Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey
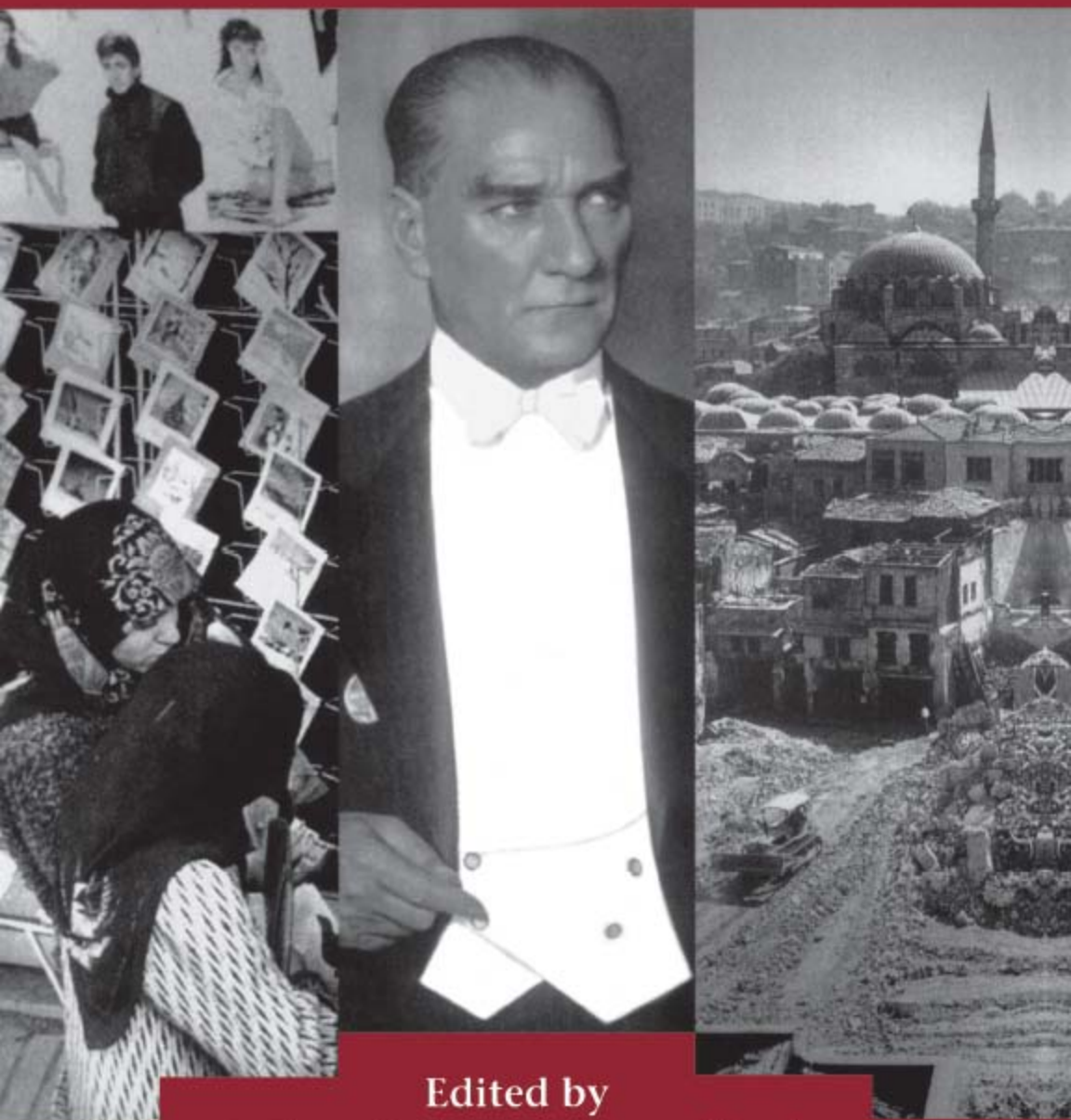
Edited by
Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba

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Cover collage: Young girls look at posters of Turkish popular music and film
stars, 1990s (photo by Haluk Özözlü); portrait of Atatürk (private collection);
urban renewal in Istanbul, 1950s (photo by Ara Güler).

