

Reşat Kasaba

5. STUDYING EMPIRES, STATES, AND PEOPLES: POLANYI, HOPKINS, AND OTHERS

After writing down some of my thoughts, I realized that a more appropriate title for this presentation would be “Portrait of a Sociologist as a Young Man.” For there is quite a bit of material in here that borders on confession, and on the whole it is somewhat more personal than the current title suggests. But then again I cannot think of a better way to reflect on Hopkins’s work than approaching it from a personal perspective. That is how he always approached his own work, after all, and he encouraged us to do so as well.

I would like to take you back to the fall of 1975 to Ankara, Turkey. At the time I was completing my last year at the Middle East Technical University, about to graduate with a Bachelor of Science in Economics and Statistics. Our university was one of the best in the country, and the program we were in was quickly acquiring the status of being on the “cutting edge” in the fast-changing environment of Turkey. We were, in other words, well-prepared to take on the challenges of the “real world.” At least we thought we were.

Then during that last year things changed. During that academic

year, several recent Ph.D.'s and Ph.C.'s (ABDs) arrived in Ankara armed (loaded) with the latest books, articles, ideas, debates, and discussions in the social sciences. Among them was Çağlar Keyder, who was coming from Berkeley by way of Paris. In a matter of months, a group of maybe ten or so of us became fully conversant in the new and alluring language of French structuralism, dependency, unequal exchange, accumulation on a world scale, and yes, the modern world-system. Coming at a particularly volatile time in Turkish history, our experience in 1975-76 was truly phenomenal. All of a sudden we had gained access to a vocabulary that seemed to give us some way of thinking about the world that surrounded us. It looked as if we could now discuss the questions of development and underdevelopment, capitalism, socialism ... in a new way that promised to be very fruitful in resolving the unproductive debates that were consuming all the waking hours of politically active students. There was such an urgency in our debates that you would think the fate of the world depended on finding out whether Latin America was feudal or capitalist; whether and how the labor theory of value could be used to explain unequal exchange; how exactly the ideological instance was linked with the other instances of a mode of production; how relative was the state's autonomy, etc., etc. In short, we thought there were answers in these debates for the many problems Turkey was facing.

At the same time, we were very much aware that this was at best the beginning of something very big. We had leapfrogged to the most contemporary debates with a background that included lots of economics, mathematics, and even architecture but very little in the way of history, philosophy, or social sciences in general. We could tell you how one should "read *Capital*" but *we* had not really read the thing. (Since then I found out that Althusser never read it past the first volume either!) Our knowledge of Weber was second or third hand; yet we "knew" that he was wrong; even our familiarity with the *Modern World-System* consisted of a very thorough reading of the last chapter ("Theoretical Reprise") and a quick skimming of the rest of the 344 pages and 1343 footnotes. (We knew it was significant that it came at the end but we skipped the beginning, nevertheless.)

So even though our university years were coming to a close, some of us became quickly convinced that we just couldn't drop what we had started and we certainly could not be content with a job in the fledgling private sector, in an architectural firm, or a position in an agency of the colossal state bureaucracy. We had to continue and build on what we had started in that short year in Turkey. But where? It did not take long to find out that there weren't that many economics departments where one could do this kind of thing.

It was at that crucial point in my life that I ran into Çağlar Keyder, literally, in the streets of Ankara in the early fall of 1976. In the middle of our conversation that day, he mentioned a university in upstate New York where some people he knew were starting a graduate program in sociology. He mentioned Wallerstein's name and also scribbled down Hopkins's name, saying he was "the main person" I had to contact. "The rest," I am tempted to say, "is history."

In some ways, coming to Binghamton and eventually enrolling in the Ph.D. program in the Sociology Department was the most fitting corollary/sequel to what I had already started in Ankara. But more significantly, it was a departure; perhaps not a radical break, but movement onto a different—dare I say, a higher?—plane. And ultimately it did involve a fairly radical reorientation in my thinking as well.

