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Beyond 'Black Turks' and 'White Turks' – The Turkish Elites' Ongoing Mission to Civilize a Colourful Society

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Abstract: This article undertakes a conceptual enquiry into the history of the Ottoman/Turkish concept of civilization. It shows how the concept of civilization became one of the key elements of political and intellectual thought in the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Beginning with the adaptation of the idea of civilization in the nineteenth century, the desire to be recognized as civilized has moulded the thinking of Ottoman and Turkish elites regardless of their political orientation. From the early Ottoman modernizers to the present-day AKP government the pursuit of *medeniyet* (Turkish for 'civilization') has united radical reformers and religious conservatives. The article analyses how these succeeding imperial and republican elites understood the concept of civilization, how they transformed it into a specific Ottoman and Turkish civilizing mission, and how they approached those groups of the population who were regarded as 'backward' and 'uncivilized'. Thereby *medeniyet* has maintained its dominance until today, making 'civilization' the most influential ideological concept of modern Turkish history besides the idea of the nation.

Keywords: AKP, civilization, civilizing mission, Ottoman Empire, Turkey

While Black Turks listen in general to arabesk and folk music, White Turks prefer Western music and Turkish Pop. ... For their entertainment Black Turks have a barbecue, prepare *ciğ köfte* [spicy balls made from bulgur and raw minced meat], and have a picnic; White Turks play tennis or squash or go skiing. In a taxi Black Turks prefer to sit on the front seat, while White Turks favour the back seat. Black Turks meet their future partner generally in a tailor's shop for ready-made clothes, among their neighbours or at a wedding, and their marriages are arranged with the help of a matchmaker [*göricü usulü*]. White Turks marry the partner they met at a ball, in a night club or at a party. You can see typical examples of Black Turks rather in coach terminals, typical examples of White Turks rather in airports. The most striking difference between both is, however, that

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the ‘whites’ express their identity in wearing bow ties, the ‘blacks’ in moving and turning prayer beads between their fingers.¹

Though it presents them in a humorous manner, the above quote from a book on the achievement of ‘Turkish-style success’ reproduces and confirms the clichés regarding the life-style, cultural practices and attitude towards religion of so-called ‘black Turks’ and ‘white Turks’.

The stereotypical ascriptions *siyah Türk* (‘black Turk’) and *beyaz Türk* (‘white Turk’) emerged in the 1990s, when members of the urban secular establishment in Turkey began to use these terms in order to distinguish themselves from social groups having a rural background and a religious outlook. In this view the city-based ‘white Turks’ appear as ‘modern’, ‘educated’ and ‘cultured’, while the ‘black Turks’ from Anatolia are depicted as ‘primitive’, ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘parochial’. Politically the label ‘white Turk’ was also applied to members of the Kemalist bureaucratic-military elite, the label ‘black Turk’ to supporters of the Islamic political movement, which increased its influence in those years and later merged into the successful Justice and Development Party AKP.

In the Turkish public today the terms ‘black Turks’ and ‘white Turks’ are widely disapproved of due to their openly discriminatory character.² Nevertheless, they continue to be used informally, and on occasion Turkish politicians or domestic and international media refer to them to illustrate social distinctions in Turkish society.³ One of most frequent users is AKP co-founder and current Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who repeatedly mentioned his status as *siyah Türk* or even *zenci Türk* (‘negro Turk’) in order to characterize his and his party’s claim to power as a necessary emancipation of ordinary people from *beyaz Türk* supremacy and arrogance.⁴

Academic research has approached the emergence of the ‘black Turks’/‘white Turks’ dichotomy from several viewpoints:

¹ Sekman 2000: 269–270.

² In 2005, for example, Turkish journalist Mine G. Kırıkkanat lost her job as a columnist at the liberal daily *Radikal* following an article in which she described the barbecue habits of migrants from rural Anatolia in an extremely offensive language (Demiralp 2012: 516–517).

³ In 2013, for instance, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* published its bilingual German-Turkish analysis of the Gezi protests in Istanbul under the title “White Turks, black Turks” (“Weiße Türken, schwarze Türken – Beyaz Türkler, siyah Türkler”, *Der Spiegel* 24/06/2013, 78–93).

⁴ During an official Ramadan dinner at the presidential palace in June 2015 Erdoğan said that “they [the white Turks] call you and us *zenci Türk* [‘negro Turk’], and I am proud of being a *zenci Türk*” (“Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’dan iftar sofrası açıklaması”, *Hürriyet* 24/06/2015. <http://hurarsiv.hurriyet.com.tr/goster/printnews.aspx?DocID=29372616> [27/01/2016]). For Erdoğan’s use of the terms *siyah Türk* and *zenci Türk* see also Ferguson 2014: 78–80.

- Post-1980 urbanization processes during which former squatter settlements (*gecekondu*) developed into more formalized suburbs (*varoş*), leading to a more visible presence of rural migrants in Turkish cities.⁵
- The formation of a new transnational (global and European) bourgeois class identity among the Turkish urban middle classes as a result of the neoliberal economic reforms of the 1980s, Turkey's growing integration into capitalist globalization, and intensified ambitions to join the European Union.⁶
- Unsolved centre-periphery and majority-minority conflicts beneath the state ideology of national homogeneity as well as an increasing polarization between secularism and Islamism in the 1990s, disguising a power struggle between the Kemalist establishment and ascending provincial actors (represented by Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party) as well as their competing claims to modernity.⁷
- A widespread ignorance of the role of race in the formation of Turkish national identity and of the legacy of Ottoman slavery, which manifests itself in the presumption of Turkish 'whiteness' and African or Arab 'darkness' (in particular when it comes to the use of the word *zenci* as in *zenci Türk*).⁸

In this sense the 'black Turks'/'white Turks' distinction proves to be the creation of a long-established urban elite which believed in its entitlement to the resources of the state and sought recognition of its bourgeois identity in a world shaped by globalization and EU integration. Challenged through demographic change and the rise of a rivalling elite in the periphery, this elite reacted by creating an exclusivist class identity which kept newcomers and competitors at bay in racist terms.

This article puts the attitude of the self-declared 'white Turks' of the 1990s and 2000s in a broader historical and conceptual context. A sense of natural superiority, contempt for the 'backward' and mistrust in the 'masses' has a long tradition among the dominant strata of Turkish society. It shaped the

⁵ Sumer 2003.

⁶ Arat-Koç 2007.

⁷ Bilici 2009; Demiralp 2012.

⁸ Ergin 2008; Ferguson 2014. The latter author also discusses the meaning of the word *zenci*, which is not the exact equivalent of the English 'negro'. *Zenci* includes both connotations of a more neutral 'black' and an openly derogatory 'negro'. Nevertheless the word is deeply rooted in the history of Ottoman slavery (Ferguson 2014: 80–84).

world view of all Ottoman and Turkish elites from the beginning of modernizing efforts in the Ottoman Empire during the nineteenth century. This includes the AKP elite, which once rose from the ranks of the perceived ‘black Turks’ and has now replaced the ‘white Turks’ at the top of the state.

It is the aim of this contribution to link the world view of the country’s past and present elites to a key concept: The concept of civilization. Since the emergence of the French idea of *civilisation* in the late eighteenth century the concept of civilization had a profound impact on many societies, among them imperial Ottoman society and later republican Turkish society. The Ottoman/Turkish case, however, is special for three reasons:

First, the amplitude of the concept. The reference to civilization is one of the central elements of political and intellectual thought in the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. Since the first half of the nineteenth century, the desire to be recognized as civilized has moulded the thinking of Ottoman and Turkish elites regardless of their political orientation. This pursuit of *medeniyet* (or in modern Turkish *uygarlık*, a term less often used) has united radical reformers and religious conservatives, even if their understanding of civilization might differ substantially.

