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REVIEW ESSAY

The Quandary of Proliferating Intermediaries: Ottoman State Formation Beyond the De/Centralization Impasse

Choon Hwee Koh

Department of History, University of California, Los Angeles, Los Angeles, CA, USA
Email: chkoh@history.ucla.edu

Is Meta a more decentralized organization today than twenty years ago, when it was known as "Thefacebook"? Its CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, certainly delegates a wider range of tasks to a wider range of intermediaries in 2024 compared to 2004. But Meta is also a far larger company today. Two decades ago, it was a small start-up; today, it is a multinational, publicly listed company. Given this organizational transformation, it would be odd to describe Meta as more decentralized today than "Thefacebook" twenty years ago without accounting for scale or giving more context. It is similarly odd when historians describe the Ottoman state as being more decentralized in the 18th century than in the 16th century.[1]

In this review essay I explain why. I suggest several interrelated reasons: the neglect of scale, the misidentification of Ottoman imperial territory for the Ottoman state, the assumption that proliferating intermediaries indicated a weakening of central imperial control, and the tendency to evaluate governance decisions by whether they were made centrally or provincially, and not by their actual outcomes (in part because there is no agreed upon method to assess these outcomes).

I propose a different way of understanding the Ottoman state and its transformation. First, it is the Ottoman imperial bureaucracy, not its territory, that should be defined as the state and the appropriate unit of analysis. According to longstanding secondary scholarship, the Ottoman state expanded in scale (in numbers of personnel, in documentation produced) significantly after the 16th century. Defining the Ottoman state as the imperial bureaucracy clarifies downstream research questions that must be asked, such as how did an expanded

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[1] This analogy between two kinds of bureaucracy, one imperial, one corporate, should not be controversial. The bureaucracy has long been as a major research focus for social scientists studying organizations, whether states or business enterprises. S.N. Eisenstadt, "Bureaucracy and Bureaucratization," *Current Sociology* 7, no. 2 (1958): 99–124, https://doi.org/10.1177/001139215800700201. This interdisciplinary cross-fertilization influenced studies on early modern European state formation, which, in turn, heavily influenced Ottoman state formation literature. Ariel Salzmann's important article owed an intellectual debt to Charles Tilly, whose early work engaged with economics, business studies, and organizational studies. Charles Tilly, Louise Tilly, and Richard Tilly, "European Economic and Social History in the 1990s," *Journal of European Economic History* 20, no. 3 (1991): 645–71; Alfred D. Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1977); Alfred D. Chandler, *Scale and Scope: The Dynamics of Industrial Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1990); Ariel Salzmann, "An Ancien Regime Revisited: 'Privatization' and Political Economy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Empire," *Politics & Society* 21, no. 4 (1993): 393–423. By making this analogy, I am not claiming that the Ottoman Empire was at any point a 21st-century startup. Rather, this has been the most effective way I have found to communicate my point to students and peers – for some reason, it has been immensely difficult to convince my peers that scale matters, and the scale of the Ottoman "state" (imperial bureaucracy) changed over time. It was not a fixed, unchanging unit of analysis.

Ottoman state organize its newly recruited intermediaries, and did they achieve the intended outcomes?

This definition shifts focus to the role of intermediaries. To be a preindustrial empire is to necessarily rule indirectly by delegating tasks and empowering local intermediaries with the authority to make decisions.[2] Recognizing the banality of task delegation allows historians to distinguish business as usual in large organizations from extraordinary periods of disorder, social collapse, and genuine loss of central control. Conflict between principal and agent was a feature, not a bug, of large imperial bureaucracies with far-flung provinces. What we historians know today about this principal-agent dynamic (between central and provincial administrators) was captured on slow-moving paper in an era where information flows were still embodied and could only travel as fast as a courier on a horse. Local officials' autonomy in managing local affairs was, in fact, a default condition given their distance from the imperial capital. This default condition of local autonomy should not always be conflated with loss of central control.

In practice, distinguishing mundane bureaucratic friction from extraordinary crisis is a thorny challenge for historians, especially when considering the heterogeneous Ottoman provinces, each with different politico-fiscal agreements with the imperial administration.[3] I suggest that refocusing analysis on the intermediaries involved in Ottoman governance can clarify how Ottoman state formation processes changed. This call to focus on intermediaries is not new; historians have long focused on intermediaries, defining them as a range of contractors, local notables, functionaries, officials, corporations, councils, assemblies, and tax farmers.[4] But what is new, perhaps, is the push to taxonomize these proliferating intermediaries and to clarify their roles in the context of an expanding state–this clarification can, in turn, produce a clearer view of governance outcomes. What is also new here is recognizing the expansion of the Ottoman state as an axiomatic starting point. In sum, this attempt to taxonomize should not be controversial; it is a similar methodological move to

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[2] Many historians have previously made the same point. To give just one example, Jane Hathaway wrote in 1996: "…[it] was not simply the case that a weak sultanate encouraged local potentates to assert their independence; more fundamentally, a larger corps of government officials meant a larger corps of functionaries making the rounds of the provinces, with all the opportunities that this mobility entailed for forging ties with local elements and for becoming localized." Jane Hathaway, "Problems of Periodization in Ottoman History: The Fifteenth Through the Eighteenth Centuries," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 20, no. 2 (1996): 27–28.

[3] For useful overviews on the heterogeneity of various territories in the overall imperial context, see Gilles Veinstein, "L'empire dans sa grandeur," in *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman*, ed. Robert Mantran (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 207–9; Güneş Işıksel, "États tributaires," in *Dictionnaire de L'Empire ottoman*, eds. François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, and Gilles Veinstein (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 73; Elisabetta Borromeo and Olivier Bouquet, "Territoires Ottomans," in *Dictionnaire de L'Empire ottoman*, eds. François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, and Gilles Veinstein, vol. 2 (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 2010–20. For a more finely grained examination of different territories and their relation to the Ottoman imperial administration, see Asma Moalla, *The Regency of Tunis and the Ottoman Porte, 1777–1814: Army and Government of a North-African Eyaalet at the End of the Eighteenth Century* (Routledge, 2005); Tal Shuval, "The Peripheralization of The Ottoman Algerian Elite," in *The Ottoman World*, ed. Christine Woodhead (London: Routledge, 2011), 264–75; Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević, eds., *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, 1st ed., vol. 53, The Ottoman Empire and Its Heritage (Boston: Brill, 2013); Nicolas Vatin, "Le Pouvoir Des Barberousse a Alger d'apres Les Gazavat-i Hayreddin Paşa," in *Political Thought and Practice in the Ottoman Empire: Halcyon Days in Crete IX, a Symposium Held in Rethymno 9–11 January 2015*, ed. Marinos Sariyannis (Rethymno, Greece: Crete University Press, 2019), 391–416; Metin Atmaca, "Negotiating Political Power in the Early Modern Middle East: Kurdish Emirates between the Ottoman Empire and Iranian Dynasties (Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)," in *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*, eds. Hamit Bozarslan, Cengiz Güneş, and Veli Yadirgi (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 45–72. For an overview of Ottoman frontiers, see Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, "Between Universalistic Claims and Reality: Ottoman Frontiers in the Early Modern Period," in *The Ottoman World*, ed. Christine Woodhead (London: Routledge, 2011), 205–19.

[4] For instance, see K. Kivanç Karaman and Şevket Pamuk, "Ottoman State Finances in European Perspective, 1500–1914," *The Journal of Economic History* 70, no. 3 (2010): 595.

categorizing Ottoman territories according to their politico-fiscal relationship to the state (i.e., "core" *timar* territories, semi-autonomous *salyaneli* territories, and vassal-like tributary territories).[5]

The question at the heart of this review essay – what the macro, long-term trends of Ottoman state formation were – lends itself to social science methods. To that end, the essay ends with two possible social science approaches to carrying out the taxonomy and analysis of Ottoman intermediaries described above. These are not the only two possible approaches; they are just the two I could think of. This essay's main aim is not to dogmatically champion specific scholarly approaches, but rather to open a conversation that can move the field beyond the defunct de/centralization paradigm.

