Secular spaces and religious representations: reading the headscarf debate in Turkey as citizenship politics

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Secular spaces and religious representations: reading the headscarf debate in Turkey as citizenship politics

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Although in recent years there has been a relaxing attitude in Turkey towards wearing headscarf in the public sphere, the controversy surrounding the visibility and use of the headscarf has often been read through modernity/tradition dichotomy which sees the use of headscarf by women as a threat to modernity by religious subjectivities. The principal reason for this reading is that the citizenship regime in Turkey has not been simply about defining a framework of membership to a political community but rather has been used to construct modern subjectivity. This article attempts to dislocate the headscarf controversy from this dichotomous reading by moving it into the larger framework of citizenship politics. It argues that instead of interpreting the growing visibility of the headscarf within the public sphere that pits modernity against tradition, we need instead to identify the wearing of the headscarf as a specific ‘act of citizenship’ that challenges dominant citizenship practices.

Keywords: citizenship; Islam; identity; rights

How a woman dresses in Turkey is as controversial today as it was in nineteenth century. If there is any doubt that the current obsession about women’s dress has a long history, one needs only to look at the debates around the 1900s about the modern dress code and its incompatibility with traditional female dress (Aksoy 2005; Hanioğlu 2003; Ozdalga 1998). One particular item that occupies centre stage in this controversy about women’s representation in the public sphere is the headscarf. The headscarf issue was at the margins of the political discourse until the late 1950s. Women in rural areas continued to cover their heads with various forms of traditional coverings with limited visibility in the urban public sphere. However, with the rapid social and economic transformations of the 1950s, accompanied by large-scale migration from rural to urban areas, this picture changed drastically. As cities accepted heavy migration from the small towns of Anatolia and many of these migrants became part of the labour force in cities, they became visible in the public sphere as political actors. Some of those migrants and their children slowly made the move from working to middle class and entered into universities, becoming active in professions such as law and medicine (Keyman 1995). The increasing visibility of the headscarf in urban centres, which were supposed to be the window of modern Turkey, posed a great challenge to the modern belief that as the country modernized further, the relics of the past would disappear. Instead, as the population became more urbanized, traditional practices such as covering one’s hair became more potent and visible. Contrary to the belief that modernity would erase traditional belongings, religious and ethnic identities grew stronger and demanded recognition in the public sphere. These demands manifested themselves as controversies over citizenship rights and practices, how these rights might be used and by whom.
One particular reason for the controversy over the visibility of the headscarf is that citizenship in Turkey has not been simply about defining a framework of membership to a political community but rather used to construct modern subjectivity. The Republican elite frequently viewed challenges to the representation of the ‘ideal citizen’ as an attempt to reestablish tradition and religion within the public sphere in order to reverse modernity. Although using citizenship as a vehicle to establish modern forms of governance may be visible in other modern nation states, the Turkish experience places a heavy emphasis on the unity and homogenization of the population through citizenship practices. It is also influenced by the unique circumstances of building the modern nation state from the ruins of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire. As a result, in the Republican period, the Turkish state used a series of assumptions about the relationship between tradition and modernity and the role that citizenship practices could play in transforming what was then a traditional society.

After 10 years, the Justice and Development Party (the JDP) has won its election victory in 2002 and gained control over state institutions that were instrumental in controlling the visibility of headscarf in the public sphere, the headscarf controversy is less urgent and there is now a gradual and grudging acceptance of the headscarf in the public sphere. Although the use of the headscarf is still not permitted in the public service, the headscarf ban across university campuses has been lifted. However, the gradual shift over the wearing of the headscarf has still not changed the nature of this controversy, which many still see as being located within this tradition/modernity binary. In this article, I discuss the headscarf controversy within the framework of citizenship politics. I argue that we need to identify the wearing of the headscarf as a specific ‘act of citizenship’ that challenges dominant citizenship practices (Isin and Nielsen 2008). I further argue that rather than reestablishing religious discourse, by wearing headscarves in the public sphere women redefine the boundaries of citizenship practices by revealing the exclusionary nature of the ‘ideal citizen’. In fact, there is no single act or strategy associated with wearing the headscarf. Instead, wearing the headscarf takes on different meanings in different sites and makes different claims to various aspects of citizenship practices. As a result, the politics of the headscarf (as part of a larger politics of citizenship) may be read, at times, as a religious symbol questioning a particular articulation of modern subjectivity. In other contexts, it may be understood as an urban phenomenon that signifies socio-economic class differentiations. Alternatively, at yet other times, it may appear as a vehicle through which religious subjectivities insert and redefine themselves within the context of consumer culture. In each and every instance, the politics of the headscarf is articulated differently, often making multiple and sometimes contradictory claims. In the next section, I examine the exclusionary nature of the Republican citizenship regime in Turkey. Following this, I will discuss various ways in which the headscarf controversy challenges this Republican citizenship regime on different sites with differing subjectivities. My central argument is that the citizenship politics behind the headscarf controversy is not simply one of a political struggle between different actors but is also constitutive of their identities. In other words, women who choose to wear the headscarf do not enter into the realm of citizenship politics with already defined identities but rather are defined through these citizenship practices related to their wearing the headscarf.

