

## **Ottoman State Formation in Comparative Historical Sociology**

### **(Part 1 – about the Ottoman Postal System)**

### **(Part 2 to be submitted after confirmation of participation – Ottoman state formation in comparative historical sociology)**

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This paper examines the Ottoman postal system to study state formation. It decomposes this vast system into the perspectives of eight small-scale actors, animate and inanimate. Collectively, the Courier, the Tatar, the Imperial Decrees, the Bookkeeper, the Postmaster, the Villager, Money, and Horses enabled the postal system's expansion during the eighteenth century and participated in its transformation from an exclusive government network into a public postal service open to all subjects in 1840. Previously, only Ottoman officials had the status required to access post stations, while common subjects were forbidden due to their low tax-paying status. After 1840, tax-paying subjects became legitimate customers who could legally pay to use post horses with money.

The explanation for this arc of change may be found in the process of Ottoman state formation, which is conventionally narrated using the de/centralization framework. This framework views the Ottoman Empire as possessing a centralized state in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a decentralized state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and finally a modernizing centralized state in the nineteenth. It assumes that a centralized state was a powerful state and, conversely, that a decentralized state was a weak state. (Salzmann 1993) However, this assumption is derived from outdated theories of war-driven state centralization in early modern European history. (Roberts 1967, Tilly 1993) Recent scholarship has uncovered empirical evidence that war-making in early modern Europe often involved private military contractors who were not directly controlled by the state. These findings carry profound implications for state formation theories: instead of focusing narrowly on the state as previous generations of scholars did, present scholars now focus on how states delegated authority and fostered effective principal-agent relationships with local contractors. (Parrott 2012, Torres Sanchez 2016) To be a pre-industrial empire is to

delegate governance; the enforcement of imperial policy always required working through local intermediaries. This was indeed the case for the Ottoman bureaucracy, which expanded significantly in scale and complexity over time. <sup>4c</sup>

Instead of the de/centralization framework, I argue that the paradigm of “thickening governance” not only offers a more precise account of Ottoman state formation, but also explains symbiotic developments in the Ottoman social order. Thickening governance, a metaphor first developed by the historian Molly Greene, refers to the pattern of imperial bureaucrats and provincial officials recruiting more and more common subjects as local intermediaries to do the work of local governance. This process, which intensified in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, enabled imperial bureaucrats to increase their monitoring capacity, to expand the local impact, and to extend the reach of imperial policies. (Mann 1986, Soifer 2008) By the same token, participating in local governance enabled many common subjects who served as local intermediaries to attain the status of minor officials and, consequently, petty notables. These common subjects gained important experience from governance work and learned how to organize themselves effectively as collective groups. Consequently, they developed new expectations of imperial authorities. Thickening governance was thus a coevolutionary process where bureaucrats, officials, and common subjects interacted with and adapted to each other. Over time, this process altered the boundaries of Ottoman officialdom (the ‘state’) and loosened the prevailing social hierarchy. All this set the stage for the profound social transformations, ruptures, and reforms during the Tanzimat era (1839-76) and more broadly, during the nineteenth-century Ottoman empire—including the transformation of the exclusive government communications network into a public pay-per-use postal service.<sup>4d</sup>

The thickening governance paradigm therefore focuses analytical attention on the process of delegation: on different strategies of delegation, the diversity of local intermediaries, and the variety of outcomes. *This*, I argue, is where the story of Ottoman state formation is found—in the evolving set of relations between imperial bureaucrats and myriad local intermediaries. State formation cannot be understood apart from the evolution of the social order in which its processes are embedded.

The postal system, by offering a rare view of the whole empire as one coherent analytical unit, is a suitable proxy to examine these twinned processes. Spatially, the postal system cut across the Ottoman Empire's bewildering diversity and imposed a relatively uniform and circumscribed bureaucratic context. Language, faith, climate, and diet, as well as legal and tax arrangements, varied from province to province, as was the case in other Eurasian empires.<sup>5</sup> Yet the Ottoman postal system was, by design, operationally standardized. It had to be. The system's *raison d'être* was speed, and the speed of a courier depended on the ease with which he could flow through each post station and reach his destination. Predictability and simplicity were key. In other words, it didn't matter which language you spoke, which faith you practiced, or which food you ate. Each post station had to work the same way as the next in order for the whole system to work at all.

