

Modernization and Societal Change Through Education in the Late Ottoman Period and the Early Periods of Turkish Republic

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Abstract: The modernization movement through education in Turkish society dates back to the late Ottoman period. The importance of education has continued in the early periods of the new Turkish Republic. Educational reforms in the second quarter of the 1900s and Dewey's visit paved the way for modernization, societal change, political socialization, and, hence, democratization in Turkey. This article exhibits the stages that Turkish society went through since the late Ottoman Empire period in the 18th century and touches upon how education transformed Turkey, especially in regards to political socialization and civic culture.

Keywords: Turkish modernization, societal change, democratization, political science and international relations, comparative and international education

1. Introduction

Turkey is one of the countries that education has been the most important pillar in its development through the mechanisms of modernization, democratization and economic growth. Education has played a great role in the transformation of Turkish society since the late Ottoman times to the present. Whereas the main focus of the educational reforms in Ottoman times has been on military training and keeping up with the West, the concentration has shifted to nation building, modernization and development of the country in the early periods of the Turkish Republic. During this transition, the educational background of the nation-building elite has been very influential.

The history of Turkish reforms is worth studying as the modernization movements continued in the new Turkish Republic but the Ottoman legacy in all other areas was rejected. Significant educational reforms on the educational system and alphabet, American philosopher Dewey's visit and establishment of village institutes had contributed to the Turkish way of modernization and political development in Turkey steadily. Education has captured a very central role in this process.

2. The Late Ottoman Period

In the late periods of the Ottoman Empire, the predecessor of the Turkish Republic, Ottoman sultans in the 18th and 19th century tried to modernize the education system in the country in some different ways. However, their focus was mainly on the military schools and the education of army personnel. Selim III (1789-1808) created the New Order (*Nizam-ı Cedid*), a modern-style army, and invited French military trainers and educators to educate young Turkish army members in military schools. Mahmut II (1808-1839) gave special importance to modern and secular education. In his time, the very first group of Turkish students were sent to Europe to get foreign education in 1827. Abdulaziz (1861-1876) was the first Ottoman sultan who went on a

trip abroad. He visited France, the UK, Germany, Belgium, Austria and Hungary. Seeing and influenced by the modern educational systems abroad, he declared a national Educational Statute (*Maarif Nizamnamesi*) in 1869 upon his return to the country. With this order, he opened modern, scientific and secular high schools along with regional elementary schools in big cities similar to the ones in France such as Galatasaray, Darüşşafaka and Pertevniyal (*Mekteb-i Mahmudiye*) (Zürcher, 2014).

Education fuels the development and modernization of societies. Ottoman Empire was no exception. Intense educational policymaking aimed at a state formation in the late Ottoman period, especially after the military defeats (Wetsberg et al, 2017). Williamson (1987) claims modernization efforts in the late Ottoman period were in a “defensive” nature that the modernization movement aimed to block the discontentedness in the society, increase social cohesion if possible and defend the state against the expansionist European powers and Russia. The modernizing developments in the Ottoman educational system in the late Ottoman period paved the way for increasing modernization demands in the society and the emergence of the military and intellectual elite in Turkey. The majority of this group was educated in renowned national schools or in international schools of foreign missionaries in which either the language of instruction was non-Turkish or they had mandatory intensive foreign language learning. This elite cadre, mainly consisted of the members of a group called *Jeunes Turcs* (*Young Turks*), formed the driving force of the modernization and democratization efforts that are chronologically shaped in the Edict for Reorganization (*Tanzimat Fermanı*) in 1839, Edict for Reforms (*Islahat Fermanı*) in 1856, the First Constitutional Period (*Birinci Meşrutiyet*) in 1876 and the Second Constitutional Period (*İkinci Meşrutiyet*) in 1908. Their first demands were partially met in the “First Constitution” in 1876. With this constitution, for the first time in Ottoman history, there had been an elected body within the empire and there was a parliament. However, it didn’t last long. After a monarchic rule by Abdulhamit II (1876-1908), the “Second Constitution” was imposed by the Turkish political and military elite in 1908. The Turkish Republic was established in 1923 after a decisive victory in the Independence War (*Kurtuluş Savaşı*).

