

The Ottomans and the West: Some Thoughts on Mutual Perceptions and Good Government

An Essay for Sir Jack Goody

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Sir Jack Goody has been exploring the changing dynamics of East/West relations in numerous brilliant works. The key question concerns the dominance of the West since the eighteenth century. Are there features unique to the West which lead to its superiority both in arms and in culture? Or, were the last 200 years a mere passing moment in the “longue durée”? The history of the Ottomans from the thirteenth to the twentieth century provides a good background for Goody’s critical arguments. They turn out to be an unexpectedly tough adversary in the First World War, and yet the Empire fails. Does the Ottoman experience and the Turkish transformation provide new insights for the role of Islam in politics? Are there lessons to be learnt in the conduct of military operations against radical Islamic groups concerning the need for good, responsible and, above all, just governance?

Keywords: Western Hegemony; Radicalism; Ottomans; Reform

For an anthropologist with a profound interest in the myths of West Africa, Sir Jack Goody has cast his critical gaze very wide indeed. In a stream of extraordinarily learned studies, he has been exploring the fates of civilizations from West to East and from North to South (Goody 1996, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2010). The key question that he has set himself to answer is whether the “superiority” of the Westerners has to do with some feature “unique” to their cultures. Can this be traced back to the Greek philosophers, or is this simply a convenient “myth” of self-satisfaction as a result of the military and political hegemony—especially of the Anglo-Americans—for the last

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200 years? And further, has this historical “moment” passed? With capitalist development worldwide, and especially in China, India, Brazil, South Africa, Israel and elsewhere, can we look at the cultural connections between the ancient experiences of these various “civilizations” with a less jaundiced eye?

Islam has a crucial role that needs to be carefully examined in this context. Its achievements were evident in the three great centres of power: the Mogul Empire in India to 1857, the Persian Empire in Iran and the Ottoman Empire in Turkey down to recent times. What has happened to them? Iran and Turkey have taken amazing recent turns, but are both clearly flourishing. The rest of the Islamic world is in the throes of very powerful seething forces that have arisen as a direct result of anger at the destruction of vast Muslim populations in Palestine, Algeria, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Syria and others. It can be argued that in many regions where minority Islamic groups feel themselves threatened (Mindanao, Thailand, Aceh, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, Kenya, Nigeria, the Caucasus and Xinjiang China), they have taken on highly aggressive radical features. Instability in governance feeds the insecurity of such vulnerable populations.

Given this mournful context, the long experience of the Ottomans with the West, in both political and cultural terms, becomes significant. Why did the Empire fail, despite its strength? Was it a matter of decadence, or was it a more mundane matter of “poor governance”? The following essay is intended to contribute to the great quest raised by Goody concerning the “uniqueness” of the West.

What Went Wrong?

No people in the world have ever been more open to receive all sorts of Nations to them, then they, nor have used more arts to increase the number of those that are called Turks; and it is stranger to consider that From all parts of the world, some of the most dissolute and desperate in wickedness, should flock to these Dominions, to become members and professors of the Mahometan superstition, in that manner that at present, the blood of the Turks is so mixed with that of all sorts of languages, and Nations, that none of them derive his lineage from the ancient blood of the Saracens ... the English called it Naturalization, the French Enfranchisement; and the Turks call it becoming a Believer.¹

This intriguing statement from a well-informed traveller in the Ottoman Empire underlines the strengths of this unusual state in the early seventeenth century. The openness to talent from any country and from any station in society stood in sharp contrast to the exclusionary practices especially of the Spanish Empire. We know, however, from the famous account of de Busbecq that he too was greatly concerned with the effectiveness of the Ottoman administration at this time, and compared it to the rigid hierarchies that were maintained by the ruling classes of the Holy Roman Empire.

On (the “Turks”) side are the resources of a mighty empire, strength unimpaired, habituation to victory, endurance of toil, unity, discipline, frugality and watchfulness. On our side is public poverty, private luxury, impaired strength, broken spirit, lack of endurance and training; the soldiers are insubordinate, the officers avaricious; there is contempt for

discipline; licence, recklessness, drunkenness, and debauchery are rife; and worst of all, the enemy is accustomed to victory, and we to defeat. Can we doubt what the result will be.²

So, what went wrong? It is a question appropriately raised by Bernard Lewis' (2002) learned and searching little book: *What Went Wrong*. It is also directly related to the questions raised by Goody. Bernard Lewis' book is mainly concerned with the long decline of the Ottoman Empire, but he does offer profound insights concerning the Islamic world. At this time the conflagration has gone far beyond the frontiers of Turkey. The tragedies that have befallen Iraq and Syria, Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the misery in Egypt, not to speak of others in Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia and elsewhere all have particular local explanations. It would be quite inappropriate to put their travails down to a single cause, such as "Islam", or "colonial meddling", or "war on terror", but the lack of effective, rational, responsible long-term governance that is seen to be fair and just by their own populations is regrettably evident. Nations fail because they are poorly governed (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012).

