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Hasan Bülent Kahraman

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# The End of the ‘New’ as We Know It

## Post-1990 and the ‘New’ Beginnings in Turkish Culture

Hasan Bülent Kahraman

When defined within the context of ‘recent past’ or ‘contemporaneity’, or the cultural problems that characterise it, Turkey’s cultural history gains a special meaning and significance in the post-1990 era. Public debate in this period contained the phenomenon of conflict with ‘modern history’, which defined the period immediately preceding it. This conflict is dialectic, creative and productive. The elements of debate that have come to the fore since 1990 simultaneously influenced the political and social agendas. The ‘cultural’ also forms the backbone of this era, indicating a major break with modern history in the sense that in the former model the ‘political’ had always determined the cultural domain. Yet one must remain mindful of the cultural as characteristic of Turkish modernisation. This article will review the quality of this transformation and how it reflects on modern Turkish cultural production in relation to its historical background.

- 1 Cemal Kafadar is of the view that the beginning of Ottoman modernisation can be dated to the sixteenth century with certain provisos. That said, this article examines the systematic, Western-oriented modernisation that naturally dates from 1839. In other words, 1839 is the start date of a certain concept of modernisation that this article will focus on as well as criticise when needed.
- 2 The best source to follow this history is Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, Oxford University Press, second edition, London–Oxford–New York, 1968.

### **THE HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE AND SOME INDICATIONS OF CULTURAL MODERNISATION**

The cultural history of modern Turkey has been determined by several turning points.

These turning points go back all the way to 1839.<sup>1</sup> This date marking the start of the *Tanzimat* (Reformation) Era is interchangeable with 1908, the Second Parliamentary Monarchy Era. The third major turning point is 1923 and the proclamation of the Republic when the concept of ‘modernisation’ became fundamental in its own right, and gained irrevocable acceptance. Modernisation at this point is an ideology determining not only the hegemonic politics pursued by the founders of the new state but also the parameter which legitimises these politics.<sup>2</sup>

It is equally valid to explain this in the reverse: the republic and the modernisation it contained represent the pinnacle of the metamorphosis

- 3 Ziya Gökalp, *Türkleşmek, İslamlaşmak, Muasırlaşmak* (Turkification, Islamisation, Modernisation), İnkılap Books, İstanbul, 1960. See also Ziya Gökalp, *The Principals of Turkism*, trans R Devereux, E J Brill, Leiden, 1968.
- 4 See Julie Candler Hayes, *Reading the French Enlightenment: System and Subversion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, pp 1–3 for a debate on the concept of Despotism Enlightenment. See the following on Radical Enlightenment, Jonathan I Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*, new edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford–New York, new edition, 2002; key views are also found in the author's *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2006.
- 5 All these factors as well as a different 'categorisation' of post-1908 Turkish culture are analysed in Hasan Bülent Kahraman, 'From Progressive Conservatism to Conservative Progressivity in Turkish Culture', *Culture and Society in Modern Turkey: Conference Proceedings*, Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv, 2007, pp 17–28.
- 6 It is professor Mardin who, starting from Shills, applied the 'Centre-Right' concept to the Turkish political structure. Şerif Mardin, 'Center-Periphery Relations: A Key to Turkish Politics', *Daedalus*, Winter, 1973, pp 169–80. See Hasan Bülent Kahraman for an introduction to the latter-day debate on the concept: *Türk Sağı ve AKP (The Turkish Right and AKP)*, Agora Books, İstanbul, 2006.

within the concept of reform begun in 1839. The concept of modernisation referred to here is, in essence, Westernisation. The West exemplified modernisation in the mental cartography of the time. Ziya Gökalp in his social project defined the Turkish people as belonging to 'the parish of Islam, European (Western) civilisation and the Turkish nation'.<sup>3</sup> Gökalp, who was fundamentally influenced by Emile Durkheim's sociology, and who himself in turn influenced the formation of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's views, held the view that sociocultural criteria were *collective representations*, and these constituted subconscious truths. In short, though not often emphasised, these definitions that carried traces of the German idealism of the time led Gökalp to try to create a collective (communal) identity, placing him on the religious-nationalistic axis.

The republic seemed destined to accept this ideal. Yet the true personality of the republic would be in line with despotic enlightenment.<sup>4</sup> Its crystallisation point was secularism which foresaw the total eradication of religion (Islam) from the public realm. This concept informed the modernisation project of which the republic was but a single link. The modernisation in question was to take place under the leadership of the political and state elites which would implement the ideal society and the necessity of a non-political environment. A democratic system or a political entity called 'opposition' was not part of this equation. A system that would implement Westernisation and harmony with the West in an autocratic manner was being formed. This policy can be said to have succeeded within its remit.