The new Turkish Republic, its constitution and structure of government and state apparatus have emerged as the most recognizable outcome of the modernization process that occurred in the late Ottoman period. The common characteristics of the leaders of these movements were that they all got the modern and secular education of their time. Moreover, their influence lasted until the 1950s in the political life of modern Turkey (Zürcher, 2014).

3. The New Turkish Republic

The importance of modern and secular education persisted in the early periods of the new Turkish Republic. The well-educated and nation-building elite had a nationalist, reformist, modern and secularist approach in the country as a result of the education they received whereas the majority of the public “periphery” used to live in rural areas and they were predominantly religious and conservative (Mardin, 1973). The subjective and submissive political culture of the Ottoman Empire was prolonged into the Turkish Republic period via this “periphery”. The “center” instrumentalized a state party to reach out to the public. The revolution and Kemalist reforms were imposed “from above” with the help of the party by the well-educated ruling elite. The party was the only entity for political socialization and state administrative mechanism. During those years, education along with printed press was used for the indoctrination of the state’s Kemalist ideology on the regular citizens or the “periphery”. Kemalist ideology was characterized Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as the father, savior hero and chief-teacher of Turks (Zürcher, 2014). It was certain that modern and secular education was for the good of the people and the nation, however, it needed to be explained to the people. By education, it was aimed to improve the readiness and potential of Turkish society for development and capacities for democratic progress. The education system helped to introduce reforms and advocate them to the public as a function of a “bridge” from the ruling center to the periphery.

A new education and school law followed the new national constitution in the new Turkish Republic, as it happened in other nations in history (Wetsberg et al, 2017). In 1924, with the Law of Unification of Education

(*Tevhid-i Tedrisat*), religious schools were banned. The state declared the education will be run by the state only and it will be modern and secular. This law abolished the existence of duality in the educational institutions that remained from the Ottoman Empire (Gök, 2007). The 1920s witnessed a series of educational reforms regarding organization, homogenization and the expansion of education. In the quest for national educational reform, the Turkish government invited John Dewey to Turkey. His invitation presented a manifestation of Turkish authorities on the importance of education in the democratization of Turkey and Atatürk's desire for the establishment of democratic culture through education (Ata, 2000).

John Dewey was a very influential person in the educational discipline and he had a very profound impact on the educational system in the USA with his ground breaking progressive and pragmatist approach in education. Other than his expertise in education, he was one of the greatest psychologists and philosophers of the 20th century. In his seminal book "*Democracy and Education*", he lists many aspects of education and provides a very comprehensive philosophical framework on education's role in societies and democracies (Dewey, 1921). No one could be better than him in that period to assist a foreign government like Turkey on an especially theoretical base. Some claim John Dewey's recommendations for the Turkish educational system are still valid today (Kahraman et al, 2011). His pragmatist influence lasted a very long time in Turkish educational history (Kesgin, 2016). A few scholars discuss that he didn't have much influence as anticipated and his influence was limited when considered his pedagogical ideas on learning by doing and practicing democracy in schools were not implemented fully (Dorn & Santoro, 2011). Some suggest although Dewey has a contribution to Turkish modernization through his recommendations on the Turkish education system, however, his libertarian and democratic values to some extent conflicted with the Turkish way of modernization and democracy (Özsoy, 2009). Dewey was not the only expert invited to Turkey. Some other prominent people visited Turkey to help advance the Turkish educational system such as Kuhne in 1926, Buyse in 1927, Malche in 1932, Parker in 1934 and Kemerrer Group in 1933-1934 (Büyükdüvenci, 1994). Their reports are criticized for being impracticable totally and reflecting ignorance about the traditions and the society as a whole (Williamson, 1987).