But then, why are they poorly governed? Indeed, Lewis (1968) had already brilliantly indicated the broad outlines of an answer in his masterpiece, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is without peer in his prescient and penetrating observations on the key personalities involved during the long centuries of Ottoman statecraft. As one searches for some clues from one of the most powerful of Islamic empires as to the reasons for their ultimate failure, the subtitle of *What Went Wrong: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* appears to suggest that the Ottoman decline had to do with Islam. It can hardly be denied that conservative reactions were an important contributing element, but there appears to be a much less understood, more profound and much more destructive feature of Ottoman society at work. This is the refusal to deal with some unique features of the royal kinship system. A most exotic system based almost exclusively on slavery and sex was in operation in the Empire for many centuries. It turned around the Royal Palace. It became the source of many sensational prurient accounts. The nefarious effects in the form of devastating fratricide was indeed recognized by all, but the various efforts to solve the problem, introducing rules for succession and incarcerating all the princes in the royal palace cells ("golden cages", *kafes*—tr.), proved to be ruinous. The ominous features of the Royal Palace, the astonishing secrecy, the slavery, the access to large numbers of concubines by the Sultan, their control by black eunuchs specially imported for the purpose from Ethiopia, the many decapitations and the general sense of fear and insecurity generated by these bizarre customs must all be considered as part of this amazing history. Many European observers were not far wrong in reporting the hearsay rumours about these insidious matters (Grosrichard 1979).

Notwithstanding the strange secrecy of the palace, what is also most remarkable is the profound loyalty to the Ottoman dynasty shown by the high officers of the State and their subjects despite the awful fear surrounding the rulers. Their loyalty was in evidence until the very last days of the dynasty. The Empire was certainly powerful in the early stages of its history. Let us first consider the sources of strength for this society.

La Citta del Sole

Noel Malcolm has described a remarkable incident that took place in Calabria at the end of the sixteenth century. The incident illuminates the observations of Rycaut and de Busbecq.

In June 1599 some Ottoman ships anchored near Reggio Calabria—prominent land-owner Maurizio de' Rinaldis “had taken a boat out and parleyed with the Ottoman commander, Murat Reis, asking for military help” according to de' Rinaldis (under later interrogation by the Spanish authorities). The idea of this initiative had come from Ponzio (Dionisio—fellow Dominican) and Campanella. The request was transmitted to Istanbul, where it caught the interest of the admiral of the entire Ottoman fleet, Cigalazade Yusuf Sinan pasha; that it should attract his attention was not surprising, as he was himself an Italian, originally Scipione Cigala ... Indeed, the conspirators must have known of his special interest in the region: only in the previous year, Cigala had brought the Ottoman fleet to Calabria in order to visit his own mother, who was still living in Messina. Further negotiations between the conspirators and Cigala must have followed, possibly involving a group of Calabrian “renegades” (converts to Islam) in Istanbul. An agreement was made that he would bring thirty ships, 3000 soldiers and one hundred artillery pieces to support the revolt; he would arrive on 10 September 1599, and would send galleys close to the shore to exchange an agreed set of signals with the rebels. Cigala did in fact keep his promise: the signals were sent, both on the 10th and again three days later. But there was no response; by 10 September, all the leading conspirators were already under arrest. (Malcolm 2005)³

It is hardly surprising that intelligent observers at the time should have had a serious interest in what was going on in Istanbul. Here was a vast and powerful Empire, apparently well run, with an entirely different way of life that dominated much of the fabled lands of the East just like the Roman Empire had done previously. It is true that the world map had changed dramatically in the years since 1492 with Columbus, and Magellan, but the significance of the astonishing discovery of the New World was only just beginning to be understood. The scramble for the New World was going to change the balance of power in the world fundamentally, but those changes were still in the future.

Malcolm goes on to describe some further important details about the thoughts of Tommaso Campanella, one of the most prolific, intriguing and unusually creative writers of the period. Campanella was tried by the inquisition and accused of secret “*negozio di turchi*”—and in the “formal proceedings of his heresy trial, that he had claimed that ‘Turkish doctrine’ [i.e. Islam] was better than Christianity”.

And yet the picture which emerges from the interrogations of many of the participants in these events suggests that Campanella, together with several other conspirators, did have an interest in Islam and the Ottomans that went beyond the requirements of mere tactical expediency. One witness, a Dominican, said that when Giulio Contestabile (one of conspirators) visited Campanella in his friary, Campanella had told him to take whichever he preferred of the portraits hanging on his walls, whereupon Contestabile had taken that of the Sultan, Mehmet III. Another friar recalled Campanella questioning Muslim slaves about their practices, and praising some of the religious ceremonies. Maurizio de' Rinaldis said that he had heard Campanella speaking well of “the Turks” on many occasions; the procurator fiscal was summarizing multiple testimonies when he stated that “Campanella

dared to say that the way of the Turks [sc. Muslims] was better than Christianity". It certainly appears the Campanella's co-conspirator and fellow-Dominican Dionisio Ponzio shared that opinion, since, after his escape from prison in October 1602, he travelled to Istanbul, converted to Islam, and took up residence in Cigala's house: the Venetian envoy in Istanbul reported Ponzio's boast that there were 300 people in Calabria, some them men of note who were Muslims at heart, and that Campanella would soon escape from prison and join him in the Ottoman capital.

Malcolm adds,

... there is one odd piece of evidence that he did at least try to change people's outward appearance: one of the conspirators stated that Campanella had introduced a new sort of dress for his followers, consisting of a white tunic and a piece of headgear that was tied like a Turkish turban.