Temporally, the horse-run relay system endured as an important medium of communication from the early days of the empire in the fourteenth century until after the arrival of the telegraph. The earliest sources used in this paper date to the 1380s, when whole villages were granted special tax statuses in exchange for providing horses to imperial couriers. In 1902, almost half a century after the advent of the telegraph, the deputy judge in a small town near Amman (modern Jordan) still requested confirmation of the official end of Ramadan by horse-run post, rejecting the telegram notification. The postal system thus offers historians a practical lens with which to contemplate the entirety of empire over a very long time.

The Ottoman postal system was a pre-industrial infrastructure. Social scientists have long understood infrastructure as a bundle of relations. (Star 1999) Just like the large technological systems of today, the Ottoman postal system comprised interacting, interconnected components that cannot be studied in isolation from each other.<sup>8</sup> Just like the large logistical networks of today, the Ottoman postal system aimed to maintain steady circulation across uneven terrain and mutable seasons, albeit at a much more modest scale and velocity. (Graham and Thrift 2007; Graham 2010) Transposing these social science insights on industrial infrastructure backwards in time to the pre-industrial Ottoman world, it becomes clear that theoretical convergences exist between the scholarship on early modern state formation and on Science and Technology Studies

(STS). This is what makes the Ottoman communications infrastructure suitable for the study of the state formation process.

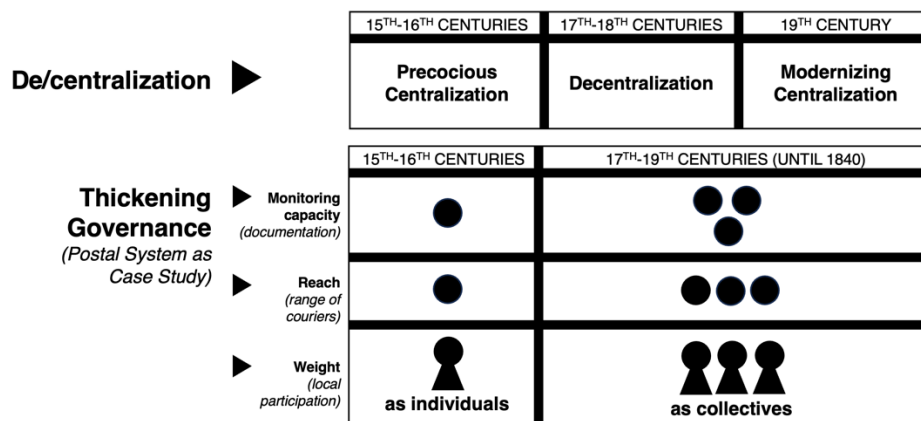
One important STS theme that has informed this paper's analysis is breakdown. Like large technological systems, the postal infrastructure grew, developed new problems, and broke down from time to time. Records from the seventeenth century show that courier traffic and horse usage began to strain the Ottoman postal system's capacity, resulting in significant delays in government communication as couriers were stranded for weeks at post stations, waiting for horses with which to continue their journey. To solve this, successive generations of Ottoman bureaucrats implemented reforms to fix horse shortages and to prevent communication lags.

These attempts at fixing chronic breakdowns show what the thickening of imperial governance looked like in concrete terms. First, imperial authorities enhanced their monitoring *capacity* of local postal operations. They did this by setting up a new bureau dedicated to postal affairs, expanding the job scope of postmasters to include administrative duties, and developing new accounting routines and quantification methods. Second, imperial authorities increased the *weight* or impact of their intervention in the provinces. They did this by recruiting more common subjects to participate in local postal operations. Third, authorities extended the territorial *reach* of their policies and, more literally, of their imperial couriers. They did this by reducing the friction of horse procurement at relay stations so that couriers could smoothly deliver messages to the limits of Ottoman territories and then return. These three dimensions of capacity, weight, and reach have been used to measure state infrastructural power, defined by the sociologist Michael Mann as the capacity of the state to penetrate its territories and logistically implement decisions. Here, I use them to capture three aspects of thickening governance, which shares conceptual affinities with Mann's notion of infrastructural power. (Mann 1986)

The outcomes of these reforms were striking. During the sixteenth century, bureaucrats in the imperial capital could not see the different stages of couriers' journeys and their mail delivery processes. In contrast, during the eighteenth century, these same bureaucrats had regular and meticulous records of every single post station in the empire, as well as of the identities of every single official who visited each post station, how many horses he took, and when he took them. At the other end of the social

hierarchy, sixteenth-century common subjects could expect to have their horses confiscated by couriers while travelling – these violent seizures were legal and were the dominant mode of horse procurement for couriers. During the eighteenth century, violent seizures were no longer the norms of horse procurement. Instead, they had been transmuted into mundane bureaucratic procedures—couriers now exchanged tired horses for energetic ones at fixed post stations by showing their papers to local postmasters for authentication. On their part, common subjects (the villagers) maintained these post stations as their tax obligations; they signed collective contracts with imperial authorities, stood as sureties for each other, and complained about the unreasonable behavior of couriers via petitions. And then, in 1840, another transmutation took place — these common subjects transformed into customers of a public postal service where, for a fee, official couriers would deliver their mail for them.

