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**POST-MODERNITY, MULTICULTURALISM AND EX-IMPERIAL HINTERLAND:  
HABSBURG AND OTTOMAN LEGACIES REVISITED**

ALI FUAT BOROVALI

*Ali Fuat Borovali is Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at Bilkent University, Ankara.*

The end of the Cold War has brought in its wake a conceptual uncertainty as to which way the 'world' ought to go. This always seems to happen, though in different modes, when a major war is terminated. The First World War had its Versailles and World War II had its Yalta and Potsdam, intimating the kind of order, rightful or not, to come. Of course, the Cold War was not a war in the literal sense, so it is not surprising that its termination was somewhat unorthodox. It did not end with a bang but a whimper, as it were. The current travails in defining the 'new world order' seem somehow to be the product of a war which never happened.

Since the systemic imperatives of the post-Cold War era are rather loose and under-determining, the range of options as to which way the world should be going gets wider—a more varied menu of possible worlds. This kind of systemic structure combined with the currents of post-modernity makes the world even less of a predictable place. Post-modernity, the defining zeitgeist of the present, can only help exacerbate the uncertainty inherent in the post-Cold War era.<sup>1</sup> The two forces, conceptual and structural, combine to make the world more resistant to any imposition of a new order. There is simply no compelling idea of a particular order. Subsequently, the scene is ripe for various forms of historiographic revisionism.

As the notions of ethnicity, nation-state and the problem of multicultural co-existence increasingly hold centre stage on the global agenda and are brought into question as such, classical concepts of world order are also re-evaluated. The Bosnian war and its particular implications seem to have acted as a catalyst in this regard. Given its particular geo-historical condition, it is natural for Bosnia to suggest all aspects of multi-culturalism and its problems. Therefore, it is not surprising to find David Rieff trying to figure out how "those great multicultural empires, the Ottoman and the Habsburg" did it.<sup>2</sup> The emergent context which brings the very talk of 'great multicultural empires' onto the agenda is well-summarised by Rieff:

As the world flounders in tribalism, those great multicultural empires the Ottoman and the Habsburg look better and better. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was nationalism, even nationalism based on ethnicity or creed, that looked modern, and these great, inefficient behemoths seemed not only destined for extinction—they were—but to richly deserve their fate. Who at the time would have sided with the Austrian emperor Franz Josef against nationalists like Kossuth or Masaryk, or with Sultan Abdul Hamid against the Balkan insurgents who confronted him? But the question must be posed again, as events in Sarajevo close the century that events in Sarajevo opened. And, in retrospect, it may seem that for all its ferocities it was the Ottoman vision and not the nationalist one that holds up better ... . So perhaps it is time, however improbable the thought may at

first appear, to turn a kinder eye on the Ottomans.<sup>3</sup>

Rieff follows with a rejoinder (unnecessarily one would think) that “we must not be romantic and aspire to be Turks again.” Whatever the substantive merits of the argument, the problem addressed by Rieff can hardly be ignored and it is simply this: there is a spectre haunting the world—the spectre of tribalism. Whether it is the Balkans, the Caucasus or Africa, evil has been set loose by tribalism, sometimes reaching apocalyptic proportions. Therefore, it is not unusual to pause and reflect upon how tribalism was handled in another time, another place.

Another salient point revolves around the notion of modernity and its historical and conceptual association with nationalism. While the concept of nationalism can be traced to the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and, more proximately, to the French Revolution, it can be reasonably argued that the praxis of the nation-state has properly evolved within the overall matrix of the modernist project. Now that the modernist project has come under substantive challenge in the post-modern era, it should be expected that the concepts and practices which have been historically associated with it also come under scrutiny. At any rate, the unusually dynamic circumstances of the post-Cold War era are such that they are forcing the issue without needing much prodding. And, in the process, the frailties of some of the modernist assumptions are painfully exposed.

#### ON BEING OTTOMAN: SEMANTICS, SUBSTANCE AND NOSTALGIA

Before proceeding further, we might have to address a semantic issue—semantics lying at the core of many a political dispute. When Rieff cautions us not to be “romantic and aspire to be Turks again” the nuance between Ottoman and Turk is somewhat lost. Ottoman, not necessarily the anti-thesis of Turk, involves a significantly different level of identity. If an analogy were called for, it would be similar to the nuance between British vis-à-vis English, or Scotsman. Ottoman practice involves an eclectic cosmopolitanism, its most telling aspect being a unique version of federalism, predicated upon the millet system—quasi-autonomous religious/denominational groups coalescing around ecclesiastical institutions, their spheres of socio-cultural autonomy delineated with extreme care.<sup>4</sup> It might also be helpful to point out that during the Ottoman times, the name Turk was mainly reserved for the nomadic Turkoman tribes of the Anatolian mountain ranges.