Noel Malcolm is of the opinion that the famous work of Tommaso Campanella, *La citta del sole*, appears to be a description of a strange utopia essentially modelled on the alien, but more flexible and open practices of the Ottomans. The description of the Ottoman practice of accepting and promoting "slaves" (*kul*) into exalted positions, allowing them to rise on the basis of merit rather than birth, was implicitly critical of the rigid Catholic social arrangements in Europe (Malcolm 2005).

It is hardly surprising that these Italians would feel hostility to their Spanish overlords at this time. The Spanish who had treated the inhabitants of the lands they had conquered in Mexico with unusual cruelty were not inclined to spare the Italians. We have the letter sent to Philip II from the Governor of Milan in 1570 which reads, "These Italians although they are not Indians, have to be treated as such so that they will understand that we are in charge of them and not they in charge of us" (Elliott 1989).⁴

As far as Turkey in the sixteenth century is concerned, there is little doubt that Ottoman Emperors had a world empire, including Europe, in their sights. Fatih Sultan Mehmet II and Suleyman "the Magnificent" (the sobriquet is European) considered themselves rulers of Rum, that is, Roman Emperors (Babinger 1992; Inalcik 1995; Kortepeter 1972). They were quite adept at inviting people of neighbouring countries to "turn Turk" and join their lofty cause for world conquest. In pursuing these great ambitions, they were quite ready to accept agents of very different backgrounds to work for them, just as Rycaut indicates.

The above vignettes reflect a time when Ottomans were major players in grand struggles for mastery in Europe. The desperate nature of these struggles is well described in the history of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Simms 2013). The attempt to find a route around the world had been directly related to find a way to circumvent Ottoman power in the East. In Spain and Portugal it was evidently part of the preoccupation with the crusading mentality which had led to the "Reconquista" of Andalusia after many centuries of Islamic existence. The discovery of immense new continents was unexpected. In fact, it appears that Columbus (1492) had Arabic translators on board to make sure that they could negotiate with the people they met when they would land in Cairo (Simms 2013, 34).

With these new routes to the East, the balance of power changes against the Ottomans. Not only is there immense new wealth arriving in Western Europe from the conquest of the Maya and Inca Empires, but the Ottomans also lose control of the Eastern trade with India and China (Casale 2010). It is clear that in these years of the middle of the sixteenth century, the Ottoman administration is quite aware of what is happening in the West. The fascinating account of the maps of the world drawn by Piri Reis (1526) recounted by Casale and the even more arresting discovery of the map of the voyage of Magellan in the Topkapi palace library in Istanbul show that the Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha was quite alert to the importance of these new technologies (and the new discoveries) that were beginning to challenge the power of the Empire. It is again of interest to note that this Grand Vizier was also of Venetian (Greek?) background himself in origin. Casale is of the opinion that these maps which would have been regarded as “top secret documents” by Spain, Portugal, Genoa or Venice were probably acquired through the effective network of spies that the Ottomans maintained in Europe. We are told that the Magellan map was probably passed on to the Ottoman palace by none other than Antonio Pigafetta, who was one of the last survivors of the extraordinary Magellan expedition (Casale 2010, 38). He was also another Venetian. Giancarlo Casale has described how the Grand Vizier Ibrahim himself undertook an expedition to Egypt to be more fully in control of the events taking place in the Red Sea, around Yemen and beyond. The danger of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean was clearly recognized in the highest circles (Casale 2010).

Apart from the interest in the openness of the Ottoman administration to talent, there was another source of strength; this was their noteworthy arrangements for the judiciary. For its time, it can be said that there was an accepted, well-conceived and effective system of justice; it was available to all and was resorted to by non-Muslims as well. In an unusual passage, Gibb and Bowen describe the careful relations between the Grand Vizier and the head of the judicial system, the Grand Mufti or Sheyh-ul Islam.

From the time of Suleyman the Seyhu'l-Islam was ranked virtually equal with the Grand Vezir. Both were the only officials to receive their investiture at the Sultan's own hands. At ceremonies the two advanced together so that neither should take the lead of his fellow. When either paid a ceremonial visit to the other he was received with equal, and peculiar, honours. The Vezir had, of course, the greater power. But the Seyh enjoyed the greater esteem, and the fact that he stood outside the Sultan's service was marked by the necessity in which the latter was placed by custom of paying him periodical visits... The Grand Vezir was bound to keep in constant touch with the Seyh on state affairs. He did this (since the Seyh was not a member of the Divan (an executive body-ny)) by paying him frequent calls, incognito, to obviate ceremony. (Gibb and Bowen 1957, Vol. ii, 86)

So the distinction between the executive and the judicial principles, so celebrated after Montesquieu in the eighteenth century, is in fact a hallmark of the Ottoman state. Many of these observers of the early period remark on the respect shown by the Sultan to the head of the religious institution of the realm (see also Lewis 1968, 14; Inalcik 1995). This is the case despite the accusations of “despotism”, which later become the dominant theme for the Europeans.⁵

The conclusion we may draw from these dramatic accounts is that in this early period, the West is not yet dominant in military, cultural or intellectual terms to their formidable Eastern adversaries. Indeed, as one might surmise from Campanella, the Ottomans present an attractive alternative to the Catholic world. As the Greek Orthodox patriarch says, “Better the Sultan’s Turban than the Mitre of the Pope” (Babinger 1992; Ortayli 1999b).

