

THE DARK SHADOW OF THE LIBERAL NARRATIVE IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE OTTOMAN PRESS

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OSMANLI BASIN TARİHYAZIMINDA LIBERAL ANLATININ KOYU GÖLGESİ

Abstract

There are some stereotypical assumptions in the study of Ottoman press history. These assumptions are mainly based on the late arrival of the printing press in the country, the absence of a European-style urban bourgeoisie, low literacy rates and the weakness of the press because modernization was top-down. In essence, these conclusions stem from the liberal historiographical tradition, which sees history as a straight line of progress, capitalization and emancipation. This narrative, which emerged in England as liberal press theory -the Whig/Liberal narrative- was added to methodological nationalism with the paradigm of regression in Ottoman historiography and in debates on Ottoman Turkish modernization, it is often repeated that the press was an ineffective extension of political events, established by top-down interventions as a result of external developments. This study, therefore, discusses the main problems of the liberal narrative tradition in the historiography of the Ottoman press through content analysis and attempts to show the important common problems that the liberal narrative poses for the historiography of the Ottoman press.

Keywords: Ottoman Press, Historiography, Liberal Narrative, Regression Paradigm, Methodological Nationalism.

Özet

Osmanlı basın tarihi çalışmalarında kalıplaşmış bazı kabuller söz konusudur. Bunlar ana hatlarıyla; ülkeye matbaanın geç gelmesi, Avrupa benzeri kent burjuvazisinin olmaması, okuma-yazma oranı düşüklüğü ve modernleşmenin tepeden inme olduğu gerekçesiyle basının zayıf kaldığına yöneliktir. Bu çıkarımlar, özünde tarihi düzçizgisel ilerleme, kapitalistleşme ve özgülleşme yolu olarak gören liberal tarihyazımı geleneğinden kaynaklanmaktadır. İngiltere'de liberal basın kuramı -Whig/Liberal anlatı- olarak beliren bu anlatı, metodolojik milliyetçilik ve Osmanlı tarihyazımındaki gerileme paradigmasına da eklenerek Osmanlı-Türk modernleşmesi tartışmalarında, sıklıkla basının dış gelişmelerin bir sonucu olarak tepeden müdahalelerle kurulan, etkisiz, siyasi olayların uzantısı bir karakterde olduğunu tekrarlamaktadır. Bu çalışma ise Osmanlı basın tarihyazımında liberal anlatı geleneğinden hareketle ortaya konan çalışmalardaki temel problemleri içerik analizi yöntemiyle ele almakta ve böylece liberal anlatının, Osmanlı basın tarihyazımı açısından yarattığı önemli ortak sorunları göstermeye çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Basını, Tarihyazımı, Liberal Anlatı, Gerileme Paradigması, Metodolojik Milliyetçilik.

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Introduction

The fact that the press is often treated as a simple projection of government policies in discussions of modernization in Türkiye is a natural consequence of the assumptions and historiographical practices inherent in media and press historiography. This is because there are still approaches in media and press historiography that normalize the reduction of the press to useful archival material. Moreover, this situation is not unique to the historiography of the Ottoman press in Türkiye but also refers to a more widespread situation stemming from the liberal perspective of press and media historiography. This interdisciplinary perspective with its triumphant historiographical approach, treats what is seen at the end of history as what should have been and thus ideologically legitimizes the outcome. James Curran (2002, 136) argues that this progressive and developmentalist motif is the most common perspective in media historiography.

The liberal historiographical approach, which originated in the fields of science, philosophy and politics, subsequently permeated the domains of history and media historiography, initiating a comprehensive examination of historical processes in a teleological manner. Herbert Butterfield (1931, 11-12) was among the first to draw attention to this situation. He criticized the liberal narrative as the "Whig/liberal interpretation of history" arguing that the liberal narrative, especially in the historiography of England, adopted the Whig interpretation after creating a dichotomy between Tories and Whigs, Catholics and Protestants. Nevertheless, this historical narrative which originated in England, presented itself as a justification of capitalism and would subsequently have a profound impact on all media and historiographical practices. Consequently, it is imperative to examine and elucidate this narrative tradition which exerted a profound influence on Ottoman press historiography through the established press history studies in Türkiye. This is necessary to address the related issues. This study, which employs descriptive content analysis will initially examine the adverse consequences of the methodological nationalism perspective

which has been pervasive in media and press historiography from the liberal narrative and political science. The study will concentrate on works of press historiography that deal with the advent of the first printing press and the inaugural official newspaper. The following sections will endeavor to demonstrate the manner in which these effects have permeated both general media historiographical practices and the historiography of the Ottoman press, particularly in conjunction with the established regression paradigm within Ottoman historiography.

The Impact of Liberal Narrative and Methodological Nationalism in Media and Press Historiography

The liberal narrative posits that the press became independent from the state by generating its own revenue through advertising in the capitalist market. In this manner, the press, no longer constrained by censorship assumed the role of a watchdog for democracy, functioning as the fourth power. This process unfolded in a linear manner, exemplifying the triumph of liberalization. Torr (2000: 56) criticizes this narrative as a reduction of history to mere progress. Accordingly, the liberal narrative posits that the press can only be truly independent if it becomes independent from the state. To achieve this, it must be a capitalist market based on a parliamentary system. In essence, the argument posits that the press can serve as a fourth force in the defense of the public interest. This line of development has been endorsed by the most advanced capitalist countries, including the UK and the US. The most significant argument is that the press became independent from the state and became the voice of the people as a consequence of Britain's transition to a parliamentary system, the limitation of the royal powers, and the increase in advertising revenues due to the development of the capitalist market.

