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COLERIDGEAN RADICALISM AND THE SOUTH WEST CIRCLE COLERIDGE'IN RADİKAL KİŞİLİĞİ VE GÜNEY BATI TOPLULUĞU

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Abstract

Although radical thoughts of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the “Big Six” pioneers of Romantic era in British Literature and his effects over the refinement of the eighteenth-century English society have been widely discussed, not much attention has been drawn into the underlying backdrop and principal grounds that he founded his anomalous ideas on. Even though some critical studies shed some light on his relationships with the marginal communities in Bristol, there is still much to say about the intellectual development of a genius mind. In this respect, this paper aims to address how Coleridge's main ideas such as *pantisocracy*, Unitarianism and political radicalism were shaped, what drove him to adopt such radical opinions, and what role the Dissenting circle in Bristol played in shaping Coleridge's intellectual mind. To do so, the present study first presents a brief introduction to Coleridge's biography, focusing on significant turning points that shaped his radical personality and thoughts. Then, the study examines the social, theological and political thoughts of this genius poet who had a great influence on British Romanticism.

Keywords: Coleridge, Radicalism, Pantisocracy, Unitarianism

Öz

Her ne kadar İngiliz Edebiyatında Romantik dönemin en önemli altı şairinden biri olan Samuel Taylor Coleridge'ın radikal düşünceleri ve 18. yüzyıl İngiliz toplumunun şekillenmesi üzerindeki etkileri sıklıkla tartışılmış olsa da, onun sıra dışı fikirlerini inşa ettiği zemin ve benimsediği temel öğeler araştırmacıların ilgisini pek çekmemiştir. Coleridge'ın Bristol'daki marjinal gruplar ile olan ilişkisine dair bazı çalışmalar bizleri aydınlatsa da, dahi bir aklın zihinsel gelişimine dair söylenecek daha fazla şey olduğu açıktır. Bu bağlamda, bu çalışma Coleridge'ın *pantisocracy*, Üniteryenizm ve siyasi radikalizm gibi ana fikirlerinin nasıl oluştuğu, onu bu tür radikal fikirleri edinmeye nelerin sevk ettiği ve Bristol'daki muhalif topluluğun Coleridge'ın zihinsel gelişimini tamamlamasında ne tür bir rol oynadığı gibi araştırma sorularına cevap vermeyi hedeflemektedir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, mevcut çalışma ilk olarak Coleridge'ın radikal kişiliğinin ve fikirlerinin oluşmasına neden olan dönüm noktalarına vurgu yaparak, onun hayatındaki önemli kilometre taşlarına atıfta bulunmaktadır. Ayrıca çalışmada, İngiliz Romantik dönemi üzerinde derin bir etki bırakan bu şiir dehasının sosyal, dini ve siyasi düşünceleri de ayrıntılı bir şekilde ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Coleridge, Radikalizm, Pantisokrasi, Üniteryenizm



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INTRODUCTION

One of the most eminent figures in the late eighteenth-century British Romanticism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born on 21st October, 1772 in a small town called Ottery, St. Mary in Devonshire, England. He attended Christ's Hospital in London in September 1782. Even though his school career started with a boring loneliness in the monotonous routines of school life, his talents were soon recognized and even developed by the schoolmaster, James Boyer. At the end of his early school experience, his success was awarded by being selected as the "Grecian", which showed his academic ability to enroll at a university (Everest, 2002, p. 17).

Coleridge began his academic career at Jesus College, Cambridge in October 1791. He attended numerous literary discussion groups and won the Browne medal for his work called "Greek Sapphic Ode" on the slavery trade in Cambridge. This created an important pathway for exposing his radical thoughts on anti-ministry campaigns after The French Revolution. Like so many of his contemporaries, Coleridge believed the events occurring in France seemed to be very similar to British radical traditions. Thus, he decided to hold no brief for an unpromising war, the idea of which was highly discussed and supported by the William Pitt government within the era (Poole, 2012, p. 140). He first showed his radical stance by attending William Fend's case, who was sued due to his radical attacks on the liturgy of the Church in a pamphlet published in Cambridge in 1793. He stood by Fend's side in the trial and took the attention of the authorities (Everest, 2002, p. 20).

