CHAPTER 6

Surveillance and Constituting the Public in the Ottoman Empire

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In large part, the history of political struggle has been the history of the attempts to control significant sites of assembly and spaces of discourse.²

Few concepts in the last decade have been invoked with more frequency and across more disciplines than that of the public sphere. We are growing accustomed to the widespread use of the term “public” for people and “public sphere” for society. Harold Mah, in a timely and incisive analysis criticizing recent European historiography’s appropriation of the concept of the public sphere, called it “a phantasy.”³ Drawing attention to the contradiction between social historians’ recent quest to recognize different identities and represent their varying interests in the public sphere on one hand, and the basic condition for Habermas’s ideal public sphere in which diverse groups set aside their particularities and assume collectivity on the other, Mah points to the “inescapable instability” in the representation of Habermas’s universal public sphere based on an order of abstract individuality.⁴

For somewhat different reasons, I argue that the enthusiastic appropriation of the concept of the public sphere in Middle Eastern historiography (and in other non-Western historiographies as well) is related to the political imaginary, to a phantasy that the concept promises to offer. Two particular features in Habermas’s definition of the public sphere have been instrumental in the recent appeal to the concept. First, in Habermas’s original use of the term, it is not clear if the public sphere is an actually existing historical reality or a normative ideal.⁵ Emphasizing the historical specificity of the public sphere in Western Europe, Habermas argued that the public sphere cannot be “transferred, ideal typically generalized, to any number of historical situations that represent formally similar constellations.”⁶ However, as many commentators have noted, the public sphere in which rational public discussions have emerged is also a normative ideal. It has, in fact, never actually been realized in the form
defined by Habermas, and it was transformed in the nineteenth century with the disappearance of the conditions that had paved the way for its emergence a century earlier. Habermas responded to this ambiguity in his later work by emphasizing the normative character of the public sphere, “deploying the concept in relation to citizenship and ‘democratic legitimation.’” As Geoff Eley argued, “in contemporary discourse, ‘public sphere’ now signifies the general questing for democratic agency in an era of declining electoral participation, compromised sovereignties, and frustrated and disappointed citizenship.”

While a large body of work using Habermas’s public sphere oscillates between these two ends (normative ideal and historical reality), in non-Western historiographies the incentive to appropriate the concept stems largely from its normative appeal. Like the term civil society that was appropriated, particularly in Eastern Europe in the 1980s, as the agency for democracy, the concept of public sphere was increasingly used in the 1990s in Middle Eastern and other non-Western historiographies to attain similar normative ideals.

The second important feature in Habermas’s definition of the public sphere is the conceptualization of a (civil) society separate from the state – of state and society as two distinct spheres diametrically opposed to one another. Strict adherence to this binary opposition has served to reinforce the emphasis on the definition of the public sphere as a normative ideal in non-Western historiographies. Civil societies/public spheres in regions outside Western Europe, the argument goes, could not develop because of the authoritarian state tradition that kept these societies under its yoke, and/or because of the submissive political culture of societies unable to resist those oppressive states and develop a “rational-critical discourse.” The basic ingredient of the submissive political culture is offered in essentialist terms – for example, Islam in the Middle East.

If the public sphere as an existing reality is a fiction in European history, even its partial realization is a phantasy in the non-Western present. The absence of the public sphere has recently become just another item in the history of absences that marks non-Western historiographies, and another means of validating the obsolete premises of modernizing approaches, by emphasizing the different temporalities that the so-called East and West occupy. Such terms as “latecomer” and “late-developing,” used in the 1950s to highlight the absence of “the necessary institutions capable of avoiding and braking the slide into political totalism, transmuting quantitative temporality into qualitative difference,” have more recently been replaced by “alternative modernities” or “retroactive modernities.” We are now experiencing a similar phenomenon in studies on non-Western regions with the increasing use of such rhetorics as
the “emergence” or “development” of the public sphere that underscores yet another temporality.\textsuperscript{13}

This strong normative agenda has led to two tendencies in Middle Eastern historiography. First, the term has become an unbound signifier, appropriated “wherever people come together for collective exchange and expression of opinion,” making analytical and focused debate difficult, if not impossible.\textsuperscript{14} The fact that it is now possible to juxtapose a study on sixteenth-century coffeehouses in Istanbul next to another on the intifada in contemporary Palestine with reference to the same conceptual framework of the public sphere is a stark example of this ambiguity. Considering that area studies has been delineated largely in relation to a loosely defined geographical orientation rather than a disciplinary focus, the conceptual ambiguity of the public sphere feels right at home.

Second, while a large body of scholarship is heralding the “emergence” or the “development” of the public sphere in the Middle East, there is also the tendency to swing the pendulum in the other direction: the distinguishing feature of what might be called defensive historiographies is the claim that the public sphere had already existed in the Middle East, even before its emergence in Europe in the eighteenth century. Coffeehouses, mosques, sufi lodges, baths and other public places where people have gathered had all the constituents of the public sphere before similar public places appeared in Europe, or so the arguments go.\textsuperscript{15} As a variant of “cultural nationalism,” of which there are numerous examples and which long predates the appropriation of the concept of public sphere, this defensive response has been an all-too-familiar component of Middle Eastern historiography. As if driven by a sense of shame vis-à-vis modern Europe, it is an attempt to cover naked absences through interventions in the past.

