Civil Society in the Ottoman Empire

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Abstract. An inquiry into the historical background of the Ottoman society reveals early seeds of, or several elements that could form a basis for, civil society in the Ottoman empire. The civil societal elements were important entities until at least the nineteenth century, even though they were not fully developed independently of the state, that is, they did not fully function on a basis of autonomy built upon their own norms and values. Accordingly, *sui generis* social categories such as the community system, *ulama,* guilds*,* and *ayan* taken together formed a distinctive reservoir for civil society. To correctly understand the ebb-and-flow development of civil society in Turkey up to the present this paper constructs a multi-faceted picture of the historical background and early seeds of civil society in the Ottoman Turkey.

1. Introduction

In 1999 Turkey celebrated the seven hundredth anniversary of the foundation of the Ottoman Empire with great enthusiasm. Such enthusiasm, which is still prevalent among the Turkish people at large, takes its sentimental incentive from the very concept of state historically established by the Ottoman Empire as well as from the multicultural structure this state embodied. Indeed, the "state"

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itself was not only one of the most distinguished concepts but also almost unanimously a highly revered entity in the political culture of Ottoman Turkish society. Notwithstanding this political cultural pattern, which could still be observed in several strata within the society in the early 1980s, the Turkish people have started to discuss the concept of "civil society." Thus, two main concepts that are widely discussed and mentioned currently in Turkey are the "state," which has a deep historical background, and "civil society," which has developed parallel to the steps Turkey has made through the liberal politics during the post-1980 period.

Actually, the true development of civil society first became visible during the so-called first economic and then political liberalization efforts under the Özal governments (1983-1991), which followed the military regime in 1980-1983. Nonetheless, the grounding and initial institutionalization of civil society in Turkey certainly involved an historical background upon which its recent advancement can be founded. In this respect, in order to foresee the future of civil society in Turkey, we need to examine its historical background. To what extent is a civil society possible considering the above-mentioned perception and structure of the "state", which is still so influential in modern Turkey? This question can only be answered by drawing a picture of civil society in the Ottoman Empire.

It is the main aim of this article to produce a satisfying answer to that question, through an elaboration of the historical background and early seeds of civil society in the Ottoman Turkey. In doing so, this article argues that although civil societal elements did develop in the Ottoman Empire, these elements did not lead to the development of a "civic" area. In fact, the civil societal elements in the Ottoman Empire functioned mainly to carry out the tasks obviously predetermined and defined for themselves by the state in Ottoman provinces.

2. The Structure of the Central Authority in the Ottoman Empire

As a bureaucratic state, the most noticeable characteristic of the Ottoman Empire was the distance between the center and the periphery. The government's independence from its environment, and in this sense, its autonomy, created the original organization and structuring of the state. It is, indeed, difficult to see the intermediary institutions between the "center," the state authority, and the "periphery," the "common people" as defined by Hegel.

There was no field of activity independent of the central authority, or any civil societal unit that had private ownership rights as those in Western Europe. The Ottoman Empire was based on a central authority comprised of loyal servants who were trained according to the norms of the state. These norms were mostly *sui generis* ones. Although they were based on the culture and values of the society to some extent, their basic characteristic accorded with the original norms of the state. For that reason, the relation between the state and the society was not based on any "agreement" or "convention," but on the principle of dominance by the state over the society.

In the political structuring process of Western Europe, there were many eminently powerful classes that had their own values, norms and interests contrary to those of the king. The nobles and initiators who belonged to those classes struggled to achieve the priorities and preferences of their own class on a legal basis. For example, countless nobles who were absolutely obeyed and loved by their subjects surrounded the French sovereignty. Each noble had the right to rule in his own region on the condition that he did not pose a threat to the authority of the king. This was, in the main, the major political structure in the medieval Europe. In contrast, the Ottoman Empire had a mixed political structure based on the unity of the state and society in its early periods (especially until the sixteenth century). The Sultan, who had the ultimate power, was the "*zillullah-i fil âlem*" (the shadow of God on earth) (Güneş, 1983: 93-94). The state itself was the power source that formed lifestyle preferences, expectations, and priorities. The state was able to control economic life due to the lack of social classes with specific privileges and the absence of autonomous cities formed on the basis of the right to property, features possessed by the social classes in Western Europe (Sunar, 1973: 60-61).

Undoubtedly, the most important medium of production in the empire was the land, which was, in fact, owned by the Sultan in the name of God. The land was distributed among the people in the form of *has*, *tımar* or *zeamet* in return for taxes paid by the holders to the state. The cavalry soldier (*sipahi)*, a member of the military, was in charge of the management of the land in the name of the state. The duties of this class were to collect taxes from the peasants and to provide soldiers (*cebeli*) to the state, especially in times of war. As a result of these duties, cavalry soldiers were a part of the government as a military class. The peasants (*reaya*) had the right to use the land, but they did not decide what to grow on the land (İnalcık, 1990). As with all economic activities, production in this field was done according to the priorities defined

by the government. In that sense, production was not a commercial enterprise targeted for the market, but for usage. This resulted in an incomplete agricultural productivity that still continues today and that has hindered the formation of a commercial class based on agriculture or the possibility of such a class being an independent power source against the government. This historical background explains why Turkey has lower agricultural production than that in any European country, even those having only one tenth of the land of Turkey. The Sultan and the administrative class did not form a class dependent on production, but a class that had the right to utilize it. Consequently, the relation of the Sultan to the administrative class and society was formed on a principle of loyalty and devotion, rather than on a principle of production, and this reinforced the position of the Sultan (Küçükömer, 1989: 39).

