

# BOOK REVIEW: TURKEY'S ENGAGEMENT WITH MODERNITY

*Based on the outcome of a conference of the University of Oxford's Program on Contemporary Turkey, "Turkey's Engagement with Modernity" provides the reader with profound knowledge on important issues such as the emergence of the Turkish state from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and the country's ideological, economic, cultural and social history. Being a compilation rather than the work of one scholar, the book includes multiple and even contesting voices, offering readers a variety of perspectives and opinions on contemporary Turkey.*

**Oğuz Alyanak and Defne Kadioğlu\***

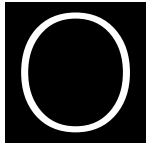


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## Turkey's Engagement With Modernity: Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century

Edited by Celia Kerslake, Kerem Öktem and Philip Robbins

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n the book cover, a man is portrayed: a farmer with a flat cap, looking to the horizon and to a place yet undetermined. There, the bronze statue of his commander, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (the founder of modern Turkey) standing still, with a sharp suit, a serious face, and a finger, points out a future indistinct. "Where to?" one should ask, and the answer he shall receive, would iterate the title of this book: A Turkey that is engaged with modernity, or simply put, a modern Turkey. Modernity, as the major project of 20th century Turkey, has arguably brought the minds and souls of the nation together to construct an image that has caught, quoting the words of Atatürk, the "standards of contemporary civilizations." Turkey, as idealized by Ziya Gökalp, the founding father of Turkish nationalism, was driven to symbolize an image where Turkishness, Islam and Western modernity fused into an exemplary *mélange* of its time.

Behind the farmer lies rubble; there are tombstones of Ottoman dervishes right below his feet and before him are tractors, industrial complexes and a future which is best portrayed by the bright red and yellow of the sun. What does the future bring? A sense of hope and capacity to develop in all aspects of life, economic, social, cultural and political, or a sense of uncertainty and fear, for not knowing how the future will be shaped? The past, represented by the ruins of a fallen Empire and the future, envisaged as progressive, illuminative, sensational and disputably modern (for what is modern is yet to be discovered), marks the transformation that Turkey has undergone: from an Islam-oriented Empire to a secular Republic; the sick man of Europe to a new, global, geopolitical power; from an Oriental actor to a Western player, and an Islamic "ümme" to a Turkish "millet". These dichotomies are also reflected upon in two parts of the edited volume: "State, Its Politics and International Relations" and "Society and Culture in Flux". These dichotomies, categorical yet not fully problematized within this comprehensive work, shape the themes this edited volume deals with.

*Turkey's Engagement with Modernity: Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century* does exactly what it promises: In Öktem's words, it "explores the structural forces of conflict and change that have marked Turkish history throughout the twentieth century." A thorough reading of the book shows that the articles elaborate upon the kind of transformation that Turkey, economically, socially, culturally and politically, has undergone, and evaluate the backlashes such transformation brought. As Öktem states, *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity* aims to find its place in the bookshelves of students and young scholars of Turkey as a reference

book, maybe following the footsteps of such classics as Erik J. Zürcher's *Turkey: A Modern History* and Feroz Ahmad's *The Making of Modern Turkey*. Thus it does not come as a surprise that the editors of this volume chose to include Zürcher and Ahmad's works in the book next to 22 other articles composed by well-known historians such as Andrew Mango, political scientists such as Ersin Kalaycıoğlu, sociologists such as Arus Yumul, policy-experts such as Ian Lesser, and scholars from fields outside the social sciences such as musicologist Emre Aracı.

Based on the outcome of a conference of the University of Oxford's Program on Contemporary Turkey, *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity* provides the reader with profound knowledge on such important issues as the emergence of the Turkish state from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire and the country's ideological, economic, cultural and social history. Because the book is not the result of the work of one scholar, but is instead a compilation and therefore includes multiple and even contesting voices, it offers its readers different perspectives and opinions on contemporary Turkey.

