

# *Nostalgia for* THE MODERN



State Secularism and Everyday Politics in Turkey

ESRA ÖZYÜREK

## *Nostalgia for the Modern*



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ESRA ÖZYÜREK

# THE MODERN

State Secularism and  
Everyday Politics  
in Turkey

Duke University Press \* Durham and London \* 2006

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Katy Clove

Typeset in Quadraat by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

appear on the last printed page of this book.

Duke University Press gratefully acknowledges the support of the Institute of Turkish Studies, which provided funds toward production of this book.

Portions of chapter 2 previously appeared in “Wedded to the Republic: Public Intellectuals and Intimacy Oriented Publics in Turkey,” in *Off Stage/On Display: Intimacies and Ethnographies in the Age of Public Culture*, edited by Andrew Shryock. 101–30. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Portions of chapter 3 appeared in “Miniaturizing Atatürk: Privatization of the State Imagery and Ideology in Turkey,” *American Ethnologist* 31(3): 374–91.

*To my parents, Sünter and Mustafa Özyürek*



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## *Acknowledgments*

Abbas Kiorastami, the most gifted filmmaker of our times, once said in an interview that he makes films in order to connect to people. I believe that the single most worthy reason for going through the painfully long process of writing an ethnographic monograph is also the same. I am grateful to this book for being the mediator of my most meaningful relationships in life and the transformer of already existing ones.

Nearly every single issue I explore in this book was introduced to me for the first time during my undergraduate education at Boğaziçi University in Istanbul. Yeşim Arat, Faruk Birttek, Belgin Tekçe, Nilüfer Göle, Leyla Neyzi, Nükhet Sirman, Ayşe Öncü, and Taha Parla put seeds of intellectual curiosity in my young mind. My after-class discussions with Ari Adut, Ayşe Gül Altınay (Karayazgan), Ayfer Bartu, Tansel Demirel, Dicle Koğacıoğlu, Halide Velioğlu, Nazan Üstündağ, and Nilgun Uygun in the dark, smoky cafeterias on campus turned out to be among the most interesting intellectual exchanges I would ever have. The larger intellectual community of Boğaziçi spread around the world is the primary addressee of my thinking and writing.

The University of Michigan proved to be the perfect place to pursue my interests. There I had the chance to become part of one of the biggest and most brilliant cohorts in anthropology. My conversations with Penelope

Papailias, Carla Daughtry, Mani Limbert, Theresa Truax, Jeff Jurgens, Jim Herron, Setrag Manukian, Laura Kunreuther, Janet McIntosh, Rachel Heiman, and Karen Strassler have been an endless source of inspiration. Without Ellen Moodie I probably would not have been able to go through graduate school or complete this manuscript. The Young Turks of Ann Arbor provided me with the right kind of intellectual and emotional support to write and stay sane. I am mostly thankful to Aslı Gür, Aslı Iğsız, and Cihan Tuğal. My mentors Bruce Mannheim, Müge Göçek, and Alaina Lemon gave the best combination of support and challenge any student could ever hope for. Andrew Shryock's arrival in the department during my writing stage was one of the greatest academic gifts I have received. His gentle but astute criticisms of my work, always framed in a great sense of humor, pushed me to produce the best work I ever could.

My wonderful colleagues—including Dwight Reynolds and Mayfair Yang at the University of California, Santa Barbara; Bob Hayden and Nicole Constable at the University of Pittsburgh; and Joel Robbins, Nancy Postero, and Elana Zilberg at the University of California, San Diego—provided me with invaluable intellectual and friendly company during the final stages of writing. My position at UCSD came with the most precious gift of Keith McNeal's heart-warming camaraderie.

George Steinmetz and Julia Adams generously pointed to the book hidden in the dissertation. Lara Deeb, Levent Soysal, and one anonymous reviewer read the whole manuscript and helped me crystallize my arguments. Sharon Torian and Reynolds Smith of Duke University Press patiently assisted me in jumping through the numerous hoops of academic publishing.