As a common, pan-imperial denominator, the postal system as infrastructure allows a tight focus on a lean institution that crisscrossed the uneven terrain of geography, threaded through the social hierarchy, and survived the vicissitudes of time. By tracking the developing capacity, reach, and weight of Ottoman postal administration, *The Sublime Post* elucidates the expansion of governance through delegation, thereby offering a new account of Ottoman state formation and its social order (fig. 1).



(fig. 1)

Envisioning the Ottoman Empire as a coherent unit is challenging due to the profound legacies of its collapse at the end of the First World War. The Ottomans began as a small frontier principality in northwestern Anatolia sometime in the fourteenth century. With the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the absorption of Egypt and Syria in 1517, the Ottomans created a transregional empire that was heir to Turco-Mongol, Islamic, and Roman-Byzantine imperial legacies. In the twentieth century, the empire unraveled dramatically, and a social order that had endured for centuries completely collapsed. Presently, the empire's more than thirty-five successor states and their cities, from Kosovo to Kurdistan, are more likely to evoke images of genocide, civil war, and destruction than any memory of a united empire that had ruled for six hundred years.<sup>16</sup> The breakup of the Ottoman Balkans into smaller polities fiercely antagonistic to one another was so novel a phenomenon that the term "balkanization" was coined to name it.<sup>17</sup> This term has since entered the general lexicon and has been used to describe contexts as varied as cloud computing technology and U.S. political parties. Lamentably, the balkanization of Ottoman lands reproduced the balkanization of its histories, entrenching historiographical views of a hopelessly decentralized and fragmented empire.

Historically, however, the Ottoman Empire was not balkanized. It was a coherent imperial unit linked by its polyglot culture and diversity of faiths, by the continuous movements of administrators and animals, by the regular exchange of luxury goods and grain, by the establishing, maintaining, and extending of basic infrastructure such as roads, bridges, mountain passes, and post stations. Imperial coherence did not mean constant peace and unwavering stability; rebellions were common across its history, just as they were in the contemporaneous Qing and Mughal Empires—and in eighteenth-century France, where a revolution toppled the king and the entire social order of the *ancien régime* along with him.<sup>20</sup> Undergirding these centuries-long patterns of exchange and circulation, of uprisings and suppression, were the living traditions of Islam in the Ottoman lands. Whether subjects were Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, there was a place for them in the empire, which recognized them legally, fiscally, politically, and socially, even if unequally and inconsistently. Ottoman Islam, as it was lived and practiced, was at once a common baseline and a changing constellation of vernacular cultural codes, laws, and beliefs.

As an object of historical study, the vast size of the Ottoman Empire has led pioneering generations of scholars to undertake smaller studies at the scale of the province, city, community, or neighborhood. Scholarship on the Ottoman postal system has followed this trend. Colin Heywood, Cengiz Orhonlu, Yusuf Halaçoğlu, Cemal Çetin, and other historians have uncovered precious archival documents pertaining to the postal system, producing detailed studies of a single post station or a set of post stations over a long period of time.<sup>22</sup> Like their peers who have studied the Roman, Byzantine, Ayyubid, and Mamluk postal systems, these pioneers have established foundational information, such as locating the relay stations, aggregating their findings into valuable lists, and constructing the first modern maps of such systems.<sup>23</sup> Their painstaking scholarship has greatly facilitated the work of the present generation of researchers, allowing us to attempt a synthesis, to understand the postal relay system as system, in order to achieve a view of the empire as one unit.

The history of the Ottoman postal system cannot be understood apart from the history of the Ottoman Empire writ large. In particular, it was during a period known as the Second Ottoman Empire (ca 1600-1800) that a profusion of fiscal registers and documents began to be produced about the Ottoman postal system. According to the historian Baki Tezcan, the Second Ottoman Empire emerged when the Ottoman ruling elite (including the vizier and provincial elite households) had consolidated power at the expense of the royal dynasty (the House of Osman). The struggle was violent and costly for the losing side: the royal dynasty suffered one regicide and six dethronements out of nine sultans between 1603 and 1703. As elite power structures were reconfigured, many aspects of Ottoman administration, too, underwent significant changes. (Tezcan 2010, 2011)

