

**Re-imagining Education in the Early Turkish Republic:  
İsmail Hakkı Tongu and His Transformative Educational Vision**



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<sup>1</sup> "Fotoğraflar," İsmail Hakkı Tongu Belgeliđi Vakfı, accessed March 28, 2021, <http://www.Tonguvakfi.org.tr>.

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## Introduction

In the autumn of 1940, İsmail Hakkı Tonguç and his son Engin left Ankara, the capital city of Turkey, to supervise the building of a new school in the village of Savaştepe located in Western Turkey. In an unexpected turn of events, they missed their train to the village. The next train was in the morning, and there was no road or highway that could take them there. This was 1940s Turkey; villages were mostly underdeveloped and roads connecting urban and rural areas were almost non-existent. But Tonguç could not wait until next morning. He had to be in Savaştepe as the Director General of Primary Education to oversee the construction of the new school, part of the Ministry of Education's recent project to disseminate education to the villages. Tonguç thus went to talk to the chief officer of the station and learned that there was a freight train going to his destination. The officer explained that the train was not meant to carry humans and that it could be dangerous to get on board. Tonguç insisted. The officer then made him sign a paper declaring responsibility in case of an accident. When Tonguç and his son arrived at their destination, they were covered in coal dust, but they had made it to the village in time.<sup>2</sup>

This was one of the many memories that Engin recalled from the school visits he attended as a child with his father İsmail Hakkı Tonguç. One of the most influential educators of the early Turkish Republic, Tonguç worked in the Turkish Ministry of Education as the Director General of Primary Education from 1935 to 1946. As a show of gratitude for his continuous efforts to disseminate primary education to the villages of Turkey, his students often called him "Tonguç Baba" ("Father Tonguç") which is how he would be remembered by the public long after his death.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Engin Tonguç, "Engin Tonguç Köy Enstitülerini Anlatıyor," İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü, May 27, 2017, Youtube video, 48:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmB4s1nt3S8>.

<sup>3</sup> Firdevs Gümüsoğlu, "İsmail Hakkı Tonguç'un Mektupları ve Klasik Eğitime Karşı Özgürleştirici Eğitim," *MSGSÜ Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 1, no. 11 (2014): 135.

When Tonguç first entered the Ministry in 1935, the Turkish Republic was only twelve years old. Established on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, Turkey had inherited what Tonguç himself called a “black hell,” a sea of underdeveloped villages populated by poor and illiterate peasants.<sup>4</sup> Under the direction of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and first president of the Republic, Turkey started to rebuild itself along the lines of a modern secular nation-state, hoping to become part of the Western developed world. The principles of Republicanism, Nationalism, Secularism, Populism, Statism, and Reformism – which together constituted Kemalist ideology, named after Atatürk himself – became the pillars of the new state.<sup>5</sup> These principles were also adopted by the founding party of Turkey, the Republican People’s Party (RPP), the single ruling party in Turkey until 1946.<sup>6</sup> Characterized by authoritarian measures and top-down reforms, this period of one-party rule from 1923 to 1946 played a crucial role in establishing the foundations of the new Republic and disseminating Kemalist ideals, while eliminating opposition to the regime.<sup>7</sup>

Originally an arts and crafts instructor in teacher-training schools, Tonguç entered this political scene from a modest background with hopes of reforming education in his new position as the Director General of Primary Education. In its first decade, the Republic had launched a widespread literacy campaign to disseminate education, but these efforts had not yielded the desired results. In 1935, the year Tonguç entered the ministry, the literacy rate was around 20% and the number of schools and teachers still insufficient, especially in the villages where the majority of the population resided.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, existing schools provided graduates

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<sup>4</sup> İsmail H. Tonguç, *Canlandırılacak Köy* (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2020), 5. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>5</sup> For a brief overview of Kemalism and its principles, see: Mehmet Arisan, "Kemalism," in *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World*, ed. Peter N. Stearns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> In addition to the Republican People’s Party (RPP), two other parties were established between 1923 and 1946 – the Progressive Republican Party (1924-25) and the Free Republican Party (1930) – but they were both dissolved less than a year after their creation, making the RPP the de facto single party of this period.

<sup>7</sup> Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2005), 172.

<sup>8</sup> UNESCO, *Progress of Literacy in Various Countries: A Preliminary Statistical Study of Available Census Data Since 1900* (Paris: Firmin-Didot et Cie, 1953), 136.

with the skills to work in clerical jobs but not in agriculture or factories, a result of the focus on theoretical book-based learning above practical training.<sup>9</sup> Tonguç himself was an ardent critic of traditional book-based learning and was interested in progressive approaches to education that favored hands-on-experience and a child-centered approach. He read and took inspiration from leading progressive educators of the modern world, including Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in Switzerland, Georg Kerschensteiner in Germany, and John Dewey in the U.S., to formulate an educational vision of his own, which he believed would solve the educational problems of his time. His vision was based on a peculiar combination of work-life with school-life. Tonguç envisioned work and education as inseparable elements of a whole and believed that work should be integrated within schooling.

Tonguç's educational vision translated into practice with the design and implementation of Köy Enstitüleri (Village Institutes), a series of schools established in the 1940s in rural areas to train villagers to become teachers. Village Institutes not only aimed to bring a solution to the scarcity of teachers in villages and thereby reduce the educational gap between rural and urban areas, but they also equipped students with modern technical skills to prepare them to integrate the workforce. The institutes recruited village children who had successfully graduated from primary school and enrolled them in a five-year training program, which included academic training in disciplines like history and mathematics, artistic training in areas such as music and dancing, and finally practical training in fields like agriculture and construction. It was the innovative combination of these three types of training that made the project unique at a time when education only consisted of academic instruction in most schools in Turkey and elsewhere in the world. Graduates of these institutes would become teachers in turn and contribute to the

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<sup>9</sup> Fay Berkes Kirby, "The Village Institute Movement of Turkey: An Educational Mobilization for Social Change: A Report of a Type C Project" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 1960), 54.

development of their own villages. Many would also become renowned writers, poets, and musicians, creating what some scholars have called a generation of “peasant intellectuals.”<sup>10</sup>

Remembered as one of the greatest educational initiatives of the early Turkish Republic, the Village Institutes project created a gleam that even left its architect Tonguç in its shadow. This gleam, however, did not always come in the form of praise. The institutes were criticized, not only by politicians and intellectuals but also by villagers themselves, for a plethora of reasons ranging from encouraging communism to corrupting traditional moral values, from creating Kemalist partisans to exploiting students as workers. Ultimately, they were closed down in 1954, fourteen years after their official opening. The closure of Tonguç’s Village Institutes became a recurrent theme in Turkish history and memory, generating debates even today, more than sixty years after the incident. For example, the current Minister of Education, Ziya Selçuk, stated in a speech he gave in 2018 that “the Village Institutes should have continued.”<sup>11</sup>

Some scholars, such as historian Ali Arayıcı, attribute the closure of the institutes to the shifting international context after the end of the Second World War, arguing that accusations of communism and socialism – whether they were founded or not – were a stain that could prevent Turkey from joining the Western block and pushed the government to close the institutes down.<sup>12</sup> Other scholars – including Fay Kirby, Pakize Türkoğlu and Necdet Aysal – associate the institutes’ closure with internal political dynamics between the RPP and powerful rural landowners, who felt threatened by the prospect of villagers’ education.<sup>13</sup> Some landowners had moral-religious concerns, opposing the principle of secularism which was

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<sup>10</sup> Ali Arayıcı, “Village Institutes in Turkey,” *Prospects* 29, no. 2 (1999): 271-73.

<sup>11</sup> “Milli Eğitim Bakanı Ziya Selçuk: Köy Enstitüleri Devam Etmeliydi,” *T24*, November 5, 2018, <https://t24.com.tr/haber/milli-egitim-bakani-ziya-selcuk-koy-enstituleri-devam-etmeliydi,740239>.

<sup>12</sup> Arayıcı, “Village Institutes in Turkey,” 275.

<sup>13</sup> Kirby, “The Village Institute Movement of Turkey,” 674; Pakize Türkoğlu, *Tonguç ve Enstitüleri* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Kültür Sanat Yayıncılık, 1997), 491; Necdet Aysal, “Anadolu da Aydınlanma Hareketinin Doğuşu: Köy Enstitüleri,” *Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 9, no. 35 (2005): 279.

promoted in the institutes, other landowners feared losing their socio-economic power in the face of a group of empowered villagers. In fact, the institutes were closed down after the period of one-party rule, under a new government by the Democrat Party (DP), a right-wing party formed by previous RPP members, some of whom were landowners themselves.

While the scholarship chiefly emphasizes internal political rivalries between the RPP and the DP, several other scholars such as Asim Karaömerlioğlu and Mustafa Gündüz refute this interpretation. They maintain that there is no evidence of any substantial threat caused to landowners by the institutes and point out that, although the Village Institutes were officially closed in 1954 under the DP, they were officiously ended much earlier under the one-party rule of the RPP. Indeed, in 1946, significant changes were made into the structure of the institutes and Tonguç was forced to resign from his position in the ministry, effectively marking the beginning of the end of the Village Institutes. These scholars claim that, while the initial conception of the Village Institutes project aligned with the Kemalist educational program and received little opposition, their practical application yielded unexpected results that clashed with the regime's interests. They argue, for example, that Village Institutes challenged social hierarchies in the villages, created a disobedient type of student and increased peasant consciousness – all of which did not please the authoritarian Kemalist regime that wanted to keep certain social hierarchies in place.<sup>14</sup>

In arguing that the institutes produced unforeseen results, these scholars have assumed an inconsistency between the theoretical conception and the practical application of the Village Institutes. Yet, Tonguç's writings show that, from the very beginning, Village Institutes were designed to create conscious villagers capable of challenging existing social hierarchies. In other words, the Village Institutes did not turn out to be different than expected but were largely

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<sup>14</sup> Asim Karaömerlioğlu, "The Village Institutes Experience in Turkey," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 25, no. 1 (1998), 70; Mustafa Gündüz, "The Radical Transformations and Deep Continuities of a Decade: Turkish Educational Policy, 1938–1950," *Paedagogica Historica* 52, no. 3 (2016): 259.



what Tonguç always conceived them to be. A negligence, on the side of both contemporary scholars and Kemalist officials of the time, to pay close attention to Tonguç's ideas has led them to overlook the actual educational philosophy and social goals behind the Village Institutes. In the overwhelming majority of the literature, Village Institutes are described as a Kemalist educational project and Tonguç is depicted as an agent and an "personification" of the Kemalist regime.<sup>15</sup> In this thesis, I examine Tonguç's educational thinking to show that his understanding of education differed and, at specific points, even challenged the Kemalist regime's education program.