Citizenship and the Republican modern subjectivity

Traditional accounts of citizenship focus on its legal aspect as denoting membership in a nation state and a set of rights and obligations through which individuals become
legitimate members (Marshall 1950, 14). While the legal aspect of citizenship and its extension to formerly excluded individuals and groups occupies an important role in deepening democratic governance in nation states, citizenship as a process of defining membership to a political community is much more political than such liberal and legalistic accounts suggest. Undoubtedly, questions around who is included and excluded from political community and under what circumstances such inclusions and exclusions occur are the foundations of political theory since the time of antiquity. However, recent debates on citizenship extend the political boundaries of citizenship by pointing out that far from simply being a neutral legal category, citizenship is a process which defines and constitutes individuals and groups by establishing categories and power differences between them and by simultaneously including some while excluding others (Isin 2002, 3–5; Rasmussen and Brown 2002). As Isin and Turner argue, this constitutive role of citizenship is visible in all three of its dimensions of ‘extent (inclusion and exclusion), content (rights and responsibilities) and depth (thickness or thinness)’ (Isin and Turner 2002, 2).

Similarly, feminist accounts of citizenship have also noted the identity-constitutive and power-invested characteristics of modern citizenship practices (Pateman 1988; Yuval-Davis 1998). As Isin argues

> citizenship is that particular view of the dominant, which constitutes itself as a universal point of view – the point of view of those who dominate the city and who have constituted their point of view as natural by representing the city as a unity. (Isin 2002, 275)

Introducing power into citizenship disrupts claim to universality and unity, reconstituting citizenship as the site of politics within which individuals intervene to reconfigure their status within a hierarchy of identities. At the same time, various citizenship practices, discursive and institutional, produce new forms of inclusions and exclusions. Modern nation states play a crucial role in defining the framework of citizenship practices as they not only define the legal boundaries of citizenship rights and duties but they also provide the legal and institutional means to determine who has the right to be a citizen. As a result, nation states use citizenship policies not only to define the conditions of membership in political community, but also to redefine and classify communities along racialized, classed and gendered lines through which to draw the boundaries of national narratives. In addition, the historical evolution of nation states and the composition of groups within them have had a decisive impact on who is included and excluded from membership and the nature of political, economic and social rights (Isin and Turner 2002, 3).

While citizenship has never been just about rights and duties and nation states have always used various citizenship practices to ‘remake’ individuals into citizens along categories of race, class and gender, the Turkish case is distinctive as the state deemed the citizenship regime to be integral to the ‘making of citizens’ as part and parcel of creating a modern and secular society. By citizenship regime, I refer to a discursive and institutional system of legal practices, norms and educational discourses, which goes beyond defining conditions of membership to the national community and creates a process of turning individuals into national subjects. Through the Turkish citizenship regime, the government defined ‘the ideal citizen’, validated and authorized its representation and included and excluded certain subjectivities from the narrow confines of this ‘ideal citizen’ (Üstel 2004). The distinctiveness of the Turkish case is that modernity is conflated with nation-building, which has resulted in specific citizenship practices being geared towards creating not just the conditions of membership but the subjectivities of members of the national community.
The Turkish experience is also unique in that the collapse of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire provided the background to the Republican attempt to forge a modern nation state. As a result, the Republican regime had two principal objectives from the beginning: to modernize the traditional structure of Ottoman society and to create a homogeneous national community out of multi-lingual, multi-ethnic and multi-religious populations. The Republican elite formulated both of these objectives as a response to what they perceived to be the failures of the Ottoman system. Deeply worried about the cohesion of the new nation, they identified plurality in the public sphere with suspicion and used the citizenship regime to maintain a homogeneous representation of national community.

The early Republican cadres understood ethnic nationalism, religion and communism as three fundamental threats against consolidating a homogeneous modern nation state and used every opportunity to erase their appearance within the public sphere. The Kurdish movement, the Left and religious groups were particularly disadvantaged in organizing opposition to the Republican’s understanding of modernity because the Republican elite viewed any claims emerging from these groups as detrimental to the unity of the nation. This particular hostility towards alternative claims to envision a society is enforced by an interpretation of modernity whose boundaries were drawn by ‘secularism, nationalism, rationalism and republicanism’ in response to the desire to neutralize such particularistic expressions of ethnic nationalism, the Left and Islamic movements (Sunar 1996). These four principles provided the constitutive framework of Turkish modernity, and the citizenship regime has been designated as the site in which these principles could be realized. Part of this realization required a process of ‘making’ individuals into citizens who internalized these basic principles of republicanism. Therefore, the Turkish citizenship regime has had a strong legislative role that not only filters and screens political demands, which are deemed to be outside the boundaries of the modern regime, but also engages in the remaking of individuals as subjects of modernity (Baban 2005). The modernizing elite understood that expressions of Kurdish nationalism and Islamists politics, for instance, were two such potent expressions of traditional belonging. The elite saw these traditional forms of belonging as relics of an Ottoman past needing to be eliminated in order to establish a modern Republic, free from the dogmas of religion and particular belongings (Gole 1996, 20). Therefore, the framework of citizenship was carefully designed not only to filter these undesirable practices but also to engage in processes of remaking individuals as subjects of modernity – subjects whose identity in the public would be defined by the four parameters of modernity.

As a result, the Republican regime understood modernity as a full-scale civilizational project in which society was led from traditionalism to modernity. As this progression could not take place gradually and naturally in a society that was in the clutches of religion and tradition, the state was supposed to take the leading role in guiding the nation onto the right path (Köker 1995). Here, a carefully designed public sphere played a key role in creating a modern national society and the modern Turkish citizen subject. The paradox of this carefully designed process was that the entire citizenship regime, rather than providing the framework within which free subjects interact with each other, operated as a communitarian project in which individuals were ‘made’ into ‘desired citizens’ who conformed to the parameters of the Republican interpretation of modernity. The education system was designed to instil the principal objectives of this new subjectivity by emphasizing civility and nationalism (Üstel 2004, 320). While civility framed the acceptable boundaries of this new subjectivity in everyday interactions such as dress, body
language and interacting with others, nationalism defined the citizens’ key responsibilities to the state.

