Abstract: The history of liberalism in Turkey has had significant implications concerning particularly whether liberalisation depends upon the reform of the self. This essay aims to accentuate the moral aspects of liberal thought in the Turkish context, because first, it is hard not to detect a tone of obstinate moralism in the writings of a large number of Turkish liberals, and second, little attention has been paid to this aspect of liberal thought. The objective is to draw attention to the views of Mehmed Sabahaddin (1878 – 1948) and Ahmet Ağaoğlu (1869 – 1939) regarding moralism, arguing that a repetitive language of character undergirded their liberalism.

With the liberalisation of the economy and, if still troubled, the ongoing democratisation process in Turkey in the past three decades, a large, and increasing, number of scholarly work has been produced about liberalism in the Turkish context. Alongside the studies about contemporary political and economic transformation,¹ the works of those long-forgotten writers whose ideas have been included in the history of liberal thought in Turkey have begun to receive attention once again, after decades of negligence and disinterestedness.² This increasing interest has stemmed mainly from the desire to establish

* I would like to thank the British Institute at Ankara for their financial support which made this article possible. I dedicate this work to the late Mr. Necdet Doganata, the founder of Izmir University.


the relationship of contemporary liberal inclinations with the neglected tradition of liberal thought in Turkey, which can be traced as far back as to the works of the liberal men of the 1860s.\(^3\)

Yet there is still much to be explored, as the history of liberalism in Turkey has had implications concerning, amongst others, the liberal conception of freedom in the Turkish context, whether the transmission of liberal ideas from one context to another has been intellectually and politically capable of generating an ideology of democratic political and social reform, and whether liberalisation depends upon the reform of the self. While each of these concerns needs to be discussed in great detail, I would like to emphasise here particularly the last point, because firstly, it is hard not to detect a tone of obstinate moralism in the writings of a large number of Turkish liberals, and secondly, to date, little attention has been paid to this aspect of liberal thought.

Liberalism in Turkey has instead often been analysed within the framework of its economic and political aspects.\(^4\) This is largely due to the belief that meeting the institutional requirements of the establishment and the development of the capitalist economic system has tended to be a fundamental concern in the liberal tradition.\(^5\) From the time of the Young Ottomans to the present day, one of the most vital differences of opinion among Turkish liberals has been as to how the Turkish economy could be integrated with the capitalist economic system, triggering schisms between protectionist and anti-protectionist camps in both late Ottoman and Republican contexts. The limits of state interference, or in a Foucauldian term, the pragmatism in the intervention of governmentality in economic activity have also long been discussed and made subject to analysis.\(^6\) Moreover, the histories of, and the dynamics between, different interpretations of political liberalisms, namely the constitutionalist movements since the mid-nineteenth century and the line of political groupings and thinking that has habitually been positioned in opposition to the authoritarian Young Turk regimes and ideologies since the 1910s, have already been the focus of discussions.


Equally striking, but long neglected, is the liberal battle for the elevation of the faculties of the individuals besides its assault on despotism and authoritarianism. In fact, this was not unique to liberal movements in Turkish history. There was indeed a supra-ideological intellectual attempt to introduce a new moral system with the seeming decline of the Ottoman Empire and growing interest in the science of society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The legitimacy of the officials and the policies of the late Ottoman state were doubted by the people in the run – up to the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the Kemalist Revolution. The fear of decadence, the economic suffering against the rapid socio-economic transformation at both domestic and international levels, and the mounting anxieties following the traumatic defeats during the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877/78 and the Balkan Wars in 1912/13 not only opened deep wounds in the psyches of the many, but also gave rise to a moralist line of thinking. From the writings of the conservative novelist Ahmet Midhat (1844 – 1912) in the late nineteenth century to those of the leading nationalists of the 1910s and the preachings of the young humanists grouped around the journal İnsan in the late 1930s, we encounter the repetitive language of character and the recurrent theme of society’s moral emancipation in a period of transformation. Late Ottoman and Republican period intellectuals sought for a “social revolution”7 as the nationalist writers put it or a moral regeneration through which the traditional sources of identity, authority, knowledge and, perhaps most importantly, the self would be transformed.8 It was in this context that the liberal thought propagators propounded the very idea of the emergence of the man, or woman, of competition and the man of enterprise and production possessing necessary skills and moral values that would facilitate integration into the capitalist system and the establishment of a democratic rule.

I intend to draw attention to particularly two “liberal” Turkish thinkers and their preoccupations with moralism and the idea of character as integral parts of their political and social thoughts: Mehmed Sabahaddin (1878 – 1948) and Ahmet Ağaoğlu (1869 – 1939). Both Sabahaddin and Ağaoğlu wrote prolifically to discuss the means for the moral regeneration of society with the aim to underscore how individuals with entrepreneurial skills and altruistic values could be brought up. As noted above, although there were many other Turkish writers, liberal or not, who were preoccupied with similar questions before or during the time of the two in concern, I chose Sabahaddin and Ağaoğlu as the central focus of this essay firstly because they were arguably the most prominent representatives of liberal thought of their era. The Victorian

concept of “character” and the enlightenment idea that “a stable political order is built not simply on laws and institutions but on the character and mores of its citizens”9 undergirded their political and social thoughts at differing levels.10 They wanted not only reform in the government of the state and in the administrative structure, but also in family structures, and the reform of the self. Within the peculiar political and economic conditions of the Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey, whilst sharing the belief that the capital problem of Turkish society was developing the faculties of the individual, their opinions differed on whether or not the agency of the state was necessary for this. Since they tended to impute particular importance to the role of public moralists, they often needed to explain how such a class could emerge, or at times, they appeared to regard it as a social responsibility to play the part of public moralists themselves, seeking the foundations of morality often in secular sources, and pragmatically using religious teachings for justification. As a result, they have often been placed not so far apart from the conservatives in the ideological spectrum of Turkish political thought.11