Chapter 1 aims to situate Tonguç in history and historiography. To that end, it examines the context in which Tonguç developed his ideas, that is, the period of transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. It argues that this context of change, characterized by new hopes and promises, shaped Tonguç's thinking by instilling in him a desire to transform society. In this section, the Kemalist education program is defined, based on Atatürk's speeches and examples of implemented policies in the first two decades of the Republic. Chapter 2 analyzes Tonguç's general approach to education. It argues that, while the Kemalist regime saw education as an economic tool in service of the state, Tonguç viewed it as a way to encourage individuals' self-realization. Finally, Chapter 3 examines Tonguç's vision for rural education. It argues that his aim to emancipate villagers through a bottom-up approach conflicted with the regime's top-down ways and objective to maintain the distinction between the ruling elite and the 'common' people.

By highlighting these differences, I wish to offer a new perspective on the closure of the Village Institutes, closed not because of international or political matters, but because their educational approach and objectives did not fully align with those of the regime. By demonstrating these differences, I also hope to complicate our understanding of Tonguç and his

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<sup>15</sup> Kirby, "The Village Institute Movement," 209. See Chapter 1 for further literature review.

educational thinking and to challenge the Kemalist framework under which he has been conventionally analyzed.

Two main issues in studying İsmail Hakkı Tonguç should be mentioned before going into further discussion. First, an essential part of what we know about Tonguç comes from the writings of his son and students who were strong proponents of his ideas. These sources should be analyzed with some level of skepticism, given the biases that naturally exist in all affective relationships. The second limit to researching Tonguç is his constant association with the Village Institutes. While many academic works have analyzed Tonguç in relation to his institutes, few have focused precisely on Tonguç and his ideas. While it is admittedly difficult to study Tonguç without mentioning the central educational design of his career, it should be remembered that, after all, Village Institutes were a government-led project that involved collective participation; they thus give a good but not a complete picture of Tonguç's ideas. In this thesis, I therefore use Tonguç's own writings, notably his books and letter exchanges, as my main primary sources in order to get a comprehensive and less biased view of his thinking. By studying Tonguç's ideas through his own works, I seek to come to a better understanding and appreciation of his distinct and original educational thinking.

## **Chapter 1:**

### **A Peasant, an Educator, a Bureaucrat: Tonguç's Life, Legacy and Memory**

There is perhaps no better way to understand Tonguç's ideas than to understand the reality in which he lived and which greatly shaped his thinking. Born in 1893 in a Tatar village in north-eastern Bulgaria, back then a part of the Ottoman Empire, Tonguç was the oldest child of a modest peasant family. He finished primary school in his village and moved to a nearby town for middle school. This is where he had the opportunity to experience urban life for the first time. Upon graduation from middle school in 1907, now aged fourteen, Tonguç went back to his village and supported his family by working in agriculture for several years.<sup>16</sup> The Ottoman Empire in which Tonguç was born was no longer the strong empire it used to be a few centuries ago. The sick man of Europe, as it was called throughout the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire had significantly weakened, had lost a considerable amount of its territory and had fallen far behind European powers in terms of military and technology. Discontent about political governance and demands for a constitutional government were on the rise, as well as Turkish nationalist sentiments in several elite circles, like the Young Turks. The latter were a political coalition of reform-minded groups who advocated for the replacement of absolute monarchy with a constitutional government. In 1908, they led a revolution against the sultan and established a constitutional government. Many members of the Young Turks movement, including Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, later also played important roles in the founding of the Turkish Republic.<sup>17</sup> 1908 was also the year Bulgaria obtained its legal independence from the Ottoman Empire, although it had been a de facto autonomous principality for some thirty years prior to that. Tonguç's family would live there for a few more years before eventually migrating to Anatolia.

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<sup>16</sup> Necati Cemaloğlu et al., "A Historical-Biographical Analysis of a Successful Educational Leader: İsmail Hakkı Tonguç," *History Studies* 12, no. 4 (2020): 1709.

<sup>17</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 71, 93.

Tonguç witnessed these critical changes from his village in Bulgaria until 1914, when he finally moved to Istanbul, at the age of twenty-one, to continue his studies and pursue a career. Soon after his arrival to Istanbul, Tonguç found the opportunity to meet the Minister of Education, Şükrü Bey, who enrolled him in a teacher-training school in the town of Kastamonu. After more than a year spent in Kastamonu, he got back into contact with the Minister of Education and transferred to another teacher-training school in Istanbul. Tonguç's move to Istanbul was a pivotal moment not only in his teaching career, but also in terms of his thinking. According to Turkish education experts Cemaloğlu and Duran, Tonguç's direct communication with the Minister of Education later inspired him to hold open lines of communication between the Village Institutes students and high-ranking state officials.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, Tonguç's stay in Istanbul coincided with the First World War. According to Işın, a Turkish writer who has studied Tonguç's biography, as Tonguç watched the Ottoman capital crumble, he started developing strong ideals about developing and modernizing society.<sup>19</sup>

Upon his graduation from the Istanbul Teacher School in 1918, Tonguç was sent by the Ministry of Education to Karlsruhe in Germany to study in yet another teacher-training school. As he saw the relatively more developed German villages, Tonguç became acutely aware of the underdeveloped state of Ottoman villages.<sup>20</sup> After the end of the war, Tonguç returned to Turkey in 1919 and became an Art and Crafts and Physical Education teacher in a teacher-training school in the town of Eskişehir. Meanwhile, the Turkish War of Independence against European occupiers had started in 1919. Tonguç's experience of the war was atypical. He did not fight on the front but rather continued teaching as per the decision of the revolutionary provisional government in Ankara. In the years 1921-22, Tonguç was sent back to Germany to study and then returned to Turkey to teach in the cities of Konya, Ankara, and Adana. He often

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<sup>18</sup> Cemaloğlu et al., "A Historical-Biographical Analysis," 1710.

<sup>19</sup> Ekrem Işın, Preface to *Canlandırılacak Köy*, by İsmail H. Tonguç ((İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2020), xiv.

<sup>20</sup> Cemaloğlu et al., "A Historical-Biographical Analysis," 1710.

moved from one place to another during this time because of the scarcity of teachers and the shifting context of the war.<sup>21</sup> The leaders of the independence movement emphasized the need for teachers like Tonguç to continue teaching because they believed that soldiers and teachers constituted the two fronts of the war, one fighting against occupiers and the other against ignorance. For example, in a speech given in April 1923 to an audience of teachers in the city of Kütahya, Atatürk stated that two armies were needed in order to establish a prosperous nation, “an army of soldiers to save lives” and “an army of knowledge to shape the future”.<sup>22</sup>

The victory in the War of Independence marked the end of the fight on the military front and a shift to the education front. Indeed, the collapse of the Ottoman Empire had been attributed, among other things, to the backward state of science and education. When the Turkish Republic was founded, the rate of literacy was only 8% in the country, not only well below that of developed Western nations to which Turkey looked up to – for example, 81% in France and 94% in the U.S. in 1920 – but also much lower than former Ottoman territories that had gained their independence in the previous century – for example 54% in Greece in 1920.<sup>23</sup> Well aware of the transformative potential of education, the Republic would thus pay particular attention to improving education, through which leaders hoped to build the nation-state. In 1925, in a speech made in the Men’s Teacher Training School in Izmir, Atatürk reiterated the importance of education in nation-building by declaring that “teachers are the sole and only saviors of nations.”<sup>24</sup>

The 1920s was a critical decade for the formulation of the Kemalist educational philosophy and policy. The regime’s educational philosophy, as well as Kemalist ideology in general, was largely based on Turkish sociologist Ziya Gökalp’s thinking, itself inspired by French Durkheimian sociology. The Gökalpian, and subsequently Kemalist, sociological

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1711.

<sup>22</sup> Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, *Atatürk’ün Söylev ve Demeçleri* (Ankara: Divan Yayıncılık, 2006), 167.

<sup>23</sup> UNESCO, *Progress of Literacy in Various Countries*, 136, 92, 150, 96.

<sup>24</sup> Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, *Atatürk’ün Söylev ve Demeçleri*, 243.

approach emphasized society over the individual. Instead of stressing individual rights, Gökalp emphasized social bonds among individuals and their duties toward society. He denied socialist interpretations of society as groups of people organized by class. Rather than as a class subject, he defined the people as an “authentic carrier of nationality,” the Turkish one.<sup>25</sup> In fact, a Turkish nationalist, Gökalp rejected Ottomanism and Islamism as the defining identity of the Ottoman Empire and instead advocated for the Turkification of the empire. Gökalp saw the Turkish nation as a homogenous entity, undifferentiated by race, religion and, as mentioned, class. As such, Gökalian thinking prioritized society, understood as the homogenous Turkish nation, over the individual. The Kemalist understanding of society adopted this framework and added a twist to it by emphasizing the primacy of the state, not society, over the individual. Under the Kemalist regime, there emerged an understanding of a state granting rights to individuals and individuals having obligations to the state rather than society. The individual and their education was viewed as a tool at the service of the nation-state.<sup>26</sup>

Accordingly, the education system was reformed in the 1920s with the goal of strengthening both the state as an administrative entity and the nation as a community. The 1924 Law of Unification of Education (*Tevhîd-i Tedrîsât Kanunu*) created a unified national education system and brought all schools under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. This law put an end to the co-existence of different types of schools for different communities, which was a practice during the Ottoman Empire. The Republican leaders believed that the lack of a centralized education system had produced individuals with different mindsets and had led to the emergence of all sorts of identities and nationalisms, eventually causing the break-down of the Ottoman Empire. The unification of the education system was thus a crucial policy for the creation of a strong nation-state. In addition to centralizing education into one institution,

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<sup>25</sup> Nuran Aytemur, "The Populism of the Village Institutes: A Contradictory Expression of Kemalist Populism" (PhD diss., Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi, 2007), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Taha Parla, *Türkiye 'de Siyasal Kültürün Resmî Kaynakları* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1991): 33-34.

the Law of Unification of Education also secularized it by prescribing the closure of religious schools (*medrese*) and the transition to co-education. Another major educational reform was the replacement of the Arabic script with the Latin one in 1928, an attempt to break away from the Ottoman past and to Westernize. The adoption of the Latin Alphabet was accompanied by a purge of the Turkish language from Arabic words, as well as a focus on Turkish history, culture and language in school curricula.<sup>27</sup>

The Republican leaders wanted to use education to strengthen the nation-state in not just political and cultural but also economic terms. They emphasized a practical and hands-on approach to education as a way to provide the people, notably the villagers, with modern technical skills, in areas like agriculture, construction or machinery, in order to boost the economy. In his 1922 parliamentary opening speech, Atatürk announced that:

In order to make the children of our nation useful and efficient components of social and economic life, our ministry's goal is to provide them the necessary basic knowledge in an applicable and practical style.<sup>28</sup>

Atatürk's words highlight a utilitarian approach to education as a tool for making children useful and efficient to the nation. Throughout the 1920s, the Turkish Republic invited foreign experts to advise the government on education policy. Among the visitors was John Dewey, American progressive education thinker known for promoting a practical and hands-on approach to education. In his 1924 report to the Turkish government, Dewey underlined the need for more practical and technical training instead of book learning, as well as a need to focus on the villages. Although Dewey's recommendations were in line with the regime's wish to focus on practical training, education throughout the 1920s remained heavily book-based.<sup>29</sup>

The 1920s were as critical to the formulation of Tonguç's educational thinking as they were to the Kemalist one. In 1925, Tonguç was once more sent to Europe by the

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<sup>27</sup> Ufuk Şimşek et al., "Cumhuriyet Dönemi Eğitim Politikalarının İdeolojik Temelleri," *International Periodical for the Languages, Literature and History of Turkish or Turkic* 7, no. 4 (2012): 2815.

