



**Mehmet Hakan Yavuz. *Nostalgia for Empire. The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism.*
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Among reductionist, culturalist, and orientalist biases characterizing branches of the social and political sciences, one clear specimen is the debate over Turkey's multifaceted features, from its history to sociology as well as from the humanities to foreign policy. In particular, the unparalleled behavior deployed by Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) in the last two decades has led to a "renaissance" of Turkish Studies, where abundant space has been dedicated to the evolution of the concept of "Ottomanism". As a matter of fact, while academics have generally recognized that the instrumental use of the past is now a political project, incorporating made-up traditions and considerable fantasy, there is no unanimous agreement over its deeper meaning, origin, and practical implementation (Fisher Onar 2009:229-241).

Here, what comes to shed light is the latest book by M. Hakan Yavuz, one of the most established scholars working on Turkish Islamism in its broadest possible sense. Indeed, both exploring and embodying the everlasting contradictions over this theme, the book is an attempt to explain the sociocultural causes, actors, and currents that have played a critical role in the construction of Neo-Ottomanism as «[...] a conservative ideology, a form of identity, a worldview, an orientation in foreign policy, and a melancholic reaction that Turkey experienced after the empire fell» (p.6). Without any doubt, absolute relevance stems from its aim to demonstrate how such a disputed notion is not reducible to a single aspect. Yet, it reflects the dynamics of interconnection and interdependence existing in different contexts. That is, disentangling such a complex concept is fundamental to understanding in what way – both at the political elite and the popular-masses level – Neo-Ottomanism has been fluctuating between a mindset of reaction and restoration.

What mostly distinguishes the eight chapters of Yavuz's work from other accounts¹ becomes immediately clear in the Introduction and Chapter 1. Here, a rich theoretical-historical framework provides the basis to capture the importance of how different conceptualizations of the same term can be shaped by different elements, and can themselves shape different outcomes. Appropriately, a sound premise depicts the distinctive versions characterizing the more recent Republican Ottomanism, other than dissimilarities from its 19th century original predecessor movement. Although treating this new Ottomanism as «[...] a social

¹ Just to name some: Fisher Onar 2009; Ergin & Karakaya 2017; Wastnidge 2019.

imaginary, that is, a set of shared norms, symbols, and myths that constitute the collective framework of understanding and ways of representing collective life» (p. 25), the author also underlines how it assumes different shades when attaching itself to specific ideologies.

This is supportive of Yavuz's main argument: the imagery of the Ottoman past is the most crucial determinant of Turkish identity and provides the primary context of politics. Specifically, Yavuz argues that Republican Ottomanism is constituted with various elements from history, but at its essence is the nostalgia for the past. In turn, this nostalgia has significant influence on the frictions between secular and Islamic variants of Turkish identity provoked by the Kemalist Westernizing reforms. Coherently with the idea that nostalgia can serve to recover something of value in the past as well as something missing in the present (Lears 1998:59-66), Yavuz states that

Neo-Ottomanism means the formation of a historical consciousness (i.e., how people think and look at their past from different perspectives) to cope with the present issues and challenges. This consciousness has been formed by numerous cultural, literary, and cognitive factors that interact with each other as well (p. 4).

Above all, he agrees with Aktay that in conservative Muslim circles in Turkey there is always some sense of lingering political nostalgia (Aktay 1997) and a deep sense of loss in Turkish society (p. 21). In this light, the author succeeds where previous accounts have failed: detecting the roots that gave momentum to the emergence of Ottomanism under new vests. Indeed, he sounds unquestionable when finding that, although the Kemalist Republic's nation-building policy of forgetting the Ottoman past aimed to create a new national and secular (Turkish and Western) identity,

[...] the imperial “ghost” still haunts the state and society and has done so since the empire collapsed. The more it was pressed, the more it responded with the same intensity of “remembering” that imperial past (p.6).

This perpetual tension runs throughout Yavuz's book. He advocates that the “Jacobin” attitude of Atatürk's reforms paved the way for a reactionary force that the pro-Ottoman myth-making industry has canalized over time until the visible one exposed by President Erdoğan and his AKP (p. 65). Accordingly, he catches a mutually constitutive relationship that, due to different combinations of these attachments, leads to either Islamization of the Ottoman heritage or the Ottomanization of Islam within various identity construction sites. Hence,

the vague concept of nostalgia is here well-explained as the main force shaping these alternatives, by constructing historical memory to envision a future for the nation and by allowing the creation of an identity that heals the deep division in the self that underlies the sense of loss or ontological insecurity characterizing Turkish society (Ciftci & Yavuz 2021:314-317).

Chapter 2 substantiates these propositions with an analysis over the social, economic, and intellectual origins shaping memory construction from the Ottoman past, including the changing demographic makeup of Turkey, suppression of memories by the top-down modernization project, democratization, the Cold War and making of a Turkish-Islamic synthesis, leftist interpretation of history, and neoliberal economic policies.

Built on this background, Chapter 3 surely represents the real added value of Yavuz's work, since it distinguishes itself for comprehensively exploring the strong correlations and interdependencies between literary and political dimensions of post-imperial nostalgia. Focusing on the intellectual contributions of key figures like A.H Tanpinar, N.F Kisakürek, and S. Ayverdi, literature is identified as a major battleground (p. 68), and – according to each author's ideological affinities – as a transmission belt for an «aestheticization» of the empire over questions of belonging, remembrance, and ideology. Moreover, Yavuz is pioneering in surveying the linking of those authors with left and right-wing counteractive «alternative identities» to the Kemalist secular outlook of the early Turkish Republic. In addition, the chapter accurately examines Said Nursi's heritage and the influence of various Nurcu communities – especially Gülenist movements – to demonstrate the synergy between religion, Ottoman-Turkish identities, and policymaking processes.