Sabahaddin was an Anglophile leader of one of the Young Turk movement wings in the 1900s. His close affinity to the Liberal Party in the 1910s and his constant emphasis in his writings, in reference to the teachings of the School of Le Play, on private initiative and decentralisation from 1900 through to his deportation in 1924 have led later commentators to identify him as a liberal, even though nowhere in his writings did he identify himself as one. In contrast to Sabahaddin, Ağaoğlu was a self-acclaimed representative of liberal thought. Having immigrated to Istanbul from his homeland Azerbaijan in 1909, he earned fame as a prominent liberal particularly in the 1920s and 1930s when he sought to outline the moral foundations of republican thought, advocating a Durkheimian version of social liberalism. As a matter of fact, he was once introduced by Recep Peker, a Secretary-General of the vanguard Republican People’s Party, as the most renowned Turkish liberal of his time.12

One of the main arguments of the essay is that neither Sabahaddin nor Ağaoğlu embraced any sort of hedonistic doctrine that took “the satisfaction of actual wants as the criterion of moral conduct and public policy.”13 Their liberalisms

11 In so arguing, I will also add that both Sabahaddin and Ağaoğlu have been labelled by later commentators as intellectual and political opponents of the positivist, statist, nationalist and illiberal mentality that later formed the backbone of the official Kemalist ideology. Liberals and conservatives are therefore believed to have formed an intellectual and political alliance to balance the power of the Kemalists that took control of the state in the early 1920s.
were moralistic rather than utilitarian. Unlike the nineteenth century French and British liberals, they were not indecisive about what to introduce first, rights or values, among what they believed to be the less capable masses.\(^{14}\) They regarded “communitarian” and “Eastern” societies as composed of individuals lacking the skills to compete with Western superiority. The political ascendancy of the masses therefore had to be linked to their moral enhancement. How could this be achieved? Which were the specific values that the two thinkers were most eager to bring to attention? In this essay, my primary aim is to reproduce in systematic form the programs of Sabahaddin and Ağaoğlu on the moral empowerment of the individual. I use the term moral in the more inclusive and neutral sense here, referring to vices and values. I believe that a discussion over the features and limits of liberal conception of morality in Turkey has salient features throwing much light on the reasons for the absence of a deep-seated liberal democratic culture permeating everyday life.

One question that perhaps needs to be raised at the outset is whether one can test if the arguments of the two, or any other contemporary Turkish intellectuals, provide historical alternatives to contemporary, mostly Western conceptions of the self. The answer I would like to provide here is quite modest: conceptions of the self in contemporary political theory, relying on a distinction between the self and society, revolve around the question of whether the “self chooses freely and is therefore independent from collectivities or society exists prior to individual beings”.\(^{15}\) As I will demonstrate, neither Sabahaddin nor Ağaoğlu endeavoured to free the self from the collective. Unlike the propositions of such prominent political theorists as Michael Sandel and Michel Foucault, none actually found it necessary to examine personal relationships that bind one person to another or “doer to deed”. They made no attempt to look for a “different way” in developing moral programs for achieving architectonic values that would enable the moral empowerment of society. Instead they turned to pre-defined modes of morality utilising different moral sources as ideals to which individuals had to attain. In other words, they did believe that there was a body of principles that guided society to progress. In Sabahaddin’s case, these authoritative sources consisted of the teachings of La Science Sociale and the values of what they called the particularistic type of society and to a much smaller extent the doctrines of Islam. Ağaoğlu’s case, on the other hand, saw a change of moral sources from the teachings of Islam to the sociological teachings of Durkheim, the Darwinist teachings of Kropotkin and the universal ethics of humanism. Particularly the


latter drew bold moral boundaries without allowing space for expressive subjectivity, urging the individuals to know how to act as knowing subjects, rather than urging them to dare to act. As I will demonstrate, their conception of the self was socially constructed and no trace of appraisal of subjective rights or the practices of what Foucault calls parrhesia that offer “an alternative manner of subject-formation and mode of truth-telling”\textsuperscript{16} can be found in their rather pragmatic intellectual works.

I. La Science Sociale, the Idea of Character and the Individual: Which Individual?

In the winter of 1946, Sabahaddin sent a letter to Nezahat N. Ege, then owner of a college in Istanbul and his loyal disciple, observing that “the biggest and most vital need of our time is to save politics from the slavery of opportunism and moralise it through social and spiritual sciences.”\textsuperscript{17} Written in Switzerland in conditions of hardship while Sabahaddin was suffering from the devastating influences of the war, the above quoted sentence signifies that the French school of sociology known as La Science Sociale was always a major source of influence on his social thought. It also indicates that he always persisted in his emphasis on the moralisation of politics.

