

Ottoman inconsistencies, Europe's paradoxes: Ahmed Midhat Efendi on Science and Spirituality

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Both in academic and popular discourse, it is common to represent late Ottoman and Turkish views on Europe in terms of a *love-and-hate relationship*. Regardless of the approach and explanation, the fundamental point made by this trope is inconsistency: rather than constructing coherent perspectives on Europe, the suggestion goes, late Ottoman and Turkish speakers swung between extremes, and contradicted themselves. In this paper, I focus on a late Ottoman author who not only demonstrated this attitude, but tackled it head-on. Tracing the writings of Ahmed Midhat Efendi (1844-1912), the most productive Ottoman writer of his time, I scrutinize the contradictory images of Europe that he constructed. Rather than attributing Midhat's inconsistencies only to his idiosyncrasies or role within the Ottoman intellectual field, or seeing his arguments as but the reactive comments of an author from a culture under threat, however, I suggest exploring the Europe that he saw. This exploration indicates that the contradictions that characterize Midhat's writings stem from the contradictions of colonialism and industrial capitalism, particularly the mismatch between dominant representations and lived realities. Ahmed Midhat may not have been consistent, yet assembling a coherent and univocal fictive entity named *Europe* out of the available elements was hardly a straightforward task in the late nineteenth century, if it ever is. Additionally, I contend that Midhat's observations and assessments were not dissimilar from those of many European observers; in this respect, he can also be seen as a distant participant in European debates on the state of modern European societies. Finally, I highlight Midhat's efforts not only to confront but to resolve the inconsistencies of his views on Europe, efforts which actually intended nothing less than to offer a way for Europe to resolve its own paradoxes. For Midhat to be consistent, Europe had to be consistent, and for this, he argued, the key role fell to scientists.



Ottoman pragmatism and Ahmed Midhat Efendi as an *inconsistent father*

A common tendency in studies on Ottoman policy and thought, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is to underline the pragmatic, eclectic, and, at times, disjointed, nature of the approaches of Ottoman intellectuals.¹ References to pragmatism in studies on late Ottoman thought account for the fact that Ottoman intellectuals rarely produced bodies of work characterized by rigor and coherence. *Pragmatic thinking* is a label that implies that the apparent haphazardness of the arguments which could be perceived as shallowness of thought can also be attributed to Ottoman authors' priorities. Offering solutions to the Empire's problems in a state of exigency, these authors steadily produced ideas, rather than methodical programs. This



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1. For examples, and an important discussion on the shortcomings of this stress on *pragmatism*, see Murat DAĞLI, "The Limits of Ottoman Pragmatism", *History and Theory*, 52 (2013), pp. 194–213.

pattern implied a certain flexibility and eclecticism, as in the case of the Young Ottomans who strove to synthesize ideas from European political thought with those from numerous Islamic traditions, leading at times to inconsistencies.² Similarly, it can be argued that the intellectuals of this period were themselves, in a way, *torn*, as the proclivities, beliefs and tastes they had come to acquire did not easily cohere with the dominant traditions of their communities.

An influential approach suggests that the roots of this pragmatism go even deeper, claiming that late Ottoman authors lacked an intellectual legacy on which to construct their interventions, as Ottoman *medreses* were not designed to develop this kind of systematic thought, either.³ Regardless of whether this explanation is adopted or not, it is important to note that in the late nineteenth century Ottoman Empire there did not exist strong and stable institutions or patronage networks that supported and incentivized methodical, *slow* thinking. Late Ottoman idea-producers were bureaucrats for whom practical concerns could not but be the priority, and journalists, playwrights, and novelists who needed broad audiences.

If the question is about (in)consistency and pragmatism in late Ottoman intellectual life, probably the first name that would come to mind is Ahmed Midhat Efendi (1844-1912). Well-known as the most prolific of Ottoman authors, Ahmed Midhat was a tireless generator of ideas who commented on all the topics debated in the Ottoman society of the late nineteenth century. Seen increasingly as an outmoded author after the 1890s, and out of favor following the Young Turk revolution of 1908 due to his identification with the sultan Abdülhamid II, Midhat's non-fiction output was relatively ignored in Ottoman studies until recently. While his novels have long been subject of research as glimpses into late Ottoman social life, his countless texts on political, philosophical, religious and social issues –the connections among which were always central to Midhat's writings– have only recently started to attract attention.⁴ Furthermore, the articles he published in his long-lived newspaper, the *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, still await a comprehensive analysis.

