

Introducing Cemil Meriç

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Cemil Meriç was born in 1916 in the Hatay region of southeastern Turkey, a region riven by political and cultural turmoil. His family emigrated from Greece after the Ottoman defeat in the Balkan Wars. After World War I, the region came under French Mandatory rule. After brief independence in 1938, the Hatay region was annexed by Turkey in 1939. Meriç's family history, personal experiences, and studies in the French education system contributed to his anticolonial worldview, search for universal rationality and creation of a unique, subversive language that combined Persian and Arabic with Turkish.

From early adulthood on, Meriç did not conform to his cultural milieu. Serdar Poyraz and Duygu Köksal describe his misgivings regarding the suppression of Ottoman culture and national aspirations in the French education he received. Meriç hoped to find refuge in Turkey but realized that Istanbul of the 1930s and 1940s was rejecting its Ottoman past and had adopted the French principles of *laïcité* he was trying to escape. The French saw his interest in Ottomanism as a political statement favoring the unification of Hatay with Turkey. The Kemalists saw his linguistic preferences for the Ottoman heritage as evidence of his unwillingness to join the secular modernization project and consequently as an intellectual threat. Meriç had several temporary teaching positions; he taught French at the University of Istanbul from 1946 until his retirement in 1974.¹ He lost his sight in 1954, at the age of 38, a harsh blow to his agonized spirits.²

Meriç was a prolific author with a unique cultural-linguistic strategy. He discusses fascism and anarchism, French literature, sociology, and Eastern philosophy. He critiques Kemalist modernity, the activities of the reformist generation, and his intellectual contemporaries. The chapter "Babil" from his notable book *Bu Ülke* [This country] is translated into English and published here. To a great extent,

this chapter summarizes his worldview. His other books include *Bir Dünya'nin Eşiğinde* [On the threshold of a world], *Umrandan Uygarlığa* [From 'umran,' social life, to civilization], *Saint Simon: İlk Sosyolog, İlk Sosyalist* [Saint Simon: The first sociologist, the first socialist), and *Işık Doğudan Gelir* [Light comes from the East].

At the heart of Meriç's writings is a critique of Turkey's Westernized elite who emptied Turkish culture of its treasures and content. He argues that the secular, modern Kemalist order perpetuated Western hegemony and the imposition of an intellectual dictatorship in the name of universal values it did not understand. The Kemalist project saw secularization as the rational basis of modernity with no room for theology or religious law. Religion became a social category through which the population was identified and controlled. These circumstances—the disappearance of the religious establishment and the tight clamp on freedom of thought—raise the question of how controversial ideas that are not allowed expression are preserved. Meriç's writings suggest that the literary establishment preserved tradition and the critique of what Antoine Compagnon calls *les antimodernes*.³ The antimodernists, who are the product of modernity, are, however, reluctant to accept its premises. In France, from the revolution until the mid-twentieth century, antimodernists excluded from the political and social establishment protested, socially and culturally, through poetry and prose—examples of writers include Stéphane Mallarmé, Honoré de Balzac and Marcel Proust. Perhaps this is what inspired Meriç to study their work.

Scholars of political and religious thought in Turkey attempt to categorize and decipher Meriç's writing. Poyraz argues that:

Meriç symbolizes an intellectual trend in Turkey whose ideas are similar to those of Takeuchi Yoshimi in Japan and Jalal Al-e Ahmed in Iran in that they question the predominant Eurocentric notion of modernization and enlightenment.⁴

According to Köksal, Meriç is a conservative who broke free of the vicious circle of conservative religious writers. He emphasized the rational tradition in Islam, followed the thinking of Ibn Khaldun and the work of the *ihvan-ı safa* (Brethren of Purity). Meriç's writing reflects Ibn Khaldun's sociological theory on the separation of theology and history and of science and religion. He was one of the founders of the Turkish *medeniyet hareketi* (the civilization movement).⁵ In contrast to other conservatives who ascribe moral superiority to Islam and see the Christian West and the Islamic East as unbridgeable civilizations, Meriç seeks the universal meaning of rationality.⁶ As Poyraz notes, unlike the Kemalists who attribute rationality to the geographical and Christian West, Meriç does not see the West as a geographical

category or as a Christian entity. In his writings the West is a value equivalent to free thought.⁷ Secularization, on the other hand, as understood and implemented by the Kemalists in their linguistic and cultural reforms, is a Christian product. Unlike religious writers who rejected the entire generation of Ottoman reformers, Meriç relates positively to some of them. Striving for universal categories, he follows the spirit of the *ihvan-ı safa* and objects to the social ills of religious and ethnic sectarianism.

