The Paradox of Turkish Nationalism and the Construction of Official Identity

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Civilization is a book to be written internationally: Each chapter containing the culture of a single nation.

Ziya Gökalp

On an ordinary day in 1986, a group of Turkish stage actors dressed in Nazi (SS) uniforms asked randomly the people walking in the streets of Istanbul to show their identity cards. Interestingly, they had employed a mixed language – semi German and semi Turkish – in approaching these people and asked for ‘kimlik bitte!’. What was more interesting was that the majority of the people who were approached by these actors in SS uniforms showed their identity cards without questioning any part of the staged act. The whole event was meant to be humorous, yet it also revealed the unquestioned authority of anybody dressed in a uniform in a country with a strong state tradition.

A study trying to come to grips with the official Turkish identity, first of all, makes references to the strong state tradition in this country which evolved in such a way as to stifle the civil society. It is possible to argue that in such a country, the question of national identity was hardly posed as ‘Who are the Turks?’, but rather as ‘Who and/or how are the Turks going to be?’. The latter question was clearly more prevalent throughout Turkish history indicating the manufactured character of the Republican Turkish identity. Secondly, the study of official Turkish identity makes references to the paradox of Turkish nationalism. Such a paradox is a characteristic of Eastern nationalisms with a derivative discourse. In fact, it is possible to argue that the paradox of Turkish nationalism enhanced the power of the state elites in Turkey and paved the way to a manufactured, official identity.

In what follows, first of all, the paradox of Turkish nationalism will be unravelled. Secondly, the role of the state elites in Turkey, especially during the single party regime in manufacturing an official Republican ideology will be portrayed.

The theme that a patriotic Turk should try to achieve a balance between the benefits of the West and the East by opting for adopting the science and technology of the former and the spirituality of the latter is repeated quite often in
the schooling system designed by the educational establishment in Turkey. This difficult endeavour is almost like a mission for every patriotic Turk. Hence, it is possible to argue that since the days of the early Westernization efforts, the Turkish psyche has been burdened with the difficult task of achieving a balance between the Western civilization and the Turkish culture. Perhaps, one can argue that the women’s world is like a microcosm of this paradox ingrained within the Turkish psyche. Since the early days of Westernization at the beginning of the nineteenth century, women have been burdened with the task of being tight-rope walkers between tradition and modernity. They are expected to be modern in appearance while retaining some traditional virtues such as modesty which would keep them away from stepping into men’s realm. Those women who are unable to achieve such a delicate balance by either being too modern as to warrant promiscuity or by being too traditional for not keeping up with novel fashions are usually pushed to the margins of society. The former are usually portrayed as too ambitious, and promiscuous ‘loose women’ while the latter as old-fashioned and outmoded types. The tension between modernity and tradition depicted in the behaviour and dress codes of women exists albeit in a less apparent way in other domains of the Turkish social life as well. Patriotic Turks try to resolve this tension by achieving a balance between the materiality of the West and the spirituality of the East. However, the achievement of such a balance is quite enigmatic since a combination of Western civilization and Eastern culture, when transposed to the realm of nationalism renders itself as an insoluble problem.

Partha Chatterjee identifies nationalism as a problem in the history of political ideas. This is especially apparent in the deeply contradictory mission of Eastern nationalism opting for transforming a national culture by adjusting it to the requirements of progress while at the same time maintaining its distinctive identity. In trying to shed some light on to the contradiction embedded within Eastern nationalism, it is necessary to point to a distinction between Western and non-Western nationalisms that is employed quite often in the literature. Such a distinction is made by Hans Kohn, for instance, between Western and non-Western nationalisms that are referred to as good and evil nationalisms, respectively. Accordingly, while the former is taken as the normal type, the latter becomes the deviant type of nationalism. One of the distinguishing characteristics of Western nationalism is its cosmopolitan outlook, universalism, and its acceptance of civilization along with the material and intellectual premises of the European Enlightenment. French nation-state that was established in 1789 emerged concomitantly with such a nationalism which ‘represented to the rest of continental Europe the modernity of a nation based upon individual liberty, equality, and a cosmopolitan outlook’. German nationalism, on the other hand, which emerged about half a century prior to the
formation of the German nation-state in 1870, acquired an ethnic and cultural character with anti-Western, anti-Enlightenment, and Romantic premises. The nationalist youth movement in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century was fraught with the purpose of ‘reconstructing the Volk along more genuine and natural principles than modernity had offered’. These Volkish ideas were adopted by the German youth immediately preceding the National Socialists’ rise to power as well. In an analysis of the intellectual origins of the Third Reich, George Mosse maintains that the discovery of such ideological presuppositions of the German youth is much more important than the search for some individual precursors of National Socialism such as Herder, Wagner or Nietzsche. German nationalism is loaded with such Volkish ideas. Perhaps, the most distinguishing feature of these ideas is the distinction they put between culture and civilization which, according to Mosse, ‘was always on the lips of its adherents’. While regarding culture as an entity with a soul, German nationalists regarded civilization as external and artificial, a feature which had forgotten its genuine, Germanic purpose. In the words of Mosse:

