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## A DIFFERENT POINT OF VIEW ON UNDERSTANDING THE CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

**Nazım BERATLI\***

### **Abstract**

Modernization as a conceptual matter, means different aims depending on the time, country, development level of the society and the history which has been living. Only in Turkey and Russia modern concepts have not been demanded from the lower classes of the community but, prospected by the authority. Because of the religion, it was easier to convinced the lower classes in Russia, but not in the Turkey. In Turkey it is continuing not with the western meaning of the term but with its own meaning in a different culture, different interests, different needs, and different history of the country and society. If somebody tries to find any pure western feature in Turkish society, it is very easy to fall in a fault, because of the differences. In order to understand the contemporary Turkey, it is a necessity to learn the mile stones of the history about Turkish improvement.

**Keywords:** Modernization, Turkey, Western Culture, Religion.

### **INTRODUCTION**

When the issue of Modernization in Ottoman Empire and the rise of contemporary Turkey is discussed, the meaning of the modernization and the difference between the roots of the Ottoman and the Western cultures should also be analyzed in order to comprehend the reason of the Turkey's

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\* Doç. Dr., Kıbrıs Sosyal Bilimler Üniversitesi, Orchid No: 5,716,021e mail: nazim.beratli@kisbu.edu.tr



delay in participating to the mentioned process and the current political approach which has been administrating the country for more than fifteen years.

No doubt that, every culture is built on its historical structure which is dependent on its basic elements.

Cultural codes of current Turkey and some other Islamic societies are strongly related with the events at the deep levels of the historical, cultural and religious memories which had been lived once.

Another irrefutable fact is that, although modernisation is a problem of modern era, still one cannot simply describe it solely with industrialization or economic aspects. Not even in England, the country whose people are the point of origin of the above mentioned matter.

What is modernization? And what is the meaning of "modern times"?

Before answering such questions, following matters should also be discussed;

"Against whom or what did the modernisation take place?" and, "What were the systemic values which have revolted by the modern ideas?"

By reason of your competitor determines you, you are determined by your competitor.

No doubt that, the point of origin of Modernisation is the Enlightenment. The question is, against whom did the Enlightenment took place? Many researchers who have conducted studies on this matter agreed and claimed that Enlightenment was the opposition of the destroyed and spoiled morality concept of the Catholic Church of the time. It is very clear that Enlightenment and modernisation were two novel proposals for a new moral value. Everything that was raised during those times was depended on this new moral comprehension. Capitalism, nation state, science, social freedom etc... were all depended on this new moral comprehension. For instance, Max Weber's book titled About Protestant Morality can be used as a reference on this matter.

Lucien Febvre notes that, the protestant morality is the morality of bourgeois (Febvre 1995, 101-102).

In this sense, it is possible to say that the begging of the Enlightenment was a conflict between two Christian sects. It is a great pleasure to observe that, not the conservative side, but the side who represented progressive ideas have won. It should be noted that, winning here does not refer to the Revolution of France. The victory is strongly related with former century of the European History; with the Westfalia Agreement...

At this point, one shall analyse the Ottomans.

More than 30% of the Ottoman's population was Christians. However it should be noted that, since 392 B.C, all Christians had their own Churches which were independent from Rome, but depended on Constantinople except from some minorities in Antioch, Alexandria and Nicosia. Vatican was unimportant, not only for Muslims who were consisted the grand majority of the population but also for the Christian population of the empire.

For this reason, the conflict between two Christian sects was not a problem for the Ottomans; no one was concerned about the moral conceptions that were causing struggle within Europe.

Even in the Hungary that was a sovereign state under the Ottoman Empire in that era, was not one of the sides of the Hundred Years War, nor the Westphalia Agreement, because they had no concern about the ideas or the values that caused entire Europe to wage battles with each other for a century.



Thus, modernisation was not a point of interest for Ottomans, due to religious differences as well as cultural differences.

Here, the matter of “Was modernisation a necessity for Ottomans?” shall also be analysed.

