

# Nineteenth Century Ottoman Intellectuals and Their Perception of ‘Civilisation’

*Mustafa Serdar Palabiyik*

**Abstract:** This article seeks to provide an account of nineteenth century Ottoman intellectuals with a particular focus on their perception of ‘civilization’. As a result of the process of Ottoman modernization, it was mainly in the 19th century that Ottoman intellectuals encountered the concept of ‘civilization’ and developed different understandings of it. In this article, these different conceptualizations will be examined with reference to prominent nineteenth century intellectuals, including Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, Ahmet Mithat Efendi, Münif Pasha, Namık Kemal, Şemseddin Sami, Cenap Şehabettin and Safveti Ziya. The focus will be on the Ottoman intellectuals’ separation between material and moral elements of civilization. Moreover, in the article three material elements, namely dress, city and museum, are chosen to show how Ottoman intellectuals perceive material elements of European civilization as a medium for labeling a community civilized or not. The article affirms that such a separation is essential to understand Turkish modernization process.

**Key Words:** Civilization, Ottoman Empire, modernization, intellectual, Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, Ahmet Mithat Efendi, dress, city, museum.

In the nineteenth century, once glorious but currently decaying, the Ottoman Empire was heavily influenced from the spirit of European civilization. It was in this century that the Ottoman intellectual began to learn Europe not only through translations from European literature or through interaction with the Europeans, who were serving in the Ottoman Empire as merchants or diplomats; but also by their own experiences in Europe. In other words, Europe was no more a mere imagination; it was a ‘reality’.

Excessive interaction with Europe resulted that the Ottoman intellectual of the nineteenth century began to perceive Ottoman society by utilizing the elements of European civilization. Therefore, the central argument of this paper is that particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, after Ottoman attempt to modernize its institutions as well as its society with the *Tanzimat* reforms, Ottoman self-perception had largely been influenced from elements of European civilization. In other words, European civilization acted as a tool in the hands of the Ottoman intellectuals to evaluate their own society. In doing that, these intellectuals separated between the material and moral elements of civilization, and while welcoming the former, they were generally reluctant and hesitant for the implementation of the latter.

## 1. Ottoman Self-Perception with Reference to the Elements of European Civilization

In the nineteenth century, one of the main problems for the Ottoman intellectual in reviewing the European civilization and adoption of some of the elements of this civilization to the Ottoman Empire was that which elements should be taken from European civilization and which should not. Here, conciliation of European civilization and Ottoman culture was a significant matter of concern. Ottoman intellectuals had not a monolithic perception on that matter, however between the two relatively marginal views of total acceptance or total rejection of European civilization, a third view, was offered and accepted by many of the nineteenth century Ottoman intellectuals. Accordingly, they argued that the European civilization should be perceived as the sum of material and moral elements. The adoption of material elements would not create a problem for the Ottoman society since they did not

necessarily include the adoption of European values, most of which might not be suitable for the Ottoman society. On the other hand, moral elements included such values; therefore they should be excluded.

#### A. Ahmet Cevdet Paşa (1823-1895) – Critique of Ottoman Preference of Moral Elements of European Civilization

This distinction between ‘material’ and ‘moral’ elements of civilization is quite discernible in the writings of the nineteenth century bureaucrat and historian Ahmet Cevdet Paşa. To start with, Ahmet Cevdet Paşa opposed the view that there was one single civilization, i.e. the European one, as modernist approaches argued. His position was that there were multiple civilizations, since civilization was a ‘process’ of continuous transformation of societies. Accordingly, Islamic civilization was one among many civilizations. Its contemporary backwardness did not impede to label it as a civilization<sup>1</sup>. Ahmet Cevdet Paşa also argued that the Ottomans failed to follow the European modernization and they could not catch up with the achievements of European civilization<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, he insisted that these achievements should be transferred to the Ottoman Empire. In other words, he had no objection regarding the implementation of material aspects of European civilization; he even encouraged it. However, he argued that the implementation of moral elements of European civilization such as legal system or values would disturb one’s own civilization<sup>3</sup>. Because the moral elements of civilization was a product of peculiar characteristics of a particular society; thus, they were applicable only for that society<sup>4</sup>. In sum, for Ahmet Cevdet Paşa adoption of material elements of European civilization was a requisite for the revival of the Empire, and it would not disturb the peculiar characteristics of the Ottoman society; whereas, adoption of moral elements would create significant problems.