An Impasse in Ottoman Historiography

Today, Ottoman historiography is still largely governed by a paradigm that sees the empire as having a "precocious" centralized state in the 15th and 16th centuries, a "privatizing" decentralized state in the 18th century, and finally, a "modernizing" centralized state in the 19th century.[6] This tripartite de/centralization schema likely arose from the uneven development of 20th-century Ottoman historiography. By the 1970s, scholars observed that Ottoman research tended to cluster around the "golden age" of the 16th century or the "modernizing" 19th century, contributing to "two disjointed temporalities of the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries."[7] These uneven research foci neglected the "middle period" between the empire's founding and its modernization, likely encouraging historians of an earlier generation to view the empire as entering a centuries-long period of decline after the 16th century.[8]

In the 1990s, a new generation of scholarly studies focused on the 18th century rebalanced this uneven historiography. New literature on Ottoman fiscal practices, especially the life-term tax grant (*malikane*), helped to reframe the 18th-century period as an era of "decentralization."

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[5] Historians have distinguished regions where the *timar* land-grant system was instituted (Anatolia and Rumelia) from the "salyaneli" regions (Egypt, Baghdad, Basra, Abyssinia, Lahsa, Alger, Tripoli, and Tunis), where the governor derived his salary from the provincial treasury and submitted fiscal revenues to the sultan, which were received as a kind of tribute, from tributary states (Moldovia, Wallachia, Transylvania, Ragusa, Georgia, Circassia, Montenegro, Crimean khanate, and Hijaz). These tributary states submitted annual tributes and usually committed to participating in Ottoman military campaigns. Veinstein, "L'empire dans sa grandeur," 207–9; Borromeo and Bouquet, "Territoires Ottomans," 2015–16. For a useful overview focused on the late Ottoman Empire, see Thomas Kuehn, "Bringing the Imperial Back in: Reconsidering Governance in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1839–1923 (Part I)," *History Compass* 19, no. 8 (2021): 1–10; Thomas Kuehn, "Bringing the Imperial Back in: Reconsidering Governance in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1839–1923 (Part II)," *History Compass* 19, no. 8 (2021): 1–11.

[6] Salzmann, "Ancien Regime Revisited," 394. For other versions of this paradigm, see Halil Inalcık, "Centralization and Decentralization in Ottoman Administration," in *Studies in Eighteenth Century Islamic History*, eds. Thomas Naff and Roger Owen (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 27–52; Yaşar Yücel, "Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Desantralizasyon'a (Adem-i Merkeziyet) Dair Genel Gözlemler," *Belleten* 38, no. 152 (1974): 657–708; Şevket Pamuk, "The Evolution of Fiscal Institutions in the Ottoman Empire, 1500-1914," in *The Rise of Fiscal States: A Global History, 1500–1914*, eds. Bartolomé Yun Casalilla and Patrick O'Brien (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 304–31.

[7] Huri Islamoğlu and Çağlar Keyder, "Agenda for Ottoman History," *Review* 1, no. 1 (1977): 31–55.

[8] Roger Owen, "The Middle East in the Eighteenth Century - an 'Islamic' Society in Decline? A Critique of Gibb and Bowen's Islamic Society and the West," *Review of Middle East Studies* 1 (1975): 101–12; Douglas Howard, "Ottoman Historiography and the Literature of 'Decline' of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Journal of Asian History* 22, no. 1 (1988): 52–77; Rifa'at Ali Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State: The Ottoman Empire, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), ix; Karen Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 197.

At the time, the "decentralization" concept was greeted with skepticism in some quarters. Some historians argued that it was really a "euphemism" for the other "d-word": decline. Others critiqued the "inherent negativity" of the concept, which, they alleged, overshadowed the fact that the Ottoman bureaucracy remained "viable" until the 1800s.[9] Still others offered alternatives, such as "consolidation" and "transformation," the latter of which has recently been critiqued as an imprecise, "catch-all" term.[10]

In a way, "centralization" and "decentralization" have become "catch-all" terms as well; they are frequently invoked but often left undefined. Notably, historians have used this language of de/centralization ("centrifugal," "centripetal decentralization," "decentralizing centralists") to describe the Ottoman state and its processes in the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.[11] This is a long time to have analytical purchase.

In cases where these terms *are* defined, historians use them to refer to quite different phenomena. For instance, historians can use "centralization" to refer to: a state that is autonomous from the ruling class; the Ottomanization of provinces through, for instance, the codification of provincial law codes (*liva* or *sancak kanunnameleri*);[12] direct appointments by the imperial bureaucracy, such as appointing a judge or janissaries in the provinces (as opposed to local appointments of officials, such as the postmaster);[13] the application of the *timar* land-grant system, which, in the view of some historians, distinguished core, central lands from non-core regions;[14] and the quality of sultanic leadership.[15] Other times, historians use "centralization" to mean standardization (such as the adoption of European mean time across the empire), the uniformization of administrative processes, or the state's new involvement in areas in which it previously did not intervene.[16]

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[9] Linda T. Darling, "Another Look at Periodization in Ottoman History," *Turkish Studies Association Journal* 26, no. 2 (2002): 20; Jane Hathaway, *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule, 1516–1800* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2008), 9.

[10] Darling, "Another Look at Periodization in Ottoman History," 21; Olivier Bouquet, "From Decline to Transformation: Reflections on a New Paradigm in Ottoman History," *Osmanlı Araştırmaları/The Journal of Ottoman Studies* 60 (2022): 50.

[11] Salzmann, "Ancien Regime Revisited"; Gabriel Piterberg, *An Ottoman Tragedy: History and Historiography at Play* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 154; Nobuyoshi Fujinami, "Decentralizing Centralists, or the Political Language on Provincial Administration in the Second Ottoman Constitutional Period," *Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 6 (2013): 880–900. See also Rhoads Murphey, "Continuity and Discontinuity in Ottoman Administrative Theory and Practice during the Late Seventeenth Century," *Poetics Today* 14 (1993): 437; Alan Mikhail, "An Irrigated Empire: The View from Ottoman Fayyum," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42, no. 4 (2010): 582; Bruce McGowan, "The Age of the Ayans, 1699–1812," in *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire: 1600–1914*, eds. Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), ii, 642; Karl Barbir, "The Changing Face of the Ottoman Empire in the Eighteenth Century: Past and Future Scholarship," *Oriente Moderno* 79, no. 1 (1999): 261; Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State*, 393, 417 48.

[12] Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State*, 7, 12–13.

[13] "...the Ottoman Empire established a centralized judicial institution by setting up a sharia court in every judicial-administrative unit or district (kaza) and by appointing a judge (kadı) from the centre." Jun Akiba, "Farming out Judicial Offices in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1750–1839," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 87, no. 1 (2024): 29, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X23000940; Yannis Spyropoulos, "Janissary Politics on the Ottoman Periphery (18th–Early 19th C.)," in *Political Thought and Practice in the Ottoman Empire: Halcyon Days in Crete IX, a Symposium Held in Rethymno 9–11 January 2015*, ed. Marinos Sariyannis (Rethymno, Greece: Crete University Press, 2019), 473–75.

[14] See notes 3 and 5 above. For a recent assessment of *timar* studies, see Douglas Howard, "Why Timars? Why Now? Ottoman Timars in the Light of Recent Historiography," *Turkish Historical Review* 8 (2017): 119–44.

[15] Jean-Louis Bacqué-Grammont, "L'apogée de l'Empire Ottoman," in *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman*, ed. Robert Mantran (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 158; Robert Mantran, "L'Etat ottoman au XVIIe siècle: stabilisation ou déclin," in *Histoire de l'Empire ottoman*, ed. Robert Mantran (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 231, 236.