It can be presumed that, not for the sake of the moral aspects. Ottoman culture did not consist of such problems. Neither for Muslims, nor for Christians and it is not for economic reasons as well. Since the productivity level of Ottoman was not equal with Europe, these new values which were necessities for Western Europe, were not necessary for the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, Ottoman Empire needed to understand these new values due to political reasons.

#### “NİZAM” AN RELIGIOUS PRINCIPLE OF RULE:

From the conquest of Constantinople (1453) until to the Agreement of Karlofcha(1699) the main ruling approach of Ottomans was a principle called *Nizam-ı Alem* which meant “The Deal of the Universe”. Although the term was generally related with the Islam religion, it is known that this principle was taken from the Byzantium policies, maybe from ancient Rome. The term means that, all incidents which take place within the universe are the decisions of the God. For instance, position of an individual as a Sultan, and other as a peasant is the decision of the God. According to this principle, when a battle is lost or won, this is also the decision of the God. Hence, the order of world is flawless because of the God, and criticizing this order meant a rebellion against the God. ( Berkes. 1998, 13-19)

For certain, during the era in which this ideology was popular, Ottoman family was one of the strongest dynasties, along with the Habsburg Dynasty and this can be stated as the reason for such great self-confidence. In addition to the rulers, even the society thought that the system of Ottoman was perfect as it was the decision of the God.

Not only the rulers, but the society also thought that, Ottoman System was perfect in every aspect, as it was the provision of the God. For this reason, it was not necessary to come up with new ideas and therefore standing against the order meant, standing against the provisions of the God. During these times, this comprehension had become the reason of incredulity, especially after the Agreement of Karlofcha in 1699, since this was the first time in history, that the Ottomans had lost a piece of land.

Thereafter, not the society but the dynasty itself, started doubting about the Excellency of the “old” *Nizam-ı Alem* idea. If it was really the provision of the God, how could they lose their battle against the Christians? Entire 18<sup>th</sup> century, passed with the attempts to figure out the reason of being defeated in the military area by the Europeans.

At the beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Ottoman rulers finally decided that their army was out of order and it was not possible to achieve success with such army. They had to comprehend this new concept of militarism and the underlying ideas. Otherwise, they would not be able to preserve their empire.

The aim of the first attempt to understand modern ideas and enlightenment in the Ottoman, was neither the pursuit of improving the economics, developing intellectual world of the empire, debates on the concept of morality nor the discussions between religious sides, but to understand the reason of military lost. It was not a crisis in the mind of an ordinary people’s mind but, it was a problem that should be solved for the officials from all levels of the state. Not a moral but an official aspect it was!



Famous German Field Marshall Helmut von Moltke emphasizes in his memoirs titled "Letters from Turkey" that, there are only two countries in the world, as exceptions, which enlightenment and modern ideas, haven't raised from the lower classes of the people, but were declared from the upper layers of the society. According to Helmut von Moltke, in both countries, the great majority of the societies were conservative. On the other hand officials had to be progressive, ( Moltke 1995: 388) otherwise they would not be able to achieve success in the competition with the improvements that took place within the Western Europe, and furthermore they would not be able to rule as well. Both countries perceived the concept of modernization not as a religious, moral or an economic need of the society but as a political and military need of the state and as a need for themselves. Not as an improvement, but as a way to save the current status quo.

Turkish Historian Dr. İlber Ortaylı has stated that, "The Young Ottomans (in Europe they were referred as Young Turks) consisted of young officials who were somewhat resistant against to the upper classes, to the older officials" (Ortaylı 2000,270)

At this point it is not a surprise to hear that first generation writers of the Turkish modernisation were paid by the upper class officials. For example, Buyuk Reshid Pasha the Grand Vizier of the empire was one of the supporters of the very famous "modernist" Turkish writer/poet Shinasi. The poet had written "He is the prophet of religion of modernism". Therefore, "The prophet" gave a rank to his "believer", at the Embassy of Paris. (Eğribel, Genç. 2001,153) He found another "supporter" in the capital of France: Mustafa Fazıl Pasha, the brother of the Khedive of Egypt. The second supporter was not a prophet, but he was richer than the first one. Pasha was against to the sultan, because he had not elected himself as the governor.

