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An Enlightenment Thinker in the Early Republican Period: Ahmet Ağaoğlu

Erken Cumhuriyet Döneminde Aydınlanmacı Bir Düşünür: Ahmet Ağaoğlu

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Abstract

This study focuses on Ahmet Ağaoğlu's ideas shaped by his conception of Westernism. This focus has been chosen because, unlike his other ideological inclinations such as nationalism, Jadidism, and Iranism—which he supported in a more contextual and temporal manner—Westernism remained a consistent and unwavering element of his intellectual outlook throughout his life. For Ağaoğlu, Westernism represented a comprehensive system of thought that prioritized individual development and was fundamentally grounded in freedom of thought and expression. According to him, the West emerged as a developed and advanced civilization precisely because it upheld these values, whereas the East remained stagnant and underdeveloped due to its suppression of individual autonomy and its preference for dogmatism and authoritarianism over liberty. In this context, Ağaoğlu viewed the East—what he considered a defeated civilization—as one that must emulate the West in every aspect. Although his proposed solution remains open to critical discussion, the study concludes that Ağaoğlu's persistent emphasis on democracy and freedom—especially during a period when authoritarian regimes were gaining prominence both domestically and internationally, and liberal economic principles were being widely abandoned—renders his ideas still relevant and significant in contemporary discourse.

Keywords: Ahmet Ağaoğlu, Westernism, East, West, Liberalism, Enlightenment.

Öz

Bu çalışma, Ahmet Ağaoğlu'nun Batıcılık anlayışı doğrultusunda geliştirdiği düşüncelerine yer vermektedir. Batıcılık görüşü, milliyetçilik, Cedidcilik, İrancılık gibi düşüncelerinden farklı olarak Ağaoğlu'nun dönemsel-konjektürel bir şekilde değil, yaşamı boyunca şaşmaz bir şekilde savunduğu bir görüş olarak ön plana çıktığından bu tercih yapılmıştır. Batıcılık, Ağaoğlu için ferdi gelişimin önünü açan, düşünce ve ifade özgürlüğü ile karakterize olan bir düşünce sistemine karşılık gelmektedir. Batı, bunu başarabildiği için gelişmiş ve ileri bir medeniyet halini almışken Doğu, tam aksine ferdi ezdiği, özgürlükten ziyade taassup ve zulmü tercih ettiği için geri kalmıştır. Bu yüzden Ağaoğlu için mağlup medeniyet olan Doğu'nun Batı'yı her şekilde kendine rol model alması gerekmektedir. Çalışma, Ağaoğlu'nun çözüm önerisinin tartışmaya açık olsa da iç ve dış siyasette totaliter ve baskıcı yönetimlerin yükselmeye, liberal iktisadi sistemin terkedilmeye başlandığı bir dönemde ısrarla demokrasi ve özgürlük vurgusu yapmasının Ağaoğlu'nun düşüncelerini bugün dahi önemli kıldığı sonucuna varmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ahmet Ağaoğlu, Batıcılık, Doğu, Batı, Liberalizm, Aydınlanma.

Introduction

Ahmet Ağaoğlu was a prominent intellectual and administrator who lived during the final years of the Ottoman Empire and the early period of the Turkish Republic. He played a significant role in internalizing the foundational principles of the new regime. Like many other Turkish intellectuals of his time, he questioned the reasons behind the backwardness of society and expressed his views on how to overcome the prevailing crisis. Ağaoğlu believed that the crisis experienced by the Ottoman Empire, along with its eventual collapse, was in fact part of a broader decline that encompassed all Eastern societies. According to him, the fall of the Ottoman Empire, which he regarded as the "last stronghold" representing Eastern civilizations, symbolized the inevitable end of Eastern civilization as a whole.

Nevertheless, the Turkish nation demonstrated a reflexive response by continuing its historical presence through the establishment of a new regime. From that point onward, the essential task was to build this new regime upon solid foundations. Ağaoğlu identified these foundations within Western civilization, which had adopted the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Without hesitation, it can be asserted that the one unwavering principle throughout Ağaoğlu's intellectual career was his commitment to a form of Westernism shaped in this context.

