

Petitions and Accommodating Urban Change in the Ottoman Empire

Nora Lafi

► **To cite this version:**

Nora Lafi. Petitions and Accommodating Urban Change in the Ottoman Empire. Özdalga (Elisabeth) Özerverli (Sait) Tansuğ (Feryal). Istanbul as seen from a distance. Centre and Provinces in the Ottoman Empire, Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul, p.73-82, 2011. halshs-00618770

HAL Id: halshs-00618770

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00618770>

Submitted on 6 Sep 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Petitions and Accommodating Urban Change in the Ottoman Empire

Nora LAFI (ZMO Berlin-BMBF)

Published in: Özdalga (Elisabeth) Özerverli (Sait) Tansuğ (Feryal) (eds.), *Istanbul as seen from a distance. Centre and Provinces in the Ottoman Empire*, Istanbul, Swedish Research Institute, 2011, 219p, p.73-82. Please quote as such.

In many societies, petitions are a means of communication between rulers and ruled. Since the 1980s, historians have tried to analyse the nature of this relationship and to answer linked questions, such as the emergence of public opinion, the existence of a civil society and the capacity of a society to develop forms of democracy. Petitions are indeed a very abundant archival resource, and also a very specific individual or collective expression of discontent, protest, opinion or need. As such, they are invaluable historical sources, both informative and reflective of the nature of the society that produced them.

From ancient times to the era of Byzantium, from medieval England to 18th century North America, or from 18th century Japan to present times, petitions have been crucial in shedding light on the whole governance context, as scholars have frequently shown.¹ In the Ottoman empire, petitions were also central features of the relationship between rulers and ruled.

In the Ottoman empire, communication between local societies and the central administration in Istanbul was codified during the period of the old regime on the basis of various medieval practices, themselves sometimes of ancient origin. In cases of conflict, or where generally accepted administrative processes had broken down, or in cases where new demands or problems had arisen, inhabitants were granted the right to write petitions either on an individual basis or as a group (professional, confessional, civic collective body). But this system of petitioning was more than mere recourse to remedies or adjustments. Rather, it was an integral tool in the functioning of the empire and in the definition of imperial power in the provinces. The petition was not just an exceptional tool, but a normal procedure, whose bureaucratic nature had been formalised over the course of the Ottoman centuries. Indeed, the central archives in Istanbul contain hundreds of thousands of such petitions from throughout the empire and spanning the 15th to the 20th centuries.

These petitions were registered by a specialised administrative bureau, whose consistency and importance grew as the empire set about constructing its bureaucratic apparatus. Petitions were registered in *daftar*, and subjected to a whole administrative process that constituted the very essence of imperial authority. The petition cannot be likened to a bottle thrown into the ocean in the hopes of capturing the sultan's attention, and nor was it merely akin to a medieval supplicant's appeal to the sovereign in the hopes of gaining an exception. It was rather an act of codified administrative communication whose role is pivotal to an understanding of the very essence of the Ottoman empire and the relationship between centre and peripheries.

¹ For example, Tor Hauken, *Petition and Response: An Epigraphic Study of Petitions to Roman Emperors 181-249* (Athens: Norwegian Institute, 1998), 383; Lorraine Attreed, "The Urban Identity of Medieval English Towns," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 32, no. 4 (2002): 571-92; Mark Knights, "London's Monster Petition of 1680," *Historical Journal* 36, no. 1 (1993): 39-67; "Petition of Merchants of Alexandria, 1792," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (1923): 206-8; Luke Roberts, "The Petition Box in 18th century Tosa," *Journal of Japanese Studies* 20, no. 2 (1994): 423-58; Stephen Higginson, "A Short History of the Right to Petition Government for the Redress of Grievances," *Yale Law Journal* 96, no. 1(1986): 142-66.

