

ARTICLE

A Strategic Eurocentrism: The Construction of Ottoman Evolutionism in an Uneven World (1870–1900)

Daniel Kolland 

Institute of Ottoman Studies and Turcology, Freie Universität Berlin
Email: daniel.kolland@fu-berlin.de

(Received 20 January 2023; revised 3 July 2023; accepted 6 August 2023)

Istanbul's intellectual life saw an evolutionist paradigm shift during the Hamidian period (1876–1908). Two generations of intellectuals used their privileged education and the burgeoning printing press to popularize evolutionism to advance global and local claims. On the one hand, selective readings of evolutionism allowed them to claim Ottoman adherence to a superior Caucasian race and to claim belonging to the circle of “civilized nations.” On the other hand, by hailing themselves champions of a new positivist age, oppositional evolutionists sought to challenge the Hamidian establishment and the kind of Islam it represented. Because examinations of Ottoman evolutionism in the Hamidian period reveal the interconnections between new globalized ways of ordering the world, the rise of new Ottoman elites, and conflicting strategies to guarantee imperial survival in the asymmetrical age of empire, they allow transcending narratives centered on the (ir)reconcilability of Islam and evolutionary theories.

Today, we do not unquestioningly accept studies and theories that were once established by scholars about sciences and laws; new scientific progresses have revealed other scientific truths to us. In fact, sciences that have been known since ancient times [*devr-i kadīm*] have been shaken to the core.¹

In 1894, an Ottoman journalist praised evolutionism as a revolutionary paradigm shift in conceptions of creation and human nature. In line with this theory, he argued that “morality and virtues” (*aḥlāk ve faẓā'il*)—the social glue of “civilization”—were not innate to humans but predicated on physiological dispositions that have evolved over hundreds of years.² To illustrate this, his article contrasted the brains of newly “civilized savages” (*mütemeddin vaḥşiler*) in North America to those of contemporary Ottomans. While Ottoman brains were perfectly disposed

¹Kadri, “İlm-i Aḥlāk Ḥaqqında Mütala'a,” *Servet-i Fünun* 191 (Nov. 1894), 133–4, at 133.

²Note on transliteration: unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Ottoman Turkish are by the author. For people's names, I have used simplified transliteration (only 'ayn and hamza). For titles of books, periodicals, and journal articles, as well as direct quotations from texts, I have transliterated according to the guidelines suggested by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*.

© The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

to exert “good moral qualities” (*ahlāk-ı hasene*) because Ottomans had been grappling with ethics and moral philosophy for centuries, indigenous peoples were incapable of doing so. Even if they learned European languages and mastered intellectually demanding professions, the article reasoned, their brains are still physiologically too inept for *good moral qualities*. Emphasizing this interrelation between civilized behavior and cerebral evolution over centuries, the journalist asked, “Does that mean that brains of those humans who progress in civilization grow and evolve in quantity and quality? There is no doubt about that.”³ Ultimately, this text from 1894 shows that Ottoman intellectuals used evolutionism as a new lens not only to explain nature and human differences but also to make new claims about their own place in an uneven world.

To date, historiography has studied evolutionism in the Muslim, Turkish-speaking parts of Ottoman society during the Hamidian period (1876–1908) mainly from two sides: either as the project of socially marginal, highly educated but ultimately scientifically inept and delusional oppositional figures in exile, or as something contemporary intellectuals perceived as a menace to Ottoman society because it either undermined the Islamic moral order of society or reduced Turks to the rank of an inferior Asiatic race.⁴ While building on this scholarship, I will foreground the versatility and political usefulness of evolutionism and argue that this paradigm was actually more popular in late Ottoman society than has previously been suggested.⁵ To do that, I go beyond historically

³Kadri, “İlm-i Ahlāk Hakkında Mütâla’a,” 134.

⁴On scientifically inept evolutionists see Atila Doğan, *Osmanlı Aydınları ve Sosyal Darwinizm* (Istanbul, 2007), 335–7; on the marginal see M. Alper Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots: Debating Science, State, and Society in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire* (Chicago, 2015), 179; on oppositional figures see M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (New York and Oxford, 1995); M. Ş. Hanioglu, “Garbcılar: Their Attitudes toward Religion and Their Impact on the Official Ideology of the Turkish Republic,” *Studia Islamica* 86 (1997), 133–58; Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Vorkämpfer der “Neuen Türkei”: Revolutionäre Bildungseliten am Genfersee (1870–1939)* (Zurich, 2005); on undermining Islamic moral order see Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots*; on anti-Muslim racism see Cemil Aydın, *The Politics of Anti-westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York, 2007); Renee Worringer, *Ottomans Imagining Japan: East, Middle East, and Non-Western Modernity at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2014).

⁵This scholarship can be roughly divided into two strands: first, scholarship on individual thinkers engaging with evolutionism: Deniz Gültekin, *Osmanlı Düşünce Dünyasında Evrim Teorisi Tartışmaları* (Istanbul, 2020); Serdar Poyraz, “Science versus Religion: The Influence of European Materialism on Turkish Thought, 1860–1960” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio State University, Columbus, 2010). See also earlier studies: Murtaza Korlaelçi, *Pozitivizmin Türkiye’ye Girişi* (Istanbul, 1986); Mehmet Akgün, *Materyalizmin Türkiye’ye Girişi* (Ankara, 2005); Hilmi Ziya Ülken, *Türkiye’de Çağdaş Düşünce Tarihi* (1966) (Istanbul, 2013). For more recent articles elucidating isolated episodes of Turkish-language evolutionism see İnan Kalaycıoğulları, “The Birth of the New Perception of Humankind from Şemseddin Sami to Ahmed Nebil,” *Felsefe ve Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 21/3 (2016), 181–96; Murat Öner, “Osmanlı’da İnsanın Kökeni ve Evrimine Dair Tartışmalar,” *Kebikeç* 41 (2016), 367–88; Mehmet Ö. Alkan, “Osmanlı Darwinizmi,” *Cogito* 60–61 (2009), 1–26. The second strand consists of studies charting German vulgar-materialist and positivist ideas in the ideological makeup of the oppositional Young Turk movement: Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition*; M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Atatürk: An Intellectual Biography* (Princeton, 2011); M. Ş. Hanioglu, “Blueprints for a Future Society: Late Ottoman Materialists on Science, Religion, and Art,” in Elisabeth Özdalga, ed., *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy* (London and New York, 2005), 28–116. On Ottoman positivism see M. S. Özervarlı, “Positivism in the Late Ottoman Empire: The ‘Young Turks’ as Mediators and Multipliers,” in Johannes

contentious or overly narrow categories such as (vulgar) materialism, social Darwinism, and positivism and present a more capacious and inclusive concept of evolutionism as a science-based belief in the physiological mutability and perfectibility of every creature according to universal laws over millions of years.⁶ This new and more encompassing concept not only allows engaging with Ottoman encyclopedists, *littérateurs*, teachers, and pedagogues who have conventionally not been considered “evolutionist” because they do not neatly fit into historiographical categories. It also reveals the porous, dynamic, and contested nature of Turkish-language intellectual life during the Hamidian era, thereby providing a fresh look at an epoch often reduced to a stifling censorship regime that was, in its flexibility, still far from total.⁷ Consequently, I argue that Ottoman evolutionism entailed three major (and interconnected) intellectual shifts: first, a rising belief in a science-driven cosmological paradigm shift that reformatted and even sidelined inherited concepts of nature; second, a new concept of humankind as historical and evolving even long *after* creation; and third, the concept of unequal evolution in time according to which the “white race,” to which many Ottomans claimed to belong, was superior to other races.

This appeal of West and Central European evolutionist theories to Ottoman intellectuals should not be misread as the irresistible triumph of modern sciences. Nor is this a reiteration of diffusionist notions of “European civilization” as the sole motor of world-historical transformations.⁸ Wary of such readings, historians studying the globalization of ideas have warned against retroactively explaining the globalization of West European ideas such as evolutionism as predetermined

Feichtinger, Franz L. Fillafer, and Jan Surman, eds., *The Worlds of Positivism: A Global Intellectual History, 1770–1930* (Cham, 2018), 81–110; Erdal Kaynar, *L'héroïsme de la vie moderne: Ahmed Rıza (1858–1930) en son temps* (Paris and Louvain, 2021); Banu Turnaoğlu, “The Positivist Universalism and Republicanism of the Young Turks,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14/3 (2017), 777–805; Enes Kabakçı, “Entre l’universel et national: Les usages du positivisme dans l’empire Ottoman (1895–1923),” in Güneş Işıksel, Emmanuel Szurek, and François Georgeon, eds., *Turcs et Français: Une histoire Culturelle, 1860–1960* (Rennes, 2014), 99–114.

⁶Even if Şeyma Afacan has recently vindicated the analytical potential of the materialism concept in revealing how certain Ottoman intellectuals reconceptualized the human body and mind, this concept still is analytically too specific to grasp all the phenomena under discussion in this article. Şeyma Afacan, “Idle Souls, Regulated Emotions of a Mind Industry: A New Look at Ottoman Materialism,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 32/3 (2021), 317–53. The analytical narrowness of the materialism concept is also owed to the term’s historical contentiousness, as Alper Yalçınkaya has shown. In the 1880s, “materialists” (*mâddiyyûn*) became a pejorative label for young, male, elite-school students who study the wrong kind of sciences and thereby subvert “Islamic morality.” Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots*. The concept of social Darwinism is equally problematic—albeit for another reason. Considering that the intellectuals under scrutiny saw “social” and “natural” phenomena as by default inextricably entangled, the social Darwinism label implies an anachronistic differentialization between categories of “nature” and “society.” This has also been argued by Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago, 2014), at 320. Lastly, in contrast to previous scholarship that has misleadingly treated positivism as apart from evolutionism, this article argues that they were part of the same intellectual current.

⁷On Hamidian censorship see İpek K. Yosmaoğlu, “Chasing the Printed Word: Press Censorship in the Ottoman Empire, 1876–1913,” *Turkish Studies Association Journal* 27/1–2 (2003), 15–49; Ebru Boyar, “The Press and the Palace: The Two-Way Relationship between Abdülhamid II and the Press, 1876–1906,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 69/3 (2006), 417–32.

⁸For one of most prominent critiques of the diffusionist paradigm see James M. Blaut, *Geographical Diffusionism and Eurocentric History* (New York, 1993).

by their “built-in universality.”⁹ Moreover, they have cautioned against reducing those non-Western historical actors who engaged with said “universal” ideas to “avatars of Eurocentrism” whose subaltern agency was limited to redeeming these ideas’ universal potential.¹⁰ A global-history perspective addresses such misconceptions. Rejecting notions of “built-in universality,” the approach asks instead for the reasons why ideas became appealing to intellectuals across the world. It thereby shifts analytical focus away from the ideas themselves to the global structures, conditions, moments, and actors that propelled the circulation of ideas in *transnational intellectual fields*.¹¹ Global history thereby overcomes both the producer–recipient binaries and the logic of “first in Europe, then elsewhere” that have haunted many non-Western intellectual histories.¹²

That Ottoman intellectuals participated in the globalization of evolutionism was not owed to its inherent universality but to expediency; the paradigm was key to their own political, social, and intellectual projects. Evolutionism was not only an ideological alternative to the pan-Islamic ideology of Sultan–Caliph Abdülhamid II. It was also, more generally, a strategic response to the Ottoman “problem-space.” Anthropologist David Scott introduced the concept of “problem-space” to grasp an “ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological–political stakes) hangs.”¹³ Reminding us thereby that any idea always is an intervention to a historically specific context of argument, Scott pushes us to reconsider Ottoman evolutionism as more than a motley of disparate utterances but as addressing a particular *fin de siècle* Ottoman problem-space. It consisted of questions of Ottoman and Islamic decline, global unevenness, fears of colonialism, negotiations of imperial and national identity, challenges to inherited epistemologies, and matters of societal reform. Many of those intellectuals who based their answers to this Ottoman problem-space on evolutionism saw in it one of the most versatile and powerful discursive devices of global positioning.¹⁴ They spoke in a Eurocentric “lingua franca that promised to endow their ideas with universal validity,” all the while sidelining Islamic hermeneutics and endorsing Eurocentric power hierarchies.¹⁵

⁹Samuel Moyn, “On the Nonglobalization of Ideas,” in Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori, eds., *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013), 187–204, at 190.

¹⁰Cemil Aydin, “Globalizing the Intellectual History of the Idea of the ‘Muslim World’,” in Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*, 159–86, at 160.

¹¹For this perspective see Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton and Oxford, 2016); Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *American Historical Review* 117/4 (2012), 999–1026; Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*. For the concept of transnational intellectual fields see Christopher L. Hill, “Conceptual Universalization in the Transnational 19th Century,” in Moyn and Sartori, *Global Intellectual History*, 134–58.

¹²Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2009), 6.

¹³David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC, 2004), 4. I thank the anonymous reviewer for bringing this analytically useful concept to my attention.

¹⁴On *race* as a device for global positioning see Christian Geulen, “The Common Grounds of Conflict: Racial Visions of World Order 1880–1940,” in Sebastian Conrad and Dominic Sachsenmaier, eds., *Competing Visions of World Order: Global Moments and Movements, 1880s–1930s* (New York and Basingstoke, 2007), 69–96.

¹⁵Citation from Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History,” 1022.

This deliberate Eurocentrism on the part of many Ottoman evolutionists thereby neither was an instance of “subaltern fulfillment,”¹⁶ nor should it be understood as proof of Islam’s innate incompatibility with this paradigm; it was a strategic choice by historical actors. Seizing on evolutionism’s claims to scientific truth to delineate new universalist frameworks that transcended notions of East (*şark*) and West (*garb*), Ottoman intellectuals remolded concepts of society, race, nature, universal laws, and history. These reformatted concepts were instrumental for challenging the Ottoman Empire’s imagined subaltern rank in an asymmetrical world order as well as for prescribing new theories of social and intellectual transformation to their compatriots. To conclude, I offer a new account of one of the most momentous paradigm shifts in late Ottoman intellectual life that studies Ottoman evolutionism neither as a default function of the universalism of Western ideas nor as a failed appropriation, but foregrounds the social actors who used evolutionism in strategically Eurocentric ways as they tried to save the Ottoman Empire.