"The relationships between Mustafa Fazıl Pasha with Namık Kemal and Suphi Pasha with Ali Suavi are well known". (Eğribel, Genç 2001, 154) It must be noted that Suphi Pasha was married to a Sultana from the Ottoman Dynasty.

A Turkish sociologist Prof. Baykan Sezer, states that all of the "revolutionists" received regular salaries by those pashas, depended on their importance for the country! ( Eğribel, Genç 2001:156)

Sultan Abdülaziz, was the first Ottoman Sultan who visited Europe. While he was in Paris, they signed an agreement with Mustafa Fazıl Pasha about the ruling in the Egypt. When the Pasha, turned back to Istanbul, all of the supporters, accepted high level ranks in the administration by the sultan. According to Prof. Sezer, the problem was about the sharing of the ranks of the government and the direction of the support as it was before for centuries. (Eğribel, Genç. 2001, 157)

*Tanzimat Fermani* declared on 1839 by *Sultan* and is accepted as the beginning of the modernization in Turkey by many historians for a long time. However, Ortaylı states that, "*Tanzimat* was not an idea influenced from the French Revolution, but, on the contrary, it was an idea which was against the French Revolution." (Ortaylı 2000, 280). It can be said that it was a challenge against the ideas of the French Revolution.

This short story of the Ottoman social improvement ideologists is a summary of the long socio-cultural history, and the Ottoman society. Above mentioned ideologists of the modernism and the secularism were the first generation that had been referred as "Young Turks" in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At the end of the century, and within the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was very clear that, the second generation who had succeeded to revolt the empire to a nation state were Ottoman officials, as well. Not as governors, but most of them were young military officers of the empire. Furthermore as a second trauma, this new generation had to encounter with the local nationalism of the minorities of



the empire, even in their own land they had to fight against a local nationalism. This time, the condition of the ordinary people was even worse. Young generation of the male population had been lost due to the wars that took place in the last 25 years. The only concern of the society was to earn money and look after their families.

The national state and modernization were matter of concern only for young officials, but not asa moral, social, religious or economic one again. It was still a politic and military problem. As a matter of fact, it was not possible for the Turkish society to understand the concept of modernization, as a moral crisis between the Catholics and Protestants, because they were not Christians. Depended on their own different culture, modernization meant a completely different value for them. Although at the beginning, young officials who tried to conduct a revolution accepted it as a military and political problem. However, it is a political issue for the society even now. Other reasons such as economic, social, and cultural and many more rank lower at this day, not at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Besides of the “young officials” of the empire, the ordinary people from Islamic roots had been continued to insist on their old values of the religion, and attempted to resist to the values which the official intellectuals accepted from the western philosophers. In fact, they are not convinced still! However; from the second part of the twentieth century, the popular map of the Turkish community is going to be changed due to the economic aspect. Because of the Industrial development, taking their own part from the contemporary trade, and development on the agricultural techniques, has changed the preexisting levels between the urban and rural people. During the last fifty years, people who were living in the urban areas of Turkey have increased from 25 % to 75 %. In other words, 50 % of the people have been immigrated from the villages to the cities during the last 25 years! In one hand, this “new” urban people, had still tried to preserve their old values, but at the other hand, besides the needs of the new economic conditions, improvements of the communication with the other parts of the world, tourism and the need of learning at least one foreign language, have shown them that it is impossible to keep living with only the traditional values in the contemporary world. Thus, may be this is the right time for Turkey to improve their own modernization not with depending on the values of the Christianity that are commenting on the foreign values, but with a novel view of their own values. Not for the officials of the country, but acceptable by the ordinary people who are demanding it, currently.