[16] Avner Wishnitzer, *Reading Clocks, Alla Turca: Time and Society in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 13–15, 59–61; Omri Paz, "Documenting Justice: New Recording Practices and the Establishment of an Activist Criminal Court System in the Ottoman Provinces (1840–Late 1860s)," *Islamic Law and Society* 21, no. 1/2 (2014): 81–113; Marc Aymes and Olivier Bouquet, "Administration Centrale et Provinciale, XIXe -XXe siècles," in

Historians have used "decentralization" to refer to the formation of provincial networks of elites, whether they were openly rebellious or obedient to imperial directives, and even when they enjoyed close relations with the imperial administration in the capital and with the sultan.[17] "Decentralization" has also been used to refer to the granting of life-term tax farming contracts (*malikane*) across the empire;[18] the growing economic independence of certain cities, such as Smyrna, as they integrated into the world economy;[19] the decrease in tax revenues accruing to the Imperial Treasury;[20] the "abandonment of provincial regulations" (whose enforcement in previous centuries, in any case, was never clear); and to describe the onset of intra-elite struggles resulting from the shift in the locus of power from the House of Osman to an elite circle of powerful households (from the monarch to the monarchy), a process some have named the Second Ottoman Empire.[21]

Regardless of one's thoughts on the utility of the de/centralization paradigm, hopefully historians can agree at least that this semantic expansion comes at the expense of analytical precision. Worryingly, this semantic confusion, together with the lack of feasible alternatives, threatens to revive already refuted paradigms of Ottoman history. Recently published monographs continue to state, matter-of-factly, that the 16th century was a period when "centralized power was at its height" and, subsequently, that "decentralized governance replaced the strong centralist pull" of the 16th century.[22] The notion of "centralized power" being "at its height" in the 16th century has roots in older romantic visions of a Suleymanic golden age. This Suleymanic golden age, in turn, is a crucial element in the decline paradigm

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Dictionnaire de L'Empire ottoman, eds. François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, and Gilles Veinstein, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 60.

[17] Inalcık, "Centralization and Decentralization in Ottoman Administration," 27–28; Jane Hathaway, "Introduction," in *Mutiny and Rebellion in the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Jane Hathaway (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2002), 7; Mantran, "L'Etat ottoman au XVIIe siècle: stabilisation ou déclin," 227; Jun Akiba, "From Kadı to Naib: Reorganization of the Ottoman Sharia Judiciary in the Tanzimat Period," in *Frontiers of Ottoman Studies: State, Province, and the West*, eds. Colin Imber and Keiko Kiyotaki (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 43–60; Hathaway, *The Arab Lands under Ottoman Rule, 1516–1800*, 8–9; Molly Greene, *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks, 1453 to 1774: The Ottoman Empire* (Edinburgh: University Press, 2015), chap. 7; Stefan Winter, *A History of the 'Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 120; Spyropoulos, "Janissary Politics on the Ottoman Periphery (18th–19th C.)," 472–73.

[18] Salzmann, "Ancien Regime Revisited"; Mehmet Genç, "Osmanlı Maliyesinde Malikane Sistemi," in *Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda Devlet ve Ekonomi* (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat A.Ş., 2000), 99–152.

[19] Suraiya Faroqhi, "Centre et Périphérie," in *Dictionnaire de L'Empire ottoman*, eds. François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, and Gilles Veinstein, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 410–11.

[20] On the same page, "centralization" is explained as the guaranteed payment of a fixed sum to the Imperial Treasury; any deficit would have to be covered by the tax collector (*muhassıl*). Jean-Pierre Thieck, "Décentralisation Ottomane et Affirmation Urbaine à Alep à La Fin Du XVIIIe Siècle," in *Mouvements Communautaires et Espaces Urbains Au Machreq*, eds. Mona Zakaria and Bachchar Chbarou (Beirut: Centre d'études et de recherches sur le Moyen-Orient contemporain [CERMOC], 1985), 125.

[21] Abou-El-Haj, *Formation of the Modern State*, 14; Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[22] This observation is not a critique of the important contribution these works have made to the field. Rather, these important monographs are merely continuing a tradition in the historiography, and it is this tradition, in which Ottoman historians collectively partake, that this review essay is discussing. Helen Pfeifer, *Empire of Salons: Conquest and Community in Early Modern Ottoman Lands* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 23; Aslıhan Gürbüzel, *Taming the Messiah: The Formation of an Ottoman Political Public Sphere, 1600–1700* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2023), 1. Similar usages can be found in older scholarship, such as Inalcık, "Centralization and Decentralization in Ottoman Administration"; Donald Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 37; Pamuk, "The Evolution of Fiscal Institutions in the Ottoman Empire, 1500–1914"; Bruce Alan Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire, 1516–1918: A Social and Cultural History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 45; Spyropoulos, "Janissary Politics on the Ottoman Periphery (18th–Early 19th C.)."

that states that the Ottoman Empire entered a long period of decay and corruption after Suleyman's reign ended in 1566.[23] The germ of the decline paradigm has endured, refusing to die – a germ incubated in its euphemism, decentralization.[24]

The Problem of Scale

There is a territory-bureaucracy fallacy at the heart of the de/centralization discourse.[25] The expansion or contraction of imperial territory is distinct from the transformation of the imperial bureaucracy governing that territory; it is possible for the imperial territory to have shrunk at the same time as the bureaucracy expanded. The imperial bureaucracy should thus be defined as the Ottoman state and is the appropriate unit of analysis. It is the changing scale of the state – *not* its territory – that determined the reach, scope, and weight (or impact) of Ottoman rule between the 16th and 19th centuries.[26]

Secondary literature on Ottoman history is clear that the 18th-century Ottoman state was much larger than its 16th-century incarnation in terms of both personnel and how much more documentation it produced than the two previous centuries. Between the 16th and 19th centuries, the number of scribes in the Ottoman imperial bureaucracy increased from 50 clerks and 23 apprentices to between 50,000 and 100,000 men.[27] During this same time period, new bureaus emerged and produced new genres of administrative documents, such as the Office of Protocols (Teşrifat Kalemi), the Protocol Register (Teşrifat Defteri), the Post Station Bureau (Menzil Kalemi), and a range of post station-related registers (Menzil Defteri, Inamat Defteri, and others).[28]

The increasing specialization of some genres of administrative documents mirrored, to an extent, the increasing specialization of new bureaus in the imperial bureaucracy. In 1649, for instance, the Complaints Register (Şikayet Defteri) was hived off from the Register of Important Affairs (Mühimme Defteri) to become an autonomous register; and in 1752, the Complaints Register underwent further specialization as Provincial Complaints Registers were created to cater to each province in the empire.[29] Another example is the separation of "codes of law" and "codes of protocol" (Teşrifat Kanunnamesi).[30] Historians have described

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[23] Hathaway, "Problems of Periodization in Ottoman History," 26, 29. On the decline thesis, see Owen, "The Middle East in the Eighteenth Century - an 'Islamic' Society in Decline?"; Howard, "Ottoman Historiography and the Literature of 'Decline'"; Alan Mikhail and Christine Philliou, "The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 4 (2012): 725–30; Nicolas Vatin, "Declin," in *Dictionnaire de L'Empire ottoman*, eds. François Georgeon, Nicolas Vatin, and Gilles Veinstein, vol. 1 (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 575–79.

[24] Darling, "Another Look at Periodization in Ottoman History," 20.

[25] I thank Nihal Kayalı for coining the phrase "territory-bureaucracy fallacy" when she reviewed my draft.

[26] Hillel Soifer, "State Infrastructural Power: Approaches to Conceptualization and Measurement," *Studies in Comparative International Development* 43, no. 3–4 (2008): 231–51.

[27] Carter Vaughn Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Sublime Porte, 1789–1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 53, 65.

[28] Colin Heywood, "Some Turkish Archival Sources for the History of the Menzilhane Network in Rumeli during the Eighteenth Century (Notes and Documents on the Ottoman UIak, I)," *Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Dergisi: Beşeri Bilimler -Humanities* 4–5 (1976): 39–54; İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı devletinin merkez ve bahriye teşkilatı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1984), 348, 372; Hakan T. Karateke, *An Ottoman Protocol Register Containing Ceremonies from 1736 to 1808: BEO Sadaret Defterleri 350 in the Prime Ministry Ottoman State Archives, Istanbul* (Istanbul: Ottoman Bank Archives and Research Centre, 2007); Filiz Karaca, "Teşrifat," in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* Vol. 40 (Istanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı Yayın Matbaacılık ve Ticaret Işletmesi) 570-572. There was an Office of Protocols (Teşrifat Kalemi) in the 16th century, but it was only a fiscal bureau at the time. Its oversight of protocols and ceremonies was a later development of the 17th and 18th centuries; I follow the existing secondary literature in viewing this as a "creation" of a protocol office. Also see note 30.