<sup>28</sup> Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, *Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demeçleri*, 236.

<sup>29</sup> Arayıcı, "Village Institutes in Turkey," 269.

government to observe the functioning of schools in several countries, including France, Germany and England. On this trip, he made what was arguably the two most important acquaintances of his career, the concept of vocational education and its leading theorist Georg Kerschensteiner. Vocational education is a type of education that provides the necessary skills and knowledge to practice a specific occupation.<sup>30</sup> Vocational schools had been established throughout Europe, notably in Germany, in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to better prepare the youth for insertion in the labor market. Tonguç observed these schools during his trip and grew fond of their focus on practical, hands-on training revolving around work. He also had the opportunity to meet and discuss with Professor Kerschensteiner, who was a leading theorist and proponent of this type of education in Germany. Kerschensteiner emphasized the importance of practical activities and the role of work in developing students' character and civic virtue. The kind of vocational education he promoted emphasized on manual skills, as well as a broad knowledge base. Tonguç's exposure to Kerschensteiner and vocational education would profoundly shape his thinking about education.<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, upon his return to Turkey, Tonguç started thinking of ways to integrate work-based approaches into schools. In 1929, he began teaching in the Ankara Gazi Education Institute (*Gazi Eğitim Enstitüsü*), a higher education institution training leading school directors and educators of the country. There, he designed a "Work Class" ("İş Dersi") which extended across all departments of the school and provided practical training on different crafts. A few years later, in 1932, Tonguç created a new Arts and Crafts Department which was also inspired by hands-on practical training. In addition to his work at the Gazi Education Institute, Tonguç was writing extensively during this period. He wrote and translated several books on arts, crafts

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<sup>30</sup> For the sake of clarity, practical, technical and vocational education are three different concepts which are often practiced together. Practical education can refer to all forms of education that include hands-on or experiential approaches. Technical education refers to forms of education that teach a set of skills and knowledge specific to an area. Vocational education refers to forms of education that prepare for an occupation.

<sup>31</sup> Cemaloğlu et al., "A Historical-Biographical Analysis," 1711.



and education more generally. In 1933, he published *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi* (*Work and Vocational Education*) – analyzed in Chapter 2 of this thesis – in which he laid the foundations of his educational philosophy, inspired both by Dewey’s focus on hands-on experiential learning and Kerschensteiner’s focus on vocational education.<sup>32</sup>

Despite the growing recognition among educators of the time that practical training was better suited to the conditions of the modern era, practical training did not become the main focus of educational policies in Turkey until the mid-1930s. Rather, the focus throughout the 1920s was on literacy, that is, learning how to read and write. However, the inability to integrate practical education resulted in a pressing need for qualified labor across the country by the mid-1930s. Schools, which still practiced book-based learning, yielded graduates who did not have enough practical knowledge to work in modern industries. In other words, educational practice had not yet adapted itself to the needs of the new industrial and mechanized era. This, coupled with the deteriorating effects of the Great Depression on the Turkish economy, led the Kemalist regime to shift its focus on technical and vocational training, notably in the villages which were the center of agricultural production. The educational policies of the 1930s and 1940s thus aimed to train villagers in technical matters and for specific professions to enhance production.<sup>33</sup> For example, the 1935 RPP Party Program asserted that “the goal of education is to turn knowledge into a device that yields economic success for citizens.”<sup>34</sup> Similarly, the 1943 Party Program stated that “technical education is viewed as the most important concern of a powerful nation.”<sup>35</sup> In a 1939 meeting of the Ministry of Education, the education minister Hasan Ali Yücel also emphasized on this matter:

The fact that our nation has gradually entered the path of industrialization, that machines have acquired an increasingly important role in the general life of the country and that economic life has taken a whole new structure indicate that there is an imperative need

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 1711-12.

<sup>33</sup> Karaömerlioğlu, “The Village Institutes Experience,” 54-57.

<sup>34</sup> Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, *C.H.P. Programı* (Ankara: Ulus Basımevi, 1935): 34.

<sup>35</sup> Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, *C.H.P. Programı* (Ankara: Ulus Basımevi, 1943): 7.

for our citizens to go through vocational and technical training. [...] Vocational schools will prove effective in accelerating industrial and economic growth.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, the RPP party programs and the minister's words indicate an aim to use vocational and technical education as tools to benefit the economic development of the nation.

Efforts to disseminate education to the villages were not just motivated by economic but also political reasons. According to modern Turkish historian Asim Karaomerlioglu, the 1930s were marked by attempts to broaden the mass base of the political regime throughout the country. The Kemalist Revolution had not yet reached "the hearts and minds of the people" in the villages. The new education policies aimed to do so by creating Kemalist loyalties.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the 1943 meeting of the Ministry of Education concluded that there was an increasing need for moral education. The first "moral rule" to be taught at schools was: "to be useful to the Turkish nation means not to hold back from any form of self-sacrifice." The goal of education as defined in this meeting was "to establish good discipline and to teach students obedience."<sup>38</sup> What was called "moral" education was in fact a nationalist education – historians like Erik Zürcher have even called it "indoctrination."<sup>39</sup>

When Tonguç entered the Ministry of Education in 1935, he was very much aware of the need to incorporate practical training into school curricula. Now aged forty-two, his educational thinking had fully matured and, as Director General of Primary Education, he could finally implement it. Upon his appointment, Tonguç wrote a comprehensive report on the state of primary education in Turkey. This report observed that more than 80% of the Turkish population lived in villages and concluded that there was a need to focus on the villages to disseminate primary education. There was, however, an insufficient number of teachers across the country and the existing ones were concentrated in the cities. Tonguç therefore decided that

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<sup>36</sup> T.C. Maarif Vekilliği, *Birinci Maarif Şûrası* (Ankara: T.C. Maarif Vekilliği, 1939): 17.

<sup>37</sup> Karaomerlioglu, "The Village Institutes Experience," 48.

<sup>38</sup> T.C. Maarif Vekilliği, *İkinci Maarif Şûrası* (Ankara: T.C. Maarif Vekilliği, 1943): 6, 107.

<sup>39</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 182.

the best solution would be to train villagers themselves to become teachers. This would not only provide the villagers with teachers but would also ensure that these teachers knew the local culture.<sup>40</sup> As such, from 1936 to 1940, Tonguç directed a project called “Teacher Courses” (“Eğitmen Kursları”), pilot teacher schools located in villages which would set a precedent for the Village Institutes. The success of these pilot schools ultimately led to the creation of the Village Institutes in 1940. In line with Tonguç’s educational thinking, the Village Institutes gave particular importance to practical and technical training in different fields, like gardening, technical crops, zoology, animal husbandry, bee-keeping, silkworm breeding, fishing or handicrafts. In the next six years, he worked on developing and improving the Village Institutes. According to Pakize Türkoğlu, Turkish writer and graduate of the Aksu and Hasanoğlan Village Institutes, between the years 1936-1946, “[Tonguç’s] Sundays and holidays, days and nights, bread and cigarette, love, dreams – if he could sleep at all to dream – were each filled with the Village Institutes.”<sup>41</sup> Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, a former teacher at the Hasanoğlan Village Institute, described Tonguç’s commitment to the institutes with a short anecdote:

I remember a night during which I slept in the same room as him [Tonguç]. It was around the time of the foundation of the Hasanoğlan Village Institute. In the middle of the night, I woke up and saw a small red light blinking in the dark. Was it a star, a fire or a firefly? Once my drowsiness went away, I realized that it was Tonguç smoking a cigarette. I watched silently. I sensed such worry, longing and anger in this ceaselessly blinking light. Perhaps, that night, another Institute was conceived. I fell asleep while I was thinking. When I woke up at sunrise, I learnt that Tonguç had already left for Ankara.<sup>42</sup>

While he was working on the Village Institutes, Tonguç wrote three books, two of which will be analyzed in the Chapter 3 of this thesis – *Canlandırılacak Köy (Village to Revive)* published in 1939 on how to revive the village through education, and *İlköğretim Kavramı (The Concept of Primary Education)* published in 1946 on his conception of primary education.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Cemaloğlu et al., “A Historical-Biographical Analysis,” 1712.

<sup>41</sup> Türkoğlu, *Tonguç ve Enstitüleri*, 563.

<sup>42</sup> Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, *Köy Enstitüleri Üzerine* (Istanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 1979), quoted in Türkoğlu, *Tonguç ve Enstitüleri*, 563.

<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to get access to the third book he wrote during this period: *Köyde Eğitim (Education in the Village)* published in 1938.

In 1946, Tongu was dismissed from his position at the Directorate of Primary Education due to controversies surrounding the institutes, as mentioned in the introduction. He was appointed as a member of the Board of Education and Discipline, a consultation body directly affiliated to the Minister, but lost much of his influence on policy-making. In 1949, he returned back to teaching Arts and Crafts and retired in 1954. In the last years of his life, Tongu continued thinking and writing about education. He traveled around Turkey and Europe, visiting and examining schools restlessly. In 1956, he published *Pestalozzi ocuklar Ky (Pestalozzi Children's Village)* in which he wrote about his observations of a progressive school in Switzerland named after the founding father of progressive education, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi – this book will also be discussed in Chapter 3. Days before his death, ten to be exact, Tongu visited the closed Hasanođlan Village Institute one last time to reminisce about old days. Eight days before his death, he wrote thirteen points about primary education that he believed should be included in the constitution. He died in Ankara in June 1960, at the age of sixty-seven.

