

## DID THE LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE HAVE A MUSLIM MIDDLE CLASS

FINDLEY, Carter Vaughn  
ABD/USA/CIHA

Conventional wisdom long held that the late Ottoman Empire had no Muslim middle class, or else that this Muslim middle class included bureaucrats and intellectuals but not economically productive elements; by this argument, the economic middle class consisting only of non-Muslims. Müge Göçek has devoted a significant book to this thesis of a religiously divided middle class, thus providing scholarly support for this interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

In a broader, comparative perspective, this conclusion appears to need rethinking. It may turn out that this is an opinion based on conditions in Istanbul, or on identifying the Ottoman Empire with Anatolia to the exclusion of other regions. In a comparative perspective, if late Ottoman society did not include propertied Muslim middle-class elements, it was the only Muslim society of its time that did not. Among neighboring Muslim societies, Iran had a Muslim *bazari* class, which figured prominently in the revolutionary coalition of ulema, modernist intellectuals, and *bazari* elements that made history in Iran's major moments of political mobilization and upheaval from 1890 to 1906 to 1979.<sup>2</sup> Among the Turkish Muslims in the Russian Empire, very significant trade networks also existed. The Volga Tatars, especially, included very wealthy merchant families who had made a lot of money out of Russian expansion into Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> Yusuf Akçura's famous views about the absence of a Turkish bourgeoisie may reflect the fact that he was precisely from one of those families and knew conditions in Central Asia better than in the late Ottoman Empire. Likewise in the Arab provinces of the late Ottoman Empire, Muslims are greatly in evidence among the economically active sectors of the middle strata.<sup>4</sup> There, the Christians, who were also mostly Arabs indigenous to their localities, tended to be more active in externally oriented trade. The Muslims tended to be more active in the internal

<sup>1</sup> Fatma Müge Göçek, **Rise of the Bourgeoisie, Demise of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> Nikki Keddie, **Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution** (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2003) and many other historians of Iran.

<sup>3</sup> Adeb Khalid, **The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia** (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Shafiq Daulet, **Kazan and Moscow: Five Centuries of Crippling Coexistence under Russian Imperialism (1552-2002)** (Hudson, New Hampshire: Kase Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Leila Tarazi Fawaz, **Merchants and Migrants in Nineteenth-Century Beirut** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

trade, which was much larger in volume. Among the Muslims of the late Ottoman Empire, it would be very odd if the Arabs had an economically active middle class and the Turks did not, although it would not be surprising if more of the Turks worked in other pursuits, especially in the capital city.

Several scholars have begun to rethink issues of bourgeois class formation in the Ottoman Empire, but no one has yet done this in the broad chronological perspective needed to examine the question fully.<sup>5</sup> I am now working on a book on **Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity**, and one of its objectives is to examine this question. More exactly, my book sets the question of bourgeois class formation in the context of the dialectical interaction between two currents of change that shaped late Ottoman and modern Turkish history. To understand these currents fully requires examining political, economic, social, and cultural change. In human terms, however, the people who made up these two currents of change were primarily the two wings of the Ottoman and Turkish proto-bourgeoisie: the intellectual-bureaucratic wing and the property-owning wing. The class status of the bureaucratic intelligentsia depended on their intellectual assets; culturally, they tended toward radicalism and secularism, although there were cultural conservatives among them. The class status of the propertied elements depended on economic assets, mostly in land or commerce; culturally, their most characteristic cultural outlet of expression consisted of religious movements.

### **Thesis: Two Competing Currents of Change**

To site the radical current of change, Anderson's (1991) concept of "print capitalism" provides a helpful starting point.<sup>6</sup> Launched earlier (1789-1839) by government efforts to create new institutions and elites, the secularizing trend expanded beyond government control with the rise (1840-1860) of privately owned Ottoman print media. The "print capitalism" image evokes new linkages among cultural production, economics, society, and politics. The florescence of the print media presupposed modern schools, increased literacy, and linguistic changes facilitating mass communication. New literary forms opened imaginative realms in which to envision alternative futures. Propounding these visions, elite males assumed vanguard roles in mobilising others--women, rival elites, minorities, peasants--to pursue their visions. Political controversy intensified as competing visions proliferated, and old forms of personality-centered factionalism clashed with a new politics of issues and ideologies. Among the Ottomans, most elements of this complex existed by the 1860s. During the terminal crisis of the

<sup>5</sup> Notable examples include Kemal Karpat, **The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman Empire** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); M. Hakan Yavuz, **Islamic Political Identity in Turkey** (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Benedict Anderson, **Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism**, revised edition (London: Verso, 1991 [1983]).

empire (1908-1923), secularists provided the leadership for first the *constitutional* (1908) and then the *national* (1919-1923) phases of the political restructuring that replaced empire with republic. Secularists governed Turkey from 1908 until at least 1950 and still retain great power and prestige.