The framework of citizenship, in this process, codified the acceptable norms of behaviour for citizens, validating their representation in the public sphere and creating others by eliminating undesirable subjectivities from the public sphere. Citizenship classes in the early Republican years were designed to teach individuals their duties and responsibilities and lacked any kind of emphasis on individual rights or promotion of individuality (Üstel 2004, 320). In order to establish a particular interpretation of the modern nation, the Republican regime established practices of citizenship based not only on education geared towards specific interpretation of being modern, but also on assumptions, imaginations and symbols of being modern. These practices entailed a certain representation of the modern citizen not just as bearer of rights but also as a representation of modernity and a modern nation. Therefore, from its beginning, the citizenship regime in Turkey was not about defining the rights of citizens but about creating individuals by installing certain values, norms and lifestyles and about creating its own Others against whom claims of modernity could be measured. The citizenship practices, legal and otherwise, ensured that the public realm was kept free from undesirable subjectivities, remaining the exclusive site of the modern national subject. The visibility of the headscarf in the public sphere plays a particularly controversial role in this context as it disrupts the unitary nature of citizenship both visually and symbolically.

The headscarf controversy as citizenship politics

The headscarf controversy is by no means limited to Turkey. Since September 11, public visibility of wearing the headscarf has become politically controversial in almost all European countries. While the headscarf controversy manifests in its own ways in each particular country, there are recurring themes, such as the discrimination against women, the violation of liberal values and the alienation of national cultural codes, through which the public visibility of the headscarf is either legislated or deemed to be uncivilized (Joppke 2009, 3). Perhaps more interesting is that these common themes of contention against the headscarf are accepted across a wide spectrum of political positions from the left to the right. Central to the discussion in all cases is whether a liberal democratic state has any right to legislate religious choice. The headscarf controversy puts liberal democratic states in Western Europe to the test, raising the question of whether individual citizenship rights, such as the right to religious freedom of expression as expressed by wearing the headscarf, can be upheld in cases where there is a vocal opposition to the headscarf and where religious expression in the public sphere is viewed as being antagonistic to perceived civilizational and national codes. As Joppke has documented, in most cases courts have sided with individual rights and rejected attempts by governments to restrict the wearing of the headscarf in public spaces (Joppke 2009, 17). France stands out from the other cases as it has adopted the most legislative approach, banning any clothing in public schools that might reveal religious affiliation. Some have explained this rather strict attitude by focusing on the historic development of laicité which understands secularism not just as religious freedom but also as individual freedom from religion (Bowen 2007). Scott adds to this the notion that the mythical construction of France as the ‘realization of the Enlightenment principles’ in France’s national narratives results in stigmatizing Islam and its symbols as backward and traditional (Scott 2007, 7). Yet, as Scott observes, this mythical national narrative masks the way racism and France’s colonial legacy manifests itself within the headscarf controversy (Scott 2007, 42–54).
The headscarf controversy in Turkey has some similarities with those in Europe, and the legal dimension of the headscarf controversy in Turkey has also been a matter for deliberation within European courts (Saktanber and Çorbacıoğlu 2008, 530–531). However, it also differs from them on two important counts. First, while in European countries, Muslim populations constitute a minority culture, in Turkey, Islam is the religion of the majority and, therefore, the headscarf controversy takes place in a predominantly Muslim setting. Second, although the Turkish version of secularism is influenced by and is closer to the French laïcité, in Turkey, secularism is part and parcel of a state-driven project of creating a modern nation state. This is why, in contrast to the European context, the public visibility of the headscarf is not just simply about individual rights but extends to the idea of a nation building project and its central objective of removing religion from the public sphere through citizenship practices. In other words, as with other European cases, the headscarf controversy in Turkey is about the boundaries of citizenship rights but it also differs from the European context in that citizenship in Turkey is also directly integral to the creation of modern secular state out of a predominantly Muslim population. This is why the controversy over the public visibility of the headscarf was (and still is) much more comprehensive in Turkey than in other European countries and extends to public service, courts and secondary schools as well as the parliament. Below, I will provide more detail about the development of the headscarf controversy in Turkey and its direct relation to citizenship politics.

In the 1999 general elections, the Islamist-oriented, Virtue party (Fazilet Partisi) nominated Merve Kavakci, a law school graduate who wore the headscarf, as a candidate from one of the electoral districts of Istanbul. After being elected to the Parliament, Merve Kavakci entered the General Assembly on 2 May 1999 to take her oath along with other MPs. Her appearance in the General Assembly caused an uproar, with many MPs asking the speaker of the house to remove her from the assembly immediately. Female MPs from other parties made a human chain around the microphone so that Kavakci could not approach the podium to take her oath (Ozkan 2005, 43). As the protests grew louder, Kavakci had no choice but to leave the Parliament without taking the oath and unable to return. A couple of months later, the Ministry of the Interior revoked her citizenship using a very little known and never implemented clause in the citizenship law which requires Turkish citizens to inform the state when they take up a second citizenship from another country. The severity of the reaction to a headscarved female MP is a testimony to the symbolic power of headscarf visibility as an expression of religiosity taking over the public realm. The Parliament is perceived to be the utmost place where citizens exercise their sovereignty. The appearance of a woman with a headscarf not only ruptured the image of ‘ideal citizen’ but also demanded a space for a subjectivity against which the ‘ideal citizen’ of the Turkish republic was defined.

