Mediterranean Connections: The Circulation of Municipal Knowledge and Practices at the Time of the Ottoman Reforms, c. 1830-1910

Nora Lafi

Mediterranean connections: the circulation of municipal knowledge and practices at the time of the Ottoman reforms, c.1830-1910 [1]

LAFI Nora (Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin, ZMO-BMBF)

Draft version of a chapter published in ***ANOTHER GLOBAL CITY Historical Explorations into the Transnational Municipal Moment, 1850-2000***, Saunier (Pierre-Yves) Ewen (Shane) (Ed.) (2008), 242p., p.135-150.

The question of the circulation of municipal knowledge has benefited in the last decade from a renewed historiographical attention.[2] The result of this new tendency in reading municipal history between Europe and North America is not only a new perception of the interactions between municipalities and urban societies, but also a renewed consideration of the diffusion of a local democratic governance and of the relationship between a bureaucratic apparatus and both urban space and the urban society. Methodologically, the main achievement might be the illustration of new ways of practising crossed history, and of collective new paths towards a common global history of cities. But this globalized urban history also has to confront the world in its spatial extension, in order to discuss some conventional wisdoms about circulatory patterns, models, influences and, most of all, the relationship to modernity, conceived here as a passage from old-regime structures to something representing democracy. If discussions largely remain centred within the limits of the Western World as it is generally perceived, and the circulation of urban knowledge read though the lens of a limited geographical horizon, there can be no true global history.

---

[1] This research was made possible thanks to the support of the *Deutsche Forschung Gemeinschaft* (DFG).
[2] Bibliographical overview in Saunier (Pierre-Yves) 'La toile municipale aux XIX° et XX° siècles : un panorama transnational vu d'Europe', *Urban History Review/Revue d'Histoire Urbaine*, vol.XXXIV, n.2, 2006, p.163-176.

If we accept that a crucial current stake is to confront these new trends in urban history with the dominant discourses on the so called Non-Western World, it seems that studying the Ottoman Empire could be one of the new frontiers for research. It can provide the experimental conditions to go beyond simplified interpretations from an "importation" model and invent a new globalized urban history, which integrates complex considerations of this long-held fuzzy periphery into its methodologies. Thus, the aim of this chapter is to re-assess the conventional wisdom that municipal reforms in the Ottoman Empire were only the result of imported ideas and techniques from Western Europe.

This dynamic integration of the peripheries into global history, a programme that responds to converging suggestions in present research, is not only a way to study "subaltern" areas with new instruments, but also a new trajectory in constructing the global paradigm, then.[3] It is no longer necessary for discussions on universal history, like at the time of Croce or Meineke, or even for chronological journeys through the conceptual minefield of world economy, but surely for the insertion of so-called peripheral spaces into the developing global analysis.[4] This ongoing *aggiornamento*, mainly based upon a new vision of China, India and the Islamic World might, of course, contest the very core of the funding paradigms, but is the only way to go beyond the ideological ambiguities carried by world history and defied by global history. But geographical enthusiasm is insufficient to invent new theoretical grounds. Global history is global only when its method allows the enactment of a comparative approach that goes

[3] Saunier (Pierre-Yves), « Circulations, connexions et espaces transnationaux », *Genèses*, 57, 2004, p. 110-126. Middell (Matthias) (Ed.), *Globalisierung und Weltgeschichtsschreibung*, Leipzig 2003. Freitag (Ulrike) Von Oppen (Achim), *Translokalität als ein Zugang zur Geschichte globaler Verflechtungen*, http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/forum/type=artikel&id=632&view=print
[4] Gozzini (Giovanni), "Dalla *Weltgeschichte* alla *World History*: percorsi storiografici attorno al concetto di globale", *Contemporanea*, 2004, 1, p. 3-37.

beyond prejudices. It requires less a simple universal explanation of the function of all human societies, than a comparative methodology.[5]

In a Mediterranean context, the stake is mainly to reconsider our perception of the circulation of ideas that enabled (or constrained) the modernisation of societies during the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The subliminal starting point (but sometimes enounced very explicitly) is that circulations occurred from North to South and West to East. The "Mediterranean Crossings" hypothesis I will explore in this chapter, and illustrate with the case of the urban reforms in the Ottoman Empire, is that circulations were more complex, while modernity, even when imported in its exact form, was interacting dynamically with societies in which processes of change were already in process.

The study of circulations in a Mediterranean case is a minefield. It provides opportunities not only to understand the circulation of ideas between different cultures, but also to confront the impact of colonialism and imperialism. The very vision of modernity being prejudiced by these issues, the stake of the promotion of a renewed global history involves a reconsideration of two centuries of unequal circulations and, ultimately, a different reading of the fate of modernity in "subaltern" societies. The study of the Ottoman Empire shows that circulations were more complex than a translation of knowledge from 'export' to 'import' societies. It is only with a discussion of ideas on circulation that the complexity of these societies can undo this conventional "reception" mode.

