

## HOW TO LIE WITH STATISTICS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE AND INDIA<sup>1</sup>

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was a series of conferences, held mostly in Cambridge, Mass., but also in Philadelphia, Cambridge (England), Istanbul, and Munich that aimed at bringing together historians working on southern Asia (mainly the Indian subcontinent), Iran, and the Ottoman Empire. As it emerged, Indianists and Ottomanists had a good deal to say to one another. Although the Indianist field was more advanced, especially in matters of conceptualization, the difference was not such as to make dialogue impossible. Because both fields are largely concerned with official documents and to a lesser extent with chronicles and travelogues, the problems posed by primary sources were a starting point for many lively discussions. However the proceedings of these conferences were never published, and thus they were soon reduced to no more than a stimulating memory in the minds of the participants.

However, Sanjay Subrahmanyam and myself in particular have continued to feel that this dialogue was fruitful and should be continued. As a modest beginning, we decided to bring together a few Indianists and Ottomanists who happened to be within reasonable distance from Berlin this past spring. On the Indianist side, apart from Sanjay Subrahmanyam himself, there were Norbert Peabody from Cambridge University and Michael Mann from the Fernuniversität Hagen. The Ottomanists were represented by Beshara Doumani, who works on Syria and Palestine, Dariusz Kolodziejczyk of Warsaw University, who has published extensively on Polish-Ottoman relations, and myself.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Report on a one-day conference held at the Wissenschaftskolleg, May 15, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> The summaries of the papers by Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Michael Mann, Beshara Doumani, and Dariusz Kolodziejczyk are based on texts composed by these four authors themselves. Norbert Peabody could not be reached, and I have written the summary on the basis of a published article of his: "Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India." *Journal for the Comparative Study of Society and History* 43 (2001): 819–850. In all these instances, verbatim quotations from the respective authors will not be specially acknowledged.

Sanjay Subrahmanyam: “The culture of scribes (*munshi*) in the seventeenth century Indian subcontinent”

The author has examined the role played by scribes (*munshis*) in the formation and maintenance of a bureaucratic culture in India, both in the Mughal domains and in the regional kingdoms of western and south-central India. After discussing the development of scribes as a social category, from the origins of this group under the Delhi Sultanate to the opening of *madrasa* education to Hindus at the time of the Lodis, Subrahmanyam has argued that the *munshi* class was important because its members were capable of writing history and also because, in their professional capacity, these scribes formed the backbone of any pre-colonial Indian fiscal system.

To explore the history of the group in greater depth, a few textbooks serving the education of *munshis* were examined in some detail to establish how the authors conceptualized the ideal *munshi*. What were cultured scribes supposed to read at a particular stage of their education? What different skills were they called upon to accumulate? The writings of the famed *munshi* Harkaran, dating from the period of the Mughal emperor Jahangir, and the somewhat more obscure autobiography of Nek Rai from the latter part of the seventeenth century have been analyzed with this purpose in mind.

Michael Mann: “The hapless revenue collectors: data gathering and statistics in British India, c. 1760–1860”

When the British East India Company, from the second half of the eighteenth century on, expanded its territorial possessions on the Indian subcontinent, the leaders of the colonial enterprise increasingly needed to resolve the problem of running the newly won territories in an efficient manner, once the option of leaving them under Indian administration had been discarded. The British therefore began to collect data about the land and its inhabitants. At first this was done in a fairly unsystematic fashion, but soon the British came to employ Indian methods of counting and measuring in order to establish wide-ranging collections of data. However, at a closer look, it becomes apparent that these statistics are marred by considerable inaccuracies; quite often, the authors have merely recorded estimates. Yet in certain cases, we encounter an astonishing degree of exactitude, both in the methods of collecting and in the analysis proper; these instances definitely surpass the level of contemporary censuses in England and Wales.

Apparently the entire project of British census-taking was considerably indebted to the great statistical compendium covering the Mughal empire as ruled by Akbar (1556–1605).

Similarly to the later British censuses, sixteenth-century Mughal statistics also suggested a degree of centralization and homogeneity throughout the imperial territories to which realities “on the ground” did not necessarily correspond.

