МЕРЖЕЛЕЕЩИТЕ СЕ ЦЕНТЪР И ПЕРИФЕРИЯ: НЯКОИ БЕЛЕЖКИ ПО НАЙ-ПОПУЛЯРНИЯ ДЕБАТ В ТУРСКАТА ПОЛИТОЛОГИЯ

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Abstract. *In an article, published in 1973, the Turkish sociologist Şerif Mardin proposed the idea that the center-periphery cleavage is the key to understanding Turkish politics from the Ottoman era to the present days. Since its publication, this has been one of the most widely discussed texts ever written on Turkey, with the article having between 50 and 100 citations in academic publications every year since 2010. The aim of this paper is to familiarize the audience with the authors' main thesis, the academic criticisms leveled at it, and the contemporary political uses of the concept. The text will demonstrate the historical reconfigurations the center and periphery undergo, especially after the Justice and Development Party, which (claims to) represent the periphery, came to power in Turkey in 2002, thus becoming the center. The text will question the current validity of the center-periphery divide as well.*

Keywords: *Şerif Mardin; center; periphery; Turkey*

In 1973, the Turkish sociologist Şerif Mardin published an article that proposed a hypothesis about the key to understanding Turkish politics (Mardin, 1973, pp. 169–190) It became one of the most frequently cited texts in Turkish political science and sociology, with Google Scholar currently reporting over 1,000 citations of the original English text and its Turkish translation from 1991 (Mardin, 1990, pp. 30–57.) In addition to being frequently quoted, the article is considered "probably the most influential single study," (Wuthrich, 2013, p. 751) devoted to Turkish politics. In addition to introducing readers to Şerif Mardin and his thesis, this article also seeks to answer two additional questions: are there political uses of Mardin's idea, and are the conclusions drawn by this Turkish scholar some 50 years ago still valid as a paradigm for understanding political processes in Turkish society.

Şerif Mardin was born in 1927 in Istanbul into a family of Ottoman notables – his father was a

diplomat and his mother was the daughter of a famous publicist. Mardin began his high school education at the prestigious Galatasaray Lyceum, but completed it in the United States. Overseas, he graduated with a BA from the renowned Stanford University, earned an MA in International Relations in 1950 from another first-tier university (Johns Hopkins) and defended his PhD at his alma mater Stanford in 1958, but subsequently returned to Turkey in 1961, where he taught between 1973 and 1991. Mardin witnessed at close range the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Turkey that began from the 1960s onward, and the associated social conflicts and clashes between the old republican elites and the new populist parties that claimed to represent the excluded from the decision-making process in the society groups. (Levin, 2023, p. 620).

In his text Ş. Mardin sketches the tension between the central power and the periphery in the Ottoman Empire, defending the thesis that the transformation of the empire into a nation-state (the Republic of Turkey) did not erase this major cleavage in society. He argues that the Ottoman provinces were characterized by "localism," "particularism," and "heterodoxy"", as well as having an economic model, which was different from that of the center, and for all these reasons they were a launching pads for revolts against the center. In turn, it consists of the administration and the army, which are westernized. The key question of Ottoman and Turkish modernization, Mardin states, is how to integrate the Muslim masses of the periphery, whom modernization has not reached. This was attempted through various policies – Sultan Abdulhamid II's pan-Islamism; integration into the system through taxation, military service, roads, patronage and clientelism, and education. The researcher stresses that the secular republican project attempts to achieve this aim through its ideology, because it fails to achieve it through political mobilization of the Anatolian masses.

The language of the article is plain, the text depicts with large strokes in a *longue duree* sociological and political processes in Ottoman and Turkish society and proposes a not very elegant but simple and clear formula – a struggle between the center, i.e. the state, which is official and foreign, against the periphery, which consists of the society, which is local. But are these sufficient conditions for the text to gain such popularity?

