Modernization and the Elite Cycle: State Formation and Economic Elites in the Ottoman Empire

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Abstract: This study focuses on the question of why states need elites. Throughout history, political powers (such as tribal leaders, great emperors, or nation-states) have shared some of their power, albeit in a limited manner, with certain individuals who held authority to rule, setting them apart from the general population. Over time, as the central power of a political entity weakened, the power of those acting on behalf of the center increased. Conversely, when the administrative power of the center strengthened, the powers in the periphery remained more limited. These individuals with whom power is shared are commonly referred to as the elite. Though not entirely separate from society, the elite occupy a higher position in the social hierarchy compared to the rest of society. The primary focus of this study is to trace how the pre-modern state-elite relations transformed during the process of modernization. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Ottoman Empire, like other contemporary states, sought to embrace change and modernize. Consequently, the relationship between the political power and peripheral powers underwent reconfiguration. As the Ottoman state attempted to eliminate existing elites, new ones were simultaneously created to take their place. Another important aspect addressed by this study is the exploration of the organic link between the new elites and the state. This includes examining the economic relations of the emerging 19th-century Ottoman elite with the state and amongst themselves.

Keywords Elites, Elite Cycle, Ottoman Empire, Bourgeois, Modernization

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Introduction

Throughout history, no state has governed without elites. From the military aristocracies of early empires to the bureaucratic classes of modern nation states, elites have acted as indispensable intermediaries between rulers and the ruled. Classical elite theorists such as Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto emphasized that political power inevitably concentrates in the hands of a minority and that this minority is periodically renewed through a process of "elite circulation." In this cyclical dynamic, old elites lose legitimacy or capacity, while new groups emerge to meet the evolving needs of governance. Elite change, therefore, is not merely a social outcome but a structural condition for state continuity.

The Ottoman Empire in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries provides a particularly rich setting for observing this process. The crises of the eighteenth-century provincial autonomy, fiscal exhaustion, and military defeat gave rise to powerful local notables (*ayan*), tax farmers (*mültezim*), and other provincial elites who filled the vacuum left by a weakening imperial center. Yet, as the empire entered the nineteenth century, reformist sultans such as Selim III and Mahmud II sought to reverse this decentralization. The abolition of the Janissary corps in 1826, the suppression of semi-independent ayan households, and the curtailment of the ulema's administrative influence were not simply acts of centralization; they marked the beginning of a new cycle of elite transformation. Old elites rooted in patrimonial and military networks were dismantled, and new ones emerged in their place above all, a professionalized, salaried bureaucracy loyal to the sultan, and state-connected economic actors who operated under official protection.

This transformation was institutionalized during the Tanzimat era (1839-1876), when the Ottoman government embarked on comprehensive administrative and fiscal reforms. The creation of ministries, provincial councils, and codified laws produced a distinct bureaucratic elite defined by education, legal expertise, and service to the state rather than lineage or local power. At the same time, the empire attempted to cultivate a Muslim commercial class through initiatives, integrating economic elites into the state's modernization project. However, property insecurity, the persistence of *müsadere* (confiscation), and the lack of

autonomous corporate institutions prevented these elites from evolving into an independent bourgeoisie comparable to their European counterparts. By situating the Ottoman case within the broader framework of elite theory, this article examines how modernization reshaped the relationship between the state and its elites. It argues that nineteenth century Ottoman reforms did not merely dismantle existing elites but reorganized the mechanisms through which power, wealth, and prestige were distributed. In contrast to the European model, where capitalist development fostered autonomous social classes, the Ottoman trajectory produced state-dependent elites whose fortunes were tied to imperial authority. In this sense, Ottoman modernization represents not a linear importation of Western institutions but a complex process of elite reconfiguration, one that reveals how state survival and social transformation were mutually constituted within the empire's late modern history.

This article seeks to explain how the relationship between the state and elites evolves under conditions of modernization, taking the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire as a case study. Rather than relying on archival data, the study builds its analysis on conceptual synthesis and comparative interpretation, combining classical elite theory with secondary historical scholarship on Ottoman social and economic transformation. Its aim is twofold: first, to trace the mechanisms through which elites sustain and reproduce state power across different historical contexts; and second, to show how modernization reorganized these mechanisms within the Ottoman polity.

By linking elite theory to Ottoman modernization, the study contributes to the literature in two main ways. Conceptually, it extends the classical "elite circulation" framework beyond its Western origins, demonstrating how it can illuminate non-Western experiences of institutional change. Empirically, it reframes Ottoman modernization not merely as a process of reform or Westernization but as a deliberate reconfiguration of elite power where old patrimonial and military groups were replaced by bureaucratic and economic actors whose legitimacy derived from the state. In doing so, it bridges a gap between political sociology and Ottoman studies, offering a perspective that connects macro-level theories of power to the empire's particular social dynamics.

The article is organized into four sections. The first discusses why all states, regardless of form or era, depend on elites to maintain political order and legitimacy. The second outlines the main typologies of elites; military, genealogical, religious, bureaucratic, and economic and traces their historical evolution. The third examines how Ottoman elites transformed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, focusing on the decline of the ayan, the abolition of the Janissaries, and the rise of a centralized bureaucratic class. The fourth section analyzes the emergence of economic elites and the institutional constraints that limited their autonomy. Together, these sections reveal that Ottoman modernization was less a story of Western imitation than one of internal reorganization, in which the state reconstituted its elite foundations to ensure continuity amid change.

Why does the state need elites?

From the earliest human communities to modern states, social relations have been shaped by the persistent attempts of individuals to dominate or persuade others to fulfill their will. As populations grew, it became evident that this chaos needed to be controlled. Consequently, certain individuals assumed roles as rule-makers on behalf of the community. Initially, this authority was often based on physical strength, but it evolved over time, taking various forms. Even in the earliest civilizations, there existed a ruling class composed of individuals relying on physical prowess. As societies progressed, factors such as the domestication of animals, population growth, and agricultural advancements reshaped the nature of the ruling class. Gaetano Mosca, an early scholar, examined political structures throughout history and posited that societies are fundamentally divided into two groups: the rulers and the managed. The ruling class has always been smaller in number, while the governed class constitutes the majority. The rulers make decisions on behalf of the majority and strive to maintain the political structure. Two crucial aspects of the ruling class's role are ensuring the economic welfare of the governed and safeguarding them against external threats. These responsibilities are vital for the stability and continuity of the political structure (Mosca, 1939: 430-460). The concept of elites - encompassing

elements of violence, oppression, social agreements, and welfare - remains a consistent and influential force in society (Hartmann, 2007: 9).

Wilfred Pareto is another prominent figure who contributed to the theories of elitism. One of his significant principles, known as the Pareto principle, is observed in various social sciences. It asserts that a minority governs the majority, and this concept is particularly relevant when examining the economic dimension (Pareto, 1935: 1517-1520). Economists have long discussed the concentration of most income in the hands of a ruling minority, while a smaller portion is shared among the vast majority of individuals. According to Pareto, the ruling class must adapt to the changing principles of the age. Failure to do so would result in new elites replacing the existing ones. He likens the existence of elites in society to a cycle, which he termed the "Elite Cycle." Building on Pareto's work, Kolabinska further divides the elite cycle into two phases. The first phase involves the transformation between different types of elites. A wealthy individual, relative to the rest of society, belongs to the economic elite. When such a person ascends to power, they become part of the ruling elite rather than just the economic elite. In the second phase of the cycle, non-elite individuals have the opportunity to transform into elites. This transformation can occur in two ways: a person from a humble background can achieve elite status through exceptional achievements, under certain circumstances such as rebellions, wars, or invasions, the existing elites may be ousted from the system, and new elites emerge in the process (Bottomore, 1993: 36).