Second, the persistence of the concept. While in many countries the idea of civilization has been fundamentally questioned (above all due to its complicity in colonialism), the Turkish version of *medeniyet* has maintained its rather unchallenged dominance until today. I therefore argue that ‘civilization’ is, besides the idea of the nation, the most influential ideological concept of late Ottoman and republican Turkish history.

Finally, the missionary nature of the concept. Most studies exploring an Ottoman/Turkish civilizing mission have focussed on Ottoman colonialism, centralization efforts, or Kemalist assimilationism and secularism. I suggest a broader perspective based on Jürgen Osterhammel’s definition of the civilizing mission (see next section): In this sense Ottoman and Turkish elites have always perceived the concept of civilization as a project of “collective self-civilization”⁹ in order to achieve full membership to the club of ‘civilized’ nations, with an inherent mission to civilize unwilling or resisting elements within. The missionary impetus to enlighten and to discipline ‘backward’ or ‘ignorant’ groups of the population did not end with the Kemalist regime of the early Turkish Republic. It has driven the ruling Turkish elites ever since, including the present leadership of the Justice and Development Party.

9 Osterhammel 2005: 391.

This article thus undertakes a conceptual enquiry into the history of the Ottoman/Turkish concept of civilization. Informed through the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*),¹⁰ it investigates how 'civilization' was perceived, interpreted and negotiated by the succeeding elites at different historical stages and how the concept was embedded in broader discursive fields like colonialism and nationalism.

Hence, the analysis follows the development of the concept of *medeniyet* from an overall accepted lodestar of modernization to a discursive weapon used to brand social deviants or political opponents. It discusses the colonial setting of the adaption of 'civilization', the emergence of a domestic version of the civilizing mission, and the transformation of the concept of *medeniyet* under the impact of nationalism and scientific race theories. The second part of the article focusses on the rather unexplored history of the Turkish civilization concept in the post-World War II period. It investigates how – as a result of the pluralization of the Turkish political landscape – competing political actors appropriated the concept of civilization for their own ends. This process culminated in the term 'civilization' becoming one of the favourite political catchwords of the AKP government, which uses references to *medeniyet* to justify its ambitious reconstruction of Turkish society, to denounce political adversaries, and to advocate the expansion of Turkey's influence beyond its borders.

The origins of the concept of civilization

The French term *civilisation* in its modern sense developed among mid-eighteenth century French philosophers of the Enlightenment. Based on terms derived from the Latin word *civis* ('citizen'), 'civilisation' also spread in other European languages and soon became one of the central philosophical concepts of the modern era.¹¹

The concept of civilization includes several aspects. In a collective sense the term describes a higher developed state of human society regarding moral standards and lifestyle as well as scientific and technological progress. Individually understood as 'the condition of being civilized', the term refers to

¹⁰ For the essentials of the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) see Koselleck 2006; for the application of this field of research to contemporary history see e. g. Steinmetz 2011; Kollmeier/Hoffmann 2010.

¹¹ Fisch 2004: 716–720.

a higher developed state of a person marked through characteristics and values like decency, self-discipline, virtue, tact, courtesy, refinement or the appreciation of art and education. The concept also covers the process of 'becoming civilized' whose starting point is located in a natural state. 'Civilization' is demarcated through antonyms like barbarian, primitive, savage, undeveloped or underdeveloped – or simply uncivilized.¹²

The history of the civilization concept was always accompanied by its criticism. The critique of civilization idealized an imagined unspoiled natural state or romanticized the so-called 'noble savage', untainted by the influences of a corrupt or decadent modern civilization.¹³

In German-speaking countries, on the other hand, the development of the civilization concept took a separate path. Referring more narrowly to scientific and technological achievements, *Zivilisation* was contrasted with *Kultur*, a term that conveyed intellectual, religious and moral aspects and was increasingly used to demarcate national differences.¹⁴

Later the concept underwent a certain pluralization. 'Civilization' in the singular understood as a potentially universal human condition was widened – and in a certain way challenged – through the division of the world into several 'civilizations' in the plural.¹⁵

A fundamental element of the concept of civilization is a firm belief in progress. Initially 'becoming civilized' was regarded as a natural process of maturation during which the primitives could once reach the state of being civilized. The idea of a 'hierarchy of civilization' emerging in the first half of the nineteenth century formalized this process in scientific terms. Thereby each people of the world could be classified according its perceived degree of civilization on this scale ranging from primitive peoples or barbarian peoples to civilized peoples, with Europeans at the top.¹⁶

The emergence of the civilizing mission

In the late nineteenth century the evolutionist perspective changed together with an increasingly interventionist role of the state and an ethnologization of the civilization concept as result of intensifying colonial expansion in the age of

¹² Graf 2008: 1888–1889.

¹³ Graf 2008: 1890.

¹⁴ Fisch 2004: 722–730.

¹⁵ Fisch 2004: 718, 757–758.

¹⁶ Fisch 2004: 743.

New Imperialism.¹⁷ This more active approach generated the idea of a 'civilizing mission' by Europeans or North Americans. The term *mission civilisatrice* itself was first used in France in the 1870s and then adopted by other imperialist powers.¹⁸ According to Jürgen Osterhammel this idea implies, on the one hand, both the right and the obligation to advance the process of progress in the name of civilization. In a more limited sense it means, on the other hand, the necessity of active interventions in order to secure minimum standards of civilization in acute times of crisis.¹⁹

Osterhammel regards civilizing missions as projects of elites that were not restricted to European or North American colonial empires.²⁰ Civilizing missions could also cover efforts to 'civilize' domestic peasants or revolutionaries, interventions to remove despotic regimes or to establish a beneficial peaceful order (increasingly with reference to international law), or campaigns in the name of humanitarianism.²¹ Osterhammel puts particular emphasis on what he calls "self-civilizing" projects: Such projects were often implemented by the elites of non-European countries (above all in the Ottoman Empire, in Latin America, in Egypt, in Japan and later in China). Motivated by the perception of inferiority on the hierarchy of civilization or the threat of being colonized by foreign powers, the elites of these countries decided to 'civilize' themselves and their population according to Western models.²²

Elites, the state, and the Ottoman/Turkish 'self-civilizing' project

While thus elites appear as the principal actors in civilizing and self-civilizing projects, the term 'elite' itself needs some further clarification in this context. Sociological theories of elites offer a wide range of definitions of the term, which could be condensed to certain elements: Elites are social minorities consisting of persons that have achieved their status through some kind of selection process. They are ascribed (or ascribe to themselves) an outstanding or exclusive position in the functioning of society and have privileged access to the resources of

¹⁷ Osterhammel 2005: 366–367.

¹⁸ Schaebler 2004: 8.

¹⁹ Osterhammel 2005: 363.

²⁰ Osterhammel 2005: 370.

²¹ Osterhammel 2005: 366–368; 389–390; 400–408.

²² Osterhammel 2005: 390–392.

(political, economic, and other forms of) power.²³ It is debated if there is one singular elite or if there are several elites in societies. More recent research tends to distinguish elites in different social fields (political system, economy, higher education, religion, media, etc.), which could be nevertheless closely intertwined, to the point of forming a ruling class.²⁴

What is important in the Ottoman/Turkish context is the extremely close association of the elites with the state. In the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic power depended (and still depends) to a large extent on proximity to the state, thus for a long time the dominant elites emerged primarily from the state apparatus (in particular from the bureaucracy and the military). This close relationship could be traced back to the Ottoman 'self-civilizing' effort. From the nineteenth century onwards the state has been at the centre of all efforts of the elites to achieve civilization. Karpāt emphasizes that in this period "assuring the survival and supremacy of *devlet baba* (the father or mother state) acquired undisputed priority and legitimacy as the instrument of civilization (that is, modernization)".²⁵ In this logic the overall aim of civilization required that the ruling elites lay exclusive claim on the state resources: "[T]he bureaucracy intelligentsia – included the military – became [the] supreme and exclusive agent [of civilization] and used it to legitimize their political supremacy and absolutism".²⁶ As a consequence, any group that emerged as rivalling elite strived to take over the state together with its civilizing mission, as it is demonstrated further below.

