

The impact of Levantine community on the westernization process of Ottoman Empire

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Abstract. The aim of this research is to understand the role of Levantines in the westernization process of Ottoman Empire. The scope of the study covers the second half of 19th and the first quarter of 20th century of İstanbul, specifically Galata and Pera regions which took on the appearance of a European city. The method is Center – Periphery Theory. According to the Modern World-System approach, the world is divided into two, center and periphery, and the center means both; the center in geographical sense, and also the center of the cultural values, symbols, beliefs, and behavioural patterns. In this system, above mentioned are demanded and imported by the periphery. The importation process is performed primarily by the privileged actors such as, elite class, tradesman and bureaucrats in the periphery. Within the case of Ottoman Empire and İstanbul at the time, the center was west, particularly France and the way of life was associated to the Belle Époque period. Ottoman elite living in the capital, desired a western lifestyle while the west was taken as a role model of progress during the 19th century and even later. In that period, the Ottoman elite was in a challenging attempt to westernize the Empire in every aspect of life, in collaboration with Levantines who were the European tradesman in İstanbul. Just as the West was recognized as the center of progressing and the Levantine community was the representation of west in the Ottoman capital, in other words, the West in the Orient, so İstanbul was the West in Anatolia as the center of progressing.

1 Introduction

1.1 Aim & Scope

Not only the Greeks and Armenians who settled in Galata and Pera regions, but also the Levantine community was influential in the capital of Ottoman Empire in terms of representing the western lifestyle in the east. Together with the Ottoman elite, wealthy families of those communities were the actors and the region with many restaurants, cafes, and entertainment places was the center of westernization of Ottoman Empire in 19th century. However, very few sources are available on the influence and the role of Levantine community in the literature. Therefore, the aim of this research is both, to understand the role of Levantines and to fill the gap of information in this area.

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With the 1838 Treaty of Balta Limani, 1839 Tanzimat Edict, and the 1856 Islahat Edict, and various rights were granted in politics, economics and possession to foreigners. Especially the right to own property, and the establishment of the sixth municipal district of Istanbul have been very significant developments. Mainly as a result of these, the Levantine population quickly increased by the move of tradesmen and early industrialists in Europe to set up a business in İstanbul. Thus, the scope in time in this study covers the 19th century. Because the developments can be considered as they have started at the second half of the 18th century, the beginning time can be dated back to 1750's. The scope in the space is defined as İstanbul due to the city is the center of change in Ottoman Empire, specifically Galata and Pera regions which took on the appearance of a European city with their increasing population, culture and art activities, and physical appearance.

1.2 Method

The method of the study is the relationship/duality of Center- Periphery. The relationship of Center- Periphery" is a method in the social science, is conceptually named by Edward Shils. He explains this method in the fourth chapter of *The Constitution of Society* as: "Society has a center. There is a central zone in the structure of a society. Being a member of this society is shaped by the relationship established with this central zone. This center or central zone is a phenomenon in which the values and beliefs of a society could be found. What constitutes the center of a society are its symbols, values, and beliefs which shape the whole society" [1]. For Turkish history, Şerif Mardin is the first to conceptually apply this method of understanding and explaining the social and political change. Mardin examines Turkish modernization in the axis of center-periphery relations. According to him, the center-periphery theory is the most characteristic feature of the Turkish modernization process [2].

The Modern World-System Theory divides the world into two, center and periphery, and there are also semi-periphery regions that vary according to the relationship among them. While the center leads all the developments, the periphery provides imports them from the center. The semi-periphery proceeds as periphery relative to the center or center relative to the periphery.

The center means both, the center of the state in geographical sense, and also the center of the cultural values, symbols, beliefs, and behavioural patterns which all are exported to the periphery. The exportation process is performed by the actors such as, elite class, tradesman and bureaucrats in the both center and periphery. Within the case of Ottoman Empire and Istanbul, the center is west, particularly France and the way of life is associated to the period right after the industrial revolution in Europe. Ottoman elite living in the capital desired a western lifestyle and the west was taken as a role model during the 19th century and even later.

2 Ottoman westernization

The Ottoman history is evaluated under five main headings in terms of militarist way of history making: the Establishment Period between 1299 and 1453, the Ascension Period between 1453 and 1579, the Stagnation Period between 1579 and 1699, and the Decline Period between 1699 and 1792, and the Dissolution Period between 1792 and 1922.