The subtle changes in the balance of power between empires affect the way people see themselves. Most importantly, it affects their sense of self-confidence. From a period when the Ottomans regard the world around them as inferior and not worthy of intellectual attention, the attitude changes profoundly in the years leading up to the French Revolution when the ruling elites begin to turn towards the West (Lewis 1982).

The “Sublime” State

Popular histories of the Ottoman Empire both in the West and in Turkey provide accounts of the rise and fall of the Sublime State (Devlet-i Ali), as the Empire was known to its ruling classes. The stages are usually presented with the following time periods: Rise (1299–1453), Growth (1453–1606), Stagnation (1606–1699, Sultanate of Women), Decline (1699–1792), Tulip Era (1718–1730) and Dissolution (1792–1923). For many historians this “decline and fall” of the Empire, echoing Gibbons’ great work, is taken for granted. This assumption of a general decline with age is embraced with even greater enthusiasm by Turkish writers in the Republican period. It fits in with the idea of a Kemalist, republican and nationalist “renaissance” after the traumatic depredations brought about by the First World War.

But the period of supposed decline from 1606 to 1923 is not less than three centuries. Moreover, if Ottoman statesmen had been able to avoid being dragged into the First World War (as Mustafa Kemal—later Atatürk—had urged at the time), 1923 might well not have been the end (Yapp 1987). In fact, considering the enormous war effort that the Ottomans were able to mount during the war, with Gallipoli, Kut el-Amara and numerous other lesser known engagements that went their way, it might be said that the ancient Empire, far from being “dissolute”, had evidently unexpected reserves of strength. Still, despite such resilience, there is no doubt that there is a great deal of truth in the observations of astute writers, both westerners and Ottoman observers, that there is much that is not in order in the Empire.

Their self-confidence may have been shaken as the Empire continued to lose territory to the Habsburg Empire and to the Russians in the Balkans. But, the careful study of the seventeenth century by Max Kortepeter indicates the remarkable resourcefulness with which the Ottomans were able to withstand the forces aligned against them. Despite major weaknesses in the royal household, all is not yet lost (Kortepeter 1972).

The Ruling Institution

Here we arrive at one of the unique features of Ottoman history mentioned at the beginning: the workings of the strange dynastic kinship system. From the earliest

times on the central administration, what Gibb and Bowen refer to as the Ruling Institution, is composed of “slaves” (*kul*—tr.). The high officers are all carefully selected from Christian children (*devshirme*—tr.), mainly of the Balkans, who are educated in the ways of the Empire in the Palace school (*enderun*—tr.). Equally important to note: almost all the consorts of the Sultans are also slave girls who are also specially selected and educated. They are destined to become the mothers of future Sultans. They come from all parts of the Empire, but in later periods are often Abkhazians, Circassians, Georgians, Bosnians or Albanians. The recruitment to the ranks of the Ulema, the religious institution, the other pillar of the State, follows different lines often drawn from the Arab provinces. Muslims cannot be enslaved. These “slaves” (*kul*) are only regarded as such because they are “bound” to the Sultan; there are also other lower ranking “slaves” (*kole*—tr.) in the more usual sense in English. Necipoglu notes astutely that the variety of ethnic backgrounds in the Royal Palace reflects the diversity of the populations in the Empire: “The real daughters of the sultans were married to the graduates of the palace school [...] This system created a multi ethnic imperial elite with close marriage ties to the circle of the palace household” (Necipoglu 1991, 162). It linked the provinces with the circles of power at the centre. This ethnic diversity of the Ruling Institution evidently contributed to the loyalty of the population for the dynasty for many centuries (Yalman 1914; Aksin 1997). Many languages of far-flung provinces, from Circasian, Georgian, Abkhas and Ubukh, to Albanian and Bosnian, were spoken in the palace. The elegant language of the court, however, was Ottoman, an ingenious form of Turkish enriched with Persian and Arabic, accessible to large parts of the population (Tavernier 1984 (1678); Inalcik 1995, 84–85; Aksin 1997; Ufki 2002).

Koertepeter makes it also quite clear that despite weaknesses of many of the Sultans who ascend the exalted throne, there are still many impressive public servants such as the Grand Vezier Sokollu (from Sokolovitz in Serbia), and many others who come forth to serve the Sublime State, at great risk to their lives, but the major weakness in the structure of the dynasty cannot be remedied. This is the inability to manage the succession to the Ottoman throne in an orderly and responsible fashion. This central problem may be said to dominate all others in the conduct of the affairs of the Ottoman State from the time of Suleyman on. How can the dynasty so prepare the princes in waiting so that really competent ones may rise to the highest office? How are the princes who might become claimants to the throne to be educated and treated? The failure to address this matter may well have been the single most important contributing factor in weakening the governance of the Empire.

The problem of succession to the reigning Sultan had been faced immediately by one of the most effective rulers, Mehmet II, the conqueror of Constantinople. His remedy had been ruthless: all male claimants to the throne, that is, all his brothers and their sons must be eliminated, killed “for the sake of public order”.