Andrew Mango, for instance, following the thread of his ground-breaking biography *Atatürk*, depicts the Turkish Republic's founding father Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as a rational and highly-skilled leader and shares an overall optimistic attitude towards Kemalism and its ability to shape Turkey's future. Interestingly here, he seems to work against the grain of the volume: Many of the other authors offer alternative readings of Turkish history that challenge the official history as portrayed by Mango in multifarious ways. Murat Belge, for example, shows the reader the "downside"<sup>1</sup> by highlighting the cumbersome nation-building process. Moreover, Belge discusses the utilization of nationalism (and at times racism) as the "glue" for the Turkish nation through the manipulation of historical facts. On a similar line, Benjamin C. Fortna, in his article, provides the reader with an absorbing piece on the reflections of the Ottoman legacy on the Turkish educational system. He disputes the idea that a deep break, or what scholars often call a "historical rupture" between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic exists in this realm and thus makes the reader think about how "revolutionary" the Kemalist Revolution really was. As he concludes, "the year 1923 probably was much less of an historical watershed than such epochal dates are meant to convey [...]"<sup>2</sup> Similarly Yeşim Arat chooses an alternative way to tell history by analyzing the work and life of two important feminist leaders of that day, Halide Edip Adivar and Afet İnan. She depicts how both women in different but very important ways, managed to influence the events of their time.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Mango, "Introduction: Atatürk and Kemalism throughout the Twentieth Century" in C. Kerslake, K. Öktem and P. Robins (eds.), *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity. Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Benjamin C. Fortna, "The Ottoman Educational Legacy" in C. Kerslake, K. Öktem and P. Robins (eds.), *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity. Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 25.

By touching upon delicate issues that are feverishly debated today, the book follows the footsteps laid by the authors of other encyclopedic works on Turkey and even takes it further. The articles on body-politics (Arus Yumul), memory studies (Leyla Neyzi) and the media (Ayşe Öncü and Şahin Alpay), for example, which are supported by contemporary researches on oral history, contribute immensely to new ways of approaching Turkey, and understanding the sorts of change Turkey has undergone in the last century, and is still experiencing today.

Though the book is far from homogenous in respect to the topics included and the methods of analysis chosen, it may still be held that the common aim of the 24 authors and the editors seems to have been to provide the reader with a link between the manifold dynamics that have contributed to the emergence and maintenance of the Turkish state and the problems and challenges that Turkey faces today. And it does so quite successfully by offering the reader not only basic knowledge on Turkey but also insights to more specific fields of relevance.

Nevertheless, any elaborate study on Turkey is prone to criticism for leaving out certain theoretical and practical aspects. One of the most theoretically problematic features that will strike any scholar focusing on Turkey is the very concept of modernity. To coin such a transformative stage of the 20th century as a struggle for modernity is an issue that is left untouched by the book. The book lacks a theoretical chapter in which some of the central concepts, such as modernity and change/transformation could have been tackled with. After reading the book, the reader is left with questions such as “modernity for whom?”, or “what kind of modernity?” Although modernity is tackled in its sociological, artistic and political facets, and is assisted through historical and contemporary debates that have shaped Turkey in the past century, there is barely any mention on the argumentation on “rationality” to be found in this edited volume. Therefore, for scholars with a more theoretical leaning, these missing pieces come as a shortcoming which this book faces. If what we understand of modernity is a combination of a “process” of rationalization, secularism, industrialization and nation-building, the very dilemmas that are attached to such “processes” may be necessary to challenge. However, such a task may understandably require a new volume, and perhaps, a new approach to the issues dealt by this book.

At the same time, what the book leaves unchallenged opens up a new field to be studied for emerging scholars, such as ourselves, to be researched in future studies. *Turkey's Engagement With Modernity* seeks to shed light on the Turkish experience with modernity, without necessarily tackling what the concept itself stands for. And by leaving such problematization to the reader, it accomplishes a somewhat surprising academic achievement: pushing students and scholars into defining what the very concept of modernity stands for. With such a critical

attitude, an emerging scholar is driven into tackling the sort of “modernization” Turkey has undergone, and evaluating the consequences this path of modernity leads to.

Furthermore, as Öktem admits himself in the preface of this edited volume, the book excludes some of the major historical conflicts that Turkey faces, namely the national liberation struggles of the Kurdish population and the critical encounter of the Turkish state and society with Armenian and other ethnic and religious minority communities. Though one must give credit to the volume’s editors for warning the reader that this part has not been analyzed in-depth, it remains a deficiency of the book. The violent and non-violent conflicts of the Turkish state with its minority populations and the societal debate on this issue are probably one of the main determinants of Turkey’s reality. Could Turkey’s encounter with modernity be fully understood with taking into account the very subject, that is the non-Turkish, or non-Muslim minority, the modernization project aimed to transform? Could any modernization project be fully understood without problematizing its hegemonizing and homogenizing nature? The war in Eastern Anatolia can surely be described as one of the major factors contributing to the polarization of Turkish society and the shaping of every-day politics. It is true that several scholars touch upon the minority question from a historical perspective (i.e., Neyzi in her inspiring piece on oral history, Barkey in respect to Turkish foreign policy, or Özdalga in her article on Sufi communities). However, it could be argued that a chapter dedicated to the minority problematic would have enriched the volume considerably. The book clearly tries to go beyond the mainstream by including such interesting fields as the evolution of Turkish music (Emre Aracı), the media (Ayşe Öncü and Şahin Alpay) or architecture (Sibel Bozdoğan), which is worth appraising, however, if the aim, as proclaimed, is that *Turkey’s Engagement with Modernity* becomes a reference book, such a fundamental trajectory, as the minority question in Turkey is, surely deserved its own section and cannot afforded to be left out.

