

# **From Plato to Ataturk**

## **Transformation of a Nation through Education**

### ***Introduction***

*"The governments most creative and significant duty is education."*

*(Mustafa Kemal Ataturk)*

Centuries ago Plato lived in a state not very far away from where Turkey is located today, Anatolia. The land that hosted great civilizations through the centuries, become a scene for the shiny days of some and the fall of many others. Called as a bridge between the east and the west, this land also witnessed great wars of religion, ethnicity and imperialist fights. The last war, the Independence War (Kurtulus Savasi), was between imperialist countries who occupied the country and Turkish people who wanted to take their country back from these forces to be an independent state. After centuries of Ottoman Empire's expansionist policies, it was time to defend the country, fight for independence and move towards a new vision of democratic and modern Turkey. That was the time when Turkish statesman Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (the Great Turk) acted as the revolutionary founder of the Republic of Turkey. Not only he led the whole country to gain her independence, also employed reforms to change the political, economic, social and cultural structure of the country to make her modern, secular and democratic state, turning her face to more western ideologies. These reforms ranging from legal and political acts to educational, economic movements changed country's social and political practices that were based on the Ottoman Empire's traditions and formed a new vision for modern Turkish society. Ataturk believed that education at all levels of the society would be one of the most important forces of Turkey's improvement in democracy, secularity, science, culture and prosperity. He valued the role of education in country's development and started "free education" movement leading the literacy program. Literacy which had been less than 9 percent in 1923 rose to more than 33 percent by 1938. Many educational reforms followed this literacy movement to modernize the country and made her move towards the level of contemporary civilizations. Through investigating these reforms, one can

easily track some of the ideologies that Plato mentioned in the *Republic*. The reforms and ideologies of Ataturk are closely related with Plato's visions of education which entail personal realization of knowledge and philosophy to create a just city. The aim of this paper is to explore the commonalities between Ataturk Reforms and Plato's educational insights. The reforms such as education of women, applied education and secularism will be explored with the connections of what Plato specifically state in the *Republic*.

### ***Education of Women***

The state ideologies and reforms in Turkey were shaped around equality of each person in the society free from class, gender, ethnicity and religious differences. The democracy in the nation could only be achieved through equal treatment of every individual. After hundred years of suppression, now women in Anatolia were treated as equal citizens and same opportunities were granted to them to be active participants in the society. Ataturk greatly admired Turkish women's struggle during the war and praised their contributions. Women for the first time in the history were given right to elect and to be elected and gained their political rights in 1934, years before many Western countries. Moreover, Ataturk also encouraged the equal treatment of both men and women in education so that they could raise the country together and be role models for next generations. Ataturk declared that " *We shall emphasize putting our women's secondary and higher education on an equal footing with men.*" Giving women equal social and political rights, had an impact on the educational system of the country in which women played active role as idealistic teachers of Kemalist reforms and principles. Plato as a radical philosopher in his time lived in a state which was not very different from Turkish society at the very beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century in terms of the status of women. In Athenian society women were not yet regarded as citizens and they had no right to participate in state's political acts. Plato, however, takes a very radical approach in this respect arguing that women should be treated equally as men in his ideal state (454 e). For instance he states that women should also be guardians who will defend the state and fight against the enemies together with men. In the analogy of watchdog, he includes women as the ones who will protect the city by simply because she gives birth to puppies (451 d). In the *Republic*,

since all children were raised communally and treated equally regardless of their gender, women must also be productive as men to make the state successful. Therefore girls should also be nurtured and educated the same as men to be future guardians and they should be educated in arts and gymnastics together with the men (456 b, 452 a). As we see, both Ataturk and Plato believe that women should take an active role in the society and thus be educated as men to operate the society in harmony.

### ***Applied Education***

Through educational reforms, the aim of Ataturk was to increase not only the knowledge in basics but also the practicalities which would help citizens develop modern structures in the society. He stated his position in this respect in one of his speeches: “Ladies, gentlemen. The method to be applied in education and instruction is to make knowledge a practical and useful tool that ensures success in material life rather than an accessory, a tool of administration, or a modern form of pleasure”. That is why he invited John Dewey, an American Educator and philosopher, as a guest to Turkey in 1924. After the Independence War, Ataturk wanted to ask his advice on the improvement of the newly established modern Turkish Educational System and provide some reform ideas to educate the citizens of the country based on the ideals of a democratic society. Ataturk envisioned a progressive, critical pragmatic and democratic education to create a modern Turkey. Through the educational reforms, Ataturk wanted to change the educational system which was initially depended on memorization and passive receiving of knowledge; and directed toward religion by Ulema <sup>1</sup>during the last period of the Ottoman Empire. These reform initiations without any doubt overlap with Plato’s statements in the *Republic* in which he opposes to education as a passive transmission of knowledge. Plato asserts that education is not a passive way of receiving knowledge and cannot be delivered from a source to the receiver. According to Plato "education is not what the professions of certain men assert it to be. They presumably assert that they put into the soul knowledge that is not in it, as though they were putting sight into blind eyes" (518b). As we clearly see, the idea of “active learning” is not a new approach, rather a long