The main reason behind this neglect is precisely the superficiality attributed to the writings he produced. As a very popular author who defined his mission as educating the public broadly and without specializing in any field, Midhat, by his own definition, does not fit the idea of the *true thinker*. Even studies drawing attention to his contributions commonly highlight his preference for readability and popularity.⁵ Midhat's biography is also linked to his perspective: born in a modest family, and a petty bourgeois business owner, Midhat's concern for the practical is hardly surprising,

2. Nader SOHRABI, *Revolution and Constitutionalism in the Ottoman Empire and Iran*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 40.

3. Şerif MARDIN, *Jön Türklerin Siyasi Fikirleri*, ed. İstanbul, İletişim, 2008, p. 18.

4. For two compilations of MIDHAT'S non-fiction writings, see Ahmed MIDHAT, *Felsefe Metinleri*, ed. Erdoğan ERBAY and Ali UTKU, Erzurum, Babil, 2002, and *Iktisat Metinleri*, ed. Erdoğan ERBAY and Ali UTKU, Konya, Çizgi, 2005.

5. For a review of the ways in which scholars have interpreted Midhat's works, see Şeyda BAŞLI, "'Ulusal Alegori'den İmparatorluk Eğretilmesine: Osmanlı Romanında Çok-Katmanlı Anlatı Yapısı'" Ph.D. dissertation Bilkent University 2008, p. 174.

and due to this approach, his followers were also *pragmatists* who aspired to a new society that would “preserve the virtues and accomplishments” of the old.⁶

As the owner of a successful printing house, an idea-generator appreciated by sultan Abdülhamid II, and a well-liked author operating outside an institutional setting that could impose the norm of consistent theorizing, Ahmed Midhat wrote ceaselessly, and precisely due to this relative freedom, he produced texts that demonstrate the tensions within late Ottoman thought better than any other. Of these tensions, perhaps the most vital, and one best demonstrated by Midhat’s writings, is the one that concerns the answer to the question on Europe. How is the Ottoman public, particularly the Muslim community, to perceive Europe? What does “Westernization” entail? So much of his output is related to these questions that the most detailed scholarly study on his views is entitled *Ahmed Midhat Confronts Western Civilization*,⁷ and it is in this *confrontation* that the so-called *love-and-hate* relationship can be seen most clearly.

Particularly important in this respect is Ahmed Midhat’s appetite not only as a writer but also as a reader: an ardent follower of French newspapers and popular novels, Midhat acquired familiarity with European (and especially, French) debates, life styles, and manners. Based on what he read, he wrote many stories and novels set in Europe before ever setting foot there. Finally, in 1889, he got the chance to travel in Europe, as he was appointed by the sultan to represent the Ottoman Empire at the Orientalists Congress held in Stockholm. This marked a critical point, as after having finally seen Europe –after the Congress, he also visited cities including Berlin, Paris and Vienna– he embarked on a conscious effort to systematize his views, starting with the travelogue he published upon his return.⁸ While his earlier writings had already highlighted Europe’s contradictions from an overtly political point of view, after 1889 he attempted to construct a more comprehensive perspective on Europe which forced him not only to face his own inconsistencies but analyze Europe’s paradoxes more intentionally.

Arguably, the dilemma faced by Ottoman intellectuals like Midhat was due to their adoption of the *progress of civilization* narrative, and the belief that the apparent might of European states was due to the higher level of civilization that they possessed, with the implication that they should serve as the model for the Ottomans. Yet each incident that placed one or more European states in the position of enemy for the Ottoman state –and these incidents were more often than not related to European colonial and imperial expansion– made this belief harder to endorse in a resolute fashion. The result was the co-existence of pro- and anti-European comments in texts, and particularly after the 1870s, the emergence of a more critical discourse that accused



6. Kemal KARPAT, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 359. Also see Şerif MARDIN, “Super-Westernization in Urban Life in the Last Quarter of the Nineteenth Century,” in Peter Benedict et al, (eds.), *Turkey: Geographical and Social Perspectives*, Leiden, Brill, 1974; and Carter FINDLEY, “An Ottoman Occidental in Europe: Ahmed Midhat Meets Madame Gülnar, 1889”, *American Historical Review* 103 (1998), pp. 15-49.