Although the state was actively involved in economic life, the motives of its actions were not purely economic, but rather for the purpose of satisfying the needs and priorities of the government. Particularly before the nineteenth century, the economy was closely related to political, religious, military, and administrative needs, and this situation impeded the development of an economic life independent of the state. The bureaucrats who had no direct relation to the economy made and enforced economic decisions. As a matter of fact, such bureaucrats as the *Kazasker* (Chief Military Judge)*, Qadi* (Judge of Islamic Law)*, Defterdar* (Minister of Finance)*, Darphane Nazırı* (Minister of the Mint)*, Gümrük Emiri* (Customs Director)*,* and *Divan Beylikçisi* (Divan Chancery Head), who were in charge of areas other than the economy, determined and organized economic activities. To some extent, economic life was regarded as a by-product of bureaucratic activities. In consequence, economic life developed within the body of the state and market-based non-governmental economic groups could not flourish (Genç, 1988-89).

Until the sixteenth century, the position of the Sultan was perceived as identical to the state itself. After the sixteenth century, it seems that the Sultan gradually became a puppet in the hands of the army, civil and religious bureaucracy, and some cliques in the court. His charisma faded and the bureaucratic elite gained a degree of prominence. After that, the state itself became responsible for maintaining order, and the Sultan became a symbol representing the state (Heper, 1985: 35). Thus, the concept of *Örf-i Sultani* (Tradition of the Sultan) gradually developed and became an institution. In essence, *Örf-i Sultani* indicated that the will and orders of the Sultan had a secular aspect. In this sense, the orders and laws that were put into effect were not the consequence of the Sultan personally, but the consequences of current

conditions and rationality. This resulted in the formation of the *adap* (manners) tradition that was essentially secular and state-based in the Ottoman Empire.

A strict centralist bureaucratic tradition developed with the institutionalization of the state. Within this tradition, there was no tolerance for any power group that could oppose the center. The most powerful and unique institution in the Ottoman Empire, in addition to the army, was no doubt the bureaucracy. This was comprised of the children of Ottoman minorities, who were gathered together, converted and educated. The education and the tendencies of these groups were fully determined by state-based norms (Mardin, 1973: 169). The bureaucratic administration, which consisted mostly of these converted people, regulated and controlled the economy and had absolute domination over almost all areas in society. With the centralist bureaucracy, the state began to interfere with commercial and industrial activities by establishing an absolute *patronage* system in the sixteenth century. This interference, in addition to the agricultural sector, reached even to the foreign merchants, especially during times of financial trouble (Sunar, 1974: 20). This bureaucratic group totally isolated itself from the public and promoted *sui generis* and secular values in the last centuries of the empire. The absence of social classes like the industrial bourgeoisie that appeared during the process of the industrial revolution in Europe, enabled the bureaucratic tradition in the Ottoman Empire to become the supreme ruling political power. With the deterioration of the empire, the bureaucracy set up a social reformation project based on Western institutions and acted as its initiator. Thus, the state (bureaucracy) became an all-powerful institution. This prevented the formation of classes, such as an aristocracy and bourgeoisie, that are the basic elements of civil society in Western Europe, and thus impeded the limitation of the state by such classes from above and below.

3. Political Culture in the Ottoman Empire

Ottoman political culture did not form the basis of civil society. This political culture always took a hostile approach towards the phenomenon of opposition. The Turks had organic approaches to society and government, and easily adopted solidarist doctrines. No political, cultural or ideological opposition could be legalized or institutionalized as had happened in Western European history. As the political structuring was based on a centralist ground even before the Ottomans, any group having the potential to form an opposition was defined as perverted, and was ostracized. This political attitude of the Turks

was reinforced with the adoption of Islam. The concept of unity in Islam had the effect of cementing this concentration of unopposed political power. In the struggles of sovereignty that occurred in the early periods of Turkish history, the classes that lost sovereignty lost their legacies as well. We can see the reflection of this same tendency in the social and cultural dispositions of the Turks today. As a matter of fact, as the traditions of the Sunni Muslims gained popularity, other religious denominations were defined as anti-Islamic and excluded.

The same cultural disposition was also common among Ottoman subjects. There was no ground on which any social opposition could be based, since the unity of government and society was reinforced by the classless structure of Ottoman society, and the four-way balance between the *saray* (the palace), the *babıali* (bureaucracy), the *ulema* (Islamic clergy) and the *sipahi* (soldiers). In the same manner, the ruling class that held political power in the Ottoman Empire legally prevented the opposition from flourishing. Representing the spiritual and worldly authority as the wardens of public order, the Sultans regarded any action or formation against them as illegal. They constantly accused their opponents of rebellion, treason and schism. Until the nineteenth century, the line distinguishing opposition from treason was undefined in the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman political culture did not legalize or tolerate the concept of opposition until the last half of the nineteenth century. On the contrary, obedience to the political authority or *ulu'l-emr* (the rulers) was accepted as a religious duty (Eryılmaz, 1993). The ostracized groups are still used as symbols in curses and insults today. For example, such words as "*kitapsız*" (bookless/pagan), "*imansız*" (infidel), "*harici*" (foreigner) and "*rafizi*" (heretic), etc., are common curses used in the Turkish language, especially in the rural areas. This is a contemporary reflection of the historical ostracizing mechanism.

Another important characteristic of the Ottoman political culture was that it was not developed on market-based values, but on status-oriented values. This was a natural outcome of the centralist bureaucratic political structuring. The lack of sufficiently developed economic classes led the Ottoman subjects towards obtaining position and status within the state. The deficiency of a commercial and industrial middle class like that of Western Europe caused economy-based values to be of secondary importance (Özbudun, 1989: 7). Undoubtedly, the centralist authority had a significant role in the formation of this disposition. The interference of the centralist authority in economic activities has not only impeded the development of capitalism-based production but also prevented formation of autonomous economic groups. In such circumstances as plow spoiling (*çift bozma*), which is an indicator of social

