The Intersection of Eastern and Western Thought in Turkish Sociology and Civilizational Discourse

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1. Introduction

2014, during the opening ceremony of a public university, the former Turkish prime minister Ahmet Davutoğlu publicly stated that he "debated with Hegel and 11th century Islamic jurist Ghazali in his dreams." (Hürriyet Daily News 2014)

In a symposium held at the recently established Ibn-Khaldun University in Istanbul, which is affiliated with the AKP-led education organization TÜRGEV, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said, "For instance, the contributions of troubled Western scholars like Auguste Comte to sociology have been recognized, while Ibn Khaldun, whom Comte acknowledged, has been virtually ignored." He continued: "The sloppy translations of those who take whatever they find in the West and pour it into our country without passing it through any filter have paralyzed our academic curriculum."" (Gazete Duvar 2017)

These comments were particularly intriguing to me at the time because I was a sociology undergraduate student at my liberal private university in Istanbul, which primarily taught Western thinkers. The language he employs, and the discourse of Western intellectuals were no stranger to me, as someone who grew up within Islamist circles. However, openly attacking Comte, a figure that was so central in Turkish sociology and the Turkish nationalism, and the Kemalist ideology – in a university he himself founded after Ibn Khaldun attracted my attention. Unlike Davutoglu, who regarded as "organic intellectual" from Islamist circles, Erdogan possessed no intellectual capital that matches to him, and unlike Davutoğlu's speech who shows an inclusivity to the Western and Eastern thought, Erdoğan's speech has an authoritarian and attacking tone that he would employ continuously from that point on.

This change between those two quotes demonstrates a transformation of Erdoğan regime, Between the years of 2014 and 2017 their alliance with Islamist Gulen movement ended violently, which eventually led to the coalition between the Justice and Development's Party and the Nationalistic Action Party (MHP). Erdogan's shift toward an increasingly authoritarian governance model, emphasizing the "cultural politics" of Islamization, nationalism, and conservatism, has developed into a more urgent, survival-driven strategy thanks to confidence. And since 2016, these initiatives have gotten stronger, driven now by a sense of existential necessity.

Shortly after the speech, I personally witnessed the immediate consequences of these policies. Over fifty percent of my teachers in the sociology department had to leave due to their affiliation with the Academicians of Peace. They soon departed for institutions in Europe and the United States. After a span of 4 years, when I decided to further my studies in sociology at Boğaziçi University, a similar situation happened for them. It was only due to delay because of their position as a prestigious university, however, they were referenced as "foreign" several times by Erdoğan himself. As a sociology student, I closely observed the entire process, and the experiences I had throughout that period form the central point that I intend to put up in this paper. What distinguishes a university as either one of our own or an alien institution?

It is intriguing that the international university Erdoğan chose to name the speech after Ibn Khaldun rather than Ziya Gökalp, who is considered the "father of Turkish Sociology." Despite being imprisoned for reciting an Islamist poem by Gökalp in 1997, Erdoğan's speech directly targeted the intellectual antecedents of the secularist tradition in Turkey. The use of Khaldun holds a significant role in Islamic civilization, which the Neo-Ottomanist strategy of Turkey seeks to promote. The education policies implemented by the AKP government, in line with

Neo-Ottomanist ideas, have been extensively studied. However, these policies have not sufficiently addressed current developments in higher education, particularly in the field of social sciences.

This paper will examine the beginnings of sociology in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey. It will explore the philosophical origins of sociology within the historical context and discuss the constraints that limited its development as a discipline of study. I shall briefly examine the Islamic intellectuals and their discussions about opposition to modernity and the Islamic civilization. This analysis will finish by examining the recent advancements concerning academic freedom in Turkey. I shall base my remarks on the existing literature.

