the time, a situation that allowed merchants in Bursa or Istanbul to trade with both East and West.<sup>11</sup> He further published an important body of articles in English apart from a book on early Ottoman history that is still standard introductory reading for undergraduates.<sup>12</sup>

9 Ömer Lütfi Barkan, "Şehirlerin Teşekkül ve İnkişafı Tarihi Bakımından: Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda İmaret Sitelerinin Kuruluş ve İşleyiş Tarzına ait Araştırmalar," *İstanbul Üniversitesi İktisat Fakültesi Mecmuası* 23/1-2 (1963): 239-296; *idem*, "The Price Revolution of the Sixteenth Century: A Turning Point in the Economic History of the Near East," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 6 (1975): 3-28.

10 Halil Inalcik, "The Problem of the Relationship between Byzantine and Ottoman Taxation," in *Akten des XI. Internationalen Byzantinistenkongresses* (Munich, 1958), 237-242; *idem*, "Capital Formation in the Ottoman Empire," *The Journal of Economic History* 29 (1969): 97-140.

11 Halil Inalcik, "The Ottoman State: Economy and Society 1300-1600," in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire*, eds. Halil Inalcik with Donald Quataert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1-409.

12 Halil Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600*, trans. Norman Itzkowitz and Colin Imber (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973).

In the early 1970s Inalcik took an early retirement from Ankara University and relocated to the University of Chicago, where he taught for over ten years; he also was a visiting professor at Princeton and developed ties to the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton, the creation of Immanuel Wallerstein. For a time he also worked closely with Donald Quataert who initiated the history of labor and working people in the Ottoman world.<sup>13</sup> Apart from his many publications Inalcik also supervised a large number of doctoral dissertations, by both Turkish and American Ph. D. candidates. He has therefore played a major role in ‘putting the Ottomans on the map’ as far as the American historical profession is concerned. Through his work and that of a few others, particularly Cemal Kafadar at Harvard and Donald Quataert in Binghamton a bi-lingual (Turkish-English) historical community has come into existence, whose members are comfortable in both historiographical traditions.<sup>14</sup> Moreover a large number of well-trained younger historians have entered the field during the last few years; they have produced what we might call a ‘critical mass’ of work that in itself has made it possible for Ottomanist historiography to secure an audience among colleagues working in fields other than Ottoman studies.

### **The previous ‘grand narrative’ of Ottoman history and its recent demise**

As most of us know all too well, the economic difficulties of academic publishing and the introduction of BA-MA according to the Bologna model in Europe have made it necessary to produce a large number of handbooks and syntheses *ad usum delphini*; doubtless many of our students will never read anything else. That insight is most depressing to the scholar and teacher, yet there are compensations: during the past two decades or so, a quiet but important paradigm change has occurred in Ottomanist historiography, and the syntheses written for beginners and outsiders, which *nolens volens* we now find ourselves producing, do permit us to articulate it.

13 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3 vols. (New York etc: Academic Press, 1974, 1980, 1989); Donald Quataert, *Miners and the State in the Ottoman Empire: The Zonguldak Coalfield 1822-1920* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2006).

14 Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).



When reading older general studies including Inalcik's *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age 1300-1600*, we are confronted with what we might call 'the decline paradigm.' Roughly speaking after 1600, or even earlier according to some scholars, the Ottoman Empire, once the era of great and easy conquests was a thing of the past, began to decline. According to this model, a period of expansion from a petty border principality into a regional empire (1300-1517), and a brief apogee as a world power (1517-1600 or thereabouts) were followed by a decline that continued for over three centuries, until the final demise of 1918-1922. Certainly "Ottoman observers of Ottoman decline" to quote the title of a well-known article by Bernard Lewis, had led the way, as the advice literature (*nasihatname*) and 'mirrors of princes' that Ottoman intellectuals produced during the late 1500s and early 1600s went on at length about phenomena that the authors perceived as causes and symptoms of decline.<sup>15</sup> Especially the depreciation of the currency which began during the 1580s and continued in the following decades, but also the long and inconclusive wars against both Safavids and Habsburgs during the later sixteenth century reminded Ottoman intellectuals of Ibn Khaldun and his theories of tribally-based coherence and its inevitable disappearance once an empire had been firmly established.<sup>16</sup>

For many writers of the so-called advice literature, military organization was the key feature: they often assumed that if conditions supposedly prevalent under Süleyman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566) and more particularly the tax assignments to cavalry soldiers (*sipahis*, *zaims*) could be re-instituted, the empire would recover its former glory. Some authors also criticized the growth of the army, especially the janissaries as well as the increasing ascendancy of harem ladies and eunuchs.