The republican era initiated a number of its own turning points.<sup>5</sup> The momentum of social transformation created a line of tension defined as 'centre-periphery', as historical analysis has revealed.<sup>6</sup> The year 1950 stands out as a major stage in this context. It witnessed the rise to power of a political organisation representing the provincial claim to power that had hitherto been in the monopoly of the statist political elite.<sup>7</sup> This political rule, destined to last for a decade, would survive on a cultural-populist basis and would close down the major, functional but ultimately ideological institutions of the early republican era such as the People's Houses and Village Institutes. The centre, led by the intelligentsia and the bureaucracy but implemented by the armed forces, would end this era after ten years with a military coup in order to reform society once more in the course of Kemalist reforms. However, the die was already cast; the new era opened the door to a brand-new cultural phenomenon. The leftist political actions manifested throughout the whole of Western Europe in the 1960s would rage on in Turkey until 1980 as part of the struggle for power between the centre and the periphery.<sup>8</sup> The aftermath of the last big and direct *coup d'état* in 1980 was the search for an entirely different Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

The 1983 election gave rise to two things in Turkey. The constitution produced by the 1980 coup had left behind the legacy of an apolitical, corporatist society under guardianship which should be called a tutelage society. The new government did nothing to disturb the military junta but, on the contrary, appeared to accept its fundamental ideology. That said, neoliberal and right-wing governments were emerging around the world in the mid-1980s, as in Turkey. This rightist government was based on a decidedly congregationist structure in politics while its 'liberal' wings followed a more open path.<sup>10</sup> 'Open' in this context had

- 7 For a detailed analysis see Çağlar Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey: A Study in Capitalist Development*, Verso, London, 1987.
- 8 That the political party who by its own admission followed the DP line was elected in 1965 indicated that the people had become familiar with politics and were unwilling to depart from that particular line. The 1971 'memorandum' coup was a new attempt by the centre to regain power. However, this coup created a rift in the historic alliance. The armed forces had ignored the intelligentsia. As a matter of fact, this time it was the enlightened Left who had objected to the coup.
- 9 See Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, revised edition, I B Tauris, London, 2004.
- 10 For a critical assessment of this recent history in general from different angles see Metin Heper and Ahmet Evin, eds, *Politics in the Third Turkish Republic*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1994.
- 11 See Hasan Bülent Kahraman, *Postmodernite ile Modernite Arasında Türkiye: 1980 Sonrası Zibinsel, Toplumsal, Siyasal Dönüşüm*, (*Turkey Between Postmodernism and Modernism: Mental, Social and Political Conversion after 1980*), second edition, Agora Books, Istanbul, 2007, for detailed analysis on this subject.
- 12 I analysed this very cultural development and transformation in Turkey critically in my book, Hasan Bülent Kahraman, *Kitle Kültürü Kitlelerin Afyonu (Mass Culture is the Opium of the People)*, Agora Kitaplığı, Istanbul, 2005.
- 13 See D Kandiyoti and A Saktanber, eds, *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey*, I B Tauris, London, New York, 2002, for a general view of this

two meanings. First, Turkey's political and social structure, hitherto determined to remain statist, insular and closed to the wider world, now violently opened up to a new economic mentality. Second, 'open' determined a new focal point for Turkey regarding the implementation of American culture in Turkey. This was not the first time it had been Turkey's goal, but this passionate ardour was utterly unprecedented.

America as a cultural goal for Turkey was a tremendously significant conversion on the sociocultural stage. Cultural policy, which had previously focused on high culture, slid swiftly towards popular culture. 'Popular culture' here indicates something of an anthropological phenomenon. It emphasises the weight, if not yet the dominance, of the result of the move to the cities from the country that had begun in the 1950s. It signalled a tacit acceptance of the part this rural displacement would play within social culture. But, despite all concessions, the government and its ideological apparatus meant a 'blended-eclectic' country culture as seen in the cities, rather than actual country culture itself. As a matter of fact, the concept of the middle class, reiterated ad nauseum in the 1980s, meant exactly that.<sup>11</sup> The middle class, for its part, was the focal point of a sociocultural opening decidedly American in origin.

This cultural preference, which stamped its mark on the entire 1980s, very quickly evolved within its own boundaries. In a very short time, popular culture that had been anthropological, yet still democratic to a degree, conveyed to mass culture.<sup>12</sup> This latest term was a direct extension of the culture industry itself. Commercial TV stations, the spread of new technological and electronic gadgets and the animation of mass communications, insufficiently realised until then, comprised a new beginning. Television and the entertainment industry were the particular backbone of this new beginning. Television had very quickly covered the whole of Turkey and lost little time in ushering in new cultural attitudes. As the 1990s came round, Turkey familiarised itself with the world at large, broke free of its traditional shell and arrived at the doorstep of a new cultural phenomenon best described as *everyday life* culture.<sup>13</sup>

Postmodernist debates of the time were equally influential in the formation of this 'new cultural phenomenon'. The end of the Cold War, marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, put an end to traditional nation-state identities and nurtured new searches in Turkey. Postmodernism also began to question the rigidly rationalistic principles and ideals of the Enlightenment that had for so long been a fundamental element of Republican Turkey, and this doubt contributed to a relaxation on the social stage greatly influencing the relationship between the state and the individual. All that aside, the simple acceptance of truth gained a new significance.<sup>14</sup> Established and unitarian acceptance swiftly gave way to changeable and pluralistic ideas. This meant, in effect, the acceptance of social multiculturalism based on identity policies and pluralism. The great breakaways of the 1990s began to be shaped from this point onwards.

### THE 1990s AND TURKEY

It would be appropriate to begin looking at the 1990s with the 1991 elections. Those elections indicated that Turkey was in dire need of change

subject and Martin Stokes, 'Afterword: Recognising the Everyday', in *Fragments*, op cit, pp 322–38, for a particular study.

14 Hasan Bülent Kahraman, 'The conversion of reality in the post-modern era, media and popular culture', *Postmodernite*, op cit, pp 146–72.