The headscarf controversy in Turkey has a long history but its origins can be traced to its increasing visibility in public spaces such as the Parliament, government offices, courts, schools, universities, public hospitals and state buildings (Aksoy 2005; Kirik 2007). The segment of the society who closely identify with Republican secularism associates the headscarf with backward traditions but nevertheless tolerates its use in the private realm. However, the appearance of women wearing headscarves in the public realm, such as in the school, university, court and hospital, has always generated swift condemnation and, until recently, has resulted in the banning of the wearing of the headscarf in public spaces. Starting in the late 1960s, the headscarf controversy has appeared in the public discourse in regular intervals not just simply as an issue of expression of religious belief but as a symbolic resistance to the Republican modernity in Turkey. While there has never been an
explicit legal ban on the wearing of the headscarf, various institutional regulations have limited the wearing of it in different settings such as courts, public offices and higher education institutions. What, according to Ozdalga, complicates the headscarf issue in Turkey is its simultaneous constitutional entanglement both with the issue of individual rights and freedoms and with the issue of secularism (Ozdalga 1998, 60). Both Islamist and secular camps refer to the different sections of the constitution to justify the use and the ban of the headscarf in public places. While those in the Islamist camp argue that there should not be any ban on the wearing of the headscarf in public spaces as this is an issue of individual freedom, those in the secular camp argue that the wearing of the headscarf in public spaces violates the principle of secularism as the headscarf is an expression of religious belief and therefore has no place in public places (Ozdalga 1998, 61). This complicated situation is largely due to the specific interpretation of secularism in the context Turkey which, similar to the French case, is understood not as freedom of religious expression but as control and regulation of religion within the public realm. This particular interpretation of secularism resulted in a situation where religious expression and freedom are seen as a direct affront to the very nature of the regime and resulted in many of the institutional regulations restricting the wearing of the headscarf in public places.

The contradictory legal interpretations of the constitution provided the background for successive bans of wearing headscarves in courts, higher education institutions and other public places. In 1973, the Ankara Bar Association disbarred a female lawyer who insisted on wearing the headscarf in the court. The Bar Association justified the ban by declaring that ‘theocratic dress cannot be worn in a modern environment’ (Aktas 2006, 14). Furthermore, in its detailed decision the association stated that every member of the association is obliged to act according to the principles of the Turkish modern revolution and further argued that ‘religious dress cannot be reconciled with civilized and professional dress’ (Aktas 2006). Similarly, in 1985, a headscarved university teacher was suspended as a result of the Higher Education Council’s ban on the wearing of the headscarf on university campuses and a group of female students went to the appeals court to challenge the ruling. The appeals court rejected their application stating that ‘it may be tolerable for individuals with little education to wear headscarves but the wearing of headscarves by educated females, especially in universities, is intolerable and a reaction to secular society’ (Cumhuriyet 1985). In both cases, which were separated apart from each other by almost a decade, the courts were insistent on seeing the wearing of the headscarf in public places as a symbol of tradition and backwardness that is deeply antithetical to the values of Turkish modernization.

Why does the presence of women wearing headscarves in public places create such controversy and generate strong reaction? Given that there are other visible religious symbols in the public sphere, such as men wearing a specific type of beard indicating a religious orientation, or the call to prayers, the headscarf, in fact, generates much more political controversy than such other religious symbols. The answer to this question lies in the particular understanding of modernity and civilization, which forms the basis of nation-building processes and the implementation of citizenship practices as not just a framework of rights and obligations but also a vehicle through which this modern nation-building process can be completed. Both the visibility of religion and women in the public sphere play a particular role in this configuration of nation-building and citizenship practices. Cinar explains that control of the body is an important subject of Turkish modernization and the representation of the female body is particularly important for the representation of the modern nation (Cinar 2005, 60). In this context, the visibility of covered women becomes particularly problematic as far as the representation of the
modern nation is concerned as she not only presents an image that does not fit with the image of what the modern female subject is supposed to look like but she also is seen as a carrier of religion. This double symbolism of the headscarf violates the main contours of citizenship as a complete regime which is not simply about defining who is entitled to use what kind of rights but which actively ‘makes’ the modern subjects who are the bearer of those rights.

This special role of citizenship, as a vehicle through which the modern nation is created, extends from the legal realm to education, mannerisms, dress, food, architectural style, music, cinema, opera, ballet and theatre. For example, the propaganda movies of the 1950s pictured a modern Turkey where unveiled modern women with stylish short hair cuts worked together with men in modern public buildings, national theatres, symphony orchestras and in the opera and ballet (Bozdogan and Kasaba 1997, 5; Navaro-Yashin 2002, 11). Even ‘the body language’ that indicated a modern individual educated by the secular establishment represented what was acceptable in the public sphere (Gole 1997a, 1997b, 52). From the beginning, citizenship practices not only defined the legal boundaries of membership to the national community and its associated rights and obligations, but also extended its mission to making and representing ‘ideal citizens’ as subjects of modernity. Absent in the representations of modern Turkey were religious motifs such as mosques, religious dress and veiled women. Religion, of course, constituted one of the most potent symbols against which claims of modernity were measured. By carefully manipulating the symbols and cultural codes the modernizing elite strictly controlled what was represented in the public sphere. For instance, in 1928 the government went as far as to appoint a committee to examine ‘the problem of reform and modernization in Islamic religion’ which concluded that ‘religious life, like moral and economic life, must be reformed on scientific lines’ (Kasaba 1997, 25). The modernizing elite was committed to eliminating the signs and symbols of Islam from the public sphere but the physical presence of mosques constituted reminders of past and tradition. The committee therefore sought to reform behaviour in the mosques. It recommended that ‘mosques should be clean and orderly, with pews and cloakrooms, and that people should enter mosques with clean shoes’ (Kasaba 1997). Given that one cannot enter a mosque while wearing shoes, the committee was further mandated to modernize the rituals of Islam in order to make the mosque a part of modern public life.