My research was based on my lifetime connections in Turkey. I am grateful to everyone who made the time to talk, think, and explore with me. Of those, my cousin, friend, and editor Asena Günel has been one of my greatest supporters and critics through my research and writing process. She patiently answered my endless questions over e-mail and kept me updated on the Turkish intellectual scene by regularly sending new books that came out. Most important, she encouraged me to write in Turkish and take part in the Turkish language intellectual dialogue. The positive feedback and encouragement I received from scholars based in Turkey became one of my main sources of motivation.

This project allowed me to connect with my parents Sünter and Mustafa

Özyürek in new ways since many of my questions and analyses of Turkish political culture have been shaped through my conversations and arguments with them. My primary reason for undertaking this project was to understand them better. I chose to come to the United States for graduate school in the first place so that I could be close to my sister Aslı Özyürek. As a scholar, I strive for her ability to think big, never tire of asking new questions, and pursue them without relinquish.

The greatest reward I received in my life as a result of coming to the United States to pursue this project was meeting my partner Marc David Baer. I developed all my ideas in this book as I debated with him. For more than a decade he kept sharpening my arguments, giving them historical depth, and converting my sentences written in Turkish grammar to proper English. Without his day-to-day loving support, critical involvement in my project, and, most important, sense of humor, I cannot imagine having completed this work.



## Introduction

“This time,” my mother said, her voice suddenly serious, “you will find Turkey very different.”

It was the summer of 1997. She and my father had just picked me up from the Atatürk Airport in Istanbul. I was back again after my final year of graduate coursework in the United States. During our two-hour ride through endless traffic to their apartment on the other side of the Bosphorus, my parents kept on pointing. They pointed to veiled women drivers in cars. They showed me the countless new mosque complexes on the fringes of the city. They read out loud Islamist car stickers such as “Peace is in Islam.” All the while, they went on and on about the policies of the Islamist Welfare Party, whose coalition had ruled the country from 1995 until a few months before my return to Turkey. They were not perfectly happy that a discreet military intervention into politics had banned the party, but my mother especially was relieved that political Islam had been contained, at least for the time being.

When we arrived at their apartment, I told them that I was too tired to talk any more. I tried to reorient myself into their place and life by quietly wandering through the rooms. I scanned the walls to see if they had hung new paintings. I rifled the drawers where they stuffed recent snapshots. I caressed the new clothes they had bought. I studied the shelves on which they stacked their latest books.

I noticed some curious things among all the items and images. What first attracted my attention was that Atatürk, the founding father of modern Turkey—literally

father Turk—dead nearly sixty years by then, seemed to be everywhere. I noted pictures of a standing Atatürk on coffee tables and in bookshelves, there were mugs and key chains with pictures of Atatürk, and six different pins had been fixed onto four different coats belonging to my mother and father. I noticed that they had also read several books on Atatürk's and other early Republican citizens' lives: *A Life with Atatürk* (Gökçen 1994); *The Blonde Zeybek: The Last Three Hundred Days of Atatürk* (Dündar 1998); *Atatürk's Gallery of Lovers* (Yesilyurt 1997).<sup>1</sup> What surprised me most were pictures from a 1930s-style ballroom dance party they had attended with little red paper Turkish flags in their hands. My mother had doffed a stylish black hat, and a piece of tulle covered the upper part of her face, but my father wore one of his usual navy blue suits with a bright red tie. In the following days, as I strolled through the city and visited relatives and old friends, what kept intriguing me was not the veiled drivers, but the repeated appearance of Atatürk and nostalgic references to the 1930s in homes so familiar to me.

Although I could not make much sense of these new developments taking place in my parents' or friends' lives at the time, I soon realized that it was not only the Islamists who changed but also secularist citizens like themselves, devoted to early Republican principles, who were transforming the way they experienced and displayed their ideological commitments. It seemed that the Republican ideology and imagery, once marking the public sphere, had suffused domestic space in a new way.

