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Eastern Mediterranean Port Cities and Their Bourgeoisies:

Merchants, Political Projects, and Nation-States*

During the latter half of the nineteenth century the Mediterranean basin, and the Levant in particular, regained some of the importance in world trade that the area had lost after the mid-seventeenth century. The 1848-73 boom and the transportation revolution that accompanied it were the main developments fashioning the area's mode of integration into the world-economy. As steamships arrived in the Mediterranean, British and French investors planned railway projects to

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link major port cities with their hinterlands and internal markets. Foreigners, Levantines, Jews, Maltese, and other islanders and inland populations were attracted by economic opportunity through increasing mercantile activity; they helped swell the population of port cities. Within this new context of flourishing mercantile activity, port cities developed as opulent and cosmopolitan outposts of European bourgeoisie. Against this background, although unequal partners with the British and the French, native traders and associated professionals gained sufficient strength during the second half of the nineteenth century to make their presence felt on national politics. Often they constituted the only "bourgeois" class or, at least, a rival class in terms of their economic and social affiliations, to more entrenched groups organized around and deriving their status from the seats of power. These new groups in time acquired sufficient mass to "become political" in the sense of seeking ways to employ the administrative structure of a state to their advantage. Depending on the specific historical context, they turned to their own imperial seat of power or chose to align themselves with one or another foreign government influential in the region. Especially during the few decades preceding the Great War, the carving up of imperial territories into new entities was so much on the agenda, and the future of these territories so open to debate, that a wide variety of options was entertained. Frequently, rival factions within the new urban groups chose different patrons and agitated for competing scenarios.

The merchant bourgeoisies could also become political "by invitation" when the initiative was taken by a reforming bureaucracy in their attempt to modernize the state apparatus toward what they perceived as the requirements of the interstate system. In this endeavor they would want to mobilize a particular group of the bourgeoisie because of their presumed loyalty to the state-building cause. The relationship between the Committee of Union and Progress government in the Ottoman Empire, representing Young Turk reformism, and the Jewish bourgeoisie of Salonika is a case in point.
II.

The principal concern of the Research Working Group on the Ottoman Empire and the World-Economy has been to look at the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the formation of its successor states from the perspective of the Eastern Mediterranean port cities. In this attempt, we do not intend to argue that the growth of a bourgeoisie, as conditioned by the expansion of trade, was the sole variable determining the process of state formation. There certainly were other actors on the scene, such as the already mentioned traditional classes, among which the bureaucracy was perhaps the most notable. It might even be maintained that actors not on the scene were the proximate cause of the drafting of borders. The fate of Trieste was decided by an agreement between Italy and Britain, and the specific partitioning of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire was certainly not determined by the merchant bourgeoisies of Beirut, Aleppo, and Baghdad. Even at the turn of this century, Salonika’s fate was far from being certain, as its dominant position in Macedonia made claims over the city an integral part of wider designs over the region itself. Nonetheless, the political presence of merchant bourgeoisies strongly colored the environment in which the formation of states adequate to the modern interstate system unfolded. Deciphering the conflicting projects designed by the actors mentioned above concerning their political and economic programs and expectations will enable us to unearth the paths of state-formation, and the particularities of the incorporation of the Ottoman Empire into the world-economy. Unlike the Russian imperial rule, which was considerably strengthened, or the Indian Peninsula or the Caribbean region, in which the segmented political unities were brought under the same canvas under the aegis of particular core powers, Ottoman imperial rule lost much of its effectiveness during the process of incorporation. The cultural and political activities of these bourgeoisies laid the foundation both for nationalist movements before the First World War and for statist nationalism of the postwar era. We are expecting, therefore, that this
perspective will illuminate both the more conventional accounts of the break-up of empires and the discussion on state formation that has recently been prominent on the social science agenda. Additionally, although much has been said and written about the Middle Eastern and/or Islamic cities, and about their divergent characteristics from those of their counterparts in the West (in terms of their spatial layout and social organization), port cities lacking the imperial grandeur their inland counterparts enjoyed have never received extensive treatment. The project will also try to remedy this void in our knowledge about the region itself.¹

