



Jenny White

Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks

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Who is a Turk? What does it mean to be a member of the Turkish nation? This fundamental question is at the heart of many of the most tense and divisive debates in present day Turkey. This question is also at the heart of Jenny White's book *Muslim Nationalism and the New Turks*.

White, an anthropologist at Boston University, over the last four decades has been a keen observer of the shifting political discourse and cultural norms in Turkey. Her ability to connect relationally and allow individuals to express their own feelings of identity adds a powerful dimension to the work. The combination of narrative with academic analysis makes this a valuable read for both the newcomer and the seasoned student of Turkey.

The book does not attempt to resolve the issue of Turkish identity, but provides an incisive and thorough investigation of the various formulations prevalent within Turkish society. The Turkish Republic, founded in 1923, emerged during an era of ethnic nationalism as empires gave way to newly emerging states. The definition of who the Turks were that would occupy the Republic of Turkey was - and remains - a hotly debated concept.

In Third Republic Turkey (the descriptive term used by academics to refer to the period following the 1980 coup; the Second Republic coming in the wake of the 1960 coup) the concept of Turkish identity is facing multiple challenges and again going through a process of revision. These challenges include issues of gender roles, ethnic minorities, and the place of religion. Some would posit that the challenge to identity could be portrayed as Islam versus Secularism. This binary, however, fails to adequately grasp what is taking place as traditional lines of definition are being blurred.

Among the many ways White demonstrates the changing categories, she parses ten different Turkish terms of what it means to be a national subject, each possessing minute differences of ideology. Even those specific labels are shifting as what was a "known" characteristic of an ideology in the 1970s may mean something quite different in 2010 (64-65). These labels have taken on overlapping and sometimes paradoxical meanings, they are not fixed concepts and identity markers. As White shows through her conversations with a wide range of groups and survey data there are multiple and overlapping identities that each citizen possesses.

"Today, it is not so much Islam that has challenged the status quo, I suggest, but rather what Islam has become in the postcoup urban, modern, globalized environment where, for many, religious and national identities, like commodities, have become objects of choice and forms of personal expression" (p.4).

This idea of personal expression and a choice of identity is quite interesting within Turkey. Globalization in many places worldwide has resulted in growing liberal freedoms and individualism, but in Turkey this is most often expressed in allegiance or membership in a group but perhaps one of your own choosing. The narrative articulated to citizens through society, from the earliest school days, is one where group membership remains essential for survival and also social identity. However, "the economic, political, and social revolution of the Third Republic has nurtured a new generation with greater freedom of choice that can be expressed through new media, civic activism, and consumerism. Individualism, however, is



framed within a collective logic, so the emphasis on choice means that people, especially young people, are actively searching for arenas of belonging beyond social identities inherited from family, community, and the Kemalist nation" (p.90).

Groups such as the youth wings of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*AKP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) or the Islamic *Hizmet Movement*, inspired by the teachings of Fethullah Gülen, are examples of some of the groups that have benefited from the collective logic that offers identification and opportunities for the individual. Seeing youth turning towards Islamic groups in their search for identity is troubling to those who are proponents of the secular Kemalist idea of the nation, who are comfortable with religion so long as it remains in its assigned place and perhaps as a useful tool of the state when necessary.

White clearly articulates how this interplay between the individual liberties, on the one hand, and the collective logic, on the other, requires an extensive negotiation process for the individual and also creates a sometimes paradoxical mixing of ideologies.

Take for example the well-meaning secularist who sees veiling as a form of oppression of women, and thus is in support of a ban that excludes covered women from universities and government buildings, limiting education, employment and political representation. White also points to the AKP which articulates support for universalist principles of human rights and at the same time, as has been repeatedly observed, curtails freedom of speech, freedom of the press, holds restrictive views towards women and expresses opposition to lifestyles that are not consistent with its preferred conservative worldview.

"Muslim nationalism" is the term White employs to describe the newly emerging Turkish identity. She sets this off against "Secular nationalism" which she feels has increasingly migrated toward Turkish exceptionalism, isolation, and a narrative of the West as a threat to the purity of the Turkish state. Muslim nationalism on the other hand is based on a personal "Muslimhood" and a national history based more on its Ottoman than Republican roots. This blurs traditional lines as it is progressive in promoting many liberal freedoms but with elements of traditional gender and cultural norms. Muslim nationalism offers a Muslim alternative vision of the nation, of what it means to be Turkish, and a challenge to the Kemalist tradition.

Whether one or the other of these nationalisms will win out or if some new concept of Turkish citizenship will emerge remains to be seen. White's book succeeds marvelously as a descriptive and analytical work. It brilliantly captures the contemporary debate of what it means to be Turkish.

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