The argument that the press in the US has succeeded in becoming independent from the state by ensuring democratization through penny newspapers since the 19th century is the second most prominent argument of the liberal theory. According to Bark-

er and Burrows (2002: 9), although there was a public sphere in most of Europe in the 18th century that had long been formed through reading culture, the liberal narrative associates the formation of the public sphere with the spread of newspapers in the capitalist market in the 19th century. Thus, the liberal narrative attempts to measure the development of the press by its success in joining the capitalist market. Burrows (2002: 24-27) offers a critique of this perspective, noting that even prior to the French Revolution, numerous French newspapers were widely circulated in various countries.¹ Dutch newspapers were readily accessible in Ottoman port cities and the *Courier de Londres*, which published in Egypt during the Napoleonic Wars, were read in Egypt and Tunisia. Therefore, it is problematic to limit the conception of newspaper circulation and readership to certain countries and certain economic stages. Patricia L. Dooley (1997: 1) posits that the historiography of the press in the 19th century in the US has constructed a narrative of centrality over the US as the press in the US is dealt with only in relation to politics. Consequently, in the absence of a parliamentary system similar to that of the UK and the US or a developed capitalist advertising market, the press is regarded as a passive, state-extended medium. Furthermore, the liberal narrative frequently fails to acknowledge instances that deviate from the predetermined trajectory it has established. As Taş (2010: 47) notes, the commercial press's development in the 1880s led to a shift in the nature of newspapers which became increasingly apolitical in order to appeal to a broader audience. This period also saw the emergence of journalistic norms such as neutrality, impartiality, balance and accuracy. It is, therefore, erroneous to assume that these institutions were already in place in the UK and the US from the outset.

The argument that the abolition of taxes by the bourgeoisie facilitated the emergence of a free press is also a central tenet of the liberal narrative. In England, the imposition of *Taxes on Knowledge* commenced in 1712 and was subsequently rescinded in 1855. The liberal

narrative posits that the *Taxes on Knowledge*, which comprised four taxes—stamps, pamphlets, advertising and consumption—could only be abolished with the development of the capitalist market which was led by the bourgeoisie. As Jean K. Chalaby (2002: 13) notes, this argument does not account for the circumstances in England between 1800 and 1830, a period during which the working-class press was at its most dynamic. The imposition of taxes on the working class due to their low purchasing power resulted in a shift away from the purchase of newspapers individually. This led to the emergence of a thriving black market for newspapers which in turn led to a press boom. The liberal narrative posits that the abolition of these taxes at the behest of the bourgeoisie led to a boom in the press. However, the corresponding movement in the working-class press was made possible by taxes. Furthermore, this contrast is indicative of the liberal narrative's failure to address the issue of ownership in the media.

James Curran (2005: 4) notes that the liberal narrative places greater emphasis on the liberation of individuals from state control than on the ownership of the media. However, he asserts that the events of the 19th century did not constitute a genuine exercise of freedom of the press. The events of the 19th century represent a period of transition in the state, as it moved from an aristocratic to a market-based system. During this period, the press was freer than it had been previously. However, the liberal narrative reads this relative freedom as a historical necessity. Bingham (2015: 22) posits that, despite the prevailing narrative of independence from the state, journalists and broadcasters remained largely organically linked to the existing political forces and elites. However, this link has not been sufficiently emphasized in media historiography which is dominated by a media-oriented narrative. As observed by Rachel Matthews (2015: 241), the industry has opted to define its role as that of the fourth estate rather than as a conduit for power in the press and a source of increased advertising revenues. Nevertheless, technological

¹See Simon Burrows (2002: 24) for a list of regularly read French-language newspapers in different countries.

advancements during this period, such as the telegraph and the railroad, were, in fact, instrumental in enabling the press to gain a share of the growing capitalist market volume.² Therefore, it is problematic to naturalize the process by excluding all these factors. Ward (2014: 6) posits that while liberal theory purports to describe the liberal press, in fact, it describes the most liberal press, which is, in essence, an adaptation of liberalism to the press. As a stateless economy is the optimal economic system for liberalism, a stateless press is the freest press. In this context, numerous other countries have been evaluated in terms of their development of the press with regard to their alignment with liberalism and their adaptation to the capitalist market. For instance, in the US due to the advanced capitalist market, there has been a tendency for the press to be liberalized with the advent of penny newspapers. In contrast, John C. Nerone (2009: 377-378) posits that this approach is a mythological narrative as it fails to acknowledge the pervasive dissemination of partisan political views through newspapers and pamphlets that emerged during the American Revolution (1776). Nerone even reads the emergence of the penny press should not be understood as a phenomenon driven by the bourgeoisie but rather as a parallel development to the increased demand for reading among the working class, which was becoming more densely populated in urban areas. In contrast, the liberal narrative attempts to attribute this development solely to the bourgeoisie, thereby avoiding the issue of class.

If the advancement of freedom of the press and the proliferation of newspapers can only be achieved through independence from the state, it may be possible to invalidate the liberal narrative based on examples that do not conform to it. Schudson (2002: 485) posits that the number of newspapers per capita in Scandinavia and Japan in the 19th century was considerably higher than in the US and Europe. This observation challenges

the conventional wisdom that these countries should be lagging behind the US and Europe in terms of the power and development of the bourgeoisie. In his work, Huffman (1997: 24) notes that even in the 18th century, a substantial distribution and sales network for books existed in Japan. Nevertheless, it was not the capitalist market that facilitated this outcome; rather, it was Japan's internal balance and feudal structure. As a *daimyo*, *Bakufu* also sought to unify Japan by exerting influence over other principalities. This ensured the dissemination of various newspapers, pamphlets and books to rural communities. Consequently, the dissemination of information in Japan began to generate its own internal market.

