Factories Against the Clock: Time-discipline and Resistance in the Silk Reeling Factories of Bursa 1850-1915
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Factories Against the Clock: Time-discipline and Resistance in the Silk Reeling Factories of Bursa 1850–1915

by
ZEYNEP ECEM PULAS
ABSTRACT

What can the study of different regimes of time discipline in factories and deviations in their measurement tell us about the relationship between capital, labor and the state authority in the Ottoman Empire? In this article, I will answer this question by analysing the official letters and petitions of the Bursa Silk workers to explore how “watchless” people understand and negotiate new time patterns emerged from mechanized production. I argue that the mechanized factory production did not result in a clock-measured, regular working day up until the early twentieth century in silk factories of Bursa. These irregular labor patterns, however, cannot be explained by the immature scale of the industry or lack of labor rationalization. The answer lies at the heart of the working day: such irregularity enabled employers to increase, to say it in Marxist terms, the absolute surplus value. Furthermore, I will argue that the demand for regimented work hours came not from the capitalists, and it was not the Ottoman government’s top-down reforms. Rather, the demand to curb all-invading, irregular work hours came from the young female laborers who were deemed the least “time-conscious”. In this light, the story of Bursa decenters the male-dominated view in the global history of economy and labor and adds nuance to our understanding of the temporalities of capitalism.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION

How was the Ottoman Empire’s incorporation into the Europe-dominated capitalist economy achieved during the first wave of globalization between 1850-1914? As it was the norm in other middle-sized low-income states like India, some of the small-scale domestic producers were wiped out as a result of the fall of economic barriers. Yet the Ottoman response to this ever more economically interconnected world was to transform its manufacturing industry from male-dominated, guild- and urban-focused production to female-dominated, unorganized, spatially mixed production. Following the Anglo-Turkish Commercial Convention of Balta Limanı in 1838, in return for European military support to curb the Egyptian governor Muhammad Ali’s march to the imperial capital, an influx of cheap machine-made English cotton yarn into local markets transformed the main textile manufacturing centre of the Empire, Bursa. While cotton manufacturing became less profitable, it did not mean a total collapse of the city’s industry. The cotton industry was soon replaced by raw silk production—the process of unravelling the silk cocoon—since profits in the silk sector were more substantial. Following developments in manufacturing technologies in Lyon, French reeling machinery was adopted by the private enterprises in the Empire. Ultimately the small Western Anatolian city became a supplier of raw and semi-finished silk for European factories, chiefly in France. Hundreds of smaller-scale filatures and a dozen factories mushroomed in the city as a result.

In such a scenario, one may expect export-oriented large-scale raw silk production to upend the old work rhythms marked by the sunrise and sunset and to cultivate new ones where the changing wage labor patterns were integrated into rigid clock time. The clock time also championed the new work ethic characterized by the

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2 Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Renata Holod, Antillio Petruccioli, and André Raymond, eds. “At The

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4 The word filature comes originally from French and is used to describe both the act of silk spinning and silk factories in Bursa in the documents of the era.
close relationship between time and monetary value. As Karl Marx pointed out, there is a necessarily temporal dimension to how capitalist production occurs—it requires workers and the material to be in the right place at the right time, “with military uniformity, regulated by stroke of the clock times.”

This was elaborated further by E. P. Thompson in his classic essay, where he argued that in England, the industrial revolution paved the way to a transition from task orientation to timed labor, from irregular work to the regular, clock precise, and rationally organized factory work.

These external factors, coupled with the preachings of the moral value of work and productivity, and the Puritan work ethic, gradually altered the workers’ sense of time. This resulted in not only the internalization of clock time discipline by the workers, but also an apprehension of time as a commodity: time became an object of bargaining power between the worker and the employer.

The debates that E. P. Thompson opened about the historical fusion of industrial capitalism, the spread of clocks, and internalization of time discipline in Britain were both extended and challenged. Some scholars argued that this shift in time senses progressed neither linearly nor uniformly. They claimed that natural times of the day and night and seasons retained their importance in people’s lives, and clock time awareness in fact existed prior to industrialization. These critiques are a good reminder of the relative influence of culture in shaping and promoting clock consciousness, as opposed to the solely economic and industrial aspects of the capitalist mode of production. However, although adding nuance to the histories of time consciousness, the research of these scholars was more focused on the multiplicity of time senses and of time disciplines, and less on the process whereby clock time became hegemonic, which is what, in fact, Thompson was concerned with.