Dewey's two-month visit to Turkey attracted the Turkish press attention considerably (Ata, 2001). He visited the schools in Istanbul, Ankara and Bursa. When Dewey met Atatürk in 1924, the most urgent element to address for a democratic society was literacy. The "Language Reform" in 1928 aimed to spread literacy widely throughout the nation. A new Turkish language and alphabet based on Latin scripts were accepted. Dewey encouraged the Ministry of Education to take active leadership for the enlightenment of society towards modernization, social, political and economic development. He reported to the Turkish government with his proposal in the categories of program, organization of the Ministry of Public Instruction, training and treatment of teachers, school system, health and hygiene and school discipline in his first preliminary report (Ata, 2001). He later added his thoughts in a second report on the programming aspect of education, funding the schools, the school system and comprehensive national educational planning. It was not so easy for the young Turkish Republic to put Dewey's recommendations into practice due to depleted economic resources after the Independence War.

Dewey's model was focused on the education for democratic citizenship. Dewey visioned the development of schools as public centers, however, the Turkish Republic somehow inclined towards a centralized and authoritative educational model that is influenced by German and French systems. Dewey's visit in that sense was indeed an interesting encounter between Dewey's social ideal of education for democratic localism for a vibrant democracy and the Turkish government's political goal of centralized education for a homogenous, secular, modern and democratic identity for the citizens of the new nation-state (Dorn & Santoro, 2011).

The illiteracy rate in 1923 was 93 percent and 80 percent of the population was living in rural areas. There were about 3200 primary schools but only 5600 primary school teachers (Kahraman et al, 2011). The situation was worse in the rural areas, there were schools without teachers. Idealist teachers who were not aware of the conditions in the villages prior were sent to rural remote areas in harsh conditions, although it created discontentment among them. Even, a group of military personnel was chosen and sent as teachers in villages

starting in 1936. This really helped ameliorate the teacher shortage in rural areas. This period witnessed a massive undertaking for the dissemination of education nationwide even into the villages and small towns via “village institutes” (*köy enstitüleri*) (Zürcher, 2014). It was noted that Dewey said, “*village Institutes were the schools of his dreams*” (Benli, 1990). Village institutes started to open in 1940. 16.400 teachers and 7.300 health officers graduated between the years of 1940 and 1946 (Kahraman et al, 2011). By 1950, the literacy rate increased to 28 percent. However, there was a significant difference between men and women. Where the literacy ratio for men was 47 percent, it was only 13 percent for women (Altuğ et al, 2008). However, village institutes lost their functionality after 1950 and were completely closed in 1954.

Dependent on Turkey’s international relations, World War II signifies a turning point in the Turkish educational system. Before the war, the Turkish educational system and intellectual life were under the influence of continental Europe, specifically that of Germany and France. After the war, American influence on economic, political, military and education has become prevalent (Ünder, 2008). In the first half of the 1950s, the educational campaign on the spread of literacy nationwide even into the villages was altered by economical preferences which resulted in massive migration from villages to the cities. With the abolition of the village institutes and uncontrolled migration to the cities, the schools in the cities became overcrowded and the double-session educational system adapted.

4. Modernization And Democratization in Turkey

Modernization theory emerged in the post-WWII period when colonial independence movements were occurring worldwide and international organizations for global governance were being formed (Portnoi & Bagley, 2011). Classical modernization theorists assert that there is a direct and linear correlation between widespread literacy and mass schooling with democratization in the societies (Perry, 2005). Modernity to be achieved by developing and underdeveloped was uniform which is a Western type. The progress and the path for modernization were assumed to be uniform and applicable to any developing country independent of the local and endogenous factors. The social and political progress built on democratic ideals could serve for the industrialization and economic development of countries.