7. Orhan OKAY, *Batı Medeniyeti Karşısında Ahmed Midhat Efendi*, Ankara, Milli Eğitim Bakanlığı, 1989.

8. Ahmed MIDHAT, *Avrupa’da Bir Cevelan* ed. Istanbul, Dergah, 2015.

Europe of contradicting itself.⁹ This can be interpreted as an attempt many authors made to establish a coherent way of talking about Europe; but in the case of Midhat, an additional constraint existed. The literary persona that he spent much effort to construct was that of a father figure for Ottoman readers, and with its emphasis on self-discipline, moderation, and order, this persona became central to his role as the sultan's collaborator in the Ottoman press. Hence, as I will discuss below, he paid increasing attention to putting his views on Europe in order so as to prevent his readers from the "dangers" of misunderstanding Europe. Portraying contradiction as the essence of European civilization was the solution, and the contradictions imperialism and capitalism embodied provided him with ample resources.

Europe's words, Europe's deeds: the Russo-Ottoman war and its aftermath

Midhat's rise as a litterateur and entrepreneur took place after the ascendance of Abdülhamid II to the throne in 1876, and he started publishing the newspaper *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* in 1878. This was a momentous period in late Ottoman history, comprising the first experiment with constitutional monarchy, the uprisings in the Balkans, and the disastrous Russo-Ottoman war. The Bulgarian rebellion of 1876 was crushed violently by the Ottoman state, tarnishing the public image of the Ottomans in Europe, particularly in Britain. The Ottoman government was instructed to carry out political reforms in the region, and European states increasingly used a *humanitarian* discourse to represent themselves as the protectors of the non-Muslim communities of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁰ That the Empire was now under European tutelage, and perhaps could not even be considered to have full legal personality were now respected views in Europe.¹¹ After the 1877-78 war with Russia and the Berlin treaty of 1878, the Empire would lose most of its territories and influence in Europe, and concentrate on efforts to insure the loyalty of the Muslims of various ethnic backgrounds within the Empire, and gain the support of Muslims elsewhere, such as in India and Java. These moves involved depicting the Ottoman state as the protector of Muslims around the world, and as burdened with its own civilizing mission when dealing with its peripheral regions.¹² In these respects, these strategies were about the Ottoman state's reassertion of its sovereignty and power at a time its existence was seen to be increasingly more precarious in European capitals.

9. For effective analyses of these processes, see Cemil AYDIN, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*, Columbia University Press, 2007, and Renee WÖRRINGER, *Ottomans Imagining Japan: East, Middle East, and Non-Western Modernity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century*, [n. p.], Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. To AYDIN, the British occupation of Egypt in 1882 followed by the scramble for Africa constitutes the turning point.

10. On the importance of this period for the development of a *human rights diplomacy*, see Carole FINK, *Defending the Rights of Others: The Great Powers, the Jews, and International Minority Protection, 1878-1938*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

11. Davide RODOGNO, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815-1914*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 47.

12. Maurus REINKOWSKI, "The State's Security and the Subjects' Prosperity. Notions of Order in Ottoman Bureaucratic Correspondence (19th Century)" in Hakan T. KARATEKE and Maurus REINKOWSKI (eds.), *Legitimizing the order: the Ottoman rhetoric of state power*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2005, pp. 195-212; Selim DERİNGİL, "“They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery”: The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 45-2 (2003), pp. 311-342.

These factors played a crucial part in shaping Midhat's writings about Europe and the Ottoman Empire. In the aftermath of the Russian war, he mastered the rhetorical strategy that characterized most of his writings on international politics: accepting dominant European ideas about progress and civilization, then using them to show either that they also applied to the Ottomans, or that they did not apply to Europeans themselves.

The issue of the protection of minorities is a case in point. In an article published several months after the Treaty of Berlin had been signed, Midhat noted that European attempts to *liberate* the non-Muslims were leading to nothing but more strife. "This is a great era," Midhat proclaimed, yet also one ridden with contradiction:

The people of the civilized world that proved to us the greatness of this era by showing us astonishing inventions like telephones, phonographs and microphones, also treated peoples right next to and among us in such an unjust way that in order to liberate them, [...] rendered one third of them dead, one third imprisoned, and one third so desperate as to beg for a morsel of food.

