Civilizing Islam, Islamist Civilizing? Turkey’s Islamist Movement and the Problem of Ethnic Difference
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ABSTRACT The Islamist critique of the post–1923 regime in Turkey centres around the deconstruction of the Republic’s civilizing mission. Here the modernization of the rump of the Ottoman Empire undertaken in the name of the universality of western civilization (with the consequent attributing of backwardness to Islam) is problematized: Islamist discourse converges with other postmodern critiques in proclaiming the exhaustion of modernity as a project of emancipation. Islamist politics celebrate the return of the Muslim actor and identity. And yet the making of an Islamist movement is threatened by the mobilization of other political identities similarly suppressed by the Turkish state’s modernizing project. This includes in particular Kurdish subjectivity, long a target of assimilation in the name of the universality of the greater Turkish nation. This paper examines the fragmenting of the Islamist movement in Turkey, as well as Islamist attempts to head off Kurdish nationalism. The Islamist suppression of difference within its own ranks in the name of an Islamic universalism betrays it too as a descendant of Enlightenment discourses and a modernizing movement in its own right.

KEYWORDS alternative modernity • assimilation • Islamism • Kurds • nationalism

Islamist movements like to portray themselves as radically other to the west. But because many of their opponents, political and ideological, also seek to paint them so, it is possible to observe a fusion of discursive horizons
between Islamists and their analysts. This is reason enough to suggest the need to look less at what is claimed to make Islamist politics different, and more at what is shared with the dynamics of other social movements. It might avoid too the temptation to excise Islamist movements from their historically specific body-politic and hold them up to the light, cleansed and sterilized, as a detachable category in their own right. Similarly, by being wary of the polemics of protagonists, interpreters would become more sensitive to alternative local responses to the political, social and economic crises so often held to generate the growth of Islamism in the first place. In Muslim countries Islamism is not, despite its imperious bluster, the only other game in town. Alternative responses (both within and without Islamism) offer grounds for hope: Islamism can become Islamisms, and the proposed black and white choice faced by Muslims and Muslim countries between (authoritarian) State laicism or (intolerant) civil Islamism can be rejected.

Nor, in like spirit, should we gloss over the differences, even contradictions, among those analysts who are often perceived as proposing some form of essentialized civilizational basis as the key for understanding Islamist politics (e.g. Esposito, 1992; Huntington, 1993; Lewis, 1993; Roy, 1994). Roy, for example, explicitly denies that political Islamism is a contemporary revival or defence of traditional Islamic categories: on the contrary, Islamist movements are understood to be products of, and actors upon, modernity. In ‘rejecting a Westernization that is already in place, they express the myth of authenticity in a borrowed, inauthentic language. For they borrow from this modernity the refusal to return to the real tradition in the name of an imaginary Tradition’ (Roy, 1994: 22).

Lewis is less convinced. He sees little significance in the existence of patronage networks, patrimonial politics, corruption and lumpen-proletarianization in Muslim and non-Muslim third-world countries alike, nor in Islamist and non-Islamist states’ similar and unsuccessful remedies for such problems. By ignoring sociological considerations about the ongoing politicization of fractures in the Muslim world (ethnic, religious, national), he is predisposed to a vast over-estimation of the centrality of religious concerns and identity for Muslims alone.¹ But Lewis is not reluctant to admit the failure of notions of ‘Islamic brotherhood’ (pan-Islamism). As he notes in response to the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, even at Islamic summit conferences ‘it proved impossible to muster general support for an explicit condemnation of Soviet aggression and occupation’ (Lewis, 1993: 149).

Huntington, by contrast, is undeterred from predicting a possible ‘clash of civilizations’ between a miraculously unified Islam and a similarly culturally coherent west (and even an alliance between the Confucians and Islamists). One might have thought that the ‘final solution’ to the Jewish question would be testimony enough to the clash of civilizations within the west itself. Nor has the fact of two Gulf wars in a decade, and the Islamist groups’ falling in behind the positions of their respective nation states, flagged much
of a decrease in claims of a unified Islamic threat. But pan-Islamism (in
Islamist terms, ummah^2) is a lost cause: Arnason's words on the demise of
Marxist internationalism on the outbreak of the First World War might well
have been written for the ummah; 'It was irreparably damaged by the civiliz-
ational disaster of 1914, although it was still vigorous enough to lend itself
to a new and deceptively radical interpretation' (Arnason, 1995: 40).

