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The racialization of Kurdish identity in Turkey

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Abstract

Until the 1990s, the Kurdish issue in Turkey largely involved the Turkish state, an ethnic group and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK). The 2000s witnessed community-level clashes between Kurds and Turks, signalling the Turkish population’s rise as an actor in the issue. This paper makes two claims. First, communal clashes indicate that Kurdish identity is not an ethnic identity alone, but is experiencing a racialization process, based on four indicators: emphasis on physical characteristics in the definitions of Kurds; linking Kurdish identity with the absence of certain moral characteristics; the increasing assignment, rather than self-assertion, of Kurdish identity; and discourses of racial extinction. Second, the racialization of Kurdish identity corresponds to historical change in conceptions of diversity. Racialization became possible after a distinct Kurdish identity was recognized but normatively unwelcomed.

Keywords: racialization; race; ethnicity; Kurds; Turkey; Kurdish issue.

Introduction

In September 2008, life in Altinova, a town in western Turkey, was shattered by a three-day bout of violence. When several Kurdish youths and Turkish residents exchanged words over the music from a Kurdish resident’s vehicle, a small group gathered and reportedly attacked the father of a Kurdish youth, who then drove his truck into the crowd, killing two Turkish locals. This led to widespread looting of local Kurdish businesses. Kurdish residents complained that local Turks equated them with terrorists affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), which the government considers a terrorist organization. Indeed, rumours about the sightings of PKK flags and militants may have prolonged the attacks. This inter-communal clash was not an
isolated incident. Since 2004, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have reported tensions between Turkish and Kurdish residents of cities in western Turkey (Blum and Çelik 2007).

This paper hinges on a central observation: the 1990s and 2000s witnessed a new phase in the unfolding of the Kurdish question because of fundamental changes in the actors involved. The struggle had largely been limited to two opponent groups: the Turkish state and an ethnic group (the Kurds), and the Turkish state and the PKK. Yet, the conflict has expanded to community-level tensions between ordinary Turkish and Kurdish citizens in contemporary Turkey (Blum and Çelik 2007; Gambetti 2007).

What caused this turn of events? The official view propagated until the 1990s framed the issue as one of security, refusing to recognize Kurds and Turks as ethnic groups and rendering unthinkable direct interactions between them in the absence of state mediation. Today, government officials and media pundits still hesitate to frame recent popular clashes as group-based incidents, instead explaining events with reference to provocation and agitation, generally using the euphemism ‘people of Eastern origin’ (i.e. Kurds). This paper makes two central claims. First, recent events signal that Kurdish identity in Turkey is experiencing a racialization process. Racialization assigns ‘racial meaning to a previously unclassified relationship, social practice, or group’ (Winant 1994, p. 59). It is a process in which human characteristics, both physical and cultural, acquire racial significance and constitute foundations for classifying individuals into groups, turning what is complex and nuanced into immutable phenomena (Silverstein 2005). As Rattansi (2005) argues, the concept emphasizes a process and can be used more productively than race and racism; however, ‘it is not always clear what the race in racialisation refers to’ (Murji and Solomos 2005, p. 4). Racialization is essentially a process of forming a race out of a collection of perceived group characteristics. Without an explicit conversation with the concept of race and its formations, racialization remains vague. Here, following Cornell and Hartmann (2007), I examine the differences and overlaps between race and ethnicity in the case of Turkey’s Kurds. I argue that Kurdish ethnic identity is in the process of acquiring racial characteristics.

The second central claim is that the racialization of Kurdish identity corresponds to historical changes in conceptions of diversity. In thinking about race, we need, beyond purely definitional enterprises, a racial formations perspective that pays attention to historical processes in which racial conceptions emerge (Omi and Winant 1994). Racialization in the Turkish context has only become possible after the difference of Kurdish identity was recognized rather than denied, but when the newly recognized diversity is not normatively welcomed, neither by state officials nor citizens. Social diversity can be conceptualized along three
dimensions: (1) the actual existence and extent of diversity, and its recognition; every group situation involves diversity, yet acknowledging diversity is not automatic; (2) the normative evaluation of diversity; embracing diversity is an important issue in complex multicultural societies today; and (3) the social, legal, cultural and economic policies that address the question of incorporating diversity in a coherent framework. Diversity does not necessarily imply fragmentation (Hartmann and Gerteis 2005), because coexistence is inseparable from diversity. The following question emerges only after recognizing a distinct Kurdish identity: ‘Do we want to live together?’ This paper discusses the shift of the Kurdish question in Turkey from the first to the second, and ultimately third dimension. After 1990, embracing racialized differences is becoming a strong alternative to coexistence, rivalling the pre-1990 policy of denying difference. Rather than being exceptional incidents, community-level violence between Kurds and Turks corresponds to this particular configuration of diversity. In a context where diversity is recognized but undervalued and where the state’s former monopoly of mediation has weakened, Kurdish identity is being exposed to racialization.