The concept of *medeniyet* in the late Ottoman Empire

In the Ottoman Empire, the adaption of the concept of civilization took place in the context of a radical modernization effort. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Ottoman elites initiated numerous reforms to modernize centuries-old institutions (beginning with the military) and to save the Empire from foreign domination. The concept of civilization, as it was understood in its early phase, provided the elites with a vision on which the desired transformation of the state could be based: The vision of becoming part of a universal

²³ Wasner 2004: 16–17.

²⁴ Hartmann 2004: 103–105.

²⁵ Karpāt 2001: 11.

²⁶ Karpāt 2001: 11–12.

civilization open to all peoples and nations if they followed the example of the civilized states in Western Europe and Northern America.

The term 'civilization' was included into Ottoman language when after 1826 more and more Ottoman diplomats and officials served in Western Europe.²⁷ According to Tuncer Baykara different Ottoman versions of the term 'civilization' circulated in the 1830s and 1840s:

- a) *sivilizasyon*, the equivalent of the French word *civilisation* that was used in particular in the 1850s.
- b) *hazariyet*, a word derived from the Arabic word *ḥaḍārī* (sedentary, settled, also: civilized) that yet could not gain acceptance.
- c) *temeddün* and *medeniyet*, two expressions based on the Arabic root *mad-dana*, from which the word *madīna* (town) is derived. Ibn Khaldun used the Arabic word *tamaddun* (becoming urbanized or civilized) already in the fourteenth century. Its Turkish equivalent *temeddün*, however, did not prevail in the Ottoman context. Based on the Arabic word *madaniya*, the neologism *medeniyet* became instead the customary Ottoman and later Turkish term for 'civilization'.²⁸

The Ottoman bureaucrats and intellectuals who sought a fundamental modernization of the Empire according to Western models yet faced the problem that the notion of civilization included certain Christian roots. In particular, the contemporary British idea combined Protestant Christianity with Victorian values like commercial diligence, free trade, incorruptibility and the rule of law, moderation, self-restraint and cleanliness.²⁹ Though the successful model of the dominant British Empire had considerable influence on the Ottoman reform elite, the French idea of *civilisation* with <21–38> its less pronounced religious connotations provided a more suitable ideological basis.³⁰

The Ottoman modernizers of the era of the *Tanzimat* ('reforms') thus purged their vision of *medeniyet* of any Christian religious-cultural traces in order to secure acceptance in a dynastic empire legitimized through Islam.³¹ Instead, they propagated 'civilization' as a universal, superior lifestyle that was essential

²⁷ Baykara 2007: 34–39.

²⁸ Baykara 2007: 49–55; Schaebler 2004: 16–18. The latter author locates one of the first elaborated modern discourses on civilization in the journal *Mecmua-i Fünun*. In the early 1860s the contributors to this intellectual Ottoman journal discussed the concept of civilization in the terms of *medeniyet* (Schaebler 2004: 18). For complementary examples of the translation of 'civilization' into Arabic in the mid-nineteenth century see Stephan (2012:).

²⁹ Osterhammel 2005: 388.

³⁰ Osterhammel 2005: 390.

³¹ Karpas 2001: 11.

for the development of Ottoman society. Kemal Karpat describes the Ottoman understanding of *medeniyet* accordingly as “a higher level of social order, morality, refinement, grace, good manners, development (*umran*), and secure, comfortable living; and it was the opposite of ignorance, stagnation, passivity, unproductive existence, and primitiveness”.³²

This idea of *medeniyet* became the key concept of the Ottoman reform movement and its national ideology, Ottomanism, designed to unite all subjects of the Sultan as citizens in a modern state. The perception of inferiority to Western Europe and North America made the Ottoman modernizers embark on a far-reaching ‘self-civilizing’ project, as it was outlined in the previous sections.

Medeniyet remained the unshaken ideal of the Ottoman elite even when nationalist ambitions of the Christian communities and imperialist claims undermined Ottomanism and its aim of national unity. Yet the debate about how the universal concept of civilization should be culturally embedded and how it should be distinguished from Western and Christian interpretations intensified and became more and more controversial.

The Ottoman civilizing mission

Confronted with growing European imperial aspirations on Ottoman territory, the elite of the Empire instigated its own version of a civilizing mission. The Ottoman civilizing mission targeted those who defied the benefits of *medeniyet* and remained in ‘backwardness’ and ‘primitivity’. According to Birgit Schäbler this affected Ottoman imperial subjects in tribal, rural frontier regions who lived far from the urban centres and their way of life, especially nomadic Arabs, Turkmens and Kurds.³³ Selim Deringil describes how in the late Ottoman Empire *bedeviyet* (nomadism) and *vahşet* or *vahşiyet* (savagery) emerged as the main antonyms of *medeniyet*.³⁴ Maurus Reinkowski adds to these terms the word *cahiliyet* (ignorance), the Arabic term for the pre-Islamic period, by which Ottoman civilizers denoted the ‘uncivilized’ and ‘barbarian’.³⁵

The role of European colonialism and Orientalism in the creation of an Ottoman colonialism has become part of an intensive scholarly debate.³⁶ A growing number of studies has demonstrated how the Ottoman elite adopted

³² Karpat 2001: 11.

³³ Schäbler 2003: 22–27.

³⁴ Deringil 1998: 41.

³⁵ Reinkowski 2005: 249.

³⁶ See, for instance, Makdisi 2002; Deringil 2003; Reinkowski 2006.

the mind-set of European colonialism and began to view its periphery in colonial terms from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (covering regions like Lebanon, North Africa or the Yemen).³⁷ These civilizing efforts even intensified in later decades when the territorial claims of European powers increasingly threatened the Empire's existence.

The following quote illustrates this close connection between colonialism and the civilization ideal. In 1909, the Young Turk sympathizer and educational reformer Dr. Hafız Cemal (Lokmanhekim) criticized the 'backward' mentality and 'lack of civilization' among the Turkish Muslims living in British-occupied Cyprus:

From the occupation of our island onwards, the British government has granted freedom to the Turks and the Greeks. ... Ninety-five percent of the miserable Turks, however, misused the idea of 'freedom'. They have become the slaves of wine, *raki*, brothels, pubs, places of prostitution, in short, of the world of pleasure and amusement. Ruined and pitiful every other day, they almost know nothing about true civilization. Therefore, we sadly have to admit that the Turks of the island have even not been able to reach the degree of progress and development of the Chinese or so. While Europe lives in the year 1909, we are still in 1709 and 200 years behind of their standard of thinking and living.³⁸

The combination of inferiority feelings and a strong claim to equality is typical of the Ottoman (and later Turkish) civilizing mission. In order to demonstrate their civilized character to the outside world, the elites distinguished themselves from those parts of the population that they identified as uncivilized. At the same time, this differentiation justified modernization schemes from above through which the elites strived to civilize 'backward' elements within.

'Civilization' between universalism, nationalism and racism

In the course of the nineteenth century, a shift in the meaning of civilization forced the Ottoman modernizers to accentuate their civilizing effort. 'Civilization' began to lose its universalistic character, with existing and newly emerging nation-states laying claim on the term in an exclusivist manner. Already in

³⁷ See, for instance, Makdisi 2000; Herzog/Motika 2000; Kuehn 2011; Palabıyık 2012; Lafi 2015.

³⁸ Dr. Hafız Cemal [Lokmanhekim], *Kıbrıs Osmanlılarına mahsus son hediye-i acizanem veyahud Kıbrısta geçen dört senelik tarih-i hayatım* (My last humble present for the Cypriot Ottomans or the biography of my four years in Cyprus), İslam ve Mirat-ı Zaman Matbaası, Lefkoşa (Nicosia) 1909, in: Lokmanhekim 2001: 169.