A nephew of Sultan Abdulhamid II from his mother’s side, Sabahaddin was a well-educated man with very good knowledge of French, Arabic and Persian, and a keen interest in natural sciences. When he encountered the teachings of La Science Sociale for the first time in 1900,\textsuperscript{18} one year after he fled to Paris with his father and brother to fight against the despotic rule of his uncle along with the revolutionary Young Turk movement, these personal interests and linguistic skills perhaps drew him closer to the teachings of this school:

One day I was strolling along one of the renowned streets of Paris extremely tired and very upset, when Edmond Demolins’s book entitled ‘A quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons’ caught my eye in the window of a book shop. I immediately entered the book shop and purchased the book […]. In the response given by the author to the question ‘What is the reason for the Anglo-Saxons’ superiority?’ I noted the existence of a scientific method similar to the methods of the natural sciences that I had never come across in the sociological literature. The next day I went to the same book shop and bought all the works of Edmond Demolins. Upon reading these with great attention and interest, my conviction gained strength and I became certain that these studies follow a scientific train of ideas and possess a method of observation like that of the natural sciences. In the meantime, I was honoured with


\textsuperscript{18} Cavit O. Tütengil, Prens Lütfullah Dosyası, Istanbul 1977, p. 43.
the friendship of the great thinker Edmond Demolins. So that by participating to the Science Sociale Society myself, I was able to meet all the members of the society and to work with them. I read with great astonishment the works of the founder […] Le Play, of Henri de Tourville, and all the members of the society […] and I was convinced that it was feasible to make a sociological analysis of Ottoman society and to prepare the necessary reform program.19

Rather than studying and embracing liberal theories of a certain kind, Sabahaddin devotedly followed the teachings of this school. His entire intellectual endeavour consisted mainly of studying these, translating some of them into Turkish, and seeking to solve the problems of Ottoman/Turkish society under their light. For this reason, capturing the real meaning in his texts entails an intellectual excavation, tracing the origins of his thought.20 Such an endeavour also helps us to uncover the sociological and pedagogical train of influences among Britain, France and Turkey.

This train of influences, which I shall discuss in detail below, reveals that the concern for “character” in Britain and France stemming from the fear of revolutions like the ones Frenchmen had suffered in the nineteenth century found echoes in Turkish political and social thought following Sabahaddin’s encounter with the teachings of La Science Sociale.21 The main discovery of the School was in short the idea that the characteristics of a society can best be explained by examining the characteristics of the families that form that society. Frédérick Le Play (1806 – 1882), the founder of the school, sought the means to give an end to the cycle of revolutions that broke out in France by understanding how a politically stable order could be established. He therefore studied approximately three hundred worker families during his visits to several European countries between 1829 and the early 1850s, particularly focusing on how they ran their budgets. In 1855 he published his results in the first field research monograph in the world, “Les Ouvriers Européens”.22 The subsequent fieldwork and monographs allowed Le Play’s sociology to become one of the major lines of social thought in nineteenth century France.23

22 Le Play later provided a more detailed study in which he examined nearly two hundred families across the world; Frédérick Le Play, Les ouvriers européens, Tours 18792.
Sabahaddin was fascinated by the teachings of a particular wing of the School’s second generation led by Henri de Tourville (1843 – 1903) and Edmond Demolins (1852 – 1907), who sought to improve Le Play’s research methods and devise new tools for field research.24 Exploiting what social scientists would see today as epistemologically presumptuous methods,25 they believed that Le Play overemphasised economic relationships to understand the characteristics of families and underscored the need to stress in their research the socialisation of individuals into distinctive value patterns. This showed them that there were three types of families according to the kind of education which a family gave to the young generation: patriarchal, unstable and particularistic.

A patriarchal family was the type in which social ties were very strong, that it moulded the young generation so that children remained together in peace respecting the authority of the head of the family. It caused them to sacrifice all their individual efforts for the family community. “Within this type of family the character is annihilated and completely absorbed by the community.”26 The unstable family was supposed to be insufficient in imparting respect for authority and traditions, at the same time failing to promote individual originality. Such families lacked discipline as well as initiative. Particularistic families, on the other hand, emerging from the collapse of patriarchal families, marked the appearance of a new mode of private life, which was all-sufficient to itself. The characteristics of the particularistic type of men were self-reliance, energy, independence, and being “accustomed to material facts and to look upon life as a battle, a superabundance of youthful strength to cope with the difficulties of existence.”27 This mode of life led to the system of patriarchal community being succeeded by direct land ownership (small estates).28 Their associations became voluntary, based entirely on covenant and agreement, and they were created only when and where they were necessary and desirable. Self-governing social and political bodies with elected authorities checked the
power of the monarch and replaced the forced, autocratic and traditionalist authorities of a patriarchal society. In short, “the particularistic type of family led to what is now styled the real democratic and free society.”

The leading members of the School observed that particularistic families were seen predominantly in Scandinavia and the English-speaking countries, which was why these places became the primary targets of their field researches. Rousiers tackled the question of workers as a central problem of the time and analysed how the problem of the elevation of the working men vis-à-vis the rapidly changing circumstances through industrialisation was addressed in America and Britain. His arguments appeared to show striking similarities to what Collini introduced as “the idea of character” in Victorian political thought, “an expression of a very deeply ingrained perception of the qualities needed to cope with life, an ethic with strong roots in areas of experience ostensibly remote from politics.” Rousiers shared Victorian concerns when he wrote that the object was not “to make good workmen who would remain workmen,” but to educate them into capable and independent men adopting “middle-class” values. Therefore, he appeared to assign the role of “educator” to the entrepreneurs who would provide workers with better wages and working conditions and would be responsible for the wealth and comfort of their workers as well as their morality through their active good-will. However, where the forms of moral values were concerned, he was not as clear as Victorian writers such as George Craik and Samuel Smiles who published self-help books over the nineteenth century.