Background

Kurds are one of the world’s largest transnational and stateless ethnic groups. As a language/ethnic group, they comprise 14–16 per cent of Turkey’s population (Koc, Hancioglu and Cavlin 2008), and neither form a linguistically or religiously homogeneous group, nor exclusively inhabit a particular region, although they represent the majority in Turkey’s eastern parts. Economic migration since the 1950s increased Kurdish population in western cities. The conflict’s escalation in the 1990s resulted in forced displacement (Ayata and Yükseker 2005), which dispersed millions of Kurds throughout Turkey. Several studies demonstrate large inequalities between Kurds and Turks: Kurds tend to have higher levels of poverty, unemployment and fertility, and lower levels of educational attainment and literacy (İçduyuğ, Romano and Sirkeci 1999; Smits and Gündüz-Hoşgör 2003; Koc, Hancioglu and Cavlin 2008).

The Kurdish conflict is enmeshed with the history of nationalism and modernization, especially in early republican Turkey (1923–50). Minority issues generate controversy because of deep-seated suspicions among Turks – called the Sèvres Syndrome, implying that the West intends to dismantle the country’s territorial integrity (Blum and Çelik 2007). The Treaty of Sèvres (1920), which planned the establishment of a Kurdish state, was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), which defined a limited group of non-Muslims as minorities. Today, only major non-Muslim groups are officially recognized...
minorities. International developments such as the US-led wars in Iraq in 1991–92 and 2002 and the subsequent establishment of a federal Kurdistan in Northern Iraq in 2004 have fuelled fears that Turkey’s territorial integrity is under threat (Tank 2005).

Religion has historically been important for Kurdish identity. Being predominantly Muslim, Kurds felt assimilative pressures much more than non-Muslim minorities, because in the republic’s formative years Islam signalled cultural belonging. Although the modernizing elite pursued secularizing policies, citizenship and immigration policies suggest preference for Sunni Muslims (Kirişçi 2000). Religion also helped the modernizing elite to subsume Kurdish unrest under Islamic fundamentalism. Several popular uprisings – for example, the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1925 – were framed as religious reaction (Brockett 1998), which contributed to denials of Kurdish identity thereafter. Until 1938, eighteen Kurdish rebellions occurred, yet they became ‘Kurdish’ only after 1980 (Çelik 2010). Only with the demise of the modernizationist paradigm, which interpreted ethnic challenges to state authority as religious reaction, in the 1990s do we see the emergence of a discursive space for the Kurdish issue – formerly a taboo – in ethnic terms.

In the absence of official minority status, Kurds encountered assimilation (McDowall 2004; Yegen 2007), but its extent is contentious (Heper 2007). After 1924 constitutions defined all citizens as Turkish. The state did not tolerate cultural expressions of Kurdish identity, for example publicly speaking one of the Kurdish languages (McDowall 2004). The 1950 transition to multiparty democracy has changed Turkey’s political field. Following military interventions in 1960, 1971 and 1980, Kurdish calls for separatism intensified (Barkey and Fuller 1997). The PKK’s establishment conflated the issue with terrorism in public opinion (Dixon and Ergin 2010), which became more divided especially after the 1991 Gulf War. This period witnessed relaxation together with escalation, especially during the presidency of Turgut Özal, himself of Kurdish ancestry. The government’s declaration of emergency law in thirteen majority-Kurdish-populated provinces in 1987 was followed by conflict between 1991 and 1999, when many deaths and human rights violations occurred (Çelik 2010). Despite brief episodes of escalation, the 2000s witnessed improvements, because Turkey’s bid for EU membership re-framed the issue in terms of rights. The emergency rule and the ban on Kurdish languages were lifted in 2002 and 2004, respectively. The government established a TV channel broadcasting entirely in the major Kurdish languages (Kurmanji, Sorani and Zaza), and in 2009 declared a ‘Kurdish initiative’ – a comprehensive package meant to resolve the issue quickly.
The historical transformation of Kurdish identity

Acknowledging Kurdish identity occurred only in the 1990s. It is telling that intellectuals and politicians wishing to introduce Kurdish identity to public debates preferred the term ‘Kürt realitesi’ (Kurdish reality), demonstrating the first dimension of diversity: actual Kurdish existence in Turkey (and by implication the absurdity of refusing to acknowledge Kurds). This gesture marked the end of assimilationism, mostly as a consequence of PKK activities since 1984.