Norbert Peabody: “Seventeenth-century data on Indian population”

Among Indianists, the last few decades have seen a lively debate about the extent to which “caste”, as an organizing principle of Indian society, is a construct of the British colonizers. Certain authors have defended the view that the invention of “caste” as a fundamental matrix of social relations merely served the aim of British officials to “divide and rule”. Yet Norbert Peabody has undertaken to demonstrate that reality is far more complex. In the later nineteenth century, the compilers of British censuses and revenue surveys doubtless assumed the existence of “castes” over broad swaths of territory, while previously these organizations had functioned only on a local level. But early colonial collectors of statistics did not invent “castes” out of thin air. On the contrary, they greatly relied on the information given to them by their Indian collaborators, who were themselves very conscious of their own and others’ “castes”.

One fine example is the household enumerations produced by Munhata Nainsi, in the seventeenth-century a high official in the western Indian kingdom of Marwa, today located at the border dividing India and Pakistan. Certainly the household lists of this period lacked the universalizing thrusts of later colonial censuses. But even so, they highlighted the notion of “caste”; in fact Nainsi differentiated between “castes” that were already “pure”, and others in the course of “purification”, in other words, as yet still “impure” – this opposition, incidentally, was not taken over by British census takers. Norbert Peabody thus concludes that colonial administrators did not come to India with a fully elaborated vision of the society they planned to govern, quite to the contrary. Munhata Nainsi’s account conveys an idea of the notions about local social structure that early nineteenth-century British officials were to assimilate and rework.

Suraiya Faroqi: “The long story of Ottoman tax records”

Ottoman tax records were prepared as the basis for the distribution of *timars* (tax assignments), the receivers being obliged to perform cavalry service. From these registers, officials could find out what revenue sources were located where and what the latter might be expected to yield. Assigning *timars* was undertaken in two steps, with two sets of registers the result. At a first stage, taxpayers were enumerated village by village and town by town,

with the scribes indicating the persons or institutions with rights to shares of the local taxes. This type of register is known as a *mufassal* (detailed). As a second step, the scribes prepared “summary” registers (*icmal*), encompassing much larger units, usually an entire province. Much information that might or might not become relevant for tax collection was included here, so that to the unwary, these lists very much resemble modern statistical tables. However, sixteenth-century registers were composed for revenue allocation only, and what did not need to be distributed was often treated quite cavalierly.

In these registers, a taxpayer was only identified by his personal name and that of his father, in addition to that of the village or urban quarter in which he resided. But the Ottomans also developed a more detailed system of identification, namely by compiling standardized physical descriptions, with a special emphasis on people’s faces. In the sixteenth century, we encounter this practice especially in cases of manumission, so that freedmen would be enabled to prove their identities and free status.

In the nineteenth century, the Ottoman authorities produced records not only for taxation purposes, as they had always done, but also for drafting soldiers. As a result, it was necessary once again to identify particular people with some certainty. Standardized descriptions of men’s faces, formerly common in manumission documents, were now taken over at least in some of the population registers compiled during the 1830s. Moreover, beginning with the 1840s, the Ottoman Empire began to produce governmental yearbooks on the French model, which often also provided general information on the provinces covered. When it came to setting forth this information, Ottoman officials were, to a considerable extent, inspired by the form of presentation already in use in sixteenth-century *icmals*. With all due caution, I submit that even in the novel types of documents introduced in the mid-nineteenth century, the tradition of “classical” Ottoman record-keeping was more significant than has often been assumed.

Dariusz Kolodziejczyk: “Conquering and organizing the land of ‘infidels’: the Ottomans in Podolia and the Russians in Kazan”

This paper focuses on the methods applied by two early modern empires in newly conquered territories. From the two governments’ points of view, both provinces to be discussed here were inhabited by “infidels”, namely Muslims in Kazan and Orthodox Christians in Podolia. The Russian conquest of Kazan in 1552 has been considered a crucial turning point in the building of the future Russian empire. Admittedly, the conquest of Podolia in 1672 was less important for the making of the Ottoman state, yet it offers a good

opportunity for comparison. In both conquests and their respective aftermaths, the phraseology connected with the notion of a “Holy War” played a prominent role. Yet the majority of the inhabitants of both provinces were tacitly allowed to retain their respective religions. Only the inner quarters of the provincial centers of Kazan in the Tatar case, and Kamieniec in the Podolian, were forcibly colonized by new settlers, while “infidels” were removed to the outskirts of these towns.