At the age of 21, Coleridge had already been driven into the political atmosphere of 1790s. He met Robert Southey in Oxford on a tour to Wales. Sharing same political and literary opinions, the two soon became intimate friends and named "the friends of freedom" (Taussig, 2002, p. 124). Their political debates led them to adopt a utopian ideology that they called "Pantisocracy". The connection with Southey dragged Coleridge to Bristol where he found an excellent environment for his political and religious thoughts. Even if he loved a different woman, he married Sara Fricker in Bristol and became brother-in-law with Southey (Everest, 2002, p. 22).

It was also in Bristol that Coleridge started to publish his major works. With the help and encouragement of Robert Southey and some other friends, he published a periodical called "*The Watchman*" in which he included parliamentary discussions, newspaper abstracts and verses of some remarkable poets of the time (Barry, 1996, p. 31). Though he made a Midlands tour to attract subscribers and published *The Watchman* in every eight days to avoid stamp duty, the

journal ran only ten volumes due to financial reasons. Even in this short period, he was able to show his radical opinions on philosophy, political theory, and theology.

Then, Coleridge met the Wordsworth family, William and his sister Dorothy and moved to a tiny cottage in the countryside called Nether Stowey. Under William's influence, the greatness of his poetry began to emerge and they both made a deep impression in the historical development of English poetry with their "plain and understated style in lyric and blank verse writing" (Everest, 2002, p. 19). His visit with the Wordsworths to Germany, which was believed to be the centre of European thought in this period, also yielded very fruitful results for his theological ideas. The new understanding of biblical scholarship that he obtained from prominent German scholars - notably Semler and Michaelis – helped him become a leading Unitarian movement figure.

Following the death of his baby child Berkeley, Coleridge put an end to his marriage and took up drug (laudanum) addiction. He began slowly to be deserted from his acquaintances in the Bristol circle and decided to move to London where he found a post as a commentator and journalist in *The Morning Post*. When Napoleon rose to power in France, Coleridge developed a patriotic identity in England and became the target of *Anti-Jacobin* ideology on account of his radical and satiric comments (Everest, 2002, p. 22). Although Coleridge's both mental and physical wellbeing continued to deteriorate at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, his reputation as a political and literary figure enabled him to publish another periodical called *The Friend*. To much surprise, the journal proved to be successful. As a real Coleridgean work that contained philosophical principles and some articles on political and social issues, *The Friend* was able to run twenty-eight volumes till March 1810. It was considered to contribute to the 19th century English intellectual conservatism (Everest, 2002, p. 27).

A NEW SOCIAL ORDER: PANTISOCRACY

Derived from the Greek word *pan-socratia* (all-governing-society), Pantisocracy is defined as "an experimental society, living on pastoral seclusion, sharing property, labour and self-government equally among all its adult members, both men and women" (Holmes, 1989, p. 65). After Coleridge met Southey in Oxford, who was then a young, republican poet, the idea of a new social order emerged from "metaphysical subjects" that they discussed during their night talks (Holmes, 1989, p. 56). These metaphysical subjects were listed by Holmes as "Rousseau and the back to Nature movement, Godwin and the anarchist society and shared property and ideal communism, David Hartley and the psychological motivations of human action and

intellectual prejudice, Joseph Priestly and the American emigration movement” (1989, p. 62). These subjects can be referred to the definition of Pantisocracy which actually has its roots in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Coleridge disclosed how this idea of pantisocracy came into his mind, he says “after a diligent, I may say, an intense study of Locke, Hartley and others who have written most wisely on the Nature of Man – I appear to myself to see the point of possible perfection at which the World may perhaps be destined to arrive” (Holmes, 1989, p. 80).