The scientific metrics of the text's popularity are extremely interesting. In the period between its publication and 1990, the article gained only 18 citations. In the decade between 1991 and 2000 50, and most of them around the end of the period. Thereafter, interest in the article skyrocketed, reaching around 100 citations in 2017 and then staying at similar levels. (Levin, 2023, pp. 618–619; Bakiner, 2018, p. 519) This boom, in our view, is likely due to the incorporation of this paradigm into political usage in Turkey. Arguments in this direction are twofold. Statistics do not report such an increased interest in the article by Edward Schils on which Mardin builds. (Bakiner, 2018, p. 519) The second argument is more substantial. The explanation could be the criticism of Mardin's approach to republican reforms in Turkey for not being successful enough in integrating large parts of society into the country's body politic. (After Öztürk, 2016, p. 19). According to Onur Bakiner, Mardin himself does not praise the periphery, as he notes in one of his earlier text from 1966 that "the culture of the Turkish rural population, although different from that of the elite, is no more tolerant" in its attitude towards the opposition.

The political uses of the center-periphery notion

Regardless of Mardin's own position on the matter, his hypothesis found a warm reception in two intellectual circles: Islamists, who identified their selves with the oppressed, and the liberal left, which, through the center-periphery framework, could build coalitions with other social groups against Kemalism, considered by them to be the main culprit of Turkey's authoritarian character (after Bakiner, 2018, pp. 508–509). Turkish secularism, which means state control over religion rather than freedom of conscience and religion, and the top-down modernization imposed by the state on society are two of the main arguments historically of Turkish center-right parties that give them grounds to claim that they are representatives of the so-called periphery

and want to be its political representatives in the center. (after Öztürk, 2016, pp. 19–20) This tradition started with the Democratic Party (DP, see below in the text), it was continued by the Justice Party, by Islamist parties of the National View (Milli görüş) movement, and by the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Thus, during the AKP's first two mandates (2002–2011), a strange alliance emerged between Islamists and liberal intellectuals, who until recently had been competing for influence. Their informal coalition is directed against the incumbent 'center' of society and the state because of its authoritarian bent. In 2010, the AKP proposed changes to the Turkish constitution. Prior to the referendum vote, liberal intellectuals stated that the proposals were insufficient for the full democratization of public life, but were nevertheless a step in the right direction and should therefore be supported. In Turkish political circles, their slogan 'insufficient but yes' (yetmez, ama evet) is becoming a byword. Meanwhile, the AKP actively uses the rhetoric that they are representatives of the so-called "Black Turks", i.e. the underprivileged, looked down upon and oppressed by the economic and social elites of the "White Turks". (Bilici, 2009, pp. 23–35; Demiralp, 2012, pp. 511–524; Ferguson, 2014, pp. 77–88; Ramm, 2016, pp. 1355–1385) Even Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan himself has stated that he is proud to belong to the "black Turks." (Sabah, 2015) In our view, the metaphor of "white" and "black" Turks is another way of expressing the center-periphery clique in a different way. In the political sciences literature it is a well established fact, that the political parties could (de)politicize certain issues and the political cleavages could vane/transform/be reinvigorated through the time. In other words, the political usage of the notion, keep it alive and stimulate the interest towards it.

Indicative of the AKP's appropriation of the theme of center and periphery is the fact that Şerif Mardin's funeral in 2017 was attended by former Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, former Minister of Culture and Tourism Ertuğrul Günay, AKP Deputy Chairman Mehdi Eker, and President R. T. Erdoğan coveyed his personal condolences to the family (Sözcü, 2017).

Şerif Mardin and his academic critics

The Swedish scholar Paul Levin divides criticisms of Mardin's text into two groups: normative (ideological) and empirical.