2. A Science to Save an Empire

The amazement of Ibn Khaldun in Turkey is not new. Even though today in popular culture he is known for the falsely attributed deterministic quote "*Geography is destiny*," he was an always reference point for Muslim intellectuals. The well-renowned romantic sociologist Cemil Meric says, "Turning to Ibn-Khaldun is turning to ourselves."

The basic openness of Ibn Khaldun to new patterns of historical development attracted the attention of a few later Muslim dynasts. The Ottomans proved the exception, beginning with Katib Celebi and Naima, the 17th–18th century historians who were the first Ottoman interpreters of the Muqaddimah. Before he was discovered in Europe during the early 19th century, Khaldun's work was rediscovered in 17th century, and later it became popular and influential in Ottoman intellectual circles during the late eighteenth century. Hanioğlu (2010) writes that in 1864, when an Ottoman publication asked for contributions for a new library, the only work offered that was not of European origin was a copy of the Muqaddimah. Even the

Ottomans' fascination with Ibn Khaldun had an impact on their efforts to become civilized (Adamiak 2018). Reformist Ahmed Cevdet Pasha utilized Ibn Khaldun's demise of empires theory by discerning the ultimate element of it, and arguing the process can be reversed.

One of the important intellectual developments in this period was the change in the circular perception of history, which had its origins in Ibn Khaldun, being replaced by the Western-originated straight-line and progressive understanding of history. This new understanding led to the widespread belief that the empire needed to adapt to new conditions to survive.

Social theory emerged in Western thought as an effort to understand the structure of society and social phenomena, like how the natural sciences explain the physical world. The concerns of the intellectual class of the Ottoman Empire during the 19th century were not very different; they had a multinational empire that was growing weaker by the day and only attached to each other by weak ties. So, the interest of the late Ottoman thinkers, especially Young Turks, in Western Social theories to save the state, which were considered one of the strengths of the advanced Western civilization as well as the natural sciences, was no surprise.

Auguste Comte was fascinated by Ottoman Empire because to its role as a connecting link between Europe and Asia. The distance separating these two poles extended beyond mere positional or geographical dimensions, it also encompassed metaphorical and cultural aspects. As a propaganda effort; Comte penned a letter to the Grand Vizier Mustafa Reshit Pasha to invite the Ottomans to the religion of humanity. In his letter, he stated that Islam, due to its emphasis on science, held a position that was more progressive in comparison to other religions. He further argued that Islam would be open to transformation into a positivist society. Despite the lack of success in Comte's propaganda activities, his disciples, who also held affinity towards Islam and

the Ottomans compared to their contemporaries, tirelessly spread his positivist ideals and continued to be in contact with Ottoman intellectuals even after his death.

Ahmet Rıza stood out among them, as he was more strongly influenced by Comte than any other Ottomanists. He devoted himself to Comte's religion of humanity and named the İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti (Committee of Union and Progress) after Comte's principles of positivism. Intellectuals associated with the Committee of Union and Progress embraced positivism as a comprehensive ideology to reorganize society, employing sociological reforms in order to prevent the decline of the empire. The reformists were captivated by the objective that Auguste Comte placed upon sociology: 'To transition individuals from metaphysical thinking to positivist thinking, thereby creating a positive society comprised of individuals who think in such terms.' All educational institutions associated with CUP shared a fundamental belief that sociology is a type of philosophy and, in some cases, even a form of religion. They also considered sociology an authoritative source on matters of morality, society, politics, and religion. *(Senturk 2022)*

The ideas of the Young Turks were considered authoritarian, conservative, elitist, and positivist. Ziya Gokalp, who was considered the "father "of Turkish sociology, shared some of these elements, but he largely created his own political framework and school of thought. He took his methodology as well as philosophical orientation from Émile Durkheim, especially positivistic idealism. He often made line-by-line translations from Durkheim in his works, he also synthesized it with his own thoughts; adapting the theories to the Turkish culture and Islam and creating a conceptual framework that was in synthesis with traditional Islamic societal science and modern Durkhemian sociological theories. One notable contribution of Gökalp to sociology is his distinction between hars (local/national culture) and medeniyet (universal/civil culture). This concept allowed societies to maintain their unique social characteristics while embracing

the values of civilization that he linked to the Western world during the modern era.The divide between culture and civilization offered him a foundation for social cohesion, a framework for a shared sense of self, and a structure to prevent sharp distinctions between the East and the West.(Özervarlı 2017) There were other Ottoman intellectuals during this period that influenced by other European social theorists such as Le Play, Demolins, Herbert Spencer but Gokalp's Durkheiman tradition had created the basis of sociological thought in Turkish language.