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Some economic and social historians have also directed their attention to other parts of the world, such as the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, to test the extent of the new capitalist time consciousness in different sociocultural contexts. For example, Thomas C. Smith holds that Japanese workers had easily sensitized themselves to the new capitalist time economy in factories, and time disciplining workers was not an important component of Japanese industrialization. In Tokugawa Japan, peasants’ pre-industrial time keeping habits resulting from their agricultural economy complied with the new time economy in factories. Smith argued that the Japanese peasant attached a high moral value to time and its productive use, which was already appropriate for an industrial mode of production. Analyzing the export-oriented cotton mills of Colonial Bombay, Hatice Yıldız similarly claims that mechanized production did not result in a radical change to irregular, task-oriented working patterns. The capitalist employers in Bombay’s mills did not endorse fixed hours of labor despite further industrial development well into the twentieth century. She concludes that in the Bombay “business model”, the terms of working life were shaped by fluctuations in demand, which gave mill owners the upper hand in adapting themselves to the volatile markets while contributing to precarity and instability for the workers. Yıldız contends that workers demanded more structured working hours to resist the working conditions in the mills and thus “asserted the importance of clocks and calendars against the oppressive


10 Smith, “Peasant Time and Factory Time in Japan”.


ambiguity of factory time."14

I argue that Thompson described the shift from one time system to the other as by no means easy or one directional, and as such, his different conceptualizations of time should be thought of as overlapping, rather than one subsuming the other. Thompson describes in detail how English workers’ time was expropriated by factory owners, showing that rules regarding time-discipline were continuously refashioned and negotiated. He quotes a Dundee factory worker: “...in reality, there were no regular hours: masters and managers did with us as they liked. The clocks at the factories were often put forward in the morning and back at night, and instead of being instruments for the measurement of time, they were used as cloaks for cheatery and oppression”.15 In the Ottoman context as well, labor patterns were elastic because owners kept them as such to have the capacity to maneuver better in an unpredictable market. Given that the cost of labor power was low, and unionization was almost non-existent, owners could gain more from a lack of “time discipline” than from it.

In this paper, I demonstrate that the case of Bombay shows strong parallels with the Ottoman silk industry of Bursa. I argue that the mechanized factory production did not result in a clock-measured, regular working day in the Ottoman silk reeling factories of Bursa until the early twentieth century. Employers relied on new disciplinary practices to control the female workers via bells, spatial reorganizations, and male overseers, all of which differed from small scale ateliers. Meanwhile, the actual hours of employment in these filatures themselves were unregulated: the workdays in the factories continued to fluctuate between 8 and 16 hours, and varied from summer to winter. These irregular labor patterns, however, cannot be explained solely by the immature scale of the industry. A clock-measured, rationally organized work model did not take place in the silk factories because factory owners wanted to respond to the changing market demand more alertly. Moreover, this irregularity enabled employers to increase, in Marxist terms, the absolute surplus value. By extending the workday as much as they could, the hyper-exploitation of the cheap female labor subsidized profits even further. As I will show, however, these workers soon learned the value of time, and started to fight for their working day. They were conscious of themselves as people who were being exploited and whose interests were different from those of their employers.

In July 1908, the thirty-year autocratic rule of Abdülhamid II ended with the restoration of the constitution and the establishment of the Young Turk regime. What followed was sweeping labor strikes across the empire that shocked both

15 Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” 68.
capitalists and the Ottoman state. The euphoric aftermath of the so-called “Young Turk Revolution” and “Declaration of Freedom” provided a liberal political climate for workers from all sectors to demand their rights and higher wages. Bursa silk workers soon joined the strike wave. After a series of petitions and letters sent to officials that did not prompt change, 6000 silk workers, mainly women, took to the streets of Bursa to demand more clearly defined work hours and higher wages in 1910. These workers not only became aware of the levels of exploitation they endured, but they also resisted these ambiguous hours of labor. They emphasized clearly defined work schedules, thus weaponizing the hours of the clock in their struggle against the ambiguous employers’ time. In other words, time-discipline became their very symbol of oppression and resistance simultaneously.