The acceptance of Culture and the rejection of Civilization meant for many people an end to alienation from their society. The word ‘rootedness’ occurs constantly in their vocabulary. They sought this in spiritual terms, through an inward correspondence between the individual, the native soil, the Volk, and the universe. In this manner the isolation they felt so deeply would be destroyed.

These people opted for ‘a spiritual revolution which would revitalize the nation without revolutionizing its structure’, that is, ‘a revolution of the soul’.

Both the French and the German models of nationalism and the nation-state deeply influenced the character of rising nation-states everywhere. The paradox of Eastern nationalism stems from its attempt to combine the missions of both the French and the German models. Chatterjee, who focuses on anti-colonial, Eastern nationalism, maintains that such an attempt is deeply contradictory since ‘It is both imitative and hostile to the model it imitates. It is imitative in that it accepts the value of the standards set by the alien culture. But it also involves a rejection . . . of ancestral ways which are seen as obstacles to progress and yet also cherished as marks of identity.’ The search of Eastern nationalism, then, is to transform the nation culturally while at the same time retaining its distinctiveness. Such a contradictory attempt is a leitmotiv in Turkish nationalism as it evolved alongside Turkish modernization.

Turkish modernization began in the course of the eighteenth century at the end of the first systematic attempts to understand the difference between the Ottoman and the European military systems. As a result, first traces of modernization involved the establishment of disciplined troops trained upon
the recommendations of Western, mostly French, advisers in an effort to replace the janissaries that had become an organic part of the state rather than its instrument. At the turn of the nineteenth century, modernization involved areas other than the military as well. Between 1839 and 1908, the reforms increasingly involved civilian matters that resulted in the ‘revamping of the civil and political institutions of the Ottomans’. These reforms were introduced by the Tanzimat Charter which was proclaimed by Sultan Abdülmecid in 1839. Tanzimat reforms which involved a major reorganization at the levels of provincial administration, education, and the judiciary brought the Ottomans to a point of no return towards institutional modernization. The ultimate aim of the Tanzimat reformers was the achievement of sivilizasyon as seen through French eyes. This aim later became the slogan of the Republican reforms in the 1920s that strove to elevate Turkey to the level of muasır medeniyet (contemporary civilization).

With the initiation of Tanzimat reforms, the dilemma of the achievement of a balance between the materiality of the West and the spirituality of the East became quite clear. The main problematique of the Tanzimat writers was the achievement of a balance between these reforms and Islamic teachings by delineating the possibility of a compatibility between the two. The writings of the Young Ottomans – a new literary movement that was inspired by French writing – became crucial in coming to terms with the ongoing modernization by focusing on such a balance. The extent of modernization and its compatibility with Islam, for instance, constituted the problematique of the writings of Namık Kemal (1840–88), a leading young Ottoman.

In a study that focuses on the implications of the Tanzimat reforms on women, Nilüfer Göle depicts a similar theme within the literary movements of the period that opt for achieving a balance between the materiality of the West and the spirituality of the East. She maintains that authors like Namık Kemal, Ahmet Midhat, who thought with the conventions of West–East, and/or à la Franca-a la Turca, distinguished between the good and the bad aspects of the Western civilization corresponding to its material and spiritual aspects, respectively. These authors opted for a balance between Islam and Western civilization by making references to the practices associated with the early, golden age of Islam (Asr-i Saadet). In so doing, they tried to manifest the compatibility between Islamic culture and Western civilization. Tanzimat writers were critical of the adoption of certain Western codes of conduct and life styles on the part of the Ottoman elites. All the debates regarding modernization and Westernization were, in fact, about how to set limitations to this process. As Şerif Mardin puts it:

One of the questions raised was the extent to which European or western civilization is an indivisible force . . . Every time the question came up,
whether in the nineteenth century or in the twentieth, the idea of equality as a fundamental value of the Ottoman system emerged as one which competed with the idea of an untrammeled bourgeoisie. This is possibly one of the subtlest strains of 'survivals' which cannot be neglected in considering the position of Turkey vis-à-vis Western Europe. In the nineteenth century, one of its manifestations was the disapproving attitude of much of the Ottoman middle- and lower-class population towards the behaviour of westernized Tanzimat statesmen. Ottoman grandees who had borne the responsibility and the risk of initiating new policies had also developed Western European consumption patterns. Crinolines, pianos, dining tables and living-room furniture were new ideas which the official class soon adopted, and these were often seen as foolish luxuries by the section of the population that had lived on the modest standards imposed by traditional values.