However, in opposition to the idea of dissolution, considering the cultural developments, 19th century was characterized as a period of opening up to the west and integrating with the world, which refers to a change. Istanbul, the capital of Ottoman Empire, was the center of this change and both the west itself and the representatives of the west, such as the Levantine community, have been playing a major role.

According to Harmandar, in Ottoman daily life, whereas women were in the houses and not appeared in public spaces usually, men were in the public spaces, such as mosques and bazaars [3]. With the emergence of different social spaces in 19th century, such as coffee shops, restaurants, retail shops and taverns, not only socialization among the people from various cultures has increased, but also the women appeared in the public slightly. It can be stated that the Ottoman Empire has been changed in many areas by the effect of westernization after Tanzimat. In relation to that, completely different from the traditional space types, new public spaces in western style like boulevards and theatres have been emerged. This change can be observed in both, in public space typology and in lifestyle: understanding of entertainment and behavioural patterns (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. The main street of Pera. A postcard view from the Galata Seraglio Fountain [4].

As the core of change, Galata and Pera had the appearance of European cities with their urban pattern, demographic structure, culture and art activities and were open to social, cultural, architectural and urban innovations of the 19th century. Galata has always been an important settlement in ancient times, was an administrative region in Roman period. Even after the conquest of Istanbul, the district kept its importance this time with the commercial activities by the port. In fact, there was not a significant change in the population of the region until the 18th century. However, increasing commercial and political relations with the west needed many embassy buildings in the 19th century, (Fig. 2) so the population was increased radically [5]. The region, had the first civil buildings with sculptures and the first apartments of Ottoman Empire, as well as the passages which are typical in industrialized European cities, although the industrialization was not started in Ottoman Empire yet.



Fig. 2. British Embassy Building in Pera [4].

It should be stated that the capitulations given to European tradesmen in 19th century, were aimed to accelerate the economic development of the Empire. For instance, after the Treaty of Balta Liman signed in 1838, freedom in trade was granted to British people, which caused economic effects. Trading was exponentially in growth, new areas in business were established by both non-Muslims and Muslims. Whereas many European tradesmen moved to the capital of empire to set up a business, poor people and peasants began to migrate to Istanbul and formed the working class in that period. Along with above mentioned factors, the immigration to Istanbul from Balkans and Caucasus after the 1854-1855 Crimean War and the 1877-1878 Ottoman-Russian War caused the population to be increased. The population of Istanbul, which was four hundred thousand at the beginning of the century, reached one million in the second half of the 19th century. In 1885, 44% of the demographic structure in Istanbul was Muslim, 41% Ottoman non-Muslim (Greek, Armenian and Jewish citizens of the Empire), and the remaining 15% was Europeans. However, the ratio distribution differed in Galata region, which was 21% Muslim, 32% Ottoman non-Muslims and 47% Europeans [6]. This is indicating that Europeans in Galata are triple than the other regions of the city. It is considered that the hundred thousand came between 1840 and 1900 to benefit from trade opportunities and other rights, increased the foreign population (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. A postcard view of Galata [4].

Mahmud II, who was the sultan between 1808 and 1839, established the Ministry of Ihtisab in 1826 regarding urban planning as one of the reforms of him. The Ministry paved the way for the establishment of following municipalities which took over some of the duties and powers of kadhıs and became responsible for the collection of taxes, inspection of shopkeepers, and setting the security of city [7] (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. A postcard view of the seafront of Galata around 1900, that seems to have a Punta feel to it, with English language signs such as ‘London house’ indicating its international and Levantine mixture. Galata tower is visible in the distance [4].