#### B. Ahmet Mithat Efendi (1844-1912) – ‘Technology’ vs. ‘Idea’

Being one of the most impressive figures among the nineteenth century Ottoman intellectuals, Ahmet Mithat Efendi was a reputable and a productive author, contributed much to the *Tanzimat* literature with his over two hundred books and pamphlets. One significant aspect of Ahmet Mithat Efendi was his travel to Europe, which was recorded within his book, entitled ‘*Avrupa’da Bir Cevelan*’ (A Promenade in Europe), written after his representation of the Ottoman Empire in the Congress of Orientalists in Stockholm in 1889<sup>5</sup>. Despite his admiration towards Europe, Ahmet Mithat Efendi wrote quite in a similar fashion with Ahmet Cevdet Paşa regarding the distinction between material and moral elements of European civilization. He thought that European civilization could be divided into two categories, being ‘technology’ and ‘idea’. Technology represents the ‘external’ progress of this civilization whereas idea represents the ‘internal’ progress<sup>6</sup>. For Ahmet Mithat Efendi, externality facilitated the adoption of the technological elements of European civilization by any other civilization, since such an adoption would not afflict own distinct characteristics of that particular civilization; whereas, internal qualities of a civilization is harder to adopt since it

---

<sup>1</sup> Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, *Tezâkir*, Türk Tarih Kurumu, Ankara, 1953, 4 Volumes, Vol. 1, p. 15 ff., also cited in Harun Anay, ‘Ahmet Cevdet Paşa’nın Modernizme Bakışı’, in *Ahmet Cevdet Paşa Sempozyumu*, 9-11 June 1995, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, Ankara, 1995), p. 70

<sup>2</sup> Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, *Tezâkir*, Vol. 4, p. 220

<sup>3</sup> Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, *Tezâkir*, Vol. 4, p. 221

<sup>4</sup> Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, *Tezâkir*, Vol. 1, p. 64

<sup>5</sup> Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Avrupa’da Bir Cevelan*, İstanbul, 1891. Since Ahmet Mithat Efendi pressed his books in the small presshouse that he established in his home, there is no indication for the publisher in the relevant references.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Menfa*, p. 50.

necessitated the transformation of peculiar characteristics of that civilization.<sup>7</sup> Similar to Ahmet Cevdet Paşa, he was also criticizing that the Ottoman practice was quite the contrary; namely, the Ottomans were adopting the moral aspects of European civilization more quickly than the material aspect<sup>8</sup>.

#### C. Münif Paşa (1830-1910) - Appraisal of European Technology

Another Ottoman intellectual who wrote extensively on the issue of civilization and Ottoman adoption of European technology was Münif Paşa. He perceived the adoption of material aspect of European civilization as a requirement for the amelioration of the Ottoman society. Photograph, lithographic press, newspapers and telegram turned out to be the symbols of modernity in his writings. For example, he praised the invention of telegram as a significant development with which "...the distance between nations disappeared and whole earth turned out to be a single city"<sup>9</sup> Another example was his conception of newspapers. He wrote that without newspapers it would be impossible to be informed about the developments in the world; thus newspaper was a must for 'civilization'<sup>10</sup>.

#### D. Namık Kemal (1840-1888) – Comparison between Europe and Ottoman Empire and Defence of Islam

As it can be seen, Ottoman intellectuals were open to any implementation of European technological achievements and perceived it even necessary. However, they were generally conservative about the adoption of European values and other moral elements of European civilization. Namık Kemal was also following this intellectual lineage. Like Ahmet Mithat Efendi, in many instances, he compared Europe with the Ottoman Empire and criticized the latter for some of its wrongdoings. In one of his articles he wrote that Europeans always worked for their future; whereas, Ottomans were just living in 'present'. In another article entitled as '*Medeniyet*' (Civilization), he criticized those views that disregarded European technological achievements because of religious reasons, and argued that it was civilization that differentiated between the human being from other species<sup>11</sup>.

Namık Kemal not only defended adoption of European achievements against the conservative *ulama*; but also defended his religion, which had been accused as an obstacle in front of scientific development, against the Europeans. One of his acclaimed texts entitled '*Renan Müdafaaamesi*' (Defence against Renan) reflected such a reactive stance<sup>12</sup>. In this short book, he criticized the French philosopher Ernest Renan (1823-1892), who claimed Islam as an impediment in front of scientific development, whereas Namık Kemal argues that Islam, as a religion, had always encouraged its followers to acquire knowledge wherever it was. Therefore in his defence, he tried to conciliate between the European civilization and Islam as a religion.