Similarly, Southey’s political ideas were shaped in Oxford where he supported the liberal and democrat beliefs derived from the French Revolution and stood against the idea of a possible war with France. Coleridge was actually planning to immigrate to London or America. So, the idea of pantisocracy was built upon his wish for an occupation and marriage (Curry, 1975, p. 22). Southey describes this ideal society in a letter to his brother. He suggests that “these, Tom, are the two new words [pantisocracy and aspheterism], the first signifying the equal government of all, and the other the generalization of individual property” (Curry, 1975, p. 22).

The details of Pantisocracy are revealed in Thomas Poole’s writings whom the founding fathers of the idea visited quite often:

Twelve gentlemen of good education and liberal principles are to embark with twelve ladies in April next. Previous to leaving this country they are to have as much intercourse as possible, in order to ascertain each other’s disposition, and firmly to settle every regulation for the government of their future conduct. Their opinion was that they should fix themselves at – I do not recollect the place, but somewhere in a delightful part of the new back settlements; that each man should labour two or three hours in a day, the produce of which labour would, they imagine, be more than sufficient to support the colony. As Adam Smith observes that there is not above one productive man in twenty, they argue that if each laboured the twentieth part of time, it would produce enough to satisfy their wants. The produce of their industry is to be laid up in common for the use of all; and a good library of books is to be collected, and their leisure hours to be spent in study, the liberal discussions, and the education of their children. A system for the education of their children is laid down, for which, if this plan at all suits you, I must refer you to the authors of it. The regulations relating to the females strike them as the most difficult; whether the marriage contract shall be dissolved if agreeable to one or both parties, and many other circumstances, are not yet determined. The employments of the woman are to be the care of infant children, and other occupations suited to their

strength; at the same time the greatest intention is to be paid to the cultivation of their minds. Everyone is to enjoy his own religious and political opinions, provided they do not encroach on the rules previously made, which rules, it is unnecessary to add, must in some measure be regulated by the laws of the state which includes the district in which they settle. They calculate that each gentleman providing £125 will be sufficient to carry the scheme into execution. Finally, every individual is at liberty, whenever he places, to withdraw from the society. (Curry, 1975, p. 23)

They set March of 1795 as the departure date (Curry, 1975, p. 24). The details of this new colony can also be found in Southey's letter. He informs Horace Bedford that

It is my duty to depart, at present everything smiles upon the undertaking. Should the resolution of others fail, Coleridge and I will go together... We go at least twelve men with women and children; My Mother accompanies me, who will then not be the only Mrs Southey. The woman whom I love has consented to go with her sisters. Burnett Allen Coleridge Lovell etc. ... We purchase a thousand acres, hire labourers to assist us in clearing it and building houses. By this day twelve months the Pantisocratic society of Aspheterists will be settled on the banks of the Susquehannah. (Curry, 1975, p. 25)

Southey was so determined and enthusiastic about their new life that he argued "my mind is never at rest not even for a moment. One grand object has fully possessed my soul" (Curry, 1975, p. 25).

The way that Southey and Coleridge persuaded people to join their social scheme was completely different. Whereas the former published long, apocalyptic letters predicting violent revolution in England, and forcing his friends to be with him in Kentucky – the first site for Pantisocracy, the latter adopted an altogether lighter touch as there was always an element of humorous fantasy in Coleridge's Pantisocracy (Holmes, 1989, p. 63). Coleridge and Southey were keen on their idea of pantisocracy and brave enough to show their political and social thoughts in a collaborative play *Wat Tyler* (1817), in which they introduce a hard-working character, domestically oriented towards wife and daughter, and beset by poverty and high taxes, which the king and courtiers are wasting upon their own luxurious living and the pursuit of a war with France. Wat Tyler and John Ball, the priest, are opposed to the war in which they feel no interest and are strongly opposed to all forms of tyranny in both church and state.

The relation between Coleridge and Southey went slowly worse after they began living together in a house in Bristol. Both lectured in some Unitarian congregations at those times. The fascination of Coleridge's articulation and rhapsody made Southey envious of him as it was the first time that he had ever met someone whose genius was far more beyond his. Till the separation of the two, the majority of participants into the Pantisocrat colony had already withdrawn their consent, showing money as an excuse.