Furthermore, the Ottomans, westward-looking as they were, seem to have been averse to Turkifying the empire. And, any favourable disposition toward the ‘Turkic ethnicities’ seems to have been drastically downgraded following the 1400-1402 devastation of Asia Minor by Tamerlane. The repercussions of that traumatic event, that nearly destroyed the work of a whole century, seems to have persisted in the Ottoman psyche for quite some time. And then came the determined cosmopolitanism of Mehmet II’s reign, 1451-81.

If a prototype Ottoman who embodied the said quality of cosmopolitanism were called for, the renowned Sokollu (Sokolovich) Mehmed Pasha would be an apt choice. Grand vizier (prime minister) between 1565-1579, the first two years under Süleyman the Magnificent (d.1566), he was an Orthodox Serb from the Bosnian town of Sokolac. Arguably the most competent of all Ottoman grand viziers, Sokollu was cognisant of his ethnic origins to the point of appointing his own brother as head of the Serbian Orthodox Patriarchate in Pec in the Kosovo province.<sup>5</sup>

Far from unique, Sokollu was one of a long line of Roumeli bureaucrats who administered the Empire. By one count, there were thirty-six grand viziers from Bosnia alone. Though it may seem

like a kind of American-style meritocracy, it was more than that—a reflection of the trust placed in the Christian convert, with no power base back home (you cannot go home again), as opposed to the Muslim who may forge connections with clusters of discontent more easily. Those belonging to the millets, allowed to keep to their non-Muslim faith, though not allowed into the higher ranks of the divan (cabinet) or military councils, were singularly prominent in the diplomatic service. The renowned ambassadors of the nineteenth century, Musurus and Karatheodori (serving in London and Berlin respectively), were Ottoman Greeks and, by common historiographic consent, as every bit Ottoman as the rest of them.

In more recent times, the cosmopolitan mix of self-declared Ottomans have included many non-Turks, particularly Palestinians and Lebanese, Jews in Israel and elsewhere, Bosnians and Albanians, and perhaps surprisingly, not an inconsiderable number of Greeks and Armenians across North America and Europe.

Talking of Ottoman cosmopolitanism in the context of a resurgence of interest in multi-culturalism should not be considered suggestive of an Ottoman chauvinism. On the contrary, it could be seen as a means to defuse ethnocentric tensions (or at least mitigate them) by attempting to establish common reference points—ie. shared cultural ethos and historical associations.

#### NEO-HABSBURG: AUSTRIA ÜBER ALLES?

Just to put the matter into comparative (hence less of an ethnocentric) perspective, the focus could be shifted to Habsburg experience. Revival of interest in the shared historical experience along the Danube Basin stands as an even better advertisement for multi-culturalism. Travelling across the Habsburg hinterland, even today, demonstrates a well-worn system of cultural transmission between imperial Vienna and a constellation of cities, stellar in their own right—Salzburg, Budapest, Bratislava, Prague, Cracow and, yes, Sarajevo.

The notion of Habsburg solidarity was revived during the later phases of the Cold War, with much of the impetus coming from Budapest. Though not a yearning for the restoration of the Dual Monarchy, it was a call for establishing closer economic ties and restoring the integral economic interdependence of the Central Danube Basin. It was hoped that countries like Hungary and Czechoslovakia would find some relief out of the COMECON straitjacket, through increased commercial and infrastructural access to (neutral) Austria. There was also a reference to the organic cultural unity of the Central Danube Basin which had been disjointed by the recent tumultuous history and was in need of repair.<sup>6</sup>

A feature article which appeared in *The Economist*,<sup>7</sup> rather predictably entitled ‘The Return of the Habsburgs’, captures the essential nuance of the issue. Here is a selected quote:

The railway stations, you soon notice, are invariably yellow. The opera houses are all built by the same pair of architects ... . In cafes, the day’s papers from far and wide hang on the wall ... . Central Europe has a certain harmony that goes deeper than the dilapidation bequeathed by communist times ... it derives from something that Central Europeans seem curiously reluctant to recognise: theirs are the lands of the old Habsburg empire ... .