This codification had a multifaceted heritage dating from the period from the 16th to the 18th centuries, an era that in administrative terms constitutes the Ottoman old regime. However, during the Tanzimat era and, for cities, the period of municipal reform during the second half of the 19th century, when both the whole administrative system and the very foundations the organisation of society itself were reordered, these old practices were, paradoxically, used intensively to negotiate the accommodation of the new administrative system with local configurations. At the very moment of its reform, the old system was the object of strong collective investment, which reveals both the importance of the old channels of communication and of the mediation process for accommodating the new.

Based on sources from various cities of the empire, especially the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA) archives in Istanbul, this chapter sets out to explore the evolving relationship between the central administration and urban elites. Specifically, it seeks to discuss the way in which local urban notables, and the urban civic sphere they embodied, managed to prevail upon the empire to take their privileges and prerogatives into account in its drafting of urban administrative modernity. The main focus will be on understanding the stakes in the reform process, and, according to local context, the range of conflict, mediation and accommodation it gave rise to, all of them pivotal to understanding the relationship between Istanbul and the provinces in a period of deep redefinition.

The centrality of the Old Regime Petitioning System

Petitions were common in ancient administrative systems. Their origin is surely to be found in the second millennium BCE, and as early as in the 7th century BCE they were common in many parts of the Middle East.² In Roman administrative practice, they were a central feature and were the object of very complex legal and theoretical elaboration.³ In the Roman administrative framework, petitions were central to the regulation of the relationship between cities and the empire.⁴

In many different cultural contexts from ancient times to the present, petitions have generally been a way of regulating relations of power. In the Ottoman empire specifically, petitions were also a Byzantine heritage. In imperial Byzantine practice, petitions had been precisely codified and were a very important channel of administrative and social communication. Denis Feissel has illustrated how the petition was the starting point of a complex bureaucratic process that, in the case of a one petition to the emperor, led to the ~~redaction~~ promulgation of an edict.⁵ There was in Constantinople a whole bureau for petitions, which dealt with complaints from throughout the empire, from both individuals and collective bodies, including urban or professional groups. Rodolphe Guiland and later Rosemary Morris have shown how this bureau was important in the definition and negotiation of the relationship between the imperial apparatus and *milieu* and the rest of society.⁶

In the medieval Arab Muslim world, again under the possible influence of ancient and Byzantine practices, petitions were also a crucial tool. Stern, for example, studied their

² For example, Dennis Pardee, "An overview of Ancient Hebrew Epistolography," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 97, no. 3 (1978): 321-36.

³ Tor Hauken, "Structure and themes in petitions to Roman Emperors," in *La pétition à Byzance*, ed. Denis Feissel and Jean Gascou (Paris: Association des amis du CHCB, 2004), 199.

⁴ Graham Burton, "The Roman Imperial State, Provincial Governors and the Public Finances of Provincial Cities, 27BC-AD 235," *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 53, no. 32 (2004): 311-42. See also Wilhem Liebenam, *Die Stadtverwaltung in Römischen Kaiserreiche* (Leipzig, 1900), 577

⁵ Denis Feissel, "Pétitions aux Empereurs et formes du rescrit dans les sources documentaires du IVe au VIe siècle," in *La pétition à Byzance*, ed. Denis Feissel and Jean Gascou (Paris: Association des amis du CHCB, 2004), 33-52.

⁶ See Rosemary Morris, "What did the EPI TON DEËSEÏN actually do?," in *ibid.*: 125-40 and Rodolphe Guiland, "Etudes sur l'histoire administrative de l'empire byzantin: le maître des requêtes," *Byzantion* 35 (1965): 97-118.

importance during the Fatimid period.⁷ And in general, in medieval times individuals and collective bodies had recourse to petitions against the abuses of a ruler. Such petitions were also the subject of established administrative treatment.