Two main concerns shaped assimilation efforts: perceptions of modernization and definitions of Turkish identity. The modernization of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century brought efforts by elites to emphasize the empire’s Turkishness and to relegate Kurds to uncivilized others (Yeğen 2007). Nation building in republican Turkey continued this process of ethnicization, and political expectations demanded non-Turkish ethnic allegiances to be private issues (Keyder 2004, p. 73). Considerations for local autonomy in the early 1920s were passed over when they appeared in tension with westernization (Mango 1999). The subsequent rise of assimilation was a product both of efforts to imagine a homogeneous nation, and of authoritarian attempts to modernize the country without dealing with complex local conditions.

Definitions of Turkishness subjected assimilation to inevitable tensions. On the one hand, republican policies placed an ethnic Turkish core at the centre of citizenship (Yeğen 2004). Although Kurds faced assimilation more intensely than non-Muslim minorities, republican reformers had doubts about Kurdish belonging in terms of culture and language. The very attempt to assimilate suggests tacit acceptance of difference. On the other hand, widespread scholarly mobilization in that period sought the origins of Turks in ancient history (Ergin 2008). Ambitious but now discredited intellectual attempts entertained the possibility of Turks as an original source of world civilization and Turkish as an original human language, making assimilation actually unnecessary.

The tension between these two logics – the first one exclusive, the second inclusive – led to paradoxical positions. The first logic assumed that Kurds were different, hence needing assimilation. The second logic assumed that, although currently different, Kurds were essentially Turkish. In this complex equation, assimilation became a tool to uncover Kurds’ Turkish essence and eliminate their current difference. Here emerged a paradigm that shaped the Kurdish issue until the 1990s. Popular prejudices – for example ‘tailed-Kurds’ (McDowall 2004, pp. 405, 409) – existed following the 1930s as vestiges of the first logic, especially targeting Kurdish children studying in boarding schools, a tool of assimilation (Yeğen 2009, p. 605). However, the
term ‘Kurd’ largely disappeared from circulation after the Sheikh Said Rebellion, and ‘race’ for Kurds was used only to deny Kurdish identity in pseudo-scientific studies and governmental reports (Toprak 2012, pp. 531–84). Government officials and large segments of the population believed Kurds to be ‘future Turks’ (Yeğen 2007) and envisioned a war between forces of Kurdish tribal backwardness and the republican promise of modernity. The following years witnessed extra-ethnic discourses explaining the Kurdish issue in terms of law and order, the provocation of external powers, and underdevelopment and regional inequalities (Yeğen 1999, 2007). These approaches sought diverse roots behind the Kurdish issue: a bunch of bandits; a changing constellation of international actors, such as the USA, the EU, Turkey’s Arab neighbours or communists, provoking the Kurdish issue; or poverty and lack of education causing underdevelopment. Uniting this eclectic collection was a denial of Kurdish identity.

Until the 1990s, the Kurdish issue remained a tug of war between activists and organizations that demanded recognition and state officials who refused such recognition. While the term ‘Kurdish reality’ signalled the increasing recognition, state officials’ responses contained mixed messages that weakened human rights improvements – for example, following widespread Kurdish demonstrations and flag-burning instances in 2005, the Turkish General Staff called protestors ‘pseudo-citizens’ (Yeğen 2009, p. 610). Therefore, one should not underestimate the role of the state and prevailing nationalism (Karakoç 2011) in the contemporary marginalization of Kurds. For the majority Turks, the newly involved actors in the conflict, the recognition of Turkey’s Kurdish minority resulted in a challenge: the necessity of an ethical response to the ‘Kurdish reality’. The word ‘ethical’ here refers to a dimension that follows recognition and concerns normative evaluation of differences. The refusal to recognize Kurdish existence was tragic, but also convenient for Turks. It was tragic because the official position denied identity to a group of people who demanded recognition. Assimilationism was convenient because the ‘Kurds-as-future-Turks’ argument postponed the necessary development of an ethical stance towards diversity. Therefore, while assimilation presented a questionable policy for the government, at the inter-community level it held difficult ethical questions at bay. Turks who believed that no Kurds, except for ‘Mountain Turks’ who speak a different dialect of Turkish, lived in Turkey did not feel the urge to engage with diversity. The transition in the 1990s represents the tensions between the convenient absence of recognition in the past and the necessity of facing diversity today. The normative response to now-recognized diversity may be a refusal to coexist as much as embracing difference.
Community-level tensions between Kurds and Turks indicate a particular historical moment in which the reality of diversity is recognized, but its desirability rejected. Saracoğlu’s (2009) innovative formulation ‘exclusive recognition’, based on his fieldwork in Izmir, a city with a growing Kurdish population, marks the end of the Kurds-as-future-Turks paradigm. Others have shown similar examples of ethnic tension in Istanbul, especially after urban renewal projects disturb patterns of ethnic segregation (Bartu Candan and Kolluoğlu 2008, pp. 25–6). For Saracoğlu (2011, pp. 4–5), exclusive recognition includes four characteristics: (1) recognition of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group; (2) extension of recognition to particular encounters in urban settings; (3) discursive generalization of exclusion through stereotypes; and (4) stereotypes exclusively used against Kurds. The recognition seems to have arrived in a context of anti-Kurdish discursive exclusion linked with spatial segregation, increasing inequalities and occasional violent confrontations.