If the phenomena surrounding print culture gave radical modernizers their forum, symmetrical logic suggests that manuscript culture must have served conservatives analogously. In fact, a more narrowly defined phenomenon, albeit one identified at first with manuscript culture, served this purpose: Islamic religious movements, and not just any of them. The Islamic movements of the period varied widely, and anti-Ottomanism or otherworldliness prevented some of them from stimulating Ottoman revitalization. So much greater was the significance, then, of a shaykh from Ottoman Kurdistan, who introduced the reformist Mujaddidi form of the Naqshbandiyya from India and won recognition even from other orders as “the Renewer” of his century. Khalid al-Naqshbandi (1777-1826) founded the Khalidiyya, the dominant branch of the Naqshbandiyya in the western Islamic world. Among factors contributing to its long-term success, two were critical. In contrast to some orders’ social withdrawal, the Naqshbandi principle of “seclusion within society” (*halvet der encümen*) prompted political engagement and support for the state. Equally important, strict sharia observance won the Naqshbandis adherents among the ulema, who criticized other orders’ laxity. Once it overcame Sultan Mahmud II’s (1808-1839) initial suspicions by reassurances that its members prayed for the state, the Khalidiyya became a major reintegrative force for the remainder of the empire’s history.<sup>7</sup>

Emerging on the empire’s periphery, the Khalidiyya sparked a great awakening in center and periphery alike. Among the Muslim proto-bourgeoisie, if progressives with intellectual capital (the new official and literary elites) rallied around the emerging print media, people with economic assets (merchants, landowners) generally espoused more conservative views and sought their cultural outlet in religious movements, particularly the Khalidiyya and its branches. Under the early republic, the fact that the Naqshbandis performed their essential ritual silently and could do so in private houses helped them to survive the 1925 ban on sufi brotherhoods. Their historically positive orientation toward the state and their willingness to take jobs within the state-controlled Directorate of Religious Affairs

<sup>7</sup> Among many references on Mevlana Halid and the Halidiye, see Sean Foley, “Shaykh Khalid and the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya, 1776-2005,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, 2005; Butrus Abu-Manneh, “A New Look at the Rise and Expansion of the Khalidi Sub-Order,” in *Sufism and Sufis in Ottoman Society*, ed. Ahmed Yaşar Ocak (Ankara: TTK, 2005), 279-314; Abu-Manneh, *Studies on Islam and the Ottoman Empire in the Nineteenth Century (1826-1876)* (Istanbul: Isis, 2001); Raymond Lifchez, ed., *The Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art, and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 209-27 (Hamid Algar, “Devotional Practices of the Khalidi Naqshbandis of Ottoman Turkey”).

enabled them to “colonize” one bastion of the secular republic.<sup>8</sup> In recent decades, organizations of other forms--mosque congregations, foundations, business firms, media ventures, political parties--also evolved out of the Khalidiyya. As secularists and Islamists came to compete in the same arenas, Turgut Özal (prime minister 1983-1989, president 1989-1993) could identify himself openly as a Naqshbandi.

