

IV ENIUGH Congress „Encounters, Circulations and Conflicts“: The Ottoman Empire in World and Global History

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Scholars have long studied the Ottoman Empire as if it were distinct from the larger world. Events transpiring in the Ottoman Balkans, Red Sea, or even Mediterranean, for example, tended to be read in isolation from those taking place in the same „areas.“ In other words, somehow events in Dalmatia, post-independence Serbia, or Tunis after 1890 were deemed „outside“ the reach of the Ottoman story for reasons as much methodological/pedagogical as reflective of actual interactions. By cause of the formal training most historians of the Ottoman Empire and those regions „in Europe“ received, the perception that the „Orient“ represented analytically arenas of study that were sharply divide by „East and West“ distinctions has only recently been challenged.¹

By way of a growing attempt by recent PhDs to integrate critical revisionist narratives about the modern world coming out of Subaltern Studies and Post-Colonial theory into their own research into events shaping the Ottoman Empire, the „Empire“ has itself become a unit of analysis. Unfortunately, this analysis does not entirely succeed in integrating events beyond the empire in a way that could contribute to Global History. With a few exceptions, relations between various polities within the territorially vast empire and the world „outside“ remains informed by an understanding of there being distinctive spheres of experience; this resilient „East/West“ divide thus persisting. It is not quite clear any longer, however, what exactly this divide constitutes when considering the healthy integrative analysis by those outside the Middle East Studies sub-discipline. As a result of some crucial innovations introduced by a new generation of scholars trained to asked questions inspired by Subaltern Studies and Post-

colonial methods, the Ottoman Empire is becoming slowly integrated into a more complex global story.

The healthy amount of studies presented in this year’s ENIUGH European Congress suggests the trend continues to push the analysis of events in the Ottoman Empire (and immediate post-imperial period) toward this interactive direction, if tangentially. The occasional reference to the Ottoman Empire in respect to global flows of migration, especially in the context of exploited labor and the infiltration of technology into the Middle East to extend channels of communication since the late 19th century is promising. That being said, having had the chance to attend many of the sessions with the Ottoman Empire explicitly the area of focus, it is clear there are still some critical issues about how one may want to retool the inquiry left unaddressed. While it was physically impossible to read and/or observe all the presentations related with the Ottoman Empire, the following will reflect on what I did observe and offer some preliminary comments on what promises to be (but it must be stressed, not yet clearly addressed) a move toward integrating Ottoman studies into the larger trend to explore trans-national, indeed, global „encounters, circulations, and conflicts.“

To start, it must be observed that of those participants offering reflections on themes directly related to the Ottoman Empire, the Congress had the healthy mix of „heavy-hitters“ and young scholars. The presence of such prominent established historians as Selçuk Esenbel, Suraya Farocho, and Virginia Aksan presenting their specific case studies certainly enhanced their panels’ geographic range. While their contributions helped to redirect historians’ focus to the dynamic contours of the early modern empire’s cultural and military interactions with its immedi-

¹ Scholars studying the areas immediately outside those of the core Ottoman/Oriental territories have, however, broken this divide in interesting ways. See in particular, Dominique Kirchner Reill, *Nationalists Who Feared the Nation. Adriatic Multi-Nationalism in Habsburg Dalmatia, Trieste, and Venice*, Palo Alto 2012; Ariel Salzmann, *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire. Rival Paths to the Modern State*, Leiden 2004); Julia Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans. North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c.1800–1900*, Berkeley 2010.

ate neighbors in „Christian“ Europe, in the case of Faruqi and Aksan, and in the fascinating interactions between late Ottoman and Meiji Japan (Esenbel), these contributions were nevertheless predictable. Any well versed scholar would realize these are observations these scholars have made in the past. It was, rather, the PhD students present in Paris who proved the most interesting contributors.