Saracoğlu (2011, pp. 10–18) raises several arguments against using racialization literature: (1) there is no historical memory of ethnic conflict between Turks and Kurds; (2) there are no homogenous Turkish and Kurdish ethnic groups; (3) there is no common Turkish view regarding the Kurds; and (4) ethnic groups other than Turks use anti-Kurdish discourses, too. The first claim supports one of the premises of this paper – namely, we face a novel phenomenon. The remaining objections are not necessarily specific to the Kurdish case. In no ethnic or racial conflict are there homogenous groups sharing a homogenous perspective, although it is not clear why this makes racialization inapplicable. Racial discourses are always fragmented, but nonetheless powerful. Regardless of the complexities of group formation (racial groups are never given, but socially constructed), or the novelty of community-level clashes (race is a dynamic concept, showing immense variation across time and space), we observe a process of racialization.

Also, neoliberalism and race are closely related because individualism and privatization render the operation of race less visible and insidious (Goldberg 2009). Global neoliberal transformations in urban spaces demonstrate that transferring the state’s regulatory mechanisms to the market under conditions of formal democracy does not necessarily lead to the eradication of racial inequalities (Samara 2010). From a class perspective, anti-Kurdish discourses hinder social mobility in urban settings and maintain established privileges of the middle and upper classes. Comparative cases have been made for the headscarf ban in Turkey (Rankin and Aytac 2008; Guveli 2011). Changes in Kurdish migration, too, coincide with neoliberalism, because the rise of neoliberalism has shattered governmental networks of welfare support and made larger population segments, Kurds and
The racialization of Kurdish identity

Economic restructuring under neoliberalism may well have contributed to recent shifts in the perception of Kurds. However, this should not blind us to the fact that discourses used in encounters between Kurds and Turks are acquiring racial elements. The conflation of race and class does not make race any less significant. Irrespective of the root causes and trajectory of anti-Kurdish sentiments, popular anti-Kurdish discourses have increasingly constructed Kurds as a racial group. We have at hand a striking example of contemporary racialization.

Below, I describe instances of the racialization of Kurdish identity in Turkey, keeping in mind that the complex terrain ahead prevents us from drawing absolute boundaries between race and ethnicity. The majority of the evidence comes from self-identified secular Turks, the historical architects and guardians of state-sponsored nationalism, who were especially vocal about the Kurdish issue after 1990.

Increasing emphasis on physical characteristics

Max Weber (1978, p. 389) defines ethnic groups as ‘entertain[ing] a subjective belief in their common descent’. Ethnicity contrasts with kinship, because the former is a constructed identity, whereas the latter involves ‘concrete social action’ (Weber 1978, p. 389). The belief in common descent does not necessarily correspond to actual blood relationships. Races are constructed categories, too, although more likely associated with perceptions of physical difference (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). Racial groups are generally identified with putatively common and objective physical characteristics, although in a colour-blind neoliberal world these characteristics are attached to cultural formulas of inferiority and superiority (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991).

Racialization involves imbuing ‘cultural signs’ such as language and the body with racial meanings (Chun 2011, p. 405). Since the 1990s, references to physical characteristics in popular cultural discourses have increased – for example, the popular term ‘white Turks’. The concept emerged as a critique of westernized and privileged intellectuals, but quickly turned into a sign of linkages between appearance and cultural capital/class/status (Arat-Koç 2007; Bilici 2009). Although admittedly fuzzy, ‘whiteness’ here refers to an eclectic package of physical characteristics (light skin colour, blond hair, blue eyes, lack of facial hair and body odour), all signalling a person’s
location in hierarchies of taste and culture as well as socio-economic status. Indeed, ethnographic studies show the relative advantage of ‘European looks’ in contemporary Turkey (Hann and Beller-Hann 1998, pp. 251–2; Navaro-Yashin 2002, pp. 90–1).

