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THE INSTITUTION OF THE OTTOMAN EMBASSY AND EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY OTTOMAN HISTORY: AN ALTERNATIVE TO GÖÇEK

Fatma Müge Göçek, in *East Encounters West*,¹ looks at the gradual expansion and upgrading of Ottoman diplomatic missions to Western Europe during the eighteenth century, culminating in the establishment of permanent Ottoman embassies in several European capitals after 1792. Her discussion is very much tied to the framework of ever-increasing Western impact. For her, the embassies--particularly the Paris embassy of 1721--provide an important early vessel for the transfer of ideas from the West to Turkey. In the following two centuries, this framework would increasingly take on the form of an all-encompassing ideology--"Westernization"--an ideology that has shaped to a large extent later Ottoman and Turkish political life. It is certainly important to properly identify the sources of this process. Indeed, there can be no question that increased contact between Turkey and the West was a necessary precondition for the dissemination of Western ideas, and without doubt whatever further contact might have been achieved, the embassy certainly played such a role. Is this, however, the real story of eighteenth-century Ottoman embassies?

In this paper, I argue that accounts of embassy missions--the so-called *sefâretnâmeler*--reveal a different dynamic in Ottoman-Western relations. I also argue against too much dependence on the hindsight of later history. Traditional Ottoman perceptions of the West had all the institutional limitations responsible in many ways for the Ottoman military defeats that triggered the dispatch of embassies in the first place. This Ottoman-European relationship, of course, would be inherently unstable and would later be dwarfed by (more than be the cause of) a wave of Western impact, which could not possibly be held within its confines. It was the instability of this relationship, however, more than the relationship itself that defined the Ottoman eighteenth century as an age of transition.

Perhaps I should elaborate on what I mean by the pervasive and commonly accepted "framework of Western impact" to clarify what we are dealing with. The simplest way is to refer to the opening lines of various chapters of Göçek's study:

The eighteenth century marked the culmination of a rapid transformation in the West. The scientific revolution, the discoveries of new lands, and the resulting

¹ Fatma Müge Göçek, *East Encounters West: France and the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

flow of wealth into Europe, the Enlightenment, and the increased communication among European states had altered Western societies.²

The economic, political, and social changes in the West up to the eighteenth century changed the image of the West.³

Behind Western commercial expansion and recurrent military victories was a new Western technology.⁴

The transformation of Western impact into long-term Western influence was a complex process.⁵

By this device we are constantly reminded of: 1) the extent of the changes that had taken place in the West; and 2) the destiny of their eventual absorption into Ottoman life.

Indeed, from the point of view of intellectual and geopolitical history as we see it today, the “rapid transformation,” which had gone on in the West by 1700, lies at the center of long-term subsequent developments in Ottoman-Western relations. It is equally clear, however, that this was not the view of the Ottoman Porte when the first embassy that Göçek considers was dispatched to Paris in 1721. This is not to say that the Ottoman perspective had not changed. On the contrary, it was clear from the beginning of the eighteenth century that the basis of self-sufficiency and superiority through which Classical Islamic thought, transmitted to the Ottomans and reinforced by their military might, viewed the West, had weakened to a large degree. In 1699 at Karlowitz, the Ottomans found themselves for the first time signing a peace treaty as a defeated power, ceding Hungary, Transylvania, Podolia, Ukraine, and Morea. Moreover, the institution of *harâc*, i.e., payment of tribute by the European states to the Ottomans, was lifted. There is no doubt that the Ottomans themselves viewed as significant these changes in their status and prestige as a world power. They were an ominous sign for the century that would initiate the slow withdrawal of Turkish influence from Europe.

Yet we must not lose sight of the fact that from the view of Constantinople, this problem had two limited elements: 1) military and 2) geopolitical. On the military side, new technology (e.g., fort construction and artillery) would have to be imported if the Empire were to have any chance of competing with the Europeans. On the geopolitical side, because self-sufficiency from Europe was to be replaced by equality, the Ottoman Empire would have to learn how to become a player in the European alliance system. Of these, the first, the military element, was not at all out of line with the traditional Ottoman attitude of adopting what was useful from the West, albeit at a far greater pace and scope than ever previously. The second, the geopolitical element, clearly needed a more radical break with prior official dogma, under which the concept of equality between *Darü'l-Islam* (the abode of Islam) and *Darü'l-Harb* (the abode of war) was inadmissible. On the other hand, radical as it

² Göçek, p.3.