As can be observed, even in countries where the liberal press narrative is dominant, there are numerous instances that do not align with the narrative. However, this narrative is not simply a debate inherent in the historiography of the press; it has also permeated the debates in history and political science.³ Furthermore, this approach attempts to elevate the narrative to the level of truth by evaluating societies and countries according to a necessary straight-line progression distance whose ultimate goal is modernization and enlightenment. In essence, this approach attempts to analyze without considering the specific conditions of countries and societies, and without opening the concepts of modernization and development to discussion. One of the common problems in this approach is methodological nationalism. Methodological nationalism is a pervasive phenomenon within the social sciences that normalizes nation-state-based thinking and attempts to explain and legitimate social theory from the perspective of the nation-state. Consequently, the emergence of nation-states during the process of modernization is not perceived as an eventuality resulting from modernization but rather as its intrinsic purpose. As a result, this perspective introduces an anachronistic dilemma.

²Schudson (1981: 35) also observes that the liberal narrative attempts to naturalize the entire process by ascribing an autonomous character to technological developments.

³As the most prominent illustration of this methodology, Siebert et. al. (1963) offer a Cold War-era analysis that conceptualizes the press as the voice of the free world when it aligns with the capitalist bloc.

Wimmer and Schiller (2003: 576) posit that methodological nationalism strives to align not only countries and societies, but also the researcher with the perspective of the nation-state in which the researcher is embedded. This focus is particularly evident in the analysis of the nation-states that emerged in Europe during the 20th century. Consequently, the researcher assumes the role of either defender or objector to the problem they are attempting to comprehend and make sense of. However, this is not a conclusion that can be drawn from the research itself; rather, it is an expression of the attitude that the researcher held prior to the research which was influenced by the research. Furthermore, the objective of academic research and the generation of knowledge is not to disseminate, democratize, or discuss knowledge but rather to serve the interests of the nation. As Giddens (1981: 12) notes, methodological nationalism which gained prevalence in the wake of the 1970s, coinciding with the advent of globalization and neoliberalism, encompasses the aspiration to impose the nation-state on the global stage as a necessary consequence of modernization through capitalism. However, it is important to note that the nation-state is a phenomenon that originated in Europe. Therefore, any location where the capitalist market is unable to flourish, where the state structure is unable to evolve into a nation-state, or where the process of transformation is impeded will remain economically and politically underdeveloped. This will result in a lack of autonomy and influence with the region becoming a fourth power and expressing the demands of public opinion in accordance with the liberal press narrative. Consequently, the press in countries where the capitalist market is not well-developed and there is no nation-state will remain relatively weak and inadequate in terms of becoming independent from the state and voicing the demands of public opinion as the fourth power. Chernilo (2011: 102) posits that in this narrative which the nation-state is absolutized, there is an error in evaluating nations and history

without the Braudelian definition of the *longue durée*.⁴ This is because a narrative that is spatially and conceptually restricted to the nation-state will tend to ignore alternative narratives or development processes.

The fallacy of analyzing nation-states as if they existed in their current form a century ago via methodological nationalism has also been adopted by the historiography of the press. Consequently, when analyzing the press of a multiethnic empire, the nation that constitutes any nation-state that is still a remnant of that empire today is evaluated as if it were the center or the only member of that empire. For instance, Benlisoy (2020: 89) posits that newspapers and magazines printed in Karamanli Turkish⁵ during the Ottoman Empire are not accorded sufficient importance in Türkiye today due to the dominance of nation-state historiography. Similarly, the newspapers published by Armenians, Greeks, Jews, Levantines, Circassians, Kurds and other nationalities, who were citizens of the empire, were not included in contemporary Ottoman press historiographical debates. This stance can be attributed to two key factors: Firstly, the perception of Turkish language publications as the most and unique prolific, influential in terms of press activities, and secondly, the nation-state perspective. As a consequence of the fact that nations deal with their own history only in their own languages, languages that belonged to the same country not long ago are ignored. Wimmer and Schiller (2003: 287) highlight the fact that approaches that focus on the nation-state often fail to take account of ethnic differences. The field of historiography is thus constrained by a limitation problem based on methodological nationalism. According to Beck (2007: 287), this problem of delimitation is due to the fact that a country compares itself with other countries through sharp borders. As a result, methodological nationalism posits that the world is constituted by nation-states and that humanity is structured through these nation-states.

⁴The concept that refers to the historiographical approach of the French Annales School, which prioritises long-term historical structures behind events.

⁵A dialect of Anatolian Turkish spoken by Karamanites and Cappadocian Greeks. They used Greek letters to write in Turkish.

The Liberal Narrative Shaping the Historiography of the Ottoman Press

The Ottoman press has long been a forum for the articulation of a worldview that is informed by the drawing of borders. The tendency to view the empire as a monolingual, mononational nation-state is a consequence of methodological nationalism which has been a dominant approach in established academic studies. This perspective has also been shaped by the liberal narrative which has cast the press as relatively ineffective and passive. This assessment is based on the observation that the press was not integrated into the capitalist market as quickly as in some European countries or that parliament was not established for a long time, as in the case of England. Yüksel (2021: 52) notes that there is a paucity of comprehensive studies on the historiography of the Ottoman press. This is due to the fact that numerous countries that emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire also adopted nation-state-centered historiography. Methodological nationalism, which limited the empire's borders to a single language and, moreover, a single dialect from the 19th century onwards, led to an illusion in which the multilingual and permeable structure of the empire was ignored. In addition, the researcher's focus on press activities in the empire from this perspective leads to the omission of other ethnic elements or the press activities of political exiles residing in that country, depending on the researcher's country of citizenship. For instance, the newspapers published in various languages by intellectuals who immigrated to İstanbul as exiles from Iran and engaged in extensive and impactful press activities there or by Ottoman intellectuals who were compelled to leave İstanbul for Paris are often regarded as if they occurred outside the empire and detached from the imperial context. Moreover, the perspective of researchers who cannot analyse the texts of the period because they cannot read Ottoman Turkish constitutes a significant problem in the field of contemporary press history studies.