[29] Linda T. Darling, *Revenue-Raising and Legitimacy: Tax Collection and Finance Administration in the Ottoman Empire, 1560–1660* (Leiden; E.J. Brill, 1996), 249–60.

this phenomenon as the "specialization" of the "provincial paper trail," of diplomatic and state protocol, and more generally, of bureaucratic documentation.[31] The overall picture is one of an expanding group of administrators organized into more specialized bureaus producing more specialized administrative documents.

Available evidence on urbanization trends in Anatolia match this timeline: between the 16th and 18th centuries, secondary towns grew "in number and influence," suggesting a correlation between urbanization (and possibly, demography) and the growing specialization and intensity of provincial administration.[32]

An expanded state did not mean a better or more efficient state. More personnel and more documentation did not mean better or more efficient outcomes.[33] My argument here is thus a narrow one: there was an expansion in organizational scale, there was increased activity, there was increased scope, but I make no claim about increased effectiveness or the quality of outcomes.

More Intermediaries did not Necessarily Mean Weakening Imperial Control

The mere existence of more intermediaries did not, in and of itself, indicate weakening imperial control. Historians cannot assume imperial weakness based solely on the proliferation of intermediaries – they have to show how this weakness came about. Even if we know that, ultimately, the Ottoman Empire broke apart, the particular way in which it collapsed requires analysis. Recognizing the contingency of the shape of Ottoman collapse – and the fact that proliferating intermediaries can produce a variety of outcomes, negative and positive – is historical work.

To be a large empire is to necessarily depend on intermediaries to govern. This is especially true for the pre-industrial period, when communication and transportation over large distances were slow and costly. This dependence on intermediaries and chains of intermediaries means that control necessarily meant indirect control, not direct; it also means that so-called "centralized" empires would have depended predominantly on intermediaries and exercised indirect control in many arenas of governance in the pre-industrial world.[34]

In theory, an organization can be centralized and brittle, or decentralized and powerful. Centralizing all decision-making in one individual authority creates a single point of failure, which is a huge vulnerability; if that individual authority is disabled, the entire organization can become paralyzed. Conversely, decentralizing decision-making under multiple authorities can ensure resilience and responsiveness in times of crisis, but it can also be difficult to gain consensus and unify these different powerbases. It all depends on the working relations

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[30] Tülay Artan, "The First, Hesitant Steps of Ottoman Protocol and Diplomacy into Modernity (1676–1725)," *The Court Historian* 26, no. 1 (2021): 29–43.

[31] Guy Burak, "Şeyhulislâm Feyzullah Efendi, the Ḥanafī Mufti of Jerusalem and the Rise of the Provincial Fatāwā Collections in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 64, no. 4 (2021): 395. Also consider Başak Tuğ, *Politics of Honor in Ottoman Anatolia: Sexual Violence and Socio-Legal Surveillance in the Eighteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 86–93.

[32] Leila Erder and Suraiya Faroqhi, "The Development of the Anatolian Urban Network during the Sixteenth Century," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 23, no. 3 (1980): 298.

[33] For one example involving postal administration, see Choon Hwee Koh, *The Sublime Post: How the Ottoman Imperial Post Became a Public Service* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024).

[34] A recent study on the 19th-century Ottoman Empire articulated this point using the language of de/centralization, noting that "the Ottoman system of government was obliged to rely on the regional network of a provincial notable for centralization efforts." Tuna Başıbek, "Ottomans in the Caucasian Highlands: Recruitment of the Circassians and the Ottoman Mission in Anapa, 1812–1828," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 56, no. 4 (2025): 657, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743824000941.

among the different authorities, their experience collaborating and coordinating with each other, the political culture, and a host of other factors. In between these two poles are many possible ways of calibrating the trade-offs among centralized decision-making structures, flexibility, and security.

The quintessential example of state centralization within Ottoman historiography is the 19th-century Tanzimat reform period (1840–76). Specifically, there is a broadly accepted idea that, in this period, tax collection came under the state's "direct control."[35] Yet, even in this classic example of "centralization," intermediaries were involved: new tax collectors (*muhassıls*) replaced an older group of intermediaries. These new intermediaries also took time to learn the ropes of tax collection – in fact, collected tax revenues had decreased initially, compared to pre-Tanzimat times.[36] When collected tax revenues did eventually increase, the question historians could ask is: what made this new set of intermediaries more effective than the previous? Locally appointed intermediaries might be more prone to pursuing local interests at the expense of imperial ones, but imperially appointed intermediaries would face challenges understanding local conditions well enough to carry out their tasks, requiring a transition period to learn on the job.

What is commonly referred to as state centralization, thus, is shown to have involved Ottoman intermediaries and indirect rule.[37] Conversely, Ottoman historians, in many cases, interpret the proliferation of intermediaries (urban notables [*ayan*], partners of empire, participants, contractors) as "decentralized" rule, when "negotiation" and bargaining came to replace an idealized era of imagined direct "command" as the mode of rule.[38]

But intermediaries were always part of the story of Ottoman rule. The real question is about what intermediaries actually did and achieved, about the *outcomes* of different modes of indirect control. Focusing on the actions and outcomes of intermediaries will hopefully enable analytical distinctions, for instance, between the kind of "decentralization" associated with Ottoman judges' delegation of duties to deputies (*naibs*) and the kind of "decentralization" associated with the collapse of rural order and social structures.[39]

At present, there does not seem to be any accepted method in the field of Ottoman studies to evaluate the role of intermediaries in imperial governance, and the continued use of "de/centralization" to describe Ottoman state capacity suggests a methodological impasse plaguing the field. There are two likely reasons for this impasse: the legacy of nationalist historiographies and the difficulty of evaluating intermediaries.

The "intermediary" concept has a history in the era of nationalist historiography, where, in many cases, "province" translated to nation-state. Albert Hourani's study of urban notables (*ayan*), which emerged in the 1960s, had the unintended effect of overemphasizing

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[35] 19th-century Ottoman archival documents also tend to use the language of "direct control" (or "taking back control") of provinces, which likely influenced modern historians' understanding of the equation of "direct control" as state centralization and strength. I thank Erdem Ilter for this insight, which is elaborated on in his forthcoming dissertation, "Ottoman Statebuilding: An Analysis of the Anatolian General Inspectorate (1895–1899)" (University of California, Los Angeles). Also see Karaman and Pamuk, "Ottoman State Finances in European Perspective, 1500–1914," 620.

[36] Yoichi Takamatsu, "Ottoman Income Survey (1840–1846)," in *The Ottoman State and Societies in Change: A Study of the Nineteenth Century Temettuat Registers*, eds. Kayoko Hayashi and Mahir Aydın (London: Routledge, 2004), 18; Ilber Ortayli, *Studies on Ottoman Transformation*, 1st ed. (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, LLC, 2019), 120.

[37] I am thinking of studies such as Yonca Köksal, *The Ottoman Empire in the Tanzimat Era: Provincial Perspectives from Ankara to Edirne* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[38] Halil Inalcık and Donald Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1; Quataert, *The Ottoman Empire, 1700–1922*, 37.