To clarify the extent to which the global revitalization of Islamist polit-
ics is better understood as made up of specific historically situated local
struggles (despite the rhetoric and best intentions), it would be useful to
examine how Islamist discourse in one particular national context is impli-
cated in such struggles. Turkey here would seem to constitute a particularly
apt case study, with the enlightened absolutism of its military and bureau-
cratic elites seen by some as the theoretical lodestone that illumines the
processes of secularism in all Muslim countries. Sayyid (1997), for example,
proposes that Kemalism be used as a metaphor to describe all the post-
colonial regimes in the Muslim world.

What is it about the alternative modernity of Turkey that merits such
claims? The answer doubtlessly resides in the seriousness with which the
republic has pursued both a secular civility and a Turkish nationality. In its
production of civility unauthorized expressions of Islam were excluded from
the public domain. The key reproductive sites of republicanism (the uni-
versity, the concert hall, the Palace of Justice, the hospital, even the stadium)
were presented as sites of 'pristine secularism', policed by the state to ensure
their conformity with the 'universal civilization' of the west. At the same time
in the place of the Caliphate and the surviving religious institutions inherited
from the Ottoman Empire, a Directorate of Religious Affairs was formed,
incorporating (reinscribing) Islam under the state's nation-building project.
Article 24 of the Turkish Constitution declares that 'religious and moral edu-
cation will be conducted under the supervision and control of the state'.

Bureaucratized Islam, then, having submitted to the requirements of
building a unitary state, is called into service for constructing (among other
things) a regime-friendly Turkish–Islamic identity, especially over other
potential identities. Indeed official Islam is unable to criticize republicanism's
ethnic preference for Turks without simultaneously delegitimizing its own
existence. Here the state's production of nationality is most easily seen in its
attempts to inhibit the growth of Kurdish identity, through either the outright
denial of Kurdish existence or the outlawing of the Kurdish language through
legislation.

The problem remains to bring these two dimensions together, to trace
to what extent the state's production of a Turkish national identity has worn
off on the Islamist movement, despite its rejection of secularism and the
Religious Affairs Directorate. That is, how is Islamist discourse in Turkey
problematizing the relationship between an ethnic political identity and an
Islamic one? This article will investigate the problem through the lens of the
‘Kurdish question’, Kurdish Muslims in particular being faced with a state that still refuses to collectively grant Kurds certain elementary human rights, while continuing the historic project of assimilating diverse populations within the gamut of Turkish nationalism.³

**STATE ISLAM AND THE ISLAMIST CRITIQUE**

Perhaps the most useful way of indicating the prevailing tenor of the Islamist movement’s response to the Kurdish problem is to recount a story narrated by Kurdish Islamist writer, Altan Tan. He claims that even as late as 1991 *Refah*, the Islamist party in Turkey, had never used the word ‘Kurd’ but only euphemisms such as ‘our brothers in the south-east’. According to Tan, when someone asked the *Refah* Party’s highest council whether mentioning the word ‘Kurd’ was legal, the religious experts decided that even if its use was legal, the present was not a propitious time to say the dreaded ‘K’ word (Tan, 1993: 70).

Such a state of affairs should sober those who consider the Islamist critique of the Republic’s deficient democracy (vis-à-vis Muslims) as a sure indication of its commitment to plurality. For there is an emerging counter-orthodoxy among some commentators on Islamist politics in Turkey today that situates the Islamic movement and its deconstruction of the founding myths of the Republic as major participants in a more general reassessment of the political role played by these myths.⁴ In this reading, the republican elites, while claiming for themselves the legitimizing trope of progress and civilization, have resembled the bourgeoisie in Marxist analysis: the class whose universalist claims obscure their particularistic interests. Here in the name of the general will, the state felt free to guide society into the enlightenment designated for it. Within this analysis then, the Islamist unmasking of the Republic’s dictatorial practices is interpreted as a contribution to the gradual emancipation of civil society from a Jacobin republicanism.

But the real question for democrats is this: to what extent does the Islamist movement, and Islamist discourse, allow for a genuine expression of plurality? That is, does the critique of the Republic’s insufficient democracy amount to more than the rhetoric of a rising counter-elite, determined to translate its emerging economic power into the political sphere so as to forcibly stamp its impress upon the cultural life of the society? The question should not only be asked theoretically but also practically; and it is the contention of this article that the Islamist movement’s response to the Kurdish problem should be one of the litmus tests in giving an answer.

One problem which immediately strikes the eye is the definition of Islamist in the current context. The state in republican Turkey has since its foundation been consistent in its concern to carve out a space for religion (Islam) to occupy. Though we can discern some differences in state policies between the single-party period (1923–50), the rule of the populist parties,
and the period after the 1980 military coup, there has never been a time in republican history in which the Islamic religion has not been politicized by the state, even if the removal of Islam from the public sphere and its incorporation under the control of the Diyanet Bakanlågi (Religious Affairs Department) in 1924 is often defended in this way. For secularism is not a process that depoliticizes Islam. Rather, secularism removes Islam from its political role in the old system (and defeats those groups empowered by this role), while enlivening it in new ways to support the new regime.