15 For example, Istanbul was at that time witness to just such a development on a district level. Some districts were beginning to host new 'guests' arriving from Russia; a 'Polish Market' was organised in the centre of the city; a serious human trafficking issue over Russia was on the agenda; districts such as Cihangir, while being gentrified on the one hand, were also increasingly the homes of homosexuals, transvestites and transsexuals and finally a group of Africans.

16 It is worth pointing out here that in the post-1990 era there has been an overwhelming inclination in Turkish universities toward the foundation of Cultural Studies departments focusing mostly on similar subjects.

17 This term belongs to Jacques Derrida and has been applied to Turkish politics by Bobby Said in *The Fundamental Fear: Eurocentrism and the Emergence of Islamism*, Zed Books, London, 1997.

18 There is now a large and rapidly growing literature on the birth and development of political Islam in Turkey. See, Jenny White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*, University of Washington Press, Seattle, WA, 2002.

19 The endeavour of Islamic intellectuals in Turkey is studied in an old but productive text, Michael Meeker, 'The New Muslim Intellectuals in the Republic of Turkey', in Richard Tapper, ed, *Islam*

on two counts. The first of these was a reaction to the heavy-handed and repressive statist constitution that had been forced on Turkey after 1980. This anti-statist faction was led by the social democratic left. The second was political Islam, which had managed to obtain a presence in parliament but whose grassroots support went much deeper. These two disparate elements converged on the desire for a new political and cultural structure. The collapse of the Soviet Union demonstrated that Turkey was itself destined to encounter a new picture manifested by disintegration, exodus and migration, all facets that had already been felt in stages during the postmodern era. The metropolitan area had become a space where different cultures of both local and alien origin intermingled and subculture groups made their presence felt as a tangible entity.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, *space, memory, identity, belonging, acceptance and difference politics* all appeared as truths in their own right.<sup>16</sup>

The main elements defining the post-1990 era are identity politics that became the focal points of fundamental debates. This empowered political Islam in the elements brought to the debate and the political and cultural environment it created. Political Islam gained an intensity that I call 'contemporary progressiveness' in Turkey with the strides it made in the 1990s. The concept of contemporary progressiveness not only transforms traditional historical understanding but also offers significant opportunities. Political Islam had constantly been excluded from the public space by the republican elite, yet political Islam and secularism, its counterpart, played important parts as the *constitutive outside*.<sup>17</sup> The republican-statist elite had never hesitated to brand the Islamic section as 'reactionary' in political ethos. Yet it was political Islam that in the 1990s would open the debate on the convex concepts of the republic, bringing new dimensions to the debate regarding the headscarf in the context of civil/private space versus the public space. It was democracy itself that appeared on the agenda.<sup>18</sup>

The second wave of globalisation, beginning in the mid-1990s, determined the need for a *new democracy* as a universal demand and desire. Turkey participated in this debate to a limited extent. The enunciation of such requirements as civil rights, private space and the definition of a new social contract by the advocates of political Islam and a group of intellectuals was a key indicator of this change in Turkey.<sup>19</sup> In the same way, starting by the mid-1990s political Islam began to gain power, first in local government and later in parliament, and this created an entirely new situation. In the period immediately following, the army intervened once more in 1997, but this time with a completely different method. That said, within the next five years, Turkey's 'iron rule' exhibited itself once more and resulted in a landslide for the party whose roots lay in political Islam (AKP), although it was founded as a reaction to it.<sup>20</sup> This triumph was repeated in the recent 2007 elections and apparently the AKP is now considered the most significant liberal-Islamic-reformative political force in Turkey. This itself is a powerful signifier of the transformation that Turkey has undergone in the last fifteen years. What is equally challenging is that despite the AKP declaring itself conservative democrat, the needs and expectations concerning transformation-*cum*-reform are addressed to this party. This speaks of the problematic linkage between conservatism and the ambition for progressive politics.<sup>21</sup>



Turkey is set to turn a new page in its history. This is demonstrated by the person soon to become Prime Minister, R T Erdoğan, whose characteristics are very different from those of previous incumbents. This new Prime Minister of the 'New Turkey' originates from the religious sector that was in constant conflict with previous ministerial governance and the republic. He comes from Kasımpaşa, on the outskirts of Istanbul, was educated at an Imam-Hatip school (the official school for Imams and Preachers) and speaks no foreign languages. He has no work or education experience of the world outside Turkey and has not worked for a single day in the public sector. He has no managerial experience other than a spell as Mayor of Istanbul. His previous political career was forged in political Islam.<sup>22</sup>

I ought at this point to introduce the concepts of *civil society* and *civil consciousness* that gained ascendancy in the mid-1990s, although they were in place some ten years earlier. In the mid-1980s there was a revival of the concept of civil society in parallel with developments in the former Eastern Bloc and the New Social Movements. The consciousness that arose in Turkey of both civil society and liberal understanding was strongly supported by Turgut Özal, as Prime Minister first and later as President. The formation of civil society in Turkey did not follow a traditional path. It eventually came to mean the rise of society-focused claims in opposition to the state. In the highly chaotic and politically anguished environment post-1980, it also assisted in the search for an oppositional stance to the state, with human rights at the forefront. These developments gained momentum under the influence of globalisation and the widening interest in the democratic world. Again, political Islam and the women's movement are examples of civil society initiatives in their own right. The empowerment of the bourgeoisie and its desire to play a part in political and social life independent of the state also bear special weight in this context. 'The New Culture' of contemporary Turkey was born as a common movement of all these elements which we may now look at in more detail.