[39] Gilles Veinstein, "Sur Les Nâ'ib Ottoman (XVème-XVIème Siècle)," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 25 (2001): 247–67; Akiba, "Farming out Judicial Offices in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1750–1839"; Oktay Özel, *The Collapse of Rural Order in Ottoman Anatolia: Amasya 1576–1643* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

local actors that resonated with the contemporary "maturing" of Arab nationalist narratives as well as prevailing structural-functionalist approaches and patronage system explanations within the academy.[40] The convergence of these trends and research agendas soon bred what one historian described as an "insurmountable opposition" between the [Halil] Inalcık-led "central" and Hourani-led "local" historiographies.[41]

In the 1960s, almost immediate attempts were made to show that local intermediaries were integral to Ottoman governance and to harmonize the use of local and central sources; Hourani himself had tried to remedy this by emphasizing the Ottoman context of premodern Arab historiography.[42] These remedies did have effects as, in subsequent decades, the historiography shifted to framing the "center" and "local" as sharing a symbiotic relationship, not a zero-sum, antagonistic one. In the 1990s and 2000s, Ottoman historians continued to show that provincial elites and the Ottoman imperial bureaucracy (the center) negotiated with each other and worked together, with varying degrees of friction and contestation, to govern the empire.[43]

However, the ballooning diversity of intermediaries and the inherent difficulty of evaluating what they did was the more serious difficulty that remained. To give an example, distinguishing between those who were originally dispatched from the capital to the provinces (Ottoman elites) and intermediaries recruited from the provinces (local elites) was one important way that historians taxonomized intermediaries. But the former could also transform into the latter. Ottoman elites "localized" and local, indigenous elites who participated in governance became "Ottomanized"; it was a "dual, interactive process of *localization* and *Ottomanization*" (italics in original).[44] This melting away of the central-local distinction over time made this particular taxonomy analytically fuzzy, especially when making diachronic comparisons.

In the initial setup of this taxonomy (i.e. before localization and Ottomanization), historians categorized Ottoman elites as the products of the *devşirme* "boy-tax" levy on Balkan and Anatolian Christians who received training in the capital before being dispatched to govern the provinces, even though they usually did not speak the local language. Over time, many such Ottoman elites became "localized" and intermarried with local women; some even established large households that persisted for generations.[45]

In contrast, local elites were usually drawn from provincial notables and dynastic households. In some cases, they had a local powerbase, which Ottoman elites might not have had, as in the case of the Ma'ans (local elites) and Sayfas (Ottoman elites) in Mount Lebanon.[46] These local elites became "Ottomanized" by learning Ottoman Turkish and

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[40] Albert Hourani, "Ottoman Reform and the Politics of Notables," in *The Modern Middle East: A Reader*, eds. Albert Hourani, Philip S. Khoury, and Mary C. Wilson (London: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1993), 83–109; Ehud R. Toledano, "The Emergence of Ottoman-Local Elites (1700–1900): A Framework for Research," in *Middle Eastern Politics and Ideas: A History from Within*, eds. Ilan Pappé and Moshe Ma'oz (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1997), 145–62; James Gelvin, "The 'Politics of Notables' Forty Years After," *MESA Bulletin* 40, no. 1 (2006): 19–29.

[41] Toledano, "The Emergence of Ottoman-Local Elites," 145; Uğur Bayraktar, "Reconsidering Local versus Central: Empire, Notables, and Employment in Ottoman Albania and Kurdistan, 1835–1878," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 4 (2020): 685, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743820000835. See also Olivier Bouquet, *Pourquoi l'Empire Ottoman? Six Siècles d'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2022), 68–69.

[42] Toledano, "The Emergence of Ottoman-Local Elites," 145.

[43] Dina Rizk Khoury, *State and Provincial Society in the Ottoman Empire: Mosul, 1540–1834* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Jane Hathaway, *The Politics of Households in Ottoman Egypt: The Rise of the Qazdaglis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Hülya Canbakal, *Society and Politics in an Ottoman Town: 'Ayntāb in the 17th Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Karen Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman* Route to State Centralization (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1994).

[44] Toledano, "The Emergence of Ottoman-Local Elites," 148.

[45] Ibid., 152; Masters, *The Arabs of the Ottoman Empire*, 37–39.

culture, competing for government posts, and then serving as government officials; this process could vary widely across the empire.[47] In some contexts (such as the Balkans in the period leading up to and including the Russo-Ottoman war of 1768–74), local notables paid to obtain official statuses and titles.[48]

Ottoman intermediaries could also be categorized according to their origins, not only how they were appointed to their position within the bureaucratic hierarchy. Historians have discerned, for instance, "east-west" antagonism along ethno-religious lines between "westerners" (from the Balkans and western Anatolia) and "easterners" (from the Caucasus and Georgia). Historians have shown how this antagonism structured the dynamics between local intermediaries and the imperial bureaucracy (the state), as well as attempts to redraw the boundaries outlining who could belong within the state elite.[49]

Historians have also created more granular taxonomies within the category of local elites by, for instance, distinguishing between the "localizing governing elite and emerging notable elite" and breaking down the category of "notable" into sub-categories comprising the local religious establishment, janissary garrison chiefs, "secular" notables, and Bedouins who facilitated and provided security for the pilgrimage.[50] This ballooning range of provincial intermediaries and their relationship with the imperial bureaucracy becomes more confusing to analyze when, over time, some of these groups emerged, faded away, or merged with others. Layered upon this confusion are the different terms used by different historians, and also the same terms used to refer to different kinds of intermediaries.[51]

To summarize the foregoing points, the proliferation of intermediaries constitutes the core problématique underlying our understanding of Ottoman state formation. The success of the Ottoman state in recruiting Ottoman subjects into its imperial project were such that even residents of the relatively remote desert oases in upper Egypt were known during the 17th and 18th centuries to have joined the military and achieved social mobility within the Ottoman system.[52] But by the same token, the organizational hierarchy and structural relations that intermediaries shared with each other in local contexts become more difficult to analyze from a macro imperial perspective. Perhaps, for all these reasons, even the most important historical sociological study of the Ottoman Empire simply assumed away the

[46] Abdul-Rahim Abu-Husayn, *Provincial Leaderships in Syria, 1575–1650* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1985).

[47] Toledano, "The Emergence of Ottoman-Local Elites," 154–55.

[48] Yūzō Nagata, *Muhsin-zâde Mehmed Paşa ve âyânlık müessesesi* (Izmir: Akademi Kitabevi, 1999), 105. See also Lawrence Zhang, *Power for a Price: The Purchase of Official Appointments in Qing China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2022).

[49] Metin Kunt, "Ethnic-Regional (Cins) Solidarity in the Seventeenth-Century Ottoman Establishment," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 3 (1974): 233–39, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743800034917; Piterberg, *An Ottoman Tragedy*; Jane Hathaway, "East-West Regional Antagonism as a Defining Feature of Ottoman Administration in the 17th Century," in *Dechiffrer le passe d'un empire: Hommage a Nicolas Vatin et aux humanites ottomanes*, eds. Benjamin Lellouch, Frédéric Hitzel, and Elisabetta Borromeo (Paris: Peeters Publishers, 2022), 269–80, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv2tjdg3b.

[50] Dror Zeʾevi, *An Ottoman Century: The District of Jerusalem in the 1600s* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1996), 6, 67–68; Canbakal, *Society and Politics in an Ottoman Town*; Hülya Canbakal, "The Ottoman State and Descendants of the Prophet in Anatolia and the Balkans (c. 1500–1700)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 52, no. 3 (2009): 542–78; Hülya Canbakal, "Vows as Contract in Ottoman Public Life (17th–18th Centuries)," *Islamic Law and Society* 18, no. 1 (2011): 111; Charles L. Wilkins, *Forging Urban Solidarities: Ottoman Aleppo 1640–1700* (Leiden: Brill, 2010); Karl K. Barbir, *Ottoman Rule in Damascus, 1708–1758* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 71, 97, 105.

[51] Consider the term "notable" when used in the Balkans, Anatolia, and the Arab provinces. This needs its own review essay.