Thus, in terms of empirical plausibility, the Habsburg vision may have a head start compared to the Ottoman. For one thing, the domestic resistance would be far less in Vienna. But how a neo-Habsburg revival might play in Budapest, Bratislava, Prague, Ljubljana, Zagreb, Sarajevo and

Mostar remains to be tested. What is certain is that the cosmopolitan idea underlining the Catholic-Muslim re-integrative framework lies at the very basis of the federated Bosnia-Herzegovina.

#### OTTOMANISM REVISITED

While the case for a revival of trans-Danubian solidarity might have to rest with the countries of the former Habsburg impera, aspects relating to the Ottoman hinterland would have to be resolved elsewhere. It is clearly imperative to clarify how an ‘Ottoman vision’ might relate to the 1990s.

Perhaps the most succinct formulation of the issue has been made by Hadi Uluengin, columnist for the mainstream daily *Hürriyet*, in an article entitled ‘Neo-Ottomanism’, the occasion for which was President Turgut Özal’s visit to the Balkans in February 1993 (two months before his untimely death). Uluengin takes pains to reassure his readers that neo-Ottomanism does not, in any shape or form, involve a restoration of Empire as such. For him, there is the extremely vital distinction between imperial vision and imperialism. Neo-Ottomanism involves neither the myth of reconquest nor the ethos of chauvinism. While certain aspects of Republican era policies may be open to debate, neo-Ottomanism shuns the rejectionist impulse towards the Republic. A wholesale denial of the obvious achievements of the Republic would merely be a repetition of an earlier mistake—an extravagant denial of the imperial legacy. Now is the time not for extravagant denials but for reconciliation with history, with due acknowledgement of sins but also cognisant of virtues. There are those who say that history repeats itself, which is not necessarily true. The neo-Ottoman vision holds that history renews rather than repeats itself.

The neo-Ottomanism debate has found a resonant echo in the Turkish press, across a broad ideological spectrum. Zülfü Livaneli is a case in point.<sup>8</sup> Livaneli weaves his argument around the concept of “Ottoman hinterland” and, for reasons of his own, insists in maintaining a distance between his concept and neo-Ottomanism as promoted by others.<sup>9</sup> For him, the Ottoman hinterland is “our natural cultural legacy” and the web of relationships springing from the common Ottoman past constitutes “our natural sphere of [cultural] action”—much like the cultural solidarity among the Hispanic countries, bonded by adherence to a common cultural tradition. In speaking of a “natural” (a word that he uses repetitively) cultural sphere, Livaneli seems to suggest a geo-cultural sphere of inter-action.

Another writer and columnist who has persistently delved into the neo-Ottomanism debate is Cengiz Çandar. Çandar is known for his searching and critical stance regarding what he considers to be certain dogmatic aspects of classical Turkish foreign policy. Staunch supporter of Özal (then and still), he refers to the late president as the “21st Century Ottoman.”<sup>10</sup> Constantly probing for new approaches that might help break the “present deadlock” in foreign policy, Çandar thinks that even issues like northern Iraq might be handled within the conceptual matrix suggested by neo-Ottomanism. For Çandar, both foreign policy (eg. Bosnia) and internal stability are likely to benefit from analytic exercises involving the question, “how did the Ottomans do it?”<sup>11</sup> Writing on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Sephardic Jews fleeing from the Spanish Inquisition, Çandar notes with great relish that “the thing that elevates an empire is not military conquest but, as was true of our Ottoman ancestors, the ability to absorb cosmopolitanism within is midst.”<sup>12</sup>

The neo-Ottomanism debate has not escaped notice in the outside world. Eric Rouleau, journalist

and former French ambassador in Turkey, presents an argument which zeroes in on the very heart of the matter: the reconciling of Republicanism and Ottomanism. The quality common to the Ottoman state and republican Turkey, Rouleau notes, is that they had both developed state structures where the religious establishment was under the state prerogative. Rouleau's argument, though by no means original, has the virtue of drawing attention once more to the laic nature of the Ottoman state. Thus, there is more of a continuity along the Ottoman-Republican axis than is commonly supposed. Therefore, a properly understood neo-Ottomanism is more likely to reinforce laicism than otherwise, acting as an additional bulwark against any fundamentalist upsurge in the country as well as the region.<sup>13</sup>

A perusal of foreign commentary over neo-Ottomanism reveals a pronounced need for more conceptual clarity over the subject. The French weekly *Le Point* with its cover story 'Turquie: Le Retour du Reve Ottoman' ('Turkey: The Return of the Ottoman Dream'), might be commended for having brought the issue to the attention of its readers.<sup>14</sup> But, perhaps inevitably, the initial effort turns out to be hazily impressionistic.

