Thinking about Turkish Modernization: Cemil Meriç on Turkish Language, Culture, and Intellectuals

Serdar Poyraz

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume 26, Number 3, 2006, pp. 434-445 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cst/summary/v026/26.3poyraz.html
Thinking about Turkish Modernization: 
Cemil Meriç on Turkish Language, Culture, 
and Intellectuals

Serdar Poyraz

In this essay, relying on a close reading of the major works of one of the least-known, 
and, dare I say, most interesting, Turkish intellectuals of the twentieth century, Cemil 
Meriç (1916–87), I question the accuracy of what I call the “official dogma” of Turkish 
modernization. Briefly stated, this official account argues that Turkish modernization is a 
*linear process of progress* from tradition to modernity, from obscurantism to reason and enlight-
enment, and from the Empire to the Republic.

This narrative of linear progress, which formed the backbone of the main arguments 
of diverse writers on Turkish modernity such as Bernard Lewis and Niyazi Berkes, explicitly 
depends on a set of dichotomies (tradition-modernity, religion-science, and Empire-Republic) 
and implicitly favors the dichotomies’ second terms (modernity, science, and Republic) over 
the first (tradition, religion, and Empire). While the first terms stand for *arbitrariness* with 
respect to political government and *lack of reason* in societal affairs, according to the accepted 
wisdom, the second terms represent *order* in politics and *reason* in society.

Meriç debunks this simplistic account and argues that modernization in Turkey is a com-
plex process during which some essential cultural ingredients of the society—the language 
and the shared norms of interpersonal behavior—are badly (perhaps irreparably) damaged. 
Turkish modernization, in Meriç’s account, is not a process of linear progress but a process 
containing serious amounts of *alienation* (of the political elite and the intellectuals from 
the common people) and *displacement of identities*: the casualties here include not only ethnic 
and religious minorities but also those societal groups that formerly represented the mainstream 
in several of the Empire’s institutions, such as the religious orders, or *tarikats*.

Rather than sing the praises of the Republican political elite for their ambitious projects 
of political and social engineering, Meriç warns that their overconfident and hasty “reforms” 
push society to the brink of anomic by destroying the cultural connections of Turkish society 
to its own history.¹

However, it should be strongly emphasized here that Meriç is not simply a conservative 
thinker who yearns for the past. On the contrary, as the following pages will make clear, his 
analysis of Turkish society includes a remarkable criticism of its past and traditions as well.

¹. It is certainly not a coincidence that one of Meriç’s major 
books deals with the history of anarchism (particularly the his-
tory of the nihilist movement in nineteenth-century Russia). He 
is very interested in comparing the case of Turkey with Russia, 
where enormous dislocation in terms of identities took place 
in the late nineteenth century. See Cemil Meriç, *Bir Facianin Hi-
Placing himself above the simplistic dichotomy of modernity and tradition, Meriç criticizes both modern Turkish society and tradition from a critical/humanist perspective, calling for mutual understanding and tolerance between the different segments of Turkish society. Meriç symbolizes an intellectual trend in Turkey whose ideas are similar to those of Takeuchi Yoshimi in Japan and Jalal Al-e Ahmad in Iran in that they question the predominant Eurocentric notions of modernization and enlightenment.

The secondary literature on Meriç is rather thin. For this article I made some use of the book published about him by his daughter (and Istanbul University professor) Ümit Meriç Yazan, as well as the selections from his writings prepared by Mustafa Armağan. Other than these two works, I completely relied on the primary material written by Cemil Meriç. The primary sources include all of his works, which are currently in print in Turkey.

The following discussion consists of three main sections and a conclusion. In the first section, I present a brief life story of Meriç and try to demonstrate how the singular facts about his personal life may account for the later development of his character and ideas.

In the second section, I try to conceptualize how Meriç understood the terms East and West with regard to civilizations and culture. I attempt to demonstrate that these terms did not have any geographical connotations in his works and that his use of these terms often referred to differing attitudes to reason and rationality prevalent in certain societies in different periods of history. For Meriç the civilization dividing lines are demarcated not by religions (Christianity versus Confucianism or Islam a la Samuel Huntington) but by attitudes toward criticism and free speech.

I also attempt to account for his peculiar use of Marxism as a critical tool in his investigations about the nature of European history. Again, Meriç is no dogmatist here, and he freely criticizes the so-called Marxists in Turkey (represented by the Türkiye İşçi Partisi, or Turkish Workers’ Party, in the 1960s) for their dogmatic understanding of Marxism and their “religious” reading of Karl Marx.