#### E. Şemsettin Sami (1850-1904) – Acceptance of the Supremacy of European Civilization

The opposition to the idea of Islam being an impediment in front of scientific development was also visible in the writings of Şemsettin Sami (1850-1904), famous Ottoman linguist and author. Şemseddin Sami perceived European civilization as the most developed one and argued that particularly in the eighteenth century both as a result of

<sup>7</sup> Carter V. Findlay, *Ahmet Mithat Efendi Avrupa'da*, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul, 1999, p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Okay, *Batı Medeniyeti Karşısında Ahmet Mithat Efendi*, p. 13

<sup>9</sup> İsmail Doğan, *Tanzimatın İki Ucu : Münif Paşa ve Ali Suavi: Sosyo-Pedagojik Bir Karşılaştırma*, İz Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1991, p. 136

<sup>10</sup> Doğan, *Tanzimatın İki Ucu*, p. 137

<sup>11</sup> Namık Kemal, 'Medeniyet' in *İbret*, No. 84, January 1, 1873. Taken from Özön, *Namık Kemal ve İbret Gazetesi*, p. 210

<sup>12</sup> Namık Kemal, *Renan Müdafaaamesi*, Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, Ankara, 1988.

technological achievements and literary criticism, scholastic thinking began to wane and gave way to the emergence of modern European civilization<sup>13</sup>. However, he was also arguing that although these innovations were realized in Europe, this did not necessarily mean that they belonged to the European civilization. He criticized the perception that the contemporary civilization was a product of Christianity and Islam was a religion that acted as an obstacle in front of progress. He argued that it was not the religion that resulted in the development of one civilization and the decadence of another<sup>14</sup>.

#### F. Cenap Şehabettin (1870-1934) – Accepting the Moral Elements of European Civilization

It was previously mentioned that there were some Ottoman intellectuals who argued for the adoption of the elements of European civilization without separating between material and moral elements. Cenap Şehabettin was one of the most significant authors among them. Regarding civilization, he thought that one society could modernize itself only by changing its virtues and defects. He once wrote "... [a]s the requirement of trade is the exchange of goods; modernization means to change the virtues and defects of one's own race, with those of modern nations"<sup>15</sup>. In other words, he argued that only through acceptance of Western values, the Ottoman society could modernize itself. He further argued that the Ottoman Empire should also follow the modernization path of Germany. Accordingly, he blessed such German values as division of labor; seeking for total benefit of the society; clarity, certainty and accuracy of behavior; realpolitik; and inclination towards continuous progress<sup>16</sup>.

## 2. Three Material Elements of European Civilization

### A. Dress – A Symbol of Being European

Technological development was not the only material element of European civilization that Ottoman intellectuals referred. Besides steamboats, railways, electricity, etc, some of the Ottoman intellectuals perceived dress as a material element of civilization that should be adopted as well. Indeed, dress was a sensitive issue, since some of Ottoman dresses had religious meanings. Therefore, it was not easy to change the dress styles of the Ottoman society. However, still, one of the most significant and symbolic reforms that Mahmud II (r. 1808-1839) initiated was the dress reform.

The issue of dress was a significant concern for Ömer Faiz Efendi, the Mayor of Istanbul during the period of Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861-1876). Particularly his observations in Europe, where he visited in 1867 within the framework of the visit of European capitals by Abdülaziz for attending the Universal Exposition in Paris, are quite significant. In the first pages of his diary that he regularly held during his visit to Europe, he started to compare Ottoman civilization with the European one and used dress as a symbol.<sup>17</sup> He argued that although their dresses were of quality and more adorned, the Europeans were "...dressed more comfortably in simplicity"<sup>18</sup>. In other words, European style dress was perceived somehow superior to the Ottoman one.

Another interesting instance during this visit regarding Ottoman perception of European-style dress as an element of European civilization was an official ceremony in London, in

---

<sup>13</sup> Şemseddin Sami, "Medeniyet", published in 1883 in a journal called 'Hafta' whose editor was himself. Cited in Zeynep Süslü and İsmail Kara, 'Şemseddin Sami'nin "Medeniyet"e Dair Dört Makalesi' (*Kutadgubilig*, No. 4, October 2003), Taken from the URL: <http://www.kutadgubilig.com/makaleler/1.php?id=26>

<sup>14</sup> Süslü and Kara, 'Şemseddin Sami'nin "Medeniyet"e Dair Dört Makalesi'.