³ Göçek, p.24.

⁴ Göçek, p.103.

⁵ Göçek, p.116

may sound, it was a break that was accomplished quite literally, through the stroke of a pen. In any case, while both these elements are related to the word “West,” it is important to hold back our intuition from later westernization. Were westernization such a confined and simple matter, after all, it would not have played the role that it later did (and still does).

As a consequence, the status of Ottoman diplomatic representatives sent to the West increased during the eighteenth century. Before then, Ottoman envoys were recruited from the ranks of relatively low-ranking heralds. The Ottoman representatives were also given more responsibility. They had not only to conduct diplomacy but also to observe a foreign country and determine possible courses of action for the Ottoman Empire. These representatives were now given the title of military judges and referred to as ambassadors.

From this point of view, Yirmisekiz Mehmed Çelebi Efendi, dispatched to Paris in 1721, represents the Ottoman ambassador at his best. Although his mission was somewhat atypical compared with previous and subsequent missions, it captures the ideal of what these missions were supposed to be and is the one in which the issue of Western impact (and thus all the ambiguities surrounding it) is most pronounced. Mehmet Efendi’s embassy was based on a framework of friendly relations (a concept in itself new, part of the framework of equality and not superiority to which the Ottomans had to adapt), and his goals—of primary importance because they constituted the first example of such an aim in the history of Ottoman embassies—were explicitly mapped out: “to visit fortresses and factories, and to make a thorough study of means of civilization and education, and report on those suitable for application in the Ottoman Empire.”⁶

On a first reading, one might indeed be tempted to parallel this quotation with the “contemporary civilization” to which Atatürk aspired for his new country in the 1920s. But can one really take such a view seriously? Who was Mehmed Efendi, after all, or what was Western civilization, so that one could conduct “a thorough study” and then “report” on what was “suitable” (a highly problematic concept) for application?

Mehmet Efendi’s thought was certainly more positive and progressive than that of others, and he was “receptive” to what he saw. Moreover, he was polite, despite the expectations of the French, who had had a bad experience with the previous Muslim ambassador they entertained, someone from Persia.

But was Mehmet Efendi really capable of being the protagonist of a book entitled *East Encounters West*? I would argue that were the magnitude of European progress not truly so great as to make its influence eventually inevitable, so inevitable that we see it as ubiquitous in space and time, Mehmet Efendi would come across more as a well-behaved tourist than as a visionary. Although he had some experience with foreign travel, he did not speak French. He was eager to understand, for instance, how the French bureaucracy was structured, but for him, understanding meant translating concepts into more familiar Turkish ones. The kind of sensation his visit caused had an element of reciprocity and lightness which is

⁶ As cited in Göçek, p.87.

certainly not characteristic of the nature of the eventual Western impact on Turkey; here we have in mind the Turquerie fashion in France and the French style in Constantinople.

Mehmet Efendi's trip is often discussed in connection with the printing of the first books in Ottoman Turkish. Göçek explains how Mehmet Efendi, on his return from France, convinced the authorities to allow such a thing. But, if we are truly to consider the printing press as the great achievement of a thousand-mile voyage, it is ironic that the Christian communities in Constantinople had been printing in that city for over a hundred years. This is in many ways proof that if we were to assess this embassy through the prism of westernization or even as its precursor, what would emerge is that the Ottoman Porte was not then serious about westernization and had no true conception of what it was. Göçek's book discusses extensively the fact that there existed within the confines of the Ottoman Empire, and within the confines of its capital, many internal elements that had extensive knowledge of the West, much more than a Janissary colonel could hope to obtain no matter how many times he traveled to Europe. She discusses the difficulty of transmission of such elements to the Ottoman bureaucracy and argues that it is precisely Mehmet Efendi's position that thus made him an important link. But if a person of such a position could still be considered an important link for his time period, this shows more the continued weakness, rather than strength, of such links.