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<sup>1</sup> Refers to the educated class of [Muslim](#) scholars engaged in the several fields of [Islamic studies](#). (Retrieved from Wikipedia)

standing idea that was long years ago proposed by Plato. Plato also criticizes passive instruction in Thrasymachus speech. "When Thrasymachus had said this, he had it in mind to go away, just like a bathman, after having poured a great shower of speech into our ears" (344d). In response, Socrates asks him, "Thrasymachus, you demonic man, do you toss in such an argument, and have it in mind to go away before teaching us adequately . . . ?" (344d). He criticizes those who consider teaching as pouring knowledge into souls of each as if they are "putting sight into blind eyes" and stresses the power of learning in each soul (518c). This power of learning was highly encouraged in Ataturk's educational reforms with the reliance on Turkish youth as a major force to carry on with his reforms.

### ***The Enlightenment and Secularism***

"The major challenge facing us is to elevate our national life to the highest level of civilization and prosperity." Ataturk

Ataturk wanted to raise the standards in all levels of the society to the highest level of modern civilizations. The secularism was one of the biggest steps in country's history. Secularism in Ataturk's reforms separated the religion from educational, cultural and legal affairs. The aim was to form independent thinking free from religious dogmas. This was a big step in the history of the country, which many years depended on religious policies of the Ottoman Empire. Since Islam dominated the whole country socially, politically, culturally and economically, secularism act was initiated to remove religious dogmatism and create a new socio-cultural reform and apply scientific principles to westernize the country. Ataturk's words "the best and the real guide in life is knowledge and science" reflected themselves in education through the many reforms of separating religion from education in the form of closing religious schools and secularizing public education.

The secularism attempt can be connected with the allegory of the cave which Plato describes in the Republic. The allegory describes a situation where individuals in the society are born in a cave, their legs and arms in bonds and watching the shadows on the

wall of the cave. The people are watching the shadows on the wall reflected by the burning fire behind them and are not aware of the realities and the real truth (514 a). In case a prisoner is unchained and allowed to see the reality, he would first be resistant to this new change but then will adapt to the real truth (515 d). He later will go to the people on the cave and explain them the reality and will face with the resistance (517 a). In the allegory of the cave Plato describes a line between the tangible truth and perceived truth. This line can be connected with the early days of Turkish Republic. Because of the very limited education in the country, the Ottoman Empire's policies of disregarding the public and creating a closed system in the elites, people were unaware of their thinking free from dogmas. At that time, what they perceived was the truth reflected by religious thinking. The awakening movement was initiated by some brave and farseeing people, Ataturk and his friends, explaining the public the desperate situation of the country and encouraging them to break the chains of hopelessness and fight for the independency and later adapt the new reforms of modernization. At the very beginning it was not very easy to adopt these reforms because the education level of the country was very low and the educated ones were exposed to religious training. Ataturk and his friends faced with struggles in some parts of the country where people did not want to adopt this new secular system. That was the time that Ataturk sent many Turkish teachers who were in the mission of disseminating the reforms of Ataturk to the country, forming schools where girls and boys were seated together, promoting the literacy, scientific principles and modern values of new Turkish Republic. As Plato states once the truth is known, it is hard to understand the things in a different way (516 d) and later it is hard to go back to previous beliefs (516 e). Therefore with these reform attempts, Turkish citizens were encouraged to go out of the cave, see and process intellectually and perceive the tangible truth free from any religious dogma.

### ***Conclusion***

Turkish educational system is built with the principle that the national education shall be based on single school and secularism with the goal of raising citizens that shall increase the economic power and civilizations and social value of the national society. Through many reforms, Turkish citizens not only progressed toward a modern society but also

started to practice a new way of life. This awakening and transformation period has its philosophical and practical roots from the *Republic* where Plato describes a just city with the true education of the citizens. Turkey is now struggling with many problems concerning education, economic wealth and secularism. After the attempt of going out of the cave, new caves were formed with new modes of chains and shadows. Without any doubt, in today's world we have to consider the *Republic* more seriously than ever to better understand the structures in the country and thus propose educational solutions to raise it to the level which Ataturk once envisioned.