What is left of this man who devoted so much of his life to education? How is he remembered and depicted? A survey of the literature on Tongu shows that he has been almost exclusively examined in two ways, in relation to the Village Institutes and in the framework of the Kemalist regime.<sup>44</sup> One of the earliest and most authoritative academic works on the Village Institutes is a comprehensive 900-pages dissertation written by Professor Fay Berkes Kirby at Teachers' College, Columbia University in 1960. Kirby describes the Village Institutes as a “Kemalist educational formulation” and presents Tongu as “the symbol” and “the very personification of the spirit of the Kemalist Revolution.” According to Kirby, Tongu was “the man of the ideological regime” and “reflected the type of ‘modern man’ that it was the purpose

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<sup>44</sup> The only exception I have come across and which deserves a mention is: Sekin zsoy, “A Utopian Educator from Turkey: İsmail Hakkı Tongu (1893-1960),” *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 7, no. 2 (November 2009): 250-78.

of the Kemalist Revolution to create.”<sup>45</sup> Following Kirby, many scholars also argued that Tonguç was indeed a Kemalist agent, the “Trojan Horse of Kemalism in the village”, a “Republican enlightened intellectual” and a man “who tried to bring about the type of person needed by the Republic through education.”<sup>46</sup>

The majority of the literature, however, only goes as far as recognizing Tonguç as the “founder”, “architect”, “theoretician” and “man” behind the project.<sup>47</sup> More often than not, Tonguç only constitutes a subpart in sources that entirely talk about the Village Institutes, including Kirby’s dissertation. In most sources, it is the description of the Village Institutes, instead of his educational ideas, that define Tonguç. The Village Institutes are described as a “movement for Republican enlightenment in the villages”, a movement that “carried the Republican project and philosophy to the folk,” and “spread Kemalism to the masses” with the purpose of “continuing the Atatürk Revolution” and strengthening “state control in the villages.”<sup>48</sup> As the founder of the Village Institute, Tonguç is thus viewed as the implementer of the Kemalist education program in the villages. The scholarship’s focus on the institutes has eclipsed Tonguç’s representation. This is perhaps both a blessing and a curse for Tonguç’s memory. On the one hand, it is a blessing because Tonguç was a pragmatic man who valued creation more than ideas and who, described as “modest in the extreme,” always wished to remain in the background, to be anonymous.<sup>49</sup> In this regard, his wish was certainly granted. On the other hand, Tonguç’s absence from the scene has led to a lack of understanding of his

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<sup>45</sup> Kirby, “The Village Institute Movement,” 203, 207, 209, 207, 210.

<sup>46</sup> Özsoy, “A Utopian Educator from Turkey,” 261; Hacer Çelik, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi Sosyo-Kültürel Değişim Üzerinde Türk Aydınının Etkisi: İsmail Hakkı Tonguç Örneği,” *Uludağ Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 11, no. 18 (2010): 116; Funda Demirel, “John Dewey ve İsmail Hakkı Tonguç’un Düşüncelerine Göre İnsan Doğasının Eğitimle İlişkilendirilmesi,” *Ankara Üniversitesi Eğitim Bilimleri Fakültesi Dergisi* 52, no. 3 (2019): 977.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Erol Kapluhan, “Atatürk Dönemi Eğitim Seferberliği ve Köy Enstitüleri,” *Marmara Coğrafya Dergisi*, no.26 (2013): 181.

<sup>48</sup> Kapluhan, “Atatürk Dönemi Eğitim Seferberliği,” 172; Çelik, “Cumhuriyet Dönemi,” 111; Gündüz, “Radical Transformations,” 258; Aysal, “Anadolu da Aydınlanma,” 281; Karaömerlioğlu, “The Village Institutes Experience,” 48.

<sup>49</sup> Kirby, “The Village Institute Movement,” 209.

ideas. The intellectual work behind the creation of the Village Institutes has been overlooked in favor of political discussions. Tonguç's political role as a Kemalist bureaucrat has outshined his intellectual contributions as an educator.

It is not difficult to see why Tonguç has been repeatedly analyzed under the Kemalist framework. After all, his Village Institutes seemed to perfectly fulfil the educational needs and objectives of the time. A teacher training institution focused on the villages and providing villagers with practical skills. Is this not what the Kemalist regime exactly wanted? Moreover, as far as his writings go, Tonguç seemed to truly agree with Kemalist principles. He promoted the principles of Nationalism, Secularism, Populism, Republicanism, Statism, Reformism in almost all of his books. A Turkish nationalist, he wrote, for example, that the “[Ottoman] palace was filled with people who did not come from a Turkish lineage.”<sup>50</sup> He also agreed and even applauded many of the reforms made in education in the 1920s, such as the adoption of the Latin alphabet which he believed was “much easier to read and write.”<sup>51</sup>

Despite how fitting the Kemalist framework appears to be to describe Tonguç, it also seems meaningless. During the one-party regime under which Tonguç operated, adherence to Kemalist principles was a prerequisite of participating in politics. Unless state officials were Kemalists – or appeared that way – they would not be able to have influential positions within the body of the state.<sup>52</sup> In that sense, almost all state officials of the one-party era can, by nature, be described as Kemalist. Furthermore, Kirby mentions how Tonguç used Kemalism as a sort of legitimization device to put his educational project into practice:

For a conception to succeed practically it had to have extra-personal legitimisation. For Tonguç, that legitimisation would be the six Kemalist principles as it was inconceivable to his that the day might come when the validity of these would be challenged again politically. Whatever was done would be tested and accepted on the grounds that it was in conformity with the separate and mutual implications of the six principles.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Tonguç, *Canlandırılacak Köy*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> İsmail H. Tonguç, *İlköğretim Kavramı* (Ankara: Piramit Yayıncılık, 2004), 255.

<sup>52</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 176.

<sup>53</sup> Kirby, “The Village Institute Movement,” 237.

Tonguç's son, Engin Tonguç, also argues that his father at times used what he calls "tactical Kemalism" to convince state officials of his project.<sup>54</sup> Whether Tonguç truly believed in Kemalist principles or used them strategically will be resolved in the last chapter of the thesis, but a series of anecdotes told by his students and son suggest that Tonguç was indeed different than his Kemalist colleagues.

His son Engin recalls that Tonguç did not always get along with the officials of the Kemalist regime. During his routine visits to the institutes, like the one to the Savaştepe Village Institute, it was not the difficulty of getting to the villages through underdeveloped roads that made Tonguç uncomfortable, but rather his relations with Kemalist bureaucrats of the villages. At lunchtime during his visits, when he was invited to go out to eat with the village officials, he went reluctantly. He would much rather sit near a small fountain in the village, have bread and cheese, and chat with the villagers. The state officials were apparently equally repulsed by Tonguç. They expected a typical Kemalist senior state official with formal attire and refined manners but instead were met with a man who did not care much about dress or formalities.<sup>55</sup> His son also mentions that Tonguç did not want a radio installed in his house arguing that "If ordinary people do not have it, why should I?"<sup>56</sup> These anecdotes perhaps suggest that Tonguç saw himself as part of the 'common' people, more than as part of the Kemalist elite. Indeed, during his time at the ministry, his colleagues called Tonguç "peasant Ismail" to distinguish him from another officer who had the same name. One of his students recalled Tonguç as follows:

It is then that I understood that his [Tonguç's] cause was not just to create an educational institution. [...] That night, I heard the voice of a revolutionary in his speech. After all, teachers and administrators came from a tradition. Tonguç was demolishing this tradition, passionately criticizing and undermining it. The next morning, before students started working, they danced. At that moment, rain started to pour. Children's clothes

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<sup>54</sup> Engin Tonguç, *Bir Eğitim Devrimcisi İsmail Hakkı Tonguç: Yaşamı, Öğretisi, Eylemi* (İzmir: Yeni Kuşak Köy Enstitüleri Derneği Yayınları, 2009), 207-208.

<sup>55</sup> İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü. "Engin Tonguç Köy Enstitülerini Anlatıyor." *Youtube* video, 48:37. May 27, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wmb4s1nt3S8>

<sup>56</sup> Engin Tonguç, "Engin Tonguç Köy Enstitülerini Anlatıyor."

were getting wet. But Tongu did not move an inch. He stood under the Anatolian rain as if he was standing under the Anatolian sun, just like a peasant.<sup>57</sup>

The next chapters will show that the difference between Tongu and the Kemalist regime was visible not just in dress or manner, but also in ideas.

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<sup>57</sup> Ceyhun A. Kansu, *Cumhuriyet Bayrağı Altında* (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1998), 180-182, quoted in E. Tongu, *Bir Eđitim Devrimcisi*, 307-8.



## Chapter 2:

### **An Original Approach: Education, Work and Self-Realization**

The great majority of Tonguç's ideas about education can be found in his first original work, *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi* published in 1933, a few years before his entry into the ministry. In this book, after carefully examining the emergence of the modern economic system and establishing the connection between the concepts of work and education, Tonguç proposes a new form of work-based education as an alternative to book-based education. Kirby calls this book "a notebook of creative mind in foment" and "the founding document from which not only the motto but also the core practices of the Village Institutes derived."<sup>58</sup> Although the book provides a detailed picture of Tonguç's educational thinking, it does not present a systemized and elaborate theory of education. In fact, none of Tonguç's books do. This is because, as mentioned, Tonguç was a man of action over words. He trusted practice more than he trusted theory and believed that it is only through real-life experiments that ideas acquire value. He often criticized intellectuals, including the Republican intelligentsia, for getting caught up in theory and never transforming any of their ideas into practice – a topic to which we will return in more detail in Chapter 3. As such, he preferred not to spend time writing a complex, elaborate theory of education, but rather to spend time turning his ideas into reality, most notably through the Village Institutes project.

Tonguç's pragmatic approach to his work was echoed in his approach to education. Education, he believed, should reflect and respond to reality. Schools should be a microcosm of society, a place where students get acquainted with real-world issues and acquire practical skills.<sup>59</sup> Because he took his inspiration from a series of educators – such as Pestalozzi, Kerschensteiner, and Dewey – who were classified as part of the progressive education

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<sup>58</sup> Kirby, "The Village Institute Movement," 220.

<sup>59</sup> İsmail H. Tonguç, *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi* (Ankara: TÖB-DER Yayınları, 1974), 28.

movement, Tonguç has been closely associated with the latter. While progressive education (also known as new education) does not have a clear definition, it is often used as an umbrella term for pedagogical movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which opposed traditional schooling and put the child at the center of education.<sup>60</sup> Although there are different views within the movement, its advocates all believed that “children learned best not through books but through sensory experience and contact with real objects.”<sup>61</sup> If limited to this definition, Tonguç can loosely be placed within the progressive education movement as he, too, strongly opposed traditional education, which he called “bookish” and argued did nothing but “polish the child with information.” Indeed, he claimed that “the thing given to children under the banner of education is just a thousand-pages of lecture information.” For Tonguç, traditional education was a “remnant of the Middle Ages” and “an institution marching towards illness and death” which had to be replaced.<sup>62</sup> While Tonguç’s rejection of traditional education made him a progressive educator, such a classification would also be misleading given how much his thinking diverged from those progressive educators who had initially inspired him. His divergence from other educators was apparent not in his opposition to traditional education but rather in the alternative he proposed to it. This section will demonstrate how Tonguç’s educational approach represented a break with not only existing concepts of progressive education but also the Kemalist education program, described in Chapter 1.

Perhaps the most important element in all of Tonguç’s educational thinking is the concept of *work*. This might sound like an odd association for us, contemporary readers, whose lives are marked by the separation between work-life and school-life and for whom education can seem disconnected from work or real-life in general. It is this disconnection that Tonguç

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<sup>60</sup> Traditional Education refers to a teacher-centered form of education based on long-established practices such as memorization or rote-learning.

<sup>61</sup> William J. Reese, “The Origins of Progressive Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (2001): 16.