Throughout his intellectual journey, Ağaoğlu's thought evolved—beginning with Iranian nationalism (İrancılık), transitioning to Jadidism, moving at one point towards Turkish nationalism, and eventually, especially from the 1930s onwards, embracing liberal values (Özcan, 2010, pp. IX). However, in every phase of his thought, he maintained the view that the backwardness of the East stemmed from certain characteristics specific to Eastern societies—such as their modes of thought, belief systems, and lifestyle practices. These inherent problems, in his view, rendered Eastern societies incapable in the face of Western advancement. He firmly believed that the West represented a superior civilization and thus constituted the most appropriate guide or model for the development of Eastern societies. Therefore, it would not be incorrect to state that the central theme of Ağaoğlu's writings is the comparison between Eastern and Western societies.

1. Ağaoğlu's Analysis of Eastern and Western Civilizations

Ahmet Ağaoğlu presents his analysis of Eastern and Western civilizations in his seminal work *Üç Medeniyet* (Three Civilizations). Although the work was written during his exile in Malta, it was first published in 1927. According to

Eğribel and Özcan, “The book, in a sense, reflects an effort to justify the newly founded Turkish Republic’s orientation toward the West and to present the reforms being implemented. The primary aim here is to provide the rationale for Turkey’s radical departure from the East and its adoption of a new position vis-à-vis the West. By rejecting both our Eastern roots and the legacy of the empire, it is declared that the new Turkish state has entered the orbit of Western civilization” (Eğribel & Özcan, 2013, pp. 8–9).

The three civilizations referenced in the book’s title are as follows: the first is the Buddha-Brahmanic civilization, encompassing India, Indochina, China, Korea, and Japan; the second is Western or European civilization, including Europe, the Americas, and Australia; and the third is Islamic civilization, which comprises almost all of Africa, along with parts of Asia and Europe (Ağaoğlu, Üç Medeniyet, 2013, pp. 19–20). Ağaoğlu argues that both the Buddha-Brahmanic and Islamic civilizations have suffered a comprehensive defeat—materially and spiritually—at the hands of Western civilization, a reality he considers indisputable. As evidence of this material decline, he cites the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, which he describes as the last bastion of Islam (Ağaoğlu, Üç Medeniyet, 2013, p. 22).

Given that this defeat has become an undeniable historical truth, the question to be addressed is how a fallen civilization might be restored to its feet. Identifying the problem with clarity, Ağaoğlu contends that the only viable course for Islamic civilization is to take victorious Western civilization as its guide. In other words, “both Islamic and Buddha-Brahmanic civilizations must accept the identity and attributes of Western civilization and submit to its will”¹ (Ağaoğlu, Üç Medeniyet, 2013, p. 23). The critical question that follows concerns the extent to which such submission is necessary.

At this juncture, two fundamental approaches may be identified. The first attributes Western superiority solely to certain elements of its civilization—primarily its science and technology—and advocates for selective adoption of these elements.² The second approach, to which Ağaoğlu subscribes, regards civilization as an indivisible whole. Therefore, if Western civilization is triumphant, it is so not merely because of its scientific and technological achievements, but as a totality, encompassing both its strengths and weaknesses. According to Ağaoğlu, Western life has, as a whole, proven superior to Eastern modes of life. Hence, he argues, “if we wish to survive, to continue our existence, we must

¹ In his work *Bu Ülke*, Cemil Meriç harshly criticizes Ağaoğlu’s proposed solution, arguing that one of the main reasons behind Ağaoğlu’s “admiration for the West” stems from the internal contradictions within his own life. For a more detailed discussion, see Meriç (2013, pp. 156–161).

² Figures such as M. Akif Ersoy and Ziya Gökalp can also be included in this context.

adapt ourselves entirely—not merely in clothing or institutions, but also in our minds, our hearts, our ways of thinking, and our mentality” (Ağaoğlu, *Üç Medeniyet*, 2013, p. 23). Thus, he maintains that it is unrealistic to adopt only parts of a civilization while rejecting others.

Ağaoğlu is fully aware that his proposed remedy may provoke criticisms that it threatens the "national identity" of the Turkish people. Anticipating such objections, he challenges the essentialist assumption that nations possess immutable cores. He argues against what he calls the “frozen racial theories” of essentialists such as Gustave Le Bon, claiming that such views had already lost their relevance by his time (Ağaoğlu, 2013, p. 26). Proponents of essentialism often reduce this so-called core to moral codes, legal systems, or language. However, Ağaoğlu asserts that even a cursory examination of world history is sufficient to demonstrate that such elements are not immutable:

Which nation, he asks, has not changed its religion at least twice in its history? Turks, for example, practiced Shamanism and several other faiths before ultimately adopting Islam. Arabs, too, adhered to various religions prior to Islam. In fact, no nation has remained constant in this regard. When it comes to morals and laws, these are by their nature subject to transformation. It is a commonly observed fact that an action once considered immoral or improper may come to be viewed as good and appropriate, even within the same cultural context. As for legal systems, they exist precisely to register and institutionalize the continuous changes in human life, which is why parliaments and legislative bodies have been established around the world.