[52] Nicolas Michel, *Oasis ottomanes: Dakhla et Kharga dans l'Égypte des XVIe-XIXe siècles* (Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2023), 145–50.

structural relation between different intermediary groups, assuming a hub-and-spoke model in which the spokes did not interact with each other.[53]

There are important exceptions in the historiography that provide instructive guidance for future research. Some scholarship has been able to elucidate the administrative relationships that different local intermediaries had with each other. For instance, a recent study showed how the Ottoman state managed to achieve "upwardly accountability" by delegating power to the provincial governor (of Diyarbekir province), who could intervene in the judge's court of the city of Harput, a sub-district of the same province. This shows the structural relation between two kinds of intermediaries and its impact on Ottoman governance. However, this accountability was achieved at a cost, as this process of empowering local officials contributed to tensions and possibly to the eventual separation of these regions from the empire.[54]

Sometimes, the cultivation of groups of intermediaries changed local social and cultural dynamics. In the case of 18th-century Ottoman Syria, local 'Alawis' increased participation in imperial governance reinforced 'Alawi identity and sense of community; rather than being a community forged in opposition to imperial power, the 'Alawis were made by it. This consolidated communal identity had the later consequence of conferring upon the 'Alawis the reputation of comprising a "uniform sectarian faction (*taife*/*ta'ifa*) pursuing a single political goal," which local Ottoman officials would eventually perceive as a threat.[55] The embedding of intermediary communities in imperial governance processes might pose, consequently, threats or counterweights to other Ottoman officials (other kinds of intermediaries).[56]

Again, I wish to contrast the empowerment of local intermediaries with the actual collapse of order. The two phenomena can certainly be connected, but this has to be shown. In the 18th century, for instance, in the conflicts between Ottoman military personnel stationed at frontiers and local representatives of life-term tax farmers residing in Istanbul, the state often allowed the latter's fiscal interests to prevail. Life-term tax farm revenues were thus prioritized over military funding, contributing to the erosion of imperial control over these frontier troops.[57] Another example, this time from 18th-century Mughal Ahmedabad, shows how the proliferation of local intermediaries could result in a confused chain of command and unclear scope of jurisdiction that ultimately led to the breakdown of local order.[58] Indeed, historians have long noted the proliferation of intermediaries in different

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[53] Barkey, *Empire of Difference*, 9–10.

[54] Yavuz Aykan, "Tax Farming, the Provincial Council and the Nature of the Late Ottoman State," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 67, no. 3–4 (2024): 291–92, https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209-12341621. Another recent study showed a centrally appointed intermediary jostling with autonomous local rulers to produce ambiguous outcomes for the state. During the 18th century, the begs governing the Kurdish emirates had to work with Istanbul-appointed superintendents of rich copper and silver mines. One such superintendent, Yusuf Agha (who served from 1785–99 and 1809–11), was particularly savvy and amassed the power to appoint and dismiss the Kurdish begs. He also interfered in the appointment process of the leader of the emirates, undercutting their autonomy and hereditary privileges. In this case, a centrally appointed intermediary dominated nominally autonomous Kurdish begs; yet this centrally appointed intermediary also pursued personal profits. Nilay Özok-Gündoğan, *The Kurdish Nobility in the Ottoman Empire: Loyalty, Autonomy and Privilege* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), chap. 2.

[55] Winter, *A History of the 'Alawis*, 119–60.

[56] Other analogous examples may be found in the Greek Orthodox case. See Greene, *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks*, 163–91; also see Richard Antaramian, "Confessionalism, Centralism, Armenians, and Ottoman Imperial Governance in the 18th and 19th Centuries," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 2 (2022): 319–37.

[57] Michael Robert Hickok, *Ottoman Military Administration in Eighteenth-Century Bosnia* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 53–83, 92–98, 106.

[58] Sudev Sheth, *Bankrolling Empire: Family Fortunes and Political Transformation in Mughal India* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2024), 174–75.

imperial contexts, using various terms to name this phenomenon (such as a "chain of deputies," "thickening governance," and even "proto-democratization"). The next step, I suggest, is to show concretely how increased intermediaries affected imperial operations in each context.[59]

The brief sketch above shows that proliferating intermediaries can be arranged in organizational structures that look different from each other, and that task delegation can produce different outcomes. This variation in structure, process, and outcomes underscores the particularity of each empire's historical trajectory; there must be respect even for a narrative of collapse, and that respect manifests in excavating the specific, idiosyncratic detail of that empire's unraveling. To reiterate, the argument in this section is that historians cannot assume weakened imperial control on the sole basis of a proliferation of intermediaries.[60]

Two Pathways

How can we make sense of the proliferation of intermediaries in early modern states? In the final section of this review essay, I discuss two possible paths out of this methodological impasse. The first method focuses on one type of intermediary, the tax collector, while the second method offers a way of organizing a variety of intermediaries, which may in turn enable more precise definitions of the concept of the intermediary.

Quantitative Economic History: Calculating Ottoman Fiscal Capacity

Fiscal capacity, an important dimension of state capacity, is commonly defined as the central state's ability to extract tax receipts per inhabitant in its territories relative to total national income. This quantitative metric is what allows macro-historical comparisons between the Ottoman Empire, the "Chinese empire," and European states such as England, France, and Prussia across centuries, as demonstrated in Figure 1 below, taken from economist Thomas Piketty's recent study.[61] In this context, the more centralized a state, the more tax receipts it can extract per inhabitant relative to total national income (there can be similar moves made for legal capacity and military capacity; the debates there surround what to quantify and how).

Many, if not most, Ottoman historians are qualitative historians and would reject the premise of quantitative historical work, or even the need to compare with early modern European states. If this is the kind of forest one must have, then many might be happy just to focus on trees. Yet much qualitative Ottoman historical research has been influenced by these same social science approaches and European historiographies – the frameworks and vocabulary we use are language derived from those fields of study. To give an obvious example, the centralization-decentralization-centralization periodization repeated over the

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[59] Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 47; Greene, *The Edinburgh History of the Greeks*, 128; Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire*, 10.

[60] During the 18th century, an elite life-term tax farmer and a powerful provincial governor from a dynastic household could make demands on the imperial center in a way that a lowly, local postmaster could not. In fact, during the 18th century, the local postmaster was relatively compliant, fulfilling his official duties and enhancing imperial rule in the provinces. This shows variation in outcomes across the hierarchy of Ottoman intermediaries. Koh, *The Sublime Post*, 98.

[61] Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2020), 366. Karaman points out, persuasively, that it might not be very meaningful to compare the Ottomans with China due to the latter's relative geographical and political isolation until the 19th century. Consider Figure 6 on page 615 of Karaman and Pamuk, "Ottoman State Finances." My inexperience with historical daily wage indicators prevents me from engaging with the set of data featured in Figure 6.
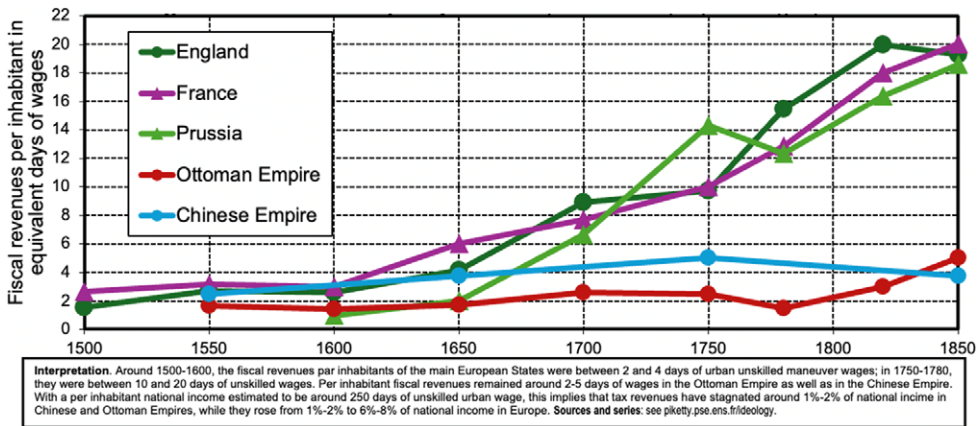
Figure 1. The fiscal capacity of states, 1500–1850 (days of wages)
Source: Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, 366, http://piketty.pse.ens.fr/fr/ideology.

Table 1. Four modes of indirect governance

	MANAGEMENT (Ex POST CONTROL)	
MOBILIZATION (Ex ANTE CONTROL)	Hierarchical	Non-hierarchical
Granting authority	*Delegation*	*Trusteeship*
Enlisting authority	*Cooptation*	*Orchestration*

Source: Kenneth W. Abbott, Philipp Genschel, Duncan Snidal, and Bernhard Zangl, eds., T*he Governor's Dilemma: Indirect Governance Beyond Principals and Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

past three decades by Ottoman historians was itself influenced by Charles Tilly's important social scientific work on early modern European states.[62] However, Europeanists have long revised Tilly's core assumptions regarding early modern European state centralization, showing that Tilly vastly overestimated such states' capacities and the fact that they relied tremendously on a range of intermediaries and contractors.[63] Ottomanists should thus move on from this outdated language.

