

Notes on a bewildered modernization

The great socio-cultural transformation known as Turkish modernization has certain absolutely specific attributes. It is lacking in the characteristic traits of the social transformation known as modernization in the West, and naturally appears to be quite different from it. If we look at western modernization as a single process, it began approximately in the 16th century. The main factor that played a fundamental role in the rise of this phenomenon was the appearance of the bourgeoisie on the historical stage. The bourgeoisie, which Marx summed up in a very concise way in his Manifesto of the Communist Party, calling it the most revolutionary class in history, after attaining economic clout set its sights on political power. As a result, a new current of thought, new models and definitions of the figure of the intellectual came to the fore. In particular, the Scottish Enlightenment, and that of France in the 17th century, took charge of interpreting and understanding, and at times of defining or orienting 'from below', the changes that took place. But here we are faced with an incontrovertible reality.

Since the Encyclopedists of the 17th century had a 'problematic' relationship with God and religious belief, and they attempted to define the world as a material phenomenon in their texts, at times written in an absolutely fantastic, childish way. Today we can read them with pleasure, almost like a science fiction novel. We cannot say that they failed in their attempt. Starting with that era, secularism has interpenetrated modernization. Here we are not talking about a merely institutional and systematic secularism, calling for a separation between church and state, but also a secularism equipped with a method for conceiving of the world and mentally representing it. In this way, laicism becomes a mentality. In relation to this, one of the main specificities of occidental modernization becomes evident. In his very short article 'What is Enlightenment?'¹, written in the form of an encyclopedia entry, Kant provides a great answer to that question. According to the philosopher, 'Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity'. As for immaturity, it is 'the inability to use one's faculties without guidance from another'. And, even worse, immaturity is often a self-imposed limitation: 'its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without guidance from another'. And the solution Kant finds is '*Sapere aude!*[dare to know] "Have the courage to use your own understanding!"-- that is the motto of Enlightenment'.

What we would like to specify here is that this concept was not born spontaneously. Conditions exist that prepared this development, and the first such condition was the rise of the bourgeoisie. This also triggered the French Revolution and all its repercussions. But the most striking fact of the Revolution is not so much that the Empire was overthrown, as that a new system was established, structured around the *res publica*, the people. The basis of this new social order, inspired by Ancient Greece and Rome, was an extremely fascinating concept: the contract, the 'social contract'. In this way, the authority of the state was limited by the rights of citizens. This constituted the most important link in the chain of development achieved by man after the democracy of Athens.

II

At the outbreak of the French Revolution the Ottoman throne was occupied by the Sultan

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *What is Enlightenment?* Translated, with an Introduction, by Lewis White Beck. London: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959.

Selim III², a ruler open to new ideas, resolutely in favor of reform and also known as one of the greatest composers of the sumptuous Ottoman music. Even before rising to power, he had corresponded with the French king Louis XVI. When the insurrection began, the Sultan took close interest in the king's fate, requesting reports from his ambassadors. His thoughts were based on a profound conviction regarding the activation of a radical transformation of the State. He wanted to implement this by disbanding the classic Ottoman military force of the *Yeniçeri Ocağı* (Janissaries) and replacing it with a modern army, called the *Yeni Düzen* (New Order). But the old order soon returned, blocking the reform with the assassination of Sultan Selim III.