The elaboration of the Ottoman administrative apparatus drew on both the administrative heritage of the Byzantine Empire and the Islamic procedures encountered during the various phases of Ottoman expansion.⁸ Discussions on the nature of the early Ottoman state have been renewed during the last decade. A series of new studies have appeared, focusing mostly on the way in which the dynasty consolidated its power through alliances and by inserting itself into existing societies.⁹ In this regard, Karen Barkey has illustrated the importance of notions such as mediation, brokerage and network.¹⁰

A whole new interpretive panorama on the construction of the Ottoman state has been opened up by recent research, and this has led to new interpretations on the evolutions that occurred during the 17th and 18th centuries. Current Ottoman studies are focused on precisely these issues of mediation, accommodation, negotiation and adaptation, which are at the very heart of Ottoman imperial power. One of the great advances in our understanding of the functioning of the Ottoman state arising from this recent research is that these notions, which in no way precluded conflict, were not just an anthropological posture, but also played a role in the construction of the bureaucratic apparatus itself. Ottoman imperial power was the fruit of the progressive sedimentation resulting from thousands of micro-mediations. The result was an old regime, with a particular nature.

At all stages in the development of the empire, petitions were a central feature. In a word, they were one of the main vectors of mediation and accommodation, at all scales. And as a communication tool between centre and the periphery, they were not only important in leading to mutual adjustments, but also in defining the very relationship between the centre and the outlying provinces and the very nature of the empire. They were also the starting point of a precise administrative procedure. We now know that from early in the development of the organisational structure of the empire, the bureau of petitions in Istanbul was central to the decision-making process and in the daily work of the imperial administration.

For the 16th century, Fatma and Ramazan Acun, who worked on *ahkam* registers, specifically that published by İlhan Şahin Feridun Emecen,¹¹ have shown the causal link between complaints and decisions, and how *hüküm*, or edicts, issued by the *diwan* and later confirmed by the sultan, were the result of an administrative process that began with a petition.¹² As early as the 16th century, at the most central level of the imperial administration, a good part of daily decision-making was in response to petitions. The Ottoman bureaucracy was born not simply as a pyramidal organisation, but also as a system

⁷ S.M. Stern, "Three Petitions of the Fâtimid Period," *Oriens* 15 (1962): 172-209.

⁸ Norman Itzkowitz, *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1972), 117. See also, as a contribution to the debates on the relative weight of the Byzantine and medieval Islamic heritages in Ottoman state building, Mehmed Fuad Köprülü, *Some Observations on the Influence of Byzantine Institutions on Ottoman Institutions* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1999), 195.

⁹ Heath Lowry, *The Nature of the Early Ottoman State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 197. See also Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). Herbert Adams Gibbons, *The Foundation of the Ottoman Empire; A history of the Osmanlis up to the Death of Bayezid I (1300-1403)* (London: Routledge, 2007[1916]), 384. Virginia Aksan and Daniel Goffman (eds.), *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 316.

¹⁰ Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference. The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 342. See also Halil İnalcık, *The Ottoman Empire: The Classical Age* (New York: Praeger, 1973), 258.

¹¹ *Osmanlılarda Divan-Bürokrasi-Ahkam, II, Bayezid Dönemine Ait 906/1501 Tarihli Ahkam Defteri* (Istanbul, Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı, 1994) (BOA A.DVN, nr.590).

¹² Fatma Acun and Ramazan Acun, "Demand for justice and response of the Sultan: Decision making in the Ottoman Empire in the early 16th century," *Etudes balkaniques* 2 (2007): 125-48.

of direct linkages between individuals or local organisations and the centre. As early as in the 1950s, Lajos Fekete suspected that petitions were more than an exception to the rule in Ottoman administrative practice.¹³ But later, with the work of Georg Majer¹⁴ and Halil Inalcik¹⁵ and the new questions about Ottoman administrative history, it is clear that greater prominence has to be afforded the role of petitions.