In “A quoi tient la supériorité des Anglo-Saxons,” Demolins showed comparable concerns for social mobility, devoting in a Smilesian manner much space to the success stories of self-made men such as Benjamin Franklin, who rose from humble roots with the help of such faculties as industriousness, energy and perseverance. He pointed out that particularistic societies formed by particularistic families as seen among the Anglo-Saxons were preparing their children for the struggle for life with an education and social system which enabled them to develop not only their mental skills, but also their physical and moral faculties. The social system in question allowed social mobility, encouraged working men to dare to act, practice and develop their skills “to reach the highest positions without appearing out of place, and figure quiet decently in the characters of gentlemen.”

29 Ibid., p. 74.
30 Paul de Rousiers, La vie Américaine. L’éducation et la société, Paris 1892; id., The Labour Question in Britain, London 1896.
32 Rousiers, The Labour Question in Britain, p. 365.
33 Edmond Demolins, To What Do the Anglo-Saxons Owe their Superiority, London 1899, p. 191.
Demolins wrote that “comfort in the home does fit individuals of modest positions for higher situations, in which their bearing and manners shall not make them appear out of place.” The only solution for social elevation was enabling individuals to sustain themselves and to rise on their own instead of keeping them in a perpetual state of inferiority so as to be led more easily. The communitarian type (shaped through patriarchal families), in contrast, sought solution to social problems in “state intervention, in never ending regulations, and in making the means of production common property, interfering even the private space of the individuals, while particularistic type, i.e. the Anglo-Saxon world, was seeking a solution in private initiative.”

This emphasis of the School on character and the development of the individuals’ moral faculties appeared in Demolinsian terms in Sabahaddin’s work. Just as Demolins regarded French society as a communitarian society which had brought up mentally strong but morally weak individuals educated only as civil servants, Sabahaddin classified Ottoman society as a communitarian society, and devoted his intellectual career to propagating particularistic values within Ottoman society, even though he never conducted any field research to analyse its characteristics.

Until he was deported from Turkey in 1924 as a member of the Ottoman dynasty, Sabahaddin insistently argued that the biggest problem of his time was the problem of character which was most apparent when one recognized the absence of skillful and industrious individuals in Ottoman society. Without taking into consideration the growing nationalism in the 1910s and as opposed to the excessively centralised structure of the administrative system of the empire, he maintained that such individuals could be brought up through the promotion of scientific teachings of La Science Sociale, a new type of education, the promotion of private initiative and an administrative reform ensuring self-government. What he had in mind was a model derived from the teachings of the French School, and his intellectual activity was limited to the confines of this model.

As early as 1906, he wrote that private initiative referred to one’s self-reliance in his achievements instead of relying on his family, his relatives or his government.

Those men who have to struggle with difficulties and obstacles every day and all alone of course see that their social skills improve as the time passes […] Their individual interests are exceedingly for the interests of society! Because with their work they increase the wealth of their countries. In our country, individual interests are opposed to public interests! Because we seek individual interests in domination and becoming a tool of injustice, not in agriculture, industry and commerce, the three sources of wealth […] For becoming wealthy,
relying on such faculties as knowledge, experience, effort, perseverance and wariness is a must!36

In Ottoman society, Sabahaddin hastened to add, people were exceedingly deprived of these faculties. They were instead accustomed to living without earning, becoming wealthy without working, and keen to become civil servants. For this reason, in a country with a lot more civil servants than required, people sought the protection and support of those high in rank instead of relying on their own merit so as to be able to take up such positions.

According to Sabahaddin, this meant that once an Ottoman man (he would not think to add “woman” yet) entered life, he began to seek the support of others. He began to live with “arm sticks”, dispossessing his dignity gradually by shaping his skills not as he wanted, but as his masters willed. This was how Ottomans came to have weaker characters over time, and how their civil servants, too many of them, became morally degenerated. This giant consumer class under the protection of the state enormously hindered the development of entrepreneurial classes. “Those producers; the villagers, artisans and small tradesmen, who live and maintain the subsistence and existence of the country with their earnings could not improve their circumstances, but instead, they were deprived of what should be rightfully theirs.”37 In Sabahaddin’s view, the most crucial factor for the empire to prosper was to ensure the improvement of these classes, allowing them greater chances to have a say in government. As such, he embarked on defending the men of competition and production. This was where, in my view, he came closest to what Donzelot calls with a Foucauldian terminology the liberal intelligence of the governmental rationality.38 He was against the raison d’État the ultimate end of which was the state itself. Instead he placed greater importance on the government of the population formed by individuals as the architects of progress, thus introducing the concept of “the individual” in the Turkish political and social thought lexicon. Who then was this individual?

The inherent paradox in Sabahaddin’s thought was the fact that he never spoke of the emancipation of all individuals. What he had in mind was a class or a selected group of individuals who would be responsible for social progress in the political, economic and moral spheres. Even when he spoke of opening a space for individuals to work, live and act freely, he had in mind these altruistic individuals with superior skills that would serve as a medium

for a social transformation. Instead of suggesting these individuals’ participation in the state mechanism, he wanted a self-government system as encountered in Anglo-Saxon societies. They would take up roles as local leaders initially, solving problems at a local level. When necessary they would put pressure on the central government to receive public services in return for their taxes, rather than being positioned in a perpetual state of inferiority towards the state. 