His theory of combining Islam, Turkishness and Modernization had become the founding ideology of the new secular Turkish Republic. As the modern republic's first president, Atatürk consulted the works of Western sociologists, and he leaned heavily on the scholarship of Ziya Gökalp, the first chair of the sociology department at Istanbul University. *(Pearce 2012).*

Gökalp's emphasis on the importance of social cohesion and solidarity in building a strong and unified nation and belief in Turkish culture and Islam are crucial to national identity, as long as Arab influences are removed, and Turks possess a superior civilization for global leadership resonated with Atatürk's vision for the new republic. Through his writings and teachings, Gökalp sought to reconcile traditional Islamic values with the principles of modernization and progress, paving the way for the development of a unique sociological perspective in Turkey. This fusion of Western sociological ideas with Islamic and Turkish cultural heritage laid the groundwork for the shaping of Turkish society and politics in the early years of the republic, and made him an influental figure for both Islamists and Turkish nationalists.

3. **Instutionalization of Sociology in Republican Period**

In the initial years following the establishment of the Turkish Republic, universities were seen as pivotal in shaping a new, modern, secular, uniform, and Westernized nation-state. Faculty across

various disciplines, including history, literature, anthropology, and linguistics, among others, supported the state's official ideology. Central to this ideology were various theories and propositions concerning the Turkish language and history, which formed the foundation of the republic's guiding principles. Sociology, a relatively new discipline at the time, also played a crucial role in shaping the new nation-state.

In 1933, İstanbul Dârülfünun was replaced by Istanbul University, leading to the dismissal of 92 out of 151 academics. Subsequent changes in higher education, notably after military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980, significantly affected academic freedom and led to the and expulsion of many, particularly left-leaning, academics from Turkish universities *(*Doğan Selenica 2022*).* Behice Boran and Niyasi Berkes, both of whom earned their sociology PhDs in the United States, conducted detailed empirical studies on the rural social structure in Turkey during the 1940s. Their work unsettled the political authorities of the time, leading to their expulsion from Ankara University in 1948 on accusations of communism. Interrupting a devoloping sociology program at Ankara University illustrates the extent to which the establishment of sociology departments in Turkish universities is impacted by dominant political structure Sociological research in Turkey has mostly conformed to dominant scientific beliefs, often without critically examining the theoretical and methodological challenges within the field of sociology. Therefore, regardless of the predominant sociological perspective worldwide, it has been the perspective maintained as a scientific basis in Turkey. The tradition of Continental European sociology, which had a dominant theoretical foundation, was the prevailing orientation in Turkey from the introduction of sociology until the 1960s. However, after that period, American sociology became the dominant scientific orientation in parallel with the dominance of the United States of America (Esgin 2013).

In Turkish sociology, topics such as Kurdish and Armenian "Questions" have remained taboo and have been restricted in Turkish universities, as well as academic topics that are considered against the official state narrative. The prominent researchers on these topics, such as Ismail Beşikçi and Tamer Akçam are expelled, even sentenced to imprisonment.