In addition, I talk about his approach to orientalism and argue that his ideas in the 1960s may be the first systematic account of orientalism written before Edward Said. More important, I try to demonstrate that Meriç not only accounted for the orientalism of Western writers (for the sake of argument, I call this “outward orientalism”) but also talked about the orientalist attitudes of the native intellectuals toward their own culture and people (“inward orientalism”).

The third section mainly deals with Meriç’s ideas about the Turkish language and his harsh criticism of language reform in Turkey. He actively responded to the “reforms” in language by creating a highly peculiar literary style of his own, relying extensively on Persian and Arabic vocabulary yet not refraining from using French or Latin expressions in his works.

Finally, I conclude by making a number of general remarks about Meriç’s writings and the possibilities they offer to the reader for a radical reinterpretation of the history of the Turkish Republic and the Turkish modernization process.

The Life and Works of Cemil Meriç

Meriç was born on 12 December 1916 in Reyhanlı, Hatay (Antakya), just before Hatay, a small town in southern Turkey, was placed under the French mandate. His father was a minor bureaucrat who migrated to Hatay from Dimetoka, Greece, with his family in 1912 during the Balkan Wars. In 1923 Meriç obtained his primary school degree (certificat d’études primaires), and after finishing secondary school in 1928 he began his high school studies in Antakya Sultanisi (Antakya High School), where a curriculum heavily influenced by French cul-

---

2. Ümit Meriç Yazan, Babam Cemil Meriç [My Father Cemil Meriç] (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1994).
4. Cemil Meriç, Bir Fabianin Hikayesi: Bu Ülke (This Country) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003); “Türk Genci,” Yıldız 1 (1935); Mağaradakiler (Those in the Cave) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003); Bir Dünyanın Eşliğinde (In the Threshold of a World) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002); Umrandan Uygarlığa (From Social Life to Civilization) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003); Sosyoloji Notları ve Konferanslar (Sociological Notes and Lectures) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003); Jurnal, vols. 1–2 (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003); Saint-Simon: İlk Sosyolog, İlk Sosyalist (Saint-Simon, the First Sociologist, the First Socialist) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2002); Kirk Ambar (Encyclopedic Knowledge) (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2003).
Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East

In the first year of high school, we read *Legends du Siecle*, written by Victor Hugo. In the second year, *Atala, Rene, and Le Dernier des Abincérges* by Chateaubriand. . . . In the third year our course book was *History of Literature*, written by Lanson. Only Lanson? Occasionally we read the “Selected Articles” of Desranges. And the classics: we had to read three or four novels by Molière, Corneille, and Racine.5

Understanding the social and cultural diversity of Hatay in the 1930s, I think, is crucial for comprehending Meriç’s later development of ideas on culture and language (and why he was reluctant to buy the nationalist myths of the Turkish Republican elite wholesale). He experienced the curious combination of living in a vibrant periphery city of the Ottoman state (in terms of social structure and culture) and in a French mandate, where genuine contact with European civilization and culture was possible for the aspiring student because of the educational system.

Moreover, he was spared the cultural shock caused by the radical changes in language and alphabet that were brought about by the Republican “reforms” in the Turkish Republic. Meriç himself seems to be well aware of the influence of his early life on his later intellectual stance:


[In the first year of high school, we read *Legends du Siecle*, written by Victor Hugo. In the second year, *Atala, Rene, and Le Dernier des Abincérges* by Chateaubriand. . . . In the third year our course book was *History of Literature*, written by Lanson. Only Lanson? Occasionally we read the “Selected Articles” of Desranges. And the classics: we had to read three or four novels by Molière, Corneille, and Racine.]

A brief fall under the spell of Turkish nationalism and the publication in a local journal of an essay in which he accused his Turkish teachers of not being nationalistic enough against the mandate authorities led to problems with the high school’s administration.7 As a result, he had to leave Hatay for Istanbul without graduating from high school (he was at the final grade at the time, and he would have been sent to Mulkiye [Istanbul University Department of Government] for university studies if he had finished high school in Antakya).