This particular understanding of the Republican modernization with a civilizing mission at its centre sees the visibility of the headscarf in the public sphere as a threat to the realization of the modern subjectivity. Representations of women are particularly important here as the Republican elite emphasized the modernization of women as akin to the modernization of the nation as a whole. As carriers of modernization, women’s participation in the public life in terms of their legal rights as well as how they look and appear in society was seen as the key signs of progressing modernity (Tekeli 2009). As a result, the visibility of the headscarf in public places, such as universities, hospitals, courts, government buildings and the Parliament, is seen not only as a sign that religion is returning to what is supposed to be a secular site of modern life, but also read as an attack on the most potent symbol of Turkish modernization. Particularly telling is the distinction that is made by opponents of the use of headscarf in public places, between the traditional headcover (basortusu) and the headscarf (turban). While the former refers to the traditional covering used by rural and older women, the later refers to the covering used by young urban women. The headscarf (turban) has a distinctive style, tied and worn in a specific way (Ozkan 2005, 110). What makes the headscarf ideological according to those who oppose women wearing it, is the fact that it is worn by young, urban and educated women,
who are supposed to be representative of the achievements of Turkish modernization. Therefore, claims of young urban educated women to appear wearing a headscarf in universities, courts, hospitals and the parliament are seen as nothing less than a direct assault on the achievements of the modern revolution. Controversy about the wearing of the headscarf revolves around not only what kind of rights modern (female) citizens have but also on how they act and behave in the public sphere. For instance, after the election of the current JDP government, one of the most hotly debated issues was ‘how wives and daughters of elected officials should display themselves in the public sphere’: ‘While attending state functions, wives and daughters of state officials are given temporary public duty and are obliged to uphold the principles of the Republic and should not try to change the rules of protocol’ (Kirca 2004).

As my discussion above demonstrates, the demands to enter into the public realm with the headscarf are usually read as religion encroaching into the modern public sphere and as regression of the gains of the modern revolution in Turkey. This particular viewpoint rests on several assumptions such as that the relationship between modernity and tradition is necessarily antagonistic, that any visibility of religion in the public sphere is necessarily a regression of modernity and that women who choose to appear in the public sphere with headscarf are hostage to backward traditions and that they are engaged in direct confrontations over values of modern life. What is missing in this discussion is that the headscarf controversy is essentially a political struggle about the particular articulation of the citizenship and that demands to wear the headscarf in public places are claims of challenging the framework of this citizenship framework and making demands to change the exclusionary nature of its practices. The act of wearing a headscarf in the public sphere can be understood as an ‘act of citizenship’ in cases where a woman wears the headscarf, not simply to express her religious beliefs, but also to protest against her own and others’ exclusion from the public sphere. Here, the act of wearing the headscarf can be understood as an act of demanding inclusion and recognition as an equal member of society. In cases where headscarved women are banned from university campuses, excluded from representation in the parliament, and discriminated against in the workplace, women are prevented from exercising their full citizenship rights. This is why the visibility of the headscarf may not be a political issue in the private realm yet becomes one in public, since it is the very visibility of the headscarf in public spaces through which women articulate their demands to redefine the legal framework of the citizenship regime for greater inclusion and through which the very symbols that construct an image of the ideal citizen are re-imagined. What is also missing from this discussion is that the act of wearing a headscarf in public has many layers of meaning such as a marker of modesty, an expression of identity, a sign of oppression, a socio-economic status class symbol and a political strategy. Each of these layers indicates different aspects of citizenship politics through which subjectivities, secular or religious, are made and remade.

**Religious subjectivities and citizenship politics**

In the previous section, I argued that demands to wear the headscarf in the public sphere are seen as an expression of religious revival. This view ignores the fact that the citizenship regime constantly reproduces the headscarf controversy by defining the ‘ideal citizen’ and how he/she is represented in the public sphere. As White has argued, this value-laden process of nation-building constantly creates its Others, against which representations of modern subjectivities are measured (White 2002, 33). As a result,
demands to wear the headscarf are not just simply an expression of a religious strategy but more often than not are directed against legal, economic and cultural dimensions of citizenship practices. As demands to wear the headscarf in the public sphere are about these various dimensions of citizenship practices, there are different actors involved with different and sometimes contradictory strategies. This is why the politics of the headscarf sometimes appears to be about redefining modern subjectivity, while at other times it becomes an expression of socio-economic class differences and cultural representation, which cannot be reduced to a single causality such as religious revival. Instead, as Secor has argued, it takes different meanings in different contexts, it is spatially specific in that while, for instance, it takes a different form in the context of the university and it becomes a different symbol in the context of low-income neighbourhoods (Secor 2002). Below, I will focus on some of these different sites and political strategies through which headscarved women redraw the boundaries of the citizenship in Turkey.