4. **Civilizational Islam and Islamic Intellectuals**

While sociology institutionalized in the new republic, opposing thinkers who were influenced by anti modernist thought and Islamic tradition continued to exist and criticized the secular state and society despite state repression. One of them, Said Nursi focused on the lack of faith among the ruling classes and their profound alienation, under Kemalism, from Turkey's historic Ottoman and Seljuk past. Indeed, the ideas and identities held by the elite in Ankara no longer served the purpose of societal cohesion among the people but were rather divisive and resulted in the isolation of the elite from the rest of society by giving them a false sense of superiority as the bearers of "Western civilization" defined in terms of Comtean positivism and Jacobin anti-religiosity. French thinkers like Bergson and Blondel were influential in these Muslim intellectuals thoughts, as some of these thinkers also had studied in France. The influence of French philosophers on Turkish Islamic political thought highlights the complex interplay between Western modernity and secularism and Islamic tradition in shaping the intellectual landscape of Turkey (Dalacoura 2019).

Against the official ideology, a group of intellectuals merged Turkish identity and Islam in the nation's definition. Islamist intellectuals like Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, Nureddin Topçu laid the creation of a new self in an individual and collective sense, and advocated for the civilizational renaissance of Turkish-Islamic culture, Ottoman past being is essence and they became the

piilars of a new "civilizational intellectual movement" in the republican Turkey. (Guida 2012)

For Kısakürek, Ottoman Empire was "the realization of the true civilization", and there was a civilizational duality between the West and Islamic World. Erdogan and leading AKP members, has been shaped to a great extent by midcentury Turkish Islamist thinkers like Kısakürek and Topcu.(Ozkan 2014) The Islamist author Ali Bulac states that for the first time in the 1990's, since the rise of modernism, the world has fallen 'into serious doubt as to the validity and accuracy of the widespread conviction that all problems can be solved within the Western paradigm".

5. **Neo-Ottomanism and Higher Education**

During its initial years in power, the AKP mildly criticized the traditional Western-style modernization and promoted a different version of modernity that included Islamic elements. The AKP's rhetoric frequently highlighted 'our ancient values' and the concept of a 'New Turkey', with a significant focus on incorporating Sunni-Islamic practices into education. Ambitious cultural change program whose objective has been defined by President Erdoğan as "the fostering of young generations that are fully devoted to Islamic and national values" has started after their second term. This period marked a significant change in both foreign and domestic policies, and often termed as "Neo-Ottomanism". Neo-Ottomanism is a nostalgic project can be traced back to 1990's, as Özyürek examines the 75th anniversary celebrations of the republic: "*the promoters of neo-Ottomanism had a rather flattened sense of the seven-hundred-year- long rule of the Ottomans and saw the empire as a proof of the superior achievements of a 'Turkish' state that accepted Islam as its official religion*." (Ozyurek 2011) The most influential figure of the Neo-Ottomanism was Ahmet Davutoğlu, the main architect of the foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party and a pioneering figure in the more recent movement towards

"civilizational" thinking in Turkey. To him, Western civilization was in crisis because of the ills of secularism and modernization, and soon the synthesis of a new civilization will spread throughout the world.He argues that some civilizations, the Islamic civilization among them, resist Western hegemony and dominance, and the universalization of Western norms; he argues that changing a civilization's self-perception/self-understanding enables it to resist domination. (Dalacoura 2019) Through this approach, Turkey could establish itself as a key player in the resistance against Western hegemony and contribute to the synthesis of a new, powerful Islamic civilization; as Islamist intellectuals before him like Kısakürek also envisioned. Davutoğlu aims to resolve conflicts and tensions within Islamic intellectual traditions regarding the nature of God and God's attributes, as well as the tension between mysticism and rationalism, and the historical and atemporal Neo-Ottomanism. (Morrison 2014) Davutoğlu objected to the use of the term "neo-Ottomanism" to describe his policies, and instead used the word "Pax-Ottomanica", with the emphasis on peace. He began to turn his pan-Islamist vision into reality after 2002, following his appointment as foreign-policy adviser to the ruling Justice and Development Party, a position he held until he was made foreign minister in 2009.