It might be noted that an historically complex issue like Ottomanism, subject as it is to so much emotional and intellectual baggage, is a difficult one to grasp for all—strangers and countrymen alike. It often turns out that layers of ideological, doctrinal and historiographic varnish might have to be removed for any conceptual clarity to surface.<sup>15</sup> But, besides the analytical aspect there is an urgency to the situation, which is political. To paraphrase Clemenceau, Ottomanism (neo or otherwise) is too important a matter to be left to the discretion (or monopoly) of those who insist in defining it shorn of its most resonant quality—cosmopolitanism. In terms of actual Ottoman practice, cosmopolitanism is not adequately captured by the mere invocation of mutual tolerance. What is pivotal is the determined effort to enlarge one's horizons, extend one's vision, and even enhance the quality of one's life through multicultural contact with those of the other faiths.

That the issue is not merely one of semantics or nostalgia but carries a good deal of substance is demonstrated in a relatively recent article entitled 'Third American Empire, With a Balkan Frontier' (January 1996). Authors Jacob Heilbrunn and Michael Lind advance a number of interesting theses, but what is particularly germane to the issue at hand is the conceptual and historical association made between the Ottoman hinterland and the current sphere of American strategic responsibility and action in and around the Mediterranean basin:

... instead of seeing Bosnia as the eastern frontier of the NATO, we should view the Balkans as the western frontier of America's rapidly expanding sphere of influence in the Middle East ... . The fact that the United States is more enthusiastic than its European allies about a Bosnian Muslim state reflects, among other things, the new American role as the leader of an informal collection of Muslim nations from the Gulf to the Balkans.<sup>16</sup>

The authors then deliver a flamboyant message the implications of which might take years, if not decades, to unravel:

The regions once ruled by the Ottoman Turks show signs of becoming the heart of a third American empire.<sup>17</sup>

## VISION AND PRAXIS

What good can be expected to come out of these analytic exercises? As suggested primarily, a

rapprochement of sorts between the Habsburg and Ottoman multicultural visions might create enough synergy towards conditions conducive to moral sanity and conservation of culture in and around Bosnia-Herzegovina. There may be other instances where common imperial legacy, used properly and with discretion, might be instrumental in sustaining diplomatic structures already in place.<sup>18</sup>

One candidate for such an enterprise could be Jerusalem. The fortresses surrounding the ancient quarters were built during the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent. The property registers are still of Ottoman origin, so are many of the legal statutes. Therefore, the rhetorical question ‘how did the Ottomans do it?’ might yet carry significant resonance.

Vaclav Havel, in an incisively titled article (‘In Our Post-Modern World, a Search for Self-Transcendence’) seems to capture some of the core issues in this paper:

The distinguishing features of transitional periods are a mixing and blending of cultures and a plurality or parallelism of intellectual and spiritual words. These are periods when all consistent value systems collapse, when cultures distant in time and space are discovered and rediscovered. New meaning is gradually born from the encounter, or the intersection of many different elements ... . Today, this state of mind, or of the human world is called post-modernism. ... . We live in the post-modern world, where everything is possible, and almost nothing is certain.<sup>19</sup>

At a time when even the ending of the Cold War is fast becoming distant memory, it is not clear whether the initial shock of the new era has been absorbed. Whether a new order is gradually falling into place or the possible worlds are such that we face an embarrassment of riches still remains an open question. Havel says that a distinguishing feature of transitional periods is the rediscovery of distant cultures in time and place. If this state of mind happens also to be a feature of post-modernism, we would have to come to terms with the notion that post-modern situations may require post-modern solutions. We might then start to find out whether the multicultural ethos inherent in the Habsburg and the Ottoman experience might carry certain guidelines that might still be applicable to the post-modern world.