However, the inability of Ministry of Ihtisab in carrying out the municipal services and solving the problems caused the services to be distributed to separate units. For instance, the Ebniye-i Hassa Directorate which was established in 1831, was given the control of construction facilities. As a part of the modernization attempts, the first municipal organization had been established in Istanbul, in 1856. The city was divided into 14 districts, among them, the Sixth Municipal District comprising Galata, Beyoğlu and Tophane, was chosen as a pilot area. City Council of the municipality, which was consisting of Muslim and non-Muslim Ottomans and Europeans, presented a report to the government two years after. In this report, it was stated that the roads should be rebuilt and cleaned, and streets should be widened and illuminated. This commission required a fund which should be reserved only for the municipality, and the new services should be provided for Galata in the first hand. This demand was accepted and legalized in İrade-i Seniyye published on February 14, 1858, with that, the application would start in Beyoğlu under the responsibility of Sixth Municipal Office. The first municipal building of the Empire, was constructed for this Office in Beyoğlu, was a Neoclassical building designed by an Italian architect Giovanni Battista Barborini in 1879-1883. This new institutional body formed the infrastructure of the city with new apartments, sites and passages in a new and modern urban pattern (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Another turn of the century tinted postcard view of Galata looking up the main through fare to Pera, Yüksek-kaldırım [4].

There was a rapid development in Istanbul in a 70 years period from the publication of *İlmühaber* in 1839 to the declaration of Constitutional Monarchy in 1908. Many roads for cars and lanes for trams were built, which were not the transportation modes of the city before. Summer houses were constructed around the city, new houses were no longer of wooden construction but masonry, and as a new housing typology, apartments and row houses emerged, which all caused the expansion of city. Urban development started in Galata and Pera, and was including the coastline from Tophane to Ortaköy, west of the road from Taksim to Şişli, and the roadline from Dolmabahçe to Teşvikiye and Nişantaşı. With sultan's movement to Dolmabahçe from Topkapı Palace, the historical peninsula was disfavored and the new prestigious areas were appeared in and around Galata. In this remarkably wide settlement area, Pera the upper parts of Galata, was the center of attraction with a number of embassies, and was the place where non-Muslims settled mostly. In 18th and 19th centuries, commercial buildings, shops, and warehouses increased in Galata with the acceleration of trade. By the second half of 19th century, most of the Greek, Armenian, Jewish people and Levantines had their offices and shops in Galata as well as their homes in Pera. To summarize, a mixed-used building type including a variety of functions such as trade, office, residence and accommodation, and with a passage on the ground floor, a new plan typology like in the industrialized cities of Europe, was emerged.

Levantines were the most influential group in Galata region and the main actor of change both in culture and architecture among Greek, Armenian and Jewish communities. All settled around embassies and churches, imported the European lifestyle to Galata in 19th century which can be named as a golden age.

3 Levantine culture in the capital of the Ottoman Empire

As a model, the European lifestyle has been desired and imported to Ottoman Empire by the two main actors. The first actor was a group of Ottoman elites who were educated in Europe, experienced the western lifestyle and conveyed it to the Ottoman intelligentsia. The second actor was the Levantine community who were already from the western lifestyle, were living in Galata and Pera regions, has played a leading role in representing and setting the European values (Fig. 6). With this role, Levantines were together with Ottoman elites in sports clubs, theatres, restaurants, hotels and entertainment centres. Their population

increased especially with the construction facility of the second half of 19th century. This was the period of a radical breakthrough in terms of the migration of Levantine architects such as Alexandre Vallaury and Giulio Mongeri to Istanbul.



Fig. 6. A view from the courtyard of Notre Dame de Sion, a French girl school [4].

As an example of their influence in particular to building elements, Tanyeli states that, the double-hung window became widespread in the 19th century in Galata region [8]. Ottoman type wooden window shutters disappeared and European type shutters appeared firstly in wealthy family houses. Even in middle-income family houses, room doors became double-leafed. Europe originated decorative elements were fashionable on the facades and interiors of almost all houses. Unlike with the Ottoman houses, apartment buildings in Galata region had an infrastructure of heating, hygiene, and comfort. This might cause an admiration and create a demand, so many improvements were made in Ottoman houses. On the other hand, Levantines might aspire the upper floor extension of a typical Ottoman house. Therefore, the apartments with bay windows, which the bay window is purely the adaptation of extension to the apartment facade, were common in the period and different than the western examples. Moreover, a series of rooms on a corridor is a typical plan type of an apartment. However, the rooms are around a middle hall in Galata apartments, which is a typical plan type of the Ottoman house with central hall. This is indicating that the relation was mutual, not from the center to periphery only, but vice versa to a certain extent naturally (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7. The shot, a tinted postcard, shows a western facade of buildings still very much in evidence today, despite the loss of the bulk of the Levantine community over the years [4].

