CHAPTER 1

Order and Compromise
The Concrete Realities of Public Action in Turkey and the Ottoman Empire

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The Turkish state tends to be described as a unitary whole that is able to impose its order and regulations on society. According to this interpretation the state is a sovereign body clearly differentiated from the rest of society and largely impermeable to social demands. It is viewed as the main or indeed sole actor in a process aiming to bring about the ‘modernisation’ and ‘westernisation’ of society. This conception influences how sociological and historical research into public action is conducted, and frequently the sole indicators used to study public policy are speeches, official texts (mainly legislation), and institutional changes. However the concrete realities of how public action is actually carried are but rarely studied.

In order to appraise this dominant approach the team working on the TransTur programme decided to develop a sociological reading of the methods of government and administration in Turkey, thereby offering a new understanding of Turkish public action from a socio-historical perspective. This led us to abandon the predominant analytical perspective and, rather than conducting static analysis of the state (as found in the majority of existing studies), to instead focus on the ways of governing and administering. We have thus adopted an open vision of public action as based essentially on interaction, and have shifted our focus away from solely state institutions to take into account other kinds of actors involved at various levels and in various ways, including users and citizens.

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1 Studies of social movements in contemporary Turkey show that demands tend not to be granted when conducted using open public means (demonstrations, petitions, etc), and instead emphasise the importance of informal transactions See Gilles Dorronsoro (ed.), La Turquie conteste. Régime sécuritaire et mobilisations sociales en Turquie, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2005.
2 See “Introductory Note” above.
The founding hypothesis of the present work is therefore based on the idea that institutions need to be analysed as arenas of social relations, and hence public action as resulting from these relations. All chapters here therefore apprehend ‘statecraft’ as resulting from the interactions of the various agents involved in producing and implementing it. The authors view the exchanges between individuals, groups and institutions, officials and citizens, the public sector and civil society as being of critical importance, and reveal the concrete ways in which public action is carried out, as well as reconstituting the space in which it is produced so as to understand its social underpinnings. This work therefore provides a relational analysis of state spheres and social forces, with the aim of characterising the various forms taken by the society-state dialectic in action over time and across the territory.

This introduction starts by presenting the ways in which the state and public action in Turkey and the Ottoman Empire have traditionally been analysed, as well as the reasons for which the TransTur programme broke with the theoretical presupposition on which such analysis are founded. It then places the results obtained into perspective before putting forward a few generalisations indicating the main advances made by the team.

The Transcendental State—State Domination and Modernisation in the Ottoman Empire and during the Republic

There are two broad traditions of analysis in historical and sociological works devoted to studying the state in the late Ottoman Empire and in Turkey. The first tradition posits that the state dominates society (without really subjecting this idea to critical enquiry), leading to analyses that tend focus on the historical, political, economic, and social reasons behind this domination. The second tradition draws on theories of modernisation, adopting the idea that the modern Turkish state came into being as a result of westernised elites carrying out a series of borrowings. Both traditions view state and society as a dichotomy, and tend to ignore the multiple transactions, adjustments, arrangements, and exchanges making up public action.

State Domination of Society
Numerous analyses of the state see Turkey as an instance of a ‘strong’ state differentiated from society, and imposing its order and regulations on the

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