



Summary :

During the period of the tanzimat reforms in the Ottoman Empire (1839-1876), some typical features in the cultural and social environment of the Ottoman capital emerged, which leave room for the use of the term “public space”, according to the model of Jürgen Habermas. These features consisted of new spaces of sociability, like the bourgeois associations and clubs, the development of the press, the formation of a literate public through the establishment of educational foundations. As a result, there were created the conditions for the formation of public opinion and public discourse, which could often transcend ethno-religious borders.

Date

1839 – Beginning of the 20th century.

Geographical Location

Constantinople (Istanbul)

1. The concept of public space

The concept of public space refers to the social-cultural sphere in which the public opinion is formed. The concept of public space was implemented in many ways after the work of Jürgen Habermas became broadly known as introducing the term and examining its historical foundation and political significance.¹ The successful implementation of the term “public space” is comprehensible especially if we distinguish its historical foundation from the Habermasian political philosophy, which tried to establish the public space within a model of incomplete rationalization process, which modern societies have to accomplish. Instead, the historical analysis of Habermas had a strong influence especially on historians, as it correlated the private with the public on the basis of a new rational management of issues that were considered to be public –hence explicitly excluded from the private space- and it located the emergence of public space at the core of the conflict between the emerging bourgeois society and the authoritarianism of the post-feudal state, i.e. in the context of West European historical experience.²

This definition raises a problem directly as far as in this entry the concept of public space is implemented for a city, like [Constantinople](#), which did not participate independently in what is considered to be the Western historical experience. However, the emergence of similar characteristics in the cultural and social environment of the Ottoman capital –like the spaces of socialization and interaction, the new technologies that enhanced public debate, and the emergence of a new new framework of values and of public opinion- leaves much room for a fruitful use of the term in the context of Constantinople in the 19th century. Moreover, these characteristics were directly related to the cultural and social profile of the bourgeois strata of [non-Muslims](#) as well as the emerging new Ottoman bureaucracy.

2. The constitution of public space in Constantinople during the Tanzimat period (1839-1876)

The formation of public space in Constantinople, but also generally in the Empire, can be dated at the period of the [Ottoman reforms](#) in 19th century (Tanzimat) –largely at the period of introduction of equal rights for Muslims and non-Muslims – **taking into account the political context which formed them** i.e. the strengthening of the Ottoman central power, the rise of secessionist national movements, especially those of the Christian populations, and the intensification of European intervention in the economic and political issues of the Empire. The relative political liberalization after 1856, but also the intensity of economic activity and internal migration, which was observed, influenced directly the formative process of public space. The issue of [internal migration](#) cannot be analyzed here, but the reader should be aware that ultimately the [Greek Orthodox community of Constantinople](#) and its population as a whole was not static, but changing through the constant flows of people and networks moving, settling or migrating.

2.1. The role of the Press



During the 19th century, practices and technologies that could serve a public dialogue and a large-scale communication multiplied. It is easy to understand the role of print media technology and generally of [Press](#) in this case. Dozens of newspapers and magazines appeared in Constantinople during the 19th and 20th century in many languages. The Press was consolidated in the Ottoman Empire and, despite adventures during the period of Sultan Abdul Hamid, it maintained a central position in political life. The Greek-speaking Press developed rapidly with newspapers of regular circulation ([Neologos](#), Constantinople, Anatolikos Astir and Thraki etc.) and with weekly and monthly publications. The same happened with newspapers printed in other languages, Ottoman, Armenian, Hebrew, French and Italian. Some newspapers and magazines were short-lived, some other were published regularly, but all together formed the space of communication which the public space was based on.

However, we have to extend this setting taking into account the issues which the public debate dealt with through the Press, and they appeared in this space. It was not just about issues of political or educational interest, at least not only about them. It was about the emergence of a broad list of issues concerning the poverty and [charity](#), [education](#), gender relations and consumption, public security and epidemic diseases, history and science etc which were presented and discussed consistently throughout this period, from the first reform decrees until the end of the Empire. A broad literate public that transcended the vertical divisions of religious communities formed opinions and disagreements for these issues, as they kept being topical. It is interesting to note that unlike the urgent and pressing political issues, which often met with the suspicion of the Ottoman censorship especially during the period of Sultan Abdul Hamid , other public issues remained constantly at the forefront of public interest.

2.2. Societies and Clubs as spaces of public dialogue

The formation of public space is not only linked to the printed communication, but also to the formation of an institutional framework for social interaction and public debate through the foundation of [Societies](#), Clubs, Reading Halls and other similar places. The Greek Orthodox excelled particularly in the creation of such institutions founding hundreds of them in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century. However, most of them were stillborn as they failed to survive [beyond](#) their founding declaration, but some of them, like the [Greek Philological Society of Constantinople](#), the [Ladies's Charity Society of Pera](#), the Ksyrokrene Club and some others had remarkable presence. Of course, members of other ethno-religious groups founded quite similar institutions too. In these institutions there was invented a whole process of presenting, informing and discussing issues of public interest, although subjects that could provoke political or religious controversies were often explicitly excluded. For this reason, the statutes of the institutions clarified what exactly was legitimate and permissible to be discussed, what exactly constituted a “decent” and “useful” public debate, after all.