The first group of criticisms is related to Mardin's underlying assumptions. As we have pointed out, as an American graduate, he works in the tradition of American political science that was formed in the middle of the last century. It draws on the traditions of behaviorism, positivism, and empiricism. However, not only is it not normatively neutral, but on the contrary, in the context of the Cold War, it aims to offer analyses that justify and extend the application of democratization and American leadership around the world. American political science postulates that the modernization of countries follows a uniform pattern. Critics of this approach note that it is teleological, i.e., it presupposes the achievement of a predetermined end result, it is Eurocentric, ahistorical, and aims to spread American ideology. This approach, which focuses on political power, also avoids analysis of topics that might be perceived as dangerous from the perspective of the state, such as religious studies. (After Demirel, 2020, pp. 20–32, 48; Gergedan Dergi, 2021) The contemporary scholar Halil Gürhanli attacks Edward Shils' theories, which Mardin builds on, as resting on elitist, modernist and anti-populist assumptions. (Gürhanli, 2020, p. 129, 130)

The second group of criticisms can be called "empirical" and question whether the picture of Turkish society presented by Mardin is correct. First of all, the centre and the periphery are not absolutely homogeneous. For example, within the centre there are different interests between politicians and bureaucracy; between different bureaucratic institutions (army, judiciary, economic bureaucracy); between economic elites on the one hand and politicians and bureaucracy on the other. The renowned academics Meliha Benli Altunışık and Özlem Tür point out that until 1950 there was a complete consensus between the state and political elites, but with the coming to power of the Democratic Party this unity of the elites was broken. (Altunışık & Tür, 2005, p. 30) The two failed coup attempts of Col. Talat Aydemir and the unfinished conspiracy of

left-leaning officers in 1971 show that even the army itself is not a unified institution. (Karagözov, 2021, pp. 51–52)

The periphery is also not entirely homogeneous, consisting of conservative Sunni Muslims, Alevis, leftist working classes, Kurds, etc. Hatred against minorities escalated at times to the point that the Turkish far right organized pogroms against Alevis, in which at least 111 people died in 1978 in Kahramanmarash and at least 50 people in July 1980 in Çorum (Altunışık & Tür, 2005, p. 41). According to the theory of center and periphery, Alevis and religious Sunnis should belong to the excluded periphery, whereas, if we use this optic, in this case we see a clash of different groups on the periphery.

Nor are the categories of 'center' and 'periphery', *inter alia*, frozen and fixed once and for all. In the parliamentary elections of 1973 and 1977 and in the local elections of 1989, the majority of the people, including the so-called periphery, voted for the secularist left-wing Social Democrat Bulent Ejevit and for the Social Democratic candidates for mayors of large cities, i.e. for the so called center. The sociologist Tolga Gürakar adds to these critiques by objecting to the stylized representation of the center as frozen and status quo oriented and the periphery as dynamic and demanding. (Gergedan Dergi, 2021)

In a text armored with a huge amount of data on electoral results, researcher Michael Wuthrich points out that the center-periphery hypothesis cannot adequately explain the political dynamics in Turkey in the 1940s and 1950s. The parliamentary elections held in Turkey in 1950 were won with a landslide majority by the opposition Democratic Party (DP), which ousted the Republican People's Party (CHP), which had ruled unchangingly since the founding of the Republic in 1923. The DP is often portrayed in the literature as the party of the periphery because of its center-right and populist character, as well as its insistence on mitigating the Kemalist regime's most extreme secularization policies. At the same time, however, the DP cannot be taken entirely as a party of the periphery, since its leadership consists of elite representatives, many of whom split from the CHP. Moreover, much of its electorate is not backward residents of the periphery but urban merchant classes. As M. Wuttrich convincingly

demonstrates, absolutely contrary to the center-periphery theory, during the 1950 elections CHP underperformed in the developed areas in the Marmara Region and the Mediterranean, where DP won, but CHP received the highest support in the poor eastern and southeastern Turkey. The reason, of course, is more prosaic than some abstract attraction of the least developed Turkish regions to the modernizers of the CHP, and lies in the fact that the Kemalist party co-opted the large landowners and clan leaders in the Southeast, who guaranteed the support *en masse* of their peasants or ctribesman (Wuthrich, 2013, pp. 751–773; Altunışık & Tür, 2005, p. 29, 39).