<sup>15</sup> Cenap Şehabettin, *Avrupa Mektupları*, TC. Kültür Bakanlığı Yayınları, Ankara, 1996, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> Cenap Şehabettin, *Avrupa Mektupları*, pp. 46-48

<sup>17</sup> The diary of Ömer Faiz Efendi was transcribed by Cemal Kutay in his book, *Avrupa'da Sultan Aziz*, Sile Matbaası, İstanbul, 1970.

<sup>18</sup> Kutay, *Avrupa'da Sultan Aziz*, p. 49

which the English bureaucrats and royal family wore their traditional costumes and wigs. These costumes were perceived as quite ridiculous; the British elite was even derided by the Ottoman convoy. Therefore, ironically, likewise many Europeans found the Ottoman costumes weird, Ottomans did so in London. Hâlimî Efendi, the second secretary of imperial palace, said Ömer Faiz Efendi that the Europeans laughed at their costumes and traditions, whereas they did not think that those who saw their costumes would find them weird. Ömer Faiz Efendi replied him quite interestingly. He said: “They think, but they also know that whatever buffoonery they make, the world has to seem like an admirer of them”<sup>19</sup>. Thus likewise Cenap Şehabettin and Münif Paşa, Ömer Faiz Efendi perceived power as a determinant of the right to do whatever one wants to. However, his conclusion regarding that matter was quite significant: “...in this journey I understood that the era of. ...appearance has ended. There must be something within the head”.<sup>20</sup>

#### B. City – A ‘Sine Qua Non’ for Civilization?

Besides technological inventions and dress, another significant element of civilization was the ‘city’. Since both the words, ‘civilization’ and its Ottoman equivalent ‘*medeniyet*’ are derived from the concept of ‘city’; this concept was widely used as a determinant of civilization. Therefore for the Ottoman intellectual, a planned, clean and tidy city was a requisite to label a group of people as civilized.

For Cenap Şehabettin, ‘city’ was a *sine qua non* indication of civilization. In his letters, he criticized peasant life and villages; and perceived the peasant life as an inferior one compared to the urban life. During his journey towards European capitals, his train passed through Bulgarian countryside, and he saw many villages.<sup>21</sup> For him, every peasant has one dream, to survive from peasantry. The adjectives that he used to define villages and peasants were generally pejorative; even peasants were evaluated as people of self-incurred immaturity. Such an articulation reflected the significance that he asserted on the urban life as an element of civilization.

One can also find the indication of Münif Paşa’s inclination towards European civilization in his writings on city planning particularly regarding Istanbul. He complained about the narrow streets of the city, which facilitated the spread of fires and criticized people’s choice to construct wooden houses, whereas the Europeans preferred stone houses that prevented the spread of fires to whole neighbourhood. He admired the fire brigades of European cities and expected the organization of a fire brigade in Istanbul as efficient as in Europe. Thus, this inferior situation of Istanbul was not proper to the honour of the Sultanate; it would be a matter of shame against Europeans as well<sup>22</sup>. Likewise, Ömer Faiz Efendi visited the city of London and appraised the regularity and cleanness of the city life. He once wrote that after he saw the municipal organization of London, he was ashamed of his title being the Major of Istanbul<sup>23</sup>.

To recapitulate, cities like Paris and London became models for the Ottoman intellectuals. For example, for Namık Kemal, London turns out to be a sample city that represents every aspect of civilization. However, still, association of civilization with cities is not always the case. Some intellectuals did not glorify these cities but sometimes criticize them. For example, Fağfurizade Hüseyin Nesimi argued that many opposite conditions were coexisted in Paris. He wrote “Being the world of freedom and the conservation of civilization, Paris is

---

<sup>19</sup> Kutay, *Avrupa’da Sultan Aziz*, p. 76

<sup>20</sup> Kutay, *Avrupa’da Sultan Aziz*, p. 84

<sup>21</sup> Cenap Şehabettin, *Avrupa Mektupları*, pp. 1-2

<sup>22</sup> Doğan, *Tanzimatın İki Ucu*, p. 133

<sup>23</sup> Kutay, *Avrupa’da Sultan Aziz*, p. 70

[also] the centre of the people of indulgence and misery.”<sup>24</sup> In other words, while they appraised European cities as centers of civilization, they still preferred Istanbul if they were asked to make a choice.