Among the factors typically considered to constitute national identity, Ağaoğlu identifies language as the most essential and enduring. In his view, language is the only element that can develop without altering its inherent nature and thus comes closest to embodying the core of a nation’s material and spiritual existence. Therefore, the concept of national identity or “essence” is ultimately reducible to language and the tangible existence of the nation (Ağaoğlu, 2013, p. 25). In light of this, Ağaoğlu’s prescription leaves no room for ambiguity or misinterpretation: civilizations that have been defeated must, in their entirety, follow the path of the victorious one. The fear that such an approach might erode national identity is, in his view, baseless. Given that a fixed national essence does not exist, nations can and must adapt in accordance with the conditions of their age.

At this point, a crucial question emerges: what characteristics define the defeated Eastern civilization³, and what defines the triumphant Western one?

³Ağaoğlu fundamentally believed that Islam was, in fact, more conducive to progress and advancement than Christianity. However, over time, the course of history changed. In his words: “No longer are there those who, after lighting a candle before the image of the Virgin Mary, go off to steal; nor are there fools left who believe they can buy paradise by paying a priest.” He suggests that if one were to read Stendhal or the tales in *The*

Put differently, what has the East done—or failed to do—that has led to its backwardness, and what has the West done—or refrained from doing—that has allowed it to attain the status of an advanced civilization? In analyzing the underdevelopment of Eastern societies, Ağaoğlu focuses on three primary factors⁴: the structure of the family and the status of women within it; the effects of schools and literature; and the long-standing influence of an anarchic form of despotism (Ağaoğlu, 2020, p. 37).

1. 1. The Causes of the Eastern Civilization's Decline

Ahmet Ağaoğlu placed particular emphasis on the "woman question," as he believed that the salvation of Muslim societies—and their material, spiritual, and even political advancement—depended on resolving two fundamental issues: the status of women and the reform of the alphabet (Ağaoğlu, 2022, p. 55). He authored a separate work titled *İslamiyet'te Kadın* (Women in Islam), in which he noted the momentum gained by feminist movements in the West, observing how women's increasing visibility in the public sphere was accompanied by intellectual efforts to legally safeguard their rights. In contrast, the condition of women in Eastern civilizations, particularly under the influence of Iran, was dire.⁵ He described this situation starkly: "Here, women were not only deprived

Decameron, it would become evident that medieval Europe was once full of such people (Ağaoğlu, 2013, p. 36). Yet, as other parts of humanity began to move in a different direction—once these societies succeeded in gaining complete freedom and autonomy in organizing their worldly and material affairs—they began to progress and advance beyond Islamic societies. Over time, the gap widened, ultimately resulting in the present condition: on one side, liberty and freedom, the dominance of experience and reason; on the other, stagnation and a clinging to the past. According to Ağaoğlu, this is the current state of Eastern and Western civilizations (Ağaoğlu, 2013, pp. 36–37).

⁴Even during the period when he wrote for the journal *Türk Yurdu* and aligned more closely with a nationalist perspective, Ağaoğlu continued to reflect on the causes of societal underdevelopment. According to him, there are three primary reasons for this backwardness. The first is sectarian conflict. The second is the failure to sufficiently value one's own traditions, language, and history following the adoption of Islam. The third is the absence of national consciousness. Ağaoğlu regards the lack of national consciousness both as a cause and a consequence of the aforementioned factors. Lamenting the fact that Turkish intellectuals "considered writing in Persian and Arabic to be a matter of honor, while the Turkish language had been nearly forgotten," he expresses astonishment at the near-denial of the existence of Turks within the Ottoman Empire (Gümüsoğlu, 2008).

⁵ Ağaoğlu asserts that in the East—specifically in Muslim societies—the condition of women is not inherently a result of Islam itself, but rather stems from the influence of Iranian culture. He explicitly states that no part of the Qur'an possesses such a noble and heartfelt tone—one that deeply moves the reader—as the verses that speak of women, orphans, and the oppressed. He considers expressions such as "O believers! Fear Allah, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the two spread many men and women throughout the earth!" to be revolutionary in nature, especially given how profoundly they contradicted the beliefs, mindset, and traditions of the idol-worshipping Arabs of the time (Ağaoğlu, *İslamiyette Kadın*, 2022, p.

of the most basic rights but lacked even the natural rights enjoyed by animals and plants—such as growing freely and breathing air” (Ağaoğlu, *İslamiyet’te Kadın*, 2022, pp. 9–10). He lamented the absence of any intellectual or practical struggle aimed at liberating women from such conditions.