Given such distinguished predecessors from among Ottoman intellectuals, foreign historians who wrote about the sultans' empire during the 1700s, 1800s and early 1900s were happy enough to follow their lead. After all quite a few of these scholars sympathized either with the nation-

15 Bernard Lewis, "Ottoman observers of Ottoman decline," *Islamic Studies* 1 (1962): 71-87; compare also Cemal Kafadar, "Les troubles monétaires de la fin du XVIe siècle et la conscience ottomane du déclin," *Annales ESC* 43 (1991): 381-400.

16 Cornell H. Fleischer, "Royal Authority, Dynastic Cyclism and 'ibn Khaldunism' in Sixteenth-century Ottoman Letters," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 18 (1983): 198-220.

building projects that began in the Balkans in the late eighteenth century and perhaps to some extent in Egypt during the first half of the nineteenth. Others were in one way or another committed to the colonial administrations of France, England, and the Netherlands; and for such people as well, it made sense to emphasize the decline of the Ottoman Empire so as to justify contemporary colonies and ‘mandates.’<sup>17</sup> Moreover in the early years of the Republic of Turkey, the newly established elite wished to draw clear borders between the regime they had just established and that which had preceded it: thus for about a quarter century ‘corruption’ and ‘decline’ became the hallmarks of the Ottoman Empire in Turkish history-writing as well.<sup>18</sup>

Later authors have supplemented this picture by reference to the ‘price revolution’ fuelled by the influx of American silver in the later 1500s but surely also by the population increase of those times.<sup>19</sup> In addition Halil İnalcık has suggested that the ‘fundamentalist’ movement of the adherents of Kadızade that gained considerable political clout in the seventeenth century, implied a “triumph of fanaticism” that was perhaps both symptom and cause of the empire’s decline.<sup>20</sup> Heath Lowry has come up with a modern version of this argument when pointing out that the early Ottoman state was willing to arm its non-Muslim subjects for garrison and other duties, thereby making them junior partners in the Ottoman enterprise. On the other hand the increasing exclusion of non-Muslims from state service, perhaps partly a result of the Islamization that followed the conquest of the Mamluk Empire and the wars with the Safavids, may well have led to the disaffection of non-Muslims that was to become a serious problem for the sultans beginning with the eighteenth century.<sup>21</sup>

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17 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978).

18 Büşra Ersanlı, “The Ottoman Empire in the Historiography of the Kemalist Era: A Theory of Fatal Decline,” in *The Ottomans and the Balkans: A Discussion of Historiography*, eds. Fikret Adanır and Suraiya Faroqhi (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2002), 115-54.

19 Barkan, “The Price Revolution;” Şevket Pamuk, “The Price Revolution in the Ottoman Empire Reconsidered,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33 (2001): 69-89.

20 İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age*, 179.

21 Heath Lowry, *Fifteenth Century Ottoman Realities: Christian Peasant Life on the Aegean Island of Limnos* (Istanbul: Eren, 2002), 173-6.

However during the last thirty years or so, the ‘decline theory’ has come in for increasingly serious questioning and today, many Ottomanists no longer think it very useful. To begin with, our *hoca* Rifa‘at Abou-El-Haj has demonstrated that advice literature and mirrors of princes were not one-to-one reflections of any ‘objective reality,’ but either policy statements or else simply weapons which the relevant authors used in factional struggles with their competitors.<sup>22</sup> Therefore the claims of these writers needed to be checked against outside evidence, often archival; and it was also necessary to study the intellectual and social world of a particular author so as to evaluate his claims. After all such a personage simply might be promoting a particular grandee from whom he expected patronage. As for the ‘reign of harem women,’ Leslie Peirce has shown that in order to make one’s way in the hierarchical and complicated world of the sultans’ harem, a considerable degree of political skill was of the essence. Thus Peirce’s and Jane Hathaway’s work has shown that certain queen mothers and high-level eunuchs were not necessarily worse politicians than their male or non-eunuch counterparts in the ‘outer’ palace, the janissary corps or the bureaus of the grand vizier.<sup>23</sup>