You see, our initial readings had prompted us to think that we had seen "the light." We knew who was right and who was wrong; and we knew where the answers were; even if we did not know *what* they were. Sometimes, when I look back at those years, I can't help but think of myself and some of my friends as resembling missionaries determined to spread the structuralist, Althusserian faith. Upon entering the program in Binghamton, however, and especially upon meeting Hopkins, one thing became immediately clear: There was no God, and there was no heaven, and there were very few unequivocal answers. From our very first meeting with Hopkins, we were encouraged not to close but to open our minds. We were encouraged not to find answers to all the mysteries that surround us but to generate intelligent questions (*queries*, Hopkins called them) so that we could deal with

them collectively.

For example, when I first told him that I might want to switch departments (for initially I was in economics) and move full-time to sociology, Hopkins engaged me in a lengthy discussion on the substantive and formal meanings of rationality and economics and suggested that I read Polanyi to gain some insights into this. After reading parts of *The Great Transformation*, I went back and told Hopkins that I wanted to follow up our discussions on economics by writing a paper on labor theory of value. Obviously, I had not quite got what either Hopkins or Polanyi was saying! This was one of the few times when Hopkins gently but stubbornly steered me away from what he thought would be a colossal waste of time. His words, as recounted by him several years later, were that “there were matters of rather more consequence to worry about.”

On the third try, when I had decided I was interested in some historical work that had something to do with the Ottoman Empire, Hopkins was supportive. (Maybe a better way of putting this would be to say that my interest in such historical work had been carefully cultivated by him and by Wallerstein over the preceding year). He went over with me, at length, his impressions and readings on Ankole, Uganda; and then he suggested that I read some more of Polanyi (this time the essays in *Trade and Markets in the Early Empires*) and also Ibn Khaldun. The common theme of our discussion of Ankole, the Ottoman Empire, Polanyi, and Ibn Khaldun was that I needed to think relationally in figuring out my topic. If I wanted to understand the Ottoman Empire, I needed to study the historical constitution, reproduction, and dissolution of the relations among the central and local administrators, landlords and peasants, capital and labor, etc. Focusing on the inherent characteristic of some institutions, cultural peculiarities of this or that people, or the articulation of the modes of production would be of little help in such an endeavor.

Here is how Hopkins puts it:

We know that in some way in the nineteenth century some of the surplus in kind produced by Ottoman peasants and appropriated by their

landlords (as tribute, rent, and so forth) eventually wound up, in the form of Francs on deposit, in ledgers of European capitalists as profits; but we do not know theoretically the circuits through which such appropriated surplus became transformed into money capital, let alone empirically the relational networks involved, the intervening commissions, or the overall estimated amounts. (1982, 18)

Yes, this could be frustrating. Just as we were thinking we were on the right track, we were made to realize our limitations. How much we did not know; how little we had to justify our self-confidence. Yet, this also had the effect of liberating us from some of the rigid approaches that had dominated the studies of the Ottoman Empire for some time.

There was, of course, the much maligned modernization perspective. It was particularly difficult to steer oneself away from modernization if one was interested in the Ottoman Empire/Turkey. All the major figures in this school of thought—from Daniel Lerner to Cyril Blac, and from S.N. Eisenstadt to Samuel Huntington—had written about Turkey. They all held Turkey up as a successful example of how a society that was steeped in tradition had succeeded in shaking off its history and taking giant steps towards modernity. This might be a flattering story but it did not tell us much about either the Ottoman Empire or Turkey; except to say how the former was NOT like the West and the latter WAS (becoming so). Like all models that insist on homogeneity, cohesion, and similarity, modernization could not explain social change; most of its categories were fixed, and the researcher was expected to substantiate these categories and their underlying assumptions.