When this rule is combined with the unlimited access to the large number of concubines and slaves in the harem of the Sultan, the result is disastrous. For a while when a concubine gives birth to a male heir, she and her son were sent to the

old palace intended for the womenfolk of the royal household and not permitted further contact with the ruler. The fate of the prince was highly uncertain. Depending upon the balance of power in the palace, he could become the next ruler, or he may be killed precipitately. Since there were many women involved in the harem, all watched over jealously by Black Eunuchs, the intrigue between women and their relations with both the ruler and the high officials of the state became part of a very dangerous game.

A much celebrated and famous case involves the favourite of Suleyman “the Magnificent” and Roxelana, his consort and later legal wife. Roxelana, known as Hurrem Sultan in Turkish accounts, was a slave girl from Ukraine. The great Sultan Suleyman became increasingly attached to her to the point of writing love poetry. Under his pen name, Muhibbi, Sultan Suleiman composed this poem for Hürrem Sultan:

Throne of my lonely niche, my wealth, my love, my moonlight.

*My most sincere friend, my confidant, my very existence, my Sultan, my one and only love.
The most beautiful among the beautiful... My springtime, my merry faced love, my daytime,
my sweetheart, laughing leaf... My plants, my sweet, my rose, the one only who does not dis-
tress me in this world... My Constantinople, my Caraman, the earth of my AnatoliaMy
Badakhshan, my Baghdad and Khorasan My woman of the beautiful hair, my love of the
slanted brow, my love of eyes full of mischief...⁶*

And mischief she does seem to have created. Suleyman’s favourite eldest son, Mustafa, from another concubine, was gifted and popular with the Janissaries. Roxelana is thought to have convinced the Sultan that Mustafa was scheming with the military to usurp the throne. She wanted to have him removed to allow one of her sons to rise to the Sultanate. So Mustafa was executed. The very able Grand Vizier Ibrahim, a close childhood friend of Suleyman, who supported Mustafa and was suspicious of Hurrem’s inordinate power over the Sultan (mentioned above), seems to have shared the same fate. Hurrem seems to have been a highly effective consort who evidently had the Sultan in her thrall to such a degree that she was suspected of using sorcery by the populace.

The story of Roxelana became the subject of a wildly successful TV series that reached a vast audience around the Near and Middle East all fascinated by this central tragedy of the Sublime State. This nefarious pattern, a peculiarly morbid kinship system of Sultans with unlimited access to numerous slave women in the Ottoman royal harem, who became mothers of male offspring all of whom except for the chosen one will have to be executed for public order, clouds the dark fate of the dynasty.

The simultaneous execution of all the brothers of a new sultan and the sight of several coffins being carried out of the palace, some of them very small, must have made fratricide seem an anachronistic practice. Pilgrims to the tombs of Selim II and Mehmet III (located in the courtyard of Aya Sofya ... were) reminded of the sorrowful executions upon seeing the coffins of the princes, some of them doll-sized, ranged at the foot of their father’s casket. (Pierce 1993, 102–103)

This pattern of women scheming in the royal palace for their sons, all in mortal danger of execution as soon as one among them is elevated to become the Sultan, is the curse that afflicted the royal house down to the last incumbent in the twentieth century. With the weakness of the ruler, palace intrigues and insecurity for all become the order of the day. When the practice of fratricide was abandoned, a different similarly cruel, possibly even more insidious method was invented: the “Golden Cage”:

The princes-in-waiting were confined to the inner sanctum of the Harem ... to await a sudden or natural death, or coronation, dragging out their existence in a state of suspended animation, amused by concubines whose sterility was guaranteed, withdrawn from the flow of life. (Goodwin 1998, 168–169)⁷

It is hardly surprising that with the general air of mortal danger some princes raised to the throne turned out to be quite unbalanced. The contrast with the venerable old practice of sending the royal heirs to high office to the provinces to rule as governors, with suitable tutors to prepare them for their later responsibilities, can hardly be more striking.

The Palace

There is little doubt that there follows an entire line of either incompetent or child Sultans in the seventeenth century who are raised to the throne and maintained by different factions in the palace. Women are deeply involved in this process either as concubines or as mothers of princes in deadly competition. They often are called upon to rule as regents to child Sultans so that this period of Ottoman history has come to be referred to as the “Sultanate of Women” (*Kadinlar Saltanati*—tr.). All the high officers of the palace are deeply implicated themselves to support one or the other of the claimants, and to assure their own survival. It is a deadly game with Black Eunuchs in close contact with the concubines and scheming mothers, and White Eunuchs managing the many pages (all slaves as well) being prepared for the high administration of the State, in which the losers lose their lives. No one is secure. All have to watch out for their lives. This can hardly be an atmosphere conducive to rational governance. It is a kind of Russian roulette in which all the high officers of the State, the Grand Vizier as well as the Grand Mufti find themselves obliged to play.

This structural weakness at the very heart of the Empire is in striking contrast with the earlier, more sane, Ottoman administration. At a time when the major Atlantic states are systematically roaming the oceans for world domination, it is evident that a portentous change comes over the conduct of public affairs among the Ottomans: the palace turns in upon itself. There is a twilight period known as “The Tulip Age” (1718–1730) highly emblematic of the times. The Sultan and his entourage give themselves up to a pleasant carefree existence in the sumptuous gardens of Istanbul. Tulips are all the rage. The gardens are filled with playful music and dancing. It all ends with a major conflagration when these royal luxuries and extravagance provide the justification for a serious rebellion. Sultan Ahmed III is deposed and the Grand Vizier executed. Sultan’s themselves are clearly out of touch with the world outside and ill-prepared to rule over their vast patrimony.