As for the notion that the ‘price revolution’ imported from Europe by means of foreign trade initiated Ottoman decline, an explanation invented by Ömer Lütfi Barkan and extremely influential for a time, Şevket Pamuk has shown that price increases were less important than historians had originally assumed.<sup>24</sup> Not only was most of the price increase due to debasement – to some extent Barkan had also been aware of this, but had been less willing to draw the necessary consequences – so much treasure flowed eastward to India that permanent consequences to the Ottoman economy must have been limited. Moreover Barkan’s corollary assumption, that Ottoman crafts declined as raw materials were ‘sucked out’ of the

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22 Rifa‘at A. Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (2nd ed., Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 23-53.

23 Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Jane Hathaway, *El Hajj Beshir Agha: Chief Eunuch of the Ottoman Imperial Harem* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006).

24 Barkan, “The Price Revolution;” Şevket Pamuk, *A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

eastern Mediterranean by the higher prices prevailing further west, also is not longer much in vogue. Barkan had built a good part of his argument on the story of the Bursa silk industry, whose role as a supplier of high-quality fabrics to the sultans' palace did in fact decline after 1650. But as Haim Gerber has shown, the industry recovered in the 1600s by using cheaper, locally cultivated raw silk to produce fabrics that were not of 'palace quality' but did appeal to a well-to-do if not necessarily super-rich public.<sup>25</sup> The population growth of the sixteenth century cheapened the labor force and thereby aided the recovery process. In addition, as Murat Çizakça has shown, European demand for Iranian raw silk decreased once other sources of supply had become available on the emerging world market.<sup>26</sup> Thus Ottoman industrial history after the 1580s was not merely a story of decline.

### **Moving towards a new 'grand narrative'**

Even more importantly, the transition of the late 1500s and early 1600s now appears as the transformation of an 'empire of conquest' into a 'sedentary monarchy.' Both these terms obviously refer first to imperial expansion and then to its end by the mid-seventeenth century. Yet the emphasis is markedly different from an earlier pair of terms, which contrasts 'a period of expansion' – a different way of referring to the 'empire of conquest' that we favor today – with a 'period of stagnation,' which supposedly was the prelude to 'decline.' On the other hand, the notion that an 'empire of conquest' became a 'sedentary monarchy' is less emotionally loaded than 'conquest' and 'decline.' Or it even has positive connotations in a world where many people including the present author have come to abhor the idea of conquest and military intervention.

However the older manner of interpreting Ottoman history remains a potent image which Turkish high school students often encounter in their textbooks and classes. We might say that these youngsters are encouraged to wonder why the empire did not expand indefinitely, conquer Vienna and perhaps even Rome. As for the more reflective students, they either want

25 Haim Gerber, *Economy and Society in an Ottoman City: Bursa, 1600-1700* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1988).

26 Murat Çizakça, "Incorporation of the Middle East into the European World Economy," *Review* 8/3 (1985): 353-378.

to know why in practical terms, the Ottoman Empire declined, or else they will express some disillusionment with an entity they have been taught to revere but which was built on the subjection of people by force of arms.<sup>27</sup>

In the ‘sedentary monarchy’ of the 1600s and 1700s, the Ottoman polity could function without a charismatic sultan like Mehmed the Conqueror, Selim the Grim, or Süleyman the Magnificent. For both the palace and the office of the grand vizier which increasingly became detached from the palace, developed bureaucracies of their own that could keep the empire going even if the sultan was not much involved in everyday political affairs. But officialdom still needed the sultan to legitimize the whole structure: therefore as once again, Rifa‘at Abou-El-Haj has shown us, a major defeat often caused the sultan to lose his throne.<sup>28</sup> More recently the work of Nicolas Vatin and Gilles Veinstein has made it clear that whether the sultan wielded much effective power or not, his illness and death or else his deposition caused enormous anxiety and feelings of crisis not only in the palace but also in the city.<sup>29</sup> This unrest continued until a new ruler was seated on the throne and decided on the funerary honors that should be rendered to his predecessor, thus initiating a new era. Perhaps the religious attributes of the Ottoman ruler which continued to be enormously important in the 1600s and 1700s allow us to characterize later Ottoman rule as a kind of sacred kingship, including the risk that a sultan *sans fortune* might be sacrificed for the continued prosperity of the dynasty and its realm.