One could say more on this Hobbesian solution devised by the founders of the Republic for the Islamic religion – suffice it at this point to note that non-religious critics who dismiss the Islamic movement for using religion for political or economic gain are perhaps unwittingly joining the debate over the nature of religion in general and Islam in particular. For the assumption that religion and politics, or religion and economics, are not only separate conceptual realms, but that their mixing for mutual benefit is illegitimate and grounds for falsification in itself, appears in part to be a discursive effect of Kemalist practice.

Yet as Talal Asad argues in a recent article, this conception of religion should be understood as an answer to a particular historical crisis in Christian theology and politics (Asad, 1993), and should not therefore be seen as a universal criterion for measuring the authenticity (i.e. religiousness) or otherwise of any particular religious ‘revival’. Nevertheless this distinction is slowly being embraced by some Muslim intellectuals as well, as the particularity of the Turkish experience opens new political channels for moderate Islamists to work in. More importantly perhaps, the amount of money to be made by combining Islamic consumerism with capitalistic business practices encourages a form of commodity Islam. But more on that later.

The meaning of Islamist then is self-referentially constructed against the state’s official Islamic position, and is not a description of a person’s religiosity. Perhaps this is best illustrated by an example. During my fieldwork in Istanbul two of my Islamist friends met each other for the first time at my invitation; one asked the other whether her employer was a ‘Muslim’. This of course was not a question about the employer’s piety but about his political position: was he anti-laicist, did he support Refah (Turkey’s Islamist party), did he agree with the Islamist critique of Turkey’s westernization? In the same way, some Islamist friends describe the official bacular (prayer leaders) in the mosques pejoratively as state (devletçî) religious.

Given the complicated relationships between Islam and the Republic, between Islam and Turkish nationalism, between Islam and resistance to the state (ethnic or otherwise), Islamist best denotes those movements, groups and individuals who reject republican law and desire to substitute Islamic law (seriat) for it, or live under its aegis. This means for example that the Turkish-Islamic synthesis and its representative parties such as the quasi-fascist MHP (National People’s Party) or the BBP (Greater Unity Party), who
champion both a form of Islam and a form of Kemalism (i.e. whose defining position is in fact right-wing anti-communism), will not be considered participants in the more recent Islamist movements. On the other hand, the Islamist movement does not inhabit a public sphere devoid of state interest, but is subject to all the compromises, contradictions and pressures that any social movement falls prey to while involved in political and economic struggle. For this reason Islamist groups too are prone to nationalistic sentiments, and radicals who should by definition reject nationalistic fantasies in the name of 'Muslim brotherhood' (Islam Kardeslik) are liable to let the ogre in by the back door cloaked in an Islamic cuppe (robe). This means that although this article does not seek to examine the official Islam of the state but to limit the investigation to a movement characterized by anti-state rhetoric, it is important to note that in practice people and groups may be at once Islamist, nationalist and anti-Kurdish.

**SUBVERTING STORIES, HISTORICIZING HOPE**

The Turkish elite have discovered that their long pursuit of secularization and universalism in the name of enlightenment and modernity has been re-defined, almost overnight, as the oppression and internal colonialism of Islam and of the Kurdish people. (Oncu, 1993: 261)

Before examining the 'internal' categories of Islamist discourse, it will be useful in this section to sketch out how the redefinition described above has occurred. I will do so by looking at the crisis in the historical narrative of the founding of the Turkish Republic, in which historical interpretation, i.e. history itself, has become an intrinsic part of present-day contestations. In such redefinitions we witness the creation, the telling and the criticizing of stories, so that the meanings of present conditions are reworked as the stories explaining their origins change. To change the avowed reasons for one's living and waiting is to find a new hope injected into one's life, as well as a new oppression. Those who tailor their personal stories to these meta-narratives need to feel both stigmatized by the old story and stymied (socially and economically) by those conditions now illumined by a change of perspective, by a different historical interpretation, by a subverting story.