Ağaoğlu identified the lack of an enlightened intellectual class capable of rescuing women—and, by extension, the individuals of Eastern civilizations—from such helplessness as a second major cause of the East’s backwardness.⁶ In other words, he regarded the absence of a class of intellectuals, detached from yet capable of guiding the public, as a central reason for the East’s failure to progress. In contrast, he cited the West’s experience, led by figures such as Montaigne, Luther, Calvin, Da Vinci, Cato, Brutus, and Socrates, as an example of how an intellectual elite could spearhead societal transformation (Ağaoğlu, 2020, p. 41).

Drawing upon his own experiences, Ağaoğlu emphasized the absence of such a class in the East. He argued that religion and literature in Eastern societies had evolved in ways that perpetuated blind dogma and hypocrisy, producing individuals concerned only with their own well-being and indifferent to the collective good (Ağaoğlu, 2020, p. 42). Unlike in Western societies, Eastern societies lacked an intellectual stratum that could lead the public.⁷ He illustrated this disconnection between the people and the Turkish intellectual through a vivid depiction from a remote Anatolian village in his work *Gönülsüz Olmaz*:

Look, my friend, at this village itself. It is a celestial body detached from this world. Who knows how many generations it has remained exactly as it was when it was first cast here? Earlier, you were astonished by the primitiveness of their lives. But where would they have learned to live otherwise? Who has cared for them? Who has taught them that different ways of life exist? Who has shared in their pain and suffering? As for the government—it only remembers the village when it needs soldiers or money. Outside of that, this village has been forgotten and abandoned by the world, by humanity, by the state, and by the nation (Ağaoğlu, 2020, p. 96).

23).

⁶ While discussing the driving forces behind the development of altruism in the West as opposed to egoism, Ağaoğlu emphasizes the role of the intellectual. In his work *Serbest İnsanlar Ülkesinde* (In the Land of Free People), he argues that the intellectuals—whom he refers to as *pirs*—serve as guides for society. Ultimately, he claims that a society can be attained in which selfishness is diminished, and solidarity, mutual assistance, and the pursuit and defense of rights become collective duties.

⁷ In his article published in *Son Posta* newspaper on January 12, 1931, Ağaoğlu expresses deep sorrow over the Turkish public’s silence—and even apparent approval—in response to the massacre in Menemen. As an intellectual, he believes that some degree of responsibility must be attributed to himself and his peers. Critically addressing the Turkish intelligentsia to which he belongs, he asks: “Do you not also bear some responsibility, O Turkish intellectual, for the fact that the Turkish masses remain in such a primitive state and continue to live with such brutality in the twenty-first century?”

For Ağaoğlu, this disconnect signifies more than mere neglect; it reveals a deeper ideological betrayal. The intellectuals, instead of enlightening the masses and encouraging critical thought, wrote to imprison the people within their own shells, to condition them into accepting their misfortunes without question, and to legitimize domination rather than promote freedom. He frequently cited works such as al-Māwardī's al-Aḥkām al-Sultāniyya, Nasir al-Din al-Tusi's Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī, Saadi Shirazi's Bostan and Gulistan, as well as Fuzuli's ghazals, as representative of this trend. According to Ağaoğlu, the values espoused in these works—unquestioning obedience to rulers, contentment with worldly suffering, submission, patience, and endurance—had become ingrained behaviors practiced daily by many, thereby serving as ideological justifications for the East's enduring despotism, inertia, and inequality.

He similarly criticized classical Ottoman divan literature for glorifying rulers excessively, promoting unconditional loyalty, and thereby fostering an unhealthy social order (Haklı, 2018, p. 135). He argued that this ideological orientation both resulted from and sustained the regime of despotism. As he remarked:

Under the despotic rule that governed us for centuries, the fate of the entire country and every individual was subject to the whims of a handful of tyrants. As a result, writing flattering verses and engaging in sycophancy aimed at gaining favor and mercy from these tyrants became a legitimate livelihood and a vital, even spiritual, cultural trait (Ağaoğlu, 2020, p. 44).