The growth of the bureau of petitions in Istanbul is a good indicator of the development of the imperial bureaucracy. Far from eclipsing the role of petitions, this development, which led to what I call the age of the Ottoman old regime, revolved around petitions. Starting in the 18th century, probably at the beginning of the 1740s, petitions began to be treated separately and no longer along with the other affairs recorded in the *ahkam*. The bureau of petitions established a register of all the petitions received, a *daftar*, in which the nature, origin and content of the complaints was noted, as were the various stages of the bureaucratic, administrative and political response. These registers are well known. Not as generally appreciated is the fact that they shed light on another dimension: the hundreds of thousands of dossiers spanning the centuries, which give evidence of the treatment of each petition. Such treatment made up a large part of the daily work of the Ottoman central bureaucracy. Each dossier contains the original petition, sometimes a translation, and often the annotations, drafts and comments and all the administrative actions spawned by it, from the enquiries it provoked to the imperial edict it gave rise to. This was the core of Ottoman governance practice. My research into the archives of this bureau of petitions at BOA in Istanbul¹⁶ shows how the *daftar* were the spinal cord in a highly articulated body. What happened at the beginning of the 1740s, based on the evidence I have been able to examine, was only a reorganisation of the bureau, but with the earlier spirit remaining. And often, the archives of the former bureau were transferred to the new dossiers.¹⁷

This organisational structure had parallels at many other levels of the Ottoman system. As Michael Ursinus has illustrated, at the provincial level complaints were also sent to a special division of the local administration.¹⁸

As for urban governance, what is important is that not only individuals were allowed to sign petitions, but also constituted bodies, such as confessional communities and guilds, and for cities, the notables who embodied urban civic interests. There are numerous petitions in the Istanbul archives from notables in hundreds of cities of the empire.

This system lent flexibility to the imperial organisation and allowed for negotiation.¹⁹ It also permitted better circulation of information. As for urban civic and political life, petitions are both a reflection of the local balance of urban factions and an instrument of Ottoman governance. Jane Hataway, Linda Schatkowski and Herbert Bodman have examined the importance of factions in shaping urban and provincial conflict in Ottoman times, but also

¹³ Lajos Fekete, *Die Siyâqat-Schrift in der türkischen Finanzverwaltung. Beitrag zur türkischen Paläographie* (Budapest: Bibliotheca Orientalis Hungarica, 1955), 910.

¹⁴ Hans Georg Majer, *Das osmanische 'Registerbuch der Beschwerden' (Şikâyet Defteri) vom Jahre 1675* (Vienna: Osterreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1984).

¹⁵ Halil Inalcik, "Şikâyet Hakkı: 'Arz-i Hâl ve Mahzar' lar," chapter in his *Osmanlı'da devlet, hukuk, adâlet* (Istanbul: Eren, 2000), 201: 49-71.

¹⁶ BOA, A.DVN Series. *Bab-I Asaî Diwan Hümayan Sicilleri Ahkam Defterleri*. See the catalogue *Başbakanlık osmanlı arşivi rehberi*, Istanbul, BOA, 2000, 558pp., pp.23-4. *Ahkam* are to be found at pp.24-31.

¹⁷ To be found at BOA under the name Antik.

¹⁸ Michael Ursinus, *Grievance administration (Şikâyet) in an Ottoman Province: The Kaymakam of Rumelia's Record Book of Complaints of 1781-1783* (London: Royal Asiatic Society and Routledge, 2005), 190.

¹⁹ On these notions in an Ottoman context, see Gabor Agoston, "A Flexible Empire: Authority and its Limits on the Ottoman Frontiers," *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 9, nos. 1/2 (1993): 15-31; Sevkettin Pamuk, "Institutional Change and the Longevity of the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1800," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 35, no. 2 (2004): 225-47.

in the design of the Ottoman balance.²⁰ The example of petitions makes possible further interpretation: *sikayet* were the main instrument for regulating the relationship between urban factions and the imperial sphere. Ottoman governance of urban factions was achieved both by choosing a pro-imperial faction and through negotiations, often via petitions, to secure the submission of other factions to this order.