Turkey’s two other leading religious movements did not derive directly from the Khalidiyya but reacted to its stimulus, among others, and led the way in generating new organizational forms. These movements began with Said Nursi (1873-1960), known as Bediüzzaman, “the wonder of the age.”<sup>9</sup> He sought to fill the spiritual void of republican secularism by founding--not a sufi order--but rather a text-based movement that people would join by studying his writings. Advocating both modern science and religious studies, he produced sophisticated refutations of the European materialists esteemed by Turkish secularists. Nursi embodied both the transition in religious teaching from orality to textualism and religious activists’ adoption of the modern media. In the same period, the rise of Islamic “print capitalism” was further evidenced by Islamist journals like *Sebilürreşad* and widely published authors like Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904-1983), whose early studies in France perhaps inspired him to emulate the right-wing French Catholic writers and movements like the Action Française.<sup>10</sup> The branches into which Nursi’s movement divided after his death include that of Fethullah Gülen (1938-), now Turkey’s most influential religious leader. More interested in acting on their beliefs than reading, Gülen’s followers founded schools in many countries and sponsored print and electronic media, among other, diverse forms of social action. With Gülen, Turkish Islamists have adapted not only to modernity but also to globalization.<sup>11</sup>

The institutions, economic interests, sociabilities, and modes of cultural production associated with “print capitalism” in the secularists’ case and with the three great religious awakenings in the conservatives’ case symbolically site the two competing currents of change in which Turks have lived out their stormy

<sup>8</sup> Ufuk Ulutaş, “Religion and Secularism in Turkey: The Dilemma of the Directorate of Religious Affairs,” unpublished seminar paper, Ohio State University, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Şerif Mardin, **Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey** (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989); Şükran Vahide, **Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi** (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005); Serdar Poyraz, “Preliminary Reflections on Bediüzzaman Said Nursi and the Nurcu Movement,” unpublished seminar paper, Ohio State University, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> James C. Helicke, “Islam, National Identity, and Modernity: The Revival of the ‘Turkish-Muslim’ Journal *Sebilürreşad* in Turkey’s Multiparty Period,” unpublished seminar paper, Ohio State University, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> M. Hakan Yavuz and John L. Esposito, ed., **Turkish Islam and the Secular State: The Gülen Movement** (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003); Bayram Balcı, **Missionaires de l’Islam en Asie Centrale: Les écoles turques de Fethullah Gülen** (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2003).

struggle for nationhood and modernity. The two currents' historical courses differed markedly. The radicals emerged during the Tanzimat (1839-1870s), engineered the Young Turk revolution (1908) and National Struggle (1919-1923), ruled the republic for two generations, consolidated power positions they still retain, and made secularism into a lasting "belief system." Powerful under the empire, religious conservatives ran afoul of the early republic's secularism and nationalism, struggled to reorganize and create their own modern media, and could again compete successfully in the political arena only by the 1980s. They have since reestablished themselves as part of the mainstream, no longer the objects of state policy but among its makers.

What governed the interactions among these two currents of change? Channeled in their flow by Islam, nationalism, and modernity, the secularist and Islamist currents of change differentiated gradually in the nineteenth century, clashed as the secular republic succeeded the Islamic empire, and moved back toward symbiosis since the 1960s. The contradictions between the currents have been more conspicuous than their convergences. However, the Turkish polity probably could not have survived as a coherent entity if the two trends had only clashed and never achieved moments of synthesis. In fact, the convergences have been many. Like Namık Kemal, Ahmed Midhat, and Fatma Aliye among writers, individuals often participated in both trends unless forced to choose. The course of events likewise created convergences. The land law of 1858 served the interests of both the office-holding and the property-holding wings of the proto-bourgeoisie. After 1908, the Young Turks' "national economy" policy, aiming to form a Turkish bourgeoisie, implicitly privileged common ethnicity, not ideological uniformity.<sup>12</sup> The successful National Struggle (1919-1922) and the foundation of the republic created a wave of gratitude that enabled republican leaders to enact reforms for which most of the populace were unready; significantly, some Kurdish Naqshbandis did revolt in that period. Yet the fact that Atatürk is the only strongman leader of the 1930s still revered by most of his people clearly demonstrates widespread appreciation for the changes over which he presided. More recently, the positive reassessments of Abdülhamid's reign and Turgut Özal's and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's success in "main streaming" religious Turks suggest that other Turks increasingly recognize conservative Muslims' contributions. Social and cultural differences have been highly politicized in Turkey, to a degree that has no counterpart in many Euro-American countries. The Turkish middle class has had difficulty cohering, but that does not excuse writing it out of history.

<sup>12</sup> Zafer Toprak, *İttihad-Terakki ve Cihan Harbi: Savaş Ekonomisi ve Türkiye'de Devletçilik, 1914-1918* (Istanbul: Homer, 2003), and other works of Toprak.