New global orders and new orders of nature

Islamic conceptions of creation were underpinned by the Neoplatonic notion of a cosmic *great chain of being*. It ascribed to every being a fixed place in a vertically imagined and static hierarchy of beings. The top of the ladder constituted God’s divine, perfect essence, and each creature on this ladder possessed a share of the divine essence that was relative to its rank on the ladder. In this larger scheme, humans took a middle position below angelic beings and above all animals, plants, and minerals, who were deemed the lowest creatures on the chain.¹⁷ Islamic metaphysics imagined a species’ position on the great chain of being as immutable—even if medieval Islamic philosophers insisted on the innate perfectibility of humans and even though Sufi Islam discussed the soul’s cyclical ascent and descent on this ladder, from mineral to perfect human (*al-insān al-kāmil*) and back.¹⁸ Such schemes were not only purely metaphysical but also limited to the individual; they deemed a species’ rising or falling on the ladder of creation unthinkable.

This order of nature came under attack in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western Europe, which had largely shared this cosmology. An understanding of creation as dynamic and evolutionary incrementally replaced the concept of a static hierarchy of creatures. The findings of new scientific disciplines such as geology, zoology, anthropology, and biology suggested new concepts of nature as historical and shaped by (autonomous) natural laws over a time span of millions of years. Evolutionist conceptions downplayed divine design, providence, and miracles; in

¹⁶Moyn, “On the Nonglobalization of Ideas,” 191.

¹⁷Aziz al-Azmeh, *Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies* (London, 1986), 4–6; Shoaib Ahmad Malik, *Islam and Evolution: Al-Ghazālī and the Modern Evolutionary Paradigm* (London, 2021), 155–73.

¹⁸The purely metaphysical nature of these imaginations was most convincingly argued in Malik, *Islam and Evolution* (Ch. 5); and William C. Chittick, “The Evolutionary Psychology of Jalal al-Din Rumi,” in Peter J. Chelkowski, ed., *Crafting the Intangible: Persian Literature and Mysticism* (Salt Lake City, 2013), 70–90. With regard to Sufi concepts of the soul’s cyclical rise and fall see Abdullah Uçman, “Devir Nazariyesi ve Osmanlı Tasavvuf Edebiyatında Devriyeler,” in Ahmet Y. Ocak, ed., *Osmanlı toplumunda tasavvuf ve sufiler: Kaynaklar, doktrin, ayin ve erkân, tarikatlar, edebiyat, mimari, güzel sanatlar, modernizm* (Ankara, 2005), 575–625; Mehmet Bayrakdar, “Tekamül Nazariyesi,” in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, 338–39, at <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/tekamul-nazariyesi> (accessed 5 May 2023).

their most extreme interpretations they even ruled out divine agency.¹⁹ Similarly, as the evolutionary paradigm inspired scholars to insert the human into new and more expansive chronologies, they also began to question the validity of scripture as the ultimate reference point for the origins of human creation.

From the 1850s onwards, Ottoman intellectuals became increasingly familiar with the controversial discussions on nature, creation, and the human happening in contemporary Christian Europe.²⁰ This heightened familiarity with science debates in Western Europe had been the function of changing geopolitical realities since the eighteenth century. These new realities had prompted the Ottoman elite to embark on the Tanzimat reforms (1839–1876), an imperial reform project, unprecedented in scope, that pursued political, economic, and intellectual integration into the European concert of powers as an equal partner among the “civilized nations” (*mile-i mütemeddine*).²¹ Crystallizing in this problem-space of Ottoman adjustments to a new Eurocentric global order, Ottoman engagements with Western European evolutionist ideas were underpinned by a painful sense that Ottoman “scientific works only conform to the old way [*eski yolda*]; however total and encompassing they may be, they are not enough anymore ... in this new age of science.”²² These words by partly Berlin University-educated Münif Pasha (1830–1910) reflected his sense of mission.

As director of the Ottoman Scientific Society (*Cem'iyet-i 'İlmiye-i 'Osmaniye*) and editor of its mouthpiece, *Mecmū'a-ı Fünūn* (Journal of Applied Sciences) (1862–83), Münif Pasha channeled all his energy into familiarizing Ottoman citizens with new and distinctly secular branches of science crystallizing in Western European universities.²³ *Mecmū'a-ı Fünūn*'s encyclopedic articles propagated a conception of nature that sidelined supernatural causation in the explanation of physical phenomena and insisted on the rational investigation of natural laws.²⁴

¹⁹Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA, 1961), 244–70; Wolf Lepenies, *Das Ende der Naturgeschichte: Wandel kultureller Selbstverständlichkeiten in den Wissenschaften des 18. und 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich, 1976); Bowler, *Evolution*; Jan Sapp, *Genesis: The Evolution of Biology* (Oxford and New York, 2003).

²⁰On Ottoman engagements with scientific cultures in Christian Europe see Miri Shefer-Mossensohn, *Science among the Ottomans: The Cultural Creation and Exchange of Knowledge*, 1st edn (Austin, 2015); Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, *Studies on Ottoman Science and Culture* (Abingdon and New York, 2013); Berrak Burçak, “Science, a Remedy for All Ills: Healing ‘The Sick Man of Europe’. A Case for Ottoman Scientism” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2005); Kenan Tekin, “Reforming Categories of Science and Religion in the Late Ottoman Empire” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, New York, 2016); Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots*; Aret Karademir, “The Introduction of Modern Western Philosophy in the Ottoman Empire: Armenian Thinkers,” *Modern Intellectual History* (2023), at <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244323000136>.

²¹See the Reform Edict from 1856. Akram Fouad Khater, *Sources in the History of the Modern Middle East* (Boston, MA, 2011), 14.

²²“Sa'adetlü Münif Efendi Hâzretlerinin Nuḫkuydur,” *Takvīm-i Vakāyī*, 1192 (Feb. 1870), 3.

²³On Münif Paşa see Ali Budak, *Batılılaşma Sürecinde Çok Yönlü Bir Osmanlı Aydını: Münif Paşa* (Istanbul, 2012); M. Kayahan Özgül, *XIX. asrın benzersiz bir politekniki: Münif Paşa* (Istanbul, 2014). On the secular nature of the Ottoman Scientific Society see the manifest that states that the society “would be bereft ... of religious questions.” Münif, “Cem'iyet-i 'İlmiye-i 'Osmaniye,” *Mecmū'a-ı Fünūn* 1 (July 1862), 2.

²⁴On *Mecmū'a-ı Fünūn* see especially Cemil Aydın, “Mecmua-ı Fünun Ve Mecmua-ı Ulum Dergilerinin Medeniyet ve Bilim Anlayışı” (unpublished master's thesis, İstanbul Üniversitesi, İstanbul, 1995).

Beyond introducing numerous new scientific disciplines to its Ottoman readers, the monthly also became the main popularizer of a new narrative of scientific progress.²⁵ The periodical instilled a belief—ideologically far from undisputed, however—in a linearly progressing universal civilization with Western Europe as civilization’s current apogee.²⁶ Among the new sciences, Münif Pasha particularly championed geology for its revolutionary potential to reveal chronologies that would correct scriptural calculations of the Earth’s age.²⁷

While it was in the tumultuous and transformative context of the late Tanzimat period that Istanbul saw the first evolutionist articulations and even its first public controversy, evolutionism only gained wider traction in Ottoman society during the reign of Abdülhamid II (1876–1908).²⁸ As will be emphasized, evolutionism became popular both because and in spite of the Hamidian regime’s ideological pivot to a more Islamic Ottomanism.²⁹ This pivot was owed both to new demographic realities after the loss of many Christian subjects in the Balkans as a result of the humiliating Russo-Turkish War (1877–78) and to Ottoman frustrations at European imperialism after France and Britain’s occupations of Tunisia and Egypt. Consequently, Abdülhamid II propagated a more prudent reform formula that imagined material (*mâddî*) “civilizational progress” against the foil of conditions in Western Europe while diligently preserving the spiritual (*ma’nevî*) bond to Islamic civilization (*medeniyet-i islâmiye*).³⁰ Islamic civilization was a new concept that gained popularity as a reaction to the new colonialist geopolitical realities.³¹ Because the regime also used this ideological shift to justify the suspension of the Constitution of 1876 and autocracy, which was underwritten by the secret police and strict censorship, politically disgruntled intellectuals in

²⁵See Münif, “Muḳâyese-i ‘İlim ve Cehil,” *Mecmû‘a-ı Fünûn* 1 (June 1862), 22–6. For a history of this discourse of temporal progress see Daniel Kolland, “The Making and Universalization of New Time: A History of the Late Ottoman-Turkish Magazine *Şervet-i Fünûn* (1891–1914)” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, 2021), 50–80.

²⁶On ideologically competing Ottoman science journals such as *Mecmû‘a-ı ‘İber-i İntibâh* and *Mir‘at* see Asil, “The Pursuit of the Modern Mind,” 70–71.

²⁷Burçak, “Science, a Remedy for All Ills,” 89. That Münif Pasha’s “big-history” vision was far from uncontroversial, however, can be gauged from polymath and Molière translator Ahmed Vefik’s (1823–91) insistence on the seven thousand years indicated in scripture. Ahmed Vefik, *Hikmet-i Ta’rih* 1 (Istanbul, 1863), 4–8.

²⁸On this controversy see Ahmed Midhat’s evolutionist writings in *Dağarcık* and the ensuing harsh criticism by religious scholars. Burçak, “Science, a Remedy for All Ills,” 103; Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots*, 115–18.

²⁹For the concept of “Islamic Ottomanism” see Julia P. Cohen, “Jewish Imperial Citizenship in the Hamidian Era: Between Civic and Islamic Ottomanism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44/2 (2012), 237–55. See also Kemal H. Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State* (Oxford, 2001).

³⁰Carter V. Findley, “An Ottoman Occidental in Europe: Ahmed Midhat Meets Madame Gülnar, 1889,” *American Historical Review* 103/1 (1998), 15–49, at 23; Aydın, *The Politics of Anti-westernism in Asia*, 39–71; Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (London, 1998); Benjamin C. Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford, 2003).

³¹Cemil Aydın, “Beyond Civilization: Pan-Islamism, Pan-Asianism, and the Revolt against the West,” in Lütfi Sunar, ed., *Debates on Civilization in the Muslim World: Critical Perspectives on Islam and Modernity* (Oxford, 2016), 144–70.

Istanbul started to look for alternative ideologies and sources of intellectual authority; they often found this alternative in evolutionism.³² Their secular accounts of humankind, as well as the novel epistemological nexus between physiological evolution and civilizational progress, which ultimately affirmed a colonial and Eurocentric world, should be seen in this light.

Towards evolutionist visions of the world

Few were as qualified to translate Western European evolutionist ideas to a largely Muslim audience as publicist Şemseddin Sami (Frashëri, 1850–1904).³³ He was a devout Muslim, Ottoman patriot, and scholar of Islam and Islamic history while unambiguously hailing nineteenth-century Western Europe as synonymous with the “civilized world” (*‘âlem-i medeniyet*) and “modern civilization” (*medeniyet-i hâzıra*). Sami praised modern civilization in his newspaper, lexica, and numerous pocketbooks as a truly “universal” (*‘umûmî*) and indestructible civilization that was the product of Europe’s victory over religious fanaticism and of “positive philosophy” (*felsefe-i müsbete*)—a science-based and rational philosophy of “future centuries” that “will render all former philosophies obsolete.”³⁴ Beyond contrasting Western Europe to Islamic nations in which “obsolete beliefs” (*efkâr-ı bâtıla*) had become so widespread that merely studying the heavens was decried as “blasphemy” (*küfür*), he noted in exasperation that *Islamic civilization* was inferior to *modern civilization* like a “charcoal drawing on a wall next to a tableau by famous painter Raphael.”³⁵ Nevertheless, he had no doubts that Islam was conducive to scientific progress and that scientific inquiry “strengthens the belief.”³⁶ Sami sought to define Islam “as a repository of guidelines” and objectified it as a “delimitable entity” separate from—but technically reconcilable with—the domain of (secular) science.³⁷ Similarly, to make these “guidelines” more accessible, he went so far as to author a Turkish translation of the Quran and a new exegesis (*tefsîr-i cedîd*) in the 1890s. The Shaykh al-Islam rejected both, however.³⁸ Two decades earlier, Sami had penned the evolutionist books *İnsân* (Human) (1878/9) and *Yine İnsân* (Again Human) (1885/6) while following this same project of imparting a

³²This, of course, has already been argued by Şerif Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasî Fikirleri, 1895–1908* (Ankara, 1964). More recent is the assessment that also Ottoman Salafism emerged as opposition to Abdülhamid II. See Itzhak Weismann, “Between Şüfî Reformism and Modernist Rationalism: A Reappraisal of the Origins of the Salafîyya from the Damascene Angle,” *Die Welt des Islams* 41/2 (2001), 206–37.

³³On Sami see Yüksel Topaloğlu, *Şemseddin Sami: Süreli yayınlarda çıkmış “Dil ve edebiyat yazıları”; inceleme—metin* (Istanbul, 2012); George W. Gawrych, *The Crescent and the Eagle: Ottoman Rule, Islam and the Albanians, 1874–1913* (London, 2006), 72–139; İsmail Kara and Zeynep Süslü, “Şemseddin Sami’nin ‘Medeniyet’e Dair Dört Makalesi,” *Kutadgubilik* 4 (2003), 259–81.

³⁴On indestructible modern civilization see Şemseddin Sâmî, “Medeniyet: 3,” *Hafta* 11 (Oct. 1881), 165; Şemseddin Sâmî, “Felsefe,” *Hafta* 9 (Oct. 1881), 147.

