

The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas

Serif Mardin, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000, xii+456 pp.

This book, originally published in 1962, has now become a classic on the history of modern Turkish political thought, whose beginning is usually traced back to the Tanzimat period (1836-1878), the most turbulent and crucial period of modern Turkish history. Serif Mardin, the famous Turkish historian and political scientist, is like a household name to those interested in modern Ottoman and Turkish intellectual history. In his numerous books and articles, which followed the publication of the present work, Mardin took the herculean task of unearthing the parameters of modern Turkish thought with an almost solitary conscience. It is simply impossible to have a discussion about Islam and Turkish society, social change, modernization or secularization without referring to Mardin's work, which is woven around a string of ideas, concepts and analytical tools, all of which enable him to see the realities of Turkey and the modern Islamic world both from within and from without. His more recent *Religion and Social Change in Turkey: The Case of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: SUNY Press, 1989), which is the single most important book written in English on Said Nursi, the founder of the Nurcu movement in Turkey, is the result of the same set of principles Mardin has adopted throughout his career: diligent scholarship, resistance to fads, and willingness to understand before passing any judgements on his subject.

The present work under review touches upon the most sensitive and crucial period of modern Turkish history, viz., the end of the Ottoman era and the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic. Mardin's exclusive emphasis is on the Tanzimat period, and the figures that laid the intellectual foundations of it. The significance of this period can hardly be overemphasized, not only for Turkish history but also for the rest of the Islamic world. It was in this period that a whole generation of Ottoman intellectuals, from right to left, was faced with the historic task of confronting modern western civilization in the profoundest sense of the term, and their successes and failures set the agenda for the modern intellectual history of Turkey for decades to follow. Their troublesome journey was shaped by the historical setting, in which they came to terms with such questions as modernism, secularism, westernization, nationalism, Islam, society, science, tradition, and a host of other issues that continue to haunt the minds of the Islamic world today. Their trial, however, was linked to the rest of the members of the Islamic world in ways, as the present work under review shows, more important than is usually thought, and this issue, namely the place of Ottoman intellectual history within the larger context of modern Islamic thought, has not been resolved. In this

regard, the present work is not only about a number of prominent Ottoman intellectuals, known as the 'young Turks' (as adopted from the French appellation 'Jeune Turquie'). It can also be considered as an account of the deep transformation that came into being in one of the political and cultural centers of the Islamic world.

The present book is comprised of fourteen chapters, each dealing with a different aspect and figure of the group of Ottoman intellectuals known as Young Turks. The first chapter (p. 3-9), which is the Introduction, outlines the structure and scope of the work. The primary goal of the present investigation is to analyze the complex process by which a number of modern western political ideas and concepts were introduced into the Ottoman world in the 19th century, the 'longest century of the Empire', to employ a phrase by the Turkish historian Ilber Ortayli. The author also attempts to show the internal consistency, or lack thereof, of the ideas of the Young Ottomans, who were no giants of political theory but rather the intellectual Jacks-of-all-trades of their times.

The second chapter (pp. 10-80) gives an account of the formation of the Young Ottomans as a political group with an expressed goal: to take action against what they believed to be the pernicious policies of the Ottoman government, which was then seen as the 'sick man of Europe'. The unofficial establishment of the movement goes back to a picnic held in Istanbul in the summer of 1865. The six men present in that picnic formed the ideological basis of the movement. They were united by a number of interesting characteristics, such as having some knowledge of Europe and working in the official translation bureau of the Empire opened by the Sultan himself. Needless to say, they were under the spell of the lure of European civilization from which they had derived their visionary spirit. Most interestingly, they were given this opportunity by the very man against whom they were determined to fight. This chapter also recounts the story of the dissemination of the Young Ottoman ideas through the extensive use of the media, especially newspapers and literary tracts, appealing both to the political consciousness and to the emotions of the crowds. A useful survey of such journals as *İbret*, *Muhbir* and *Hurriyet*, all of which played a key role in the spread of the political ideology of the Young Ottomans, is given, and the tribulations they caused for their proprietors are analyzed within the context of the formation of the Young Ottoman movement.

The third chapter (pp. 81-106) is devoted to a detailed discussion of the Islamic intellectual heritage which shaped, in a number of interesting ways, the direction of the political program proposed by the Young Ottomans. Mardin justifiably turns to classical Islamic political thought for this historical background, because the Young Ottoman intellectuals were not systematic philosophers nor did their main interest lay in theoretical discussions. Such concepts as natural law, religious