<sup>62</sup> Tonguç, *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, 162, 163.

wanted to avoid above all. Thus, to understand Tonguç's educational philosophy means to understand his particular conception of work and how it relates to education. Tonguç defines work as "an effort that every person has to make to sustain their existence." This definition of work has two implications. First, it implies that work cannot be limited to a job or a profession for Tonguç. While he recognizes that in the modern world, the word work has become increasingly associated with working at a job, Tonguç holds that any type of effort that produces output, whether monetary, mechanical, physical, intellectual, or social, can be viewed as work. In fact, in its simplest definition, the word work in Turkish, *iş*, means 'something that is done' or 'something to do.' Then, in order to understand Tonguç's ideas, it might be appropriate to think about work simply as an act of doing throughout the rest of this thesis. Second, Tonguç's definition of work implies that work is an integral part of living; without it, human existence cannot be sustained. What Tonguç understands by this is not just mere subsistence, but also the importance of work for happiness, self-development and social prosperity. In other words, work is such a constitutive part of existence that, for Tonguç, to be is to do.<sup>63</sup>

Since Tonguç views work as a central part of life, any type of education that excludes doing work is ultimately detached from reality for him. This is why he advocates for "work education," a form of education that focuses on teaching and learning "*while* doing work." According to him, this type of education provides the individual with "practical skills that prove necessary in life" and with "useful knowledge that helps them sustain their living." He does not clearly state what exactly he means by practical skills and useful knowledge because, according to him, these cannot be pre-determined; they depend on the time and place in question. Tonguç argues that work-education is not only better suited to the realities of life but also more beneficial than traditional book education in pedagogical terms. He points out that the modern "mechanized and rationalized economic system of work has obscured the educational value of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 18, 15, 30, 9.

work” and the role it plays in individuals’ “personal development.” According to Tonguç, work-education encourages personal development by pushing students to be “active” and to create something on their own, as opposed to traditional book education which encourages students to passively receive information. The ultimate purpose of work-education, says Tonguç, is to “awaken students’ inner and physical individuality,” and make them active agents who can engage in activities on their own.<sup>64</sup>

On the surface, Tonguç’s work education seems to draw from several concepts of progressive education such as experiential education, hands-on-learning, or learning-by-doing – all referring to methods of education based on interacting with the surrounding environment and performing an activity. Yet, a closer look indicates that Tonguç’s conception strikingly differs from existent ones, perhaps by one-word only: Tonguç does not promote learning-*by*-doing, but rather learning-*while*-doing. In the first, the primary goal is learning; doing is a pedagogical tool used to enhance learning. In the second, learning and doing occur simultaneously; doing is not a mere means but a goal in itself. Thus, whereas doing is as important as learning in learning-*while*-doing, it is only of secondary importance in learning-*by*-doing. The question of which of the two, learning-*while*-doing or learning-*by*-doing, is preferable is not so relevant to this thesis as what the comparison of the two implies. Learning-*by*-doing is an innovative pedagogical approach that effectively puts doing in the service of learning and so entails a reform in the traditional education system which often excludes experience and practice. By contrast, learning-*while*-doing gives learning and doing equal footing in education and thus requires a complete shift in the way education is ordinarily perceived as a mere process of learning; it entails a complete change, one might say revolution, of the education system. In fact, in one of his later books on primary education, Tonguç states that despite the addition of technical and practical classes to school curricula, the current school

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<sup>64</sup> Tonguç, *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, 15, 28.

“remains what it was when it was first conceived, that is, just a place of learning.”<sup>65</sup> By contrast, Tonguç envisions schools as places of doing as much as learning.

The principle of learning-*while*-doing expressed in Tonguç’s 1933 book later seems to have taken life in the Village Institutes and can help us better picture the concept. One Turkish educator, who also served as headmaster for a Village Institute, explained the difference between learning-*by*-doing and learning-*while*-doing through the example of building a brick wall.<sup>66</sup> In learning-*by*-doing, a brick wall is constructed for the sake of learning (for example about construction, geometry, or architecture) and can be dismantled after its construction. By contrast, in learning-*while*-doing that is practiced in the institutes, the brick wall is constructed for the double purpose of learning and doing, and it is not dismantled. Learning-*while*-doing thus implies a process of actual creation, production. This example of manual work can be extended to artistic, intellectual, or any other type of work done in the institutes. When students of the Village Institutes made music or wrote a story, the aim was not just to learn but also to create. It is this unique association between education and creation that led the Village Institutes to be named institutes instead of simply schools. It is also this very concept of creation or production that differentiates Tonguç’s approach from other progressive education approaches that view work as mere practical training and not production.

The element of creation or production in Tonguç’s conception of education also reflected the urgent needs of the time. As explained, the newly found Turkish Republic lacked the resources to build schools throughout the country. Thus, Tonguç came up with the solution of having students and teachers build their own school infrastructure and learn *while* building it. The principle of learning-*while*-doing work has led certain scholars to describe the institutes as places of economic production and students as workers.<sup>67</sup> Tonguç addresses this criticism in

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<sup>65</sup> Tonguç, *İlköğretim Kavramı*, 291.

<sup>66</sup> Şerif Tekben, quoted in Aytemur, “The Populism of the Village Institutes,” 125.

<sup>67</sup> Kirby, “The Village Institute Movement,” 890.

his writings. He argues that one of the biggest threats against work education is misinterpreting it as a form of education based on manual work.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, in a general meeting of the Ministry of Education in 1946, Tonguç strongly opposes a proposal to put teachers of the institutes under the supervision of the Ministry of Agriculture. “This task”, he argues, “should not be given to an entity that does not know anything about pedagogy. This could lead to the use of inappropriate pedagogical methods, like abuse and beating.”<sup>69</sup> As such, for Tonguç, the institutes do have an economic function which respond to the needs of the time, but they cannot be reduced to mere economic institutions.

Tonguç’s concept of work education is inspired by what he calls “life education” or “education through the ways of life” practiced in pre-modern societies. He explains that in pre-modern societies, where most people did not go to school, work along with family were the only institutions of education; children simply learned by working throughout their life. For example, he talks about medieval guilds in which the master craftsman would be both teacher and boss to the young apprentice. According to Tonguç, this system allowed these societies to raise children who were in tune with reality and educated according to the needs of the time and place. However, in today’s modern world, says Tonguç, this organization is no longer possible since occupations are professionalized, meaning they require specialized and formal training, and ‘life’ can no longer naturally teach children the skills they need to integrate the economy.<sup>70</sup> This leads Tonguç to advocate for work education that takes the form of vocational education, a type of education that prepares the child for an occupation. Tonguç promotes vocational education not because it is the ideal realization of work education, but because it is the most suited to reality according to him. If work education is Tonguç’s general philosophy

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<sup>68</sup> Tonguç, *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, 40.

<sup>69</sup> T.C. Maarif Vekilliği, *Üçüncü Maarif Şurası* (Ankara: T.C. Maarif Vekilliği, 1946): 173.

<sup>70</sup> Tonguç, *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, 18, 114.

of education, vocational education is its adaptation to the modern world of professionalized occupations. Vocational education is only the “next best thing to life education” for Tonguç.<sup>71</sup>

Although Tonguç’s emphasis on vocational education seems to align with the regime’s emphasis on vocational schools, his conception of vocational education goes beyond simple vocational training. Rather than training for a specific occupation, Tonguç views vocational education as a way for students to explore different occupational possibilities. Too often, he writes, young people find themselves in occupations that they have not chosen and have been “forced to become whatever destiny and nature dictated them to be.” The purpose of vocational education is to change this, so as to help the youth find a life vocation that is truly in harmony with their natural abilities and interests. To that end, children need to get familiarized with different occupational possibilities and experiment with different activities before choosing a life vocation. Thus, schools should not train students to master the skills of a particular occupation, but rather allow them to explore different options to find the one that suits their natural abilities and interests best.<sup>72</sup> Beyond attainment of a set of skills or placement in the labor market, vocational education for Tonguç is about choice and creating harmony between the individual and their life vocation. It is, therefore, more appropriate to talk about vocational exploration rather than vocational training to describe Tonguç’s conception of vocational education. The ultimate purpose of this education is, as Kirby finely puts it, “to help each individual find that combination of profession and vocational pursuits which would afford maximal self-realization within a societal context.”<sup>73</sup>

In Tonguç’s conception of vocational education, teachers should play a supportive rather than a central role. Their role is to observe students, track their interests and abilities and guide them to make the best vocational choice. In his book *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, Tonguç

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<sup>71</sup> Kirby, “The Village Institute Movement,” 224.

<sup>72</sup> Tonguç, *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, 126, 113.

<sup>73</sup> Kirby, “The Village Institute Movement,” 225.

includes a sample table of how teachers are expected to track students' interests and abilities. Categories include "general interests," "special talents," "intellectual curiosities," "memory," "attentiveness," "adaptation" and more. The teacher's role as a guide rather than an instructor in Tonguç's thinking thus stands in contrast to the Kemalist regime's emphasis on the preeminent role of teachers in nation-building. According to Tonguç, a teacher's duty is to "awaken and feed students' interests" more than to instill knowledge. He believes that teachers can help, assist and guide students but that learning itself can only be done by the student. For Tonguç, "all education is ultimately about self-education", that is, educating oneself on one's own. Indeed, in *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, he defines education in one single sentence as "the process of formation of the self by oneself."<sup>74</sup> Teachers thus play an important yet only an auxiliary role in this process. Tonguç's definition of education indicates a child-centered, rather than a teacher-centered or book-centered, approach to education. Above all, this definition reveals Tonguç's belief in children's agency, their capacity to learn, decide, and act on their own. Kirby actually explains Tonguç's conception of vocational education in terms of "vocational guidance" from the point of view of the teacher and their guiding role in the process; I prefer to describe it as "vocational exploration" from the point of the student, given the agency Tonguç assigns to students in the learning process. This type of education can perhaps be compared to contemporary career counseling offered at schools. Only in Tonguç's world, career counseling is an integral rather than a supplementary part of schooling, and it has a practical dimension that enables students to experience different 'careers' instead of having them answer career-aptitude questionnaires.

Vocational exploration seems to be practiced to some extent in the Village Institutes, although not necessarily in the way Tonguç initially conceived it. After all, the institutes were designed with the ultimate purpose of training teachers, which defeats the purpose of vocational

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<sup>74</sup> Tonguç, *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, 38, 131, 37, 31.



exploration. However, students were not just trained in teaching but were offered a variety of activities, ranging from agriculture to theater-play, in order to experiment with different fields and acquire different skills. By the end of the course, if a student was found to be fit for teaching, they would become teachers. Those who did not were oriented to another field that suited them better.<sup>75</sup> The idea of re-orienting those unfit for the occupation of teaching perhaps indicated some attention to individuals' needs and abilities. Regardless, the idea of choice present in Tonguç's conception of vocational education was only partially translated in the Village Institutes because the priority was to raise teachers. These teachers, in their turn, would perhaps guide their own students to a truly freely chosen vocation someday.