Over time, two major revolutions played a crucial role in shaping and changing the dynamics of elites. The first of these revolutions was the Neolithic revolution, which led to an enormous increase in the scale of organizations. This growth in collective wealth and power gave rise to the first kingdoms and empires. These newly formed kingdoms continued to expand, conquering surrounding territories and other states. As a result, for several millennia, vast swaths of the earth's surface were ruled by empires like the Sumerian, Egyptian, Chinese, Persian, Roman, Inca, and Aztec empires. This period marked a significant revolution in its time, brought wealth and power to a select few but also had both beneficial and harmful effects on many. Prior to the Neolithic revolution, human

societies often engaged in casual, carefree, and relatively unstructured activities such as hunting and gathering. This lifestyle, though simplistic, allowed for a sense of freedom in their natural environment. However, with the emergence of organized kingdoms and empires, the majority of people faced a transition to a life of hard and constant work. This transformation represented a significant change from their previous way of life, and while it brought benefits to some, it also introduced challenges for many. In summary, the Neolithic revolution and the subsequent growth of kingdoms and empires played a pivotal role in the evolution of elites and societal structures. While it brought wealth and power to certain individuals and groups, it also introduced a shift from the carefree past to a more structured and labor-intensive existence for a considerable portion of the population (Perkin, 1996: 8-15). Indeed, the Industrial Revolution was a transformative period that redefined the concept of the elite. With the advent of industrialization, new categories of elites emerged, reflecting the changing economic and social landscape. Various professions and roles gained prominence, leading to the rise of different types of elites.

During the Industrial Revolution, factory owners held significant power and influence, as they controlled the means of production and accumulated wealth. Union leaders also played a crucial role in representing and advocating for the rights of the working class. Technological advancements during this era led to the rise of technical experts, including engineers in various fields, including civil, mechanical, chemical, electrical, and electronic engineering. These professionals were instrumental in driving innovation and progress in the modern sense. The expanding business landscape necessitated the presence of accountants and company secretaries, who became key figures in managing financial affairs and maintaining corporate structures. Writers, journalists, and media professionals became influential in shaping public opinion and disseminating information, earning their place among the elites. Likewise, medical professionals, dentists, scientists, statisticians, and other experts contributed significantly to the advancement of knowledge and the improvement of public health. University professors and school teachers, as educators and intellectual guides, also held a prominent position within the educated elite, shaping the minds of the next generation. Moreover, architects and healthcare professionals were

essential contributors to societal development, both in terms of physical infrastructure and public well-being. However, as time progressed, the concept of the elite has evolved. While certain types of elites have continued to hold significant power and influence in the understanding of the nation-state, some have transitioned into being primarily seen as symbols of social status, rather than exerting direct political or economic control. Overall, the Industrial Revolution played a vital role in diversifying the types of elites and expanding their influence across various professions and sectors. Today, the nature and significance of the elite continue to evolve as society progresses and undergoes further transformations.

Types of Elitism and the Elite Cycle

There are various types of ruling elites engaged in a two-way struggle. The first part of this struggle involves maintaining their existing power. The second challenge is to expand their influence further. Political crises, economic fluctuations, occupations, and technological innovations may lead to the replacement of existing elites with new ones. Additionally, economic elites may rise by assuming political roles and increasing their power. These dynamics constitute what is known as the elite cycle (Kolabinska, 1912: 44-54). The elites in the elite cycle do not necessarily belong to the same category. It is entirely possible for an individual to be part of multiple elite categories simultaneously. To fully comprehend this cycle, it becomes essential to explain the various types of elites involved.

Military elitism

Military elites and political elites can be considered as the first types of elites in history. Unlike family conflicts or social turmoil, war possesses a distinct structure. Those defending the society against external attacks have consistently been set apart from the rest of society (Janowitz, 1957: 11-13). Specifically, individuals leading soldiers such as commanders and military leaders are referred to as the military elite. Due to their role as guardians of political power, military

elites hold a privileged position. In pre-modern times, military power itself constituted the legitimate basis of political power.

According to Marcel Mauss's theory, birth was the most crucial determinant of a person's life in pre-modern times. Where an individual was born, their race, and other innate qualities determined their position in life. If someone was born into an important family, their life reflected their social standing. Similarly, those born tall, strong, and capable of combat were placed in the military hierarchy. Mauss interpreted this situation as a divine gift (Cowell, 2007: 16). Since the vertical hierarchy between strata in society in the pre-modern period was rigid; it was almost impossible for the frail child of an agricultural family to attain elite status.

In pre-modern times, legitimacy was primarily derived from physical strength and military competence. The most notable characteristic of rulers was their status as warriors. The political elite and the military elite were often concentrated in the same hands. For instance, in the Inca Civilization, soldier-kings known as "cinchecona" ruled (Amıno, 2015: 351). During the first dynasty in China (Shang Dynasty), the defining feature of kings was their role as warriors. The sanctity of warrior-kings emerged when physical strength and the ability to wield weapons were combined with political power (Keightley, 1999: 125). In the Sumerian civilization, the individuals who safeguarded and governed the cities were military lords. The source of legitimacy derived from military service, and the god-King-Warrior trilogy was embodied in one person (Çığ, 2012: 153).

Over time, although the soldier-king myth persisted, this structure started to professionalize. As states and empires expanded, military elites emerged to holistically address the military structure. Concurrently, elitize within the military began to take place. For instance, in China, an aristocratic-warrior class was formed to combat external threats, particularly invasions. These individuals held a distinct position within society, but they remained subordinate to the king (Poo, 2005: 78). In the Roman Empire, a military consul was established to advise the king on military matters and formulate strategies (Johnston, 2013: 25-34). Even in the northern Germanic communities, where military service was considered the holiest profession and every man was trained as a soldier,

over time, the military hierarchy and political administration began to separate (Wilcox & Trevino, 2000: 25). Even in a society like Carthage, where being a good soldier meant being a good citizen, commanders in wars formed the military elite (Scullard, 2008: 19-21). As society expanded and the number of soldiers increased, military elites were needed to command the war.

As the understanding of the state developed, the relationship between the military elite and the state underwent changes. States began selecting their military elites from loyal individuals who could command thousands of troops and were highly dependent on the central administration. Both the Byzantine Empire and the Seljuks balanced the military elite by granting them land in exchange for their loyalty and success (İnalcık, 2012: 168-170). The Ottoman Empire and the Safavids, on the other hand, had developed a structure that completely tied the military elites to political power. In the system called Kapıkulu in the Ottoman Empire and gulam in the Safavids, the military elites were completely under the command of the ruler. Political authority was positioned above military authority (Lindner, 2012: 22-30). This system was a balance mechanism developed by the center against feudal tendencies.

Genealogical elitism (Aristocracy)

Aristocracy, in the social sense, is a concept that refers descendants of political authorities and ruling elites who inherit the same privileges. Even in the oldest civilizations of history, a certain minority passed on their privileges to their subsequent generations. With a simple formula, 'a good birth' became the most fundamental key to becoming part of the elite (Doyle, 2010: 2). This system, which existed thousands of years before the modern conception of democracy, is an important part of preventing political turmoil (Hoppe, 2014: 22). Aristocracy derives from the word *aristoi*, meaning "best citizens". It is a word that denotes power, wealth and prestige (Duplouy, 2013: 696). Many of the properties owned in pre-modern times were passed on to the next generations. And this was called aristocracy.

The Ottoman Empire was an aristocratic state in administrative terms, functioning as a monarchy. Since Osman, the founder of the state, rulers came from

the same family. However, unlike their European contemporaries, elite families with significant influence on the government did not exist. Therefore, during the period under examination (19th century), one cannot speak of a blood-based aristocracy that perpetuated through generations in the Ottoman Empire. This topic will be discussed in detail in the second part.