Research on the Ottoman temporal regime is still limited and has fallen heavily on the “watch owning” middle class and Ottoman bureaucratic elite. Scholars of the Middle East have drawn similarities between government offices, military compounds, and schools, as well as what Foucault called the “docility projects” of the eighteenth-century, yet a separate study on time discipline in the Ottoman factory has not been carried out. By focusing on Bursa’s silk industry, this paper aims to fill this gap. Since the Ottoman state showed little interest in documenting the labor conditions in the empire, I will be drawing on a mixture of unofficial sources, namely foreign and local newspaper articles, foreign travelers’ accounts, and secondary sources. Of this evidence base, the only piece produced by the workers themselves is a single letter that was sent to the newspaper İştirak. The rest is produced by a class different from the workers. This is a shared concern by many historians globally who are dealing with subaltern groups, since archives are by and large silent to their experiences. This paper will nevertheless attempt to recover and favor workers’ experiences in the factory in discussion of capitalist time regime.

18 In the eighteenth century, European armies employed a combination of control and surveillance techniques to impose docility on their soldiers both “in economic terms of utility” and “in political terms of obedience”. Through repetitions of practice and continuous impositions of strict time schedules on the body, soldiers adapted to these disciplinary techniques and became capable of acting without them. Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 135-156.
This paper has three main objectives. First, I will argue that the mechanization of the silk reeling industry in Bursa did not result in clock-measured work patterns. Although the use of machinery is “a powerful supplement to regulating pace of work”\(^1\) that creates habits and customs, in this case social relations molded the technology rather than vice versa. A flexible approach to measuring working time enabled employers to keep wages down and adapt to a highly unstable silk market. Therefore, employers prioritized flexibility over discipline. Secondly, I will show that both Abdülhamid II and the Young Turk opposition were mutually reluctant to interfere in time regulations in the factory despite, paradoxically, preaching punctuality and crafting the image of the hard-working Ottoman worker in public discourse. Lastly, I will show that the demand for regimented work hours came not from the capitalists, and neither from the Ottoman government’s top-down reforms. Rather, the demand to curb all-invading, irregular work hours came from the young female laborers who were deemed the least “time-conscious”.

With or without mechanical time pieces and observance of clock-time, capitalists were always on the hunt for reasons to extend the boundaries of the working day. To cite Marx, that is how absolute surplus value is obtained: by increasing the amount of time worked per worker in an accounting period.\(^{20}\) Thompson too, coming from the Marxist school, described time-management in the factory as a means of exploitation. The exploitation consists of the employer paying the worker for only a certain part of their working time, keeping the rest without compensation. The length of the working day, therefore, is an ever-contested issue between the worker and the employer—the proletariat and the capitalist, in Marx’s terms—and, thus, it sufficiently explains workers’ resistance. In what follows, I will demonstrate that the time management in the silk reeling factories was shaped by the strategic decisions of the employers.

1. SILK REELING IN BURSA

“Moments are the elements of profit” — Marx quoting from an 1860 report by one of the British government’s factory inspector\(^{21}\)

Sixty years before E. P. Thompson’s seminal work “Time, Work-discipline and Industrial Capitalism” was published, a letter was sent to İştirak, a socialist newspaper published in the Ottoman Empire. In the letter dated 1909, the workers describe the rigorous working conditions in the factory: “The working day starting at night and finishing at one o’clock

\(^1\) Thompson, “Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism,” 82.

\(^{20}\) Marx, Capital, 445.

\(^{21}\) Ibid, 226.
the next day is only interrupted by a 20-minute meal break,” they convene. They meal break passes so quickly that they “cannot even swallow their first bite of bread.” They demanded a reduction in the 16-hour working day and explained the hardships of working the night shift as women. They further describe the verbal and physical abuse the female workers receive from their male overseers. As soon as the factory bell commences ringing, calling them back to work, the bell sound “makes their heart somber and shreds their dignity into pieces.”

The letter concludes with signatures of ‘five thousand young women working in Bursa’s silk mills’.

Thompson argued that large-scale factory production, which was facilitated by the Industrial Revolution, altered the organization and value of time in the first generation of English workers around the end of the eighteenth century. These workers from farming backgrounds were “task-oriented”, meaning that their work rhythm was in harmony with that of nature’s. In other words, it lacked urgency and allowed for interruption. Like “milking the cows” or “harvesting before thunderstorms set in,” this work was marked by a sense of necessity for executing that task. The absence of clear demarcation between work and leisure was, however, not suitable for the mechanized working rhythm of the factory. In fact, it was seen as wasteful. The necessity of straightforward time-measurement with mechanical clocks was more convenient for the mechanized factory where “the time meant employer’s money.”