In the Ottoman old regime, petitions were also used to defend local privileges against the central power. This was particularly important in times of change, for example when a new tax was introduced.²¹ In addition, petitions recalled previous agreements and sought adaptation of the proposed change to local conditions, thereby constituting a very local form of Ottomanity. In some domains of public administration, the negotiations surrounding petitions and edicts contributed to the fashioning of jurisprudence.²²

Collective petitions could be the result of the deliberations of confessional, professional or urban civic bodies, usually in the hands of notables. They were indeed often the expression of a form of local urban civil society to the imperial authority, which in turn fashioned its presence in the city accordingly.²³ Chronicles, generally the civic annals of the circle of urban notables in charge of many aspects of urban governance, often took good note for future reference of the writing and sending of a petition to the sultan.²⁴ Petitions, as Eunjeong Yi has illustrated, were also common in the negotiation of the conditions governing guilds.²⁵

In the case of Aleppo, thanks to intense research in recent decades, we now have a quite precise historiographical perspective on the urban situation. For the 17th century, Charles Wilkins has recently put forward some important interpretations regarding guild self-government, one of the privileges afforded constituted social bodies in urban settings.²⁶ This privilege also often needed to be defended by means of a petition, for example, against the fiscal demands of a new governor.

Aleppo is also the city Margaret Merywether studied. She has noted, for the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, the intimate relationship between local urban notables and imperial office, the same family being able to serve as both *naqib al-ashraf* and as imperial figures in various parts of the empire. Petitions were also a frequent and effective means of preventing, mediating and resolving conflicts.²⁷ For the same period, Bruce Masters has copiously

²⁰ Jane Hataway, *A Tale of Two Factions. Myth, Memory and Identity in Ottoman Egypt and Yemen* (Albany: SUNY, 2003), 295. See also Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, *Families in Politics: Damascene Factions and Estates of the 18th and 19th centuries* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1985), 248. See also Herbert Bodman, *Political Factions in Aleppo (1760-1826)* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 160.

²¹ For example, Süleyman Demirci, "Complaints about Avâriz Assessment and Payment in the Avâriz-Tax System: An Aspect of the Relationship between Centre and Periphery. A Case Study of Kayseri, 1618-1700," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 46, no. 4 (2003): 437-74.

²² For example, for the negotiation of the prerogatives of the local *qâdî*, Ronald Jennings, "Limitations of the Judicial Powers of the Kadi in 17th Century Ottoman Kayseri," *Studia Islamica* 50 (1979): 151-84. See also Isik Tamdoğan-Abel, "Les modalités de l'urbanité dans une ville ottomane d'après les registres des cadis," Thèse de doctorat, Paris, Ehes, 1998.

²³ On the concept of civil society in an Ottoman context, Suraiya Faroqhi, "Civilian Society and Political Power in the Ottoman Empire: A Report on Research in Collective Biography (1480-1830)," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 17, no. 1 (1985): 109-17.

²⁴ For example, Ahmed b. Abi Diaf on the notables of Tunis sending a petition to Istanbul. On chronicles as a decentred source of information, Bruce Masters, "The View from the Province: Syrian Chronicles of the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 114, no. 3 (1994): 353-62.

²⁵ Eunjeong Yi, *Guild Dynamics in 17th Century Istanbul. Fluidity and Leverage* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 306: 41.

²⁶ Charles Wilkins, *Forging Urban Solidarities. Ottoman Aleppo 1640-1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 323.

²⁷ Margaret Meriwether, *The Kin Who Count: Family and Society in Ottoman Aleppo (1770-1840)* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 278.

illustrated the role of local notables as chambers of mediation.²⁸ Petitions were always crucial in this process.

The case of Aleppo further illustrates the fact that the Ottoman petitioning system had various overlapping scales. One could petition either the local representative of the empire or the sultan in Istanbul if the issue related to the activities of the local representative. It was also possible to bring the petition in person to the capital city, either as an individual or as the representative of a collective group.