Karagöz-Kızılca (2016: 77) notes that the liberal narrative and methodological nationalism have contributed to the problematic

treatment of press activities in the empire. The influence of the orientalist perspective has led to the perception that both the empire itself and its rulers were passive and static, justifying the interventions of the West, which was seen as active. In a similar vein, the liberal narrative's adaptation of the modernization process observed in certain European regions as a schematic necessity of progress to the historiography of the Ottoman press and its subsequent demonstration of newspaper subscriptions or the number of newspapers as a legitimizing evidence for the passive press, is the result of the same perspective. Yüksel (2021: 35) highlights this issue and notes that while poems were disseminated through newspapers, the historiography of the press does not address poems because they are considered to be part of the field of literature. Indeed according to him while some poems carry highly effective political messages, for example, the Kurdish oral tradition of *dengbejs* traveling along the Turkish-Iranian border to inform people about the latest political developments is easily ignored on the grounds that it is not a written activity.

As can be seen, the limiting effects of the liberal narrative and the perspective based on methodological nationalism in Ottoman press historiography are still the main reasons for ignoring or failing to see possible alternatives and debates in the Ottoman modernization process. It is important to recognize that without a concerted effort to address this issue, discussions on modernization in the Ottoman Empire or the historiography of the press will continue to present significant challenges. Undoubtedly, there have recently been individual or collective efforts to overcome these problems, such as Kebikeç's six-volume *Osmanlı'da Türkçe Dışı Süreli Yayınlar (2020-2023)*. Nevertheless, in order to address these issues, studies that analyze in detail the works written directly on the historiography of the Ottoman press remain scarce and inadequate. Indeed, the historiography of the Ottoman press from the first newspapers to the collapse of the empire, continues to emphasize that the press acted as a passive extension of the state. In this context, the activities of *Takvim-i Vekâyi*,

the first official newspaper founded by Mahmud II in 1831, are mostly seen as a simple extension of modernization efforts. According to Karagöz-Kızılca (2016: 76), the fiction that the Ottoman sultans passively followed the modernization process is an extension of the "sick man of Europe" approach. In support of this, press historiography perpetuates the understanding that the press is a simple reflection of what happens in state power and evaluates the actors of modernization as politicians, soldiers and bureaucrats. So, following the example of England and the US, both the Ottoman Empire and its press are portrayed as declining, ignorant of world developments, and therefore deserving of what happened to them. This approach is particularly influenced by the regression paradigm in the field of history and has become a dominant feature of the historiography of the press.

It is, in fact, the case that Rifat Abou El-Haj's pioneering work against the regression paradigm, which was fed by the liberal narrative, demonstrated that the power structure in the Ottoman Empire was not in the hands of the omnipotent sultan, especially during the so-called decline period. Furthermore, it was emphasized that this entire process should be read in conjunction with changes in the internal bureaucratic structure. Donald Quataert (2020) demonstrated that in contrast to the prevailing paradigm of decline, the Ottomans were not merely passive observers of the Industrial Revolution but rather made numerous initiatives and efforts to adapt to the new era although not to the same extent as European states. Baki Tezcan (2011) challenged the prevailing stereotypes of the period of stagnation and decline, arguing that the pace of scientific developments was constrained by the struggle for power within the established order. In his study on the inconsistency and partiality of the layihâs and nasihatnâmas on which the regression paradigm is based, Douglas A. Howard (2011) revealed fundamental contradictions in the paradigm's basic tenets. And Suriya Faroqhi (2010) drew attention to the importance of reading this process because of internal conflicts between Mahmud II and the a'yan rath-

er than as an external imposition in overcoming the regression paradigm.

In addition to the aforementioned studies, there are numerous other studies that challenge the regression paradigm. Nevertheless, the influence of the regression paradigm on the historiography of the press remains significant, despite the fact that it has begun to lose its influence in the field of history. Indeed, a number of the most significant studies in Turkish literature which align with the liberal narrative and the regression paradigm, have treated the press as if it had emerged in a backward country under the coercion of the state. While these initial studies offer a valuable overview of the subject matter, they are ultimately limited in their ability to demonstrate that state support for the press was driven by a genuine concern about the public's perception. For this reason, the press has no place in studies of Ottoman history that focus on military, political, diplomatic, or economic aspects. When it is included, it serves a purely decorative role as an extension of modernization. Furthermore, the methodological evaluation of the studies is influenced by the presence of sharp scientific boundaries. The majority of studies on the history of the press and the historiography of the press continue to originate from the fields of history and political science, rather than from those of media and communication. In consequence, the historiographical traditions of these fields have also informed the traditions of media and press historiography. Even before the advent of the first printed official newspapers, this situation is evident in the discourse surrounding the introduction of the printing press to the Ottoman Empire.

