
Key Words: Ottoman Empire, Middle East, Islam, Historiography

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Cem Emrence’s, Remapping the Ottoman Middle East, is an ambitious effort to cultivate a new analytical framework to the field of Ottoman Studies that addresses variables of socio-economic and political diversity that are often overlooked in previous studies of the Ottoman Middle East. The application of this new analytical framework functions both as a mean of explaining the uneven development witnessed in specific regions of the Ottoman Empire and revealing multiple, alternative paths to modernity in the region. Emrence’s call to implement his multi-disciplinary, intra-empire perspective is necessary, according to the author, in order to understand the variations of historical paths in the Ottoman world. Subsequently, Emrence identifies three distinct historical paths spatially situated within the Empire: the Coast, the Interior, and the Frontier. Moreover, while focus is placed on discerning these alternative paths to modernity, Emrence can address the much larger question concerning the disposition of Ottoman rule from the eighteenth century to the Empire’s demise following the War of 1914-18 and, by extension, address the implications of the empire’s demise on Middle Eastern social constructs.

Chapter One outlines the dominant historiographical trends in the field of Ottoman studies, beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century. Emrence notes a penchant among these historians to favor a mono-causal approach to explaining Ottoman path towards modernity. The author begins his critique with the modernization approach, which focused on addressing Western influence on Ottoman culture and the subsequent response of the Ottoman population to these efforts. This approach focused mainly on the imperial center during the Tanzimat and its attempts at modernization. In doing so, the author notes that it overlooks much of the complexity that
defined Ottoman society during the nineteenth century, focusing primarily on the struggle between reformers and conservative factions, while omitting a considerable amount of Ottoman history in the process. Emrence then moves to address “macro-models” that came into vogue during the late 1970s. Their application to the field of Ottoman studies stemmed from a desire to better understand the historical dynamics of the empire in its later years. This approach argued that the Ottoman Empire was the site of a double struggle that pitted the West vs. the Empire, and non-Muslim merchant class vs. the Ottoman state bureaucracy. Emrence argues that this “macro-perspective” relied too heavily on economics as a means of explaining evolving social patterns and conflicts. The third approach represents an effort during the late twentieth century to bring historiographic change to Ottoman studies. The characteristic application of center-periphery models of analysis placed emphasis on the machinations of the political elite, including both state and local factions, as a mode for explaining the developmental path of the Ottoman Empire. The Bargaining Model proved valuable in defining the relationship between the state apparatus and Ottoman society; however, much like its antecedents, it seeks to explain causality by identifying single events, all the while ignoring intra-Ottoman variation and multi-causality perspectives.

Emrence suggests that each of the models mentioned above is burdened by a reliance on an overtly liner, or state-centric approach that is unable to account for the presence of complex patterns of development witnessed in different regions of the empire. His alternative model considers the variables of diversity within separate regions of the empire, each following uneven, yet parallel paths of regional development. As a result, Emrence argues that his new approach will encourage multiple conceptual understandings of socio-economic and political realities within the Ottoman Empire, while likewise providing an explanation for the geographical variables from which they emerge. Applying his new theoretical model, the author identifies three regionally influenced path of Ottoman development, wherein the formation of distinct, Sub-Ottoman identity bespeaks in each the presence of differentiated historical processes influencing their separate paths towards modernity.

Chapter Two addresses the economic and commercial constructs that defined socio-political development in Western Mediterranean and Anatolia Regions. The author concludes that the presence of commercial traditions in and around the coastal port cities linked the realities of each to the influence of world economic markets and the rise of a dominant merchant middle class, who solidified their grip on regional politics through a process of speculative diversification. As the public sphere expanded within this region, the presence of a free press, class oriented political conflicts, and municipal councils that operated according to regional self-interest, engendered notions of autonomy throughout the coastal regions of the empire.

Emrence follows his analysis of the Coastal regions with an equally compelling evaluation of the internal structure of the Ottoman Empire in Chapter Three. He defines the interior as Central Anatolia, Syria, and Palestine, and proceeds to connect the merging of historical trajectories of the region with the revitalization of Ottoman imperial presence following the withdrawal of the Egyptian military occupation. The most important point of divergence between the Coastal and Interior trajectories was 1) the dominance of a Muslim bloc that worked to pre-empt efforts of non-Muslim to achieve economic hegemony, and 2) the centralization of Ottoman Imperial bureaucracy, which prevented efforts seeking to establish regional autonomy. As such, social,
political, and economic authority resided within the constructs of the Ottoman state apparatus, through which political legitimacy and economic opportunity was extended to those with politically powerful positions. While contentious, most conflicts between political coalitions never threatened Ottoman authority, which enjoyed majority support of those in favor of a Sunni Islamic State.

In sharp contrast to the regions discussed above, Chapter Four considers the historical trajectory experienced in the Frontier regions of Eastern Anatolia, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula. Unlike the Coastal and Interior provinces of the Ottoman Empire, the Rural Frontier was governed through a process of religious brokerage. Mutual distrust of what was considered an inherently corrupt state bureaucracy, leadership in the Ottoman frontier fell to local elites, who gained legitimacy based on popular perception of ethical virtue. The region’s distance from the constructs of the imperial establishment permitted rural leaders to enjoy a measure of flexibility when dealing with both State and third-party entities. Economic viability was acquired through protection rents, which benefited local leaders while simultaneously undermining Ottoman efforts that sought to assimilate the peripheral population. Thus, Frontier leadership operated in an area of ambiguity that existed inside and outside of Ottoman state authority.

Chapter Five and the Conclusion speculate on the long-term ramifications of these processes in the context of post-1908 rise of the Committee of Union and Progress, continuing through to the post-Ottoman period to address how the previously discussed paths toward modernity affected the formation of twentieth century nation-states throughout the Middle East. Emurence argues that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire resulted in the Muslim bloc of the Ottoman Interior adopting nationalistic designs that led to the establishment of conservative-minded states. While this transition was precarious at best for those in the Coastal and Interior zones, for the Frontier region, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire aroused nowhere near the trauma witnessed in the more politically and economically developed regions. As mentioned earlier, the most traumatic residual effect, according to Emurence, lies in the new states that formed in the wake of the Ottoman collapse. Indeed, the difference in historical experience of these new states made any effort toward integration and cohesive unification impossible.

Remapping the Ottoman Middle East achieves its goal of examining the Ottoman imperial experience through an intra-imperial lens, identifying and expounding upon three unique, yet parallel regional paths toward modernity. While well written and extremely engaging, Emrence’s book struggles at times due to the author’s assumption of pre-knowledge on the part of the reader. Subsequently, Emrence misses an opportunity to provide the non-specialist with a wealth of historiographical and methodological knowledge beneficial to anyone seeking entry to the field of Ottoman Studies. This is unfortunate considering the engaging nature of the book.

Nonetheless, Emrence’s text will find itself welcomed by Middle East scholars seeking methodological variety, or perhaps insight on a new angle from which to deviate from traditional approaches in their field. All the same, even seasoned scholars might find some of the theoretical discussion challenging to follow – let alone internalize. Perhaps the greatest contribution this text provides is inspiration to all who may wish to deviate from the methodological status quo and experiment with developing more diverse, multi-disciplinary approaches to answer unresolved questions.