



Suicide as a “Disease of Civilization”: A Tool for Westernization Critique in the Nineteenth Century Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

This article focuses on a specific subset of archival materials: suicide-related news reports published in nineteenth century Ottoman Turkish newspapers, identified through digital tools such as *Wikilala* and *Müteferriqa*. Among these, the study selects only those articles that provide statistical data on suicide rates in Europe or offer a critique of Western civilization. The analysis reveals that the Ottoman press was well aware of the increasing suicide rates in the West and familiar with emerging European claims that associated these rates with civilizational development. In some cases, the reports not only relayed but also echoed such interpretations. Interestingly, the lack of similar statistical efforts within the Ottoman Empire (and the absence of critique regarding this gap) suggests that suicide was largely perceived as a Western phenomenon. The Ottoman press employed suicide statistics as a rhetorical and discursive tool for expressing broader critiques of Western modernity. Since Ottoman intellectuals were already engaged in debates over the adoption of Western civilization, especially concerning its moral and cultural dimensions, suicide became integrated into this wider framework of scepticism and critique. Rather than presenting suicide as a domestic issue, Ottoman newspapers largely reported on it as a problem confined to Europe, reinforcing the notion that it was a byproduct of Western modern life. This article aims to demonstrate how suicide functioned as a symbolic site for articulating anxieties about civilization and moral decline. By analysing these reports, the study contributes to broader discussions about the Ottoman engagement with modernity and the selective appropriation of Western ideas within the empire’s public discourse.

Keywords: Suicide, Ottoman Press, Civilization Critique, Nineteenth Century Ottoman Empire, Moral Statistics, Western Modernity, Disease of Civilization

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“Medeniyet Hastalığı” Olarak İntihar: On Dokuzuncu Yüzyıl Osmanlısında Batılılaşma Eleştirisi

Esra Abaoğlu¹

Öz

Bu makale, 19. yüzyıl Osmanlı Türkçesiyle yayımlanmış gazetelerdeki intihar haberlerinden oluşan özel bir arşivsel veri kümesine odaklanmaktadır. *Wikilala* ve *Müteferrika* gibi dijital arşiv yazılımları kullanılarak tespit edilen bu haberler arasından yalnızca Avrupa'daki intihar oranlarına dair istatistiksel bilgi içeren ya da Batı medeniyetine yönelik eleştiri barındıran haber metinleri analiz edilmiştir. İncelenen haberler, Osmanlı basınının Batı'daki artan intihar oranlarının farkında olduğunu ve bu oranın medeniyet seviyesiyle ilişkilendirildiği yönündeki Avrupa merkezli yorumlara aşına olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu tür yorumlara destek veren bazı haber metinleri de söz konusudur. Buna karşın, intihar konulu haber metinlerinde Osmanlı topraklarındaki intihar olaylarına ilişkin istatistiksel bilginin yokluğuna dair bir eleştirinin olmayışı, intiharın Osmanlı Türkçesi ile yayın yapan Osmanlı basınında, Batı toplumlarına özgü bir patoloji olarak görüldüğünü düşündürmektedir. Bu çerçevede, Osmanlı basını Avrupa'daki intihar oranlarını ve istatistiksel bilgileri, Batı medeniyetini eleştirmek için işlevsel bir söylemsel araç kullanmıştır. Zaten uzun süredir Batı medeniyetinin ne ölçüde ve nasıl benimsenmesi gerektiğini tartışan Osmanlı aydınları, Batı'yı din, ahlak ve kültür gibi değerler üzerinden eleştirirken, intiharı da bu çerçevede araçsallaştırmıştır. 19. Yüzyılda Batı'da gayri ahlaki olarak etiketlenen davranışlara ilişkin toplanan ahlaki istatistikler içinde kendisine yer bulan intihar meselesi, batı medeniyetinin ilerlemesinin yan etkisi olarak nitelenmiş ve “medeniyet hastalığı” olarak etiketlenmişti. Söz konusu hastalığın en bariz semptomu yükselen intihar istatistikleriydi. Bu makale, Osmanlı türkçe basınının Batı'daki güncel medeniyet eleştirisini yerelleştirerek benimsediğini iddia etmektedir. Bu çerçevede, bu makalede 19. yüzyılda Osmanlı basınında intiharın, modernleşmenin ahlaki yan etkileriyle ilişkilendirilen bir “medeniyet hastalığı” olarak nasıl temsil edildiği incelenmektedir. Böylece makale, intihar olgusunun Osmanlı düşünsel dünyasındaki medeniyet eleştirisinin bir parçası olarak nasıl şekillendiğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İntihar, Osmanlı Basını, Medeniyet Eleştirisi, On Dokuzuncu Yüzyıl Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Ahlaki İstatistikler, Batı Modernitesi, Medeniyet Hastalığı

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1. Introduction and Literature Review

From the 1860s onward, suicide became an increasingly visible and controversial issue in Europe, widely reported in newspapers and analyzed through emerging statistical frameworks. Rising suicide rates in the most developed regions were frequently associated with secularization and levels of civilization, leading suicide to be framed as a "disease of civilization" within nineteenth-century European thought (Morrissey, 2006, p. 14). From the 1820s onward, figures such as André-Michel Guerry and Adolphe Quetelet laid the foundations of moral statistics by examining suicide and other morally charged behaviors. Later contributions, especially those of Enrico Morselli, linked moral statistics to social Darwinist interpretations and framed suicide as connected to natural selection and the struggle for existence within modern societies (Morrissey, 2006, p. 187).