Financial Elites

One of the most fundamental arguments of elitism is wealth, and the institution that ensures the perpetuation of wealth among members of the same family is inheritance. In other words, the law of inheritance forms the basis of the financial elite (Tacoma, 2006: 205-206). Through the inheritance system, wealth can be passed down within the same family, ensuring its continuity over generations. The development of the law of inheritance occurred in Rome, where the elite held prominence. Agricultural production was one of the most profitable areas in the Roman Empire. Thanks to the inheritance of agricultural lands from father to son, wealth could be preserved within the family, guaranteeing the living conditions of future generations.

From the Stone Age to the present, one of mankind's greatest discoveries has been trade. Thanks to trade, meeting unlimited needs became easier (Davis, 2017:18-20). Merchants generated profits by trading various goods, and with the development of the inheritance law described above, they ensured that capital remained within the family (Curtin, 2008: 8-14). However, after periods of turmoil, invasions, and wars, the origins of the modern bourgeoisie were laid in the Middle Ages. Capitalist families such as Medici family emerged during a period of relative peace when the law of inheritance had developed. As entrepreneurs amassed a certain level of capital, they shifted their focus to the financial field. The power of financial elites became increasingly important for the state.

The separation of capital into public and private capital paved the way for capitalists to become the elite. The fact that wealth was in the hands of individuals other than the state treasury marked a crucial stage. In the economic arena, those engaged in businesses outside the purview of the state, or collaborating with the state, managed to accumulate capital. In instances where the state's

economic structure was weak, these private capital owners also gained political power by aiding their states during times of crisis. Furthermore, similar to many premodern European states, they established armies with their financial resources. The Medici family was neither the first nor the last of such financial elites. Nonetheless, as Florence's wealthiest family, they wielded significant influence in the administration of the state (Roover, 1963: 31-45).

The most evident divisions of the financial elite were in the area of tax collection. As a natural obligation, the state had to ensure the safety of life and property for the people within its borders. To finance these essential tasks, states collected taxes. However, establishing a new fiscal organization in pre-modern states incurred high costs, including trained human resources, construction of public spaces, personnel expenses, creation of new laws, tax calculations, and more. As an alternative, tax collection was delegated to other individuals. Collecting taxes on behalf of the state, the king, or the emperor also implied that the state shared its authority. Consequently, the financial elites possessed the political power of the state behind them. In this manner, public capital resources were made available to private capital, and the relationship between the financial elite and the state evolved into a more complex direction (Verdier & Bourguignon, 2012: 258).

However, in periods when the political, social, cultural, and economic structures underwent changes, the elite cycle came into play. Thanks to the contingency of history, new elites rose, while old elites declined. This pattern occurred repeatedly throughout history. For instance, with the conquest of regions previously under Greek rule by Rome, the local elites endeavored to assimilate into the Roman period. They adopted Roman customs and began using Latin names. This trend persisted during the time of Augustus and Marcus Antonius, and some of these elite families successfully integrated into the Roman elite (Lamprou & Riginos, 2017: 6). However, the main breakthrough occurred in the 15th and 16th centuries, forming the origins of today's modern elitism. In the early modern period, European princes were almost constantly engaged in warfare. Despite being able to collect significantly more taxes than their late fifteenth or early sixteenth-century predecessors, resources were running short.

It was also challenging for them to establish a state bureaucracy independent of the elites or to compel these elites into submission. The prolonged wars placed enormous, unprecedented, and unsustainable financial pressures on the noble dynasties. As a result, taxation began to have an impact on the elites as well (Morrill & Friedeburg, 2017: 3).

The increase in taxation, prolonged wars, and the shift from fame and fortune to economic dynamics revived the elite cycle in early modern continental Europe. The conflicts between the elites created by the feudal system and the blood-based elites in the 15th and 16th centuries facilitated the emergence of Republic-like structures. As a consequence of these conflicts, parliaments were established to protect the interests of the elites among themselves. Especially the states influenced by the Protestant revolution had to adopt the parliamentary management approach (Morrill & Friedeburg, 2017: 6). With the advent of Enlightenment thought, new elite classes emerged and became part of the elite cycle. In other words, modernizing states required modern elites. There was a collaboration between Enlightenment thinkers and the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie found itself in a challenging position, stuck between the monarchy and the aristocracy, sought a new way out. This opportunity arose during the era of enlightened despots. For example, when Napoleon militarily defeated Prussia, it provided Joseph II the space to reorganize the social hierarchy.

Under the leadership of Karl Freiherr Stein and Karl August von Hardenberg, a series of reform movements known as Stein-Hardenberg reforms were attempted. These reforms aimed to support industrial production instead of the monopoly power of the guilds. They also aimed to distribute land more equitably among the peasant base and strip the elite of their privileges over the land. Joseph II thus created a new elite group and a bureaucratic elite group with his own hand (Struve, 1973: 23-26).

Just as in Prussia, elite groups in France during the early modern period began to diversify. The power of the aristocracy was starting to crumble. As guardians and enforcers of modernizing laws, judges and lawyers emerged as the judicial elite. Concurrently, people in the trade and finance sector gained power due to the development of business partnerships. During this period, the elite acted as

a transmission link between the people and the monarchy. In response to the Protestantization of Germany, the French elites became staunch Catholic supporters. They were also the visible faces of the King's public charities during times of privation (McHugh, 2007: 13-15).

In addition to these elements, there exists another form of elitism intertwined with political, military, and aristocratic power. This group, which can be considered as religious elites, takes on a social role by nourishing from the dialogue between people and the creator. As will be seen in the second part of the article, there was no hierarchical religious elite group in the Islamic religion. In other words, there was no concept of a church that could be used in the classical sense in the Ottoman Empire. However, throughout the historical process, religious elites found their place in many religions and beliefs. For instance, in Byzantium, monastery priests always held a privileged status (Morris, 1984: 113). Using the power of religion, they became an elite group. In China, religious officials who went through Confucian education held a high status similar to dynasty members. Even though ruling families changed, the status of religious elites remained constant (Man-Cheong, 2004: 185). In Europe and in the eyes of many Catholics worldwide, the importance of the Vatican shows that religious elites have a significant place in social stratification.

Modern Elites

Elitism is acknowledged as a source of power. As seen above, this origin can sometimes be related to wealth, physical-military power, or bloodlines (Clark, 1989: 1706-1711). However, the sources of elitism are not limited to these alone. Legal power and technical knowledge can also be sources of elitism. With modernization, social life has expanded significantly and taken a form that includes the entire population. The impact of the technological revolution on human life has not been limited to specific areas; it has also reshaped social strata. Individuals possessing technical knowledge have become more important in society with the proliferation of modern inventions and their widespread use in everyday life. With the extension of state institutions and apparatus into the public sphere, a class has emerged that possesses both political power and knowledge.

Although this class has existed throughout history, the number of individuals belonging to it has increased with modern states. Thus, a bureaucrat elite typology has emerged.

Technical Elites

Throughout history, regardless of the society, individuals with exceptional skills, creative intelligence, and the ability to invent have always stood out from the rest of the masses. A highly skilled sword master, a weapon expert capable of using gunpowder in firearms, a doctor developing innovative treatment methods with different plants, or an engineer who can build a sturdy bridge over a river, these individuals have always been regarded as part of the societal upper echelons (Augustine, 2007: 3-12). Many people, working under the patronage of states and empires and benefiting from their technical knowledge, have differentiated themselves based on their opportunities. However, the increase in industrialization and the integration of technological devices as an indispensable part of human life has led to the segregation of the technical elite group from other professions such as doctors and lawyers, solely focusing on the technological domain. The rise of modern economies, alongside the proliferation of education, has facilitated an increase in the number of technological elites. Consequently, a high-tech-producing technical elite class has emerged (Noble & Roberts, 2020: 114).