One of the direct challenges generated by the headscarf controversy to the established citizenship practices is an attempt to redefine modern subjectivity. Women who choose to cover their head refuse to accept that theirs is a calculated political struggle and argue that far from being political, the issue is simply about religious freedom and should be understood within the context of individual rights (Kavakci 2004; Şişman 2004). While at one level, the headscarf controversy is indeed a matter of religious freedom and individual rights, it is also a refusal to conform to the parameters of modern subjectivity as defined by the Republican regime. If ‘making citizens’ through legal, political, cultural and social practices was meant to represent modern subjectivity in the public realm, the same process also validated its dominance by defining and excluding its others. Therefore, headscarf politics within the larger context of citizenship practices involves questioning the meaning of this modern subjectivity, articulating grievances against it, refusing to be confined in the private and formulating alternative subjectivities that demand to be represented in the public realm.

Despite the usual claim that headscarved women are passive bearers of religion and tradition, women who engage in headscarf politics express themselves as political subjects. They differentiate their understanding of what it means to be modern and view their headscarf as an expression of individuality. Both Göle and Özdalga have provided detailed accounts of how women reconcile their individual decision to wear a headscarf with what they believe is their religious duty through a series of detailed interviews (Ozdalga 1998; Gole 1997a, 1997b). Özdalga, for instance, in her detailed study of how different women decide to wear the headscarf provides valuable insight into the process in which women end up engaging in multiple struggles within their family environment, their workplace and their social circles to defend their choice. In one of the cases, after reading and deliberating about the necessity of covering her head as part of her religious duty, Leman, a teacher, ends up having a lengthy conflict with her parents to convince them to respect her choice (Ozdalga 1998, 81–98). She then also has to put up with harassment in her workplace and eventually leaves teaching because she cannot teach while being headscarved and, in addition, she loses some of her friends who refuse to accept her choice (Ozdalga 1998, 81–98). I provide additional examples below that outline a similar process. These examples, however, by no means constitute a detailed case study but are meant to provide short illustrations within the context of a theoretical discussion.

Nazmiye Yılmaz, the first female news director of Islamist-oriented TV station Channel 7, states that covering her head is a personal choice and explains the reasoning of her choice as follows:
Some women choose to be part of modern life by covering their heads. However, the Republican elite saw women who cover their heads and also want to take advantage of opportunities provided by the republic as troublemakers. In fact, headscarved women’s desire to express her personal choice is not antagonistic to the enlightenment thinking. How could women’s desire to leave the house and participate in everyday life be against secularism and pose a threat to the regime? (Ozkan 2005, 274)

Her statement points out that there is not necessarily an antagonistic relationship between religion and modernity, so one does not have to conform to what is considered to be modern defined by the Republican elite. If modernity necessitates an autonomous individual, who is capable of deciding his/her own destiny and making his/her choices, then, she asserts, headscarved women are indeed modern and do not pose a threat to the Republican ideals. This, in turn, requires a reorientation of citizenship practices, as usually argued by headscarved women, in a way that citizenship can no longer be about producing modern subjectivity as defined by the Republican elite but needs to accommodate greater representation of individual choices in the public sphere. In fact, many accounts of headscarved women point out that their choice to wear headscarf is a process of individuation in which the tension between modern and traditional is constantly reworked through citizenship politics (Gole 1996; Oğuzhan 1998). Ozlem Albayrak, a headscarved journalist, explains this reworking as follows:

Muslim women can be part of fast changing [modern] culture by not compromising her values. Any woman who achieves a balance and keeps the distance between her values and modern ones is a modern woman in my opinion. If modern means not covering your head, then that is another thing. We know that the Republic has a set definition of [modern] women. Why can’t we have other colours in this country? Why can’t we have different lifestyles, different discourses and alternative ideas? Clearly, this is a problem of democracy. (Sever 2006, 23)

She further argues that

It is important to provide alternatives to established norms of modern life style that are equally attractive. For instance, there are more ways of being modern than drinking. You may choose not to drink to entertain but you can find other ways of entertainment such as getting together with friends whose company you enjoy a great deal. You are no less modern when you have these alternatives. You can have a dress style that is modern, chic and at the same time observe religious rules. It is not always easy but nevertheless it is possible to have a style that combines both. (Sever 2006, 45)

Gender is one dimension of the headscarf controversy where not only the individuation process is highly visible, there is also a conflicting political struggles which situates women differently within the headscarf politics as they are the subjects of the headscarf controversy and are immediately impacted by its consequences. Whether it is in universities, in courtrooms or in the Parliament, women who cover their heads have experienced the direct consequences of the ban either losing their right to education or losing employment. Headscarved women have often emphasized that while they struggle with the ban that denies them visibility in the public sphere, they also have to deal with the male culture within their own circle that views woman’s role as one largely confined to the household (Aktas 2005; Sever 2006). They emphasize that very often their male compatriots abandon their cause, leaving them alone with the consequences of the ban and that businesses with religious owners offer them very low salaries knowing that their chances of finding employment in other places are very slim (Sever 2006, 11). Perhaps the most striking demonstration of this abandonment was the case of the headscarved member of the Parliament, Merve Kavakci. While criticizing the secular establishment for being intolerant towards her choice, she was also critical of the male members of her own party
for failing to side with her to defend her right to enter the General Assembly wearing a headscarf (Kavakc̣i 2010). Women work very hard in political parties that represent their worldview only to find out that during the election time they are mostly ignored and not given a chance to participate in the electoral process (Ozkan 2005, 122). As a result, the politics of wearing the headscarf is frequently intertwined with issues pertaining to gender roles and women’s visibility in the public, patriarchal roles between men and women and discrimination against women by both secular and religious establishments (Aktas 2006; Ozkan 2005).