*in Modern Turkey: Religion, Literature and Politics in a Secular State*, Palgrave Macmillan, London, 1994, pp 189–219.

- 20 See Hasan Bülent Kahraman, *Türk Sağı ve AKP* for a detailed analysis of this history; various different approaches might be found in M Hakan Yavuz, ed, *The Emergence of a New Turkey*, University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City, 2006.
- 21 The opening of the concept of 'conservative democratic' is found in Yalçın Akdoğan, 'The Meaning of Conservative Democratic Political Identity', in *Emergence*, ed M Hakan Yavuz, op cit, pp 49–65.
- 22 There is not yet an analytical biography of Erdoğan but as a useful source see, Ruşen Çakır, *Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Bir Dönüşüm Öyküsü (Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: A Transformation Story)*, Metis, Istanbul, 2001.

## SOCIAL COMPONENTS OF THE NEW CULTURE

### 1 The role of the 'truth'

The systematic development here is from a state-centred perception to one where society takes precedence. Its most striking outcome is pluralistic perception on the cultural stage which brings the 'ownership' of democracy through a new awareness. Of primary note here is the change in the perception of the concept of *truth* and the conflicts that this change brought about. From a cultural standpoint, this conflict may be said to have started at the time when identity policies entered the agenda. Previously, a nationalistic and unitarian historical view had allowed minority identities to remain forgotten in exclusion from society and history. This was a certain perception of truth. Beginning in the 1990s, and with increasing momentum in the 2000s, first the Kurdish identity and next the highly charged and controversial Armenian identity burst into the public domain with all their historical and current baggage. Kurdish identity and the Armenian issue in the final stages of the Ottoman Empire cried out for attention.

## 2 The process of de-centralisation

The cultural atmosphere of the 1990s therefore bears witness to the anguish of a transformation from a Durkheimian *organic society* to a post-Weberian *decentralised society*. The cultural dynamics that increasingly resulted from the lower middle class gaining a greater role, combined with political Islam, are explained within this framework.<sup>23</sup> The endeavour for the creation of a decentralised society was also due partly to a transformation of the East–West dichotomy.

Two major elements played their parts in creating this result at the time. First, republican cultural and social values had succumbed to the impact of sociocultural movements and a populist will. Second, a cultural morphology of Western origin and Judeo-Christian in essence had also lost its dominance in the West as a singular cultural focal point of truth. At the same time, the highly controversial ‘clash of civilisations’ thesis of the 2000s provoked societies outside the West to review themselves in an entirely new light. This concept, so widely referred to in Turkey, has influenced the change in how a society largely composed of Muslims began to view the West.

The 2000s therefore offered a new language in which to debate the East versus West issue, one of the most potent concepts since the preceding reforms in Turkey and which legitimised Westernists and the Easternists equally. The common place of this language is the European Union. Turkey’s unrequited wish for full accession to the European Union transformed Europe itself into an increasingly questioned culture and entity. The once warm relationship that a conservative government had nurtured with Europe quickly soured and had serious consequences in Turkey’s sociocultural arena. The leading outcome has been the rise of nationalism. A segment of society, unable to digest the post-nation-state parameters, boosted nationalism in a period when similar behaviour could be observed in the USA and in Europe. Therefore, while the meaning of conservatism and progressivism changed, so also did nationalism as the common denominator underlying all ideologies. As a result, Turkey rapidly began to slide towards the right and to use rightist cultural references in the period after 1990.

## 3 Non-Western modernity as a common denominator

It is an absolute certainty that this phenomenon, by no means rare in history, is offered as a solution. It is pertinent to the upheavals of post-1990 Turkey that concepts once seen as dual contrasts, and which provided the linchpin for Turkish modernisation, have now become dual syntheses. Phenomena once viewed as three major points of conflict, ie, ‘secularism–Islamism’, ‘Western–Eastern’ or ‘urban–provincial’, in time became accepted as concepts that could coexist, that occasionally conflicted and yet were capable of creating a common and unique fabric. This situation was directly perceived as a position of non-Western modernity despite all the rifts in post-1990 Turkey.

Turkey’s re-evaluation of its relationship with modernity created its own problems. In the 1990s, for the first time ever, it became possible to visualise modernity as a non-centrist phenomenon within a climate of

23 A number of different aspects of Turkish modernity seen from a viewpoint based more on sociology and social theory are discussed in Şerif Mardin, *Religion, Society and Modernity in Turkey*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY, 2006.

intense pressure and debate that globalisation had introduced. The lower middle classes and the countryside played critical roles here. Rural lifestyle, sets of values, preferences and cultural codes not only burst into the metropolitan arena but also stood to take over the values hitherto dominant in that urban environment.<sup>24</sup> That debates about the headscarf issue turned into a barometer of modernisation shows just how sociocultural organisations in today's Turkey have moved beyond the domain of conventional modernity.