It is obvious that a seemingly cosmetic Westernization adopted by the Ottoman elites was only skin-deep. Nevertheless, it generated criticism in the society that was crystallized in the Tanzimat literary tradition. Cosmetic Westernization was criticized as imitation of Western ways. It was also maintained that modernization was possible without resorting to Western codes of conduct that were usually portrayed as ridiculous for being artificial and phony.

Since the literary tradition between Tanzimat and the Republic is like a gold mine in unravelling the problematique of modernization/Westernization, it is worthwhile to refer to a couple of cases in this context. One of the most important novels written at the end of the nineteenth century that focuses on the theme of the extent of Westernization is Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi by Ahmet Midhat which was published in 1876. The main theme of the novel is the description of the difference between an imitative, cosmetic Westernization which is ridiculed as phony and a rather preferred one which is characterized by a relentless effort to hold on to indigenous cultural traits. Whereas Felatun Bey is portrayed as an archetype of the former, Rakım Efendi represents the latter trend. Felatun Bey, for instance, prefers the name Plato rather than the Ottoman Felatun. He is the heir to an abundant inheritance and spends his life on the European side of Istanbul gambling and entertaining with women. Rakım Efendi, on the other hand spends his time working diligently in order to achieve his goal of leading a modest life. He is someone who was sent to school as a result of the self-sacrificing efforts of his guardian. He not only graduated from Ottoman educational institutions but also studied French. He is a serious, hard-working person, in contrast to the affluent, flagrant and spend-thrift Felatun Bey. It is obvious that Rakım Efendi represents a preferred model of Westernization without falling into the trap of
engaging in conspicuous consumption and by retaining distinctive traits such as modesty.

Another well-known example is Bihruz Bey, an ostentatious Western character in Recaizade Ekrem’s novel Araba Sevdasi which was published in 1896. Bihruz Bey is a man who became a public official through his father’s connections despite the fact that he was a lazy, incompetent, fool for Western materialism. He inherits his father’s fortunes which is more than adequate in guaranteeing a comfortable life for him and his mother on the European side of Istanbul. Bihruz Bey refers to Turkish customs as barbaric. He makes fun of the traditional costumes of the Turks. He, on the other hand, dresses himself in the European style with expensive, tailored costumes. He spends his fortune on carriages to roam around in the style of the European aristocrats. He constantly makes remarks in French. In short, he behaves and lives like a French noblesse de robe in Istanbul at the end of the nineteenth century. The Bihruz Bey syndrome which is so eloquently depicted in Recaizade Ekrem’s novel generates a criticism against such cosmetic Westernization.

It is obvious that there were many Bihruz Beys in the Ottoman society at that particular historical juncture who were characterized by their imitative Westernization. The criticisms that were directed against them focused on their exaggerated adoption of Western materialism at the expense of indigenous cultural traits. The criticisms that were directed against Felatun Beys and Bihruz Beys point to the evolution of what Mardin calls the ‘just discourse’ in Turkish society. Drawing on the dichotomous classification of the Ottoman Empire with an elite stratum of military and civilian establishment on the one hand, and a folk stratum of the administered, on the other, Mardin maintains that the ensuing duality appears in a number of guises that sets a neat separation between Ottoman political society and civil society. In raising the issue of the ‘cause of the just’ or the ‘just discourse’, Mardin portrays the ‘lingering modern feeling that the folk are a part of a ‘team of the just’’. More significantly, Mardin points to the way the ‘just discourse’ is embedded within the Islamic discourse in modern Turkey enabling the folk to seek protection from the changes introduced by Western-oriented Republican reforms. Hence, the rift between the teams of the unjust and the just was produced and reproduced in the course of the modernization of the Ottomans, representing the ‘high’, ‘palace’ culture or the culture of the elites and the ‘little’, ‘folk’ culture, respectively.