The Ottoman Empire is particularly adapted to such a historiographical programme. On the one hand, the concept of Empire has recently aroused new developments in global and

---

[5] Capuzzo (Paolo) Vezzosi (Elisabetta), "Traiettorie della World History", *Contemporanea*, 2005, 1, p. 105-133.

imperial history.[6] These have revisited the canonical empires, or developed comparative

imperial questions between the Russian, the Habsburg and the Ottoman, bringing about new

insights into the treatment of local characters, the dynamics of integration and assimilation,

the importance of circulation as a social glue for imperial constructions, and the governance

of diversity. As for the Ottoman case, a whole new generation of scholars is especially keen to

discuss the complex interaction between local and global, and to reach beyond nation and

religion as central paradigms.[7] This is not to suggest that these notions are irrelevant.[8] Yet, as

they turn our eyes to specificities and peculiarities, they sometimes mask the dynamics of the

circulation of ideas associated with modernity. This insistence on cultural specificities also

contributed to the conceptual isolation of the Ottoman region, despite Franz Rosenthal's

proposals for a firm inscription of Muslim societies into World History as early as 1952.[9]

This isolation has had a very effective sidekick with the 'decline theory'. Certainly, the

Ottoman Empire's difficulties were a major opportunity for European powers to export their

idea of modernity, together with their geopolitical domination. But this alleged Ottoman

decline has for too long been seen as masking European imperialism. In 1910, in spite of

important territorial losses under the appetite of some European powers, the Empire's sudden

disappearance was not envisaged. It is blunt teleology to read the history of the Empire at the

light of its sudden disappearance triggered by the First World War. This has led to a

---

[6] Hall (Catherine), *Civilizing Subjects. Colony and Metropole in the English imagination (1830-1867)*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2002, 556 p; Ballantyne (T.), "Empire, Knowledge and Culture: from Proto-Globalization to modern Globalization" in Hopkins (Anthony), *Globalization in World History*, New-York, Norton & Company, 2002, Subrahmanyam (Sanjay), *Explorations in Connected History*, Oxford University Press, 2005, 250 p.

[7] Horowitz (Richard), "International Law and State Transformation in China, Siam and the Ottoman Empire during the Nineteenth c.", *Journal of World History*, 2005, 15-4, p. 445-486; Faroqhi (Suraiya), *Approaching Ottoman History*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 262 p.

[8] Choueiri (Youssef), *Modern Arab Historiography. Historical discourse and the nation-state*, London, Routledge, 2003, 239 p.

[9] Rosenthal (Franz), *A History of Muslim Historiography*, Leiden, Brill, 1952, 558 p. See also: Hodgson (Marshall), "The role of Islam in World History", *International Journal of Middle-East Studies*, 1970, I-2, p. 99-123.

disparaging view of the Empire's modernisation programme, the *Tanzimat* process, enacted between 1830 and 1910. On the contrary, this modernisation programme is an important occasion for the historian to integrate a periphery, marked by its convergence with the main industrial West, into a more complex vision of the circulation of the modernity paradigm. The very vision of modernity might be reopened by such perspective, which considers that several competing visions interacted.

The conjunction of these different views has resulted in a paradigm of the Ottoman city as irreducible by essence to any other reality. This has prevented specialists from the Arab imperial provinces from confronting other historiographies. The city was Ottoman *in se*, and met modernity by importing some European characteristics. Even important works such as *The Ottoman City between East and West*, do not really complete the aim of freeing the Ottoman urban history from the burden of the East/West dichotomy [10]. A way to better understand modernity is to know what came before. In the case of the Ottoman Empire, the characterization of what presaged modernity is unclear. Until recently, no one seemed to accept using concepts elaborated elsewhere to describe the Ottoman "old-regime". However, its study provides a way to better understand the rhetoric of belonging in the Empire, the modalities of both central and local governance, the role of the notables and the customization of imperial power to rule plurality and diversity. [11]

Ottoman municipal reforms have something to deliver here, as a moment when an established regime of urban governance interacted with reformist impulses coming from Istanbul, but

---

[10] Eldem (Edhem) Goffman (Daniel) Masters (Bruce), *The Ottoman City between East and West,* Cambridge University Press, 1999, 244 p; Raymond (André), *Grandes villes arabes à l'époque ottomane*, Paris, Sinbad, 1985, 389p.

[11] Salzmann (Ariel), *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire. Rival Paths to the Modern State*, Leiden, Brill, 2004. See also: Lafi (Nora), *Une ville du Maghreb entre ancien régime et réformes ottomanes*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002, 305p.

including a detour by municipal experiments in foreign lands. This process, itself complex and not reducible to a one-way journey, induced a change in the urban system, the analysis of which requires a multi-scale focus on the effects of the circulation of reformist ideas. Accordingly, this chapter focuses not only on circulations between the Empire and the rest of the world, but also within the Empire, at various scales, from general to local. What will be focused on, with reference to different case studies, from North Africa to the Middle-East, is the local implementation of general reformist impulses, and most of all their dynamic relationship with previously existing forms of urban government. In reassessing the existence and substance of an urban old-regime, one can not only discuss the "import" paradigm (and then the relationship to the "West") but also reflect on the very nature of society, thanks to the study of an often neglected element: the urban civic sphere. The stake today is not to contest the importance of the idea of nation or of religion in societies, which is of course central, but to reinsert the study of so-called "non-western" societies into a global history that is global not only in its geographical extent, but also, and mainly, by its use of global concepts, in the study of circulations.

