

## THE ORIGINS OF THE LEFT IN TURKEY

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Until recently, the systematic study of Turkish leftist movements had been neglected by social scientists. This is not surprising since it has been taken for granted both in the West and Turkey that Communism can never get rooted in Turkey. This is explained mainly by the alleged hostility between Turks and Russians. The ephemeral appearance of leftist currents in Anatolia during the war of liberation was considered as the result of the necessity for the Kemalists to obtain Soviet Union's support in their struggle against the Imperialist powers. Therefore, students of Turkish political life have concentrated their attentions elsewhere. Beside a few articles, and a number of books and memoirs dealing incidentally with the subject, the studies concentrated on it were written with some extra-scientific considerations by extreme-right wing politicians such as F. Tevetoğlu and I. Darendelioglu. True enough, the ideological discussions and debates that pervaded every aspect of the Turkish society after 1960, stimulated a great number of writings on the past of the left in this country. Many documents came under day light and and some of the leading leftist leaders of the past such as Şevket Süreyya Aydemir have published their memoirs. But on the whole, many others kept silent, and even those who were willing to speak out proved themselves to be very discreet. In a word, the history of the leftist movement, and the extent of their influence on the polity have not been systematically and rigourously studied.

The two books under review are the firsts of such attempts<sup>1</sup>. They study the rise of the Turkish left, from the "Young Turk" revolution of 1908 during which Turkey had experienced for the first time

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<sup>1</sup> George S. Harris, *The Origins of Communism in Turkey*, Hoover Institution Publications, Stanford University, Stanford, Cali., 1967, 215 pp.

Metec Tuncay, *Türkiye'de Sol Akımlar (1908 - 1925)*, Bilgi Yayınevi, Ankara, 1967, 218 pp., 2nd. ed.

the quake of a great amount of clushing ideas which were to influence decisively the Turkish Republic, to the immediate aftermath of its establishment and the crushing the leftist movement in its infancy (1925). Beside the fact that they cover the same period, Harris' and Tuncay's books have been written more or less at the same time and the authors have corresponded and cooperated during their researches. Harris' knowledge of the Russian allowed him to exploit the sources in this language, whereas Tuncay's bibliography is richer in Turkish sources.

The respective contents of the books present also similarities, both Harris and Tuncay starting with the "Ottoman left", organised in the Ottoman Socialist Party, then in the Turkish Socialist Party and the Social Democratic Party, and continuing with the leftist movements in Anatolia, with the "Green Army", the "official" Turkish Communist Party, the Peoples Communist Party of Turkey (Türkiye Halk İştirakiyun Fırkası), and the "secret" Turkish Communist Party, created in Anatolia and considered as a branch of Mustafa Suphi's Bakou-based Turkish Communist Party. In parallel to the leftitss in Anatolia, a movement developed in Istanbul under the Allied occupation and which has a very scant relationship with the former mainly because of the difficulties of communication, first around the review "Kurtuluş", then the Turkish Worker and Peasant Socialist Party (Türkiye işçi ve Çiftçi Sosyalist Fırkası), founded by Şefik Hüsnü and his friends and which is considered as the ancestor of the present Turkish Communist Party, according to Harris (p. 99); and also around the "Aydınlık" (named after <sup>6</sup> Clarté", the French leftist movement led by H. Barbusse). This 1 ast periodical has played a remarkable and lasting role in the Turkish left, well beyond its closure by the government in 1925. Tuncay has devoted more space to the detailed analysis of ideas expoused by these organizations and movements than Harris who provides us instead with two interesting chapters (3 and 5) dealing respectively with the leftist ideas coming from Soviet Union (Mustafa Suphi), as opposed to other leaders of the movement who have been mostly educated in Germany and France, and with the relations between Turkish leftist movement and the Comintern. Also Harris describesthe leftist currents among the minority groups (Greeks, Jews and Armenians) whereas Tuncay is principally interested in the Turkish left.

Harris affirms in his Introduction (p. 7), that "Communism, to be sure, never succeeded in becoming a mass movement." Yet he argues about the "Green Army" that "at one point during the early phases of the struggle for independence, the communists seemed to be almost on the threshold of achieving power." On this Tuncay disagrees, since he does not think that "until the 1960s, the leftism as a movement did not bear a great importance in Turkey." (p. XI).

Moreover, Harris tries to link the early leftist currents to the later ideological developments which took place in Turkey during the 1930s, namely the "Kadro" movement, in his Epilogue. He is accurate in saying that Atatiirk has attracted to Kemalism many leftists, by "carrot and stick" methods (pp. 141-148), but when he declares, <sup>6</sup> Aydemir's propaganda activity in the Turkish Hearth Society in Ankara (which was going to lead to the "Kadro") demonstrated vividly that it was possible to come to terms with Atatiirk without abandoning the essence of the ideas earlier espoused by Aydmlik.", he becomes much less so. And what is more important is the fact that such a debatable affirmation stems from a fundamental vice of his approach. We will come back to this point.