In the new dispensation, it was no longer the sultans’ palace alone but a multitude of ‘political households’ that ensured the training and early careers of fledgling Ottoman power-holders. These households could be formed in the capital, where even in the 1500s servitors of the sultan trained young men who might be of use to them in the future, as Metin Kunt and others have demonstrated.<sup>30</sup> In the second half of the seventeenth century, the Köprülüs rose to power after Mehmed Paşa had become grand vizier at a time when the war against Venice over Crete was going badly

27 These were the impressions that I got from a discussion with students in a teacher-training school (Çankırı, 2008) and on many other occasions.

28 Rifa‘at A. Abou-El-Haj, “Ottoman Attitudes toward Peace-making: The Karlowitz Case,” *Der Islam* 51 (1974): 131-137.

29 Nicolas Vatin and Gilles Veinstein, *Le sérail ébranlé* (Paris: Fayard, 2003).

30 Metin Kunt, “Kulların Kulları,” *Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Dergisi/Hümaniter Bilimler* 3 (1975): 27-42.

(1656); and his household produced viziers well into the 1700s. In the later seventeenth century Sultan Mustafa II (r. 1695-1703) attempted to balance Köprülü power by encouraging his former tutor Feyzullah Efendi whom he appointed head of the religious establishment (*şeyhülislam*) to form a rival household; after all Feyzullah was an outsider from far-away Erzurum on the Iranian border.<sup>31</sup> However the attempt backfired as Feyzullah's ambitions soon ran out of control, and when a coalition of janissaries, religious scholars, and artisans brought down the *şeyhülislam*, the sultan went down with him.

In addition to the households that supplied the central administration with manpower, the Ottoman provinces from the late 1600s to the early 1800s contained many 'political households' both large and small.<sup>32</sup> At the head of the most important ones, we find veritable magnates such as the Tirsinik-oğulları in the Balkans, the Karaosman-oğulları in Anatolia and above all the numerous power-holders of the Arab provinces such as the 'Azm of Damascus. These dynasts governed certain provinces more or less autonomously; yet albeit with some difficulty, the Ottoman center was able to retain their loyalty. On the other side, the provinces contained numerous petty tax farmers who had branched out into money-lending and become small- to medium-scale agricultural entrepreneurs: political power thus was at the origin of economic potency rather than the other way around. Even in the barracks of Cairo certain military men established 'households' of their own.<sup>33</sup>

It therefore makes sense to view the Ottoman Empire of the period between 1650 and the 1820s/1830s as a decentralized structure governed by political households whose heads had tied their fortunes to those of the sultan because the latter alone could legitimize their collection of provincial revenues and thereby their local ascendancy.<sup>34</sup> This decentralized structure

31 Rifa'at A. Abou-El-Haj, *The 1703 Rebellion and the Structure of Ottoman Politics* (Istanbul, Leiden: Nederlands Historisch-Archeologisch Instituut, 1984).

32 Rifa'at 'Ali Abou-El-Haj, "The Ottoman Vezir and Paşa Households 1683-1703: A Preliminary Report," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 94 (1974): 438-47.

33 Jane Hathaway, *A Tale of Two Factions: Myth, Memory and Identity in Ottoman Egypt and Yemen* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 27.

34 Ariel Salzmann, "An Ancien Régime Revisited: 'Privatization' and Political Economy in the Eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire," *Politics and Society* 21 (1993): 393-423.

proved impressively crisis-resistant. We will assume that the earlier system functioned from the mid-fifteenth to the late sixteenth century and the household-based arrangement from the middle 1600s to the 1830s – with a fifty-year transition period in the early seventeenth century. Thus 180 years of decentralized rule stand against 150 years of early modern centralization. Of course both the concepts of central control and decentralization are models, to be taken with more than just a grain of salt: for at the height of the reign of Süleyman the Lawgiver, to say nothing of other less effective reigns, the provinces were not exactly peaceful places. On the other hand even staunch defenders of the advantages of a decentralized system will admit that during the last quarter of the eighteenth century, the Ottoman household-based empire and sedentary monarchy were on the verge of collapse.