The Ottoman municipal reforms in historical context

The *Tanzimat* period, starting in the 1830s, is a key age in the study of the Ottoman Empire. Paradoxically seen as a last desperate attempt to save bits and pieces from the wreckage, or as a true reformation movement aiming at administrative modernity, the *Tanzimat* are generally considered an importation into the Ottoman Empire of European administrative and bureaucratic solutions. [12] But the *Tanzimat* can also be read in a more strictly Ottoman chronology: they came after both the reformist impulses (mainly in the military organisation) of the *nizan-i-cedid* period (under the reign of Sultan Selim III (1789-1807)) and the troubled

---

[12] Mantran (Robert) (Ed.), *Histoire de l'Empire Ottoman*, Paris, Fayard, 1989, 810p.

period of the beginning of the reign of Mahmud II (1808-1839), with constant clashes between conservative forces and reformers. The *Tanzimat*, then, continue a trend in Ottoman history and need to be read in the Empire's historical context, not as a mere mirror of external influences. While some of their features came externally, they initially emerged from an internal demand. There again, one must not fall under the spell of 'decline theory' and read the entire Ottoman history in the light of its final moments, where external pressures might have been much stronger than any internal logic. Be it in the military domain, with the creation of artillery schools; in the economy, with important fiscal reforms; or in the central administration, with ministerial reorganisations, the European installation is generally underlined. The urban reforms are also conventionally read in this intellectual frame. The objective of this paper is in no way to deny their European aspects. But a dynamic reading of the so-called "receptive" societies helps to complete the analysis of the journeys of possible "models".

Before the *Tanzimat* reforms, cities were ruled according to an old-regime schema characterised by the existence of privileges, the dominant role of traditional notables, and the powers of the confessional communities and guilds. All Ottoman towns were provided with an old-regime style of urban government, generally in the hands of the mercantile notability and the most powerful guilds, which met in a civic assembly, at the head of which was generally a "chief of town" (*sheikh al-bilâd, sheikh al-madîna, naqîb al-ashrâf...*) This urban administration was responsible for public order, markets and building supervision, taxation, and also symbolically represented the civic corps before the representative of the central imperial power.

This scheme had many different forms according to the specific place.[13] But the gist was that the individual was defined according to his sense of belonging to certain units: the confessional, professional, family, and sometimes tribal. His place in, and relation to, society depended on this sense of belonging. Both local traditions and many strata of imperial recognition of local situations conferred different privileges to certain professions, to certain families, to the members of certain confessional communities, and to certain cities. These private laws (i.e. not universal but designed to differentiate individuals according to specific criteria) constituted the core of old-regime and the corpus of rules for urban government. This corpus was the result of an accumulative logic, and did not bear marks of a search for a rational division of tasks and competences on a uniform basis. In fact, the competences of the various instances were sometimes contradictory, as they might be found to take their cue from specific conflicts and agreements that took place decades or even centuries ago. Typically in this old-regime urban scheme, a specific guild might have been granted a privilege (fiscal, professional, civic) in the XVIIth century following a conflict, and still reclaim its application in the XIXth century.

In every provincial capital, a governor represented the imperial power and dealt with this scheme according to Istanbul's instructions and to the tradition of mediation and negotiation with local élites. There was no uniform urban administration at the Imperial scale, and the Empire adapted to every local situation according to a logic of negotiation with local bodies. This does not mean that there was no organisation; just that it was made under a specific urban governance regime, It was in this context that the *Tanzimat* reforms were implemented. They were part of the Ottoman state's effort to introduce a new rationality into its

---

[13] For studies on Tunis, Jerusalem, Rhodes, Damascus, Beirut, see : Lafi (Nora) (Ed.), *Municipalités méditerranéennes. Les réformes urbaines ottomanes au miroir d'une histoire comparée*, Berlin, K. Schwarz, 2005, 373p. In Europe too at this time there was a great diversity of local forms of urban government.

administration. One can read the whole movement as a passage from old-regime to administrative modernity, in the introduction of general rules instead of specific privileges.

The *Tanzimat* reforms began as early as the 1830s with reforms to the military, under the reign of Sultan Mahmud II. Indeed, this was a period in which very few European states had enacted, or were enacting, similarly profound changes to their institutional and administrative structures. Sultan Abdul-Majid I's *Gülhane Hatt I Sharif* Edict of 1839, for instance, contained important measures that contributed towards social and religious equality. The *Hatt I Humayun* edict of 1856 that allowed non-Muslims to become civil servants,[14] and the *Dustur* (constitution) of 1876 by Sultan Abdul-Hamid II, were similar milestones on the *Tanzimat* trail.

Soon thereafter, though, the constitution was suspended and the Empire experienced several decades of inertia in the implementation of a new administrative scheme. The initial impulses, themselves still ambiguous in the constitution of an administrative modernity and a new definition of the self in its relation to religious, professional and family belongings, were contrasted by a politics of reaction. In interpreting this period, the conventional wisdom, shared by several generations of historians, is that the reforms were the product of external influences.[15] Generally, the phenomenon is seen as a top-down one, with reformist impulses coming from Europe, irrigating the central administration in Istanbul and then the various parts of the Empire.

---

[14] Aristarchi Bey (Grégoire), *Législation ottomane ou recueil des lois, règlements, ordonnances, traits, capitulations et autres documents officiels de l'Empire Ottoman*, Constantinople, Nicolaïdes, 1873, 464 p.
[15] See, for example: Matran, *cit*.

A new generation of Turkish scholars has introduced new variables into this discourse, proposing a richer vision of the Ottoman society before and during the reforms.[16] They have made it possible to contextualise Ottoman municipal reforms, by studying the administrative and social evolution of the Empire.[17] We are now more familiar with the roots of the Ottoman reforms, a key point in the journey of Ottoman modernity.[18] In this context, the analysis of municipal reforms can sketch new directions.