To Peter and Kathie,
who have been thinking
of Turkish modernity
for some time

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Acknowledgments

Earlier versions of the essays collected in this book were presented at a conference held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1994. In addition to the authors represented in this volume, Aydan Balamir, Murat Belge, Sibel Erol, Zeynep Kezer, and Ilhan Tekeli also presented papers, and we wish to acknowledge their contribution to this project. We also wish to express our gratitude to Philip Khoury, Feroz Ahmad, Beyhan Karahan, Nasser Rabbat, and Royston Landau, whose comments greatly improved the quality and the interdisciplinary appeal of this event. The conference was made possible by a generous grant from the Aga Khan Program at MIT and Harvard, with additional support from the Department of Architecture at MIT and the Turkish Tourism Office in New York. We would like to thank Stanford Anderson, chair of the Department of Architecture at MIT, and Barbro Ek, former director of the Aga Khan Program, for their support of this event. We also thank Renee Caso, Denise Heinze and the rest of the staff at the Aga Khan Program office, Ayşen Savaş, Hande Bozdoğan, Felicia Hecker, and Nicole Watts, who helped us at various stages of this project. Finally, we are grateful to the Institute of Turkish Studies for their grant that supported the publication of this book.

Unfortunately, these acknowledgments must end on a sad note. As we were getting the essays in this volume ready for publication, we received the news of Ernest Gellner's death. Professor Gellner had carefully revised his own presentation and prepared it for publication well within the deadline we had set for our contributors. We feel privileged to have had the opportunity to host him at our conference, to have benefited from his insightful comments and criticisms, and to have been the editors of a volume that includes one of his last writings.

Rethinking Modernity
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in Turkey

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Introduction

SİBEL BOZDOĞAN AND REŞAT KASABA

I n Turkey and around the world today, we are witnessing the eclipse of
the progressive and emancipatory discourse of modernity. Some of us
view the spectacle with melancholy—yet it has also produced a re-
markably lively and pluralist climate in which new voices are being heard
and deeply entrenched assumptions are being radically and, we believe,
irreversibly challenged. At the center of the most heated theoretical de-
bates in many disciplines is the question of whether it is possible to un-
dertake a rigorous critique of the Enlightenment project of modernity
without surrendering its liberating and humanist premises.

From the humanities and social sciences to art, architecture, and cul-
tural studies, scholars in many disciplines are looking for new ways of
critically engaging with the modern project and exploring options be-
yond it without falling back on an antimodern "return to tradition" or
getting lost in the postmodern "global theme park." The stakes in these
latter gambits are too high. As Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob explain it, turn-
ing our backs to modernity completely would amount to abandoning
any notion of the "freely acting, freely knowing individual whose ex-
periments can penetrate the secrets of nature and whose work with other
individuals can make a new and better world."[1] Although the current de-
bate on modernity is a worldwide and highly popular one, we believe it
has a particular urgency in non-Western contexts where modernization
has had a relatively short and contentious history. This collection of es-
says aims to assess the Turkish experience of modernity from a broad, in-
terdisciplinary perspective.

In the first two decades after World War II, social scientists often her-
alded Turkey as one of the most successful models of a universally de-
fined modernization process. The country's history of modernization and
Westernization, extending back to the institutional reforms of the late
Ottoman era and epitomized by the establishment of a secular nation-
state under Kemalism in 1923, appeared to confirm all the expectations
of theoretical writings in this genre. Ottoman and Turkish moderniza-
tion was seen to be succeeding as an elite-driven, consensus-based, in-

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stitution-building process that took its inspiration exclusively from the West. It is no wonder that two books whose authors studied the Turkish transformation closely from this perspective—Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society* and Bernard Lewis's *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*—became the classic texts of the modernization literature.[2]

In these and similar writings, Turkey's apparently successful adoption of Western norms, styles, and institutions, most conspicuously in education, law, social life, clothing, music, architecture, and the arts, was portrayed as testimony to the viability of the project of modernity even in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. As such, the Turkish case has not only been frequently cited in academic discussions on modernization but has also informed and inspired many independence movements in Muslim "Third World" countries such as Pakistan and Indonesia.