Another key indicator in this direction is the way in which liberalism also moved beyond the boundaries of political choice in the 1990s. Liberalism had been an unfamiliar political formation in Turkey. But that said, a political party of the 1990s (YDH), firmly entrenched in the urban centre, and one that indisputably represented the upper income groups of the bourgeoisie in consort with a series of intellectuals, aimed to defend and popularise liberalism in its widest sense. This drive was confronted with robust criticism from the established political structure. The end result was that the party dissolved itself after the first election in which it ran. A newspaper, *Yeni Yüzyıl* (*New Century*), entered the arena at the same time as the YDH and defended the same stance – which indicates the importance a certain factional group placed on this subject. While this debate continued, a similar one raged through the political party, SHP, that was the founder of traditional modernisation in Turkey.<sup>25</sup> At the outset of the 1990s, the most important issue within the SHP was the formation of a 'liberal Leftist' party instead of a statist legacy supporter 'Leftist' party that had prescribed top-down modernisation. This concept of 'liberal Left' had yet to be uttered. The review of some of the concepts underlying the CHP's ideology as represented in its Six Arrows, and the transformation and renovation of their contents, were the main goals of a group that called itself the 'New Left'.

This debate was won by the traditionalists and not the reformists. The reformists, for their part, seceded. Surprisingly, they later returned and restarted the CHP, increasingly backsliding despite the changing conditions and coming to defend values they had once opposed. This is the point at which established reformism in Turkey rapidly slid into contemporary reformism. But this situation was not limited to the CHP. Another group of intellectuals emerged, again in the 1990s, focused on traditional modernisation and aiming to reinterpret the historical context of Kemalism which was its concrete ideology. This group styled itself the Second Republicans. The goal here was the renovation of Kemalism and the hegemonic modernisation concept that had moved from the centre to the periphery and was inextricably linked to Kemalism.

This movement was set to link up with the YDH but the expected expansion never happened. Liberalisation continued as an intense yet ineffective drive in the 1990s and reappeared in the 2000s. Another quest, again originating from the Left, led to a second attempt by the 'liberal Left' to form an alliance of intellectuals and bureaucrats just before the 2002 elections. This attempt also failed in the face of violent opposition from the conventional section. It was at that moment that the concept of *non-Western modernisation* was propagated by the Islamic Right instead of the Left.

24 Gül Özyegin, 'The Doorkeeper, the Maid and the Tenant: Troubling Encounters in the Turkish Urban Landscape', in Kandiyoti and Saktanber, eds, *Fragments*, op cit, pp 43–72.

25 This was CHP, the Republican People's Party. Sadly, it had been abolished by the generals following the 1980 coup along with all the other political parties and had yet to be reinstated during the period in question. The Popular Social Democrat Party (SHP) founded after 1980 was a true follower of the CHP.



## THE FOUNDING ELEMENTS OF THE NEW CULTURE

### 1 The intellectuals and their new position

This framework so far outlines the fundamental conflicts between the cultural structures pre- and post-1990. The major differences between the two periods hinge on conservatism–reformism, secularism–faith, centre–surroundings and state–society. Another key element here is the role played by intellectuals. Previously staunch defenders as well as propagators of the hegemonic ideology of the centre, intellectuals began to evolve an entirely different identity in this period. They are now the defenders of a much more liberal ideology. They may well have lost some of the powerful social standing once previously enjoyed but still play a determining role in fundamental topics of debate. More important, they have moved away from the traditional alliances. Intellectuals defending a liberal stance broke off all ties especially with the army and the bureaucracy and have even taken a position in complete opposition to them.

Nevertheless, it is still quite difficult to view Turkish intellectuals, who faced their own share of trouble in the past, as ‘special intellectuals’ in the sense defined by Michel Foucault. Intellectuals fulfilled all the responsibilities associated with being in the general sense ‘engaged’, following in the footsteps of their forefathers since the time of the Reformation. This position was particularly evident in the defence of EU relations. Intellectuals did not merely defend EU integration as an inevitable outcome of their own traditional Westernist roots but more as a tool with which to oppose the state.

Three events marked the entry into the 2000s and constituted another factor that defined the changing role of the state in the 1990s. The first is the incident known as the Susurluk Scandal. That event brought to an end the phenomenon called *raison d'état* which had up to that point been one of the main linchpins of the state and statist groups in Turkey. It was assumed that the ‘deep state’ syndrome had been uncovered after that incident, which shed light on the corruption within the state. Large swathes of society lost their traditional trust in the state. The second event was the 1999 earthquake. The state was found wanting in the face of this disaster and the people felt no hesitation in expressing their anger. The third incident was the high-speed train disaster. This calamity was a direct result of the state’s desire to impress rather than create a solidly efficient structure. It convinced the majority of people that populist policies had reached the end of the road. While the 2002 elections are viewed as a direct extension of this perception, many intellectuals also pointed out that the people had begun to believe that reactions do not elicit results and this view caused a great deal of frustration.