Influenced by current economical conditions, global competition in business is rapidly increasing! We must leave behind our plain and stationary lives! Now we are encountering a totally new world with its new requirements and new men! We need men who will easily overcome its difficulties [...] without fear [...], who will make the world their industrial houses with their facilities all over the world! The struggle of these new owners of the globe is private initiative; and the two means to use it are ability and direction! 

In the Ottoman context, since there was no growing industry yet, a trained agriculturalist class had to be created first in order to take control of farms and to take care of the subsistence and the elevation of peasants. When they would be fit enough to participate in industrial activity, they would use the surplus obtained in agriculture. Meanwhile, they would supervise the elevation of the peasants who would work for them, admire them, and learn and develop the faculties they saw in them. In his account, these “elites” would thus be the driving force for the economic and moral revitalisation of the empire, acting not only as entrepreneurs but also as public moralists.

In 1913, Sabahaddin devised a two-fold program for the emergence of such a group: first of all, modern schools would be established to bring up individuals that would enable the transformation of society into a particularistic type. His model was Demolins’ École des Roches, which had been founded in 1899 following the examples of two British public schools: Bedales and Abbotsholme. Sabahaddin’s aim was to apply the education methods of the École des Roches in Ottoman schools to provide Ottoman students with more than just theoretical knowledge: These schools would educate responsible and moral human beings with strong and healthy bodies, and cultured and open minds, learning how to tame nature with their advanced farming know-how, engineering, livestock breeding and others. Initially teachers should be brought from Britain to demonstrate the methods of particularistic education. Just like the students of the École des Roches, Ottoman students would also be sent to Anglo-Saxon countries.

40 Ibid., p. 75.
where they would observe and familiarise themselves with the particularistic form of life. They would learn the English language, and before commencing to study at one of the farming schools there, they would live at an English mansion to be able to adjust to the lifestyle. Upon their return to Turkey, they would educate their students making use of their observations and the methods they had learned. These educated young people would settle down as farmers, they would succeed through their practical and theoretical knowledge, and, over time, they would also establish a strong Ottoman industry that would compete with the world industries. They would become role-models for peasants and workmen as morally strong, hardworking individuals, sharing their knowledge and individual faculties, both theoretical and moral, with them.

At this point I would like to highlight the over-emphasis that Sabahaddin’s program places on the relationship of men to nature and how Ottoman men could become more productive. This, I believe, limits his interest in the moral empowerment of the individual to promoting a work ethic. Not coincidentally, he consulted Islamic sources only when he wanted to support his preaching for hard work.

The one place where he engages himself with improving the dynamics of personal relationships is when he suggests that the new individuals (or elites) should also deal with the local social issues as educated elites with intimate knowledge of their regions and their particular problems. With the decentralisation of the Ottoman administrative system, in his opinion, the state would be more efficient in solving socio-economic problems in particular areas. These elites would subsequently be the morally strong, elected and natural representatives of their regions. For Sabahaddin, this was how a deep-seated democratic culture could be established in Turkey. I believe that this would provide society with at least a starting point in establishing a link between political governance and ethical self, introducing daily resources to educate individuals to the arts of governing and being governed.

Spending the last twenty-four years of his life abroad in financial hardship, his inner convictions always led Sabahaddin to argue that the moral weaknesses of the individuals in communist societies which had long deprived them of democratic governments were the main cause of the suffering and the deaths of thousands in the twentieth century. However, even when he wrote about the

43 Sabahaddin, Türkiye Nasıl Kurtarılabilir, pp. 56 – 57.
44 Id., İzahlar, p. 72.
moral faculties of the individual, it was the work of a certain group of individuals he was concerned with, rather than the liberties, subjective or not, and the happiness of the individual itself.

II. Moral Foundations of the Republic

Born in the Russian-controlled Azerbaijan to a rather religious Shi’ite family and following a conscience crisis in his early youth, Ahmet Ağaoğlu had a long intellectual career. Throughout his writing life, spanning almost fifty years, he embraced and propounded different, and at times contradicting, ideas with different intentions, objectives and even under different names in changing times, places and circumstances. An intellectual biographer of Ağaoğlu therefore finds her-/herself having to cope with a constant intellectual evolution, encountering more than one Ağaoğlus: between 1891 and 1894, he appears as a young Persian student of Oriental languages in Paris and embarks upon a writing career in French journals with the aim of introducing Muslim societies to Western audiences and condemning Western encroachments in the East; between 1894 and 1919, as an emerging Pan-Islamist and Turkish nationalist struggling for the rights of Muslims and Turks against what he regarded as the unjust practices of the rulers in the Russian and Ottoman empires; between 1919 and 1930, as a Kemalist revolutionary advocating the actions of the Kemalist rule which aimed to establish and control political power employing at times strictly authoritarian measures; and finally, as an independent writer and professor of law excluded from the inner circle of the revolutionary elites due to his increasingly liberal leanings and criticism directed against the İnönü government. In this last phase of his writing career, he sought to lay the moral foundations of the republic.