In the nineteenth century, civilization was a concept through which thinkers sought to distinguish its benefits from its harms. During the same period, the Ottoman Empire also tried to define its own position on civilization, shaping its approach according to the changing political context. The word "medeniyet" (civilization), as a Western concept, entered Ottoman literature in the 1830s in the form of "sivilizasyon," and over time, it became one of the primary topics of discussion for all nineteenth century Ottoman intellectuals (Güler, 2006, p. 3). In the early periods of Ottoman modernization, "medeniyet" was an umbrella concept that encompassed many terms with Western origins, such as *Hürriyet* (Liberty), *Terakki* (Progress), *Meşrutiyet* (Constitutionalism), and *Kanun-i Esasi* (the Constitution). For Ottoman intellectuals, civilization signified not only a desirable development but also an unstoppable progress that was impossible to resist (Kara & Süslü, 2003, p. 260).

The main debate of the entire nineteenth century Ottoman intellectual world was centered on how much and in what way the developments of the existing civilization should be adopted. While the Ottomans were prepared to accept the innovations of civilization in scientific, technological, and to a certain extent, economic and political matters, they were also seriously concerned about the influence of its moral and social way of life on Ottoman society. Initially, for the intellectuals of the Tanzimat era, civilization had a singular meaning and directly referred to European (Western) Civilization. However, beginning in the 1870s, the concept of "Islamic civilization" also began to be used, and with this new concept, Ottoman intellectuals in particular, and Muslim intellectuals in general, attempted to reconcile their own past with the concept of "civilization" (Güler, 2006, p. 201).

Moral statistics and their association with social Darwinist interpretations positioned technological progress and modern urban life as indicators of civilization in nineteenth-century European debates, while also linking phenomena such as crime, prostitution, and suicide to these processes. In response, Ottoman discussions of civilization were often articulated around the proposition that 'we should take the science of the West but not its morality.' Within this framework, a collective "we" was constructed in opposition to the West, alongside a corresponding "they" (Yalçınkaya, 2024, p. 17). Western morality was thus presented as the "morality of the Other", discursively constructed as an undesirable outcome positioned against science. Ottoman intellectuals engaged with the West's internal critique grounded in moral statistics and used it to justify a selective and cautious approach to modernization. One clear manifestation of this stance was the

discussion of civilization through the theme of suicide, which constitutes the central focus of this article. Accordingly, this article examines how suicide reports in the Ottoman press were mobilized as a tool of critique directed at Western civilization.

There is an impressive body of literature in the Ottoman Empire concerning the critical attitudes towards how and to what extent civilization should be adopted. A considerable body of literature on topics such as civilization , social Darwinism (Doğan, 2006), the entry of positivism into Turkey (Korlaelçi, 2021) (Hanioğlu, 1981), and the Ottomans perception of science (Yalçınkaya, 2024). However, there has been no research on the Ottoman critique of the West through the topic of suicide, which Western thinkers also employed to criticize their own modernity. Existing studies on suicide in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire link its causes to the cultural values, gender norms, and socioeconomic conditions of Ottoman society (Şenol, 2003) (Kılıç, 2018) (Abaoğlu, 2024). Records of suicide cases can be found in the police archives of the period, but these documents mostly provide information about how suicide was understood and treated from sociological and legal perspectives.

When suicide is examined in the context of a critique of civilization, the first question that arises is whether suicide statistics existed in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. Although it is possible to find references to suicide numbers in the *Death Registers* which began to be compiled for sanitary purposes in the early nineteenth century, these records are irregular and inconsistent (Balsoy & Gündoğdu, 2020, p. 199). Systematic efforts to collect statistical data specifically on suicide appear to have begun only in the early twentieth century (Abaoğlu, 2024, p. 156). Therefore, throughout the nineteenth century, the Ottoman Empire did not treat suicide as a statistical category of knowledge, as a result could not engage in a comparative critique of the West. This study employs discourse analysis to examine how suicide was framed in the Ottoman press as a phenomenon associated with civilization and, by extension, with the West. By focusing on Ottoman Turkish newspaper reports, the article analyzes how representations of suicide and references to Western suicide statistics were mobilized as discursive tools in Ottoman critiques of Western modernity.

2. Suicide and the “Disease of Civilization” Discourse in the Nineteenth Century Europe

Suicide was systematically recorded and analyzed throughout the nineteenth century. By the end of the century, this growing body of data enabled Durkheim to systematize sociology as a discipline and also influenced the emergence of social Darwinism. However, neither Durkheim’s analytical framework nor social Darwinist models are the main focus of this study. Rather, this article examines the western civilizational critique discourse that developed around the rise of suicide statistics and the interpretation of these statistical increases of suicide as side effects of civilization in the nineteenth century. It argues that the Ottoman press was well aware of this Western discourse and used it to criticize Western civilization by adopting western terms of critique. This section explores the relationship between statistics, suicide, and the idea of civilization as they were conceptualized by the west in the nineteenth century.

