University Seminar #703: Modern Greek Studies
October 26, 2006
Speaker: Christine Philliou, Columbia
Topic: "The Millet System and Its Discontents: Dealing with Difference in the Ottoman
    Empire"

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Columbia; Karen Barkey, Columbia; Nadir Sahrabi, Columbia; Stefanos Tsigrimanis,
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Summary of Presentation:

In her presentation, Philliou used scholarship on the question of confessional difference
in the Ottoman Empire as a point of departure to explore and historicize a broader logic
of difference in Ottoman governance. She argued that when we separate the question of
confessional difference from the larger question of Ottoman governance, as is often done
in conventional scholarship of Ottoman Empire, we operate from our assumptions, not
necessarily from contemporary evidence, that the religious divide between Muslim and
non-Muslim must have at all times been immutable and more profound than any other
social, economic, or political divide. Instead, she argued for a re-framing which would
allow scholars to compare how groups of different religions may have crossed back and
forth over the more formal divide between rulers and subjects--in different ways and at
different points in time. She offered the comparative case study of the evolution and
functions of Phanariots, a Christian elite, and Janissaries, a Muslim military-political
elite, at the turn of the 19th century to demonstrate the possibilities for re-framing the
question of difference; her work seeks to decenter the Muslim/non-Muslim divide as the
ultimate and immutable difference in all Ottoman times and places, so as to allow for
change and variation across time and over the vast territories that were at one time or
another under Ottoman control. Though her work doesn't generally focus on the millet
system, the assumption of this system's importance is so pervasive in scholarship on the
Ottoman Empire that she took this as a necessary starting point.

        This term, millet system, has been used to account for the administrative and legal
status of the large numbers of non-Muslim subjects from the Ottoman 15th to 20th
century. With the conquest of Constantinople and the establishment of Istanbul as capital
in 1453, the early, inclusive phase of the Ottoman Empire gave way to a phase of
institution-building and hardening of political and religious tenets, the solidification of an
Orthodox Sunni framework with certain allowances made for religious diversity. The
Millet system has traditionally been used by scholars to account for the Ottoman
administration of this diversity. According to this imagined system, Christians and Jews
were administered with this corporate communal structure. At the head of each millet was

a religious leader, assigned spiritual, legal, and to some extent political authority over his flock. And while these millets are traditionally seen as detachable from the grand narrative of the Ottoman Empire, the millet system is nevertheless still linked to the narrative of Ottoman decline. Although many scholars have come forward to dismantle this narrative of decline, none have really come forward to tackle the story of the millet system, though evidence has long been available that would lead us to question the supposedly static nature of the system. Yet, Philliou argues, even into the 16th and 17th centuries, when confessional divisions seem to have become more pronounced, we know that the rule rather than the exception for Ottoman functionaries was that they were converts or sons of converts to Islam from Christianity who had passed through the *devsirme* slave system. This shows that if there was a formalized millet system, which is itself arguable, it seems clear that there was an array of possibilities for individuals of non-Muslim origins to participate in Ottoman governance above and beyond this corporate millet structure.

In order to see how differences of several kinds played out in practice, Philliou focused on two groups that had acquired significant political power at the turn of the 19th century, but who belonged formally to opposite sides of both the religious and the ruler-ruled divide: Phanariots and Janissaries. Phanariots were an Orthodox Christian elite that formally and informally penetrated operations of governance in the course of the 18th century. Janissaries were the formally Sunni Muslim infantry corps for the Ottoman Sultanate who, from their position in the military core of Ottoman governance, informally diversified their activities through multiple sectors of Ottoman governance, and proliferated in numbers and fields of activity in the 18th century. Philliou tried to show through this comparison that the two groups, presumably of no relevance to each other in the current schema of Ottoman governance, could in fact have been undergoing analogous changes, and from the inside their members could have been using similar strategies to move through and beyond the Muslim/non-Muslim and ruler/ruled divides.

