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Nostalgia for the empire: the politics of neo-Ottomanism

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DISCUSSION

Nostalgia for the empire: the politics of neo-Ottomanism, by M. Hakan Yavuz, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020, 336 pages, $34.95 (hardcover), ISBN: 9780197512289

A ghost has been haunting Turkey, a ghost of the Ottoman past. This statement, inspired by The Communist Manifesto, succinctly captures the message of M. Hakan Yavuz's latest book. *Nostalgia for the Empire* provides a fantastic account of how imagination of the Ottoman past has deeply influenced Turkish society and politics. This volume is a major contribution to Turkish studies that will leave a lasting impact on the field.

Yavuz argues that the imagery of the Ottoman past is the most crucial determinant of Turkish identity and provides the primary context of politics. Throughout the book, he treats the reader with a rich account of the intellectual, social, and political origins and the political consequences of Ottomanism. This concept may signify an ideology, identity, emotions, a model for modernization, and/or a set of conservative values. Specifically, Yavuz argues that Republican Ottomanism is constituted with different elements from history but at its root is the nostalgia for the past. This nostalgia, in turn, has considerable sway on the schism between secular and Islamic variants of Turkish identity, a division rooted in the Kemalist Westernizing reforms. The Kemalist nation-building project rejected the Ottoman heritage and attempted to construct a Western secular identity. However, the salience of Islam and the imperial legacy brought about alternative configurations of belonging at the intersection of Islamic, Ottoman, and Turkish identities.

There were different combinations of these attachments leading to either Islamization of the Ottoman heritage or the Ottomanization of Islam within various identity construction sites. Nostalgia is the main force shaping these alternative attachments. It calls on and constructs historical memory to envision a future for the nation. Furthermore, it allows the creation of an identity that cures the deep division in the self that underlies the sense of loss or ontological insecurity characterizing Turkish society. Nostalgia may take different forms ranging from a desire to restore the past (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) to reflective nostalgia that reimagines and reconstructs the past to guide the future (Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar). It may also turn into a revanchist ideology against the Republican vision (Necip Fazıl Kısakürek) or become a transformative worldview reconstituting the Turkish nation-state building thorough cosmopolitanism, tolerance, and inclusion (Turgut Özal). These various forms of nostalgia stem from either deep historical trauma resulting from the loss of Ottoman territory and migratory movement to Anatolia, rendering the new state to a nation of immigrants, or the longing for the grandeur of old days represented in the flourishing

of everything Ottoman in art, architecture, cinema, fiction, and cuisine. With a rich reservoir of emotions, the construction of memory according to the nostalgic imaginations of the Empire can result in pluralistic, conservative, or authoritarian political preferences. The Introduction and Chapter 1 present rich theoretical and historical discussions about these themes.

Yavuz demonstrates that Republican Ottomanism has many different versions, and it is quite different from its original predecessor movement in the nineteenth century. He treats this new Ottomanism as 'a social imaginary, that is, a set of shared norms, symbols, and myths that constitute the collective framework of understanding and ways of representing their [people] collective life' (p. 25). Given this broad conceptual net, it should not come as a surprise that Ottomanism comes with different shades attaching itself to conservative, nationalist, leftist, and Islamist ideologies. In Chapter 2, Yavuz presents the social, economic, and intellectual origins shaping memory construction from the Ottoman past. Some of these factors include the changing demographic makeup of Turkey, suppression of Ottoman memories by the top-down modernization project, democratization, the Cold War and making of Turkish-Islamic synthesis, leftist interpretation of Ottoman history, and neo-liberal economic policies. These socioeconomic and intellectual foundations set the main background for the meticulous construction of Ottomanism, as seen in works of literature and Sufi orders.