The first cracks in the celebratory tone that characterized these early writings appeared in the late 1960s and the 1970s. With the growing influence of what Şerif Mardin calls the "Marxisant" perspective,[3] new histories shifted their focus away from the elite, emphasized conflict over consensus, and studied economic structures rather than political institutions. According to these critiques, Turkish modernization, when examined from alternative vantage points, contained little that was worth celebrating. So influential was their demur that by the end of the seventies "modernization" had become a dirty word, and authors such as Lerner and Lewis were cited only as examples of the "wrong" way of studying the late Ottoman Empire and republican Turkey.

Early critiques of Turkish modernization concentrated their criticisms on the Ottoman leaders who preceded Mustafa Kemal or on those who followed him, and not on what Kemal himself attempted to do. In these writings, the "War of Independence" especially was considered a valiant effort and was even seen as a harbinger of the Third World revolutions to come. Recently, in the hands of groups ranging from advocates of liberal economy to Islamist intellectuals, the criticism of Turkish modernity has become more comprehensive. Now, people publicly debate and criticize the Kemalist doctrine as a patriarchal and antidemocratic imposition from above that has negated the historical and cultural experience of the people in Turkey. In a hitherto unprecedented tone, the Kemalist path of modernization, far from being an exemplary success story, is declared a historical failure that undermined the normative order in Ottoman-Turkish society. It is ironic that such doubts about the Turkish experience are being voiced precisely at a time when Turkey is again being

promoted by Western diplomatic and press circles as an appealing model of social reform for the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union.

Underpinning these criticisms of Kemalist modernization is a strongly held doubt about the universalistic claims and aspirations of modernization theories. Today, many scholars and intellectuals favor and emphasize cultural identity, difference, and diversity over homogenization and unity. At the same time, concurrent with the demise of nationalist developmentalism in the world at large, the globalizing trends and high technologies of the market are also finding their way into Turkey. As these global trends ensnarl the country with all their energy and unruliness, official modernization, with its singularity, austerity, and paternalism, appears woefully inadequate both as a source of inspiration and as a mechanism of control in economics, politics, and cultural production.

Few of us would deny the democratic premises embodied in these developments, but we should realize that the theoretical, historical, and political debate in Turkey has left some important loose ends and generated several pitfalls. For example, it is sometimes ignored that regardless of how shallow Turkey's "civilizational shift" from Islam to the West has actually been, institutional, ritual, symbolic, and aesthetic manifestations of modernity have become constituent elements of the Turkish collective consciousness since the 1920s. Images and photographs of *La Turquie Kemaliste* in the 1930s, the propaganda films of the 1950s, and countless other representations of the official history of modernization still offer the most powerful visual tropes of this ethos of the making of a thoroughly modern nation out of the ruins of an old empire. Unveiled women working next to clean-shaven men in educational and professional settings, healthy children and young people in school uniforms, the modern architecture of public buildings in republican Ankara and other major cities, the spectacular performances of the national theater, symphony orchestra, opera, and ballet, and proud scenes of agriculture, railroads, factories, and dams are among the most familiar images. Not only have these been charged with a civilizing agency for the greater part of Turkey's republican history, but they have also come to set the official standards of exterior form and behavior against which people, ideas, and events have been measured and judged.

Another loose end is the inadequate way in which some aspects of recent Turkish history are studied and evaluated. As writers try to align themselves according to whether they believe Turkey has had too much or too little modernization, few have stepped up to study the real history of mod-

ernization in Turkey in all of its aspects. The serious doubts of some post-modernists notwithstanding, it is hard to ignore the relevance and reality of history. No matter how one might want to qualify it, in Turkey today more people live longer, fewer children succumb to childhood diseases, more people can read and write, and more people have access to modern means of transportation and communication than was the case in the 1920s. In other words, one would be justified in claiming that most people in Turkey now live lives that are qualitatively better than was typical in Anatolia during the early decades of the twentieth century. It seems to us that how this came about constitutes a valid and interesting research topic. Yet more than thirty-five years after its publication, Bernard Lewis's *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* remains the best introductory text for the study of the late Ottoman and early republican eras. On the other hand, despite his omnipresence in all aspects of modern Turkish history, Kemal Atatürk still does not have a scholarly biography.