Just at this point it must be said that Tayyip Erdogan is the representative of the new incomers to the urban life of the country. Because, first of all he is one of the second generation members of this above mentioned new comers. Neither urban nor rural! Or half urban; half rural! Both of them or none of them!

This is the dilemma between the two Turkish paradigms since 1839! The sides of the conflicting ideas are not divided with their own parts, but it is possible to say, that the differences are depended on the ratio which is sharing of the principles, from both disciplines. Either western ideas, or Islamic principles. If somebody has more aspects from the “western” ideas then the traditional he/she is accepted as a modern individual! But if the ratio of traditional values is more than the other in the individual identity of a person, it is the main reason to accept him/her as conservative. No one is purely belonged to one side! Everyone has carried both values depending to the both civilizations with more or less values. More from western values, less from the Islamic cults or vice versa... Or, more from the Islamic values, less from the western ones... As a very flushing example: Army is the first and most important institution of the country since the beginning of the modernization process and accepted the most representing part of the western ideas of the society! But after the coup d’etat which took part on 15<sup>th</sup> July 2016 it found out that at least thirty per cent of the army officers at the



high ranks were members of a conservative Islamic sect and could be ordered by a Islamic “vaiz” called Fethullah Gulen! How much “easterner”, or how much “westerner” they are? Or it is not an unusual example to meet an “Islamic/conservative” women driving a truck with her hidjap or as a taxi driver, or riding a motorcycle in the traffic! How much Islamic, how much western, she is? It is impossible to meet such examples together neither in the societies of the western parts of the world, nor in the Islamic societies from the east part of the planet!

The people of Turkey are neither westerner nor easterner! They are both of them or none of them. Or it is better to define them as unique... This is a different culture and history from the other parts of the world.

It can not be said that Turkish society is dividing between the Islamic and western cultures. The politic and cultural identity of an individual in Turkey, depends on the ratio between the values two main civilizations. Either the old traditions from the history, or the modern values which are given from the contemporary life. If the old ones are more, he/she accepts him/herself as a conservative people! If the ratio of the modern values are more than the others, he / she is accepted as a modern people! This is the great majority of the society because of the mobilization of the people from the rural parts of the country, to the urban area during the last thirty years.

This is the secret which is lying at the deep levels of interesting improvements of Turkish society. And that is the main concept of the subject which cannot be understand by the “other part” of the world, except the old competitor; Russia, which is known with the same problems in their own society.

Therefore, it is not an easy task for foreigners to understand the condition of Turkey without the knowledge about the history and the sociology of the country.

## CONCLUSION

Nowadays, the western part of the world is busy with producing a new age of civilization: Postmodernism. In this sense, the term ‘Western’ does not refer to a geographic concept, but it is deeply related with the phenomenon of culture.

With this point of view, modernization in Turkey is still an ongoing process due to the following reasons:

First of all, at the beginning, modernization was not a social necessity, since the grand majority of the Ottoman population was not Christian. Thus, they did not have any deprivation in their minds to judge their moral concept or change it. As a result, modernization did not come to the fore with the demand of the lower layers of the society.

Second, not only the lower layers of the society, but also the upper class intellectuals were not concerned with the concept of modernization with its western meaning. They were concerned with gaining their strength again, via administrative and military apprehensions.

Third, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the upper economic classes, which should constitute the basis of the modern idea, consisted of Christian citizens due to the economic policies of the empire. These citizens were not concerned with the concept of restoration of the Ottoman economy or society but they were concerned with creating their own ‘nation states’. On the other hand, modernization idea and even the concept of “nation state”, was a reaction against the ones in charge. This dilemma was the reason for not receiving real support from the society, except from officials.

And lastly, modernization is an ongoing process in Turkey with the actual meaning of the concept. Not with the western values but with the native aspects.



It must be clear that, Turkey has an unique cultur and history not synonym with any other culture neither from the eastern nor from the western part of the world. Thus understanding Turkey, depends on the knowledge about the cultur and history of the country and society. When somebody try's to judge the Turkish society with the western features during understanding the country; to fell in a fault is unavoidable.

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