1838 the French politician and historian François Guizot had narrowed ‘civilization’ down to ‘the civilization of Europe’ with France as most-developed nation at its core.³⁹ In Britain meanwhile the notion of a hierarchy of civilization was popularized – with the British Empire at its top. From the 1860s onwards this hierarchy was increasingly theorized by evolutionist scientists on the assumption that all countries and peoples of the world could be compared according to their standard of civilization.⁴⁰ In the hierarchy of civilization the Ottoman Empire, perceived as the epitome of an ‘Oriental despotism’, was placed on the inferior ranks.⁴¹ Later this perception became manifest in the persistent image of the ‘Sick Man of Europe’.⁴²

The national movements in South-East Europe, too, based their demands for secession from the Ottoman Empire on a superior status of civilization. Independent Greece (being itself subjected to a civilizing project under a Bavarian king after its establishment through the European powers) now considered itself on a civilizing mission towards the Ottoman East. Accordingly, Greek Prime Minister Ioannis Kolettis explained the national aspiration of the *Megali Idea* (‘Great Idea’) in 1844 as follows:

By her geographical location, Greece is the center of Europe; with the East on her right and the West on her left, she has been destined through her downfall to enlighten the West and through her regeneration to enlighten the East. The first task has been fulfilled by our ancestors; the second is assigned to us.⁴³

At the same time, the rising Ottoman Christian elites began to see themselves as natural representatives of European civilization who were superior to their ‘underdeveloped’ Muslim rulers.⁴⁴

In connection with ongoing nationalist ambitions of the Christian communities and increasingly unconcealed imperialist claims, the image of the Ottoman Empire further deteriorated during the second half of the nineteenth century. The same period witnessed the rise of scientific race theories. In contrast to the civilization concept, which incorporated the possibility of change and development in order to reach a higher standard, these theories attributed social and cultural differences biologically to unalterable ‘races’, thereby basically denying any civilizing option.⁴⁵

³⁹ Guizot 2004 [1838]: 27.

⁴⁰ Osterhammel 2005: 388–389.

⁴¹ Adanır 2001: 95–96.

⁴² Ramm 2009: 103.

⁴³ Kitromilides 1979, S. 152.

⁴⁴ Karpát 2001: 12.

⁴⁵ Barth 2005: 203; Osterhammel 2005: 420.

This shift is reflected in the well-known quote from British Prime Minister William E. Gladstone's pamphlet *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, published in 1876:

Let me endeavor very briefly to sketch, in the rudest outline, what the Turkish race was and what it is. It's not a question of Mohametanism simply, but of Mohametanism compounded with the peculiar character of a race. They are not the mild Mohametans of India, nor the chivalrous Saladins of Syria, nor the cultured Moors of Spain. They were, upon the whole, from the black day when they first entered Europe, the one great anti-human specimen of humanity. Wherever they went, a broad line of blood marked the track behind them; and, as far as their dominion reached, civilization vanished from view.⁴⁶

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the image of an inferior and blood-thirsty 'Turkish race' that could not be civilized served as popular justification for interventions by European powers into Ottoman affairs and annexations of territory from a debt- and conflict-ridden Empire.

Medeniyet, Islam and Ottoman nationalism

With their desire to become accepted as a civilized country having clearly failed, the Ottoman elites reacted with an ideological split that is mirrored in the two political ideas that have been most influential in Turkish political discourse until today – the nation and civilization. On the one hand, the elites stuck to the ideal of a universalistic civilization. Only the achievement of 'civilization' in the singular could revive the Empire's power and thereby secure its well-deserved recognition as member of the club of the civilized. On the other hand, they rejected superficial Westernization and emphasized a culturally unique Ottoman path to this universal civilization, a task assigned to an Ottoman imperial nationalism that was later enriched with Islamic and Turkish components.

Though Ottoman intellectuals closely followed Western scientific and philosophical trends of the era, this ideological split was rarely as theoretically elaborated as it was the case with the German differentiation between *Zivilisation* and *Kultur* (an exception was Ziya Gökalp's approach to civilization which is referred to further below). In addition, it was blurred through the notion of multiple 'civilizations' which emerged in that period. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century thus references to 'our civilization' increased. It was not unusual that the mention of 'civilizations' in the plural appeared side by side with references to universal 'civilization' in the singular – a phenomenon

⁴⁶ Gladstone 1876: S.10.

that can also be observed in contemporary Turkey (see in particular the section on the AKP).

In the 1860s, the Young Ottomans were among the first who advocated a separate path the Ottoman nation should pursue to achieve civilization. According to the members of this intellectual-political movement, the Ottoman modernization project should be based on the nation's own cultural and religious foundations instead of merely copying Western culture. In particular Namık Kemal claimed that European civilization rested on many institutions that were initially Islamic and had only later been perfected by Europeans.⁴⁷ Kemal's writings contained a strong emphasis on these Islamic roots:

If you consider it civilization when women go on the street indecently dressed [*açık saçık*] or dance at gatherings, this is against our moral standards. We do not want that, not a thousand times! Thanks to religion we are a nation that has conquered three large continents of the world starting from two small towns in the Hejaz. Regarding knowledge and bravery we got ahead of the Greeks and the Romans.⁴⁸

The ideological split between the aim of achieving universal civilization and the insistence on a culturally genuine and religiously compatible way of modernizing the state (increasingly understood as project of national modernization) transcended the growing factionalization among the Ottoman elites. While in the second half of the nineteenth century the debate became more and more polarized between conservatives and Islamists on one side and modernists and radical Westernizers on the other, the concept of civilization itself shaped the rational and worldly outlook of Ottoman bureaucrats and intellectuals regardless of their political stance, as Kemal Karpaz states: "By the time the nature, scope, and origin of civilization – whether it was materialistic, Western, and/or Christian, created or borrowed – became subject to debate, the idea itself had been largely accepted and incorporated into the elites' culture."⁴⁹ As part of the Ottoman understanding of *medeniyet* this author also notes a changing perception of Islam, which was increasingly combined with worldly notions and openness to enlightenment and progress.⁵⁰

Hence, the dividing line between conservatives and modernists was less clear than often perceived. Sultan Abdülhamid II, who ruled the empire in an absolutist fashion after the suspension of the Ottoman constitution in 1878, expressed his opinion on civilization in his memoirs: "What is beneficial to us

⁴⁷ Mardin 2000: 322.

⁴⁸ Namık Kemal: "Fırkamız meydana çıktı çikali", *Hürriyet* 07/09/1868, 7.

⁴⁹ Karpaz 2001: 410.

⁵⁰ Karpaz 2001: 410.

is not to imitate the so called European civilization but return to the *şariat* [sharia], the source of our strength.”⁵¹ Such remarks could be seen as a proof of Abdülhamid’s Islamist convictions. Yet his ambitious continuation and expansion of the Ottoman modernization project reveal to what extent the sultan had internalized the concept of civilization, even if he gave it a stronger Islamic touch. Authors like Karpāt argue that Abdülhamid’s approach towards Islam included a progressive perception of religion and that he used Islamism as modern political ideology.⁵² As part of his centralization policy the sultan pursued the Ottoman civilizing mission and colonizing efforts more systematically.⁵³

In contrast to their adversary Abdülhamid the Young Turks have an image of staunch Westernizers. Many members of the movement which would start the successful constitutional revolution of 1908 were convinced that Western civilization was the one and only and equivalent to ‘contemporary science’.⁵⁴ At the same time they were dedicated Ottoman patriots in the tradition of the Young Ottomans. Their stance to Islam was ambivalent: Though members like Abdullah Cevdet, an important theorist among the early Young Turks, saw religion as an impediment to progress, Ahmet Rıza, a committed positivist and early leader of the movement, made many references to Islam in his writings.⁵⁵

Driven by a vigorous desire to preserve the unity of the empire at any cost, the Young Turks combined the concept of civilization with an extremely elitist perception of the ordinary population, the ‘masses’.⁵⁶ Influenced by popular Western race theories, their pronounced elitism mixed with emerging Ottoman-Muslim and later Turkish nationalism and contained a strong social Darwinist notion.⁵⁷ In this sense, the achievement of civilization became an issue of the ‘survival of the fittest’. Abdullah Cevdet expressed it once as follows:

Modern civilization does not have any pity on those who are not civilized. The law of evolution is a law without compassion and understanding. It condemns to oblivion the weak, the ignorant and the incompetent.⁵⁸

51 Sultan Abdülhamit: *Siyasî Hâtıratım*. Hrsg. von İsmet Bozdağ. Istanbul: Dergâh Yayınları 1974, 157. In: Karpāt 2001: 162.