A third and perhaps more important pitfall can be described as the state of extreme relativism that is associated with some forms of postmodernism and that may follow from a radical break with Kemalist modernism. Such an outcome would erode the possibility of finding any common ground or evaluative standard among different discourses and lifestyles. As editors of this volume, it is our conviction that if the recognition and celebration of pluralism and difference are not to lead to a complete "indifferentiation and indifference," as Chantal Mouffe cogently puts it, "one must be able to discriminate between differences that exist but should not exist, and differences that do not exist but should exist."[4]

On the basis of this conviction, we underline the importance of avoiding reductionist definitions of both modernity/modernism and postmodernity/postmodernism while embarking upon a rigorous and critical rethinking of Turkish modernization. Just as we need to distinguish between modernity as a potentially liberating historical condition and its instrumentalization for a political project of domination, we also need to distinguish between the democratic implications of the recent postmodern critique, on the one hand, and its self-closure into a new form of orthodoxy, on the other. In order to take advantage of the openings created by the former while avoiding the pitfalls of the latter, we must work toward building a new consensus that makes communication across social, political, and theoretical divides possible while upholding the universal principles of justice and truth. The parameters of this consensus must originate not in a grand theory or the political project of an elite

but in the very dialogue that would take place across societal divisions. It is only through such interchange that we can support the growth of an "unfettered, uncensored domain of public discourse," which Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob describe as a "New Republic of Learning."[5]

The essays in this volume, first presented in an interdisciplinary conference titled "Rethinking the Project of Modernity in Turkey," held at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in March 1994, bring together a wide range of writers from different disciplines and professions, all of whom are preoccupied with the critical debates over the current dilemmas and prospects of the project of modernity in Turkey and elsewhere. While keeping their essays focused on Turkey from their respective fields of expertise, they incorporate some of the most recent conceptual tools and frameworks, thereby providing an opening for theoretical and historical engagement with each other across disciplinary boundaries, as well as with specialists on other parts of the world. They represent a variety of positions, mostly complementary but at times conspicuously at odds with each other.

Rather than selecting the contributors strategically to affirm our own views, our objective was to open up space for some of the most prominent names to speak for themselves around our selected theme. We did not, however, want to reduce the debate to essentialized and mutually exclusive oppositions, especially between Kemalists and Islamists. Therefore, we avoided activists who were closely identified with these positions in favor of contributors who maintain a critical distance from essentialist and totalizing worldviews of any kind. A distance from both the self-righteous authoritarianism of Kemalist nationalism and the anti-individual and antimodern authoritarianism of certain aspects of Islamist politics characterizes most of the essays in this collection.

The range of positions notwithstanding, the common thread cutting across the essays is a two-fold observation that can also be seen as the tentative conclusion of this study. First, many of the writers find that the Turkish project of modernity, in the way it was conceived under the sponsorship and priorities of the nation-state, has been flawed and problematical from its inception, compromised precisely by some of the things that were done in the name of modernity. Second, they agree that both politically and intellectually, the current critical climate is an opportunity, albeit a precarious one (without any convincing indication so far that the opportunity has been seized), for rectifying the initial flaw toward a more democratic, pluralist, and creative unleashing of the country's potential.

The first seven essays after this introduction offer historical overviews

of Turkish modernization, critically reevaluate the paradigms employed in its study, and discuss current challenges to it. In chapter 2, Reşat Kasaba distinguishes between modernization as a world-historical process and the modernization that is described in social science texts. He sees the former as a liberating process that made it possible for people to pursue their individual interests while forming meaningful collectivities. By contrast, the models of social change that were elaborated in the aftermath of the Second World War confined the analysis of this rich and complex development into separately conceived nation-states that were labeled with sterile pattern variables. Kasaba sees the current conjuncture in the world and in Turkey as fortuitous for having brought a relative relaxation of political, intellectual, and ideological constraints. He argues that it should be possible for us, as historians and as historical subjects, to take advantage of these circumstances and reclaim the universal and liberating potential of modernization.

Çağlar Keyder argues in chapter 3 that the 1980s and 1990s have been a time of momentous change for Turkish society, when all the institutions, values, and ideals of modernity have come under siege. Yet he cautions us that it would be misleading to blame modernization as such for the current sense of malaise in Turkey. Rather than agreeing with those who advocate culturally authentic models of social change, Keyder insists that modernity should be accepted as a total project, embracing and internalizing all the cultural dimensions that made Europe modern. Hence, he insists on the enduring validity of the project of modernity while emphasizing the crucial need for shifting the focus of the project away from the state to society itself. For this to take place, the society needs to be constructed around well-formulated and protected notions of freedom and citizenship.

