

## Historein

Vol 15, No 1 (2015)

Revisiting Democratic Transitions in Times of Crisis



**Political Thought and Practice in the Ottoman Empire (Halcyon Days in Crete IX Symposium, Rethymno, 9-11 January 2015)**

*Eleni Gara*

doi: [10.12681/historein.306](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.306)

Copyright © 2015, Eleni Gara



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### To cite this article:

Gara, E. (2015). Political Thought and Practice in the Ottoman Empire (Halcyon Days in Crete IX Symposium, Rethymno, 9-11 January 2015). *Historein*, 15(1), 186–192. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.306>

*Political thought  
and practice in the  
Ottoman empire  
(Halcyon Days in  
Crete IX Symposium,  
Rethymno, 9–11  
January 2015)*

Eleni Gara

University of the Aegean

The Halcyon Days in Crete symposium, organised by the Institute for Mediterranean Studies in Rethymno every three years, is a well-established scholarly encounter that has fostered academic dialogue on Ottoman history for over two decades. The most recent symposium, held in early January 2015, was the second one in the series devoted to the political. While the previous meeting in 2009 focused on local politics, popular protest and collective action,<sup>1</sup> this year's symposium turned towards the realm of concepts and ideas.

Research on Ottoman political thought has been gaining some pace recently, although the vast majority of primary sources relevant to the subject remain unedited and are not easily accessible. This is connected both to a rather recent turn of Ottomanist scholarship to the history of ideas, a hitherto neglected field of study, and to the heightened interest of world historians in comparative research on empires. The blossoming of world history in recent decades has renewed scholarly interest in the Ottoman empire and has presented Ottomanists with the challenge of integrating comparative approaches into their own work. A preoccupation with the potential for and the merits of comparative research was indeed visible throughout the symposium, in the individual presentations as well as general discussions.

*Explaining change*

In the keynote presentation, Linda Darling gave an overview of what she called the "standard narrative" of Ottoman political thought. In her critical remarks, she argued that perceived

wisdom on Ottoman political literature is not adequate for explaining short-term changes in political discourses. Taking as an example the case of the Janissaries, she showed that the considerations underpinning political writing are much more complex than what the “standard narrative” allows for. She argued for a nuanced and less introverted analysis of political literature that takes into consideration all kinds of sources, including archival ones.

Virginia Aksan and Ariel Salzmann also offered macroscopic overviews, this time of sociopolitical change. Aksan focused on army mobilisation in the transitional period of 1750–1850 from a perspective that places at the centre military manpower and the provisioning of the army, both key issues in current research on empires. By emphasising the aspect of war as an enterprise from which some benefit, not least from provisioning labour, Aksan highlighted the importance of constant negotiation and of networks centred on and sustained by political households for the mobilisation of soldiers and the practice of warfare.

In the same comparative vein, Salzmann discussed the relationship of the transformation of ideas and policies to systemic change in the course of the eighteenth century. Her central question was “where did the Tanzimat come from?”. In formulating an answer, she revisited old and recent scholarship, concurred with those who reject the earlier conceptualisation of the Tanzimat reforms as a modernising programme imported from Europe, and argued that a nuanced account of the origins of the reforms must also include indigenous responses to challenges brought about by the financial transformation in Europe in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars.

In the only paper concerning late Ottoman developments, Sia Anagnostopoulou discussed the political thought of the Young Turks, focusing on two key elements: the revolutionary rhetoric and the demand for a constitution. She gave a thoughtful analysis of the internal contradictions of Young Turk goals and policies and argued that, although the 1908 revolution was fully situated within the European revolutionary tradition, its goal was not to overthrow the Ottoman imperial reality but to restructure it by creating an imperial constitutional modernity. At the core of this project lay the shaping of a “neo-imperial Ottoman nation”, invented through the secularisation of Islam and founded on the principles of modernity.