Since the renovated idea of Pantisocracy in Wales came to nothing, this iconoclast new social order was unable to go beyond a utopian ideology or – as some argue – “a temporary fit youthful idealism” (Holmes, 1989, p. 82). Even if it ended up as a failure, the Pantisocracy had remarkable impact on radical thoughts in England at this time. The idea itself enhanced “the growing popularity of such expeditions among Quakers, Unitarians, and other idealistic freethinkers” (Holmes, 1989, p. 89). It also gave Coleridge “his first sense of vocation, of having a spiritual task in the world. And the dream of some form of communal life, of living among close friends and working for a common objective became a permanent feature of his imagination” (Holmes, 1989, p. 91). It certainly haunted the whole next decade of his life – in Bristol, at Stowey, in the Lakes – and was never entirely abandoned.

A RELIGIOUS CHALLENGE: UNITARIANISM

In the late eighteenth century, Bristol was a flourishing trade city with a population of over 50,000. Being the second port after London in the kingdom, it was densely engaged in the transatlantic slave trade. For a political and religious dissenter like Coleridge, Bristol served the notion of a place - with a printing press, newspapers, theatres and a lending library - where he could build up his radical thoughts. The city hosted a big minority of dissenting milieu including Protestants, Presbyterians, Quakers and Unitarians whose congregations attracted at least 20 percent of the populace (Dresser, 1996, p. 100). Coleridge was introduced to these leading radical communities by Southey and J. Cottle. Kitson argues that via his contact with this circle he deepened and reinforced his radical ideas, born first in Jesus College, Cambridge (2010, p. 115).

For sources of immediate income, Coleridge started lecturing about moral ethics, politics, religion, social order and fraternity in Bristol. From these riveting congregations, which clearly showed the gift of Coleridge for public speaking, emerged a new religious notion for Coleridge, Unitarianism. Holmes summarizes this concept and the status of radical dissenters at this time.

The Unitarians who believed in a Divine Creator based on the theological argument from Design, but who did not subscribe to the 39 articles of the Anglican Establishment, represented the backbone of the Dissenting tradition in England. Forbidden from holding official state offices by the Test Act of 1673, Dissenters have developed an alternative, radical culture, strongly influenced by the ideas of the European Enlightenment, with an emphasis of the physical sciences, experiment and political reform. Every city has its dissenting society or reading group, the most famous being the Lunar society of Birmingham, which included among its members, Joseph Priestly, James Watt, Dr. Erasmus Darwin, the Wedgwoods, and Dr. Thomas Beddoes. They also owned many leading newspapers, journals and publishing houses (like the Cottle brothers) and regarded themselves, with some justice, as the progressive intellectual elite of the nation. Unitarians were particularly associated with four public causes: repeals of the Test and Corporation Acts, parliamentary reform, abolition of the slave trade, and the freedom of the press. The local Unitarian congregations employed ministers and welcomed visiting lay preachers to speak on public issues, rather like modern colleges welcoming visiting lectures. (1989, p. 96)

Although Coleridge's religious past is Anglican, he welcomed the teachings of Unitarianism. His introduction to Unitarian creeds was through "his contacts with friends such as William Frend, Benjamin Flower, editor of the *Cambridge Intelligencer*, and George Dyer at Jesus College, Cambridge" (Kitson, 2010, p. 116). However, it was Estlin who introduced Coleridge Joshua Toulmin, the Unitarian minister of the Mary Street chapel in Taunton. Toulmin became "a mentor and friend to Coleridge from 1795 until their falling out in 1814" (Kitson, 2010, p. 118). Kitson argues that "Toulmin had been a prolific writer of tracts and sermons from the 1770s, many of which Coleridge must have known and which may well have impacted upon his own and similarly historically grounded dissent" (2010, p. 119).

Coleridge's main subject, while preaching about religion, was the pure essence of Christianity. His spiritual world was nourished by "mosaic history, primitive Christianity, Newton's scientific philosophy, Paley's argument from design, Priestley's deism and the psychological associationism of Hartley" (Holmes, 1989, p. 96). According to Coleridge, the significant point for understanding Unitarian radicalism is the critical study of the Bible. Harding claims that

“for Unitarians in particular, reading the Bible had to be a critical activity, because it was thought to be a misunderstood and misrepresented text, a text that had been appropriated by worldly powers for impious, aggressive, and murderous purposes. The combination of the humanitarian and the critical in a single enterprise brought about a quiet but significant shift in the ethics of reading” (2010, p. 132).