In this process we can identify (at least) three competing narratives of nation – Turkish Republican, Kurdish and Islamist – though within each of these, fractures exist that distort the neat presentation of ideal-types. Recent Alevi narratives too may be considered an attempt to map out a cultural space for themselves through a reimagining of their own and others' history. But Alevi ideas are so heterogeneous that it is difficult to ascribe to them a coherent vision challenging the construction of the ruling narrative (and for the Alevi all narratives but their own are ruling?). Split as they are between Kurdish and Turkish, religious and secular fractions, it seems difficult to
imagine that the *Alevi*, the traditional ‘insurance of laicism in Turkey’, will play quite the same role in the future. This has not stopped Bulent Ecevit, leader of the Democratic Left Party, from claiming at the recent *Alevi* Haci Bektas Veli festival that *Alevi* were Turkey’s democratic ‘security’.

Central to the story told by the discourse of *Turkish Republicanism* is the denial that it is telling a story. That is to say, the discourse does not claim to interpret history but rather appears to be constituted by it as history. Its narrative device is to ‘denarrativize’ itself, so that the very origin of the nation becomes inseparable from the story of the nation’s origin. Rival narratives then cannot merely reinterpret certain elements within the discourse; they must first deconstruct it and its values.

Republican discourse arrogated to itself Enlightenment values of rationality, progress and universality. So, for example, the 1931 statutes of the Republican People’s Party (the only party in the Parliament) stated that ‘The Party has accepted the principle that all laws, regulations and procedures used in the administration of the state should be prepared and implemented . . . in accordance with the foundations of and the forms of science and technology in modern times’ (Mardin, 1993: 365). In its bid to create civilization, and in its corresponding attack on religion and the memory of religious constructions of identity, the state took upon itself the task of liberating the people from tradition. In the name of rationality and the abolition of privilege, the Republic accorded equality to all before the law (including enfranchising women). The unity of the people was reconceived then, away from holistic visions of society and hierarchy towards the freedom of citizenship. Republican discourse enabled nascent citizens to be caught up in the ‘most heroic of the images of the democratic tradition, those of popular revolutions mobilizing nations against internal [reactionary] and external [imperialistic] enemies’ (Touraine, 1994: 6), while making themselves modern. Hence the Republic became the great story-teller of Nation, sponsoring the grand narratives of nationalism, independence and secularism. In this story both Islamic and Kurdish discourse are cast as villains, the first characterized as backward primitivism, the second as parochial particularism. Beside this sorry pair, the universalism of the Republic exists as a sharp rebuke.9

*Kurdish nationalist* discourse, by contrast, is a narrative of inversion. Unlike Islamist discourse it does not attempt to unravel the major themes of the ruling narrative, but seeks to inscribe itself in an identical way, bar one vital difference: it does not seek a Turkish state but a non-Turkish or even a Kurdish one. Kurdish discourse as a text can be read off the mirror of Turkish republicanism, with provision of course for explaining how the struggle against imperialism by the nationalists was subverted into its opposite, with Kurds being betrayed in the process. For this reason, perhaps, the PKK (Kurdish Workers Party) portrays its struggle as being for all the oppressed peoples in Mesopotamia, viewing the racist Turkish State since its inception as the handmaid of western interests. The founding of the Turkish Republic, however, is
not only interpreted as a defeat: it empowers by way of negative inspiration: ‘one day soon we Kurds will be able to tell the real story of national liberation’.

It follows, I think, that the discourse of Kurdish nationalism is simultaneously more and less of a threat to Turkish republicanism than is Islamist discourse. More, because the more fervently republicanism asserts its virtues in its struggle against Islam, the greater becomes its ‘exchange’ value: exchange Kurd for Turk and the drama of national liberation constantly inserts neophyte characters into its quest. More invidious also because to reject the logic of a Kurdish state is to reject the logic of the Turkish State as well (though racists could always argue that Kurds, for whatever reasons, are culturally incapable of administering a state of their own). As a result there is little theoretical struggle by the State against Kurdish separatism (bar the labelling of its opponents as terrorists) and likewise little theoretical critique of the project of Kurdistan. Instead the warfare is reduced to mere brutality, in an unwinnable battle between two constituents of the nation-state narrative. Yet exactly (and ironically) because this war can only be fought militarily, it is less of a threat to Turkish republicanism than Islamist discourse: as even the carving off of an independent Kurdistan from the rump of Turkey would not delegitimize the integrity of the remaining space held together and traversed by republican discourse. That space would just be smaller.