This paper is not concerned with the emergence or development of the public sphere against the state, nor does it attempt to partake of the debate on the existence or absence of a public sphere in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Middle East. Instead of employing the conventional antagonistic conceptualization of state and society, and understanding public and public opinion as merely sociological referents that emerged despite and against the state, I will argue that the “public” and “public opinion” have been constituted in a series of governmental practices that redefined politics in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{16} Although the term public opinion [efkar-i umumi] was not an explicit component of the Ottoman political lexicon before the 1860s, I will contend that it emerged as a new element in politics and as an implicit source of legitimacy for the Ottoman government from the 1830s onward.
Constituting the public and construing its opinion as a source of authority were processes intimately linked with the changing “governmentality” of the Ottoman state, processes by which the population became the primary target to be acted upon.\textsuperscript{17} To this end, the political means employed were diverse, ranging from legislation to taxation, and from institutional organizations to ceremonial practices.\textsuperscript{18} Indeed, the second quarter of the nineteenth century provides abundant evidence for us to trace such changes in the Ottoman mode of governance, changes that marked a rupture between “the old” and “the new,” and were officially stamped as the much celebrated \textit{Tanzimat} reforms that were initiated in 1839.

Underlying this rupture, I argue, was the surveillance of the population. Broadly defined, surveillance is “the collation and integration of information put to administrative purposes.”\textsuperscript{19} It is a new conception of society as a knowable entity, and it refers to such administrative practices as surveys, registrations, and the mapping of people and things for fiscal and political purposes that make society “legible.”\textsuperscript{20} Surveillance is not merely intended for social control; although the latter is integral to it in that it identifies resistance. It is also constitutive, for surveillance equally provided the means for the state to act upon, and to shape and manage the population.\textsuperscript{21} In other words, this paper departs from the emphasis on the “nonpolitical” character of surveillance in the literature\textsuperscript{22} – an all-encompassing disciplinary power that leaves the governed population little or no voice, which makes it unpalatable for studies on the public sphere – and stresses that surveillance was fundamental to a new conception of politics and the redefinition of the public sphere. I will detail the process of constituting the public and public opinion by way of two examples. First, I will trace the changing status of public opinion that occurred with the establishment of surveillance, using a set of spy reports that were generated by the Ottoman government in the 1840s. Second, I will highlight the symbolic yet consequential meaning of an unprecedented practice in courtly behavior, namely, the Ottoman sultan’s public visibility.

\textbf{LISTENING TO THE PUBLIC}

In 1840, the Ottoman government engaged in the intensive activity of gluing its ears to people’s conversations. Stationed in public places, and even in private houses and hotel rooms in the capital city of Istanbul, informers eavesdropped and recorded mundane exchanges about current events, and produced a sig-
significant number of reports, now housed in the Ottoman archives in Istanbul.23 The subjects of conversations recorded in these reports varied, but most of them consisted of political comments in the widest sense of the term: comments on the rebellions in North Africa and the Balkans, the new tax system, the corruption of high officials, the European Great Powers, and so on. Once the reports were submitted by the informers to their superiors, they would be dispatched to the chief of police and eventually found their way up to the sultan. While the reports consist entirely of conversations recorded in the capital, Istanbul, it is clear that informers paid special attention to those who had just come from the provinces and engaged in such topics as the irregularities of provincial land and income registration, or the corruption of tax collectors, governors, and local notables. The practice of listening in was therefore not limited to the capital, although it is impossible to assert that the entire population was indeed under the purview of surveillance.

Informers recorded with great precision the identity of those on whose conversations they eavesdropped and the location in which a particular conversation took place. In addition to names, occupations, and places of residence, the provisional lodgings of those who came from the provinces were carefully noted. Their reports were not summary accounts of public moods based on the informers’ impressions, but verbatim transcriptions of individual utterances reconstructed by the informers, some of which were recorded in dialogue form. After 1843, informers began to enter the exact date and time of each reported utterance, lending their reports an even greater level of detail.

The informers were not undercover security officials. They were recruited from among the local population, Ottoman subjects and foreign nationals alike.24 This strategy ensured that informers could effectively penetrate the webs of society without being detected and listen in conversations carried out in any of the nearly dozen languages that were widely spoken in the cosmopolitan city of Istanbul. 25 In many cases, the informer was a personal acquaintance of those on whose conversations he eavesdropped. Nor was he merely a good listener. Acting rather like a modern opinion pollster, he sometimes operated as an active participant by asking leading questions – and he did not hesitate to include the latter in his report.

The primary purpose of this surveillance activity was to investigate public opinion, not to indict perpetrators on the grounds of their political remarks. These reports were therefore not strictly conventional police reports, which tended to record sedition for the purpose of denouncement and ultimately, punishment. There is no indication that those whose political utterances were
recorded in the reports were ever prosecuted. However, people were not necessarily aware of that; and a strong fear of punishment permeates their voices.

