From Economic History to Cultural History in Ottoman Studies

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Reflecting on the state of Ottoman social history poses a paradox. On the one hand, it is impossible not to appreciate the great strides accomplished over the past three decades. Earlier approaches have been challenged, topics that were previously untouched or unimagined have been studied, and the foundations of a meaningful dialogue with historiographies of other parts of the world have been established. On the other hand, the theoretical sophistication and methodological debates of Ottoman social history still look pale compared to European and other non-Western historiographies in the same period.

Ottoman history is a relatively new field, in which only a handful of scholars worked before the 1970s. A new, radical generation of Ottoman social historians entered the profession and began publishing their work in the 1970s, influenced by trends in European social and economic history and focused especially on criticizing the dominant paradigm of modernization theory. Ömer Lutfi Barkan had already introduced Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* school into Ottoman historiography, but Immanuel Wallerstein's world-systems approach was more instrumental than any other in shaping the research agenda of Ottoman historians in the 1970s and a good part of the 1980s.[1] The main participants were trained in sociology and economics rather than in history, and their work was closer to economic history than to social history; peasants, workers, and other subaltern groups loomed in the background rather than appearing as agents of history. They were referenced in debates on land tenure systems, rural economies, and demography, but studies did not focus on the revolts, strikes, and other actions that were so central to contemporary developments in European historiography. The empirical foundation of these debates was quite thin, and there was little effort to engage with the British Marxist historians who were revolutionizing European social history. If Ottoman historians noticed the great movement of "history from below," it hardly found any place in their writings.

When the next generation entered the field in the 1980s, the landscape was radically changing. First, as the political and intellectual force of Marxism declined, the explanatory potential of social history was increasingly questioned. Second, the influence of Edward Said's *Orientalism* was reshaping Middle East historiography, decisively forcing modernization theory—already weakened by the earlier political economy approaches—into retreat. Postcolonial theory forcefully entered into the field, emphasizing the fluidity of religious, national, and other identities. Ottoman social history was shaped by this new intellectual climate, as manifested in the selection and conceptualization of new research topics. Historical agency was recast as local and indigenous rather than external and European, and the focus, drawing on a much richer empirical base, shifted from institutions and elites to the lower classes, and from empire-wide transformations couched in terms of the penetration of capitalism or incorporation into the world economy toward local and regional processes. Increased access to archival materials contributed to this

trend, but it was fostered mainly by the broader historiographical shift. One of the most lucid examples was Abraham Marcus's *Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century*, published in 1989.[2] The title of the book conveyed the changing scope: capitalism was replaced by modernity; regional focus was given priority over sweeping empire-wide generalizations; and urban communities were emphasized over rural structures. These elements grew stronger in the following years and it would be fair to say that only in the early 1990s did Ottoman historiography confront the question of historical agency, and seriously tackle "history from below."

This transformation was most evident in the conscious attempt to find in the archives surviving traces of the past that revealed the complexities of human agency, and the kinds of materials that were hitherto declared absent were discovered with considerable success. A number of new and fascinating subjects—from the diary of a dervish to the chronicle of a Damascene barber, from the dreamlog of a Sufi woman to the dreamlog of the Ottoman Sultan Murad III—have become the hot topics of the field and inspired new graduate students entering the profession.[3] Even well-established scholars whose previous works largely reflected the tendencies and concerns of the economic and social history of the 1970s could not resist the temptation.[4]

Well-known sources have also been reinterpreted, with important results. Court records, for instance, which in the early 1970s were analyzed largely, if not exclusively, from a political economy perspective, are now read to uncover relations within families and communities in all of their nuanced complexities.[5] Within Middle East social history, gender and women's studies in particular have flourished in the new intellectual atmosphere.

Historians have been trying to recuperate, in new and old sources, the complex, ambivalent, marginal, and "liminal" subjectivities who represent themselves in the courtroom or in the public sphere with various strategies and investments. Crime and punishment, sexuality, labor, public health, charity, intercommunal coexistence, and slavery, among other topics, have constituted the bulk of the new research on social history since the early 1990s. This has all been exciting and one expects the flourishing of similar works in the coming years.

All these new avenues of research show the signs of a maturing field. Nevertheless, not to take away from the recent strides, Ottoman social history is still lagging behind the historiographies of other regions; we still look to the resurgent historiographies on Russia, China, and South Asia, in addition to European historiography, for inspiration. One reason for this seems to be that, however contradictory it may sound given the proliferation of quality works in the field, we do not have enough studies on any given topic in social history, which prevents the field from building a critical mass that will lead to new conceptualizations. More important, however, is the insufficient interest in interdisciplinarity. The trademark of the so-called linguistic turn or the cultural turn that significantly influenced Middle East social history has been its interdisciplinary focus, with heavy methodological borrowings from anthropology, linguistics, literature, and psychoanalysis, yet it is hard to find any serious engagement with these disciplines in historical works in our field. We need to be encouraged by the long and happy marriage of the discipline of history with these disciplines, and encourage our students to take on more innovative methods and approaches that benefit from interdisciplinarity.

But then again, the radical transformation marked by the linguistic turn or the new cultural history is losing its momentum in recent years in European historiography. On the one hand, the signs of a transition from a cultural to a more material-based social history are evident, although the material here is defined less in the Marxist terms of the 1960s than in the terms of the bourgeoning field of environmental history. On the other hand, historians, especially economic historians, are less reticent about posing big questions in grand narratives, reminiscent of those of the historical sociology in the 1970s. Ottoman social history is already showing the signs of this newly acquired interest, and this could very well be the new direction Ottoman social history might be taking in the coming years, one that would excite a new generation of scholars entering the profession.[6]

NOTES

[1]For the influence of the *Annales* school on Ottoman historiography in the 1970s, see Halil İnalcık, "Impact of the *Annales* School on Ottoman Studies and New Findings," *Review* 1, nos. 3/4 (1978): 69–96; for the influence of Wallerstein's world-system approach, see Huri İslamoğlu-İnan, ed., *The Ottoman Empire and the World-Economy* (Cambridge Cambridge University Press 1987); and Reşat Kasaba, *The Ottoman Empire and the World Economy: The Nineteenth Century* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1988).

[2]Abraham Marcus, *The Middle East on the Eve of Modernity: Aleppo in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

[3]Cemal Kafadar, "'Self and Others:' The Diary of a Dervish in Seventeenth-Century Istanbul and First-Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature," *Studia Islamica* LXIX (1986): 191–218; Dana Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2013); Cemal Kafadar, "Mütereddid Bir Mutassavvıf: Üsküplü Asiye Hatun'un Rüya Defteri 1641–43," *Topkapı Sarayı Yıllığı* 5 (1992): 168–222; Ozgen Felek, "Re-creating Image and Identity: Dreams and Visions as a Means of Murad III's Self-Fashioning" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010).

[4]Intellectual itineraries of Suraiya Faroqhi and the late Donald Quataert, among others, may illustrate this point. See Suraiya Faroqhi, *Subjects of the Sultan: Culture and Daily Life in the Ottoman Empire* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2000); and Donald Quataert, ed., *Consumption Studies and the History of the Ottoman Empire, 1550–1922: An Introduction* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 2000).

[5]See Leslie P. Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003).

[6]Alan Mikhail, *Nature and Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alan Mikhail, ed., *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Sam White, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).