### C. Museum: A Linkage between Ottoman and European Culture?

Another significant yet under-researched element of Western civilization is the museum. Almost all the intellectuals who visited the reputable museums of European capitals united in the need for establishing a museum in the Ottoman capital. Among them was Ahmet Mithat Efendi. He visited the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm and wrote that a similar museum should be established in Istanbul, in which all kinds of costumes, weapons, tents, etc. would be exhibited. Accordingly, the use of such a museum would be proving the presence of the ‘Ottomanness’ in a geography stretching from Yemen to Germany<sup>25</sup>.

Celal Nuri (1877-1938) went further and criticized the Ottomans of being a society, which disrespect the notion of ‘antiquity’. He bitterly wrote that the Ottomans have no idea of conservation (*fikr-i muhafaza*)<sup>26</sup>.

Indeed, museum was perceived as a necessary establishment, particularly in the Hamidian era, when Ottoman Empire lost most of its European territories. This perception was coincided with the attempt to create a singular identity for the citizens of the Empire. In other words, the museum was not only important to exhibit the history of a particular Empire to its citizens but also it was important as an attempt to implement one significant element of European civilization in the Ottoman Empire.

### Conclusion

In the long nineteenth century, the principle issue that occupied the mind of the Ottoman intellectual community was the survival of the Empire. Whether it be a member of traditional *ulama* or a bureaucrat in the Chamber of Translation of the Sublime Porte, the main concern that united all these people was how to prevent the decay of their once-glorious Empire. After the problem had been fixed, they sought for a solution. They had experienced the development of their arch-enemies, namely the European states as well as they were aware of the decadence of their own state. Thus, there must have been something that made Europe glorious while resulted in the irreversible defeats of the Ottoman Empire.

In this search for an outlet for the survival of the Empire, many of the Ottoman intellectuals began to think that the reason of their decadence was missing the spirit of time. In the last three centuries, Europe turned out to be a land of innovations. Their weapons were more destructive, their soldiers were healthier, their products were more of good quality; in sum they had been living in a more prosperous position compared to the Ottoman society. The underlying reason of this betterment could contribute to the betterment of the Ottoman Empire as well. Hence, the achievements of European civilization were examined thoroughly and the Ottoman intellectuals concluded that adoption of these elements might result in the revival of Empire, such as the revival of enlightened Europe from the darkness of the Middle Ages.

Thus, Ottoman modernization became the most significant feature of the nineteenth century. It was not imposed on the Ottoman Empire by the adherents of this civilization as in the case of colonial expansion, rather it was the Ottoman ruling elite that had initiated this process. The role of intellectuals in the Ottoman modernization should not be ignored as well. Many of them had the opportunity to visit Europe and experienced the developments there

---

<sup>24</sup> Asiltürk, *Osmanlı Seyyahlarının Gözüyle Avrupa*, p. 79

<sup>25</sup> Asiltürk, *Osmanlı Seyyahlarının Gözüyle Avrupa*, p. 352

<sup>26</sup> Celal Nuri İleri, *Şimal Hatıraları*, Mavi Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1997, p. 73. This book was first published in 1914.

vividly. Therefore, these intellectuals perceived the adoption of European type of civilization as the only option to save the future of the Empire.

The elements of European civilization did not only serve as a recipe for the survival of the Empire but also as a glass for the Ottoman intellectuals to look at their own society. In other words, while searching for the reasons of Ottoman decadence, these intellectuals utilized these elements to a great extent. For some of them, lack of a railway system impeded the economic integration of different regions of the Empire; whereas for others the absence of European type of cities was something to be ashamed of. For some of them, the 'nomadic desire' in the minds of people made them living in an uncivilized condition; whereas for others lack of the mentality of conservation resembled the Ottoman society to a barbarian one. Therefore, elements of European civilization such as railways, cities or museums turned out to be criteria for labeling a community as a 'civilization'.

Ottoman bureaucratic correspondence, newspapers, journals and literature provides the reader with significant insights on the Ottoman perception of its own society and other societies as well. Examination of these documents reveals how European civilization has been influential in shaping not only the Ottoman society and civilization, but also the minds of Ottoman intellectuals.

All in all, the awareness of decadence and seeking an outlet to prevent the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire forced the nineteenth century Ottoman intellectual to turn to European civilization. From the most conservative to the most liberal, almost all these intellectuals examined European experience and derived several conclusions, or recipes for the survival of the Empire. Although this search has a single aim the method to reach this aim differed. The general trend was that the material aspects of European civilization should be transferred to the Ottoman Empire; whereas, moral elements should be left aside. Therefore, technological achievements, dress, city or museum turned out to be the vital organs that should be implanted to the 'sick man of Europe' in order to ameliorate him.