It is obvious that with modernization efforts while the ‘cause of the unjust’ was affiliated with the Westernizing elites – hence critically portraying their affluent and spend-thrift life styles, ‘the cause of the just’ which is characterized by a sense of grievance gradually began to be embraced by the Islamic discourse. The reforms introduced by the young Turks and the Republicans which continued a modernizing trend that was set with Tanzimat,
purported to replace from above the Islamic teachings about a ‘good and just’ life.’ This eventually paved the way to the identification of the Kemalist secularists with the rule of the unjust. The Republican regime simply could not fill the vacuum that was formed with the estrangement and delinking of the discourses of the just and the unjust from each other.

A preoccupation with this balance between modernity and tradition, Western materialism and Eastern spirituality as well as Civilization – based on the premises of Enlightenment – and Culture – based on the premises of Romanticism – is a recurring theme accompanying Turkish modernization. The desire to achieve such a balance is nowhere better expressed than in Ziya Gökalp’s (1876–1924) works. Ziya Gökalp’s ideas were wavering between the three trends of Islamism, Turkism, and Westernism, hence, reflecting the political climate of the context in which he was located. As Niyazi Berkes puts it: ‘He was fighting within himself the battle that intellectuals and politicians were raging on other levels’.20

Ziya Gökalp produced his basic writings between the years 1911 and 1918 when he was associated with the Party of Union and Progress against the emotional background of the period laden with nationalist movements among the non-Muslim and non-Turkish peoples of the decadent Ottoman Empire. While on the one hand, there were those intellectuals and politicians who opted for a social reconstruction by way of reversion to Şeriat (Islamic law), there were those who staunchly supported the idea of Westernization, on the other. In addition to these two groups, there were others who longed for the romantic ideal of the pre-Islamic Turkic unity. Ziya Gökalp was influenced by all of these trends. Yet, he envisaged a middle road in the tradition of Namık Kemal: ‘that only the material civilization of Europe should be taken and not its non-material aspects’.21 Yet, contrary to Namık Kemal’s thought, Ziya Gökalp did not think that the individual and his reason could be a criteria for social reconstruction. Ziya Gökalp rather signified a shift from Tanzimat rationalism inspired by the eighteenth century thinkers of the European Enlightenment to the nineteenth century Romantic thought in the tradition of the German philosophers by accepting the transcendental reality of society identified with the nation instead of individual reason. Berkes sums up Ziya Gökalp’s convictions in the following manner: ‘As the ultimate reality of contemporary society is the nation, and as national ideals are ultimate forces orienting the behavior of the individuals, so the most urgent task for the Turks consisted of awakening as a nation in order to adapt themselves to the conditions of contemporary civilization’.22

Ziya Gökalp believed that it was the primary task of sociology to determine ‘what the Turkish people already possessed or lacked to be a modern nation’.23 He diagnosed the major ailment of the existing cultural climate in Turkey within the dichotomous representations of the East and the West. Accordingly,
he believed in the necessity of an adjustment between the two aspects of social life, namely civilization and culture. Ziya Gökalp believed that civilization simply became a matter of mechanical imitation without a cultural basis. The source of cultural values was located in the social unit that he called ‘nation’. Hence, he tried to give momentum to the rise of the concept of a modern Turkish nation as an independent cultural unit within the confines of contemporary civilization. He placed a lot of emphasis on the concept of ‘nation’ in coming to terms with the adjustment of culture and civilization. Ziya Gökalp’s analyses contained the premises of both Enlightenment and Romanticism symbolized in the concepts of civilization and culture, respectively. By the same token, the nationalism that he described contained elements of individual liberty, rational cosmopolitanism, and universalism while at the same time tended for its own self-preservation. In short, it contained elements of both a cosmopolitan French nationalism and an organic, anti-Western and anti- enlightenment German nationalism. This paradoxical synthesis, first of all, posed the national question in the Turkish context as an insoluble problem; secondly it assigned a particular role to the refined intellect in transforming the popular consciousness by an elitist project from above. The latter had paved the way to the evolution of an official Turkish identity within the confines of a peculiar Turkish nationalism that was adopted in the course of the formative years of the Turkish Republic.

