CHAPTER 5

Early Modern Royal Court as Contact Zone

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Abstract: Royal courts take a central place in the study of early modern political culture. The court defines a wider network of relationships than just a royal palace, and it extended into every segment of early modern society. This study suggests examining the early modern royal courts through the contact zone perspective. Contact zone conventionally refers to the colonial encounters of the disparate cultural groups and is mostly used in Cultural and Postcolonial Studies. Different from using the contact zone perspective to examine transcultural entanglements in colonial encounters, this study suggests applying contact zones to the early modern royal court as a political space. It specifically puts emphasis on the relational construction of the political space, as well as the power hierarchies and asymmetries in this construction. Also, in a case study, this article highlights the Grand Vizierate of Sokullu Mehmed Pasha, and argues how Sokullu Mehmed's death made the Ottoman Court a contact zone for various political actors.

Keywords: royal courts, Ottoman Court, contact zone, political space, Sokollu Mehmed

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This study is a preliminary attempt to examine the early modern courts through the conceptual framework of contact zones and the spatial turn, aiming to shed light on the analysis of political power and expand our understanding of the early modern political culture. While it will draw on examples from various European royal courts of the era, the primary focus will be on the Ottoman Court, thereby integrating it into the broader narrative of court and favorites studies. The chapter will unfold in four key parts. First, it will offer an introduction to and debate on the concept of "contact zone" and try to relate it to a discussion of political space and spatial turn. The first part will be followed by an overview of early modern royal courts in relation to politics of exclusion and contact zones. An introduction to the Ottoman Court and its spatial politics will be the focus of the next part of the chapter. The final section of the chapter will try to bring together the previous discussions in the chapter on the court as a contact zone, spatial politics and politics of exclusion in the example of the Ottoman Grand Vizier Sokullu Mehmed Pasha.

Contact zone as political space

Contact zone entered into the analytical tool kit of humanities and social sciences especially with Mary Louise Pratt's influential work, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, in 1992.[1] In Imperial Eyes, Pratt makes it clear that "contact zone" in her discussion "is often synonymous with 'colonial frontier'"; she explains that "contact zone refers to the space of imperial encounters… in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other. The term 'contact' foregrounds the interactive, improvisational dimensions of imperial encounters."[2] The characteristics of the "contact" perspective, as Pratt continues to argue, seem to have far richer heuristic possibilities which can be applied to other fields of humanities. While Pratt is defining "contact zone", she elaborates that

> a contact perspective emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other. It treats the relations… in terms of co-presence, interaction,

1 Pratt 1992
2 Pratt 1992: 8

> interlocking understandings and practices, and often within radically asymmetrical relations of power.[3]

Thus, in the way Pratt presents it, the "contact zone" perspective suggests a relational analysis which sees subjects constituted in the "contact" with each other and is characterized by asymmetrical power relations.

In this study it is contended that the versatility of "contact zone" as a concept and a framework for analysis is too significant to let it refer only to colonial encounters. The broad applicability of Pratt's term to a wide variety of cultural encounters is also attested by later studies, where "contact zone" has become a pivotal concept for analysis.[4] For instance, James Clifford, in his collection of essays, *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, brilliantly employed the "contact zone" perspective to museums, and wrote that "when museums are seen as contact zones, their organizing structure as a collection becomes an ongoing historical, political, moral relationship—a power-charged set of exchanges, of push and pull. The organizing structure of the museum-as-collection functions like Pratt's frontier".[5]

As distinct from both Pratt's and later studies' use of the concept "contact zone", this study does not refer to any frontier zone or cultural encounter of peoples who are historically and geographically separated; neither does it engage in a debate on transculturation though the court as a contact zone to examine "the entanglements in diplomacy" as an engaging exercise, as done by Flüchter.[6] On the other hand, what this study tries to do is to see the contact zone as a political space which is produced by the interactions, operations and practices of the political agents. This perspective is not very far from Pratt's and many others' conceptualization of the contact zone as a "relational framework where subjects are constituted in their contact with each other". Also, the designation of political actors/agents calls for attention, since they are not two culturally distinct groups of people on a colonial frontier but are political actors/agents, most of whom are either already vested with authority and power or have a claim to political and social power in a strictly regulated political space.