This book explores new everyday expressions and emotive affiliations associated with neoliberal political culture. It investigates rapidly shifting boundaries between what is considered public and private, political and apolitical, legitimate and illegitimate. It focuses on the way grounds of the political field and state-citizen relations are transforming in a peculiar but globally connected way in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> In the late 1990s, the memory of a strong, independent, self-sufficient state and its secularist modernization project that dominated the public sphere through the past century was challenged by the rise of political Islam and Kurdish separatism, on the one hand, and the increasing demands of the European Union (EU), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank, on the other. In the past decade, Islam, which the secular Turkish Republic had limited to the private sphere after its founding in 1923, gained visibility in public places (Öncü 1995; Göle 1996; Bartu 1999; Çınar 1997; Navaro-Yashin 2002) and became part of party politics (Gülalp 2001; Tuğal 2002; White 2002). Concurrently, Kemalism, the publicly official ideology of the secu-

larist, modernist, and developmentalist Turkish Republic founded by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, was moving to the private sphere—yet without deserting the public. Ordinary citizens promoted the ideology, carrying its symbols to private domains such as businesses and homes, and developed a nostalgic attachment to the founding days. In other words, as religion increasingly became “public” (Casanova 1994), secular state ideology underwent privatization.

In this study I trace the much neglected second set of changes. I analyze how secular state ideology, politics, and symbolism found a new life and legitimacy in the private realms of the market, the home, civil society, life history, and emotional attachment just as political Islam began to occupy the public sphere and a newly hegemonic neoliberal symbolism defined the civic and private spheres as the latest exalted centers of power. More specifically, I explore how and why the symbolism of neoliberalism, which aims to substitute the market for both society and the state, is being popularly translated into new contexts with strong state ideologies and nostalgic memories of state-led modernization projects.<sup>3</sup> Most of the countries once deemed to belong to the second or third world—having recently adapted the neoliberal policies of a liberalization of the markets, the privatization of state enterprises, and structural adjustment—have experienced state-led modernization projects. How, then, do they take up the new conceptual and organizational transformation that sees the state not as the agent but the inhibitor of the latest kind of modernization project to be adopted? I ask how and why local political leaders and actors who worked under the strong-state ideology now translate the history and symbolism of state-led modernization into the conceptual framework of the new hegemony of market-led modernization.<sup>4</sup> And how do ordinary citizens adopt these concepts into their everyday lives?

What I explore in this book is the unexpected integration of the neoliberal symbolism of privatization, market choice, and voluntarism with that of the etatist, nationalist, and modernist ideology of Kemalism in the 1990s. I argue that the Kemalist political, intellectual, and army elite, as well as their citizen supporters, utilized market-oriented symbols of neoliberalism, along with powerfully authoritarian measures, in order to defend their ideology and position in opposition to political Islam. This symbolism, I suggest, allowed Kemalist citizens to carry the symbols, practices, and emotional affiliations with the Turkish state outside the



conventional and public boundaries of the state, there giving Kemalism a new home and legitimacy in the private. In that respect, state ideology and imagery in Turkey became “privatized” in multiple meanings of the word.

Elizabeth Povinelli (2002) reminds us that liberalism travels well and gives way to novel meanings and practices when in diaspora. Be it multiculturalism in Australia, neoliberalism in Chile (Paley 2001), or the creation of a market economy in Eastern Europe (Bockman and Eyal 2002), liberalism in its late form has become a powerful model of modernization that non-Western and postcolonial societies intimately related to at the turn of the twenty-first century. Turkey offers a particularly interesting place to study the peculiar manifestations of neoliberalism since it has been one of the earlier and most steady testing grounds for the policies of deregulation and structural adjustment prescribed by the World Bank and the IMF in the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> These new policies contradicted the earlier model of state-led modernization based on self-sufficiency and independence. The neoliberal symbolism of the market and privatization rapidly traveled to spheres of life outside the economy such as civil society, the domestic sphere, history writing, and emotional expression. Hence it radically transformed the political field by introducing new boundaries and key concepts such as voluntarism, choice, and privacy. Everyday actions establish the hegemony of these concepts outside the field of economy, and by doing so, they privatize politics and can thus also be called “popular neoliberalism,” the topic of this book.

