Is It Time to Stop Speaking about Ottoman Modernisation?

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In 1940 Tanzimat I came out.¹ This collection of articles was brought out to mark the centenary of the inaugural Ottoman reform act, the 1839 Gülhâne edict. They compared the leading figures of the Tanzimat (“Reforms”) to the founding fathers of the Republic, emphasising the continuity in the historical experiences of the Empire and the Turkish nation. For Ottomanists, this offered a way of building a tomb for Atatürk’s that did not conform to the Republican ideology of the moment—of erecting a different statue, no longer that of the demiurge of the new Turkey but instead of the last man of the Reforms. The work offers a rich overview.² The historiographical framework put forward by the contributors was extensively taken up by Ottomanists after the Second World War. It presented the reforms as a process of modernisation or westernisation carried out by enlightened actors. It amounted to a new institutionalist school, one that was strong enough to dominate Turkish academic historiography for the next half-century. This school comprised such historians as İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı whose works on the central, religious, and naval institutions acted as a model for the following generations. The publication of general overviews in Great Britain and the United States during the 1950s and early 1960s acted as a vital relay for these perspectives. Bernard Lewis saw the Ottoman Empire as the matrix for the emergence of modern Turkey; Sir Hamilton Gibb and Harold Bowen emphasised the Islamic foundations of the Ottoman state³; Niyazi Berkes, Roderic Davison, and Şerif Mardin presented the Ottoman Empire

¹ Istanbul, Maarif Matbaası.
² I am grateful to Marc Aymes for having reminded me of how decisively important this work is. I also wish to thank him along with Benjamin Gourisse and Élise Massicard for their useful suggestions and corrections to this chapter.
during its final centuries as the locus for a major opposition and cultural bifurcation between the artisans of modernity turned towards western influences and the defenders of Islamic tradition.⁴

In the 1960s and 1970s the key subject in Ottoman studies was precisely that which other better-known fields of study were then neglecting—the state, study of which was divided into three distinct historic periods: a ‘classical’ period (1300–1600) characterised according to Halil İnalcık by the constitution and consolidation of central institutions⁵; the decline of the Empire (1600–1789) corresponding to the devolution of power to autonomous provincial forces; the beginnings of modernity and the time of reforms under the aegis of bureaucrats and then westernised military officers (1789–1922). And then inversely, at the time when the state was once again becoming a favourite subject of historical and political study in the 1980s, Ottoman historians moved on to other areas of enquiry. Monographs about the central administration were now superseded by explorations of more provincial forms of authority (and especially the ayans of the 18th century) and by studies of the structures and usages of imperial power. Researchers tended to be more drawn towards the history of demography, monetary history, the history of social groups, and the study of Sufi brotherhoods. Sources which had previously been seen as clearly secondary suddenly came to the fore—chronicles, probate records, endowment deeds. At the same time, researchers who had studied in the 1980s and 1990s had boldly turned their backs on the theories of their predecessors.⁶

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