Thirdly, the centre-periphery theory does not take into account any class aspects, highlighting only and exclusively cultural and value differences. The already cited T. Gürakar points out that the essence of the contradictions listed by Mardin (the sultan's Saray versus the ayans; the Saray and the provinces) is economic and related to taxes, the land system and the inheritance of land within the family (Gergedan Dergi, 2021).

Fourth, Mardin's analysis focuses entirely on internal dynamics, ignoring the external political and economic conjuncture, as well as the external impact of adopting or not adopting certain policies. (Gergedan Dergi, 2021) All of this is inevitably a weakness for an analysis of a country with belated modernization and a semi-peripheral status for almost the entire twentieth century. In another text, Mardin himself acknowledges that his framework should be situated in a world-systems perspective. (Bakiner, 2018, p. 518)

Fifth, the concept under consideration needs to be placed within a specific historical framework in order to assess whether it is credible or not. The theory has validity in the 1950s, charactericed by the conflict between the DP and the 'center'. On the other hand, after the adoption of the most liberal Turkish constitution in 1961, there was a relative opening of Turkish political life and the rise of workers', students' and other leftist movements. They are opposed by the religious and nationalist righ, whose paramilitary militias are (tacitly) supported by the state. This is due to the fact that from the point of view of the Turkish political and security establishment, as well as Turkey's Western allies, the growing influence of the left poses a risk to Turkey's status

as part of NATO's southern flank. In this sense, the main polarization in the 1960s and 1970s, reaching in its peak even armed clashes towards the end of the period, was along the left-right axis, not center-periphery. Identity politics (Islamism, the Kurdish political movement) intensified after the 1980s (After Altunışık & Tür, 2005, p. 41). In the 1990s, the secular-religious divide came to the fore again, making the idea of a center-periphery conflict attractive. When historicizing, we should note that the actors in the political process also change. E.g., the Republican People's Party underwent an evolution – during the one-party period it was an authoritarian and firmly secularist organization, very different from the social-democratic populist party of the 1970s. In the period from 2002–2010, as a reaction to the rise of the AKP, the CHP reoriented itself towards hawkish secularism, but this trend had been reversed since 2010 and moderation of the party towards religion could be observed.

An equally significant critical argument against the center-is-periphery thesis is the gradual movement of the periphery towards the center. Political scientist Behlül Özkan argues that a rapprochement between the Turkish state and the Islamist movement began as early as the 1960s. The aim of the state was to use the Islamists to contain the rise of the left and because of this it began to support Islamist publications and organizations. Furthermore, from the 1970s onwards, as the Islamist parties, led by Necmettin Erbakan gained parliamentary presence and participation in coalition governments, cadres of the movement received appointments in the state administration (Özkan, 2015, pp. 74–80; Özkan, 2017). The authoritative historian Kemal Karpat writes that on the eve of the 1980 coup, Kemalism as a state philosophy no longer had formal, organized representation among the political parties, and only the army remained its defender. (Quoted in Laçiner, 2010, p. 91) In other words, there is a significant difference in attitudes towards Kemalism among the various institutions of the center - on the one hand, at that time it was still rooted in the bureaucracy, e.g. the State Planning Organization, the National Security Council, the Constitutional Court, but it was absent in the policies of the parties, their programmes and the political life as a whole. (After Laçiner, 2010, p. 93).