We start with the observation that the expansion of trade involves a multiplication of class positions that are "bourgeois." Our reading of the historical material suggests, however, that, contrary to commonly held assumptions, the political impact of the rise of this class was far from being uniform. The historical conjunctures in which the bourgeoisie moved to prominence, their physical and social surroundings, and the economic processes that supported their ascent were all important in determining their political choices and influences. In order to capture the complexity of this process the research group has proceeded by focusing on seven port cities: Trieste, Patras, Salonika, Izmir, Trabzon, Beirut, and Alexandria. While six of these are Ottoman cities, Trieste was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Its inclusion has enriched our project in a number of ways: First of all, it was a receiving port for many of the articles that originated or were in transit from other Mediterranean ports. In other words, it remained, for the most part, an importing port. Aside from this substantive difference, the particulars of the growth of Trieste in the

nineteenth century closely parallel those of the other port cities. This enables us to assess and compare the impact of importing activity on the social structure of a port city. More importantly, Trieste, like the other cities, was a port of an empire, yet an empire with a significantly different trajectory than the Ottoman. Its inclusion in the project enables us to compare the processes that were involved in the overall transformation and final demise of two empires as well as the historical development of the cities themselves. The choice of the other port cities, on the other hand, was motivated by the concern to encompass the whole spectrum of cases. On one extreme there are Izmir, Beirut, and Alexandria, which rose to become the most important ports of the eastern Mediterranean. In the other end, there is Trabzon, whose story was one of relative decline along with the Ottoman loss of monopoly over the Black Sea. In between are Salonika and Patras. The former evolved from being an imperial port of the redistributive system to being an export outlet for the entire Macedonian region. Patras, on the other hand, although initially its originator, was by mid-century excluded from the Greek nationalist project that was centered around Athens. Outbid also by Piraeus and lesser ports, the merchants of the city had to struggle against the newly established political authority in order to be exempt of the tax imposed upon their trade.

III.

As mentioned, the Mediterranean basin reappeared as a lively economic zone within the matrix of global trade during the latter half of the nineteenth century. This process of recovery, slow though it was in pace, can historically be traced back to the mid-eighteenth-century upswing, finding full expression only during the mid-Victorian boom. Given an impetus by the expansionary phase of the broadening world-economy during the post-1740/50 period, the development of the coastal regions of the Levant signaled a new balance of power within which the supremacy of the inland cities was
eventually brought into question. Extending their sphere of influence well into the hinterland of their port cities, Dahir al-'Umar and Ahmad Pasha al-Jazzar in northern Palestine, Karaosmanoğlu and Araboğlu in Western Anatolia, and the famed 'ayans of Ottoman Europe were the most illustrious cases of this coastal upsurge. Likewise, the Shihabi princes of Mount Lebanon occupied and established control over Beirut, the port of shipment for Lebanese silk. During the same time span, with the eclipse of the overland trade through Hungarian, Romanian, and Transylvanian routes, Hapsburg trade through Trieste and Fiume was undergoing a marked development. The increase in Austrian imports from the Ottoman territories by sea through Trieste gave an additional impetus to the economic florescence of Salonika. Izmir and Salonika were by then important sources of cotton for Europe. The Napoleonic Wars and the Continental Blockade contributed to promote several port cities as gates to the continent for British commercial penetration. During this period, Salonika, Trieste, and Fiume were the endpoints of these newly established commercial conduits, Malta being the main reexport center.

The retaliatory measures taken by the Sublime Porte in response to Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, and the Continental Blockade proved to be fatal for the French, who were the most important trading partners of the Ottoman Levant in the eighteenth century. When accompanied by political upheavals along the southern shores of the Levant, this conjuncture catered to the northern ports' (and especially Smyrna's) increasing importance, thus establishing the predominance of this zone in the region's sea-borne trade. In the late eighteenth century, when European factories began to desert the Levant—because of disruptions in Mediterranean trade caused by continuous wars and blockades, the increasing exactions of local rulers, the attractions of the Cape route, and the greater profits to be derived from investment in other parts of the globe—Levantine merchants were successful in taking over their position, with the names and trading connections of the European houses. In the first half of the nineteenth century,
they were to install their own agents in the metropolitan centers of production, and found the Greek, Syrian, and Armenian communities in England and elsewhere. The region was effectively embedded into the new networks of commerce and trade after the resolution of the disarray caused by the Greek War of Independence, and the Egyptian occupation of Syria was resolved in favor of the imperial bureaucracy. One of the indices of this effective incorporation was the steep rise in the tonnage of shipping entering the Levantine ports: Between 1830 and 1913, in the case of Alexandria it increased from 140 to 3,500, from 40 to 1,700 in Beirut, and from 100 to 2,200 in Izmir.