Chapter 3 provides an excellent overview of the history of ideas related to Ottomanism and identity in the Republican period, mainly focusing on key figures like Tanpınar and Kısakürek and also acknowledging the intellectual contributions of Kemal Tahir, Orhan Pamuk, and Samiha Ayverdi. As Yavuz demonstrates, poetry, fiction, and religious writings turn into fertile grounds for constructing identity according to nationalist, Islamist, or leftist worldviews. Chapter 3 also examines Said Nursi's heritage and the influence of various *Nurcu* communities -especially Fethullah Gülen and his movement – to demonstrate the synergy between religious outlooks and Ottoman-Turkish identity construction. Given the lack of systematic studies into the intellectual history of the Republican era, Yavuz's attempt to provide a narrative explaining the ideas of nationalist, Islamist, leftists, religious, and liberal thinkers around the central notions of Ottomanism and Turkish identity is a welcome contribution to Turkish studies.

Next, Yavuz presents the tenures of Erbakan, Özal, and Erdoğan in Chapters 4–6 to explain different versions of Ottomanism as the determinants of the most formidable political movements since the 1980s. All three leaders are influenced by the charismatic *Nakşibendi* sheik Mehmed Zahid Kotku, but they represent different political ideologies. For Turgut Özal, the memory of the Empire is constructed to support a cosmopolitan project that would accommodate Islamist and Kurdish groups within and build the bridges to Turkish people outside Turkey. This vision is compatible with a liberal, democratic, and inclusive political project. For Erbakan, Islam is the solution, a blueprint for life. This view provides the frame with which the memory of the imperial past is built. Per the *Nakşibendi* outlook, particularly that of the *İskenderpaşa* community,

religion and Islamization of the Ottoman Empire comes to the forefront. Consequently, Erbakan was primarily concerned with Islamic identity and asserting Turkey's leadership role in the Muslim world and less with the economy. Finally, Erdoğan's nostalgia increasingly turned restorative and regressive. It detached itself from the historical reality as reflected in the construction of Ottoman memory in popular culture, architecture, and historical dramas. Certain Ottoman sultans such as Abdulhamid II play an important role in constructing Ottoman memory and reorienting the present. Islamic identity still matters a great deal for Erdoğan. Meanwhile, his version of Ottomanism provides a 'home' for Anatolian Muslims but is also inspired by Turkish nationalism and Kisakurek's revanchist ideology against Kemalism. These tendencies have given way to a particular type of authoritarianism tailored to the persona of Erdoğan at the expense of democracy and Turkey's international standing. Overall, these three chapters provide a novel approach for understanding Turkish politics through varieties of religious conservative Ottomanism.

Finally, Yavuz discusses the international dimension of Ottomanism by looking at the evolution of Turkish foreign policy during the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) era and the reactions to Ottomanism and new foreign policy in the Balkans and the Arab World. Yavuz argues that Turkish foreign policy under the AKP has increasingly become assertive, relied on outward economic expansion, and shifted from a security framework toward an identity-based strategy. Ahmet Davutoğlu's approach, dubbed as 'Neo-Ottomanism,' is seen as romantic and improbable to the extent that it reflects a restorative nostalgia longing for the past. In Chapter 7, Yavuz examines the three periods of the AKP era foreign policy -Europeanization and market-led foreign policy, Islamization during the Arab Spring, and its collapse. Turkish foreign policy strategies during these periods are scrutinized in light of the competing visions of Ottomanism and the changing international conditions. Finally, Chapter 8 provides an account of Balkan and Arab responses to Neo-Ottomanism. The main take away from this chapter is that the intellectuals in the Balkans and the leaders in the Arab region perceive the new Turkish foreign policy based on 'Neo-Ottomanism' as a threat or as an expansionist strategy aiming to revive an imperialist past. These intellectuals' understandings of the Ottoman past are quite different and not always accurate representations of history. Overall, these two chapters show that varieties of nostalgia for the Empire have implications beyond the domestic scene, and their consequences extend to the international arena.