2.3. The role of education in the formation of public space

Correlating the public space with the framework of Ottoman reforms and the development of printed medium technology and Societies doesn't exhaust the question. The formation of public space was founded on the emergence of an educational system and a literate public that was able to follow the public issues. There is no implication here that the education served as a precondition preparing the formation of public space, but rather that there was a [mutual relation of production](#) among this space, the education and the emergence of a literate public. The education in Constantinople followed [an intensive course engaging](#) all the religious communities. Despite the unstable and limited beginning directly determined by an education of religious kind, the educational system developed rapidly creating different levels of education -based on gender divisions- and schools, while the teaching extended to new subjects. Basically, the educational system related to the elementary education, but it extended to the secondary education for both sexes and to schools that provided specialized curriculum for [technical](#) training.

This kind of education was not confined to the official Ottoman schools or to the schools of non-Muslim communities, but it incorporated also the schools that the [western missionaries](#) or private initiative had created. The shaping of the educational system cannot be interpreted on the basis of a transition from a religious kind of education to another more secular and “enlightened”. The religious leaderships that is the [Ecumenical Patriarchate](#) and other non-Muslim religious authorities or the Muslim [ulemas](#), largely kept the system and the teaching under their control. On the other hand, this system exalted the value of literacy and education in general, it aimed directly at the lower social classes and produced an ever expanding literate public able to communicate and express itself on



public issues. The “open” social character of the educational system reflected this direction in the sense that its objective was to integrate not only the economically powerful, but all social groups into its mechanisms. Graduates from this system continued their university studies in Athens, Paris, Vienne and elsewhere and usually they returned to Constantinople to work as doctors, lawyers, architects, engineers etc., contributing to the expansion of new dynamic professional strata in the Ottoman capital. It is not a coincidence that members of these groups, particularly doctors, participated constantly in the public debate on many issues.

Consequently, the literacy was a precondition for the formation of public space. At the same time, the public space encouraged literacy to the extent that **it provided a framework for raising public issues through the Press and Clubs**. However, establishing literacy as a value created a problem. If a literate person could follow the public issues from an advantageous position, precisely because he could read and talk about them, then from which position could an illiterate person talk about them? It would be at least a paradox to believe that the illiterate persons were not interested in public issues, as the literate ones were, to the extent that some of these issues, such as philanthropy, education, medical services etc., concerned them directly. This is a very complicating problem because it refers to parallel communicative processes of different intensity, in which literate persons correlated with illiterate ones **on unequal terms**.

On the other hand, literacy, literate persons and their symbolic capital in fact **revealed** the restrictive, socially determined at last, character of public space. Their own discourse established points of differentiation between them and the “popular” element or the popular strata which were not able to represent themselves adequately and basically they appeared in the discourse of literate bourgeois in ways they certainly could not control. Although the literate public, in the strict sense of bourgeois entrepreneurial class, was much larger numerically, in fact the imaginary coherence of this public was based on their belief that literacy ensured a leading position, but also on other values such as “dignity”, “hygiene”, “work ethic” etc., which were meaningful only if they were related to their opposites, which were identified most of the times with the profile and traits of popular illiterate classes. Therefore, the constitution of public space was not restricted in a communicative or cognitive dimension, but it also entailed powerful values, which were constitutive of social hierarchy.

This didn’t exclude the reference to the popular strata and their cultural and social traits. On the contrary, they were a prerequisite. From this point of view, our imagery about these strata is formed to a great extent by the literate public that talked about them. The emergence of public space was marked by the mutual relationship between the “literate” and popular public. For instance, the popular strata constituted the object of the literate Orthodox Christians’ discourse, intervention and rule aiming at forming a cohesive national community. In fact, many of the public issues referred to the life of popular strata and their control: **indigence and poverty, public hygiene and the provision of medical and philanthropic services were the main fields of control**. Aspects of the everyday popular life became the object of interest and they were defined and analyzed under specific ideological prisms, acquiring through that process such consistency and specificity that they didn’t have previously. The treatises on indigence and poverty, drunkenness, idleness, beggary, ignorance etc, that filled the columns of the Greek Press of Constantinople, maintained a double attitude toward the popular strata, which encompassed, on the one hand, the perspective of assimilation, even the idealization, and on the other hand the exclusion and social stigmatization.

For the Muslim literates, the popular distrust of the Ottoman state’s reform measures constituted a complex field of communication with the popular strata. The Empire’s relationship to the West and the economic consequences of the European capitalism for the corporatist organization of labour created great discontent among the Muslims, which inspired the criticism of many literate Muslims toward the Ottoman state. For example, the reaction of the New Ottomans toward the authoritarian and “mimetic” reform of the pro-Western representatives of Tanzimat was based on the production of literary stereotypes, like Bihruz Bey which lacked any originality and creativity and it was utterly distant from the popular strata.³ In this case, the idealization of Muslim popular tradition aimed more at the Muslim literate strata than the popular ones. Nevertheless, the Muslim Press and a large part of the Ottoman bureaucracy and scholars began at that time to treat many problems which the Greek Orthodox literates dealt with, in a way that transcended the ethno-religious lines. For instance, beggary, epidemics and the management of large number of needy people who flooded into Constantinople during the last decades of 19th century beginning with the forcible displacement of thousands of Muslims after the [Russian-Turkish war in 1877-78](#), were treated as problems of the Ottoman city in a manner similar to that of the Greek Orthodox Press.