3 Pratt 1992: 8
4 Williams 2015: 297–312; Clifford 1997: 188–219; Merrill 2009
5 Clifford 1997: 192–93
6 Flüchter 2016: 91

One of the ideas this study suggests is that the contact zone framework inherently implies a space and should be related to discussions of the spatial turn. Recently, scholars have emphasized the relational construction of space and "envisage the space as the dynamic product of interactions between locations, objects and human agents".[7] In fact, a host of renowned theorists[8] have endorsed the change in understanding space from an absolute, natural category to "a relational construct and in turn a factor with a potential to shape subsequent forms of human exchange".[9] This transformation in the conceptualization of space has found its best expression in de Certeau's emblematic assertion, "space is practiced place".[10] In line with the developments in conceptualization of space, this study suggests examining the early modern royal court as a "contact zone", and it will hold that court as a contact zone is a political space, a "site for politics"; alongside its physically determining characteristics it should also be viewed as a fluid and relational political space which is created by the movement and interaction of political agents.

As mentioned earlier, this study also explores the possibilities of building and exercising power in early modern political culture. Through the optics of royal courts, contact zone perspective and spatial analysis, it tries to understand what made "will to power" a possibility for a wide range of political actors. For such an investigation, "court studies" stands out as a well-established and insightful framework for analysis. It seems especially helpful to apply the idea of relational construction of space to courts to better comprehend the power matrix among the many political actors or, as Jeroen Duindam aptly puts it, to understand "who, in practice, wielded power behind the smoke screen of royal omnipotence".[11] It should also be noted that when we perceive court as a contact zone, the political actors who get "constituted by their relations to each other" are not symmetrically placed in terms of their possibility to access, build and exercise power. Here, "relational does not mean symmetric; it does not mean that the various actors would all have had the same opportunities to act".[12]

7 Kümin 2009: 8
8 de Certeau 1984; Lefebvre 1991; Foucault 1986: 22–27
9 Kümin 2009: 9
10 de Certeau 1984: 117
11 Duindam 2018: 35
12 Stollberg-Rilinger 2009: 315

Early modern royal courts

Court and favorite studies is a well-established theme in the history of early modern political culture. Beginning with the influential work of Norbert Elias on the Court of Louis XIV, royal courts in the early modern period have always received special attention from historians who are interested in topics such as the politics of governance, patronage networks, rituals of royalty and ceremonial construction of power and authority.[13] Despite its seminal place in court studies, and thus in early modern European political culture, Elias' work *The Court Society* has been heavily criticized during its long career and today court studies has become much more varied both in time and space than Elias' famous focus, Louis XIV's court.[14] Norbert Elias was also among the first who gave early modern courts a central place in the formative period of the modern state, thus providing instruments to differentiate the courts of the early modern period from the courts of other pre-modernities. Despite the possibilities that allow us to make comparisons between ancient and early modern courts, even the word "court" is sometimes very difficult to find in some ancient societies, though it is possible to trace some initial conceptualization of court in ancient Greek and Roman culture.[15]

In any case, the "court" is an elusive concept. In an attempt to define the early modern court, historians came up with various definitions, which are not always congruent with each other. More than thirty years ago, Ronald Asch in his introduction to the collection of essays which were published under the title, *Princes, Patronage and Nobility. The Court at the Beginning of the Modern Era,* gave three different definitions of the court. While he was discussing the link between the court and the household, he defined the court "as the center of patronage and as a forum for politics".[16] A little later, when emphasizing the importance of patronage, he presented the court as "the greatest market-place".[17] Finally, most enticing of all, and under the contagious influence of Ralph Griffiths' article in the collection, he wrote, "it is tempting to generalize and say that the court was, in itself, an event".[18] More recently, Jeroen Duindam, one of the most prolific scholars of

13 Elias 1983
14 Duindam 2011: 5–9
15 Spawforth 2007: 2
16 Asch 1991: 2
17 Asch 1991: 17
18 Asch 1991: 9

the early modern court, also seems to have been caught up in the ambiguity of defining "court". In the article where he compares the dynastic centers in Europe and Asia, he writes, "In using the term court, I refer to the amalgam of household and government services grouped around the person of a dynastic ruler".[19] However, Duindam seems to have a definition which he favors over others and has used on at least two different occasions, "what we call court, is where the prince resides".[20] This definition is ostensibly a simple one, and it does not actually belong to Duindam but to an 18th century German scholar. According to Duindam, the reason for the persistence of this definition's validity, even in 21st century court studies, is its "elasticity". It is quite peculiar that while the perseverance of the definition from the 18th to the 21st century is remarkable, the definition seems to be a relic of the medieval era, a residual understanding of kingship when the whereabouts of the kings were uncertain. Duindam is right in assigning a kind of time-proof elasticity to the definition "the court is where the prince resides", because it also provides a clear link to a spatial analysis and brings us closer to the discussion of courts in the framework of contact zones.