The study of the Aleppo *daftar* for the years 1155-64 heg. and of a number of original petitions and related administrative dossiers illustrates the bureaucratic channels petitions necessitated and supported.²⁹ The BOA archives in Istanbul reveal that this kind of work was replicated for hundreds of cities and villages.³⁰

Confrontation with Administrative Modernity

When, at the turn of the 19th century, the first modernist reform impulses changed the panorama of debates about governance in the empire, new stakeholder issues and interests had to be confronted. In general during the reform period, there was a strong centralising impulse³¹ and a new spirit abroad among representatives of the central power.³² However, these reform impulses were not a new feature *per se* in the empire. The old regime, or classical age, had also witnessed numerous reforms, themselves fashioned and adapted through a process of accommodation and mediation in which petitions played a great role. This time, however, something else was at stake: the very organisation of society. Yet even the new logic had to confront the inertia of old practices.³³ The classic top-down, East-West vision of the origins and development of the reform impulses has been much discussed in recent decades. Yet one might also say that reform was as much the result of local-central accommodation and design processes as of the importation of outside ideas. There is indeed a pressing necessity to understand the modernisation process in the empire by using new tools.³⁴

The Tanzîmât was, of course, not just a Westernisation, a notion which itself has become the object of profound critical examination.³⁵ We now know that internal factors, more complex circulation models and accommodation processes were part of the reform

²⁸ Bruce Masters, "Power and Society in Aleppo in the 18th and 19th Centuries," *Revue du Monde Musulman et de la Méditerranée* 62, no. 1 (1991): 151-8.

²⁹ BOA *daftar* Halep: Bâb-i Âsafi Divan-ı Hümayun Sicilleri Halep Ahkam Defterleri, 295pp., A. {DVNS.AHK.HL.d.00001. All petitions attached to this register can be found in BOA, A. {DVN. ŞKT. There is no specific classification: petitions are classified in the order of their arrival in the office at the time of their redaction. The only existing classification is that made for a sample of such documents in the 19th century by archivists like Cevdet: BOA Cevdet Belediye.

³⁰ BOA, A.DVN. ŞKT. Classification per year, all zones together. Examples: BOA, A.DVN. ŞKT.2136: petitions of the bakers of Edirne, 1786; for the year 1177h, BOA, A. {DVN. ŞKT.666, 43: petitions of the urban notables of Kütahya, BOA, A. {DVN. ŞKT., 666,1: petition of the merchants of Aleppo; BOA, A. {DVN. ŞKT. 666, 42: petition of urban notables of Rhodes; BOA, A. {DVN. ŞKT.666,3: petition of the notables of Antalya.

³¹ Stanford Shaw, "The Central Legislative Councils in the Nineteenth Century Ottoman Reform Movement before 1876," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1, no. 1 (1970): 51-84.

³² Serif Mardin, "The Mind of the Turkish Reformer, 1700-1900," *The Western Humanities Review* 14 (1960): 413-36.

³³ On this subject: Stanford Shaw, *Between Old and New: The Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim III, 1789-1807* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1971), 535.

³⁴ On the general context of such studies: Dipesh Chakrabarti, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 320.

³⁵ For a general panorama of the reforms: Kemal Karpat, "The Transformation of the Ottoman State, 1789-1908," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 3 (1972): 243-81. For a discussion of the concept of Westernization: Shirine Hamadeh, "Ottoman Expressions of Early Modernity and the 'Inevitable' Question of Westernization," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 63-1 (2004): 32-51.

process.³⁶ Interpretations also take another dimension into account: the persistence of the old regime. According to Arno Mayer, old factors and social phenomena still helped to shape society even when the formal or legal landscape had changed.³⁷ And the study of petitions, as in the case of urban reform, shows how an old communication channel between Istanbul and the peripheries of empire was instrumental in shaping urban administrative modernity. This latter included the introduction of new rules, such as representation.³⁸ But this modernity was more than the centrifugal spreading of a new rationality. The reforms also implied a new kind of communication with provinces and local societies in response to more complex geopolitical stakes, including preservation of sovereignty over threatened provinces. To this end, the establishment of a new equilibrium with local notables was crucial, a requirement that had also been essential in the old Ottoman regime.