In both cases, the central governments enjoyed a much stronger position in the newly conquered areas than in the old “core” provinces. In Kazan, the Tatar aristocracy was largely deprived of the tax exemptions previously granted by the khans. Their hereditary lands (Russ. *votëiny*) were converted into state fiefs called *pomest’ja*. In Podolia, the estates owned by Polish nobles were similarly transformed into *timars*. The administration of the new lands was facilitated by survey registers (*piscovye knigi* and *tahrir defters* respectively), prepared by the Muscovian and Ottoman bureaucracies. Thus within certain limits, the two conquests served as tools of modernization and strengthened the central governments in question.

A very interesting aspect is the treatment of members of the local nobilities. On the one hand, both the Russian and Ottoman governments justly considered these families as the least reliable segments of the respective local societies. On the other hand, the aristocrats’ assistance was often indispensable in keeping social order and reviving local economies. Contrary to stereotypes, a significant number of Tatar Muslim nobles in Kazan preserved their privileges without being obliged to change their religion. A number of Polish Catholic nobles in Podolia also were allowed to keep their estates on condition of demonstrating loyalty to the *padīshah* and paying a lump sum in taxes. But most of these nobles chose to emigrate rather than stay under the Muslim “yoke”.

In comparison to Habsburg Spain or France under Louis XIV, both Muscovy and the Porte seem to have been much “softer” in their attitudes towards their “infidel” subjects. It is a matter of debate whether we should speak of “tolerance” on the part of these two Eastern European empires, or rather of their inability to consistently apply a more “modern” policy of centralization and unification.

Beshara Doumani: “Family history through the Islamic court records of Greater Syria”  
The voluminous records generated over the centuries by the Islamic courts of the Ottoman period contain a wealth of information allowing us to track specific families and their activities over long periods of time. These archives allow the social historian to recover the

role of local agency in the social construction of contemporary notions of kinship, property, and sexual difference. Family, defined as a set of understandings governing relations between kin, is both the crucible in which these three factors operate and the product of their interaction.

With hindsight, the Islamic courts were clearly a very effective legal and social mechanism of cultural, socioeconomic, and political integration, at least of the urban populations. By institutionalizing these courts and making them a key instrument of rule, the Ottoman state helped to determine the shape and content of their archives. Were it not for this governmental initiative, we would probably not have an archive to work with in the first place.

However, the use of these court records presents a number of problems, only two of which can be touched upon here. First, there is the angst and nail biting all too obvious in the academy when it comes to the issues of form and content, text and context, representation and agency. An anthropology of archives that focuses primarily on literary analysis is slowly emerging and poses a serious challenge to the work of most social historians. Second, legal history, in the full sense of the word, is just beginning to breach the fortresses of Islamic studies. The social history of the production of legal norms, studies of specific groups of religious scholars over time, and intellectual history on both the popular and elite levels still have a long way to go.

At the same time, any reading for content must take into account that the notions referred to in the surviving documents were not simply brought in by litigants and then deposited or reflected in the archives of the Islamic courts. Rather, in the very process of producing the summaries of the cases that the historian reads today, these hopes, fears, and understandings were reworked and molded to fit into the legal language and scribal codes of an institution that served both as a law court and as a public records office of sorts. Consequently, the social content that the family historian looks for is already discursively embedded in larger discourses of power and authority. This does not mean that these documents can tell us no more than the story of their own production as texts. Rather, one could argue that recovering a fuller sense of the “real” demands attention to both form and content, as well as to the manner in which both changed over time. Ideally, such a multi-layered reading would also build bridges between legal history, social history (broadly defined), and the ethnography of archives as a cultural product.

## Good intentions

Discussion was lively throughout the conference and tended to move from record-keeping to broader issues, particularly the socio-political structures of pre-colonial India and the Ottoman Empire. The authors have promised to submit their contributions toward the end of the year, so that they can be published together in a historical journal with a comparative focus.