reaction, the centralist political power immediately got things under control and employed great numbers of people in the bureaucracy (Akdağ, 1974: 457ff.). This policy became a persistent malady in the Ottoman-Turkish political tradition. One of the underlying factors of prestige-based cultural values is that the only employment opportunity for people in the educated group in the Ottoman Empire was an official position. In short, the cultural values in the Ottoman Empire remained dependent on the prestige obtained under the body of the centralist political power; hence there was no well-established economic market or classes, and as such, the government was transcendental and all-encompassing. This obviously reinforced the central system, and in return, weakened the cultural area of civil society.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of the Ottoman Empire was that it was composed of two opposing cultural units. Şerif Mardin labels these "palace" and "rural" culture (1969: 270). This cultural dichotomy formed a basis for the division of the Ottoman political system into two different specific areas: the *center* and the *periphery*. The *center* here indicates "groups or persons that support or maintain the autonomy and superiority of the government in the political structure," as defined by Metin Heper (1980: 85). On the other hand, the *periphery* indicates all of the citizens and groups who live in the rural area. The rural culture came to a standstill in the Ottoman Empire, since it did not have any specific identity. As Mardin states (1969: 273-74), "neither the noblemen, nor the artisans could produce a literary form which would transform the rural culture and sub-units of that culture. However, the novel, which is developed as a new form of art in the West, was generated as a result of the use and transformation of local cultural resources."

Being unable to adapt themselves to city life, the nomadic clans could not integrate with the culture developed in the Ottoman cities either. The term "*medeniyet*" (*civilization* or *city-dwelling*) was used for the Ottoman ruling class. In contrast, the term "*Turk*" contemptuously referred to nomads. The centralist bureaucrats, the army, the literati which existed in big cities, and the *ulama* who settled into the civil bureaucracy, already regarded themselves as high and mighty, above the nomads or semi-settled nomads (Mardin, 1969: 270-71). This cultural division was a conspicuous legacy the Ottomans inherited from the previous generation, the Seljukids. There was a very sharp distinction between central and rural culture in the Seljukid Empire. The sub-units of the rural culture had never been able to reach the center. The most important impediment was the language used. While Turkish was the common spoken

language in the rural areas, Persian was the official language of that State (Güneş, 1983: 101). In Ottoman times as well, the Persian language was the prime indicator of palace culture.

The community system in the Ottoman Empire provided a considerable opportunity for non-Muslim minorities to develop their own languages and values. These minorities have always been an important link between the Turks and the Western world. They contributed a far-reaching historical dynamic in Turkish history, both by their own cultural values and by bringing Western life and institutions into the Ottoman Empire, especially via the economic relations they established with the West. Modernization efforts in the Ottoman Empire helped the minorities to develop unity and their own values.[1] However, the same efforts affected the Muslim population in the opposite way and sharpened the distinction between the center and the periphery. The ruling class who took Paris and Florence as its basic model was in opposition to the illiterate group who insisted on their own cultural values. As Mardin states (1969: 274), this was in fact the distinction between the French and Islamic cultures. French culture was the victorious one, thus there emerged the necessity to change and educate the society with its Islamic values in the direction of modern institutions. That process apparently reinforced the dominance of the central political power, and weakened the rural culture, which was the most important, yet faintest element of the Ottoman civil culture.

Another characteristic of Ottoman political culture that impeded the flourishing of civil society was the priority that was given to collectivism rather than individualism. In Ottoman times individualism meant perversity, and an extravagant sensitivity against individualism developed at state level and sub-units thereof (Vergin, 1981: 37). The concept of "*nizam-i alem*" (the order of the universe), which sought to maintain the existence and unity of the state, overruled all rights of diversity, freedom, and even life. In fact, the Sultans even went as far as executing their brothers in order to fulfil this aim. The Fatih Code accepted the murder of brothers as lawful in order to maintain the

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[1] The history of Westernization in Turkey is admittedly extended back to the period of the Tanzimat. This is a misleading argument, brought about by the assumption that Westernization and modernization are the same. The history of Westernization could date even back to the migration of Turks to Anatolia. One of the mediating institutions that maintained this was the minorities, who provided a means of building up a relation with Western commercial goods. See Lewis (1968: 43).

existence of the state, and thus, a considerable number of sons of the Sultans lost their lives at a young age (İnalcık, 1959).

In this aspect, Ottoman culture was under the influence of Eastern societies that regarded collectivism as more important than individualism. Ottoman subjects were called *reaya*, which literally means a flock needing to be guided by a shepherd (Güneş, 1983: 71). The individual had no importance or value in the *reaya* category. As a matter of fact, in most Eastern cultures, including Ottoman culture, folk literature is full of epic narratives of kings, heroes, sultans and states. In reality, Islam respected human dignity more than Christianity or Western cultures did. However, a concept of the individual that stressed personal life was of secondary importance in the collective and religious community cultures of Islamic societies (Mardin, 1980: 23). Furthermore, there was an absence of intermediary institutions between the government and the individual and consequently, the ruling elite, in its modernization attempts, produced transformative projects for the entire society, taking their own values as a basis with a Jacobinian attitude (Akat, 1983: 10-11). Heper (1985) claims that typologies such as liberalism or authoritarianism are insufficient in analyzing Turkish society with regard to the position of the state in Ottoman political culture. Therefore, he uses *transcendentalism* as an analytical concept. This means that the state is developed above all private initiatives, interests, structures, enterprises and entities. This fact must be taken into consideration in studying Ottoman society.

The diverse characteristics of the Ottoman political culture discussed above combined to curtail the development of civil societal elements. Undoubtedly, political culture is the most crucial factor that underlies the political system of a civil society whether based on democracy, authoritarianism or monarchy. The political culture solely determines the institutions that each society generates throughout its history. Different political cultures have created great diversities among the modern institutions and even democracies in Western European countries. The political culture in the historical background of European societies underlies the contemporary democratic institutions that play a significant role in state-society relations. In the case of Turkey, the Ottoman political culture built a continuing tradition of a weak and underdeveloped civil society.