Municipal Reforms and the persistence of Petitions

The established narrative scheme for the implementation of municipal reforms in the empire is again a top-down, West-East one.³⁹ Reforms were supposed to have been introduced from Europe to Istanbul, a city whose important Christian community was supposed to ease the process of “Europeanisation”. From there, reforms are thought to have spread throughout the empire.⁴⁰ This simplistic narrative is definitely no longer acceptable. Not only does it give a false idea of the reform process, but it stems from an inaccurate understanding of the functioning of the empire and of local urban governance in the provinces. Cities in the Ottoman old regime were long believed to be unburdened by forms of organised local power emanating from the local society. This assertion has by now been dismissed in the historical literature, and it is now accepted that cities were indeed ruled by a class of merchants, notables, members of the guild elite and sometimes nobles, in conjunction with representatives of the imperial power.⁴¹

So, the first element in the reinterpretation of the urban reforms is that they were no mere importation into an empty landscape. Rather, one should consider the impact of the proposed reforms on the existing landscape, itself the result of centuries of mediation between the central power, its representatives, who were themselves often urban notables from another city and not just members of the bureaucratic caste, and local notables. We have seen how petitions were central to this mediation, and they remained so during the reform era.⁴²

As Albert Hourani stressed, the urban reforms were both a challenge to the relationship between the central power and the notables and a response to the loss of

³⁶ Nora Lafi, “Mediterranean connections: The circulation of municipal knowledge and practices at the time of the Ottoman reforms, c.1830-1910” in *The Other Global City*, eds Shane Ewen and Pierre-Yves Saunier (New York: Palgrave, 2008), 242: 35-50.

³⁷ Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old-Regime. Europe to the Great War* (New-York: Pantheon, 1981), 368.

³⁸ Roderic Davison, “The Advent of the Principle of Representation in the Government of the Ottoman Empire,” in *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle-East: the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Richard Chambers and William Polk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 427.

³⁹ As illustrated, for example, in Roderic Davison, *Reform in the Ottoman Empire, 1856-1876* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 479.

⁴⁰ Steven Rosenthal, “Foreigners and Municipal Reforms in Istanbul: 1855-65,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11, no. 2 (1980): 227-245 and idem, *The Politics of Dependency: Urban Reform in Istanbul* (Westport: Greenwood, 1980), 220.

⁴¹ For an overview of this subject Nora Lafi (ed.), *Municipalités méditerranéennes. Les réformes urbaines ottomanes au miroir d’une histoire comparée (Moyen-Orient, Maghreb, Europe méridionale)* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz ZMO Studien 21, 2005), 365.

⁴² The BOA petition resources for the period of reform are as rich as for the previous period. See, for example, the series classified by Cevdet at the turn of the 20th century, BOA, Cevdet Belediye (C. BLD). The most valuable source on the reforms in general is Osman Nuri Ergin, *Mecelle-I Umûr-i Belediye* (Istanbul: Municipal editions, 1995 [1st edition 1914-1922]), 8 vols.

important provinces to European colonial powers.⁴³ They were meant to establish a new relationship, so the proposed framework needed to be accepted locally. The municipal reforms were in no way a wave of administrative and political modernity radiating out from Istanbul, but must be understood as occurring in a more complex and dynamic context.

Local notables were certainly not passive towards the Porte. They did not hesitate to have recourse to old communication channels like petitions. And there was still a bureau in Istanbul to receive them.⁴⁴ During the modernisation reforms, the bureau of petitions ran as it had during the old regime. From every corner petitions came in, protesting against the brutal nature of the changes and asking for notables to be able to retain a central role in the new system. The actual reforms were implemented using the communication channels of the old regime. All told, Ottoman modernity was an evolution of the previous system at least as much as it was an importation. The 1877 law, the result of 25 years of mediation, was more the result of a long process than an experiment in centralised control.