During his first stay in Istanbul (1936–37), he attended the twelfth grade of the Pertevniyal Lisesi (Pertevniyal High School) and made acquaintance with Nurullah Atac (whom he would later harshly criticize for his role in the language reform) and Nazim Hikmet (for whom he translated a work by Joseph Stalin into Turkish from French). In any case, life proved to be harsh in Istanbul for a lonely young man, and because of financial difficulties Meriç had to return to Antakya, where he finished his secondary studies. After working as a schoolteacher in an Antakya village for a brief time in 1937, following his graduation from high school, he managed to find a job in the translation bureau of Iskenderun, where he directed a team that translated Turkish newspapers into French.

---


7. Meriç, “Türk Gençl.”
In 1938, after Hatay became an independent republic for a brief interval, he was sent to a small town as district governor (nahiye müdüru). The governor of Hatay duly dismissed him from his job after a month; in 1939 he was arrested for engaging in “communist activities.” The content of these activities was next to nothing, it seems, and after spending two months in prison during his trial, he was set free. He chose to return to Istanbul in 1940.

Meriç began his university education in the School of Foreign Languages (Yabancı Diller Okulu) in Istanbul that year. The school was designed to offer two years of language education in Turkey, followed by two years of practical studies abroad. However, he could not be sent abroad because World War II was being fought and was instead appointed as a French teacher to the Elaziğ High School in eastern Anatolia. Just before he went to Elaziğ, he married Fevziye Menteşoğlu, who was a teacher of geography, several years older than he.

In 1945, he had to return from Elaziğ to Istanbul because of his wife’s health problems. In 1946 he was accepted as a reader of French at Istanbul University. He eventually retired from there in 1974.8

Meriç’s university job, together with the steady nature of his marriage, gave a semblance of normality to his turbulent life. But the apparent normality was cut short in 1954 when he lost his sight. He had had progressive myopia since the age of four, and his hectic (almost superhuman) schedule of constant readings did not help either.

He went through a period of serious depression after a visit to Paris and a subsequent operation did not restore his sight. Thanks to the support of his family and students, he managed to return to his studies and in the 1950s published a number of translations from French literature. In the late 1950s, he prepared and published a French grammar book for Turks and began his studies of Indian literature. His interest in Indian literature and philosophy enormously influenced his later and more important publications. In one of his later publications he explicitly says that until studying Indian literature and philosophy, his understanding of culture and civilizations was essentially Eurocentric:


[Up to the 1960s, my curiosity was directed to Europe. In my geography there was no Asia. . . . (Discovering) India meant the discovery of Asia for me. An Asia, perceived from Europe, in the European perspective, but in the end, Asia. I mean to say that in this new world, too, my guides were Europeans; my first master was Romain Roland. . . . However, the spell had been broken, and I realized that there were other Europes in history as well.]

After publishing his book on Indian literature in 1964,10 Meriç began to examine one of the earliest modern socialist thinkers, Saint-Simon. His book on Saint-Simon11 was followed by a number of very important publications in the 1970s and early 1980s in which he began to talk about the problematic nature of Turkish modernization. In other words, after a serious engagement in Indian literature and French philosophy, Meriç returned to the study of Turkish history and culture with decisive effect.

His highly original criticisms of Republican ideology and of the naive belief of the Turkish bureaucratic elite in “progressing” by authoritarian measures led during this later period to various accusations being directed against him, to claims that he had begun his intellectual adventure from the “left” and decided to settle on the “right” in his later years. These, in my opinion, were shallow criticisms that missed the essence and scope of his cultural critique of Turkish society. In fact, the words left and right did not mean much to Meriç, who asserted force-

8. During his stay at the university, he also lectured in the Department of Sociology.
9. Meriç, Mağaradakiler, 322.
10. See Meriç, Bir Dünya’nın Eşiğinde, for a new printing of this book, which was originally published as Hint Edebiyati (Indian Literature).
fully, “İzm’ler idrakimiz gizdirilen deli göm-lekeri. İbibarları menselerinden geliyor. Hepsı de Avrupa’nın bu habs kelimerinden bize ne? Bu maskeli hay-dutları hafızalarımızdan kovmak ve kendi gerçek-iimizi kendii kelimerimizle anlayıp analımatık, her namuslu yazarın vicedan borcu.15

[Left-Right . . . two demons suckled by mad loves and unconscious venoms. Two strangers that are not related to the structure of our society at all. . . . Of what concern could those two malicious words of Europe be to us? Repelling those masked bandits from our memory and understanding and explaining our own reality with our own words are the intellectual responsibilities for any honorable author.]