The opening section of the narrative is condensed to a single scene in which Yirmisekiz Mehmed Çelebi encounters a printing press during his journey to France with his son Sait. He subsequently established the printing press in the Ottoman Empire in 1727. According to Ahmet Emin Yalman (2018: 11), the printing press was not introduced until a considerable period after its invention due to the clergy's perception of its irreligious nature. However, neither Yalman nor any sub-

sequent commentators could demonstrate a single instance of institutional rejection of the printing press by the clergy during this process.⁶ Furthermore, they were unable to provide an explanation for the state's apparent lack of opposition to the fact that the Jews had already owned printing presses in the Ottoman Empire for centuries, initially through commercial activities of the Jews and subsequently by the churches to which the Greeks and Armenians were predominantly affiliated. Niyazi Berkes (2018: 61) identifies this issue and attributes the state's reluctance to embrace the development of the printing press particularly among Muslims, to concerns about the potential impact of the printing press on the Reform Wars in Europe and the risk of Ottomanism being undermined in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith country.⁷ The fiction of discovering the printing press that existed in his own country when he traveled to Europe placed the historiography of the press in a problematic position, as it looked for reasons outside the context rather than within it. Furthermore, the effort to explain the reason with religious opposition also elevated a frequently repeated error to the level of truth. Similarly, Koloğlu (1987: 24) also highlights this issue, suggesting that the advent of the printing press was influenced by economic and political factors. From an economic standpoint, the introduction of the printing press posed a threat to the livelihoods of calligraphers and guilds while from a political perspective, it could ignite religious debates that could potentially harm the country's multinational structure. Babinger (2004: 9), tends to explain the reason with the internal conditions of the country, arguing that this work was prevented due to the commercial concerns of the guild of the scribal. As can be observed, the functioning of the printing press in the Ottoman Empire indicates a distinctive situation characterized by numerous internal contradictions. Kocabaşoğlu (2004: 140-162) highlights these contradictions and notes

that the development and utilization of the printing press in the Ottoman Empire, even within the country, differed according to regions. Furthermore, it experienced a distinctive development, particularly in areas where missionary schools were located.

The issue of the printing press which can be identified as a consequence of the liberal interpretation of progress, can also be observed in the initial newspaper debates. When comparing European states with the Ottoman Empire, everything is subjected to a comparison according to the Western-centered modernization template without considering the internal dynamics, specific conditions, internal contradictions and unique development processes. The approach that the press was established by the state as a necessity of modernization in order to foreign interventions and that it did not have much of an impact on the public can be seen in Hıfzı Topuz's work. According to Topuz, the reason for the publication of *Takvim-i Vekâyi* was external developments:

Why was *Takvim-i Vekâyi* published? The press in foreign countries had a history of two hundred years. Those who followed foreign events through newspapers would announce them to the Sultan. In those years, the French newspapers published in İzmir had also caused wide repercussions. It is understood that these events influenced the Sultan (2015: 15).

The assertion that the first official newspaper emerged as a result of the personal decision of Mahmud II in response to the events in Europe is an example of the regression paradigm which derived from the liberal perspective, being introduced into the history of the press. In this light, Kocabaşoğlu (2004: 46) posits that the advent of the newspaper in the Ottoman Empire was driven by a desire for modernization from above, namely the

⁶ As an early example of this, Beydilli (2003: 107) posits that although there are rumours that printing in Arabic script was forbidden during the reigns of Bayezid II and Selim I, there is no extant document that corroborates this assertion.

⁷ Berkes's argument is based on the premise that Sabatay Sevi's teachings were disseminated through the printing press particularly in Salonica, creating a challenging situation for the state. Berkes (2018: 59) characterizes this as "the state's allergy to the printing press."

Sultan's personal desire. However, Mahmud II who ascended to the throne following the assassination of Selim III by the janissaries and the signing of the *Sened-i İttifak* (1808) with the a'yan, initiated the newspaper not because of external factors but as a consequence of the internal conflict between the palace, the janissaries and the a'yan. The Sultan was concerned that the implementation of centralist policies, which were designed by him to eliminate threats to his power, would result in the loss of public support. This was compounded by the destruction of the Janissary Corps in 1826 and the publication of the first official Ottoman Turkish newspaper *Vekay-i Mısriyye* in 1828 by the Governor of Egypt Kavalalı Mehmed Ali Pasha who had emerged as a rival to the Sultan and sought to explain his reforms to the public. The Sultan had already begun to be known as the "Giaour Sultan" due to a series of liberal economic measures; the emphasis on the equality of the subjects, the change in the dress code and several other innovative reforms. Therefore, the Sultan was looking for a way to legitimize the reforms. As a result of this fear of the public, *Takvim-i Vekâyi* was published to announce the reforms to everyone and even to legitimize the reforms by resorting to absurd news for this purpose.⁸ In contrast to the prevailing notion that the newspaper was intended solely for civil servants, the fact that it was to be published in six different languages and sultan's directive to emphasize plain language in conveying his travels to the public, as highlighted by Koloğlu (n.d.: 54), substantiates this assertion.

The fact that *Takvim-i Vekâyi* references developments in Europe, sciences and literary issues in order to inform the public and civil servants, as well as to encourage the public to adopt the reforms, also indicates that the newspaper emerged as a result of internal developments rather than foreign intervention. The manner in which the newspaper pre-

sented the developments in Europe, focusing on the internal dynamics of the empire and portraying the conflicts with Governor of Egypt Mehmed Ali Pasha as a minor internal problem, serves to corroborate this assertion. Nevertheless, Mithat Atabay (2015: 5) presents a similar argument to that of Topuz, namely that the objective of the newspaper was to elucidate the reforms to Europe. However, this argument is insufficient to explain the fact that the newspaper was published in the most widely used languages in the empire, often with religious emphasis. Indeed, it can be observed in the news that Mahmud II sought to safeguard himself from potential domestic repercussions and criticism by emphasizing the caliphate at an earlier point in time than Abdülhamid II.⁹

