

KİTÂBİYAT / BOOK REVIEWS

Murat R. Şiviloğlu,

The Emergence of Public Opinion: State and Society in the Late Ottoman Empire,

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018, 319+xii pp.,
ISBN 978-110-7190-92-4.

In this remarkable endeavor of conceptual history, Murat Şiviloğlu traces the emergence and growth of public opinion in the nineteenth-century Ottoman world. Or rather say Ottoman Istanbul; as with many books with titles suggesting that they cover the entire empire, it is restricted to a view from and of the capital city. It is a timely publication not only for historians, but also for followers of politics in Turkey who know that the people in this country have gone to the polls 13 times (Istanbul residents 14 times) since 2002 and how an important political force is the changing will of the majority, especially in the local elections of 2019.

As old as the rise of human civilizations, public opinion has always exerted a powerful influence on society and politics for the sake of consensus. Şiviloğlu is also conscious of the fact that it did not suddenly appear in the nineteenth century, but existed under many ancient labels. “Chroniclers always used similar phrases to express people’s content or discontent through the centuries,” he writes, and gives the three examples of *âmme-i nâs*, *halkın lisânı*, and *ezhân-ı nâs* (p.5). But none of the terms, he argues, had the strength or intensity of the term *efkâr-ı umûmiye*, or *efkâr-ı âmme*. This term implied a significant shift from the old elitist (*havâs*) notions and their negative connotations on the common people (*avâm*) towards paying more attention to their will.

While looking for the winner of the conceptual struggle on the equivalent or correct translation of *opinion publique*, Şiviloğlu rejects previous claims that the term was invented by Şinasi. Instead, he bestows this honour onto Sadık Rifat Pasha (d. 1857), who used it for the first time “in the 1840s or 1850s” in a posthumously published pamphlet. Şiviloğlu clearly explains how Ottoman policymaking succeeded in forming a ‘cultural public sphere’ among its members, which eventually spread to other layers of society. He shows that “the Ottoman public sphere was not created, as one sees in other examples, out of a clear delimitation between the state and society, but rather out of their union, out of modernizing reforms...” (p.15). This is a conclusion bearing significant relevance for understanding modern Turkish politics.

The first chapter of the book is about the historical background of the concept. “The first public campaign”, namely the destruction of the janissaries in 1826, is under the spotlight here, along with Mahmud II’s reforms thereafter, including the publishing of an official newspaper. The 1830s are seen as a transitional period between the representative publicness of the janissaries and the realization of an Ottoman public. The following chapter is on the “bureaucratic public sphere”, which was initiated through the increasing bureaucratization of the empire, operated through the house (*konak*) gatherings and eventually acquired a political relevance. Some houses were associated with the establishment, some with the opposition, and others with poetry recitals. The third chapter, sheds light on the world of İsmail Ferruh Efendi. Trying to identify the reading habits of the Ottoman elite, this short and, as to be seen below, problematic chapter examines the estate records belonging to officials who died in the 1830s. The fourth chapter is about the schooling of the public. How perceptions on mass education changed is demonstrated with the construction of the first Ottoman university, and the emergence of new societies replacing the pasha houses in the 1860s. The fifth chapter explores the emergence of a reading public after c.1860, with the birth of private newspapers and the commodification of literature. Twenty-five pages are dedicated to the birth of a public intellectual, Namık Kemal.

The last chapter represents the overthrow of Sultan Abdülaziz in May 1876 as the apogee of public opinion as a political force in the empire. At this point, Şiviloğlu is struck by the absence of the ‘public’ in contemporary scholarly discussions, which he blames on the fetish of the historians with state archives. Although contemporaries believed the fall of the sultan was because of the ‘wrath of the public opinion’, today historians still portray it as a *coup d’état* executed by the military

and bureaucratic elite. Rather than orchestrating it, the pashas actually took action according to the political climate. They had no influence over the public agenda. As such, it clearly was the people (“nation,” in the author’s word) who deposed the sultan. This is an impressive argument. The problem here is not that the author is unconvincing; rather, it is that the argument renders the earlier chapters incoherent. While it is the will and the power of the people that is emphasized in this chapter, the rest of the book actually focuses on and empowers the role of the bureaucratic elite in imposing top-down reforms and creating the public sphere. In other words, Şiviloğlu does not seem to explain the seeming shift in terms of agency of change from the bureaucratic elite to the wider public. The rest of the book actually overemphasized the role of the bureaucracy not only in the creation of the public spheres, but also in the whole modernization story. According to him, the agent of change is the bureaucratic elite (p.133). The narrative of top-down reforms leads to a conclusion about an all-powerful bureaucracy.

There are other inconsistencies as well. The criticism of “historical ‘orientalism’, which still designates political participation as a Western phenomenon,” and his conclusion that “notions like public and public opinion were not mere imitations of Western practices but resulted from overwhelming changes” of the times are quite welcome (p.253). But then, it is hard to understand why the author was trying to bind Sadık Rifat Pasha’s first usage of the term to the external influence of Marmontel or Metternich (following Şerif Mardin’s usual claims) just because he was earlier an Ottoman ambassador to Vienna (p.9), though he knows that Rifat Pasha’s knowledge of French was poor. Şiviloğlu repeats such assertions throughout the book. He equals “modern” and “Western” governments (p.171); the Tanzimat man, for instance, “unlike his earlier counterparts, demonstrated an increasing ability to incorporate Western values and ideals” (p.86).

