

OTTOMAN POLITICAL THOUGHT THROUGH THE CENTURIES

The presentation of Marinos Sariyannis at the Central-European University

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(Abstract) The presentation of Marinos Sariyannis dealt with three centuries of Ottoman political thought from the 14th to the 17th century. Special attention was placed on representing not the five most well-known philosophers and their ideas, but those who were severely neglected in past studies. During his speech the audience was presented with the basic theories of Ottoman political thought, from Ahmedi to Lutfi Paşa, then he presented how the notion of the decline of the Ottoman Empire influenced later ideas.

Keywords: Ottoman political thought, Islam, Ibn Khaldun, Ahmadi, Tusî, circle of justice, basic theories, Persian traditions

Outline

Ottoman political thought in scholarly studies
The basic theories of Ottoman political thought
The idea of decline and the ideal state

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Introduction

Marinos Sariyannis's speech was held on 16 October 2014 as part of the Central-European University's initiative, *The Frontiers of Democracy*.¹ His speech centred on the change and study of Ottoman political thought through the centuries. He underlined, that the presentation of Ottoman political thought has been focusing exclusively on the “top five or six authors”, neglecting lesser known philosophers. In the past, studies of Ottoman political thought have even stopped for a time and interest in the topic has only been revived in the last few decades. According to Professor Sariyannis, studies of Ottoman political thought have two great disadvantages, or obstacles. One is, that researchers focus on a very limited number of authors, disregarding the others, and thus, they are incapable of creating a comprehensive study of Ottoman political thought. The second disadvantage is a so-called “Local Orientalism”, meaning that 20th century researchers concentrated on Middle East authors, such as al-Farabi, al-Gazali or Ibn Khaldun. Hence, Arabists like Bernard Lewis or Erwin I. J. Rosenthal only saw “either a sterile continuation and imitation of their great Arabian or Persian prototypes or a senseless series of concrete advice on military and administrative matters”, that had no worth in the field of political thought. They were not looking for the “meaning” of

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Ottoman political thought, but for its “worth”. This idea was enforced by the popular notion of the decline of the Ottoman Empire from the 16th century onwards. In his speech Professor Marinus Sariyannis divided Ottoman political thought into three categories, in which he introduced various theories. Thus, Ottoman political thought was expounded on through these ideologies.

Before delineating the basic theories of Ottoman political thought, Professor Sariyannis gave a detailed explanation on what Ottoman political thought is from an Ottoman viewpoint. Essentially, political thought is the “study of society, state and politics, with the goal of describing a legitimate government”. Ottoman political thinkers, however, followed a different set of values. Although there are those amongst them who have created comprehensive systems, based on moral or historical values, yet most of these philosophers' work resembles an “administrative manual more than anything else”. This means that Ottoman authors follow the emic approach, as opposed to the etic approach which is more popular in Europe.

Sariyannis, according to the existing tradition amongst Ottoman political thought studies, began his speech with Ahmedi. The 15th century thinker created a Gazi ideology in connection with the Holy War and the Persian scholars who came to the budding Ottoman Empire. As these soldiers had a mostly syncretistic mentality and were most well-known because of their looting, Ahmedi in his theory expounds on the conflict between the Gazi warriors and the scholars who had to live in an increasingly militaristic environment and growing imperial hierarchy that begun to rule the Ottoman infrastructure. The Persian scholars brought their urban culture and political ideas that augmented the change from tribal emirates into an empire. The originally Persian “mirror for princes” tradition is one of the earliest written genres containing political content. In these works one can find advice on how a future ruler, a prince should comport himself according to the Persian concept of justice. Ahmedi's most important work from these is the one detailing the theory of the “circle of justice”, which greatly influenced later Ottoman political ideas. This ideology states, that for the well-being of society the sultan must be just. The building blocks of the circle are as follows: the military, for without military there is no king; wealth, because without wealth there is no military; peasants, for without peasants there is no wealth, and peasants need justice to prosper which is provided by the king. Thus, the circle closes.