Nostalgia for the Empire casts a wide net to provide a straightforward theory of Turkish politics. This essay raises two criticisms about the book's general framework and applicability of the specific explanatory framework for examining the construction of identity among the masses. Throughout the book, the reader can sense a degree of reductionism that explains a highly complex history with a single powerful idea. Social scientists generally use three frameworks, namely ideas, institutions, and interests, in studying social phenomena. Yavuz prefers to use the first of these frameworks and tells a compelling story about the substance of Turkish politics. However, with this, he misses an

important opportunity to develop a more parsimonious theory. Ideas do not exist in a vacuum, and institutional context may significantly influence social and political phenomena. The ideology and the identity of three leaders – Erbakan, Özal, and Erdoğan – whose Ottomanism and its political consequences are explained in great detail in the volume, are presumably shaped by the institutional context. Özal operated from a restrictive but democratizing institutional setting, Erbakan operated against a hostile political establishment controlling the military and bureaucratic institutions, and Erdoğan was responding to the imperatives of an institutional order defined by the secularist military elite. So, what is the role of these different institutional contexts in the development of ideology and identity? What are the effects of different institutions on memory construction, and how do they shape these leaders' ideas?

It is also quite curious why the most significant intellectual foundations of the Ottomanist thought were formed from the 1950s to the 1980s. This period is the most vital era for the politics of identity and ideology in Turkey, thus resembling the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Ottoman period. This period is also marked by democratization efforts and increased freedoms resulting from a new constitutional experiment. Yavuz is right to devote a significant portion of Chapter 3 to examine the intellectual history of this period. He also acknowledges the role of political and economic institutions as social determinants of Ottomanism in Chapter 2. However, the volume does not present neat mechanisms linking the institutional environment to the developments in the intellectual field.

As for interests, it is crucial to consider the strategic calculus of rational actors in explaining social phenomena. Yavuz presents some micro-level mechanisms, including a feeling of loss and ontological insecurity, as foundations of memory construction and identity. Yet, the analysis does not always result in exact explanatory mechanisms about how interest-based strategic interaction could play a significant role in shaping Ottomanism, or how the interest might be shaped by it. Yavuz exactly employs this approach when he explains the linkages between the neo-liberal economic model and Özal's Ottomanism. However, there are many opportunities in other chapters where the 'interest framework' could have been used to explain how strategic interaction may shape ideology, rather than merely being an effect of Ottomanism. For example, how can we explain the clash between Erdoğan and the Gülen movement if they both share Ottomanism as their starting point? Could it be the diverging interests that resulted in the evolution of Ottomanist ideology in different directions? Why did a young group split from the Virtue Party to form a new party when Erdoğan presumably shared an ideology with Erbakan? Finally, as the institutional context and international environment changed during the AKP era, did Erdoğan strategically use memory to reap political gains? Adding the institutional and interest dimension might be too much to ask in a book that already accomplishes quite a bit. Nevertheless, these are questions that require answers, and perhaps combining Yavuz's framework with institutional and interest-based explanations will immensely increase our understanding of Turkish politics by providing parsimonious explanations built on precise theoretical mechanisms.

A second criticism concerns the applicability of the volume's framework to explaining the ideology and identity of the masses. At its core, the volume is a study of ideas and elite behavior. There are attempts in different sections of the book toward extending the applicability of the theoretical framework. For example, the dissemination of Ottomanism into popular culture through literature, activities of Sufi orders, cuisine, and TV shows is indicative of the widespread appeal of nostalgia in constructing mass political preferences. This assumption invites two questions. First, while literature serves as a significant site for building memory, ideology, and identity, until Erdoğan's Ottomanism, this intellectual effort's target audience was the elites or the educated urban residents. Perhaps, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek's poems or Said Nursi's ideas found their way to sermons or public gatherings, but at its core, the construction of the Ottoman past remained an elite project. So, what are the exact mechanisms that disseminated Ottomanism among the less-educated Anatolian masses? Second, the Republican period resulted in enforced internal migration movements and it also witnessed numerous rebellions against the Kemalist nation-state building project. The popular revolts presumably had their dynamics concerning identity and ideology. Can we apply the explanatory framework of *Nostalgia for the Empire* for understanding the ideology and preferences of the masses? The contribution in Chapter 3 is significant for understanding the intellectual and religious foundations of Ottomanism and the evolution of Turkish identity. The survey of the history of ideas in this chapter is impressive and includes the works of conservative, religious, and leftist thinkers. One wonders, however, what drives the selection of the intellectual and religious figures examined in this chapter.