At this point, we need to ask why the Ottoman government engaged in this intense surveillance activity, and more importantly, what inspired it to generate these reports. One of the ambivalences of the history of early modern and modern states is the use of contradictory strategies to cope with public political discourse: on one hand, a manifest desire to know what kinds of political issues people talked about and thought affected their lives and on the other, various attempts to place limits on people’s expression of their political opinions. In historical scholarship, this apparent contradiction is usually raised in connection to the practices of early modern forms of government – especially those of eighteenth-century France – and those of the so-called authoritarian and totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, such as the Stalin-era Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.

A basic principle of early modern governments that informed the relationship between the ruling elite and its subjects was that politics were the prerogative of the ruler. To the extent that this was so, and that it was recognized as the embodiment of the state, popular utterances regarding politics, government, and administrative matters were legally forbidden. Numerous archival documents testify that prior to the mid-nineteenth century, and especially in times of political crises, the Ottoman state had vigilantly monitored public places for “seditious” political conversations and punished subversive gossip-mongers. In 1798, the sultan wrote to his grand vizier:

> It has been reported that lies and fabrications are being invented and circulated by fomenters of strife and mischief and by the malicious and devilish sort, and that some ignorant and half-witted people, unable to tell good from evil and benefit from harm, dare utter words about the state and impertinently tell these fabrications to each other in coffeehouses and barber shops. It is necessary to close these coffeehouses and barber shops, where these dissolute assemble and dare talk about the state, and to apprehend, punish, and banish both those who own these coffeehouses and barber shops as well as those who dare utter frivolous and nonsensical words… From now on, those who dare talk about state affairs and those who listen to them in coffeehouses, barber shops, other shops and places of assembly, as well as officers who discuss state affairs beyond their duties in state offices, are to be apprehended without hesitation as a warning to others; and in order to execute this order, special undercover [agents] and spies are to be posted in such places,
and state officers are to be warned by their superiors that they, too, will
be punished accordingly, in case they indulge in such talk.²⁸

Two important points need to be stressed here. First, for the government,
popular opinions were perceived as noise that had to be monitored, controlled,
prevented, and if disturbing enough, silenced. In the late sixteenth and early
seventeenth century, especially, the sheer violence imposed on coffeehouses,
the most notorious public places in urban centers across the Ottoman Middle
East, is an indicator of the state’s objective to suppress “seditious” political con-
versations. Several times in the course of this period, coffeehouses in Istanbul
were closed down wholesale. Second, in addition to the age-old practice of
tebdil-i kıyafet (a personal control mechanism by which the higher echelons of
state officials and even the sultan himself would prowl through the streets of
Istanbul in disguise), placing spies at the nerve centers of the city had been a
common practice before the 1840s. Throughout the eighteenth and early nine-
teenth century, spies closely monitored coffeehouses and other public places to
prevent insolent talk and punish seditious gossip-mongers. The extent of spy-
ing was limited neither to men nor to male-dominated public places. Authori-
ties also employed women informers to persecute women allegedly engaging
in seditious conversations, as in 1809, when a woman informer had a group of
women discussing state affairs in a bathhouse arrested and imprisoned.²⁹

Although surveillance was extensive and inclusive, as the above example
suggests, it was nonetheless erratic. It was not a permanent fixture of Otto-
man subjects’ everyday lives. Nor did the government succeed – if indeed they
had intended it – to penetrate the social fabric. The success of social control
depended as much on the luck of the informers’ prowling as it did on people’s
negligence and inattention. Usually, gossip-mongers were alert to the presence
of outsiders seemingly anxious to eavesdrop on their conversations, and were
quite inventive in turning the whole process into a forum to voice their expec-
tations and sufferings to imperial ears.³⁰

To sum up, although spying on the population was certainly carried out
in the years preceding the 1840s, it took a radically different form in the mid-
nineteenth century. The differences can be identified in relation to three fac-
tors: mode of execution, agents, and objectives. First, whereas before the 1840s
spying had been sporadic and intermittent, it was implemented in a continuous
manner after this date.³¹ Second, while social control through monitoring had
been previously accomplished by military-administrative officials, the higher
bureaucracy, and even the sultan himself, after the 1840s it became increas-
ingly impersonal and “unofficial,” as local people were incorporated into the
surveillance system. Third, and most importantly, while pre-1840s surveillance aimed to subdue the populace by persecuting “seditious” words, its new purpose thereafter was to investigate public moods and opinions through a subtle and elaborate system of collecting and recording conversations and exchanges. Thus, beginning in the 1840s, the Ottoman state was no longer confined to its traditional political sphere, interfering sporadically with the daily functioning of public places to keep the population under control. On the contrary, its authority began to permeate the minute practices of the governed population. The changes in surveillance mechanisms cannot simply be conceived as mere technical matters pertaining to Ottoman administrative practices. While this extensive surveillance was a manifestation of the state’s emerging concern for public opinion, it also demonstrated a corresponding shift in the role of the ruling authority. This was a new form of political power, in which the state no longer dictated to the people but rather consulted them. The process of listening to conversations and conveying them to the ruling elite without any retributive penalty points, first and foremost, to the collapse of the distinction between “official truth” and “popular lies.” In this system of governance “popular lies” that had been hitherto persecuted acquired a legitimate status. This was the discovery of “public opinion.” In the long and uneven process of historical development, this was the moment when subjects were constituted as political citizens rather than subversive gossip-mongers, when word of mouth became worthy of note, and when political power implicitly recognized the legitimacy of public opinion instead of denouncing it.