#### THE PRIVATIZATION OF POLITICS

The process that I define as the privatization of state ideology is far from unique to Turkey, although it takes a particular form there. Scholars of contemporary societies agree that the definition, practice, and location of politics have changed around the globe at the turn of the millennium. Social order is maintained by new rationalities, strategies, and technologies. Political actors and lay citizens alike carry the newly hegemonic ideology of neoliberal privatization into political and social realms. International aid agencies and political advisors encourage governments in Turkey and elsewhere to leave their responsibilities to nongovernmental organizations and private companies and to redefine the role of the state as a “consumer state” rather than a “citizen state.” In such states, Philip

McMichael (1998, 95) argues, “governance . . . has become evaluated according to how effectively states adopt market-oriented economic policies,” even though this process leads governments to lose the freedom to pursue national redistributive and macroeconomic policies.

A number of scholars have interpreted the latest transformations in the political field in quite negative terms. Jean and John Comaroff (2000, 232), for example, argue that neoliberalism actually kills politics by prioritizing the economy and defining political relations in terms of self-interest. Others have even termed the West’s contemporary moment as “post political” because the decision-making process is delegated to technocrats (Žižek 1999, 198), or as “anti-political” because the neoliberal ideology empties the public sphere and defines society as a “self-propelled and self-sustaining machine driven by market competition” (Schedler 1997, 5). In this context, these thinkers argue, politics has come to be seen not only as unnecessary but also as “nothing other than a parasitic, rent-seeking activity” (5).

In this study, rather than deny the existence of politics in the neoliberal order of things, I argue that the end of the twentieth century produced a new kind of politics—or a new governmentality, to use Michel Foucault’s (1991) language—that allowed new imaginations of the public, the state, and the state-citizen relationship. As the symbolism of the market, of privacy, and of voluntarism as located outside the state are increasingly becoming hegemonic, the symbolic center of politics is not dismantling but shifting from public institutions to such things as civil society (Cohen and Arato 1992; Hann and Dunn 1996) consumer activism (Yudice 1995), and faith-based organizations (Casanova 1994). The public sphere is becoming intimate as private matters of sexuality, morality, and family values have become key issues to be discussed in public (Berlant 1997; Beck 1997; Bauman 2001; Plummer 2003). In this new public sphere, Lauren Berlant argues, citizenship appears “as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values” (1997, 5). Accordingly, politics is conceptualized as something that does not take place in relation to a shared public and does not recognize a shared public good.

In countries like Turkey, where state ideology and symbolism occupied a central role in the local political field for centuries, the concept of a shared public sphere is still imperative. Yet the global ideology of neoliberalism and the local controversy between Islamism and secularism make privacy

and intimacy vital to politics and citizenship in a particular way. In the 1990s increasing numbers of Islamists, Kurdish nationalists, and liberal intellectuals argued that the oppressive reforms of the Turkish state were creating a secular public ideology and ritual not effectively integrated with beliefs and practices of domestic life, ethnic identity, or religious belief. Since that time a new configuration of the personal, domestic, sentimental, and consumerist practices of commitments to Republican values have been put into practice and publicly displayed by secularist political activists, civil society organizations, and the mass media, as well as lay citizens, as proper models of citizenship. Such dedication has manifested itself through novel practices such as consuming symbols of the Turkish state, developing nostalgic sentiments for the early Republican days, and paying attention to the life histories of elderly citizens who transformed their private lives through the Turkish reforms. This book explores the publicly displayed private expressions through which visible sections of Turkish society personally relate to the state and its founding principles in ways that they had not done before. It suggests that personalized expressions of politics, or such expressions that take place in the private sphere, have become the new basis of citizenship and legitimate political participation, as well as a novel rationale for governmentality.