Statistics had become a central epistemic tool through which social phenomena such as crime, mortality, and suicide were rendered measurable and comparable across societies by the nineteenth century. Hacking comprehensively demonstrates the emergence of a

new mode of statistical reasoning that developed alongside the changing use of statistics. Randomness, probability, and statistical thinking radically transformed the way human behavior and social events were perceived. This transformation contributed to the rise of modern fields such as demography and risk assessment, fundamentally altering how human life, health, and social outcomes were understood and managed. These new statistical facts made randomness governable, bringing uncertainty under the control of law. As a result, phenomena such as crime and mortality and even suicide came to be interpreted not as individual acts but as patterns of collective behavior (Hacking, 1990). Indeed, it is impossible not to agree with Hacking, both in terms of the rise of moral statistics and the organic relationship between the data derived from this and social Darwinism.

2.1 Birth of Moral Statistics

From the 1830s onward, moral statistics emerged as a scientific approach aimed at uncovering social regularities behind morally charged behaviors such as crime and suicide. Through figures such as Adolphe Quetelet and André-Michel Guerry, suicide was transformed from an individual act into a measurable social phenomenon, allowing comparisons across regions and populations. These comparative frameworks enabled suicide to be interpreted not merely as a moral failing but as an indicator of broader social and civilizational conditions (Paperno, 1998, p. 23).

While finding a correlation between immorality and crime was a long-established understanding, the attempt to quantify morality with numbers led to somewhat radical interpretations. Starting from the question of whether "the level of moral decay could be known by the numbers of acts and crimes," scholars began to collectively analyze crimes against morality, such as suicide, drunkenness, vagrancy, and murder. It was believed that certain statistics on crime and population revealed the "moral condition of the public" in different regions of the empire. This statistical approach weakened the conventional view that explained crime through individual reasons. Instead, it encouraged comparisons between countries and, through this, supported conclusions about their level of civilization (Morrissey, 2006, p. 92).

2.2. Interpretation of Moral Statistics and Social Darwinism

Late nineteenth century, was defined by the publication of pioneering statistical study Henry Morselli's *Suicide: An Essay on Comparative Moral Statistics* (Morselli, 1881). Across the civilized states of Europe and America, the incidence of suicide demonstrated a consistent and significant increase from the turn of the century, outpacing both the rate of population growth and general mortality rates. These trends led Morselli to characterize suicide as a profound concern among civilized populations, labeling it as "the fatal disease of civilized peoples." He argued that suicide represented a manifestation of the intense struggle for existence and the process of human selection, which he believed operated according to the principles of evolution within modern societies (Kushner, 1993, p. 476).

Taking a step beyond Morselli, Enrico Ferri viewed suicide from a broader sociological perspective, characterizing it as a safety mechanism for society. He argued that in the struggle for existence, those least adapted to social life were the first to perish, with suicide being one manifestation of this defeat (Brancaccio, 2013, p. 709). The ideas of both Morselli and Ferri demonstrate that suicide rates were regarded as indicators of

civilization. Moreover, the phenomenon of suicide itself was rationalized as a means of protecting society by eliminating or isolating its perceived misfits. Consequently, the link between suicide and the elements of modern life, such as urbanization, education, secularization, and industrialization, was widely accepted among nineteenth century intellectuals (Whitt, 2010, p. 138).

The interpretation of comparative moral statistics varied significantly from one ideology to another. While some expressed concern over the decline of Christian morality, nationalists instrumentalized these statistics to voice their suspicions about dangerous foreign influences. Social Darwinists, on the other hand, read the data as a sign of a society's "natural" ability to purge itself of the unfit (Brancaccio et al., 2013, p. 608) Experts who combined Darwinian metaphors with degeneration theory characterized suicide as a social disease. According to this view, nature unconsciously works towards the attainment of physical and mental well-being for humanity. These experts posited that the outcome, or physical inevitability, of evolution is the victory of the strong over the weak, the survival of the better-equipped, and the disappearance of the degenerate (Morrisey, 2006, p. 193).

Durkheim stands as a central figure in the late nineteenth-century study of suicide, primarily due to his seminal work, *Le Suicide* (Durkheim, 1951). The originality and enduring significance of Durkheim's work on suicide do not stem from his discovery of new empirical correlations. What made his work groundbreaking was his ability to interpret and explain this existing data through a consistent and comprehensive sociological theory (Giddens, 1965, p. 5). While suicide was framed as a "disease of civilization" in the West, I will now focus on a new set of questions: how was civilization and its relationship with suicide received in the Ottoman Empire, which of its aspects were considered acceptable, and for what reasons was it criticized?