By now, however, the die was cast, and Mahmud II, who took his place on Selim's throne shortly thereafter, pursued the same goals as his predecessor. He reinforced the Ottoman institutional structure by opening new schools. This was the start of a radical modernization. In fact, this great breakthrough reached its apex with the proclamation in 1839, a few months after Mahmud's death, of the *Tanzimat Fermanı* (Edicts of Reforms). The Edict was the adaptation of the classic Western contract to the Ottoman Empire. Though it did not yet contain a logic similar to that of the Declaration of Human Rights, in the strict sense of the terminology, the Empire had nevertheless reached the threshold of an important transformation. This radical innovative process implied limitation of the power of the Sultanate within institutional confines, and acceptance of the constitution of a Parliament. This, of course, meant balancing the absolute divine authority with secular powers, at least partially. The first session of the Ottoman Parliament took place in 1876. The Ottomans did not call this 'modernization'. The name the rather confused intellectuals managed to find for this process, which constituted the great gift to the Ottomans of the Tanzimat period (and this too was the result of later interpretations), was 'Westernization'.³ In spite of this, the Tanzimat period opened the way for many different social and cultural reforms. In the Ottoman Empire, public opinion made its first appearance, in its present sense, in this time. What made this possible was the publication of newspapers. Furthermore, the intellectuals of that period, who we might define as the Ottoman Romantics, had learned new literary techniques from the West. For the first time, they began to write novels in Ottoman, a language that had previously had no prose of its own.⁴ The novels were published in newspapers. Theatrical works soon followed. For all this to happen, a language was needed that was different from that of the Palace, a language everyone could understand. This objective was achieved. The new thoughts were expressed with this new language, aimed to a greater extent at the populace. Nevertheless, the critical point was that the Tanzimat intellectuals supported the achievement of this substantial turnaround, on the one hand, while also urging the continuation of the old, traditional structure. This was a crucial node, because it demonstrated that the traditional Ottoman thinking on development/progress was still effective. For the Ottomans progress, under the influence of an Islamic ideology, was possible only through a return to the past, to the *asr-ı saadet* (golden age). The idea of a forward-looking progress, with its implications of a break, was still not sufficiently rooted. In this context the society too was divided in a dichotomous way. As can be seen in all modernizations, the conflict between *the ancients and the moderns* represented the

² On Selim III, cfr. Stanford J. Shaw, *Between Old and New: The Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim III, 1789-1807*. Boston, Harvard University Press, 1971.

³ For an overview of this historical period, cfr. Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, London, New York, Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 2001.

⁴ The most important text on this subject remains that of Robert P. Finn, *The Early Turkish Novel*. Istanbul, ISIS Press, 1984.

supporting axis of the mental structure.

Be that as it may, in the Tanzimat period and the phase that followed, an unstoppable process had been set in motion. In the Ottoman Empire, where portraits and images had been banned, it was precisely the Sultanate that would start to send, in 1864, artists to Paris, to study painting. This was the start of a great tradition.⁵ In 1882 a school was also founded in Istanbul, based on the model of the French Academy of Fine Arts. Experimentation was taking place with innovations in architecture, ways of dressing, music. We should not forget that Abdülmecid, one of the heirs to the Ottoman throne, was a painter. In 1908 he founded the Ottoman Society of Painters. Sultan Abdülaziz also took a personal interest in painting. His album of drawings is now conserved at Krakow. While the canvas made on the basis of the poem *Sis* ('Fog') by Tevfik Fikret, the political adversary of Abdülmecid, is very important in terms of cultural relations, equal significance is held by his paintings of 1917-18, *Haremde Beethoven* (Beethoven in the Harem) and *Haremde Goethe* (Goethe in the Harem), revealing the cultural attitudes of the Sultanate in the direction of Westernization. Moreover, in 1899 the Prince had already made a painting entitled *Avluda Kadınlar* ('Women in the Courtyard'), which included female nudity.⁶

III

From 1889 to 1908 this whole transformation shifts onto a completely different line. In 1889 came the centennial of the French Revolution. Sumptuous festivities took place in Paris. At Bursa, Ahmet Rıza Bey, the Minister of Agriculture, asked the Sultan to authorize him to attend the events. He went there, and sent a letter stating that he would not return. This was followed by five articles written to answer the question of 'how to save the state?', to be presented to the Sultan. But Ahmet Rıza didn't stop there. Not only France but all of Europe was under the influence of Positivism and the German movement known as Vulgarmaterialism.⁷ Both currents asserted that the world can be interpreted only through positive knowledge, and that traditional thought no longer had any function, nor occupied any space. Both these ideologies, and Positivism in particular, advanced a new concept: that of the *enlightened guide*. According to this idea, intellectuals were seen as subjects "that know". They are the enlightened men, in the Kantian sense of the term. As a result, in the transformation of a society integrated with tradition, their task would be completely different. In a certain sense, they would find themselves with a Divine status. For the Ottoman intellectuals, this represented an absolutely unique opportunity that was not to be squandered. The intellectuals of the Tanzimat reforms, after all, were known as head/chief teachers. Now, at the end of the 19th century, the intellectual is a savior, a guide and a leader. A new society we be born from their imagination.