This late eighteenth-century crisis is currently at the center of attention: one of the first scholars to bring up the topic was Mehmet Genç, who emphasized that Ottoman officialdom paid very poorly for the goods and services it demanded, and this was particularly true in times of war.<sup>35</sup> In consequence a war-related boom in the armaments sector could not emerge; and of course in any war of some gravity, the civilian sector is bound to suffer. A general economic downturn thus resulted from eighteenth-century Ottoman wars, the conflict with Catherine II of Russia (1768-1774) being especially destructive. Certainly, in earlier periods financing had not been very different, but wars in the 1700s were much more expensive than their predecessors had ever been. Even worse from the manufacturer's point of view, the administration tended to concentrate its demands on the more prosperous enterprises so that by the end of a major war, overall capital formation was at low ebb. In this respect Genç has developed Inalcik's previous allusions with respect to the weaknesses of the Ottoman political and economic system.

Sultan Mustafa III (r. 1758-1774) and his government began the Russo-Ottoman war, which in turn caused the empire's near-terminal crisis – the extent to which French politicians precipitated events, is still a subject for discussion. Information on the novel mobilization of Russian resources by Catherine II and her ministers evidently had not reached Ottoman decision-makers, or if it had, the sultan and his viziers had not taken this news seriously enough. Provisions contained in the treaty of Küçük Kaynarca

35 Mehmet Genç, "Osmanlı Ekonomisi ve Savaş," *Yapıt* 49/4 (1984): 52-61; 50/5 (1984): 86-93; French version: "L'économie ottomane et la guerre au XVIII<sup>ème</sup> siècle," *Turcica* 27 (1995): 177-96.

(1774) not only led to the loss of the Crimea in 1783, but also, control over Istanbul's bread-basket, the territories adjoining the Black Sea became more problematic. In a recent major study, Virginia Aksan has suggested that Ottoman armies had not sufficiently prepared for a confrontation with their Russian opponents because between the treaty of Passarowitz in 1718 and the Russo-Ottoman war half a century later, the empire had largely avoided participation in European wars, especially the Seven Years War.<sup>36</sup> However on the other hand, the sultans had been at war from 1683 to 1718 with only a short interruption; and if they were to continue supplying the armies the taxpayers badly needed a lengthy period of recuperation. It is an open question if given the resources of the Russian Empire, enormous once the tsars and tsarinas of the time had managed to mobilize them, an undersupplied Ottoman army participating in mid-eighteenth century central European wars would have gained many victories.

While the crisis of the late 1700s has recently become a focus of new-model Ottoman historiography, most historians and especially the new generation concentrate their efforts on the nineteenth century. After all it is for the period between 1839 and 1908, with special emphasis on the reign of Abdulhamid II (r. 1876-1909), that enormous masses of archival material have recently become available. Pioneering studies have discussed the implications of Ottoman modernization on the central and particularly the provincial level: work has been done on education, the revamping of the navy and especially the drafting of Muslims and occasionally non-Muslims into the army. It has also become apparent that while the empire was in constant danger of dismantlement by the Great Powers and their Balkan clients, the Ottoman elite came to subscribe to the view that some of the empire's more remote provinces were 'backward' and should become the objects of a special *mission civilisatrice*, Ottoman style.<sup>37</sup> It was an integral part of this undertaking to spread Sunni Islam among 'benighted Shiites.'<sup>38</sup>

36 Virginia Aksan, *Ottoman Wars 1700-1870: An Empire Besieged* (Harlow/England: Pearson Longman, 2007), 46, 88; on p. 130 the author also emphasized that a lengthy period of peace was important for the recovery of the taxpayers.

37 For example, Maurus Reinkowski, *Die Dinge der Ordnung: Eine vergleichende Untersuchung über die osmanische Reformpolitik im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2005), 150-79.

38 Selim Deringil, "The Struggle against Shiism in Hamidian Iraq: A Study in Ottoman Counter-Propaganda," *Die Welt des Islams* 30 (1990): 45-62.