52 Karpāt 2001: 174.

53 Deringil 2003: 318–324.

54 Hanioglu 1995: 17–18.

55 Mardin 1969: 10–14.

56 This elitism was notably influenced by French sociologist Gustave Le Bon and his theories on ‘crowds’ (Hanioglu 1995: 22).

57 Hanioglu 1995: 22, 208–209.

58 A[bdullah] C[evdet]: “Fas Hükümet-i İslamiyesinin İnkırazı”, *İctihad*, April 1905. In: Mardin 1969: 15.

This radical interpretation of civilization had a profound impact on the policy of the Young Turks until 1918. Elitism and social Darwinism coloured their centralization efforts, their increasingly uncompromising attitude towards any political opposition, their seizure of absolute power in 1913, and their decision to annihilate the Ottoman Armenian community during the First World War.

After the war a more sophisticated theoretical approach to civilization was elaborated by Ziya Gökalp, a leading Young Turk ideologue and one of the originators of Turkish nationalism. The sociologist offered one of the most pronounced examples of the ideological separation between national culture and supranational civilization. His civilization concept differentiated between *hars*, the invariable culture of a nation, and *medeniyet*, larger international collectives a nation could change and thus participate in the technological and scientific achievements of Western civilization.⁵⁹

The Kemalist civilizing mission

Continuing the elitist outlook of the Young Turks, the founders of the Turkish Republic implemented their own version of a civilizing mission in order to convince the populace of the benefits of secularism and Turkish nationalism. Mustafa Kemal, being himself a member of the Young Turk movement in late Ottoman Empire, stood in the scientific tradition of those radical Ottoman Westernizers who recognized only one singular civilization. His approach differed from that of Gökalp, who had included Islam as a unifying element in his vision of Turkish culture. In Kemal's view civilization contained different cultures, but it took its shape from Western European cultures as the most advanced. Therefore elements of domestic culture which were not compatible with universal civilization had to be adjusted or eradicated.⁶⁰

This concerned in particular Islam. After the establishment of the Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal sought to bring the Islamic religion under the control of the state, with the ultimate aim of confining it to the private realm. When the Sufi orders (*tarikāt*) and dervish lodges (*tekke*) were banned in 1925, Kemal declared:

In view of the enlightenment of science, technology, and civilization in its entirety, I will never accept the presence of individuals in the civilized society of Turkey who are so

⁵⁹ Gökalp 1976: 25–26.

⁶⁰ Hanioğlu 2011: 203–204.

primitive that they are looking for material and spiritual felicity under the guidance of such-and-such a sheikh.

Gentlemen and the nation, you all should know well that the Republic of Turkey cannot be the homeland of sheiks, dervishes, disciples and members [of religious orders]. The truest *tarikât* is the *tarikât* of civilization. To do what civilization requires is enough to be a human being.⁶¹

The words *muasır* (contemporary, modern) and *medenî* (civilized), already part of the Ottoman concept of civilization, became the central terms of Mustafa Kemal's speeches, occurring even more than references to national identity.⁶² The whole Kemalist modernization project was embedded in a discourse of civilization that branded its adversaries as ignorant, backward, uncivilized, reactionary or fanatic. The following passage of Kemal's 36-hour-speech before the congress of the Republican People's Party CHP in 1927, in which he explained the 'Hat Law' prohibiting the fez, is emblematic in this respect:

Gentlemen, it was necessary to abolish the fez, which sat on our heads as a sign of ignorance, of fanaticism, of hatred to progress and civilisation, and to adopt in its place the hat, the customary head-dress of the whole civilised world, thus showing, among other things, that no difference existed in the manner of thought between the Turkish nation and the whole family of civilised mankind.⁶³

Kemal thereby managed to transform the image of the fez, which had become the headgear of the modern Ottoman gentleman in the *Tanzimat* era, into a symbol of 'reactionary' behaviour.

The secularization and assimilation campaigns of the early Republic marked the culmination of a civilizing mission that was now delineated in ethno-nationalist terms as 'Turkish'. The Kemalist civilizing effort widened its scope from nomadic and rural populations – the main target of the Ottoman civilizing mission – to true or alleged religious traditionalists as well as non-Turkish ethnic groups, in particular the Kurds.⁶⁴ Going far beyond their Ottoman predecessors, the Kemalist civilizers aimed at erasing any ethnic-cultural identity other than Turkish and any form of religious consciousness beyond the official version of Sunni Islam prescribed by the Presidency of Religious Affairs.

The civilizing mission of the nationalist and secularist republican elite created frictions that still trouble Turkish society today. The underlying concept of

61 Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: "Kastamonu'da İkinci Bir Konuşma", 30/08/1925, in: Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü 2006: 223.

62 Zürcher 2000: 177.

63 Kemal 1929: 721–722.

64 For the assimilation campaigns against non-Turkish groups see, for instance, Üngör 2011.

civilization, however, was made one of the central pillars of the state ideology, even if it was not one of the six official principles of Kemalism.⁶⁵ This process was so effective that all relevant Turkish political actors in the post-Atatürk era adopted the phrase of *muasır medeniyet* – contemporary civilization – (or, more rarely, the neologism *çağdaş uygarlık*), as it is shown further below.

The success of the Kemalist concept of ‘contemporary civilization’ rooted in a semantic manoeuvre. Mustafa Kemal not only split the overall aim of universal civilization from a Turkish-national way to achieve this aim. Moreover, he forged ‘civilization’ into the master narrative of the Turkish nation. Consequently ‘being civilized’ appeared as a feature that was already inherent in the national character of the Turks and had only to be revived in order to bring the nation back at the top of the most civilized countries. This notion coloured Kemal’s often-cited speech delivered for the 10th Anniversary of the Republic of Turkey in 1933, which culminated in the famous nationalist motto “How happy is the one who can say ‘I am a Turk!’” (“*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene!*”). Similarly the phrase “We shall raise our national culture above the level of contemporary civilization” (“*Millî kültürümüzü muasır medeniyet seviyesinin üstüne çıkaracağız*”) would become the creed of Kemalist belief in the ideal of civilization:

We shall raise our homeland to the level of the most prosperous and civilized countries of the world. We shall provide our nation with the broadest means and sources of welfare. We shall raise our national culture above the level of contemporary civilization. [...]

Today I declare with the same faith and determination that the entire civilized world will soon acknowledge once again that the Turkish nation, which is marching towards the national ideal in full unison, is a great nation. I have never doubted that the once forgotten great civilized characteristic and great civilized talent of Turkishness will, with its subsequent flourishing, rise like a new sun from future’s high horizon of civilization.⁶⁶

In the 1930s, amidst the rising influence of anthropological race theories on Turkish nationalism, the fusion of civilization and the nation was carried to extremes. The Turkish history thesis, officially propagated until Atatürk’s death in 1938, claimed that the cradle of civilization was Central Asia, where the Turks created ‘world civilization’ and spread it over the globe.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ The six principles of Kemalism – or ‘Six Arrows’ (*Altı Ok*) – are Republicanism (*Cumhuriyetçilik*), Populism (*Halkçılık*), Nationalism (*Milliyetçilik*), Secularism (*Laiklik*), Statism (*Devletçilik*), and Revolutionary Reformism (*Devrimcilik*).