Another factor to consider in the evaluation of the press as an extension of the state is the observation that while the press became an important part of daily life in Western Europe and the US in the 19th century with the expansion of the capitalist market, technological innovations and the tremendous development of the postal and railroad network, we did not see a similar development in the Ottoman Empire. In the period following the French Revolution and the Revolutions of 1848, which profoundly affected the European continent, working-class publications played a pioneering role in the development of an effective and involved press. In addition, the advent of technological innovations such as the telegraph, telephone, electricity and radio -particularly in the US- transformed the press into an indispensable component of daily life, establishing a far-reaching network that had never existed before. According to Benedict Anderson (2015: 71), while it was previously possible to create an imaginary community through pilgrims traveling to distant lands, it was now realized through the press. Furthermore, in light of the fact that these developments ultimately gave rise

⁸ 6 October 1833, Nu: 68. In Tarnova the people called a witch expert named Nikola to neutralize the janissaries who had turned into witches in their graves with their elongated fingernails and fire coming out of their eyes. After Nikola defeats the witches by driving stakes into their bodies and scalding their hearts, the people pray to God to protect Mahmud II for destroying these witch janissaries in time.

⁹ See Koloğlu's (n.d.: 80-84) for the issues in which the Sultan's caliphate was emphasized in the face of various rebellions and reactions.

to capital conflicts and attempts to establish nation-states, it is crucial to acknowledge the integral role that the press played in the daily lives of individuals under the guidance of urban, newly-emerging commercial classes, particularly in Western Europe and the USA.¹⁰ In contrast, a similar dynamism was not observed in the Ottoman Empire which allowed for the formation of a perception of significant backwardness and ignorance regarding modernization.

As is often seen in the Orientalist perspective, the role of the decayed, static, exotic "Orient" in the rapid development of the 19th century is reduced to that of a distant spectator. According to Islamoglu (2010: 59), this obsolescence attributed to the East by Orientalists is due to the *Golden Age* vision of the past. Consequently, the East must now decline. Nial Ferguson (2020: 30) critiques this stagnation attributed to the East, arguing that the relative development of the East prompted the West to engage in competition and development. In this context, it is imperative to move beyond a simplistic dichotomy of the West and the East and to instead examine the specific conditions that prevail in each region. This necessitates an investigation into the inter-relationship between these conditions and the global context. As a result, the argument that technological developments are both a necessity and a cause of progress encounters an impasse in the face of the question of why those technological developments emerged. For example, it is a common misconception that Europe's advancement was due to the invention of the printing press while the Ottoman Empire lagged behind. However, this ignores the fact that the printing press was already known centuries ago in China and Korea or by Jews in the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 15th century. This is because the liberal narrative fails to explain why the printing press did not have the same impact in other geographies as it did in Europe. This approach also fails to explain the fact that the newspapers published by non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire were widely read, es-

pecially in port cities while the first Turkish newspapers were published much later by Mehmet Ali Pasha and Mahmud II. The fundamental issue is not the creation of new technology but rather the existence of the economic and political conditions necessary for its widespread and effective utilization.

In line with the tenets of the liberal narrative, the dearth of press activity in the Ottoman Empire bolstered by urban nobility and substantial advertising revenues, should be interpreted in light of the circumstances faced by a state that did not undergo the same degree of capitalist transformation as Western Europe. Curran's (2002: 135) assertion that media historiography should eschew an emphasis on the history of media as a technology, it is imperative that this perspective be taken into account. This is because the prevailing approach considers the media itself to be the primary criterion rather than social and economic relations, as a consequence of the Western-centered liberal narrative. James G. Stovall (1991: 126) asserts that the liberal narrative's ideological framework is constructed to argue that what is supposed to be is already in history. For instance, the penny press, which emerged because of technological and distribution innovations is addressed exclusively through prominent figures within the contemporary liberal discourse. Consequently, unless this approach is overcome, the historiography of the Ottoman press which already presents significant challenges due to the regression paradigm will become even more intractable.

Another area where the liberal narrative has influenced the historiography of the press is the limited role attributed to the public due to the low literacy rate. The prevailing narrative posits that the public is a passive entity, acquiescing to the directives of those at the pinnacle of the social hierarchy. This narrative is reflected in the notion that modernization is a process whereby the masses are subjected to the will of the rulers. To such an extent that a substantial body of literature

¹⁰ Similarly, Jeffrey L. Parsley (2001: 12) posits that in the aftermath of the American Civil War (1861-1865), the culture of reading newspapers which had previously been largely exclusive to the upper class became accessible to all, leading to the post-war Americanization process.

has been compiled in which the reader is frequently relegated to a secondary position. Selim Nüzhet Gerçek's *Matbuat Tarihi* is one of the most important works in the history of the Turkish press.¹¹ Gerçek (2019: 214) discusses the emergence of *Takvim-i Vekâyi* through *Le Moniteur Ottoman* which until then had undertaken the task of informing foreigners about the situation in the country without intermediaries. He posited that the state required a Turkish newspaper because *Le Moniteur Ottoman* was in French. However, the author does not question the fact that the first newspapers were published after the Greek Revolt (1821-1829). Because it was through newspapers that national unity was primarily constructed at the level of discourse. To illustrate, Gregory Jusdanis (2018: 211-212) posits that *Efimeris*, the inaugural Greek-language newspaper published in Europe between 1790 and 1798 sought to disseminate the tenets of the French Revolution among the Greek populace. However, the true media boom was the proliferation of newspapers during the Greek Revolt. Nevertheless, the low literacy rate observed during this period was also applicable to the Ottoman Greeks. But according to the liberal narrative, the press should have been passive and newspapers should have been limited. Therefore, as will be seen in the following process, measuring the impact of newspapers by the number of subscribers and literacy rate is a highly problematic adaptation of Western European and US criteria to the Ottoman press.