Conceptualizing the public through surveillance reports was intimately linked with the new strategies of state involvement with the population which emerged at the same time. Just as listening in turned the population into an observed body, the unprecedented public visibility of the sultan marked a new conceptualization of the body politic in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

SEEING AND BEING SEEN

Before the reign of Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839), the public visibility of Ottoman sultans was a rare phenomenon, if not a completely unusual one. Institutionalized in Mehmed II’s Code of Law shortly after his conquest of Istanbul in 1453, the notion of the ruler’s invisibility had been fundamental to courtly etiquette. It remained more or less unshaken until the beginning of the eighteenth century, but its most dramatic development occurred in the 1830s. Up
until the late sixteenth century, the sultans had made themselves visible to the public mainly by leading elaborately staged military campaigns. In the following centuries, when the potential for defeat was greater (which could tarnish the monarch’s glamour and authority), and when leading a military campaign became a more precarious affair, various sultans resorted to different means of appearing before the public, of which Mehmed IV’s (r. 1648-1687) infamous hunting trips between Istanbul and Edirne are one notorious example. In addition to these occasions, during which imperial pageantry was carried out outside Istanbul, monarchs took part in a few public ceremonial activities within the capital. Processions to and from Friday prayers, during which people could approach him to submit their petitions; visits to the site of the mantle of the Prophet during the holy month of Ramadan; and succession ceremonies that culminated in the sword-girding ceremony in the town of Eyüp, served as extraordinary imperial spectacles in the Sublime Porte.

These staged and symbolically informed imperial displays did not challenge the notion of the ruler’s invisibility. They were well regulated moments, embedded in a carefully observed body politic that centered on the seclusion of power. The sultan’s exceptional public appearances were what Habermas called “representative publicity”; the ruler’s visibility was not meant “for” the public but for a display “before” the public. This body politic provided the sultan with a symbolic yet crucial tool to perform his role as ruler in the complex web of absolutist politics. Just as politics, in principle, was the prerogative of the ruler, so the ruler’s invisible body represented the immutability of the political order.

The ruler was mysterious, external, otherworldly; and so were politics, in theory, for the populace. Hence the illegality of political discourse by the ruled population and the invisibility of the sultan.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, during the reign of Mahmud II, the public persona of the sultan acquired a completely new character. His “country trips” [memleket gezileri] played a crucial role in this regard. Between 1830 and 1837, Mahmud II made no less than five country trips. The ostensible purpose of his travels, as was repeatedly stated by government sources, was to examine the living conditions of his subjects and provide charity for the poor. In reality, he wanted less to see his subjects than to be seen by them. In his journeys to the provinces, Mahmud II indeed heralded a new era in which “westernizing” imperial monarchs took to leaving their capitals for the more remote corners of their empires, so as to make themselves visible to their people. Alexander II, Crown Prince of Russia, undertook extensive tours across the Russian countryside beginning in the late 1830s, and so did the Japanese emperors in various parts of their empire throughout the 1870s.
On each trip, Mahmud II went deeper into the empire, both literally and figuratively. Throughout his long journeys he took every opportunity to show his compassion for his subjects, offering large sums of money for the repair of churches, synagogues, and historic and sacred sites, going into small villages, and distributing gifts. In an attempt to capture the sentiments of his people, he constantly downplayed his supreme figure and presented the image of an invincible yet human and earthly ruler. He spent a night on a battleship, favoring a simple dinner in the company of sailors instead of splendid banquets given in his honor; he addressed large crowds of people who came to see him; and he frequently mingled with his subjects to make himself both visible and touchable, all as part of an unprecedented and strategic move to construct his new image. He appeared as a father figure when offering gifts, as a devout believer when ordering the repair of religious sites, as a caring administrator when listening to people’s complaints, and as a diligent commander when reviewing his troops. In short, the image he created was not that of a ruler delegating his authority while isolated in the luxury of his palace, but of one deeply committed to his subjects.

One of the most important purposes of the sultan’s visits to the distant provinces was to regain the loyalty of his non-Muslim subjects. This is evident in his choice of the regions he visited. He traveled extensively in the predominantly Christian Balkan provinces, whereas, in chiefly Muslim Anatolia, he only visited Istanbul’s neighboring town of Izmit. Considering this was a time when nationalist movements were gaining momentum in the Balkans, Sultan Mahmud II’s visits were quite timely. Already in 1829, he had legally “offered non-Muslims and Muslims a common subjecthood/citizenry,” by enforcing the new clothing law which eliminated the headgear as the chief marker of status and confessional identity. Now he personally delivered assurance to his subjects of the equity of his imperial eye toward Muslims and non-Muslims:

You Greeks! You Armenians! You Jews! Just like Muslims, you all are God’s servants and my subjects. You differ in matters of faith. But you are all protected by the law and by my imperial will. Pay your taxes. They will be used to ensure your security and your well-being.

