BOOK REVIEW

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M. Hakan Yavuz. *Nostalgia for the Empire: Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2020. xviii + 318 pp.

Few books have been as formative to my understanding of contemporary Turkish society and politics as Hakan Yavuz's *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*.[1] I have assigned it in my classes, I have recommended it to colleagues, and I used it when called upon to analyze Turkish politics up until 2013. In this book Yavuz drove home an argument within what can best be described as a post-Kemalist framework; understanding Turkish politics as an opposition between an organic, Muslim nation whose true home is in Anatolia (his native Bayburt is frequently used as a reference point) and an artificial secularist elite that has relied on the coercive means of the state to impose its Westernizing worldview on the nation. Out of the former sprang a conservative counter-elite that started challenging the latter, and whose very different understandings of themselves and Turkey's position in the world then came to the fore in Turkish politics. This post-Kemalist story, as İlker Aytürk has argued, is the most forceful Turkish narrative of the past four decades, with distinct political and academic instantiations.[2] The political narrative was used to legitimize the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and rally a diverse set of voters as it rose to power. The academic version became paradigmatic in the study of Turkish history and politics, and its use does not imply support for a post-Kemalist political project. Where many early works within this academic paradigm focused on criticizing the authoritarianism of the post-1980 status quo ("the Kemalist elite"), Yavuz used rich ethnographic fieldwork to analyze the discourse and political practice of the conservatives, taking them seriously beyond facile stereotypes in a way that few other post-Kemalist historians and political scientists did.[3]

1 M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

2 "İlker Aytürk, "Post-post Kemalizm: Yeni bir paradigmayı beklerken," *Birikim* 319 (2015): 34–48.

3 Exceptions did of course exist, see e.g. Jenny B. White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002); Şerif Mardin, "Turkish Islamic Exceptionalism Yesterday and Today: Continuity, Rupture and Reconstruction in Operational Codes," *Turkish Studies* 6, no. 2 (2005): 145–65.

It is therefore with great admiration for Yavuz that I read *Nostalgia for Empire*. Again, he has provided a rich emic account of Islamist discourse, in this case showing the confluence of Islamism and Ottoman nostalgia. The overall premise is that the Ottoman heritage has been an inescapable part of Turkish identity since the founding of the Republic, even if some in the past have tried to mute that heritage. The Ottoman Empire is therefore not only Turkey's past, it is also the framework within which Turks have to imagine both the political present and the country's future. At the same time Yavuz shows that the Ottoman heritage—mostly in the form of invented traditions—has been appropriated by the Islamists to such an extent that Ottoman imagery implicitly evokes Islamist politics' and Islamist politicians' use the Ottoman Empire as their reference point for a "golden age" that can and should be mimicked. There are some non-Islamist examples of Ottoman nostalgia there too (like Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar's and Orhan Pamuk's), but it is elite Islamist sources that carry the book. They carry it well. I would like to highlight the chapters on *nakşibendi* uses of the Ottoman past (chapter 5) and neo-Ottoman legitimations of foreign policy (chapter 7) and their reception (chapter 8) as particularly interesting. Unfortunately, chapter 7 suffers from poor referencing. Chapter 3 on literary origins is also quite good, but the author's treatment of the Turkish historical context leaves something to be desired. In short, the work is good where Yavuz sticks to his sources. Weaknesses appear where he leaves his textual sources behind. The pages on Erdoğan and Sultan Abdülhamid II (pp. 149–56) read more like an op-ed or straight-up rant than a scholarly work. Abdülhamid II is described as someone "Urbane and cosmopolitan, [he] admired European culture and was an advocate for opera, theater, and classical music in the empire in the Western styles. He regularly read books published during his time, which he would discuss with some of his advisers. He was a sensitive, intellectually curious leader who was an amateur musician and a talented craftsman in carpentry" (p. 150). Erdoğan, on the other hand, has no intellectual curiosity and his only side interest beyond pomp and power has been to play soccer:

> His [Erdoğan's] sense of marginalization has seared his self-image of victimhood, which has evolved into a political weapon sharpened by personal envy, animus, and resentment. He is filled with a loathing for the people and history behind Turkey's modernist awakening and has henceforth defined his education policy in terms of "raising a pious and hateful generation." Unquestionably, he is committed to fulfilling that objective. (p. 150)

Even if neither of us particularly likes President Erdoğan, and even if the psychological diagnoses turn out to be correct, an editor should not let us get away

with such characterizations without a solid set of references. Unfortunately Yavuz provides nothing to back them up.