Kurds have been increasingly identified in terms of physical characteristics. An anecdote recently narrated by a columnist illustrates this tendency and how it is internalized by Kurds themselves. A Kurdish man, looking for a job for his son, responded when asked if his son could work in a desirable front-stage job: ‘Of course, he does not look like me. His facial complexion is whiter’ (Temelkuran 2011, p. 6). Several studies have shown the mounting influence of appearance in identifying Kurds. In an ethnographic study on nationalism in Turkey, one respondent identified Kurds based on facial hair: ‘There is no one wearing beards like the Kurds… The Kurds have day-old stubble’ (Kentel, Ahiska and Genç 2007, p. 102). In popular culture, Kurdishness is associated with a prototype combining culture and physical features: the kiro. In Turkish humour magazines, the uncivilized characters with dark skin and hairy bodies always turn out to be Kurds, sometimes euphemistically called Easterners. Indeed, in these magazines, ‘the darker and hairier one gets, the less civilised one becomes’ (Apaydin 2005, p. 112, original emphasis). One of Saracoğlu’s (2011, p. 156) respondents explained:

You know these people we call “kıro”, the people from the East. They fill these places. They follow us; make a pass at us. They are Kurds. When you hear the way they speak, you can easily realise who they are. Or you can immediately get this from their face and appearance.

A final example comes from a survey conducted in two locations in Izmir: the majority of both Turks and Kurds validate the idea that they recognize the other group based on external physical characteristics (Ok 2011).

As a social construct, racial stereotypes do not have to correspond to objective reality. In fact, it is generally not possible to distinguish between Kurds and Turks based on physical features (Sezgin and Wall 2005, p. 788). In anonymous daily interactions, people conceivably rely on proxies, such as accent and dress, to identify Kurds (Saracoğlu 2011, pp. 143–4) in a racialized framework.

Linking identities and moral worth

The origins or consequences of racial perceptions cannot be limited to physical features. Racial difference operates on a large terrain where culture and morality intersect. As Lamont (2000) shows for
working-class men in the USA, racial and moral boundaries overlap. In Turkey, the idea of race has never operated independently from perceptions of modernity (Ergin 2008). The goal for bureaucratic modernizers who established Turkey after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was to adopt a modern identity while remaining Turkish, and also neutralizing western perceptions of Turks as the others of modernity, essentially unable to modernize. A scholarly mobilization in the 1930s sought to attach Turkishness to timeless racial essences. Although the overtly racial vocabulary slowly disappeared, a fascination with physical and immutable characteristics remains a subterranean component of Turkish culture. The linkages between appearance and socio-economic status make sense only within this historical perspective combining race and modernity.

An important way in which Kurdish identity is racialized today concerns how Kurdishness becomes a moral position inherently possessed. Racialization is more complex than appearance: an important aspect is the association of perceived differences with moral worth (Cornell and Hartmann 2007). While Kurds are coded into immutable physical or cultural difference, some also define them as lacking morally redeeming qualities. The linkages between race and modernity become especially potent here, because appearance and moral/cultural categories contribute to the categorization of Kurds as undesirable. The association of European looks, ‘proper’ accent and western-style dress marks Kurds as different in terms of appearance and cultural characteristics. The absence of modern characteristics, corroborated by physical evidence, is linked to moral deficiencies.

Racial perceptions take everyday encounters and interpret them as evidence of immutable differences. As explicitly racist discourses are condemned around the world, ‘new racism’ (Bonilla-Silva 2001) disguises racial lenses as objective observations of social regularities. One often hears people say: ‘I am not a racist but…’ (Bonilla-Silva and Forman 2000, p. 50). This insidious racism denies its existence, but relies on everyday observations as tools to classify individuals into racial groups. Racial evidence gathered in daily encounters are problematic because they tend to imagine social patterns where there are none, selectively focusing on certain aspects of daily life so as to support already existing stereotypes. Even if these social regularities do exist, racial perceptions notoriously ignore their historical formation.