Moreover, not only had Russian intervention led to bloodshed and misery, for some non-Muslims *liberation* had led to a decline in status: in places "protected by Europe such as Romania and Serbia, there is still resistance to giving Jews equality before the law, whereas all Ottoman peoples have become equal, bestowed with the glorious title of Ottoman."¹³

In another article entitled "Where is the real fanaticism?" Midhat noted sarcastically that to Europeans the answer was obvious: "in Islamic lands," where "the darkest shade of barbarism," rather than the "light of learning," could be found.¹⁴ Yet if fanaticism was about the lack of a sense of harmony among people, Midhat argued, one should easily see that it was European fanaticism that caused friction and dissolution. "A state that has been making great strides in the path of progress of European civilization [...] declared war on us, claiming the title of the guardian of Christianity and the savior of the oppressed Christians. [And] it separated some peoples from us." Yet Russia had no right to claim the role of the savior, considering its treatment of Jews, Midhat noted, alluding to the pogroms of 1881. In fact, *l'agitation anti-sémitique* and *Judenhass* had now become common phrases in Europe, where Christians had long been taught to hate the Jews.¹⁵ As for Armenians, those that had been separated from the Ottoman Empire had not fit in in Russia, primarily because they had less in common with Christian Russians than with Muslim Ottomans, and the European attitude in this context was hypocritical:

If they saw [one of these] Armenian women in Paris, they would undoubtedly say, "What barbarity! What a boorish Turk! What a bigoted Muslim!". Why not! What else can a ... [scantily clad] French coquette who chatters continuously in the company of men to attract their [amazed and infatuated] looks think about a woman who is entirely

13. Ahmet MIDHAT (unsigned) "Asır da büyük, padişah da!," *Tercüman-ı Hakikat (T.H.)*, 203, 2 Rebiülevvel 1296 / 24-2-1879, 2. Here Midhat alludes to the policy of Ottomanism that remained dominant in the second half of the nineteenth century, and defined "Ottomanness" as the common identity of all subjects of the sultan, trumping their affiliation to their religious community.

14. Ahmet MIDHAT "Asıl taassub nerede?," *T.H.*, 887, 7 Receb 1298 / 5 June 1881, 2.

15. *Ibidem*. Midhat uses the French and German terms themselves in the text. On the struggles of Jews after Ottoman rule in the Balkans, see Mary NEUBURGER, "The Russo-Turkish War and the 'Eastern Jewish Question': Encounters between Victims and Victors in Ottoman Bulgaria, 1877-8," *East European Jewish Affairs*, 26, 2 (1996), pp. 53-66.



covered except her eyes and the tips of her hands and would not speak a single word with men unless absolutely necessary? Presuming that civilization, Christianity and humanity consist in her civilization, her Christianity, and her humanity, what else can she think about this lady of ours from Van or Erzurum? If someone said “Madam! This woman here, too, is a Christian, just like you!”, she would take a few steps back in astonishment, saying “But what savagery!”

Choosing a “French coquette” as the representative of “European civilization” is of course a deliberate rhetorical strategy on Midhat’s part, as this, rather than, say, a Swedish scientist, is the character that serves the contrast he wishes to construct. I will discuss this in the final section of the paper. Here it is important to underline how Midhat’s portrayal is in line with the Ottomanist discourse that remained effective (albeit increasingly less dominant) during the reign of Abdülhamid II. But this Ottomanism relied also on implications of a broader contrast: Muslim and non-Muslim Ottomans constituted a *brotherhood* not simply as Ottomans, but as people of the *Orient*, a point Midhat would emphasize more after attending the Orientalists’ Congress. And in this respect, precisely by destroying the *brotherhood* of Oriental peoples that shared common values and virtues regardless of their religion, Europeans were demonstrating a *fanatic, barbaric* attitude.

The Essential Contradiction: Material Progress, Spiritual Decline

12

While making these arguments that represented Europe as a threat, however, Midhat also continued to refer to Europe as the highest level of civilization. In the words of the protagonist of his novel *Acaib-i Alem (Wonders of the World, 1881)*: “Is it hard to understand that the progress of humanity is not equivalent to the level of progress in our country? When we think about where all these new inventions come from, it becomes obvious that we occupy a point of intersection between civilized and uncivilized countries.”¹⁶ The adoption of the ideas of civilization as on a unilinear path of progress, and progress as represented by technological change, made Europe the model to emulate for *less-civilized* societies like the Ottomans. Hence, Midhat’s Europe was undeniably advanced and imitable, yet also hypocritical, if not malignant.