The national question poses itself theoretically as an insoluble problem in the Turkish context. Chatterjee explains the theoretical insolubility of the national question in colonial countries by pointing to a distinction between the thematic and problematic levels of nationalist thought. In so doing, Chatterjee draws a great deal from Anouar Abdel-Malek’s distinction between the thematic and problematic levels of Orientalism. Accordingly, Orientalism at the level of the thematic is ‘codified in linguistic conventions’. It is a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident, the East and the West. Orientalism, at the level of the problematic, on the other hand, involves a separation of the Orient as an object of study stamped with an otherness that is passive and non-participant. Edward Said’s description of Flaubert’s encounter with an Egyptian courtesan, which produced a widely influential model of an Oriental woman portrays Orientalism at the level of the problematic:

... she never spoke of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence, or history. He spoke for and represented her. He was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuk Hanem physically but to speak for her and tell his readers in what way she was ‘typically Oriental’.
It is obvious that Said’s description points to a power relation between the Orient and the Occident that enables the latter to dominate the former. Therefore, the subjectivity of the object is denied to him/her. Orientalism at the level of the problematic is analogous to ‘an understanding of meaning in terms of the subjective intentions that lie behind particular speech acts.’

When these two levels of Orientalism are transposed to the nationalist thought, the compatibility between the two levels extinguishes. At the level of the thematic, nationalist thought adopts the same essentialist distinction between the Orient and the Occident or the East and the West. Therefore, the object still retains the essentialist Oriental character. Yet, at the level of the problematic, the nationalist thought, quite contrary to Orientalism, relinquishes the subjectivity of the object who henceforth is no longer passive, and non-participant. Since the subject is the advocate of an anti-colonial, anti-Western nationalist cause, ‘he is seen to possess a “subjectivity” which he can himself “make”.’

The active, autonomous, sovereign subject is burdened with the mission of carrying an anti-colonial nationalist movement at the level of the problematic. It is obvious that in the nationalist discourse while the object retains its essentialist, passive Oriental character at the level of the thematic which condemns its subjectivity, it is also positioned in an active role in the anti-colonial nationalist struggle at the level of the problematic. These two levels of nationalist thought are inherently contradictory. It is this contradictory which places the national question as an insoluble problem in a post-colonial country. As Chatterjee puts its: ‘There is, consequently, an inherent contradictory in nationalist thinking, because it reasons within a framework of knowledge whose representational structure corresponds to the very structure of power nationalist thought seeks to repudiate.’

Despite the fact that Turkey was not a colony, a similar contradictory and insolubility results from the adoption of a Westernization project while at the same time clinging on to distinctive cultural traits. The paradox of Turkish nationalism which resulted in both a hostility towards and an imitation of Western ways has accompanied the modernization process since the turn of the nineteenth century. Accordingly, it is quite obvious that Turkish nationalism was not the awakening of Turks to national consciousness. It was rather a project undertaken by intellectuals whose discourse was laden with the dilemma of a choice between imitation and identity stemming from the aforementioned paradox. The intellectuals, in Chatterjee’s words,

always face the crucial dilemma between ‘westernizing’ and a nareodnik tendency . . . But the dilemma is quite spurious: ultimately the movements invariably contain both elements, a genuine modernism and a more or less spurious concern for local culture . . . By the twentieth century, the dilemma hardly bothers anyone: the philosopher-kings of
the ‘underdeveloped’ world all act as westernizers, and all talk like narodniki.30

The superior material qualities of the West, its science and technology, however, can only be synthesized with the spirituality of the East with a project ‘from without’ which necessarily involves the intellectuals who take upon themselves the task of transforming a popular consciousness ‘steeped in centuries of superstition and irrational folk religion’.31 By adopting a positivistic stance that was intolerant towards the religio-mystical tradition, the Republican elites in Turkey instigated a distancing of popular, religious elements that thenceforth represented the ‘cause of the just.’

The proclamation of the Republic in 1923 was followed by the abolition of the office of the caliphate in 1924. Other steps were taken in the course of the 1920s and early 1930s towards secularizing the Republic. These included the abolition of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Pious Foundations, abolition of religious courts, proscription of male religious headgear, namely the fez, dissolution of the dervish orders, reform of the calendar, and adoption of the Swiss Civil Code. By the end of the 1920s, radical reforms were passed such as disestablishment of the state religion (10 April 1928), adoption of the Latin alphabet (1 November 1928), and the use of the Turkish language in the Islamic call to prayer (3 February 1932).32 These reforms constituted an onslaught on the existing cultural practices. They opted for a general state of amnesia which would lead to a process of estrangement of the people from some of their own cultural practices. Feroz Ahmad refers to the adoption of the Latin alphabet in place of the Arabic script as the ‘most iconoclastic reform of the period.’33 He says: ‘At a stroke, even the literate people were cut off from their past. Overnight, virtually the entire nation was made illiterate’.34