By contrast, Islamist discourse does not seek to emulate but to assimilate. Its aim is not to bite off a territorially separate ‘Islamistan’ but to desecularize and re-Islamify everything within the sovereign boundaries of Turkey. (On the other hand, its more consistent thinkers are not advocates of the nation-state, but see its development too as one more effect of the westernization foisted upon Muslims by a Jacobin class of soldiers and bureaucrats.) Islamist discourse’s main revisionism is directed then towards the republicanism of the Kemalist ideology (Kurdish rewriting focuses of course on its nationalist elements), and its relationship with Turkish nationalism, as the Refah Party’s reluctance to utter the ‘K’ word shows. In this way an Islamist narrative of nation is not the oxymoron it should appear to be. Islamist discourse too redefines the founders of the Republic as an oligarchy, imposing an alien ideology on Muslims, imitating the west in an act of cultural conspiracy against the customs and habits of the people in the false name of someone else’s ‘civilization’. Thus the republicans are designated betrayers of their own history, and as bequeathing an identity crisis to generations of Muslims. In this way a certain romanticism about the Ottoman Empire and its ethnic harmony is disseminated, and the 75 years of Kemalism is treated polemically as an aberrant inter-regnum.

Within this narrative landscape the Kurdish Islamist position may be thought at first to borrow its major themes quite logically from its two partners: to be critical of both the state’s nationalist bent as well as of its republican irreligiosity. But things are never as neat as they appear.
First, we have the problem that identical phrases have different meanings for different people. Islamic kardeslik (brotherliness or fraternity), the key to solving the Kurdish question for both Kurdish and Turkish Muslims, means for Kurdish Islamists an acknowledgement of their created cultural particularity and entails the sacrificial support of Turkish Muslims in their struggle to reclaim usurped rights. For Islamist discourse, on the other hand, kardeslik implies the cessation of separatist claims in the name of Muslim unity (i.e. against the enemies of Islam) and the subordination of Kurdishness to a ‘higher identity’ (ust kimligi).

For Kurdish Islamists, seriat (Islamic law) likewise should be seen, beside its technical definitions, as having the same meaning that secularism has for Alevi Muslims: as being a refuge and providing a legal space that gives one permission to be Kurdish. Seriat as freedom, then, becomes the topic of discussion, Islamic law being understood as consenting to Kurdish identity. Here we see the gulf of meaning opening up between Kurdish Islamist and Islamist positions. For Islamists seriat as a solution to the Kurdish problem carries with it connotations of assimilation, in which everyone throws in their ethnic hand and picks up a new non-ethnic Islamic identity.

Second, we have the messiness of people inserting their own life stories into the meta-narratives of the discourses and their annoying failure, from the point of view of the movements, to be faithful to the principles of one or the other. Exposed to the browbeating of either the nationalist or the religious media as a habitual part of everyday life, subjects simultaneously reveal the footprints of the discourse on their bodies (in the choice of clothes or hairstyles, etc.) while being unable in fact to reduce their lives to the envisioned paucity of the particular discourse they choose, or have chosen for them.

We might see this in the lives of the Islamists themselves, who while ontologizing the difference between the west and Islam are quite happy to adopt rather uncritically capitalist business practices. Even the Islamic movement’s most immediately defining characteristic, the separating of men and women and its corresponding project of reconstructing gender relations, is not so transformative of social relations within the community generally. As Saktanber says, ‘the discourses of complementarity and modesty which inform Muslim women’s gender identity can quite effectively find places of correspondence in both the official and civil discourses of patriarchal morality of modern Turkish society’ (Saktanber, 1994: 130). It is not easy for analysts or protagonists to separate the Islamic ‘idiom’ as an organizing principle of certain ‘traditional’ aspects of human relationships from political Islam with its reorganizing programme.

In this way the republican project and the Islamic movement are faced with the same problem: ‘to bridge the immense gap between the state of things [i.e. the social reality postulated by the discourse] and the state of habits’ (Bauman, 1985: 10). For this reason both Kemalism and the Islamic
movement give zealous attention to education, seeing children as empty vessels needing to be filled with true knowledge before they are corrupted by the prejudices of social life. As Bauman writes again, describing the project of the revolutionary French state, ‘no progress toward reason could possibly be made unless the old education was razed to the ground and the influence was wrestled out of the hands of the past educators’ (1985: 10). But he could as well be describing the rhetoric of the Islamic movement in Istanbul today (and of historic Kemalism), which explains why political Islam is engaged not only in the struggle to change the education system, but also for the right to implement new laws. Islamic education would be ineffective if social life too was not regulated according to Islamic principles. In this way it is necessary to accept the credentials of the Islamist movement as being as modern as its opponents claim to be, exacerbating Muslim identity (Gole, 1996: 24).