4. Dependent Elements of Civil Society in Ottoman Empire

The units that formed civil society in the Ottoman Empire were dependent on the center. This dependency was derived from economic, cultural, and administrative bases. In Ottoman history, there are no civil societal elements that have relative autonomy and integrity within their own value system as are found in West European political history. It is possible to come across such elements in Ottoman society, but none of them were able to develop their own norms, principles or relations as a result of their position associated with the central government. Various civil societal elements acted almost as branches of the official authority.

Ottoman cities did not provide the necessary conditions to bring forth a powerful civil society due to their structure and the fact of their formation by the central authority. Ottoman cities were basically the centers of bureaucracy and the army. These cities were not formed by industrial and commercial dynamics, but rather the central administration determined their status as states *(eyalet)*, provincial subdivisions *(sancak)*, provinces (*vilayet*) and so on (Faroqhi, 1993: *passim*). In fact, the Arabs were the main influence on the structure of Ottoman cities. In the Omayyad and Abbassid States before the Ottomans, cities were where the central administrative units gathered. Cities such as Baghdad, Aleppo and Damascus were the central cities of these administrations. Ira Lapidus (1969) explicates that, before the Ottoman Empire, there were four main groups in Arab-Islamic cities: ordinary citizens, tradesmen and artisan groups, religious communities and ministers, and high officials. Among these, ordinary citizens and the tradesmen and artisan groups belonged only to one city, while the religious communities, and the ministers and high officials were active in more than one city. However, none of these groups were defined according to the places in which they dwelled. In contrast, the citizens of the Ancient Greek city-states or the subjects of Medieval European communes were named after the region in which they lived. Thus, Athens was identified with the Athenians, Sparta was identified with the Spartans and Ephesus with the Ephesians. However, the Ottoman cities were marked by nothing more than a definition based on an ancestral relationship such as being Ottomans.

By taking Manchester City in the United Kingdom as a contrasting example, we can discern remarkable differences. Manchester developed with the construction of factories after the Industrial Revolution. These factories attracted peasants and workers from around the region. The structure and norms of the city were built up by the social classes, which emerged in relation to production. In urban sociology two cities are used as examples of the two

main city typologies: Manchester, for cities that developed due to industrialization, and Calcutta, India, for cities that developed due to governmental administration. Calcutta rapidly developed after it became the center of the governmental administration of India in 1950. The city, which had been only an ordinary city before then, became the second largest city in India, and the eleventh largest in the world (Worsley, 1977: 382). In addition to being a governmental city, Calcutta is a center of commercial activity. In the Turkish context, Ankara, the capital of the Republican central government, serves as a vivid contrast. Ankara developed as a city where the entirety of the central government is located, not as a city dependent on production. Thus it became the second largest city of Turkey and a center of consumption. The administrative units of the political government are settled in this city, which is colloquially called "Ankara, the city of officers." In essence, these units do not produce anything that has an economic value, except service. Also, it is clear that the service produced is quite unproductive and this has caused great disorganization in the Turkish economy. Istanbul, which stands as the center of production in Turkey today, had virtually the same status during the Ottoman period that Ankara has attained during the Republic. The government officers employed in the administrative units of Ottoman Istanbul did not contribute to production, but instead lived on favors distributed by the government. In contrast, in the 1770s, Manchester flourished as the prototype of an industrial city where economic dynamics and social classes are both located (Worsley, 1977: 385). It is clear that such a city would have an influence on the government and hold more sway with the government by its nature. Consequently, the cultural values and norms formed there would surpass the models imposed by the central authority.

Halil İnalcık states (1964a: 42-45) that there were basically four main social groups widely dispersed among the original Ottoman cities. These were the *masters of pen and sword* (the bureaucracy and the army) who constituted the ruling class, and the farmers and tax officers, who were not included in that class. The status of each group was for the most part determined by the state. Towards the last decades of the Ottoman Empire, another four identifiable groups gained political importance. These can be distinguished as the bureaucracy, the military and religious institutions, and the judiciary. However, none of these groups depended on production within the city and, thus, they could not build for themselves an autonomous identity against the state. Complicating this situation was the fact that the religious institution, the most widespread one among all the institutions in Ottoman times, with its source and

support from the public, also played judicial, administrative, and educational roles in the government (Frey, 1975: 45). In short, the structure of the cities and their position with respect to the central government did not provide the necessary ground for civil societal elements to flourish.

In the Ottoman Empire, non-Muslim minorities predominantly carried out economic activities, mainly trade. These minorities lived on the principle of the *community* system in the Ottoman Empire. The community system, though a civil societal element, depended on the state. The leaders of the religious communities had close relations with the state and acted as administrators in the administrative positions in their communities (Heper, 1991: 16-17). With regard to its multi-legal system, the Ottoman Empire presents a *sui generis* typology of civil society. In terms of civil societal elements, the Ottoman Empire was a remarkable example. The community system had a "pluralist" character in essence. This system was formed purely on the basis of religious, not ethnic origins. For instance, the Ottoman Armenians were divided into two communities as "Armenian Catholics" and "Armenian Protestants," although they had the same ethnic origin and spoke the same language. These communities were defined by their own laws and were directed by religious leaders who were responsible to the central government for the payment of taxes and fees and maintaining domestic security. Meanwhile, each community had some social and administrative duties still within the working authority of the central government. However, these societies resolved intra-communal issues in their community councils (*meclis-i milli*) without outside interference.

The Ottoman community system (Ortaylı, 1985: *passim*) in the provinces was organized by the spiritual leaders of the community, who were named "*millet başı*" (the head of community). Also in rural areas, the village council chose the "*kocabaşı*," which is a position equivalent to the "village head" today. The *kocabaşı* was in charge of fulfilling the responsibilities for the benefit of the village community. This system began to dissolve with the proclamation of the Reform Edict (*Islahat Fermani*) in 1856. Religious organizations became meaningless as the Reform Edict proclaimed that all citizens were regarded as equal. By that date, the community concept became independent of religion, and began to be delineated by ethnic origin. This, in fact, coincided with the emergence of Ottoman and Turkish nationalism. Before that time, the community system, which had an autonomous status in essence, constituted an element of civil society in the Ottoman Empire with regard to its organizational structure. However, with regard to its functioning, the community system in fact fulfilled the duties of the government, especially in provincial administrative and educational fields.   The heads of the

communities, as the leaders, had a vertical relationship with the central government and this allowed the autonomous civil societal bodies to be dependent.

