

Şerif Mardin

A Year in Berlin



Born in 1927. B.A. in Political Science, Stanford University (1948), M.A. in International Relations, School of Advanced International Studies (1950), Ph.D. in Political Science, Stanford University (1958). Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Ankara, Associate and then Full Professor (1961–72). Professor and Head of Social Science Department, Bogaziçi University (1973–76). Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Administrative Sciences, Bogaziçi University (1976–78). Professor, Department of Sociology, Bogaziçi University (1978–80). Visiting Professor at various American and European Universities (1965–86). Professor, Department of Administrative Studies, Bogaziçi University (1986–88). Chair of Islamic Studies, School of International Service, American University, Washington, D.C. (1988 – present). – Address: Chair of Islamic Studies, School of International Service, American University, 4400 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20016-8071, USA.

A larger scope of research than academic routine would allow, the time to engage in courageous comparisons of parallel developments between the Islamic culture area and the “West” leading to new discoveries, a general recognition that Ottoman studies are of intrinsic interest to all comparatists: these were the expectations with which I arrived at the Wissenschaftskolleg in the Fall of 1997. The conviction that ten months of study and discussion would promote such success was, of course, utopian, from the start. Our fearless leaders at the Kolleg seem to have had repeated encounters with such unrealistic dreams, which lead them to better titrate the musings which are the final and richest products of the freedom to think for two semesters. In my case, however, the experience at the Kolleg rewarded me with unanticipated outcomes.

My “Tuesday” presentation focused on the idea that the mobilizational activities of the Islamic Nakshabandi sect – one item in many similar social movements figuring under the heading of neo-sufism in the modern history of the Middle East and the Maghrib – should be considered an important component and propellant to world history. It was well-known

that such stirrings had redrawn the *modus operandi* of many Islamic groups from the 18th century on, changing the whole setting of Middle East politics. Such a claim was met by my audience with caution, although a positive valence was added to the reserve shown. Such a reaction was to be expected from an audience for the majority of whom the lineaments of modern Islamic history suddenly appeared on the world stage with the forbidding image of Imam Khomeini. However, in the end, a more subtle process left deeper traces in the minds of our colleagues.

Some of my Turkish friends, also Fellows, worked on other aspects of the transformational mechanisms of Islamic societies in modern times, taking up aspects of the development, from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, of the concept of the private property or the structural influence during modernization of the latent premises contained in the Islamic institution of *wakf*, or charitable foundation. These presentations did, in the end, place Islam in the very perspective I was trying to promote. I was happy that we could thereby leave the Fellows from the West with the idea that Islam is a social setting with its own internal transformational potential.

A more specific subject I was able to develop during my two semesters was that of the “vernacularization” of language and culture in the Ottoman Empire after the 19th century. In 1996, I had been drafted into a group of scholars brought together by Professor S. Eisenstadt of the Van Leer Institute in Jerusalem and Prof. Björn Wittrock of Stockholm University. At a conference organized on the subject of changes of social identity during early modernization, I had been unable to develop this theme in the time allotted to conference participants. The papers of this conference were later published in *Daedalus*, Summer 1998. In a way, I used my time at the Kolleg to make up for what I considered an unsatisfactory performance with the group. I’m happy to declare that in a preliminary investigation aimed at eventually taking up the development of new forms of social and political identity, I was able to unravel some of the intricate ways in which “vernacularization” as promoted by a set of Ottoman liberals in the 1860s found an earlier foundation in classical Ottoman culture. These intellectuals then went on to use this earlier vernacular to redraw a frame of “Turkish” national literature. I have since been underlining the way in which “Turkish” maintained a hegemonic position in a multicultural society in which Arabic and Persian were integrated into the language of the elite. The last findings of this version of my research will appear in a book edited by Profs. Deniz Kandiyote and Ayşe Sakkamber.

Regarding what inspired my work as a background force, I have, of course, to mention my colleagues and their ideas, the setting of Berlin, where I was fortunate to witness an outstanding director’s staging of

Brecht, the constant assistance of the Kolleg staff, and the excellent library services. Last but not least, an apartment with a view, which interestingly had a wider span in winter than in summer.

Scholars will want to continue to tap the Kolleg's unique facilities for developing ideas that have emerged in their work but which they have not had the luxury to fully develop.