Ağaoğlu lamented the moral decay caused by authoritarian rule. In his view, despotism encouraged hypocrisy, turning society into one where individuals' actions contradicted their words, where subservience to authority became normalized, and where lying acquired a social function (Ağaoğlu, 2020, pp. 48–49). In *Ben Neyim?* and *Serbest İnsanlar Ülkesinde*, he argued that when personal advancement is determined not by merit but by ingratiating oneself with those in power, individuals will naturally seek shortcuts to success (Ağaoğlu, 2020, p. 58). This inevitably devalues knowledge and science—an outcome sufficient, in and of itself, to explain societal stagnation and degeneration.

As such, Ağaoğlu identified three interrelated causes of Eastern civilization's backwardness: the issue of women and the family, the absence of a guiding intellectual class, and the persistence of despotism. These, he contended, culminated in the suppression of the individual. The historical, cultural, and political structures of the East did not cultivate values such as freedom of thought and expression; instead, they produced populations subjugated by tyranny, trembling before power, and indifferent to both others and the fate of society. In other words, the most characteristic feature of Eastern civilization, according to Ağaoğlu, has been a crude and destructive egoism. He even claimed

that the architecture of the East supported such self-centeredness: the courtyard system, for instance, isolated households from one another, encouraging families to focus solely on themselves and remain indifferent to the outside world.

Ağaoğlu believed that the most fundamental distinction between Eastern and Western civilizations lies in the concept of the individual. In the East, due to the reasons discussed above, individuality failed to develop—this, he argued, was the primary cause of the East’s decline. For Ağaoğlu, societies are static; individuals are dynamic. Thus, progress is only possible when individual creativity is allowed to flourish. Despotism in Eastern societies not only repressed individuals but also stifled the potential development of society at large.

However, Ağaoğlu did not equate individuality with selfishness. He acknowledged that a crude form of egoism had already long prevailed in the East. Rather, he pointed to Western models—especially those of England and France—as exemplars of “true” individuality. The very conditions that caused the East’s stagnation were gradually eliminated in the West through centuries of intellectual and political struggle. In Western societies, led by writers, artists, and philosophers, the birth and development of the individual, along with values emblematic of the Enlightenment—such as freedom of thought and expression, and democracy—were eventually embraced by the broader public.

1. 2. Westernism: Individualism, Democracy, and Progress

François Georgeon asserts that Ağaoğlu was profoundly influenced by the French Enlightenment and the Revolution. Thus, it can be argued that the French political and intellectual milieu served as one of the primary reference points in shaping his Westernist outlook. Georgeon notes Ağaoğlu’s excitement and enthusiasm when he left Russia for France, believing he was going to the “homeland of the great revolution,” and how deeply he was impressed by the advancements exhibited at the 1889 Universal Exposition (such as the Eiffel Tower and the “fair of electricity”) (Georgeon, p. 121).

Traces of Ağaoğlu’s admiration for the West, led by France and England, are also visible in his writings. In his work *In the Land of Free People*, where liberal values are prominently featured, Georgeon traces the influence of Western ideals. As he observes, this fictional country includes an Academy reminiscent of the Académie Française and a Pantheon where great figures are buried. The inscription above the Pantheon reads: “To the great men, with the gratitude of the Land of Free People...” The work also contains elements inspired by English democracy. For instance, Georgeon identifies a passage in which orators

stand on chairs addressing the public and openly criticizing the government, evoking an image reminiscent of Hyde Park (Georgeon, p. 127).⁸

Although Ağaoğlu argues that Enlightenment values spread to the West as a result of the French Revolution, he maintains that the roots of these developments can be found earlier in English history. His 1929 publication *England and India* reflects this perspective. Ağaoğlu argues that England initiated its democratic tradition as early as the thirteenth century with the Magna Carta. This document curtailed the king's powers and established a Council of Barons, without whose approval no taxes could be levied and no laws amended (Ağaoğlu, 2023, pp. 8–9). For Ağaoğlu, the Magna Carta, achieved during a period marked by brutal feudal power, deserves praise from the perspective of democracy and human rights. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges that the agreement primarily served the interests of the aristocracy, bolstering their power not only against the monarchy but also over the common people (Ağaoğlu, 2023, p. 9). Later developments, such as the Bill of Rights and Habeas Corpus, laid the groundwork for individual freedom. These gains were significant as they emerged gradually and organically, without bloody revolutions or the destruction of tradition⁹, at a time when arbitrary rule dominated much of Europe (Georgeon, pp. 122–123). Hence, Ağaoğlu affords England a somewhat special status. This privilege stems from certain fundamental and immutable traits of the English character: “a love of freedom, respect for laws, attachment to tradition, resoluteness, and perseverance” (Ağaoğlu, *England and India*, 2023, p. 8).