³⁵Şemseddin Sâmî, *Gök* (Istanbul, 1296 (1878/9)), 14. Quotation from Şemseddin Sâmî, “Medeniyet-i Cedidenin Ümem-i İslâmiyeye Nakli,” *Güneş* 4 (probably 1884), 179.

³⁶Citation from Sâmî, *Gök*, 14.

³⁷Alper Yalçınkaya, “‘Science,’ ‘Religion,’ and ‘Science-and-Religion’ in the Late Ottoman Empire,” *Zygon* 54/4 (2019), 1050–66, at 1057.

³⁸M. Brett Wilson, *Translating the Qur’an in an Age of Nationalism: Print Culture and Modern Islam in Turkey* (Oxford, 2014), 108–10.

new view of the history of creation that acknowledged divine providence (*yed-i kudret*) and denied supernatural forces any analytical value in the explanation of creation.³⁹ Another intention of these books had been to insert—and favorably so—the races of the Ottoman Empire into a novel kind of *natural* history of human civilization.

Sami touted *İnsân* as a synthesis between “religious beliefs” (*‘itikādât-ı dîniye*) and “ideas of [contemporary Western] scholars” (*efkâr-ı hûkemâ*).⁴⁰ This was more than a marketing trick: it gave license to navigate even the most controversial issues of evolutionism, such as humans’ nature and origin. With regard to humans’ nature, he suggested a compromise between conceptions of human nature as proposed by “materialists” (*mâddiyûn*) and “Sufis” (*aşhâb-ı taşavvuf*). Stating that the human “is both a variant of mean animals created from soil and a spiritual soul that belongs to the holy world,” Sami defined the human as having two natures, a bodily animal essence and a sublime spiritual essence.⁴¹ Sami adopted a similar compromise to solve the question of humans’ origin.⁴² These attempts at harmonizing revelation with contemporary theories allowed Sami to further elaborate his evolutionist vision of humankind in subsequent chapters. Sami presented especially the Neanderthals and Cro-Magnon as evidence for the “complete transformation” (*külli bir tebeddül*) of humankind as it perfected (*tekemmül*) in the course of ages and “changed their form” (*tebdil-i şekil*) “according to the age’s necessities.”⁴³ In other words, he explained human transformation by the law of adaptation.

While Sami’s *İnsân* was not short of controversial positions, his *Yine İnsân* must have been a provocation. Revealing dramatic shifts of what can be publicly said and written in 1880s Istanbul, Sami had shed in 1886 his earlier reconciliatory stance of finding middle grounds between “scriptural traditions” (*naqliyât*) and “observations based on reason” (*aqliyât*).⁴⁴ Vowing to make judgments solely on the basis of reason and science regardless of “our beliefs,” Sami not only flatly dismissed notions of Adam and Eve.⁴⁵ He also, most tellingly, dropped in *Yine İnsân* his definition of the human as also possessing a sublime spiritual nature. He reduced the human to an animal-like creature: “Yes, humans—in spite of all their distinctions, perfections [*kemâlât*], progresses [*terakkiyât*], intellectual and moral characteristics—are only an animal species.”⁴⁶ Sami iterated thereby a position he himself had described as *materialist* just years earlier in *İnsân*.

Furthermore, Sami advertised *Yine İnsân* as a work of “anthropology” (*antropoloji/ilm ül-beşer*), a brand-new science that saw “progress every day,” that aimed at transforming a rich ethnographic tradition in the Turkish and especially Arabic

³⁹Şemseddin Sâmî, *İnsân* (Istanbul, 1296 (1878/9)), 5. See also Asil, “The Pursuit of the Modern Mind,” 326.

⁴⁰Sâmî, *İnsân*, 5.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 7–8. For similar conclusions see also Gültekin, *Osmanlı Düşünce Dünyasında Evrim Teorisi Tartışmaları*, 151–2.

⁴²Sâmî, *İnsân*, 25–6.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 38.

⁴⁴Şemseddin Sâmî, *Yine İnsân* (Istanbul, 1303 (1885–6)), 20.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 18–22.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 12.

language.⁴⁷ For one thing, he replaced ancient classifications of humans according to the three sons of the Prophet Noah (Japheth, Shem, and Ham) that “do not seem to correspond to the truth *anymore*,” with a more global classification of five “races” (*ecnās*).⁴⁸ Similarly, the racial hierarchy implicit in Sami’s classifications bore little resemblance to pre-nineteenth-century Ottoman race hierarchies—neither to popular Galenic concepts of seven climatic zones in which only races living in moderate climates were by temperament (*mizāc*) disposed for civilization nor to religious classifications of the “house of war” (*dārü ’l-ḥarb*) or the “house of Islam” (*dārü ’l-İslām*).⁴⁹ While these older typologies had classified urban (Arab) Muslims as the most noble human race and, by contrast, deemed peoples from climatically more extreme geographies such as Northern Europe as by nature savage, this scheme had dramatically changed by the nineteenth century.⁵⁰ To Sami, it was a matter of fact to consider the “white” (*beyāz*), “Caucasian race” (*kaḫkas cinsi/ ’ırkı*), among which Ottomans also counted themselves, as the, at least temporarily, physiologically most superior race.⁵¹ All these nineteenth-century transformations notwithstanding, Sami’s chauvinist conception of black Africans as essentially inferior had already pervaded the writings of medieval Muslim philosophers and geographers.⁵²

Sami’s *Yine İnsān* used evolutionism to classify human diversity along a temporal development scheme. By stressing the infinity of human mutation, he synthesized and transcended preexisting ethnographic schemes that had all assumed fixed racial characteristics on the grounds of a people’s ecological, political, or religious contexts. Similarly, explaining differences between human races as the function of mechanisms of “adaptation” (*tagayyür, tebeddül*) “in the time span of centuries

⁴⁷Ibid., 5.

⁴⁸Sami, *İnsān*, 109–10, added emphasis. These five races were: a “white or Caucasian race”, a “yellow or Mongol race” (*moḡol*), a “black race” (*zenci*), a “red or American race,” a “brown or Malay race.” As he stated himself, this classification was provided by German zoologist and anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach (1752–1840). Ibid., 52–3. Some earlier Ottoman intellectuals did not see a contradiction between the old classification and the new one. Ahmed Vefik, for example, described the “Caucasian race” as the descendants of Japheth, the “Mongol race” as going back to Shem, and so on. Vefik, *Ḥikmet-i Tārīḫ*, 42–3.

⁴⁹For an introduction into these preexisting ethnographic frameworks see Wael Abu-Uksa, “The Premodern History of ‘Civilisation’ in Arabic: Rifā’a Al-Ṭaḥṭawī and His Medieval Sources,” *Die Welt des Islams* 62/3–4 (2022), 395–414.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Already Münif Paşa had counted all Ottoman subjects (“Türk ve ’arab ve ’acem ve rum”) among the Caucasian race (*kaḫkas cinsi*). He singled it out as the race most disposed to science. Münif, “Māhiyet-i Aḫsām-ı ’Ulūm,” *Mecmū’â-ı Fünūn* 13 (June–July 1863), 9. Sami argued in his lexicon, *Ḳāmūsü ’l-’A’lām*, that while Turks originally had belonged to the Mongolian race (*moḡol ’ırkı*), the Ottoman variant of this race had become so intermixed with Caucasian peoples in Southeastern Europe and Anatolia that by the nineteenth century Ottoman Turks can be counted as Caucasians too. “Türk,” in Şemseddin Sami, ed., *Ḳāmūsü ’l-’A’lām* (Istanbul, 1889 (1306)), 1640–43.

⁵²Sami, *Yine İnsān*, 56–81; Paul Hardy, “Medieval Muslim Philosophers on Race,” in Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott, eds., *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays* (Malden, MA, 2002), 38–62; Abu-Uksa, “The Premodern History of ‘Civilisation’ in Arabic,” 401–2. For a more critical and Islamic perspective on European colonialist and racialist discourse see Mustafa S. Palabıyık, “Ottoman Travelers’ Perceptions of Africa in the Late Ottoman Empire (1860–1922): A Discussion of Civilization, Colonialism and Race,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 46 (2012), 187–212.

and ages,” he described a race’s adaptation process as propelled by a number of interlocked and mutually constitutive factors.⁵³ These factors were climate, “lifestyle” (*şüret-i ta’ayyüş*), education, morality, social norms (the right treatment of women, for example), and physiology, especially cranial size.⁵⁴ Renouncing cyclical models of the fall and rise of peoples à la Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), he called this adaptation process “perfecting” (*tekemmül*) and reconfigured human history as a linear, teleological, and universal trajectory from “the state of savagery” (*hâl-i vahşet*) to modern civilization on which some “peoples” (*aqvâm*) advance faster and some, such as the Chinese nation, never progressed beyond intermediary stages of the civilizing process.⁵⁵ Sami’s *Yine İnsân* described a global “contemporaneity of civilizationally non-contemporaneous” lifestyles: “Many peoples are forever stuck at one of the many steps of progress [*terakki başamaçları*]. This is why today we can see humans that live in every possible way of life; some have not changed since they appeared.”⁵⁶ Sami thereby presented a racial taxonomy and hierarchy that was not “preordained” (*hulki*) but the result of uneven and extended evolutionary processes.⁵⁷

Even though Sami presented the Caucasian race as physiologically especially “predisposed” (*isti’dād*) to reach the highest civilizational levels, he disavowed any form of Caucasian exceptionalism.⁵⁸ Describing *perfecting* as an exponentially accelerating process, he explained the Caucasian race’s contemporary superiority via evolutionary boosts in the preceding thousand years that were further propelled by “civilizing” (*temeddün*) and “education” (*terbiye*).⁵⁹ Like the following generation of Ottoman evolutionists, Sami—without disclosing this, however—professed a Lamarckian concept of gradual and cumulative evolutionary change over centuries in which every generation bequeaths to coming generations characteristics and skills acquired in life that further *perfect* a people’s physiological dispositions.⁶⁰ Projected on the globe, this conception scientifically precluded immediate evolutionary convergences between peoples: “Even if a savage child grows up next to civilized Europeans since birth, it still cannot overcome its race’s indisposition [*cinsiñ ‘adem-i isti’dādi*] because a savage brain cannot process too much civilizing and education at once.”⁶¹ In spite of his references to genocidal campaigns against indigenous peoples, he praised European tutelage, i.e., colonialism, over the timespan of generations as the most effective way for “savages” (*vahşiler*) to recover evolutionary

⁵³Sami, *Yine İnsân*, 45.

⁵⁴Ibid., 85–120. Sami explicitly condemned polygyny (*ta’addüd-i zevcât*). Ibid., 118.

⁵⁵Ibid., 96; for *tekemmül* see ibid., 98. On his rejection of Ibn Khaldun see Şemseddin Sami, “Ta’rih,” *Güneş* 4 (1884), 171–9.

⁵⁶Sami, *Yine İnsân*, 92. On the concept of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (Boston, 2004), 222–54.

⁵⁷Şemseddin Sami, *Medeniyet-i İslâmiye* (Istanbul, 1302 (1886–7)), 5.

⁵⁸He claimed, “Together with the evolvedness [*mükemmeliyet*] of the Caucasian race’s other limbs, they also possess higher skills, because their skulls are bigger and their brains heavier.” Sami, *Yine İnsân*, 96. Similarly, with reference to the studies of German anthropologist and pathologist Rudolf Virchow, he singled out the skulls of his own “Albanian race” as the most evolved of all Caucasian skulls. Ibid., 67.

⁵⁹Ibid., 102. Sami did not specify what “civilizing” entailed, however.

⁶⁰On the popularity of Lamarck among Ottoman evolutionists see Doğan, *Osmanlı Aydınları ve Sosyal Darwinizm*, 169.

⁶¹Sami, *Yine İnsân*, 100–1.

delays. At its core, Sami's evolutionist scheme affirmed the contemporary Eurocentric world order as nothing but a function of "natural history" (*ta'riḥ-i tabī'i*).

Sami's evolutionist reading of global differences was no mere academic exercise but a direct answer to the late Ottoman problem-space. First of all, his appraisals of Caucasian racial superiority also catapulted the Ottoman people(s) to the top of global race hierarchies, and thereby offset orientalist and colonialist readings of Middle Eastern societies as *racially* prone to stagnation. Moreover, *Yine İnsān* can be read as corroborating from a biologicistic angle his other, quasi-simultaneously published articles on the superiority and universality of Western Europe's modern civilization. In contrast to many non-Western peoples on the globe doomed to long colonial tutelage, he deemed Ottoman nations physiologically disposed to live in accordance with modern civilization; if they were to follow Western examples, they could attain it within a generation.

Generations of evolutionists admired Sami and read his *İnsān* and *Yine İnsān*, two books written in an easily accessible Turkish and published in the affordable "pocket library series" (*ceb kütübhānesi*).⁶² The absence of direct criticism against the books should not distract from their novelty and radicalness. These most elaborate expositions of human evolution in the Hamidian age presented two arguments. First, by introducing the notion of uneven evolution over hundreds of thousands of years, Sami constructed, and affirmed, an unequal Eurocentric global order as nothing but a function of racial superiority. Second, instead of presenting a synthesis of different cosmologies, his books delineated a new natural order that implicitly supplanted inherited scriptural notions of creation and humankind with conceptions presented by contemporary Western European scholars that highlighted the causality of natural laws and humankind's constant *perfecting*. Nevertheless, even if his *Yine İnsān* made little effort at proving Islam's compatibility with positive sciences, Sami, as a devout Muslim, still presented an understanding of evolutionist creation that was easily reconcilable with a concept of providential design and a "transcendent creator" (*cenāb-ı ḥallāk*).⁶³ This also set Sami's books apart from a contemporaneous wave of evolutionist writings in Istanbul and Beirut, which went so far in professing materialist conceptions (nothing exists except matter and its movements) that they challenged religion and any form of faith in the supernatural.⁶⁴

In response, the late 1880s saw the first empire-wide and state-sponsored efforts to halt evolutionism's further popularization. Some Muslims interpreted this new

⁶²Ahmed İhsān, "Şemseddin Sâmi Bey," *Servet-i Fünûn* 275 (June 1896), 226–8; Ahmed İhsān, "Zıyâ-i Elim: Merhûm Şemseddin Sâmi Bey," *Servet-i Fünûn* 687 (June 1904), 162–3; "Şemseddin Sâmi Bey," *İctihād* 2 (Jan. 1905), 7.