If we want to sample some basics of the early modern royal court and lay out its differences from earlier periods, it is plausible to state that while medieval courts were characterized more by itinerancy, studies on early modern courts indicate a static, fixed place. It seems that this difference is first and foremost related to the itinerant character of the kingship; while medieval rulers needed to be on the move for various reasons during most of their reigns, the early modern period saw a sedentarization of rule and a monarch more in palace than in action. Although most rulers moved between residences and hunting lodges during spring and summer, they preferred to spend winter in one place. We also need to keep in mind that until the end of the seventeenth century, most of the courts were located in a palatial building in an established urban environment; the "court space within this urban setting was a diverse and polycentric phenomenon".[21]

Aside from lengthy royal tours to parade the king and bolster loyalty,[22] a court is almost always physically located in a palatial building where the ruler resides. A sequence of courtyards, leading to the monarch with

19 Duindam 2009: 3
20 Duindam 2003: 3, 2015: 440
21 Adamson 2000 : 11
22 Chaline 2000: 83

increasing seclusion is also a typical aspect of these palaces.[23] One of few examples examining early modern royal courts through spatial analysis is Ronald G. Asch's article "The Princely Court and Political Space in Early Modern Europe". In this article Asch signals the awareness of the importance of a spatial analysis in court studies. For the layout of his article, he writes,

> I shall first address the hierarchy of space in the princely palace and I shall then look at the relationship between the court and the wider world… Finally, I will examine the particular structure of communication at court.[24]

This trajectory of topics is very stimulating, for he also brings communication into the discussion. For the first part, what Asch presents as hierarchy of space is the well-known fixture of court studies, "the politics of access". He rightly points out the importance of access to the ruler in order to gain favor and shows how court ceremonial and spatial differentiation regulated access to the king by providing examples from English, French and Habsburg courts. However, while discussing the French court, he comes to an impasse and cannot explain the lack of hierarchy of space, the "spatial openness" of the French court. He continues to argue that although "they were not spatial in character", etiquette and sophisticated ideals of conversation created an invisible barrier and distance to the king.[25] Here, it seems that Asch misses a golden opportunity to expand on political space and link it to the early modern court. First of all, it may be fair to ask that if access to the monarch in the French court did not have a spatial character, would it not be better to exclude the French court from an analysis on "court and political space"? More importantly, he seems to perceive "the political space" not as an interactive and relational production of political actors, but as a physical or perceptual container which is the opposite of what scholars recently contributed to the debates on the spatial turn.[26]

As a prominent scholar of court studies, Asch's article is a competent presentation of the recognized themes in examining the early modern royal court. Beside putting "politics of access" at the core of his discussion and trying to relate it to an analysis of "politics of space", Asch also touches

23 Duindam 2015: 440
24 Asch 2009: 43
25 Asch 2009: 44–45
26 See Steinmetz 2013: 11–34; Bachmann-Medick 2016; Schwerhoff 2013: 420–432; Crang & Thrift 2000.

upon the dilemma between the rulers' increasing seclusion and getting buried under routines of increasing bureaucratization. In the third part of his article, he examines the structure of communication at court and gives a lengthy discussion on dissimulation "as the hallmark of the court and court society".[27] Despite the prevalent place of dissimulation, deceit and secrecy in court and the broader cultural and political context of Europe during the early modern period,[28] Asch's discussion of communication markedly departs from those studies that employ communication theory to analyze the court. It should be noted that contact zone and spatial analysis are inextricably linked to the communication process, and at the juncture of court studies, contact zones and spatial analysis, communication theory has much to offer, particularly when dealing with the possibilities of building and exercising political power; as Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger fairly expresses it, "approaches offered by communication theory make clear that power is not a property of the powerful, but rather a relation which arises from communication process".[29] With these approaches it becomes possible to think that restrictions on communication or denial of access to information can also create a political space, a contact zone. In this way, it may be possible, for instance, to understand how the "spatial openness" of the French court could still produce a political space of exclusion.