The notion of an Islamic state was anathema to the Republican elites organized around the Republican People’s Party. They wanted Turkey to reach to the level of contemporary civilization by emphasizing notions such as science, modern education, rationality and secularism. The 1920s and the 1930s were crucial years in the making of the new Republican Turkey and the emergence of the ‘new Turks’.35 In the course of this transformation, there were certain critical turning points that portrayed the gradually increasing conflict between the state and the civil society. In fact, one of the first opposition parties that was founded in November 1924, the Progressive Republican Party – led by ex-officers like Ali Fuad Cebesoy and Rauf Orbay, opted for ‘restoring the sovereignty of the people over that of the state’.36 The Progressive Republicans declared their commitment to liberalism and promised to respect religious opinions and beliefs. Yet, their attempts to pose themselves as a viable opposition failed when an extraordinary law – Takrir-i Sükun Kanunu (the Law for the Maintenance of Order) – was passed in March 1925 as a
response to a Kurdish rebellion that broke out in eastern Anatolia in February. Thereafter, all the opposition to the Kemalist regime was either crushed or was ‘created’ by the regime itself which was acting as a ‘referee’. After prompting the establishment of the token Republican Free Party in 1930 as the opposition, Atatürk advised the leaders of the two political parties (İsmet İnönü and Fethi Okyar) in the following manner: ‘I am now a father. Both of you are my sons. As far as I am concerned there is no difference between the two of you. What I want from you in the Grand National Assembly is an open debate upon national issues.’

The February 1925 rebellion was launched and sustained in religious terms. It confirmed the fears of the Republican leaders of religious reaction and counter-revolution in a society in which a revolution was being realized from above. The Law for the Maintenance of Order gave the government virtually absolute powers for the next two years and on other occasions until March 1929. The 1924 rebellion and the ensuing extraordinary legislation was a dress rehearsal of the dynamics of the Republican regime which was determined by the undisputed principle of the indivisibility of the country. It was through such critical turning points that the Republican regime finally established itself in a centralized fashion.

Another turning point which furthered the centralization of the Republican regime was the incident in Menemen, near İzmir, in November 1930, where a violent reaction erupted which was directed against the secular military-bureaucratic elites. The disturbance began when a reserve officer in the local gendarmerie was sent to Menemen to quell a disturbance caused by Derviş Mehmed of the Nakşibendi mystical order who claimed that he was the Mahdi, who had come to save the world. The reserve officer was seized by the raging crowd, beheaded, and his head was stuck on a flag pole and paraded around the town. The Menemen incident is critical in channelling the subsequent route of the Republican regime since it made it quite clear to the Republican elites that the reforms that were undertaken in the 1920s had not taken root. It manifested in no uncertain terms the erasure of the link between the causes of the unjust and the just, manifested in the centre and the periphery, respectively. As Mardin puts it: ‘... between 1923 and 1946 the periphery – in the sense of the provinces – was suspect and because it was considered an area of potential disaffection, the political center kept it under close observation'.

In the period after 1930, the efforts of the Republican elites were more systematically geared towards creating a new ideology. In May 1931, the ideology of Kemalism was launched in accordance with the principles adopted at the Third Party Congress of the Republican People’s Party. Accordingly, the six fundamental and unchanging principles of the regime were defined as Republicanism, Nationalism, Populism, Statism, Secularism and Revolutionism/Reformism. The insignia of the six arrows of the Republican
Peoples’ Party represent the premises of the Turkish Republic that were formulated at that time. Since liberalism and democracy had already been discredited in the eyes of the Republican elites in the 1930s due to the instability of the regimes in Western Europe, they were not included within the founding principles of the Republic. Moreover, the principles of liberalism and democracy did not coincide with the interests of the Republican elites internally since they were constantly trying to tighten their grip on the periphery. The efforts of the Republican elites to create a systematic ideology led to the publication of a monthly called Kadro. Kadro, which began publication in Ankara in January 1932, aimed at ‘creating an ideology original to the regime’.39 The Kemalist regime tightened its grip over the periphery in the aftermath of revolts such as the 1925 Kurdish rebellion — which was actually a religious reaction — and the 1930 Menemen incident. In fact, the dynamics of events that paved the way to overt attempts at creating a Republican ideology from above manifested a latent fear of the Kemalist elites that Anatolia would be split on primordial group lines.40 That fear channelled the Kemalist elites towards further social engineering.