The fact that I depicted four different Ağaoğlus is not, however, to say that he had no inner convictions that formed an integral part of his political and social thought lifelong. Since he started his writing career in France with his essays published in La Nouvelle Revue in 1891, the fugue-like running theme in his writings was the elevation of the faculties of the individual. Little is known as to whether this resulted from the Nihilist influences he had been exposed to when he was a high school student in Russian schools or whether it happened under the influence of Ernest Renan’s lukewarm republican writings. Ağaoğlu had become acquainted with Renan through his teachers at the Collège de France. The famous French philosopher and Orientalist had supported him to embark upon his writing career. One of the central

47 Samet Ağaoğlu, Babamdan Hatıralar, Ankara 1940, p. 81.
48 Until 1915, he penned his articles with the name Ahmet Aghayheff. As a Turkish nationalist, he changed his name to Ağaoğlu Ahmet in 1915. In the early Republican context, he signed his writings as Ahmet Ağaoğlu.
arguments in Renan’s thought was that the fullest elevation of the individual’s intellectual and spiritual faculties was the only source of value in social matters. “There will be no happiness until all are equal,” he once wrote, “but there will be no equality until all are perfect.”  


possessing sufficient moral force for defending these materially; but the situation of women in Muslim families kills the individual by taking away all his initiative and personal energy.\textsuperscript{52}

He laid the historical blame for the situation of women in the Muslim world at the door of the Turks, the lower clergy of Arab origin and the lack of a hierarchical organisation and a strong state to control it.\textsuperscript{53} With the Turkish domination of Islamic lands, he argued, the role of the caliphate was demoted, while reducing state authority over religion weakened the Islamic hierarchical organisation. The weakness of the state, which was unable to impose its authority on the clergy, resulted in unfettered powers for the lower clergy and its corruption. The lower clergy impeded almost all attempts at change in order to secure their position in society. By using this as an instrument and exploiting it they engendered increasing moral degradation in society and the eventual weakness of the individual.

After his return to the Caucasus, the first book he wrote was about the position of women in the Islamic world.\textsuperscript{54} In this book he endeavoured to demonstrate that the reason for the deterioration of women’s position in Islam was not the religion of Islam. He pointed to three other reasons: first, the disappearance of elite women; second, the negative influences of increasing wealth; and third, moral degeneration under the degrading cultural and moral influences of the Syrians and Iranians (as an emerging Turkish nationalist he would no more blame the Turks), especially the appearance and debasement of harems.\textsuperscript{55}

In Ağaoğlu’s view, the decay of high culture also marked the beginning of the harem’s intervention in politics, the mysterious murders and intra-palace uprisings in the history of Islam. This spirit of degeneration blighted philosophy and literature and created a suffocating atmosphere in social life.

Theosophism, a weepy scepticism and an ambiguous mysticism which disclosed the unsteadiness of the soul replaced the old traditions of rationalism, knowledge and virtues; literature became a continual outcry; miserable weak minds found consolation in cursing holy things, in meaningless symbolism […] and weird descriptions. In short, everything pointed to the perishing of society. This perishing was, above all, due to the change in the situation of women.\textsuperscript{56}

In the 1900s and 1910s, he continually propounded, often with a sharper tone, his arguments about the degenerative role of the clergy and the weakness of the state, whilst at the same time writing to defend the rights of Russian Muslims

\textsuperscript{52} Ahmed Bey, La société persane. Le clergé, in: La Nouvelle Revue n. 70. 1891, pp. 792 – 804.
\textsuperscript{53} Ahmet Bey, La société persane. La femme persane, in: La Nouvelle Revue n. 69. 1891, pp. 376 – 389.
\textsuperscript{54} Ahmet Aghayef, Zhenshchina po Islamu i v Islame, Tiflis 1901. In this essay I refer to the Turkish translation of the book „İslâmlıkta Kadın“, Istanbul 1959.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 47.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., p. 48.
and Turks in the Russian and Ottoman empires. Due to his sceptic approach to the theology of Islam, he pragmatically regarded the Islamic mentality as essentially congruent with modernity and liberalism,\(^{21}\) and maintained that a modern interpretation of Islam could be the major source of individual and societal morality with its strong moralist character. In the early Republican context, the vocabulary Ağaoğlu used in putting forward his moralist concerns began to change, particularly after 1928, when the fourth article of the constitution was amended thus: “the Republic of Turkey is a secular state.” He thereafter came to seek secular and scientific sources of morality in reference to the communitarian teachings of Émile Durkheim and Petr Kropotkin. The closure of religious orders, increasing financial hardship toward the end of the 1920s and the strictly authoritarian rule at the time may also have led him to increase the space he devoted to morality in his writings, in which he often employed such terms as sacrifice, altruism and disinterestedness. In 1930, by penning an allegorical utopian novella under the title of “In the Land of Free Men” he attempted “to constitute the moral ideology of the Republic.”\(^{22}\) Following the republican tradition of Montesquieu, Durkheim and Duguit, he sought to identify civic virtues, whilst introducing the republic as a new religion.\(^{23}\) In Ağaoğlu’s views, the republic should surpass all moral systems in Turkey and transform the hearts and minds of the citizens, preparing them for a modern and democratic country which would leave behind the problems of bigotry, religious dogmatism and conformity, egoism and many other moral illnesses which he associated with the “Eastern” mentality. Believing that the fundamental tenets of the long-lasting moral philosophy in the East tended to contradict these values, he suggested a new understanding of morality (yeni ahlâk) based on altruism and communitarianism (cemiyetçilik) to replace the prevailing negative sentiments of self-interestedness and individualism (ferdiyetçilik).\(^{24}\) “Liberty is a problem of culture,” Ağaoğlu contended, and in transforming that culture one must look into the character of man, and there alone. Because

\[i\]t is not easy to instil freedom into places which have long been ruled and oppressed by despotism. In fact, the place wherein despotism is in charge is nowhere but the spirit and heart of the individual. Despotism settles and flourishes there […] sometimes you deem it to

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\(^{22}\) Ahmet Ağaoğlu, Serbest İnsanlar Ülkesinde, Istanbul 1930, p. 1.