3. The West as "Other": Ottoman Civilizational Critiques in Nineteenth Century

3.1 Different Narrative Paths of Ottoman Modernization

There is a substantial body of literature on Ottoman modernization, which can be examined through a historical trajectory. Over the past thirty years, studies on nineteenth century Ottoman history, conducted from various perspectives, have critically challenged earlier interpretations that explained the Ottoman experience primarily through the concepts of modernization and Westernization, while attributing only a limited and secondary agency to the Ottoman political elite (Berkes, 1973). The works that once described the Tanzimat reforms of the nineteenth century as progressive and modernizing, and the following three decades of the reign of Abdülhamid II as a period of decline due to its Islamic orientation, have been particularly refuted, especially by research in the field of economic history (Akarlı, 1976; Pamuk, 2019; Quataert, 1987). A common feature of these studies is their emphasis on the continuity between the Ottoman Empire and the early Republican period (Özbek, 2004 , p. 72).

The Eurocentric narrative of modernization interprets Ottoman modernization within the framework of problems arising from its perceived delay or lateness in relation to a European-centered model. While this perspective attributes to Ottoman society and its political elite a historical agency limited to imitating the European example, the critical literature that challenges this view and conceptualizes modernization as a process

operating within a shared global temporality, one that also includes the variations shaped by local conditions (Özbek, 2004, p. 79).

Selim Deringil's study, which focuses on the symbols through which legitimacy was constructed during the reign of Abdülhamid II, centers on the worldview of the Ottoman elite. Contrary to the claim that the Ottoman Empire turned inward during this period, Deringil argues that it was, albeit reluctantly accepted by, the only Muslim world empire which succeeded in joining the modern community of nations (Deringil, 2014, p. 15). The distinctive aspect of Deringil's pioneering work lies in his examination of historical processes unfolding across different political geographies within a shared global temporality, without subjecting these cases to a hierarchy of advancement or backwardness (Özbek, 2004, p. 79).

The problematic aspect of both the Eurocentric perspective and the claim that all modernization experiences developed within a shared temporality lies in their inability to move beyond a generalized ideology of modernization. Although some approaches call for a complete rejection of the modernist epistemology built around the Enlightenment ideal of the rational subject, it is also important to note the existence of alternative conceptualizations, such as non-Western modernities, hybrid modernities, and alternative modernities (Özbek, 2004, p. 82). These frameworks question whether the experiences of modernity in non-Western societies can generate new claims, and explore how different local contexts and cultural spheres, with their own sets of values, might create distinct forms of modernity. The term "alternative," in this sense, evokes both a critique or even rejection of Western modernity and a model of transformation that is more politically motivated and voluntary in nature (Göle, 2004, p. 58).

This article departs from Eurocentric and linear narratives that attribute only a secondary agency to the Ottoman elite or the press. It does so by asking how a modernization movement experienced in the same historical timeframe as the West defined itself through reports of suicide within the context of a broader critique of civilization. In contrast to the view that the Ottoman Empire merely imitated Western models, it argues that the Ottoman elite, in their critique of civilization, were fully attuned to the intellectual currents of their time. By turning against the West the very criticisms, the West had developed of itself, they contributed to shape their own chosen way of modernizing which valued science and technology but rejected Western morals.

3.2. Ottoman Civilizational Discourse

Concepts often evolve over time, not only through internal semantic shifts but also through interactions between different geographies. This section examines the concept of *civilization*, which originated in Europe and was later adopted by the Ottomans. It focuses on how the term's meaning was narrowed in the nineteenth-century Ottoman context and how Ottoman intellectuals reinterpreted it in light of changing political dynamics.

The concept of *civilization* emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century as a way for Western societies—particularly in France and Britain—to articulate the elevated status they believed they held in the world. Initially associated with aristocratic refinement and courtly manners, the term was used to remind the rising bourgeoisie of their lower social standing. However, following the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie appropriated the term, turning it into a legitimizing discourse for their own political ambitions. *Civilization* soon became a key justification for expansionist projects—especially France's mission to

"civilize" other regions, including Africa and parts of Europe. Throughout its evolution, the concept consistently retained an implicit sense of cultural superiority (Güler, 2006, p. 64).

The term *medeniyet* (civilization) entered Ottoman Turkish around eighty years after its initial use in French. In its classical usage, it was derived from Aristotle's concept of *zoon politikon*, referring to humans as inherently social beings. Thinkers like Ibn Khaldun and Pirizade used the term to describe the collective life of humans on earth. However, from 1837 onward, *medeniyet* began to carry a new emphasis on transformation. Unlike earlier, internal forms of change, this transformation was framed as a necessity driven by external forces. It was to align with contemporary demands, closely tied to concepts such as modernization, progress, and development (Güler, 2006, p. 313).

Initially rendered as "civilisation" or "sivilizasyon," the term gradually found expression in the Ottoman context as "medeniyet." Although the word itself already existed in Ottoman Turkish, its association with the Western notion of "civilization" only began in the late 1830s. Thus, Ottoman intellectuals did not coin a new word from the Arabic root *medine* (city), but rather began to restrict an existing term to convey the meaning of "civilization". In a memorandum prepared by Mustafa Reşit Pasha in 1834, the term *civilisation* appears as *sivilizasyon*, referring to efforts to cultivate human character and establish order. The word first entered Ottoman lexicons in G. Rhasis's 1829 dictionary, where it was defined as the moral improvement of society. In the second edition of this dictionary, published in 1843, *civilisation* was translated to Ottoman Turkish not only as *insaniyet* and *temeddün* but also as *medeniyet*, indicating the gradual lexical stabilization of the term in Ottoman Turkish (Güler, 2006, p. 87).