It is important here to note that the term ideology for Meriç always means a system of thought devised in a specific part of the world during a specific period of history in order to answer the questions that essentially belong to the geography where that ideology was created. So it is not surprising that he opposes the usage of the terms left and right as universal categories to explain the problems of modern Turkey.

Meriç’s later publications (between 1974 and 1984) include important works such as Bu Ülke (This Country), Ümrandan Uygarlığa (From Social Life to Civilization), Mağaradakiler (Those in the Cave), and Bir Faciann Hikayesi (The Story of a Disaster).14 After this period of immense intellectual and publishing activity in the last fifteen years of his life, Meriç passed away in 1987.

In the early 1990s İttifak Yayınları published his notes for the lectures he gave in the Sociology Department of Istanbul University, in addition to his complete works and diaries. These were literary diaries intended for publication after his death.

Civilizations, Ideologies, and the Issue of Orientalism in the Works of Cemil Meriç

In one of the earliest entries to his diary in 1959, Meriç writes the following passage in which he attacks essentialist cultural classifications:


[The East-West conflict is an irrelevant conceptualization of the West. If West is (thought of as) the motherland of independent thought, then attimes East turned out to be West. Ibn Khaldun, who lived in the fourteenth century, is much more Western than Bossuet of the seventeenth century. (Emphasis added.)]
It is obvious that Meriç associates the term West with freethinking. Since freethinking and criticism do not need to be associated with any particular geography, various parts of the world may, in principle, be more “Western” than others in different periods of history, according to Meriç. As his understanding of the East and West does not contain any references to a particular geography (Europe) or religion (Christianity), Meriç feels himself free to occasionally criticize the Turkish intellectuals who implicitly make the assumption of linking the ideas of progress and science with Europe and Christianity (and obscurantism and backwardness with Islam and Asia). For instance, in one of the lectures he gave at Istanbul University, he says,


[A question such as “Is the religion of Islam a hindrance to progress?” displays the lack of sociological thinking (on the part of the questioner). Islam is an institution of superstructure. It was not an obstacle to the appearance of, say, Ibn Rushd or Ibn Khaldun. Islam is a hindrance to progress as much as Christianity is. Religion is a “wing” for a developing society and a “ballast” for a collapsing one. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire was because of social and economic reasons, and Islam had no role in that collapse. The feudal production system was routed by capitalism.]

One should carefully note that Islam is defined as an “institution of superstructure” in the passage above. It means that Meriç essentially accepted the Marxist distinction between the infrastructure and superstructure (at least in 1968 when he gave that lecture), which privileges the role of the modes of production and economic relations over other sociological factors in explaining social phenomena.

It should be clear to the reader that Meriç was very well read in Marxist literature, making occasional references to the writings of Marx and Engels. He talks about his acquaintance with Marxist literature in the following manner:

[First I got into my hands the Anti-Duhring, by Engels, in high school. Three volumes. All of the subjects related to socialism are included in this book. I read it carefully, even summarized it in approximately a hundred pages. I bought it in Aleppo. I read the Capital by Marx around that time as well... In my library, there was also an extract of the Capital published in Moscow.]

However, in my opinion, one should not overemphasize the role of Marxism in the thought of Meriç. Meriç uses Marxism basically as an analytical tool to attack the common assumptions made by the Turkish intelligentsia about European history and the superiority of European culture. In an important passage, he writes,


[Marxism created an intellectual revolution here (in Turkey) similar to the one accomplished by Descartes in the seventeenth century in Europe. It taught that Western thought is not a monolith of untouchable truths. There are lies that are made up by all classes, nations, and communities in order to protect themselves. (Before Marxism) we could not criticize the West unless we got permission from the West. Marxism gave us this permission. Thus, it smashed the chains tied to our conscious and broke the spell of Europe.]
In other words, Marxism acted as an agent of disenchantment (to borrow from Max Weber’s terminology) for Meriç, pointing to the contradictions and problems of European history. His thorough understanding of Marxism, in my opinion, is one of the reasons, which may explain Meriç’s success in leaving behind the dichotomous way of thinking about Turkish culture (religion versus science, obscurantism versus reason, and Empire versus the Republic). These dichotomies implicitly depended on a view that proposed the essential “correctness” of reason, science, and traditional Turkish culture. Marxism, it seems to me, helped Meriç to see that those supposedly monolithic entities were problematic and full of contradictions themselves.

