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## **The Ottoman Cosmopolitan Hypothesis in the Light of Pheng Cheah's Critical Explorations of Cosmopolitanism, Transnationalism and Colonialism**

**Nora Lafi (ZMO Berlin-BMBF)**

My intent here is just to suggest a few reflection tracks. The present short paper is to be seen as a complement to the general position text we wrote with Ulrike for this programme. The following remarks are in no way to be seen as something closed, but are instead conceived as stimulants for our debates.

As Terry Cochran argues, there is a whole linguistic economy of cosmopolitanism in present debates<sup>1</sup>. And it is sometimes difficult to be sure that we are dealing with the same concept. This is why I'd like to start here from the work of Pheng Cheah. In our preliminary position text with Ulrike, we've been using this author very little, maybe because he doesn't believe in one of our first assumptions: there is something to understand in the relationship between cosmopolitanism as an idea of the period of Enlightenment and cosmopolitanism as a tool to analyse societies with a component of diversity.

I quote: "any contemporary revival of cosmopolitanism must take a critical distance from the older style cosmopolitanism of philosophical modernity"<sup>2</sup>. For him, what he calls the 'ancestor cosmopolitanism', is something else, and taking it into consideration would be entering a lose end. But then, all his trajectory is to confront contemporary societies to the modern idea of nation and its roots, as if cosmopolitanism as a theoretical creation for the contemporary world was only indirectly related to its ancestor. One of the aims of the present programme, based upon an examination of the ottoman urban situation, is to explore the possibility of a more complex relation. As modernity and its implications in societies is at the centre of the attention, why should we evacuate one of the most central questions about the modern conception of modernity itself and about the birth of nations as newly defined in a modern context before any discussion? The result of a such discussion might be: yes indeed, the nature of the concept has changed. But it has to be discussed, and even in this case, the shift itself is interesting. And the ottoman situation surely appears as one of the most productive research fields for such a discussion. For Pheng Cheah, I quote again, "the history of colonialism has disproven Kant's benign view of the unifying power of international commerce". And as for him contemporary reflections on cosmopolitanism are aimed at explaining what he calls the present neocolonial globalization, the discussion seems closed. We'll see that the ottoman case might suggest to at least partially reopen it. As for the

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<sup>1</sup> "The Linguistic Economy of the Cosmopolitical", *Boundary*, 26-2, 1999, p.59-72.

<sup>2</sup> In « Given culture : rethinking cosmopolitical freedom in transnationalism », *Boundary*, 2, 1997, p.157-197.

responsibility of universalism in imperialism, the discussion is also open, as arguments by Pratap Bhanu Mehta illustrate<sup>3</sup>.

But the editor (with Bruce Robbins), of *Cosmopolitics: thinking and feeling beyond the nation*, also develops some very interesting ideas, which can't be characterized by the simplistic dichotomy I described for the various phases of the development of the concept of cosmopolitanism. He mainly focuses on present debates on the fate of culture in globalization. His point is to contrast the various theories on hybridity, such as developed by Bhabha and Clifford, and their use of the cosmopolitan context. I quote: "I argue that the accounts of radical cosmopolitan agency offered by hybridity theory obscure the material dynamics of nationalism in neo-colonial globalization".

For Pheng Cheah, contemporary cosmopolitanism is a constant renegotiation of the postcolonial nation state, in the framework of complex forces of both resistance and accommodation. But the impression, for the historian, is that in Pheng Cheah's account, several steps are missing. The sequence: Kant, colonial, postcolonial can't be satisfactory in its building of mechanical causal links.

The Ottoman case studies we are dealing with in this programme might also bring light on some of these missing steps.

Here is a first list of the points on which we might have something to say. Of course it is at this stage a tentative, open and provisional one.

- The enlightened concept and the diversity concept of cosmopolitanism
- An imperial context dealing with diversity
- The role of religious communities in an imperial society
- The pre-nation-state process of modernisation of society and of redefinition of the place of the individual with his complex identity
- The elements of the definition of what is identity
- The non mechanical link between this process of definition and the construction of the nation state
- The non mechanical link between radical nationalisms and the end of the imperial project
- The existence of an ottoman imperial cosmopolitan political project as a response not only against internal nationalistic forces but also against external influxes.
- This same project as part of a wider ottoman history of imperial state building and of the governance of diversity

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<sup>3</sup> « Cosmopolitanism and the circle of Reason », *Political Theory*, 28-5, 2000, p.619-639.

This moment might design a clash between what cosmopolitan theorists describe as the perverted Kantian cosmopolitanism (by the imperial colonial project) and what we can begin to define as the defensive imperial cosmopolitan ottoman imperial project. But on this point I must say that I not necessarily agree with the definition of European imperialism as a derivation of Kantian ideals. We have to answer on this field, but also maybe to redefine it. In this way, ottoman studies might help complexify both ends.

