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Introduction: Interventions to Istanbul Studies

Koray Durak | Cemal Kafadar | Christine Philliou

The editors of the Interventions to Istanbul Studies series are proud to present these contributions, which together comprise the first round of what will be an ongoing conversation inspired by the 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. While honoring the issues of systemic racism, oppression, and abuse of power that were and continue to be raised in the context of the BLM movement, we wanted to invite colleagues in the emerging intellectual field of Istanbul studies (and more broadly Byzantine, Ottoman, and Turkish studies) to engage broadly with its own legacies of various exclusionary and discriminatory practices/approaches. This can certainly mean thinking through the experience of Blackness and racial discrimination in Ottoman Istanbul and beyond, but the act of “thinking with BLM” within an Istanbul-studies milieu is, we argue, also much more, and holds even more transformative potential than that.

Critical rethinking is a regular part of scholarship in all fields of historical study, but there are moments when particular developments—a new body of research quietly building up toward a critical mass with fresh perspectives, novel methods and approaches enjoying some widely shared ground among scholars working independently of each other, and world-historical events that bring the concerns of the public and of intellectuals into a close alignment and into razor-sharp focus—can trigger a deeply transformative reorientation. In our case, it is a combination of all of these kinds of developments—and one can add ongoing resonance of the Gezi movement and the vocal public debate around Turkey’s withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention to the context in which BLM offered inspiration—that prepared a fertile ground, we thought, for our “Meclis” to offer a forum for a sustained critical engagement by scholars of Istanbul studies with their field. In other words, the transposition is timely and meaningful because pioneering works have already been articulating similar concerns and critical perspectives on the scholarly literature on Istanbul. It is time to bring that critical reassessment regarding the exclusionary practices of the field and the new horizons pregnant with emancipatory potential front and center into the conversation.

As readers will see, there are many ways to make this transposition: bringing to light the intersectionality of racial, ethnic, and gender hierarchies among Istanbul’s subjects and their histories; imagining a Byzantine history from below; and imagining how we might reverse the erasure of Armenians and of the Armenian Genocide from Istanbul’s history are meant to be three of many possible paths forward. Here we provide a brief comparative discussion of the first three contributions to draw out their commonalities and specificities.

All three essays in the first dossier draw attention to the internalized and almost instinctive perspectives (read: prejudices and apologetics) that modern historians have adopted, which contribute to the creation of new practices of oppression or perpetuate the old ones. The omnipresence of such distorting and occluding perspectives as the “given”s of scholarship is confirmed by the diversity of fields (Byzantine and Ottoman), subjects (political, ethnic, and gender-related), and evidence type (visual, material and written sources) covered in these essays.

Roland Betancourt reminds us why we should be self-reflexive and open our fields to a self-critical investigation in the first place. Privileging the experience of the diverse non-elites over the achievements of “great men” or determinism of economic structures, Betancourt offers an alternative view alongside the tradition of micro-history/*Alltagsgeschichte*. In the roots of this alternative view lies the need to write an ethical history; a type of historiography that values “the accomplishments of social good” rather than the privileged few, the variety in human experience rather than the violently imposed norm(al). Such an approach, applied by Betancourt to the question of what the Hagia Sophia represents, can easily be extended to the cases of many other individuals or groups who have been denied their voices due to various

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Zavier Wingham’s contribution not only reminds us how perceptions of gender, race, body, and class interacted with each other through the example of Arap Bacı, making the parsing of suppression a pretty messy business to deal with, but also shows us the distorting mirrors preventing us from seeing Arab Bacı as “a self-possessed subject” present in time and place. While the paucity of primary written sources produced by the suppressed people and the nature of the available ones (which, unsurprisingly, were written in the language of the dominant discourse) is combined with the indifference of earlier modern scholarship about embedded discriminations, we find ourselves in the position of a detective with very few pieces of evidence at the scene of the crime. Fortunately, as the transformative efforts of the historians of labor, or women, or children, or those of the Subaltern School prove, historians in the last fifty years have equipped themselves with the necessary tools to hear the voice of the voiceless. Wingham’s use of an 1847 verdict of an Ottoman court in Istanbul on the treatment of Black slaves as evidence for the “grammar of suffering” of the Black people shows how much one can get by reading different sources or reading the sources against the grain. Last but not least, Wingham introduces the language and analytical means, of a growing literature with fresh insights and perspectives on these matters. This is a literature that Istanbul studies has not yet been acquainted with in such a way as to establish a regular relationship to it (as happened with, say, the literature on the history of books and reading—a safer ground to tread, of course, even if intellectually just as exciting).

Finally, Lerna Ekmekcioglu’s essay can be read as a road map on how to transform our paradigm that would liberate us from the chains of ongoing oppression. Inspired by the example set by some American universities to question their own institutions’ role in institutionalized racism past and present, including their involvement in slave ownership, Ekmekcioglu offers possible paths to reverse/undo the intellectual and practical erasure of Armenians in Turkey, past and present. It is no less than an invitation to “do otherwise” towards making Armenian deaths matter and reckoning with the Armenians of today. A significant part of her road map for the process of healing involves universities, showing how much responsibility lies on the shoulders of academics for investigating the mechanisms of silencing. Her map also reveals the extent of the healing which involves the transformation of public life (from monuments to holidays) and the language of the relevant conversation, exposing how deep “ideology” penetrates every corner of the human experience.

In their own way, each contributor also cunningly invites readers to reflect on who “we” are. Is there more to its frequent use than taking refuge in a presumed consensus, an imagined collectivity of likeminded colleagues? An invocation of common sense, that comforting illusion? An indirect salvo at “them,” and an unstated threat at “you,” the dissenters, the game-changers, the radicals, the newfangled, the upstarts? Can “they/you” even read the documents?

This gets even more complicated when scholars use “we” diachronically. Some folks of the past that we study are “us.” Who, then? Arab Bacı? The Turkopouloi? Sokollu Mehmed Pasha? Patrona Halil? Kantakouzenos? The Assyrian peasants of Mesopotamia? Anna Komnene? Esther Kyra? Gomidas? Furthermore, are “we” fooling ourselves by assuming that “we” as scholars can be autonomous from “we” as individuals, with particular gender, racial, ethnic, and national identities in the world today? To what extent are “we” always embedded in the power structures in which we live today, and therefore need to “do otherwise” before we even open our *defters* or pick up our pens to try to bridge “our” world, where eradicating racism and all forms of discrimination is a never-ending task, with our role as scholars of “their” world—the Istanbul of the past in all its messiness and hierarchies. We look forward to future rounds of this conversation, and this invitation to “think and do otherwise,” both past and present, and, in our present study of the past of Istanbul.