### *Sources of Ottoman political thought*

Although Ottoman policies and institutions also owe much to Turco-Mongol and Byzantine practices, there is no doubt that the principles, concepts and ideas that shaped the political thought of the dynasty and the ruling class, at least until the late eighteenth century, were embedded in the Islamo-Persian tradition of governance. Hüseyin Yılmaz remarked that the intellectual origins of Ottoman political thought, as cultivated in the court and by scholars close to the dynasty, must be sought in the rich literature on governance found in late Seldjukid and post-Seldjukid Anatolia. Yılmaz argued that Bayezid’s confrontation with Timur (Tamerlane) and the crisis that ensued after the Ottoman defeat at the battle of Ankara (1402) were instrumental in triggering an intellectual output sponsored by the Ottoman dynasty with the aim to educate princes and future statesmen.

The impact of Ibn Khaldun's work on Ottoman political thought was at the core of Marinos Sariyannis' and Şükrü Ilıcak's presentations. The theories of the famous Arab historian and philosopher undeniably influenced Ottoman political discourses well into the nineteenth century; it is, however, a matter of debate whether they were influential from early on. In his perusal of Ottoman political literature from the sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, Sariyannis analysed many direct influences and even more echoes of Ibn Khaldun's theories. While earlier authors were preoccupied with his stage theory on the rise and decline of empires, later ones were attracted to his discussion of nomadic versus settled polities. As Ilıcak showed, the shock of the Greek revolution in 1821 made the sultan and the Ottoman government turn to Ibn Khaldun in order to make sense of the event and find a solution to the crisis. With meagre results, the sublime porte attempted to mobilise Muslims and recruit soldiers by evoking the warlike ways of their ancestors as envisioned by Ibn Khaldun in his analysis of nomads.

### ***Concepts or rule***

The conceptualisation and implementation of principles of governance was a theme that came up in most papers. Treatises on governance, usually of the "advice literature" variety, and historiographical works were the main vehicles through which political thought was articulated and disseminated. Mirrors for princes, that is, texts discussing how a ruler must act in order to succeed, have always had a central place in research. Given their obliquity (such texts are to be found in every major Eurasian civilisation from ancient times), mirrors for princes are particularly suitable for comparative research, as demonstrated by Vasileios Syros, who, in his perusal of advice literature from a Eurasian perspective, made the distinction between works discussing the attributes of the just and successful ruler (exemplified in Machiavelli's *Il Principe*) and those addressing the role of the counsellor, minister or courtier (exemplified in Castiglione's *Il Libro del Cortegiano*). He highlighted the importance of such texts for understanding the changing relationship between imperial authority and ministerial empowerment in governance and policy making.

The Eurasian perspective was evident also in Güneş Işıksel's presentation. In his discussion of the key concepts of order (*nizam*) and harmony (*aheng*), Işıksel elaborated not only on their direct Islamo-Persian antecedents but also on their resonance with similar notions from the post-Hellenistic world to China. Işıksel argued that these concepts, exemplified and visualised in the "circle of justice",<sup>2</sup> appear early in Ottoman political discourse, promoting an understanding of society as a harmonious whole.

As every Ottomanist knows, another key concept is that of *istimalet*. Since Halil İnalcık's seminal article on the Ottoman methods of conquest,<sup>3</sup> the term has been used to describe the policy of concessions towards the conquered Christian populations by the Ottoman rulers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. By placing it under scrutiny, however, Elias Kolovos discovered that the term hardly ever comes up in the sources of that period; it appears only in the course of the sixteenth century, especially from the 1560s onwards. Furthermore, it has a much broader sense. Instead of denoting a specific policy towards the Christian populations, *istimalet* is used by the Ottoman

authorities in all kinds of conflictual situations, often involving mutiny or rebellion, when the central state considered it expedient to make concessions or to offer incentives in order to solve the matter rapidly and without much cost.

Marc Aymes also delved into archival documents but with a different aim, namely in an effort to unveil the potential of fakes and forgeries as “political utterances”. Aymes argued that fake and forged documents can be considered as “trials” of how politics was performed and that forgers, by usurping the state monopoly over legitimate documents, contributed in an oblique way to political thought and practice.