During his trips, Mahmud II promised his subjects that he would continue to visit them regularly. The message he conveyed was clear: “Law and order will be placed in motion not only in the capital but in the rest of the empire as well.” He promised more reasonable taxes, an end to the secondary status of the provinces, and the observance of justice irrespective of his subjects’ faith. His aim was to replace the public’s widely held perception of government mis-
conduct with that of law and order. In a strategic move to display his sense of justice, he often left a substantial sum of money to compensate for the town’s expenditure in hosting his own reception.  

Throughout his travels, Mahmud II sought to achieve personal popularity with his new image, and the response he received from his subjects was as welcoming as he could have hoped for. People embraced him with great enthusiasm, praying for him as he walked among them accompanied by his entourage. His presence in the far and distant provinces was an attempt to demonstrate the territorial unity of an empire on the verge of disintegration, as ethnonationalist movements in the Balkans and the disheartening rebellion of Mehmed Ali Pasha in Egypt gained ground. He attempted to connect the remote corners of the empire to the capital of Istanbul and to bring the people closer to him both by seeing them and by giving them the opportunity to see him, thus eliminating the sense of aloofness that had existed between the ruler and his subjects. His aspiration was both to constitute his subjects as a collective identity and “to take symbolic possession” of his realm.  

In the capital, too, Mahmud II took every opportunity to make himself visible to the public, especially in the last decade of his reign. He frequently participated in the opening ceremonies of new schools and public buildings, and reviewed his troops. This newly established tradition of imperial public visibility continued during the reign of Mahmud II’s two consecutive successors, Abdülmeclid (r. 1839-1861) and Abdülaziz (r. 1861-1876).  

As Mahmud II began to make himself visible to the public, the official newspaper, Takvim-i Vekayi (the first Ottoman newspaper, launched in 1831) disseminated the mundane activities of the ruler to bolster the new image of an earthly sultan. The idea of an Ottoman newspaper had largely emerged as a counterattack to Mehmed Ali Pasha’s newspaper, Vaka-yı Mısriyye, that had been established in 1828. Once the loyal governor of the lucrative province of Egypt, Mehmed Ali Pasha rebelled and posed the greatest challenge to the empire as his armies defeated the Ottomans more than once, approaching a day’s march from Istanbul, in the 1830s. Takvim-i Vekayi began to serve as a new front in the continuous war between the sultan and his rebellious governor, and as the new arena for the battle over public opinion.

The newspaper aimed at constructing a caring and nurturing image of the sultan who was now directly involved in the affairs of the state. Originally published in Ottoman Turkish, different versions in Arabic, Persian, Greek, Armenian, Bulgarian, and French were also published and distributed. This signaled Mahmud II’s persistent urge to convey his message to his subjects, which was also evident in his efforts to make the original language of the newspaper sim-
ple enough to be easily understood by ordinary people. When Mehmed Esad, chief editor of Takvim-i Vekayi, submitted to him a draft of his coverage of the sultan’s 1837 trip to the Balkans, which he had written in florid style, Mahmud II thought it too complicated. His response is illustrative of his effort to eliminate both physical and linguistic estrangement between himself and his subjects:

Although your piece is beautifully written and well crafted, in these kinds of matters that are to be presented to the public, the wording should be such that everybody can understand.\(^{51}\)

In addition to the novelty of Mahmud II’s decision to leave the capital and travel through the empire to “see his subjects,” he also became the first sultan to make his personal portraits available for public viewing. Despite the Islamic ban on the reproduction of human images, Ottoman sultans since Mehmed II had had their portraits painted. However, these portraits had never left the secluded imperial palace of Topkapi. In his attempt to expand the public visibility of his rule, Mahmud II broke with this tradition. For the first time, the subjects of the empire had the opportunity to see what the sultan looked like. As portraitists rushed to Istanbul from Europe in the early 1830s,\(^ {52}\) Mahmud II began dispatching his portraits to ambassadors, high-ranking bureaucrats, and most importantly, to the Şeyhulislam, the chief religious authority – much to the latter’s displeasure.\(^ {53}\) Mahmud II’s self-conscious public image is intimated by the British ambassador Stratford Caning who remarked that the sultan appeared at all times as though he were posing for an artist.\(^ {54}\) By 1835, the monarch began to distribute his portraits to schools, official buildings, and military barracks throughout the capital, creating a symbolic presence as the ultimate overseer, even in his physical absence.\(^ {55}\)

