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Deciphering Continuities and Transformations in Turkey's Political History: The Town of Of from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic

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This book is one of those rare scholarly studies that emerge out of many years of meticulous inquiry, a wide array of research methods, and an interdisciplinary analysis of different sources. It builds on the author's dissertation work on the role of tradition in the political development of Of, a small town of Trabzon that is located by the Black Sea coast. Employing a combination of ethnographic, historical, and textual analysis, Meeker unpacks the continuities and transformations in the nature of relationships among central authority, local elites, and inhabitants from the Ottoman Empire to the contemporary Turkish Republic. He concludes through an analysis of Ottoman provincial documents, foreign embassy accounts, and everyday interactions that a social amnesia about local history and the Republican regulations of Islam underlie the formation of Of's social and political life.

The book consists of four parts. The first part illustrates that a local oligarchy of agnatically related men (i.e. the local notables, *aghas*, and their male offspring) shared social and political authority with the legal-rational institutions of the Republic in the 1960s (p. 21). Noting the multiplicity of such patronymic groups in the region, Meeker aptly explains how an Islamic framework of sociability homogenizes parochial allegiances into a stable,

more broadly-based local identity. His thorough observation of everyday practices also reveals a surprising fact: the townsmen (i.e. *Oflus*) were almost oblivious to the pervasive influence of *aghas* and *hodjas* in the region's imperial and nationalist history and present. Moreover, while they identified *aghas* as malevolent rulers against the central authority, *Oflus* usually evaded any questions about the town's once-legal and widely-known Islamic academies and *hodjas*. Despite their different characteristics, these two groups of actors appeared in local culture as either corrupt or reactionary figures of the imperial past.

The last three parts of the book challenge the validity of such popular representations. Meeker specifically argues that *aghas* and *hodjas* were loyal subjects who intended to attain official recognition and a better future by participating in administrative, military, and religious branches of the imperial state. He asserts, through a textual analysis of the imperial palace's architectural design, that the Ottoman state was fundamentally based on a set of interpersonal associations between Sultans and their administrative and military staff (pp. 113-140). These networks of power were further legitimated by an official version of Sunni Islam so that the imperial discipline could supplement its effectiveness with a depersonalized source of authority (pp. 143-146). The imperial web of interpersonal associations were initially closed to those who were not of slave origin, but, with the decentralization of the Ottoman administration in

the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, aspiring *aghas* found greater opportunities to act and to be recognized as imperial agents in the periphery.

The decentralization of the Ottoman state, as Meeker argues, led to successful dissemination of the imperial discipline to remotest provinces. This was particularly due to the *aghas*' adamant imitation of the Sultans' political tactics. Of's *aghas*, for instance, consolidated their political and military predominance by establishing multifaceted interpersonal associations at the local level and justified their actions with the help of local *hodjas* that they sponsored (p. 179). For Meeker, *aghas* were not completely assimilated into the imperial governance and they achieved their demands through a combination of compliance, negotiation, and resistance. Neither was the Ottoman center completely powerless vis--vis these strong local elites. It instead played them off against each other in order to ensure and to maximize the well-being of imperial administration.

The re-centralization of political authority, first during the reign of Abdulhamit II and later in the Turkish Republic, slightly modified the relationships among central government, *aghas*, and *hodjas*. Though, for instance, the Republican state has pushed the *hodjas* underground with its severe regulation of religious practices, it has largely built upon the existing *agha* networks in consolidating its secular nationalist ideals in the periphery (p. 316). Meeker illustrates this point well by dwelling upon the patronymic features of local organization of political parties, implicit code of conduct in coffeehouse discussions, and leadership patterns in local tea cooperatives. All of these cases attest to the fact that the social amnesia about *aghas* and the legal prohibitions regarding Islamic practices have helped Oflus integrate successfully into the nationalist framework of the Republican social and political life.

I think that the fundamental strength of Meeker's book comes from the multiplicity of resources and research methods that it utilizes. The detailed and yet easy-to-read narrative of events grabs the reader's attention in every respect. Meeker particularly deserves credit for reading the archive against the grain. Throughout the book, he engages in a critical dialogue with the Ottoman officials, foreign consuls, and local historians, and captures Of's political development from an analytically unprecedented perspective. The book also constitutes a useful reading for social methodology courses. Besides employing an intricate combination of different research methods, Meeker demonstrates the ever-changing and

cumulative nature of scholarly research especially in the first two chapters, where he candidly discusses how he revised and enhanced his initial arguments during his dissertation work as well as in the following decades.