Rostow (1960) formulated the stages of development in five steps. Although it was derived from Europe it could have been projected to all countries worldwide. In the first stage, the countries experience dependence on agricultural mode of production, low technology level and are run by monarchies or dictatorships. In the second stage, they are prepared for “takeoff” which is to be industrialized and become advanced economies by shifting from agricultural economies to technology and start doing trade. In the third stage, the countries achieve economic progress, technological development and integration with the global market. The fourth stage witnesses the maturity in the economic growth supported by advanced technologies. The fifth stage is the high mass consumption period in which the citizens experience a higher level of wealth and industrialization.

An increase in the literacy rate and schooling went hand in hand with the modernization process and transformation of Turkish society. In the 1950s, social mobilization followed the physical mobilization of masses and urbanization that occurred in Turkey with the moving of rural people from peripheries to the cities. Social mobilization compelled people to change their way of life and beliefs towards modernity which helped for political participation and societal development (Deutsch, 1961). This new situation required newly migrated people to interact with other migrated communities from different ethnic and cultural origins in the country in addition to the existing urban citizens in big towns. In order to survive financially, the migrated people needed to find jobs or do trade and business with others which led them to learn about others and to have empathy for other people from different cultural backgrounds. Beyond the empathy, to be on the same page and secure in their trade transactions with the other sides of the businesses, people needed to put their verbal agreements on some sort of written declarations and agreements. At the same time, the issue of “trust” in the business reinforced the formal legal contract settings in daily life where the people realized that they needed to secure their rights with binding legal contracts. Literacy played a very important role at this point because people

needed to pay attention to the terms of agreements and were motivated to learn how to read and write. Hence, the urbanization and modernization process resulted in an increase in literacy along with increasing trade, capital in the business and wealth in Turkey.

With the increase in literacy, people also started to read more about literature and magazines. Increasing engagement in printed daily materials fueled the creation of mass media in Turkey. People started to follow up the daily social and political matters with the newspapers. This augmented involvement in printed media paved the way for political socialization. Politically socialized citizens and rising business groups started to have demands from the state in accordance with their interests. They formed associations, unions and political parties to represent and pursue their interests. Lerner (1958) stated that the key to modernization lies in the participant society – one in which people go to school, read newspapers, are in the wage and market economy, participate in political processes through elections and are able to change their opinions on diverse matters through time. He also posted that education is the pivotal agent in the transition to a full participant society.

Dissemination of education among society has important effects on the political culture of the countries. With modernization movements led by education, the society moves from passive modes of parochial and subjective culture to an active participant one as the most desired in a democratic society (Diamond, 1993). As a result of this developmental progress in political culture, with a balanced composition in which the majority of society has participatory political culture and minor portions possess parochial and submissive culture, “civic culture” could be achieved (Almond & Verba, 1963).

A step further, social capital is a very important concept in democratic societies. Social capital is defined as “networks together with shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (Keeley, 2007). Putnam (1993) drew a very comprehensive explanation for social capital in his seminal book. When there are bonds, bridges, linkages and trust among people in the communities, social capital produces the most efficient outcomes socially and economically. Social capital indeed serves as a public good for all society (OECD, 2001). It reduces the transaction costs and time if mutual trust is established in communities with shared norms and values. The linkage between education and social capital may be characterized as a two-way relationship. On the education side, individual’s socialization in educational institutions by itself and democratization in the society with increasing literacy rates tend to elevate the political culture and increase the social capital of societies. In return, social capital enhances the educational quality and performance, and it encourages the civic engagement of educated individuals in society.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, in the Turkish case, modern education among the nation-building Turkish elite has had a vital influence in the governmental transition from Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. Increasing literacy rate due to nationwide education reform in the early years of the republic had a very significant role in the Turkish nation’s modernization and democratization process. Political development brought about political socialization and economic wealth to the country. It can easily be said that increase in literacy rate and educational attainment catalyzed the modernization and democratization process in Turkey more than any other factors.

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