The potential of the contact zone and spatial turn frameworks to provide new analytical pathways for understanding the complexities of early modern courts is also shown in the studies of Antje Flüchter and Michael Talbot.[30] Flüchter's article examines the early modern Mughal Court through the lens of contact zone perspective and reveals the intercultural entanglements and European perceptions of difference within early modern European-Indian diplomacy, highlighting the experiences and actions of European ambassadors like Sir Thomas Roe. She underlines that her article "investigates specifically how Europeans perceived differences and how they translated their experiences into action".[31] Similarly, Michael Talbot's research on the Ottoman Court focuses on the ceremonial conditions and the significance of spatial thresholds that ambassadors from Europe encountered while traveling to the inner sanctums of the Topkapı

27 Asch 2009: 56
28 Snyder 2009; Eliav-Feldon & Herzig 2015
29 Stollberg-Rilinger 2009: 315
30 Flüchter 2016; Talbot 2016: 104–123
31 Flüchter 2016: 91–94

Palace. Talbot discusses "the spatial and performative conceptualization of access", and adopts from Bourdieu the concept of "polysemy" for European diplomatic encounters.[32] Interestingly, what Flüchter calls "entanglements in diplomacy" in the Mughal Court becomes "polysemy" in European diplomatic encounters in Talbot. Both Flüchter and Talbot advance the study of early modern courts, mapping out the entangled dynamics of diplomacy in the Mughal Empire and the layered meanings within Ottoman ceremonial spaces respectively, using the frameworks of contact zone and spatial analysis to provide fresh analytical perspectives.

The Ottoman Court

Sir Paul Rycaut was in the service of the British ambassador to the Ottoman Court between 1660 and 1667, and spent more than 15 years in Istanbul and Smyrna, two of the commercially busiest and culturally most dynamic cities of the Ottoman Empire. In the very beginning of his history of the Ottoman Empire, he wrote that:

> …when I have considered seriously the contexture of the Turkish Government, the absoluteness of an emperor without reason, without virtue, whose speeches may be irrational, and yet must be laws; whose actions irregular, and yet examples; whose sentence and judgment, if in matters of the imperial concernment, are most commonly corrupt, and yet decrees irresistible: When I consider what little rewards there are for virtue, and no punishment for profitable and thriving vice…If the tyranny, oppression and cruelty of the state, wherein reason stands in no competition with the pride and lust of an unreasonable minister, seem strange to your liberty and happiness, thank God that you are born in a country the most free and in all world; and a subject to the most indulgent, the most gracious of all the princes of the universe; that your wife, your children and the fruits of your labor can be called your own, and protected by the valiant army of your fortunate king.[33]

Since the Ottomans' initial incursion into the Balkans in the mid-14th century, the Ottoman Empire had been on the agenda of every concerned European observer. In terms of statecraft, for centuries it amazed and bewildered European observers with its omnipotent sultans and powerful, yet 'slave', viziers. It was beyond understanding that one person, the

32 Talbot 2016: 106–109
33 Rycaut 1686/2017: 2

sultan who lived behind impenetrable, well-guarded gates, possessed all power, economic and political. This view of the Ottoman Empire laid the grounds for the demeaning understanding of the Ottoman ruling apparatus as Oriental despotism. In the absence of representative bodies or nobility, the power of the sultans was seen as arbitrary, and the Ottoman Empire was never a relevant and proper example on the way to the emergence of the modern state. An adjunct view, which reinforces the mystical aura that surrounds the Ottoman Court and the sultans, was also plotted for the inner precincts of the Topkapı Palace, where the Sultan lived with his women and pages. The fact that even today, the harem section of the Topkapı Palace attracts the biggest number of tourists can provide a hint of the deeply rooted beliefs, in fact prejudices and disinformation, about life in the Topkapı Palace. To the eyes of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Europeans, the corruptness of everything about the Ottomans is embodied within the walls of the "Grand Signour's Seraglio". An unchecked power of the sultans immediately triggered the imagination with all kinds of sexual perversion, performed within the well-confined walls of the Sultan's harem.

Yet this condemnable view of the Ottoman political system does not align with the Empire's effective governance over a diverse and vast territory for centuries. This discrepancy suggests a possible misinterpretation by Rycaut and his contemporaries. Their accounts provide ample material to analyze from a transcultural perspective, suggesting that cultural and ritual differences were often misunderstood and needed to be translated, as suggested by Flüchter.[34] The following part of the chapter will present some preliminary observations on the Ottoman Court and look at the possibility of seeing it in the frameworks of contact zone and political space.

While comparing the courts of East and West during the medieval era, Jonathan Shepard pointed out that "few major Western rulers could afford to remain fixed to a single seat of governance", which was in sharp contrast to Byzantine emperors who "resided in a city whose monuments bespoke world-class dominion. Through the ceremonial performed at his court the message went out that his rule was God-willed and world-wide".[35] When Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, the city of "world-class dominion" became the permanent imperial seat for the Ottoman sultans. The

34 Flüchter 2016: 117–120
35 Shepard 2018: 11

construction of a new palace, Topkapı Palace, began immediately after the takeover of the city, and it would become the residence of the sultans for almost four hundred years. Although some of the sultans visited and spent considerable time at Edirne Palace, it can be argued that a permanent court emerged earlier in the Ottoman Empire when compared to its European counterparts. During the reign of Süleyman I (r. 1520–1566), the sultan's household and the expanding bureaucracy came under the same roof at the Topkapı Palace, and this marked a turning point for the emergence of the Ottoman Court.[36] Entwining the household and the bureaucracy brought certain servants of the palace into close proximity to the sultan. These servants, who otherwise did not have officially designated responsibilities, became holders of crucial information just for the sake of the spatial configuration of the palace and their power engendered by their proximity to the sultan.