The early proliferation of public clocks and general diffusion of timepieces started prior to the appearance of the factory. Nevertheless, factories, especially mills, became the sites where this time discipline was first scrupulously put into force. Thompson adds that the Protestant work ethic also overlapped with industrial capitalism’s demand for the synchronization of labor. Therefore, mechanical clocks not only became the harbinger of industrial capitalism, but also, with the help of Protestant ethics, clocks became the very tools for disciplining the self. A greater sense of time-thrift and a more exacting time discipline thus spread by word of mouth from the capitalist employers to the workers: in Thompson’s words, “by the division of labor; the supervision

22 ‘Hayat ve hakikat,’ İştirak, 2 Apr. 1909 (20 Mart 1325), 25.
23 Ibid, 26.
24 Ibid, 25.
of labor; fines; bells and clocks; money incentives; preachings and schoolings; the suppression of fairs and sports—new labor habits were formed, and a new time-discipline was imposed.”

In order to understand the alternative path of capitalist development in the Ottoman Empire, we need to extend and enrich Thompson’s theoretical framework. The Ottoman female workers were abhorred by the nerve-wrecking sound of the factory bell and the inhumane precision of a twenty-minute lunch break, yet the seemingly clock-precise mealtimes did not follow the same kind of time-regimented workdays in their factory. Since the industry was very precarious and heavily dependent on the European market demand, work was organized on the principle of flexibility, meaning whenever there was demand, the workers were put to work for long uninterrupted hours. Factory operators, while adopting new disciplinary techniques, did not want to formalize the length of the workday. Factories in Bursa worked longer hours in summer, between fourteen and sixteen hours, and shorter hours in winter, with no overtime payments. The Ottoman government neither cooperated with workers nor with the local government of Bursa to pass any legislation to set work days.

The silk reeling industry experienced a roller-coaster pattern for most of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. When the silkworm epidemics devastated European raw silk production in the first half of the nineteenth century, the industry turned to Ottoman markets. Sustained by rising Western demand, the industry continued to expand, and by 1855 the Bursa region contained some 2000 factory-based reels. This early boom lasted until the 1850s and was followed by a sharp burst in the global silk market. However, as soon as the silkworm diseases came to plague the Ottoman silk industry, many mill operators went bankrupt. In 1869, the newly opened Suez Canal and the subsequent entry of East Asian silk into the market caused a further fall in silk prices. Nevertheless, Bursa’s silk reeling industry recorded a significant growth in the late nineteenth century. According to the British Console Mailing’s report on Bursa, 9000 workers were employed at that time, making up twelve percent of the local population.

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28 Ibid, 90.
32 Quataert, Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500-1950, 105-7.
33 Türkcan, “İngiliz. Konsolosluk
booms and bursts, the industry was overcome by uncertainty even when the market was stable. It remained an exceptionally volatile industry, a risky investment for the capitalist, and provided low paying, irregular, and undependable jobs for workers.  

Exploitation of female labor, availability of home-produced raw material (cocoons), and vast European demand all aided the establishment of mechanized production in Bursa. By 1913 there were 41 reeling factories using steam power.  

Mechanization of the reeling process was pioneered by Swiss and French entrepreneurs, who were soon joined by Ottoman subjects.  

Mechanized silk production, due to its spatial characteristics such as gathering a high number of workers under one roof and demanding a regularity of work and repetition, required a unique type of time discipline. Scottish traveler and writer Charles Macfarlane described this new industrial time discipline in Bursa factories as significant for natives to learn some degree of regularity and orderliness. “Usually,” he writes, natives are “busy for one day and idle for three or four, or [they] work very hard for one hour and loiter and saunter for three.” This regularity Macfarlane espoused for was in line with what Thompson described as the transition from task work to timed labor. 

To keep the expenditure per worker as low as possible, factory owners increasingly relied on the women-only cheap labor force. With such risky market prospects at hand, mill owners preferred young girls from the lower strata of the Ottoman society who were willing to work for extremely low wages. These young girls lived in dormitory-like quarters and were subject to harsh disciplinary conditions reminiscent of nineteenth-century Japan or Victorian England. After the rapid growth of factory-building in the first half of

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34 Quataert, Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500-1950, 106.
the nineteenth century, the industry suffered from overcapacity in the second half. Mills typically operated for fewer than 200 days a year.