Some alternatives could have strengthened the book's argument by providing evidence for the popular appeal of Ottomanism and its reception by a broad audience. First, while Kısakürek, Tanpınar, and Ayverdi are significant figures, an analysis of the works of Peyami Safa or Şule Yüksel Şenler, who presumably have a wider readership than Tanpınar and Ayverdi, could have provided the needed insights about the popular challenge to the Kemalist project. Second, Islamists discovered their Ottoman roots and connected with the global Islamist movements between 1960 and 1980. Through journal publishing, new forms of Islamism were communicated to a broad audience which was not necessarily linked to the elite social literary circles or Sufi orders. A unique brand of Islamism connected to its Ottoman roots and global Islamism became a notable social force in the 1990s. This brand played a significant role in creating its own variant of the memory of the past, which at times goes beyond the Ottoman past, by influencing the constellations of Islamist, Ottoman, and Turkish identities. Can the explanatory framework of *Nostalgia for the Empire* accommodate different brands of Islamism?

Finally, beyond literature and Sufi orders as sites of memory construction, cinema has been the quintessential medium where the Ottoman memory was established for a broad audience since the 1960s. The 1960–1980 period witnessed the rise of the Nationalist Cinema Movement (*Milli Sinema Akımı*) and White Cinema (*Beyaz Sinema*) focusing on Turkish identity, the encounters

of Western and Eastern values, and religion. The movies by directors like Halit Refiğ, Metin Erksan, and Yücel Çakmaklı had a certain degree of influence in national identity construction through depiction of native values (*yerli ve milli değerler*). In addition, popular historical dramas following the adventures of the Seljuk and Ottoman raiders (*Akıncı*) such as Kara Murat, Battal Gazi, and Malkaçoglu were seen by millions of viewers. These movies were instrumental in keeping the memory of the past and the Ottoman images alive among the masses. Before the TRT drama Payitaht Abdulhamid, there was Battal Gazi. Examining memory construction and perception of Ottomanism in the popular culture by building on Yavuz's approach provides a fruitful avenue for future research.

Overall, *Nostalgia for the Empire* is a theoretically rich account of Turkish politics bringing substantial evidence from history and Turkey's rich intellectual field. It shows that history and ideas matter. For a nation whose 'self' is ruptured between an Ottoman past and Republican modernization, the construction of memory of the past (Ottomanism) may turn into a powerful prism that reflects competing visions of identity, ideology, and politics. The criticisms raised in this essay aim to broaden our perspective, point to future research possibilities, and start a dialogue in Turkish studies by building on the great insights provided in *Nostalgia for the Empire*.

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Author's reply

Professor Sabri Ciftci's review essay raises a number of critical issues about *Nostalgia for the Empire*. Although I agree with most of his criticisms, there are several points where I believe he goes beyond the intent of my book. The main goal of this book is to understand the construction, evolution, appropriation, and (mis)use of Ottoman memory in modern Turkey. In other words, I tried to explore questions, such as; what does Ottoman (*Osmanlı*) signify in modern Turkey?; how does society, especially those who used to be marginalized, remember and appropriate Ottoman memory into an identity and ideology?; why is this memory more appealing to these people than even Islamism?; and why does this nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire play an important role in the way certain sectors of society define who they are and what their interests should be? I have argued that the Ottoman imaginary is a set of symbols, ideas, norms, and practices that cultural entrepreneurs use in a creative way to understand, represent, and make sense of their ordinary lives. This historically inspired and politically constructed Ottoman imaginary is the most effective and useful framework to understand some of the public perceptions

of identity, the reasons for social and political mobilization, and the dynamics of state-society relations. In other words, this Ottoman imaginary provides the 'background of an intersubjectively shared lifeworld' that girds the social bonds of any society.[1] In that sense, nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire differs from historical Ottomanism.