The eighteenth century was a period of hectic transformative activity in the West. The seven-year war of 1756–1763 between the British and the French had begun with skirmishes in America: the French were threatening to encircle the thirteen New England colonies along the east coast. In the East, in India, the French had captured Madras from the British East India Company and thus gained control over most of South India. With her possessions in the Caribbean, France had set her sights on a global empire. They were halted in Madras in India by Robert Clive in 1759. This in turn allowed the British to embark on their Indian empire. It also opened up a major new phase of maritime explorations and discoveries.

In 1766 Captain James Cook undertook the first of three extraordinary expeditions to the Pacific Ocean during which he sailed through Cape Horn, the most fearsome straits in the world, especially for high-rigged sailing ships, all the way up to the Bering Straits then down to Australia. It is sadly unclear, in striking contrast to the alertness of the early Sultans, who were evidently pursuing the maps of Magellan with great interest, to what extent these momentous events penetrated the high walls of the Ottoman palace (Eldem 1999).

The eighteenth century ended ominously for the Ottomans with calamitous events surrounding the palace. The reformist Sultan Selim III ascended the throne on 7 April 1789 only a few months before the storming of the Bastille during the French revolution. He is said to have communicated with Louis XVI in France as well as with Tipu Sultan of Mysore in South India. Neither of these contacts was helpful. There were major reverses in the wars with Russia under Katherine the Great; the Ottomans lost Crimea and much of the Black Sea coast. None of this distracted Selim from having a large harem of fifteen “wives” as some accounts quaintly put it. A revolt of the Janissaries (1807) brought Selim III down in favour of his cousin Mustafa IV. In the chaotic circumstances, Mustafa in turn could not feel secure on his throne. A year later he ordered the execution of Selim III and his own brother Mahmud to eliminate possible rivals. Selim was killed, but Mahmud, the brother, escaped with his life fleeing over the rooftops, according to legend, with the help of one of the Georgian concubines (Cevri Kalfa). He was, in turn, raised to the throne. Mustafa IV was then executed on the orders of Mahmud II (1808).

The memory of these mournful events was naturally passed down among the members of the dynasty. They were to be repeated again in 1876. It appears to have coloured the relations and the outlook of the Sultans who followed. It is evident from the many accounts we have that each one was in mortal fear of both their kinsmen around the palace and the high officers of the state.

The Long Nineteenth Century

A distinguished Turkish historian has written of the nineteenth century as the “longest century” of the Ottomans (Ortaylı 1999a). At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Empire is miraculously still largely intact. As the century progresses, large parts of the Western and Northern provinces are lost. Greece becomes independent. Witnessing the defeats, the palace and the high administration turn to increasingly significant

reforms. They become amenable to European ideas and customs. The power of the threatening European states impressed the Sultans. The organization of the Ottoman State changed dramatically as a result of the great reforms (*Tanzimat*) undertaken by successive western-oriented Sultans, Mahmud II and his sons from different concubines, Abdulmejid and Abdulaziz, through the nineteenth century. In the long process of reforms, from 1789 to 1876 the major institutions of the State, the military, much of the bureaucracy and higher levels of the educational system, were gradually westernized. Gifted Grand Viziers and their supporters in royal circles were the main drivers of this process, while the Sultans often remained uncertain (Hanioglu 2008). It is true that their outward appearances, their dress, their architecture, their furnishings and their way of life conformed increasingly to European tastes. Western music and languages were encouraged, but despite these changes in appearance and tastes, it is evident that the life of the royal household with the slave origin of the many concubines did not change until the very end of the Ottoman dynasty (Rezzemaza 2013).⁸

Mahmud II became increasingly autocratic. Bernard Lewis writes about the views of a fascinating British sailor who becomes an advisor (“Musavir Pasha”) to the Ottoman Navy and spends long years in Turkey: “Sir Adolphus Slade thought the Sultan had disturbed the ancient balance of liberty and freedom in the Empire in the name of reform and westernization, and was using this as an excuse for making himself more autocratic.” And here is Slade:

Though the autocracy of the Sultan was nominally supreme, the people in effect possessed three great checks against tyranny. These were the *derebeys*, a hereditary nobility, whose domains were “oasis in the desert”, the *ayan*, a provincial and urban magistracy; and the *ulema* ... In his policy of centralization Mahmud set to work to destroy or undermine all three ... Hitherto the Osmanley has enjoyed by custom some of the dearest privileges of freemen, for which Christian nations have so long struggled ... His views of ambition were not restricted by the barriers of birth and wealth; from the lowest origin he might aspire without presumption to the rank of pasha; if he could read, to that of grand vezir; and this consciousness, instilled and supported by numberless precedents, ennobled his mind, and enabled him to enter on the duties of high office without embarrassment. Is not this the advantage so prized by free nations? Did not the exclusion of people from posts of honour tend to the French revolution? For this freedom, this capability of realizing the wildest wishes, what equivalent does the sultan offer? It may be said none. (Lewis 1968)

After the tumultuous times of Mahmud II, his son Abdulmejid is able to reign, but is unable to control the expenditures of his enormous retinue. He has about 40 children from perhaps 22–30 concubines. He receives good advice from his Grand Vizier, Mustafa Resit Pasha, the architect of the important liberal *Tanzimat* reforms, but the military situation remains dire.