The liberal narrative fails to explain the boom of the press in the Greek Revolt and evaluates the first state-run newspaper in the Ottoman Empire as independent of the public. For example, Ortaylı (2018a: 48) argues that the newspaper entered Ottoman life as an official newspaper. However, he does not mention the press boom during the Greek Revolt and ignores the fact that the Ottomans included not only Turks and Muslims but also all other inhabitants of the empire. Consequently, he is unable to discern that the publication of *Takvim-i Vekâyi* was intended to assuage

the internal unrest precipitated by the revolt and the radical reforms. Aksan (2011: 168-169) asserts that Mahmud II was keenly interested in gauging the public's response to the reforms and took prudent measures to ensure their acceptance. The Sultan conducted an inspection of the Balkan borders with the Prussian officer Helmuth von Moltke and issued messages of unity and solidarity to the non-Muslim population. Koloğlu (2014: 132) also challenges the conventional wisdom that newspapers should be evaluated solely in response to external developments. Instead, he examines the rivalry between *Vekây-i Mısriyye* and *Takvim-i Vekâyi* and the tension between Mahmud II and Mehmet Ali Pasha through the lens of newspaper efforts to influence public opinion. However, Uğur Gündüz presents the most radical argument in the historiography of the Ottoman press, suggesting that the public was merely a passive entity and that developments in the press should be interpreted in terms of interventions from the top:

In the West the bourgeois class brought modernization. For this reason, modernization in the West is bottom-up, accompanied by democratization and secularization. In our country, the engine of modernization is the state. Therefore, modernization has been top-down and authoritarian. In order to revive the old, we have tried to innovate. Even the proclamation of freedom in 1908 was not for democracy but to save the state. In this process, the progressive army, intellectuals and bureaucrats form a historical bloc. The public is seen as a herd, as in medieval theory (2018: 49).

This characterization of the public as an ineffective herd provides a clear example of the liberal narrative. This approach must be subjected to critical analysis with the presentation of evidence demonstrating that the government consistently exercised control and censorship over the press due to concerns about public opinion. Additionally, it

¹¹ The 2019 publication in question is a single-volume edition of Gerçek's three separate books, originally published in the late 1920s and 1930s.

is important to highlight that a significant proportion of the population gathered in cafes to read the newspapers rather than subscribing individually. As Cengiz Kırılı (2009: 5) demonstrates, had the public been so passive and uncaring, Mahmud II would not have been interested in ascertaining the public's perception of the reforms through the agents he dispatched to various coffeehouses in İstanbul. The erroneous assumption that public opinion is passive is the also subject of famous Ottoman journalist Namık Kemal's critique. The renowned journalist posited that the Russian Czarina Catherine II compensated Voltaire, D'Alembert, and Diderot to compose articles denigrating the Ottoman Empire and swayed public opinion in Russia's favor. According to him, the reason for the Czarina's success was that the balance between the palace and the public had been lost after Mahmud II abolished the janissaries, and the press had not yet been able to fill this gap.¹²

Bernard Lewis is another scholar who posits that the Ottomans were largely indifferent to the developments in Europe. As he states (2002: 54), European journalists who traveled to the Ottoman Empire during the Crimean War (1853-1856) were able to provide their European audiences with the latest developments thanks to the telegraph. Lewis posits that this resulted in a profound shift in the perception of the West among the peoples of the Middle East. In addition to the fact that the Ottoman Empire, which was multiethnic and multilingual and had already been a political part of Europe for centuries, suddenly became a non-Western, Middle Eastern society. The problematic notion that the press experienced a major change as a result of a singular event rather than a multitude of developments is also evident here. However, in his celebrated novel *Aziyade*, Pierre Loti describes his experiences in İstanbul where he arrived shortly before the Constitution was promulgated in 1876. He notes that the men in the coffeehouses listen to the newspaper read by one person in silence, collectively:

People in Eyüp are extremely calm and determined. In the evenings in all Turkish coffeehouses, even the humblest ones, pashas and commoners, everyone gathers together without distinction between rich and poor. A sage reads the daily newspapers and everyone listens in silence and faith (2018: 114).

Pierre Loti's narrative is similarly confirmed by Ahmet Emin Yalman. Yalman (2018: 42-45) posits that the number of readers cannot be gauged by subscriptions and circulation alone. Even a single copy can reach dozens of individuals in coffeehouses and house tours and many people even collect and bind the newspaper issues. Moreover, Beşir Fuad's letter dated October 14, 1886 confirms this.¹³ Beşir Fuad who was attempting to publish a magazine, highlights the fact that people read magazines and newspapers in coffeehouses without paying as a potential impediment to the magazine's sales. Furthermore, in his missive, he expresses concern that the magazine he is preparing for publication will not achieve a substantial sales volume, given the considerable number of individuals who peruse the magazines and books rented by bookstores. Indeed, the practice of reading newspapers from hand to hand was so prevalent that Benlisoy (2020: 96) illustrates how Evangelinos Misialidis -the proprietor of *Anatoli*, a Greek newspaper published in Karamanli Turkish- attributed the low sales figures to the practice of individuals whom he referred to as "scroungers," reading these newspapers from hand to hand in exchange for the price of coffee or deserts and sending them to their relatives in various locations within Anatolia. Similarly, Clayer (2020: 396) posits that individuals in Albania who were unable to read could visit Bektashi dervish lodges where they would be apprised of current affairs through the reading of the newspaper aloud by a member of the community. It is evident that there was a high demand for reading or listening to newspapers as evidenced by the high prices at which the newspapers published by Ali Suavi, Namık Kemal and Ziya Pasha in exile were sold on the black market.

¹²Namık Kemal, "Hatıra Zeyli", Hürriyet, Issue: 34, 3 Zilkade 1285-15 February 1869.