Şiviloğlu is an ardent critic of mainstream Ottoman historiography throughout the book. He criticizes historians who use the term ‘public opinion’ without questioning its applicability, as in the case of Leslie Pierce with reference to the 16th century Ottoman Empire (p.4). At the same time, he himself does not much bother to call Şânizâde, Kethüdâzâde, and Melekpaşazâde “liberals” (p.76), or the Ottoman public a “nation” (p.232). Furthermore, he criticizes historians who described a lack of civil society in Turkish history. But those he criticized are actually not historians: Şerif Mardin (“one of the most prolific scholars of Ottoman historiography”) is a sociologist; Ömer Çaha and Lutfullah Karaman (referred as the only names for “many historians”) are political scientists. He repeats the same

mistake when he accuses “the most erudite historians” with lack of knowledge on early newspapers and journals, but cites only one example from the same old work (the *Genesis*) of Şerif Mardin; an easy target.

Living in postsecular times, the readers would also not understand the undocumented idea that *sharia* increasingly found its sphere of influence curtailed by the expansion of the public sphere (p.15), as if the religious sphere stood apart from other layers of society. The same trouble arises when the author -understandably excludes but- automatically categorizes non-Muslim publics as “minorities” and oppositional “subaltern counterpublics” (p.19). He further thinks that, *münâzara* (debate), “was completely removed from its religious context” (p.100), whereas Islamic classifications of sciences never considered such ancient arts of argument as religious sciences, but rather parts of their toolkits (*ilm-i âlet*). The lack of precise knowledge in religious references is part of the problematic. The author addresses the print shop of *Tasvîr-i Efkâr* to be known “also known as Dârün-Nedve or House of Consultancy by contemporaries,” and adds in the footnote that “Darün-Nedve (*sic*) was something of a town hall in Mecca in the time of Muhammad” (p. 183). Şiviloğlu would have loved its symbolic meaning for a Muslim public knowledgeable about the life of the prophet: The town hall was the very meeting place of the established polytheists where decisions on killing the prophet were taken. Calling the print shop Dârünnedve was actually meant to stigmatize the journalists.

A related issue deserving some comments is his findings on the lack of copies of the Quran in the estate records of the Ottoman elite, who according to Şiviloğlu, did not read anything but *Delâilü'l-Hayrât*. This observation may mislead the reader. As İsmail Erünsal, the doyen of Ottoman book history, writes in his *Osmanlılar'da Sahaflık ve Sahaflar*, the publishing of the Quran was allowed only in the second half of the century and the manuscripts of the holy book were quite expensive; many could not afford to have their own copies. This is why many of the bookdealers left behind unsold copies of manuscript Qurans, as evidenced by their estate records. Moreover, it is well known that the probate officers' proceedings were only on controversial estates and that they were unable to register everything left behind; Şiviloğlu is aware that the family members may have swept away certain books aside, and even acknowledges that “building an argument based on absence can be problematic, particularly when perishables are in question”. Nevertheless, he still does not hesitate to write that the lack of copies of the Quran in İsmail Ferruh Efendi's estate “might suggest his latitudinarian tendencies” and

“signs of an interest in another world” (pp.122-123). First of all, having such tendencies and interests has no direct relation with having or not having left a copy of the Quran in the estate. Here we are talking about a man who was not only a diplomat and bureaucrat, but also a religious scholar who translated *Tefsîr-i Vâkidi*, an exegesis of the Quran. The author’s assumptions rather derive from the embedded prejudice that a proper religious scholar cannot have interest in both worlds. Şiviloğlu seems to be too prone to the “decline of the ulema” thesis to extend it to someone who died in the first year of the Tanzimat period.

I also have to touch upon some minor problems in the book. The author takes “Reîs Pasha” as a person’s name (p. 104), though this expression, in the context of the relevant source, is generically used for the Head of the Council of State. There are also linguistic issues. He translates “ümrân-ı memleket” as “civilized countries.” The central term of the book is annoyingly misspelled as *efkâr-ı umûmîyelumûmîyye* all through, as are many other important joint words which all shadow his competence in the old language(s): *devlet-i âliye*, *cemiyet-i hâfiyye*, *şûrâ-ı devlet*, *ma’adâlet-i nümun-şâhâne*, *kavânîn-i mevzuiye*, *mevâd-i hikemiye*, *mevâd-i müşkile*, *müdâvim-i şakirdân*, *ef’al-i sey’ie*, *hısn-ı hâsîn*, and other words misspelled like *münâza*, *mütenevvie*, *nâsihat*, *cibhetle*, *sakemet*, *darüşafaka*, *sürrat*, *ressen*, *ceryan*, *maârifet*, *hidâmatı*, etc. The book is also lousy with numbers. Sadık Rifat Pasha’s pamphlet was not published in 1857 as written in the text, but in 1859 as right footnoted (p.8). He records that “even after twenty years of his death...in 1888, government spies reported of stores secretly selling his photographs,” but from the footnote we see the year of the report was 1902, which makes only fourteen years (p.220).

I consider all the criticism cited above as minor errors that can be identified in any book on Ottoman history because of the structural problems in the field. Otherwise, Murat Şiviloğlu has done a great job. The book is an enjoyable and quality read, very informative and satisfyingly resourceful. I highly recommend it to colleagues, and especially graduate students as an exemplary work to lead in new directions. We need more of this kind, as the history of concepts is a perplexing lacunae waiting for more pioneers like Şiviloğlu in the study of the Ottoman Empire.

Abdulhamit Kırmızı

Istanbul Şehir University