Moreover, Tonguç's emphasis on the individual is another breaking point from Kemalist educational thinking. As discussed, Tonguç sees vocational education not just as mere preparation for an occupation, but as a way for the individual to explore their interests and abilities and make an informed choice about their life vocation. To create harmony between the individual and their vocation is thus a key concern for Tonguç. Moreover, by conceiving teachers as guides, Tonguç accords each individual the possibility and agency to shape their own education. This focus on the individual contradicts the Kemalist understanding of education which, as mentioned, is based on a solidarist approach that prioritizes the nation, defined as a homogenous unity, over the individual. Tonguç's concern with the individual and their inner well-being, therefore, represents a break from Kemalist educational thinking.

However, this does not mean that Tonguç does not think about the nation and the society at large in his approach to education. In line with his pragmatism, Tonguç believes that individuals had to be considered in their social environment, not independently of society. In the same way that he wants to create harmony between individuals and their vocations, he also wants to create harmony between individuals and the society they live in. In fact, he believes

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<sup>75</sup> Arayıcı, "Village Institutes in Turkey," 271.

that a society's ability to help its individuals find a vocation that suits their nature is correlated with that society's achievement of high-culture and prosperity. In other words, to find a suitable vocation for the individual is not just beneficial for the individual in question, but also for society because individuals who are interested in and capable at what they do naturally contribute to social well-being. Following this, Tonguç concludes that the purpose of education is to create a meaningful "interaction between the individual and society." Hence, Tonguç challenges the Kemalist prioritization of society, as a single unity, over the individual, not by prioritizing the individual over society, but rather by underlining their interdependence.<sup>76</sup>

There remains another fundamental difference between the regime's understanding of vocational education and that of Tonguç. For Tonguç, vocational education is not separate from general education. General and vocational schools have to be one and the same, not two different types of institutions as they are conceived to be in Kemalist policies. Increasing the number of vocational schools as a separate unit from general schools is not how Tonguç imagined education would improve. "According to certain views", writes Tonguç, "education is divided into vocational and general" but "in actual and real life, there is no such distinction." In saying that there is no distinction between vocational and general schools, Tonguç does not mean that schools should only provide practical education to be used in real life and let go of the common knowledge and theoretical education often provided in general schools. Instead, vocational education should absorb general education and offer both practical and theoretical, general and specialized courses. This is in line with Tonguç's definition of work as an activity that can encompass all fields, from the physical to the intellectual. Indeed, Village Institutes embodied this combination of general and vocational education by offering students both general knowledge classes like Mathematics and History, and specialized classes like silkworm breeding and technical crops. Theory and practice, intellectual and physical, general and

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<sup>76</sup> Tonguç, *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, 113, 31.

specialized, individual and society, work and school; these do not exist as separate categories for Tonguç because, in real life, there are no such categorizations. One necessarily involves the other and it is through their combination, rather than separation, that education best emulates life.<sup>77</sup>

Tonguç emphasizes the need to complement practice with general knowledge not just because it is the best emulation of life, but also because he views knowledge as power and believes that the achievement of knowledge can be liberating. Tonguç explains that “it is through knowledge that individuals are able to think and act by themselves and solve their own problems.” For example, he argues that it is only through the combination of practical and theoretical knowledge that a “craftsman” becomes an “enlightened craftsman,” that is, a craftsman who can think and act on their own. In other words, knowledge allows individuals a degree of independence and autonomy. In particular, Tonguç emphasizes the need to teach students the general structure of the economy, including the functioning of banks, trade relations, trade agreements, socio-economic policy, insurance coverage, and labor unions. According to Tonguç, teaching these economic concepts is crucial because it allows individuals – especially groups who have long been denied rights, like peasants – to know their rights and protect their economic assets. Thus, according to Tonguç, the achievement of knowledge about the structure of the modern economy becomes a potential tool of liberation or emancipation from oppression.<sup>78</sup>

Indeed, the very conception of Tonguç’s vocational exploration is motivated by a desire to end forms of oppression. As discussed, Tonguç argues that individuals, especially peasants, often do not choose their own vocations. By not choosing their vocation, peasants become prisoners of their destiny and nature. Although Tonguç never really clarifies what he means by destiny, it can be implied that he understands it as the usual course of life that peasants have

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 121, 34.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 114, 115, 116.

been passively and unconsciously following for centuries as a socially oppressed group. Similarly, his reference to nature can be understood in the context of Turkey's delayed industrialization as the peasants' inability to control nature through modern tools. Tonguç believes that it is the very tools of traditional education that make people captives by teaching them abstract knowledge that cannot be turned into action – for example, teaching the industrialization process but not how to use industrial tools. For Tonguç, the purpose of spreading work and vocational education in the villages is thus to create people who are not “prisoners” of nature and destiny, but rather “sovereigns.” With this very idea, Tonguç lays the foundations of his thinking about rural education and its potential to promote social emancipation. His concern about social, economic, and political injustice will become all the more visible in his subsequent writings, which will be analyzed in the next chapter.<sup>79</sup>

Hence, as this section demonstrates, work and vocational education carry more than a mere economic function for Tonguç. While his conception of education is undoubtedly in accordance with the economic realities of the time, it is not solely motivated by economic reasons. In conceiving work and vocational education, Tonguç also accounts for the mental and social well-being of the individual. When viewed in close detail, it is thus clear that Tonguç's ideas did not really align with the regime's understanding of work and vocational education, which was based on a need to improve the country's economy by training individuals for a position in the labor market. Depictions of Tonguç as a Kemalist agent prevents us from recognizing these differences. The terms he uses to define his ideas – ‘work education’ and ‘vocational education’ – are the same ones used by progressive educators and Kemalist policy-makers of the time, which makes it confusing to spot the differences. Perhaps this is the drawback of the absence of systemized theory in Tonguç's writing. But, perhaps, it is also its

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 163, 154.

benefit, given that he was able to partially bring his ideas to life through the Village Institutes, before the regime noticed contentions.

### Chapter 3:

#### **An Emancipatory Purpose: Education in the Villages and Social Change**

In *İş ve Meslek Eğitimi*, Tonguç hinted that work and vocational education were particularly suited to peasants by arguing that it would allow them to overcome their destiny and thereby oppression. This idea was further expanded in his subsequent works *Canlandırılacak Köy (Village to Revive)*, *İlköğretim Kavramı (The Concept of Primary Education)* and *Pestalozzi Çocuklar Köyü (Pestalozzi Children's Village)*. *Canlandırılacak Köy* surveys the history of education in Turkish villages and argues that villages should be revived from within. *İlköğretim Kavramı* surveys the history of primary education in the West and in Turkey and argues that primary education is the basis of healthy, equal and democratic societies. Finally, *Pestalozzi Çocuklar Köyü* is a short book in which Tonguç writes about his observations of a Swiss village school known for welcoming orphan, outcast and refugee children. This chapter will look into his ideas on rural education as expressed in these books, as well as in his letter exchanges with colleagues, to show that Tonguç and the regime had different views about the purpose of education in the villages.

Before going into a discussion on the purposes of education in the villages, we must understand Tonguç's perspective on Turkish rural life. According to him, the backwardness of the villages was directly related to the Ottoman Empire's abuse of villages and villagers. He argued that, by the end of the Ottoman Empire, "the relationship between state officials and intellectuals on the one side and peasants on the other had taken a terrible and disgusting shape" and the village was so neglected that it had turned into a "cemetery." While the villagers were working with their whole strength, Ottoman intellectuals were living in luxury by "sucking the blood of Turkish villagers" and "using the villagers as animals." According to Tonguç, Ottoman intellectuals – whom he refers to as "fake" or "half" intellectuals – had bred "by trampling on poor widows, orphans and helpless people." This unhealthy relationship had "increased the gap

between the oppressed and the oppressors,” that is, the Ottoman intelligentsia and the peasants.<sup>80</sup>

Tonguç’s ideas about Ottoman society were heavily influenced by the historical narrative constructed by the Kemalist regime, that is, that the Ottoman state abused Turkish villagers and neglected their education. In a speech given at the third meeting of the Grand National Assembly in March 1922, Atatürk indeed stated himself that “the villager has long been deprived of an enlightening education.”<sup>81</sup> This narrative was not entirely false. As discussed, the literacy rate in the Ottoman Empire was much lower than in developed Western nations and there was a real gap between urban and rural areas. At the same time, however, many of Tonguç’s ideas about education had their roots in discussions going on in Ottoman intellectual circles in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ottoman leading intellectuals of the time, such as Ahmet Tevfik, Satı Bey or Ethem Nejat, discussed the importance of disseminating primary education to the villages and creating “farmer schools.”<sup>82</sup> Despite the existence of an arguable continuity between Tonguç’s ideas and that of several Ottoman intellectuals, Tonguç frequently demonized the Ottoman Empire and idealized the Turkish Republic in his writings. Tonguç’s discourse about Ottoman intellectuals oppressing villagers should thus be interpreted as a narrative built to distance the Turkish Republic from the Ottoman Empire since the reality itself was more complex.

Tonguç dreamed that the establishment of the new Republic would end the centuries-long oppression of the villagers. He wrote about how the Turkish War of Independence had broken “the chains of capitulation on Turkish people’s arms and feet.” The very idea of a Turkish Republic for Tonguç meant that “there would no longer be a separation between intellectuals and people” and that people would “become one body.” Tonguç thought that, with

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<sup>80</sup> Tonguç, *Canlandırılacak Köy*, 3, 4, 5, 10, 11.

<sup>81</sup> Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, *Atatürk’ün Söylev ve Demeçleri*, 236.

<sup>82</sup> Mehmet Reşit Sevinç et al., “Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’ndan Günümüze Kırsal Alanda Uygulanan Eğitim Politikaları,” *Elektronik Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 15, no. 56 (2016): 256.

the establishment of the Republic, there would no longer be “oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited classes.” Finally, after all those years of oppression, “power would rely in the people and the peasants for all decisions” and the latter “would be allowed a place in the state structure.” Turkey was decisively headed towards becoming what Tonguç called a “classless society.” This is what the Republic meant for Tonguç: *popular sovereignty* and a *classless egalitarian society*.<sup>83</sup>

Soon, however, Tonguç realized that the reality of the Republic was quite different than what he had in mind. He noticed that, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Republican state apparatus was still filled with what he described as “semi-intellectuals” who had an “Ottoman mentality.” According to him, these people had not freed themselves from the “chains of routine and bureaucracy” and were still not aware of the power of the village and the villager. Incapable of seeing the reality of the country for what it was, these “semi-intellectuals” still lived in a world of ideals. In fact, Tonguç argued that many of the ideas that the Republican Revolution implied had been “put to sleep for years in stamped files.” These observations led Tonguç to conclude that ideas and ideals that were not turned into reality were “no different than dreams.” It was about time that “real intellectuals” like himself stopped dreaming and put the ideals of the revolution into execution.<sup>84</sup> Although Tonguç’s choice of words was perhaps overdramatic – for example, “chains of capitulation” or “blood suckers” – his criticism was indeed valid. As discussed in the previous sections, villages did really lack fundamental infrastructures, including school buildings, and the majority of villagers were still poor and illiterate. Historian Karaömerlioğlu also points out that elitism was rampant under the single party regime, confirming Tonguç’s observations about the gap between the ruling elite and villagers.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Tonguç, *Canlandırılacak Köy*, 13, 14, 15.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 19, 25, 17, 22.

