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Author(s): David Norman Smith

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Ziya Gökalp and Emile Durkheim: sociology as an apology for chauvinism?

David Norman Smith

Ziya Gökalp is not well known to Durkheim scholars. Yet his relationship to Durkheim is the subject of a voluminous Turkish language literature. There are also accounts of Durkheim's seminal importance for "*la pensée gökalpienne*" in European languages.¹ Gökalp's biographer, Uriel Heyd (1950), opens his narrative of Gökalp's life and philosophy with a list of abbreviations, devoted equally to the writings of Gökalp and Durkheim.

For specialists on modern Turkey, in other words, Gökalp and Durkheim are corollary figures. This is interesting in itself. But there is also another, more immediate reason to delve into the Gökalp/Durkheim nexus. This concerns Gökalp's intellectual and practical culpability for the Armenian genocide of World War 1 – a responsibility which some contemporary scholars have linked, more or less delicately, to Gökalp's purportedly "Durkheimian" chauvinism and corporatism.

Is Durkheim guilty, however indirectly, of supplying intellectual aid and comfort to the "Pan-Turanian" ideologues who conceived and implemented the Armenian genocide? He has been accused of chauvinism and even proto-fascist tendencies before.²

1. See the many sources cited by Taha Parla, 1985. Besides scholarly studies, these sources include a journal, *Ziya Gökalp*, which appeared semi-annually in the 1950s. The phrase, *la pensée gökalpienne*, appears in the best discussion of Gökalp's sociology yet published in a European language, Ziyaeddin Fahri's Strasbourg dissertation of 1936.

2. See, above all, Mitchell 1931, and Ranulf 1939. For a negative verdict on this thesis, see Llobera 1994. For a contrasting view, see Turner 1992.

But recent discussions have intimated that Durkheim's sociology may have an elective affinity for a form of nationalism so violent that it leads, by an inner necessity, to mass murder.

In my opinion this is far from the truth. Still, there plainly is a connexion between certain forms of sociological communitarianism and an anti-humanist ethic. Sacralizing the *Volksgemeinschaft* can indeed lead to the devaluation – and destruction – of other peoples. This point is well illustrated by the cautionary tale of Ziya Gökalp's aberrant "Durkheimianism".

Here I can only sketch this tale. A fuller exposition will await another occasion.

I

Ziya Gökalp rose to power and influence in the wake of the revolution of 1908, in which the "Young Turks" of the Committee of Union and Progress (C.U.P.) displaced the old sultanate and put Turkey on the path to national integration. The cosmopolitanism of the multiethnic Ottoman empire gave way to the new passions and dynamics of "Turkism", largely under the intellectual tutelage of the youthful Gökalp, who became a member of the C.U.P. central committee in 1911. Then in his early thirties, Gökalp was soon recognized as the leading intellectual of the new regime. Many still regard him as the pre-eminent Turkish thinker of the century.¹

Until 1908 the C.U.P. had been less a "revolutionary party" than a cluster of oppositional circles, led largely by physicians educated at the Military Medical College. The authoritarianism and secularism which have so indelibly marked Turkish nationalism in this century sprang, in part, from the exalted self-image of these physicians, who believed that only they could prescribe a future for the Turkish people. But Young Turk elitism and scientism also

1. E.g., Niyazi Berkes calls Gökalp "the most original and influential" of 20th century Turkish writers (in Gökalp 1959). Cf. Heyd 1950: ix; Parla 1985: 22; and the sources cited by Parla.

reflected the influence of Western European doctrines, most notably Le Bon's crowd psychology (see Hanioglu 1995). Gökalp, too, was apparently swayed by Le Bon before 1908. However, when he began to theorize on the future of the revolution, Gökalp referred most often to Nietzsche and Fouillée. Still later, on the eve of the world war, Gökalp's thinking took a decisively "Durkheimian" turn. Seeking a recipe for national unity on a new, post-Ottoman foundation in a period when the Young Turk regime was embattled and insecure, Gökalp found insight and hope in an idiosyncratic adaptation of Durkheim's ideas on collective effervescence and moral authority.

Durkheim himself responded to the war with a stinging denunciation of the illiberalism and Prussian chauvinism of Heinrich Treitschke's *Alldeutsche* disciples on the German General Staff. Often construed narrowly as little more than a patriotic tract – which of course it was – Durkheim's *L'Allemagne au-dessus de tout* (1915c) was also a reaffirmation of the humanitarian principles he had defended earlier, against Brunetière *et al.*, in the context of the Dreyfus affair and its aftermath. This was entirely consistent with Durkheim's lifelong refusal to regard the suffocating "altruism" of the military as an alternative to the egoism rife in civil society. "Excessive de-individuation" is not the Durkheimian remedy for "excessive individualism". *Gemeinschaft*, briefly, is not Durkheim's cure for the ills of *Gesellschaft*.