And we also might have things to say on the content of what we might describe as a cosmopolitan situation. I think that everybody agrees to say that a cosmopolitan situation can't be defined only by a description of diversity and cohabitation. It also has to deal with the sphere of governance and with the imperial design for it. We have to read cosmopolitanism in an ottoman urban context at various scales: imperial, urban governance, neighbourhood, professional association... and on various levels. This posture also invites us not to use the cosmopolitan concept only in a passive and descriptive way: we have to confront it to a political theory and practice in the ottoman context.

One of the other points we might have is to say that debates on cosmopolitanism are dominated by scholars who deal with the history of ideas, and little with the history of societies. The urban ottoman case might bring the case to argue that the one needs the other. Present debates are: is today's globalization something like cosmopolitanism? And if yes, is it the Kantian enlightened cosmopolitanism such as perverted by colonials (with hybridity theorists arguing that anti-colonialists have been able to use this universalism against colonialism) or is it something else? We are dealing with the question of world governance. And little with the governance of diversity into societies, which is another crucial point and which constitutes a vital approach to the discussion of the national paradigm. This is why we might have a point with the ottoman and post-ottoman urban case: a large scale governance dealing with the growth of national ideas and with external influences and local situations in which diversity is a basic element. The Ottoman case brings the double scale: the empire as a world, the city as a microcosm. Our challenge is to find a theoretical link between these two spheres. The gap is not, as Pheng Cheah argues, between Kant and globalization, it is between the government of the (a) world and the functioning of a local diverse society. It is on the articulation that we have to build up theoretically.

The ottoman case might close the gap, as we illustrate with our case studies that the local governance of diversity in the ottoman empire was part of a global imperial method of supra local government. The only question is: was it cosmopolitanism? Or what would be our definition of the ottoman urban cosmopolitanism? It is not just a static description of local

features of diversity. It is not just a vague imperial principle. It is all in the dynamic relationship of these two elements working both downwards and upwards and possibly creating a specific sphere of governance. And of course, the concept of cosmopolitanism is just a tool, not an end *in se*.

What we are looking for are the relays. In today's debates about globalization, Carolyn Cartier tried to reinsert the concept<sup>4</sup>.

What the ottoman case brings is a reflection on the importance of intermediary instances of governance. You can't reflect on cosmopolitanism just at a broader scale. Possible cosmopolitan elements and their limits, were definitely grounded into concrete elements of locality, which the historian has to describe with accuracy in order to be able to then go back to global debates. Those who dissert on cosmopolitanism in doing the splits between Kant, nationalism, colonialism and Georges Bush do miss a step, both empirical and theoretical. And what we might argue here is that this step can be empirically described and theoretically constructed around the ottoman urban situation.

The ottoman urban situation might suggest that, contrary to what those who push for hybridity theories or to what a figure like Peng Cheah argues,

- there might be a link to explore between the ottoman situation of diversity and the European conceptualization of enlightened cosmopolitanism (seen as a conceptual tool and not as an imported influence of course)
- there might be a step before the nationalist disintegration of any cosmopolitan idea, consisting of an imperial construction of governance of local diversities
- we might need something more complex than postcolonial theories in order to propose global interpretations to the present globalized illustration of what might not be a cosmopolitanism
- Historians might have something to bring into such debates, and not just empirical facts, but also theoretical impulses.

I would also like to add some remarks about present debates in the international historiography about empires, nations and identities. A recent dossier in the French *Annales*

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<sup>4</sup> « Cosmopolitics and the maritime world city », *Geographical Review*, 99-2, 1999, p.278-289.

illustrates this trend very well<sup>5</sup>. In dealing with such crucial questions as national identities in imperial constructions or the nature of an empire, the author selected for this dossier completely neglect the ottoman case, deal with it in a few lines and just with common wisdoms. And from these conclusions, propose interpretations for our present world. It is very often the case: the imperial situation is very often taken by those dealing with global history in order to explain the present globalization. And debates generally function on a genealogical logic: backwards. The aim today is instead to reinsert reflections on the ottoman case in a dynamic historical logic and to use them to dissert on present debates only once they have been built on solid historical questionings.

And one the promising research tracks might be to start from the reading of local microcosms.

To sum up: contrary to what Pheng Cheah argues, I think that there is something to discuss in the articulation of cosmopolitanism as a concept aiming at characterizing social diversity and cosmopolitanism as a concept of political philosophy characterising world governance. This something might be in the dynamic and both ways interaction of the Ottoman urban imperial world sphere with the local ottoman urban microcosms (small worlds).

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<sup>5</sup> *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 2008, 63-3.