

## Gender and Ottoman Social History

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Starting with Said's critique of Orientalism but going well beyond it, poststructuralist and postcolonial critiques of modernity have challenged not only one-dimensional visions of Western modernity—by “multiplying” or “alternating” it with different modernities—but also the binaries between the modern and the traditional/premodern/early modern, thus resulting in novel, more inclusive ways of thinking about past experiences. Yet, while scholars working on the Middle East have successfully struggled against the Orientalist perception of the Middle East as *the* tradition constructed in opposition to the Western modern, they often have difficulties in deconstructing the tradition *within*, that is, the premodern past. They have traced the alternative and multiple forms of modernities in Middle Eastern geography within the temporal borders of “modernity.” However, going beyond this temporality and constructing new concepts—beyond the notion of tradition—to understand the specificities of past experiences (which are still in relationship with the present) remains underdeveloped in the social history of the Middle East.

As an Ottomanist working on gender through archival legal documents, I will confine my analysis to the field of Ottoman history in conversation with the larger field of sociolegal history of the Middle East to give more specific examples. My purpose is not to produce a comprehensive summary of the field of Ottoman social history but rather to sketch out what I mean by the persistence of the boundaries created by modernity in our analytical vocabulary. In fact, Ottoman social and economic history was developed first by scholars working primarily on the early modern era, until recently dubbed the “classical” period in reference to a so-called golden age of the empire. Scholars such as Roland Jennings and Haim Gerber challenged the Orientalist perception of the empire as a backward rural society ruled by an absolute monarchy bolstered by arbitrary justice.<sup>1</sup> They revealed—from different angles and through archival sources—the urban and bureaucratic social structure as well as the relatively “emancipated” character of gender relations in Ottoman society, especially during the 16th and 17th centuries. Yet, when it comes to challenging the binaries created by modernity—for example, the modern versus the traditional—conceptually inspired empirical works often come from scholars working on the late Ottoman period, the so-called “modern” era.<sup>2</sup> In other words, modernity is challenged through deconstructing the modern: the legal, demographic, and ethnic restructuring projects of late Ottoman society.<sup>3</sup> Our analytical registers in Ottoman historiography are thus still very much determined by the temporal binary between the early modern and the modern. However, revisionist scholarship not only has challenged the conceptualization of the middle period (the 17th and 18th centuries, situated between the so-called “classical” and “modern” eras) as the “dark ages” of Ottoman history but has also provided rich empirical data of the transregional and transimperial character of Ottoman society.<sup>4</sup> Intellectual and urban histories are among

the most thoroughly explored new fields. Thanks to this scholarship, a new generation of Ottoman social historians has started to approach old sources with new questions—or, better yet, old questions with new terms.<sup>5</sup>

What I want to emphasize in this roundtable on social history is the potential of gender as “a useful category of historical analysis” for transcending oppositions between the modern and the pre/early modern.<sup>6</sup> If we define gender as “a primary way of signifying relationships of power,” as Joan Scott does, then writing history through gender does not mean merely adding women to history; rather, it means changing the entire narrative of history written through the normative concepts of hegemonic positions.<sup>7</sup> By exploring alternative experiences, subjectivities, and discourses in different historical spaces and times, rather than accepting the binaries (e.g., between the male and the female as given), the historian can more freely contribute to new conceptualizations not bound by the modern versus the premodern.

Gender history is still a developing field in Ottoman studies. Thanks to the increasing inclusion of women in Ottoman historiography, first by social historians and then by scholars with more explicit feminist agendas, women—both subaltern and elite—have been restored as agents of Ottoman history.<sup>8</sup> This has been crucial, given that women were exiled so long from the androcentric plateau of Ottoman history as either “subordinates” or the plotters of disastrous intrigues in the imperial palace. Yet, there are still very few studies that take gender as an explanatory category to challenge the mainstream paradigms of Ottoman history. Leslie Peirce’s seminal work *Imperial Harem* has a special place in challenging our perception of Ottoman political history through a gender analysis of the Ottoman imperial household.<sup>9</sup> She introduced not only the central role of reproduction in imperial politics but also new frameworks to conceptualize the relationship between public and private in the Ottoman world. Similarly, Madeline Zilfi’s work *Women and Slavery* reveals how central gender politics around female slavery were to Ottoman imperial governance in the 18th and 19th centuries.<sup>10</sup> The works of Dror Ze’evi and Ruth Miller on changing sexual discourses and subjectivities in the Ottoman Empire go beyond the rigid premodern/modern dichotomy by asking new questions (about surveillance, agency, and desire) of the old sources of social history (legal documents and manuscripts).<sup>11</sup> Last but not least, recent studies on conversion and the interactions between confessional groups—as one of the most previously neglected topics of social history in the Middle East—have traced alternative cross-border and transregional subject positions.<sup>12</sup> These studies also prove that gender has played a crucial role in the self-definition of both subjects and states in conversion histories.