Bureaucratic Elites / Legal Elites

With the modernization of states, innovations have occurred in education, military, technology, and the economy. Alongside these developments, changes have also taken place in forms of governance. As the concept of the nation-state became more widespread and with the increase in legal regulations and population, a ruling class emerged within the states. Regardless of the legitimacy of power (democracy, monarchy, constitution, etc.), the number of government officials increased during the 19th century. These government officials came to be known as bureaucratic elites (Jacoby, 1973: 34-35). The modernization of the state triggered the need for spreading governance to the grassroots level.

The governance model that spread to the grassroots required an increase in the number of government officials. States no longer operated with a limited bureaucratic group, such as governors and local administrators, as they did in the past. Instead, they expanded the number of these individuals to address new tasks and responsibilities. As a result, starting from the 19th century, the concept of a bureaucratic elite class emerged (Wright, 1999: 10-12). Indeed, bureaucratic elites constituted one of the key dynamics of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, as will be seen in the subsequent sections.

Elites in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century

The Ottoman Empire entered a process of modernization during the reigns of Sultan Selim III and Sultan Mahmud II in the 19th century. The reasons behind these modernization efforts were military, political, and economic failures. Therefore, certain reform efforts were necessary to reorganize the state in a manner similar to other Western European states. The classical institutions of the Ottoman Empire had become dysfunctional, and the central authority of the state had weakened. This study focuses on how the elite classes acted during the modernization movement initiated by the Ottoman Empire. The elite groups considered include the powerful individuals in the surroundings, known as ayan, the Janissaries who held an important position in the military hierarchy, the ulema who, although not religious elites, had power, the commercial elites, the bureaucratic elites, and naturally, the central figure, the sultan, as determined by the imperial form of governance.

During the 18th century, the political authority of the Ottoman Empire in its provinces experienced erosion. The primary causes of this power decline were the wars fought against Russia and Austria, which frequently resulted in unfavorable outcomes for the Ottomans, imposing a substantial financial burden. Each military engagement inflicted considerable damage on the state budget, prompting the adoption of various measures, such as the transformation of timar lands into mukataas and internal borrowing, to alleviate the financial strain. However, this process led to more profound disruptions in the already fragile and inconsistent financial administration of the Ottoman Empire, consequently

exacerbating its instability. This situation had taken on a vicious cycle (Cezar, 1996: 30-42). Particularly in the Balkan and Arab regions, the authority vacuum emanating from the Babı-ali (Ottoman central government) had first resulted in a series of rebellions, and subsequently, it was filled by local elements known as "ayan". The prolonged wars with Russia and Austria led to soldiers deserting the frontlines. Soldiers who were not receiving their wages would act in an undisciplined manner and seek protection under the influence of powerful individuals in the periphery. Consequently, the "ayan" figures gained strength and influence even in the military field (Akçura, 1988: 37).

The empowerment of ayan figures was a consequence of the weakening of Ottoman authority. The retention of power by ayan individuals meant continuous political, military, and economic weakening of the Ottoman Empire. According to Mark Pinson, the period of banditry between 1795 and 1810 eroded the Ottoman Empire both economically and militarily. This process, which began in the 1790s, was further compounded by Napoleon's military activities in the Balkans, the Russian advance into the interior of the Balkans during the 1828-1829 Ottoman-Russian War, and the independence gained by the Serbs and Greeks. The region was being governed by individuals known as ayan, who lacked cohesive military and economic administration and consisting of quasi-autonomous structures (Pinson, 1975: 105-108). Yuzo Nagata asserts that in order to rectify the financially strained state caused by long wars, the Ottoman government dispatched special authorized individuals (mütesellim) to the provinces to ensure regular tax collection. Over time, these individuals gained authority and power in the provinces, becoming autonomous figures in their own right, according to Nagata's argument (Nagata, 1997: 21-22).

The peak of power for the ayan figures in the provinces was marked by a document known as "Sened-i İttifak". Under the leadership of Grand Vizier Mustafa Pasha, a consultative assembly was convened, where the ayan from the provinces participated. The purpose of this assembly was to secure the implementation of the Nizam-ı Cedid reforms, which were initiated during the reign of Sultan Selim III and continued during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II. By bringing together the ayan and the Ottoman bureaucracy, the aim was to resolve disputes

and ensure cooperation in implementing the reform measures (Berkes, 2012: 138). The text of Sened-i İttifak has been interpreted by some historians as the state's attempt to delineate the authority areas of the ayan figures. The main basis for this interpretation is that powerful ayan figures refused to sign this document. Their refusal to endorse the Sened-i İttifak is seen as evidence that the state's attempt to regulate their authority was not well-received by those who already held significant power in their regions (Akyıldız, 1998: 209-212).

We have made an important point here. Ayan figures were elite individuals in the periphery, and they faced direct competition from the central administration, represented by the Sultan (Akdağ,1963: 54). There was a conflict between the peripheral elites and the Ottoman central elite. Considering the conditions of the 19th century, these spontaneously emerging elites operated independently, far from the center. The reasons behind their disconnection from the center were largely attributed to the transportation and logistical limitations of the era. In pre-modern and early modern states, as one moved away from the center, political and military loyalty to the central authority decreased. One of the most typical examples in history is the relationship between England and its regions like Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. During the Tudor Dynasty in the 1500s, although the crown claimed to rule over all of England and Wales, the king's decree did not apply to most of Wales and northern England. Only about a third of Wales was occupied, and some regions in Wales and northern England did not send any representatives to Parliament and were, therefore, not subject to taxation. The Tudors in Ireland were "lords" rather than "kings," and their decrees were applicable in less than 10% of Ireland. The rest of Ireland was governed by the descendants of Late Norman settlers and over 100 indigenous tribal leaders. Scotland was a separate monarchy ruled by kings who regularly acknowledged the feudal sovereignty of English kings but maintained de facto independence (Morrill, 2017: 18-22). Indeed, engaging in a costly and non-profitable military conflict far from the center was not rational for the state, especially considering the distance involved. During this period, the central structure and state power were not yet strong enough to justify such endeavors. As a result, this situation was tolerated until the central authority and state power began to strengthen.

In the 19th century, one of the elite classes in Ottoman society was the Janissaries, a military unit. Originally representing the Sultan's centralized power, the Janissaries gradually lost this characteristic and transformed into a force threatening the central administration. In the 14th century, the Ottoman principality consisted of soldiers united under the principles of gaza (holy war) and jihad. (Emecen, 2010: 76-84). As centralized tendencies emerged, a portion of war spoils, whether in the form of slaves or commodities, began to be allocated to Ottoman leaders. During the state formation process, the Ottomans underwent a phase of aristocratization based on bloodlines among the military elite. The wealth accumulated in the center was used by the state's administrator to establish his own army. This dynamic also became one of the fundamental factors distinguishing the Ottoman Empire from contemporary states. Considering the conditions in Europe, kings were compelled to rely on feudal structures to assemble armies. In contrast, the Ottoman Empire successfully created a centralized army equipped with the latest firearms technology of the era. These newly formed units under central control were given the name "Janissary," which means "new soldier" in Turkish.

The consolidation of centralized tendencies gained significant momentum during the reign of Mehmed II. The Ottoman leaders, by demonstrating military success in campaigns focused on war and plunder, transformed into a dynasty that also held administrative authority, thus occupying the highest echelon of the system (Wittek, 1987: 207-215). However, centrifugal tendencies continued to act as powerful elements within the social structure. Considering the 15th-century Anatolian context, "centralizing power under a single authority" was far from an easy task. The political foundation from which the Ottoman Empire drew its strength necessitated the concentration of power in a single entity. In earlier Islamic civilizations, as well as in the Roman and Seljuk Empires, centralized structures had always been strong. As the classical saying goes: authority does not tolerate a shadow. Following his conquest of Constantinople, Mehmed II steered the state in this direction, adopting an absolutist approach and striving to bring other power centers, in other words, the elite classes, under the control of the central authority. Sufi traditions (various Islamic patterns) were weakened, which in turn led to the emergence of a centralized religious elite in

Ottoman society, namely the *ulema*. The central army was strengthened, and efforts were launched to counter nomadic groups (Ocak, 2009: 89-96).