Since the 1980s, rising anti-Kurdish sentiments in cities have contributed to inter-ethnic tensions (Ayata 1997). The perceptions of social regularities in urban encounters between the Turkish middle classes and Kurdish migrants feed discourses that credit Kurds with certain moral characteristics. Saraçoğlu (2011, pp. 131–61) provides an extensive list of moral objections. The first refers to Kurdish involvement in informal and illegal economic activities, including
working in informal sectors, inhabiting squatter settlements and evading taxes. Similarities between discourses describing Kurds as ‘parasites’ and those blaming minorities for welfare abuse in other contexts are undeniable. Second, Kurds are blamed for being ignorant and uncultured. Research shows that the low levels of formal education among Kurds hamper their social mobility (İçduygu, Romano and Sirkeci 1999, p. 1003). However, the imagery of ignorant and uncultured Kurds refers to cultural and moral exclusion as much as to formal education. Considered in the context of Kurds’ representations in several television series and in Turkish humour in general, ignorance and uncouthness indicate strong affinities with the prototype of the kıro. Popular imagination attributes a number of culturally undesirable characteristics to Kurds: honour killings, blood feuds, berdel marriages (bride exchange between two families) and child neglect (failing to educate children and allowing their participation in political demonstrations). Third, Kurds are defined as separatist hate-mongers (Saraçoğlu 2011, pp. 149–50). The image of separatist Kurds partially derives from the armed conflict between security forces and the PKK. International developments, especially in northern Iraq, have also contributed to fears of an independent Kurdish state. However, this image equally refers to the perceived strength of solidarity among Kurds (Saraçoğlu 2011, pp. 150–5).

Finally, the criminalization of ethnic minorities, immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers bolsters the process of racialization (Silverstein 2005; Yacobi 2011). Turkey’s Kurdish citizens, unlike refugees and asylum seekers, were an integral part of the country’s foundation; yet, the end of assimilation and increasing internal migration changed the parameters. Today, Kurdishness is increasingly associated with crime. The 1990s and 2000s were marked by a rising fear of street crime, such as purse-snatching and burglary (Karakus, McGarrrell and Basibuyuk 2010). Some justify the perception of Kurdish criminality based on daily encounters and regularities, and attribute urban disorder to the Kurdish presence (Saraçoğlu 2011, pp. 155–60). Therefore, as seen in other contexts (Mears and Stewart 2010), increasing contacts between Kurds and Turks in cities may lead to greater fear of crime among Turks. The subterranean motif in these accusations is Kurds’ natural inclination towards violence and crime (Bora 2006, p. 236).

The assignment of Kurdish identity

Race is assigned by others, whereas ethnicity frequently involves self-assertion (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, p. 28). In inter-group encounters involving questions of distribution, racial assignment gives additional advantage to dominant groups and helps them to
naturalize, justify and perpetuate existing hierarchies. Ethnic classifications can also be products of assignment, but ethnic identities often are claimed by groups themselves. There may be exceptions: for example, neo-Nazi organizations globally assign a racial designation – whiteness – to themselves. Indeed, in the scholarly mobilization in 1930s’ Turkey (Ergin 2008), whiteness was self-asserted, too. Turkish modernizers saw it as a cherished prize, jealously guarded by the West as a secret ingredient for modernity.

While the republican modernizers were busy claiming whiteness as overarching identity, Kurds were engaged in uprisings to claim their ethnic identity. Kurdish activists insisted on a self-asserted ethnic identity vis-à-vis governmental assimilation. This is a continuing process. For example, since the 1990s Kurdish intellectuals have been involved in inventing traditions, myths, national roots and ancestors, parallel to Turkish efforts in the 1930s. However, only in the 1990s, following the collapse of the myth of Kurds-as-future-Turks and the delay to pair recognition with genuine acceptance, did Kurdish identity begin to acquire elements of assignment in addition to assertion. The Turkish majority now largely recognizes Kurdishness, regardless of whether someone assigned this identity prefers it. State officials’ use of the term ‘pseudo-citizens’ after the 2005 flag-burning incidents ‘was making generalizations about the larger Kurdish population’ (Yeğen 2009, p. 611) and, while disregarding citizenship as a viable option of engagement, was assigning Kurdishness as overarching identity. Another example of assignment appears in a research study on citizenship and youth: a Kurdish youth explains his identity as follows (Senay 2008, p. 969):

When they asked me the question “are you Muslim or Turkish?”, I used to answer “I am Muslim”. But now I think, you are a Kurd by birth, by geography, and biologically; so, you are Kurdish. It’s something you have. Firstly, I am Kurdish, because people do not categorize me as being Muslim, but as a Kurd. It is society that determines your identity.

Before the 1990s, Kurdish identity had to be self-asserted because of the assimilationist belief that denied Kurdish existence in Turkey. Racialized recognition has activated the process of other-oriented assignment. However, assignment is closely interwoven with the previous step: the formerly self-asserted Kurdish identity has changed into a racially other-assigned category, increasingly coded in terms of inherent differences of moral worth. As Çelik (2005, p. 142) reports:

Most of the Kurdish migrants interviewed for this study indicated that one of the most common problems they had to face was the
refusal of some of the Turkish landlords to rent apartments to them because of their Kurdish identity. Some of the interviewees also reported that when they had problems with their Turkish neighbors over any issue, their neighbors used the word “Kurd” as a pejorative label.