When the Ottomans began using the concept of civilization in its modern sense, it was understood as a singular entity: "civilization is one, and that is European civilization." For example, Abdullah Cevdet argued that there was no civilization other than European civilization and advocated for embracing the West "with its roses and thorns." Similarly, figures such as Mustafa Reşid Pasha, Sadık Rifat Pasha, Mustafa Sami Efendi, and Şinasi also regarded civilization exclusively as European civilization. However, by the early years of Sultan Abdülhamid II's reign, in the 1870s, the concept of Islamic civilization also entered the discourse. Ottoman intellectuals asserted that civilization first emerged in the East and maintained that Islamic civilization had historically existed. In response to Western characterizations of the Ottomans as uncivilized in past, present, and future terms, Ottoman thinkers at least rejected this characterization with respect to the past. Within this framework, the idea of Islamic civilization was invested with a defensive meaning for nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectuals, enabling them to resist European colonial and psychological assaults. Through a discourse centered on cultural particularism, these intellectuals constructed a form of Westernization that positioned their own civilization as central in relation to other civilizations (Reyhan & Halaçoğlu, 2021, p. 166).

In their relations with the West, the Ottomans increasingly found themselves in a position of decline. While they were prepared to adopt the innovations introduced by the powerful Western civilization in the fields of science, technology, and to some extent, economics and politics, they were also deeply concerned about the influence of Western moral values and social lifestyles on Ottoman society (Güler, 2006, p. 137). As a result,

debates centered around the concept of "civilization" primarily aimed to delineate the extent and context in which such acceptance and appropriation would occur.

During the reign of Abdülhamid II, Islamist intellectuals advocated not for the adoption of Western civilization, but for a return to and revival of the former Islamic civilization. In the press of the Abdülhamid era, a clear boundary was drawn regarding the achievements of Western civilization. Western civilization was associated almost exclusively with industrial and technological advancement. Despite this material progress, it was argued that in terms of morality and virtue, Eastern civilization was far superior to its Western counterpart—an idea that lay at the heart of the intellectual discourse of the period. (Reyhan & Halaçoğlu, 2021, p. 188).

During the reign of Abdülhamid II, Westernist (Garpcı) intellectuals envisioned modernization through ideas that were often internally contradictory. At the center of their ideal model of modernization was the belief that science and technology (referred to as *fen* and *ilim*) coming from the West were necessary and unavoidable. At the same time, however, they developed a strong rejection of the West's spiritual and moral culture. This rejection was largely based on the widely held belief that Western moral values were incompatible with Islamic ethics and Ottoman traditions. Numerous articles in the newspapers, journals, and pamphlets of the period, which emphasized the necessity of religion and morality, reflected this concern. While Westernist intellectuals sought to preserve religious and moral concepts that they saw as central to their own identity, they also constructed a discourse of othering. In this discourse, the spiritual values of the West were associated with immorality and irreligion (Reyhan & Halaçoğlu, 2023, p. 13). Within this context, suicide was interpreted as a symptom of the West's decaying moral order. It was represented as a "disease" unique to Western civilization. The fourth section of the article will examine how suicide was framed in the Ottoman Turkish press as a tool for civilizational critique

4. Ottoman Discourse on Suicide as a "Disease of Civilization"

4.1 Discursive Analysis and Methodology

Drawing on Stuart Hall, this study treats language as a constitutive element of meaning-making. Language does not merely transmit meaning but actively produces and stabilizes it through social practices and representation. Meaning is therefore understood as historically and socially negotiated rather than fixed or inherent (Hall, 1997, p. 47). Following Foucault, discourse is understood not simply as language but as a historically specific system of knowledge that shapes how phenomena are thought, discussed, and governed. From this perspective, meanings are not located in individual texts but are produced within discursive formations that operate across institutions and practices (Foucault, 1972, p. 31). As a genre newly introduced to the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, newspapers gained popularity toward the end of the century and were used both as platforms for informing the public about state regulations and as instruments for enlightening the population by the educated elite. The representation of suicide in Ottoman newspapers not only allows us to trace existing discourses on suicide but also provides insight into what the state and educated elites sought to communicate to the public regarding the body, the mind, and individual agency, particularly within the moral frameworks shaped by civilizational debates. This article directly focuses on

the discourse of suicide in the Ottoman press within the framework of civilizational critique.