As the Ottoman Empire evolved into an imperial structure, the Osmanoğlu family became an elite class based on bloodline and lineage, while the Janissaries emerged as the military elite. However, over time, the Janissary corps began to deteriorate. Alongside their military duties, they engaged in trade and, despite legal prohibitions, began to marry and establish families (Uzunçarşılı, 1985: 506-514). By the end of this process, which spanned the 17th and 18th centuries, the Janissary units had fallen behind the military standards of Europe by the 19th century. Recognizing its significant lag behind its military and economic rivals, the Ottoman Empire became aware of the necessity for modernization and reform. Yet, as a cornerstone of the old order, the Janissaries resisted these efforts at modernization. During times of disrupted balance between the center and the periphery, the Janissaries began to operate with considerable autonomy. However, attempts by the bloodline-based elites to reform the military elite changed the course of events (Kafadar, 1991: 274-275). Reformist statesmen such as Selim III and Mahmud II, who sought to strengthen central authority, faced significant resistance from the Janissaries. Ultimately, Mahmud II's near-civil war effort to abolish the Janissary corps not only marked the end of the military elite but also redefined the power dynamics within 19th-century Ottoman society. In dismantling the military elites, Mahmud II aligned himself with the religious elites. This process of centralization and modernization necessitated the emergence of a new actor to replace the eliminated military elites, which took the form of bureaucratic elites, a hallmark of modern states. Over the nearly century-long period from the second quarter of the 19th century to the fall of the Ottoman Empire, these bureaucratic elites rose to become the highest-ranking elite class within the state.

In the Islamic world, religious authority was fundamentally different from that in the Christian world. In the Christian world, the "Church" was a horizontally and vertically organized institution. However, in states influenced by Islamic principles, there was no hierarchical institution organized in the manner of a church. Furthermore, after Ottoman rulers conquered Islam's holy regions, they

began to refer to themselves with the title of "Caliph," representing the highest religious authority (Turan, 2017: 14-20). Nonetheless, due to the nature of Islam, the Caliph did not serve an intermediary role between the Creator and the created. The Caliph's primary duty was to ensure the enforcement of the Creator's prescribed rules. For this reason, the office of the *qadi* (judge) in the Ottoman Empire did not evolve into a clerical class.

However, until the 19th century, there were periods when the religious elite, known as the *ulema*, gained significant power. During the modernization period, though the religious elite maintained their presence, their influence waned. Factors such as the world's shift toward a different political trajectory, technological inventions that altered and accelerated the ordinary course of life, and the rapid expansion of trade significantly impacted societal structures. Moreover, the Ottoman Empire's multinational composition was inherently opposed to nationalist ideologies. Modernizing institutions and ideologies sought to emphasize Ottoman identity as a unifying factor. The establishment of judicial courts alongside religious courts during Mahmud II's reign further limited the power of the religious elite in the Ottoman Empire (Berkes, 2012: 176-178).

The transformation of classical institutions also brought about the emergence of a new elite class within Ottoman society. The suppression of military and religious elites heightened the need for new actors. As noted earlier, bloodline-based elites were incapable of governing the entire system on their own, necessitating the rise of a new class. When the internal dynamics of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century are taken into account, this elite class emerged from within the bureaucracy. The modernization of state apparatuses and the transition to a ministerial system played a significant role in the formation of this new bureaucratic class. The *kalemiye* class in traditional Ottoman society was evolving into a new type of civil servant, gradually becoming a social elite. Changes in the Ottoman Empire's diplomatic relations with Europe elevated the societal importance of individuals working within these institutions (Turan, 2014: 309-313). The legitimacy of these officials, grounded in legal frameworks, grew steadily throughout the 19th century in both number and influence (Findley, 2014: 161). With the proclamation of the Tanzimat reforms, the bureaucratic

class firmly established itself as one of the elite groups within Ottoman society. Individuals emerging from the civil bureaucracy had begun to gain influence in the administration of the Empire (Ortaylı, 2000: 125-130). This development progressed in a manner similar to the modernization process in Europe. With modernization, the religious, peripheric and military elites in the Ottoman Empire experienced a loss of power. The primary beneficiaries of this process were the bureaucratic elites and the aristocracy. However, the situation of the economic elites followed a somewhat different trajectory. The transformation in the financial sector and commercial life should be analyzed within the framework of modernization paradigms.

Creating Economic Elites in 19th Century Ottoman Society

Analyzing the economic elites of the Ottoman Empire presents a greater degree of complexity than examining other elite groups. As an imperial polity grounded in extensive ethnic diversity, the Ottoman Empire possessed an institutional configuration that does not fully correspond to modern organizational norms. The trajectories of wealth accumulation, capital formation, and production relations in Europe unfolded in a manner that was not parallel to developments within the Ottoman context. The structural conditions and socio-economic opportunities that enabled the rise of the European bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century were markedly different from those under which the Ottoman economic elites either emerged or failed to consolidate. In this respect, the Ottoman Empire's economic, legal, and political institutions exhibited distinctive characteristics that set them apart from their contemporary European counterparts.

The economic structures and institutional developments that enabled continental Europe to gain prominence in the economic sphere during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had begun to emerge in late medieval Europe. In particular, the initiative of Dutch entrepreneurs, who expanded their activities from regional commerce to long-distance trade, played a pivotal role in the transformation of feudal structures. Economic institutions that relied on the revitalization and expansion of trade in the northern regions came to the forefront,

contributing significantly to the rise of a dynamic commercial and financial environment (Epstein, 2014:299-300). Moreover, when viewed from a broader perspective, the highly centralized tendencies of governance and political institutions in Asia, their differing worldviews, and their greater emphasis on military and political order contributed to the relative advancement of the Western world. In addition, the dominance of Asian states over the ancient trade routes that connected Asia and Europe prompted the Western world to seek alternative avenues of exchange. Competition over these commercial routes led European states to support institutions that encouraged exploration and the search for new resources, thereby laying the groundwork for their eventual economic ascendancy (Hoffman, 2018: 120-130). At the same time, the transformation of factor markets in Europe triggered a broader transformation in production. The growing dominance of manufacturing stimulated an increasing demand for resources to sustain this new mode of production (North & Thomas, 1973: 91-100). The success of long-distance trade in securing raw materials supported and accelerated the development of this system. Within this evolving economic ecosystem, entrepreneurs, merchants, producers, and financial actors emerged as the economic elites of the Western world.

In addition to these factors, property rights stand out as a crucial institution in explaining the economic disparity between Europe and Asia. The guarantee of property rights by the state encouraged economic actors to accumulate wealth more freely (Parthasathi, 2019: 2-20). Individuals who did not face the risk of expropriation of their land or capital by the authorities or whose economic assets were protected by the state were able to act with greater autonomy in expanding their wealth. The evolution of property rights in Europe followed a markedly different trajectory from that of the Ottoman Empire.