It was my work on the petitions from the notables of Tripoli that first led me to these conclusions. These notables collectively petitioned the sultan to protest against the conditions attaching to the creation of the municipality. They were part of the old regime institution, and they demanded to be included in the new one. My focus then turned to this negotiation process for other cities.⁴⁵ And as Elisabeth Thompson, who showed the existence of chambers of negotiation between notables, the guilds of Damascus and the empire, “debate about the Tanzimat centered not on vague ideologies but on bargains struck on very specific issues”.⁴⁶

What study of the archives of the bureau of petitions in Istanbul reveals is that petitions acted as the vectors of these bargains. In Aleppo too, petitions helped fashion what Bruce Masters has dubbed the local political economy.⁴⁷ In 1860, a time of both great tension and reform, many petitions reached Istanbul, influencing, even structuring, decision-making processes.⁴⁸ Every step or decision was an attempt to accommodate a petition, individual or collective, whether the petition was a protest against violence, contested the form of the new institutions or denounced the corruption the implementation of the reforms made possible. Just as with the old regime, petitions were an expression of the constant dialogue between the local civic sphere and the central administration. Many of the petitions from Tunis, for example, illustrate this dimension. But in a city already partly under the influence of foreign consuls (who opposed Ottoman modernisation), the classical form of dialogue through petitions did not culminate in full implementation of reform: old regime institutions survived, and the modern municipality never managed to include all the old urban elites.⁴⁹

However, during this process many interesting petitions were sent to Istanbul, and dealt with there by the imperial bureaucratic apparatus, and to the local representatives of the empire. One by the guild of the cap (*chechia*) manufacturers illustrates the negotiation of adjustments to modernising reforms, both political and economic.⁵⁰ In all cities of the empire, as the petitions in the Istanbul archives show, such procedures were part of a process of accommodating the reforms to local situations. These facts necessitate abandonment of old interpretive models about the diffusion of administrative modernity, and call for this process

⁴³ Albert Hourani, “Ottoman Reform and Politics of Notables,” in Polk and Chambers, *Beginnings of Modernization*, 41-68.

⁴⁴ Şikayet, Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Istanbul: ADVN series.

⁴⁵ Lafi, *Municipalités méditerranéennes*.

⁴⁶ Elisabeth Thompson, “Ottoman Political Reform in the Provinces: The Damascus Advisory Council in 1844-45,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1993): 457-75.

⁴⁷ Bruce Masters, “The Political Economy of Aleppo in an Age of Ottoman Reform,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53 (2010): 290-316.

⁴⁸ For example: BOA (1278 s 09 1) ref A. MKT.UM: dossier 539 n.48.

⁴⁹ See Nora Lafi, “Les pouvoirs urbains à Tunis à la fin de l'époque ottomane: la persistance de l'Ancien régime,” in Lafi, *Municipalités méditerranéennes*.

⁵⁰ Archives nationales de Tunis, Série H, Carton 72, dossier 859, document n.6, 1872-77.

to be read as a negotiated one. Petitions were not only form of protest. They were part of a consolidated administrative dialogue and the expression of articulated local civic interests, and their role was integral to the Ottoman imperial scheme, even during the reforms.

Petitions, their administrative treatment and their role in decision-making processes were highly Ottoman method in nature. This communication channel had been functioning for centuries as part of the Ottoman old regime. It was the specific elaboration of various heritages, themselves the subject of diverse evolutions over time and in no way a block of inherited medieval practices ready to supplanted by an imported modernity. The adoption of such a revised perspective on the character and evolution of the Ottoman old regime invites us to resist simplistic notions of imported reforms and to refine our understanding of Ottoman urban modernity. In the case of cities in the age of reform, it is evident that not only was the empire *in* the city, as Hanssen, Philipp and Weber have argued, but also that the empire *was* the city, in the sense that the negotiated new urban situation was also a new expression of the Ottoman imperial project.⁵¹ The urban civic elite, comprising notables, guilds, merchants, members of confessional communities and sometimes nobles, took part along with other groups like military castes or rural landowners, in constant negotiations, and thus in shaping the very administrative, bureaucratic and ideological form of the empire.

Adopting such a perspective, made possible by the extraordinary abundance of petitions in the archives, allows us to discuss and challenge views of the Ottoman empire as a static apparatus, and also opens the way for a revision of prevailing views on public opinion, civil society and their form of expression in the imperial context.

⁵¹ Jens Hanssen Thomas Philipp and Stefan Weber (eds.), *The Empire in the City: Arab Provincial Capitals in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Beirut: Orient Institute, 2002), 375.