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Living at the Margins of Poverty: The Begging Poor in the Ottoman Empire (1550-1750)

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ABSTRACT

Studies on the living conditions of the poor and the attitudes toward them not only expand our understanding of Ottoman society but also provide us with a better picture of the role of charity in Islam. Nevertheless, the history of poverty and the life of paupers in the Ottoman Empire have not been a major concern in modern Ottoman historiography. It is axiomatic that there exist very significant studies on pious endowments. Yet these studies are concerned more with the founders of these organizations than with their beneficiaries. Hence, the main purpose of this study is twofold: first, to offer glimpses of the physical and material conditions of a group that functioned at the margins of poverty: that of beggars; and secondly, to analyze social attitudes and administrative policies toward them. By using primary sources such as the mühimme registers and the court records of the period, I would suggest that The policies followed by the Ottoman state did not seek to marginalize the mendicant poor and in fact provided a definite place for them in the society. This fact is attested to by the existence of state-sanctioned professional guilds for beggars. It can be argued that the existence of such a social space reflected Islamic injunctions to give charity to the poor. That is to say, the recognition of the existence of beggars as an acknowledged part of the society was facilitated by the notion that the more affluent sections of the society could not fulfill their obligations otherwise.

In the year 1574 an imperial decree was issued by the Ottoman Sultan[43] to the chief judge of Istanbul, informing and commanding him as follows:

> Some men and women who are not old (*pir),* poor (*fakir*), blind (*a'mâ*) or paralyzed (*mefluc*) but able to earn their living (*kâr ve kisbe kadirler iken*), commit beggary either wandering in the quarters of the capital or sitting [in a corner] and asking money (*akçe cer idup*) from by passers. Some buy blind and disabled male and female slaves and make them beg and earn money out of it. They were always able to get begging license (*cer kağıdı*) issued for them [blind and disabled male and female slaves] and present these licenses to his Excellency without even being ashamed. Some young ladies put shabby clothes on and sit among these kinds of people and being beggars. … named person who was appointed as the head of beggars (*başbuğ*) issued begging certificates in exchange for money [bribe]. It is

[43] This is one of the titles of the Ottoman state. Peter Sugar, in *South Eastern Europe under Ottoman Rule (1354-1804) (*Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1977), 3.

> certain that their mode of conduct/ way of acting is in clear contradiction with the noble Shari'a (*şer'i şerif*), that is why, I have ordered that …[44]

This decree recorded in the *Mühimme* registers[45] of the sixteenth century sheds light on how the categories of "deserving" and "undeserving" beggars were constructed by the Ottoman state and how these two broad categories of the mendicant poor were dealt with by the Ottoman authorities. This document also offers glimpses on the beggars themselves: their lives and experiences. It gives vivid description of the strategies adopted by the able-bodied beggars to practice their "profession", their places of "work," their external appearances as well as their interactions with government authorities. While recognizing that to reconstruct the lives and experiences of the beggars through looking more closely at their "professional" stratagems, their "working" places as well as their physical and material conditions is an important topic of analysis, this study is limited to explore the Ottoman state's policies towards the urban mendicant poor from the end of sixteenth to early nineteenth century. Through this long-term historical analysis, we shall attempt to address to what extent the state attitudes towards beggars underwent changes as result of political, economic and social developments that took place within the Empire.

While the history of poverty and poor relief has been explored thoroughly in modern European historiography,[46] research on history of paupers still enjoys *marginal status* in modern Islamic historiography in general and Ottoman History in particular. Recently, however, new works have been published on poverty and charity in Middle Eastern contexts focusing mostly on the nineteenth century onwards.[47] As Mine Ener points out that these study studies are concerned more with the founder of charitable organizations and their motivations than the poor themselves and their survival strategies.[48] In some of these new studies beggars were mentioned among the itinerant urban poor but they were not explored extensively as a distinct social marginal group.[49] Lately, however, Turkish historian Nadir Özbek devoted some attention to the beggars and vagrants of Istanbul from nineteenth to early twentieth century.[50]

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[44] Ahmed Refik, *On Altıncı Asırda İstanbul Hayatı (1553-1591)* (İstanbul: Devlet Basımevi, 1935), 143-144. Translation is mine.