Even so, concerning the *sefâretnâme* of 1721, it is argued by some that "No book occupies so important a place in the history of the Westernization of Turkey as this little report. [...] concealed in almost every line of it is an idea of comparison. In truth it contains almost a whole program."⁷ I personally find this very difficult to accept concerning a book that speaks in a pleasant style of the gardens of Versailles and of the mirror factory Mehmet Efendi visited.

Perhaps some authors force onto this period the paradigm of another, where the issue of the encounter of East and West adopts in earnest a dominating role. This perhaps is a useful technique when searching for the seeds of the future in the events of the past. Göçek, for instance, tells us that "the tension between the Eastern and Western civilizations in Turkey" is what led her to her study. The Ottoman eighteenth century, however, was not yet a period of tension between civilizations. For those of us who are interested in that time period, it is important to interpret the seeds for what they were then--seeds-- and not for what they became later on.

The *sefâretnâme* of 1721 was chosen as the focus of this discussion because it is the document that receives the most attention in the context of the impact of the West. As cited above, this mission perhaps presents an ideal of what the Porte envisioned to be the basis of a limited contact with the West. We have seen even in the context of this ideal that institutional imitations confined it to very rigid, albeit interesting and important, boundaries. Perhaps, however, to understand further these limitations, it would be useful to consider briefly another *sefâretnâme*, that of Abdülkerim Efendi, the Ottoman ambassador sent to Moscow in 1775 as a result of

⁷ Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *XIX. Asır Türk Edebiyatı Tarihi* (İstanbul: İbrahim Horoz Basımevi, 1956), p. 10.

the 27th article of the Küçük Kaynarca treaty of 1774 stipulating a *mübâdele* (exchange) of Ottoman and Russian embassies at the border of these two respective empires. This document has, of course, provided no valuable information for those historians who look at the eighteenth century in order to dig up the seeds of westernization. Islam is at the center of this document. Norman Itzkowitz, in the introduction to his study entitled *Mubadele*, relates the following sentences concerning the tone of the *sefâretnâme*: “To them [the Ottomans] in 1775-76 the world was still the *world*. A sincere Islamic feeling pervades this *sefâretname*. There is a quiet, but firm sense of the righteousness of Islam, and an awareness of the intimacy between the Muslim and his God.”⁸

There is another example, that of Mehmet Said, the son of Mehmet Efendi. He was able to truly transverse the cultural barrier between Turkey and the West, merrily drinking wine in public in Paris, speaking excellent French. His adaptability, however, did not translate into much for Ottoman diplomacy, which was not institutionally ready to make use of such characters.

From all of this, we see a century whose institutional contact with the West was rather limited, set against the backdrop of a string of military defeats, Karlowitz in 1699, Passarowitz in 1718, Küçük Kaynarca in 1774, and the Ottoman regime’s anxiety as to how to put an end to this continuous humiliation. The reaction of the Porte was cautious, through conservative and rigid structures, with neither the means nor the will to make it more than that. The embassy itself, as a metaphor for the eighteenth century, represents, more than anything else, this caution and reserve. Although the embassy is a medium for the communication of cultures, it is very stylized and rigid.

This is not to dispute the role of “seed” which Göçek carves out for the embassy. Our difference is one of emphasis. The Ottoman eighteenth century is a subject in itself, one that contains many elements both of the present and of the past. It is a century which began with defeat and was stained by multiple defeats, but whose reaction to defeat was more subtle than the formula, “defeat leads to westernization.” It was a reaction whose limitations were at the crux of its instability. There would not be another trip with the simplistic charm of Mehmet Efendi’s.

It is difficult to freeze an epoch that in hindsight, one knows to be unstable, which is typically viewed as “in between,” or simply is dug up for the seeds of the epoch that takes its place. Perhaps we are again doing injustice to the institution of Ottoman embassies by turning them from a “seed” of the future to a “metaphor” of a present. The former, while perhaps lacking the immediate appeal of the latter, could well turn out to be the more interesting.

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⁸ *Mubadele: An Ottoman-Russian Exchange of Ambassadors*, Annotated and Translated by Norman Itzkowitz and Max Mote, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 13.