Summary of Discussion:

Q: I think that the idea of bringing the Phanariots and the janissaries together as two different trajectories between the core and the periphery is superb, and I think you add a great deal to the Ottoman literature of the 18th and 19th centuries by introducing this angle, by connecting the Phanariots with all of these linkages and telling the story of their multiple, shifting connections to the state. It will be an incredible addition to the literature. My question is, whether the issue of this Hellenization route into the Ottoman state is another way in which the millet system, without being carved in stone, could be a very capacious administrative format that started because of certain geopolitical considerations; then, as the empire evolved, this route became another alternative, one more way of organizing. In other words, perhaps it's not that the millet system doesn't exists at all, but that there was a degree of adaptability and flexibility in the Empire that allowed Christians, even as late as the 18th century, to govern in these ways, in its stead. It's not really about millet, but about this idea of flexible rule, adaptable, pragmatic imperial rule; that's the overall, larger story.

Q: Because what you're talking about are the various networks of ties that become grafted onto the Ottoman state; you're comparing that to the notion of a patronage system, in which you as the state have an intermediary: people are ultimately loyal to you, but you give them the flexibility to be Christian or Jewish or whatever. You're saying that these connections start to form through other kinds of networks; the Ottoman Empire has all of these ties, and their density seems to be increasing through the 18th century. Dan Nexton is someone you might look at, for more on this idea of networks radiating out and continuously changing. That kind of theorizing might give you more leverage, rather than working against the story of the millet system.

Q: I would add that when you were talking, I wasn't really thinking of the millet system at all, but of Hellenization as a second *devsirme*. It's almost embedded in the governance of the Ottomans, a parallel paradigm of flexibility; just think of the way that most of the sultans asked for the name "Constantinople" instead of "Istanbul" to be stamped on their coins. Maybe we should really push the millet system out and look at the traditional methods of governance and its flexibility. Though of course I am exaggerating when I say *devsirme*. And as a footnote, I totally agree with the larger argument, except for the case of skilled artisans, silk weavers and dyers, for which the concept of the guild becomes important, because within the guild as a concept or organization there are so many Greeks and Muslims working side by side, with Muslims partners or apprentices working for Greek masters, and vice versa.

A: And Armenian and Jewish, too.

Q: I have a question about the Phanariots; some present them as a group, and others argue that the Phanariots didn't actually exists as a concrete group at all. So, in your view, were they a group or a type? What is the exact reality, socially and geographically speaking? Can we think of pseudo- or quasi-Phanariots elsewhere, on Cyprus for instance, who yet aren't really Phanariots?

A: I use the term Phanariot loosely. Those who admitted to being Phanariots are definitely of the upper crust, referred to as a clique, or *takun*. But each of them had a retinue and a household, and I'm interested in those people who are getting funneled through that system. I guess I should probably call them Phanariot associates; a lot of them coming from Chios, Samos, getting pulled into the orbit through the Orthodox Church.

Q: And perhaps the Cypriots weren't getting involved because they had their own Phanariot-like system, incorporating them into the local system of governance.

A: There I would wonder what their connections were to the dragon of the fleet.

Q: Yes, they were connected.

A: It's tricky, though, because it was kind of an unconscious process that was going on. People kept getting added to these retinues, titles kept getting added, all for the love of

aggrandizement, through the proliferation of patronage circles. Of course there's a conscious element, but there's an unconscious one, too. And from our perspective it's all part of the process that is being led or driven by these Phanariots

Q: Could you also look at this not through retinues but through marriage ties? Because there are ways of climbing into that hierarchy through low-level marriages; you might be able to trace this through personal histories as well.

A: Yes, and Vogorides, about whom I wrote my dissertation, is a good example of this.

Q: I'm thinking about the question of names, what someone mentioned about the names on coins, and also the importance of the list of subscribers' names you discussed in your paper. Is there something here having to do with the obsession with the name and with language? On the Ottoman side is there this much obsession with the Greekness of the name?

A: In New York the fur workers had a Greek local within the union, and in the 60s with the civil rights movement there was a trial to see whether this Greek local was engaging in discrimination based on language, which of course was illegal. One man from Rhodes was questioned about how they determined whether to let someone into the union or not, and he said he hadn't really thought about it, but if the man's name ended in "os," he was probably fine. I imagine that it's something similar in 18th century, too; people aren't thinking too hard about it, but if you push them against the wall it does come down to the name. I can trace it in certain personal histories, but it's all anecdotal.