The self-description of headscarved women as religious but at the same time as active political subjects who strive to be a full part of society creates a deep cleavage in the Republican interpretation of modernity and its depiction of modern women. In its neat division of public and private realms, where religious subjectivities are destined to exist in the private, Republican citizenship practices defined the modern Turkish women as active participants of society, not just in terms of what they do as students, judges, doctors and other professionals but also in terms of how they look and how they carry themselves in public (White 2003). Young, professional but, at the same time, religious women disrupt this neat division and introduce a new subjectivity with an alternative reading of modernity. While young, professional headscarved women with specific claims to be active political subjects create a cleavage within the logic of Republican modernity, they also disrupt the traditional gender roles of Islamist politics as well with their refusal to conform to the traditional role of housewife standing behind their husbands (Suman 2000).

Another area where the headscarf controversy creates multiple subjectivities and contradictory strategies within the context of citizenship politics is class and associated cultural representations and consumer patterns. An extensive set of literature has developed over the course of the last 10 years discussing the relationship between a growing consumerism, the rise of religiosity in the public sphere and the intersection of consumer culture and expression of religious lifestyles within the context of the public visibility of the headscarf (Cinar 2005; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Sandikçi and Ger 2005; White 2002; Secor 2005; Gökariksel and Secor 2009, 2010). These works draw attention to the complex interaction between consumer culture and individualization pointing to the fact that the absorption of consumer culture by religious groups and individuals does not simply indicate a growing individuation but instead appears to be indicative of a much more complex interaction between growing manifestation of individualization and conforming communitarian religious roles. White describes this as ‘vernacular politics’ where individualism and communitarian solidarity come together to form new forms of modern politics (White 2002, 68–69).

For the most part of the 1970s and early 1980s, there was little variety with respect to how women wore the headscarf and certainly the headscarf as a style of dress was not associated with the making of any fashion statement. Even in the 1980s, advertisements for headscarves took the form of illustrations without any female models. However, the representation of the headscarf has evolved quite dramatically over the course of 20 years and in the 2000s, there were many women’s magazines featuring different fashions and styles of headscarves displayed by actual women models with suggestive poses (Barbarosoglu 2005). While early commercials did not show actual women and disguised the agency of women, more recent advertisements now show women as powerful agents, who display a great deal of individuation (Barbarosoglu 2005). Similarly, within the last 20 years, several fashion companies have emerged that have directly targeted women with Islamic lifestyle choices and which have developed clothing lines for them (Gökariksel and Secor 2009). One of these companies, Tekbir Giyim, regularly organized fashion
shows where there were separate prayer rooms for male and female guests and where models displayed Islamic dress choices similar to regular fashion shows. With the expansion of the urban middle-class population adapting the Islamic lifestyle, formerly concealed preferences and not very visible lifestyle choices, including the wearing of the headscarf, gained a greater presence within everyday life.

This apparent visibility of an Islamic lifestyle associated with a middle-class urban population attracts a great deal of attention in the mainstream media as it makes visible an intersection between the rise of Islamic lifestyle and consumer capitalism. What becomes the source of this attraction is the seeming contradiction between the headscarf with its religious references and its articulation into fashion statements, which are ultimately associated with capitalism and modernity (Gökarküsel and Secor 2009, 7). However, as Gökarküsel and Secor have argued, this conflation between religious expression and fashion is ultimately about ‘Islamic identity, the transnational linkages of both producers and consumers, and the shifting boundaries between Islamic ethics and imperatives of neoliberal capitalism’ (Gökarküsel and Secor 2009, 7). For instance, this conflation between Islamic identity and neoliberal capitalism can best be seen in the attention that a particular fashion show has received, which is organized by one of the Islamic fashion companies, Tekbir. The fashion show organized by Tekbir Giyim was in the news for days and the secular mainstream media called the attendees as ‘white muslims’ referring to their middle-class urban status (Aksam 2008a). Newspapers reported every detail about the show, which opened with prayers and religious songs and was attended by young women wearing headscarves and converse shoes. Tekbir fashion house had its creation designed by a German fashion designer, Heide Beck, and the whole set was influenced by Ottoman, Anatolian Selcuklu patterns (Aksam 2008a). The day after the fashion show the Aksam newspaper published an interview with one of the headscarved women, who was described as the symbol of a new conservative generation. In the interview, she stated that she prays five times a day and also wears make-up and refuses to be locked in the house (Aksam 2008b).

Conservative fashion designer Rabia Yalcin, reflecting on this increasing frequency of Islamic fashion shows, argued that the fashion industry has simply discovered the headscarfed woman as its new market and that women who choose to cover themselves are as enthusiastic about fashion and style as other groups of women might be (Safak 2007). According to her, women wearing the headscarf want to pronounce their individuality and show their strong personality, and therefore, the clothing has to allow for such preferences. The extraordinary attention given by the secular mainstream media to Islamic fashion shows and other public demonstrations of Islamic lifestyle choices is perhaps because of the surprise factor caused by the Islamic actors’ ability to emulate lifestyle choices that are normally associated with middle-class urban secular lifestyle. When Islamic groups are represented in their traditional roles in mosques and other traditional places, this does not usually create a surprise. One of the headscarved journalists explains this as the secular anxiety of seeing the other becoming similar to itself (Barbarosoglu 2005).