Social histories of gender have an enormous potential to show us how persistent certain configurations of power are. Alternatively, writing histories of subaltern (or queer in its broader sense) subjectivities would help us to recognize the very historicity of hegemonic positions today and may contribute to challenging them in the present. In Scott’s words, “history’s representations of the past help construct gender for the present.”<sup>13</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Ronald C. Jennings, “Women in Early 17th Century Ottoman Judicial Records—the Shari’a Court of Anatolian Kayseri,” *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 18 (1975): 53–114; idem, “Kadi, Court and Legal Procedure in Seventeenth Century Ottoman Kayseri,” *Studia Islamica* 48 (1978): 133–72;

Haim Gerber, "Social and Economic Position of Women in an Ottoman City, Bursa, 1600–1700," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12 (1980): 231–44; idem, *Economy and Society in an Ottoman City: Bursa, 1600–1700* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1988).

<sup>2</sup>Huri İslamoğlu-İnan, *Constituting Modernity: Private Property in the East and West* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004); Selim Deringil, "'They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery': The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43 (2003): 311–42.

<sup>3</sup>Cengiz Kırılı, "Yolsuzluğun İcadı: 1840 Ceza Kanunu, İktidar Ve Bürokrasi," *Tarih ve Toplum Yeni Yaklaşımlar* 4 (2006): 45–119; Gülhan Balsoy, *The Politics of Reproduction in Ottoman Society, 1838–1900* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2013); Lerna Ekmekcioglu, "A Climate for Abduction, a Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion during and after the Armenian Genocide," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55 (2013): 522–53.

<sup>4</sup>Suraiya Faroqhi, *Artisans of Empire: Crafts and Craftspeople under the Ottomans* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009); Ariel Salzmann, *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire: Rival Paths to the Modern State* (Boston: Brill, 2004).

<sup>5</sup>Shirine Hamadeh, *The City's Pleasure: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 2008); Tolga Esmer, "Economies of Violence, Imperial Governance, and the Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Banditry in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1800," *Past & Present* 224 (forthcoming, August 2014).

<sup>6</sup>Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1053–75.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 1067.

<sup>8</sup>For social history, see Jennings, "Women in Early 17th Century Ottoman Judicial Records"; Haim Gerber, "Social and Economic Position of Women"; Suraiya Faroqhi, "Crime, Women, and Wealth in the Eighteenth-Century Anatolian Countryside," in *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Madeline C. Zilfi (Leiden: Brill, 1997); and idem, *Stories of Ottoman Men and Women: Establishing Status, Establishing Control* (Istanbul: Eren, 2002). More explicitly feminist works include Judith E. Tucker, *In the House of the Law: Gender and Islamic Law in Ottoman Syria and Palestine* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1998); Leslie Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2003); and Elyse Semerdjian, *"Off the Straight Path": Illicit Sex, Law, and Community in Ottoman Aleppo* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup>Leslie Peirce, *The Imperial Harem, Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup>Madeline C. Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire: The Design of Difference* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>11</sup>Dror Ze'evi, *Producing Desire: Changing Sexual Discourse in the Ottoman Middle East, 1500–1900* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2006); Ruth Austin Miller, "Rights, Reproduction, Sexuality, and Citizenship in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 32 (2007): 347–375.

<sup>12</sup>Marc David Baer, "Islamic Conversion Narratives of Women: Social Change and Gendered Religious Hierarchy in Early Modern Ottoman Istanbul," *Gender & History* 16 (2004): 425–58; Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011); idem, "Contesting Subjecthood and Sovereignty in Ottoman Galata in the Age of Confessionalization: The Carazo Affair, 1613–1617," *Oriente Moderno* 93 (2013): 422–53; Eric Dursteler, *Renegade Women: Gender, Identity, and Boundaries in the Early Modern Mediterranean* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

<sup>13</sup>Joan Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 2.