A crucial lesson we learn about contemporary politics from a close examination of the Turkish case is that the popularization of neoliberal symbolism in the political public sphere cannot simply be understood as a displacement of personal issues. Scholars who study the transformation of the public and private spheres in the United States and Europe explain the rise of new kinds of political and public discussions focusing on private issues as a result of new reproductive technologies such as test-tube babies or cybersex (Plummer 2003), the increased individualization of social life during the postindustrial phase (Beck 1997; Bauman 2001; Putnam 2000), or the growing power of corporations (Marden 2003). Whether they evaluate these developments as positive or negative, most scholars assume that the emergence of new private concerns or intimacies precedes their colonization of the public sphere (Bauman 2001; Marden 2003). My analysis of the privatization of state ideology in Turkey instead suggests that political agents deliberately create and display novel privacies and intimacies in order to represent freely internalized, and hence voluntary and legitimate, political positions. These actors transform the old and create new mean-

ings for the private spheres according to the newly shared priorities of neoliberal ideology.

At another level, my work on the privatization of politics is an attempt to demonstrate how the different “privates” of economic, civil, domestic, or personal life are actually connected to and shape each other. It is important to note that by pointing to a privatization in politics I wish to suggest neither the existence of a well-recognized distinction between the private and the public nor that political affairs by definition belong to the latter area. To the contrary, my analysis of the shifts between what is considered private and public are inspired by feminist scholars who have successfully demonstrated that the line between the two spheres has always been under negotiation (Suad 1997; Landes 1998; Benhabib 1998; Gal 2002; Gal and Kligman 2000). In this book I demonstrate that local political actors reshape their definitions of the public and private, as well as of the political and the apolitical, as they engage with the broader social, political, and discursive transformations in which they find themselves situated. I also consider it central to this study to pursue how these actors define, reify, and transform the representation of the state as they valorize seemingly irrelevant realms of the private—such as the nonstate ownership of businesses, family life, or domestic organization—in opposition to the state.

A discussion of the private sphere and hence privatization is impossible without paying tribute to Jürgen Habermas’s (1989) definition of the public sphere. In his seminal work about the development of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas points out that multiple meanings are associated with the phrase, ranging from an event open to all, to a sphere of commodity exchange, to state authority. What Habermas does not pay equal attention to in his work is the multiply conceptualized and dynamically functioning nature of the private sphere. In his creatively imagined discussion, he argues that the public sphere “grew out of the audience-oriented subjectivity of the conjugal family’s intimate domain” (28), but he does not discuss how the public sphere in turn shaped and formed the private sphere again, especially once there was an audience formed to observe the displays taking place in the internal domain.

At the turn of the new century, the *public* seemed to carry a more uniform meaning for Turkish citizens, namely, that of state authority.<sup>6</sup> A multiplicity of meanings lay in the *private sphere* since it included any field conceptualized as outside the direct involvement of state power and hence one

in which individuals engaged in activities freely and voluntarily. My ethnographic research demonstrates that Turkish citizens did not think in terms of a tripartite public/private model that differentiated between the market, civil society, and the state (Cohen and Arato 1992). According to Turkish political activists, any sphere outside the commonly accepted boundaries of the state organization is considered private, and hence represents the voluntary engagement of citizens. That is why seemingly disparate areas such as individual life history, the domestic sphere, family, the market, civil society, and private property were all considered as constituting the private and thus related to each other. Furthermore, any activity taking place in one of these spheres was considered as more in tune with the neoliberal ideal of free expression—and hence more legitimate and modern.<sup>7</sup> This novel criterion for political legitimacy gave way to innovative conceptualizations of both political actions and private spheres, rather than a well-defined public simply growing out of a preconstituted private.

#### THE ROLE OF NOSTALGIA

In this study I focus on the “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) of nostalgia as one way in which what used to be considered public and political has become privatized in post–Cold War Turkey. I argue that nostalgia and privatization are among the powerful driving forces behind neoliberal ideology, which turns objects, relations, and concepts into commodities and transforms political expression by converting it to an issue of personal interest. In the past several years, scholars have studied privatization and taken note of emergent forms of nostalgia in postsocialist countries, usually without connecting the two phenomena to each other (Berdahl 1999; Rofel 1999; Boym 2001). This book traces the development of interconnections between nostalgia and privatization as they shape and transform a local political culture at the “margins of Europe” (Herzfeld 1987).