It is important to emphasize that these portraits were strikingly different from earlier ones, which had been painted in much the same fashion as those of his predecessors and had not been intended for public viewing.\(^ {56}\) In one of his earlier portraits, painted sometime between 1808 and 1829, Mahmud II is depicted with a long beard, in a traditional loose caftan and a large turban on his head, seated on his jeweled throne (Figure 1). His face looks pale, his body motionless and apathetic, and despite his young age he appears aged. By contrast, in a later painting, produced between 1829 and 1839, he is shown seated in a western-style chair. He dons a European-style military uniform consisting of tight trousers and a shirt enveloped in a cloak (Figure 2). His beard is much shorter, and projects a solemn authority and a younger look. Instead of the traditional turban, he wears a fez, which he had made compulsory for all officials
Figure 1: Anonymous (between 1808 and 1829). Reproduced from The Sultan’s Portraits: Picturing the House of Osman (Istanbul: Isbank, 2000), 504.
Figure 2: Anonymous (between 1829 and 1839). Reproduced from *The Sultan’s Portraits*, 505.
in 1829. His bodily disposition is dynamic and vigorous. His right hand points out, conveying his role as the guide and leader of his subjects. In his left hand, a *ferman*, the sultanic edict, displays his imperial seal, and on the table next to his chair, a set of books signifies the authority of fixed texts. It is now these, and not his figure seated on the throne, that serve as the new metonyms of his power as the law-abiding and just administrator.

By both seeing his subjects and making himself visible to them, Mahmud II did not merely aim at emphasizing the collective identity and unity of his empire. He also aspired to the “ability to look back at the people.” He asked his officials for detailed topographic and demographic information and requested maps of the places he visited, only to find out that such detailed maps did not exist. Upon his order, cartographers began mapping the lands of the empire, an endeavor followed by two attempts at comprehensive censuses in 1831 and in 1844. In addition, land and income surveys of the population across the Anatolian and Balkan provinces were conducted in 1840 and 1844; however incomplete, they served to establish the basis of a new tax system. Quarantine reports must also be added to these statistical activities. Prepared monthly by centrally appointed officials as part of the state’s emerging concern for public health in the 1840s, these reports, which inventoried epidemics and major diseases, were sent to Istanbul from all four corners of the empire.

Within the same decade, then, while spy reports registered the mood of the people, quarantine reports listed their health conditions, income registers recorded their wealth, and maps and censuses charted the empire’s territory and its inhabitants. And while these maps and statistics rendered the subjects “legible,” the ruler was making himself visible to his subjects. In other words, as the symbol of power was rendered visible, the subjects were constituted as “objects of observation.”

All these new surveillance practices, exemplified in the land, health, and opinion surveys, reflect a new governmentality based on the notion that the population is not an aggregate body, but a knowable entity; the attempt to make it legible must be seen in this light. Making the population legible was at once a process of inscribing that required a reconfiguration of power relations but also, and perhaps more importantly, inevitably opened up a new space of communication between the ruler and the ruled. As part of this new governmentality, even social control, which explicitly attributes a passive role to society and renders the state the only agent of an unequal yet reciprocal process, is located within this space. This is the space where politics is redefined. It is “disciplinary” in that it arranges, shapes, and controls, and it is “emancipatory” in that it lends a legitimate voice to those subjected to control in the business of
government.63

This is also how the public sphere was redefined: It was no longer merely a moral sphere within which the populace was to be kept aloof from politics and submit its loyalty to the ruler, but an actual political sphere where public and public opinion emerged as a legitimate force in the business of governance, and people were constituted as political subjects. In practice, surveillance brought about the state’s active involvement in the minute details of the lives of the people. Encircled by the state’s overt and covert interventions, the public sphere itself thus became a sphere of control. With the establishment, in 1844, of the first Ottoman police organization as a body separate from the military, this process was institutionalized.64 The discovery of public opinion inevitably overlapped with public policing. While the public sphere was defined as the political sphere, it simultaneously became a zone of control. This extensive surveillance ultimately increased the state’s capacity to sanction, while it decreased its need to flex its muscle before the public. European travelers point to the rarity of capital punishment in the 1840s, attributing it, with expected credulity, to the leniency of the young ruler Abdülmecid, son of Mahmud II. In 1844, the English traveler Charles White noted:

The present Sultan evinces extreme repugnance to sanction capital punishment, even in cases of malefactors whose crimes would inevitably lead them to the scaffold in France, England, or the United States. The knowledge of the sovereign’s sentiments naturally influences those of the judges.65

CONCLUSION

The elements of transformation of nineteenth-century Ottoman political culture presented here were among the ingredients of a new language of political authority that could no longer be effectively maintained by relying on the language of the conventional political order.66 Ottoman absolutist rule depended on the mystification of politics, on the portrayal of the sultan as the sole representative of politics, and on the mystification of the ruler, ensured by his invisibility. This notion of politics was completely reversed towards the mid-nineteenth century: first, as demonstrated by the spy reports, the popular political discourse was implicitly legitimized; second, people were constituted as political subjects; and third, the sultan was humanized by becoming more visible through his country trips, his portraits for public consumption, and the
publication of his mundane governmental activities.