In this study, I examined newspaper reports on suicide published in nineteenth-century Ottoman Turkish print media. The tools that made this research possible were the Wikilala and Müteferriqa databases. Using these digital platforms, I conducted keyword searches for “*intihar*” (suicide) across newspapers included in their databases, covering the period from the beginning of the nineteenth century to its end (1900). Within the scope of this research, I reviewed 124 suicide-related reports from 11 different newspapers. The suicide reports were thematically classified into two main categories: reports concerning suicides that occurred abroad which contain 86 news reports and reports addressing suicides within Ottoman territories that include 38 news reports. Within the corpus of suicides occurred abroad news reports, 12 items explicitly contained statistical information, while 52 reports presented suicide cases from various countries that subjecting suicide as a news of ordinary or routine incidents. Overall, 64 of the 86 foreign-related news items referred in some form to rising suicide trend abroad, or foreign suicide statistics. This article does not seek to provide a comprehensive analysis of all the suicide reports under examination. Instead, it focuses on news texts that interpret suicide, suicide statistics, or increasing suicide trends through the lens of civilization.

This study is based on Ottoman Turkish newspapers published up to 1900 and accessible through the relevant newspaper databases. While press materials in languages other than Ottoman Turkish, as well as archival sources beyond newspapers, also remain valuable for examining suicide and civilizational critique, including medical texts, literary works, medical writings offer valuable insights into debates on civilization, they fall outside the scope of the present study. This article does not aim to offer a comprehensive account of suicide discourse in nineteenth-century Ottoman media. Instead, it argues that suicide reports functioned as a key discursive site through which civilizational critique was articulated. By directing toward the West the very criticisms, the West had developed of itself, Ottoman intellectuals engaged in a historically attuned and distinctly modern form of critique, reflecting a selective and pragmatic approach to modernization rather than a wholesale imitation of Western models.

4.2. Civilizational Critique through Suicide News in the Ottoman Press

The psycho-sociological series of articles on suicide written by Dr. Aziz Bey from Crimea in *Mecmua-i Fünun* in 1866 is considered one of the first seeds of modern psychology (Turan, 2010, p. 18). *Mecmua-i Fünun*, which began publication in 1861 with the aim of introducing modern science and culture to Ottoman society and bringing it to a contemporary level through science and culture (Uçman, 2003, p. 270), published Dr. Aziz Bey's article on suicide in its 39th and 40th issues. The article on suicide written by Dr. Aziz Bey in issues 39 and 40 of *Mecmua-i Fünun* is noteworthy both for its publication in a prestigious scientific journal of the time and for its extensive statistical information on the West, as well as for being an early work on the subject.

The text discusses how certain historical societies viewed suicide as a moral act, particularly when individuals could no longer contribute to the community due to old age or incapacity. In such contexts, continuing to live in a state of perceived uselessness was seen as shameful, while choosing to end one's life voluntarily was regarded as honorable. Although this idea was supported by some philosophers, others like

Pythagoras and Aristotle rejected it, arguing that life is a sacred gift (Mecmua-i Fünun, n. 39, p. 218).

Drawing on examples from world history, the text explores circumstances under which voluntary death was considered an act of honor or resistance. These include citizens setting themselves on fire during Alexander the Great's siege, Roman officials committing suicide to avoid capture, and a devout Jew choosing death for his faith. The text then shifts focus to cultural practices where suicide held collective or ritualistic significance. For instance, Japanese monks starved themselves to death as religious offerings, Hindu widows practiced Sati by immolating themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, and the Gauls and some Bengal communities engaged in self-sacrifice for spiritual or familial reasons (Mecmua-i Fünun, n. 39, p. 219).

The text emphasizes that suicide is condemned in the religions of modern civilized nations. However, it acknowledges the widespread phenomenon of sacrificing one's life for political or national causes, as seen in warfare. It also draws attention to the roles of imitation and habit, citing the case of young women in Lyon, France, who committed suicide by copying one another. More significantly, the text notes the growing influence of philosophical works that legitimize suicide, suggesting a correlation between the dissemination of such literature and a rise in suicide rates across Europe (Mecmua-i Fünun, n. 39, p. 221).

The article on suicide continues in the 40th issue of *Mecmua-i Fünun*, presenting various statistical findings from France. It discusses when suicides are more or less frequent during the year, the age groups most affected, gender distribution, and commonly used methods for suicide. According to the data, between 1850 and 1860, there were 38,195 recorded suicides in France. The highest incidence occurred among individuals aged 40 to 60, with a noticeable increase during the summer months. Hanging, strangulation, and drowning were the most prevalent methods. Suicide rates in 1856 had doubled compared to 1826, indicating a clear upward trend (Mecmua-i Fünun, n. 40, p. 252).

The article also highlights contemporary approaches to suicide prevention. It suggests that individuals contemplating suicide should be dissuaded through appeals to reason and religious principles. Some physicians recommended mentally engaging such individuals with other concerns to distract them from suicidal thoughts. However, the text makes a distinction: while these interventions may be effective for those of sound mind, they are deemed insufficient for individuals with mental illness, whose suicidal behavior is considered a matter requiring specialized treatment (Mecmua-i Fünun, n. 40, p. 255).