Similar to the Ottoman community system were the Ottoman guilds (*lonca*). The guilds functioned as an important bridge between the tradesmen and the central government. The guilds emerged as institutions that encouraged co-operation in production and marketing in Anatolia. Over time, they also undertook such tasks as increasing production quality, training qualified personnel, giving mastery certificates to trained personnel, improving and controlling business and trade ethics, protecting workers and distributing produced goods to the consumers with minimum cost. Integrating with the *Akhi* (Islamic brotherhood) tradition in the fifteenth century, the guilds were directed by a specific council, which had the authority to apply punishment. If the council decided that a tradesman was guilty of breaking its rules, the guild administration could punish him with flogging or shutting down his business (Özdemir, 1988: 403). The guilds functioned as a branch of the central government throughout Anatolia until they were closed in 1913.

The guild members elected the head of guilds (*kethuda* or *sheikh*). When we consider this aspect of the guilds, it is possible to regard them as an example of a civil institution. Nonetheless, when it comes to considering their vertical relationship with the central government, it is more difficult to draw this conclusion. Although the artisan members elected the head of the guilds, the ratification of this choice was completely dependent on the imperial edicts of the central government. The status of the head of guilds was recognized only on the condition that the Istanbul government gave its consent (Özdemir, 1988: 403). Moreover, the guilds were in charge of collecting taxes and controlling the price and quality of production (Sunar, 1974: 20). Thus, in essence the guilds represented the state, performing an administrative function between the government and the Anatolian artisans and tradesmen. So, while one part of the Ottoman guilds was tilted towards civil society, the other dominant part remained attached to the government.

Apart from agriculture, the Ottoman economy was dependent on trade. Silk was the most important merchandise of Ottoman trade and it was the main commercial goods traded by the merchant groups. Bursa, which was famous for silk production, was an important place for merchants of the East and West, who frequently visited to conduct commerce. Other commercial goods were

exchanged for silk in Bursa, and many other goods (gold, silver, tiles, etc.) were traded in addition to silk. There was a prosperous merchant group involved in the trade of these goods, but they were foreigners, not natives (Mantran, 1982: 135). Persian merchants carried out the commercial activities of the Ottoman Empire with the East, while merchants from Venice and Florence carried out the trade with the West (İnalcık, 1993: 197). As a result, no powerful merchant class was able to arise from among the Ottoman subjects. The Ottoman subjects who were involved in trade were mostly non-Muslims. The merchant section was never able to form a power source that directed and changed the social life, in contrast to the mercantilist class in Western Europe.

In the Ottoman Empire, the religious institutions could not stand as a serious power source against the government either, although they constituted in essence a civil societal element. Theologically, Islam does not make sharp a distinction between state and religion. However, neither does it propose a standard governmental institution, nor suggest that the administrative class be comprised of people of religious identities (Bulaç, 1993). The organization of the religious institutions in the Ottoman political structure was not very different than that of the Directorate of Religious Affairs today, which is totally dependent on the government. The position of the Sultan at the top of the political structure was additionally reinforced by Islamic norms. The "Sultan Tradition" could not be limited by Islamic rules in Ottoman law. The Sultan was the only person to appoint or discharge the *Sheikhulislam,* who was the head of the religious organization. Also, the *Sheikhulislam* was not authorized to interfere with governmental affairs. The form of religious organization in the Ottoman Empire was chiefly influenced by the Byzantine system, which made the Orthodox Church an institution dependent on the body of the government. Religious organization was headed by the *Sheikhulislam*, who was completely dependent on the government and operating within its authority.[2]

As the government in the Ottoman Empire decided the status, appointment and post of the *ulama*, the *ulama* became a symbol of loyalty and fidelity to the government. The central administration did not discharge the *ulama* on the condition that it recognized the legality of the regime and engineered the public to obey it. The *ulama* played an important role in helping the public to recognize the legality of the political system (Sunar, 1974: 19) because they were the most widespread and influential representatives of the Istanbul government in each province. As the judges, or *qadis*, belonged to this

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[2] For an original and detailed study on the form of religious organization in the Ottoman Empire see Dursun (1989).

circle, the *ulama* were in a direct dialogue with the public. As the interpreters of religious and legal norms, the *ulama* were more important than the other groups in relation to the public.[3]

The *ulama* constituted a common branch of the government in two respects: they collected certain taxes and organized educational activities. The members of the *ulama* also happened to be members of the boards of directors of the *vaqfs* (religious foundations), which were common in the Ottoman Empire.[4] As a result of this position, they were the tax collectors as well. In addition, this group was responsible for the education of the citizens within the *madrasa* (Muslim theological school) system. The *madrasa* trained people for religious bureaucracy, while also training staff for the central government, according to the state norms within the system of customs and observances. The Sultans made considerable contributions to the construction of Ottoman *vaqfs*. As the Sultans and their relatives financed mosques, places of worship (*mesjid*), dervish lodges (*tekke*) and dervish monasteries (*hankah*), the relationship between the religious institutions and the state was reinforced. This intimacy between the state and religious institutions brought the religious institutions under the absolute control of the state. In Western European history, in contrast, the Church created an aristocratic class above the state in the kingdoms, and later in the nation-states, where the Catholic Church was organized. This class at the same time controlled the state from above, limited its actions and thus became an important element of civil society.[5] Even after it lost its influence on the state, the Church continued to be a civil societal element with economic and organizational sources independent of the state. However, in the Ottoman tradition, religion never became an institution that limited the state or was truly independent from the state. On the contrary, it constituted a civil cultural code, which in essence supported the state and existed under its protection.