With Unitarianism, Coleridge was planning to introduce “a religion that took a strong, principled political stand, not one that disdained involvement with politics” (Patton and Mann, 1971, p. 83). Coleridge based his religious thoughts on the Hebrew Commonwealth system proposed by Lowman. Harding argues that “the biblical model of an egalitarian, democratic commonwealth exercised a powerful influence on Coleridge in the period immediately following the Treason Trials of 1794” (2010, p. 141).

While studying theology in Bristol library, Coleridge found in ancient Christian scriptures that for every member of the church to have adequate provision, the property of the whole had equally been shared. As a result of his in-depth readings, Coleridge eventually came to argue that individual property should be abolished within the country so that every single Christian should preserve “perfect Equality” (Harding, 2010, p. 143). To justify himself, he refers to the Bible reading that “and all that believed were together, & had all things in common – and sold their possessions & goods and parted them to all men, as every man had need” (Kitson, 2010, p. 124) The notion of shared property, apart from anti-slavery and anti-war standings, had become unique phenomena in Coleridge’s Unitarian inquiry. Kitson argues that “it is in his ideas concerning property that Coleridge departs most radically from both the Unitarian consensus and that of secular reformers” (2010, p. 122).

THE POLITICAL DISSENTER

The politics was another field that Coleridge was interested in in his middle life. The issues mainly discussed at that time were a possible war with France, the practice of slavery and some restrictive laws launched upon by Pitt government. During the three political lectures he delivered in early 1795, Coleridge always stood against these three issues and was labeled as Jacobin by aristocratic communities and government spies. However, he defined himself as a Democrat and his ultimate political aim was “preparing the way for a revolution in this country, bloodless as Poland’s but not, like her’s, to be assassinated by the fool hands of ...” (Patton and Mann, 1971, p. xxix).

Coleridge also lectured on the slave-trade, which was published in the fourth volume of his eight-day journal *The Watchman*. He argued that the commerce with the West India was useless and unjust and resulted in an anti-human practice, the slave trade (Patton and Mann, 1971, p. 238). He proposed to “employ these native Africans elsewhere under more human masters instead of leaving them in prey to the barbarity of their tyrants” (Patton and Mann, 1971, p. 241). Coleridge further referred to “the Rights of Man” throughout his whole speech and he finally asked “the slave-merchants to apply for the Parliament for the abolition of the slave trade” (Patton and Mann, 1971, p. 238).

The effects of the French Revolution on Coleridge cannot be denied, either. He was criticizing the Pitt government for their plan to pledge a war on France. One of the goals of Coleridge – in political terms – was to make a comparative analysis of the English Rebellion and the French Revolution. Therefore he planned to give six weekly lectures, some of which would be about “The Liberty of the Press”, “Characters of Charles the First, and Louis the Sixteenth”, and “On Revolution in general” (Patton and Mann, 1971, p. xl). However, because of Coleridge’s precedence for his poetical works and the reluctance of proprietors at the Assembly Coffeehouse, he failed to realize this project.

An attack to the King on his way to parliament opening in the late 1795 gave the government the chance to restrict dissenting meetings and enlarge the definition of treason. These new enforcements, which are referred as the Two Bills in the English politic history, drew a big opposition form the country’s significant dissenting assemblies both in London and the South West. The newly-wed Coleridge – despite the protest of his honeymooner wife – “felt impelled to join in [the campaign]” (Patton and Mann, 1971, p. xlv). He willingly participated into the oppositional meetings and gave some eloquent speeches along with delivering a separate “Lecture on the Two Bills”, which he built on his understandings of *Political Disquisitions* by James Burgh. Despite all his efforts, the two bills were passed into law and became the Two Acts but resulted in diminishing numbers at the Parliament for Pitt’s ministry in the next elections.