Coherently, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 present a novel approach to the tenures of politicians, such as Erbakan, Özal, and Erdoğan, to explain different versions of Ottomanism as the determinants of the most formidable religious conservative political movements since the 1980s. Yavuz is original in discerning between «reflective» and «restorative» Neo-Ottomanism. The former, as expressed by Özal, revived and reframed progressive, cosmopolitan, and universal elements of the Ottoman Empire to counter the tight Kemalist tutelage (p. 124). Restorative nostalgia has become salient since 2002, when the AKP and President Erdoğan started adopting a different construction of the Ottoman past which tries to restore the Islamic character of the Empire domestically – as opposed to its cosmopolitan one – by discursively reproducing its past glories (p. 140). Similarly, in foreign policy, Turkey now seeks to restore presence or influence in the post-Ottoman space by promoting Turkey's «historical responsibility» toward those territories and peoples (p. 202).

Finally, Chapter 7 and 8 discuss the international dimension of Ottomanism by looking at the evolution of Turkish Foreign Policy (TFP) during the AKP rule and its consequences. In contrast with other either realist or constructivist accounts, Yavuz convincingly argues that politicized Neo-Ottoman nostalgia has little to do with history or the past and is much more connected to contemporary feelings of exclusion, marginalization, displacement, and especially discontinuity of identity (p. 24). Within this discourse, nostalgia operates as a tool for political mobilization and integration since it aims to restore, or rather to emulate, former Ottoman successes by combining traumatic memory and stressful experiences with an idealized, fictional, and decontextualized understanding of the past. Such an approach explains Turkey's recent proactive engagement in exploring new alliances on the basis of Islamic solidarity. Consequently, Yavuz ably explains how Turkey seeks to exploit strategically its erstwhile geopolitical reach by relying on a supposed «historical responsibility» in order to strengthen and reaffirm relationships with areas that used to be under Ottoman rule (p. 201; 181). Another point deserving attention is that, though recognizing Erdoğan's own logics of power, he rejects the notion that the AKP's anti-Westernism and Islamist-Ottomanist worldview led it directly to radical shifts for domestic political purposes. In fact, he considers this argument to be «[...] essentialist and Orientalist since it treats human conduct as an outcome of identity and considers Islamic and Ottomanist thinking mutually exclusive toward European identity» (p. 192). Here, Yavuz argues that TFP under the AKP was driven by the emergence of a new Islamo-Ottomanist Turkish elite who have hegemonic desires but, more importantly, by geopolitical structural changes (p. 198). Thus, his thesis also holds from a theoretical and methodological viewpoint: «[...] identities influence national interests, whereas ideology acquires a well-defined intervening role between the external environment and the foreign policy outcome» (p. 201). At the same time, the main take-away from Chapter 8 is that, in tandem with disillusionment with its traditional Western camp, the feeling of a new TFP based on “Neo-Ottomanism” in the Balkans and in the Middle East is perceived as a threat or as an expansionist strategy aiming to revive an imperialist past.

All in all, Yavuz's merit lies in having overcome the frequent Westernism² vis-à-vis Islamism dichotomy. As he notes, this can no longer hold when dealing with the quick and effective way Erdoğan and his AKP deployed a thoroughly nationalist version of it, thereby fueling Turkey's eternal “Sèvres syndrome”, na-

² Differently from Occidentalism, Westernism is here to be intended as Turkey's choice – from its early republican phase until the late 1990s – to anchor itself to the West in terms of security, culture, and an institutional framework in order to emancipate itself from its Ottoman past. See Chua 2017; Kushner 2019.

mely its hostile suspicion toward the risk of the country's disintegrations because of pressures from minorities and foreign powers. In accordance with a common Turkish saying – *bizler hüzünlü bir milletiz* ("we are a nation of melancholy") – *Nostalgia for the Empire* reminds us that «[t]he ghost of the empire has permeated the vision and hopes of Turkey deeply enough to transcend the political portfolio of any ruling Turkish government, regardless of its partisan bearings» (p. 202).

Yavuz has once again managed to recall how policies, discourses, and everyday practices in today's Turkey – including the latest reversals accompanying the latest governments – are inextricably related to the fine yet durable *fil rouge* connecting ideal retrospective concepts such as Neo-Ottomanism to both the Ottoman Empire and the ongoing modern republican successor. Books like this are crucial not only for a general understanding the multiple façades composing the Ottomanism topic itself, but also: (1) to enlarge the effort in assessing origins and future directions of the erratic changes typically affecting Turkey's socio-political milieu; (2) to evaluate the capacity of this new flow of works in redeeming accounts about Turkey out of embeddedness in Western-centered outlooks. In the end, if the current socio-political dream (Levitas 2010) re-imagining the Ottoman past can be seen as a cognitive utopia linked to a nostalgia for the bygone Empire, Yavuz's work allows us to interpret Neo-Ottomanism also as a retrotopia situated at the axis between the past and future and shaping the daily imaginary in contemporary Turkey.

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