\(^{23}\) Id., Viciadan Azab Duyuyanlara, in: Son Posta, 12. 1. 1931.

\(^{24}\) Id., Eski ve Yeni Ahlâk, in: Hakimiyet-i Milliye, 23. 1. 1928.
have collapsed, and in practice its visible marks disappear. But in reality it still exists everywhere and in everybody. It is observed that those who appeal strongly for freedom cannot endure the freedom of their neighbours […] because essentially despotism still rules in their spirits and hearts, it has not yet been detached […] Eventually, as despotism, which was once observed in the acts of one [ruler], displays its marks in the deeds of everyone, so-called liberty turns into anarchy. In the end, since it is not possible for a society to long remain under these circumstances, the need to limit the acts of its people arises in the name of liberty. Therefore, those societies which are unable to detach themselves from the roots and marks of despotism become condemned to oscillating between anarchy and [despotism], which is the most disastrous form of uncertainty. 62

How then could the remnants of despotism be detached from the very depths of individual heart? He placed a great importance on the agency of the state and the intellectuals, profound familial education, and the self-overcoming of the individual which entailed the reform of the self.

1. The State

In his later writings, Ağaoğlu employed Durkheim’s utility approach, in which the French sociologist had questioned “the state and its intervention in terms of utility for society rather than its sovereign basis.” 63 As long as it encouraged social solidarity based on interdependence and functional differentiation, the state’s interference in private life was justifiable, because, unless produced and constructed, there was no freedom. And the only means to produce and construct freedom was the interference of the state. In his utopian novella, he tried to give a practical example of the moral principles he desired for a free society and its members, applying them to an imaginary state called the Land of Free Men. He wrote that the Free Men were enlightened individuals in that they were accustomed to self-reasoning and thinking. They were enjoying democratic institutions and moral hygiene. However, their moralist constitution was extremely rigid, preaching, amongst others, bravery, honesty, transparency and solidarity and showing no tolerance to any breach of these. Ağaoğlu thus used the authority of the law as the major weapon to determine the boundaries of individual conduct. Later this led commentators to justly argue that his vision was rather a dystopia. 64 He failed to assume a voluntary and freely chosen character without obligation or imposition from above thus falling into the trap of the Enlightenment dilemma best illustrated in Rousseau’s paradox: “the voluntary acts require an initial educative authority, [illustrated] when he had the pupil Emile say to his tutor, ‘I have decided to be what you made me’”. 65 The “enlightened” (self-reasoning

63 Donzelot, Michel Foucault, p. 126.
64 Kadıoğlu, Cumhuriyet İradesi Demokrasi Muhakemesi, p. 94.
and thinking) Free Men therefore decide to be what the state and society want them to be. He seemed to take the idea that freedom ultimately consisted in individuals acting morally to an extreme when his utopian state forced the Free Men to act so and when he practically demanded the perfection of the individual. Nowhere in his writings did Ağaoğlu appear to think that social conflict could stem from the lack of a culture of tolerance and in certain cases respect for imperfection.

2. The Intellectuals

Just like the censors or moral guardians in Jean-Baptiste Say’s “Olbie”, 66 in the Land of Free Men, there was also a special group, known as the elders (pirs), responsible for public moral education dictating the moral rules of the Free Men. These people, who had deep knowledge of the history, politics and laws of the country, would journey all over the land, delivering speeches wherever they went as public moralists. In his later writings, Ağaoğlu persistently prompted Turkish intellectuals to inspire high sentiments in individuals in the manner the public moralists of the Free Men did. He believed that the intellectuals could entice the spirits of the individuals and inculcate in them the high sentiments of mutual aid, solidarity and altruism through their novels, poems, plays and any other medium that would reach the very roots of the individual heart through the transformative power of art, literature, science and philosophy. In his views, an intellectual was one who selflessly pursued sciences and arts to understand life and to disseminate moral values for a positive change in others’ lives. 67 He maintained that intellectuals as a class could create ideals, influence society, act as its leaders and open up paths for new creative activities. The Western superiority over the East, he believed, was a consequence of the success of Western intellectuals from Locke and Voltaire to Turgenyev (he always regarded Russians as a Western society) and Durkheim in laying political, economic and moral ideals. 68 “It is the duty of the intellectuals,” he wrote, “to ceaselessly work to elevate character and the level of social morality, and therefore, to fight above all with those moral ills that lead to degeneration and infirmity.” 69

3. The Individual

Ağaoğlu assigned families and professional groups with the special role of socialising individuals through particular values, 70 but in his view, the individuals themselves would have to carry the yoke of a painstaking moral

66 Jean-Baptiste Say, Olbie, ou Essai sur les moyens de réformer les mœurs d’une nation, Paris 1800.
69 Id., Entellektüellerin Borçları, in: Cumhuriyet, 10.2.1936.
70 Id., Genç Nesli Yetiştirmek, in: Cumhuriyet, 8.4.1933.
regeneration process as self-sacrificing and altruistic citizens. Particularly
during the early Republican era, when social and cultural codes were gradually
overturned, Ağaoğlu, like most nineteenth-century Francophone sociologists
who drew on Rousseau’s social thought,71 believed that ending political,
cultural and economic crises was premised on quelling the problems
emanating from the depths of the individual. In his swansong “What am I?”
he brought up the theme of the duplicitous self to argue in more detail how the
individual’s self-overcoming could take place in the East.