⁵ In the book by Deniz Artun, *Paris'ten Modernlik Tercümelere: Academie Julian'da İmparatorluk ve Cumhuriyet Öğrencileri* ('Translations of modernity from Paris: students of the Empire and the Republic at the Académie Julian') İstanbul, İletişim yayınları, 2007, we find an analysis of the relationships between the Ottoman artists and the Parisian academy.

⁶ This generation is generally known as the "generation of 1914". A significant number of painters from the late Ottoman period and the early republican phase belongs to this generation. While Abdülmecid was older, he helped to protect that generation. On this subject cfr. Alastair Wright, 'The Work of Translation: Turkish Modernism and the 'Generation of 1914'', in Jocelyn Hackforth-Jones and Mary Roberts, eds., *Edges of Empire: Orientalism and Visual Culture*, London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2005.

⁷ For a detailed analysis of the theme, cfr: Şükrü Hanioglu, 'Blueprints for a future society: late Ottoman materialists on science, religion and art', in Elisabeth Ozdalga, *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*. London, Routledge, 2005.

This idea held not only for the Ottoman society but also for other rural societies, like those of Russia and Japan. In particular, Russia had many similarities to the Ottomans. The Russian nihilists quickly transformed into Russian revolutionaries. In the next period, the two factions met as European exiles. With the *İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Committee of Union and Progress), founded by the Ottomans and influenced by the title of the book by Auguste Comte⁸, the intellectuals learned about a new reality: revolution. But they were still tied to the sultanate. Their sole aim was not that of overthrowing the state, as for the Russians, but of saving it. Nevertheless, they were convinced that this could not happen within the established order. The Russian Revolution of 1905 brought great encouragement. And the revolution they triggered, in 1908, which for the second time led to a constitutional period, was instructive, in turn, for the Russians and for the revolutions of 1917.⁹

To get back to the point we were examining at first, this scheme presents us with two very important conclusions from the standpoint of Ottoman modernization. The first is that, as has been noted, in the context of all these changes and transformations the society is not present. What is in discussion is not the mechanism of demand-representation of the classes, from the bottom up, which constitutes the main distinguishing feature of modern politics. This is the conception of a hegemonic modernization, accomplished under the guidance of the intellectual, from the top down. It is possible to define this type of modernization as *enlightened despotism* or *radical enlightenment*.¹⁰ And, even more importantly, everything is done for the state. All the steps taken are based on the idea that the state will be saved through the transformation of the society. The second conclusion lies in the fact that the roots of this conception are found in European thought. The Enlightenment as philosophy never directly interested the Ottomans. But they found what they were looking for in positivism and materialism. So much so that Beşir Fuat, to understand and test the anesthetic effect of 'cocaine chlorohydrate', administered it to himself, slashed his wrists and, at the same time, recorded in his notebook, line by line, 'the experience of death'. This signified a new approach: for the people, in spite of the people.

The foundations of the modern Republic are rooted in this spiritual world. Mustafa Kemal, when he proclaims the Republic at the end of the Turkish War of Independence, the culmination of a pursuit that lasted almost 150 years, raises himself to the level of savior of the state. Today, based on the most detailed analysis of the texts he read, and in-depth study of his intellectual roots, we realize that Mustafa Kemal was aware of all the above-mentioned intellectual ferments, or was actually immersed in them. He had read the magazine *İçtihat* (Verdict,) published by Abdullah Cevdet, supporting radical westernization, and had seen reforms drafted there that he would later implement. Furthermore, the Committee for Union and Progress, of which he was a member, had

⁸ We should immediately clarify the fact that the founder of Positivism, Auguste Comte, had written a letter to Mustafa Reşit Paşa, the maker of the Tanzimat edict, explaining the reasons why the system of thought he founded was also valid for oriental societies. This is extremely important to identify the confines of relations of modernization between the Ottomans and the Occident.

⁹ For the similarities and interactions between the Empires at the end of the XIX century, see the articles in the following publication: Karen Barkey and Mark Von Hagen, eds., *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies And Nation-building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman and Habsburg Empires*. Seattle, Westview Press, 1997.

¹⁰ Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2002.

already considered all the reforms that in 1913, after its rise to power, it would promote with inflexible determination, as part of an uncompromising radicalism, transforming them into a complete system and, to a certain extent, putting them into effect. The new state is absolutely westernized. It has embraced all this as an existential system.