Our first task, then, was to chart the economic growth of these cities over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We have done this through an examination of the trade and (when relevant) production data. For the most part we found the Kondratieff cycles useful for categorizing the periodicities of this economic expansion. Specifically, the B-phases (i.e., 1820-45 and 1873-96) corresponded to periods of faster growth of imports than exports, while the reverse was true for the A-phases. The most rapid expansion occurred, in all sites, during the mid-Victorian boom of the 1850's and 1860's. The presence of these periodic reversals are taken as indicators of the integration of these port cities into the global networks and processes. Their explanation, on the other hand, closely follows the realignment of forces in the world-economy. For example, imports surged when core areas were in search of new outlets for their accumulated commodities, whereas exports picked up when Britain in the mid-nineteenth century was concerned with finding cheap raw materials and food for its industrial expansion. In all instances it is possible to observe a heavy and concerted participation by local merchants in the networks that linked the ports to the core areas of the capitalist world-economy. In other words, the expansion in trade did not only benefit foreign merchants and merchant houses. One of our provisional conclusions, then, was that the local merchants were among the primary beneficiaries of economic expansion.
These merchants, however, were a new breed compared to the old group of “imperial” merchants who had played a crucial role in the overall working of the traditional economic system. Furthermore, contrary to the established notions about their status, their fortunes were not necessarily tied to those of foreign capital all the time. In other words, it would be inadequate to portray them as mere appendages of foreign capital (as compradores) in their respective localities.

A proposition related to economic expansion concerns population growth. As opposed to the Latin American and African experiences in urbanization, both of which gained a considerable momentum only during the second half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire, like other Asian civilizations, was already highly urbanized: At the turn of the nineteenth century, a relatively large proportion of the population (10% in Egypt, circa 20% in Syria and Anatolia) lived in towns of over 10,000. Between 1830 and the Great War, the demographic growth in the region was close to 1% per annum—that is, twice the world rate of growth—although the region as a whole exhibited a performance inferior to other regions to the West. Reflecting this trend, the port cities under consideration witnessed a meteoric rise in their population figures. Trieste’s population, for instance, increased from 30,000 in 1800 to 100,000 in 1860, and 250,000 before the War; Salonika increased from 50,000 in 1870 to 130,000 in 1905. Beirut was a small town of no distinction in the 1830’s, with a population of 10,000; by 1900, it had reached 120,000. Alexandria, resuscitated by Mohammad Ali, was a metropolis of 330,000 in 1900. Izmir’s population doubled between the 1830’s and 1870’s to 200,000. Both Patras and Trabzon, however, lost relative ground after the mid-century boom, for reasons already mentioned. On the eve of the Great War, an extremely high proportion of the region’s population, approximately 25%, was living in towns, as opposed to 4.2% in Africa and 14.4% in Latin America. Yet, as can be surmised, the phenomenal demographic growth in these seaports did not represent a corresponding rise in the overall rate of urbanization in the region, for they were partly achieved at the expense of other
towns. Whereas the gradual decline of the traditional handicrafts and increasing rural security kept the growth of inland cities under control, the growing share of the sea-borne trade within the overall trade of the Empire helped to shift the center of gravity toward these port cities.

IV.

All these cities reflected the ethnic and religious richness of the Eastern Mediterranean, and their population mix became even more complicated as a result of immigration, from their hinterlands, from Greek islands, and of the nationals of core powers. A complex ethnic division of labor ensued, but it is difficult to ascertain at the moment whether class formation developed along ethnically uniform lines. This is certainly an important item in the research, for it has direct bearing on the cultural and political choices of merchant and professional groups. We might also mention that imperial rivalry—especially after the 1870's—implied the wooing of ethnic groups by British, French, and German political and cultural agents. Itself a factor in the definition of ethnic identity, the formation of colonial agencies—mostly in the form of missions, schools, and cultural associations—came to have an impact on the political choices of the various groups and shaped their projects concerning the state.