After the 1980 military coup, the "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" was promoted by the military. Islam gained visibility in every aspect of life, beginning to create an alternative to the existing system and to redefine modernization, in the words of K. Karpat:

The cultural and political emulation of the West is no longer the axis of 'modernism'. It is rather economic development, technological advancement and material progress in all its forms . . . Reshaping of the national identity in the light of the Turk's own cultural and religious ethos has broadened the scope of modernisation in such a way as to relegate the West, without abandoning it, to a secondary position, while giving priority to a new historically rooted socio-cultural Turkish identity. (Quoted in Altunışık & Tür, 2005, pp. 42–43)

All this further encourages Islamist movements at the expense of the left, which was repressed. (Özkan, 2015, pp. 74–80; Özkan, 2017). (Moreover, the neoliberal reforms of Turgut Özal in the 1980s led to the rise of new social classes. Özcan, G. & Turunç, H., 2011, p. 64) During the 80's then Prime-minister and later President of Turkey, Turgut Özal, pursued socially and politically conservative but economically liberal policies. A new "center" reflecting this understanding replaced the progressist and statist Kemalist one. Although in the 1990s the army, bureaucracy, economic and media elites resisted the takeover by the pro-Islamic Welfare Party, the evolution of Turkish politics sketched above means that in the 1970s and 1980s there was an integration of the pro-Islamic periphery into the centre, which was partially revised in the last decade of the twentieth century.

A Turkish journalist stated that he opposes the state's repressive policies against the Islamic segments of society in the 1990s, for example the ban on girls wearing headscarves to study at university. He adds, however, that this is incomparable to the degree of repression against the left currents, because since the 1960s its members have been regularly even killed by their political opponents, tacitly supported by the state, or arrested and tortured directly by the state. (Author's interview, Ankara, September 2024.) These arguments also cast a shadow of doubt on whether these processes can be explained through a ‚centre-periphery' prism.

Finally, there is the acute question of whether the center-periphery paradigm is valid at present. Reasons for doubting this are as follows. First, the mass migration from the countryside to the cities in the 1970s and 1980s increased the contacts between the centre and the periphery and rearranged the relations between them, because of the upward social mobility of counter-elites associated with the periphery. (After Göle, 1997, pp. 46–58) Second, after coming to power in Turkey in 2002, the Justice and Development Party managed to establish a kind of political hegemony and has remained in power for more than 22 years to date, an absolute record in the history of Republican Turkey.[1] During this time, the AKP's rule has significantly accelerated the shift in the layers of the centre and the periphery.

When AKP came to power it was facing a hostile bureaucracy, judiciary and army, but this was gradually changed. Through a series of reforms linked to the country's accession to the EU, as well as through mass public trials of high-ranking officers, the AKP has succeeded in bringing the army under civilian control. (Karagyozov, 2021, pp. 62–28) The bureaucracy and judiciary have also gradually been filled with personnel loyal to the government. Although it relies mainly on the support of the conservative Anatolian masses and the lower social strata in the big cities, the AKP has created its own political, intellectual, media, social and economic elite over the past years.

All this poses the problem now of what is the centre and what is the periphery of society, as a mixed picture emerges. Politically, the periphery and its counter-elite is becoming the centre, at least as far as control of central power is concerned. The local elections of 2019 and especially those of 2024 nuance the scene as the party holding central power lost mayoral seats in the country's largest cities. Similarly, in the public sphere, the old Republican elite retains a strong position due to its educational, social and other capital, but there is also a strong network of universities, media, and social organizations that are linked to the AKP and have significant positions in society. In economic terms, the

formation build business circles, close to it, thus creating its own bourgeoisie, but also the pro-secular and pro-European oriented big business in Istanbul retains its unassailable role.