Kurdish Muslims are potential trouble-makers, then, in their refusal to weld their stories to one or other of the combatants in the battle over civility, and they represent an unpalatable reality for many Turkish Islamists who have struggled to cleanse their own souls of nationalist sentiment, only to ‘rediscover’ it in the lives of Kurdish Muslims. Kürdcülük (Kurdishness) is often dismissed by Islamists as equivalent to Turkish nationalism in a flat refusal to acknowledge the particular experience of Kurds and the logic, even necessity, of their recourse to a defence of ethnic particularity. It is difficult to know whether this insensitivity on the part of Turkish Islamists to Kurdish Muslims is a nationalistic reflex (as Islamist writer Ali Bulac claims) or not. They are, however, striking an unfair bargain: if we can’t be (aggressively) Turkish, they say, then you can’t be (defensively) Kurdish. This is Islamism as a negation of culture, with Kurdish and Turkish nationalisms being equated – and equally denounced.

In conclusion, perhaps the best way to illustrate the distinctive features of the different discourses is to recall briefly my attendance at a symposium organized by the Refah Party-controlled Greater Diyarbakır City Council in 1996 on Selahaddin-i Eyyubi (Saladin) to mark the 900th anniversary of the First Crusade. The spectre of the Kurdish problem haunted the conference, as Selahaddin-i Eyyubi, like a blank cheque, was inscribed with the values informing the positions of various players in the current political struggle, and then cashed in for their respective accounts. For example, a Kurdish speaker in the summing-up session argued that Eyyubi’s greatness lay in his establishing a state that did not seek to buttress its power by allowing any one ethnic group to dominate. He was immediately rebuked by the Chair, who went on to claim in good Islamist fashion that it made no difference if we arabize, turkify (turklestirilsek), or kurdfy – the Muslim’s true essence remains unchanged. In this context, the simple fact of acknowledging that Selahaddin-i Eyyubi was Kurdish was censured as a form of ‘Kurtçülük’ (Kurdism), while the deliberate avoidance of all references to his ethnic origin in the name of his status as a Muslim was never admitted to be the political
act it so clearly was. On the other hand, the Islamist censure should also be understood in the light of the conference’s opening address, when the representative of the state, the Governor of Diyarbakir, opened proceedings by telling the audience that they were to be introduced to a ‘great Turkish warrior’. This claim stood uncorrected by the Chair. Thus in the Islamist response – the repudiation of all and any politics based on ethnic difference – to the chauvinism of Turkish republicanism, the high-wire that Kurdish Islamism must walk is spotlighted.

In brief, Kurdish-Islamist discourse seeks to defend both the particularity of Kurdish Muslims against their belittling by Islamism’s Muslim universalism, as well as the universality of Islam against the prejudice of state Islam’s Turkish particularism.

TRANSLATING THE UNTRANSLATABLE? MODERNITY AND THE KORAN

In the second section we saw that Turkish republicanism and Islamist narratives of the nation share some common convictions vis-à-vis the Kurdish question. In this final section I want to show that the Islamist movement is fragmenting along other lines as well.

At its simplest, the Islamist movement in Turkey has this aim: to produce among those living in Turkey an Islamic identity and not a laik (secular) one. To achieve this, Islamist discourse must simultaneously criticize the republican project and its political and philosophical antecedents, while developing in its place an Islamist practice, purified and in conformity with Islamic sources. There is little doubt that the Islamist movement has been more successful in realizing the first half of its mission (the deconstruction of Kemalism) than in constructing a viable alternative. Moreover, its critique of Turkey’s modernization experiment is made often enough in terms conforming to (post)modern social theory itself: the attack on religion by the post-1923 state elite, for example, is criticized not merely for being inspired by religious animosity but as an undemocratic assault on the cultural rights of a community in the name of a universalizing will-to-power. This convergence is hardly surprising: though the Muslim political movement attempts to radically separate Islamic ideas from non-Islamic/western thought in a kind of reverse occidentalism, discourses critical of the modernist project often flit in its ambit like moths around a candle.

Strategic essentialism runs the risk of imposing a politics of internal assimilation upon the differences hidden within its own mythicized unity. Or again, the risk of merely producing a mimicking ‘reverse discourse’ which aids the west to paper over its fractures by way of asserting its essence, à la Huntington. Yet we have the Koran’s own concern for justice (to each according to their [created] nature) imperilling the desired distinction between Islamic and non-Islamic political philosophies.
In the practice of Islam, the religious movement is attempting to translate the modern day, socially and historically, into that religion. But as with all successful translations, the movement runs the risk of transforming its own syntax in the process. ‘The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the condition in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue’ (Asad, 1986: 157). But this process of translation is not something the individual can achieve alone: ‘it depends on the willingness of the translator’s language to subject itself to this transforming power’ (Asad, 1986: 157). So the determining question for the shape of the Islamist movement in Turkey today, we might hypothesize, is how much is it willing to let modernity transform its own categories in the process of translating it. Although the Koran is supposed to be untranslatable, translation nevertheless goes on behind its back.