The protection of property rights constitutes one of the fundamental preconditions for sustainable economic prosperity and institutional stability. As Douglass C. North (1990) argues the establishment of secure and enforceable property rights minimizes transaction costs and provides a stable framework within which individuals and firms can make long-term economic decisions (North, 1990: 3-10). When the legal system guarantees ownership and enforces contracts

impartially, actors gain confidence that their assets will not be arbitrarily expropriated by political authorities or private powers. This predictability of the legal environment transforms economic behavior, encouraging productive investment, entrepreneurship, and innovation over short-term rent-seeking. From a broader institutional perspective, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson (2012) highlight that inclusive political and legal institutions, which ensure the protection of property rights and uphold the rule of law, form the backbone of enduring economic development. In contrast, extractive institutions where law serves as a tool of elite control rather than an impartial constraint, undermine trust, limit market participation, and stifle capital accumulation (Acemoğlu & Robinson, 2012:85-99). Within the European historical context, the progressive codification of property rights and the emergence of independent judicial institutions created a system of legal certainty that linked individual ownership to collective prosperity (Robilant, 2017: 751-769). The recognition of private property as a legal entitlement, protected against arbitrary seizure, not only empowered economic agents but also strengthened the autonomy of civil society vis-à-vis the state. Thus, the legal institutionalization of property rights transformed ownership from a privilege granted by rulers into a structural foundation of economic order laying the groundwork for Europe's long-term growth trajectory (Barbot, 2015: 78-93).

Religion played a pivotal role in shaping the formation and evolution of Europe's economic institutions from the late medieval period onward. Far from being a purely spiritual phenomenon, religion provided a normative framework that structured the behavior of economic actors, defined the moral boundaries of market exchange, and influenced the legitimacy of emerging institutions. The Protestant Reformation, in particular, transformed the moral foundations of economic life by redefining labor, thrift, and profit as socially acceptable and even virtuous forms of conduct. This ethical transformation, described by Max Weber (1905) as the "spirit of capitalism," gave rise to institutions that valued discipline, contractual reliability, and individual accountability. From an institutional economics perspective, the diffusion of Protestant ethics reinforced the development of rules and organizations that facilitated trust, contract enforcement, and capital accumulation (Weber, 1992: 3-13). As Becker, Rubin and

Woessmann demonstrate, the Reformation's emphasis on literacy and individual responsibility fostered the creation of formal institutions such as guild regulations, credit systems, and property registries capable of supporting a market-oriented economy (Becker, Rubin & Woessmann, 2020: 1-69; Becker, Panin, Pfaff, Rubin, 2024: 2-76). Religious norms thus acted as a moral infrastructure underpinning legal and financial institutions. In contrast, in regions where religious authority remained intertwined with hierarchical or rent-seeking structures, institutional innovation tended to lag behind. Consequently, religion in Europe functioned as both a cultural and institutional catalyst for economic modernization. It provided a set of shared moral codes that reduced transaction costs, promoted contractual trust, and encouraged the emergence of inclusive economic institutions (Jong, 2008: 1-33). Through these mechanisms, religious ideas became embedded in the very architecture of Europe's economic order, transforming faith into a durable institutional force that shaped the continent's path toward sustained economic development.

In the Ottoman Empire, the emergence of institutions comparable to the European bourgeoisie, or the conditions under which such a process might have developed, remains a matter of scholarly debate. As an economic elite, the bourgeoisie undoubtedly played a central role in commerce, finance, and fiscal administration. However, it should not be overlooked that the bourgeoisie was not the only form of economic elite. There is a general consensus that capital accumulation and the development of productive forces in the Ottoman Empire did not progress in the same direction as in its European counterparts. The reasons for this divergence have been widely discussed within the framework of certain overarching institutional and structural dynamics.

Şevket Pamuk's interpretation of factor markets in the Ottoman Empire closely resonates with Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson's (2012) framework, particularly their distinction between inclusive and extractive institutions. In Pamuk's view, the Ottoman system of state control over land and production embodied an extractive order one oriented toward maintaining political stability and fiscal extraction rather than promoting private enterprise or market integration. The miri land regime and corporatist guild structures preserved

the hierarchical authority of the state and religious elites but simultaneously curtailed the rise of autonomous economic actors. Thus, Ottoman institutions succeeded in ensuring administrative cohesion at the expense of the incentives required for sustained innovation, entrepreneurship, and capital formation (Pamuk, 2009: 1-30). Conversely, Acemoglu and Robinson attribute Europe's long-term economic ascent to the emergence of inclusive institutions that protected property rights, fostered market participation, and constrained arbitrary state power. Viewed through this comparative lens, Pamuk's Ottoman case illustrates how extractive institutional arrangements, though effective in sustaining imperial governance, created systemic impediments to inclusive economic growth. The Empire therefore stands as a paradigmatic example of how strong political centralization without institutional inclusiveness can preserve short-term order yet suppress the evolution of a dynamic bourgeoisie and a self-sustaining capitalist economy.

Building on Douglass C. North's theory of institutional change, the Ottoman Empire's economic trajectory can be understood as a case of path dependence, in which earlier institutional choices constrained subsequent possibilities for transformation. North (1990) emphasizes that institutions evolve incrementally and that societies often remain locked into frameworks that once ensured stability but later inhibit adaptation(North, 1990: 3-10). The Ottoman administrative and legal order centered on state control over land, a tax-farming fiscal regime, and religiously informed financial norms was initially functional for governing a vast and diverse empire. Over time, however, these same institutions produced a self-reinforcing cycle that limited the emergence of markets, private property, and long-term investment. Transaction costs remained high, and political actors faced few incentives to dismantle the structures that preserved their rents. Consequently, even when external pressures for reform arose in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the deep-rooted institutional configuration of the Empire constrained the extent of economic modernization. In North's terms, the Ottoman Empire illustrates how institutional persistence can generate stability at the cost of dynamism, anchoring an economy in a path that diverged from the capitalist evolution of Western Europe.

The perspectives of Timur Kuran and Murat Çizakça converge on the argument that the institutional configuration of Islamic law and finance, rather than the moral or cultural tenets of Islam itself, constrained the formation of long-term capital in the Middle East. Kuran (2011) identifies classical Islamic institutions such as the waqf (endowment), inheritance law, and partnership contracts as key impediments to sustained accumulation. The rigidity of the waqf system immobilized vast resources by prohibiting the reallocation of endowed wealth, while Islamic inheritance rules fragmented capital across generations. Moreover, the absence of corporate legal forms meant that commercial partnerships were short-lived and dissolved upon the death of a partner, preventing the creation of enduring business entities. These institutional characteristics collectively limited the emergence of large-scale, impersonal economic organizations akin to those that underpinned Europe's capitalist transformation (Kuran, 2011: 45-77). Çizakça (2011) complements Kuran's institutional thesis by focusing on the evolution of Islamic finance. He argues that early Islamic economic practice exhibited proto-capitalist features, but over time the prohibition of interest (riba) and the dominance of risk-sharing contracts confined financial activity to small, short-term ventures (Çizakça, 2011: 36-45). The inability to develop instruments of credit, banking, and corporate investment delayed the maturation of a modern financial sector. Like Kuran, Çizakça highlights the path dependence created by the moral and legal rigidity of Islamic institutions: mechanisms originally designed to ensure social justice and moral balance eventually hindered economic innovation and capital deepening. Together, their analyses suggest that institutional stagnation rather than religious ideology was the principal factor that curtailed the evolution of capitalist dynamics in the Ottoman and broader Islamic economies.

One crucial aspect that must not be overlooked when examining the Ottoman economic elites of the nineteenth century is the transformation of the Mediterranean world. Once the core of global commerce, the Mediterranean gradually lost its central position, giving way to new routes that redefined the geography of international trade. The opening of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean circuits shifted the flow of goods, capital, and maritime power toward Western Europe, marginalizing traditional Mediterranean hubs. This reorientation

profoundly affected the Ottoman economy, particularly its coastal provinces, where commercial elites had long thrived through regional trade networks connecting Istanbul, Alexandria, Izmir, and the Levantine ports (Tabak, 2015: 29-46). As European mercantile and financial institutions penetrated the eastern Mediterranean, the structure of Ottoman commerce underwent a deep transformation. Levantine merchants,many of whom were non-Muslim intermediaries with access to European capital and consular protection, emerged as dominant actors in long-distance trade, while traditional Muslim trading groups found themselves increasingly confined to domestic markets (Serdaroğlu, 2025: 241-277). The resulting asymmetry in access to credit, technology, and maritime insurance eroded the competitiveness of indigenous Ottoman merchants. Thus, the shifting center of world trade not only displaced the Mediterranean from its historical prominence but also reconfigured the hierarchy of economic elites within the Ottoman Empire itself.