Despite the importance he gave to Marxism in his writing, Meriç was no naive believer in Marxism. What he valued in Marxism was the use of dialectics as a technique of inquiry, not understanding as monolithic entities, vis-à-vis religion and tradition. Marxism, it seems to me, is one of the reasons, which may explain Meriç’s success in leaving behind the dichotomous way of thinking about Turkish culture (religion versus science, obscurantism versus reason, and Empire versus the Republic).

Markizm de dışardan gelen bütün ideolojiler gibi bir felaket kaynağı olmuştur. Çünkü, çocuklarımızın hazırlıklar(blindness)dır. Markizmin de bir ideoloji olduğunu bilmiyorlardı. Delikanlıklar çarptığı sloganları dünyaca geçerli bir hakikat sandılar. Oysa Markizm bir doktrin olmadan once, bir araştırma yöntemidir. Bir tekke şeyhi degildir Marx. Belli bir çağa, bellii bir bölgede yaşamış, her insan gibi, birçok zaflar olan bir düşünce adami.21

[Marxism has been a source of disaster like all the other ideologies of foreign origin because our children were unprepared. They did not know that Marxism is also an ideology. Youngsters thought of the distorted slogans as universal truths. However, Marxism, before being a doctrine, is a method of research. Marx was not a sheik of a dervish lodge. He was a man of thought, who lived in a certain age and region, with many weaknesses, like every human being.]

In fact, in various places in his works Meriç criticizes Turkish intellectuals for reading Marx religiously and creating an unnecessary dogma of Marxism.22 What he proposes, instead of following an ideology blindly, is to take a critical stance against all ideologies and make a thorough reading of them by comparing various ideologies with one another. Not unlike the old European humanists, he encourages the reader to read and think about the ideologies before following any one of them:

Hep birden eser-i safeline yuvurulmak istemiorsak, gözlerimizi açmalıyız. İnsanlar sloganla gündüler. Düşünceneye hürriyet, sonsuz hürriyet! Kitapta değil kitapçıklardan korkmalıyız. Bütün ideolojilere kapıları açmak, hepsini tanmak, hepsini tartışmak ve Türkiye’nin kaderini onların aynılığına, fakat tarihimizin büyük mirasına dayanarak inşa etmek. İşte en doğru yol.25

[We have to open our eyes wide if we do not want to fall into the deepest pit of hell. People cannot be herded with slogans. (There should be) freedom to think, an unlimited freedom! We should be afraid of the dearth of books, and not of the books. Leaving the doors open for all ideologies, understanding and discussing all of them, and building the future of Turkey in the light of those ideologies, depending on the great heritage of our history. This is the best way.]

Elsewhere he stresses that the only possible way of establishing a connection to European culture is to learn to analyze both the strengths and the weaknesses of that culture:


[From the Young Ottomans up to the young socialists, our whole intelligentsia has been sunk into stupidity. We imitated the West without understanding it. The remedy is to entirely understand the West: to know the entire social and economic history of the West. We can figure out the poisonous and beneficial sides of

Thinking about Turkish Modernization

I turn now to an issue of central importance in Meriç’s writings, namely, orientalism in its various versions. A decade before Edward Said published his original work on orientalism, Meriç wrote the following remarks in 1968:


[Orientalism was not founded in a day. And it does not operate in a single branch. The East, at first, was understood philologically. Ecole des langues orientales was founded in the beginning of the nineteenth century in France. Its first teacher was Silvestre de Sacy, who reigned in his academic field for fifty years in the West. Arabic études began with him. ... At the base of the Western curiosity toward the East, there is capitalism; it is not a purely scientific curiosity. It is the need of a growing class.]

When Said’s book Orientalism was published in the late 1970s, Meriç was so advanced in his analysis of orientalism that he dismissed some of Said’s ideas as exaggerations. 26 For example, in one of the entries he wrote in his diary in 1981, he says,


ruz, ne Suk-ul Ukra’yı. Ajan biz miyiz acaba, batılılar mı? 27

[I am thinking of William Jones’s translations of “Muallakat.” Then the accusations of Edward Said come to my mind: orientalists are agents. Perhaps this is true, but agents of what? The guy (William Jones) wrote a still respected grammar of the Persian language. He translated The History of Nader Shah into the language of Voltaire. He proved that Ottoman literature has an original place beside Persian and Arab literature. Is this what you call an agent? We are still unaware of a “History of Arab Literature” written fifty years ago. We know of neither İmr’ul Kays nor Suk-ul Ukra. So who are the agents, the Westerners or us?]