The current constructed discourse of Ottomanism, to cite Cornelius Castoriadis, constitutes 'the laces which tie a society together' and also provides a bridge between the state and society, the past and the present, thereby offering a new language of communicating the current socio-political challenges.[2] This Ottoman imaginary signifies the contemporary beliefs and ideals of Turkish society. It is more bottom-up and has evolved as a counter-culture framework of identity and ideology for criticizing the excesses of the modernizing Kemalist Republic. The Ottoman imaginary provides a more stable and effective glue for Turkey's ethnically, ideologically diverse population, and it also imbues the state with meaning both for the bureaucracy as well as, and especially so, for the population. What the structure of Turkey's societal glue is and what the state in Turkey signifies cannot be answered without understanding the meaning and the function of this Ottoman memory. The meaning of identity, political legitimacy, and the sense of the state is derived from this active Ottoman memory. Ciftci is correct to ask how state institutions are shaping the changing discourses on Ottoman memory and its appropriation in daily ideological debates.

Ciftci's main criticism is that my book is reductionist by merging the complex issues of identity, ideology, legitimacy and popular nationalism into the 'single powerful idea' of Ottomanism, and by ignoring the intersection of the role of ideas, interest and institutions. Although my book never claims to provide a mono-causal explanation to understanding Turkish politics, it does not ignore the close and embedded relationship between ideas and interests. However, Ciftci is right in that I start my discussion with the formation of counter-ideas and memories against the Kemalist project of creating a new (secular) society and homogenous nation-state. In fact, the Jacobin and exclusionary policies of the Kemalist state triggered a *ressentiment* in conservative-religious groups which has festered since the 1930s. I argue that counter-ideas and memories were constructed by marginalized sectors of the population and their cultural entrepreneurs to advance their own interests. In other words, the Ottoman memories were weaponized into ideas for critiquing the exclusionary Kemalist policies implemented against the conservative (religious) sector of the population. This affinity between the two explains the effectiveness of the Ottoman imaginary. The way the Ottoman legacy turned into a counter-identity and even ideology by the marginalized sector of the population due to their perceived interests. Those who have updated their worldview and mobilized around the concept of Ottomanism are those who were previously from the excluded sector of the population and subsequently the newly emerging conservative bourgeoisie, which evolved as a result of Özal's neo-liberal economic policies. I did not examine the role of institutional frameworks on how they may have inadvertently shaped the evolution thus changing discourses of Ottomanism. Yet, after displaying the evolution of Ottomanism, I treated Erbakan, Özal,

and Erdoğan more as consumers of these ideas and memories, rather than manufacturers. Ciftci is also right to argue that ideas and memories shared by both Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen did not prevent their bloody confrontation since their interests clashed over the distribution of resources and positions.

Ciftci also argues that my work is more 'a study of ideas and elite behavior.' Yes, my entry into the discussion is aimed at an examination of how the marginalized sectors of society and their cultural entrepreneurs constructed their counter identity and memory to criticize the top-down modernization project. However, since my entry point is counter-ideas and memories to empower the masses, I had to focus on the elite – in particular conservative writers, novelists, poets, and Sufi leaders. Within Ottomanism, I also examine the origins of Islamic political discourses since Ottomanism functioned as a surrogate identity of Islamism. Ottomanism prevented the development of a purely Islamist political discourse and enveloped and filtered Islamism through an Ottoman legacy. Thus, Turkish Islamism has been consummated, incubated, birthed and evolved within this framework of Ottomanism. Both Ottomanism and Islamism are closely linked with the process of mass education and urbanization.[3] In other words, the successes of the Kemalist modernization also provided its ground for the formation of counter identities and ideologies to evolve.

In conclusion, my 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. It also shows the diverse interpretations and manifestations of post-Ottoman Ottomanism: neo-Ottomanism.

Notes

1. Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*, 322.
2. Castoriadis, *The Imaginary Institutions of Society*.
3. Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey*, 81–102.

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