

ALÂEDDİN ŞENEL: A DEVOTED SCIENTIST FOR THE STRUGGLE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

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Our first curiosity is to learn the circumstances that brought you up because we believe that forming a person is only possible in its historicity. That's why we want to delve into your private life. We know that you come from a worker family. We heard that you were a hardworking student. You entered the Faculty of Political Sciences in Ankara University at a time when the social struggle was on the rise. How did this background affect your thoughts?

Let me remark; it is not correct that I was hardworking. If I ask how I describe myself it's probably appropriate to say that I am a person grown up by the republic. Why the republic? It searches for the new person and as a result of this, some institutions were established that gave a western-style education. One of them was Mülkiye (Civil Service School), you know, whose name was changed to Siyasal Bilgiler Okulu (Political Sciences School) after it had been moved to Ankara. At those times, there were new generations who came to an educational institution like this. I came from the country-side and of course, there were people from import-

ant cities as well. Of course, one of the key properties of the republic was that it did not discriminate people by their socioeconomic status and ethnicity in the context of the services provided to the people. Still, they had some discrimination; but I leave that aside. For the likes of us, it was of utmost importance that the education was made mandatory and that a quota for boarding schools made available. Educational institutions arose to where people, rich or poor, send their children to have jobs different than their traditional jobs. So I entered the university in 1959 as a son of a worker or an artisan worker family.

Those were the years that the universities were also quite active, weren't they?

Yes, yes. What was my position there? I can think of what was I, and what I have become. I must not forget what was I, and I should not underestimate the effect of contemporary secular educational institutions and intellectual movement on what I have become. Actually, my father did not go to the primary school but he

glanced inside the tents in which writing was taught, he saw there are only 29 letters. He said I can memorize 29 letters to himself, and he managed to learn reading and writing all by himself. My father started to work as an apprentice to a Greek shoemaker, then he learned carpentry, I also think he knew something about construction as well. In short, I will say he was an artisan worker. Why worker? There were tile factories, tile workshops are more correct, in the city we lived in. My father used to work there. Owner of that tile factory kicked the workers out. At that time, I never forget, he gave his daughter a magnificent amount of 40 thousand lire worth wedding. After my father became unemployed, he became a clerk in the military and then in a foreign mining company but they were not permanent jobs. My uncle was a dispatcher at a lignite business in Tunçbilek. He calls for my father to oversee worker teams of five or six people. At that time, since I was six years old, I had been helping my uncles who lost their father. I went to my uncles and settled there after my family went to Tunçbilek. I had a quite significant experience there. I later realized its value. It's the beginning of the semester, we are in the first grade. Two people did not have the alphabet, one was me, one was another person. The teacher had an extra alphabet and gave it to me. He/she gave it to me because I was able to answer his/her questions. One of my uncles whom I worked with applied for free education, he was 14-18 years old. His rejection was, of course, resulted in disappointment and he made me learn reading/writing before I went to school by threatening me with burning my tongue because he wanted his elder sister's son (me) to read. Nevertheless, you go to school, they teach you reading/writing, and then you happen to already know reading/writing. Of course, you'll know the answers to the questions, you raise your hand. That created a self-confidence in me which had a lasting effect for years. In fact, I was not a successful student throughout my secondary education because I was helping my uncles all the time.

So you were working and studying at the same time?

In a sense. Another important thing is that I was not successful in some courses in school. I experienced my first failure in the religion lesson. The teacher asked us to memorize a prayer at the weekend. However, I had to go to my workplace at the weekend and I cried when I couldn't memorize the prayer. On the other hand, I would perform my salat rituals at the weekend for one or two hours as compensation for not being able to perform while I was at the workplace. That was the situation and years later, I was actually upset, thinking "why they didn't teach me to brush my teeth instead of salat rituals". Nevertheless, the Democrat Party came to power after the People's Republic Party as I was growing up in an artisan and worker culture. There was a great sympathy for Democrat Party there. I was in this, too. I remember this quite well, I was in high school, every year, failing maths, physics, and chemistry. Sometimes with the

help of my friends, sometimes through hard work, sometimes not eligible but passed by making promises, I finished high-school. Then I started working in a hotel. There, I earned enough money to manage my finances at the university for two years. At the time I was a clerk in the hotel, I met with a concierge whom I thought was an Alawi. He sympathized with the People's Republic Party. He never stopped listening to Vatan Cephesi (the Motherland Front) from radio, the program that Burhan Belge was reading the lists. I made fierce discussions with him and made him enlist in Vatan Cephesi (the Motherland Front). The environment was like this when I arrived at the faculty and the revolution of May 27 happened. Then schools were closed. Boycotts started and continued even after schools are reopened.

Did you also participate in the demonstrations?

