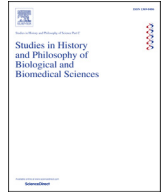




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## Beating the Turkish hollow in the struggle for existence: Darwin, social Darwinism and the Turks



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### ABSTRACT

Despite the vast literature on Darwinism and race, the way in which Darwin's opinions on race were received and used by non-Western circles has been little studied. In the case of the Turks, Darwin's comments have been related to British-Ottoman relations, and Darwin was blamed for stoking anti-Turkish sentiment within Europe. This allegedly resulted in the British occupation of Egypt in the 19th century, the demise of the Ottoman Empire, as well as contemporary Neo-Nazi arson attacks in Germany which targeted Turkish migrants. Consequently, Turkish anti-Darwinists perceive Darwinism to be not merely a false scientific theory, but also a political-ideological instrument of Western hegemony wielded against Turkey and the Islamic World. Turkish Darwinists who responded to those claims, on the other hand, presented Darwin as an egalitarian who could overcome the prejudices of his social class. Further scrutiny, however, proves both accounts to be over-simplistic. This paper aims to throw some light on the context within which Darwin expressed his opinions on Turks and thus contribute to the broader discussion of the relationship between Darwinism and race. More importantly, it aims to familiarise Western readers with one of the cultures of creationism which is very little known, despite its great impact on Muslim masses.

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In Constantinople we attended the weekly *selamlik* of Abdul Hamid, and saw him with his dyed beard and the ladies of his harem as they passed down to their devotions. It was an incredible sight to Western eyes to see the crowd of officers and officials, many of them fat and short of wind, who ran like dogs behind his carriage in the hope that they might catch the imperial eye. It was Ramadan, and the old Sultan sent me a message that he had read my books and that he would gladly have seen me had it not been the holy month.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (*Memories and Adventures*, 2007)

### 1. Introduction

Discussions of Darwinism's implications for morality have recently intensified in Turkey as the influential Turkish geologist and science populariser Celâl Şengör defended the tortures inflicted by the military government following the 1980 coup d'état by appealing to the social behaviours of gorillas. Şengör argued that

forcing people to eat faeces –as occurred during the period of military rule– does not qualify as torture, for he witnessed gorillas willfully engage in eating faeces in the San Diego zoo (Çağlayan, 2015). Anti-Darwinist circles in Turkey lambasted Şengör and emphasised that he was not the first person to draw a parallel between natural and social realms. Via social media, they reminded the Turkish public of Darwin's letter to William Graham in which the British naturalist allegedly celebrated Turkish defeats by "superior" European nations as exemplifying the operation of natural selection in the social realm.

Indeed, plausibly no other work of Darwin's has received as much attention in Turkey as his letter to Graham. Prominent Turkish anti-Darwinist Adnan Oktar (under the pseudonym of Harun Yahya) wrote a book titled *Darwin's Hostility Towards Turks* in 1999 as a response to the aforementioned letter, in which he portrayed Darwin as an agent of British imperialism who, through his theory as well as through this letter, motivated imperial powers to fight against Turks. Oktar utilised Darwin's opinions on Turks to diminish the prestige of Darwinian evolutionary theory in the eyes of the Turkish public by enhancing the idea that Darwinian evolutionary theory is pseudo-scientific and motivated by colonialist ideology. Oktar used the book to repeat the well-rehearsed allegations that Darwinism was responsible for the Holocaust and

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for the extermination of native peoples by imperial powers (Yahya, 2010).

As Ronald Numbers has noted in his pioneering work on Darwinism and creationism, Turkish anti-Darwinists were inspired by American evangelical literature (Numbers, 1993, p. 335). Yet in this case, Turkish anti-Darwinists did more than introduce Western discussions to a Turkish audience. The novelty of their discussion was that Darwinism, along with Darwin himself, was also held up as responsible for European anti-Turkish sentiment, the fall of the Ottoman Empire and even for Neo-Nazi assaults on Turkish migrants in Germany in the 1990s. Turkish anti-Darwinists thereby allege that Darwin was the arch-enemy of Islam, not only by his theory's materialist assault on theism, but also through his support of the British in their imperialist campaign against the Turks. Against the Turkish conservative proponents of these positions, Turkish secular defenders of Darwinian theory countered that Darwin's theory was solely biological and had no implications for society. They claim that it was rather missionaries, and thus religion itself, that was to blame for colonial atrocities (Ertan, 2009, p. 248).