Nostalgia, a term that originally named the symptoms of homesick Swiss soldiers in the seventeenth century (Lowenthal 1985), is now a widespread feeling shared by millions of people at the margins of the Western world. From Islamic activists in Afghanistan (Roy 1994) to discontented postreform workers in China (Rofel 1999) and disillusioned Kemalists in Turkey longing for the 1930s,<sup>8</sup> large groups of people yearn for bygone days and imagine a pristine past in which each individual society united

around a common goal. A widely held belief about nostalgia is that because modernity could not fulfill its promises for a better and freer life, people marginalized during the modernization process now look back at the past fondly. According to Andreas Huyssen (1995), modernity ended with the end of hope for tomorrow. Since then, people have looked for their utopias in the past rather than in the future. Another popular explanation for the new orientation toward the past holds the modern age's rapid social and technological transformations responsible. According to Pierre Nora (1996), modern people have lost an embodied sense of the past, so that their only access to earlier periods occurs through archived, alienated, or dutifully followed histories. In his words, "Memory is constantly on our lips because it no longer exists" (1).

Although dissatisfaction with modernization projects that did not deliver on their promises could serve as a viable explanation for the spread of nostalgia across the globe, I favor another perspective, namely, that nostalgia has been an integral part of modernity. Svetlana Boym (2001) argues that nostalgia and progress are merely alter egos of each other because, she claims, both concepts emerged as a result of radical transformations in the concept of time as unilinearly progressive and thus unrepeatable and irreversible. Longing for a past lost became possible only by concentrating on a future that had yet to arrive. Boym provides a perceptive account of the development of nostalgia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. But what about the recent explosion of nostalgia at the turn of the twenty-first century, I ask, the nostalgia coming after the utopias had vanished? How is recent nostalgia related to the neoliberal modernity in which it flourishes?

Market-oriented modernization projects aim to carry every possible object or relationship into a market regulated by a Smithian "invisible hand." In the late stage of capitalism we live in, the biggest challenge is to constantly create new commodities for consumption. Nostalgia, in this context, becomes a convenient desire that can transform public concepts such as the national past or identity into personalized commodities. Kathleen Stewart (1988) has already noted that nostalgia runs with the economy of which it is part. This is truer than ever for late capitalism. Marilyn Ivy, for example, demonstrates how nostalgia has become a crucial part of Japanese capitalism by creating the desire necessary for consumption. This is maintained through having "a nostalgia for a Japan that is kept on the verge of vanishing, stable yet endangered (and thus open for commodifiable

desire)” (1995, 65). At the turn of the twenty-first century, nostalgia privatizes and, by doing so, commodifies images and concepts once seen as public and thus nonmarketable by previous capitalists around the world.

Nostalgia plays another specific role in Turkey’s current relationship with Europe. Since the eighteenth century scholars have defined temporality, a constant sense of newness, as a central aspect of modernity.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary scholarship has discussed the experience of alternative modernities in the non-West as a sense of repetition (Mitchell 2000), of lagging behind (Bhabha 1994), or of longing for the future (Göle 2001). But what of countries like Turkey, which have been modernizing for generations, where not only Western modernity but also local modernization projects have been repeated as ideal models? What of places that became modern but then went “unmodern”? Based on her study of a textile town in Java called Laweyen, Suzanne Brenner (1998) argues that modernization is not a straight path but can also have reverse trajectories. Also, what once was considered modern can at one point come to be seen as traditional or simply nonmodern. Like the residents of Laweyen, many Kemalists have also suggested that Turkey stopped moving forward and has even gone backward in the past several decades and let slip away the stage of modernity it had earlier achieved, especially after political Islam came to power.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, European and American advisors had completely different criteria for the modernity by which they asked Turkey to abide. Although European leaders had approved of the authoritarian model in the 1930s as setting Turkey on the right track, in the 1990s they were increasingly critical of the Turkish state for being too intrusive. They accused Turkish politicians and bureaucrats of limiting political freedom, violating human rights, and oppressing ethnic minorities. As European Union officials asked for a smaller state—particularly for a reduced political role for the army—at the political level,<sup>10</sup> the primarily American-controlled IMF and the World Bank asked for a smaller state at the economic level.<sup>11</sup> They wanted Turkey to privatize state enterprises, decrease state subsidies and protection for agriculture, and lower the state contribution to social security.