By 1930, it was generally agreed by the Republican elites that the reforms that were undertaken in the course of the 1920s had not taken root. This problem was to be remedied with further reforms from above that were geared towards creating a new Turk. The emerging new Turkish identity, then, was distinguished by its manufactured character. Turks were a ‘made’ nation by virtue of emphasizing their difference from the Ottomans along the similar Jacobin lines that the French revolutionaries followed in creating the Frenchman. The fervent desire to break with the past was clearly manifested in the ensuing reforms. From 1923 onwards, the new Turks were to be governed from their new capital at the heart of Anatolia, Ankara, in a mental state that was havoc and can perhaps best be described as ‘voluntary amnesia’. The Republican state had the mission of elevating people to the level of contemporary civilization. Since any peripheral revolt was interpreted as an effort to revive the old religious order, Republican reforms contained anti-religious themes or in the words of Mardin ‘showed a clear distaste for religion’.41 The plain fact remained, however, that the Kemalist ideology could not replace Islam in the lives of the people. The teachings of the Kemalist doctrine were internalized only by the intelligentsia which contributed to the widening of the rift between the center and the periphery.

The Republican elites’ attempts to create an ideology was only skin-deep and not espoused by all the classes. The Republic was founded upon principles that were not genuine but were rather manufactured from above. In short, the Republic was not democratic. Democracy was not one of the six arrows of the Republican People’s Party.

In the aftermath of the military coup on 12 September 1980, a trend was set
in Turkey towards challenging the early Kemalist principles. Such a trend was set in the political atmosphere created in the aftermath of the 1982 Constitution which curbed the number of categories of the state elites, that is, the appointed rather than elected bureaucratic and military elites. The evolution of the Turkish democracy involved a constant conflict between the state elites and political elites, namely, the elected representatives of political parties, who emphasized the vertical and horizontal dimensions of democracy, respectively. It is obvious that an undue stress on the vertical dimension maintaining the long-term interests of the community paves the way to the evolution of strong states that block the development of pluralism and/or civil society. An undue stress on the horizontal dimension, i.e. political participation, leads to debilitating pluralism. Hence the problematique of democracy lies in the achievement of a balance between these two dimensions. In the words of Metin Heper:

The problematique democracy faces is the necessity of striking a balance between political participation and prudent leadership. By definition, increased participation democratizes political regimes, but the consolidation of democracy necessitates the less dramatic but equally significant process of the emergence of a prudent, not merely a responsive government.

It is obvious that the state elites re instituted their powers throughout Turkish political history whenever they felt that the political elites gained too much independence. Hence, the political elites were allowed to play their roles in a system in which the state elites had traditionally been more established. Since the time of the drafting of the early Republican principles the state elites had always felt that they had the last word on vital matters. They took it upon themselves to protect the early Republican ideals that came to be symbolized in the six arrows of the Republican People’s Party. Hence, the three military interventions (1960–61, 1971–73, 1980–83) were undertaken in order to reinstitute these early ideals that the political elites had ostensibly ignored. The tradition of resolving the conflict between the state elites and the political elites by reinstituting the powers of the former and by punishing the latter had among other things led to the mystification of an official, absolute, and monolithic Turkish identity.

The 1980s opened up a new chapter in Turkey’s political dynamics. Many international and internal factors were influential in prompting this opening. The end of Cold War rhetoric, the opening up of new foreign policy arenas for Turkey, globalization and a score of internal factors pertaining to the Turkish political structure heralded this new era in Turkish politics. Perhaps one of the most critical consequences of the process of globalization is the shattering
of homogenous, standardized cultures in an international order whose main political actors were the nation-states. Globalization paradoxically led to the emergence of local identities. The liberal economic policies which were adopted in Turkey in the early 1980s were geared towards global integration. This process was accelerated by the exposure of the Turkish public to global television channels such as CNN and BBC. Moreover, the emergence of various Turkish television channels has lessened the importance of the official Turkish Radio and Television that had been instrumental in maintaining the monolithic Turkish identity.