Questioning the reformist narrative

Turkish historiography has accepted the reading of the Ottoman urban reforms through the prism of an imported European-style of municipal government. Though such an explanation clearly challenged Turkish nationalism, most of the existing Turkish literature illustrates the *Tanzimat* as the application into the Empire of 'Made in Europe' measures. Ilber Ortaylı, one of the most authoritative Turkish historians, insists on the importance of Istanbul as an Ottoman laboratory for the implementation of European-style municipal reforms, to then be spread throughout the Empire.[19] The narrative is very effective. Firstly, an experimental phase takes place in Istanbul's Galata district, starting in 1857. This follows three years of study by a reform commission, and is universally described as the application of municipal reforms on a European model to a very particular corner of the Empire, mostly populated by non-Turks.[20] Secondly, an experimental phase devolves to a series of test cities during the 1860s and early

---

[16] Canbakal (Hülya), *Society and Politics in an Ottoman Town: 'Ayntâb in the 17th century*, Leiden, Brill, 2007, 213 p.; Terzibaşoğlu (Yücel), "Land Disputes and Ethno-Politics: North-western Anatolia, 1877-1912" in *Ethno-Nationality, Property Rights in Land and Territorial Sovereignty in Historical Perspective* (ed. by S. Engerman and J. Metzer), 2004, Routledge, London.

[17] See, for example: Faroqhi (Suraiya) Mc Gowan (Bruce) Quataert (Donald) Pamuk (Sevket), *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, vol. II, 1600-1914*, Cambridge University Press, 1994, 1010 p.

[18] Black (Cyril) Brown (Carl) (dir.), *Modernization in the Middle-East*, Princeton, Darwin, 1992, 418 p.

[19] Ilber Ortaylı, *Tanzimat Devrinde Osmanlı Mahallî Idareleri (1840-1880)*, Ankara, 2000. See also: Ilber Ortaylı, *Tanzimattan Cumhuriyete Yerel Yönetim Gelenegi*, Ankara, Hil Yayin, 1985 ; Ilber Ortaylı, *Osmanlı Imparatorluğu'nda. Iktisadî ve sosyal değişim*, Ankara, 2000, 2 vol., 553 p. and Vecdi Akyüz and Seyfettin ünlü (Eds.), *Sehir Ve Yerel Yönetimler*, Istanbul, 1996.

[20] Rosenthal (Steven), "Foreigners and Municipal Reforms in Istanbul: 1855-1865", *IJMES*, 1980, 11-2, p. 227-25.

1870s. Thirdly, the reforms are generalized across the whole Empire with the 1864 provincial Law and the 1877 municipal Law.[21] The latter created the urban municipalities as such, with a municipal council elected by male Ottoman tax-paying landowners, a mayor, and a fiscal system. Municipalities were granted important powers, from building rights to hygiene, and from water distribution to education.[22]

This chronology of the different steps of the local reforms corresponds to important phases in the implementation of the municipal reforms, and, in general, in the modernisation of the Ottoman urban administration scheme. Legally, it sums up most of the main measures. But its basic assumptions can be discussed, beginning with the very existence of a European model that would have served as the matrix of Ottoman municipal reform. The first thing to discuss is Europe. Europe was not a homogeneity of municipal structures and no European 'model' was available in the 1850s, between a French dictatorship modernising Paris thanks to the submission of the municipality to the State order of Prefect Haussmann, an Italian or German panorama in which the construction of regional States often contested the prerogatives of the municipalities, a United Kingdom in which the liberal definition of politics and administration is embedded into the frame of old regime and the rest of the continent where after the 1848 events the situation is often tensed and confused and where reaction has often cancelled many of the reforms passed in the dynamic of the 1848 spirit.[23] As for local democracy, the European example and the persistence of the qualification of electors by property illustrate the difficulties of implementing it.

---

[21] See: Ergin (Osman Nuri), *Mecelle-I Umûr-i Belediyye*, Istanbul, 1995(1st edition 1914-1922), 8 vol, vol. 1, p. 1658-1672. See also: Young (George), *Corps de droit ottoman*, Paris, 1905, vol. 1, p. 69-84.
[22] Lafi (Nora) (Ed.)*, cit.*
[23] See : Bocquet (Denis), « De la municipalité d'Ancien régime à la municipalité italienne », in Lafi (Ed), *cit.*, p. 51-70.

On the other hand, the fact that Galata was a quarter with a large Greek and "European" population was not such an exception in the Empire. Europe was not a block of exportable modernity, then, and the Empire was not a block of 'indigenous' homogeneity in the outback, with islands of diversity where modernity could be tested.

Of course, this does not mean that no "European" knowledge was used in the Empire. Far from it; municipal European knowledge did indeed circulate, as did publications and experts. The Ottoman government of 1854 was also fascinated by Haussmann's Paris, just like so many other governments and social elites in the world.[24] But once this fascination is attested, there remains the question of how it was turned into material to be used in the Ottoman context.

During the era of the reforms, Ottomans did indeed send many fact finding missions to Europe. The organization of the Prussian Army, for example, was studied carefully, from the time of Azmi Efendi, Ottoman Ambassador in Berlin (1790-1792), to the middle of the nineteenth century.[25] Many European experts were also invited to teach in the newly created Ottoman Artillery schools, or hired as officers in the Ottoman Army. The Ottomans also collected information on European cities, particularly their administrative and fiscal systems. The interest of Mehmet Said, an early nineteenth century Ottoman traveller to the German and Hanseatic free cities, is testament of an early attention to what was happening in Europe's cities.[26] During the *Tanzimat*, several fact finding parties were sent to Europe, while ambassadors were required to write reports about urban reforms so that that their memos could be read by Istanbul's reform commissions members. Several European experts and

---

[24] Among many relevant publications, Radovanovic (Elisa), *Buenos Aires, Ciudad Moderna (1880-1910)*, Buenos Aires, Banchik, 2002, 192 p.