### *The significance of religion*

Persian concepts of rule are usually evaluated as more “secular” in their outlook, in the sense that they give priority to the state and emphasise justice over piety as the foundation of prosperity and social peace. The foundation of imperial ideology on the concepts of order and justice helped the Ottomans to accommodate practices and institutions incorporating elements that, while contentious from a strictly Islamic perspective, enhanced sultanic power. Conversely, opposition to autocratic rule was fuelled by Islamic piety and expressed in the form of puritanical movements. The potential of Islam to inspire opposition to official ideology did not stop even after the diffusion of the ideas of the French Revolution and the emergence of alternative discourses that challenged sultanic power.

Given this state of affairs, the question arises whether there were distinct trends of political thought among members of the *ulema* class (the religio-judicial establishment) and statesmen with a purely bureaucratic or military background. This is an issue for future research; it has been one of the symposium’s merits, however, that by including papers on *ulema* authors, it effectively overcame the dichotomy between religious and political literature, challenging the common view that political writing was the domain of “secularly” – in the sense of pragmatically – oriented statesmen.

Derin Terzioğlu’s analysis of the sixteenth-century Sufi sheikh İbrahim Kırımı’s letters to Sultan Murad III showed clearly how advice on domestic and foreign policy in matters of religion could alternate with spiritual counsel. Ekin Tuşalp Atıyas also illustrated the dense interconnections between statecraft and religion. Her analysis of the chief scribe Sarı Abdullah Efendi’s *Nasihatü’l müluk* (Counsel for kings) showed how, in the case of a bureaucrat that was at the same time a renowned Sufi intellectual, political thought could effortlessly coexist with spiritual preoccupation. Lastly, Baki Tezcan delved into the intellectual formation of Kadızade Mehmed, the founding father of the pietistic Kadızadeli movement that had a profound impact on seventeenth-century Ottoman political life.

Although the core tenets of official political discourses remained more or less stable from the mid-fifteenth to the early nineteenth centuries, the conceptualisations of governance, considerations of war and peace, etc., changed following historical developments. In this respect, Ottoman political thought, as cultivated by statesmen and official intellectuals, was at the same time con-

servative and flexible. The integration of religious discourses at crucial times contributed decisively to this. Gottfried Hagen analysed the so-called “argument from al-Hudaybiyya” that was cited by eighteenth-century Ottoman authors to legitimise contentious political decisions, namely peace treaties with the Habsburg and Russian empires. The argument evokes an episode of Islamic religious history, the treaty of Hudaybiyya, which Prophet Muhammad negotiated in 628 with his head-then Meccan enemies. Hagen argued that, when Na’ima, Ahmed Vasif or other Ottoman authors turned to the example of al-Hudaybiyya to justify peace treaties, they made moral arguments about the necessity to pursue different policies towards European opponents.

### ***Legitimising Ottoman rule***

Key to the evaluation and understanding of political writing (be it advice literature, historiographical work or other kinds of text) is, of course, the relation of authors to the dynasty, other poles of authority or specific social groups. This, in turn, begs the question which part of the intellectual output of the Ottoman era that can be arguably considered political qualifies as Ottoman. Although the issue was not directly addressed, the inclusion of a paper by Kostas Moustakas on Ottoman Greek views of Ottoman rule and by Denise Klein on Crimean Tatar political thought gave an oblique answer, namely that research should not be limited only to Muslim authors or the imperial core lands. As a vassal state, the Tatar khanate had an autonomous tradition of rulership and political ideology, and Crimean authors were not particularly preoccupied with their Ottoman suzerain. Greek authors, on the contrary, were far more Ottoman in their outlook. By focusing on the use of the word *basileus* (king) by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century scholars, Moustakas showed how the application by specific authors of this key term to sultans was instrumental in legitimising Ottoman rule vis-à-vis Greek Orthodox subjects.

Moustakas’ and Klein’s presentations also illustrated the importance of historiography for the elaboration and transmittance of political ideas and as a tool of legitimation. Nicolas Vatin offered a window into another aspect, that of history as political propaganda. In his discussion of *Ğazavat-ı Hayreddin Paşa* (The campaigns of Hayreddin Pasha), an account of the conquest of Algiers written at the sultan’s command by Hayreddin Barbarossa, Vatin showed how issues of legitimation are constantly negotiated in the text so as to accommodate the realities of the conquest within the framework of imperial ideology.