The period following 1990 can be said to have created an important cultural plateau whose outcomes have not yet entirely matured in Turkey. This refers to the rapid loss of meaning in the concept of *democratic culture* as a cultural position. Defended hotly during the 1970s and 1980s, this was the view that claimed the state had to relinquish its culturally defining role whose methodology has been rooted in the post-1923 statism. The world of culture ought instead to be handed over to

the leadership of a number of professional associations that were already active in their own fields. In this new set-up, the state would act only as a coordinator and provide funding; an entirely democratic National Council for Culture and Arts would handle regulations. Thus the state would finally relinquish the hegemonic function that it had exercised throughout the nineteenth century. Culture and the arts would no longer be used in Turkey, as a tool to 'forge good citizens', in Matthew Arnold's sense, was the aim in the Republican Era.<sup>26</sup>

This formerly relevant demand disappeared entirely after 1995. Another debate filled the vacuum. The rising nationalist wave and the constant stream of rightist governments in Turkey opened the way for more conservative and local quests in the cultural sector. Nonetheless, this new wave did not manage to preserve the cultural legacy of the past with much transparency, despite all its protestations of conservatism. The Ottoman cultural legacy still languishes unloved, undervalued and much omitted to this day. The state in fact has completely disappeared from the cultural stage, and has become even less visible than had been demanded by the most 'minimalist state interference' views that held sway in the earlier independence debates.<sup>27</sup> This is clearly evidenced by the transformation of the Ministry of Culture into the Ministry of Culture and Tourism which took place under the auspices of a conservative government. A damaging polarised formation gained ascendancy over this environment after 2002. The conservative government in power faced strong distrust and violent criticism by cultural production centres. The proposed redevelopment of Taksim Square, for example, was taken to indicate that a mosque would be erected in the middle of the square; and again, the proposal to demolish the Atatürk Culture Centre, also in Taksim Square, to be replaced by a newer one, fuelled an outcry that the government was preventing cultural activity by sheer ideological intervention. A substantial culture under such conditions becomes almost impossible.

Despite all that, post-1990s Turkey witnessed three highly significant advances, whose examination will allow us to conclude this article.

## 2 The reality of TV and the middle classes

A true understanding of the new cultural formations that arose in post-1990s Turkey is only possible through an appreciation of the TV channels and the middle classes that they widely targeted. The entertainment industry gained a mass dimension in Turkey in the 1990s. The notion of entertainment, hitherto largely 'modest' in nature, changed very quickly after these years. Mass culture and the entertainment industry originated in the 1950s when the urban bourgeoisie largely dominated cultural and social behaviour patterns. This fact was clearly manifested by the codes of the cultural world. Müzeyyen Senar and Zeki Müren, the first to attain star status on stage, marking in effect the beginning of the entertainment industry in Turkey, took special pains to constrain their behaviour and comply with the established modes of morality and 'social respect', despite their own clearly incongruous natures. Zeki Müren, who exuded a drag-queen persona and whose transvestite appearance was groundbreaking at the time, still paid scrupulous attention to the requirements

26 David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State*, Routledge, London–New York, 1998, p 1

27 The state–Kemalism link and relation with its looming presence in the public memory is studied by Esra Özyürek, *Nostalgia for the Modern: State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC–London, 2006.

of bourgeois morality and manners and even insisted on being addressed as ‘paşa’, the traditional military term used for generals. In contrast, these boundaries were summarily done away with in the 1990s despite the Radio TV High Council that came to prominence then.

Turkish TV channels did not confine themselves to replacing the stage, by that time in its death-throes, but went way beyond to show the world ‘backstage’. ‘Backstage’ was no longer concerned only with popular singers and stars of the stage. In an environment that became entirely ‘tabloid’ in approach, the unseen facets of everyone’s life became the subject matter of TV programmes and major newspapers. The paparazzi became a major branch of the media in this period. Disclosure of private lives with no concern for boundaries, news broadcasts divested of traditional sobriety, and magazine items concentrating on the disclosure of private ‘secrets’, as has been criticised by Pierre Bourdieu, became fashionable. The proliferation of commercial TV channels served only to inflame this situation. Page three in major newspapers became entirely devoted to sensational news of murders and accidents.<sup>28</sup> All newspapers, without exception, raced to publish pictures of scantily clad women on their back pages. This was an important step in the ascent of *mass enchantment* and *social pornography*.<sup>29</sup>

The second dimension in the TV middle class duo is formed by the TV shows targeted at the middle-class lifestyle, the number of which increased exponentially and took over the entire medium. The middle class can now watch themselves on these new shows: ‘Big Brother’ or ‘I Want to Get Married’ are just two of the shows that relentlessly display a calculating mentality and social-climbing aspirations in a no-holds-barred manner despite all protestations to the effect that Turkish people are essentially conservative deep down. The attitudes that may well have been utterly alien to the middle class at the start were rapidly assimilated thanks to these programmes. TV channels in the 1990s provided a platform on which political and social problems were widely discussed, for example on programmes such as ‘The Political Arena’ (*Siyaset Meydani*). Sociopolitical topics that had recently arrived on the agenda, such as those examined in this article, were debated on shows that ran all night and nurtured a new public awareness. The formation of civil society and the creation of a new political awareness were among the positive outcomes of these programmes. What is interesting is that the sensational ‘magazine shows’ came hard on the heels of the demise of these political discussion programmes. This phase signals the end of the political in Turkey.

The third leg of the TV-related activity area is formed by (soap opera) series. Based mostly on south-eastern Turkey’s feudal lifestyle, these serials elaborate on the desire for wealth and the mafia underworld. This is currently the only stage on which TV channels compete with one another. These serials and soap operas, which run for months on end, occasionally reflect current events and have some comical relationship to a world beyond reality. The natural extension of this world that creates its own sociology is once again magazine journalism. Remaining airtime on TV channels is taken up by programmes at best defined as ‘direct magazine’ shows. The soaps develop sociologically on both horizontal and vertical axes. On the horizontal, a middle-class lifestyle is portrayed, while films, especially those focusing on mafia stories,

28 It is interesting that one of the significant members of the New Turkish Cinema, director Zeki Kubuz, made a film bearing this very name, *Third Page*.