⁶³Sâmi, *İnsān*, 3.

⁶⁴Istanbul saw Ahmed Edib and Ahmed Mecid's *Ta'riḥçe-i Beşer* (A Short History of the Human) (1889–90) that offered an evolutionist and highly functionalist concept of humankind and especially Beşir Fuad's *Beşer* (Human) (1886). It reduced the human to a material existence that could solely be examined through physiology (*'ilm-i vezâ ifü 'l-a'zâ*). On Beşir Fuad see Orhan Okay, *İlk Türk Pozitivist Ve Natüralisti Beşir Fuad* (Istanbul, 1969); Hanioglu, "Blueprints for a Future Society." On Fuad's suicide see Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots*, 171–3. On Beirut see especially Shibli Shumayyil's publications: Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 99–130.

paradigm through the lens of civilizational and geopolitical competition, considering evolutionism, which for many was synonymous with materialism, a subversive and harmful attack by Western Europe on the foundations of Islam.⁶⁵ The most emphatic reassertion of the authority of revelation as the single most important reference for the Muslim community and of its interwovenness with natural philosophy was presented by the theologian and teacher Husayn al-Jisr (al-Trablusi, 1845–1909).⁶⁶ His seven-hundred-page *A Hamidian Treatise on the Truth of Islam and the Sharia* (1888) not only was an exhortation to enquire into the origins of humankind and the secrets of the universe only under the premise that God's divine hand was the final cause in creation. It also presented multifaceted views on the theory of evolution (Arabic: *nushū' wa-irtiqā'*).⁶⁷ On the one hand, his treatise reaffirmed the notion of an immutable divine great chain of being and was therefore diametrically opposed to Şemseddin Sami's account of human evolution from an animal state. Similarly, he extolled the Quranic position that God himself had created humans from clay so that humans miraculously skipped several steps on the divine ladder of creation as proof of God's almighty powers.⁶⁸ On the other hand, al-Jisr speculated that Muslims might accept the evolutionary theory in the future, if presented with more evidence.⁶⁹ Because it actualized age-old debates and traditions of "Islamic theology" (*kalām*), contemporaries celebrated al-Jisr's treatise as a long-awaited reconciliation of revelation with natural philosophy.⁷⁰ Arguing for Islamic civilization's seamless compatibility with the age's scientific progress, the book gained instant fame across the empire and even earned al-Jisr the personal patronage of Abdülhamid II. It was quickly translated into Turkish (in several editions), as well as into Urdu, Tartar, and Chinese.⁷¹ This pan-Islamic, anti-evolutionist volley notwithstanding, Ottoman engagements with evolutionist knowledge were far from being nipped in the bud. Rather, they began to gain further momentum throughout the 1890s.

An evolutionist challenge to the Hamidian order

There was an unprecedented blossoming of Turkish-language writings on evolutionism in 1890s Istanbul that was driven by a new generation of incumbent state servants. This was a select circle of exclusively male, Muslim students and

⁶⁵Margaret Kohn, "Afhānī on Empire, Islam, and Civilization," *Political Theory* 37/3 (2009), 398–422; Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*.

⁶⁶Johannes Ebert, *Religion und Reform in der Arabischen Provinz: Husayn Al-Ğisr Aṭ-Ṭarābulusī (1845–1909)—Ein Islamischer Gelehrter zwischen Tradition und Reform* (Bern, New York, and Paris, 1991), 147.

⁶⁷Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 153–4.

⁶⁸Björn Bentlage, "Husayn Al-Jisr Al-Ṭarābulusī: The Hamidian Treatise (Lebanon, 1888)," in Björn Bentlage, Marion Eggert, Hans-Martin Kramer, and Stefan Reichmuth, eds., *Religious Dynamics under the Impact of Imperialism and Colonialism: A Sourcebook* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2017), 134–8; Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 151–2.

⁶⁹Ebert, *Religion und Reform in der Arabischen Provinz*, 149–50; Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 151–3.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹After Ahmed Midhat had published the Turkish translation in his daily *Tercümān-ı Hakaikat*, he republished it as a monograph: *Tercüme-i Risāle-i Hamidiye* (Istanbul, 1889/90 [1307]). For the other translations see Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 137.

recent graduates of the new imperial elite schools in Istanbul.⁷² These new educational institutions, often boarding schools, offered unique educational possibilities in the positive sciences.⁷³ While providing skill sets that the empire desperately needed for its survival, the new schools also inadvertently fostered among many students such a familiarity with the French language that one critic even called them “Europeans” who have lost their “Ottomanness” (*‘osmānluluk*).⁷⁴ Similarly, these institutions instilled a belief among students that positive sciences were the universal savior of humankind.⁷⁵ Especially evolutionism promised a revolutionary new, heroic, all-encompassing, and purely science-based vista on creation. Celebrating Darwin’s theory as a “magnificent revolution” (*inkılāb-ı ‘azīm*) of humankind’s understanding of natural history, they felt as if they were on the cusp of a “future, [in which] it will be universally accepted that all activities and transformations—be they organic or inorganic, political or literary, material or spiritual—are linked to natural laws, and this law is the mighty law of evolution [*kānūn-ı tekāmül*].”⁷⁶ The students’ sense of being possessors of this still little-known paradigm to reread the world not only amplified their already marked sense of entitlement but also compelled them to take political action. Dismissing the Hamidian regime’s authoritarianism and pan-Islamic ideology as futile in an age of European dominance, they used evolutionism to devise new and alternative ways of social and intellectual self-strengthening that would gain the empire a rank among Europe’s so-called civilized nations. Their idealistic and subversive activism was a daring bid to technocratic leadership in a highly paternalistic society built on deep respect for elders.⁷⁷ A first crackdown by the Hamidian security apparatus against organized conspiratorial activities in the winter of 1895 sent many young advocates of evolutionism into prison or exile.⁷⁸ But many more picked up the torch and popularized the theory in Istanbul’s print landscape.

The simultaneity of crackdowns against advocates of evolutionism along with exuberant appraisals of it in Istanbul’s Turkish-language press characterized this

⁷²M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Bir Siyasal Düşünür olarak Doktor Abdullah Cevdet ve Dönemi* (Ankara, 1981); Ceren G. İlikan Rasimoğlu, “Hidden Curriculum and Politicization of Medical Students in the Late Ottoman Empire,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 77/1 (2022), 81–107; Ahmed İhsan, “Professor Ludwig Büchner,” *Servet-i Fünun* 1155 (July 1913), 252; Mehmet Rauf and Rahim Tarım, *Mehmed Rauf’un Anıları* (Istanbul, 2001), 49; Hüseyin Cähid, *Kavgâlarım* (Istanbul, 1326 (1910/11)).

⁷³See especially the Imperial Medical School (*mekteb-i tıbbiye-i şâhâne*), the Imperial Military Academy (*mekteb-i harbiye-i şâhâne*), the School of Public Administration (*mekteb-i mülkiye*), and the Imperial Law School (*mekteb-i hükkû-ı şâhâne*).

⁷⁴Ahmed Midhat, “Avrupalaşmağdaki Tehlike,” *Tarih* 4616 (Nov. 1898), 1.

⁷⁵See also Mardin, *Jön Türklerin Siyasal Fikirleri*; Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition*; Burçak, “Science, a Remedy for All Ills.” For contemporary debates in the press on the usefulness of this new knowledge, as opposed to Medrese curricula, see Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots*, 74–8.

⁷⁶Abdullah Cevdet, *Fizyuluciya ve Hıfz-ı Şihhat-ı Dimâğ ve Melekât-ı Aklıye* (Istanbul, 1894), 219; quotation from ‘Abdullah Cevdet, *Goril* (Istanbul, 1895), 37–8.

⁷⁷Avner Wishnitzer, “Beneath the Mustache: A Well-Trimmed History of Facial Hair in the Late Ottoman Era,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 61/3 (2018), 289–325, at 301–4.

⁷⁸On these crackdowns see Martin Hartmann, *Unpolitische Briefe aus der Türkei* (Leipzig, 1910), 61–2; Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil and Abdullah Uçman, *Kırk Yıl* (Istanbul, 2017), 365–8; Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots*, 182–3; Rıza Tevfik Bölükbaşı, *Biraz da Ben Konuşayım* (Istanbul, 1993).

evolutionist moment in Ottoman intellectual history between the years 1894 and 1899. The simultaneity is less paradoxical considering that this proliferation of evolutionist writings was limited to the socially circumscribed space of the generalist, strictly apolitical, and often illustrated weeklies that catered to the upper middle class. Scores of young, idealistic elite-school graduates had taken over the editorial offices of (bi)weeklies such as *Ḥazîne-i Fünûn* (Treasure of Science) (1893–6), *Ma'ârif* (Knowledge) (1891–7), *Mekteb* (School) (1890–98), and especially *Servet-i Fünûn* (Riches of the Sciences) (1891–1944) that by 1895 had become major platforms of evolutionism. This coverage was discrete, however. Intellectual biographies or engravings of Pasteur, Helmholtz, or Röntgen were omnipresent, whereas Lamarck, Darwin, Spencer, Büchner, or Haeckel were addressed in more subtle ways. Similarly, while concepts such as the “law of evolution” (*kānûn-ı tekâmül*), “natural selection” (*ıstıfâ-yı tabîî*), or “struggle for existence” (*mücâdele-i hayât*) became commonplace in the journals, only a few writers dared to directly discuss their epistemological foundations, let alone their social and political implications for Ottoman society.⁷⁹ The detailedness of Sami’s books from the previous decade remained unprecedented.

This discreteness notwithstanding, evolutionist journals were ideological competitors to newly founded periodicals politically closer to the palace, such as *Hânımlara Maḥşûs Gazete* (1895–1908) and *Ma'lûmât* (1894–1903).⁸⁰ Although evolutionist periodicals like *Servet-i Fünûn* were financially dependent on palace subsidies, neither did they reiterate the Hamidian regime’s ‘authority triangle’ (Sultan, Islam, and science) and its calls for conformity, nor was their science coverage preconfigured by lenses such as morality, patriotism, and its potential rootedness in Islamic civilization.⁸¹ Sidelineing—and thereby implicitly devaluing—Islamic traditions of scientific inquiry, these journals constructed a separate discursive space for “modern sciences” (*‘ulûm-ı hâzıra*) that they defined as solely based on “experimentation” (*tecrübe*) and “observation” (*müşâhede*). They hailed these “modern sciences” as in line with a new “age of humanity” (*insâniyet devri*) that “neither looks down on humanity nor is occupied with unattainable things such as the heavens [*gökler*] or perfect happiness.”⁸² Their science coverage entailed introductions to materialist cosmologies, highly racist and colonialist interpretations of evolutionist anthropology, racial miscegenation, Herbert Spencer’s evolutionist sociology and translations of his educational philosophy, and Hippolyte

⁷⁹Some striking exceptions are Maḥmûd Şadık, “Muşâhabe-i Fenniye,” *Servet-i Fünûn* 323 (May 1897), 162–3; İbnülreşad Maḥmûd, “İbtidâî İnsânlar,” *Mekteb* 35 (May 1896), 545–50; ‘Osmân Raḥmî, *Mübâreze-i Hayât-ı Hayvâniye* (Istanbul, 1897).

⁸⁰On *Hânımlara Maḥşûs Gazete* see Ayşe Zeren Enis, *Everyday Lives of Ottoman Muslim Women: Hanımlara Maḥşûs Gazete (Newspaper for Ladies) (1895–1908)* (Istanbul, 2013); Elizabeth Frierson, “Mirrors Out, Mirrors In: Domestication and Rejection of the Foreign in Late-Ottoman Women’s Magazines,” in D. F. Ruggles, ed., *Women, Patronage, and Self-Representation in Islamic Societies* (Albany, 2000), 177–204.

⁸¹On subsidies for the press see Boyar, “The Press and the Palace”; on “authority triangle” see Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots*, 217. On Hamidian morality regimes see Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains*, 11; Benjamin C. Fortna, “Islamic Morality in Late Ottoman ‘Secular’ Schools,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 32 (2000), 369–93.

⁸²Nüreddin Ferruh, “Şan’at,” *Servet-i Fünûn* 264 (April 1896), 57–8, at 58.