All the same the title he picked up for his book generates some confusion, and the more modest but accurate title chosen by Tuncay seems preferable to us: "Left Currents in Turkey, 1908 - 1925". Tuncay devotes his introduction to the definition of the term "Left", whereas, Harris does not make this effort, except a few lines (P. 11). This is regrettable, because such an effort would spare him many confusions, and render his already well written book cleared to the reader. Anyway, the confusion of ideas that characterizes the nascent Turkish left has been clarified after 1925, when a series of trials and condemnation put an end to the legal left in Turkey through the entire modification of the Turkish Penal code on the model of the Fascist Italian code (Harris p. 137). By that time it required real courage to continue the work of propaganda and underground organisation, and this played certainly as important a role as Atatiirk's appeals to join the Kemalism, in the defection of so many prominent marxists. As to the question who were the communists among the Turkish leftists and marxists, not all of them, specially in Anatolia, had a clear idea about what it was, others were opportunists. Mustafa Suphi represented the communism in close cooperation with Moscow in the early phases of the War of

Liberation; his assassination in January 1921 was followed by a period of confusion and then the fourth Congress of Comintern in November 1922 decided to sacrifice the leftist movement in Anatolia, for Soviet Union preferred to continue its good relations with Ankara (Tuncay p. 142). After this decision, the Turkish Workers and Peasants Socialist Party of Istanbul, and the "Aydınlık" circle became the representative of Comintern in Turkey (Harris, p. 11). Therefore it is difficult to group all the leftist movements during the War of Liberation under the heading of "communism", specially when one thinks that presently, this concept is more blurred than ever. Who are the "communists" today in Turkey? The members of the foreign based Turkish Communist Party, or those of The Worker's Party of Turkey, of the tenants of the "National Democratic Revolution" movement? Can the Maoists, Guevarists be put under the same appellation as those who are faithful to the moscovite orthodoxy? All these considerations result in the fact that to call the Turkish left "communist" at any time is at best imprecise, and at worst unscientific, unless the term is defined. Once again we are confronted with the problem of approach and methodology.

Tuncay's approach can be characterized as the classical and descriptive "History of Political Thought" approach. The limitations of such an approach, and the criticisms addressed to its "historicist" aspect are known<sup>2</sup>, as well as its merits. It follows the evolution of ideas and the movements or organizations which adopted them in time and space. For political scientists, principally interested in analysing the processes of social and political systems, of their structures and functions, books using such an approach can serve as "raw materials", as evidences to be fitted into theoretical models, conceptual frames, the cumulative aspect of which is the only way to advance on the path of a general theory of political phenomena. To say this is not to diminish the merits of Tuncay's book which is very valuable for those who work on ideas, values and attitudes as factors underlying the political process in Turkey. It should also be read by those who are active in the left wing politics, for it contains many insights useful in explaining the present difficulties of the Turkish socialist movement.

<sup>2</sup> Popper, K. R., *The Poverty of Historicism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961 160 p. and Eckstein, Harry, "A Perspective on Comparative Politics, Past and Present", in H. Eckstein and D. Apter, eds., *Comparative Politics*, New York, The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963, pp. 8-9.

Harris' book is also interesting from this point of view, and what is more, the author claims that his work "has much to contribute to an understanding of the development of the attitudes and outlook of the Turkish elite today. Such an understanding is essential for any deep appreciation of the modern Turkish scene." (p. 12). No one could seriously contest such a "Lapalissade". Yet the question remains whether the approach followed by Harris is appropriate for linking the leftist movements and ideas of 1920s to the behavior and the values of the present Turkish elite.

His approach is also descriptive and the criticism of "historicism" can be renewed here. Much to his credit, he tries to analyse his topic with constant attention given to the political forces at play and tries to assess the relative places and influences of the different leftist movements in the struggle for power in Turkey. But he does this without an effort of systématisation, which would require a more careful definition of the objectives set out for the book, and a more sophisticated conceptual framework. He constantly refers to the elites, intellectuals, to the communism as "an intellectual movement" (p. 12). He argues that "It is to such frustrated and impatient elements of the elite that communism in Turkey has always found its greatest appeal", (p. 9), that it "never succeeded in becoming a mass movement." (9. 7), without ever defining these terms, references. This is why one is puzzled when one reads along the above mentioned assertions, that the "Green Army" which was a combination of Islamic and Marxist ideas was on the "threshold of achieving power" (p. 7). It is not inconceivable that an elite movement achieve power in a country, but one has first to define what is elite and the movement it creates. Again Harris' lack of conceptual clarity leads him to make such statements as "But over the next few year they (the Kemalists) would enact laws regulating various facts of social life in a manner almost as revolutionary as anything the communists had demanded." (pp. 139-140). He aggravates this incredible statement (to revolutionize by enacting laws!.. .), by some normative declaration, such as "Yet it was the mark of Atatürk's genius that this revolution could take place without completely abandonig parliamentary forms and without destroying utterly the social fabric. In Turkey, then, the new grew out of the old with a harmony that would be the envy of her neighbors and the amazement of the West." (p. 140).

Similarly, in a book dealing with an "ideology", he never defines it theoretically. Yet, specially during the period under study, the leftist ideas are so confused that a conceptual approach is necessary, which would allow the author to evaluate the functions performed by the marxist-leninist "hard" ideology considered as a social structure<sup>3</sup>. Harris' and Tuncay's contributions to better understanding of the Turkish polity are significant, but they could have been even more so, had they approached their topics with theoretical considerations in their minds. Political scientists look forward to a general theory in their field. It is still far away, but one of its conditions is the incremental factor. Descriptive and formal approaches cannot fulfill this requirement.

<sup>3</sup> Şerif Mardin, *Din ve ideoloji*, Siyasal Bilgiler Fakültesi Yayınları, (275), Ankara, 1969, p. 17. Prof. Mardin defines a "hard" ideology as "a construct with a strong content, based upon fundamental theoretical works, circumscribed by the culture of the elites.", p. 6.