The Impact of European Freemasonry on the Turkish Civil Society
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During my PhD I worked on the history of Freemasonry in Turkey, from 1850 until 1935. Today I would like to talk about the impact of European Freemasonry on the Turkish civil society.

Freemasonry: its origins and expansion

The speculative Freemasonry was founded in England in 1717 and its roots go back to the church and cathedral builders’ guilds from the fifteenth until the seventeenth century that enriched major European cities with their works of engineering and architecture. Since the end of the seventeenth century, however, the guilds were in a crisis due to the decrease of construction projects. It had its direct origin from the craft guilds, and it took on new targets connected with the culture of the Enlightenment, characterizing itself as a cosmopolitan association. It was aimed at promoting the well-being of the individual and for society as a whole through ongoing education, regardless of differences in language, religion, nationality and political ideology.

In the same way as in the European countries, its expansion also affected the Mediterranean and the Near East, along with the colonial expansion. In fact, Freemasonry expanded in many countries outside Europe.

The appearance of the Masonic institution in the Ottoman Empire is dated 1738 and in this context Freemasonry returned in a certain way to its origins because, according to many authors, since its roots go deep into the Mediterranean civilization, along with that of ancient Egypt, the Jerusalem of Solomon, and Hellenic culture, although this hypothesis is unproven due to the lack of clear documentation.

In order to fully understand the extent of cultural relations caused by the presence of Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire, it is necessary to consider the situation of this vast state in the time span from the entrance of the institution until the period of the greatest bloom of its activities, which is identified as the beginning of the main attraction of the Institution for the Ottoman civil society.

The Empire was founded about 1300, and it had gone through almost four hundred years of unscathed history, yet in the first half of the eighteenth century it was going through a period of deep crisis. It was afflicted by military defeats, territorial concessions, especially in the European territories. Its supremacy was no longer absolute. Although it still remained a giant in terms of territory, it was affected by the evolution of the countries beyond its borders. This is true not only from the technological point of view but also from a cultural and social one. While in the Empire there was a decline of the arts mainly because of economic problems, Europe was treading new ground and trying new roads. The philosophical Enlightenment pervaded Europe.
The Enlightenment revolutionized the lives of an entire continent. The eighteenth century was for the Empire a century of a deep crisis during which, however, the need for necessary reforms concerning the outdated economic and social state system became understood. There was a need to discover the outside world in order to understand the reasons of military success or economic dynamism, that dynamism which the Empire had now lacked for too long and that led to its system being outdated.

During the reign of Sultan Ahmed the III even a wider technological gap could be noticed that the kingdom had accumulated towards the West. He tried to remediate this for by trying to innovate the institutions’ functioning these attempts failed partly because of the pressure of powerful conservative groups. There was then a transition period which registered even a stronger awareness of the real conditions of the Empire, and what was the actual power of the neighbouring countries, that continued to push the boundaries and whose economic trade extend their influence in Ottoman ports. The true and real reforms would only start in the nineteenth century when the European presence became more evident.

**The arrival of Freemasonry in the Ottoman Empire**

Freemasonry arrived early in areas far from England, reaching the Ottoman Empire nearly twenty years after its conversion from the operative Freemasonry into the speculative one. During the first fifty years of its presence in the major imperial cities it was but one of many manifestations of the European presence, which during those years was becoming more evident. It was also influential because of the increasingly unstable situation and decadent Empire. The contacts, and social and cultural relations between members of the Freemasonry, and the local people were in practice non-existent. The Ottomans did not tolerate Freemasonry, because for them it was a foreign association, composed of foreigners, the bearers of Western ideals, a modern culture that is badly amalgamated with the social structure, traditions, and above all even the religion of the majority of the Ottomans. In particular, the British Masons considered Freemasonry a "thing" of its own, which represented their national identity, and felt no need to integrate within the lodges people who had a completely different cultural background from their own.

We are therefore in the presence of a case of nationalist Freemasonry, in the sense of Freemasonry that was practiced by Europeans, the bearers of traditions and customs that remained confined to the European community.