To understand Turkish modernization, we should emphasize three points here. The essence of the republic contains the idea of Enlightenment, in the Kantian sense. There are traces that prove this. The aim is to construct an individual who is his own master, mature. Nevertheless, the *laissez-faire* with enlightened guidance on which the model is based, the structures of the totalitarian state that begin to appear on the political scene in the 1930s, and the fact that the main goal is salvation of the state, all combine to rapidly stifle the formation of that individual. In his place, what emerges is the conception of an organic society, a general will in the Rousseauian sense. As a result, liberty becomes possible only by submission to the collective will/ideology. This basic principle opens the way for the birth of a more communitarian structure, rather than a society. The second point is that in spite of this very serious shortcoming, the Republic revives the idea of progress. The uprooting of all ties with the past and the pursuit of progress projected into the future cause a critical break in the way of thinking. At this point all bridges to the past have been burnt, in every sense. The third point is that in spite of the great ambition of Westernization, the Republic is in search of a synthesis. This pursuit, though at times combined with racist tendencies, has kept the country constantly focused on the local dimension. In any case, the point of reference is not an Ottoman-Islamic tradition. At times, it is a very fragile *un Anatolism*.¹¹ In other cases, it is antiquity.¹²

This framework of modernization in Turkey becomes synonymous with materialism. The materialism is revealed in the rejection of tradition and, as a result, the rejection of whatever pertains to the people. The people, therefore, is an entity that must be educated and 'uplifted'. Secondly, materialism puts an end to the process of secularization. The Republic, while on the one hand it is defined as the sovereignty of the *res publica*, on the other opens the way for the adoption of laicism, from the Greek word *laikos* or people, almost as an existential foundation. Given the fact that the system is one of *authoritarian modernism*, the same method is applied in the area of secularization. Everything that pertains to the people and to tradition is rejected, along with the practice of all that is religious. This is defined as *authoritarian populism*. It is accepted that the final 'enlightenment' can only be reached along this path, and it is taken as a constitutional framework.

IV

Today, in a time when the concept of an *alternative modernization* has come to the fore, and the accent is on local things (though in the midst of globalization), the continuation of this type of modernization is inadmissible. A conception based on faith in science, the legacy of the previous positivist and historicist philosophy, gives way to much more libertarian and eclectic models. The majority structure on which the Republic is based is being transformed. We have clearly entered a phase of pluralism. This is why Islam, which was the taboo of an era, has resurfaced in the public sphere.

¹¹ This current of thought later transformed into a cultural-literary movement known as *Mavi Anadolu* (Blue Anatolia)

¹² It is reported that Atatürk stated: 'At the battle of Sakarya we took on the revenge of the Trojans'. In fact, the *Mavi Anadolu* movement was also oriented toward humanism, which could be said to be based on the Ionian civilization.

This is the rediscovery of the politics of memory and identity. The Republic, constructing public buildings, as seen in all authoritarian regimes, reorganizing squares and, in the end, basing its actions on a constructivist visual ideology, attempted to create a new identity. The Russian avant-garde and Italian Fascism represented great examples, from this viewpoint. Furthermore, but in a much more dramatic way, the Republic – in the span of one night – changed the alphabet and gutted the society's memory. The project of constructing a new identity would start with this *tabula rasa*. The images and expressions that recur in the series *Mesopotamian Dramaturgies* by Kutlug Ataman offer an excellent chance to understand this context. In our time, perhaps the last frontier reached by Westernization and globalization in Turkey is reflected by the fact that everyone tries to speak, or think they are speaking, English. This can be seen as the last degree of this republican ideology. The chaos that is an inextricable, inherent part of Ataman's work, and the references he inserts on both a linguistic and a literary level, offer a very telling indication of the dramatic voyage of this ideology, which began with the reform of the alphabet. At the same time, he alludes to the reconstruction of that uncharted but extensive area we call memory.

The long adventure of modernization in Turkey today seems to be entangled on a very different point. Well beyond having to do with political Islam and the existence of a version of it in the public sphere, this involves a mental concept: investigation. If we want to find a last stop for the Enlightenment-modernizing tradition, it will certainly be research, in the form of investigation. The visibility of Islam and the discussions that continue in that context are the result of the politics of identity, recognition and difference. This is a very confused point. Because it brings us back to the rediscovery of tradition, to the extent that 'tradition', contrary to what we might imagine, is a modern concept.¹³ The moderns defined it. Certainly people who led a traditional life were not aware of being in that condition. Moreover, it is probably very hard to assert that the bewildered and rediscovered topography of the blindfolded man who roams the desert and has some autobiographical elements in common with Ataman is not a critique of 'modern Turkish' identity, in its cartographic characteristics.