Ranulf was right to indict communitarian doctrines exalting the group over the person. He was wrong to imagine he had found such a teaching in Durkheim, who did not romanticize the loss of individuality in Arunta ritual, as Ranulf claimed. But Gökalp did indeed support what Durkheim is falsely accused of endorsing. "I am a soldier, [the nation] is my commander/I obey without question all its orders/With closed eyes I carry out my duty."¹

1. From the didactic war-time poem of 1915, *Vazife* ("Duty" – cited by Heyd 1950: 124; and Parla 1985: 65).

II

During the war, Gökalp defended an ultra-nationalist perspective which left no room for individual liberties and initiatives. The authoritarianism of old was reborn in a corporatist “Durkheimian” guise, which Gökalp elaborated in a stream of essays, lectures, and poems. A close ally of Talaat, the key triumvir in the C.U.P. regime, Gökalp was effectively the official ideologue of the war and revolution. He was also assigned to assess the status of minorities, including Armenians, and propose measures to deal with them. When the war ended, Gökalp was arrested with other C.U.P. leaders, charged with war crimes, and deported to Malta. While denying that a genocide had occurred, he nonetheless defended the policy of “deporting” the Armenians – often to trackless wastes. At least 200,000 and perhaps as many as 1.5 million “deportees” died.

An ardent supporter of Atatürk in the immediate post-war period, Gökalp died in 1924, shortly after publishing his most important work, *The Principles of Turkism* ([1923] 1968).

This, then, is the background for the claim that Gökalp’s chauvinism rests on a Durkheimian foundation. This claim takes several forms. The mildest yet most troubling version is put forward by Robert Melson in an account of the ideological roots of the Armenian genocide. Calling Gökalp the theorist of the genocide *par excellence*, Melson is careful to say that Gökalp’s worldview was rooted in geopolitics as well as in ideology. But he does note Gökalp’s professions of fidelity to French sociology: “it was Gökalp’s reading of Durkheim”, he writes, “and his adaptation of the French sociologist to the political landscape that proved to be seminal”.¹ Taha Parla, meanwhile, insists that Gökalp was innocent of genocide, adding, however, that “if Gökalp was

1. Melson 1992: 164. He does not blame Durkheim for Gökalp’s views, but readers may still infer a connexion.

illiberal, he was not more so than Durkheim was". While Parla agrees that "Durkheim, as opposed to fascistic corporatists, is not totally anti-liberal", he still blames Durkheim for lapses in Gökalp's liberalism, arguing that Gökalp was torn between a radically democratic, "Rousseauan" outlook and a "Durkheimian, i.e., corporatist" view (Parla 1985: 66, 101, 114).

What, in reality, is the bond between Gökalp and Durkheim? I believe that there is, in fact, a connexion, but that Gökalp's chauvinism negates Durkheimian premises, rather than realizing them. Gökalp's sociology is quite subtle at times. His writings show the influence of many Durkheimian texts, including essays and lectures that were quite obscure at the time. Many of Gökalp's pupils still paid homage to Durkheim decades later. Yet Gökalp is far more concerned, ultimately, with Turkish glory than with sociological orthodoxy. Durkheim's sociology served Gökalp as a platform for a doctrine of his own, which differs decisively from Durkheim's in crucial ways – not least, e.g., in Gökalp's naïve praise for the "geniuses" who allegedly shape history and peoples.

As far as nationalism is concerned, Gökalp was worlds removed from his ostensible master. In fact, as Uriel Heyd observes, Gökalp's stance was distinctly Treitschkean in many ways – he was very much a partisan of altruism and *Gemeinschaft*, very much an advocate of "the Prussian ideal of absolute devotion of the citizen to the State even to the extinction of his personality". Ironically, though, Heyd supports his observation about Gökalp and Treitschke with a quote from Durkheim, which he calls an "appreciation" of Treitschke!¹ Evidently, even Gökalp's keenest students sometimes find it difficult to distinguish Durkheim's iconoclastic, anti-militaristic sociology from Pan-Turkish and Pan-German chauvinism. A closer comparative reading of Gökalp, Treitschke, and Durkheim would, I believe, make the vital differences between them quite clear.

1. Heyd 1950: 163, 165; cf. 58-8, 161 and *passim*.

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