Once we establish the substantive basis of the rise of new groups in port cities, we will move forward with the assumption that these groups voiced their demands relating to the conduct of economic relations with the outside and to administrative and legal affairs inside the Empire. This assumption is supported by the appearance of a plethora of political movements and projects voiced basically by groups domiciled in these port cities. To start with, Salonika took the central stage during the second half of the century when contending projects about the future of the region were brought to the agenda. Nationalist sentiments of the Slavic component of the population grew side by side with the reformist prescriptions of the
Turkish opposition to the Sublime Porte. Indeed, being a minority in such a milieu found expression in Young Turks' ideological cosmos as the principles of a constitutionalist regime, and of equality of all races cohabiting within the Empire. Alexandria became the hotbed of political agitation for Syrian refugee intellectuals, who were warmly welcomed by the British after the dismantlement of the Empire seemed like an unavoidable outcome to the authorities at Whitehall. The Greek population of Trabzon, after entertaining the idea of becoming a province of the newly created Greek Empire, later had to opt for reviving the Pontus Empire when the former seemed like a distant option. Beirut, as the home of Christian intellectuals, shifted between subscribing to the "decentralization" project of the dissidents of the Porte and to a program of separatism—either as an independent political unit or as a mandate. Izmir was regarded by the Greek minority as the center of a greater "Hellas" project, and Trieste remained a bone of contention between the Italian and Austrian political classes.

The manner in which economic presence was translated into political demands depended on a number of factors: First among them was the timing and the cyclical evolution of the economic role of the city. Determinant though the periodicities and the geographic expansion of the world-economy were on their individual trajectories, the paths travelled by these seaports depended to a great extent on their specific characteristics and on their relations with the hinterland from which they were approwvisioned. Salonika's exports came from almost all of Macedonia. Yet it also was an industrial town. Apart from its traditional manufactures of cloth and carpets, during this period silk-weaving, glass-blowing, and the manufacture of soap and faience were added to its repertoire. Partly due to its manufacturing background, Salonika did not experience the kind of slowdown, or even the demise, that its counterparts had to face beginning from the last quarter of the century. Trabzon's seaborne trade was also nourished by a multiplicity of sources. Commodities channelled through the Iranian
transit trade and the coastal trade along the Black Sea were supplemented by the products of the East Anatolian hinterland. Yet the changing routes of transit trade and the fierce competition of Samsun (another port city to the west of Trabzon) for export trade considerably weakened its position as a seaport. Izmir’s maritime trade soared during the second half of the century, when its hinterland was rendered easily accessible through railroadization. However, the completion of the Anatolian railway at the turn of the century diverted a significant volume of trade from Izmir to Istanbul, hence rendering the former’s position quite fragile. In a similar vein, after suffering a reversal of the phenomenal rise in its trade during the mid-century boom, Beirut’s fate was sealed when silk cultivation in Mount Lebanon was given a fatal blow during the War. The rise of new seaports along the Syrian littoral also was influential in tapping the hinterland to which Beirut had access in the past. The position of Trieste was also challenged by Fiume, a development that deprived the city in 1891 of its privilege of being a free port—a privilege that had been bestowed by Charles VI in 1719. When the city was taken over by Italy in 1918, and was eventually cut off from its “natural” hinterland, it lost most of its maritime trade. Alexandria, on the other hand, was able to hold its grip on its hinterland and withstand, for some time at least, the pressures emanating from Port Said’s accession to a key position in the region, thanks to the heavy engagement of its trading community in the cotton-growing hinterland. In this way, it was able to avoid a drastic demise in its position. An analysis of the symbiotic relationship between these trading ports and their hinterlands hence provides us with clues as to how the political projects about the future of these areas were formulated and how these designs changed, depending on the regional context within which these political demands found their proper contours.