Not only does Yavuz share the Islamists' rose-tinted image of Sultan Abdülhamid II as the ideal enlightened despot without any closer scrutiny, the move is extended to Turgut Özal.[4] Whereas Erdoğan is motivated by malice and avarice, Özal is the ideal steward of the Ottoman heritage: "In the case of Turgut Özal, neo-Ottomanism was a search for post-Kemalist cosmopolitanism. For Erdoğan, it is a model of building an authoritarian one-man rule through the dominance of Islamic identity and politics" (p. 6).

By way of a historical narrative from the late Ottoman period onwards, Yavuz adeptly shows the reader how neo-Ottomanist discourse makes sense in the present. Unfortunately he hardly steps outside the discourse and analyses it from an *etic* perspective. At most there is a neo-Ottomanist critique of the way the AKP and Erdoğan practice neo-Ottomanism (see, e.g., p. 211). Acceptance of the overall tenets of neo-Ottomanism leads Yavuz to resort to merely assuming continuities between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic when they should be critically explored through historical sources. As a result he ignores obvious questions such as the conceptual opposition between "Osmanlı" and "Türk" in Ottoman and early Republican discourse. Taking a cue from the neo-Ottomanist discourse itself, Yavuz claims that the real Turks in Anatolia continued to consider themselves Ottoman and that they believed the secularist elite in Ankara had distanced themselves from the empire (e.g. p. 151). This may be true, but it stands in contrast to an anecdote about the Ottoman/Turk dichotomy related by philologist Geoffrey Lewis:

> The author was told by Fahir İz that, during his military service in the neighbourhood of Erzurum just before the Second World War, he had got into conversation with a shepherd, whom he shocked by using the words "Biz Türkler" (We Turks). "Estağfurullah!" was the reply, "Ben Türküm, zat-ı âliniz Osmanlısınız" (Lord have mercy! I am a Turk; Your Excellency is an Ottoman).[5]

Lewis' is not the final word here, but it is a good baseline against which an argument about provincial Anatolians "continuing" to consider themselves Ottoman in contradistinction to Ankara could be made. The problem is that Yavuz musters no actual non-elite sources from the time to argue his case.

The book contains many unreferenced (if interesting) claims. For example, the reader is told that "After the collapse of the Ottoman state, the term 'post-

4 Turkish prime minister in the 1980s and president in the early 1990s.

5 Geoffrey Lewis, *The Turkish Language Reform: A Catastrophic Success* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 22.

Ottoman space' became popular among scholars and politicians" (p. 39). As I have found no mention of this term prior to 2004, I wonder which scholars and politicians Yavuz is referring to. Moreover, the fact that the term does not have an established Turkish translation equivalent calls for elaboration.

I also find it difficult to believe that Ziya Gökalp was "one of Atatürk's right-hand men" (p. 41). The Turkish War of Independence lasted until 1922 and Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk from 1934) was primarily a military leader up until then. Gökalp died in 1924, before the socially transformative reforms of the Turkish Republic were initiated. His writings may have been influential, but Gökalp was hardly Atatürk's right-hand man.

More egregious than the varying quality of factual claims is the overall framing of the work. The post-Kemalist take that was refreshing in the early 2000s appears stale when used in 2020. Perhaps it is because the party that its political version fostered has grown authoritarian, but more pertinently the scholarly version has run out of analytical purchase. If I were to be unkind, *Nostalgia for Empire* is a scholarly counterpart to those books and think pieces where American journalists go to "fly-over country" to interview Trump supporters in diners, essentializing "the real America" and buying/reproducing a particular narrative of where that America is (in Kansas) and what it wants ("make America great again"). The difficulty is that the resulting analysis is not only analytically problematic, but at the same time it is the legitimizing discourse of a particularly nasty political current.

This review could have been the equivalent of a music fan claiming "I liked his early work better." But the problem runs deeper. Like the "Trump voter in diner" genre, *Nostalgia for Empire* turns the sources' political narrative into its own scholarly analysis. Despite extensive criticism of Erdoğan and Ahmet Davutoğlu, the book reads as an apologia for imperial nostalgia and for the post-Kemalist political project as much as an analysis of it.

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