It is not surprising, that in parallel with the growth of the Ottoman Empire a more elaborate ideology became a necessity. The creator of this theory, Nasir al-Din Tusî, used the synthesis of Aristotelian ethics and Platonic politics and also augmented Persian traditions to create a comprehensive ideology that would encompass the whole of human society. He mentions the virtues which a ruler must own, and explains both the individual and society. The system of Tusî is centred around the three states of man, using these also to portray households and the state. It is based on the concept of the Aristotelian soul and in its particulars. Tusî also delineates four cardinal virtues: wisdom, courage, honesty and justice. From these four, justice either as combination of the other three or as another virtue is the main guarantor of governance. He also divides society into four categories, all of which are associated with an element. As such, scholars are associated with water, soldiers with fire, merchants with air and peasants with the earth. Just like in nature, these elements must also be balanced in society for it to remain functional.

In the 16th century a new political trend arose amongst the jurists and the bureaucratic apparatus. This trend was based on the Sharia and paradoxically it explored the possibility of “secular legislation”. Although, the secular legislation imagined by these people was also a sort of synthesis, as sultans had had issued edicts and regulations in the past. The focus of Ebusuud Efendi's work was on finding among these edicts and regulations the ones contradicting the Sharia and reformulate them accordingly. The 16th century also saw the birth of a new movement in the “mirror for princes” genre, which shifted the focus from the ruler to the institutions. In *Âsafnâme* Lutfî Paşa writes down the obligations and responsibilities of a Grand Vezier. In these four chapters the desirable qualities of a Grand Vezier are found, and also affairs concerning the army, the treasury and the peasants. Though not completely devoid of such passages, the work contains relatively little moral pondering or theorising. One such passage, maybe the most important from them, is the strict compartmentalization of society into taxable and untaxable classes. As such, for society he uses only two categories instead of four.

From the beginning of the 17th century decline became a governing motif in Ottoman political thought. The military stalemate, janissary and peasant revolts, financial questions and the problems of the timar system all showed a spectacular decline from the Suleymanic “Golden Age”. This idea of decline was so strong that it was present until the 20th century. Lutfî Paşa's emphasis on institutions was followed by a series of essays describing the discrepancies of their current society from the “Golden Age”. The work of

Mustafa Ali is a mixture of moral advice, social criticism and concrete advice on administrative, financial and military affairs. His description and condemnation of the changes to the “old law” is off-set by caricatures of specific officials. Ali states that Mehmed II. asked him to create a legal code, the promulgation of which would stop decline from ever touching the empire again. That is, if the code is not changed by Mehmed's successors or if strangers remain prohibited from entering the army. The essay of Hasan Kafi el-Akhisari holds a similar viewpoint, although he also stresses that decline may also be caused by social mobility amongst the classes or bribery. Akhisari's work is special because he advises the Ottoman Empire to adopt Western weaponry so that they could be more successful in their wars.

During the 17th century the idealization of the “old law” and the Suleymanic “Golden Age” gained new dimensions. The most famous author who wrote about the dangers of deviating from the “old law” was Koçi Bey. He and his followers not only described the faults of their current situation but also laid down rules to be followed by the government. These works, not coincidentally were often called “books of law” as they posed as a sort of ad hoc constitution for the sultan. The “old law” was above the authority of the ruler and as such would limit his power. However, this implicit constitution was often disregarded by the sultan and as such was not very effective.

A more general and philosophical trend was again evident in Ottoman political thought around the 1650s, that was reminiscent of Nasir al-Din Tusi's system. Such is the work of Kâtib Çelebi, who for the first time in the history of Ottoman political thought gave a systematic introduction to the “state levels” of Ibn Khaldun. In accordance with this, there three stages of a state are: growing, standstill and decline. The last theory mentioned in Professor Sariyannis's speech was Çelebi's medical simile. This theory divides society into four categories, functioning like pillars and all associated with one of the fluids found in the human body. As such, scholars are symbolised by blood, the army by phlegm, merchants by yellow bile and peasants by black bile. Stress is, yet again, on the balance of these fluids and social classes, for society like the human body, is only functional if its components are balanced.

Conclusion

Professor Marinos Sariyannis's speech on these few centuries of Ottoman political thought encompassed an enormous time period, with numerous influential philosophers and theories. The importance of Persian traditions can be felt throughout the ideologies. Special consequence is given to this speech because it deals mainly with the lesser known theories and thinkers, as opposed to most Ottoman studies. The presentation showed the inception, the change and development of these obscure ideas, underlining that they often co-existed in Ottoman society.

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