¹³Özturan (n.d.) 59-60.

Undoubtedly, there is a notable disparity between the press in Europe and the US and that of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, this is evidenced by the considerable discrepancy in the number of newspapers and the frequency of their readership. For instance, as Çelik (1994: 156) notes while there were only two Turkish newspapers in the early Ottoman period, the number of foreign language newspapers exceeded thirty. Nevertheless, it is evident that a considerable number of foreign language newspapers were published and that the majority of these were read by Ottoman non-Muslims and intellectuals. Although the press initially appeared to have been suppressed by Abdülhamid II's policy of repression and censorship, interest was consistently maintained, particularly through the influence of foreign newspapers. As a matter of fact, one of the most striking examples of this interest was given by famous writer Ahmet Mithat in *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* dated July 6, 1891:

The Ottoman press has a limited circulation and no revenue. On the other hand, it is certain that the foreign press in İstanbul is more popular than the local one. It is a general practice to find French, English, German, Greek and even Italian newspapers, both without pictures and with pictures, in every part of our city where there are many casinos, coffeehouses and beer houses with foreign customers or frequented by Ottoman citizens who know the language (cited in Koloğlu 2017: 44).

All of these examples suggest that the significant technological and economic differences between the Ottoman Empire and the European states of the period cannot be treated in the same way in the field of the press, as the liberal narrative suggests. Because this difference is directly applied to the press by the liberal narrative which evaluates the press of the supposedly inferior state as ineffective and unable to speak out because of censorship. Nevertheless, it is evident that in the Ottoman Empire it was a common practice for individuals to congre-

gate in coffeehouses to peruse newspapers or engage in discourse pertaining to political matters, despite the inherent risks posed by spies. Moreover, individuals proficient in foreign languages were able to access and read the principal European newspapers particularly in Ottoman port cities. On the other hand, *Cemiyet-i İlmiyye-i Osmâniye* the first scientific society established in 1861 under the guidance of Münif Pasha published a scientific journal called *Mecmûa-i Fünûn* which served as a significant intellectual platform for Ottoman intellectuals to closely monitor scientific advancements in Europe.¹⁴ This was also the period during which Turkish novels began to emerge and numerous novels and theatrical works particularly those originating from French literature were translated into Turkish and published in newspapers as episodes. Indeed, Tanpınar (2007: 141) asserts that the periodical press played a pivotal role in disseminating Tanzimat innovations throughout the country.

In addition to the press activities of the period and translated works in newspapers, Ortaylı (2018b: 94) posits that the foundation for the cultural richness of the Tanzimat was laid through the training of *Kalemiye* members who were proficient in Western languages and well-versed in Western culture since the 18th century. Findley (2014: 237) additionally posits that non-Muslims who had been employed at Bâb-ı Âli (The Sublime Porte) for an extended period due to their proficiency in French and education at Western universities, demonstrated the state's already considerable interest in Europe. Corroborating this, after the Greek Revolt Turks were trained and employed in the *Bâb-ı Âli Tercüme Odası* (Translation Office of The Sublime Porte) instead of Greeks, paving the way for a generation of bureaucrats who had long been familiar with foreign texts, newspapers and cultural artifacts.

Conclusion

Rather than assuming that the Ottoman press lacked readers due to low literacy rates and was ineffective, it is more accurate to view it

¹⁴ See Ali Budak's (2011) for examples of the founding activities of the society and the issues of the journal.

as a press that demonstrated an interest in a wide range of topics and events occurring around the world with the goal of preventing the infiltration of liberal historiography into Ottoman press historiography. Moreover, the necessity of overcoming the presuppositions that the press was unable to speak out due to censorship and repression, especially during the *Tanzimat Period*, can be overcome through discussions on the history of the press. Because journalists who were forced to dissent at home and abroad continued to struggle against censorship. As outlined by Çağlar (2021: 152), newspaper proprietors employed a strategy of circumventing censorship and bans by purchasing the licenses of publications that had ceased operations or were in the process of being shut down. To illustrate, Aleksandr Sarrafyan surreptitiously leased the license of the newspaper *İbret* to Namık Kemal and his associates who were facing censorship and exile. They proceeded to operate from this newspaper, rather than their own which had been shut down. Furthermore, the palace's censorship and repression of the press were not universally effective throughout the empire. For instance, the modernization debates and public opinion-forming practices carried out through the press were unable to prevent the *Unionism* in the Balkans or *The Nahda* in Syria.

As can be observed, a significant proportion of the fundamental tenets that underpin the historiography of the Ottoman press can be attributed to the direct incorporation of the philosophical and political perspectives of liberal historiography imported from Western Europe. The linear progression observed in this historiography can be attributed to the erroneous practice of legitimizing events from the end and measuring the evolution of the press in terms of factors such as parliament and the developed capitalist market, as well as evaluating the world as a template. Furthermore, the issue has been compounded by the influence of modernization theories and debates in political science and history which glorify the nation-state and as a consequence, trap empires in the paradigm of decline. This approach treats them as archaic elements doomed to collapse regardless of the circumstances. Çakır (2024: 42)

issues a cautionary note regarding the potential issues that may emerge when different disciplines, such as communication and history, adhere to only their respective methodological working principles in the context of press historiography studies. He posits that a unified approach to methodology is essential, whereby the methods employed by different fields are considered together. Taken together, a transcendent approach to the historiography of the press and media will not only overcome the problematic aspects of liberal historiography but also enrich the debates on the historiography of the Ottoman press with new perspectives. Thus, revealing the unique points and facts that do not conform to the liberal historiography will make it possible to open the Ottoman press to discussion not as a passive or reticent, but rather as an extremely lively example.

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