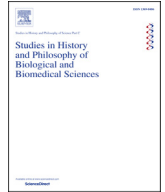




Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/shpsc

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



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 3 August 2016

Received in revised form

23 July 2017

Keywords:

Social Darwinism

Ottomans

Islam

Racism

Victorians

Creationism

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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