Taine's evolutionist literary criticism.⁸³ While this evolutionist blossoming in the 1890s might beg scholarly reassessments of the Hamidian regime's hegemony over public opinion, it should rather be understood as the function of an ideologically highly fragmented public sphere in which the regime temporarily allowed evolutionist journals to exist next to periodicals ideologically closer to the palace.⁸⁴

As part of this new wave of Ottoman evolutionism a new Ottoman Turkish standard translation for the French concept of *évolution* took shape: *tekâmül* (perfecting). It replaced earlier and haphazardly used conceptual translations such as *inkılâbât* (total transformations) or more technical ones such as *neşv' ü nemâ'* (emergence and growth).⁸⁵ Once *tekâmül*, which had been close to absent in the Ottoman Turkish language before the 1890s, consolidated, it ushered in a new phase of Ottoman evolutionism.⁸⁶ Starting out as a code word for evolutionists,

⁸³On introductions into materialist cosmologies see İbnüleşâd Maḥmūd, "Tekâmül," *Ma'ârif* 2 (Dec. 1895), 25–8; İbnüleşâd Maḥmūd, "Tekâmül-i Basîṭ ve Mürekkeḳeb," *Ma'ârif* 3 (Dec. 1895), 45–7; M. H., "Felsefe-i Tıḳ," *Hazine-yi Fünûn* 13 (July 1896), 192–3; "Kısm-ı Fenni: Şişmânlık," *Hazine-i Fünûn* 28 (Jan. 1896), 325–6; Nâmi, "Sevḳ-i Taḳbî," *Mekteb* 34 (May 1896), 535–8; 'Alî Reşâd, "Mebḥaş ü'l-Ḥayât: Reḳâbet-i Ḥayâtiye," *Mekteb* 34 (May 1896), 538–42; Maḥmūd Şâḳık, "Ḥis ve Sevdâ," *Şervet-i Fünûn* 376 (June 1897), 227–30. Maḥmūd Şâḳık, "Muşâḳabe-i Fenniye: Madde ve Kuvvet," *Şervet-i Fünûn* 381 (July 1898), 258–9. This list could be extended by the extensive record of this period's evolutionist articles found in Doğan, *Osmanlı Aydınları ve Sosyal Darwinizm*, 185–6. Moreover, on racist and colonialist interpretations of evolutionist anthropology see İbnüleşâd Maḥmūd, "İbtidâ'î İnsanlar," *Mekteb* 35 (May 1896), 545–50; H. 'Aynî, "İlm ü'l-Beşer," *Mekteb* 36 (June 1896), 569–71. See also Nureddin Ferruh's article series *Taḥassüs-i 'Aşrî* (Modern Sensitivity) in *Ma'lûmât* (April 1897–Aug. 1898). On racial miscegenation see Maḥmūd Şâḳık, "Muşâḳabe-i Fenniye," *Şervet-i Fünûn* 379 (June 1898), 237–9. In 1898, Mahmud Sadık even published a novel called *Tekâmül* on the topic of racial miscegenation in the daily newspaper *Şabâḥ*. For Turkish introductions to Spencer's sociology see the article series Nâmi, "İlm-i Mü'âşeret," *Mekteb* (June–Sept. 1896); İbnüleşâd Maḥmūd, "Tekâmül-i Fevḳ al-'Uzvi," *Mekteb* 33 (May 1896), 517–20. For (undisclosed) translations from the introduction of Spencer's *Education* see *Tekemmül* (Evolution) by Ali Münîr in *Ma'ârif* (June–Nov. 1895). For a (likewise undisclosed) translation of the same book's second chapter as *Terbiye-i 'Aklıye* (Intellectual Education) see the same journal (Jan.–May 1896). On Hippolyte Taine's literary criticism see Mehmed Rauf's article series *Tekâmül-i Tenḳid* (The Evolution of Literary Criticism) *Şervet-i Fünûn* (May–Aug. 1898); and Hüseyin Cahid's *Ḥikmet-i Bedâ'î'e* (Aesthetics) *Şervet-i Fünûn* (April–Sept. 1898).

⁸⁴Especially Alper Yalçınkaya has argued for such a hegemony. Yalçınkaya, *Learned Patriots*, 180–210. The editor of *Şervet-i Fünûn* recalled that there was a relative loosening of censorship in the years between 1895 and 1897. Ahmed İhsân, "Şervet-i Fünûn'un Ta'riḳçesi," *Şervet-i Fünûn* 1000 (Aug. 1910), 179. But even at this moment of loosened censorship the police forced frequent rotations of the editorial staffs of *Ma'ârif* and *Mekteb*.

⁸⁵*İnkılâbât* had been used by Hoca Tahsin, for example. (Hoca Tahsin, "Ta'riḳ-i Teraḳḳî," *Mecmû'a-i 'Ulûm* 5 (Jan. 1880), 357. *Neşv' ü nemâ'* was used, for example, by Mahmud Es'ad Seydişehri when he discussed "Darwin's theory of evolution [*neşv' ü nemâ' nazariyesi*] in which the simple progresses to the complex." Maḥmūd Es'ad, *Ta'riḳ-i Şanâyi'* (Izmir, 1307 (1889)), 472. *Neşv' ü nemâ'* was also the concept Sami used as translation for evolution in 1898. Şemseddin Sâmî, *Ḳâmûs-ı Fransevî: Türkçe'den Fransızca'ya Lügat Kitâbı* (Istanbul, 1898), 788.

⁸⁶On *tekâmül*: while there was a very early dictionary entry for *tekâmül* in Francisci Mesgnien Meninski, *Thesaurus Linguarum Orientalium: Turcicae, Arabicae, Persicae* (Vienna, 1680) on page 1334 (I thank the anonymous reviewer for this reference), the word does not seem to have been a technical term in Islamic philosophy (I thank Dr Cornelius van Lit for this information) and did not figure in the—at least Ottoman—Sufi vocabulary (note its absence in Süleyman Uludağ, *Tasavvuf Terimleri Sözlüğü* (Istanbul, 1995). *Tekâmül* only entered Turkish lexis at the turn to the twentieth century—Muallim Naci's dictionary being the exception (Mu'allim Nâci, *Lügat-ı Nâci* (Istanbul, 1891), 270). The word is absent in the 1890 edition of Redhouse's English–Turkish dictionary, in Ebuzziya Tefik's *Lügat* from 1890, and in

it became a buzzword and increasingly a rallying cry for the new theory and the concomitant, specific ways of cognitively (re)ordering the world.⁸⁷

The quick consolidation of *tekâmül* (perfecting) as the translational equivalent for *évolution* begs questions about this semantic choice. Why did Ottoman evolutionists prefer it over previous translations such as “emergence and growth” and “total transformations”? What does this choice reveal about Ottoman interpretations of evolutionism? Was it a deliberate choice not to opt for more literal translations for *évolution* in order to boost its acceptance in society? Because any newly coined concept or translation “can ever be so new that it was not virtually laid out in the pre-given language,” translational equivalents, such as between *tekâmül* and *évolution*, are always acts of connecting new ideas to existent epistemes on the part of translators.⁸⁸ Similarly, as translators may err or even consciously twist semantics in their interpretations, studying such acts of connecting ideas between languages can reveal unexpected differences.⁸⁹

There are three possible explanations as to why Ottoman evolutionists agreed on *tekâmül* as the standard translation for *évolution*. First, like other words that have been used for *perfecting* in an evolutionist sense, like *istikmâl* or *tekemmül*, *tekâmül* was derived from the Arabic root “kâf-mîm-lâm” (*kamala*, “to become perfect”).⁹⁰ This root prominently figured as an ideal not only in medieval Islamic ethic philosophy but also in Sufi conceptions of *al-Insân al-Kâmil* (the perfect human), i.e. that the human was by default inclined to *spiritual* perfecting. This translational

Şemseddin Sami's Turkish lexicon (*Şemseddin Sâmî, Kâmûs-ı Türki* (Istanbul, 1315 (1899)), 431) or his 1898 edition of the *Dictionnaire français-turc*. Note, moreover, that the following dictionary from 1891 of technical terms translated *évolution* quite literally as *devir* and *inkişâf*, the *doctrine de évolution* as *uşûl-i inkilâb mezhebi* and *évolution organique* as *tekevvün-i muqaddem-i tenâsül*. A. B. Tinghir and K. Sinapian, *Fransızca'dan Türkçe'ye İstilahât Lügati*, 1 (Istanbul, 1891), 39. While the Turkish translation of al-Jisr's treatise featured *tekâmül* to describe the process of evolving (evolutionary theory was translated as *neşv ü irtikâh*: “Mevâd-ı Hikemiye: Tarjamat al-Risâlat al-Ĥamidiye,” *Tercümân-ı ĤaĤikat* 3897 (July 1891), 6), *tekâmül*'s first direct translation is in a footnote in an article by Abdullah Cevdet on the relationship between intelligence and cranial size. While he “previously translated this word [*évolution* in Latin letters] as ‘continuous growth’ [*nemâ-yı mütevâli*] ... I now prefer the word ‘mutual perfecting’ [*tekâmül*].” ‘Abdullah Cevdet, “Ĥıfz-i Şihhat ve Fizyuluciya-yı Dimâğ,” *Muşavver Cihân* 33 (April 1892), 258. The first entry for *tekâmül* in a dictionary can be found in the 1905 edition of Sami's dictionary, which translated *évolution organique* as *tekâmül-i ‘uzvî*. Şemseddin Sâmî, *Kâmûs-ı Fransevî: Türkçe'den Fransızca'ya Lügat Kitâbı* (Istanbul, 1905).

⁸⁷On the performance of concepts see Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela Richter, “Basic Concepts in History,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6/1 (2011), 1–37, at 8.

⁸⁸Quotation from Reinhart Koselleck, “Social History and Conceptual History,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 2/3 (1989), 308–25, at 318. See also Lydia He Liu, *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity. China, 1900–1937* (Stanford, 1995).

⁸⁹Margrit Pernau, “Provincializing Concepts: The Language of Transnational History,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 36/3 (2016), 483–99. For a study of Ottoman Turkish translations of nineteenth- and twentieth-century key concepts see Einar Wigen, *State of Translation: Turkey in Interlingual Relations* (Ann Arbor, 2018).

⁹⁰*Istikmâl* as perfecting in an evolutionary sense can be found both in Ĥasan TaĤsin and Nâdiri Fevzî, *Ta'riĥ-i Tekvîn Yahud Ĥilkat* (Istanbul, 1307 (1891)); and Ahmed Vefik, *Ĥikmet-i Ta'riĥ: Kitâb-ı Evvel* (Istanbul, 1863). Note that Sami used *tekemmül etmek* as translation for *evolving*. Moreover, in 1897 *Servet-i Fünûn* science columnist Mahmud Sadık still translated Darwin's *On the Origins of Species* as *Tekemmülât-ı Nev'îye* (The Perfections/Evolutions of Species); Maĥmûd Şadıĥ, “Ĥis ve Sevdâ,” *Servet-i Fünûn* 327 (June 1897), 229.

choice might suggest that Ottoman intellectuals approached evolutionary theory through indigenous epistemological lenses.⁹¹ It should be noted, however, that contemporary Arab intellectuals, who were the heirs of very similar intellectual canons, chose different translations for *évolution*.⁹² A second explanation for the choice of *tekâmül* is that, in fact, *perfecting* also figured in Darwin's writings, was a central concept in Lamarck's *transformism*, and heavily featured in Herbert Spencer's cosmic evolutionism.⁹³ A third explanation would emphasize the agency of the translators who opted for *tekâmül*, first, because it was more in line with the overall progressive historical consciousness of most Ottoman intellectuals, and second, because it offered—in contrast to earlier translations—a much more teleological and normative reading of the evolutionary process.⁹⁴

While a history of concepts serves as a necessary reminder that a concept's older semantic layers may shine through and configure newer layers, Ottoman evolutionism is largely characterized by active attempts to silence older layers.⁹⁵ Just as Rıza Tevfik, who became a leading Sufi master later in life, praised “the ‘idea of evolution [*tekâmül*],’ [as] a completely *new* perspective and idea unique to our century,” so did Şemseddin Sami, who also hailed from a Sufi family, clarify that his account of human evolution was free from the “poetry and imaginations” of Sufism and only based on “positive knowledge” (*müşbet ma'lûmât*).⁹⁶ Instead of strategically naturalizing and validating the new “evolutionist school” (*mezheb-i tekâmül*) through references to possible overlaps with inherited epistemologies and thereby making the paradigm more appealing to the Muslim public, they opted for definitions of *tekâmül* as natural law (*kānūn/ka'ide/düstür*) exclusively basing themselves on Western European theories.⁹⁷ Sidelining Islamic cosmologies of individual moral and spiritual perfecting, they

⁹¹On the place of this Arabic root in Islamic intellectual history see Abu-'Uksa, “The Premodern History of ‘Civilisation’ in Arabic,” in Tusi, Nasir al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad, and G. M. Wickens, *The Nasirean Ethics* (London, 2011), 407–16; Mukhtar Ali, “The Concept of Spiritual Perfection According to Ibn Sina and Sadr Al-Din Al-Qūnawī,” *Journal of Shi'a Islamic Studies* 2/2 (2009), 141–58; Süleyman Uludağ, “Kemal,” in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, 222.

⁹²For these translations see Marwa S. Elshakry, “Knowledge in Motion: The Cultural Politics of Modern Science Translations in Arabic,” *Isis* 99/4 (2008), 701–30, at 704–5.

⁹³Stephen Jay Gould, *Ever since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History* (New York, 1977), 14; J. W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848–1914* (New Haven, 2000), 48; Ernst Mayr, “The Idea of Teleology,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53/1 (1992), 117–35.

⁹⁴On the emergence of this historical consciousness since the 1860s see Kolland, “The Making and Universalization of New Time,” esp. Ch. 2.

⁹⁵On the reactivation of the older, forgotten semantic layers of concepts see Margrit Pernau and Luc Wodzicki, “Entanglements, Political Communication, and Shared Temporal Layers,” *Cromohs* 21 (2017–18), 1–17.

⁹⁶Rıza Tevfik, “İbn Haldün ve Hikmet-i Ta'rif,” *Ma'arif* 182 (May 1895), 205, added emphasis. On Rıza Tevfik see Cem Kara, *Grenzen überschreitende Derwische: Kulturbeziehungen des Bektaşchi-Ordens 1826–1925* (Göttingen, 2019), Ch. 4; Thierry Zarcone, *Mystiques, philosophes et francs-maçons en Islam: Rıza Tevfik, penseur ottoman (1868–1949), du soufisme à la confrérie* (Paris, 1993). For a very rare identification of Sufism's *seyr-i sülûk* with *tekâmül* see “Hikemiyât: Taşavvuf-ı İslâmî ve Fünûn-ı Cedide ve Felsefe (1),” *Hikmet* 2 (April 1910), 2–3. For the quotation see Sâmî, *İnsân*, 4.