Q: Do we have evidence from the Ottoman side, opinions on this process of Hellenization in the 18th century? I imagine they had reasons to go along with this Phanariot rule in Moldavia and so on, because there were worse options, after all. But I'm sure these things also had their dangers, at a time when nationalism is consolidating itself and so on. What do Ottoman texts have to say about this?

A: I don't think the Ottomans were really aware of the Hellenization; they were of course aware that the principalities had their own governance, but they were worried more about the fact that the Phanariots were conspiring with the Russians. That's what they're worried about, not the potential for mass movements.

Q: The Phanariots also facilitated a lot of the provisioning and so on in Istanbul, so they were seen in a positive light, and by the time they became dangerous, it was too late.

A: Yes, by that point they were so deeply enmeshed, there was no getting around them.

Q: In hindsight one can pinpoint a date for the issue becoming crucial: 1776, when the Ottomans lose the Black Sea monopoly, and the connection between the Russians and the Phanariots becomes a possibility, at least in the mercantile sense. You suddenly have Greek captains pulling Russian flags and skipping the Ottoman hold on grain shipments. As a theoretical point I would say you could start looking then.

Q: It seems like you're frustrated that the millet system cannot explain this process, and so you want to throw out the millet system entirely. But this is really an issue of the state being flexible, so why can't we see both of these "systems" as ways of the state being flexible, working in tandem, as parallels? This is another way of thinking about non-Muslims getting incorporated into the state that gets around the millet system. As for the janissaries, do you have a grander story for why this is happening, these two stories at once, one moving toward the periphery and one toward the center?

A: The theory is that the society is taking over the state, rather than the state engaging in a process of privatization. So the period from 1812-1821 is the high or low point of that, depending on how you want to define it. I still can't reconcile it with the question of incipient federalism and what's happening with the *ayans*, because I haven't quite made the jump from Istnabul to the provinces. That's the underlying argument I'm working towards: not that it was an indigenous modernism that got snuffed out in the 1820s, but that there were processes going on that got cut, when the new formal process starts with the *tanzimat*. I would argue that the underlying process is till persisting through the 1850s.

Q: I was thinking about the notion of Hellenization, and the changing of the names. How deep do you think this Hellenization went? Was it simply an issue of adopting Greek as a language of convenience? How Greek do these people become?

A: The few cases I know about, it does seem to have a psychological side as well; Vogorides, for instance, who wouldn't speak Bulgarian to anyone but his mother. Bulgarians of his generation were writing in Greek, they had a Bulgarian alphabet to use but didn't. I think there was a fairly large amount of buying into the system, because it carried a great deal of status with it.

Q: Jumping around to contemporary examples, I've run into many Albanians who have baptized their children into the Orthodox church, some have bought into the system, others just feel it's a good tactical move.

A: And in the Vogarides example, he says somewhere, "rythmizeis ti glossa sou," you adjust your language to who you're speaking to, you present what you have to present according to the situation. So there's always this question of how thorough the transformation is.

Q: Doesn't this have something to do with empire? Isn't this just the way things were done, in this empire as in others? The way to survive in empire was to cultivate the ability to cross boundaries, linguistic, social, cultural, all kinds.

Q: But that's different than becoming Hellenized, isn't it? In one paradigm it's crossing the boundaries into Hellenized existence and staying there, and the other it's crossing and recrossing.

A: Maybe Hellenization in that case can be explained by the fact that in one sense it's a kind of moving up: being Hellenized is being better than Bulgarian, for instance. And in the other case, it's a very different kind of practical multilingualism.

Q: And it seems to me that one of the main points of your paper was to say that it might be possible to think of confessional difference as somehow parallel to linguistic difference. In this world right now it's hard to think it might be possible, but perhaps it was in the period you're talking about.

A: I'm always walking on eggshells here, though. It's always tempting to not take religion seriously in this period, to dismiss it as true belief. So I don't really want to equate it exactly to language. And then there's the formal/informal opposition; there's still the formal ruling class, the *askerli*, but all these people who are ruled as opposed to rulers are usurping governance at this time, in all these different ways.