CONCLUSION

From examining Holmes’, Everest’s, Kitson’s and Harding’s studies on Coleridge’s intellectual development and from the critical analysis of his early and middle life, it can be argued that the friendship with the Bristol circle (Southey, Cottle, Lloyd and Lamb) and the contact with the dissenting milieu in the South West – Bristol in particular – (Toulmin, Estlin, Priestly and Dr. Beddoes) seem to have had great influence on Coleridge’s principal radical

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thoughts. The influence of these fraternal and interchangeable relations can be observed both in the emergence of Coleridge's pantisocracy ideal and his adaptation of Unitarian doctrines. Moreover, his profound readings of prominent scholars in social sciences such as Locke, Rousseau, Godwin, Hartley and Burgh had constructed the pathway on which Coleridge was radicalized. In particular, critical reading of German translations of the Bible and studies in Bristol library at nights helped Coleridge grow his intellectual mind. In addition, the productive atmosphere of a distinctive place (Bristol) with abundant publications and newspapers and the stimulating support of a zealous population cannot be ignored in Coleridge's radical journey. Despite the tyrannizing attitude towards the society executed by the Pitt government, dissenting communities – including Coleridge and his circle – became organized in the South West because of the unique democratic populace of the region. The consequences of the French Revolution, one of the big historical events, and the European Enlightenment movement also had a huge influence on shaping Coleridge's radical mind. His reactions to the Revolution coincided with his attempt to challenge political actions of the ruling government.

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EXPANDED SUMMARY

Pioneered by a manifesting text called *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), the British Romantic Era had a great impact on literature, society, and political thought in the nineteenth-century Great Britain. The British Romanticism mostly highlighted imagination, individualism, nature, heroism, exoticism, patriotism, and ancient history. Thus, it was regarded as a literary movement that challenged classic doctrines of the art – poetry, in particular. Being one of the most prominent poets of the era, Samuel Taylor Coleridge co-worked with William Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* and published many other great works of poetry in early nineteenth-century. Therefore, he was acclaimed as one of the founding fathers of the British Romanticism in literary circles. Regarding his poetic style, romantic elements and the themes in his poetry, there are numerous critical studies. However, his radical thoughts and dissenting political figure does not attract similar attention in many literary studies.

In this respect, the present study sets out to examine how Coleridge adopted radical ideas throughout his early adulthood and reveal how his social and political relations with the dissenting circle in South West – Bristol, in particular – affected his political views. The British Romantic Era coincided with a time in which many significant social and political events broke out. Particularly, the French Revolution (1789) and the Industrial Revolution (1760-1820) resulted in many changes in the spheres of society, economy, politics, religion, and culture in the Great Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Coleridge's reactions to these events were remarkable in that they differed from the mainstream ideology adopted by the government and other wing leaders of the era. From his boyhood, Coleridge seemed to have dissident thoughts on social order, religion, and politics. In particular, his ideas like Pantisocracy and Unitarianism stood out as significant dissenting ideologies that shocked governmental bodies such as the Church and Parliament. With Robert Southey, another significant poet of the era, Coleridge hoped to establish a utopian colony in the United States of America. Unlike the social order back at home, their colony would have good education, liberal principles and short labour hours. Similarly, Coleridge's religious views included conflicting ideas with the Church. As opposed to a Trinity, Unitarians like Coleridge believed that God was one singular entity and Jesus was a saviour, not a deity or God incarnate. Coleridge was also opposed to the idea of a war with France. When he came back to London, he lectured on the abolition of slave-trade, as well.

All these social, political and religious ideas were first shaped in Coleridge's mind as a result of his long studies on eminent philosophers at the library of Cambridge University. On the other hand, his relations with the dissenting milieu like Southey, Cottle, Lloyd and Lamb in the South West region contributed greatly to shaping his radical thoughts. Moreover, the thought-provoking air of a remarkable region – Bristol with numerous publications and a library as well as the promoting backup of an energizing people should not be neglected in Coleridge's social and political journey that involved radicalism and dissent.