[45] The *Mühimme* Registers include drafts and copies of the decrees that were decided upon in the Imperial Assembly. For further details, see Uriel Heyd*, Ottoman Documents on Palestine, 1552-1615: A study of Firman According to the Mühimme Defteri* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1960); Halil İnalcık, "Ottoman Archival Materials on Millets," in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire*, vol. 1, ed. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York and London: Holmes and Meier Publishers, 1982) 438-449

[46] For an overview on the poor and poor relief programs in Europe, see, for example, Bronislaw Geremek, *Poverty: A History*, translated by Agnieszka Kolakowska (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994); Robert Jütte, *Poverty and Deviance in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). For policies toward the poor in France, see, for instance, Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason,* translated by Richard Howard (New York: Vintage Books, 1973); 38-64. Olwen H. Hufton, *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France 1750-1789* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974); M. Robert Shwartz, *Policing the Poor in the Eighteenth-Century France* (London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

[47] See, for example, Amy Singer, *Constructing Ottoman Beneficence* (Albany: Sunny Press, 2002); Mine Ener, *Managing Egypt's Poor and the Politics of Benevolence*, *1800-1952* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003); Micheal Bonner, Mine Ener and Amy Singer (eds), *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2003)

[48] Mine Ener, *Managing Egypt's Poor,* 145-146.

[49] See, for example, Eyal Ginio, "Living on the Margins of Charity: Coping with Poverty in an Ottoman Provincial City," in *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts*, 165-184.

[50] Nadir Özbek, "II. Meşrutiyet İstanbul'unda Dilenciler ve Serseriler." *Toplumsal Tarih* 64 (1999): 34-43; idem., "The Politics of Welfare: Philanthropy, Voluntarism and Legitimacy in the Ottoman Empire (1876-1914)," (Ph.D. diss., Binghamton University State University of New York, 2001), 28-85.

Consequently, his analysis is focused on modernity and foundation of disciplinary aspects of modern state apparatuses. Though for an earlier period, Adam Sabra's *Poverty and Charity in Medieval Islam: Mamluk Egypt, 1250-1517* is a welcome first monograph to this rapidly growing field. Through using a vide variety of sources, Sabra attempts to reconstruct the social history of paupers in the medieval Mamluk Egypt. Thus, his discussion includes but is not limited to the physical and material conditions of the paupers, their survival strategies as well as the attitudes towards them. One of the most interesting points he makes is related to the status of the poor in the society. He says that while "on the one hand, the poor were despised and even feared by the upper classes. On the other hand, they were thought to hold a special spiritual status; and one who gave them alms could expect to be rewarded for his actions." Another interesting argument by Sabra pertains to the role of the State in the distribution of charity. For Sabra, charity in Mamluk Cairo for the most parts an informal practice carried out by individuals. The state did not interfere in the lives of the poor except in policing beggars, managing the belongings of the orphans and helping the clear what they owe. One significant point he makes in this regard is that, whilst sporadic efforts were made to control them, the poor of Mamluk Cairo were never subject to a well-organized system of surveillance and control such as the one that prevailed in the sixteenth century Europe. In the final analysis, as Sabra himself points out, we need further studies reading more sources, including voluminous legal sources and court registers -- excluded from the narrative of Sabra – give us a more vivid picture on the lives and survival strategies of the poor and disadvantaged in pre-modern Islamic societies. Hence the present study is an attempt to provide a bird's eye-view of a complex subject that has not received due attention in the study of Islamic societies.

Coping with Mendicity in the Ottoman Empire

Research demonstrates that in Islamic society in general and Ottoman society in particular the family acted as an essential safety net by providing support and benefits to its weaker and poorer members.[51] However, there were some who lacked kinship, social and professional lies and turned to the local community for help. Institutional charity such as *waqf or* pious endowment would be an answer to the needs of those who did not belong to any kinship-based network. However, since the main beneficiaries of the pious endowment were determined by various founders' perceptions and wishes, charity from such endowments was not available to all the indigent.[52] In the eighteenth century Selonica, for example, the soup kitchen was the only institutional charity that catered the poor including migrants, unskilled workers, fugitive slaves, dervishes, gypsies and itinerant beggars.[53] However, in the eighteenth century Jerusalem, even the poor kitchen was designated to serve mostly religious men and other dignitaries.[54] Consequently, the paupers had to ensure their survival by other means. Begging was one of the strategies available to them for their survival.

Yet, as two imperial decrees, one from 1569 and one from 1574, demonstrate the Ottoman authorities did not allow those who were fully capable of earning a living for themselves to

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[51] Abraham Marcus documents the role of family for coping with poverty in the eighteenth century Aleppo in his *The Middle. East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century.* (New York: Columbia University T'ress, 1989), 212-218; For an owerview on the role of family and other networks of support dealing with poverty in Islam, see Mine Ener, *Managing Egypt's Poor,* \-10.

[52] Eyal Ginio, "Living on the Margins uf Charity: Coping with Poverty in an Ottoman Provincial City," in *Poverty and Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts** 167-171.

