

Democratisation: what's in a word?

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In April 2011 I went to Turkey to begin researching the process of democratisation. EU accession talks have stimulated a wave of political reforms. Different actors – Kurdish, Islamic, feminist – use the language of democracy for their own ends. The Turkish press is lively, and taboo subjects are openly discussed. Ozal's 1980 economic reforms transformed society and dispersed economic power to new actors and a growing middle class. On top of other concepts – modernisation, secularisation and westernisation – should we add 'democratisation' to the lexicon of Turkish studies?

Demokratiklesme is certainly present in its political discourse. On the surface, the 'wave' of democratisation which has transformed Europe since 1989 is extending itself to Turkey. This is reflected in current concepts like *demokratik özerklik* (democratic autonomy), *sivil toplum* (civil society), *sivil anayasa* (civil constitution) and *insan hakları* (human rights). Yet there is little consensus on what 'democratisation' means besides 'reaching western standards'. My intention is to investigate this question historically. The problem is that since the 19th century, periods of decay have followed those of reform, and the language of new beginnings has been misleading. Moreover, the transition to democracy in 1950 was really carried out in a mechanical way, with democracy meaning essentially elections, and there was no societal discourse of democratisation guiding it.

Turkish democratisation has been 'stop-start' and international bodies still classify it as 'a hybrid regime' (oscillating between autocracy and democracy). Since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) promises a new constitution, and committed Turkey to *ileri (advanced) demokrasi* in its April 2011 manifesto, the coming year will test whether the discourse reflects reality. Terms such as 'societal contract' are already being used for the constitution. In Turkey the process of democratisation has always needed an anchor, such as EU accession, and constitution-making provides one. In Europe, conceptual change furthered democratisation best when focused on institutional choices, such as direct versus parliamentary representation. So there are grounds for optimism. On the other hand, the Turkologist Mehmet Fuad Köprülü commented that Turkey needs a mental revolution to break away from the autocratic instincts of the past. Yet 'mental revolutions' succeed in art rather than politics, and reality may not catch up with the conceptual change. Rights, civil society and autonomy are partly illusory everywhere, but a dilemma found in many developing countries is especially acute in Turkey. On the one hand, the direction a society pursues is essential to its identity. On the other, the language ('modernisation', 'westernisation' and now 'democratisation') providing that direction in Turkey anticipates much change, creating discontent with the status quo. The result is a perpetual identity crisis which democracy on its own cannot resolve.

Sociology and revolutions in Turkey.

The transmission of ideas and the birth of liberal thought

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Understanding the dynamics of modern Turkish political and social thought requires an intellectual excavation, tracing the origins of modern political ideologies in the Turkish context to their mainly western European sources. Such an excavation brings to the surface the fact that the political and social ideas and ideals that have been imported from western Europe since the late 18th century have formed a major component of modern Turkish political thought.

In my postdoctoral research, funded by the British Institute at Ankara, I have sought to explore the impact of Emile Durkheim's sociology on Turkish political thought with a focus on the works of Ahmet Ağaoğlu (1869–1939). While the central aim of the research was to display the role European sociology played in the outbreak of the revolutions and the birth of modern political ideologies in Turkey, my aims also included contributing to the methodological discussions in intellectual history of the transformative function of ideas that are transmitted from one context to another, and uncovering the contribution of Turkish political and social thinkers to the development of sociology as an academic discipline.

Although there has been a number of studies on the Durkheimian influence on the works of the famous nationalist thinker Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924) (for example, Spencer 1958; Parla 1985; Mestrovic 1993; Parla, Davison 2004), there has as yet been no study showing that there were deep Durkheimian motifs in Ağaoğlu's liberal thought. The research has paid attention also to the works and activities of earlier Turkish thinkers who utilised European social theories in propounding their ideas, such as Mehmed Sabahaddin (1877–1948) and Ahmet Rıza (1859–1930). I would like to provide here a brief history of the process of the transmission of ideas and the birth of liberal thought in Turkey.

Engendering a new rationalist mode of thinking inspired by Enlightenment ideas in the 1860s and 1870s, the flow of 'liberal' European ideas bought to an end in Ottoman Turkish thought the dominance of the traditions of a theological and geographical-organismic understanding of history and Aristotelian philosophy (Berkes 1936). The advent of modern political ideologies in Turkey, and thus in the Middle East (Findley 1982a; 1982b), was a consequence of the introduction of this 'new mode of thinking'. As of the mid-19th century, the Young Ottomans began to formulate the ideologies of Pan-Islamism and Ottomanism with anti-imperialist but at the same time liberal leanings. These men of the 1860s and 1870s closely read and translated the works of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Montesquieu and Voltaire. The concepts and ideas they introduced into Ottoman thought, such as citizens' rights, freedom of expression, constitutional government and natural rights of the people, not only gave rise to questions connected to the absolute rule of the Ottoman