<sup>85</sup> Karaömerlioğlu, “The Village Institutes Experience,” 70.



What is perhaps most interesting in Tonguç's critique of the Kemalist bureaucracy and intellectuals is that he thought there were "real" ones and "fake" ones among them. The fake bureaucrats and intellectuals were associated with a persisting Ottoman mentality, while the real ones with a Republican mentality. Whether Tonguç really believed in this separation, or whether this was a rhetorical tool used to avoid explicitly stating the failure of the Kemalist regime, is unclear. On the one hand, given the authoritarian atmosphere of the one-party era, it is possible that Tonguç directed his criticism to officials with an "Ottoman" mentality in order to avoid explicitly targeting the Kemalist regime. On the other hand, it is also equally probable that Tonguç saw a declining eagerness among certain officials to implement Kemalist ideals. Karaömerlioğlu explains that there was indeed a "loss of enthusiasm among the Turkish intelligentsia and the upper classes for the Kemalist reforms" in the 1930s.<sup>86</sup> By encouraging an implementation of the real Republican ideals, Tonguç perhaps saw himself as a perpetuator of these ideals at a time when they had lost their appeal. Indeed, for Tonguç, the year 1936 was, as he called it, a "turning point" in the field of education which marked a break from the previous "stagnant" period.<sup>87</sup> 1936 also happened to be the year he started designing the Village Institutes. This periodization was thus perhaps Tonguç's way of legitimizing his projects and place in Turkish educational history.

Scholars like Kirby have also viewed Tonguç as someone who wanted to return to the original goals of the Kemalist Revolution. However, Karaömerlioğlu correctly underlines that this interpretation is flawed since "in the first place, Kemal Atatürk, according to this paradigm, must be considered to be against Kirby's 'real Kemalism', since he himself held virtually all power."<sup>88</sup> In other words, the problem with Tonguç's call for the *real* application of the Kemalist revolution was that the current state of affairs already corresponded to the *real*

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 69

<sup>87</sup> Tonguç, *İlköğretim Kavramı*, 276, 263.

<sup>88</sup> Karaömerlioğlu, "The Village Institutes Experience," 69.

application of the Republican revolution. The founders of the Republic, including Atatürk and İnönü, still held all powers in the 1930s, and there was no reason for the real revolution not to be applied. Then, the reason why Tonguç talked about the need for the real Kemalist revolution was that he had a different understanding of it. As this chapter will argue, while Tonguç dreamed of a bottom-up revolution which would eliminate the distinction between the elite and the people, what the regime wanted was a top-down reform which would, to a great extent, preserve this distinction.

Indeed, political scientists such as Taha Parla have argued that the Kemalist understanding of populism, or popular sovereignty, evolved significantly between the War of Independence and the establishment of the Republic, from a strategically bottom-up to an effectively top-down concept. During the War of Independence, populism was used as a tactical concept to gather people under one ideal and build a ground of legitimacy for the nationalist movement. Because the Turkish nation-state would emerge in opposition to the Ottoman state, the monarchical system of rule of the empire had to be replaced with the idea of a Turkish people's state. Popular sovereignty was used as a way to overcome the gap between the bureaucracy and the people temporarily so that the war could be fought effectively and won. Populism, or popular sovereignty, was thus equated with nationalism and anti-imperialism and used as a shorthand term embracing the goals of the liberation movement. Once the war was over and the Republic was established, however, there was no longer a need for the support of the people or peasants. This is when the understanding of populism shifted. As reforms gained urgency, populism was no longer expressed as a belief in the government of the people, by the people and for the people, but rather as 'for the people, despite the people.'<sup>89</sup> In fact, in a speech given in December 1919 in Ankara, Atatürk explicitly stated that it was "inevitable" that the revolution had to be implemented "from above."<sup>90</sup> His memoirs also indicate an inclination for

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<sup>89</sup> Parla, *Türkiye'de Siyasal*, 136; Aytemur, "The Populism of the Village Institutes," 39-49.

<sup>90</sup> Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, *Atatürk'ün Söylev ve Demeçleri*, 4.

top-down methods; in one particular section, for example, he writes that he refuses to “descend to the level of the ignorant people” and that they should resemble him, instead of him resembling them.<sup>91</sup> As such, in the Kemalist understanding of popular sovereignty, especially under the one-party era, the people were sovereign only in discourse. Atatürk’s saying that “villagers are the masters of the nation” remained that, a saying.<sup>92</sup> Whether a top down approach that excluded the people from real decision-making was necessary or not for the establishment of reforms is out of the scope of this thesis. What is clear is that Kemalist populism did not align with Tonguç’s own understanding of populism, that is, that “power would rely in the people and the peasants for all decisions.”<sup>93</sup>

In the same way that Tonguç’s conception of popular sovereignty did not align with the Kemalist one, nor did his idea of an egalitarian classless society – the other major component of his understanding of the Republic. As explained in Chapter 1, the Kemalist regime saw the nation as a homogenous unity, undifferentiated by class. The RPP’s 1935 Party Program, for instance, declared that one of the main principles of the party was to “consider the people of the Turkish Republic, not as composed of different classes, but as a community divided into various professions according to the requirements of the division of labour.”<sup>94</sup> As such, the regime denied the existence of classes altogether. The transition from empire to republic implied a change in the relationship between governor and governed; the people were no longer the subjects of a sultan but rather citizens who had equal rights. This change in status meant, at least in theory, that certain groups did not have more privileges than others, hence the possibility of a classless society. Despite this emphasis on a classless society, elitism, as mentioned, was still very much present under the Kemalist regime. Indeed, historians such as

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<sup>91</sup> Ayşe Afetinan, *M. Kemal Atatürk’ün Karlsbad Hatıraları* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 1983), 27, quoted in Aytemur, “The Populism of the Village Institutes,” 48.

<sup>92</sup> Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, *Atatürk’ün Söylev ve Demeçleri*, 236.

<sup>93</sup> Tonguç, *Canlandırılacak Köy*, 13-14.

<sup>94</sup> Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, *C.H.P. Programı* (1935), 8.

Zürcher and Karaömerlioğlu see the preservation of the distinction between the ruling elite and the people as a key characteristic of the Kemalist regime.<sup>95</sup> “As long as the distinction between the elite and the people could somehow be preserved in reality,” writes Karaömerlioğlu, “there was no problem” for the regime.<sup>96</sup> Tonguç, too, dreamed of a classless egalitarian society. However, instead of denying the concept of class all together, he recognized that there were class differences – “oppressor and oppressed, exploiter and exploited classes” – and wanted to eliminate them, notably through education.<sup>97</sup> His emphasis on vocational education and finding a suitable vocation for each individual can be viewed in line with this desire to eliminate class divides and establish a society organized by occupation. Tonguç indeed thought education to be crucial to the achievement of popular sovereignty and a classless society:

In societies that have not established primary education, the principle of popular will has not gone beyond talk and has not been put into practice. In societies that have not fully established primary education, individuals with potential have been condemned to wane away and have not been able to use their right to education to develop themselves. This is why people who have ruled society have always come from certain classes.<sup>98</sup>

The differences in Tonguç’s and the regime’s understanding of popular sovereignty and classless society inevitably led to different views about the purpose of education. As discussed in the previous sections, the regime’s purpose for disseminating education to the villages was, above all, economic development. By contrast, the goal of rural education and the Village Institutes for Tonguç was not to develop but to revive the village from within. His book *Canlandırılacak Köy (Village to Revive)* intentionally used the word *revive* as opposed to *develop*. “The question of the village” he wrote, “is not, as some assume it, a question about the development of the village in mechanical terms but rather about its revivement from

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<sup>95</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 198.

<sup>96</sup> Karaömerlioğlu, “The Village Institutes Experience,” 70.

<sup>97</sup> Tonguç, *Canlandırılacak Köy*, 13-14.

<sup>98</sup> Tonguç, *İlköğretim Kavramı*, 14.

within.”<sup>99</sup> What Tonguç meant by reviving from within was to rely on the villagers and their local culture in the process of educating them, in other words, on a bottom-up approach.

Reviving the village from within was only meaningful for Tonguç because of the value he attached to villagers, their lifestyle and their environment. “Villagers are not ignorant, vulgar and needy as presumed,” writes Tonguç. He asserts that villagers know “how to stand strong in the face of hardship, live life according to their work, love life despite its difficulties and are capable of fighting against enemies” – all of which indicate strength and resilience to him. The village is a “bed of brave and valiant heroes” for Tonguç. He believes that villagers are capable of anything and everything as long as they are given the opportunities. They are, according to him, as precious as a “jewel.” It is not only the villagers but the village in itself that is precious for Tonguç. He thinks that “all necessary resources are buried in the villages,” from human to natural resources. Tonguç not only believes in the potential of the village but also establishes an interdependence between villages and cities, as well as between villages and the country as a whole. It is clear for him that “if the justice machine is not fixed in the village, it would stay broken in the city.” Similarly, “as long as the village does not blossom,” he states, “the country cannot blossom.” The villages are thus the basis of the prosperity of the country. This is why he views the issue of the village as an existential one. To preserve existence means to preserve the village for Tonguç.<sup>100</sup>

Because the village and the villager are so valuable, it is crucial for Tonguç to get to know their local culture closely and to build upon that culture in the process of educating them. He, therefore, talks about the importance of “understanding the villager” and of “hearing the villager” instead of ignoring their needs and interests, but also of sharing the basic parts of life with them, including “drinking the water they drink” and “eating the bulgur they eat.” In fact, Tonguç believes that “heroes should be raised from within” and not outside the village,

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<sup>99</sup> Tonguç, *Canlandırılacak Köy*, 212.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 21, 40, 21, 14, 11, 22, 23.

otherwise, they would be no different from city-dwellers.<sup>101</sup> This type of thinking is in complete opposition to Kemalist education objectives. As Kirby remarks, “the idea of impressing urban knowledge, institutions, culture, and values upon the Turkish villages was implicit in all of the activities of the early Republican period.”<sup>102</sup> There was the belief that villagers would only become enlightened if they actually ceased to be villagers and resembled city-dwellers. Tonguç strongly criticizes this thinking and believes that it assumes that villagers do not have any worth: “as long as villagers do not urbanize and become what they want them to be, urban intellectuals will never believe that villagers are, or can be, worthy.” However, the resemblance of the villagers to urban intellectuals in terms of their character, working capacities, and mentality would be “the biggest disaster for the country” according to Tonguç.<sup>103</sup>

It was not enough, however, to adopt a bottom-up approach consisting in preserving villagers’ culture according to Tonguç. All members of the school community, including students and teachers, had to adopt democratic practices in their daily lives. In fact, Tonguç writes that “states that rely on people’s self-government, first and foremost are based on modern primary education.”<sup>104</sup> Beyond simply educating, primary education thus plays a crucial role in instilling self-government practices to people from a young age. Schools should not only be a microcosm for society but also a democratic society. Tonguç’s emphasis on creating a democratic community is especially visible in his letter exchanges with Village Institute students, teachers, and directors. For example, in a letter written to all Village Institute directors in 1941, Tonguç criticizes certain institute directors who have gathered all power in their person, despite having administrators, teachers, students to help them:

This style of administration is a flawed and unfounded style that is doomed to fail someday. This is the very form of administration that turns individuals into unconscious, thoughtless puppets who act without using their brains. Students, who are expected to become the leaders of their communities someday, are especially damaged by seeing

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>102</sup> Kirby, “The Village Institute Movement,” 235.