[25] Lewis (Bernard), *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982, 350 p., p. 207.

[26] Ibid, p. 213.

technicians were also hired to work in many cities of the Empire. The figure of the French or Italian engineer working in an Ottoman city is a classic image of the age. Public works, cartography, cadastral surveys, medicine, education were the main domains of this collaboration. The mapping of Ottoman cities was often commissioned to French or Italian cartographers. As for water and sewerage, it was common to hire French engineers from the *Ponts et Chaussées* to serve in Ottoman cities during the second half of the nineteenth century. And many European engineers also worked privately in the Empire, proposing public works projects or submitting proposals to obtain the concession of a public service.

Europeans were not only looking after the Empire as a market. Indigenous reform texts were translated into European languages and discussed in European specialized journals. George Young's or Démétrius Aristarchi's efforts to collect comprehensive data on the Ottoman legislation during the final third of the nineteenth century were part of this process, just like the many accounts of the Ottoman reforms published throughout Europe.[27] In his *Letters on Turkey* (1856), the French speaking writer Jean Henri Abdolonyme Ubicini provides a detailed account of the Ottoman modernization effort, from fiscal to education policy. He is very keen to describe the progress of urban reforms and gives credit to the Ottoman government for a rationale modernity effort of the old urban governance scheme.[28] In France, Germany, Great-Britain and Italy, great attention was shown to what was happening in the Empire's cities. In the best colonial science fashion, Ottoman urban knowledge was crucial for European powers because of their aspirations to command and conquer the region. When Laurent-Charles Féraud wrote a detailed account on Tripoli during the 1880s, he acted as

---

[27] As Aristarchi, an Ottoman high ranking government officer, of Greek identity and cosmopolitan culture, states in his introduction to his *Législation Ottomane* of 1873, his work is intended not only for the chancelleries working in the Empire, but also, in a perspective of compared law, for the public of the *Revue de Droit International et de Législation comparée*, or the *Zeitschrift für auslandisches Recht*. Aristarchi, p. VII.

[28] Ubicini (M.A.), *Letters on Turkey*, London, John Murray, 1856, 2 vol., 358-450 p. On Municipalities: vol. 2 p. 182-193.

much as an informant of the military secret service as an historian and erudite.[29] The logic was the same for Italian geographers in Asia Minor. A specific study investigation of this subject still has to be done, but there are clues of how the Ottoman urban governance experience has been an inspiration in newly conquered European Mediterranean colonies.[30]

This two-way circulation bore strong ambiguities: it was rarely a circulation between equal partners, though the commissioning of a foreign expert for a precise task cannot be seen as a surrender to domination. Sometimes, too, in remote Arab provinces of the Maghreb or the Middle-East, when European consuls were a factor in the implementation of urban government reforms, these ambiguities were even stronger. The reforms they promoted were not necessarily modern, but were meant to reinforce the influence of European expatriates on the urban scene. Indeed, while Ottoman administrative modernisation was mainly meant to preserve these provinces from European imperial encroachment, European consuls resisted them and promoted the persistence of the old-regime organisation to keep their patronage network intact and effective. In Tunis, the modernisation drive was Ottoman, and the support for the old-regime was indeed European.[31] The attempt to create a reformed municipality was clearly fought by the French consul, who tried to maintain the old-regime system in order to deepen his influence and patronage on the local nobility. This is why in Tunis the reforms were only half applied: the mayor did not totally replace the *sheikh-al-medina* from the previous system.

---

[29] Féraud (Laurent-Charles), *Annales Tripolitaines (with an introduction by Nora Lafi)*, Saint-Denis, Bouchène, 2005, 437p.

[30] As late as 1912, for example, Italy applied the Ottoman rule in Rhodes: Bocquet (Denis), 'Une municipalité ottomane face au nationalisme et à la colonisation. Rhodes en 1912', in Lafi (Nora) (Ed.), *cit.*, p. 301-338.

[31] Lafi (Nora), "Les pouvoirs urbains à Tunis à la fin de l'époque ottomane : la persistance de l'ancien régime », in Lafi (Nora) (Ed.), *cit.*, p. 229-251.

Last but not least, the circulation about urban government reform experiments not only occurred between Europe and the Ottoman Empire. There were also interesting circulations of urban knowledge (including the type of municipal administration and the organisation of the municipal bureaux) between the Empire and newly independent or autonomous countries in its periphery. Studies in this field are still in the early stages, as historiographies have long been separated by dominant nationalist traditions. But there is a link between the definition of municipal urban government in Greece after independence and the Ottoman municipal reform experience. Greek notables in Istanbul were the key point of contact in this dual circulation.[32] There was also a definite link between Istanbul and the Egyptian reforms of the mid nineteenth-century, at a time when Egypt gained relative autonomy.[33] Greek and Egyptian urban notables both had strong Ottoman urban cultures, and were conversant with debates in Istanbul. Throughout the Empire, the leaders of urban communities also kept an eye on discussions about urban government in Greece, even after the loss of the Greek provinces. The mere presence of Ottoman Greek notables in almost every city of the Empire reinforced this inter-connectivity, just like the content of almanacs and newspapers.

There were also more existing and intriguing connections. Shortly after the beginning of the Meiji reforms in Japan in 1868, several delegations of Japanese observers were sent to Istanbul, as they were searching for their own way to shovel their old regime into modernity [34]. The Ottoman reforms were seen in Japan as a model, and the urban aspect of this question, including municipal affairs, was seen as an example of passage from traditional institution to administrative modernity. In return, Sultan Abdülhamid II sent a party of Ottoman

---

[32] See: Rosenthal, *cit*.