A book is, I believe, as valuable as the questions it fails to raise, and the analytical loopholes it leaves untouched. In the allotted space for this review, I want to restrict my critique of Meeker's work to three major points.

I shall note, first of all, that the sub-title of the book is partially misleading. Although the author promises an analysis of "Turkish modernity," he nonetheless fails to explain, or to question, general features and the origin(s) of modernity. Throughout the book, he juxtaposes the "traditional" interpersonal networks of political sovereignty with the institutionalized and rational forms of centralized rule, implying that the latter constitute the crux of the modern state system. It is crucial to note that Meeker associates the emergence and consolidation of such modern features with the *westernization* efforts in the late Ottoman Empire (i.e. in the Tanzimat period and during the reign of Abdulhamit II) and in the Turkish Republic (i.e. the Kemalist reforms). In this respect, he presents a scrupulously-researched analysis of westernization in the disguise of a discussion of Turkish modernity. I think that Meeker could have better identified the differences between these closely intertwined and yet distinct processes, if he had located his analysis within recent debates around "multiple," "alternative," and "postcolonial" modernities.[1]

Meeker's analysis also suffers from an overly structuralist reading of the Foucauldian framework that has been much criticized for its insufficient attention to the issues of resistance and individual agency.[2] Although he argues that Oflus considerably "colonized" the mechanisms of central administration (pp. 106-7, 277), he dwells on their quite peaceful and enthusiastic integration into the imperial structures rather than on their disruptive and transformative challenges to the state. His focus of analysis usually portrays Oflus as almost identical reflections of a de-personalized imperial discipline, which perpetuates itself in and through interpersonal networks. Commenting, for instance, on the memoirs of Alphonse de Beauchamp, a French scientist and diplomat, Meeker asserts that "[t]he Muslims of Trabzon were the *creatures* of imperial undertakings and accomplishments.... the *character* of the Laz [was] then the product of the *palace machine*" (p. 228, emphasis mine). He reaches a similar conclusion when he compares the architectural design of coffeehouses owned by Oflus with

that of the Ottoman palace (pp. 348-9, 381-2). Meeker carefully notes that these structures were [not] ... explicit imitations of palace architecture ... [but] the result of a dissemination of an imperial tactic, sovereign power through interpersonal association, from center to periphery“ (p. 349). Nevertheless, he presents the imperial discipline as extremely effective and devoid of any internal contradictions, and, thus, fails to tease out whether and how Oflus negotiated, dislocated, or hybridized such imperial- and nationalist-forms of architecture, social conduct, and politics. To enhance his analysis along these lines, Meeker needs to balance his Foucauldian focus with a post-colonial perspective.[3]

Last but not least, I shall point out that the book offers a relatively underdeveloped examination of gender relations in the Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey. In contrast to his brilliant depiction of multi-layered power relations among local men, Meeker does not equally unpack the nature of social interactions either among local women or between gender groups. One may argue that being a male scholar could have significantly restricted his access to women’s experiences in Of’s highly segregated social life and, hence, prevented a comprehensive elaboration of gender relations in the book. While such a barrier may explain the lack of women’s voices in Meeker’s ethnographic account, it does not, I shall argue, justify his inattentiveness to women’s agency that may probably be present in the historical sources. Many scholars of Ottoman history have demonstrated, in their examination of imperial court records and other archival materials, that women were active participants in the social, political, and legal mechanisms of the Empire.[4] Building on this line of inquiry, I shall raise the following questions for Meeker’s

next project: Did women ever appear as full agents rather than mere tokens of exchange in local *interpersonal networks* of sovereignty? What did, and do, local women think about the *agha* networks? How did agnatical relationships among men influence everyday interactions among local women? What is their imprint on local politics and social life? How exactly does the migration to metropolitan cities such as Istanbul transform the gender relations among Oflus? I believe that Meeker can easily answer these questions by either re-reading his archival sources or conducting another ethnographic study among the new generations of Oflus.

Notes

[1]. *Daedalus*. 129:1 (2000); Dilip P. Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Duke University Press, 2000); and Timothy Mitchell, ed., *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

[2]. Jean Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992).

[3]. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

[4]. F. Muge Gocek and Marc Baer, “Women’s Experience in Ottoman Society through the Eighteenth Century Galata Court Records,” in *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era*, ed. M. Zilfi (Leiden: Brill, 1996); and Leslie Pierce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

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