Ağaoğlu regarded these Enlightenment values, which he believed characterized the West, as essential for the development of Eastern societies—especially under the new regime. Despite writing in a political and economic context where values such as individual liberty and democracy were beginning to lose favor, he staunchly defended them. He did so most notably in his debates with the Kadro group¹⁰, led by Şevket Süreyya Aydemir. In these debates, Ağaoğlu

⁸ Georgeon also points out that there are discernible “Eastern” influences embedded within the text. Within the broader framework of the work, he notes that the depiction of “receiving initiation” under the guidance of “pirs” (spiritual elders) renders *The Land of Free People* strikingly reminiscent of an expansive religious order or Sufi brotherhood. Ağaoğlu places particular emphasis on the concept of “self-mastery,” a notion drawn from Buddhism, in which he had a personal interest. Another key term that emerges throughout the narrative is “simplicity”—reflected in home furnishings, clothing, behavior, and language (Georgeon, p. 127).

⁹ These statements evoke the ideas articulated by Edmund Burke regarding the Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England. Unlike the French Revolution, Burke argued that the English Revolution unfolded gradually, without leading to bloody conflicts or entering into open confrontation with traditional values, instead following a natural course of development.

¹⁰ Kadro was an intellectual movement launched with the aim of defining the ideology

vigorously championed the development of the individual against the state, freedom of thought and expression against fanaticism, and democratic republicanism against despotism.

Ağaoğlu identified individual liberties as the fundamental point of contention between himself and the Kadro movement. He argued that democracy is fundamentally based on individual freedom, a value he believed the Kadro writers were averse to. His critique relied on their own words: “The ideal is not to grant the individual within society a freedom that would separate him from it, but to grant the nation rights within the world, and to assign duties and functions to the individual within this free nation” (State and Individual, 1933, pp. 21–22). According to Ağaoğlu’s interpretation, the Kadro intellectuals feared that individual freedom could isolate the person from society and lead to anarchism. By contrast, Ağaoğlu believed that freedom does not alienate the individual from society; rather, it establishes an unbreakable and complex web of solidarity among individuals. From a sociological standpoint, he argued that the solidarity in societies composed of free individuals is superior to that in collectivist societies (Ağaoğlu, 1933, p. 22).

In developed societies, solidarity is built on the division of labor. Here, each free individual is aware of their role within society, and any disruption in one sector is felt by all, thereby strengthening societal cohesion. He invites readers to imagine a scenario in which bakers cease production for a period—this would cause a widespread disruption in advanced societies. In primitive societies, however, where the division of labor is not fully established, each individual bakes their own bread, and such interdependence is absent. Consequently, individuals may remain indifferent to one another’s problems (Ağaoğlu, 1933, p. 23). As societies advance and the division of labor increases through freedom, mutual dependence also increases, binding individuals together through vital and unbreakable connections (Ağaoğlu, 1933, p. 24). Thus, Ağaoğlu believed he had refuted the Kadro claim that freedom detaches individuals from society. He questioned how individuals who are deprived of freedom and dissolved into the

of the Turkish Revolution. One of its members, Yakup Kadri, recounts in his book *Atatürk* that during a review of the principles of the Republican People's Party (CHP), he once told Mustafa Kemal: “Paşam, in every respect, this is a revolutionary party. A revolutionary party cannot function without being based on an ideology or doctrine.” In response, Mustafa Kemal is said to have replied, “In that case, we would become rigid and stagnant.” According to Yakup Kadri, what Atatürk meant by these words was: “I cannot imprison my free thought and free will within rusted iron cages. If I were to make such a mistake, I would deprive both my nation and myself of the power to always progress and create.” It is apparent that Atatürk did not wish to bind the revolution to a specific ideology or doctrine. Nevertheless, Kadro set out with precisely such aspirations (Türkislamoğlu, 2022, p. 407).

collective could perform any meaningful role in society, and how a society composed of such individuals could ever achieve progress and prosperity (Ağaoğlu, 1933, p. 25).

Contrary to the Kadro assertion that freedom and individuality lead to chaos and disorder, Ağaoğlu maintained that progress and increased division of labor result in greater interdependence among individuals. He argued that had the Kadro group recognized the true motivation behind the revolutions, they would have understood that the ultimate goal was to create a democratic society composed of free individuals. Instead, they insisted on extreme statism (*müfrit devletçilik*) (Ağaoğlu, 1933, p. 30). According to him, the fundamental contradiction of the Kadro thinkers lies in their pre-war belief that the state was the root of all social problems, followed by their post-war advocacy for granting the same state the highest and broadest powers to resolve those issues (Ağaoğlu, 1933, p. 58). He described the state as an executive force that represents the nation, replaces it, organizes it, directs it, assumes economic initiatives, creates wealth, and establishes technology—essentially, a state that swallows the nation and leaves it with no function (Ağaoğlu, 1933, p. 59).