3. The overlapping “public spaces” of the ethno-religious communities

It can be argued that during the second half of the 19th century different sides realized that many issues, notably the management of poor people, transcended the divisions between the ethno-religious communities and they got established as matters of common public interest. Does this mean that we are in front of the rupture in the cohesion of distinctive ethno-religious public spaces and the appearance of overlapping public spaces?

The answer to this question is crucial. The usual historiographical approach to the Ottoman society takes the ethno-religious division for granted and tends to speak in terms of distinctive national histories with strict boundaries between each other. But the inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire, even more of Constantinople, were not separated by Great Walls. Despite the fact that the religious segregation with its legal and political connotations remained active and even it was institutionalized during the period of reforms, many levels of communication between the different religious communities are observed. Political matters that the intervention of European forces or the action of opposing national movements brought to the foreground, fiscal or financial matters of wider significance, local matters concerning the infrastructure of cities, the function of schools or the control of beggars created a precedent for all the Empire's subjects, especially the literates. In this framework, a dialogue developed which without negating the ethno-religious division, didn't suppress the existence of the “other” but it highlighted it. What exactly did the Muslim newspapers say? Did they attract the interest of the Greek-speaking public that read about their opinions in the special columns of its own publications? Besides, many Greek Orthodox people were able to read the Muslim Press. Of course, the reverse was also true, as many Muslim newspapers hosted the opinions of the publications of other ethno-religious groups.

4. Conclusions

What follows from this? Undoubtedly, there were many points of disagreement, but who said that the public space is floating on consensus? Here it is not argued that this often fragmented dialogue created a cohesive public space, but rather that **it should be taken into account in order to form an overall view**. If the question is confined to highlighting common areas of interest, then, yes, a public dialogue in Constantinople was feasible. However, if the question is approached on “public opinion” level that is the basic feature of public space, then, things are different. The institutional separation of ethno-religious communities in the Ottoman Empire made the division of “public opinion” on ethno-religious basis stronger than **a consensus could be**. This did not exclude the convergence in a number of issues, such as public hygiene and beggary, but in fact the formation of a cohesive “public opinion” does not seem to have been at issue. Even when the Greek Orthodox discussed about issues like education, they did this often as if there were no other schools beside them and they were interested in them only when they were feeling a threat, as in the case of missionary schools. In this regard, there were different “public opinions” often converging, but thereafter they got diverging.

Until this point, we have treated the constitution of public space in Constantinople as a problem that can be analyzed under the conditions and the features composing it. Furthermore, we examined the problem of common questions and what they meant on “public opinion” level. Let's see the last one which as we have already said, constitutes the basic trait of public space as far as the Greek Orthodox community of Constantinople is concerned. The presence of “public opinion” was founded on ensuring the “public interest” in the sense that it appeared as a point of control for public issues, which served this interest. This correlation rendered the “public opinion” i.e. an impersonal point of reference, a public judge obscuring the fact that this judge had clear social and cultural traits. It represented the values of the literate bourgeois groups, who had the ability and the symbolic capital to proclaim that their own values of literacy, dignity and work were universal. These values never appeared to be socially determined, instead they appealed to everyone, even to the popular strata, whose culture was considered to be distinct and alien to these values. The universality which the literate bourgeois public assigned to its values is a problem relating to the constitution of public space, **because it formed the underlying layer on which the “public opinion” was founded**. The possibility of addressing an issue required knowledge, acceptance and management of this framework of values. This formulation should not be treated restrictively, but deductively. This framework of values became an object of management and negotiation for different purposes. When women teachers such as Sappho Leontias or Calliope Kechagias wanted to expand the boundaries of women's public action, they utilized systematically the vocabulary of social decency and literacy. However, the different uses of the value system of literate strata had always limits. Eventually, the conjunction of this value system and discourse on which it was founded, and this faceless point of reference called



“public opinion” tends to correspond to the emerging social hierarchy of the Greek Orthodox community of Constantinople.

Therefore, the question of public space in Constantinople was a complex one; it was a point in time and space where large-scale processes intersected with the ways that the **agents** represented themselves and their relationships, while shaping their social hierarchies.

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1. Habermas, J., *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge Mass. 1989).
 2. Calhoun, C. (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge Mass. 1994).
 3. Mardin, S., “Super Westernization in Urban Life in the Ottoman Empire in the Last Quarter of the 19th Century”, in Benedict, P., Timuzketin, E., Mansur, F., (ed.), *Turkey, Geographic and Social Perspectives* (Leiden 1974), p. 418.
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Glossary :

	ulema A graduate of an Islamic religious-school (<i>medrese</i>) who has the prospect of becoming a <i>kadi</i> (religious judge) or a <i>moufti</i> (interpreter of the religious law), an <i>imam</i> or to occupy some other religious office.
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