Marc Aymes, Benjamin Gourisse, and Élise Massicard (eds): Order and Compromise: Government Practices in Turkey from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Early 21st Century


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This book is not only a substantial contribution to the study of the Turkish State in particular, but also a valuable volume for State studies in general. First published in French in 2013, this English edition brings together the results of a French Agence Nationale de la Recherche funded research project, TRANSTUR, coordinated by Elise Massicard between 2008 and 2012. The research adopted a clearly defined position within the field of State studies. As Benjamin Gourisse notes in the first chapter, which is in fact the introduction even though it is not presented as such, the program proposed a reading of the “concrete realities of how public action is carried” in a sociohistorical perspective “to develop a sociological reading of the methods of government and administration in Turkey”. The founding hypothesis advanced an interaction-based paradigm according to which “institutions need to be analyzed as arenas of social relations and public action as resulting from these relations”. This is how this book investigates statecraft on a historical and territorial continuity.

By focusing on “the multiple transactions and arrangements which occur in the brokering of [public policy] decisions and their subsequent implementation” (p. 13), the analysis goes well beyond the three classic dialectics of political sciences: separation between policy making and policy implementation, public-private antagonism and state domination versus state retreat. This is a clear departure from the dominant conception of the Turkish state, which is a perfect illustration of state autonomy paradigm, seen as “a unitary whole able to impose its order and regulations on society from which it is clearly differentiated as a sovereign body largely impermeable to social demands” (p.1). Gourisse argues that two broad analytical traditions endorse this top-down perspective: the state domination approach disregarding numerous forms of transactions between state officials and social groups; and the modernisation paradigm scaling down the emergence of modern Turkey to its institutional modernisation, setting aside the concrete dynamics of this institutional reform processes. The chapter by Marc Aymes supports the TRANSTUR manifesto in another analytical frame: the historicisation of the state. If history is implicit in the existence of the state, the concrete existence of the state is as much related to the “historical competence of the actors” as well to the “desire for the state”, even in its non-concretised forms. Studying the state thus requires the
search “for the times and places where” it is desired, whether this desire is realized or not.

Olivier Bouquet’s chapter is a fresh look at the doxas of Ottoman modernisation theory. He criticises two dominant hypotheses on “reforming sincerity” and “cultural bifurcation” according to which young generations of Ottoman elites would have become “converted Westerners” sharing a common intention for reform, reinforced by a clear understanding of the modern world and a belief that the Empire would either to join this world or perish. Bouquet’s analysis confirms the virtues of approaching institutions, not as the result of reforming intentions, but as the products of sociogenesis of actors’ engagement with their varying relationships to modernity.

The chapter by Emmanuel Szurek reveals the kaleidoscopic nature of the state under the single party government. Although a private cultural association, the Turkish Language Institute (TDK), which was entrusted the task of reforming the national language during the single party rule in 1930-40s, displayed at one and same time diverse institutional features. Organised on a western model of a learned society club, it practiced the cultural activism of patriotic committee by progressively becoming a satellite institution of the single party. Its annual plenary assemblies used propaganda techniques to glorify the regime. It rapidly resembled an administration, being financially and structurally dependent on the Ministry of Education which mobilised in return a full range of public efforts to implement the TDK’s operations.

Nathalie Clayer also questions the complex relationship between society and state during the single party regime, through the prism of the establishment of laïcité. The progressive and differentiated patterns of the abolition of religious courses from secondary schools shows that even though this policy was introduced from above, their local practice was subject to negotiation between public authorities and those in charge of instruction subject to popular reactions. Clayer shows how secularisation in the curriculum provoked a strong growth in extra-curricular Qur’an courses provided within networks run by officially forbidden brotherhoods. However, these unofficial networks reinforced the legitimacy and capacities of the central administration’s Chargée d’Affaires Religieuses (Diyanet) all around the country during the time of the multi-party system.

Nicolas Camelio studies the overlap between legal and political spheres by analysing the patterns of involvement of the country’s most eminent law professors in the writing of the 1961 Constitution right after the 1960 military coup. The collusive transactions between these academic and military elites were possible thanks to both the recognition of the task of constitution writing coming under technical expertise, and a consensus on the restoration of an idealised regime where a legal order free from party politics would be based on harmonious institutional cooperation. However divisions between the academics opened the constitutional process to public debate and the military could not keep party politics out of these debate. The constitution which was finally accepted gave extensive freedom to political action.

Two other chapters deal with the question of how the Turkish military tries to perpetuate its authority beyond the barracks. Annouck Gabriel Côrte-Real Pinto’s work reveals how the Turkish military’s intense and legally-based involvement in charity activities produces rhizomatic networks within civil society, therefore expanding its scope through indirect intervention. By studying the symbolic and practical programmes two military-linked organisations used during religious feasts and during the army’s external incursions, the author explains how religious and
patriotic imaginaries are articulated to legitimise the army’s role as a undeniable actor of social cohesion. By associating donations with the identity of the conscript, the army not only integrates civilians into military affairs but also gives itself a human face. The author concludes that this results in the perception of the military power as a normal fact in everyday life.