⁶⁶ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk: “Onuncu Yıl Nutku”, 29/10/1933. In: Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü 2006: 318.

⁶⁷ Hanioglu 2011: 164–165.

The Turkish concept of civilization in the second half of the twentieth century

After the First World War, the concept of civilization began to lose its lustre in many Western European countries and was increasingly questioned by intellectuals. This process was furthered through the experience of the Second World War with the unprecedented Nazi politics of mass extermination and later intensified during post-war decolonization.

Turkey, however, remained unaffected. The Turkish elites' adherence to the civilization ideal survived the Second World War and the Kemalist one-party-state. Since 1945, both elected governments and the authoritarian regimes that seized power after military coups have tried to transform and to control Turkish society according to their respective idea of civilization. Moreover, political parties from the right to the left grounded their programmes on the vision of a truly civilized Turkey.

The conservative Democrat Party DP that came to power at the 1950 elections initially displayed a more cautious approach to Westernization. In its 1946 programme, it referred to the Kemalist principles, but did not mention the phrase 'contemporary civilization'. It only promised "to bring the Turkish nation in every sense to an advanced level and to eradicate in any area backward and dangerous traditions stemming from the past".⁶⁸

Nevertheless, DP-Prime Minister Adnan Menderes made many references to civilization during his term in office. In 1951, for instance, he promised "to raise the country to a level oriented towards Western civilization" and "to bring the Turkish peasant by every means [...] to the level of prosperous and civilized people".⁶⁹

In 1960, a Kemalist-inspired military coup removed Menderes and the DP from power. The relatively liberal constitution of 1961 laid down in Article 153 that the Kemalist reform laws providing for secularism and the achievement of the level of 'contemporary civilization' (among them the 'Hat Law' of 1925) were exempt from any changes:

No Provision of this Constitution shall be construed or interpreted as rendering unconstitutional the following Reform Laws which aim at raising the Turkish society to the level of contemporary civilization and at safeguarding the secular character of the Republic [...].⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Programme of the *Demokrat Parti DP*, 1946, 4.

⁶⁹ "Demokrat Partinin büyük kongresi", *Milliyet* 16/10/1951, 1.

⁷⁰ Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası, *Resmî Gazete* 20/07/1961, 4653. Translation in: Constitution of the Turkish Republic. Translated by Sadik Balkan, Ahmet E. Uysal and Kemal H. Karpat. Ankara 1961, 43. <http://www.anayasa.gen.tr/1961constitution-text.pdf> (19.02.16).

Instead of the older *muasır medeniyet* the framers of the constitution chose the neologism *çağdaş uygarlık* for ‘contemporary civilization’, both words being products of the Kemalist language reform of the 1930s.

The ensuing pluralization of the political landscape saw the emergence of many new parties which differed on ideological issues but all adhered to the concept of civilization. The mainstream parties, the centre-left Republican People’s Party CHP and the centre-right Justice Party AP, both pledged to bring Turkey on the level of ‘contemporary civilization’.⁷¹ Linguistically the party programmes of the era varied only in one aspect: In general the parties on the left – which in those years strongly identified with high Kemalism – showed a tendency to use *uygarlık* for ‘civilization’, while those of the political right preferred *medeniyet*.

Accordingly, the Workers Party of Turkey TİP – the first socialist party elected to the Turkish parliament – emphasized *çağdaş uygarlık* in its programme. The party claimed that the achievement of the level of contemporary civilization depended on economic growth and social participation of the working classes: “The economic basis which the ruling classes want to preserve and to sustain [...] definitely prevents Turkey from achieving progress and reaching rapidly the level of contemporary civilization”.⁷²

For the emerging parties on the far-right, *medeniyet* served equally as an important reference point. The Republican Peasants’ Nation Party CKMP, a predecessor of the Nationalist Movement Party MHP and the extreme nationalist *Ülkücü* (‘Idealist’) movement, stated in its 1965 programme: “Our aim is to participate constructively in the common civilization of modern humankind”.⁷³ CKMP- and later MHP-leader Alparslan Türkeş advocated that Turkey should become “the most civilized nation”, as in the following quote of 1967: “Idealism [means] the ideal of transforming Turkey into the most advanced, most civilized and most powerful entity”.⁷⁴

A peculiar understanding of civilization was displayed by the National Order Party MNP. The first in the long chain of Islamist parties founded by the *Millî Görüş* (‘National View’) movement of Necmettin Erbakan did not content itself with a civilization on equal terms: “Our Party acknowledges that our Nation will

71 Election manifesto of the *Adalet Parti* AP, 1961; programme of the AP, 1964; election manifesto of the *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* CHP, 1965; programme of the CHP, 1969.

72 Programme of the *Türkiye İşçi Partisi* TİP, Istanbul 1964, 59.

73 Programme of the *Cumhuriyetçi Köylü Millet Partisi* CKMP, Ankara 1965, 5.

74 Alparslan Türkeş in a speech before the 1967 congress of the CKMP about the principles of the ‘9 Lights’ (9 Işık), cited on *hurriyet.com.tr*, <http://dosyalar.hurriyet.com.tr/hur/mhp/mhp5.htm> (accessed 15/05/2014).

[...] establish a superior civilization as an example to the world [...].⁷⁵ A remarkable aspect of the National Order Party's notion of civilization is the strong emphasis on knowledge and technology:

It is our aim to educate the new generations in a way making them believing, diligent, patriotic, tied to national morality, family order and family discipline, endowed with our national ideal, our culture and our historical consciousness, righteous, selfless, devoted, with the determination to reach in the competition for knowledge, technology and civilization a level that may light the world the way.⁷⁶

In the late 1960s and in the 1970s growing political polarization and civil war-like conflicts shook Turkey. In addition, the Turkish army staged coups against the elected governments in 1971 and in 1980. The military junta that choked any remaining forms of pluralism after the 1980 coup also operated with the civilization ideal, yet mostly a very traditional one. In 1981, General Kenan Evren justified the coup that was organized under his leadership in referring to the role of the Turkish youth:

Once you had your doubts about the Turkish youth, but after cleaning some microbes that infiltrated these young people now you stand in front of an unblemished Turkish youth. ... In your hands this Turkey, this fatherland will rise even more and reach the level of contemporary civilization.⁷⁷

Evren even went beyond this classic Kemalist approach to civilization when he praised the role of Islam on another occasion: "The source of Islam, the world's most perfect religion of reason and science, is human kindness and civilization."⁷⁸ There he followed the doctrine of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis by which the military regime tried to marginalize the once powerful political left.

The constitution of 1982, which bore the authoritarian mark of the military, reiterated in Article 174 the provisions of the 1961 document safeguarding the essential Kemalist reform laws.⁷⁹ In its preamble, it stated:

Determining to attain the everlasting existence, prosperity, material and spiritual well-being of the Republic of Turkey, and the standards of contemporary civilization as an honourable member with equal rights of the family of world nations [...]⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Programme of the *Milli Nizam Partisi* MNP, Istanbul 1970, 5.

⁷⁶ Programme of the *Milli Nizam Partisi* MNP, Istanbul 1970, 12–13.

⁷⁷ "Evren: 'Tek Yol Atatürk Yoludur'", *Milliyet* 20/05/1981, 14.

⁷⁸ "Evren: 'Milletçe Bir Ve Beraber Oldukça Aşamayacağımız Engel Yoktur'", *Milliyet* 01/08/1981, 14.

⁷⁹ Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası, *Resmi Gazete* 09/11/1982, 51.