Needless to say this attitude on the part of Ottoman governors and their superiors in Istanbul did not always sit well with the populations that they governed: quite a few groups that had previously provided irregulars for the Ottoman army without protest were quite unwilling to pay taxes and submit to the draft. Ironically, it was just before World War I that a compromise was reached on this delicate matter: if the Ottoman Empire had remained in existence, troops from the more outlying provinces would have served mainly in their regions of origin.<sup>39</sup>

### Confronting the nationalist paradigm

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire there was a brief attempt to construct the history of the new state of Turkey with but minimal – and always negative – reference to the Ottoman elite. But this tendency did not last long: already since the 1930s nationalist historians were hard at work to ‘recuperate’ Ottoman sultans and viziers for the ‘national history of Turkey.’ The polyglot and multicultural features of the empire did not exactly facilitate this enterprise; and nationalist authors were well aware of this situation. Thus for example İsmail Hami Danişmend loudly deplored the employment of non-Turkish military men and administrators, recruited through the so-called levy of boys (*devşirme*) as practiced especially in the late 1400s and throughout the century that followed.<sup>40</sup> In Danişmend’s perspective such ‘outsiders/foreigners’ could not possibly appreciate the interests of the ‘Turkish Empire.’ It is worth noting that people who think along these lines are still quite common in non-academic and semi-academic history-writing even today.<sup>41</sup>

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39 Noel Malcolm, *Kosovo: A Short History* (New York: Harper, 1999), 247-248; Odile Moreau, *L’Empire ottoman à l’âge des réformes: Les hommes et les idées du “Nouvel Ordre” militaire 1826-1914* (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 2007).

40 İsmail Hami Danişmend, *İzahlı Osmanlı Tarihi Kronolojisi*, 5 vols. (Istanbul: Türkiye Yayınevi, 1971), compare for example the author’s comments on the death of Sultan Süleyman’s grand vizier İbrahim Paşa, vol. 2, 184.

41 For a scholarly and highly polemic study compare Y. Hakan Erdem, *Tarih-Lenk: Kusursuz Yazarlar, Kâğıttan Metinler* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2008); compare also Oktay Özel, *Düün Sancısı: Türkiye’de Geçmiş Algısı ve Akademik Tarihcilik* (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2009).

By contrast, scholars practicing the new-style Ottoman historiography consider this type of approach completely anachronistic, and when it comes to ascribing an identity to the Ottoman ruling class before the mid-nineteenth century the conveniently vague term ‘Rumi’ has been suggested. The expression recommends itself because Ottoman authors such as the sixteenth-century historian and litterateur Mustafa Âli used it when discussing the inhabitants of the empire’s central provinces, namely Anatolia and the Balkans; and in India the term designated all Ottoman subjects, especially the soldiers that Indian potentates of the 1500s sometimes hired because of their skill in using firearms.<sup>42</sup> As an additional advantage the term ‘Rumi’ obviously refers to Rome including its avatar, the Byzantine Empire. By stressing a Rumi identity, present-day scholars thus point to the fact that the empire had a multi-layered history and multicultural composition; and it was in this sense profoundly different from the self image – not necessarily from the realities – of the national states that followed it.

### Some thorny problems

As we have seen the current interest in works of synthesis allows historians of the Ottoman Empire to connect with scholars in other fields and articulate the recent paradigm change in Ottoman history: I would regard this development as very positive. Several Ottomanists have already responded to the challenges involved; most impressive in my view is the recent one-volume history authored by Caroline Finkel.<sup>43</sup>

Yet it must be admitted that we also have to confront some serious drawbacks. Pressured by publishers and also by their colleagues, many scholars find themselves endlessly reiterating – to not say regurgitating – ‘basic features of Ottoman history’ including the ‘*timar* system’ on which little research has been done since the 1970s. In consequence they become increasingly remote from innovative research, which by its nature often is somewhat arcane and does not easily lend itself to presentation to undergraduates.

42 Salih Özbaran, *Bir Osmanlı Kimliği: 14.-17. Yüzyıllarda Rûm/Rûmi Aidiyet ve İmgeleri* (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2004); Cornell H. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafâ Âli (1541-1600)* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 254-257.

43 Caroline Finkel, *Osman’s Dream: The Story of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1923* (London: John Murray, 2006).