The term *müsadere* refers to the Ottoman practice of confiscating the property or wealth of high-ranking officials and elites, either upon their dismissal from office or after their death. Rooted in the principle that all property ultimately belonged to the sultan, *müsadere* functioned as both a fiscal and political instrument that enabled the central authority to reassert control over accumulated private wealth. Within Ottoman historiography, this practice has been analyzed as both a mechanism of political discipline and a reflection of the Empire's patrimonial conception of ownership. Halil İnalcık situates *müsadere* within the broader framework of the Ottoman patrimonial-bureaucratic order, in which the sultan held supreme ownership of property and officials merely enjoyed usufruct rights (İnalcık, 1977: 27-52). According to İnalcık, the confiscation of elite wealth was intended not as arbitrary despotism but as a means of preventing the rise of hereditary nobility and preserving the political supremacy of the imperial household.

Metin Kunt extends this interpretation by analyzing *müsadere* within the transformation of provincial administration between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In his work, he argues that confiscation was one of the principal instruments by which the central government limited the autonomy of local

governors, *beys*, and other provincial elites. By ensuring that provincial office-holders could not convert administrative authority into hereditary power or lasting wealth, *müsadere* reinforced the state's centralizing tendencies (Kunt, 1983:60-68). From an economic and social perspective, Mehmet Genç (2000) and Mustafa Akdağ (1971) emphasize the broader consequences of *müsadere* for capital formation and social stability. Genç views the practice as consistent with the Ottoman principle of state ownership over productive assets, which blurred the line between private and public wealth. This ambiguity discouraged long-term investment and the institutionalization of private property (Genç, 2000:111-112). Akdağ, meanwhile, interprets the increasing use of *müsadere* during fiscal crises as symptomatic of the state's declining financial resilience. What began as an exceptional disciplinary mechanism evolved into a structural tool of revenue extraction, eroding trust in the imperial administration. Collectively, these interpretations depict *müsadere* as an institution that maintained political cohesion while inhibiting economic modernization an enduring tension at the heart of the Ottoman patrimonial system (Akdağ, 1995: 217-218).

The Ottoman institution of müsadere stood in sharp contrast to the evolution of property rights in early modern Europe. In the Ottoman Empire, all property was theoretically vested in the sultan, and the wealth of officials or elites could be confiscated at any time. In Europe, by contrast, property ownership gradually became a legally protected right, limiting arbitrary state intervention and allowing individuals to accumulate and transfer wealth securely. These legal protections encouraged long-term investment and fostered the emergence of a capitalist bourgeoisie. In the Ottoman context, however, the persistent threat of confiscation undermined economic stability and discouraged private enterprise. Since wealth could be seized by the state upon dismissal or death, elites and merchants had little incentive to reinvest profits or expand productive activities. Capital was often diverted into non-productive forms of consumption or concealed assets, rather than channeled into trade or manufacturing. As a result, the müsadere system not only reinforced dependence on the central authority but also obstructed the development of sustained capital accumulation (Karaoğlu, 2018: 48-49). Whereas European states evolved toward rule-based governance that safeguarded economic autonomy, the Ottoman patrimonial

system treated property as a revocable privilege. This fundamental divergence limited the Empire's ability to cultivate an independent entrepreneurial class and contributed to its long-term economic stagnation.

Although the Ottoman institutional framework offered few mechanisms to foster the emergence of a genuine bourgeoisie, and despite the persistence of structures that hindered capital accumulation, economic elites nevertheless existed within the prevailing political and economic order. These elites operated within the constraints of a highly centralized and hierarchical system, deriving their power not from autonomous market activity but from their proximity to the state and their capacity to navigate its patronage networks. In this sense, the Ottoman economy did not lack actors engaged in trade, finance, and production; rather, it lacked the institutional environment that could transform these actors into an independent capitalist class.

The modernization process of the Ottoman Empire extended into the economic sphere as well. Covering the entirety of this transformation exceeds the scope of this article. Therefore, it is more appropriate to focus on "new structures" and "new elites." To begin with, it must be noted that the classical economic mechanisms of the Ottoman Empire had largely lost their functionality by the 19th century. Guilds, which operated under state control and supervised production units, were no longer suitable for the economic conditions of the 19th century (İnalcık, 1978: 97-101). The globalized nature of world trade, mass production methods, and advancements in transportation technology had also influenced Ottoman markets. Products manufactured through new production methods were considerably cheaper compared to others. Furthermore, the longstanding debates over interest rates had caused a large portion of financial capital to remain in the hands of the Empire's non-Muslim subjects. When examining the economic elites of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, it becomes evident that one prominent group that stands out was the sarrafs (money changers and financiers), owing to their accumulation of financial capital. Financial institutions within the Ottoman state had developed through the sarraflık (money-changing) system. Sarrafs were the Ottoman equivalent of modern banks, taking responsibility for activities such as money exchange, lending, and acting

as guarantors in the tax farming (iltizam) sector (Akar & Al , 2015: 264-275). Thus, sarrafs can be regarded as one of the economic elites of the 19th century. It was evident that producers within the guild system had lost their influence. Another significant economic actor was the *ayan* (local notables). Considering their revenues from extensive agricultural estates and their activities in the tax farming (*iltizam*) sector, the *ayan* could be classified as economic elites. However, during the modernization period, the weakening of peripheral powers led to the *ayan* losing both political and economic influence.

At the beginning of the 19th century, there was another occupational group in the Ottoman Empire with the potential to become economic elites: merchants. Yet, in earlier periods, the organic relationship between economic elites and the state in the Ottoman Empire had been relatively limited. In other words, the development of a state-dependent bourgeoisie was not a feasible outcome. So, can it be said that an Ottoman bourgeoisie emerged during the modernization period? The answer to this question depends on the perspective from which it is approached. However, it is clear that there was an effort to create economic elites by establishing an organic connection between the state and the institution of commerce. This effort can also be seen, in line with the nature of elite cycles, as an attempt to fill the gaps left by other elites. From this perspective, it becomes apparent that economic elites did not emerge through their own internal dynamics but were instead shaped by state intervention.

Efforts to create economic elites, when considered within the framework of elite cycles, reveal the following mental map: the *ayan* held military, political, and economic power in the Ottoman provinces. Their withdrawal from the stage left a vacuum in these areas. The civil bureaucracy gained strength to fill the political gap left by the *ayan*. However, the military power of the *ayan* posed a potential threat to the state. With the abolition of the Janissaries, centralizing tendencies within the state increased. The establishment of a new central army became crucial to address the void left by the *ayan* in the military sphere. Similarly, the decline of the guild system and the economic gap created by the disappearance of the *ayan* needed to be addressed. During this period, the weakening of religious elites in the Ottoman Empire also had repercussions on the

aristocracy. The absolutist stance of the sultan and his attempts to construct Ottoman society on an egalitarian foundation were criticized as lacking religious sensitivity. To reconcile his absolutist approach with his image as a Muslim leader, the sultan sought to assign a religious mission to the economic elites he aimed to establish. It was in this context that the *Hayriye Tüccarları*, which institution was founded during the reign of Mahmud II. These commercial elites were composed of Muslim merchants loyal to the sultan, embodying both economic and religious responsibilities.