Ottoman silk reeling factories were distinct from small scale or home-produced silk in terms of their physical separation of the workplace from living areas, the mechanical pace, and stricter discipline of work they imposed on workers. Yet mechanization did not play a key role in creating temporal experiences in the factory. It was the employers’ choices when to put workers to work, and when to turn the machines on and off. The Ottoman example shows that industrial capitalism became the major profiteer in the absence of clock “time discipline”, and it benefited greatly from the malleable work hours and the precarity rustling from them. This flexibility was just as crucial for success as the low cost of, specifically female, labor power in Bursa. As Timothy Mitchell has argued, capitalism survived, parasitically, without having a singular logic or essence.41

It is not surprising to see that the irregular character of labor patterns carried on well into the twentieth century. More than a decade later, another letter was sent to a newspaper in 1935.42 This time, the workers from a weaving factory of the young Turkish Republic complained about the absence of “a factory clock that is similar to the ones in European factories”, or, in fact, “any time piece that shows the time accurately in the factory.”43 Workers demanded a whistle to blow to mark the end of the workday since they had no option but to rely on the factory owners’ “broken clock”.44 In the light of this example, it is fair to say the actual working conditions of the workers and the ambiguity of the workday remained little changed from the Young Turk era to the Turkish Republic. Once again, the question persisted: how were the workers supposed to reckon with time inside the factory?

2. IDEOLOGICAL RIVALRIES ON TIME

“In Turkey however, few people require to catch the trains or steamboats: time-tables are also as often ignored as consulted; and punctuality is not a virtue cultivated by the Oriental.”
— Lucy Mary Jane Garnett in Turkish life in town and country, 1904

While European officials and

43 “Haber,” r, 1.
44 Ibid, 1.
travelers pointed to the supposedly inherent lack of punctuality exhibited by Ottomans, their improvidence and lethargic work habits, and their apparent indifference to time, Islamic societies had a lively time awareness due to the tight rapport between their daily rituals and the sun’s movement through the sky.\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Alaturka saat}, also known as \textit{gurubi} (literally meaning relating to the sunset) was the indigenous hour system calculated by the hours from sunrise to sunset. By this method, clocks would be reset at sunset every day, and as such, time was determined by the movement of the sun. The \textit{alaturka saat} (clock) divided both day and night into 12 hours each. Since the duration of sunlight varies with the time of the year, however, the day hours and the night hours were not only of unequal length, but also changed according to season. As opposed to the \textit{alaturka saat}, which lacked precision, European mean time, known as \textit{alafranga}, divided day and night into an equal length of 24 hours throughout the year.\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Alaturka saat} persisted until the fall of the Empire in 1923, but mean time did not surpass the old temporal hour system until it was finally abolished in 1926.\textsuperscript{48}

A closer analysis of the multitude of temporal regimes prevailed in the Empire reveal a wider ideological rivalry. The old and the new temporal orders, \textit{alaturka} time and \textit{alafranga}, represented different values in the struggle to bring the Ottoman Empire in line with European modernity. The rivalry between Abdülhamid II and his discontent Young Turks was also reflected in the debates on time.\textsuperscript{49} While the former endeavored to amalgamate a unique Ottoman way to modernize the “irrational” \textit{alaturka} system from within, the latter advocated for the abandonment of the indigenous hour system and a sharp break with old traditions. However, one recurrent form of preaching emerged in both camps simultaneously: the discourse on the moralized concepts of work and productivity. Regardless of the significance attributed to time thrift and time discipline, the Ottoman government failed to take any action to regulate the flexible time-related strategies in the factories.

Recent studies reveal that time discipline and schedules were put into use in schools and public


\textsuperscript{49} Wishnitzer, \textit{Reading Clocks, Alla Turca: Time and Society in the Late Ottoman Empire}, 164-5.
service institutions from the first Tanzimat laws (1839) onwards.\textsuperscript{50} During the era of Abdülhamid II (1876-1909), however, a new approach to time became more prominent, as time regulation extended from bureaucracy to public life. The Hamidian era witnessed extensive bureaucratization with the goal of creating the ideal Ottoman citizen: hardworking and loyal to the throne. One of the decrees of Abdülhamid II was that provincial cities should build a clock tower in his name.\textsuperscript{51} Clock towers were generally built close to the government buildings or in the main square of the cities. These clocks showed both alaturka and alafranga time. In Adana, for example, the clock tower chimed every half hour and at the beginning and the end of the working day of public officials. They were built not only to showcase the hegemonic and symbolic powers of the sultan in the provinces, but also to supervise the government officials. This demonstrates a clear intention to time-discipline the Ottoman bureaucracy and instill punctuality, as well as to organize the daily life of the city dwellers with respect to their working day.\textsuperscript{52} In using alaturka and alafranga hours simultaneously, the palace as well as the intellectuals of the era accepted that the European system was necessary for interacting with the outside world, yet the abolition of the indigenous alaturka hour system was not on their political agenda. Avner Wishnitzer argues that the new time-related values such as punctuality, productivity, and efficiency, which were considered essential qualities for progressing toward European-style modernity, were cultivated relying on the alaturka saat.\textsuperscript{53}