In fact, the (qualitative) Ottoman scholarship briefly surveyed above in the previous section can be brought to bear on future (quantitative) studies of the Ottoman state's fiscal capacity: specifically, on how Ottoman fiscal capacity is calculated. Whereas a previous, pioneering quantitative study on fiscal capacity only counted centrally received tax

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[62] Salzmann, "Ancien Regime Revisited."

[63] David Parrott, *The Business of War: Military Enterprise and Military Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Rafael Torres Sánchez, *Military Entrepreneurs and the Spanish Contractor State in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016). See also Pavithra Suryanarayan, "Endogenous State Capacity," *Annual Review of Political Science* 27 (2024): 223–43, https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-polisci-061621-084709.

revenues, future studies could also include provincial tax receipts, in-kind services and obligations.[64] After all, what happened in the provinces matter for assessing fiscal and state capacity, because pre-industrial states "often mandated that provincial governments carry out particular activities and raise the money to do so." Fiscal capacity should therefore consider resources collected at local and provincial levels, including non-monetary resources such as corvée, conscription, and in-kind taxes; neglecting them "underestimates state resources more in some societies than others," particularly in societies with lower levels of monetization.[65] Using central treasury revenues as an indicator of military capacity as some economic historians do is therefore also flawed, because the bulk of the resources that supported the Ottoman military were based on provincial land grants.[66]

Crucially, provincially collected tax receipts should not always be seen as revenues captured by provincial groups at the expense of the central government. If the Diyarbekir governor recorded a much greater annual revenue in 1670–71 compared to his predecessor in the 16th century after adjusting for inflation, then this can be explained in a variety of ways (greater tax collection capacity; greater agricultural productivity), not only by the fact that provincial groups benefitted and the central treasury lost out.[67] It was a widely accepted fact that provincial revenues were not all transmitted to the imperial capital.[68]

The point here is not to claim that the Ottoman state was radically stronger and more successful relative to contemporary European states. Even if all provincial tax receipts (cash and in kind) were calculated, the results are unlikely to reveal a dramatically different picture of Ottoman state capacity. However, the relative differences within the empire among Ottoman provinces can be instructive for qualitative work. If social scientists are going to develop quantitative claims anyway, why not modify their accounting methods of state capacity in light of these new insights?

Social Science: The Competence-control Tradeoff

If the quantitative method privileges tax collectors as the only intermediary of relevance, social scientists of a more sociological bent have developed an approach that considers different kinds of intermediaries. Social scientists studying the Merovingians and Carolingians, for instance, have developed a schema to explain the competence-control tradeoffs governors face when managing and mobilizing intermediaries (or agents). The idea is that a governor is faced with a dilemma: he can either have a highly competent intermediary or strong control over his intermediary, but not both.[69]

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[64] Karaman and Pamuk, "Ottoman State Finances."

[65] Sheilagh Ogilvie, "State Capacity and Economic Growth: Cautionary Tales from History," *National Institute Economic Review* 262 (2022): 5–8.

[66] Gábor Ágoston has argued that central treasury revenues cannot explain military capabilities because provincial land grants (*timar* revenues) financed 75% of mobilized forces. Gábor Ágoston, *The Last Muslim Conquest: The Ottoman Empire and Its Wars in Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), 275.

[67] Şevket Pamuk, *A monetary history of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 138–39.

[68] It has also been suggested that kickbacks to provincial officials, when they did happen, did not get recorded in fiscal registers, but only surfaced incidentally in *sicil* court cases due to disputes about the amount of kickbacks (in this case, for tax farms). This strengthens a reading of provincial tax registers as "official" revenues that should be analyzed as a legitimate part of state capacity metrics, not private revenues pocketed by the provincial governor. Conference paper by Christopher Whitehead, "Kickbacks, Bribery, and Extortion in 17th-Century Ottoman Tax Farming," *Early Modern Ottoman Studies*, Istanbul, 28 June 2024.

[69] "Competent intermediaries derive power…from the competencies they contribute and the policy results they produce. This gives them leverage over the governor, and makes them more difficult to control. At the same time, tight control by the governor often weakens important intermediary competencies, constraining their exercise and development and limiting the policy benefits they can produce. This leaves the governor with a dilemma: it can obtain either high competence or strong control, but not both." Kenneth W. Abbott et al., eds., *The Governor's*

In this schema (shown in Table 1), a governor can *manage* an intermediary in two general ways: hierarchically (with the authority to remove an intermediary) or non-hierarchically (without the authority to remove an intermediary, needs to rely on soft power or other means). Similarly, a governor can *mobilize* an intermediary to fulfill his goals in two ways: by granting authority (delegating authority to empower an intermediary) or enlisting authority (persuading an intermediary to use his/her existing authority to do certain tasks).

When translating this schema to the Ottoman context, I have substituted the Ottoman state (imperial bureaucracy) for the position of the "governor." In Table 2 below, I have adapted this schema and filled in the intermediaries in the 2 x 2 table. An advantage of this schema is that the same broad category – such as the Kurdish emirates – can be disaggregated into more specific examples, down to geographical location and time period.

Table 2. **One way of organizing Ottoman intermediaries (based on** Kenneth W. Abbott, Philipp Genschel, Duncan Snidal, and Bernhard Zangl, eds., *The Governor's Dilemma: Indirect Governance Beyond Principals and Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

	Management	
	Hierarchical	Non-Hierarchical
Mobilization Granting Authority	*Delegation*[70] • Idris-i Bidlisi, special emissary in Kurdistan during 16th century • The Sayfas in 16th- and 17th-century Mount Lebanon • Postmasters • 18th-century Balkan ʿayans • Mehmed Ali Pasha before the invasion of Syria	*Trusteeship*[71] • Kurdish emirates in the 17th century such as those of the Azerbaijani-Caucasian frontier, as well as the Mahmudi and Mukri tribal confederations • Wallachia, Moldavia
Enlisting Authority	*Cooptation*[72] • Celalis in 16th-century Anatolia • 19th-century derebeys of Cilicia	*Orchestration*[73] • Kurdish emirates in the 16th century such as Ardalan, Hakkari, Baban, Soran, and Bitlis • Baban emirate in the 18th century • The Maʿans and Harfushes in 16th- and 17th-century Mount Lebanon • Balkan ʿayans from 1792–1822 • Mehmed Ali Pasha after the Syrian Occupation

Dilemma: Indirect Governance beyond Principals and Agents (Oxford, UK: University Press, 2020), 4–5. I thank Kevan Harris for introducing me to this study and for our long-running conversation on state capacity.

[70] Metin Atmaca, "Negotiating Political Power in the Early Modern Middle East: Kurdish Emirates between the Ottoman Empire and Iranian Dynasties (Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries)," in *The Cambridge History of the Kurds*, ed. Borzalan et al., (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 45–51; Christopher Markiewicz, *The Crisis of Kingship in Late Medieval Islam: Persian Emigres and the Making of Ottoman Sovereignty* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Abdul-Rahim Abu-Husayn, *Provincial Leaderships in Syria, 1575–1650* (Beirut: American University of Beirut Press, 1985), 27; Yūzō Nagata, *Muhsin-zâde Mehmed Paşa ve âyânlık müessesesi* (Izmir: Akademi Kitabevi, 1999).

[71] Atmaca, "Negotiating Political Power," 57; Viorel Panaite, "The Legal and Political Status of Wallachia and Moldavia in Relation to the Ottoman Porte," in *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, eds. Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević (Boston: Brill, 2013), 9–42.

[72] Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats*; Andrew G. Gould, "Lords or Bandits? The Derebeys of Cilicia," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 7, no. 4 (1976): 499–500.

[73] Atmaca, "Negotiating Political Power," 52, 66; Abu-Husayn, "Provincial Leaderships in Syria," 93–94, 139–40; Virginia H. Aksan, *The Ottomans 1700–1923: An Empire Besieged* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2022), 124–25.