But in harmony with the timeline Aydın offers for the development of *anti-Western* views in Asia, Midhat’s criticisms of Europe became gradually more radical in the late 1880s, focusing not only on the contradictions between European ideas on civilization and policies around the world, but also on the contradictions within European societies themselves. While Midhat sustained his criticisms related to the colonial and imperial policies of European states, he amplified these with withering comments about the cultural and political conflicts in Europe, and the social consequences of industrial capitalism. While he had already started to comment on the problems within Europe based on what he read in French newspapers, the revised image of Europe as a flawed and torn civilization was a product of his writings during and especially after his trip to Europe in 1889.

An interesting strategy Midhat used to condemn Europe was to use against Europe the discourse about the rights of religious communities that the Great Powers had frequently used against the Ottoman Empire; the author of many texts on Christianity as the degenerated form of the original divine religion, on Christian

16. Quoted in OKAY, *Batı Medeniyeti Karşısında Ahmed Midhat Efendi*, p. 30.

missionaries as not only mistaken but dangerous, and on the Catholic Church as deeply corrupt, Midhat penned several articles as the *defender* of Christianity in a Europe torn by *culture wars*. Having read about anti-Catholic movements in Europe, he noted that such distressing developments were due to those “who compound[ed] immorality with faithlessness”:

While man may claim autonomy when it comes to adopting views, he does not have the autonomy to enforce his views on others, and is never entitled to insult or prohibit things that he does not find desirable. Thus, it is a duty [...] for any state to exert firm legal sanctions on those who insult places of worship. [...] In the eyes of those like us who have just stepped onto the path of the new civilization, such insolent and evil deeds are [...] utterly despicable, even though we admire the vast progress of Europe in science and industry.

When we see that European authors who continuously write about how their contemporary civilization is the protector, guarantor, guardian, etc. of general liberty, can we even doubt that those words are but sophistries of faux philosophers when venerable places of worship are not even protected from contemptible offences? It is clear that a people that is not even able to perform its religious ceremonies in comfort, safety and freedom will listen to such words about European liberty in abhorrence, like we do.¹⁷

In a similar text, Midhat noted: “In some discussions, it is argued that orientals like us are lagging behind in civilization. Yet [...] [in the Ottoman Empire], all religions and all denominations are under equal protection, and attacks are promptly prohibited, no matter from which side they come.”¹⁸ Such articles highlighted his increasingly clear portrayal of European civilization as not admirable *in toto*, and “intellectual progress” as potentially dangerous.

Soon after these articles, on 15 August 1889, Midhat embarked on his 71-day journey, to attend the Orientalists’ Congress in Stockholm and visit other major cities of Europe. After serializing his observations in the *Tercüman*, he also published them as a lengthy volume. In these texts, and in several other articles he published in late 1889 – early 1890, he labored to compose his ultimate assessment of European civilization. According to his account, it was a question from “a European friend” that had led him to realize that his and other Ottoman authors’ arguments on Europe until then had been inconsistent, presenting it both as a model and as detestable.¹⁹ Facing this challenge, he came up with the solution: European civilization was composed of two dimensions, the material and the spiritual, and while Europe excelled in the former, it was in utter decline in the latter. In a sense, Midhat’s point was that his inconsistency was due to the conflict within European civilization itself. No longer a rhetorical device to be used sarcastically in political polemics, *Europe’s contradictions* would thus become a subject of its own.

In the definitive analysis of Midhat’s travelogue, Findley considers Midhat’s stance as an attempt to “creatively engage with Europe and yet resist its cultural



17 Ahmet MIDHAT, “Avrupa medeniyetinin cihât-i seyiyisi,” *T.H.*, 3250, 30 Mart 1305 / 11-3-1889, pp. 5-6.

18. Ahmet MIDHAT, “İki münteha birleşir,” *T.H.*, nr. 3304, 7 Haziran 1305/ 19-6-1889, p. 4.

19. Ahmet MIDHAT “Avrupa’nın terakkiyat-ı maddiye ve terakkiyat-ı maneviyesi,” *T.H.*, 3448, 25 Teşrinisani 1305/ 7-12-1889, p. 5. In the travelogue, it is clarified that this friend is Madame Gülnar. On Gülnar, see FINDLEY, “An Ottoman Occidental in Europe”.

power.”²⁰ An important and perhaps unique aspect of Findley’s work is that rather than putting them aside as defensive remarks, it also takes Midhat’s observations about Europe’s “spiritual decline” seriously, noting that Midhat had a *sociologist’s eye* for the social conditions in the modern metropolis.²¹ I would argue that this important point needs further emphasis, in that while Midhat portrayed the problems in Europe in a simplistic and essentialistic way, thus constructing a firm distinction between the “spiritual self” and the “materialistic other,”²² his observations on the social changes in Europe were not necessarily off the mark, or distinct from the arguments of European critics of these changes.