The social life of Levantines was distinctively different than the conventional Ottoman life. As a typical western lifestyle, Levantines were organizing parties in their houses, were entertaining in clubs, restaurants and cafes with both men and women, whereas home entertainment was separated in Ottomans, men and women, and women was not appeared in public space, only the men usually in coffeehouses. However, Ottoman elites removed this conservative lifestyle and embraced the western way of life and largely centered around privileged and eminent Levantines like consuls and foreign visitors. Social contacts started with home visits, followed with the gatherings in social clubs. In this period, the Ottoman intelligentsia desired to be recognized as a part of Europe and many developments were made in many fields to westernize the Empire. Military, political, economic, cultural and artistic developments were guided by the Levantine community and this was supported and financed by the Sultan as well (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. A souvenir of the Viennese Restaurant Janni in Pera [4].

Many activities, for instance sports events strengthened the communication among the communities and introduced new concepts to the life of Ottomans. Levantines established various sports clubs, organized matches and tournaments to introduce western sports to the Ottoman society. Polo for instance, the game which was mostly played in summer months, Simer mentioned that, a new club called “Therapia Polo Club” was founded by famous names in sports world such as La Fontaine, Whittall, Baker, Charnaud, Loraine and Léon Zarifi [9]. Another example is the cricket which is a game from the 16th century England, two clubs, “Constantinople Moda Cricket Club” and “Constantinople Baby Cricket Club” were established by Levantines and matches were usually held in “Yoğurtlu Çeşme”. Tennis was introduced by the Whittall, Giraud and Charnaud families. The first tennis court in Moda was built in 1908 by the Whittalls. “Fashion Tennis Club” was established with the contributions of Sleger, Simonde, Binns, Basil, Weiss and Whittall families. Nevertheless, the tennis did not attract as much attention as other sports branches.

As the elements of daily life, phaetons which were completely new as a mode of transportation, chairs and tables as furniture in neoclassical style which were not existed in Ottoman houses, bonnets, top hats, bustles and petticoats were the fashionable garments and clothes which were totally different than Ottoman style of clothing, all were the

reflections of modernization and brought into daily life by Levantines (Fig. 9). The community, almost all of them were speaking four languages fluently, was referred to a high level of culture, their dominance can also be understood in the commonly used languages in daily life of Galata, which were French and Italian. There were French newspapers such as *Journal de Constantinople*, *Le Courier d'Orient*, *Stamboul*, *La Turquie*, and bilingual newspapers in English and French, such as *Levant Herald* and *Levant Times* in Istanbul [10].



Fig. 9. A street view of Pera with people in the modern clothes of that day [4].

Most of the Levantines, who were usually working in Galata and living in Beyoğlu, were wealthy people with the trade, brokerage, stockbroking and money changing, and among them, the wealthiest Galata Bankers were representing the *crème de la crème*, in other words, the upper class of community. There were also foreigners who were reliable people in the foreign relations with the Ottoman Empire as embassy translators.

Social life in Beyoğlu turned into a colourful world under the influence of the Levantines. Balls, afternoon teas, masquerades and unmasked meetings in the halls, private hotels, rich houses or colonial clubs of old Pera, which have their own cafe, ball, carnival and Catholic feasts, have become a fashion in time and the people of Beyoğlu in an elite environment, experienced a *belle époque* romance [11] (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10. A reception held at the theatre in honour of Giuseppe Garibaldi, a city he lived in for 3 years, at the Naum theatre in Pera. Built in 1848 on the site of an earlier wooden theatre that was destroyed in fire, this building served as the chief opera house of Constantinople, until it too was destroyed by a fire in 1870 [4].

4 Conclusion

Ottoman Westernization was a challenging attempt and the plan of Ottoman notables, started first with the capitulations and went on with the following developments. These encouraged many European tradesmen to come to Ottoman lands which caused both, a jump in economic activities in Ottoman Empire and a transformation from the classical Ottoman lifestyle to the western lifestyle. In a period that the west has been recognized as the center of progressing, Levantine community was seen as the representation of west in the Ottoman capital. Moreover, just as the Levantine community was the West in the Orient, so Istanbul was the West in Anatolia, the center of progressing. Because not only the Ottoman elites but also the wealthy Ottomans living in the big cities of Anatolia were the admirers of this western lifestyle of Galata and Pera. To sum up, Galata and Pera can be named as literally the center of westernization for the whole Empire.

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