The new language of politics was that of modernity. Whether identified as restoration or reform towards Westernization or modernization, or imposed through revolutions or colonization, this new language was articulated as a response to “the new demands of modernity” in many parts of the world from the late eighteenth century onwards. In the Ottoman Empire, this response, which took the form of a massive reform program in the legal, economic, and administrative spheres in the nineteenth century, was officially known as the **Tanzimat**. It was initiated by Mahmud II and culminated in the declaration of the Gülhane Rescript in 1839. It is commonly argued that the **Tanzimat** reforms were inspired by European models to bring an end to the “traditional” political structure that had presumably been in decline for nearly three centuries. As common and enduring as this view may have been in serving as an explanatory framework for nineteenth-century Ottoman historiography, it has lately become a punching bag for revisionist historians.

My purpose here is neither to propose yet another revisionist history nor to undermine the importance of the **Tanzimat** reforms. While we need to dwell on the **rupture** that was brought about by the reforms, the focus of attention should not be the so-called Western-inspired institutional changes as the proponents of modernization would have it. Indeed, this ideological position has tended to place the cart before the horse, by explaining social and political transformations through the institutional reforms that were initiated from the second quarter of the nineteenth century onward. Rather, we should shift our object of inquiry to the overall constitutive effects that these reforms have attempted to accomplish.

Here, the concept of surveillance may provide us with an opportunity to capture these effects. As a governing practice in the mid nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, surveillance was a tool that served to render the population legible. But it was at the same time a constitutive practice of the social reality with a new definition of politics and of the public sphere. What also needs to be noted is that surveillance was not a peculiarity of Ottoman governance, nor of other so-called absolutist regimes. Surveillance as defined here was a common governmental practice of many nineteenth- and twentieth-century states, whether in Western Europe, Asia or the Middle East, and whether liberal, authoritarian, or totalitarian regimes. It was, in sum, a shared feature of modernity.

This view would allow us to conduct constructive – as opposed to defensive – comparative studies on the public sphere without attributing normative
content to it. Moreover, it would help us to steer clear of the tendency to use “public sphere” and “society” interchangeably, and to see “state” and “public sphere” as disconnected, diametrically opposed, and historically developed in contradistinction to one another. This chapter has sought to demonstrate that the constitution of the public and the surveillance of the population were inextricably linked. The public sphere was not a place independent of state power, nor was it merely an object of power upon which control and discipline were implemented. It was an arena of political struggle between the ruler and the ruled, and an ideal locale to trace the changing language and dynamics of this struggle.
NOTES

1. I would like to thank Shirine Hamadeh for her invaluable input in the essay.


4. Mah, “Phantasies of the Public Sphere,” 169.


8. Eley, “Politics, Culture and the Public Sphere,” 224.


13. It is this normative appeal associated with a strong agenda of democratic expansion and
citizenship in the Middle East that seems to have secured funding for numerous international conferences, workshops, and publications on the public sphere.


16. See Keith Michael Baker, Inventing the French Revolution: Essays on French Political Culture in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 171-72. Baker’s assessment (especially in chapter 8) of “the public” and “public opinion” as political and ideological constructs has been influential in formulating my argument. However, my argument departs from Baker’s in that I place more emphasis on the new strategies of governance.


23. For a detailed treatment of these reports with a different focus, see Cengiz Kirli, “Coffeehouses: Public Opinion in the Nineteenth Century Ottoman Empire,” in Public Islam and the Common Good, edited by Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman (Leiden: Brill, 2004). Most of these reports are catalogued under İradeler and some of them under Cevdet in the Prime Ministry’s Ottoman Archives (hereafter BOA). For full citations of the reports, see the article cited above.
24. Informer payment registers clearly reveal that Ottoman subjects and foreign nationals were paid different sums. The latter group was better paid. For examples of these payment registers, see BOA, Cevdet-Askeri, nos: 4584, 8066, 8618.

25. All reports were written in Ottoman Turkish but in some cases the original language of the conversation was mentioned by the informer.

26. In Sheila Fitzpatrick, Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), the author suggests that this is a contradiction that “all repressive, authoritarian regimes must try to resolve,” as if the liberal-democratic regimes of the modern era were impervious to this contradiction (p. 164).


30. For an example of such subversive strategies, see Cabi Efendi, Cabi Tarihi, 947-948.

31. The intelligence activity reached its peak during the reign of Abdülhamid II (1876-1908), but its main purpose was the denunciation and prosecution of political public discourse.

32. For the distinction in the case of India, see Ranajit Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 259.

33. Baker, Inventing the French Revolution, especially chap. 8, “Public Opinion as Political Invention.” Also, see Paul Rabinow ed., The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault’s Thought (New York: Penguin, 1984), 242, where Foucault says, “What was discovered at that time – and this was one of the great discoveries of political thought at the end of the eighteenth century – was the idea of society [emphasis original].”


36. Delegating much of his power to the grand vizier, Mehmed IV, “the Hunter,” devoted a great deal of his time to hunting away from Istanbul, much to the dismay of the public.


39. The standard account of the body politic of absolutism in Europe is that of Ernst H. Kantorowicz, The King’s Two Bodies (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).


41. See, respectively, Richard Wortman, “Rule by Sentiment: Alexander II’s Journeys through the Russian Empire,” American Historical Review 95 (1990): 745-771; and T. Fujitani, Splendid Monarchy: Power and Pageantry in Modern Japan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Fujitani’s work is indeed splendid, and has been influential in formulating my analysis of Mahmud II’s visibility.

