

Darwin and the Turks

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Introduction

This mini review is on political scientist Alper Bilgili's book *Darwin and the Ottomans* (published in Turkish as *Darwin ve Osmanlılar*, Vadi Yayınları, 2018) around the book, the review will introduce new political developments regarding the theory of evolution in Turkey. Works on the perceptions of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution are scarce in Turkey; and political scientist Alper Bilgili contributes to the discussion of the evolution theory in the late Ottoman and early Republican era with a compilation of five previously published articles. His main aim, as he states in the introduction chapter of the book, is to offer a multi-faceted perspective to transcend the ideological division between two imagined dichotomous groups of conservative-Islamist, anti-Darwinists versus materialist-secularist Darwinists in Turkey. Bilgili argues that Darwin's theory and his works have not been given scientific attention that it deserves by either of these parties, and is a victim of ideological battle rather than a comprehensive intellectual discussion. He introduces major debates in the late Ottoman and Turkish history and revisits them by offering new findings and insights into the main problematic socio-cultural dimensions of the evolution theory as perceived in the Ottoman/Turkish lands.

Bilgili's work requires attention not only as an academic contribution to an understudied subject, but also as an intellectual position as Darwin's theory of evolution has become almost a 'taboo' in Turkey today. The ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party) seems to embark on a cultural war against the evolution theory; and eliminated the theory of evolution from high school textbooks in 2017. The teaching of the evolution theory had already been limited since the 1980 military rule with its political programme of nationalist-moderate Islamist ideology synthesis; however, AKP further eliminated the only chapter on evolution in pre-college curriculum and removed all references to Darwinian or neo-Darwinian theory in textbooks. Alparslan Durmuş, head of the national education board explained that the material was 'controversial' and 'too difficult' to be understood by the average student [1]. One of the leading members of the party, Numan Kurtuluş claimed that the theory was 'old and rotten,' and therefore, didn't need to be taught

in schools. As a result of this drastic change, unlike previous generations, Turkish students now only learn about creationism during their compulsory and abundant religious courses until college enrolment. This move by AKP has been strongly criticized by the largest Turkish opposition party CHP, as well as academics from several universities and has been regarded as another move to undermine modern Turkey's secular foundations [2].

Darwin has been regarded as 'the latest victim' of an attack on scientific values in Turkey's education system. This can be best understood by a comparison of teaching of evolution in the early Republican period (1923-1938) under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic. Atatürk's main goal was to modernize and secularize Turkey, which were intertwined, according to him. He also believed this could be achieved mostly by a positivist-modern education model and political leadership. One of the most important and well-known quotes of Atatürk has been "science is the only true guide in life;" and accordingly, evolution theory was introduced to students in a basic, simplified form as early as the primary education in social studies ('Hayat Bilgisi') courses [3]. In these courses, students learned the concept of 'circle of life' and evolution from simple to complex forms as the basis of all living organisms. God's creation as the basis of organic life and Adam and Eve as the first humans were replaced with evolution theory in all textbooks [4]. Throughout secondary and high school education, Darwin's evolution theory was of the curriculum not only in science or biology courses, but even in geography, history and geometry courses. After Atatürk's death in 1938, however, Darwin's theory of evolution has been subject to cultural and religion-based antipathy. Turkey has been generally under the rule of moderate to conservative right-wing parties since 1950; and these parties were not generally enthusiastic about the evolution theory as much as the revolutionary leadership of the 1920s. Yet, religion was not a compulsory course until 1980; and students learned enough about the evolution theory in science and biology courses until its recent removal by AKP. AKP has led an anti-evolution campaign as part islamisation project. Even in universities,

pro-creationist conferences have been organized and instructors even in university levels have been facing difficulties to discuss the evolution theory. Darwin has been almost completely removed not only from compulsory education but from science in general. The censorship of a cover story on Charles Darwin, which was supposed to mark the 200th anniversary of the scientist's birth in a state-run monthly magazine of Turkey's top science and research agency (TÜBİTAK), is a striking illustration of the battle against the evolution theory.

Alper Bilgili is one of the leading academicians who challenges the popular view that science (evolution theory) and Islamic religion are incompatible entities. Not only has he written several articles on the subject, but he has also attended several TV programs, and contrary to the popular view, argued that Islamic religion and evolution theory can co-exist. Bilgili opens his book with an analysis of the views of İsmail Fenni, a religious intellectual who examined Darwin's theory from different perspectives, and as the author puts it, is more sophisticated when compared with both anti-religious Darwinists and anti-Darwinist religious camps that dominated the late Ottoman intellectual life [5]. Even though İsmail Fenni was not a materialist, he argued against the laws forbidding the teaching of Darwinism in schools, and even claimed that Muslims should not reject Darwinism if it is supported by future scientific evidence. He even supported the view that in such a case religious interpretation should be revised accordingly.

Discussion


The following two chapters focus on the social implications of Darwinism around the question of race and hegemonic ideology of imperialism in the 19th century and its implications in the Ottoman intellectual circles [6]. Despite the vast literature on Darwinism and race, the way in which Darwin's opinions on race were received and used by non-western circles had been little studied. Bilgili contrib-

utes to this understudied subject with two chapters which focus on British-Ottoman relations. He examines the accusations against Darwin for stoking anti-Turkish sentiment within Europe which resulted in the demise of the Ottoman Empire. Consequently, Alper argues that Turkish anti-Darwinists perceive Darwinism not merely as a false scientific theory, but also a political-ideological tool of western hegemony wielded against Turks and the Islamic world. This view is in sharp contrast to the position taken by Turkish Darwinists who present Darwin as an egalitarian with respect to human races. Bilgili regards both accounts to be over-simplistic, and instead offers an in-depth and multi-faceted study of the question.

Bilgili's academically sound, comprehensive study manages to open new vistas set against cultural-ideological separation regarding Darwin and the evolution theory in Turkey. Fortunately, it has been well received by the Turkish reading public: the book has already made its second print, which is rare among academic books in Turkey. The interest can be both due to the author's personal success in discussion of an academic topic in an appealing style, but also to the thirst of the Turkish people towards a scientific and philosophical discussion of the evolution theory.

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