Westernization seems to have meant lavish expenditure on vast luxurious palaces to accommodate Abdulmejid’s extensive household and many concubines, their offspring and their retinues. The most prominent sign of his reign is the lavish Dolmabahce Palace built to compete with Versailles and Schonbrunn between the years 1843 and 1856. The construction seems to have cost five million Ottoman *mecidiye* gold coins, 35 tonnes of gold, the equivalent of ca. \$1.5 billion in 2013 values. This sum

corresponded to approximately a quarter of the yearly tax revenue.⁹ It ruined the Ottoman treasury.

The next ruler, Abdulaziz, is equally incompetent. He is eventually deposed and is said to have committed suicide, but rumours that he too was killed continue to this day. Murat V, a supporter of liberals and westernizers who becomes the next Sultan for only three months before being deposed on the grounds of mental weakness, may well have been the last hope for the Empire. There are grounds to think that he was brought down by those opposed to reforms that would culminate in a liberal Constitution and Parliament in 1876. All through these disastrous events, and significant military reverses, the large private harems continue: Abdumejid has four different categories of concubines and consorts, and also large numbers of children and retinue (Kinross 1977).¹⁰

Mithad Pasha and Abdulhamid II

The Sultan who follows, Abdulhamid II, known as the Red Sultan in the West, reigns for 33 years. This is the long dark night of absolutism. Abdulhamid II turns out to be obsessed with regicide (Habib 1940). The events that have taken the lives of so many Sultans render him extremely suspicious of any kind of dissent. He bides his time. He goes along with the liberal and able Grand Vizier Mithad Pasha to promulgate the first Constitution in 1876. The first Parliament is established and almost immediately abolished. Mithad Pasha who had worked so assiduously for a Constitution is exiled first, and then strangled in the deserts of Taif in Arabia.

The year 1876 must be considered the turning point in the fortunes of the Empire. Much had been accomplished in the field of education and administrative organization through the Tanzimat reforms. There were many writers, thinkers and very devoted civil servants who could have led the Empire in a more liberal, hopeful and positive political direction (Deringil 1999). Bernard Lewis, who is particularly insightful in his estimation of Midhat Pasha, writes of his hopes:

Mithad Pasha to Sir Henry Elliot, the British Ambassador:

The Empire (he said) was being rapidly brought to destruction ... The only remedy that he could perceive, lay, first, in securing a control over the Sovereign by making the Ministers, and especially as regarded the finances, responsible to a national popular Assembly; secondly in making this Assembly truly national by doing away with all distinctions of classes and religions ... thirdly, by decentralization and by the establishment of provincial control over the governors ... (Lewis 1968, 164)

If Mithad Pasha had been allowed to put these ideas into effect, the fate of the Sublime State might have been very different. Effective decentralization (devolution?) might well have met the wishes of the restive populations both in the Balkans and in the Arab provinces. Mithad Pasha had been a liberal and progressive governor in both regions. He had evidently been well received. His demise led in the opposite dismal direction: absolutism, suspicion, smouldering discontent, rebellion and finally revolution. The poor judgement of these last Sultans can hardly be denied.¹¹

The rest of the story has been well told by many gifted historians (Lewis 1968; Yapp 1987; Deringil 1999; Hanioglu 2008).¹² After a long and bitter autocratic reign, Abdulhamid II is deposed in 1908. His secret opponents, the underground society called the “Committee of Union and Progress”, appear to have taken the secularist doctrine of Auguste Comte to heart. The very title of the society is derived from the Comteian formula: *Ordre et Progrés*, a slogan which flies to this day proudly on the Brazilian flag. After the disasters of the 1911 (against Italy) and 1912 (the Balkan Wars), the triumvirate behind the Committee take the Empire into the First World War on the side of Germany in 1914. They have vain hopes of recovering their Balkan losses (Rogan 2015).

The last Sultan left standing in the ruins of the empire in 1918 is Vahdettin (Bardakci 1998; Rezzemaza 2013).¹³ The suffering and deprivation after many years of war are bitter for all concerned. The destruction of Ottoman rule in the Balkans creates immense crowds of impoverished refugees in the many thousands; Armenians become the scapegoats; they suffer exile and massive destruction especially in their Eastern habitats (Waal 2015).¹⁴

Mustafa Kemal Pasha, the hero of Gallipoli, refuses to surrender. He rejects the terms of the Sévres Treaty imposed by the victorious allies and meekly accepted by the Ottoman cabinet. By sheer will and audacity, and going against the orders of the Sultan, he is able to rekindle an extraordinary nationalist uprising against Britain, France, Italy and Greece. Mustafa Kemal is victorious against all odds (Mango 2000; Kocahanoglu 2014).

The Ottoman Sultanate is abolished on the first of November 1922. The last sultan departs into exile on the seventeenth of November on the British warship *Malaya*. It is thus that the fabled history of an ancient dynasty comes to an end. After twelve terrible years of war and suffering for all concerned, Mustafa Kemal Pasha is able to rejuvenate a new nation, the Turkish Republic (1923), out of the desperate straits and the great defeat of the First World War.