I was going to mention that. There were only two people in the classroom, one was me and the other was a friend, Mustafa Yazgan, a religious writer of the young generation. A change started to happen. *Yön Dergisi (the Direction Journal)* started to be published. I contributed to the second issue with a writing. It was about the idea of socialism being the salvation of our homeland. I wrote this because when I was at the final grade of high school, I received a book from my friend's mother who happened to be a library officer. It was Max Beer's *The General History of Socialism and Social Struggles*. It deeply affected me. When I was at the first grade in university, there was no lecture afternoon and I walked around shanty towns with 50-100 grams of peas and roasted peas. I was thinking about how can we fix the problems of people, I formed ideas of an egalitarian society by making connections to the book. These thoughts suddenly merged with *Yön Dergisi (the Direction Journal)*. I managed to pass my courses in the faculty with the financial help of my uncle. I was getting the lowest grades possible but only took the resit exam once. Then I became an assistant. In third grade, there was an associate professor whose name is Nermin Abadan. We knew her. In class, she asked for someone to help her in a parliamentary inquiry. I volunteered. We came up with results based on statistics and I guess she noticed my orderly working style during this study.

Did you join the Worker's Party of Turkey at university?

I did not. We had a bond of communion with the people there and I thought about joining the Worker's Party of Turkey. However, let me tell you about what happened at the election campaign in Eskisehir. I was assigned by my school to watch the elections there. I was going to watch the public rally of the Worker's Party of Turkey but there was a confusion. I asked what the preparations were. There was not much preparation, so in the hotel, I prepared three speeches until three o'clock in the morning. I even gave the speech one day early but they did not read it. We hastily went to the meeting area. There were 20 minutes before the

public meeting. They told "You wrote it, you can read it better". I thought that since I gave priority on my political goals over my academic goals and eventually I will join this business, so I read the speech. One day later, I went to the public rally of the Democrat Party. However, they listened to my talk in Sivrihisar (Eskisehir). One asked, "Weren't you the scum who was talking about comradeship like having foams from the mouth like a dog?!" Someone punched me in the back and dragged me away. I went to Ankara and asked permission to resign. The dean said, "Hold there, you will resign only if it is necessary to do so". Let me explain how I became an assistant, too. Nermin Abadan said, "A position will be opened, would you consider being an assistant?". I would work with her husband. I said, "I would". I couldn't pass in English at my first trial and then I failed at my second attempt, too. Then, Yavuz Abadan said "I am not going to take the English exam into account. Pass all of the three candidates". I say this result is the product of every class of the Republican generation giving opportunities to young people. So in the next audition, I got the assistantship. So this is how I had become an assistant.

Which academic subject did you start working on? Did you get your Marxist formation during this period?

Doctoral seminars were started after I had become an assistant. Those doctoral seminars were always about subjects like political movements, fascism. At that time, one association asked me through Mümtaz Soysal to give a talk. I prepared a talk in one month. Approximately for 150-200 pages, I explained the critical history of the right-wing thought. Then I felt the ambition to suppress it and managed to do so in a way. This is the first thing. Second, I could not have annual vacations due to my doctoral lectures. I found the opportunity after four years and went back to my home country, isolated myself for a week. At that time, I was interested in my sister's situation. She had a friend from work and my uncles immediately intervened, of course, making threats like they would beat the boy. I protected my sister there. In politics, we had a sociology professor named İbrahim Yayı. He used to give homework involving students' observations of their surrounding environment. I prepared my homework on "ten problems a girl may face in rural areas and solutions to those problems".

Also, Şerif Mardin left me half of the history of political thought while I was following graduate courses and said, "your information about Ancient Greece is fresh, you take notes". I was again taking too long notes, then I went on with the printing phase. Ancient Greece is OK but there is also before that. Before Greece, Anatolia is based on three-thousand-year-old Middle East civilizations. And "what was there before civilized societies?" How did those societies manage to achieve civilization? An event of transition to food production called Neolithic. Then who made this transition? What was there before Neolithic? Hunter society, what about before that? Of course, the first sexual differentiation

and therefore biological evolution. My first goal was to make my thesis on Ancient Greece, then a study about Rome in my associate professorship and the enlightenment thought in my professorship. I went the opposite direction.

What was the focus of your doctoral work, exactly?

Since classical culture starts with Greece, I wished to take a subject on Greece and at the same time, my information about classes was on equality. I wrote a thesis on equality and inequality in Ancient Greece. During this period, I wanted to print out my lecture notes, named "Political Thought in Ancient Greece". However, I did not finish my Ph.D. yet, there was a condition, the signature of an associate professor was required. Şerif Mardin gave the approval and so my book was published. As a result, I meant this educational atmosphere and the opportunities in Turkey when I said, "I was raised by the Republic". Also, you are raised by the tradition of not being a slave to the government in the Faculty of Political Sciences, and this happens. You are in a science discipline, meaning that your previous work could not be far behind the people who would supervise your thesis. This pushes you to increase your level. I started my academic work in such an environment.