⁸⁰ Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası, *Resmi Gazete* 09/11/1982, 1. Translation in: Constitution of the Republic of Turkey 1982, 1. https://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf (19.02.16).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, the promise to reach ‘the level of contemporary civilization’ had mostly become a rhetorical formula through which politicians or political parties expressed their adherence to Kemalism or their commitment to modernization. The civilization ideal played a certain role in the conflict between the Kemalist bureaucratic-military establishment and the ascending Islamist Welfare Party RP, which was branded as *irticacı* (reactionary) in the establishment’s parlance.⁸¹ Nevertheless the ‘contemporary civilization’ formula had lost much of the visionary and mobilizing force it had in the earlier decades of the Republic. As discussed at the beginning of this article, the debate about who was civilized and who was not shifted increasingly to the social sphere – disguised in the ascriptions ‘white Turks’ and ‘black Turks’. The exclusionary character of this distinction reflected a significant erosion of the missionary character of the Kemalist project. Instead, some of the self-declared ‘white Turks’ advocated forms of class-based segregation of the urban bourgeoisie and the ‘black Turk’ masses from the countryside, who ‘invaded’ the social space of the city’s upper and middle classes.⁸²

Meanwhile the idea of civilization received some attention in its plural. References to ‘civilizations’ had always occurred from time to time, in particular to emphasize the uniqueness of the nation’s history. In this sense, the far-right Nationalist Working Party MÇP, a placeholder for the temporarily banned MHP, referred in its 1988 programme to “the Great Turkish nation which had established high civilizations”.⁸³

In the 1990s, however, non-establishment actors like the Kurdish and the Islamist movement used references to the heritage of ‘civilizations’ in order to challenge the ethnic-religious uniformity of the Kemalist civilization ideal and to justify their claim to social diversity and political pluralism. Accordingly the People’s Democracy Party HADEP, the political representative of the Kurdish movement, stated in its 1994 programme: “We are the heirs of great civilizations like Mesopotamia, the Hittites and Western Anatolia. Our historical heritage shall be preserved and its pluralist structure shall be protected and developed.”⁸⁴

The Islamist Virtue Party FP, established after the Welfare Party was banned in the course of the 1997 military intervention, couched its claim to political participation in the following words:

⁸¹ See Öktem 2011: 106.

⁸² Demiralp 2012: 516.

⁸³ Programme of the *Milliyetçi Çalışma Partisi* MÇP 1988, 4.

⁸⁴ Programme of the *Halkın Demokrasi Partisi* HADEP 1994, 10–11.

We believe that our country, which was the cradle of diverse civilizations and is situated in a very important strategic landscape, can only live in peace together with people of all opinions in reciprocal understanding and tolerance within a democratic regime.⁸⁵

To some extent the Virtue Party thereby set the tone for the Justice and Development Party AKP that would succeed it in 2001.

The civilizing mission of the AKP

When in 2002 the Justice and Development Party came to power, the concept of civilization experienced an astonishing revitalization. Often associated with the 'black Turk' milieu,⁸⁶ the AKP began to make extensive use of the idea of civilization in its older version *medeniyet*. In particular Turkish President and informal AKP-leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, known for emphasizing his 'black Turk' origin, operates frequently with the concept of civilization.

The AKP's approach to civilization includes two strands. As the first strand, the party adopted the Kemalist idea of a singular and universalistic civilization epitomized in the slogan 'to raise Turkey above the level of contemporary civilization'. This was part of what I would call 'Islamic Kemalism': The AKP abandoned the Islamist project of its *Millî Görüş* predecessors which had tried to challenge the hegemony of Kemalist secularism without success. Instead, the party continued the secular institutions and sought to control them through its pious supporters. In addition, it took over the Kemalist ideology and filled it partly with new meanings, toned down secularism and added Islamic connotations as well as references to the Ottoman past.

The appropriation of the Kemalist civilization ideal could be seen in the last paragraph of the party's 2002 programme, followed by the phrase "May God help our nation":

This programme is a project to allocate to our great nation the place it deserves in the community of humankind and to make our country 'rise above the level of contemporary civilization', a project of 'democratization and advancement' prepared by a staff that is honest, principled and sensitive to local values, that is aware of global dynamics and understands very well the present geography and age.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Programme of the *Fazilet Partisi* FP 1998, 4.

⁸⁶ See White 2013: 46–47.

⁸⁷ Programme of the *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* AKP 2002, 64.

Accordingly, the AKP legitimized its reform programme and its ambition to make Turkey a full member of the European Union with Atatürk's imperative to achieve 'the level of contemporary civilization'. During the power struggle with the old Kemalist elite in the 2000s the Justice and Development Party presented itself as the true champion of civilization.

In this sense then-Prime Minister Erdoğan used the expression *muasır medeniyet* to brand the Kemalist opposition as 'backward', for instance in the following statement of 2008 where he demanded the lift of the ban on headscarves in Turkish universities:

Before 2002 we experienced where Turkey got with artificial scaremongering, superficial interpretations and prophecies. ... With the same artificial fears, prophecies and backward views Turkey will never reach the level of contemporary civilization.⁸⁸

When the AKP government was increasingly criticized by both the domestic opposition and the international public for monopolizing power, it justified its policy in referring to a greater mission to 'civilize' Turkey. Together with the government's growing intolerance towards oppositional activities the missionary character became more and more pronounced.

This is exemplified in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's statements during the Gezi Park protests of June 2013 denouncing the participants as 'looters' and 'bandits'. In October 2013, Erdoğan censured students who protested against a road construction project on the campus of the Middle East Technical University in Ankara:

Roads are civilization. But those who are not civilized do not understand a road's value. Even if there is a mosque ahead and the road will pass through it, we will demolish and remove the mosque and rebuild it elsewhere.⁸⁹

Not always as outspoken as Erdoğan, other AKP politicians also applied the rhetoric of civilization. In June 2013 Hüseyin Çelik, AKP vice-president at that time, replied to criticism of restrictions on the sale of alcohol as follows: "Corresponding regulations exist in all civilized countries of the world."⁹⁰

⁸⁸ "Başbakan Erdoğan'dan türban mesajı", *Radikal* 23/10/2008. <http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/basbakan-erdogandan-turban-mesaji-904816> (09/12/2008).

⁸⁹ "Başbakan Recep Tayyip Erdoğan AK Parti grup toplantısında konuştu", *Hürriyet* 22/10/2013. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/24958036.asp> (05/05/2014).

⁹⁰ "Hüseyin Çelik: Gezi Parkı olayı vandalizme dönüştürüldü", *Zaman* 05/06/2013. http://www.zaman.com.tr/gundem_huseyin-celik-gezi-parki-olayi-vandalizme-donusturuldu_2097455.html (15/05/2014).

The above-mentioned statements about 'backward' Kemalists or 'uncivilized' protesters thereby follow the pattern of previous Ottoman and Turkish elites seeking to civilize 'backward' elements within.

There is, though, an important aspect where the civilization concept of the AKP government differs from its predecessors. At least in the heyday of its 'new' foreign policy, when the Justice and Development Party promised to reshape the relations with Turkey's neighbours according to the 'zero problems' doctrine, the party seemed eager to extend the Turkish civilizing mission to the outside world.

Already in 2001, former Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu had addressed this claim quite frankly in his programmatic book *Strategic Depth*:

Concerning the formation of foreign policy this psychological modernization [of Turkey] means the definition of its own hinterland (sphere of influence or backyard). With a mentality accustomed to see oneself as the sphere of influence of others it is impossible to build up an independent sphere of influence of one's own.⁹¹

Later Davutoğlu specified this vision. Declaring that "Turkey's most important soft power is its Democracy",⁹² he saw Turkey on a mission to spread democratic values in Europe, the region and the world: "Turkey now enjoys an image as a responsible state which provides order and security to the region, one that prioritizes democracy and liberties, while dealing competently with security problems at home."⁹³

Over the last years, this extrovert civilizing vision foundered on numerous regional conflicts, some of which – like the Syrian civil war – were aggravated by ideologically driven Turkish intervention. While the AKP's foreign policy mission in Turkey's neighbourhood has failed, its ideological foundations can still be felt in the second strand of the party's understanding of *medeniyet* – the reference to civilizations in the plural.