The concern for synthesizing the old and the new as well as the synchronous use of the alaturka and alafranga time was soon discredited by the political opposition of the Hamidian order.\textsuperscript{54} Known as the Young Turks, these men were trained in the new modernized, time regimented schools and military of the Hamidian era, and eventually


\textsuperscript{52} Uluengin, “Secularizing Anatolia Tick by Tick,” 20.

\textsuperscript{53} Wishnitzer, Reading Clocks, 151-152.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 167.
became the critics of the very regime “which taught them the importance of time.”55 The acceleration generated by the steamer, railway, and telegraph lines was not only something to be thrilled by for the Ottomans, but it also became a yardstick which they measured themselves against. Now civilization not only had a place—Europe—but also a time, according to which local time appeared to be both slow and primordial. As soon as they came to power, the desire to follow an Ottoman path to modernity was replaced by a stronger emphasis on efficiency and industriousness, and they weaponized the new concept of mechanical time against what they saw as the failed modernization of the Hamidian regime. Their new agenda of timed labor involved a cultural assault on old temporal practices and notions, combined with an increased emphasis on time-thrift and efficiency.56

As the nineteenth century drew to a close, time became a political matter. The discourse of laziness was used by both camps against their political adversaries because it was deemed as one of the major causes that lay at the core of the empire’s problems.57

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57 Melis Hafez, “The Lazy, the Idle, the Industrious: Discourse and Time disciplining Ottoman officials and scribes, as well as creating “a watch holding” elite which would be loyal to the throne, was at the heart of the Hamidian project, as well as that of the Young Turks. There was seemingly only one exception to the dictate of the clock-measured workday: the factory owners were not among those eager to apply time discipline to their factories. Time discipline was therefore not always imposed from a top-down approach, and could instead come from below, as regulating time in the factory was overlooked by both the Sultan and the Young Turks.

While the tension was increasing in Bursa between the workers and the factory owners, an article entitled “Amele Davasi, Acaba Onlar Vatanin Üvey Evlatlari mi?” (The Workers’ Case, Are They Step Children of the Fatherland?) was published in İştirak on 14 May 1910. The author pointed out that the workers had been continuously and ruthlessly exploited, despite the restoration of the Constitution. It further noted the indifference coming from the new constitutional monarchy that “came to power with promises of liberty, equality, fraternity” but proved ineffective in making a real change in the conditions of laborers: “otherwise the enemy of constitutional monarchy will laugh if you neglect the rights of the poor and
aggrieved workers as was done by Hamid [Sultan Abdülhamid II] and his accomplices.”

In fact, the Ottoman government failed to address the workers’ demands for a fair working wage and regulated working hours. The factory owners, to their own advantage perpetuating the exploitation in the silk industry, continued allowing for harsh working conditions and low wages. Regardless of the utmost significance attributed to time thrift and discipline, the Ottoman government never took any action to regulate the open-ended working day in the factories. It was the workers themselves who petitioned for more regulated work hours and concrete work schedules. Analysing the link between the social transformation of time and the urban industrial labor in Bursa thus reveals that it was not always the Ottoman watch-holding elite who pushed for time discipline.

As such, the contest between different temporalities was not only bound to the factory, but it revealed a further political rivalry between two camps, with differing perspectives as to how to “catch up with Europe.” Once the language advocating hard work and rejecting idleness became hegemonic, both Abdülhamid II and the Young Turks used this discourse to eliminate their political adversaries. The conflict about the clock hours was thus reflected not just in the relationship between the workers and the employers, but between the Hamidian regime and Young Turks. Yet both political camps refrained from regulating the time of the factory, since they wanted to encourage free enterprise and foreign investment capital. This negligence soon resulted in the mobilization of workers and a bottom-up politicization of time.

3. FACTORIES AGAINST THE CLOCK

“Today the masses are showing great unruliness... They are going too far with their economic demands, such demands that even old European socialists would not dare to make...” — From an article named “Strikes” published in the official Young Turk newspaper

In the early years of the twentieth century, the main demand of the workers across the empire was to set negotiable time arrangements for labor against the ambiguous, arduous, and all-demanding time structure of the factories. Flexible time arrangements in the Bursa silk filatures blurred the boundaries between “free” and “working” time to meet the demands of the

Industrious,” 8.