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[3] The position of the *ulama* under the Ottoman bodypolitic always put them in a position of legitimizing the official policies. Thus, the *ulama* undertook the same mission in the first years of the Republic and legitimized the official policies of Republican ideology. For a detailed discussion on the subject, see Bilici (1990).

[4] For a related and detailed analysis of the role of religious foundations in Ottoman Empire see, *inter alia*, Çizakça (2000).

[5] At this point, for a note-worthy comparison between Germany and Turkey with regards to this subject, see Heper (1992).

In the Ottoman Empire, the notables in the provinces also constituted an important civil societal element dependent on the state. The *ayan* (landlords) (Özkaya, 1977) emerged spontaneously in the process of dissolution of the *tımar* (Ottoman land) system and became an important power source against the central government especially in the early nineteenth century. In the late seventeenth century, the *tımar* system collapsed and the governors of states and *sanjaks* were assisted by wealthy and respectable people in such works as: acting as an initiator in the relations between citizens and the government, maintaining security, collecting taxes and sending soldiers to war. This group, known as the "provincial notables," became richer by obtaining land and revenue as the generations passed. In the last half of the eighteenth century, when the influence of this group eclipsed that of the local governors, the central government gave the town and village notables an official status between the state and the public. This group, named the *ayan*, or "the favorite," was elected by the public of the region and appointed by the central government. The *ayan* gradually became richer; some of them had over twenty to thirty thousand household guards under their order. They became so powerful that the people began to call them "crownless sultans" (*sikkesiz sultan*) or "little sultans." When their power began to threaten that of the central authority, Sultan Mahmud II began a campaign against them and thereafter their power decreased. Although they were an important source of power that rivaled the central authority, the *ayan* actually performed the duties that their positions represented in the official authority. Their *raison d'être* was to collect taxes and recruit soldiers from among the public. They existed as long as they carried out these tasks, which were in essence duties of the central government. When they went beyond these tasks, their activities were forbidden (Kuran, 1990). As a result, this group, which belonged to the public in origin, could not form an autonomous body against the state, unlike the feudal lords in Western Europe.

In theory, such intermediary institutions as cities, guilds, religious institutions, and local 'notables' were important units of mediation between the state and society, and thus contained civil societal elements. In practice, they provided only a vague potential for civil society within the Ottoman socio-political order. Accordingly, though these institutions focused on society in respect to their origins, they became institutions dependent on the state with regard to the functions they carried out. Their common characteristic was the performance of various common functions of the central government, such as tax collection, education and maintaining the obedience of the people to the political power. The democratic fundamentals observed in the case of Western Europe, such as humanism, parliamentarianism and liberalism, could not flourish in the Ottoman Empire, because the intermediary institutions were

dependent on the state, and because a European-style bourgeoisie and aristocracy were lacking.

5. Modernization Attempts in the Ottoman Empire

Nineteenth century Ottoman history corresponds to the attempts of the state elite to modernize the Ottoman Empire. The Ottomans were aware of the backwardness of their institutions, which had begun approximately two hundred years before. By the nineteenth century, the Ottoman ruling elite started to change the face of governmental institutions in the direction of Western institutions. Ottoman institutions could no longer compete with the Western world due to Western improvements in science, economy, industry and technology. Because commercial dynamics increasingly shifted to the world's oceans from the Mediterranean Sea from the sixteenth century onwards, the Ottoman State was concomitantly shifted to a peripheral position in the world economic system, whose center was to become occupied by European countries by the nineteenth century.[6]

Economic retrogression caused other Ottoman institutions to decline as well. As a result, military, governmental, judiciary and educational institutions were transformed or modernized. In the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire, modernization was entirely identified with being Western. The rapid developments in Europe and the new institutions presented to human history caused the Ottoman elite to look to the West in their efforts for modernization. They hoped to bring the Ottoman State out of its underdeveloped situation. The major vehicle for modernization was not the civil societal institutions, but the state itself, and those who undertook this task were none other than the state elite. There was a very distinctive progress in state-(civil) society relations in the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. Before then, the unity of the state and its citizens had been the basic principle for the Sultan, and he represented this unity, building up the state as a medium that encircled the civil societal institutions, in Hegelian terms. However, in the nineteenth century a sharp divergence appeared between the state and the aims of the society. This divergence was created by the bureaucratic elite, who regarded the state as the

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[6] For a comprehensive discussion on this peripheral position of the Ottomans in the world economic system, see Keyder (1983).

medium of modernization, while they considered the society its object. In this process, the state became an institution transforming the society, initiated by that group who defined themselves as the symbol of modernization. Those who opposed this process were labeled as ignorant, reactionary and against progress, and were ostracized (İnsel and Aktar, 1987: 22).

The nineteenth century also witnessed the emergence of the state elite as the initiator of progress in fields like economy, culture, and politics. Thus the roles of the civil societal elements of the classical Ottoman period were reversed. Ottoman civil society placed groups in front of the theatre curtain while the state was found behind. The civil society elements were seemingly important in terms of their existence, but functionally they served the state. The state elite began to import modern institutions to the Ottoman state in this period. A specific example of this is the order of Sultan Selim III to build the Empire's first factory (Küçükömer, 1989: 61). The role of Selim III as an initiator in that respect started a tradition that still continues: higher representatives of the state cut the ribbon in ceremonies for the laying of a foundation or the opening of a factory in Turkey even today. This at the same time reflects a structural aspect of Turkey, indicating that it is still an extension of the nineteenth century Ottoman Empire, which regarded the state as the initiator in its relations with the society.