Moreover, in a lecture he gave at Bogazici University in 1981, Meriç made an important analytical distinction between the works of Western orientalists (for the sake of the argument, I call it “outward orientalism”) and the use of these works by the native, oriental intellectuals to classify their own people. I want to argue that these intellectuals look at their own society through orientalist lenses; their attitude might be called “inward orientalism” to distinguish it from the former. The destructive effect of the second phenomenon is much more important than the first one according to Meriç. Since he also compares the attitude of late Ottoman writers such as Ahmet Mithat Efendi about the West with the attitudes of some of the later Republican authors in the same lecture, I want to quote the relevant passage of the lecture here:


25. Ibid., 173.
Ahmet Mithat’tan sonra durum tersine döndü. Küçüldükçe küçüldük. Batı’nın iftiralarına, biz de yenilerini ekledik. Şark bir harabezardır, bir miskinler tekkesidir. Ali Canip da her makalesinde Şark aleyhtarıdır. Şark bir house in ruins, a lodge for the rotten. For both Ali Canip and Nazım Hikmet, the East is like that. Çetin Altan is fiercely opposed to the East in his every article. In this manner, we became not contented even with the (false) evaluations (about ourselves) made by the enemy and added new ones to those. However, there is neither a fixed prototype of the East nor a prototype of the West. It is not right to accuse all of the orientalists of lying and espionage. This would be confusing the cannibal Europe with the thinking Europe.

In brief, Meriç, it seems to me, produced from the 1960s onward an appealing and in some ways more perceptive version of the main thesis of Said on orientalism.

Turkish Language and Intellectuals in the Work of Cemil Meriç

Before I proceed to analyze Meriç’s ideas about the Turkish language and language reform, I want to make clear that, in my opinion, Meriç is one of the best stylists of the Turkish language in the twentieth century. In his writings he extensively uses aphorisms with striking effect and pushes the boundaries of the Turkish language to its limits by the widespread, and often brilliant, usage of irregular sentences (devrik cümle), where the regular verb does not appear at the end of the sentence, which is the general rule for a standard Turkish sentence. Moreover, he often conveys his ideas forcefully by using nominal sentences, which normally sound a bit unusual in Turkish. Also, his choice of vocabulary is extremely eclectic: he does not refrain from using any word of Persian, Arabic, or French origin in his prose if he thinks that it is the appropriate word for the context.

In a certain way, he is the embodiment of the worst nightmares of the Türk Dil Kurumu (Turkish Language Society): a very intelligent writer with an excellent command of several languages (including French, English, Arabic, and Persian) who does not care about “pure Turkish” and writes in an exciting, almost captivating, prose.

Meriç’s stylistic choices are not arbitrary in my opinion. He surprises his readers by his strange grammatical choices in order to make sure that they are always alert and awake, so to speak, while they are reading his unconventional theories and explanations. In other words, his unconventional literary style is an appropriate vehicle for the unconventional content of his ideas.

What does Meriç think about the self-appointed saviors of the Turkish language who engaged in so-called language reform from the mid-1930s on, purifying Turkish from the influence of Arabic and Persian, and created an Orwellian Newspeak in its stead? Essentially he thinks that the Turkish language must be saved from its saviors.

29. The society is an ideological institution formed in the early years of the Turkish Republic with the intention of “purifying” the Turkish language.
Meriç is a believer in **continuities** in the realms of language and culture, and one of his harshest criticisms against the Republican elite is that they do not have this sense of continuity:

Turkish is a language that has existed for centuries, but the Republican elite seems to have lost sight of its origins. They do not have a sense of continuity from their own history and culture, which is characteristic of a nation: **continuity**. When the ulema left the stage, a new class of bureaucrats emerged: the men of Tanzimat. It was a natural evolution of the historical memory of the Turkish society. In reality, there is no language problem; there is the problem of alienation, of alteration, and of the intelligentsia’s becoming an enemy to its own society. In Turkey, the people read their own books and the intelligentsia read the books of the West. Of course, they would be ashamed of speaking a language that would be understood by the people. Also, they could not tolerate the vocabulary of the Koran.