Drawing on the example of Henry Ford in America, Ağaoğlu attempted to show that in societies where individual creativity is encouraged, development and progress are inevitable. In other words, the extent to which individual initiative is advanced in a society is directly proportional to the level of technical advancement. He famously claimed, “With the innovations Ford introduced, ten countries like Iran could be built” (Ağaoğlu, 1933, p. 64). The Kadro group, on the other hand, believed that technical advancement could be achieved not through individual initiative but through state control. Ağaoğlu used this comparison to demonstrate their error.

Another justification offered by the Kadro thinkers for prioritizing the state over the individual was rooted in Marxist theses. In industrialized societies, class conflict between workers and capitalists exists, and state regulation is seen as a solution. However, Ağaoğlu contended that since there was no significant capitalist class or advanced industrial society in Turkey, class conflict did not exist. The Kadro group, by examining Western contradictions, believed that potential conflicts in Turkey could only be prevented through state intervention. They therefore advocated for state control of the economy as a means to regulate social life. Ağaoğlu, however, considered the elimination of the individual and the state’s intrusion into economic life as dangerous (Ağaoğlu, *State and Individual*, 1933, p. 74). Strong societies, he insisted, can only be composed of strong individuals. Eastern societies, through their history, laws, governance, religion, morality, and philosophy, have consistently oppressed the individual,

and for this reason, have remained underdeveloped. The first aim of the Kemalist revolution, he argued, should be to liberate the individual from these oppressive forces (Ağaoğlu, 1933, p. 74).

Ağaoğlu's intellectual debate with the Kadro group clearly illustrates his prioritization of the individual over the state and his belief that societal development is contingent on individual development. This emphasis on individuality and freedom enables us to classify Ağaoğlu as a liberal thinker. However, it is crucial to note that he should not be considered a classical liberal. Rather, his liberalism aligns more closely with social liberalism. Ağaoğlu did not view the individual as an entity isolated from society; individualism that lacks a sense of social responsibility and solidarity is, in his view, a form of crude egoism—something Eastern societies have suffered from deeply:

In our society, sentiment has perished. We can no longer derive pleasure from beauty, nor do we feel aversion toward evil. We lack affection, compassion, and mercy for one another. Our hearts do not draw near, our souls do not unite, and no warmth emerges among us. We fear and avoid each other, and we do not understand how fulfilling it can be to suffer on behalf of another, to come to someone's aid, or to rescue another from calamity (Ağaoğlu, Gönülsüz Olmaz, 2020, p. 110).

Ağaoğlu attributes the parallel development of individualism and altruism in the West not to crude egoism, but rather to mechanisms such as unionization and associational life. Referring to Charles Gide, he notes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, France was home to approximately sixty thousand associations (Georgeon, p. 128). As such, it is evident that Ağaoğlu was a thinker who advocated for liberal values and adopted a Westernist-Enlightenment-oriented perspective.¹¹ The two central themes characterizing liberalism—priority of the individual and the defense of liberty—are key to Ağaoğlu's intellectual stance. As his debate with the Kadro movement, later published under the title *State and Individual*, demonstrates, Ağaoğlu consistently prioritized the individual over the state.¹²

¹¹ "Due to his education in France and his pro-Western views, the people of Karabakh gave him the nickname 'Frank Ahmet' (Erden, 2021, p. x). It cannot be said that Ağaoğlu was displeased with this."

¹² "Ağaoğlu, who lived in exile in Malta and agreed with Ziya Gökalp on certain key issues related to nationalism, held different views on this matter. According to Gökalp, 'The New State should be the basis of everything. Even the source of law could only be the state. There are no rights, only duties.' However, Ağaoğlu argued that the New State should be entirely based on liberal ideas and principles, stating, 'The only way for the Turkish Nation to reach Western civilization is by sincerely accepting the principles of free and independent enterprise that created this civilization.' These differences of opinion between the two friends and Turkish nationalists were also reflected in the CHP's program and the creation of the Turkish Republic's Constitution (Kocaoğlu, 1996, p. 76)."