[33] Baer (Gabriel), *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969, 259 p. See also: Reimer (Michael), "Urban Government and Administration in Egypt (1805-1914), *Die Welt des Islams*, 1999, 39-3, p. 289-318.

[34] Esenbel (Selçuk) Chiharu (Inaba) (Eds.), *The rising Sun and the Turkish Crescent*, Istanbul, Bogaziçi University Press, 2003, 309 p;

administrators and scientists to Japan in 1889. The wreckage of the frigate *Ertugrul* on the shores of Wakayama in 1890, left most of the Ottoman representatives dead, but the existence of the mission is a clue that the Empire was looking for insights well beyond the Mediterranean rim.[35]

If Europe was thus a component of Ottoman urban government reforms, it was so in a far more complex way than has been hitherto suggested. On the one hand, documentation on what was happening elsewhere was part of the Ottoman governance, and it was included in a circulatory scheme that is not adequately summed up by the account of imported European experiments. On the other hand, urban reforms were genuine re-forms, that involved the revamping of something already existing, and not the creation ex-nihilo of something new. They came in the context of an articulated tradition of urban governance. The question of the Ottoman municipal reforms during the period 1854-1877 cannot be regarded as the example of a mere importation of a 'western' governing technique into an 'oriental' context, then. More satisfactorily, it was the attempt to impose a modernist reform (based upon a new definition of the individual and of civic rights) onto an old-regime frame. Reforms were in no way imported into a vacuum, but were adapted by local notables to suit local circumstances, as the following section will make it clear.

The Ottoman path to urban modernity: case studies

The reason for the Ottoman modernization effort was mainly to resist European domination. At a time when, from Tunis to Damascus, from the Balkans to Asia Minor, pushy European consuls tried to reinforce their dominance over urban communities (through such traditional

---

[35] See: Tetsuya (Sahara), "Municipal reforms in Japan and Turkey: the Belediye system of the Tanzimat and Municipal Laws in Meiji Japan", in *The Rising Sun… (op. cit.)*, p. 241-265. On such contacts, see also: Roussillon (Alain), *Identité et modernité. Voyageurs Egyptiens au Japon*, Paris, Sinbad, 2005, 249p.

ways as consular protection or the granting of 'private laws', exemptions and privileges),

Ottoman reforms attempted to counter this trend. Be it with a degree of European influence in

the shaping of administrative solutions, these reforms were part of a truly Ottoman process.

This assertion does not mean that the Ottoman Empire was homogeneous (it was even in its

very nature not to be so), but that there was a political agenda in Istanbul for reinforcing the

coherence of the Empire by granting the fidelity of local notables against attempts by

European consuls to attract them into the net of foreign patronage. A new definition of local

autonomy was the solution, in order to confirm the competences of local *élites* on their cities,

and also to reinforce the Ottoman character of such autonomy. It was also an occasion to

clarify the relationship between the instances of local autonomy and the central state,

represented locally by the governor. This process occurred in the century-old frame of

mediation between the central power and local *élites*, but introduced new organisational and

political principles in the pattern. The main aim of the municipal reforms might thus have

been to grant urban notables throughout the Empire with renewed civic prerogatives, in

exchange for a renewal of their allegiance to the Empire. This is why the Ottoman municipal

reforms have to be read as a negotiation between the centre and the periphery. The 1877 Law

was just the end of the process, crowning more than two decades of mediation,

experimentation, conflict and negotiation. It was the result of these mechanisms through

which Ottoman administrators and governors dealt with very different local situations.

In this process, the circulation of knowledge about urban governance inside the Empire was

crucial. The first step was to survey the local declensions of the Ottoman old-regime urban

governance.[36] Such documentation journeys were organised in the Balkans in the 1860s.

"After the Crimean War, the reformists felt a necessity for effective local administration. In

---

[36] Herzog (Christoph) and Motika (Raoul), "Orientalism 'alla turca': late 19th/early 20th c. Ottoman Voyages into the Muslim Outback", *Die Welt des Islams*, 2000, 40-2, p. 139-195.

1860, a special delegation, headed by the Grand Vezir, Kıbrıslı Mehmet Pasha, embarked on a four-month round trip to supervise the provincial reforms in the Balkans. In 1863, with the same purpose, special supervisors of local affairs were dispatched. They were charged with duties to implement improved measures requested by the local populace (…)".[37] A similar process was followed in the various provinces of the Empire, from the Middle-East to North-Africa. Not only was reform never implemented in a city without a previous documentation of local tradition, but the very 1877 Law was the result of two decades of crossed circulations between reformers (a group of statesmen close to the Sultan and a generation of governors), local notables and Istanbul legislators. This was quite logical: if the problem was how to retain the provinces, the solution was to negotiate a programme for implementing a local declension of administrative modernity with urban notables; so they could identify it as a way to preserve and reinforce their prerogatives as notables, merchants and land-owners. It was crucial to give them some guarantees that, in the best fashion, everything was changed so that nothing really changed: while old-regime notables were city rulers because of their belonging to a particular family, guild or community, they had to be convinced that they would still be city rulers under the reformed system, though henceforth because of their belonging to a fiscal class. In this process, the locality had as much redesigned the centre as the centre the locality.