Unlike the common argument defending its religious significance presented by many headscarved women, the headscarf, as it becomes part of the consumer culture, ceases to be just simply a symbol of religious observance but becomes another vehicle of individuation. It is a form of individuation in that women who cover their head, through multiple uses of headscarf, express their individuality by using their interpretation of religion not only in contrast to secular segments of the society but also in contrast to more conservative interpretations of Islam (Sandıkçı and Ger 2005, 64). Women who choose to
wear the headscarf express their individuality through their interpretation of what it means to be Muslim in the same way that others such as conservative Muslim groups, state officials and university administrators also make decisions about the wearing of the headscarf based on their different interpretations of what it means to be Muslim. Yet, at the same time, the multiple ways that women wear the headscarf cannot be just explained as simply the expression of individuality as the act of covering one’s head is also an attempt to conform to communitarian codes of religious belief. As a result, as Secor has argued, the headscarf controversy cannot be captured by a single interpretation but is located at the intersection of multiple discourses such as between Islamism and secularism and individual rights and communitarian belonging, within which individuals deploy political strategies to demarcate their position within the existing power hierarchy (Secor 2005).

What does this double articulation of individual expression and communitarian belonging mean in terms of a larger citizenship politics? In an interesting way this simultaneous expression of individualism and communitarianism is somewhat similar to the Republican attempt to create a modern individual through a communitarian framework based on a modern citizenship regime. As it ceases to become just a religious issue, the headscarf controversy intertwines with citizenship politics on several grounds. First, it alters the stereotypical representation of religious women and establishes them as subjects capable of asserting their individuality. Second, it leads to a further opening up of the definition of what it means to be an ‘ideal citizen’, dislocating representations of the ideal Turkish citizen by introducing new subjectivities into the public sphere that do not share the Republican interpretation of modernity.

Finally, similar to the gender dimension, it creates cleavages within Islamists politics by allowing women to assert their individuality against the communitarian framework within Islamist politics. In fact, the incorporation of the act of wearing the headscarf into consumer culture has as much significance in terms of rupturing Islamist politics as it does in dislocating the Republican notion of what it means to be an ideal citizen. It allows women to develop their own political strategy regarding their status in society; it allows them to differentiate demands within Islamist politics and it enables them claim new roles within their own circles.

**Conclusion**

The headscarf controversy in Turkey is not simply a sign of religious revival but an integral part of citizenship politics. As I argued above, the act of wearing a headscarf is not necessarily a rejection of modernity but instead is an attempt to redefine it. As such, it calls the strict division between modernity and tradition into question and opens up a new category in which modernity and tradition exist within the public sphere. Beyond this general framework, the exact nature of the headscarf controversy crystallizes in specific sites with differing citizenship claims. Women involved in headscarf politics do not belong to a monolithic group but come from different cultural, socio-economic and educational background. As a result, their reasons to wear the headscarf can be different along with their chosen political strategies. Educated middle-class women wear the headscarf for reasons other than those influencing working-class women. In small towns, the headscarf functions as a marker of traditional gender roles, while women wearing the headscarf in big urban centres may reject same traditional gender roles and carve out a new subjectivity that reconciles religious belonging with modern life. Similarly, although wearing a headscarf may allow women from a working-class rural background to leave home and seek employment, women from an urban middle-class background may choose...
to wear the headscarf as a fashion statement. The multiplicity of reasons as to why women choose to wear the headscarf defies the belief that the wearing of the headscarf in public places is a coordinated political act orchestrated by well-coordinated women whose main objective is to replace modern lifestyle with an Islamic way of life. What is common, however, to all of these different acts of wearing the headscarf is that women who choose to wear it have always been defined by the Republican regime as the other against which an ‘ideal citizen’ is defined. The Republican citizenship regime that defines its own ideal citizen also defines its others. This is why the act of wearing a headscarf in public places is both an expression of religious belief and unavoidably a political act of protesting exclusion, of seeking inclusion and of redefining the framework of citizenship. It politicizes an otherwise sterile and highly controlled public sphere and in the process remakes religious and secular identities. Similar to examples in other countries, citizenship in Turkey has never been simply about rights and responsibilities and engaging in deliberative politics in the public sphere.

Currently, women wearing headscarves in the public sphere do not generate the same shock as they once did in the 1980s. The Justice and Development Party government used a bureaucratic technicality to circumvent the Supreme Court decisions about the headscarf ban on university campuses. Women wearing the headscarf can now attend university but the public service still maintains a strict dress code, which does not allow for headcovers and there has never been another female member of Parliament, wearing the headscarf, since Merve Kavakci. Women wearing headscarves are no longer an aberration but part of everyday life in large urban centres and the public debate is less preoccupied with their presence in the public realm. Over the course of the last 30 years, those who were deemed to be less than ideal and who were supposed to be made into an image of this ideal citizen have challenged the constitution of the ‘ideal citizen’ of the early Republic. The headscarf controversy is far from being over as many still think that young educated urban women wearing headscarves represents a slippery slope in which religious politics will slowly make its way into dominating other aspects of everyday life. Yet, although the headscarf controversy has shifted the boundaries of citizenship politics in Turkey, it has also transformed the identities of the women involved in a way that they are not outside of the modern discourse but are, in fact, a part of it.

References