[53] Ibid., 170-

[54] Oded Peri, 'Waqf and Ottoman Welfare Polic y: the Poor Kitchen of Hasseki Sultan in the Eighteenth-Century Jerusalem." *Journal 0f Economic and Social History of the Orient* 35 ii (1992): 172-175.

engage in begging.[55] Begging was permissible only to those "men and women who are old *pir),* weak *(natüvan),* blind *(a'ma),* paralyzed *{mefluc),* victims of fate *{meflük),* disabled *(küt),* crippled *(kotürüm),* sick *(mariz)* and unable to work *(amelmande).*[56]

The legal scholars of the period also tackled with the issue of begging and able-bodied beggars. For instance, according to Şeyhülislam Ebussuud Efendi (d. 1574) troublesome beggars *(cerrarlar)* should be chastised and forbidden to beg *(tazirt ile men olunmak).* However, those who gave alms to them were still considered virtuous.[57]

A distinction between moral categories of deserving and undeserving beggar was not confined to the Ottoman history. In fact, it can be observed throughout early and medieval Islamic history. For instance, while talking about the responsibilities of the market inspector, the well-known scholar al-Mawardi (d. 1058) discerns between two categories of beggars and states how able-bodied beggars should be treated by the market inspector. According to him

> If the *muhtasib* sees a man engaging in begging alms from people, and be happens to know that he is in fact rich, cither by his personal wealth or from his trade, he should show his disapproval of this and punish him for it. ... If the *muhtasib* sees that the beggar gives an appearance of well off, he points out to him that begging is prohibited for those who have no need to do it, but he should not violently reprove him for it, because of the possibility that he may be secretly in need. But if he sees a sturdy-bodied person fully able to work, he should warn him off begging and tell him to get busy earning his living bv his eralt and if the mendicant persists in his begging, he should punish him till he desists.[58]

In fact, all these regulations and opinions on who deserved begging and how undeserving beggar should be treated, are grounded in the hadith. According lo Iraqi scholar Abu Ubayd (d. 838), Prophet Muhammad said that

> Begging is not permissible except to three kinds of people: a man who has incurred debt, for him begging is permissible until he pays that off, then he must refrain [from begging]; a man who has been afflicted by a natural disaster which destroys his wealth, and he asks for charity so he can have what will support him, or will provide him subsistence for life, then he must refrain [from begging |: and a person who has been smitten by poverty and three sound members of his community witness that he has been so smitten, for him begging is permissible until he acquires what will support him, or will provide him subsistence to live on, then he must refrain [from begging][59]

As this short overview of the Ottoman imperial decrees, religious opinions and the hadith tradition reveals the beggars did not form a homogenous category and consequently the Ottoman state policies too show a diversity matching the heterogeneity of the mendicant groups.

The imperial decree of 1574 demonstrates that during the "classical" period of the Ottoman history (1300-1600) the Ottoman state allowed deserving beggars of Istanbul to practice their "profession" through issuing them begging licenses *(cer kağıdı)* which were distributed by a steward beggar (*başbuğ*) appointed by the state. The published archival documents do not provide further information on the details of this system for the following centuries**.** However,

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[55]For the 1569 decree see, *7 Numarah Mühimme Defteri (975- 976 /1567 1569),* vol. II, edited by Murat Şener, Nurullah lşler, H. Osman Yıldırım (Ankara: T. C. Başbakanlik Devlel Arşivleri Genel Müdürlügu, 1997), 254.

[56]Ahmed Refik, *On Altıncı Asırda İstanbul Hayatı (1553-1591)* (İstanbul: Devlet Basımevi, 1935), 143-144.

[57]*M.Ertuğrul Düzdağ Şeyhülislam Ebussuud Efendi Fetvalari lşigmda 16. Asır Türk Hayatı* {lstanbul: Enderun Kitabevi, 1972), 179

[58] *Quoted in C.E. Rosworth, The Medieval Islamic Underworld,* 13.

[59]*Quoted in* Ingrid Mattson, "Status-Based Definitions of Need in Early Islamic *Zakat* and MaintenanceLaws," in *Poverty arid Charity in Middle Eastern Contexts,* 34.

the imperial decree issued in 1788 reveals that the begging certificates were still issued for the deserving beggars as late as the eighteenth century.

According to the decree, Marko, a fully blind man declared in his petition that he was earning his living through begging and was not able to pay his poll tax and he asked help from the authorities. In response to his petition, Marko was not only exempted from the poll tax but also entitled to beg.[60] As for the stewardship of beggars *(se'ele kethüdalığı)* an institutional change that took place during the reign of Mahmud II (1808-1839} demonstrates that the steward beggar functioned as an intermediary between the government and. the beggars until the early nineteenth century. However. Mahmud II replaced the stewardship of beggars *(se'ele kethüdalığı)* with the directorate of beggars *(se'ele müdürlüğüi)* and appointed a government agent to monitor the beggars.[61] In a broader historical context, this change reflects the centralization policy of the period in all state apparatuses.