In an article he published after returning from the conference, Midhat offered the spread of contentment as the indicator for the progress of civilization, and based on this criterion, it would be neither wrong nor sinful to “accept and adopt [the] material aspect of European progress in order to bring about the bliss that is conceivable for humanity to achieve.”²³ When the same criterion was applied to the assessment of the spiritual aspect, namely “the principles of living, social conditions, and public morals and manners,” however, only decline could be detected in Europe:

The only link between people is that of self-interest! Benevolence, outside of a few rare instances, is but a word! No favor from brother to brother. [...] [A]s marriage is seen as but [in terms of] pleasure, many people avoid it altogether and start without delay the illegitimate lives they would otherwise live after getting married. Hence, some twenty, thirty per cent of births take place illegitimately, and no sense of love for parents, siblings and relatives develops among children born this way.

Home ownership is exclusive to some, and because even those people rent their properties to tenants, almost no one enjoys the pleasure of owning a home. Even the things in their houses are mostly rented. These are the bases of the principles of living and social conditions; as a result, love of religion and country, and human virtue have declined continuously. Disrespect to the government, faithlessness to religion, and negligence toward morality have become widespread.

It is true that such improprieties do not apply to the gentle class, yet one cannot assess a nation solely with respect to its gentry. A nation is the entire society.²⁴

Thus, in fact, Midhat was referring to the conditions of the working class and the lumpenproletariat in Europe, and writing in fear, reflecting, in a sense, French bourgeois sensibilities as well. In fact, poverty, atomization, and a sense of normlessness were turning more and more Europeans into “savages,” to Midhat: “Who are called savages? Men who live on their own, without a home, unaware of the existence of God and outside of social relationships, thinking only about their self-interest.”²⁵ In that case, those Europeans Midhat described as born out of wedlock and raised alone, unable to form social relations, have a home and family, and defer to any authority be it the state or God, could not but be labelled as savages; moreover, as their number was constantly increasing, Europeans themselves were in sheer terror.

20. As FINDLEY discusses the travelogue and MIDHAT’s observations in detail, here I dwell on the less emphasized points, and the self-standing articles MIDHAT published upon his return.

21. *Ibidem*, p. 47

22. As it operates on the same principle as Orientalism, i.e. a consistent contrast between self and other, FINDLEY considers MIDHAT’s approach as Occidentalism.

23. Ahmet MIDHAT “Avrupa’nın Terakkiyat-ı Adiyi ve Terakkiyat-ı Maneviyesi,” *T.H.*, 3448, 25 Teşrinisani 1305 / 7-12-1889, p. 5.

24. *Ibidem*.

25. Ahmet MIDHAT “Avrupa’dan havfımız,” *T.H.*, 3458, 7 Kanunuevvel 1305/ 19-12-1889, p. 4

One need not note the role such ideas and fears indeed played in the European social thought of this period, from Tönnies to Durkheim. But it is worth highlighting the parallels between Midhat's views on home ownership and the prevalent policy recommendations about the conditions of the working class in France. The conservative sociologist Le Play and his followers portrayed a stable family life as the solution to moral decadence, and "property ownership [...] as a moral and material anchor" for working families.²⁶ The words of Edmond Demolins would have delighted Ahmed Midhat:

The possession of his home creates [in the worker] a complete transformation. [...] With his own small home and garden, one makes the head of his family worthy of this name, one who is moral and provident, aware of his roots, and able to exercise authority over his family. He soon forgets the cabaret, whose principal appeal has been to remove him from his miserable hovel. The day when he possesses a pleasant healthful home, the home in which he is King, *his own* home which he loves, where the landlord cannot pursue him[...] his life takes on a peacefulness, a serenity, a dignity characteristic of Oriental men which is nearly unknown among the nomads of our large cities.²⁷