Even more interesting is the question of how the center and the periphery can (if at all) be localized territorially. In the past, the division between the notional "center" (the expensive, elite neighborhoods of Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir) and the periphery (the poor suburbs of the big cities and the Anatolian countryside) was more clearly visible, but in recent years the tablo has become more complicated in this respect as well. The traditional approach would define Istanbul's secular coastal district of Kadıköy as the "center", while the remote much more poorer and conservative district of Kartal would be the periphery. However, if the central power in the country and the mayoral power in the Istanbul Greater Municipality (from the mid-1990s to 2019) belongs to the AKP, in which sense the oppositional "Kadıköy" (the support for CHP stands around 80% there), be defined as the center? Perhaps, level of development and other characteirstics, but the lines between center and periphery are becoming more blurred. To make the confusion even greater, we will draw an example from sociologist Irfan Joset's excellent study "Fatih - Başakşehir." In the book he analyzes two phenomena related to the, conditionaly speaking, periphery – the Fatih neighborhood of Istanbul, which for decades has been home to poor, religious and conservative sections of the population, i.e. a typical periphery, and the newly build neighborhood "Başakşehir," created as a utopian project of an equally religious and socially conservative public group, but with a significantly higher social status. Both neighborhoods traditionally massively support the AKP, i.e. in a sense they can be classified as the periphery, but the latter is populated by the new bourgeoisie, which is actually part of the current "center" of society. (After Özet, 2019) Similarly, in recent years Ankara's "Çukurambar" district, favored by the bureaucracy and affluent circles close to the AKP, has developed as a trendy neighborhood, competing with its numerous cafes and elegant restaurants with traditional "center" districts. For this reason, another Turkish author coined the terms "white Muslims" (that is, the Islamic

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[1] The CHP ruled longer, from 1923 to 1950, but in the period from the founding of the Republic until his death in 1938 one can speak of a one-man regime of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, and in the period 1938–1950 the first multi-party elections were held only in 1946.

equivalent of "white Turks") and "Chukurambarization" (çukurambarlaşma), or in other words – bourgeoisification and acquisition of a new status. (Çaylak, 2016, p. 88, 90)

As early as 2006, the famous Turkish social scientist Ersin Kalaycioğlu described five large blocs of voters in Turkish society – the secular camp; Alevis; the religious Sunnis (Turks and Kurds), Turkish nationalists and Kurdish nationalists. (Kalaycioğlu, 2005, pp. 136–137, cited in Levin, 2023, p. 633) Gradually, however, these blocs consolidated: unification of the secular camp and the Alevis, opposed to the religiously conservative Sunnis, for whom Turkish nationalists are a natural ally, and the Kurds. Thus, sociological research and election results since at least around 2010 show that one can already speak of three separate electoral regions in Turkey with their own socio-economic, educational characteristics and degrees of religiosity. Western and coastal regions generally vote for the secular opposition CHP; Central Anatolia prefer AKP and Nationalist Action Party (MHP), while the majority in the southeastern Kurdish regions supports Kurdish political movements (and the AKP being the second party). The political demands of the three regions are also very different – the West demands democracy and political and social freedom, while Central Anatolia wants economic development (infrastructure, production facilities), and the Southeast, in turn, demands economic development plus respect for its cultural rights. (After Ağırdır, 2020, pp. 169–335) Nevertheless, a careful look at the election results shows that in a number of cases in the western regions, the dominance of the opposition parties is too fragile due to the small margin ahead of the AKP. (Levin, 2023, p. 632) Also, if the criterion of exclusion from the center is accepted, the Kurdish political movement should be classified as peripheral, something missing in Mardin`s account.

Conclusion

This article presents the thesis of the Turkish scholar Şerif Mardin that the tension between a center (embodied by the state, which is external to society), and the periphery, which has cultural values, different from those of the center, is a key to understanding Turkish politics, critical responses to it, and the use of this concept by some Turkish political parties to gain political legitimacy. Scientific criticisms of this hypothesis are not only normative, but also problematize basic assumptions of Ş. Mardin – e.g. that both the center and the periphery are homogenious and static. His critics also note the relatively ahistorical features of of the proposed analysis, as well as the failure to take into account economic and class factors, as well as the external conjuncture. Finally, an important sociological dynamic is the gradual integration of the periphery into the center. This text questions the relevance of the center-periphery cleavage explanation after the coming to power of the AKP. The political hegemony build by the party for more than 20 years of its rule, in practice leads to extremely significant reconfigurations of the societal center and periphery.

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