

The Conception of ‘Well-Connected Domains’ and Its Implications  
for Ottoman Historiography

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Recently published under the editorship of four Ph.D. candidates, *Well-Connected Domains: Towards an Entangled Ottoman History* is the concrete outcome of a research project on, in the editors’ words, “processes of exchange, interaction, and entanglement between the Ottoman Empire and its neighbors in the west”<sup>i</sup>; hence on the *well-connected domains* of the early modern Ottoman Empire. Such an application of the recently rising methodological approach *entangled historiography* to the Ottoman case bears relevance as well as significance for the theme *Turkey’s modernization from the empire to the republic*, which holds a cultic status in the history of modern Turkey, through defying the theoretically-established divide between a Christian-European and an Islamic-Ottoman world, as was predominated mostly in earlier studies on the history of modern Turkey all falling into the main heading of the so-called ‘bloc paradigm’.<sup>ii</sup> Conversely, the published research in question underlines more connections and exchanges than divisions and conflicts; plurality and entanglement of domains as opposed to a monolithic or rather a disconnected entity; and a multiplicity of centers disclaiming a monocentric structure.<sup>iii</sup> By focusing on the Western frontiers of the Ottoman State during its early modernization phase, such an ‘entangled’ point of view contributes to the scholarly attempt of reading the Ottoman Empire not only as a structural component, but also as one of the ‘cultural others’ of the history of European modernization. Therefore, the Ottoman obscurity of being at the same time an insider and an outsider of Europe had characterized and thus contributed to the formation of the Ottomans’ westward state of existence. For the reconsideration of the well-connectedness of the Ottoman Empire, it may not be irrelevant to briefly examine the linkage between the Ottoman and Republican conceptions of Westernization firstly through discussing the self-imposed obscurity towards the inherited Ottoman legacy in the Republican State discourse.

The *arrogant infancy* of revolutionary minds<sup>iv</sup> rarely, if ever, allowed them to acknowledge the legacy of the object that they aimed at destructing, and almost always defining themselves as the ‘zero-point of history’<sup>v</sup>, few, if not any, Revolutions succeeded to escape from the discursive state of ‘poverty of tradition’. Beyond anything else, the French Revolution was, in this respect, a theatrical defiance against anything associated with the Ancien Régime. In his unfinished *Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, Alexis de Tocqueville, the iconoclastic political philosopher whose studies relied more on painstaking empirical work than those of many, if not all, of his contemporaries, demonstrated through a vast quantity of official State records that the French Revolution, as opposed to its self-historiography, was more of an ‘awkward’ transitory period from the Ancien Régime to the Consul than of a rupture, which temporarily achieved disturbing the structural continuity of administrative centralization.<sup>vi</sup> In our case, it is curious that the Turkish nation-state, which discursively reconstructed the Ottoman State as its ‘other’ on the mutually exclusive dichotomies of ‘reaction’ vs. ‘progress’, ‘old’ vs. ‘new’, ‘barbaric’ vs. ‘civil’ and so forth at home, embraced both structurally and discursively its status of the Ottoman State’s successor, if not that of a full-fledged heirdom, abroad. While the Republican course of Westernization organically, thus not only directly, emanated from the Jeune Turks’ wholly pragmatist, and therefore philosophically shallow handling of the ‘Western civilization’ only to come up almost enchanted-shortcut resolutions for the divine objective of saving the *Devlet-i Alliyé*<sup>vii</sup>, the latter, as was rightfully asserted here and there, was the direct outcome of the Ottoman modernization firstly initiated and led by the Ottoman sultans beginning with Sultan Selim the Third and reaching its climax in Abdulhamit the Second’s thirty-year long ‘period of autocracy’.<sup>viii</sup> However, as was literally and practically asserted by the present research *Well-Connected Domains* in question, the Ottoman ‘westwardness’ goes long before the turbulent and decisive 19<sup>th</sup> Century, as the Ottomans actively participated from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century onwards “in many of the major developments which European historiography once considered unique to Europe”.<sup>ix</sup>