According to Ağaoğlu, the individual will, like the Durkheimian will, was not
isolated from social influence, but instead created within society which
demanded its loyalty to the public good. His notion of will was in permanent
interaction with the social milieu and this interaction was not one-way. For
Ağaoğlu, the individual was a social being, which was to say that his will was
automatically created and shaped by society. But individuals, especially those
of strong character (will), could challenge social circumstances and help
society to progress. This introduces an elitist tendency similar to that of
Sabahaddin: only the man or woman of strong will could change society, as
exemplified in the history of both the West and the East in the lives, ideas and
ideals of those individuals such as Socrates, Jeanne d’Arc or Mustafa Kemal.
The struggles of self-sacrificing individuals with strong will could shake the
status quo.

In “What am I”, Ağaoğlu’s ideas were slightly different. He wrote of his
observations on the relationship between the inner and outer selves of an
Eastern individual in order to understand the reasons for the weakness of the
individual will in the East. According to his observations, the altruistic inner
self appeared in the realms of theory, and thoughts rather than deeds. When it
came to action and deeds, the egoistic outer self took control. There were great
discrepancies, thus, between the way the individual conceived things and the
way he acted. How then could the will be strengthened and the outer self be
rehabilitated?

Since the individual was too weak to strengthen his will alone, Ağaoğlu
paradoxically asserted that the suppression of the outer self by society would
allow the inner self to hold sway over the outer self. This was not a novel idea.
He argued that in Britain, thanks to people’s active social life and the strength
of public opinion, the egoism of the outer selves was put under control. When
individuals happened to place their short-term personal interests over the
long-term interests of the society, they confronted the public’s reaction, which
was the product of political and economic liberties that bound society together
and the works of their writers, poets, thinkers and moralists, which nurtured

71 Caroline Armenteros, Revolutionary Violence and the End of History. The Divided Self
in Francophone Thought, 1762–1914, in: id. et al. (ed.), Historicising the French
the British souls and minds. In the individuals of such a society, Ağaoğlu wrote, "[the egoism] of the outer self naturally withers away, [while] the inner self is stimulated; the outer self remains silent, while the inner self makes decisions." Ağaoğlu thus tends to start with assuming that the individual has an inwardness (reminding one of Taylor’s modern persons), but goes on to seek the means for empowering the self in communal action. That is, his notion of the self is socially constructed. Not surprisingly then, in contrast to Sabahaddin, Ağaoğlu found Eastern, and particularly Turkish society, too individualistic (ferdiyetçi), deprived of high values of altruism and self-sacrifice and suffering from the absence of strong ties among individuals. He asserted that individuals in the West, by contrast, found the means to reconcile and fuse their private interests with those of society. Unlike Eastern individuals, they preferred to sacrifice their little short-term interests for the greater long-term interests of society. Thanks to their social, political and economic freedoms, social order and regulation became habitual for them. In a Durkheimian manner, he wrote that the more they opened up, the more communitarian (cemiyetçi) they became; and the more communitarian they became, the more they embraced the state in the belief that it was what held society together.

Inspired by two opposing French schools of sociology, namely the schools of Le Play and Durkheim, the ideas of Sabahaddin and Ağaoğlu showed discrepancies with regard to the vocabulary they employed and the role they attached to the state. Sabahaddin ardently opposed raison d’État with the belief that the state’s interference in economic activity weakened individual skills, slowing down progress. Whilst his notion of the individual sounded like an individualist self, his individual placed the interests of society first. Employing a more explicit vocabulary, Ağaoğlu also identified the absence of communitarian sentiments as the major reasons for the moral weakness of the Eastern individuals. But, unlike Sabahaddin, he assigned the state the significant role of inculcating these values.

Sabahaddin was in fact a liberal only so far as his linguistic work was concerned. In translating into Turkish the teachings of La Science Sociale, which was inspired by the Anglo-American way of life, and in arguing particularly for private initiative when bringing up new individuals (which, considering the origins of his thought, meant adopting Victorian middle-class values), he perhaps unwittingly transferred into the Turkish context ideas of

72 Ibid., p. 20.
73 Ibid., p. 20.
74 Ahmet Ağaoğlu, Doğu ve Batı, in: Cumhuriyet, 10.9.1935.
75 Ibid.
liberal character which would inspire liberal parties and intellectuals over decades.

All this said, both Sabahaddin and Ağaoğlu tenaciously identified the individual as the motor of the progress and placed society’s interests above private ones. Individuals did not appear to choose their paths, but followed authoritative moral sources. These sources, which I attempted to describe in this essay, would be the reference point for the education of “new individuals” who would work to raise their society to the level of modern societies. There was an ostensible element of pragmatism in their understanding of morality. Yet they were certain that the stagnation of communitarian (Sabahaddin would write) and the egoism of Eastern societies were the central ailments of modern Turkey that had to be cured. They both wanted the selected groups, and in Ağaoğlu’s case, the individual himself, to fight against these ailments for the political ascendancy of the masses. The establishment of a deeply rooted liberal democratic culture permeating everyday life was therefore a problem of the government, of the families and the self as much as the state. However, their liberal doctrines, which were in fact a fusion of political, economic and moral discourses, failed to identify the educative function of endowing individuals with political and economic liberties and an autonomous will that would benefit much from social practices of daily life.

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