1 Post-modernity, in the present context, is primarily meant to convey a lingering sense of “diminishing marginal returns” expected from the grand project of modernity. As such, it does not represent a wholesale disillusionment, calling for its abandonment, but seeks to incorporate its undeniable achievements, breakthroughs and benefits into any philosophical or cultural stance that might emerge out of the revisionist critique, and thus supersede modernity.

2 Rieff, David (1994), ‘Case for Empire’, Harper’s Magazine, January, p.16. See also, ‘Notes on the Ottoman Legacy’, Subjective Reasoning, issue No. 7.

3 Ibid.

4 The painstaking way in which the Ottomans approached matters of religious denominational autonomy is reflected by the mundane administration of the Holy Sepulchre Church in Jerusalem and how it was negotiated and re-negotiated over the centuries. Raymond Cohen’s manuscript ‘Negotiating Reality: International Relations and the Metaphor of the Holy Sepulchre’ (paper presented to the International Studies Association (ISA) Conference in 31 March-2 April 1994,

Washington D.C) highlights the point in remarkable fashion.

5 Sokollu's visionary project linking the Don and Volga by a canal so as to gain access into the Caspian from the Black Sea in the late sixteenth century is a case attesting to his illustrious reputation.

6 It is hardly surprising to see that Austrians are interested in the issues raised in this paper, as evidenced by the content of *Peace and the Sciences* (March 1993), published by the International Institute for Peace, Vienna. Articles such as 'The Danube Regional Model: Conflict Preventing and Curing Role' featuring a multi-confessional co-authorship (Edita Stojic, Mustafa Imanovic, Slobodan Pajovic) and 'Post- modern Plurality in Cultures' by Hans Joachim Turk are cases in point.

7 *The Economist*, 18 November 1995.

8 Social-Democrat, newspaper columnist, singer, song writer and international peace activist, Livaneli has managed to diversify his eclectic resumé even further by standing as mayoral candidate in Istanbul (he was unsuccessful).

9 See his article 'Neo-Ottoman or Ottoman Hinterland?' *Sabah*, 16 June 1992. In a later article, 'Rainbow Identity', *Sabah*, 20 July 1994, Livaneli argues that the cosmopolitan nature of the Ottoman Empire was predicated upon the down-playing or down-sizing of 'Turkishness'.

10 See his article 'Turgut Özal: The Ottoman of the 21st Century', *Sabah*, 28 April 1992. Çandar recalls Özal as saying that his two favourite state models in history were the Ottoman State and the United States of America.

11 Interestingly enough, the current president of the Republic, Süleyman Demirel, has also been voicing his concerns regarding internal stability within parameters suggested by that question. See article by Fatih Çekirge, 'From Demirel, a Re-definition of Citizenship', *Sabah*, 20 March 1994.

12 Quoted from 'Turkey: Land of Hope', *Sabah*, 11 July 1992.

13 Rouleau, Eric (1993), 'Challenges to Turkey', *Foreign Affairs*, November-December. It might be noted in this regard that the Kemalist conception of nationalism is also imbued with a spirit of cosmopolitanism, particularly when compared to the Ziya Gökalp thesis which draws heavily on the Islamic component in defining Turkish nationalism. These and related issues have been examined in my unpublished doctoral dissertation, 'Kemalist Tradition, Political Change and the Turkish Military' Queen's University, Canada, 1985).

14. *Le Point*, 30 January-5 February 1993.

15 Even Graham Fuller's analysis (his acclaimed scholarship on Turkey notwithstanding) remains somewhat impressionistic, thus re-confirming the complexity of the issue. See his monograph *Turkey Faces East: New Orientations Toward the Middle East and the Old Soviet Union*, RAND Publication, 1992.

16 *International Herald Tribune*, 4 January 1996.

17 *Ibid.*

18 It is particularly interesting to note that the 500th anniversary of Sultan Süleyman's birth (1494) was commemorated in Hungary, in September 1994, through a joint Hungarian-Turkish enterprise—another indication of the existing potential for sharing common historical legacy. A bronze bust of the Sultan was unveiled in Zigetvar at the spot where he died. See the article by Fatih Çekirge, 'The Ottoman at the European Community', Sabah, 6 September 1994. The Ottoman thus referred to is President Demirel.

19 International Herald Tribune, 11 July 1994.