⁹⁷On “evolutionist school” see Muştafâ Hayrullah, “İlm-i Hayâtadan,” *Hazine-i Fünûn* 50 (June 1895), 400. That evolutionist ideas circulated indeed in a highly circumscribed social sphere can be gauged from the observation that as late as 1898 nobody in Istanbul's coffeehouses and streets would understand the evolutionist meanings of *tekâmül*, as one critic of this circle of young evolutionists teasingly noted. Ahmed Râsim, “Terağki ve Tekâmül,” *Ma'lûmât* 134 (May 1898), 282.

introduced *tekâmül* as a new epistemological lens from which they could understand the progress of societies, races, humankind, and ultimately nature.

It was this very objective that drove young Ottoman intellectuals, like many turn-of-the-century reformists across the globe, to the evolutionist sociology of Herbert Spencer (1820–1903).⁹⁸ In 1895, medical student Rıza Tevfik (Bölükbaşı; 1869–1949) offered a first Turkish-language introduction to Herbert Spencer’s positivist “sociology” (*ilm-i cem’iyet/sosyolojiya*) that promised nothing short of revealing “all phenomena related to humanity’s evolution.”⁹⁹ An eight-month prison sentence Tevfik received for unauthorized public speeches on liberalism and democracy in Istanbul’s coffeehouses stalled the completion of this essay that was just as provocative.¹⁰⁰ It strove to delineate a new positivist and evolutionist “philosophy of history” (*hikmet-i ta’rih*), an epistemological principle “that has suffused all thinking in our century.”¹⁰¹ It ruled out direct divine causation by defining creation as “mechanical” (*mihânikî*), as at the most abstract level the result of “constant motion that had caused an uninterrupted chain of phenomena,” i.e. evolution.¹⁰² While the essay began—probably to incite interest among the “common people” (*avâm*) in this epistemology—with appraisals of Ibn Khaldun as “the inventor of this critical method [*uşûl-i intikâd*],” the article also insisted on the outdatedness of his premises.¹⁰³ Not even deigning to discuss the (not so absurd) possibility of overlaps between Ibn Khaldun’s and Herbert Spencer’s methods, Tevfik offered dense footnotes to a French translation of Spencer’s *The Study of Sociology* (1873) and references to French positivists Auguste Comte, Claude Bernard, and Charles Letourneau as he argued, first, that science was exclusively based on reason, observation, and sensory experience, and second, that “everything in existence is determined by the same universal natural laws [*qavânin-i tabî’iye-i umûmiye*].”¹⁰⁴ This reasoning also led him to his main argument that physical laws even hold sway in “social and civilizational affairs” so that they can be studied with the same methods of scientific inquiry as natural sciences.¹⁰⁵ Similarly, Tevfik followed Spencer’s social evolutionism in insisting on inextricable “entanglements

⁹⁸Bernard V. Lightman, ed., *Global Spencerism: The Communication and Appropriation of a British Evolutionist* (Leiden and Boston, 2016).

⁹⁹Rıza Tevfik, “İbn Haldûn,” *Ma’ârif* 187 (June 1895), 268. One of the first references to Spencer in the Turkish-language print landscape can be found in (Hoca Tahsin) “Ta’rih-i Teraqqî,” *Mecmû’at-ı ‘Ulûm* 5 (Jan. 1880), 355–8.

¹⁰⁰Feridun Kademir, *Rıza Tevfik’in İtirafı: Hayatı-Felsefesi-Şiirleri* (Istanbul, 2013), 146–8.

¹⁰¹Citation from Rıza Tevfik, “İbn Haldûn ve Hikmet-i Ta’rih,” *Ma’ârif* 182 (May 1895), 206.

¹⁰²Rıza Tevfik, “Ba’z-ı Qavânin-i ‘Umûmiyenin Hâdisât-ı Ta’rihiye ve İctimâ’iyyeye Tatbîk,” *Ma’ârif* 25 (June 1896), 387. See also Spencer’s definition of evolution as “an integration of matter and concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite, coherent heterogeneity; and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation.” Herbert Spencer, *First Principles* (London, 1867). On this mechanistic cosmology see Afacan, “Idle Souls, Regulated Emotions of a Mind Industry”.

¹⁰³Tevfik, “İbn Haldûn,” *Ma’ârif* 182 (May 1895), 206–8. On Tevfik’s aim to educate the “people” see Tevfik, “Ba’z-ı Qavânin-i ‘Umûmiyenin,” *Ma’ârif* 25 (June 1896), 388. Last quotation from Rıza Tevfik, “Ba’z-ı Qavânin-i ‘Umûmiyenin Hâdisât-ı Ta’rihiye ve İctimâ’iyyeye Tatbîk,” *Ma’ârif* 24 (June 1896), 372.

¹⁰⁴Tevfik, “Ba’z-ı Qavânin-i ‘Umûmiyenin Hâdisât-ı Ta’rihiye ve İctimâ’iyyeye Tatbîk.”

¹⁰⁵Tevfik, “Ba’z-ı Qavânin-i ‘Umûmiyenin,” *Ma’ârif* 25 (June 1896), 388.

between social and organic phenomena.”¹⁰⁶ Hence, indirectly building on Şemseddin Sami’s discussions on the interdependence between civilizational progress and a people’s evolving racial dispositions, Tevfik pursued, with Spencer’s sociology, a scientific framework in which both the laws of social and biological evolution and their causal interrelationship could be systematically investigated.¹⁰⁷ Ultimately, Tevfik and his compatriots hoped Spencer’s social evolutionism would provide a formula that would help them reshape Ottoman society in line with what they perceived as necessities of modern civilization.¹⁰⁸

This feverish search to decipher the laws of evolution and their effects on the development of societies also spilled over into education. A new generation of Ottoman pedagogues began to desacralize humankind and conceptualized it as an integral part of natural history that was—just like any creature—subjected to natural laws.¹⁰⁹ If these laws were not respected, evolutionist pedagogues warned, education could neither “facilitate a child’s happiness, nor the progress of homeland [*vatan*] and humanity.”¹¹⁰ The most prominent advocate of this new Ottoman evolutionist pedagogy was Ayşe Siddika Bint Mustafa (1873–1903), instructor and vice director at the School for Female Teachers (*dārü ’l-mu’allimāt*). Siddika’s two-hundred-page *Lessons in the Methods of Education* (1897) had—until then—been the most sweeping Ottoman synopsis of contemporary evolutionist principles in education.¹¹¹ It included, for example, an emphatic insistence on differences in human genetic disposition, both between members of the same society and between the “white race” (*beyāz ırk*) and other races.¹¹² Moreover, while her guidebook did reiterate inherited Ottoman concepts of education—especially on morality—the book’s structure directly mirrored Herbert Spencer’s hierarchical division of a child’s education into physical (*cismānī*), intellectual (*fikrī*), and moral (*ahlākī*) spheres; each sphere’s “evolution was subjected to natural law.”¹¹³ More importantly, while espousing inherited Ottoman concepts of the human as having both material and spiritual natures, she followed Spencer in stressing that the education of the physical body takes priority over the education of mind and soul.¹¹⁴ As a

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷The most explicit exposition of Tevfik’s engagement with concepts of *survival of the fittest* and *struggle for existence* can be found in the following article series: Doktor Rızâ Tevfik, “‘Sevki-i Tabî’î ve Ta’rifi için en doğru görünen Nazariyât,” *Muşavver Terakki* 4–7 (Sept.–Oct. 1898).

¹⁰⁸It was only after the Constitutional Revolution of 1908 that Rıza Tevfik could freely formulate his concrete liberal and elitist ideas. He tried to apply them as a member of parliament. On his ideas see Atila Doğan and Haluk Alkan, *Osmanlı Liberal Düşüncesi ve Ulum-ı İktisadiye ve İçtimaiye Mecmuası: Seçkin bir Devlet Anlayışının Temelleri* (Istanbul, 2010).

¹⁰⁹Şu’ayb, *Hayât ve Kitâblar*, 144–5; ‘Alî Münif, “Terbiye-i ‘Aklıye,” *Ma’ârif* 13 (March 1896), 199; Hâlid Ziyâ, “Terbiye Hakkında Fikirler,” *Ma’ârif* 25 (June 1896), 391.

¹¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹¹For further research on Siddika, which does not, however, dwell on her evolutionist thinking, see Emine Kocamanoglu, “Eğitim hakkında Görüşleri ve Ayşe Sıdika Hanım,” *Tarih ve Toplum* 32/189 (1999), 51–5; Ümüt Akagündüz, “Düşünce Tarihimizin Eğitimci Sıralarından Ayşe Sıdika Hanım ve Usûl-i Terbiye Ve Talim Dersleri Adlı Eseri,” *folklor/edebiyat* 21/81 (2015), 87–106.

¹¹²Siddika stated, for instance, “The white race generally has a higher intelligence than the yellow race, and the yellow race has a higher one than the black race.” ‘Ayşe Şiddika bint Muştafa, *Usûl-ı Ta’lim ve Terbiye Dersleri* (Istanbul, 1313 (1897)), 33.

¹¹³Ibid., 81.

¹¹⁴Ibid., 14.

consequence, she prescribed pedagogues a thorough knowledge of natural philosophy, chemistry, and physiology (*fünûn-ı ‘uzvîye*), as well as adherence to the “method of observation and experimentation” which is “applied everywhere in our times.”¹¹⁵ Driven by the idea that positive science bestowed upon pedagogues a new, unprecedented agency in the shaping of individuals, Siddika sidelined divine providence and argued that it was, instead, left to “humans to implement evolution, be it material or spiritual.”¹¹⁶ While her guidebook’s prioritization of physical over moral education suggests tensions with Hamidian education policies that strongly valued Islamic morality, the medal Siddika received for the book by Sultan-Caliph Abdülhamid II shows that its evolutionist premise still struck a nerve among contemporaries.¹¹⁷ Many similar guidebooks—mostly translations from French—followed suit.¹¹⁸

Last, all these attempts to popularize the epistemological foundations for a new society in accordance with the laws of evolution were—at least implicitly—underpinned by French positivism’s universalist, utopian model for “social” (*ictimâî*) and “intellectual” (*fikrî*) progress that promised humanity’s entry into a new “scientific age” (*devre-i fennîye*).¹¹⁹ The most detailed Turkish-language introduction into Auguste Comte’s (1798–1857) *law of three stages* was provided by elite-school graduate Ahmed Şuayb (1876–1910), whose essay presented it as “just another version of evolution philosophy.”¹²⁰ Like a *longe durée* modernization theory, the law of three stages describes humanity’s “slow evolution” (*tekâmül-i baîî*) through stages of “animality” (*hayvânîyet*) before it reaches the first of “the three stages” (*hâlât-ı selâse*), the “theological stage” (*teolojik devir*).¹²¹ Şuayb’s essay traced France’s rise from the last phase of the theological stage, “monotheism” (*monoteizm*)—in which humans explained, under the influence of “clerical institutions” (*teşkilât-ı rûhbânîye*), the “invariable order of creation” with supernatural and “divine qualities descending from unknowable worlds”—to the “metaphysical stage” (*metafizik devir*). This second of the three stages saw the decline of the church.¹²² While this downfall caused ideological chaos (*teşevvüş-i efkâr*) that shook nineteenth-century France to the core, Şuayb followed the verdicts of contemporary

¹¹⁵Ibid., 84, 72.

¹¹⁶Ibid., 204.

¹¹⁷On Hamidian education see Fortna, *Imperial Classroom*; Selçuk Akşin Somel, *The Modernization of Public Education in the Ottoman Empire 1839–1908: Islamization, Autocracy and Discipline* (Leiden and Boston, 2001); Fabian Steininger, “Morality, Emotions, and Political Community in the Late Ottoman Empire (1878–1908)” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, 2017).

¹¹⁸See, for example, Ahmed Midhat’s *Çocuğ: Melekât-ı ‘Uzviye ve Rûhiye* (1898), a translation of Gabriel Compayré’s *L’évolution intellectuelle et morale de l’enfant*.

¹¹⁹While most scholarship on Ottoman positivism has mainly focused on intellectuals in exile and is therefore mainly silent on the situation in Istanbul, a mocking description of young intellectuals mouthing positivist jargon by Ahmed Midhat offers a sense of its popularity. Midhat, “Avrupahlaşmağdaki Tehlike,” 1.

¹²⁰While this introduction was published in Şuayb’s column in *Şervet-i Fünûn* (Life and Books) (see especially *Şervet-i Fünûn* 509–12 (Dec. 1900–Jan. 1901), the following analysis is based on an anthology of Şuayb’s articles under the same name (1901). This introduction into positivism was “hidden” in an intellectual biography of Hippolyte Taine. Quotation in Ahmed Şuayb, *Hayât ve Kitâblar* (Istanbul, 1317 (1901)), 129.

¹²¹Ibid., 152–9, quotation at 152.

¹²²Ibid., 136.