The modernization attempts of the state elite constituted an important point in the Ottoman center-periphery relations. Some social groups reacted to the attempts of the state in this direction and attempted to maintain their traditional roles. The *ulama, ayan*, and especially the *janissaries* refused the attempts of Selim III to establish an army independent of the *janissaries*. The *ayan* went so far as dethroning Selim III and replacing him with their candidate Sultan Mahmud II. As is historically well known, the Ayan of Ruschuk, Alemdar Mustafa Pasha, came to Istanbul, took hold of the government and declared Mahmud II the new Sultan in 1808. He then invited the leading *ayan* to Istanbul to sign a document named *Sened-i İttifak* (The Document of Agreement) with the state. According to this agreement, the government would not interfere with the *ayan* on the condition that they remain loyal to the state and not become involved in any rebellion (Bianchi, 1984: 89). The fact that the *ayan* gained such manipulative power over the state as a civil societal element indicates the extent of the power of civil society in the Ottoman Empire. In fact, it is possible to regard the nineteenth century as a period in which Ottoman civil society showed significant rejuvenation. In addition to the *ayan,* the *ulama* and various economic groups made significant contributions to the vivacity of civil society in that period with the establishment of new bankers and legal

regulations which benefitted societal elements. With reference to these developments, Mardin (1987) points to the visibility of a civil society and suggests that it is possible to use the concept of civil society as an analytic tool in studies of the Ottoman political structure.

However, we must not exaggerate the success of civil societal elements in the nineteenth century, since the centralist political government has always been the victorious party in the long run against groups like the *ayan, ulama, janissaries,* etc. The modernization process itself provided the conditions for the dominance of political power and civil society gradually lost its vivacity with the intellectual-bureaucratic group coming into power. Upon the declaration of the Turkish Republic, the civil societal elements that existed in the Ottoman Empire left the scene until at least 1950, to the benefit of the centralist bureaucratic government.

Though he came to power with the help of the *ayan,* Mahmud II overcame the resistance of the civil powers and tried to make the authority of the Sultanate supreme over the entire empire. In order to accomplish this, he tried to maintain a more centralist government and thus produced more effective policies in modernization (Chambers, 1964: 313ff). Consequently, Mahmud II continued his modernization attempts by making the process faster through state initiatives. He ignored the demands and values of civil society, giving rise to another important issue in the modernization process. Mahmud II put aside certain civil society concerns such as Islamic and nationalist values, while trying to strengthen the central authority. Nationalist values were put aside as it was thought that they would have a negative effect on the non-Turkish elements of society. On the other hand, Islamic values were no longer taken as a reference, fearing that they would weaken the commitment of non-Muslim nationalities to the Ottoman Empire. The only path left was the use of secular values. Secularism was believed to be the way to maintain unity in the heterogeneous empire. For this reason, Sultans Selim III and Mahmud II, and the *Tanzimat* reformers took secular values as their reference points (Sunar, 1974: 42). This trend continued until the sovereignty of Sultan Abdulhamid II, who aimed to maintain Islamic unity on the basis of Pan-Islamism, which later spurred the achievement of national independence in the Balkans.

Two important outcomes of nineteenth century modernization attempts concerning the issue under discussion include the gradual development of a constitutional system on the one hand and the emergence of a statist intellectual-

bureaucratic elite on the other. The modernization attempts provided the conditions for the emergence of a constitutional system on a legal basis. The administrative institutions produced with the Document of Agreement in 1808*, the Imperial Rescript of Tanzimat (*Gulhane Hatt-ı Humayunu*) in 1839, the Reform Edict (*Islahat Fermanı*) in 1856, and the first Ottoman Constitution (*Kanun-i Esasi*) in 1876, were developments entirely to the benefit of civil society.[7] Each legal reform, at least theoretically, restricted the authority of the state and increased the initiative of civil society. The relationship of civil society to the state, its responsibilities to the state and its rights against the state were achieved on legal bases built upon secular norms. These legal bases provided important improvements for civil society.[8] However, the legal reforms did not result in the expected autonomy of civil society in practice. The main reason for this was that a new type of administrative group emerged as a result of the modernization attempts and tried to restructure the state hegemony over civil society.

The most significant result of the modernization process was the new role given to journalists and intellectuals. Members of these groups, who were mainly educated through state-led modernized institutions, passing through earlier clandestine political mobilization under the so called rubric of the *Young Turks*, later formed a new bureaucratic power elite during their *Unionist* rule in the second period of *Meşrutiyet*. As a result of their elitist policies this new group enhanced the state hegemony over civil society (Köker, 1990: 12). In consequence, this group who represented the new (or modern) face of the state, in fact impeded the improvement of the law (which is a guarantor of civil society), to the detriment of civil society.

6. The Intellectual-Bureaucrat's Government in the Ottoman Empire

Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, a powerful group was formed that shaped the political system, whose legacy still exists in the Turkish

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[7] Indeed, the Tanzimat Decree, for the first time in the Ottoman history, declared that the subjects were equal before the law. This encouraged the citizens to fight for their rights. For its application and repercussions, see İnalcık (1964b).

[8] Women, who created an important movement by means of widening circulation of the press, constituted the most notable civil societal elements in that period. For the related argument see, Çaha (1995).

Republic today: the intellectual-bureaucratic group. This group regarded Westernization as an ideal project to be realized by means of the state. The most significant characteristic of this doctrine was based on the ideal of importing technical knowledge from the West. To realize this, three main policies were suggested: to bring experts from the West, to send students to the West to obtain technical knowledge and to establish educational institutions that would teach Western science (Belge, 1983: 124). Accordingly, there emerged an extensive educational network to fulfil the requirement of this policy. A widespread educational network was set up, including *rüştiye* (secondary schools) which also included women, *idadi* (high schools), *dar-ul muallimat* (schools of female teachers), and even women's universities. Education was of critical importance to Abdulhamid II. He was especially keen on the education of women, and educational institutions were founded in the most remote parts of Ottoman lands (Kodaman, 1980).