The imperial circulation of facts and figures about urban government also took place through the movement of technicians, administrators and governors. The official gazette of the Empire was distributed to all provinces, and translated into local languages. In every city, local almanacs (*salname*) followed every step in the reforms, keeping lists of notables up-to-date and explaining the content of the reforms.[38] But urban notables were also anxious to send and

---

[37] Tetsuya (Sahara), *cit.,* p. 251.
[38] All major cities of the Empire were provided with a local almanac, that prove a terrific source for historians, as shown by Hanssen (Jens), "The origins of the municipal council in Beirut (1860-1908)", in Lafi (Ed), *Municipalités…*, p. 139-176.

collect their own information. They did not hesitate to write petitions to Istanbul when they felt that their prerogatives were under threat, or to send representatives to the capital city to make their claims in the appropriate way.[39] There was also an important peer-to-peer circulation of urban knowledge in the Empire. From city to city, notables wrote to each other to share information and coordinate their actions.[40]

Local and imperial archives show that the implementation of municipal reforms in Tripoli, in Ottoman North-Africa, resulted from a complex interaction between local and imperial actors.[41] The governor, Alî Pasha al-Jazayrî, the son of an Algiers urban notable in exile in Istanbul after the French occupation, was sent into the city by the Ottoman Imperial ministry of provincial affairs, first to study the old regime form of urban government[42] and then to negotiate the creation of a reformed municipality with the local notables. The aim for the imperial administrator was to reinforce the Empire's presence in a region coveted both by the French[43], the English[44] and the Italians. Signalling the vitality of the old-regime, the *sheikh al-bilâd* became mayor of the new municipality in 1867. Ottoman modernity in Tripoli, more than an importation, was first a confirmation and adaptation of the old-regime. After a series of conflicts, which were part of the mediation process for the accommodation of a modern administrative solution within a traditional frame, and in which Istanbul was called for decisions by various petitions of notables, the new municipality was the result, even before the promulgation of the 1877 Law, of a dynamic process in which the Ottoman path towards modernity was reflected through a combination of mediation, conflict and negotiation.

---

[39] The richness of the petition (Şikayet) dossier in the central archives of the Ottoman Empire (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi) in Istanbul illustrates this matter of facts.

[40] See, for example, the dossier of the coordination between 17 municipalities of the Empire for the equipment in the 1880s of local fire brigades with German pumps, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Cevdet Belediye

[41] In Istanbul: Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Dossier Trablus al-Gharb. In Tripoli: National Libyan Archives, dossier *Baladiyya*.

[42] A civic assembly of merchants - *jamâ'a al-bilâd*- with a chief of the town -*sheikh al-bilâd*- at its head. See Lafi, *Une ville…, op. cit*.

[43] France seized Ottoman Algeria between 1830 and 1848 and was attempting the same in Ottoman Tunisia.

[44] England was looking for a link between the Mediterranean, the *bilâd al-Sûdan* and the Indian Ocean at a time before they had seized Egypt.

In Tripoli, the reason for the initial dispute was that Istanbul wanted to impose not only the administrative scheme, but also its man. After conflict and mediation, the notables accepted the administrative scheme on the condition that they chose the man at its head.[45] The Ottomans were able to keep the city loyal for another fifty years after this deal, until the Italian occupation of 1911-1912. Most of all, the modern administration scheme and practice was the result of a reform, which had been negotiated with the local leaders and was not the product of an imported foreign solution. This was why it succeeded.

Success was not to be met in Tunis, though. There, most urban notables were already in the net of the consular clientele. The modern Ottoman municipality did not cancel the old-regime structure, and both cohabitated, the *sheikh al-medîna* (chief of the town, 'old-regime' way) and the *raïs al-belediyya* (president of the municipality's reformed government). The persistence of the old-regime was the sign of the impossibility for the Ottomans to properly negotiate the passage towards administrative modernity, as the colonisation of the province was already on its way.[46] Modernity was already checked by imperialism. This example illustrates the importance of local characteristics in implementing reforms, as trans-imperial connections interfered with local conditions. But most of all, it illustrates Europe's ambiguity.

The European origins of the urban government reforms in Tunis are at best muddled, as the reformist impulse was the result of a trans-imperial negotiation process on the basis of local forms of urban autonomy. Indeed, the European influence in Tunis between 1850 and 1880 was more obvious in the wish to increase consular rule and seize colonial territories. European consuls clearly chose to contrast the Ottoman municipal reforms to the old-regime governance

---

[45] Lafi, *Une ville du Maghreb, op. cit.*
[46] Lafi, "Les pouvoirs urbains à Tunis", *loc. cit.*

scheme, and to play the *status quo* card, as this suited their wish of detaching local notables from any Ottoman loyalty. This explains the partial implementation of the municipal reforms in Tunis. There was a batch of other reasons as well, such as the difficulties that derived from the break of confessional balances when the definition of civic rights of the individuals was to take place outside of their religious belonging. But a crucial factor to explain that urban government reforms were sometimes only partially applied throughout the Empire, is the pressure of European imperialism.

In other cities of the Empire, local situations were generally in-between these two extremes of a complete absorption of the old-regime in Tripoli and a failed mediation in Tunis.[47] There generally existed an early implementation of the municipal reforms, long before the 1877 Law, which was the result of a negotiation amongst local notables and their representation in old-regime institutions. The new administrative framework generally confirmed their prerogatives: petitions, trips to Istanbul, pressure to replace a centralizing governor, requests from other cities for advice or solidarity. The whole process exhibited a high degree of circulation, both between the centre and the periphery and peer-to–peer, for example from Beirut to Damascus or from Aleppo to Jeddah. The Ottoman municipal modernity was definitely more the result of these interactions than of a simple importation.