29 For a detailed analysis see my *Görsellik, Cinsellik, Pornografi (Visuality, Sexuality and Pornography)*, Agora Kitaplığı, İstanbul, 2005.

promote dumbing-down, advocate greed and encourage lawlessness in a manner that may be qualified as ‘inciting petty bourgeois radicalism’, to borrow a Marxist term.

Comic books are closely linked to the above. This field rose to stellar heights in the 1980s but visibly declined in the 1990s. Nonetheless, a dichotomy can be said to exist in cartoon magazines. On one side, the middle-class lifestyle is unequivocally criticised. This segment is the only medium to do so. Sadly, the same visual medium also focuses on cheap and vulgar sexuality, especially depicting violent abuse of women.<sup>30</sup> In actual fact, the criticism and those criticised run side by side in this genre ruled by the very young who originate from the outskirts of cities and who therefore are in a position to know the subculture in depth. It has spawned a slang which requires specialist dictionaries.<sup>31</sup> The coalition of the lower middle class and the plebs that began in the mid-1990s can now be viewed as leading the cultural tournament in Turkey.

30 See Ayşe Öncü, ‘Global Consumerism, Sexuality as Public Spectacle, and the Cultural Remapping of Istanbul in the 1990s’, in D Kandiyoti and A Saktanber, *Fragments of Culture*, op cit, pp 171–91, especially pp 178, 178–82 for a much more detailed evaluation of this topic.

31 Levent Tülek, *Lumpen Sözlüğü (Chavs’ Dictionary)*, Sel Yayınevi, İstanbul, 2007. The following is also a useful reference in demonstrating the widespread use of specific language in the 1990s: Filiz Bingölçe, *Kadın Argosu Sözlüğü (Dictionary of Women’s Slang)*, Metis Yayınları, İstanbul, 2001.

32 See Seçil Büker, *Hayalet Ev (Ghost House)*, Metis, İstanbul, 2006, for a specific evaluation of this cinema.

33 Melis Umut, ‘Representations of Masculinities in post-1960 Turkish Cinema’, unpublished MA thesis, Sabancı University, İstanbul, 2007.

34 See Behice Pehlivan ‘Melodramatic Turkish Cinema and its Effect on the New Turkish Cinema’, unpublished MA thesis, Sabancı University, İstanbul, 2007, for an excellent debate on both the influence of melodrama and the subject of continuity/discontinuity in Turkish cinema.

## CULTURAL PRODUCTION AREAS AND INNOVATION

### 1 Cinema

Cinema constitutes the leading cultural formation emerging in post-1990s Turkey. This so-called New Turkish Cinema once more emphasises the dominance of the rural as a vital factor.<sup>32</sup> Virtually every director has selected the countryside as a source and focal point, whether or not his own roots lay in the provinces. This particular rural genre began with Ömer Kavur in the mid-1980s and has shaped a great number of controversial films. In essence, all these films reflect an intellectual approach to cinema, also referred to as Third Cinema, concerning identity politics. The existential crises and masculinity of the protagonists plays a specific role in this cinema.<sup>33</sup> They also subtly position the provinces against the large metropolitan areas. In contrast to the cinema of the 1970s, the New Cinema, while concentrating on the issues of space, identity and examinations of memory, is also at pains to stay clear of politics. The diversity of films in this stream allows for more popular and populist themes. At opposite ends of the scale are Zeki Demirkubuz’s films – existentialist, literary and in some cases cinematographically weak – and those of Nuri Bilge Ceylan which emphasise cinematic visuality, are sensitive to changes in time and symbolise a more complex world of meanings, as seen for instance in *Uzak (Distant)*, which is reminiscent of Tarkovsky and others. In a similar vein of contrasting positions, Sinan Çetin broaches political themes from an ironic standpoint, and Yavuz Turgul resorts to traditional comedy techniques in his creation of lengthy epics.

Perhaps the most important characteristic of New Turkish Cinema is how each film aims to dissociate itself from those preceding it. No certain continuity reigns in this cinema, a situation that may be attributed to the sociological realities of the film-makers themselves. This cinema inherited the melodrama of previous Turkish cinema and, however different each film may set out to be, it has tended to preserve this characteristic.<sup>34</sup> The future of cinema is linked to the same question facing Turkey’s cultural future: Is the next stage the forgetting of resistance, or is it resistance to forgetting?

## 2 Literature

The second most important cultural area is literature, which has traditionally been the major cultural focal point in Turkey. The influence of literature on a society that only lately learned to express itself in writing, that is, in the nineteenth century, and that relied on the ideas of the newspaper litterateurs to shape its development is nevertheless undeniable. Yet even this fact has not prevented literature being put on the back burner. Literature is today sharply hemmed in – just as it is in the West – between bestsellers and a dwindling number of high-quality works. But we should also emphasise that Turkey recently ranked among the top countries for sheer output of published novels. There are some 350 new ones a year, second only after France.