Before the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when being a natural component of the European modernization process, above all, meant for the Ottomans to centralize the Empire’s administrative bureaucratic structure, the Ottoman State ruled over a multiethnic, multireligious, multilingual and multicultural empire throughout a vast plurality of

domains constituted by a multiplicity of centers.<sup>x</sup> Examining such early phase of the Ottoman modernization in its Western frontiers and then gradually moving towards the decisive 19<sup>th</sup> Century, *the Well-Connected Domains* is constituted of three thematic parts. Concentrating on trade, warfare, and diplomacy, the first part is composed of (i) Suraiya N. Faroqhi's examination of trade between the Ottoman Empire and its Western neighbors in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries that sheds light on the Ottoman State's and its Muslim and non-Muslim merchants' significance in the flow of objects and ideas between Asia, Africa, and Europe; (ii) two articles on the Ottoman's impact over maritime sovereignty written by Joshua M. White and Michael Talbot covering piracy, diplomacy, and trade in the Ottoman Mediterranean; and (iii) Viorel Panaite's analysis of the French consular presence in the Ottoman Empire. Focusing on identity not only as an expression, but also as a 'formative element of connectedness'<sup>xi</sup>, the second part is constituted of (i) Nur Sobers-Khan's analysis of the still-uncharted topic of slaves' integration into Ottoman society; (ii) an interesting contribution by Gábor Kármán to the research subject of the Christian-European conception of the Ottomans as 'Turks' through analyzing the writings of a former Transylvanian diplomat, which defies the existence of a uniform image of the 'Turk' in the early modern Europe; and (iii) two articles written by Tobias P. Graf and Christian Roth analyzing the integration of, respectively, the 'renegades' and non-Muslims in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman Empire. Aiming at avoiding 'teleology and Eurocentrism'<sup>xii</sup> at the same time in viewing the modernization of the globe, the third and final part of the *Well-Connected Domains* is dedicated to the examination of various political and social challenges raised during the Ottoman reformation and modernization process in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In this respect, Pascal W. Firges studies the mutually-desired cooperation between the French and the Ottomans in modernizing the Ottoman military; two articles written by Gülay Tulasoğlu and Sotirios Dimitriadis analyze the Ottoman modernizing efforts, along with its problems, in the case of Salonica; Maximillian Hartmuth sheds light on the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Ottoman reform efforts in the case of a civic initiative for founding of a museum in the Tanzimat-period Bosnia; and finally, Aylin Koçunyan analyzes the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 through paying particular attention to its transcultural dimension. In a word, the edited *Well-Connected Domains* provides an invaluable contribution to the development of an 'entangled' point of view, as was framed above,

towards the Ottoman modernization process through emphasizing a well-connectedness of processes in a westward, if not western, Empire characterized by a multiplicity of centers and a plurality of domains. Still, whether or not such multiplicity of centers succeeded in the reforming and modernizing leadership of the Ottoman capital to forge a structure of well-connected domains against all odds of their somewhat *disconnected* plurality remains to be a valid research question to be studied further.

### **Well-Connected Domains: Towards an Entangled Ottoman History**

Edited by Pascal W. Firges, Heidelberg University, Tobias P. Graf, independent scholar, Christian Roth, Heidelberg University, and Gülay Tulasoğlu, Hacettepe University, Ankara

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<sup>i</sup> Pascal W. Firges et. al (eds.), *Well-Connected Domains: Towards an Entangled Ottoman History*, Leiden: Brill, 2014, p. ix.

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid, pp. 3-4, 9.

<sup>iv</sup> “The beginnings of confusion with us in England are at present feeble enough, but, with you, we have seen an infancy still more feeble growing by moments into a strength to heap mountains upon mountains and to wage war with heaven itself.” Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, J. G. A. Pocock (ed.), Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987, p. 9.

<sup>v</sup> François Furet, *Fransız Devrimi'ni Yorumlamak (Penser La Révolution Française)*, Ahmet Kuyaş (trans.), Istanbul: Alan Yayıncılık, 1989, p. 105.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, p. 175. Also, see: Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Stuart Gilbert (trans.), New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955.

<sup>vii</sup> Şerif Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasi Fikirleri (1895-1908) (The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought)*, Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 15<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2008, pp. 16-17.

<sup>viii</sup> Eric Jan Zürcher, *Modernleşen Türkiye'nin Tarihi (Turkey: A Modern History)*, Yasemin Saner (trans.), Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 27<sup>th</sup> Edition, 2012, pp. 25-142.

<sup>ix</sup> Firges et. al, p. 5.

<sup>x</sup> Ibid, pp. 7-9.

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, pp. 166-167.