The internal political dynamics set in the post-1980 period had certain characteristics which connected Turkey with the international global medium. First of all, the post-1983 regime strengthened the political elites in Turkey as a prelude to further democratization. Secondly, the new discourse of the state elites began to make references to the significance of the Islamic identity of the Turks. This discourse led to the abandonment of Kemalism as a political manifesto. It is true that Kemalist principles were still emphasized in this period although not for the sake of creating a monolithic Turkish identity but rather arresting the spread of Marxism, fascism, and religious fundamentalism. The new discourse of the state elites, on the other hand, were laden with references to the significance of religious values for the Turks. Such references represented a stark contrast when compared with the early Kemalist-secular discourse of the state elites. Despite the fact that such a shift was probably prompted by an urge to fight communism rather than by a genuine renewed interest in Turkish identity, it led to a legitimation of the "cause of the just" represented by the Islamic periphery. Islam had finally been brought from the periphery to the centre of Turkish politics as the antidote of communism. Thirdly, many civil societal elements were able to find for themselves a breathing space in this medium in which the grip of the centre over the periphery was gradually being removed. This has led to the emergence of women activists marching to protest against being battered by men, environmentalists, homosexuals and transsexuals seeking the protection of their rights, and Islamic university students protesting against university dress codes. The mushrooming of such civil societal elements coupled with the new mission of the technocratic elites of the 1980s who 'defined their goal less in terms of educating the people than of synthesizing Islamic values and pragmatic rationality' gave rise to a political climate that allowed the search for a more historically rooted Turkish identity.45

In the course of these developments there also emerged those groups who were critical of these shifts in the discourse of the state elites and expressed a clear wish for the reinstatement of the official Turkish identity which was viewed as secular, nationalist, statist, republican, populist, and reformist in an early Republican sense. The debates and clashes between the Kemalist-secular
groups and others who are tolerant towards religious images have begun to represent the newly polarized political cleavages in Turkey in the 1990s.

It is meaningful to refer at this point to the manner in which the Westernist and Islamic discourses are interwoven in the Turkish context in spite of the fact that both trends in their current political manifestations are waging a war to exclude one another. In other words, while the secular Westernists are increasingly becoming more hostile to religious images by relying on and commodifying the image of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the religious groups are increasing their attacks on the decadent Western culture. Ironically, Atatürk who set the trajectory of Turkish modernization towards a zealous Westernization, had never abandoned the rhetoric of a synthesis between the West and Islam. In fact, he adopted for himself and for the Turkish military the title ‘gazi’ (connoting a crusading spirit shared by the Muslims who waged wars against the infidel). Ironically, the syntactic and semantic structure of the discourse of the Islamists who have attacked the decadence of the West of the past decade is laden with representations of post-Enlightenment rational thought. İsmet Özel, for instance, who is a prominent Islamic poet in Turkey has titled his autobiography: Waldo, Sen Neden Burada Degilsin? (Waldo, Why Aren’t You Here?), which is a statement made by an American thinker Henry David Thoreau when his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson came to visit him in jail.46

The above analysis endeavoured to show the connections between the paradox of Turkish nationalism and the emergence of a Jacobin, ‘managerial’ intelligentsia during the early years of the Republic. Turkish nationalism contained the premises of an Enlightenment mentality as well as a brand of Romanticism. It purported to synthesize the materialism of the West and certain indigenous cultural traits such as Islam, as well as pre-Islamic Turkic traditions. The origins of the attempts to realize such a synthesis date back to the beginnings of Turkish modernization with the Tanzimat reforms. Such a synthesis could only be realized by a social engineering from above that was undertaken by the early Republican elites. The early Republican reforms which were represented in the Republican People’s Party’s six arrows contained a clear distaste for religion. The reforms instigated during the early Republican years represented a turning point regarding the managerial role of the state geared towards revamping the old social institutions. It is at this historical juncture that the links between the discourse of the periphery and the centre were erased. The early Republican project of social engineering reproduced itself whenever there emerged peripheral revolts challenging the unquestioned authority of the centre. Even the opposition parties were founded in accordance with the limitations posed by the ruling centre. The Republican
state which fostered a Jacobin mentality, led to the creation of an official, monolithic, absolute Turkish identity either by suppressing or by ignoring the multiple identities that came to be imprisoned in the periphery.

The political climate that prevailed in the 1980s and the early 1990s has opened the Kemalist Pandora's box out of which have emerged multiple identities making references to the different sects of Islam and the Kurds. It remains to be seen whether the political dynamics of Turkey have reached a point of no return in this context.

NOTES


7. Ibid., p.6.

8. Ibid.


12. Ibid., p.16.


15. See Şerif Mardin, Türk Modernleşmesi (Turkish Modernization), (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1991), pp. 36–37, for a review of Felatun Bey and Rakım Efendi within the context of Turkish modernization.


18. Ibid., p.114

19. Ibid., p.126.


22. Ibid., p.22.

23. Ibid.


28. Ibid., p.38.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., p.4 (italics as in the original text).

31. Ibid., p.51.


34. Ibid.


40. Şerif Mardin, ‘Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics?’, p.177.


46. Şerif Mardin elaborates on this point in ‘The Just and the Unjust’.