law, caliphate, and political authority are discussed as they have been articulated by Muslim jurists and philosophers. Mardin identifies two sources for the political ideas of the Young Ottomans: political theology, namely the political views of the theologians and the jurists (Mardin does not seem to make a distinction between the two), and the political theory of the philosophers. Although Mardin points to the absence of the secularization of natural law in Islam as a result of the Islamic view of the cosmos (see especially pp. 86-91), he fails to register the historical confrontation between the Ash'arite voluntarism and the Mu'talazite rationalism on the question of theodicy and cosmology. A similar point can be made about certain Sufis, especially of the school of Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi and Sadr al-Din Shirazi (Mulla Sadra), who see no contradiction between the inherent rationality and orderliness of the universe and its unabated sustenance by the creative act of God. This view of law, both in its cosmological and political senses, has prevented the rise of a secular concept of law in the Islamic world. Mardin takes note of this fact but sees it, interestingly enough, as a problem rather than as the prerogative and advantage of the Islamic concept of law and social order, of which such Young Turks as Namik Kemal was acutely aware. This is a result of the secular outlook adopted by Mardin in this part of the book, which becomes even more visible when he says, within the context of a different yet related discussion, that "...Islam had not been able to achieve so great a distinction in the field of science as Europe because it did not have a major tradition of secular thought independent of theology" (p. 324). Needless to say, this view is hardly tenable in view of the Islamic scientific tradition. Mardin's other claim, repeated throughout the book (pp. 89-90, 402), that the Young Ottomans were not able to develop a natural theory of law because the traditional Islamic concept of nature, which is not self-regulatory but God-dependent, did not allow an empirical science of politics, is also open to question. The example of Ibn Khaldun or his Ottoman counterpart Mustafa Ali Pasha of Galipoli would be sufficient to invoke here in that their thoroughly analytic conception of social order and history did not have to be grounded in the idea of a self-sufficient cosmos, cut off from the Divine source, which has ultimately lead to the secularization of modern science and cosmology.

The fourth chapter, titled *Turkish Political Elites in the Nineteenth Century*, recounts the intriguing history of the political engagements of the Young Ottomans. As Mardin points out, the Young Ottomans were not against the Sultan or monarchy per se. They had rather positioned themselves against the Sublime Porte, viz., the political elite around the Sultan. Among this group of statesmen, they became the staunch enemies of Ali and Fuad Pashas (pp. 108-110). This chapter also reveals an important aspect of the Young Ottoman movement: the members of the movement were all part of the state body at different

ranks with different levels of leverage, and they attempted to reform the very structure of which they were an integral part. Hence the famous machination stories surrounding their political struggle. Chapter 5 deals with the Ottoman reforms carried out during the first half of the 19th century, and the position of the Young Ottomans concerning them. It was within the context of these primarily military and political reforms that the Young Ottoman intellectuals developed their sense of modernization and reform. In this sense, the analysis presented here is essential for the understanding of the political idealism of the 19th century Ottoman intelligentsia and their fascination with European civilization.

The rest of the book is devoted to a detailed analysis of the most salient figures of the Young Ottoman movement, with Chapter 7 devoted to secondary figures that contributed to the formation of their intellectual outlook. Here we find an invaluable discussion of the political careers and ideas of Sadik Rifat Pasha, Sinasi, Mustafa Fazil Pasha, Namik Kemal, Ziya Pasha, Ali Suavi, and Hayreddin Pasha. All of these figures played a key role in the transformation of the intellectual scene of the 19th century Ottoman society. The ideas they struggled with, and the ways in which they constructed, disseminated and applied them, were destined to determine the parameters of modern Turkish political thought. One can hardly understand the meaning of such key concepts as reform, the state, society, nation, patriotism, constitutionalism, religion, history, tradition, modern science, and so on within the context of the Turkish intellectual ambiance without having recourse to the writings of these figures. From Mustafa Fazil's pragmatism to Namik Kemal's Islamic patriotism, a comprehensive panorama of the presiding ideas of these figures is to be found in Mardin's analysis, which takes into account the political and social background of the failures and tribulations of the *hommes de lettres* of the 19th century Ottoman intelligentsia. Mardin's meticulous discussion is also important for the understanding of the rise of a new prototype of intellectuals in the Ottoman world called 'münevver', viz., 'those who have been enlightened' — an appellation coined under the intellectual tutelage of the Enlightenment. The advent of this new class of intellectuals whose sense of mission was more or less derived from an Islamic ethos, but whose texture and scope was colored by the secular thinkers of the Enlightenment, is one of the prime points of confrontation between Islamic tradition and modern West. At the present, it remains to be seen if the Islamic world will be able to resuscitate its prototype of the traditional *alim*, whose role is often confused with and restricted to the jurists (*fuqaha*), or will find ways of incorporating the modern intellectual type into its body of knowledge. In any case, the analysis provided by Mardin concerning the Young Ottomans as the new class of intellectuals and activists is sure to shed light on this lingering problem of the Islamic world.

Mardin's work gracefully succeeds in giving us a comprehensive picture of the intellectual transformation of 19th century Ottoman society. This is the only full-length book on the subject in English, and as such is a must for every student of Ottoman intellectual history or of the modern Islamic world. Even four decades after its publication, Mardin's work continues to maintain its relevance for the study of Ottoman and Islamic thought in the modern period.

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