Sümbül Kaya demonstrates the limits of this power. Her analysis deals with how the program “training in the love for motherland”, delivered to all conscripts as part of military service, contributes to their political socialisation. This training appears to be a non-coercive way of consolidating the army’s authority through the dissemination of a specific citizen model. The army appears as a moral entrepreneur since this training promotes individual and civic values and norms as well as religious ones, as consubstantial to Atatürk’s nationalism. However, Kaya concludes that army’s capacity to impose its hegemony is limited, given that the training’s effects depend strongly on two criteria, namely the conscripts’ level of education and political background.

Noémi Levy-Aksu’s article sheds light on the relations between two public institutions – police and justice systems – during Abdulhamit II’s reign (1876-1909). By using a trans-institutional approach based on a precise archival study, she shows how maintaining public order and controlling population was the priority task of police forces rather than the prevention and detection of crimes, meaning that the police was in charge of protecting the interests of the state rather than people and property. Yet the intensification of police forces in 19th century across all districts in the capital, to carry out political surveillance and social control, produced close links between them and local populations who usually called upon the police, not judicial agents, for the resolution of their conflicts. This enabled society to intervene in the administration by using one institution rather than another or even one against another.

Elise Massicard’s chapter also assesses this state-society continuum incarnated by a “middleman”, muhtar, headman of the neighbourhood and village. Considered as the lowest level of territorial state administration, this intermediary institution is a hybrid one over which the state keeps an intentionally incomplete hold. Muhtar is not a legal-rational bureaucrat in the Weberian sense: he is elected by the local population, their recruitment is free from any technical qualification, and the salary he receives from the state is rarely his principal source of revenue. As an elected part-time civil servant, involved in reciprocal dependencies with local populations, muhtars enjoy an autonomy in the way they apply rules and procedures which gives way to “arrangements” which make them circumvent official norms that they are supposed to enforce.

Jean-François Pérouse deals with the blurriness of state limits through the paradigm of the privatisation of state in the sense of non-alignment between the public (interest and services) and the state. He studies a contemporary administration, The Administration for Collective Housing, TOKI, which is at the heart of a complex authoritarian housing policy. Pérouse demonstrates how TOKI’s supply of state legitimacy and resources serves the interests of private actors of which it is the main shareholder, whilst claiming to be working for the public good. With a predominantly standardised and national perspective of modernity and security, TOKI’s operations follow a unique model of urban housing which consists of erasing
locale-specific models, and pre-existing public initiatives as unworthy and short-circuiting municipalities and local systems of housing as inefficient.

The chapter by Muriel Girard and Clémence Scalbert-Yücel focuses on the redeployment patterns of the state in cooperation with private actors in the international circulation of norms and local dynamics. They study the heritage, constituted into a category of public action, of the South-eastern Anatolia Project (GAP), a state-led local development project introduced in the late 1980s in the south eastern region of Turkey marked by the Kurdish question. This evolved into a sustainable development project with the stimulus of UNDP and EU-driven programs. The participatory principle carried by heritage action as a development tool had two consequences: its normalisation as a development aid for tourism and the empowerment of local private actors, not in spite of institutions, but in fact thanks to centralised public action conducted in close cooperation with local governmental actors.

Focusing on the EU support provided to civil society in Turkey, Claire Visier makes us also rethink the constitution of public action through international policy transfer. Neither the model of public action transferred nor the beneficiary of the transfer precede the transfer itself: they are both constituted through the use of a specific instrument of public action, the “Project”. By studying the Project “Working together”, coordinated by the European Trade Union Confederation and directed towards its Turkish trade union partners, Visier shows how civil society is built from top-down both at the European and Turkish levels. Although this project initially aimed for a value transfer on social dialogue related to the ideas of European governance, what was finally appropriated by all Turkish trade union organisations was not the values but the governance techniques embodied in the financial instrument.

Berna Erkal studies the construction of another category of public action: the way women who experience male violence are perceived by public services. She reveals how two seemingly contradictory ways of maintaining order, the impersonality of state administration and the personality of women’s solidarity, are knit together in women’s shelter staff’s everyday practices. In the eyes of the residents of these shelters, the staff appear to be the embodiment of a state provider of family-like care and security. Erkal defines this family like frame both in an intimate and in a disciplinary senses: the residents are subject to rules on their behaviour and their freedom to go out and meet people, especially men. As such, these state institutions contribute to the politics of “honourable” family through these “honourable” women’s shelters.

Benoît Fliche questions the Turkish state’s relations with women from the perspective of citizens’ official identification. Assuming the identity of a dead brother or sister, giving a wrong date of birth or changing it to have the legal age for marriage or for pension considerations are common practices in Turkey. Therefore, official records appear as arrangements between officials and people. However, both citizens’ and officials’ imprecision and negligence in keeping the records are more like to happen for women, which is, according to Fliche, related to the popular perception of women’s status in family and society. By prioritising identification over authentication, the Turkish administration exerts little control over the real and thus contributes to the opening of its own authority to discussion and negotiation.

Marc Aymes’s chapter concludes the book by invoking the idea of discharge, in the sense of both release and performance, to study the concrete historicity of the state and not its abstract or condensed history. He shows how falsification is revealed
and taken into consideration within laws during the Ottoman Empire. We know now that acts of state are shaped both by the positive imposition of order and by the negativity of deficiencies, failings and gaps which end up by accrediting an agency by falsification. Therefore, studying deceptive agency lets us finally avoid the risk of establishing the realm of the official as univocal and omnipresent. It allows us to explore the many channels by which the legitimacy of order is brought about. We therefore can concretely have the sense of how order and compromise overlap.