Up until this point, we have been trying our best to play the devil’s advocate to challenge a very well written and edited book, which will undoubtedly become a textbook that will be addressed in many political sciences courses on Turkey, and around the globe. Overall, *Turkey’s Engagement with Modernity* equips its readers with a broad knowledge on contemporary Turkey. Despite the few handicaps discussed above, it must be stated that the volume is a valuable and inspiring contribution to the existing academic literature on Turkey and will surely find its place in the syllabi of aspiring scholars of Turkey. Now, to further clarify some of the points brought up in the above written text, one of the editors of the book, Kerem Öktem, will be given a chance to respond. We believe that the six questions and the answers provided to them will not only better illustrate the aims of the book, but also give us a better take in understanding the dilemmas that Turkey has faced within the 20th century, and more importantly, even today.

***Interview with Mr Kerem Öktem, Research Fellow at the European Studies Center, St. Anthony's College***

The first question we would like to raise embodies a critical outlook towards the theoretical framework of Turkey's Engagement with Modernity. The book discusses Turkish modernity from cultural, economic, social and political perspectives. However, do you think that while debating Turkish modernity, it would be fruitful to preliminary discuss the legitimacy of the concept of modernity itself? Do you think it would contribute to the debate on Turkey to question Western modernity and to talk about alternative models?

*"I believe that there are now sufficient indicators to suggest that the Kemalist age has come to an end."*

This would certainly have been a worthwhile undertaking, had the aim of this book been to provide a critical engagement with modernity itself. This was, however, not the case. Our a-priori assumption was that modernity is a given, as certain phenomena and processes -educational advancement, infrastructural and technological improvement, growing levels of wealth and even, and secularization- are often associated with the phenomenon of modernity. In this sense, modernity here is not so much used as a critical discourse, but as an empirical reality.

**Following up on this question, we would like to ask you: What motivated you to undertake such a problematic issue –that is, modernity– within the context of Turkey? Why is it Turkey's encounter with modernity, which is problematized in this edited volume?**

I should clarify at this point that I joined this project at a later stage. When the initial conference, on which this book is based, was organized, I was still a Ph.D Student! What I can say is that my co-editors Celia Kerslake and Philip Robins, who are also the original initiators of the conference and the book project, thought of modernity in the way I already suggested: As an apt metaphor for the multiple societal transformations of contemporary Turkey.

**In your synopsis, you state: "While Turkey is coming to terms with its many traumas and entering a new, post-Kemalist age, no societal consensus is yet in sight that can entirely replace the legacy of Kemalism." Could you please elaborate a bit more on this point? How do you define the post-Kemalist age which Turkey is entering? And why is there not any alternative to replace the Kemalist legacy?**

I believe that there are now sufficient indicators to suggest that the Kemalist age has come to an end. By this I mean that the illiberal, seemingly “secular” state tradition of the Turkish Republic is coming to an end, as its proponents are not able to maintain its hegemony, neither by force nor by persuasion. However, the alternative vision of modernity which the Justice and Development Party represents -a society at ease with its Ottoman past and its religious values, but also a globalizing consumer society- is far from addressing the many fractures of Turkey’s society today. Too many constituencies –Alevi, Kurds, non-religious men and women- do not feel comfortable in this new “modernization package”. Since it is unlikely in our days that a societal consensus is achieved by social engineering or brute force, Turkey’s constitutional future has to emerge from some sort of democratic consensus. And this does not yet seem to be happening. Why this is the case is not so easy to answer, but there is little doubt that the heavy weight of an undemocratic political culture -rooted in the one party era of the early Republic- still obstructs innovative and future-oriented thinking.