The efforts to revive Ottoman and Islamic traditions had significantly increased, in addition to efforts in foreign policy. To cultivate pious generations, several educational reforms have been created. The number of public universities had skyrocketed all over rural Turkey, each in every city. The academic staff of the social sciences departments such as law, psychology, sociology have found to be often educated in divinity Islamic theology. In her work examining the public universities that have been recently founded "*AKP's Backyard: Rural Universities*", Tuğba Tekerek (2023) shows the religious perspective that is taking over higher education. One student share: "*In a sociology class, the teacher first talks about sociologists, then continues with, "As a*

Theologian…" Why every class had to include religious perspective, I was having hard time understanding. Then there is nothing left to discuss, because we all believe in it.". Another student states, "*Every class it starts with our ancestors, then continues with "Ottomans"*

In 2022, Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs Ali Erbaş stated that: *"there is no such thing as Islamic and non-Islamic sciences in our civilization. A student of astronomy, medicine, geography, and physics also is a student in Islamic sciences. So our civilization, in fact, realized the idea of educating students in different fields, which we call the interdisciplinary method that Europe discovered 25 years ago, centuries ago*." (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2022) The Religious Affairs Directorate also offers "spiritual guidance" to university students that are staying in state student dormitories. Currently, there are two universities that has the name "Islam" in it, the non-active "International Islam Science and Technology University", and Gaziantep Islam Science and Technology University, which offer education in both Islamic sciences and western faculties. These subsequent efforts can be understood as attempts to organize the academic structure in Turkey under the Islamic umbrella.

As well as public universities, since 2000, the most visible change has occurred with the introduction of foundation universities established by Islamic foundations as academies in Turkey. They are usually named after Ottoman personalities or Muslim thinkers (Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakıf University, Bezmi Alem University). Emphasizing their commitment to Islamic values in their strategic plans, they represent the hegemonic formula of neoliberalism: political conservatism combined with market liberalism. (Birler 2012)

Davutoğlu directly had a role in creating a foundation university himself. The Foundation of Art and Science, created in 1986 by a group of intellectuals including Davutoğlu, launched Istanbul Şehir University in 2008. Şehir University aimed at establishing itself as a globally recognized

and esteemed institution that upheld Islamic principles, while also boasting a politically varied faculty. In 2020, the state shut it down because of its financial difficulties when Davutoğlu, who had become a direct competitor to Erdoğan, formed his own political party. (Middle East Eye 2020)

Ibn-Khaldun University, as I mentioned at the beginning of the paper, is an effort to establish an internationally recognized educational institution. Compared to Şehir University, it lacks the liberal character that the former carries, as well as the prestige, and has more pronounced references to Islamic civilization than Western oriented thought. This can be read as the subsequent changes that occurred with their date of foundation. The institution uses English, Turkish, and Arabic as its three official languages of instruction. It houses a center for civilizational alliance studies and maintains worldwide contacts with other universities and institutes focused on Islam. In the university statement, it is said that the university employs a vision of "open civilization" with a belief in "historical experience and scientific accumulation of Islamic civilization can inspire us" and that "Islamic civilization will play a global role again and pave the way for solutions to the problems of all humanity". The aims of the university are declared as "to create a civilization consciousness by re-recognizing our own civilization concept and theory, and then to give insight into world literacy, taking into consideration the world's accumulation of leading civilizations."

Turkey's Islamic civilizational aims through higher education realized its own through most Fetullah Gülen's global school networks. These schools are seen as the foundational actors of Turkish "Neo-Ottomanist" foreign policy, as a way for Turkey to achieve global relevance as a regional leader, and especially Muslim nations in the world. Erdoğan used his old cooperator Fetullah Gülen's network and his affiliated institutions across Africa to facilitate partnership, and

cultural diplomacy by "presenting itself as a new model that strives to implement laissez-faire policies with human face, and championing the crusade that Islam and modernity can go together". (Akca 2019) Türkiye Bursları, a scholarship to attract international students, is offered to 200.000 thousand students graduate and undergraduate from the countries that especially has historical ties to the Turkey also utilizes this existing networks. It is also beneficial to add that the graduate scholarship Türkiye Burları offers named after Ibh Khaldun. These international students are offered to study in the newly opened rural universities in Turkey, facilitating the international dialogue as well as bolstering the rural economy in these towns that are often neglected.