The other approach that had gained some popularity was the modes of production literature. Now, as I mentioned earlier, this was the venue that originally attracted me and many others of my generation to the study of social change. But as soon as one recovers from the initial excitement this literature generates, it does not take long to see that one could not really do much with it. (I feel the same way about poststructuralist writings.) In this literature, the main debate revolved around the question of what was and was not feudal/capitalist in Europe. As for the rest of the world, the question

was not that different from the one that underlay the inquiries of the modernization theorists. Authors were debating whether Latin America or India was similar or different from the West. If you wanted to say similar, you argued for the feudalism thesis; if you wanted to say different, you argued for Asiatic mode of production. It is not difficult to see that here too the answers were already pre-circumscribed. And most disturbingly, there are few if any questions. (I still remember how “shocked” I was when, at a conference, Wallerstein accused some structuralist presenter of letting in the Parsonian wolf through the back door!)

So, for Hopkins, the point of studying the Ottoman Empire was not “proving” or “verifying” a closed system of thought against a set of data that exists out there. Nor was it a matter of learning about this particular “case” so that one could compare it with other “cases.” (He wanted to limit the use of the term “case” to wine or beer.) And Hopkins’s program certainly was not the place where you could pursue knowledge for knowledge’s sake! So, what was the point?

The way I see it, the answer to this question had three parts:

First of all, Hopkins found the questions that were generated by topics that had to do with places like Ethiopia or Jamaica, Pakistan or South Africa, South India or western Anatolia exciting because each one of these provided a different entry into *the world* as it was *theoretically and historically constituted*. The point was not one of showing how different or similar these places were; the point was that they were all constituents of the same singular world-system. By studying such zones, we could acquire a better grasp of the world of which we are all part.

The second part of the answer is related to something I mentioned earlier, that is, the importance of approaching these topics *relationally*. But one had to keep in mind that none of these relations was symmetrical. They all involved unequal distribution of resources and rewards and clear and determinate power relations. (We did this a lot earlier than Foucault.) But unlike the structuralists and poststructuralists, Hopkins did not shy away from taking a side, and he insisted on our moral duty to do so. Hence, the implications

of what we studied for questions of gender, race, ethnicity, and the broader interstate relations of imperialism were always at the center of his concerns. We find similar concerns in Polanyi's writings when he says, "Uncomplaining acceptance of the reality of society gives man indomitable courage and strength to remove all removable injustice and unfreedom" (Polanyi 1957: 258B).

Thirdly, knowing the world in this way (I mean relationally) meant recognizing the many forces whose combinations have made up different "moments" in history. Knowing these forces and their relations, in turn, made it possible to ask questions of the "what if" variety, to think about the "road not taken," or to contemplate historical alternatives. This again is not an idle exercise but goes to the heart of what we understand from history. Hopkins thought that Weber had it exactly right when he said that the object of history could not be the domain of necessity, because history "considers events from the standpoint of becoming" (Weber 1949: 165). Broadening our knowledge of the world in a dynamic fashion and figuring out the historical alternatives as they relate to one's particular research also had an activist import. Because, by analogy, having a rich understanding of our present would allow us to conceive historical alternatives as potential futures. Our knowledge would empower and even compel us to act on these alternatives; to shape them, facilitate them, or even prevent some of them. Like the previous point, this again had a very clear moral content.

In a memo to the Fernand Braudel Center Planning Group (Dec. 6, 1985), Hopkins writes about this very issue. He starts off by saying that he finds both evolutionary notions and Braudel's *longue durée* too politically neutered to be useful in helping to undergird active theoretical work. He continues:

[W]e conceived the demise of the [capitalist world-system] principally in terms of capital's limits and too little in terms of socialism's displacing rise. How to conceive of distinguishing, in the garden of social invention in which we live, the crops from the weeds when each first shows itself (since our acting at such times may bear on which subsequently grows)? Or what grows as capitalism demises and of what grows, which are

pulled, which watered, and fertilized? (Hopkins 1985)

What better point can there be to end with than this quotation where we have a vision of our teacher in the garden of social invention worrying about the weeds and other unwanted growth. Hopkins has always been convinced that scholars have to be able to distinguish between the good flowers and the bad ones and to act so that the good ones are protected and nourished. This is what I learned from him and this is what I try to convey to my students.

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