Another indication that the Ottoman authorities let the deserving beggars exercise their profession and made them not only integral part of the social "labor division" but also the city itself can be seen in the accounts of the seventeenth century traveler Evliya Çelebi (d.1679). In his detailed description of the guilds of Istanbul in 1638, Evliya Çelebi relates the guild of the beggars as:

> The Elder Beggars' Artisans *(Esndf-i Şuyuh-u Sailan):* [They are] seven thousand in number. They are a group of beggars *(cerrar)* and impetuous asking people *{kerrar)* who are honored by the commandment [in the Qur'an saying] that the alms are for poor and needy *(innama al-sadaqat li'1-fuquara ' wa'l -masakin),* They wear woolen garment and [among them] the blinds *(a'ma)* have a variety of lags in their hands slicking to each other — among are some lame persons, hunchbacks, paralyzed persons, epileptics, naked and burned persons and some mounting a donkey. When all, seven thousand beggars, pray with the blessed name "Ya Fettah !" and say *"Allah Allah, amin"* their voices reach the sky. On this setup, the head of beggars stands at the Alay palace and say a prayer for sultan. When they receive generous gifts and donations they immediately leave. Their master was el-Şeyh Safi . This person used to ask alms *{sadaka)* by reciting the verse *[wa amma al-saila fa-la tanhar]* from Muslim warriors *(gazi)* who return from expeditions *(gaza)* He buried near *Kibleteyn* in beatific Medina[62]

Furthermore, there existed the beggars' guild headed by a shaykh officially appointed by the Şeriat court in the provincial city of Aleppo during the eighteenth century.[63] Its members wandered the city as well as in the countryside begging for alms following the professional code that regulated their public conduct.

As for the undeserving beggars, they were not tolerated by authorities of Istanbul in theory at least and they usually were sent to the galleys or faced corporal punishments such as beating and chastisement.[64] More often of than not, the Ottoman authorities like their counterparts in Europe turned to the ancient remedy of expulsion to cope with able bodied beggars.[65] In fact, this punishment was also inflicted upon other "undesirables" of the society such as gypsies, lepers, criminals and prostitutes.[66] However, according to an imperial decree that was

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[60] Nadir Ozbek, "The Polities of Welfare: Philanthropy, Voluntarism and Legitimacy in the Ottoman Empire{1876-l9l4),"38

[61] Ibid

[62] Evliya Çelebi Seyehatnamesi vol 1 (Istanbul; Ikdam Matbaasi, 1314 /1893), 528-529. Translation is mine.

[63] Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the live of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New-York: Columbia

[64] Ahmed Refik, *On Altınca Asırda İstanbul Hayatıı (l553-l59l)* (Istanbul: Devlet Basimevi, 1935), 143-144.

[65] *7 Numamh Mühimme Defteri (975-976 / 1567-1569),* vol. II, 254.

[66] Uriel Heyd . *Studies in Old Ottoman Criminal Law,* edited by V.L.. Menage (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 19 73),310

dispatched to the governor and the judge of Izmit in 1760 A. D., the undeserving beggars should not be punished at their first offenses. Rather, they were to be transported to lzmit, a city in close proximity to Istanbul, where they were required to be work either in guilds or agricultural farms. In their second offence, however, they were required to be punished. Unlike conventional punishment - being condemned to serve in the galleys - they were to be sent their previously assigned jobs in Izmit after being severely beaten.[67] According to Nadir Özbek, this decree represents a shift from corporal punishment to disciplinary policies and development of new conception of work in which idleness considered as a source of vice and labor was regarded as having correctional and disciplinary virtue. Despite the fact that the decree differs from its precedents in term of punishment, it does not reflect a new conception of work. In order to reach this conclusion, one needs to explore further the internal economic dynamics of Izmit during this period. This would help us answer the following question: was the new conception of the work as in early modern Europe - or economic necessities of region led the authorities to deport the undeserving beggars to Izmit?

Conclusions

In western early Modern Europe, the marginalization of the poor in general and beggars in particular resulted in the creation of new institutions charged with maintaining these individuals and keeping them out of the public eye. Many of the European policies served to stigmatize the mendicant poor went through changes which reflect the internal dynamics of the western European society at various stages such as the protestant reformation, the subsequent development of the "protestant work ethic," the industrial revolution and foundation of overseas colonies.

Whereas in the Ottoman lands, the state and society attitudes towards beggars derived from *Şeriat* tampered with practical concerns of the Empire. The policies of followed by the Ottoman state did not seek to marginalize the mendicant poor and in fact provided a definite place for them in the society. A fact attested to by the existence of state sanctioned professional guilds of the beggars. It can be argued that the existence such as social space reflected the Islamic injunctions to give charity to the poor, that is to say, the recognition of the existence of the beggars as an acknowledged part of the society was facilitated by the notion of that the more affluent sections of the society could not fulfill their religious obligation of charity otherwise.

[67] Ahmed Refik, *Hicri On /kinci Asirda Istanbul Hayatı (1100-1200)* (Istanbul: Devlet Maatbasi, 1930), 194-195.