The Turkish reception of Darwin and Darwinism has a complicated and peculiar history. Yet, heretofore, little has been written upon Turkish creationism, which had a significant impact on the Islamic world and on Muslims in European countries.<sup>1</sup> This article aims to address Darwin's ideas on Turks and unpacks how those views have a continuing relevance in public discourse, as used in recent Turkish discussions on Darwinism. Essentially, it will aim to address two issues: first, why Darwin wrote what he did; and second, why it still matters. In order to answer the former question, one needs to investigate Victorian views on race in general and on Turks in particular since Darwin was not writing in a vacuum. After analysing the Victorian *zeitgeist*, this article will explore whether Darwin's theory somehow shaped his opinions on Turks, and deal briefly with the controversial question of in what ways Darwin could be considered a *social Darwinist*. This historical analysis will help us to accurately examine how anti-Darwinists' interpretations of Darwin's views on Turks are distorted. Finally, the symbolic meaning attached to Darwin by Turkish Darwinists and anti-Darwinists will be delineated, and it will be revealed that the long-established tradition of Turkish opposition to Darwinism could be explained—at least partly—by political and social concerns.

## 2. Darwin on Turks

Lastly, I could show fight on natural selection having done and doing more for the progress of civilisation than you seem inclined to admit. Remember what risks the nations of Europe ran, not so many centuries ago of being overwhelmed by the Turks, and how ridiculous such an idea now is! The more civilized so-called Caucasian races have beaten the Turkish hollow in the struggle for existence. Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilized races throughout the world (Darwin, 1887, p. 316).

So wrote Charles Darwin in his letter to William Graham in 1881 in response to Graham's suspicions of the supposed benefits of applying natural selection to the social world. Like Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace, co-discoverer of the evolutionary theory through natural selection, seemed to praise the "great law of 'the

preservation of favoured races in the struggle for life,' which leads to the inevitable extinction of all those low and mentally undeveloped populations with which Europeans come in contact" (Wallace, 1871, p. 318). These references to the views of Darwin and Wallace make it tempting to conclude that Darwinism served—if it was not in fact created by—imperial powers to justify their policies. However, there are a number of problems with the claim that Darwinism promoted racism, and anti-Turkish attitudes in particular.

### 2.1. The Natural World as a guide

Darwin has often been accused of having derived social conclusions from his biological theory. Yet, in Victorian England it was common to believe that biological theories had implications for social and political realms (Paul, 2009, p. 232). For instance, Spencer, one of the founders of social Darwinism, was a Lamarckian before Darwinism gained popular attention, and continued to use Lamarckian concepts in his theorising. Therefore it would not be fair to blame Darwin in particular—or Darwinism—for spearheading speculations on the social realm on the basis of biological theory. Nor is it true that Darwin abstained from speculating about the possible implications of his theory on the social realm. Although Darwin ridiculed certain interpretations of his theory, such as the German socialist application which linked socialism to natural selection, he nevertheless, as shall be discussed in detail later on, did not categorically oppose social applications of his theory (Paul, 2009, p. 232).

### 2.2. Racial superiority

Additionally, the utilisation of biology in general, and "science of race" in particular, for imperial goals predates Darwinism (Sivasundaram, 2010, p. 115). In the 18th and 19th centuries there was a virtual consensus amongst naturalists concerning the superiority of white races. In his famous classification, the Swedish botanist Linnaeus, for instance, held that Europeans rank top amongst the *homo sapiens* (Graves, 2001, pp. 38–39). Although Peter Bowler has highlighted a potentially important psychological component behind this racist belief—namely that considering black people morally and mentally inferior would serve to make the slave trade less immoral (Bowler, 2013, p. 257)—, it would be wrong to limit this line of thinking to slave owners. Indeed, even humanists like Kant and some of the politicians who defended abolition of slavery believed in the superiority of white races, and not only in social and cultural, but also in biological dimensions (Louden, 2000, pp. 98–100; Graves, 2001, p. 42). According to the common wisdom of Darwin's age, racial inequality was as beyond dispute as the Pythagorean theorem (Gould, 1993, p. 268).

Far from developing novel social theories of his own, Darwin's ideas on social issues were shaped by his readings of Malthus, Spencer, and Bagehot (Paul, 2009, p. 235). The term "struggle for existence," for instance, was popular prior to Darwin's publication of his theory, and was coined by Malthus (Bowler, 2013, p. 238). Darwin also made reference to Wallace's works in *Descent* and stated that he was influenced by Wallace's idea that "savages" would be eliminated in their encounters with "civilized men" (Paul, 2009, p. 218). Indeed, it was not only Victorian views on race which had impacted upon the formation of Darwin's worldview. In a similar way, Darwin's stances on slavery—and even gender (in) equality—were a reflection of his class.<sup>2</sup> Hostility to slavery,

<sup>1</sup> For the impact of Turkish creationism on Muslim immigrants in Europe and South Asian Muslims, see Hameed (2015); Krasnodebski (2014); Riexinger (2009).

<sup>2</sup> See Endsby (2009); and Radick (2013) for a more detailed analysis of Darwin's views on gender and race.

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