It is worth also viewing this element through another approach: the tradition is not only Islamic, mystical, Ottoman and religious. In our time, when we refer to the tradition, we are also talking about an oriental perspective. The interesting aspect of the question is that both the Ottoman modernizers and the Kemalist Republicans did not realize that by setting this process in motion, they had created an auto-orientalization.¹⁴ It was a model that coincided with the bewilderment from the self, with the alienation, with a self-colonization. Perhaps it was inevitable from the point of view of the method adopted, but this was the reality. The social processes that are still in progress and that at times appear to be chaotic because they mutually intersect are the situation that is encountered, to some extent, also during the surpassing of this regime. At the same time, this is a new phase of the pursuits of synthesis of the republican period, which interpenetrated and contrasted with each other. Turkey, by not adopting a more pluralist social structure, becomes the witness of new developments that this time go beyond folk culture and more often than not are manifested in a visual world. We need to emphasize the fact that these are not a synthesis, but an eclectic union.

¹³ The 'classic' text on this subject is the book by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, ed., *The Invention of Tradition*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992,.

¹⁴ Hasan Bülent Kahraman, 'İçselleştirilmiş, Açık ve Gizli Oryantalizm ve Kemalizm, ('Orientalism internalized', manifest and latent, and Kemalism'), *Doğu-Batı*, n. 20, 2002.

This is an extremely complex and, at the same time, dramatic point. As happens in all mental constructs, the awareness of this is linked to different analyses. What remains constant is a difference between what modernization has defined in a mould and a structure, and our perception and absorption of it. The most outstanding example of this is the painting by Şeker Ahmet Paşa entitled *Ormancı* ('The Woodsman'). The artist was trained in the atelier of Gérôme and learned western painting technique in an impeccable way. His talent was clearly evident as well. Nevertheless, as John Berger would later notice, there is a perspective error in this painting.¹⁵ Reflecting on this, Berger understands that it is not an error, but a reaction due to the way of perceiving the world. Paşa, as he made the painting, from the viewpoint of a person observing the forest from outside it – because this is the method, the imitative reality, of western painting – changed the vantage point and shifted toward a glimpse, the view of someone inside the forest who looks out, namely the vantage point of the forest. According to Berger this is like being in the belly of the whale, and Paşa, plausibly, with this response, experienced the indeterminacy of his own position in the deep contrast between Orient-Occident, modernity-tradition. We know that not only Şeker Ahmet Paşa but also, for example, Indian modernization in that period produced similar perspective discrepancies. Other artists, eliminating perspective in photographs, sought their own way to remain inside a visual ideology connected with the tradition of oriental miniature. We should not forget that in those same years the Primitives, or the first Ottoman artists, did not directly observe nature, but painted their works on the basis of photographs taken previously. We can say that at the point reached today, this problem is no longer the same. For this reason the portrait, one of the works of Ataman with a pasha at its center, contains a chilling harshness to reveal what a modern person had to struggle with in Turkey, still in the 1940s and even in the 1950s.

As a conclusion, we can say that Turkey, during the course of its modernization, has finally reached a new phase. Now the preference assigned to 'both this and that' has started to take the place of the previous conception of 'this or that', and of a bewilderment focused on Westernization. The construction of a new identity, a new memory, a new sense of belonging, is part of this process. Maybe the true modernization is starting now, and not only the 'dramaturgies' of Ataman, but also his feature-length films and his video installations based on explicit allegories and phantoms, are all signs of this new orientation. The fundamental problem within this phenomenon is that of posing the question of a representation organized until today around a manifest or latent Orientalism, now within a concept of mimesis purified by complexity. The subject of the mimesis, by now, is no longer nature but society and persons, directly. This, perhaps, can be taken as a clue to the fact that from now on Turkish modernization will offer richer possibilities than Occidental modernization. The exhibition of Ataman is a cornerstone for the comprehension and resolution of the past and the future of this adventure.

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¹⁵ John Berger, 'Şeker Ahmet and the Forest', in *About Looking*. New York, Vintage, 1992.