Apart from its relatively earlier emergence as compared to several European courts, the Ottoman Court was not unlike its pre-modern counterparts, and in terms of possibilities of building, sustaining and exercising political power, it was deeply based on a hierarchical "in – out" dichotomy. With the reign of Süleyman I and later in the second half of the sixteenth century, court ceremonial and the fabricated aura surrounding the sultan became much more solemn. Seclusion and the idol-like presence of the sultan in the inner court of Topkapı Palace was further accentuated by the architecture, and approaching the sultan was regulated in space as well. In other words, if the ceremonial set the pace and method of dealing with the sultan, a deliberate architectural planning determined the spatial possibilities and stages of moving toward the sultan. In accordance with this understanding, Topkapı Palace was constructed in a series of courtyards. The third courtyard, which was considered as the sultan's private quarters, was the most restricted section of the palace, and except for the sultan's closest servants, nobody was allowed to enter this area. Entering each courtyard was strictly regulated according to the rank of the officials and palace servants.[37]

Another significant concept, which is closely related to the spatial hierarchies of the Ottoman Court, is *asitane*. It literally means "threshold" in Ottoman diplomatic and ceremonial language, and it was also used to

36 Börekçi & Peksevgen 2009: 152
37 Necipoğlu 1992

denote the cities of high esteem, such as Istanbul. As its literal meaning suggests, it can be argued that Topkapı Palace consisted of a series of thresholds, hierarchically ordered separation lines. These thresholds are the major indicator of the difference between interior and exterior. Therefore, being allowed to pass these lines also indicated one's position in terms of power and favor. Thus, a hierarchy or a set of relations of power was embedded in the spatial organization of the palace. Following the arguments made by Lefebvre in *The Production of Space*, the construction of Topkapı Palace can be seen as "a project, embedded in a spatial context"[38]; it was a realization of a deliberate plan and it basically served the maintenance of a spatial, in and out separation of the political order.

Regarding the spatial hierarchies and as an analogy to the "spatial openness" of the French court that Asch mentions, the Ottoman Court developed a peculiar practice towards the end of the 16th century. As mentioned before, since the early decades of the 16th century Topkapı Palace had to accommodate both the growing retinue of sultans and an expanding bureaucracy, and by the end of the century it had become a crowded place. However, in the middle of the whole hustle and bustle of imperial business a visitor would find what was least expected – silence. The inner precincts of the palace became even more silent as one moved closer to the person of the sultan. In fact, the silence was almost a tangible quality, even in the outer premises of the palace. In 1555, when the Habsburg Ambassador Busbecq met with the *janissaries*, the elite infantry corps of the sultan, he was immensely amazed by the silence kept by a multitude of soldiers. He wrote, "I was for a while doubtful whether they were living men or statues, until, being advised to follow the usual custom of saluting them, I saw them all bow their heads in answer to my salutation".[39]

The silence in the Ottoman palace was intentional, and it was an essential part of the majestic and solemn aura ceremonially constructed around the Ottoman sultan. Seclusion and the idol-like presence of the sultan in the inner court of Topkapı Palace was further accentuated by silence. Not to disturb the silence that wrapped around the sultan, servants and even the sultan himself used sign language for communication. Most of the European sources did not pass without mentioning this curious practice. One of these observers, Bobovius, who spent nineteen years in the palace,

38 Lefebvre 1991: 42
39 Busbecq 2005: 41

related how mutes together with dwarves and eunuchs became precious assets in the palace. He advised that the most valuable gift to give a sultan would be to find someone who carried all these three qualities.[40] In his private quarters, the sultan had contact with very few people, and only very few of his servants were allowed to speak to him; others could communicate only with signs. Two mute brothers first introduced sign language to the palace during the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent. Suleyman found this form of communication very respectful and ordered it to be learned and used by the servants attached to his privy chamber. Over time, sign language became very popular in the palace, and it was even considered rude to whisper in the presence of the sultan. In 1608, the Venetian Ambassador Bon wrote that not only the sultan and his pages but also royal women and other ladies in the palace used sign language among themselves. Communicating with sign language became almost a compulsory attribute of the royal dignity. In 1617, when Sultan Mustafa refused to learn it, he was openly criticized. It was undignified for a sultan to use the speech of ordinary people. Instead, he should never talk and should make people tremble with his silent dignity.[41]