If poverty as well as political and religious strife were turning more and more Europeans into savages, caution was crucial in emulating Europe. Indeed, Ottomans should *fear* Europe and becoming like Europe, Midhat argued in an important article. The problem of poverty was unlikely to be resolved, as fertile land in Europe was insufficient for the needs of the growing population. Hence, "we are afraid," Midhat wrote, "that if, having taken our commerce under their monopoly long ago, and our industry more recently, Europeans slowly encroach also into our agriculture, they may deprive us of our sources of wealth." A second danger had to do with the fact that Muslim and especially non-Muslim Ottomans were unaware that Europeans themselves were apprehensive of the moral decline, and believed European ways should be adopted in entirety. Another reason to fear Europe stemmed from the latter's unfairness: the efforts of the Ottoman state to protect the Ottoman economy and public order were not supported by European states.²⁸ Consequently, Ottomans were losing their trust in Europeans, and "would be justified in not believing them [even] in case they were to demonstrate genuine friendship." Thus, in one breath, Midhat noted all the dangers Europe posed to the Ottoman Empire: not only cultural and social influence, but economic and political domination. Not using the term, or perceiving the situation from this perspective, Midhat's is, in essence, an implicit acknowledgement of the semi-colonial status and diminishing sovereignty of the Ottoman Empire.



26. Dana SIMMONS, *Vital Minimum: Need, Science, and Politics in Modern France*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015, p. 72.

27. Edmond DEMOLINS, "Les habitations ouvrières," *La réforme sociale*, I (1882), p. 301. Quoted in Ann-Louise SHAPIRO, *Housing the Poor of Paris, 1850-1902*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, p. 90.

28. MIDHAT's examples concern the inability of the Ottoman state to run its own railways (due to the role of the Public Debt Administration) and the impact of the foreigners in the Ottoman Empire in damaging the image of the Ottomans in Europe. In the case of the latter, his primary concern is the arguments of W.E. Gladstone on Ottoman policy, most likely referring to those on Armenians and Cretans.

Solution: Learning and the learned

Despite these scathing remarks, Midhat never went so far as to condemn Europe in total. His travelogue is filled with positive remarks on Europeans, and while he considered the French as representing the highest (and the lowest) aspects of European civilization, he saw that Europeans that were somewhat behind France in progress had much to praise. In particular, he was unequivocally appreciative of the “virtuous, dignified, pure” people of Sweden-Norway:

This people have joined Europe’s progress in science and industry, but as they have not joined its moral decline, they perfectly preserved their good traditional morals. It is true that their calmness and solemnity is to some extent reminiscent of the English, but the well-known coldness of the English is not common among them, indeed, they are extremely polite. Their hearts are so pure and clean that they strengthen their friendships very quickly. [...] The decency and virtuousness of their men and women is unquestionable, and they are exempt from the depravities seen in other parts of Europe.²⁹

The Swedish showed, then, that it was possible to progress in the material sense while maintaining moral values, even for Europeans. For the Ottomans, the material progress of Europe should remain the model, but when it came to the spiritual dimension, Europeans had much to learn from the Ottomans. And for both sides to become aware of this need, a better understanding of the other was essential.

With his articles and books, Midhat was endeavoring to disabuse Ottomans, young Muslims in particular, of their misguided infatuation with Europe. But who would perform a similar function for Europeans? How would Europeans learn about the *true* nature of the Ottomans, and appreciate the superiority of the spiritual dimension of their civilization? The Orientalists Congress, by enabling him to visit Europe, had demonstrated to Midhat the *bad aspects* of European civilization, but it had also shown him the answer to his question: if learning was the need, the learned was the solution. “Researchers and investigators called orientalists are incomparably more favorable and beneficial to the Islamic community and the Ottoman people than any other scientific association of Europe,” Midhat wrote.³⁰ The Ottomans had long sought to explain themselves to the world, which, to Midhat, could be achieved through publications in French by Ottoman authors, but now, orientalists who learned the languages of the Orient would do it themselves.

It is true that they are absolutely not involved with politics, and do not utter a single word about politics in their official assemblies and private conversations during these congresses. But if we consider how we are criticized in many political issues, and how we suffer significant damages in some because of the various false assumptions that Europe holds, we can conclude that we will, so to speak, be saved from these hardships and troubles once these false assumptions are eliminated and the truths about our conditions are known.