A consequence of the assignment of Kurdish identity is the apparent ease with which the mainstream media voice political separation as a solution to the Kurdish issue, although the idea’s popularity among Turks is hard to gauge. A prominent columnist was among the first to ask: ‘Do we have to live together?’ (Özkök 2010). More recently, another columnist invited readers to submit solutions to the Kurdish issue, resulting in proposals from what the author calls ‘white Turks’ for the secession of Kurds (Altaylı 2011), entertaining one of the historically greatest taboos of Turkish nationalism as a potential solution. In the assimilationist context before the 1990s, separatism was taboo because it symbolized Kurds’ attempts to establish a distinct identity. Racialized differences and the increasing other-assignment of Kurdish identity today lead to calls for separatism by members of the dominant group – a clear sign that racial segregation appears, at least to some of the Turkish middle classes, as an alternative to a multicultural country. In an environment dominated by fears of racial extinction and the perceived ‘parasitic’ nature of a minority, segregation and separatism becomes a potential nationalist demand.

The fear of extinction

Racism involves ‘the phantasm of prophylaxis or segregation’ (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, p. 17), which serves to maintain the purity of the self and prevent mixing and interbreeding with the other. The end of assimilationism and the recognition of Kurds intensified fears of mixing. While in the past expressions of Kurdishness were suppressed by the government because ‘there were no Kurds in Turkey’, the visibility of Kurdish languages, culture and political demands now triggers a fear of racial extinction among non-Kurds. One of Saraçoğlu’s (2011, p. 154) respondents illustrated the concern:

In a public minibus (dolmuş) for example, I sometimes hear people, mostly young people, speaking in Kurdish among themselves. This is so disturbing for me. People in Canada want you to speak in English when you are in their country, don’t they?

Part of the racialized fear of extinction concerns a general sense that Turkish identity and nationalism are under attack because of Kurdish
demands for political and cultural rights. A respondent in an ethnographic study summarized this fear of ideological extinction (Kentel, Ahiska and Genç 2007, p. 95, original emphasis):

Kurds have become extreme nationalists. As a Turk, I feel like calling yourself a Turk has become like a crime these days. I am saddened by that. I have friends, Bulgarian, Greek, Ukrainian, and Russian. They all talk about where they are from enthusiastically. But, when we say we are Turks, we are considered racists. Let me talk about a new topic now: “The Turkish issue”. It is increasingly becoming a crime in this country to say that you are a Turk.

Fears of extinction are also literally connected to population politics. Kurds are seen as ‘invaders’ in western Turkish cities (Saracığlu 2011, p. 145), considered a symptom not only of Kurdish migration, but also of a growing Kurdish population. One of Saracığlu’s (2011, p. 146) respondents argued:

For me the Kurds’ having too many children is the accumulation of many years… From my point of view Kurds multiply deliberately. Twenty years ago, when I first came to İzmir, a colleague of mine told me that “friends, look, these Kurds are multiplying very rapidly; they started to invade this city; some time later, we will be minority; they will be majority”. I think we are going in that direction now.

From this perspective, Kurds both migrate and reproduce in disproportionately high numbers. Regardless of the statistical justification of these perceptions, fears of extinction correspond to growing Kurdish visibility in public arenas, facilitating the notion that Kurds are taking over the country. Calls for Turks to reproduce in greater numbers have been a consistent theme among extreme Turkish nationalists and invoke a feeling of ‘culture wars’ with an essential other (Saç 2007, p. 143). Finally, fears of extinction have a socio-economic dimension. The most stable theme is the perceived solidarity among Kurds and its economic consequences. Some publications in the recently growing ulusalcılık tradition, which combines extreme nationalism with left-wing arguments, take this fear as far as calling for boycotting Kurdish businesses, claimed to funnel funds for separatist organizations (Saç 2007, pp. 141–2). Kurdish solidarity is cited as the foundation for the perception that economic and social activities in cities are largely controlled by Kurds (Saracığlu 2011, pp. 154–5).

Empirically speaking, Turkey’s Kurdish population has been socio-economically worse off (İçdüygu, Romano and Sirkeci 1999). The
increasing intensity of anti-Kurdish discourses among middle-class Turks may originate in a perceived threat against their established privileges by new groups claiming a share of the resources in Turkey’s growing urban economy. In instances of what Bora (2003, p. 442) identifies as ‘class racism’, calls for financial federalism among segments of the Turkish population feed off the discourse of Kurds as ‘parasites’ usurping a disproportionately larger share of Turkey’s recent prosperity.