Even worse, publishers/editors use as a baseline not the intelligent and well-informed student, but the average or even below-average type. The results are there for everyone to see: quite often serious scholars both young and old will feel extremely frustrated when after buying a new book they get to read any number of general statements that have belonged to the received wisdom of the profession for years and years. How often do we not wish that the author ‘will cut the cackle’ and ‘deliver the goods.’

The current emphasis on ‘works of interest to the general reader’ especially may operate to the disadvantage of younger authors. Due to the problems of achieving tenure and pressures from the publisher a scholar newly entering the job and publishing markets may feel under more pressure to conform than an established one. Beginning historians will therefore be tempted to ‘dress up’ a magnificent piece of research on a very specific topic with a host of well-known statements from the secondary literature quite familiar even to the non-specialist. Contextualization is important and even crucial; but like any other worthwhile human endeavor the practice is open to abuse.

In a similar vein, some editors encourage young scholars to claim that their research throws light on current issues when that is far from being the case. To not put too fine a point on it, academics and editors who encourage or even enforce such practices are not very different from their confreres or *consoeurs* of dubious memory who under ‘bureaucratic socialism,’ made the writers whose works they were to publish add little quotes from Marx and Lenin so as to make their studies ‘more acceptable.’

I can see yet another problem: to speed up the publication process and more generally for reasons of economy, scholars are encouraged to write on very broad topics, some of which are definitely outside their area of expertise. Of course a historian such as Fernand Braudel, with a marvelous memory and a great deal of critical acumen, did produce admirable work in this mode. It is also true that we can glean much more information from the secondary literature than Braudel could when he wrote his three great volumes on capitalism and material life.<sup>44</sup> But most of us unfortunately are not Braudel; and I think it an illusion to believe that ‘Lesefrüchte’ (fruits of reading) as the picturesque German expression has it, can compensate for a thorough familiarity with the relevant primary sources and state of the art.

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44 Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme*, 3 vols. (Paris: Armand Colin, 1979).

### **In conclusion**

Our discussion of paradigm change has focused on the Ottoman polity's transition from an 'empire of conquest' to a 'sedentary monarchy,' in other words we have concentrated on sultanic power and the manner in which household-based recruitment and financial incentives to local elites helped maintain the sultan's legitimacy even when conquests had come to be few and far between. This focus allows us to emphasize regularity and continuity and the slow changes of institutional frameworks, in other words the exact opposite of the 'oriental despotism' that European authors of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries so often ascribed to the Ottoman sultans.<sup>45</sup>

A stress on established structures in the military field, but elsewhere as well, furthermore encourages comparisons with other empires including several long-term opponents of the sultans, namely the Habsburgs, Safavids, and Romanovs. After all, the restructuring of the Safavid Empire under Shah Abbas I (r. 1587-1629) involved the formation of a military corps modeled on the janissaries; and possibly the Ottoman military setup served as a model when the Russian autocracy revamped its army in the late 1500s. But established structures lending themselves to comparison existed in other sectors of Ottoman society as well: thus it is now possible to discuss the similarities and contrasts between Ottoman guilds and their counterparts in early modern Italy or France, or else to compare the manner in which French and Ottoman authorities of the early 1800s gathered economically relevant information in their more remote provinces.<sup>46</sup> It now should even be possible to discuss in a comparative perspective the tax-farming processes of early modern France and the Ottoman Empire.

All this means that many Ottomanist historians now feel able to enter into a dialogue with their peers in other fields of history. Given the lengthy period during which most representatives of our field were not ready to make their results accessible to outsiders, this is indeed a major

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45 Lucette Valensi, *Venise et la Sublime Porte: la naissance du despote* (Paris: Hachette, 1987).

46 Alp Yücel Kaya, "Politique de l'enregistrement de la richesse économique: les Enquêtes fiscales et agricoles de l'Empire ottoman et de la France au milieu du XIXe siècle," Ph.D. diss. (Paris, EHESS, 2005).

sea-change. Of course there are limits. Thus when it comes to broad historical generalizations, most representatives of our discipline continue to look to other fields, and then develop hypotheses based on these 'imported' generalizations. For the time being, this procedure is not unreasonable. But I do hope that in the long run, Ottomanists will also generate hypotheses and generalizations that our colleagues in other branches of history will use in their work.