A new school of novel writing emerged in the mid-1980s with the Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk's *Kara Kitap* (*The Black Book*). It utilises confession and subconscious elements highly effectively on a cultural platform that does not foreground any institution of formal confession.<sup>35</sup> That said, confession soon deteriorates into mere disclosure, itself indicative of the conflict between higher and popular literature conveying a certain understanding of postmodernism. The resources of postmodern literature were quickly adopted post-1990, again following *The Black Book*. Turkish novels made use of *metanarrative*, the most important functional tool of postmodern literature, not only in the formation of new structures but also in the reformation of older texts. Orhan Pamuk is a representative of this technique and Selim İleri, another prominent name of 'high literature', used this technique by referring to the texts of an earlier generation and constantly updating himself. Both authors focus closely on the area of memory and their efforts have carried new literature beyond the Bergson–Proust line of remembrance. This is closely linked to post-1990 culture politics, as the question of memory enters as a factor in the formation of the future.

In a country where a new novel is published almost every day of the year, there is still a lack of reliable data to explain this flurry of activity as arising from something other than improvements in publishing technology and developments in the book industry. Reading these novels might lead one to conclude that their escalation controversially heralds the death of the novel itself. Novels might be considered as a tool utilised by different sections of the new middle class. The more urban and better educated section of higher earners use novels either as escapism or as a reaction to the rise of mass popular culture, images created by soaps, a general dumbing-down, corruption and instant consumer gratification. On the other hand, the generation of authors of more modest means who have just entered the 'contest', who are closer to the countryside and more closely linked to popular culture employ novels as a means of self-expression. In both cases, the novel takes on the function of witness. It is interesting that neither the authors nor the reviewers focus on language or style in these books, almost as though they were an 'extra-linguistic' language and merited no discussion, which, again, ought to be counted as an indicator of their concrete and functional qualities.

- 35 Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book*, trans G Gün, Vintage, New York, 1994. For critical readings of Orhan Pamuk's work see *Sabancı Üniversitesi Orhan Pamuk Sempozyumu Tutanakları* (*Sabancı University Orhan Pamuk Symposium Proceedings*), Agora Kitaplığı, İstanbul, 2007.
- 36 Sibel Irzik, 'Allegorical Lives: The public and the private in the modern Turkish novel', in *Relocating the Fault Lines: Turkey beyond the East-West divide*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC–London, 2003, pp 551–66.



### 3 Visual arts

Visual arts are a third area of production of a specific performance in the post-1990 era. This field came into its own in the mid-1980s. At that time it was supported by market conditions and the rise of new galleries and collectors. During the same period, a new generation of painters emerged in parallel with the emergence of a new generation of critics, and this continued into the 1990s. The visual or 'plastic' arts remained largely confined to conventional techniques and preferences determined by *painterly painting* until the 1990s. Thereafter the situation changed rapidly. The role of painting declined, while new alternatives the stage, and performance art and installations gained such ascendancy that the term 'visual arts' became necessary. This can be seen as a natural progression forced in actual fact by objective conditions. The two-dimensional surface of the canvas and its capacity for expression failed to convey the factors prevalent in the 1990s. Artists found themselves in need of richer means of expression in a world where space disappeared, where *spacelessness* emerged, where *transgression*, *fragmentation* and *nomadism* ruled.

'The Exhibition of Contemporary Artists' of the 1980s is the source of all the innovations in this field. Other exhibitions that followed, such as 'A Cross-section of Contemporary Art', helped to expand and disseminate galleries as an important tool of expression, an opportunity first manifested by installations. The most significant development to follow was the Istanbul Biennial, which transformed Istanbul into an international city with the potential this offers for artists resident in Turkey to confront international issues and organisations. The body subsequently became the focal point for conceptual space, memory, belonging and identity. An interest in body politics meant placing the body at the very centre of art and led to the rise of performance as an activity that was taken up by a new generation of artists from the 1990s on.

Visual arts in the 2000s have not only expanded their portfolio with new digital and video-production techniques but have also witnessed the rising influence of curators. Curators came on the scene with the first Istanbul Biennials in the 1980s, and in the 2000s their dominance seems established. The most important single aspect of this institution that nearly obliterated personal art production is its capacity to carry international concepts and trends to Turkey very swiftly. In the same way, the export of Turkish art is equally promptly executed via this channel. This is a hugely important solution that reduces the tension between the global and the local. It should be pointed out that the visual arts swiftly moved away from the *modern* and embraced the *contemporary/current*, which also facilitated the deconstruction of established mentalities.

### CONCLUSION

Turkey has undergone a profoundly significant social transformation in recent history, and one interlinked with culture. The real milestone in this history of modernisation, and the societal change of the post-1990 era in particular, in parallel with other global developments, was of a cultural nature in essence. The cultural change in question contains its

own peculiar characteristics. The cultural understanding that reigned over the nineteenth and a large period of the twentieth century was one based on the acceptance of previously determined cultural codes regulated by the state.

In contrast, the regulatory relationship relaxed over this post-1990 time period, and a cultural formation based on social precedence began to exert its influence on the state. However, since the formation of Turkish society possesses its own specific characteristics, this reality impacted on the cultural area, and thus arose a bottom-up cultural model capable of impinging on the political structure, in complete contrast to the principles of traditional Turkish modernisation. First and foremost, this has meant the emergence of a new Turkey. While it may appear to oppose conventional modernisation principles, this structure is nevertheless still an outcome of Turkish modernisation. But this in no way indicates that modernisation is complete. On the contrary, modernity has a much longer journey to undertake in Turkey, and in much more realistic conditions.