Bu Ülke is fragmentary in style; its collection of reflections on basic concepts of intellectual and political life in Turkey develops into a coherent argument. A lexicon, called *Kanaviçe*, is included. Using both texts, Meriç builds his argument and smoothly maneuvers between two axes: The first axis locates us as to the historical development of modernity, beginning with the French Revolution. The second axis consists of the intellectual's obligation toward society and language's place in the creation of culture.

Meriç argues that the lexicon is the nation's memory and the struggle today "is not between man and fate" but rather, "between man and the word." An intellectual's role is to trace the history of prose and the connection between the word, the memory, and the state. The Turkish intellectuals' serious mistake, in his opinion, was to adopt ideas and words without historical resonance in Turkish culture; words and concepts that originated in Christian Europe led to cultural emptiness. The Turkish writers forgot that their role was to express reality in their own language, based on their cultural origins.

Meriç contends that the Kemalists' fabricated language made literary revival unattainable—they removed the conscience from prose, leaving behind a collection of epileptic sentences. He sees the scholars of his time as following a conscienceless ideology whose tangible expression is the use of slogans. Meriç is not afraid of ideologies but demands their examination with a local and cultural compass.

Meriç's innovative use of Turkish, which draws on Persian and Arabic, makes his writing difficult to translate. Arzu Eker Roditakis and Saliha Paker have succeeded in this difficult task with exceptional skill, dedication, and research. They have provided the non-Turkish reader with an opportunity to understand the worldview of a fascinating Turkish philosopher.

In recent years, Meriç's work has enjoyed growing interest in Turkey among both conservative and progressive intellectuals. In the post-Cold War climate, his thinking that extends beyond the national has new legitimacy. Moreover, Meriç is one of the founders of the republican discourse on civilizations utilized by the new elite.⁸ As Poyraz observes, the demographic changes and changed balance

of power in society brought Meriç to the center of the contemporary discourse. Turkey's Europeanization and the discussion regarding its geographical and cultural-political place in the shadow of Europe's political and security consolidation created opportunities, anxieties, and problems. These, in turn, are related to the inseparable connection between orientalism, secularism and Europe, and the attempts at decolonization.

The cultural deliberations that accompanied the establishment of the republic remain almost unchanged. Today, as in the early twentieth century, Turkish intellectuals deliberate over the essence of the national projects, questions of authenticity, and the sources of cultural renewal. Meriç's writing facilitated the rejection of either-or politics, the search for an old-new cultural location, and the need to use history and Ottoman resources in the process of renewal. The implications for contemporary political and social spheres are clear.

Notes

- 1 Duygu Köksal, "The Dilemmas of a Search for Cultural Synthesis: A Portrait of Cemil Meriç as a Conservative Intellectual," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 21 (Fall 1999): 79-102.
- 2 Serdar Poyraz, "Thinking about Turkish Modernization: Cemil Meriç on Turkish Language, Culture, and Intellectuals," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 26, no. 3 (2006): 437.
- 3 Antoine Compagnon, *Les Antimodernes: de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).
- 4 Poyraz, "Thinking about Turkish Modernization," 435.
- 5 Ahmet Davutoğlu, "The Re-Emergence of Islamic Thought in Turkey: Intellectual Transformation," BRISMES Proceedings of the 1986 International Conference on Middle Eastern Studies, (London: BRISMES, 1986), 229-239.
- 6 Köksal, "The Dilemmas of a Search for Cultural Synthesis," 97.
- 7 Poyraz, "Thinking about Turkish Modernization," 431.
- 8 See: Burhanettin Duran, "Islamist Redefinition(s) of European and Islamic Identities in Turkey," in *Turkey and European Integration: Accession Prospects and Issues*, Mehmet Uğur and Nergis Canefe eds. (London: Routledge, 2004), 125-146; Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Alternative Paradigms: The Impact of Islamic and Western Weltanschauungs on Political Theory*, (New York and London: University Press of America, 1993).