The wealth of information available to the young scholar in the form of primary sources stored in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul begs for a Global perspective, and yet, the studies offered related specifically to the Ottoman Empire seemed hesitant to make the most explicit jump into taking a Global perspective. Rather, the contributions made by the younger scholars attending the conference, while recognizing their cases had some possible contribution to thinking more globally, much of their energy has remained in deciphering the nebulous paperwork left behind by an increasingly bureaucratic Ottoman state. The result was a disappointing missed opportunity by the younger scholars attending the conference to really take the next big step and reflect on how events in the late Ottoman, early post-Ottoman era, reflects global processes that inform as much events elsewhere as remain parochially „Middle Eastern.“

What may account for this lack of research that comprehensively investigates how the empire engaged, and was engaged by others, is difficult to pin down to one source. Certainly the demands of research in the vast archives in Istanbul alone require most of the students' time, but the fact that even young historians based in European universities, seem limited by the lack of financial support to permit them to explore beyond the resources available to them immediately beyond their home institution and short stints in Istanbul. This leaves an imbalance in the narratives offered in presentation in Paris. As much as this sounds like a criticism of the work in progress, it is more a frustration with how our respective programs in universities choose to fund such projects. As Global historians, we fight an uphill battle with colleagues more narrow in scope and who have

yet heard convincing arguments as to why studying these „Encounters, Circulations and Conflicts“ is of imminent value to history departments throughout the world. Here is where young scholars working on themes that include the Ottoman Empire can (and must) contribute to the larger efforts to bring a different series of perspectives to World and Global History.

In a small panel on humanitarianism, the sole presentation related to the Ottoman Empire was offered by Semih Celik (European University Institute in Florence). Drawing from a small supply of primary material found both in Istanbul and London, Celik made a fine suggestive presentation on how the empire by the 1840s sought to demonstrate its worthiness as a regional/European power by symbolically sending aid to the starving in Ireland. It was by gesturing to the Irish famine as a means to engage Britain, the Ottoman Sultan mobilized, by way of symbolic (if not entirely sufficient) supply of „relief“ for those starving in the British ruled territories, a number of emotive and ideological tools scholars studying empires comparatively are beginning to explore.

Treated as an opportunity to make a larger imperial claim that the empire (or perhaps just the Sultan's house) should be considered a partner in an emerging global network of imperial powers. The gesture, interestingly enough, of humanitarianism and „compassion“ was a gesture of largess at a time when a parallel famine was breaking out in Anatolia, caused by draught. Interesting, Celik suggested the relative lack of mobilization to address the starvation inside the empire, compared to the symbolic gesture of sending a shipment of aid to Ireland reflects how the Ottoman Empire strategically positioned itself. The result was a campaign of relief for the Irish growing among certain circles effectively, according to Celik, conceal the internal crisis of administration that led to a lack of charity and ultimately relief for subjects suffering in Eastern Anatolia.

Where there may have been greater attention paid was contextualizing the events and efforts by the Sultanate to the recent transformations within the political economy of the empire vis-à-vis the rest of the Mediter-

anean world. Having recently lost significant parts of its Balkan territories to a newly created Greek kingdom and an increasingly autonomous Slavic territories in what is known as Serbia today, the empire's political class saw increasing interference from liberals in Britain and France, who by the beginning of the Tanzimat „reforms“ in 1838, resulted in the virtual surrender of Ottoman sovereignty in key regions, deemed strategically key to well-placed European investors/bankers. As a result, both France and Britain were able to secure lucrative concessions for their merchants, who by 1840 were trading within most of the Ottoman domains under certain „capitulations“ that assured their advantage over local, specifically Muslim, rivals. By the time the Sultan symbolically sends „relief“ to the British Crown, the empire was in a position of weakness vis-à-vis its expansionist Russian neighbors and just recently (on account of a joint military intervention by the French and British, among others) to suppress the powerful virtual state of the Muhammad Ali family based out of Egypt. In this context, the push toward a „new regime“ of humanitarianism takes on several possibly useful contours that requires deeper reflection. Certainly Celik is going in the right direction but it is at this critical point of exchange, that appears at one level as a tell-tale sign of the quest by the Ottomans to better manage its territories by way of a new era of Tanzimat that has dominated the literature, and an opportunity to reflect on how the shifting fortunes of various empires vis-à-vis the East Mediterranean, with powerful local Ayans being systematically destroyed to open the door for British and French monopolies to step in, we are beginning to see the makings of a new order. Whether or not we want to revisit Wallerstein's „peripheralization“ thesis, or Gunder-Frank's equally useful thesis is another question. That being said, returning to the scholarship produced in the 1980s by Marxist oriented economic historians of the Ottoman Empire, may allow us to conjoin the growing interest in „relief management“ and humanitarian politics (Davide Rodogno's work in particular, comes to mind).