**The element of change, and more importantly, transformation, constitutes a major theme in all the articles provided in *Turkey’s Engagement with Modernity*. Would you argue that in the last couple of decades, there has been a structural shift in the actors that bring such “change” to start with? If yes, what role will the old actors, such as the army generals, assume in the new structure?**

Yes, I certainly agree. Change and development in Turkey were things which were done by elites to the masses, from top to bottom. Whether the early Kemalists or the later revolutionary movements, they all claimed to act on behalf of the people, while they were not really interested in what these people wished for in the first place. Especially after the great rupture of the 1980 coup, and Özal’s economic liberalization policies, the “agents of change” have changed. Now, we are talking about “new middle classes”, about the transformation of once dusty Anatolian towns into industrial centers, as well as about the (re)-mergence of religious networks and brotherhoods. To this, we can also add the wide range of civil society organizations and identity-based movements ranging from ethnic and religious to sexual identities. Yet, as of now, there is no new structure. As I said before, the old system is in a process of rapid dissolution, but there is no new consensus emerging. At the moment, there is a power struggle between actors of the olden times -the military, the high judiciary and so on- and the new agents of change, which are part of the “Islamic Modernity” bloc. If the Republican People’s Party was able to cut its traditional ties with the state (deep and low) and emancipate itself from vulgar Kemalism, it might even become a third actor pushing for a democratic secular model. But I do not see this happening yet.

**We would also like to hear your thoughts on the recent developments that have been taking place in the Turkish political scene. A constitutional package, which proposed major reforms in the judiciary and was largely contested by the Republican People's Party, has passed. Consequently, a crisis within the RPP broke up, ending up with the resignation of Deniz Baykal, the long time leader of the party. In *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity*, you argue that the book "explores the structural forces of conflict and change". How do you read the "structural transformations" of Turkey, in the 21st century? Do such transformations point out to a more hopeful picture for, let us say, Turkey's democratization?**

I think that the very way of Deniz Baykal's resignation was rather unfortunate. That he has been able to dominate the party for so many years, was largely thanks to his undemocratic style of leadership and his dependence on parts of the old hegemonic bloc. Yet, his dismissal through the distribution of sex tapes is not very democratic either. These tapes were leaked not by the political enemies of the RPP, but by a group within or without the party, who want the RPP to win in the elections, and who have understood that this is not possible with Baykal. This is not a good start for a democratic transformation of the party and its politics. It is a bit of a catch-22 situation: At the moment, a democratic consensus cannot emerge without the main opposition party. But I am not sure to what extent the RPP will be able to transform itself into a democratic party.

I have argued elsewhere that Turkey suffers from the long shadow of the illiberal political ideologies, which it has engendered in the 20th century: Secular nationalism and political Islam. Political Islam has made a cautious step towards opening itself up to the idea of popular sovereignty, secular nationalism has so far failed to do so. Yet, in the long run, these two political traditions and their derivatives will not be able to accommodate a society that is changing so rapidly: Growing middle classes, an increasingly sophisticated infrastructure, growing levels of education, and a fast globalizing economy that has transformed the cities of Turkey into spaces of consumption... even though all of these processes take place in a highly unequal and regionally disparate way, it is fair to assume that in a country where the GDP per capita reaches 20,000 USD, people will want to have their peace when they watch TV, rather than politicians who turn politics into violent backyard fights.

When I was at high school in Istanbul in the late 1980s, the word "Kurd" could not even be uttered. The whole country was built on the denial of identities and history. Now, this is not possible anymore. Yet, when all these societal transformations will force a new politics is anybody's guess. I am hopeful that such new politics, which will ensure that Turkey becomes a country of all its citizens, irrespective of their origins, their religion, their language, or their sexual orientation will eventually prevail.



On the other hand, and without doing precisely that, I do not think that Turkey will be able to survive in its current form. So there is also a very strong normative incentive to actively work towards such a new politics.

**Finally, we would like to ask you, in which ways this book contributes to the existing literature on Turkey's engagement with modernity. Analyses on Turkish Politics have largely focused on the Islamist/Secularists or Turkish/Kurdish divide and concluded for Turkish society to be deeply polarized. In what way does *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity* contribute with new insights to the debate on Turkey?**

*Turkey's Engagement with Modernity* is a collection of papers from a conference convened in 2003. Our aim was to give a well-substantiated and empirically grounded *tour d'horizon* of some of the most important forces and conflicts that have shaped Turkey in the 20th century. Its contribution to the debate should be seen in this context, as an effort of taking stock of a very tumultuous century, deeply marked by the contestation over how to move forward, how to become a modern country. The contributors to the volume come from different disciplinary and political backgrounds, and they approach their subjects with different methodologies. You could say that this leads to a rather incoherent and cacophonous product. I would not agree with this conclusion, however! I think that this diversity in approach and views reflects the messy nature of Turkey's incomplete project of modernity. Grand theories have surpassed their sell-by date, and a serious engagement with Turkey needs to take account of this messiness. In this, the book really reflects the fact that much in Turkey is still undecided. It is this state in which "all that is solid melts into the air" –to cite the opening line of the Communist Manifesto– which makes it so fascinating a country for social inquiry, even if it also makes it such a complex place to navigate and explain.