Here it is possible to see Midhat as simply reflecting the Ottoman state’s concerns with public image in the late nineteenth century, which generated numerous efforts and interventions particularly during the reign Abdülhamid II.³¹ Midhat’s assignment to the Congress by the sultan could be interpreted as an extension of this

29. MIDHAT, *Avrupa’da Bir Cevelan*, p. 245.

30. Ahmet MIDHAT, “Müsteşrikin Kongreleri, Mukaddime,” *T.H.*, 3367, 24 Augustos 1305 / 5-9-1889, 2.

31. Selim DERİNGİL, *The Well Protected Domains, Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909*, London and New York, I.B Tauris, 1998.

policy, which is suggested by Midhat's arguments themselves. However, such an interpretation would be reductive, considering Midhat's overall faith in science and scientists. Indeed, I would argue that a key contradiction that Midhat's writings reveal about Europe is one that is rooted in his own depiction of European material progress and the role of science within it. While the virtues and beneficial consequences of scientific research was a central theme in Ottoman thought of the nineteenth century, Ahmed Midhat's contributions in this vein are uniquely important. In his newspaper articles and novels there are countless references to the merits of the sciences developed in Europe. Not only did he refer to scientists with utmost respect, he discussed science both as the key reason behind Europe's material progress, and the way to produce sound, reliable knowledge.³² The latter is particularly important, as the exaltation of science as the way to produce correct knowledge could imply that in lands where science progressed, mistaken ideas should gradually be eliminated.

In fact, orientalism itself had emerged as a product of Europe's interest in science.

Europe is well aware of the history of the progress of the sciences. Europe knows perfectly well that some basic knowledge about the heavens originated among the Chaldeans, some [fields] like medicine among the Egyptians, and some branches like mathematics among the Greeks; that later Greek philosophers improved these remarkably; [...] and that [after the Romans] Muslim scholars made efforts beyond comprehension to progress these sciences. Indeed, while [Europeans] did benefit a lot from the Greeks who migrated to Europe after the conquest of Constantinople, this was limited to [the fields of] languages, literature and philosophy; they are proud to be the pupils of Muslims in the serious sciences.

Due to this awareness, Midhat noted, European scholars started studying the great works of Muslim masters, and knowing that it would be more helpful to read the original texts, they were learning the languages of the Orient. While Christian clerics had previously translated texts from the Islamic legacy, they not only were incompetent in the original languages, but would tend to distort the texts. In contrast, orientalists were true scientists that Muslims could trust. Indeed, to Midhat, his experiences at the Congress indicated that in Europe there existed significant potential for an appreciation of Muslims, thanks both to the efforts of scholars like the orientalists and the growing dissatisfaction Europeans felt with their lives. According to his travelogue, an English attendee that Midhat does not name told him the following:

I am among those who are aware [...] that the assumptions and ideas about Islam that European scholars held for long are entirely false. Islam recommends and encourages the current progress of civilization, let alone opposing it. Especially in the case of spirituality, Europe's knowledge and understanding is almost inexistent compared to that of Muslims. Thus, a most important, most sacred duty of this Congress of Orientalists is to reveal the principles of civilization that Islam embodies.³³

Conclusion

Put bluntly, Midhat demanded that Europe be consistent: if Europeans appreciated progress and civilization, they should acknowledge the civilization of Muslims and the Ottomans, the patron of the Muslims of the world. Second, if

32. See OKAY, *Batı Medeniyeti Karşısında Ahmed Midhat Efendi*, pp. 42-63.

33. MIDHAT, *Avrupa'da Bir Cevelan*, p. 304.



Europeans appreciated progress and civilization, they should support, rather than impede, the efforts Ottomans were making to progress. And third, if Europeans appreciated progress and civilization, they should become aware of the decline in numerous significant aspects of their own civilization. In sum, it was not Midhat who was inconsistent, it was Europe itself.

In some respects, it is indeed possible to refer to Midhat as an *Occidental*, as some of his characterizations insist on portraying the West and the East as essentially different, yet it is also true that these portrayals themselves were not always consistent. The people of Sweden, for instance, appear more similar to Ottoman people in Midhat's portrayals than to Parisians. In a similar way, Midhat would likely represent an Ottoman Muslim who detested everything about Europe as more mistaken than, say, an Austrian Orientalist who strived to learn about the Orient. Moreover, the Europe that Midhat saw was itself filled with contradictions, as discussed above, and even in his *essentializing* remarks about Europe, Midhat could not but note the significance of these contradictions. Hence, his analyses are better understood as offering compellingly contradictory images of Europe in order to develop in readers' minds idealized, *perfect* models that would serve as aspirations for the future of Ottoman society.

As an advocate of social order and stability in a rapidly changing social and cultural context, Midhat consistently attempted to construct such models for young Ottomans to follow, in such a way to allow for change without threatening the existing power relations within Ottoman society. This attempt made learning and patience key to all his arguments, and transformed *science* into a keyword that signified precisely the route to peaceful change. Science and learning served as the solution not only for the Ottoman Empire but also for Europe, and as the resolution to all the contradictions.