Etiquette and sophisticated ideals of conversation in the French court which Asch mentions as invisible barriers to access to the king became silence and mute language in the Ottoman Court. Apparently silence did more than augmenting the royal aura of the monarch. Beyond contributing to the ceremonial construction of royal power, silence served as a spatial marker to delineate the contours of the Ottoman Court. A forbidden zone of silence separated those who had access to the court from those who were denied the privilege. The silence of a mute became a precious asset, which acted like a free pass to move in a space that was strictly forbidden to most people. If "the ability to keep secret is an exercise of power" as Lawrence Quill suggests,[42] it is exactly this capacity that the Venetian Bailo Bon assigned to the mutes in the Ottoman Court when he wrote in a disdainful and astonished tone that the mutes had the "liberty to go in and out at the King's gate".[43]

40 Bobovius 2002: 30
41 Necipoğlu 1992: 26–28
42 Quill 2014: 21
43 Bon 1996: 79

Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha and after

In line with the framework of arguments presented above, one of the contentions of the present study is that the effects of the changes in the Ottoman political order that happened during the reign of Süleyman manifested themselves after the death of Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha in 1579. The death of Sokollu Mehmed was a decisive moment in Ottoman political history, which removed his overwhelming influence from the political arena and allowed the emergence of a more politically vibrant court among the various contenders for political authority and power.

Sokollu Mehmed Pasha was one of the most powerful grand viziers in the history of the Ottoman Empire. He held the office of grand vizier uninterruptedly for fourteen years from 1565 to 1579, under three successive sultans, Süleyman I (r. 1520–1566), Selim II (r. 1566–1574), and Murad III (r. 1574–1595). He was known for the policy of appointing his family members and kinsmen to the key posts of the empire, thus creating a reliable network made up of his protégés. This policy, which he began early in his career, was the most important factor behind his power and authority.[44] After Sokollu Mehmed died, in the remaining fourteen years of Murad III's reign, the grand vizierate changed hands ten times. The period after Sokollu also witnessed the reappointments of grand viziers more than once. Only on five occasions was a new name appointed to the office. During the reign of Mehmed III, the turnover rate in the office of grand vizierate increased even further. In the relatively short reign of Mehmed III, the office changed hands 12 times. Three grand viziers were again appointed more than once. None of the grand viziers, until the rise of the Köprülü family a hundred years later, amassed as much power and authority as Sokollu Mehmed Pasha did during his fourteen years as the grand vizier. It should not be assumed that the grand viziers of the post-Sokollu era were often inept statesmen. Most of these grand viziers received the same palace education and followed the same career paths. However, as can be anticipated from the last years of Sokollu Mehmed's grand vizierate, grand viziers after Sokollu would become more and more dependent on the power networks of the court, and it would become less and less possible for grand

44 Veinstein 1997: 706–707; Peksevgen, 2009: 534–536

viziers to exercise their power and authority with what Ottoman texts call *istiklâl* (freedom).

When Sultan Süleyman I died in southern Hungary during the Szigetvár campaign in 1566, only one year had passed since the appointment of Sokollu Mehmed Pasha as grand vizier. In order to avoid unrest among the soldiers and to secure the smooth succession of the next sultan, Sokollu Mehmed kept Süleyman's passing a secret for weeks until Prince Selim reached the army in Belgrade. In this intriguing incident in Ottoman history, Sokollu Mehmed demonstrated his strategic skill, administrative abilities and his control over the bureaucracy and army.[45] It is widely known that it was Sokollu Mehmed Pasha who actually ruled during the reign of Selim II. Contemporary writers depicted Sokollu as a virtual sovereign and they wrote that ruling was altogether entrusted to Sokollu. Given his overpowering influence and control over the court and bureaucracy, Sokollu Mehmed never stayed inert towards the incursions of Selim II's favorites.[46] Although prominent figures in the sultan's consort got their share of promotions and appointments, and replaced the old servants of the palace, they were not able to establish a strong influence as compared to the well-rooted power network of the Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed Pasha, and eventually they lost their privileges.[47] If we think of the succession period in terms of the "in and out" separation of the Ottoman political order, we can argue that the prince coming from the province with his expectant servants represents the "out" until he secured the assets of the "in" and established himself in the palace. Sokollu Mehmed's efforts in keeping Sultan Süleyman's death a secret and inviting Prince Selim to the throne can be seen as the facilitation of Selim's passage from "out" to "in", bridging the void between the two reigns. Naturally, those who helped the new sultan's transition from "out" to "in" also bettered their positions in the power play of the court.