When you started these academic studies, which methods did you use in your research of equality, for example, the concept of equality in ancient Greece? For instance, there are notions like material and symbolic tools in your academic or popular writings about Neolithic and prior periods. Can you elaborate on these?

A pupil can take two positions when learning about a science discipline, one says let's learn methodology first. But those who show sensitivity about methodology find themselves caught in the middle and their courage to write is rubbed because they think their method is not scientific enough. I was not like that, I did not hastily read something and bring them together to impatiently print something. We showed the courage to write without knowing the things we lack due to the free environment created after the revolution of May 27. But courage also gives you the opportunity to grow and deal with your drawbacks. One of the reasons I write a lot is this.

Also, the Communist Manifesto and other works were started to be translated into Turkish. My English was not strong enough for fast reading, so I read in Turkish. Nevertheless, my methodology was to grasp the general concepts and to assess what I read in accordance with those general concepts. Now you see that the equality does not have one shape when you talk about the political thought in Ancient Greece. Things like you search a small flint in a sack of rice. What was Demokritos? Was he really a true egalitarian? What is Kikladik culture, which thoughts of it are egalitarian? My method was general like this, let me say that I preferred concepts that appear in sources parallel to my worldview.

I want to arrive at a point. It's about what was said about Göbeklitepe. Despite dating back 11000 years, some of the findings are labeled as religious symbols. The place is interpreted as a religious temple. Klaus Schmidt made such interpretations. Although it did not materialize into an academic article, there are archeologists that say it is a marketplace. What are your thoughts? What is the development process, what kind of material circumstances could give birth to such a symbolic outcome?

If social sciences are to be evaluated through a historical and sociological view as I say, you have to explain the factors that made the class society materialize. What kind of production was there, differences between societies, the transition between Paleolithic to Neolithic, you have to tell along with their reasons. You cannot interpret a finding without fitting it into a historical perspective when there were still many questions about it. You cannot continue to make claims such as the religious organizations and temples came first, and then the agriculture to feed the temple personnel. This is a generalization from a singular instance. Against this instance, there are hundreds of examples of in what conditions (climate, geography, and knowledge) the transition from hunter-gatherer societies to agricultural societies. If you create a historical perspective from singular instances, you also have to ignore all the scientific knowledge prior to that instance. If you cannot do that you can say that the old theories exist, but they are not certain, here is Göbeklitepe, but it is just one instance. About Göbeklitepe, neither the settlements nor the communities related to the temple and its officials. There are inconsistencies like this. Therefore, we have to wait in my opinion. To jump to generalizations is very inaccurate from the perspective of scientific method and you have to research similar situations in history. We have to look at the holy stone cults. All these artifacts contain communal labor movement.

How should we interpret the motifs on it then?

The motifs on it are so masterful that it is not like any other sculpture. Spiders, animals, and other subjects aside, in my opinion, these motifs being unrelated to the production is especially interesting. Why unrelated? I think we could not find the connection. Either in the history of arts or craftsmanship, without having more primitive versions, no genius can come forward and suddenly make those sculptures in their most mature form.

Let me arrive at the question, "How do you interpret it?". An archeologist must consider the evolution of cultural tools as cumulative throughout the evolution of thought. There were a few villages that produced plant-based foods in a period of Neolithic age when there were no potteries. They are at the transition point from a primitive agricultural society to plant-based food production. That lifestyle has cultural products and one of those products is to equate the productivity of the earth and the productivity of women. Because the first logic of humans is the analogy, similarities are caught and

there is the earth mother cult. Those small sculptures are there to solve the bottleneck of birth, just as it is in the hunter-gatherer societies. Those things are just talismans. Their continuity is a matter of fact in culture. The earth mother was not yet represented by the mother god who is productive just as a woman. You have to have societies with classes to talk about god. Why class societies? Because in class societies human-human relations are based on the daily inequalities and the human brain that perceives this then tends to explain everything with inequality. The human brain searches for a source for the alleged inequality in human-nature relationships. For example, a man cannot deal with his lord, then the lord either beheads or tortures him. The man cannot deal with nature either. He considers nature as a causal being and he bows before the sun and the rain just as he bows before his lord. Inegalitarian relations are the product of the people of class societies. But the egalitarian relationship is the classless society and that's why there is something magical there. What is magic? It is a human attempt, hope, or illusion of salvation for people's materially unsolvable problems in the world of images. I have a thought that you may call a cliché, whoever is unable to best an enemy thinks he killed the enemy by stabbing a toy doll of the enemy. The stabber is victorious if the enemy dies in three days. So, these kind of images in the Neolithic period are not products of inegalitarian relationships. Therefore, their sculptures cannot be higher than human subjects. For example, they are not gods. Those images function as talismans at best and create hope. Still, the meaning of shapes at Göbeklitepe, the carrying of those stones are things that create too many questions in my mind.