This is not so much a theoretical issue as a problem of political practice. At its most general, the newly constituted Islamic middle class is constructing an increasingly comfortable rapprochement with modern life. Part of this rapprochement resides in a coincidence of criticism between Islamist intellectuals and other non-communist groups interested in political and cultural pluralism and the notion of civil society. But just as importantly, the Islamist movement is nothing if not a business as well, ‘developing in a context with high chances for upward social mobility . . . creating in this process an intellectual and professional Islamist counter-elite’ (Gole, 1996: 38).

To get some idea of the wealth being generated by ‘Islamist’ capital, one need only visit on any Sunday afternoon the restaurant and tea garden newly opened by the Refah Party-controlled Greater Istanbul Council in Fetih Pasa Korusu (forest) to see the phone-toting, fashionably dressed Islamists arriving in their brand new cars. Or on a less impressionistic level, we may note that the Islamist Independent Industrialists and Businessmen’s Association (MUSIAD) has 2500 members, a monthly budget of $US 1 million, and has since its founding in 1990 established tens of profitable enterprises. Nicknamed the Refah Party’s ‘shadow cabinet’, MUSIAD members were key associates of Refah leader and Prime Minister Erbakan on his first foreign visit to Iran, Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia, and have prepared numerous reports for the Government to consider. The Refah Party will have to be more and more concerned in the future with justifying the gap between its policies and the words of the Koran.

On the other hand, such a ‘generous’ translation of modern life into Islam entails tensions in the Islamist movement between those holding the difference between Islam and its others to be absolute, and those nevertheless willing to do business with these others. Just as importantly, these differences in interpretation do not occur only at the level of ideas: the forming of an Islamic elite means that Islamist discourse is immediately carried over into the field of class struggle. One needs to tread warily here, as Islamist
discourse itself refuses to recognize antagonistic class positions as being possible in a truly Islamic society.\textsuperscript{12}

Yet by defining Muslims in Republican history as a \textit{despised majority} and in the very process positing the unity of all persecuted Muslims, the Islamist movement refuses to admit the possibility of the \textit{disunity} of Muslims as workers or employers (and Turks or Kurds). That is, just as the advent of communism in Russia meant that class struggle was no longer possible (since class politics would be illegitimate, the ground for it having by definition been removed), so Islamism as a utopia envisions the end of politics (whether of class, gender or ethnicity) in the name of the posited unity of the community of believers (\textit{umma}).

The division of labour and gender differences become depoliticized (i.e. withdrawn from the realm of power) and functionalized, so that ‘natural’ differences (between male and female, workers and owners) are utilized in the name of service to the community as a whole. Rather like Saint Paul’s vision of the charismatic church in his letter to the Corinthians – ‘if the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing?’ (1 Cor. 12:17) – difference is relegated to the \textit{pre-political} level and then regulated, instead of being traced to its site of production. Thus the distribution of wealth is the locus of concern (vis-à-vis the institution of \textit{zakat}, the giving to the poor of a tithe from one’s profit) rather than the source of that wealth in production, as is the ordering of roles between the sexes rather than their prior structuring by power.

In this way the claim that ‘the stage is set for a possible alliance between reformist elites and moderate Muslims’ (Gole, 1996: 43) is also an admission of the possibility of an ideological role for Islamic discourse – ideology in this sense referring not to systems of thought or philosophies per se (Marxism, Kemalism, Thatcherism), but to their application in the social arena. Thompson’s definition of ideology is particularly useful: ‘ideology can be used to refer to the ways in which meaning serves, in particular circumstances, to establish and sustain relations of power which are systematically asymmetrical – [i.e.] relations of domination. Ideology, broadly speaking, is meaning in the service of power’ (Thompson, 1990: 7). That Islamic discourse is being used in this ideological sense – as ethnographic research is well-poised to establish – is perceived by participants in the movement itself.

Finally, the discussion of ideology brings us back to ethnicity. The Islamist vision of a society structured along the lines of autonomous, self-defining groups in whose living arrangements the state would not interfere – a model often articulated more or less clearly by participants in the movement itself – implies in one way an \textit{ethnicizing of religion and politics}. One chooses to be socialist or Christian or Kemalist, concepts which are then stripped of any universal or rational content and rendered as lifestyles. Being a Muslim in this sense becomes one identity among many others: but in this model there is ambiguity since the society organized on these principles is
at the same time called Islamic. The whole society is imagined as if it were a string of prayer beads: self-contained units held together by the murmured words of the *Lailabe illallah* (There is no God but Allah).