If the Ottoman Court emerged during the reign of Süleyman I, the first sultan who spent the entirety of his reign in this court was Süleyman's grandson Murad III (r. 1574–1595). Without a doubt, the seclusion of Murad III in the Topkapı Palace had significant consequences in terms of power struggles at the Ottoman Court.[48] The succession ceremony of Murad III

45 See Peksevgen 2020: 95–113.
46 Mustafa, 2000: 260; Peçevi 1980: 440
47 Selaniki 1999: 59; Mustafa 2000: 159–161
48 Peksevgen 2009: 401–403

is a good illustration of the encounter between two distinct groups that symbolized the old and the new and the "in and out" of Ottoman political order, or what Clifford called the constant "push and pull" of a contact zone. The ceremony took place in December 1574, coinciding with the celebratory first day after Ramadan. Amid a gentle snowstorm that set the stage, the throne was erected at the Gate of Felicity, where palace dignitaries and state bureaucrats assembled to honor the sultan. Historian Selaniki, probably an eyewitness, wrote the following for Murad's first meeting with his servants on this important ceremonial occasion. It should be noted that what Selaniki briefly depicted was not an encounter of two distinct groups, who were geographically and historically separated, and culturally alien to each other. It was an encounter of the servants of a deceased and newly enthroned sultan within the same political order. Yet Selaniki's selection of the term "other side" (*karşu*) while referring to the expectant servants of the new sultan shows that the encounter of these two groups of political actors was a contact between two different worlds in terms of partitioning the political space and power asymmetries.

> That unreal, erratic, and unfaithful souvenir which was known to be the throne of sovereignty was again set up in front of the *babü's-sa'âdet*. Not long ago, two eminent, great, imperial *pâdişâh* thought that it was theirs; whereas old servants knew it was owned by the others. They understood it was transitory and moaned by their hearths. Those who came from the other side saw the throne and lost themselves in joy and consolation.[49]

In fact, even before Murad III's succession to the Ottoman throne, while he was the governor prince in Manisa, his entourage was preparing the ground for the elimination of Sokollu. They even dared to say that they did not want Prince Murad's succession to take place while Sokollu Mehmed Pasha was still alive. They argued that under the Grand Vizierate of Sokollu Mehmed they would be exiled from the royal court of the *padişah*. They fiercely tried to persuade Prince Murad that the same fate that brought the ruin of his father's favorites was now waiting for them. While they were in expectation of being appointed to high posts, they would end up traveling the road to oblivion.[50] Therefore, it seems safe to claim that despite the deep respect Prince Murad felt for the Grand Vizier Sokollu Mehmed

49 Selaniki 1999: 109
50 Mustafa 2000: 261

Pasha he was also tempted by his favorites to downgrade the power and prestige of Sokollu. The anti-Sokollu faction that surrounded Murad III also took practical action by bringing Sokollu's rivals into the service of the new sultan immediately after his succession. A good example is Şemsi Pasha, who had also served as a courtier to Murad III's mother and grandfather. However, when he was brought out of retirement the main reason to reinstate him as a favorite (*musahib*) was his animosity towards Sokollu.[51] Therefore, from the very beginning of Murad's reign, the favorites of Murad were trying to create a layer of favorites which was primarily made up of an anti-Sokollu faction.[52]

While the politics of exclusion directed against Sokollu Mehmed Pasha tried to cancel those who were old and loyal confidants of the seasoned grand vizier, they also necessitated bringing new actors into the Ottoman Court. Since Sokollu Mehmed's political power and influence were wielded through a vast protégé network both in central and provincial administration, his rivals first and foremost targeted the confidants of the grand vizier in this network. These trusted aides of Sokollu Mehmed can be thought of as a means of communication through which Sokollu contacted the various sectors of the court, bureaucracy and society. Therefore, the efforts of Murad III's favorites can be seen as an attempt to deprive Sokollu of his valuable points of contact.

If Sokollu Mehmed Pasha had lived longer (he was seventy-three when he died), and stayed in the office longer than the first five years of Murad III's twenty-one-year reign, we would never have known what type of resolution the conflict between him and the anti-Sokollu faction, which included the sultan, would have reached. During these five years, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha's political adversaries infringed on his control over the business of rule and severed his contact with the sultan by establishing alternate privacies with the sultan that were out of the grand vizier's reach and supervision. Contemporary historian Hasanbeyzade reports that unlike his father Selim II, Murad III gave abundant attention to the business of state, which caused Sokollu to become very irritated and frightened. The main actor behind Murad III's inclination towards bureaucratic paperwork was again Şemsi Pasha, who convinced the sultan that state affairs were being kept secret from him by his viziers, especially Sokollu Mehmed Pasha.