<sup>103</sup> Tonguç, *Canlandırılacak Köy*, 35-36, 21.

<sup>104</sup> Tonguç, *İlköğretim Kavramı*, 9.

this kind of behavior. You need to save the institutes from the terrorizing authority of your administration and give each individual back their rightful roles and responsibilities.<sup>105</sup>

Further, in that same letter, Tonguç reminds directors that all members of the institutes, including students and teachers, should agree on decisions made about the institutes. This example demonstrates Tonguç's insistence on the importance of democratic practice and learning self-management from a young age. However, the fact that Tonguç needed to keep reminding directors of these principles also reveals that they were not fully put to practice by all institute members. Tonguç's observations of the Pestalozzi Swiss school also underlines the importance he gives to democratic principles and self-government. He praises this school for "governing itself," "promoting tolerance" and maintaining an "unbiased stance towards different political and religious factions."<sup>106</sup>

It was also crucial for Tonguç to include teachers and students in the policy-making process. In a general meeting of the Ministry of Education in 1939 where participants are talking about editing and reviewing textbooks for children, Tonguç proposes to gather the textbooks and bring them to students to ask them about their opinion. He states that "the child who is going to read the book and the teacher who is going to teach the book" would be the best judges on the issue and would give the best feedback for review. This bottom-up approach that he proposes goes almost ignored. Though a few other participants agree with Tonguç, the majority of them vote to assign the reviewing process to a special education commission.<sup>107</sup> Glimpses into such moments not only confirm Tonguç's genuine commitment to establishing a bottom-up approach to education, but they also reveal his divergence from other fellow Kemalist educators of the time.

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<sup>105</sup> İsmail H. Tonguç, *Mektuplarla Köy Enstitüsü Yılları* (İstanbul: Çağdaş Yayınları, 1976), 47.

<sup>106</sup> İsmail H. Tonguç, *Pestalozzi Çocuklar Köyü* (Ankara: Cumhuriyet Kitapları, 2020), 103.

<sup>107</sup> T.C. Maarif Vekilliği, *Birinci Maarif Şurası*, 175.

The purpose of rural education for Tonguç was not just to revive the village through bottom-up approaches but also to create a “new type” of person. This new type is defined in various ways in different sections of his thinking. One definition of the new type is a one who is:

loyal to the community, alive, hardworking, skillful, capable of enduring hardship and overcoming difficulties, determined, in tune with social environment, enthusiastic of life and its pleasures, fond of people and life, unafraid of death.<sup>108</sup>

If one common theme stands out from this exhaustive list, it would be ‘attachment to life,’ in its difficulties and pleasures. When viewed in light of Tonguç’s description of the villager under the Ottoman Empire, this definition makes all the more sense. Tonguç claimed that the Ottoman Empire had “killed villagers desire to live,” making them “poor”, “miserable” and “overworked”. By reviving the village, Tonguç aims to instill in villagers a desire to live. Tonguç also described this new type as a “conscious” person, aware of their social, economic, and political standing.<sup>109</sup>

Villagers should be revived and made conscious in such a way that no power can abuse them mercilessly. So that no power can treat them as a captive or servant. So that they do not become unconscious and unpaid working animals. So that they can always, like all citizens, have their rights.<sup>110</sup>

Tonguç’s idea of conscious citizens who know how to defend their rights, however, directly clashes with the Kemalist regime’s desire to create “obedient” citizens.

Tonguç also conceived this new type of person as a Republican citizen who adhered to Kemalist principles. One of the purposes of education, he writes, is “to spread the principles and values of the Republic among villagers.” However, this new type would not exactly be a loyal political partisan. Tonguç states on multiple occasions that “daily politics should not enter the school” and that education is a “national cause” above politics and beyond personal interests. He even criticizes the inter-war one-party regimes in Europe by claiming that “the

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<sup>108</sup> Tonguç, *Mektuplarla Köy Enstitüsü Yılları*, 37.

<sup>109</sup> Tonguç, *Canlandırılacak Köy*, 4, 9, 24.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 212



single party forces children to embrace the party's values", which "goes against freedoms of expression and belief". Interestingly, a few pages before criticizing the one-party regimes of Europe, Tonguç writes about the one-party regime of the RPP, though more descriptively and neutrally: "it was imperative to follow the principles present in [RPP's] program in everything."<sup>111</sup> Whether this is indirect rhetoric to criticize the Turkish one-party regime, or simply an attempt to distance it from the other 'bad' European regimes is unclear. Whichever it is, they both point to a central contradiction in Tonguç's thinking. Tonguç wants democratic and conscious citizens who are not blind followers of a political party, and yet he promotes the principles of Kemalism – interpreted in his own terms – as if they are not political but rather universal values. It is not so much the fact that Kemalist values could be viewed as universal by a Turkish bureaucrat of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that is surprising, but rather that this bureaucrat is none other than Tonguç. It brings him down from a pedestal. His individual-centered democratic thinking aside, he too, after all, was a man of his time.

Finally, one of the most important elements in Tonguç's idea of reviving the village from within is that education, despite its transformative potential, is not and cannot be a tool of transformation. In one letter to a Village Institutes director, Tonguç talks about the limits of pedagogic reform and how it cannot change society. He argues that educational reform can only be successful if it combines with changes in other aspects of life. "You cannot start applying your pedagogy," Tonguç says to the director, "if students' material needs like clothing and hygiene are not met."<sup>112</sup> Tonguç believes that education can provide a spark for change, but the change itself can only be done by individuals. This can be linked back to his conception of self-education - people can only educate themselves on their own. Similarly, people can only transform themselves and their surroundings on their own. This idea in itself contradicts the regime's understanding of education as a tool, a tool to build the nation-state, a tool to support

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 508.

<sup>112</sup> Tonguç, *Mektuplarla Köy Enstitüsü Yılları*, 42.

economic development or a tool to instill Kemalist principles. By contrast, education, for Tonguç, cannot change society. The only thing that it can, and in fact must, do is to educate individuals so that they can become agents of change themselves.

This chapter thus demonstrates that Tonguç's understanding of the Kemalist Revolution diverged from the regime's, which in turn led them to envision different objectives for education. Both operated under the principles of popular sovereignty and classless society. However, Tonguç envisioned a bottom-up revolution led by the people, while the Kemalist regime conceived of a top-down revolution led by the ruling elite. As such, in his writings about education and his management style of the Village Institutes, Tonguç adopted a democratic approach that took into consideration the local culture of the village and made sure that students participated in the decision-making process. By doing so, he essentially aimed to raise conscious individuals emancipated from all forms of oppression, which conflicted with the regime's goal to produce obedient citizens in service of the nation-state. Indeed, according to Engin Tonguç, "when the process of destroying [the Village Institutes] began, there was only one thing that remained intact: the fact that the teachers had become class conscious."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> E. Tonguç, *Bir Eğitim Devrimcisi*, 552.

### **Conclusion**

Today, the world more than ever needs wise individuals who are realistic and desire the impossible and who in this way expand the borders of the possible, who criticize the existing in light of what is supposed to be and produce alternatives, who plant utopias and harvest realities, just as Tonguç did.

–Seçkin Özsoy, *A Utopian Educator from Turkey*

Tonguç's ideas took shape in the context of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, a period of immense change characterized by new hopes and promises. His educational thinking was, as a result, heavily motivated by a desire to transform society so as to end the underdevelopment and the oppression which, according to him, permeated the villages. Although Tonguç's ideas about reforming education were, in appearance, in line with the Kemalist educational program – something that allowed him to put his ideas into practice – there were, in reality, significant variations in their approaches and objectives. In this thesis, I have aimed to highlight the ways in which Tonguç's educational thinking diverged from that of the Kemalist regime under which he operated. By demonstrating these differences, I hope to have to complicated our understanding of Tonguç and to have shown that he cannot be reduced to a mere implementer of the Kemalist educational program.

As we have seen, while both Tonguç and the regime encouraged vocational education, they had different approaches to it. The Kemalist regime regarded vocational education as a tool to improve the national economy by training individuals to fulfil positions in the labor market. Tonguç, however, never reduced vocational education to an economic matter. Rather, he viewed it as a way to create harmony between the individual and society, a way to help individuals find their life vocation so that they could realize their full potential and overcome their destiny. Moreover, while Tonguç and the regime both operated under the banner of Kemalism, they had different understandings of it, which led them, in turn, to conceive different objectives for education. The regime had a top-down approach to spreading education in the villages through which the distinction between the ruling elite and the people would be

maintained. Tonguç, on the other side, had a bottom-up approach which encouraged the creation of socially mobile and conscious individuals.

These points of contention offer us a new perspective on the debate about the closure of the Village Institutes. The institutes were not only closed down because of inter-party, intra-party or international disagreements, nor because they yielded results that did not correspond with the regime's expectations, but also because there was an inherent discrepancy from the start between what the regime and Tonguç had in mind regarding the future of Turkish society. In that sense, the closure of the institutes was perhaps inevitable. Furthermore, differences between Tonguç and the regime are crucially important to understand the complex history of educational reform in the first decades of the Turkish Republic. This thesis attests to the existence of diverse educational views under the one-party regime, a period of political restrictions but also surprisingly fertile discussions and developments in the field of education. I suggest that this diversity is, in part, a consequence of the elusive nature of Kemalism, a malleable notion which meant different things to different people. Officials operating under the Kemalist regime thus cannot, and should not, be reduced to mere agents of it.

It is my hope, above all, that this thesis has shed light on an educator whose ideas have been left under shadow. Despite the restrictive authoritarian atmosphere in which he worked, Tonguç managed to conceive, perhaps not a perfect, but an original, innovative and emancipatory educational alternative. He understood that a new era demanded new approaches to education. And so, he re-imagined education to adapt it to the realities of his time. Tonguç's vision has gained only more relevance in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. We can find echoes of his approach around us, in teachers and educators who, by transitioning to online teaching, keep re-imagining education every day.

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