6. **Discussion and Conclusion**

The First Republic created unity out of their inherited diversity by claiming that the Turks were the legitimate heirs of numerous other civilizations. Up until the 1980s, a Hittite sun disk served as capital city Ankara's official symbol. Today, these references have almost ceased to exist. This paper was an attempt to make sense of new reference points, especially Islamic civilizational discourse and its reactionary position toward positivist thought. Sociology held a central position in this discourse as a tool to transform society and the state, for both camps in different senses.

During the early years of AKP's administration, Turkey's former status as a "bridge" was no longer stressed, creating an opportunity for Turkey to redefine itself as a regional leader, defender, and collaborator within the global system. While Davutoğlu consistently emphasized universalism, the AKP leadership no longer showed enthusiasm for promoting cosmopolitanism internationally, nor did it maintain interest in cultural diversity within the country. The post-2016 era in Turkey is characterized by authoritative measures such as the "Academics for Peace" and

University protests, human rights violations, repression of freedom of speech, and severe governmental pressure on media and journalism.

The examples I've offered show the Islamic civilizational mission that New Turkey envisions, the educational reforms in different levels, the dismissal of academicians and move to the different countries had created important pathways that results in significant change in academic structure in Turkey. Since 2020, the government has demanded from universities to be 'native and national one' (*yerli-milli*), which signifies being a defender of the government's policy and being 'truly' nationalist and Islamist. (Doğan 2023) The recent attack on Boğaziçi University (Kabasakal Arat 2021), and Erdoğan's words "They will realize that they are a university of this country", with references to the "foreign" characteristic of the university, signals a long fight over a cultural hegemony discussions and anti-western dimensions of this tension. The Muslim intellectual class has long tried to create a cultural hegemony, As President of the Directorate of Communications, and a sociology professor himself, Fahrettin Altun had famously tweeted "*Your political hegemony is over, and your cultural hegemony will be over too..*" (Altun 2018). The Islamic Civilizational discourse, and the universities can be considered as an attempt to this end. It is important to state that the Muslim intellectual tradition do not constitute in single line, and in-group dynamics and distribution of power creates new forms of alliances and thoughts; as seen in the case of the dismissal of Ahmet Davutoğlu.

Recently, international students have become the center of racist paranoia when anxieties about the sexually transmitted diseases among African students surfaced via social media. This ironically put the Turkey's global student exchange networks, and their aims into question in public space and social media for the first time ever. In future it is safe to assume that these encounters and tensions will birth interesting research topics.

Despite the reforms, many studies also found out that despite the educational reforms, young generations are still not devoted to Islam as much as expected, and Erdoğan's pious generation project had failed. However, it is important to note that these studies may not capture the complete picture, It is possible that there are other factors at play that are not being taken into account. Additionally, it is crucial to consider the diverse range of beliefs and practices within Islam, as well as the impact of cultural and political influences on religious identity. Further research is needed to fully understand the complexities of religion and youth in Turkey.

The current state of higher education in Turkey is an intriguing subject that warrants exploration, particularly considering the brain drain and youth politics. Additionally, the recent emergence of right-wing populist parties employing ethnonationalist rhetoric with references to the CUP members adds further complexity to the discussion. Can the established institutions founded by AKP truly realize the vision of being an intellectual hub in the heart of an Islamic civilization led by Turkey? Nevertheless, the extent of that conversation goes way beyond the limits of this paper. While some view Neo-Ottomanism as an unsuccessful policy, the current level of soft global power that Turkey possesses demonstrates a certain degree of success for the idea.

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