Another aspect of addressing the economic void left by the *ayan* was strengthening the provincial economy through support from the central administration. To this end, local elements in regions where the *ayan* had been concentrated, particularly in the Balkans,were encouraged to accumulate capital. The Ottoman Court supported the trade activities of local actors, especially in the commerce of critical commodities, thereby facilitating their economic advancement.

The *Hayriye Tüccarları* institution was a state-driven project aimed at creating a Muslim elite. These merchants conducted trade under *berats* (official permits) issued by the state. Obtaining a *berat* required fulfilling certain conditions, such as being Muslim, honorable, and trustworthy. The state conducted an investigation of merchant candidates before granting the Hayriye Tüccarı berat. Additionally, a quota was imposed on the number of these merchants. The Muslim merchants were expected to accumulate capital and establish an institutional structure, much like their counterparts in European states. The ultimate goal was to create a Turkish-Muslim bourgeoisie that would remain loyal to the state. This project achieved partial success during the first half of the 19th century. However, the military, political, and economic conditions of the Ottoman Empire ultimately hindered its success.

Since the 18th century, the Ottoman state had been forced to compromise its economic principles to maintain its territorial integrity. Lacking the strength to resist European rivals, the Empire often had to form alliances with one rival against another, only to make concessions in the end. One such concession was the free trade agreements signed with states like Britain, France, and Russia. These agreements made the status of “foreign merchant” within Ottoman

borders more advantageous, as foreign merchants benefited from tax reductions. This dynamic worked to the detriment of the Turkish-Muslim economic elite group the state sought to create. Consequently, the Hayriye Merchants initiative remained a well-intentioned but ultimately unrealized endeavor (Bağış, 1983 ; Çadırcı, 1980; Masters;1992, Güripek:2022)

Apart from the *Hayriye Merchants*, another group of economic elites emerged in rural regions, particularly in areas where the influence of the *ayan* was significant. Local actors strengthened their capital throughout the century by establishing strong relations with the bureaucracy in Istanbul. In the 19th century, the Balkans stood out as the region where the influence of the *ayan* was most intensely felt. Additionally, when considering the integration of global trade into the Ottoman Empire, the Balkan geography came to the forefront. Local actors supported by the Istanbul administration predominantly originated from this region. In the 19th century, nationalist movements in the region compelled the Ottoman administration to adopt a new policy. Following the Serbian and Greek national movements, efforts were made to foster Ottoman-aligned elements in the region. Consequently, the state supported local merchants, elevating them to the status of economic elites. Among these elites were families such as Gümüşgerdan, Çalıkoğlu, Zelyakov, Chomakov, Tapçilestov, Georgiev, Puliev, and Geshov. These entrepreneurial merchants established strong relations with the Ottoman administration, transforming into international elites.

For instance, Mihalaki Gümüşgerdan was a small-scale entrepreneur engaged in the production of coarse cloth (*aba*) in the Filibe region. By forging good relations with the palace, he managed to expand the capacity of his weaving looms. After the abolition of the Janissary corps, orders for the uniforms of the newly established army were entrusted to Mihalaki Gümüşgerdan (BOA, Cevdet Askeriye, 29/1317, (14 R 1267), BOA, A.MKT. MHM, 245/38, (09-05-1279). This allowed him to significantly increase his wealth. The Gümüşgerdan family maintained close relations with the Ottoman administration until the establishment of an independent Bulgaria. Similarly, Stoyan Çalıkoğlu and his family were merchants engaged in livestock farming in regions between Bulgaria and Serbia. Livestock trade in the region was a critical matter for the Ottoman Empire, as

meeting the meat supply of the capital was a significant challenge. From the reign of Mahmud II onward, the Çalıkoğlu family established strong relations with the Ottoman court. For many years, they were entrusted with the responsibility of supplying meat to Istanbul, particularly for the Ottoman palace (BOA, İ.DH., 118/5988. (04.03.1262).

Conclusion

The relationship between the state and its elites is neither static nor incidental. It constitutes the very mechanism through which political power is organized, transmitted, and reproduced. As classical theorists such as Mosca and Pareto observed, every social order rests on the dominance of a minority that governs the majority, yet the composition of that minority is never fixed. The Ottoman experience confirms this insight while also extending it: elite circulation does not occur solely through social mobility or revolution, but also through deliberate statecraft through reforms, institutional restructuring, and the redefinition of legitimacy itself.

In the Ottoman Empire, modernization was not simply a matter of borrowing Western institutions or technologies; it was, more fundamentally, a project of reconfiguring the social foundations of rule. The eighteenth century had produced a fragmented elite landscape, where provincial notables (ayan), tax farmers (mültezim), and military households exercised significant autonomy amid a fiscally weakened center. The nineteenth century, by contrast, witnessed a conscious effort to dismantle these old formations and to replace them with new, centrally dependent elites. The abolition of the Janissaries, the limitation of ayan power, and the bureaucratic reforms of the Tanzimat all formed part of this larger transformation. What emerged was a new political elite—educated, salaried, and legally defined whose legitimacy derived not from lineage, religious authority, or local networks, but from the state's rationalized administrative order.

Economic change followed a similar, though more constrained, trajectory. The Ottoman state's attempts to foster a loyal commercial class reflected a desire to reproduce the logic of elite dependence in the economic sphere. Yet institutional

constraints especially insecure property rights, the persistence of *müsadere,* and limited corporate autonomy prevented the emergence of an independent bourgeoisie. The result was the rise of state-linked economic actors whose prosperity remained contingent upon imperial patronage. Thus, while the empire did witness a circulation of elites, it was a circulation managed from above, reinforcing the central authority even as it transformed the social composition of power.

This pattern reveals the distinctive nature of Ottoman modernization. Unlike the European path, where capitalist development eroded patrimonial structures and empowered autonomous classes, the Ottoman trajectory entailed a reassertion of state primacy through the selective renewal of elites. Modernization, in this context, was both a strategy of survival and an instrument of control: by remolding its elites, the state sought to ensure continuity in the midst of change. The persistence of central dependency, even under modern administrative forms, underscores the limits of institutional transplantation and highlights the adaptive resilience of imperial governance.

At a broader level, the Ottoman case invites a rethinking of modernization itself, not as a universal trajectory toward liberal-capitalist outcomes, but as a historically contingent negotiation between reform, coercion, and survival. The empire's experience shows that modernity can be constructed through hierarchy rather than emancipation, through bureaucratic rationalization rather than social autonomy. The very success of Ottoman centralization in the nineteenth century depended on its ability to generate new elites that would internalize, rather than challenge, the authority of the state. In this sense, the empire's reforms simultaneously modernized and constrained society, producing a class of intermediaries whose loyalty secured the system's stability while limiting the scope of structural transformation.

The legacy of this elite reconfiguration extended well beyond the nineteenth century. The bureaucratic ethos and state-centered economic mentality cultivated during this period laid the groundwork for the political culture of the late Ottoman and early Republican eras. The persistence of a strong, interventionist state and a bureaucratic elite claiming to represent the general interest can be

traced back to this formative transformation. The Ottoman case thus serves not only as a historical example of elite circulation but also as a bridge connecting imperial governance to modern statehood.

By situating the Ottoman experience within the broader framework of elite theory, this study demonstrates that modernization cannot be understood solely as a diffusion of Western norms or as a linear progression toward liberal governance. It must also be viewed as a cyclical and context-dependent process of elite transformation, through which states renegotiate the boundaries of power and legitimacy. The Ottoman example thus expands the analytical reach of elite theory, showing that the mechanisms of elite renewal whether driven by coercion, reform, or adaptation are integral to the historical continuity of all complex political orders. In this sense, modernization is less a rupture with the past than a reorganization of it, and the story of Ottoman elites stands as a testament to the enduring interplay between change and continuity at the heart of state formation.

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