In considering the westernizing reforms since 1789, it is true that the constant interplay of westernized liberals and conservative Islamists has been part of the fabric of Ottoman politics. This is now being played out in republican and secular Turkey. Ottoman historians sympathetic to the Islamist Party (AKP) in power in modern Turkey are trying to find reasons for rehabilitating the reigns of the last Sultans for maintaining stability under the aegis of Islam and modernizing the far-flung Arab provinces of the Empire, but the judgement of insightful writers at the time was, on the contrary, very severe (see Yalman 1914). The exile and murder of Midhat Pasha was never forgiven. Abdulhamid in particular is accused of having neglected the important Balkan and Western parts of the empire in favour of the Eastern Arab provinces.

The myth of the strong and dominant Islamic Sultan is much on the minds of the Islamist party in power. They are imagining reasons to glorify the dynasty in order to justify their populist Islamism by naming the grand bridges across the Bosphorus after Mehmet II (The Conqueror) and Selim I. Interest in Ottoman history after the long years of secularist policies in the new republic is now in fashion in Turkey. It fits in with the general preoccupation with religion as a source for justice and hope

for large suffering masses in the Islamic world. The experience of the Ottoman centuries in Turkey indicates that what works is not religion, but good and responsible government. Had Mithad Pasha succeeded in 1876, the Ottoman Empire would have avoided the obscurantism and tyranny of Abdulhamid II. Its fate might have been different. It is a lesson still to be learned.

Disclosure Statement

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Notes

- [1] Paul Rychart, 1628–1700, *The Present State of the Ottoman Empire*, 79–80.
- [2] de Busbecq, Ogier Ghislain. *Itinera Constantinopolitanum et Amasianum/ab Augerio Gisleenio Busbequij, &c. d. ad Solimannum Turcarum Imperatorem C.M. oratore confecta; eiusdem Busbequij De acie contra Turcam instruenda consilium*. Antuerpiæ: Ex officina Christophori Plantini, 1581. de Busbecq, Ogier Ghislain. *Avgerii Gisleonii Bysbeqvii D. legationis tvcicae epistolae quatuor. Qvar vm priores dvae ante aliquot annos in lucem prodierunt sub nomine Itinerum Constantinopolitani & Amasiani. Adiectae svnt dvae alterae. Eiusdem de re militari contra Turcam instituenda consilium. Cum indice omnium locuplentissimo*. Francofvrti: apud heredes A. Wechli, C. Marnium & I. Aubrium, 1595. de Busbecq, Ogier Ghislain. *The Turkish letters of Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq, ImperialAmbassador at Constantinople, 1554–1562*. Trans. from the Latin of the Elzevir edition of 1663 by Edward S. Forster; with a foreword by Karl A. Roider. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2005. de Busbecq, Ogier Ghislain. *Türk Mektupları. Çev. Derin Türkömer*. İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2005. Campanella, Tommaso. *The City of the Sun*. Trans. by Ann E. Berman from the Italian version edited by Luigi Firpo. Lodi: G. Zazzera, 1987. La Città del Sole. Civitas Solis. Traduzione, apparati critici, note di commento e appendici a cura di Tonino Tornitore. Milano: UNICOPLI, 1998.
- [3] This lecture discusses a new interpretation of Tommaso Campanella's most famous work, *La Citta del Sole*, as well as the motivation for the anti-Spanish rebellion in 1599. Campanella, along with a number of writers during the Counter-Reformation, had a rather special interest in the Ottoman Empire. The work incorporates many features of the Ottoman society and Islamic practice into its idealized picture of a natural human existence.
- [4] 1803 letter by Halet Efendi from Paris; Eldem comments on the difficulty of appreciating the changes taking place in the West by the Ottoman; also sexual mores.
- [5] Lucette Valensi, Perry Anderson, Alain Grosrichard.
- [6] Wikipedia on Roxelana.
- [7] Jason Goodwin provides a full description of the devastating results of these cruel customs.
- [8] See the fictional account in Topuz (2009).
- [9] Wikipedia on Abdulmejid.
- [10] Some Turkish sources list the number of consorts of the last Sultans since the nineteenth century: Mahmud II: 13 Kadın Efendi and 4 İkbal ladies—total 17. Abdulmejc: 11 Kadın Efendi; 8 İkbal; 3 Gozde—total 22. Abdulaziz: 5 Kadinefendi (Wikipedia gives 6); Kinross (1997, 503) writes of “... a harem ... so large as to involve the employment of three thousand eunuchs”. V Murad: 4 Kadinefendi; 5 İkbal; 1 Gozde—total 10. Abduhamid II: 8 Kadinefendi; 5 İkbal; 3 Gozde—total 16. V Mehmet Resat: 5 Kadın effendi. VI Mehmet Vahdettin: 5 Kadinefendi.

- [11] In 1881 Mithad Pasha had taken refuge in the French Consulate in Izmir. That year the French had occupied Tunis. The French turned Midhat over to the Sultan, and the Sultan acquiesced in the loss of another Ottoman province. See, Habib (1940, 333).
- [12] The best account in English is Lewis (1968).
- [13] Rezzemaza, a highly perceptive lady-in-waiting to one of the wives of the Sultan, provides an absorbing and rare account of personal relations inside the royal household.
- [14] The great suffering of the Armenian people cannot be denied. The dispute centres around the implications of the term “genocide” (Waal 2015).

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