Equally important were the relations of these port cities with the various political centers (i.e., the Sublime Porte, the local rulers or contenders for imperial/local power, and the represen-
tatives of European nations). As supervisors of the functioning of Western institutions (like the commercial courts) and as the protectors of minorities, European diplomats had an important voice in the administration of these cities. This is illustrated by the willingness of great powers to intervene in the affairs of these cities, if necessary, militarily, as in Beirut in 1860 in order to protect the Christian population, in Salonika in 1876 in favor of the Slavs, and in Alexandria in 1882. On the other hand, the Ottoman grip was more effective than some accounts would have us believe. The plurality of seats of power to which these cities could have recourse rendered the indigenous political projects even more diverse. We know that the historical outcome was a series of independent nation-states, but it is by no means certain that the bourgeoisies themselves would not have preferred some other outcome—perhaps city-states under Great Power protection. In the case of the Arab provinces, the final outcome was the making of the Great Powers, albeit mostly in harmony with their informal spheres of interest. In the case of Alexandria, opposition to the opening of the Suez Canal and the British promotion of Port Said forced the Alexandrian community more toward Cairo, and via Cairo to the Sublime Porte. After nearly a century of complete autonomy, pro-Ottoman sentiments gained wide currency under British rule.

The second factor related to social considerations, most importantly to the ethnic membership of the mercantile groups that mediated the passage from economic prominence to political pressure. Enveloping huge polyglot domains, the Empire was transformed in the conceptions of its subjects and in the designs of the Great Powers vying over it into a potential “multinational” empire under the growing influence of the ideology of nationalism. In tandem with the elan of the century, in order to define a peoplehood, solidarities of ethnic, linguistic, territorial, and religious origin were revived, invented, advocated, and championed in all quarters of the empire—not necessarily in support of claims to independent nation-states. Yet only a few among the potential groups that
nourished and voiced such ambitions succeeded in attaining their professed goals. Among the mosaic pattern of peoples, some gained prominence at the expense of others. Tracing the complex set of processes that gave birth to such an outcome will also be explored.

Thirdly, the presence/absence, creation/destruction of channels of communication between the economic and political spheres of action will have to be investigated. For it was through such means that class consciousness of these groups took shape and was channeled toward political ends. Under this heading the development of press, cultural associations, and municipal and wider-ranging political organizations will have to be studied. Here again, the region already had a rich cultural heritage that was geographically widespread and closely linked to the opulence of the groups in charge of such activities: the Armenians, who were in charge of the trade networks leading to Persia, Central Asia, and India; the Christians of Aleppo, who profited largely from the city’s opulence from the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century trade; the “conquering Greek Orthodox merchants,” who prospered from shipping and commerce in the eastern Mediterranean; and the Maronites of Lebanon, enriched by the cultivation of silk. They all pioneered the foundation of schools, financed and engaged in the revival of cultural activities, sent their sons to schools abroad, and established connections with the scholarly and ecclesiastical authorities of the Western world. There was an intellectual change produced by new schools, the printing press and newspapers, the translation of books from English or French, and the increasing publication of books, including many Muslim classics. The number of newspapers and journals published only in French throughout this period in the Levant totaled some 700. Among the inhabitants of these cities, new ideas circulated about how society should be organized. New municipal bodies came into being, as in the case of Alexandria. All these will provide us with the concrete manifestations of the political consciousness we impute to the new “bourgeois” group.
Although many fields of inquiry have grown out of the world-systems perspective over the last ten years, state formation/political transformation in the periphery has not yet been adequately tackled. Our research aims to illuminate this area. When completed, it will provide a perspective informed by a long-term approach to such transformations over a large part of the European periphery. It will attempt to transcend the duality of so-called internal and external factors posed by the earlier versions of the dependency theory. It will also hope to shed light on theories of state formation, mostly deriving from modernization theory, through a concrete analysis of historical cases. Our explicit emphasis on the world context as shaping the formation of bourgeois groups and their political projects will serve to relativize the standard accounts of state construction. Rather than posing an artificial separation between internal and external factors or ascribing the presence/absence of certain developments respectively to external stimuli or to inherent flaws, we will demonstrate that political transformations in the Eastern Mediterranean were part and parcel of structural reorganizations that followed upon the closer integration of this area into the world-economy.

References