According to Ağaoğlu, the fundamental distinction between Eastern and Western societies lies in their respective conceptions of the individual. The West, whose democratization process—rooted in the thirteenth century but fully realized after the French Revolution—eventually led to liberty and social progress, contrasts sharply with the East, where the individual has been historically suppressed. In the East, individuals have been crushed under the weight of deficient views on women, the hypocrisy and inadequacy of the scholarly class, and prolonged periods of despotism.

It must be emphasized, however, that Ağaoğlu's conception of the individual and of liberty differs significantly from classical liberalism or libertarian thought. These latter frameworks tend to conceptualize the individual and the relationship between the individual and the state or society within the framework of negative liberty—that is, liberty as the absence of coercion or interference from external authorities. Such a notion implies that individuals may withdraw into their private spheres, avoid public responsibility, and focus solely on personal interests. Yet, as clearly expressed in the quotation above, Ağaoğlu rejects this notion of individualism as a form of crude egoism. Instead, he advocates for a kind of altruistic individualism.

In his work *Who Am I? (Ben Neyim?)*, Ağaoğlu illustrates the conflict between egoism and altruism through a tension he describes as that between the "inner self" and the "outer self." This tension reflects the influence of Durkheim. According to Durkheim, an individual can simultaneously defend individualism and affirm that the individual is an integral part of the society in which they live. As Tok and Gürbüz argue, Durkheim distinguishes between two types of individualism: the first is "false individualism," which arises from utilitarian thought and fosters egoism; the second is "true individualism," as defined by Kant and Rousseau, which elevates moral consciousness and strengthens social solidarity. The authors suggest that Ağaoğlu's liberalism, shaped by Durkheimian thought and the reasoning presented above, aligns more closely with social liberalism (Tok & Gürbüz, 2024, p. 142).

In essence, Ağaoğlu embraces a conception of individuality defined by mutual engagement, reciprocal aid, and shared responsibility among members of society. This understanding corresponds to the ideal of the republican citizen, shaped by the notion of positive liberty. In his fictional work *In the Land of Free People (Serbest İnsanlar Ülkesinde)*, Ağaoğlu draws a portrait of the ideal citizen envisioned by the newly founded republic. This ideal citizen is one who does not hesitate to express their ideas freely, who strives for personal development, yet who is equally conscious of their responsibilities to the broader society. Such an individual is not defined by negative liberty—freedom from interference—but

rather by positive liberty, understood as the capacity to act upon one's sense of civic duty and to contribute meaningfully to the collective good.

Conclusion

Ağaoğlu was a prominent intellectual who lived in Russia, the Ottoman Empire, and Azerbaijan, and who pursued his education in France. While some of his ideas evolved depending on the time and place in which he lived, one principle remained constant throughout his life: his unwavering commitment to liberty. In his view, where freedom does not exist, the individual is suppressed, and the suppression of the individual inevitably hinders societal development. The East, according to Ağaoğlu, lagged behind precisely because it remained distant from the ideal of freedom, leading to the erosion of individuality. In contrast, Western civilization advanced through the cultivation of individual liberty. For this reason, Ağaoğlu regarded Westernism as a safe harbor for the newly established republican regime. Nevertheless, his proposed solutions and the scope of his recommendations are open to critical scrutiny. For instance, Ağaoğlu viewed England as a pioneering country in matters of individual development, liberty, and democracy. However, he himself also acknowledged that England had two faces—one domestic, one colonial (Ağaoğlu, *England and India*, 2023, p. 8). Although the British portrayed themselves as champions of liberty and defenders of justice and human rights at home, they saw no contradiction in colonizing India and oppressing its people.

Ağaoğlu did not remain silent in the face of this contradiction; he criticized it directly. Yet, England is not one or the other—it is both. If we take seriously Ağaoğlu's own assertion that civilization is an indivisible whole, that it cannot be selectively adopted—"one cannot accept parts of it while rejecting others"—then it logically follows that in order to become a "developed civilization," one must also be willing to accept, or at least overlook, the exploitation of certain segments of humanity. Alternatively, this would require a double standard: one set of policies for domestic citizens, and another for subjects abroad. But we can be quite certain that Ağaoğlu's vision of Turkey did not involve such a dichotomy. Thus, it becomes apparent that Ağaoğlu's recommendation to fully embrace Western civilization as a model cannot be defended without qualification—at least not in theoretical terms. However, his ideas—particularly his prioritization of the individual over the state, his advocacy for liberty in the face of dogmatism, and his call for democracy against authoritarianism—remain profoundly relevant even today.

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