Two new trends characterize these manifold changes brought about by the Second Ottoman Empire, which went beyond the imperial administration and affected all levels of society: an opening up and an enclosing. The empire opened up socially, culturally, aesthetically, architecturally (the historian Shirine Hamadeh refers to this trend as *décloisonnement*). (Hamadeh 2008) The imperial capital was awash with imports, trends, and fashions from abroad, including from the New World. Tomatoes, artichokes, and cauliflowers appeared in the Ottoman diet; European architectural styles were selectively incorporated in the design of sultanic mosques, producing an

“Ottoman Baroque”; new paintings were imported from India and Iran and floral-patterned textiles from eastern lands furnished Ottoman homes and clothes. (Rüstem 2018; Phillips 2021)

Across the empire, formerly exclusive elite spaces expanded to include newcomers. Barbers and “middle class” persons engaged in literary production; newly consolidated communities such as the Greek Orthodox in the Balkans and the ‘Alawis of Syria participated in Ottoman governance; and new groups of traders, forwarding agents, muleteers, and medium-distance merchants participated in commerce as older trading routes faded and yielded to new ones. Urban space came to host a new kind of sociability in major cities such as Istanbul and Damascus as rural migration proceeded apace. Men and women smoked tobacco openly in gardens and coffeehouses, along the rivers, and in the streets, even during the fasting month of Ramadan. Poetry leapt out of two-dimensional pages and came to be inscribed in stone and marble, dotting the urban landscape. (Aynur 2006; Greene 2015; Winter 2016)

These shifting boundaries produced material consequences. In sixteenth-century Istanbul, only the royal family, grand viziers, and grand admirals endowed buildings. Two hundred years later, the pool of patrons had expanded to include bureaucrats, lower-ranked *agas*, and even craftsmen who sponsored mosques, libraries, and fountains, hundreds of mushroomed across the capital. This urban revival has been described as the “second conquest” of Constantinople, three centuries after Mehmed II’s triumph in 1453. A similar mushrooming of construction may be found elsewhere in the empire: in seventeenth-century Aleppo, monumental buildings concentrated in the urban center from an earlier era gave way to the establishment of smaller neighborhood mosques and dervish lodges that spread throughout the city. Libraries, that were previously clustered within a few big cities, began to be established in a wider range of Ottoman provinces.

The second important trend of this era was an enclosing: historians have described this variously as corporatism, group formation, or communalization. (Inalcik 1977; Büssow and Meier 2019) As urban and social spaces were opening up, corporate groups were also coalescing all along the power hierarchy. These groups included professional associations organized along occupational lines and rank (drummers, druggists, money-changers, sardine-sellers, butchers, bakers), associations along lines



of identity (blind men, emancipated slaves), and religious groups, as well as whole villages and individual neighborhoods. At the upper end of the social hierarchy, new powerful groups emerged, ranging from pasha-led dynasties (such as those of Ali of Ioannina and Mehmed Ali of Egypt) and provincial households (the Karaosmanoğlus and the Çapanoğlus of Anatolia, the 'Azms of Damascus) to smaller-scale valley lords (*derebeys*) and landowning clans.

The behavior of these corporate groups varied depending on the kind of power they had. Powerful dynasties and households created a “new order of notables” who were “servicers” and contractors of the empire, rather than its “servants.” (Yaycıoğlu 2016) From Albania to Anatolia, from Bosnia to Baghdad, each region produced its own local strongmen who differed from their predecessors by their successful insinuation into governance structures, making them legitimate “partners of empire.” (Yaycıoğlu 2016) Less powerful corporations and groups undertook collective oaths and public vows and established neighborhood endowments at village levels to meet collective expenses and tax obligations. Urban guilds created ways to regulate membership, including licenses to practice a craft (*gedik*). To regulate immigration into Istanbul, the government imposed guarantorship (*kefālet*) duties on neighborhood communities, which facilitated the integration of newcomers but also consolidated group identities. (Morita 2016) As corporate groups congealed, social differentiation among them increased and acquired more diverse stakes, creating more contentious publics.

As more and more taxpaying subjects participated in the local work of delegated governance, this experience engendered new expectations of subjects' relationship with imperial authorities, prefiguring the local councils of the Tanzimat era (1840s–1870s) as well as the shift from an exclusive government postal system to a public postal service. In other words, the Tanzimat era of reform, so often presented as a westernizing, modernizing rupture from the preceding period, may also be seen as simply a new phase in the development of thickening governance in the Ottoman Empire.

(References to be added upon acceptance of paper, which will be revised)