Idris-i Bidlisi, the special emissary in Kurdistan from 1514–1516, who helped Selim I (r. 1512–20) broker military alliances there, is an example of an intermediary the Ottoman state had hierarchical authority over (it could dismiss him easily) and to whom authority was delegated. This *hierarchical* management relation and mobilization style made sense for the job scope that Bidlisi was charged with accomplishing.

Indeed, the Ottoman state had to rely on soft power (and on intermediaries such as Idris-i Bidlisi) to keep various Kurdish emirates within the empire whether in the 16th, 17th, or 18th centuries. This *non-hierarchical* form of management was due to the fact that the Ottoman state lacked the capacity to completely remove these emirates. Depending on the time period and specific emirate, however, the mobilization style differed: the Ottoman state either granted authority (trusteeship) or enlisted authority (coopted intermediaries through persuasion, incentives or some other means to do certain tasks). This was a qualitative judgment call.

For many, this 2 x 2 schema will not be sufficient. It is but a first step in finding patterns among multiple instances of these fine-grained qualitative studies on intermediaries, if that is a research desideratum for some.

These two suggested approaches each have their pros and cons. Focusing on just one type of intermediary – the tax collector – enables historians to answer the question of what governance outcomes were; conveniently, in this case, the outcome is a number representing the state's fiscal capacity. But this first method has the drawback of ignoring other types of intermediaries and, therefore, the range of governance activities the state was able to undertake through them. The second method has the virtue of offering a taxonomy of a range of intermediaries, but it is less able to concisely answer the question of governance outcomes. It also has the virtue of allowing multiple intermediaries operating within the same administrative unit (such as a province or district or sub-district) to be listed concurrently in the same table, which may facilitate analysis of their relations with each other (in Barkey's language, this 2 x 2 schema renders relations between layers of spokes perceptible, and just relations between the hub and spokes.)

Moving Forward

I suggest that the time has come for historians to move beyond the centralization-decentralization-centralization paradigm. As I understand it, the persistence of this paradigm is a symptom of a methodological impasse plaguing the field, and I propose that the reason for this impasse is the difficulty of perceiving the continuing process of Ottoman state formation in an age of proliferating intermediaries. In providing this diagnosis, this review essay has built upon important historiographical interventions that characterize the empire's center-periphery dynamic as "Ottomanization," "localization," "centripetal decentralization," and the "politics of difference."[74] I locate the analytical path out of this quandary in the taxonomy of these numerous intermediaries.

In this vein, I have proposed two approaches: a quantitative approach that privileges tax collecting intermediaries and a schema that categorizes intermediaries according to how they were managed and mobilized. Both approaches make assumptions and have limitations, just as qualitative historians who continue to use the concepts of centralization and

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[74] Salzmann, "Ancien Regime Revisited," 417 n48; Piterberg, *An Ottoman Tragedy*, 156; Dina Rizk Khoury, "The Ottoman Centre versus Provincial Power-Holders: An Analysis of the Historiography," in *The Cambridge History of Turkey: The Later Ottoman Empire, 1603-1839*, ed. Suraiya Faroqhi, vol. 3 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 155 n63; Choon Hwee Koh, "The Ottoman Postmaster: Contractors, Communication and Early Modern State Formation," *Past & Present* 251, no. 1 (2021): 138–40; Bayraktar, "Reconsidering Local versus Central," 685; Kuehn, "Bringing the Imperial Back In," 2021.

decentralization also make assumptions that have limitations. The goal should not be to avoid assumptions entirely; as a field of study, however, it may be desirable for us to experiment with frameworks that use different assumptions in order to avoid collective blind spots. What is at stake here is an accurate appreciation of the true scope of Ottoman government activity after the 16th century.

For many qualitative historians, what is at stake is perhaps something more mundane: a simple, shorthand way to set the scene for their main subject of research. De/centralization is not something they fervently believe in, but it undeniably provides a useful, macro throughline of centuries of history that could be used to create a wide lens, establishing shot for their narrative. After all, what alternatives exist?

The scholarly literature already offers many possibilities beyond de/centralization. Historians have observed several important trends during the 17th and 18th centuries. On the one hand, Ottoman society opened up socially, culturally, and architecturally (historian Shirine Hamadeh calls this décloisonnement). New fashions, vegetables, and fruits from the New World were imported into the Ottoman Empire; Ottoman builders selectively incorporated European architectural styles in sultanic mosques of this period; barbers and non-elite individuals engaged in literary production that was previously an exclusive preserve of the elites; and urban spaces hosted a new kind of sociability marked by the consumption of coffee and tobacco in public.[75]

On the other hand, there was a parallel pattern of group formation called corporatism or communalization by historians.[76] Corporate groups emerged across the social hierarchy, whether these were professional associations such as guilds, associations along lines of identity (such as the blind), villages and neighborhoods,[77] self-conscious confessional groups and sufi orders,[78] or powerful provincial households.[79] Many of these groups

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[75] Shirine Hamadeh, *The City's Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2008); Ünver Rüstem, *Ottoman Baroque: The Architectural Refashioning of Eighteenth-Century Istanbul* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019); Arif Bilgin, "From Artichoke to Corn: New Fruits and Vegetables in the Istanbul Market (Seventeenth to Nineteenth Centuries)," in *Living the Good Life: Consumption in the Qing and Ottoman Empires of the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Suraiya Faroqhi and Elif Akçetin (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 259–82; Gwendolyn Collaço, "'World-Seizing' Albums: Imported Paintings from ʿAcem and Hindūstān in an Eclectic Ottoman Market," *Ars Orientalis* 51 (2021): 133–87; Amanda Phillips, *Sea Change: Ottoman Textiles between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021); Dana Sajdi, *The Barber of Damascus: Nouveau Literacy in the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Levant* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); James Grehan, "Smoking and 'Early Modern' Sociability: The Great Tobacco Debate in the Ottoman Middle East (Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries)," *American Historical Review* 111, no. 5 (2006): 1352–77, also cited in Koh, *The Sublime Post*, 8–9.

[76] Inalcık, "Centralization and Decentralization in Ottoman Administration"; Johann Büssow and Astrid Meier, "Ottoman Corporatism, Eighteenth to Twentieth Centuries: Beyond the State-Society Paradigm in Middle Eastern History," in *Ways of Knowing Muslim Cultures and Societies: Studies in Honour of Gudrun Krämer*, eds. Bettina Gräf, Birgit Krawietz, and Schirin Amir-Moazami (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 81–110.

[77] Canbakal, "Vows as Contract"; Betül Başaran, *Selim III, Social Control and Policing in Istanbul at the End of the Eighteenth Century: Between Crisis and Order* (Leiden: Brill, 2014); Madoka Morita, "Between Hostility and Hospitality: Neighbourhoods and Dynamics of Urban Migration in Istanbul (1730–54)," *Turkish Historical Review* 7 (2016): 58–85; Büssow and Meier, "Ottoman Corporatism."

[78] Gürbüzel, *Taming the Messiah*, 97–98, 15–20; Derin Terzioğlu, "How to Conceptualize Ottoman Sunnitization: A Historiographical Discussion," *Turcica* 44 (2013): 319; Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, *The Kizilbash-Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 301; Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Tijana Krstić, "Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450–c. 1750," in *Historicizing Sunni Islam in the Ottoman Empire, c. 1450–c. 1750*, eds. Tijana Krstić and Derin Terzioğlu (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 1–27.

[79] Canay Şahin, "The Rise and Fall of an Ayan Family in Eighteenth Century Anatolia: The Caniklizades (1737–1808)" (Ankara, Bilkent University Press, 2004); Ali Yaycıoğlu, *Partners of the Empire: The Crisis of the Ottoman Order in the Age of Revolutions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016). For more detailed references, see Koh, *The Sublime Post*, 157–58.

participated in Ottoman governance which, in some aforementioned cases, recursively reinforced their corporate identities and boundaries.

These are some macro patterns of the 17th and 18th centuries that have long been observed by historians, and they can serve as suitable substitutes to the de/centralization paradigm. It is feasible, and possible, to move beyond this impasse.