The situation changed only later, thanks to the much more enlightened French Masons. They, unlike the British, believed in a universal Freemasonry, and had no conception of the national institution and soon embarked on the policy of Masonic propaganda. This consisted of the constant spread of Masonic ideals. This was also and especially outside of the community which was always quite small and was not able to provide an adequate number of followers. The only way forward was to involve other communities. First of all, they tried to introduce into the French lodges prominent people from other foreign communities, Italians, Greeks, Armenians and Jews.
It was in the late sixties and mid-seventies of the nineteenth century when the greatest opening of the French Freemasonry towards the Ottoman society was observed. It was thanks to the work of Louis Amiable, a lawyer who was the head of the French Freemasonry in Istanbul. Due to his incessant work, several lodges made up of people of different social status, culture and religion were founded in the area. He made Masonic Western culture accessible to the Ottomans by doing a very simple thing, that is translating the rituals and lectures that were carried out in the lodge into the Ottoman language. This step bridged the gap between West and East, and created a system of mutual understanding, which showed what had already been said by the Emir Abdel Kader who was a mason, that there was no distance between Masonic and Islamic thought.

**Masonry - the bearer of Enlightenment**

The events described above were the first attempts of socio-cultural inclusion. Freemasonry then became the bearer of the values attached to the Enlightenment - the cultural, social and philosophical current that was born in England around the eighteenth century but reached its maximum development in France. The term "Enlightenment" means generally any form of thought that wants to "light up" the mind of men, unenlightened by ignorance and superstition, by using the critique of reason and the contribution of science but also of classics. All of this thought is found in Masonic thought, which is the same that at first led European Masons and later the Ottoman affiliates. The Masons learnt Masonic culture by studying the Greek classics, from Pericles to Hippocrates, studying and deepening their reflections. They focused on the concept of democracy, which was alien to the Ottoman political system. The encounter with Western culture affected many areas, not least music. Since is discovery, one of the most popular composers in Turkey is Amadeus Mozart who plays a major role in the Masonic tradition.

**The Masonic culture meets the Ottoman culture**

Trying to indicate what was the contribution of Freemasonry in terms of culture in a society which is completely different from the European one is difficult, and it is a subject that has been hardly studied compared to the central theme of Freemasonry. It is possible to advance the hypothesis, however, supported by reliable sources that indicate that thanks to the French Masons, their openness and Enlightenment tradition, there was a first real contact between Western culture.

In this case represented by the Masonic institution and Eastern culture, imbued with religious ideals. Obviously Ottoman Masons, so tied to the Muslim religion, had approached the masonry only after establishing with full conviction that Freemasonry and Islam were not in conflict.

During the second half of the nineteenth century Ottoman literature was influenced by the European literature, for example such intellectuals as Namik Kemal and Tevfik Fikret who, despite the despotism of Sultan Abdülhamid II and Abdulaziz, did not stop exalting and writing about purely European ideals and concepts such as liberty, equality, homeland and nation. The relationship between Freemasonry and the Ottoman civil society can be seen from two perspectives: one is the encounter between a society that had already gained its internal experience of fraternity, through the Sufi brotherhoods, which for decades had represented the
centre of social life. They represented the most important example of Ottoman sociality. Based on the study of the characteristics of the brotherhoods it is noticeable that they had things in common with the Masons, such as liberalism, non-conformism and to some extent anti-clericalism. Through mutual knowledge Masonic rituals were welcomed in one of the most important brotherhoods in the panorama of Ottoman sufi, Bektashiyyah, that in fact made some Masonic rituals their own. The other aspect is that of opposition, which sees the Masons as the bearer of purely European values and ideals, which were not accepted by the Ottoman civil society.

Conclusions

In conclusion it is possible to affirm that Freemasonry constituted for Turkey a vector of modernity since between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, it accompanied the introduction of the ideas of progress and liberalism.

In the lodges there was also the meeting of men of different ethnicities, who were working in harmony inside the temple, and who cohabited outside but rarely had social relations, as all the ethnicities were isolated from a social perspective.

The lodges were spaces for discussion and the exchange of ideas. Here there were discussions on Masonic issues but also on issues related to the advancement of science or other subjects that had affected public opinion.