Conclusion

The study of the Ottoman municipal reform is a reflection of the very essence of the Ottoman Empire. The discussion of the 'importation' thesis allows not only for a reassessment of the

---

[47] See: Hanssen (Jens) Philipp (Thomas) Weber (Stefan*), The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire*, Beirut, Orient Institute, 2002, 375 p. For studies on Beirut (Jens Hanssen), Jerusalem (Yasemin Avcı and Vincent Lemire), Damascus (Stefan Weber), Rhodes (Denis Bocquet), see: Lafi (Ed), *Municipalités méditerranéennes, op. cit.*

European influence over so-called 'peripheries', but also a deeper understanding of the very nature of Ottoman imperial governance. The prestige of European cities and governments played a role in framing the administrative reforms, but the Empire was not a virgin field, ripe for an imported modernity. Modernity was definitely a two-way journey. In the Ottoman case, it was also negotiated in every city with the local notables in order to fit the existing social frame. Administrative modernity was the result of a complex process of interaction, and not the implementation of an already written codex. The 1877 Law came only after two decades of local experimentations and negotiations. The old-regime had indeed already been negotiated in the previous centuries on the same basis: a dynamic relationship between the urban elite and the centre. What was new with modernity was a dynamic relationship between universal principles, such as individual urban citizenship, and local situations. From the outset, the universal principle was weak and only directed negotiations. Ultimately, though, it grew stronger and allowed the Ottomans to retain their domination over a large part of the Mediterranean, from North-Africa to the Balkans, for another five decades. Everything was in the process. The new principle was that urban governance was in the hands of a landowning notability, which fitted socially with the old-regime's merchant notability. Modernity was, therefore, defined by a change in the definition of the notable, rather than a change in the composition of the notability, merchants generally having enough properties to be granted access to municipal power through the new institutional mechanisms.

The problem with the Ottoman municipal modernity is that it failed to confront some issues, which in the end proved crucial. The first of these was the persistence of the old-regime where it was impossible to negotiate reform. Cities such as Tunis were almost already lost, though. The second, more important, problem was that Ottoman modernity often failed to address the diverse nature of cities in the Empire, with their many religious, national or linguistic

communities. The old-regime privileges, exemptions and rules were unsustainable in a modern administrative environment. Where initial negotiations were unsuccessful in implementing a durable balance the situation often proved difficult a few decades later. Indeed, the Ottoman municipal law, for the very reason of its modernity, was not ductile enough to fit the situation. The Ottoman Empire, in the end, did not find the right fit for adjusting modern administrative tools and methods with the arcane cities it had to manage. The advantage of the old-regime was that it allowed greater flexibility in the treatment of the question and in the governance of diversity. Yet it also allowed a deepening of the European influence, and therefore it was chosen to reform it. Municipal government, conversely, allowed the Empire to maintain control temporarily, but in the end failed to foster a new commonality and loyalty at city-scale. The modern urban citizen never really emerged from the reform of the definition of the municipal notable.

In the Ottoman Empire, modernity brought a great deal of ambiguity in its treatment of certain local specifications, but also in its relationship with Europe. This ambiguity was later reinforced when previously Ottoman cities were seized by the Europeans. It was already the case in Algiers, conquered in 1830, at a time when it was 'normal' to have an old-regime situation, and where "modernity" was later completely colonial and fundamentally biased by the unequal treatment of individuals according to their identity. It became so after the First World War in Beirut, Damascus, Tripoli, Rhodes and Aleppo, where the modern municipalities were transformed by the colonial powers in ways that not always reflected modernity: inequality of treatment of individuals (both settlers and locals) and political use of the communal bias. A major result of the developing scholarship on old-regime imperial urban governments is that there has emerged a more accurate view of this moment. This second generation of 'Mediterranean crossings', that took place in the 1920s and 1930s, can

be seen under a new light. In most cities, a modernized Ottoman municipality existed before the European colonial reforms and even before the national reforms, and in many cases the municipal solutions enacted through colonialism were a setback, in spite of all the limits of the Ottoman reforms, in the evolution towards a local and democratic municipal-inspired modernity.

For Ottoman history, the study of municipal reform reveals a functioning of the imperial apparatus which includes modernization processes into conventionally old-regime procedures. From the point of view of comparative global history, the Ottoman case illustrates the existence of a variety of complex interests and actors involved in the circulation process[48]. Most of all, the case demands a reassessment of studies on the so-called 'reception' societies themselves. Simple ideas on circulations often derive from simple ideas on reception. At the end of the nineteenth-century, many Ottoman cities were genuine local societies with their dedicated organization, and interaction with Istanbul, other Ottoman cities, and cities in Europe and beyond. Rather than being a passive arrival point for European ideas, the Empire was teeming with projects and tensions that were developed in a dynamic web of circulations that sifted and winnowed foreign experiments. Modernity, even in peripheral environments, arrived in an already rich and articulated reality. Not only does the image of the Ottoman city, as shown in the tradition of *Orientalism,* need to be corrected, but our search for a way to place cities in the narrative of global, crossed or transnational history can be significantly changed by taking these environments into account. The other global city is not only the non-Atlantic one, until recently considered as essentially foreign to any form of modernity and only fit to receive external impulses. It is also a city with a richness of social and institutional history and a heritage of previous forms of circulation of people, goods and knowledge, which

---

[48] On these issues : Nasr (Joe) and Volait (Mercedes) (Eds.), *Urbanism. Imported or Exported?*, Chichester, Wiley, 2003, 354p.

enters a new era of communication in the nineteenth century and interacts with this new sphere according to more complex dynamics than common wisdoms may suggest.

Nora Lafi

Zentrum Moderner Orient (ZMO), Berlin