58 Satenik Derderiyan, “Amele davası” İştirak, I, 12, 1 Mayıs 1326 (14 May 1910), 184.
59 Hafez, “The Lazy, the Idle, the

60 “Grevler” [Strikes], İttihat ve Terakki [Newspaper of the Committee of Union and Progress], sayi 14, 24 Agustos 1324 [6 September 1908].
capital. As indicated in the previous sections, factories imposed a rigorous discipline onto workers. In the meantime, workers were struck by the indifference to time regulations in the factory, which was highly inconsistent with the hegemonic discourse of time thrift and punctuality. They did not wish to toil in factories “from the sunset until the sunrise, from the night until the next day afternoon.” 61 The Ottoman government concluded that any change in the length of the working day or an increase in wages would result in a total loss of investors “in a developing economy like theirs.” 62 All in all, these workers were informed by the labor strikes that swept the empire, and developed an acute sense of time as an economic currency and a language of resistance.

After the “Declaration of Freedom” in 1908, workers started continuously petitioning the central administration of Bursa, which was responsible for mediating between the workers and factory owners. The local government in return sent numerous telegrams and letters to the Ottoman Ministry of Internal Affairs (Dahiliye Nezareti) and the Ministry of Commerce and Public Works (Ticaret ve Nafia Nezareti). These letters were full of complaints about long working hours and low payments of the silk industry in Bursa. In one letter dated 3 September 1909, workers conveyed that they were paid the same amount of daily wage after being made to work longer than 15 hours. 63 Workers repeatedly mentioned that they were deprived of light and suffered from insufficient rest in the factory. 64 This series of letters and petitions from workers finally paved the way for a number of official investigations, which resulted in a bill drafted by the local authorities in 1909. 65 However, it did not pass the Ottoman Parliament, reflecting the initial political commitment to a laissez-faire economic policy.

The workers again sent a petition to urge the government to take action to decrease working hours, increase the daily payment to ten kurus, and grant a one-hour lunch break. 66 The local authorities were eager to settle the issue of wages and working hours in favor of the workers, but the “no regulation” policy of the government as well as the factory owners’ resistance to the workers’ demands resulted in the

61 'Ipek Amelesi Hakkinda", İştirak, sene 1, No 7, 27 Mart 1326, 110.
64 Çelik, “Sweatshops in the Silk Industry of the Bursa Region and the Workers’ Strikes in 1910,” 34.
65 Yıldız, “Parallels and Contrasts in Gendered Histories,” 23.
withdrawal of the bill that had been drafted by the local government of Bursa.67

On 3 September 1909, the workers of Bursa decided to send a letter to Sultan Resat Mehmet V directly. This petition was different from the others, since the female workers emphasized the problems of working flexible hours that were specific to female employment in order to get more attention for the labor abuses in the factory. They stated that the long working day, exceeding sixteen hours in the summer, endangered their safety: “we met problems while coming [to work] early before the sun rises and leaving late in the night, since the factories were usually away from the [main] streets and bad and drunk men disturbed us,” were among their grievances.68 Their ultimate demand was, once again, for the shortening of the working hours.

The 1908 strike wave shows more than ever that in the face of flexible time patterns and concomitant low payments, workers resorted to striking, work stoppages, and machine breaking to curb all-invading, exploitative factory time across the empire.69 In Bursa, 6000 strikers, mostly women, mobilized around their interests for better pay and clean-cut work hours in August 1910. La Turquie, a Francophone newspaper in the Ottoman Empire, reported the strike as a “horde of filature workers” headed by “four or five women of ill repute, adorned with jingling, false trinkets” who went through the streets of Bursa going from factory to factory and convinced the workers to join in and close down their workplaces.70 Such a tone was commonplace in Francophone newspapers, since the strikes caused a major disruption to French economic interests in Bursa.