42. There are authentic sources covering Sultan Mahmud II’s travels. Mehmed Esad Efendi, the chronicler of the time as well as the editor of the official newspaper Takvim-i Vakayi, covered the Dardanelles-Edirne and Rumelia travels, the two long-lasting ones, in his works entitled Sefername-i Hayr and Ayatü’l-hayr, respectively. Helmut von Moltke, a Prussian officer in charge of training Ottoman troops personally, joined the Sultan’s last trip in 1837, and wrote his observations in Briefe über Zustande und Begebenheiten in der Türkei. References are to its French translation Lettres du Maréchal de Moltke sur l’Orient (Paris: Libraire Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1877). Relevant information regarding the travels can also be found in Ahmed Lütfi’s Tarih-i Lütfi [Lütfi’s History], 9 vols. (İstanbul: Mahmut Beğ Matbaası, 1302/1885).


44. Özcan, “II. Mahmud’un Memleket Gezileri,” 373-74; Moltke, Lettres sur l’Orient, 135.

45. Moltke, Lettres sur l’Orient, 135.

46. Moltke, Lettres sur l’Orient, 144.

47. Moltke, Lettres sur l’Orient, 144.

48. For an analysis of the spy reports covering the public opinion on the war with Mehmed Ali Pasha, see Cengiz Kırk, “Through the Grapevine,” Al-Ahram Weekly, 10-16 November 2005, no: 768. Electronic version of the article can be found at, http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2005/768/sc2.htm

50. Abdülmecid went on a 17-day trip covering İzmit, Bursa, Mudanya, the Dardanelles, and several Aegean islands in 1844. Lütfi, *Tarih-i Lütfi* 7, 87-88. The sultan’s visibility was radically reversed during Abdülhamid II’s (1876-1908) rule, which was marked by the seclusion of power and the invisibility of the ruler. Despite the scarcity of secondary literature on Mahmud II’s public visibility, lately there has been an increasing interest in the seclusion of power during Abdülhamid II’s reign. See Selim Deringil, “Abdülhamid Dönemi Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Simgesel ve Törensel Doku: ‘Görünmeden Görmek’ [Symbolic and Ritualistic Structure in the Ottoman Empire during the Reign of Abdülhamid II: Seeing without Being Seen]” *Toplum ve Bilim* 62 (1993), 34-55; Georgan, “Le sultan caché,” 93-124.


52. Tuncer Baykara, *Osmanlılarda Medeniyet Kavramı ve Ondokuzuncu Yüzyıla Dair Araştırmalar* [The Concept of Civilization in the Ottoman Empire and Studies on the Nineteenth Century] (İzmir: Akademi Kitabevi, 1992), 53.

53. Lütfi, *Tarih-i Lütfi* 4, 65. Şeyhülislam Yasincizade Abdülvehab Efendi’s opposition was so firm that he was removed from his office. Following this, a permanent portraitist was appointed for the palace service. Baykara, *Osmanlılarda Medeniyet Kavramı*, 55.

54. Baykara, *Osmanlılarda Medeniyet Kavramı*, 54


56. See also Fujitani, *Splendid Monarchy* for the transformation in the depiction of Japanese emperors in photographic representations, 175-80.


60. These income registers (temettuat defterleri) amount to several thousand volumes. Our information about these registers is very limited. For a brief introduction to the income registers see Mübahat Kütükoğlu, “Osmanlı’nın Sosyal ve İktisadi Kaynaklarından Temetti Defterleri [Income Registers as a Social and Economic Source Material of the Ottomans],” *Belleten*, 59/225 (1995): 395-418; and Tevfik Güran, 19. Yüzyıl Osmanlı Tarımı [19th Century Ottoman Agriculture] (İstanbul: Eren, 1998). For a significant study that goes beyond a description of these registers, see Huri İslamoğlu, “Politics of Administering Property: Law and Statistics in the Nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire,” in *Constituting Property: Private Property in the East and West*, edited by Huri İslamoğlu (London:

61. These health reports are located in the Ottoman archives in the catalogue entitled İrade-Dahiliye: Tahaffuz Jurnalleri.


64. The Police Organization was turned into the Ministry in 1846. For the development of the Ottoman police organization in the nineteenth century, see Ferdan Ergut, Modern Devlet ve Polis: Osmanlı’dan Cumhuriyet’e Toplumsal Denetimin Diyalektiği [The Modern State and the Police: The Dialectic of Social Control from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2004); and Nadir Özbek, “Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda İç Güvenlik, Siyaset ve Devlet, 1876-1909 [Internal Security, Politics and the State],” Türklük Araştırmaları Dergisi, 16 (2004): 59-95.

65. Charles White, Three Years in Constantinople; or, Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1844, vol 1. (London: H. Colburn, 1845), 120.

66. See Baker, Inventing the French Revolution, 169-70 for this new language that marked the dissolution of French absolutism in the eighteenth century.


68. Holquist, “Information is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work,” 443.