To see where potentially such integrative and theoretically-informed work could take

the study of the Ottoman Empire in its global context we were offered entire panels. A panel specifically organized to address „The History of Turkish-Ottoman Thought, know-how and administration in the 19th and 20th centuries) promised to consider the transformations in Ottoman political thought, changes that culminated in the eventual rise of Turkish Republicanism. While the panels neatly divided along late Ottoman and early Republican periods, the aims of the young scholars looking at different periods seemed intersecting. At this point, they presenting their world could have done more to speak to each other over the course of their presentations. For lack of a commentator who would tie all the reflections on how different technical and scientific disciplines emerging in the larger world at the time „produced meanings“ by way transforming objects of public utility to subjects of specific knowledge and practice, it is not clear how transformations in the Ottoman Empire shaped political thought and the social engineering ambitions of various political and cultural elite. Indeed, with the exception of Martina Becker's excellent contribution, entitled „World Art History in a Suitcase: What Malik Aksel Studied in Berlin, 1928–1932“, the general thrust of the proposed panel was not entirely evident in the final papers. Ultimately what the young scholars observed/claimed was that there is room to question the analytical distinction between production of knowledge and its circulation. Those who produced knowledge, often for the „benefit“ of those heretofore denied access to „modernity“ does demand careful analysis. In the end, the first part of this panel suffered from too much presenting facts and less speculation into the very claims of the panel as advertised in the catalogue. That being said, Segolene Debarre, highlighted the considerable borrowing by Ottoman technicians, many of whom, by the late 19th century, had been trained in Paris in the arts of cartography. Debarre's analysis of Ottoman produced maps demonstrates that attempt to chart both the empire's territories and the larger world only really took form in the 1890s. While the image-rich presentation suggested a great deal, it seemed the audience needed more deliberation into why the Ottoman state was a

consumer of various maps produced by outside companies and not invested in its own cartographic projects. In other words, as with most of the papers offered by young scholars, more was needed in respect to situating the strategic utility of these maps to Ottoman authorities. That they would eventually resort to drawing their own maps, with highly contested assertions about where Ottoman sovereignty began and ended, warrants considerable time and perhaps a conference panel in its own right.

The other notable presentation in this conference that perhaps most highlights the potential for pushing the conceptual boundaries that still limit how World Historians integrate the Ottoman experience was from Duygu Aysal Cin (graduate student at Bilkent University). Aysal looks especially at the role of outside engineering and to a lesser extent, finance invested resources to the electrification of Istanbul in the late Ottoman era. Much promise comes from this work-in-progress, and it should capitalize on the growing interest in electricity politics in early twentieth-century societies, and yet, while these works all promise a variety of new angles to the specific study of the Ottoman Empire, what proved especially intriguing was the presentation of research in which the Ottoman Empire was peripherally acknowledged. This was especially evident in the work of scholars focusing on land management regimes of the late nineteenth century and questions of labor.

The presentation of Sven Beckert (Harvard University) on „land and labour in cotton frontier zones“, for one, did make note that Ottoman cotton production in Egypt contributed to the relative investment in cotton production in ways that affected labor regimes in the Americas in the first-half of the 19th century. Here was a perfect example of how collaborative work, if not the clever historian with the proper language training, could truly rewrite a Global History of labor and land management. Alas, as much as the Ottoman territories are acknowledged, without deeper appreciation for the dynamic exchanges between capitalists with a global reach, and those seeking to either profit from the investments that Muhammad Ali of Egypt

made in the production of this cash crop (and the exploitation of the arrival of cheap labor pools in the form of refugees), we may be still largely blinded by our division of labor regarding research. It is hoped that we begin to consider organizing both conference panels and long-term research projects that integrate the skills of various like-minded scholars to develop a new generation of questions about how late nineteenth century patterns of social, cultural, economic, and political exchange in the Ottoman Empire reflected and perhaps even influenced the transformations of the larger world, themes that scholars not focusing on the Ottoman Empire seemed perfectly willing to do. Clearly, there is much work to do among Ottoman historians to master the comparative trans-regional perspective of their truly global-thinking historian colleagues.

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