This series reflects the awareness among Ottoman physicians of statistical practices regarding suicide in Western countries. Moreover, it offers an example of analyzing suicide not merely as a medical issue or a sign of moral decay, but within its sociological and cultural dimensions. Yet, the article notably omits any reference to suicide within the Ottoman or Islamic context. There is no commentary on the relevance or absence of statistical data on suicide in the Ottoman Empire, nor is there any reflection on the need for such data. This silence partly stems from the nature of *Mecmua-i Fünun*, which often published translations or adaptations of Western popular science without a coherent program or consideration of the local social context (Uçman, 2003, p. 270). This lack of commentary may also suggest an implicit framing of suicide as a distinctly Western

problem from cultural, moral, and scientific perspectives. Similar tendencies can be observed more explicitly in Ottoman press coverage as the century progressed.

In Ottoman Turkish-language newspapers, reports of suicides within the empire were generally treated as ordinary incidents of public order, listed alongside news of fires, drownings, and accidents. In contrast, suicide reports from outside the empire often focused on statistical trends, highlighting the growing prevalence of suicide in foreign countries which is even among women and children. These reports sometimes intersected with broader critiques of "civilization".

A notable example is found in a 1897 article from Sabah titled "Suicide and Civilization." It opens by questioning whether there is a relationship between suicide rates and a nation's level of civilization. The article proposes that suicide is rare among so-called "primitive" societies and among animals, rejecting common beliefs such as the myth that scorpions commit suicide when exposed to fire. Drawing on British and French statistics, the text claims that children have lower suicide rates than women, and women lower rates than men. It also notes that suicide is not especially prevalent among professionals such as doctors, lawyers, or teachers; instead, it appears more frequently among individuals in lower occupational groups (Sabah, n. 2754).

The narrative continues as citing a researcher referred to as "Mr. Birand," and suggests a correlation between suicide, alcoholism, and mental illness that conditions allegedly more common in advanced societies. For instance, suicide rates are highest in Northern Germany, considered home to the continent's most "deep-thinking" individuals. France, Italy, and Hungary follow in descending order. In contrast, countries such as Spain, Ireland, and Portugal which were described as less civilized, report the lowest suicide rates in Europe. Yet, the article complicates this narrative by pointing out anomalies: for example, although alcohol consumption is very high in Denmark, its suicide rates are relatively low. It also observes that many who take their own lives are barely literate. Overall, the article appears skeptical of a direct correlation between suicide and civilization. Whether directly quoted or shaped by the anonymous author's perspective, the narrative ends with the claim that the relationship between suicide and the level of civilization remains unresolved and complex (Sabah, n. 2754).

An article titled "Another Harm of Civilization" (*Medeniyetin Bir Muzriyeti Daha*, in Ottoman Turkish), published in *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* in 1891, offers a commentary on William Mathews' essay "Civilization and Suicide," which had appeared in the *North American Review* that same year. The piece begins by acknowledging that readers may be surprised by the idea that civilization could have harmful effects—particularly ones severe enough to threaten human life. Drawing on Mathews' essay, the article aims to demonstrate that suicide is one such dire consequence of modern civilization (*Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, n. 3890).

It reports that although the official annual number of suicides in Europe had reached 60,000, the actual figure was likely much higher due to unreported cases. The text laments that suicide has been steadily increasing over the centuries at a rate that surpasses both population growth and general mortality rates. It attributes this alarming trend primarily to the impact of civilization. According to the article, suicides are more common among the poor and marginalized than among intelligent or socially respected individuals, though it also questions whether even notable historical figures such as Aristotle may

have died by suicide. The text asserts that this pattern persists into the present day. In 1890 alone, it notes, 2,000 young men and women in Europe took their own lives. Regional and cultural differences are highlighted: in Northern Europe, suicide is largely attributed to alcoholism; in Southern Europe, to emotions such as jealousy, love, or financial ruin; and in Central Europe, to fear of punishment or loss of honor.

Environmental factors are also discussed. Suicide rates are lower in mountainous or marshy areas, and higher in cities built along large rivers. June is identified as the peak month for suicides, while December sees the fewest. The article presents a comparative view of European nations, claiming that Germans are the most prone to suicide, followed by the English and French. In contrast, Slavic populations exhibit the lowest rates. Less “civilized” countries such as Spain, Ireland, and Portugal fall somewhere in between. Within nations, regional variation is linked to levels of civilization—for example, suicide is more prevalent in northern and central Italy than in the less urbanized south, and in more “advanced” parts of France such as the north and northeast.

The article concludes by rhetorically asking whether Dr. Mathews’ striking findings are not indeed worthy of attention and praise, suggesting a general approval of his thesis that civilization is a driving force behind the rise in suicide (Tercüman-ı Hakikat, n. 3890). The article published in the *North American Review* reflects dominant assumptions of the nineteenth century. It presents suicide as a longstanding human behavior, often triggered not only by major causes but also by seemingly trivial motives. To support this, it draws on anecdotes involving historical figures such as Bismarck, Byron, and Vatel. Rejecting the legal concept of “temporary insanity” as a general explanation for suicide, the article instead argues that most suicides are deliberate and conscious acts motivated by an attempt to escape unbearable suffering. The suicides of Hannibal and Cato are cited as examples of rational decisions made in moments of hopelessness, not madness (Mathews, 1891, p. 481).