51 Mustafa, 2000: 249–50; Peçevi 1980: 6
52 See Fleischer 1986: 71–74.

Şemsi Pasha advised the sultan that he did not have to take for granted what Sokollu said about the affairs of state, and convinced Murad to take care of the business himself. In order to convince the sultan and explain the importance of dealing with the petitions without an intermediary, Şemsi used a captivating analogy. He likened what they had to do with going hunting; yet this time they were going to hunt petitions. The result was catastrophic. Even the reading of petitions became impossible.[53]

Collecting petitions by the sultan or presenting them directly to the sultan indeed seemed to be a radical move. To begin with, it bypassed all the intermediary offices of the bureaucracy and, most importantly of all, the imperial council. Under normal bureaucratic procedure, the petitions were brought to the council and, according to the nature of the problem, they were transferred to the relevant bureaucratic office. Legal issues were mostly transferred to military judges, and other administrative issues were dealt with in different offices of the bureaucracy under the supervision of the grand vizier. Only very crucial issues were brought to the attention of the sultan. This was done either by presenting a report or presenting the case directly to the person of the sultan, known as "*arza girmek*", which had become increasingly rare and noteworthy given the sultan's seclusion after the mid-sixteenth century. Therefore, Murad III's personal attendance to every petition was a renunciation of the authority delegated to the grand vizier and the bureaucracy. It should be noted that this practice also nullified the need for presenting cases to the sultan and thus access to him.[54]

After Sokollu Mehmed, the Ottoman Court completely evolved into a contact zone where opposing political actors and their agents battled for control of the political space that also defined the fuzzy boundaries of the court. Murad III's conviction of taking the business of the state into his own hands was doomed from the start. As a late sixteenth century sultan, who spent almost all of his reign in Topkapı Palace, Murad III never got hold of the reins of the business of rule. The political agents, some of whom were deliberately created as favorites by Murad, were never successful enough to relate to their master the realities of the post-Sokollu era of court politics. These realities were no different for the succeeding sultans and other political actors either. When Osman II (r. 1618–1622), the great-grandson of Murad III, was murdered in an uprising and became the victim of the

53 Hasanbeyzade 2004, Vol. II: 252–54; Mustafa 2000: 241–42
54 Peksevgen 2005: 183–84

first regicide in Ottoman history, the most probable cause was his anachronistic effort to control the business of rule in the treacherous setting of the Ottoman Court.

Conclusion

Like many other studies which deal with the spatial turn and its applications, this study also takes de Certeau's assertion that "the space is a practiced place" as one of the major stepping stones for examining the early modern royal court as a contact zone. Rather than perceiving the contact zone in terms of transcultural entanglements of colonial encounters or early modern diplomacy, it proposes to perceive the contact zone as a political space which is constructed by the interactions of political agents. Thus, it specifically puts emphasis on the relational construction of the political space, and the power hierarchies and asymmetries in this construction. It is the conviction of this study that the relational approach is best suited to tackle Jeroen Duindam's question, "who, in practice, wielded the power behind the smoke screen of royal omnipotence".

Early modern royal courts were almost without exception premeditated political spaces where the movements, contacts, and interactions were "formalized arrangements".[55] They constantly reproduced an immaculate order where the ruler was presented at a ceremonially fixed place and the onlookers' gaze was framed on the ruler with a specifically designed "ocular politics".[56] On the other hand, while clarifying the term "contact", Pratt foregrounds the improvisational dimension of the imperial encounters.[57] At first glance, this spontaneity of encounters may seem to be in conflict with the strict spatial hierarchies of courts. However, this discord between spontaneity and premeditated spatial hierarchies need not be resolved. It should be noted that the court as a contact zone is not a space where power imbalances and asymmetries are relieved or eased but perpetuated.

This study offers an analysis of the entanglement between, on the one hand, the immutable and immaculate order, constantly recreated through court ceremonies that structure space and time, and on the other hand, the political actors, whose movements and communicative actions

55 Dillon 2010: 77
56 Necipoğlu 1993: 303
57 Pratt 1992: 8

continuously deform and reshape the political space. This entanglement also mirrors the dilemma between the absolute/ideal positioning of the ruler in the early modern political vision and the ambivalent position of that ruler in the fluid and erratic matrix of practical politics.

Author biography

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