French positivists by interpreting this philosophical disorder as the birth pangs of the last of the three stages.¹²³

In his description of the stage of positivism (*pozitivizm*), Ahmed Şuayb turned to outright utopianism, presaging that science would usher in the final state of “humanity’s natural evolution.” Positive science, as the new “spiritual power” (*kuvve-i ma’nevîye*), would allow a small elite of scientists to fill the moral vacuum caused by the steady decline of monotheist religion. The first step towards “establishing social order through science” was through a “science of morality” (*ulûm-ı ahlâkiye*). The morality concept at the core of this new “natural science” (*ulûm-ı tabîîye*) would be stripped of any belief in the supernatural and solely be based on the positive laws of “physiology and biology.” Reduced to nothing but “self-preservation” (*kendini muhâfaza*) and “prudent selfishness” (*âkılâne hüdâmlık*), morality was reconceptualized by Şuayb as a “social, natural instinct” (*sevke-i tabîî-yi ictimâî*) and a mere function of the “struggle for survival” within society.¹²⁴ The next step towards reestablishing social order was to discard ideas contrary to “the laws that govern historical evolution” like enlightenment’s unproven “myths” (*destân*) such as “equality” (*tesâvî*). Insisting that cognitive inequality among humans was a fact proven by natural history, Şuayb warned against “including the uneducated common people in political matters” and pointed as deterrent to the “social malaise” of France’s “democratic regime” (*demokratik idâre*).¹²⁵ Recognizing the controversial nature of this hierarchical and inegalitarian concept of society, Şuayb hastened to add, “once science makes every mind understand that social phenomena are nothing but a reflection of creation’s universal laws, everyone will fulfil their social duties in total submission and without grumbling.”¹²⁶ In summary, even though Ahmed Şuayb’s widely read introduction to the positivist law of three stages neither differed from Comte’s authoritative model nor contained instructions on possible applications thereof in Ottoman society, it cannot be over-emphasized how radical these utopianist articulations were for Hamidian-era Istanbul.¹²⁷ Next to flouting long traditions of Islamic morality discussions, Şuayb projected—for Turkish-language publications—in unprecedented detail a scientific, elitist, and technocratic order that reflected the social and political imaginary of Ottoman evolutionist intellectuals who wanted to uplift a society they considered stuck in its monotheistic stage.¹²⁸

¹²³ Ahmet Şuayb offers the following authors as source in the introduction: Émile Faguet, Paul Bourget, Gabriel Monod, Émile Hennequin, Ferdinand Brunetière, Jean Halleux. *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁴*Ibid.*, 143–55. This reading of Şuayb’s morality concept radically differs from Mehmet Karakuş, “Son Dönem Osmanlı Aydınlarından Ahmet Şuayb’in Din ve Ahlak Görüşleri,” *Kilis 7 Aralık Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 3/4 (2016), 165–78.

¹²⁵Şuayb, *Hayât ve Kitâblar*, 157–8.

¹²⁶*Ibid.*, 158.

¹²⁷Numerous obituaries reveal that *Hayât ve Kitâblar*, in which this essay appeared, was very popular among the following generation of Ottoman intellectuals. See especially two special issues just devoted to him—*Şervet-i Fünûn* 1021 (Dec. 1910); *Muşavver Şâhika* 2 (Dec. 1910).

¹²⁸On the elitism of this social milieu see Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition*; Erdal Kaynar, “The Logic of Enlightenment and the Realities of Revolution: Young Turks after the Young Turk Revolution,” in Noémi Lévy-Aksu and François Georgeon, eds., *The Young Turk Revolution and the Ottoman Empire: The Aftermath of 1908* (London and New York, 2017), 40–66; Doğan and Alkan, *Osmanlı Liberal Düşüncesi ve Ulum-ı İktisadiye ve İçtimaiye Mecmuası*.

While all these efforts to popularize Western European theories and models of natural, individual, and social evolution might suggest otherwise, Ottoman evolutionists framed this paradigm very differently than did their contemporary Western European intellectuals. Ottoman advocates attached to it an extreme belief in a better future that differed markedly from more ambivalent readings of evolutionism in Western Europe. These culminated especially in France in fears of bodily (and cultural) degeneration and decadence.¹²⁹ Faint echoes of this evolutionist *fin de siècle* pessimism in Istanbul notwithstanding, the following exuberant stanza from the poem *Tekâmül* is most representative of Ottoman interpretations of the paradigm.¹³⁰

“The entire world hastens toward the peak of perfection!
 A concealed world is yet to become manifest, its inclination!
 Time intoxicates its moaning march!
 Applaud it, its true state and its evolution!!!”
 ...
 The secrets of creation’s fire-sparking truths
 spread humanity’s concord!
 The endless flood of philosophy
 provides friendship and true love!¹³¹

Like this poet, who extolled a swiftly perfecting world in concord and united by a shared enthusiasm for the discoveries of evolutionism, many Ottoman intellectuals in Istanbul praised evolutionism as panacea. Not only would the theory allow them and other elites around the globe to solve the secrets of nature and thereby (re)order a topsy-turvy world; it would also allow them to interpret humanity’s physiological evolution as *naturally* eradicating warmongering among civilized nations.¹³² Nevertheless, their projections of evolutionism as ushering in a new era of global peace, human progress, and “friendship and true love” somewhat belie their elitism, rhetoric of “struggle for life,” and uncritical espousal of white-supremacist, colonialist world orders.¹³³ Their critics denounced these dissonances, accusing them of blindness towards European colonial crimes, disinterest in the fate of suppressed

¹²⁹Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880–1917* (Chicago, 2010); Linda L. Clark, *Social Darwinism in France* (University, AL, 1984); Rae Beth Gordon, *Dances with Darwin, 1875–1910: Vernacular Modernity in France* (Farnham and Burlington, 2009); Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, 1848–1918* (Cambridge, 1999); Robert A. Nye, “Degeneration, Neurasthenia and the Culture of Sport in Belle Epoque France,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 17/1 (1982), 51–68.

¹³⁰On Ottoman discussions of Neurasthenia see Kolland, “The Making and Universalization of New Time,” 156–82. More generally on Ottoman perceptions of the turn the twentieth century as crisis see Ömer Köksal, “Progrès dans l’impasse: Critiques de Celal Nuri et Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi vis-à-vis des puissances européennes (1910–1914),” *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 31 (2022), 1–28.

¹³¹Ali Fikri, “Tekâmül,” *Ma’ârif* 8 (Feb. 1896), 115–16.

¹³²Hüseyin Câhid, “Harb ve Şulh: Mü’tala’ât-ı Meşâhir,” *Servet-i Fünûn* 444 (Sept. 1899), 19.

¹³³Ahmed Şu’ayb, “Ulûm-ı İktisâdiye ve Siyâsiye,” *Servet-i Fünûn* 488 (July 1900), 310–12; Hüseyin Câhid, “Hikmet-i Bedâ’iye Dâ’ir 3: Maḥşûlât-ı Fikriye-yi Beşeriye, Maḥşûlât-ı Tabî’iye,” *Servet-i Fünûn* 372 (April 1898), 117; Maḥmûd Şâdık, “Muşâhabe-yi Fenniye,” *Servet-i Fünûn* 424 (April 1899), 114; Maḥmûd Şâdık, “His ve Sevdâ,” *Servet-i Fünûn* 327 (June 1897), 227; İbnülreşad Maḥmûd, “İbtidâ’i

“Eastern peoples” (*mîlel-i şarkîye*), and naively underestimating the colonial threats to the Ottoman Empire.¹³⁴

Similarly, these strategically Eurocentric readings of evolutionism set its Istanbul-based, Turkish-writing popularizers not only apart from an earlier generation of Armenian advocates of evolutionism but also from contemporary coreligionists in exile. While Young Armenian authors of the 1870s and 1880s publicly praised and discussed evolutionist epistemologies in considerable detail, they were, in comparison, anxious to mitigate any anti-theistic implications that might have undermined the church, the identity-preserving institution at the heart of the Armenian “nation” (*millet*).¹³⁵ Furthermore, Ahmed Şuayb’s narrow and Eurocentric reading of positivism as universal modernization theory stood in stark contrast to the anti-imperialist positivism of Ahmed Rıza (1858–1930), the most eminent Young Turk intellectual in Parisian exile.¹³⁶ Rıza hailed positivism as a globally compatible, inclusive, and egalitarian project that would unite “East” and “West” and overcome the colonial world order.¹³⁷ These differences between exiled Rıza and Istanbul-based Şuayb are a reminder that—in spite of their shared opposition to Hamidian authoritarianism—they spoke to very distinct discussions and audiences.¹³⁸ While Rıza’s French-language articles from Paris both attacked Abdülhamid II and defended Islam and “oriental civilization” against Western European chauvinism, censorship in Istanbul prevented Şuayb and his fellow evolutionists from attacking the Sultan himself. Their affirmations of European supremacy that eroded identitarian links to Islamic civilization were, instead of attacks on Islam itself, directed against the paternalistic Sultan–Caliph.

Just how much evolutionism underpinned such attempts at subverting Hamidian ideology can be seen in a debate on the legitimacy of the highly Europe-oriented “New Literature” (*edebiyât-ı cedîde*) movement. The debate, which began in 1897 with criticism of the group’s controversial literary style, quickly transcended questions of literature and eventually turned into the most ferocious debate on Ottoman Turkish identity of the whole Hamidian era.¹³⁹ The most vocal critics of the New Literature denounced its representatives as brazen, detached, and unpatriotic Europeanizers who willfully destroyed Islamic civilization

İnsânlar,” *Mekteb* 35 (May 1896), 545; Nüreddin Ferruh, “Taḥassüs-i ‘Aşrî: 2,” *Ma’lûmât* 79 (April 1897), 625.

¹³⁴See, for example, Midḥat, “Avrupalılaşmağdaki Tehlike,” 1; Ahmed Midḥat, “Nereliyiz? (Avrupalı mı? Aşyalı mı?),” *Ṭarîk* 4615 (Nov. 1898), 1–2.

¹³⁵Karademir, “The Introduction of Modern Western Philosophy in the Ottoman Empire.”

¹³⁶On Ahmed Rıza see Kaynar, *L’héroïsme de la vie moderne*.

¹³⁷Turnaoğlu, “The Positivist Universalism and Republicanism of the Young Turks,” 801–2.

¹³⁸For the audiences of Ahmed Rıza see Paulina D. Dominik, “For Our Freedom and Yours: A Global Biography of Seyfeddin Thadée Gasztowtt (1881–1936)” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Freie Universität Berlin, 2021), 153–5, 181–3; Stefano Taglia, *Intellectuals and Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Young Turks on the Challenges of Modernity* (Hoboken, 2015), Ch. 2.

¹³⁹Fazıl Gökçek, *Bir Tartışmanın Hikâyesi: Dekadanlar* (Istanbul, 2007); Zeynep Seviner, “Thinking in French, Writing in Persian: Aesthetics, Intelligibility and the Literary Turkish of the 1890s,” in Monica M. Ringer and Étienne Charrière, eds., *Ottoman Culture and the Project of Modernity: Reform and Translation in the Tanzimat Novel* (London, 2020), 19–36; Özen Nergis Dolcerocca, “Ottoman Tanzimat and the Decadence of Empire,” in Jane Desmarais and David Weir, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* (Oxford, 2020), 245–63.

instead of participating in the task of creating a viable Ottoman national culture that could resist European cultural dominance.¹⁴⁰ The young *littérateurs*, exclusively graduates of the new elite schools, used evolutionist reasoning to defend their new Europe-oriented literary styles as nothing but “the lucky outcome of the universal principle of evolution.”¹⁴¹ Drawing on evolutionist models of literary criticism *à la* Hippolyte Taine, they described their own literature as just one of the many *natural* results of transformations, i.e. the “Europeanization” (*avrupahlaşmak*), of Ottoman Turkish society since the Tanzimat. Framing such evolutionary adaptations to the West (*garb*) as the nation’s reaction to its precarious position in the international struggle of existence, they hailed Europeanization as a necessity of evolutionary history.¹⁴² Preserving Islamic civilization, on the other hand, would have been contrary to the natural laws of civilizational progress and national self-preservation. At the climax of the debate, in autumn 1898, opponents attacked the New Literature writers as “atheists” (*ateler*) and “anarchists” (*anarşistler*) and even voiced death threats.¹⁴³ Even if the young writers held their ground in this fierce polemic, which gripped the Turkish-language press landscape for two years, the Hamidian regime had step by step dispersed and silenced the group by 1901. It thereby also put an end to the evolutionist moment in Istanbul’s Turkish-language print landscape.

Using evolutionism to reassert Islamic authority

Evolutionism’s politicization during the 1890s notwithstanding, there were only scattered efforts at debunking it, let alone systematic campaigns against it.¹⁴⁴ In fact, pious intellectuals even began taking up evolutionist ideas to defend Islam. The ways in which they tried to reclaim with evolutionism the universal truth of Islamic philosophy and Islamic civilization’s prestige and promise as a valid alternative to “Western civilization” reveal, on the one hand, how omnipresent notions of progress history have become among Ottoman intellectuals.¹⁴⁵ On the other hand, they show the smoothness with which Muslim intellectuals could potentially reconcile evolutionist ideas with Islamic philosophy—if they desired to.

One of the most prolific propagators of explicitly Islamic readings of evolution was Ulema member, judge, and science teacher Mahmud Es’ad (Seydişehir, 1858–

¹⁴⁰Muştafâ Şabri, “Cür’etli bir Dekadan,” *Ma’lûmât* 163 (Dec. 1898), 894–5.

¹⁴¹Tevfik Fikret, “Muşâhabe-i Edebiye 35: İki Söz,” *Şervet-i Fünûn* 364 (March 1898), 402.

¹⁴²For an in-depth analysis of this discourse see Kolland, “The Making and Universalization of New Time,” 235–70.

¹⁴³On the reactions against evolutionism see Ahmed Râsim, “Mesâ’il-i Lisâniye,” *Ma’lûmât* 145 (Aug. 1898), 508–10; on the atheist label see Ahmed Midhat, “Vazîfemiz,” *Tarih* 4617 (10 Nov. 1898), 2. For the death threats see Câhid, *Gavğalarım*, 115.

¹⁴⁴For one of these attempts see Fatma Aliye’s rebuttal of Darwinist concepts of evolutionary history and reappraisal of individual perfection through faith in God. Faṭma ‘Aliye, “Mertebe-i Kemâl-ı Nev’-i İnsan,” in Ahmed Midhat, ed., *Tercümân-ı Haḳîkat ve Muşavver Şervet-i Fünûn tarafından Girit muhtâcine îâneten nüsha-ı yegâne-i fevka l-âde* (Istanbul, 1897), 94–8. There also was a—seemingly little noticed—anti-“materialist” publication in Izmir, *İbtâl-ı Mezheb-i Maddiyûn* by İsmail Ferid (1896).

¹⁴⁵On the historical imagination of Islamic reformers across the globe see Monica M. Ringer, *Islamic Modernism and the Re-enchantment of the Sacred in the Age of History* (Edinburgh, 2020).

