CHAPTER 10

Conclusion: The Road to Liberty?

The liberalism of Ağaoğlu diverged from that of many liberals, in keeping with the long intellectual and political journey he went through in Western Europe and the Near East. His early education in secular Russian schools and his contact with Russian Narodniki led to his abrupt alienation from his roots (religious and familial) and to a growing admiration for Western civilisation in his youth. It was perhaps his personal experiences and his reading of Western history which led him to argue later that the Near East required a revolution (rather than gradual reform) led by heroic individuals to bring about a clean break with the past.

When he went to France for his education and embarked upon his writing career, Ağaoğlu's views of the West were mixed. He thought that the Europeans were too prejudiced against the East, in particular against the Muslim world and Islam. His early writings indicate that his main motivations in writing were to break the barriers of Western prejudice against the Muslims and to denounce the negative effects of European imperialism in the Near East. Also, he sought the means for the self-empowerment of Islamic nations. For the first time in the early 1890s, he propounded that the most pressing problem of the East was the fullest elevation of the intellectual and spiritual faculties of the individual, an idea that had previously been propounded by his teacher Ernest Renan in the context of nineteenth-century France. The Ağaoğlu of the 1890s believed that the question of the individual in the East could be resolved by improving the abased role of women in society.

Ağaoğlu felt sandwiched between his perceptions of two different aspects of the West, that which he admired because of its achievements and that which he detested because of its aggressive and ignorant attitude toward the East. The latter led to his further embracing the religious and nationalist identities as vehicles of the collective struggle for rights to match the power of the Russian Empire and the Western powers. In the late Tsarist Russian and late Ottoman imperial contexts, he wrote in favour of the social awareness and collective rights of Russian Muslims and Ottoman Turks, seeing Pan-Islamism and nationalism as liberating components. It was in this period that he began to advocate communitarian values against egoistic individualism.

In the early Turkish Republican context, Ağaoğlu propounded his communitarian defence of liberalism most clearly. His writings of the time explicitly revealed his idea that Turkish society must absorb all material and moral features
of the West, which he identified as a civilisation of liberal and communitarian societies. In his view, the division of labour and functional differentiation, which Durkheim later put into a theoretical framework, were the key to the triumph of the liberal mentality in the West. He appeared to capture the special type of individualism accentuated in Durkheim’s work. But he did not accord the individual the autonomy accorded in the French writer’s works. He was aware that the division of labour and functional differentiation granted the individual a sacred role in society, which gave rise to further respect for each individual and collectivity. But his bureaucratic liberal interpretation suggested enforced liberalism, using laws as a moral weapon.

As such, he identified the state as an ethical idea embodying the collective aspirations of society. He drew the conclusion that the state and patriotic and altruistic intellectuals must guide individuals towards moral development and the satisfaction of higher needs without fearing, as did many liberals, the spread of conformism in society. Like other contemporary Kemalists, he therefore believed that Turkish society needed a set of moral and political guiding principles, which he laid out in *In the Land of Free Men*.

The liberalism of Ağaoğlu assigned responsibilities to the individual, and not merely individual responsibilities, thus linking each individual to others by ties of caring, empathy and altruism. For him, freedom ultimately consisted in individuals acting morally. However, he took this idea to an extreme when his utopian state forced ‘the free men’ to act so and when he practically demanded the perfection of the individual. He wanted the citizens of the Republic to obey all the moral requirements for social happiness (or the republican principles guiding those citizens) to become good and obedient (Turkish) followers of ‘the religion of republic’. He wanted a perfect system that was based on the assumption of the existence of equal and perfect citizens, yet he believed that this system would concurrently enable the elevation of individuals and their perfection.

He saw no contradiction in suggesting at one and the same time further liberty, the fullest perfection of individual manners and an aversion to tolerance, as seen in the rigid laws forming the constitution of his utopian country. Perhaps he gave too much credit to the sentiment of altruism for selfless individuals to give rise to social conflicts and a version of bureaucratic liberalism to settle them. Yet, he appeared not to think that social instability could stem from the lack of a culture of tolerance (and in certain cases respect) for imperfection. This is the underlying idea of this book which argues that his liberalism was inherently an authoritarian defense of liberalism wherein legality and morality assumed not a voluntary and freely chosen character but there were apparent elements of obligation or imposition from above, as we see in *In the Land of Free Men*. 