It seems to be popularized too much. It is on the covers of every journal...

It's not about popularity, there is an ideological war going on. There is something called the plus value and the seizure of that plus value from the producer. This fact is highly concrete. You seize the production of the man at the farm, you call it taxes or your debt to god, you take it by voluntary slavery. My point is this transmission of plus value, the mechanisms of this transmission. I think it is not in accordance with the historical view to expect worshipping things that were produced by the communal labor, especially in societies which did not meet the necessary conditions.

You have a course plan and an exhibit where you describe the history of humanity with objects. First, where did the inspiration come from, I must ask. There are ethnography museums in Turkey that contain local objects which goes to the time of Ottomans but I suppose there are no ethnography museums which are for very ancient times and contain objects all around the world. We are rich in archaeology museums instead.

Of course, there are archaeology museums and there are ethnography museums. Also, there are English sources or translations, books on that matter. For example, Meh-

met Sakıncı tried to establish a fossil museum. But I suppose there aren't any folkloric products museum. Let me tell you how I started all this. After the September 12 coup, they assigned scientists to universities and I told myself that I cannot represent this university, I resigned. Then my wife got an assignment abroad, so I went with her. During that time I collected these imitations from the museums I went. When I returned to the university, I suggested the history of humanity lecture again and it was immediately approved. I had ten years of experience, and also my collection. I found the opportunity to write the lecture notes of those ten years in *Kemirgenlerden Sömürgenlere İnsanlık Tarihi (History of the Humanity from Gnawers to Exploiters)*. I don't use computers, therefore, I could not show photos by a computer. I took a lot of photos, all them just lie still. Instead, I brought, presented, and let my students touch a blunt reaping-hook, a primitive form of the modern sickle. Then talk about how was the transition made from hunter-gatherer societies to agriculture. Depending on the day's subject, I could bring five to six things, then we put these things on shelves to save myself from carrying them every time. The history of humanity with objects born like that. After the communications expert gave that name, I stumbled upon a brochure, the history of humanity in 100 objects. That means I did not do something wrong.

You also said that you were writing utopias. For example, Teleandregenos's Utopia, you explain the inequality of men-women and the institution of family there. Today, what would you criticize if you wrote a utopia?

While writing those utopias (Teleandregenos, Ozmos Kronos), I look at the intellectual conditions of the history that I am currently living in. Especially in Ozmos Kronos, I thought people desperately needed hope and imaginative power in a time where the Soviet Union was dissolved. So utopias had a place and function. They said that another way of living is possible. But in time, this utopian tradition, if you follow the historical flow, immediately developed a tendency for opposite utopias. The Liberal idea of "utopianism is bullying, it disrupts the natural development of a human being" became common. After that, utopianism was presented as a rival to the scientific socialist organization and ideas. Solutions are started to be used for accusations. Therefore, I am not a utopianist anymore. Let me make

my statement concrete. When I was twenty-five years old after writing Teleandreganos and Ozmos Kronos, I promised myself to write an utopia-like essay such as Pesimus or Pesimismus when I become seventy-five. I would take values into consideration in the largest context possible and write my ideas about this. I mean values about living, the value of life, solving the problems of the new person, ideas like creating the person who won't be upset, I was going to make an account for all of these. Which of my values has a chance of realization, which has not? What is the scope of my values? One of the subjects that make me think about beings is documentaries. For example, *National Geographic* is very bad at this. It presents its documentaries along with the fascist themes like life is a non-stop battle on land, sea, and air. But there is also a reality, a carnivorous whale could swallow a hundred-thousand fish at a time. All these make it necessary to question the relationship between living organisms. People especially feed cats in Istanbul. Good. Then how do they reproduce, are you aware of this? So, this reproduction and the position that hunger pushes living beings into, I wished to make an account of all of this. I would write this book with the word that I came up with, Pesimus Pesimismus (I translate it as "Darkness Utter Darkness"), to represent that beings are not that good when you make this account. Two things stopped me. First, my days passed as I went from seminars to seminars and from talks to talks, so I couldn't sit and write this. Second, I could not bear to spoil peoples' happiness with a such a utopia that will really feed the darkness in today's environment. I hope that a change comes, the struggle rises, and somebody is overthrown. Then, humanity continues the development of its cultural evolution once more.

I believe, no we believe, that humanity will not stay this way.

Ideology and voluntary slavery are the latest subjects that I've been thinking on. This is a very shameful thing. There such religions that one wants to go crazy. How can a human being believe in such a thing? Can feel hopeful because of it? Spits on the ground and takes some earth, stuffs it to his eyes and his eyes get to heal. Ridiculous. I think I may have prolonged our talk a little bit too much...

Actually, I ran out of questions. Thank you, professor.