Simultaneously in this model we have a religious redefining of ethnicity: Turkish and Kurdish Christians would be understood firstly as Christians and secondly as members of an ethnic group, as would Kurdish and Turkish Muslims. Indeed to choose to be ethnic (whatever this would entail) would be difficult to conceive: Turks or Kurds (who by definition are Muslim according to some Islamist positions\textsuperscript{13}) could choose only to be either secular or religious. Political Islam, then, understood as both a cultural and religious identity, lives uneasily with other forms of political subjectivity, and Kurds who choose to be both secular (or Islamist) and ethnically conscious are placing themselves in an unacceptable position for such Islamism.

On the Kurdish problem, Islamist politics shares the same ambiguities as the enlightened absolutism of the Kemalist discourse – high modernity’s apogee in Turkish politics. Accordingly, students of Islamism should examine more closely the actual practices of Islamists (and less their Manichean claims). In sum, while lauding the analyses of Bernard Lewis and others for their sensitivity to the struggle over the norms of civility between Islamists and secularists, we should speak more of the plurality of Islamist and secularist identities under formation. For the professed unity and mutual hostility of the two protagonists become political projects more than current realities. That is, the production of Islamist and laicist subjects is dogged by shadows from at least two other directions: on the one hand by the culture of class constituted through resistance to economic exploitation and the aspirations of an emerging Islamist elite; and on the other by the assimilation project of the nation-state with its continuous stimulating of both Turkish and Kurdish identities. Such dimensions ‘add value’ to the complexity of people’s identity and political interests.

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**Notes**

1. Lewis tells an amusing anecdote in his article ‘The Return of Islam’. Rejecting a ‘meeting of intentions’ between orientalists and Islamists, he admits that accusations of their shared assumptions are ‘not entirely unjustified. A few of my writings have been translated into Arabic and published by the Muslim Brothers . . . I picked up my copy outside *Al-Azhar*, in Cairo’ (Lewis, 1993: 194).
2. See the plea for a Muslim ‘supreme loyalty’ in Abdullah al-Ahsan (1992).
3. So, for example, the headline in an Islamist newspaper that read, ‘Turkish Historical Association; The Kurds are Turks’. According to the Association, ‘new
research on the land-title deeds drawn up in Sultan Suleyman’s reign show that the large majority of tribes registering themselves as Kurdish were in fact Turkish hoping to strengthen their claims to grazing rights etc’. The association’s president, Professor Yusuf Halaloglu, makes the absurd claim that ‘this research will contribute to the solving of the Kurdish problem’(!) Such research is the latest in a long series of spurious studies purporting to prove that Kurds are really Turks, having no right to separate cultural recognition. From Yeni Safak, 2 August 1996.

4. See, for example, Gole (1994) and Robins (1996).

5. Refah (Welfare or Prosperity) Party has recently been closed by the Constitutional Court as threatening the secular nature of the Republic. Two Kurdish parties have been similarly banned in the last five years, and their elected parliamentarians jailed.

6. Alevi are a particularly heterodox offshoot of the Shiite tradition. They have no links with Iran, and no history of clericalism.

7. See Vorhoff (1998) for a summary of the different political and religious views wrestling for the soul of the Alevi community since the late 1980s.

8. Multi-party elections occurred for the first time in 1950. Until then the political structure of the state resembled the fascist system in Italy: the head of the Party was also the Interior Minister, and all state officials were members of the Republican People’s Party.

9. For a more detailed discussion of Islamists’ internal political debates, see Houston (1997).

10. Since the rise of the Islamic movement a car sticker has appeared advising izindeyiz (‘we are in your [i.e. Ataturk’s] footsteps’).

11. From Yeni Yüz Yıl, interview with MUSIAD President, 4 August 1996.

12. Again, Turkish Islamists are taking a leaf out of the Kemalists’ book. The 1923 Izmir Economics Conference, held just before the proclamation of the Republic, presented the new nation as made up of four non-antagonistic economic classes (zümre): workers, industrialists, farmers and merchants. Populism was thus integral to the constitution of the nation from the beginning, as was the Republic’s difficulty over incorporating difference. Here the Islamic ummab is a mirror image of the nation as an invitation to participate in an ideal community of mutual service and is thus equally modern.

13. ‘Turks who are not Muslim have lost their Turkishness, such as the Finns, Hungarians and Bulgarians’ (Hakimcioglu, 1992: 22).

References


Yeni Yuz Yil (New Century)(1996) 4 August.