With the vivid memory of the 1930s as a modern past utopia in which the citizens united around their state, many contemporary nationalist-modernist citizens do not recognize modernity in the European present. They are discontent with the new criteria of modernization that the Euro-

pean Union imposed on Turkey, becoming resistant to persistent criticisms of the way Turkey has handled the Kurdish issue and human rights violations. Such direct involvement of the European Union in what are considered internal affairs conflicts with the memory of Turkish modernization in the 1930s, achieving as it did its success through an all-powerful and homogenizing state that suppressed local identities, demands, and economies. At the end of the 1990s, many Kemalist citizens and politicians argued that being part of the European Union would lead to a loss of sovereignty. Ironically, at that point, it was only the Islamist politicians who favored membership in the European Union, hoping that the new laws Turkey would be required to adopt would create an atmosphere allowing them political activism and the freedom of religious expression.<sup>12</sup>

In a circumstance in which Kemalist Turks could locate modernity neither in the present or future of Turkey nor in the present of Europe, they sought it in the single-party regime of the 1930s. After all, the strength of the Turkish Republic was founded in part on its defeat of the European occupying forces after World War I. At first sight, such a nostalgic vision of modernity looks like a complex irony, an unexpected reversal that modernity theorists could not foresee. However, I argue that it is merely a different expression of non-Western modernity that locates modernity in the non-present. Contemporary Turkish modernists experience the present as the decay of a former modernity and have chosen as their model for repetition the Turkish past of the 1930s. Furthermore they know that being part of a European present, or more precisely, the European Union, would not make the Turkish state stronger, as it did in the 1930s, but weaker. At the same time, however, by invoking nostalgic feelings toward Kemalism, they have marked this ideology as something that does not belong to the present practices of Turkey, but to those of the past, thus remaining unattainable.

Before I discuss how nostalgia has worked to privatize politics in the Turkish case, I will explain how the concept of state-led modernization in Turkey gave way to a nostalgic modernity as the driving factor of political discourse.



In his foundational 1958 monograph on modernization theory, *The Passing of a Traditional Society*, Daniel Lerner considers the Turkish case as an ideal model. For him, rapid transformation in a Muslim country becomes proof that “the same basic model [developed in the West] reappears in virtually all modernizing societies on all continents of the world, regardless of variations in race, color, creed” (46). Although Lerner bases much of his proof on one village, which rapidly developed thanks to its proximity to the newly founded capital of the country, he is right to suggest that Turkish modernization is uncommon in being a self-initiated and rapidly developed project. Unlike many third world modernization projects, the Turkish one did not start in a formally colonial or postcolonial setting.<sup>13</sup> Rather, it was initiated by the Ottoman Empire’s elite and reached its climax during the authoritarian regime of the early Turkish Republic.

The Ottomans introduced the first measures of modernization in the eighteenth century following the weakening of the empire by its European enemies, the Habsburgs and Romanovs.<sup>14</sup> After a major defeat by the Russians in 1774, Sultan Selim III, who had shown interest in the Western world as a prince, adopted some Western models in the military (Göçek 1987; Zürcher 1998). The aim of these reforms was to make the central Ottoman state stronger against both European enemies and internal semi-independent local power holders. France was Selim’s source of inspiration, and French advisors established new models of medicine and schooling, in addition to military organization. The following generations of the Ottoman elite kept adopting certain aspects of European ideas, practices, and symbolisms that they believed made them better equipped to fight their enemies (Hanioglu 1995; Deringil 1998). While doing so, they did not merely imitate European ways but made the new ways of thinking and acting, such as centralized education, their own (Fortna 2002; Gür 2002).<sup>15</sup> Because of economic difficulties or disputes regarding which aspects of European ways of life should or should not be adopted not all their reforms succeeded. Yet they opened new ways of thinking and organizing the relationship between the state and its subjects.

Şerif Mardin (1962) argues that the Ottoman elite conducted such modernization measures not for the sake of being Western, but rather to protect the strength of its state. He claims that the idea of “the priority of the