The idea of imminent racial extinction ascribes to the minority group an unjustified sense of virility, both sexually and socially. Behind the suspected Kurdish reproduction or solidarity lies a sense of active and planned Kurdish takeover, envisioned as the end of a racially homogenous Turkish majority. Ironically, Turkish fears of extinction constitute the mirror image of European fears of Turkish invasion, should Turkey be allowed to join the EU. The image of a virile, uncontrolled, destructive Turk, usually depicted as a man with a propensity for violence, plays an important role in French and German discourses against Turkey’s EU membership (Yılmaz 2007). Both middle-class Turkish urban residents who fear Kurdish invasion and Europeans who fear Turkish invasion use a parallel language of virility and violence against their others. In either case, whether biologically or culturally imagined, the sources of these propensities are naturalized.

Conclusion

Kurdish identity is now gradually becoming an immutable category. Earlier hopes for the assimilation of Kurds imagined a transformation as a one-way street: Kurds would assimilate into Turkishness. The denial of Kurdishness as an independent ethnic entity precluded the need to engage with it and to develop a moral stance regarding daily encounters. It was Kurds, and not all of them for that matter, who pushed for the recognition of Kurdish identity as a distinct ethnic identity. The target of recognition was primarily the state, which would provide the long-sought-after political and cultural rights.

The end of the assimilation paradigm resulted in a major sea change. As Kurdish identity became more visible, earlier attributes of mutability assigned to it began to crumble. The Turkish majority finally had to encounter a separate identity unwilling to assimilate. In the absence of a history and institutions facilitating acceptance and coexistence, the moral engagement with Kurdish claims became mainly negative. Two processes, constantly feeding on each other, emerged: tensions between Turks and Kurds in cities increased, while Kurdish identity gradually acquired immutable and racial
characteristics. These ongoing and incomplete processes of racialization have turned Kurdishness into both an ethnicity and a race.

The racialization of Kurdish identity is important for several reasons. First, racialization matters because it is always implicated in power. While producing racial categories, it also produces racial hierarchies (Bashi 1998). Therefore, racialization signals changing power dynamics between groups. Omi and Winant (1994) suggest that one must pay attention to both social structure and cultural representation in understanding racial formations. Similarly, Phillips (2011) argues that racialization unfolds at three levels: the micro level (face-to-face encounters and individual interpretive processes), the meso level (socio-economic inequalities, residential segregation, popular representations and other institutional arrangements), and the macro level (global forces, such as de-industrialization, migration flows and neoliberalism). The evidence presented above identifies the shifting power dynamics that racialization involves in terms of both representational and structural inequalities between Turks and Kurds from the micro to the macro level. The changing nature of individual-and community-level interaction between Kurds and Turks is the most striking micro-level aspect of racialization. Popular discourses about residential segregation and socio-economic differences provide the meso-level foundations. The collapse of governmental distributional mechanisms and the resulting insecurity correspond to a macro-level transformation.

While power inequalities are integral to racialization, the present case complicates this picture because Kurdish racialization follows a period of forced assimilation attempts. In many other cases, racialization involves a process whereby relations of domination between two groups lead to segregation and the creation of racial hierarchies. Conversely, in Turkey the ending of a period of assimilation paved the way for racialization. In many cases, scholars ask:

Is the process one by which an identity is externally imposed (and outside the category of “white” it generally is in its origin), or is it a formerly imposed identity that is being reinterpreted, redefined and embraced? Thus, one must distinguish between the internal and external processes by which racialisation may occur. (Bashi 1998, p. 965)

The problem of origins in the present case breaks down the dichotomy of internal and external. Here is a process in which an identity formerly claimed by a group but denied by the state becomes assigned by the members of another ethnic group. Kurdish racialization is not a case of a formerly imposed racial identity being reclaimed by the
group itself. We observe a formerly denied, not imposed, identity being redefined and reinterpreted.

The third contribution of the case of Turkey concerns the formation of racial identities in the absence of a major reshaping of groups involved in the process. In many other cases, groups that formerly subscribed to a different identity end up being part of a larger, racial, category. Winant (1994, pp. 59–62) gives multiple examples: Africans who had previously assumed a variety of kinship categories (Mande, Akan and others) assuming blackness; Europeans who had earlier considered themselves Christian, English or free becoming white; or distinct ethnic groups who formerly identified as Chinese, Japanese or Korean consolidating into the pan-ethnic category of Asian-American. No such consolidation at the group level has occurred in the racialization of Kurds. While group boundaries remain intact, group definition acquires racial significance.

Future research should be able to provide further details regarding the extent of racialization. Its symptoms and manifestations are elusive, but they slowly build up. Given that minority groups engage in racialization projects of their own (Paul 2011), an interesting question would be to examine if, or to what extent, Kurds themselves internalize racialized discourses regarding their own and Turkish identity.

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