The involvement of the students who were educated in the West and returned to the Ottoman State was much significant. The basic philosophy and ideas of these students concerned bringing the Ottoman state up from its underdeveloped conditions. Since they were educated by the state, they were immediately employed in various state positions upon their return. Hence, they possessed the dual label of intellectual and bureaucrat. In contrast to the Western intellectual class, the Ottoman intellectual-bureaucratic group was not against political authority, but rather took a stance against the society as a part of the political authority. Indeed, this group was educated for the purpose of saving the state and transforming society. The transformation of society was to be guided by these intellectual-bureaucrats, but ultimately ended in failure as a result of the conflict between the social reality and the ideal society they had in their minds. The state and all its institutions was controlled and used as a subject of experiment, beginning with the Ottoman state in the nineteenth century up until 1950, the date of the liberation of social initiative in the Turkish Republic (Savaşır, 1984: 32).

Being the first organized and active group of intellectual-bureaucrats, the Young Turks basically struggled for the three ideals of a positivist rationality, a constitutional regime and a populist discourse. However, their notion of populism was based on their assumption that they knew what was best for society. Consequently, the essence of their populist discourse contained the notion of conditioning society to become the "ideal" society of their philosophy. The notion underlying this "ideal society" was simply Westernization

(Hanioğlu, 1986: 51-52). The intellectual-bureaucrats considered themselves to be the channel and symbol of transformation, the means of Ottoman modernization. Hence, they exercised an absolute power over all sections of the society and perceived the state as a tool that belonged to them. This tendency reached its peak in the first years of the Republic (Karpat, 1973a: 264). As Karpat correctly states (1973b: 49), the elitist philosophy of the intellectual-bureaucratic group, with the help of the pragmatic, utilitarian, and liberal policies of the middle class, was identical to the traditional values of religious and conservative circles, from the second half of the nineteenth century until the late 1940s. However, as the intellectual-bureaucratic group possessed the medium of political power and the power of the press, their thoughts had the opportunity to spread and the voices of their opponents were silenced.

The above situation unfortunately continued largely unchanged even after 1950. The basic institutions of the political power and most of the media are still controlled by the state elite in the 2000s. Only the middle classes and certain economic groups are effective within the political system by means of political parties, while the formation of religious and conservative groups is still not constitutional in the eyes of the intellectual-bureaucratic elite. These latter groups are stigmatized as ignorant, racist and reactionary, and they are ostracized from public life because they are insistent on their values (Yavuz, 2000: *passim*). The intellectual-bureaucratic group, which supposes it has the best social project, has built a vertical relationship with the people. Their view of the society does not go beyond the assumption that the society is ignorant, unaware, and reactionary. Hence they try to obtain absolute domination in every area of the society, and see the citizens as an ignorant mass, which must be educated.

Frederic Frey claims (1975: 43) that the main problem of Turkish politics is an elitism that enables a minority to oppress the society and still present this as legitimate. The intellectual-bureaucratic group legitimizes the oppression mechanism by referring to the ignorance of the society. Of these elitist policies, two structural characteristics might be distinguished: The first is that the state elite practically dominates the political power. Secondly, to legitimate this domination, this elite group gets people refrained by claiming they are ignorant, and thus underlines the necessity for power-wielding by themselves because of that ignorance. Such kind of despotism of the intellectual-bureaucratic minority over the whole society historically hindered the development of civil society to a great extent. In spite of improvements made in the law in the nineteenth century and even though the Ottoman Empire accepted its subjects on an equal legal basis, the social wing remained faint

against the oppression of the statist elite. The principle of equality in fact caused the society to lose its heterogeneous character. On the basis of the principle of equal rights, the state elite regarded the society as a homogeneous unity, not as a group of diverse elements as in the classical Ottoman period. The elements that did not accord with this totality were defined as "schismatic" and ostracized. The local groups that carried out the legal responsibilities of the state in the Ottoman Empire lost their influence in this system and became objects of state authority. To summarize, the state became a medium to be feared and no longer had the pragmatic characteristic it had had during the Ottoman period.

After the declaration of the second period of Constitutional Monarchy (*II. Mesrutiyet)* in 1908, the intellectual-bureaucrats completely took hold of the government. Until the first years of the Republic, the Ottoman state would become a subject of experiment in the hands of the administrators of the Union and Progress Committee, the governmental wing of the intellectual-bureaucratic section. During the same period, the "oppressive" (*ceberrut*) face of the state was more openly brought to surface and displayed for the society. With the Union and Progress government, social groups that had existed in the classical Ottoman period and acted as a mediator between the state and citizens, such as the *ulama*, guilds and *ayan*, lost their influence on the political system, and disappeared in the homogeneous social structure under the state dominance. The social groups could no longer insist on different interests or systems of values.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the historical background of the Ottoman society is full of elements that could have formed a basis for civil society. The civil societal elements were important entities at least until the nineteenth century, though they were administratively dependent on the state. It was the centralist organization form of the political government that made these elements ultimately dependent on the state. They acted as the extension of the state in the provinces, with regard to the functions (education and administration of the citizens and the collection of taxes) they carried out. This function prevented the flourishing of civil society on the basis of autonomy built upon its own norms and values. In spite of this situation, *sui generis* social categories such as

the community system, *ulama,* guilds*,* and *ayan* together formed a unique reservoir. This was rich enough to provide abundant material for some original works. And in it we see neither the almighty state nor the autonomous civil society, but a social prototype that has parts of both.

Within the modernization process of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, the civil society-state relationship changed in a remarkable way. Before the nineteenth century, the state and civil society had two areas that were interconnected yet separate. However, with the modernization efforts, the salvation of the state gained priority. As a result, this project required the changing of the society. In that period an intellectual-bureaucratic group emerged, which legalized a state attitude based on the restriction of civil society. Thus civil societal elements, which at least had had legal rights earlier, one after another lost their importance within the project of a society based on "general will." Ottoman civil society, which was based on the principle of "diversity," came to be transformed into a homogeneous society under a new dominant state understanding. The initiator of this new domination was the intellectual-bureaucratic group. The project of the intellectual-bureaucrats, in which the citizens were circumscribed by the state, forebode a situation that is still suffered in Turkey today and prevents democracy from standing on a strong social basis.

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