The essay attempts to reveal the influence of modern life on suicide, claiming that the rapid pace and excessive demands of industrialized society that marked by urbanization and intense competition which result in severe psychological strain. It suggests that civilization heightens the sensitivity of the nervous system, creating a form of existential impatience and emotional fragility. In this view, suicide is not random or inexplicable, but an inevitable and predictable consequence of modern progress in which the author calls a “disease of civilization” (Mathews, 1891, p. 482).

In contrast, the anonymous writer of the *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* article offers a more restrained reading of the essay, focusing primarily on its statistical data. Rather than elaborating on the psychological and social costs of modernity, the writer confines their critique of civilization to the rising suicide rates, seemingly viewing this as sufficient evidence of its harmful effects. This limited focus may reflect a distance between the writer (and their readers) and the lived experience of modern civilization itself. As such, the article sidesteps discussion of modernity’s pace and pressures (perhaps because they are not yet directly felt) and instead critiques civilization solely through quantifiable outcomes.

An article titled “Suicides in Berlin” published in the *Mürüvvet* newspaper in 1890 reflects a critical stance toward the perceived link between suicide and civilization. The anonymous author questions how a nation as advanced as Germany has failed to eliminate what is described as a “mad and misguided” act like suicide. Quoting an

unnamed German newspaper, the article notes that suicide has become alarmingly common in Berlin, with the town of Tiergarten alone witnessing twelve cases. The *Mürüvvet* writer characterizes this situation as both shocking and repugnant—something to be condemned not only by friends and enemies but also by reason and morality (Mürüvvet, n. 39).

Although not always framed as direct critiques of civilization, many articles in the Ottoman Turkish press featured detailed statistical reports on rising suicide rates in European countries. For example, a *Sabah* article titled “Alcohol and Suicide” (Müsekkirat ve İntihar, in Ottoman Turkish) presents suicide statistics from France, comparing rates by year and gender while also offering vivid descriptions of suicide methods (Sabah, n. 1409).

Similarly, a report in *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* includes data from Berlin and Paris, stating that in October alone, 51 people committed suicide in Berlin. Among them were nine women and approximately ten young girls, with victims ranging in age from 13 to 73. Most died by hanging or drowning, though other methods included cutting veins and throwing oneself under a train (Tercüman-ı Hakikat, n.3725). Together, these reports suggest that while the Ottoman press may not have directly attacked the concept of civilization, it frequently highlighted the correlation between modern European life and the prevalence of suicide, often through the lens of statistical observation and implied moral judgment

A news report cited alarming figures from the Paris police department, which recorded between twelve and eighteen suicide cases per day—framing the phenomenon as an epidemic. The report linked the high suicide rates primarily to hunger and poverty (Tercüman-ı Hakikat, n. 3687). In 1882, *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* published statistics from a study conducted by a prominent European physician. The data presented suicide rates per one million inhabitants, identifying Germany as having the highest rate, followed by Denmark and Sweden, while Italy and Spain recorded the lowest. The report also included information on the methods of suicide. Hanging was the most common method overall, though in France, drowning predominated. Suicide by poisoning was rare except in Ireland and Italy. Additionally, suicides involving coal—presumably carbon monoxide poisoning—were noted to be especially prevalent in France (Tercüman-ı Hakikat, n. 1297).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

What were the Ottomans talking about when they discussed western suicide statistics? It is time to answer this question. Suicide statistics were, above all, a product of scientific knowledge. In 1861, Aziz Bey published a two-part article titled *Intihar*, written to make science accessible to the general public. Without referring to any examples from the Ottoman or Islamic world, he explained the social and psychological causes and consequences of suicide through historical examples and statistical data. His approach to the statistical data on suicide was neither moral nor religious. Could we label it as “scientific?”

As Alper Yalçınkaya notes, science in the Ottoman context was not a fixed category but a field that was constantly redefined. It also became a site of competition for influence and legitimacy (Yalçınkaya, 2024, p. 21). In the mid-nineteenth century, Ottomans were able to discuss suicide and its statistics as a scientific matter. By the end of the century, they were increasingly concerned with how rising suicide rates might relate to the level of

civilization. Scientific thought did not follow a linear path but was reconstructed over time.

When Ottomans referred to suicide rates or treated suicide as a critique of civilization, they were also expressing their position toward modernization. By recognizing suicide as one of the West's forms of self-criticism and by acknowledging the presence of moral statistics, they adopted a selective approach to the level of civilization they wished to emulate. The West appeared as a place where women, children, and growing numbers of individuals chose to end their lives. This information was scientific in form but carried strong moral implications which draw the limits of modernization path for Ottomans.

It remains an open question to what extent the Ottoman elite was aware of the Social Darwinist ideas that underpinned moral statistics and their role in justifying suicide. Based on the texts available to me, there is no clear evidence of an explicit debate on this issue. However, the question of whether they understood suicide as a safety valve within a Social Darwinist framework, as it was often accepted and normalized in the West, and whether they normalized suicide in this way, remains an intriguing and relevant question. In other words, the question of whether there were followers of Enrico Morselli in the Ottoman Empire is intriguing.

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