Davutoğlu's foreign policy theory conceptualized the Turkish sphere of influence as geographically and culturally defined 'basins'.⁹⁴ Mentioning the great Islamic civilizations of the past (Arab Andalusia, Mughal India, and the

⁹¹ Davutoğlu 2001: 92–93.

⁹² Davutoğlu 2008: 80.

⁹³ Davutoğlu 2008: 83.

⁹⁴ Davutoğlu (2001: 119, 151 and 183) locates Turkey's sphere of influence in a 'Near Territorial Basin' (Balkans, Caucasus, Middle East), a 'Near Maritime Basin' (Black Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea), and 'Near Continental Basin' (Europe, North Africa, South Asia, Central and East Asia).

Ottoman Empire), the former foreign minister emphasized the position of these civilizations as bridges between different cultures.⁹⁵

Davutoğlu's definition of Turkey's sphere of influence has led to characterizations of the AKP's foreign policy as 'Neo-Ottomanist'. In fact the party's approach draws on a deep-rooted popular nationalism that has always existed beyond the Kemalist nationalist doctrine and combines references to Turkishness, Sunni Islam and Ottoman civilization.⁹⁶ Jenny White calls the nationalist vision of the AKP "Muslim nationalism" and points to similarities with Ziya Gökalp's concept of civilization.⁹⁷

The construction of this indigenous idea of civilization can be seen in one of Erdoğan's speeches in which he praised in 2016 the work of pious foundations (*vakıf*):

Our foundations have an important duty in raising our students as individuals with a moral sense, bound to our fatherland and our nation, and useful for humanity. [...] Our civilization is a civilization of religious foundations which we can describe in a way as the institutionalization of goodness. [...]

While everyone else came to the Middle East to exploit and to loot petrol, we came with our railways, our water pipelines, our caravanserais, our bazaars, and, most importantly, with our culture of coexistence. [...]

For their own interests they might take the risk to set the whole world on fire. Yet we will take the side of justice, mercy, kindness and goodness because our faith, our civilization, our history and our culture tell us to do so. [...]

Wherever our civilization is there can be no Daesh [the Arabic acronym of the 'Islamic State'] or Boko Haram. Wherever our civilization is there can be no PKK, PYD or YPG [Kurdish militias in Syria]. In the same manner, wherever our civilization is there can be no Ku Klux Klan or Holocaust.⁹⁸

This understanding of civilization also allowed certain adjustments of the policy towards ethnic and religious minorities. The Kemalists' blunt denial of minority identities was thus partly replaced with an Ottoman-nostalgic idea of paternalistic 'tolerance' towards Kurdish, Arab, Alevi, Christian, Jewish and other identities under the hegemony of a Sunni-Turkish majority.

In practise, however, the popular rhetoric of AKP politicians often mixes the idea of a singular, universal civilization with those of a distinct Turkish-Islamic-

⁹⁵ Davutoğlu 2001: 560–561. The author developed his approach in opposition to Samuel P. Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis (Davutoğlu 2001: 3).

⁹⁶ Ramm 2011: 60–61.

⁹⁷ White 2013: 48.

⁹⁸ "Erdoğan: Bizim medeniyetimizin olduğu yerde DAİŞ, PKK, PYD, YPG olamaz", *Radikal* 13/03/2016. <http://www.radikal.com.tr/politika/erdogan-bizim-medeniyetimizin-oldugu-yerde-dais-pkk-pyd-ypg-olamaz-1528584/> (13/03/2016).

Ottoman civilization as one of multiple civilizations. In a speech delivered in 2014 Erdoğan said, on the one hand, that during the Turkish War of Independence “the Grand National Assembly of Turkey became a light of hope for all the oppressed in our wider civilization basin”. Erdoğan praised, on the other hand, Turkey’s progress in furthering democratization and strengthening the rule of law, slamming his opponents within and beyond the Turkish border: “The enemies of Turkey could not stop Turkey’s march towards civilization, and they will not be able to stop it in the future.”⁹⁹

Conclusion

The concept of civilization rivals the concept of the nation as the most influential ideological concept of late Ottoman, early republican, and contemporary Turkish history. Since the mid-nineteenth century the succeeding, at times rivalling elites of the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic have adopted these two inextricably linked concepts in the course of their modernization efforts, and they have operated with them as discursive weapons against foreign powers, political adversaries and deviant parts of the population.

Today ‘nation’ (*millet/ulus*) and ‘civilization’ (*medeniyet/uygarlık*) are constituent terms of Turkey’s political language. Over the past two decades the Turkish concept of the nation has been increasingly scrutinized and criticized for its exclusionary, assimilatory and even genocidal potential. The concept of civilization, however, has drawn far less attention, though it has been until today equally powerful in shaping the world view of the elites and their approach towards Turkish society.

The amplitude of the Ottoman/Turkish concept of civilization, to whose variations radical reformers and religious conservatives adhered likewise, and its historical persistence is not only the result of a process during which the term *medeniyet* emerged as a potent synonym for modernity. From the early Ottoman reformers to the present AKP leaders, *medeniyet* has conveyed the deep-rooted desire to be recognized as equal by an overtly or covertly admired ‘West’.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk moulded this desire in the formula “We shall raise our national culture above the level of contemporary civilization”. Yet Atatürk was one of very few Ottoman and Turkish leaders earning from his Western contemporaries the desired admiration for his ambitious modernization project.

⁹⁹ “Başbakan Erdoğan: 1 Mayıs’ın şiddetten uzak kutlanması en büyük arzumuz”, *Hürriyet* 30/04/2014 <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/gundem/26328443.asp> (15/05/2014).

More often than not the Ottoman and Turkish elites failed in allocating “to our great nation the place it deserves in the community of humankind”, as the programme of the Justice and Development Party put it.

This failure could not only be attributed to Western anti-Turkish or anti-Muslim sentiment based on either supremacist civilizationism or exclusionary racism. It is inherent in the missionary character of the Ottoman and Turkish ‘self-civilizing’ project. The sense of inferiority profoundly entrenched in the concept of *medeniyet* generated a perpetual civilizing mission that saw a colourful society only in black and white – perfectly illustrated by the terms ‘black Turks’ and ‘white Turks’. The imperial and later republican leaderships thus assured themselves of their fragile elite status by marking out their ideal of *medeniyet* against various ‘backward’ elements within, with a changing focus on ‘ignorant’ masses, ‘uncultivated’ peasants, ‘uncivilized’ tribes, ‘savage’ nomads, ‘reactionary’ traditionalists or ‘fanatic’ believers.

Thereby their civilizing mission not only reproduced the hierarchy of civilization the Ottoman and Turkish elites so deeply resented as the embodiment of Western supremacy. Instead of creating the necessary social cohesion for a participatory modernization project this mission tended to cause frictions, resentment and resistance, which then again served as justification for an ever more determined civilizing fury. The uncompromising effort to achieve *medeniyet* at any cost was in many cases accompanied by oppression and violence that eventually damaged the elites’ civilized façade.

The civilization concept of the Justice and Development Party shows this dynamic in an exemplary way. Once themselves being excluded as ‘black Turks’ from social participation, the party leaders legitimized their claim on the state resources (and on Turkey’s regional sphere of influence) with a rhetoric of modernization and democratization that was couched in the Kemalist civilization ideal. When the aspiration for EU membership began to flag and the ‘Islamic Kemalism’ of the AKP government met with growing criticism and resistance, its civilizing mission started to show the same aggressive features as the mission of its predecessors, targeting the ‘looters’ and ‘bandits’ who dared to protest against the party’s vision of a modern, civilized Turkey.

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