As the above quotation demonstrates, Meriç’s ideas about the language reform are closely related to his ideas about the alienation of the Turkish intelligentsia from Turkish society, which, according to Meriç, started with the appearance of a new type of bureaucrat in the wake of the Tanzimat reforms, replacing the old class of the ulema:


When the ulema left the stage, a new class came to the forefront, a new group of people who have seen Europe, who have been educated in European schools, who know Europe superficially, who have some contact with the embassies, and who have been trained in the translation bureaus: the men of Tanzimat. It was the turn of this newly emerging intelligentsia to

---

31. The hilarious neology Meriç uses to ridicule the pure language of the Turkish Language Society is Uyduhra. I chose to translate it as “Newspeak.”
32. Meriç, Sosyoloji Notları ve Konferanslar, 295.
33. Ibid., 392.
This newly emerging intelligentsia was “European" in a rather shallow sense. They wanted to act and live like Europeans, imitating European dress and manners. Otherwise, they were not genuinely familiar with European thought and philosophy. Meriç ruthlessly emphasizes one characteristic they shared with the ulama: they were both uncritical imitators.


[The class of the ulama in the Ottoman state was repeating the Koran, the hadith, and the earlier imams and mujtahids. The intellectuals after the Tanzimat were also repeating, this time they were repeating the European authors . . . The second group . . . was facing a foreign culture. It was difficult for them to sort out and criticize this culture. This was a culture that grew in a foreign world in circumstances unknown to them.] In another striking passage in his diaries, Meriç criticizes the cultural reforms of the Mustafa Kemal era:


[Dünya’nın bütünumarhaneleri bizim intelijansıyanın kafatası yanında birer akli selim mihrabı. Cemiyet tek mi’e dayalı: Atatürk miti. Başka bağ yok. Imparatorluğun birbirine dünman etnik unsurlarından murekkep yamaç bohça dikiş yerlerinden ayrılarlı beri biz kendii kendimiz dümman insanlar haline geldik. Mazi yok, tarihımıza tanımyoruz . . . İnsanları bir araya getiren hiçbir ideoloji doğmadı. Nihayet dil de gitti elden. Türk milleti. Hangi millet? Milliyetçiyiz. Hangi milliyetçilik?] [Every madhouse in the world is a source of common sense compared to the head of our intelligentsia. Society depends on a single myth: the myth of Atatürk. There is no other bond. Since the patchwork of the Empire, which was composed of ethnic elements hostile to one another disintegrated in its seams, we have become our own enemy. There is no past, we do not know of our history. . . . No ideology arose that could unite the people. In the end, we also lost the language. Turkish nation. Which nation? We are nationalists. Which nationalism?]
of the “chief” in fidelity. History, however, cannot be buried. It is an indestructible witness with its buildings, streets, museums, and graves. Then it was the turn of the language. The new alphabet was indeed an axe skewered at the back of the tradition, the tradition of spiritual knowledge. Thessalonians, the Turks coming from Russia, and the young toadies eager to gain the favors of the chief made an incredible effort to destroy the language. Mustafa Kemal understood that the issue later bordered on charlatanry, but it was too late.]

Does Meriç offer a solution to the imbro-glio of Turkish culture in the post-Republican era? Apparently he does not. In fact, he stresses that ready-made solutions and magical formulas of reform do not work in the realm of culture:

Ben, herhangi bir tarikatın sözcüsü değilim. Yani, ilan edilecek hazır bir formülüm yok. Derslerimde de, konușmalarımda da tekrarladığım ve darağacına kadar tekrarlayacağım tek hakkı kat: her düşünceye saygı.37

[I am not the spokesman for any religious order. I mean I do not have any ready-made formula to declare. The only truth that I have repeated in my courses and speeches, and the only one that I will repeat until (I am sent to) the gallows: respect for every idea.]

The above passage, I believe, is the best possible way of summarizing the complex stance of an intellectual of such high caliber as Meriç.

Conclusion

Meriç offers a highly interesting critique of the modernization process of Turkey beginning from the Tanzimat era. His impact on the intellectual progress of the conservative intellectuals of Turkey in the 1980s coincided with the rise of a conservative middle class in Turkey (thanks to the economic shift of Turkey from import substitutive industrialization to export-led growth during the Turgut Ozal period), which provided the necessary readership to this rising new intellectual class. It is not surprising to see that these new intellectuals such as Ali Bulac, Mustafa Armagan, and Ahmet Turan Alkan eagerly ac-

37. Meriç, Bu Ülke, 53.