### ***Political practice***

In regard to political decision-making, a central question is how thinking about governance translated into action, as well as what was the impact of changing conditions on long-established practices. Yannis Spyropoulos explained in detail how the Janissaries came to dominate Cretan economic and political life in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Spyropoulos’ contribution, like other recent work on the Janissaries, is very important for understanding how this particular

military corps ended up holding immense political power in certain provinces, sometimes even acting independently from the central state.

Antonis Hadjikyriacou took issue with another organisation that gained economic and political power in roughly the same period, the Orthodox Church of Cyprus. Hadjikyriacou investigated the formation of communal organisation and the mechanics of collective representation in pre-Tanzimat Cyprus with the aim of revisiting the *millet* debate. Despite its rejection by Ottomanists, who have shown that the so-called “*millet system*” of communal organisation on the basis of religious affiliation is nothing more than a projection of later developments onto the past, it is still dominant outside the immediate field. Through a thorough analysis of the relevant documentation, Hadjikyriacou showed that church officials emerged only gradually as representatives of the Christian population, a development that unsurprisingly ran parallel with the rise of the church’s importance in the economic field.

\*\*\*

Political thought and practice is a potentially vast theme, since it encompasses a broad spectrum of both intellectual output and action relating to governance, not to mention political action in more general terms. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the papers presented at the Halcyon Days addressed a wide range of subjects, from the oeuvre of particular authors to the articulation of local politics. On the whole, however, heterogeneity was kept to a minimum and the presentations were attuned to the key aspects of the issue. Sometimes, however, I had the feeling that individual papers were following lines of discourse that were never meant to cross paths, were it not for the fact that they were connected to the Ottoman universe. Here is a challenge that the editor (or editors) of the volume should not shun: to write an introduction that will provide the necessary coherence. I look forward to the publication.

*For those interested in Ottoman political thought, here is a short list of basic references:*

Abou-El-Haj, Rifa'at 'Ali. *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1991.

Aksan, Virginia. “Ottoman Political Writing, 1768–1808.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25/1 (1993): 53–69.

Darling, Linda. “Political Change and Political Discourse in the Early Modern Mediterranean World.” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 38/4 (2008): 505–531.

Deringil, Selim. *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1909*. London: I.B. Tauris, 1998.

Ferguson, Heather. “Genres of Power: Constructing a Discourse of Decline in Ottoman *nasihat-name*.” *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 35 (2010): 81–116.

Fleischer, Cornell. *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire: The Historian Mustafa Âli (1541–1600)*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Fodor, Pál. "State and Society, Crisis and Reform, in 15th–17th century Ottoman Mirror for Princes." *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 40/2–3 (1986): 217–240.

Howard, Douglas. "Genre and Myth in the Ottoman Advice for Kings Literature." In *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire*, edited by Virginia Aksan and Daniel Goffman, 137–166. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Karateke, Hakan and Maurus Reinkowski, eds. *Legitimizing the Order: The Ottoman Rhetoric of State Power*. Leiden: Brill, 2005.

Mardin, Şerif. *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, (1962) 2000.

Menchinger, Ethan. "A Reformist Philosophy of History: The Case of Ahmed Vâsıf Efendi." *Osmanlı Araştırmaları* 44 (2014): 141–168.

Piterberg, Gabriel. *An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Sariyannis, Marinos. "Ruler and State, State and Society in Ottoman Political Thought." *Turkish Historical Review* 4 (2013): 83–117.

Tezcan, Baki. *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

## NOTES

- 1 Antonis Anastasopoulos, ed., *Political Initiatives 'From the Bottom Up' in the Ottoman Empire*. Halcyon Days in Crete 8 (Rethymno: Crete University Press, 2012).
- 2 The "circle of justice" is a schematic formulation presenting, in a summarised form, a theory of the state and of the relationship between ruler, subjects and governing institutions. Originating in the ancient civilisations of the Middle East and handed down in many variations, the "circle of justice" claims justice as the foundation for the prosperity of society and the survival of state. See Linda Darling, *A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East: The Circle of Justice from Mesopotamia to Globalization* (Oxford: Routledge, 2013).
- 3 Halil Inalcik, "Ottoman Methods of Conquest," *Studia Islamica* 2 (1954): 103–129.