The protest lasted for about fifteen days, a considerably long period in the general context of Ottoman labor movements, especially when the lack of unionization among female workers is taken into account.71 Immediately after the strike ended, by the end of August, the mills, which normally would have been opened until November, suddenly closed down due to the lack of raw materials.72

What countless petitions and letters show us, however, is that female workers laid great importance

70 Henri Rol, ‘Grève de fileuses de Brousse,’ La Turquie, 23 Août 1910, 2.
71 Yıldız, “Parallels and Contrasts in Gendered Histories,” 27.
72 Nicolina Anna Norbertha Maria van Os, “Feminism, philanthropy and patriotism : female associational life in the Ottoman empire,” (PhD diss., Leiden University, 2013), 199.
on the negotiations for the clear boundaries of the work day, night work, and meal times. They were aware of the fact that non-uniform time arrangements furthered their exploitation, so they fought to replace this irregularity with a regular cycle of the working week. Female workers also enhanced their language of resistance by emphasizing their gendered experiences of factory labor to push for abolishing night work. As women, their “honour” had to be protected, they argued, and therefore they asked to be allowed to leave the factory at a “suitable time” before sunset. Although the provincial government was sympathetic towards the workers’ demands, according to a 1914 article in the Kadınlar Dünyası, a popular women’s magazine, neither the strike nor constant petitioning had any concrete consequences or contributed to any amelioration in the working conditions in Bursa, even in the years after.

E. P. Thompson argued that it took three generations of workers to understand the new categories of industrial time and to fight within these categories against their employers. This paper, by demonstrating how Bursa’s female workers consciously weaponized clock time, thus complicated Thompson’s following observation: “The first generation of factory workers were taught by their masters the importance of time; the second generation formed their short-time committees in the ten-hour movement; the third generation struck for overtime or time-and-a-half. They had accepted the categories of their employers and learned to fight back within them.” The “masters” were not particularly interested in learning the importance of time discipline, since the formalization of working hours would negatively affect their profits. Yet, the workers devised their own tactics to negotiate against the flexible time patterns in the industry and actively struggled against the forces of industrial capitalism.

CONCLUSION

The research on Ottoman temporal culture has favored elitist views in explaining the temporal transformation in the Empire. However, this paper suggested a different reading from “below” by focusing on the temporal experiences on the shop floor. In the example of Ottoman Bursa, the large-scale industrial production did not bring a straightforward structuring of the irregular, imprecise work patterns. To be able to best cater to the needs of the global economy, Bursa silk factories continued to exploit workers through precarious and

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73 ‘Ipek Amelesi Hakkinda,” İştirak, 110.
random employment, with long and arduous work hours. Significantly, these Ottoman sweatshops were different from individual silk reels or merchant-controlled workshops. They incorporated effective disciplinary measures that created considerable physical stress on workers, while simultaneously cultivating a new temporal structuring through machinery, uninterrupted time arrangements, and night work.

Scholars have argued that precarious work or “flexibility” was an exception of “late”, “mature”, or “neoliberal” capitalism.76 The story of Bursa shows that we need to rethink the notion of precarious, flexible labor and its role in the history of capitalism. Flexible employment was not a symptom of underdevelopment, but on the contrary, it was a feature of capitalist modernity in the Ottoman context. Furthermore, similar employment and production tactics are part and parcel of the so-called “mature” capitalisms of today.

Secondly, as the rhetoric of time thrift along with the morally charged condemnation of “idleness” became more and more hegemonic, time became increasingly politicized. Alaturka and alafranga ways of measuring time were associated with different paths of modernizing the empire by Abdülhamid II and the Young Turks respectively. Bursa’s industrial silk production is a great example of how the interest of the industry was protected at the expense of these new industrious Ottoman citizens that the Ottoman elite tried to cultivate. Time discipline was exclusively directed at the working people and not at the factory operators. The Ottoman government’s concern with the unhindered progress of the industry overshadowed the preachings and schoolings of punctuality.

Finally, the silk reeling factory workers of Bursa established their own language of resistance against the factories’ flexible time patterns and concomitant low payments. Workers resorted to different techniques to negotiate the exploitative factory time. The female workforce utilized a variety of disruptive tactics, from striking, sending letters and petitions to the government, and trying to gain the support of the reading public with their letter to İştirak. These techniques were the product of the interaction of the gender, economic, and political hierarchies in which these workers functioned. Employment regulation was too weak to provide any effective protection against exploitation. The push for regulating working time came from, as Thompson points out, those workers who fought against the time concepts imposed by the factory owners. These

imposed time concepts, ironically, were the ones that were assumed to be pre-industrial, irregular, and “unmodern”. In Bursa it was the workers themselves who pushed for more regular, clock-precise work hours and meal times. Workers thus developed a language of resistance that emphasized the value of regular and standard work patterns, defined with reference to clock hours.