1917).¹⁴⁶ In the preface to his translation of Joseph Langlebert's textbook *Histoire naturelle* for Istanbul's elite high schools, Es'ad praised this new science of creation (*ilm-i mükevvenât*) as no mere worldly (*dünyevî*) exercise but as the path to divine wisdom and best weapon against heedlessness and ignorance.¹⁴⁷ His journalistic writings combined lavish praise for the material achievements of this "unprecedented century of progress and perfections" under the aegis of a Europe-centered modern civilization with an insistence on the historical singularity of Islam. While he explained all of creation as the function of a universal, determinist "law of evolution" (*kānūn-ı tekāmül*), he explicitly declared Islam the "sole exception" to this "total principle" (*kā'ide-i külliye*): "the sublimity of the Sharia is of a kind the world has never seen; it is still unsurpassed."¹⁴⁸ As evidence of this evolutionary exceptionalism, he cited the sudden ascendancy of the Arab people from a "savage" desert tribe to the teachers of all "civilized peoples" (*aqṣām-ı mütemeddine*).¹⁴⁹ In another context, he used the same metahistorical reasoning to defend the Sharia precept of polygyny against growing criticism among reformist Muslims.¹⁵⁰ Es'ad's line of reasoning not only transformed Islam and Islamic civilization into a supernatural, transcendent fact but also, by the same token, affirmed the law of evolution to which "all natural phenomena, and every social and political fact are invariably bound."¹⁵¹ In Es'ad's account, the authorities of evolution's universalism and Islam's transcendence supplemented each other.

The most comprehensive attempt at proving the superiority of Islamic civilization through evolutionism was Ahmed Midhat's multivolume work *The Conflict of Science and Religion: Islam and the Sciences*.¹⁵² This translation and extensive commentary on Richard Draper's world-renowned, Islamophile *History of the Conflict between Religion and Science* from 1875 especially addressed the students of the elite schools. It was an attempt to (re)kindle their "Islamic zeal" (*hamiyet-i islāmīye*) by proving that Islam, in contrast to Christianity, was fully compatible with contemporary science and progress.¹⁵³ Insisting on the embeddedness of evolutionism within "Islamic philosophy" (*hikmet-i islāmīye*) and its reconcilability with notions of a creator God, he argued that Muslim scholars, like "naturalist scholars in every nation," had long adopted the "the robust principle of 'evolution'" (*"Tekāmül" kā'ide-i kavviyesi*).¹⁵⁴ This claim, however, was based on somewhat

¹⁴⁶Moreover, that Mahmud Es'ad was a close friend of Halid Ziya (Uşaklıgil, 1866–1945), one of the writers of the New Literature, shows that the lines between different ideological milieus were far from impermeable. Uşaklıgil and Uçman, *Kırk Yıl*, 234–5.

¹⁴⁷Mahmūd Es'ad, *Ta'riḥ-i Tabī'i* (Istanbul, 1313), 3. This translation set new standards in Ottoman biology education, but consciously omitted Langlebert's long discussion of Darwinism.

¹⁴⁸First quotation from Mahmūd Es'ad, "Terakkiyat-ı Hâziraya bir Nazar," *Ma'rifet* 7 (May 1898), 59; second quotation from Mahmūd Es'ad, "Avrupa'da İlk Müsteşriklar," *Şervet-i Fünûn* 318 (April 1897), 82.

¹⁴⁹Es'ad, "Avrupa'da İlk Müsteşriklar."

¹⁵⁰Fatma 'Aliye and Mahmūd Es'ad, *Ta'addüd-ı Zevcât: Zeyl* (Istanbul, 1316 (1898)).

¹⁵¹Es'ad, "Avrupa'da İlk Müsteşriklar," 82.

¹⁵²On Midhat and Draper's texts see also M. A. Yalçınkaya, "Science as an Ally of Religion: A Muslim Appropriation of 'the Conflict Thesis,'" *British Journal for the History of Science* 44/2 (2011), 161–81.

¹⁵³Ahmed Midhat, *Nizâ'-ı 'İlim ve Din: İslâm ve 'Ulûm* vol. 3 (Istanbul, 1315 (1897–8/1899–1900)), 236–50.

¹⁵⁴Midhat gave no concrete examples, however. Ahmed Midhat, *Nizâ'-ı 'İlim ve Din: İslâm ve 'Ulûm* vol. 2 (Istanbul, 1313 (1895–6/1897–9)), 315.

idiosyncratic reinterpretations of evolutionism.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, Midhat's discussion of "secondary causes" (*esbāb-ı s̄anīye*) conceptually left room for the eventual, gradual evolution of species into other life forms.¹⁵⁶ The concept of secondary causes stipulated that God created all organic life forms with innate potentialities for change long after the moment of divine creation. While some evolutionists in Istanbul and the Arabic-speaking provinces had used the principle of secondary causes to downplay divine agency in nature, Midhat saw it as proof of the opposite.¹⁵⁷ Basing himself on the divine principle of "be, and it is" (*kun fayakūnu*) and on al-Ghazali's (1055–1111) occasionalist position that divine action was the only possible causation in the universe, Midhat saw the "natural laws" (*ḳavānīn-i ṭabīīye*) that drove any post-creation transformation of lifeforms as the purest expression of godly causation and "divine power" (*ḳudret-i ilāhīye*).¹⁵⁸ Midhat's argumentation is testimony to the ease with which devout intellectuals could discern resonances of evolutionism in Islamic philosophy.

Lastly, Islamic theology was not the only discourse for pious Muslim intellectuals to approach evolutionism through a religious lens. While exclusively drawing on English-language sources, legal scholar Ali Şahbaz (d. 1898) insisted that "there can be nothing new in this world and that all historical events are repetitions."¹⁵⁹ Şahbaz's article, which argued that humanity had remained unaltered since creation, both mentally and physiologically, was in essence a summary of *Foundations of Belief* (1895), a sharp critique of Spencerian evolutionism.¹⁶⁰ Put more pointedly, while Ahmed Midhat actualized age-old theological discussions to create some conceptual space for Islamic notions of evolution, it was on the basis of Anglican arguments that Ali Şahbaz went as far as discrediting the whole premise of evolutionist thinking: "To discover the mysteries of creation, to describe and explain the essence of God, to proceed and dare to look at everything with a scientific gaze is the product of excessive greed."¹⁶¹ Şahbaz's article is a reminder that Ottoman turn-of-the-century intellectuals comfortably moved in transnational intellectual fields; they found expedient arguments wherever these surfaced.

Ottoman evolutionism: a strategic Eurocentrism

This article has offered a new reading of Ottoman evolutionism by presenting this paradigm as a resource that intellectuals mobilized to offer concrete answers to the late Ottoman problem-space. Even if Ottoman evolutionism was neither a uniform, single-minded movement nor equally prominent in all milieus, *fin de siècle*

¹⁵⁵While his commentaries reaffirmed human nature as unchanging and remained silent on theories such as natural selection, he did equate the various Quranic accounts of human creation (from clay and dust; from semen to blood clot, chewed substance, and bones) with acts of evolution. Ahmed Midhat, *Nizā'-i 'İlim ve Dīn: İslām ve 'Ulūm*, vol. 4 (Istanbul, 1317 (1899–1900/1901–2)), 170.

¹⁵⁶Midhat, *Nizā'-i 'İlim ve Dīn*, 2: 315–25.

¹⁵⁷Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic*, 188.

¹⁵⁸Midhat, *Nizā'-i 'İlim ve Dīn*, 2: 325–33. See also Yalçınkaya, "Science as an Ally of Religion," 175.

¹⁵⁹Ali Şahbaz, "Mebānī-yi İmān," *Servet-i Fünūn* 350 (Oct. 1897), 183.

¹⁶⁰The author of *Foundations of Belief* was no other than later British prime minister Arthur James Balfour (1848–1930).

¹⁶¹Ali Şahbaz, "Mebānī-yi İmān," 183.

intellectuals across a broad ideological spectrum used it to address (perceived and real) global asymmetries, fears of colonialism, negotiations of imperial and national identity, challenges to inherited epistemologies, and conceptualizations of societal reform. While some intellectuals close to the Hamidian regime primarily used evolutionism to reassert Islam's transcendent nature and divine authority, most advocates strategically chose more Eurocentric readings as they pushed for alternative reform visions.

Evolutionists used this epistemology to popularize new notions of historical and natural time, scientific universalism, global order, and human agency, and ultimately to theorize three novel—and interrelated—orders of nature, the world, and society. First, sidelining both scriptural chronologies and inherited concepts of (occasionalist) divine causation, they proposed a new concept of nature as historical and as the total product of universal laws of evolution over millions of years. As they indiscriminately inserted humankind into this new “natural history” (*ta'rih-i ṭabī'i*), they followed Herbert Spencer and Hippolyte Taine in explaining social and intellectual transformations as intricately entangled with natural instincts and human's *perfecting* physiology and cognitive functions. Nature was thereby not only a *product* but also the main *factor* of evolution. Second, as Ottoman evolutionists transformed human history into a universal and teleological story of biologized progress, they also challenged the imagined racial hierarchies that ideologically justified the colonial world order. Nevertheless, their critiques were limited to anti-Turkish racism. As evolutionists claimed Ottoman affiliations to the “white, Caucasian race,” they not only endorsed racialist justifications of colonialism as beneficial rule over physiologically still-indisposed races, but also asserted for themselves the highest rank in the (natural) global order. Third, young elite-school graduates, while (still) remote from the reins of political power, used evolutionism to challenge the social and political order by projecting scientific, technocratic, individualistic, and non-egalitarian models for social and political transformations. Once the 1908 revolution had lifted Hamidian censorship, these ideas received another boost and became omnipresent in the social imaginary of the new intellectual and political elite of the Second Constitutional Period (1908–22).¹⁶²

Studying Ottoman evolutionism within a framework of strategic Eurocentrism discards notions of Ottoman inadequacy, emulation, and passivity. It reinterprets the often uncritical adoptions of Western European theories—as well as appraisals of Western Europe as the so-called pinnacle of human evolution and depictions of the rest of the world through the prism of evolutionary lack—as functions of Ottoman historical agency. Seizing evolutionism as their weapon of choice in the local and global power structures in which they operated, Ottoman intellectuals boosted it by translating, adapting, and advertising evolutionist ideas while facing

¹⁶²On evolutionist discourses after 1908 see Doğan, *Osmanlı Aydınları ve Sosyal Darwinizm*, Chs. 3–4; Hamit Bozarslan, *Histoire de la Turquie: De l'empire à nos jours* (Paris, 2015), Ch. 7; Fulya İbanoğlu, “II. Meşrutiyet'te Terakki Fikri” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Marmara Üniversitesi, Istanbul, 2021). Of course, evolutionist concepts such as “survival of the fittest” also figured prominently in the language that ideologically prepared the ground for the genocide against the Armenians. See Hans-Lukas Kieser, “Die Sprache politisierter Ärzte im ausgehenden Osmanischen Reich,” in Kieser, ed., *Aspects of the Political Language in Turkey: 19th–20th Centuries* (Piscataway, 2010), 71–90.

the very real personal risks of Hamidian censorship. This way of framing it ultimately also aims at creating tensions with more recent studies of Near Eastern intellectual history that study Ottoman engagements with transnationally circulating ideas through analytical lenses such as epistemological commensurability, adaptability, and hybridity, or resonances with indigenous cultures of knowledge.¹⁶³ This article, in contrast, has highlighted that Ottoman evolutionism was barely based on “dynamic interactions” with “existing cultural factors of society.”¹⁶⁴ It became popular without authorization “by the discursive traditions of Islam.”¹⁶⁵ In fact, its performativity even seemed to hinge on the deliberate and strategic shunning of Islamic hermeneutics. Far from being mutually exclusive, however, these opposing perspectives on Ottoman intellectual history shed light on phenomena that are two sides of the same coin. They show two different but complementary ways in which *fin de siècle* Ottoman intellectuals immersed themselves in their “age of scientific progress” and devised strategies to strengthen the last sovereign Sunni Muslim empire in a colonialist world.

Acknowledgments. This article has a convoluted history, making it difficult to keep this acknowledgments section short. First of all, I thank all those who discussed with me much earlier versions of this paper as a chapter in a dissertation. These people include Margrit Pernau, Ulrike Freitag, and Christoph K. Neumann, as well as all participants of the research colloquiums at Freie Universität Berlin, the Max Planck Institute for Human Development (Berlin), Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, and the University of Chicago at which I had the honor of presenting chapter drafts. For invaluable comments on drafts of the actual article manuscript I owe gratitude to Sarah Stegemann, Alp Eren Topal, Leonie Wolters, and Florian Zemmin. Last but not least, I warmly thank the three anonymous reviewers for *Modern Intellectual History* and especially Tracie Matysik for their insightful and helpful feedback and suggestions.

¹⁶³On this historiographical trend see M. S. Özervarli, “Alternative Approaches to Modernization in the Late Ottoman Period: Izmirli Ismail Hakkı’s Religious Thought against Materialist Scientism,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39/1 (2007), 77–102; Andrew Arsan, “Under the Influence? Translations and Transgressions in Late Ottoman Imperial Thought,” *Modern Intellectual History* 10/2 (2013), 375–97; Alp Eren Topal, “Against Influence: Ziya Gökalp in Context and Tradition,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 28/3 (2017), 283–310; Omnia El Shakry, “Rethinking Arab Intellectual History: Epistemology, Historicism, Secularism,” *Modern Intellectual History* 18/2 (2021), 547–72; Karademir, “The Introduction of Modern Western Philosophy in the Ottoman Empire.”

¹⁶⁴Özervarli, “Alternative Approaches to Modernization,” 79.

¹⁶⁵El Shakry, “Rethinking Arab Intellectual History,” 563.

Cite this article: Kolland D (2024). A Strategic Eurocentrism: The Construction of Ottoman Evolutionism in an Uneven World (1870–1900). *Modern Intellectual History* 21, 328–356. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244324000040>