The essays by Haldun Gülalp and Şerif Mardin address, in different ways, the primary challenge to Turkish modernization posed recently by an increasingly visible Islamic element in society. Gülalp examines the growth of Islamist politics in Turkey within a global political-economic perspective. He argues that Islamism in Turkey and other similarly situated countries is a product of the frustration of the promises of Westernist modernization and state-led economic development that preoccupied the governments of these countries for the better part of the twentieth century. According to Gülalp, Islamist politics grew in such an environment not as a backward looking premodernism but as a critique of modernity, without, however, articulating a clear alternative in economic terms.

Focusing more on the historiography than on the history of Turkish modernization, Şerif Mardin's essay takes issue with precisely the kind of macroeconomic and structural analysis proposed by Gülalp. Mardin looks at the existing literature on Turkish modernization, of both Kemalist and Marxist persuasions, and finds too heavy an emphasis on macro models and too little interest in micro aspects of social change, which he describes as "life-worlds." Only by reintegrating life-worlds as a central component of the study and practice of modernity in Turkey, Mardin suggests, will we be able to move beyond the shortcomings of the existing historical experience and analysis. This, he argues, will alleviate the authoritarian tendencies inherent in exclusively structuralist perspectives and help overcome the distance and alienation that the overwhelmingly Muslim population of Turkey has felt in the face of the social and political reforms of the past two hundred years.

Along similar lines, Nilüfer Göle, in chapter 6, takes exception with common ways of studying the rise of Islam as resulting from poverty, authoritarianism, and massive urbanization. For her, Islamist movements involve not only a rejection of and a reaction to modernity but also a positive articulation of a holistic vision for the community. She sees in these movements a reassertion of Islamic identity that had been excluded from both the practice and the history of Turkish modernization. Göle reminds us that Muslims are reclaiming their history in body and spirit, in relationship to and within the context of modern institutions that surround them. Thus Göle is inclined to see in Islamic movements "a hybridization between local and global realities." This way of thinking about Islam, however, should not deter us from critically assessing the future that is inherent in Islamic visions. As Göle herself notes in the concluding section of her essay, "the 'rise of the oppressed' can be emancipatory only if it is not itself repressive."

The last two essays in this section introduce the dimension of gender into the discussion. Yeşim Arat's chapter begins by reviewing the way the status and appearance of women in public have been among the most effective visual and symbolic expressions of the Turkish project of modernity in its various stages. After emphasizing the centrality of women's position in all discussions of modernity in Turkey, Arat compares the earlier construct of the Kemalist woman with the recent feminist critique of this idealized construct. The feminist critique, she states, represents nothing less than a major change from women's being the objects of paternalistic republican reforms that "granted them their rights" to women's

claiming subjecthood in their own lives. Yet Arat refuses to cast these two in oppositional terms and sees the feminist activism of the 1980s as testimony to the strength of the republican project of modernity. Despite their revolt, she argues, these feminists, in their search for autonomy and their belief in universal rights beyond local traditions and provincial moralities, contribute to the liberal, secular, and democratizing polity that Kemalist Westernization ultimately stood for.

While agreeing with many of the recent criticisms directed at studies of Turkish modernization, Deniz Kandiyoti draws our attention to a still largely neglected area: the emergence of new identities and new forms of subjectivity through which we can begin to question the very meaning of what is "modern." She argues that certain lifestyles, identities, relationships, mannerisms, and habits came to be defined as "modern" not by virtue of their intrinsic qualities but as a result of the specific policies of the modernizing elite and, subsequently, the particular categories developed by the modernization school of social sciences. In particular, she focuses upon the central role of family, sexuality, and gender in discourses about Turkish modernity and highlights the historically and socially constructed nature of "modern" categories. More significantly, she emphasizes that the specific ways in which these categories affected the lives and status of women depended to a large extent on local conditions and class differentiations, which varied dramatically from city to village or from one region to another. This emphasis on the need to study "the local specificities of modernity," as Kandiyoti puts it, marks an important agenda of research neglected by traditional studies of modernization confined to official and institutional realms.

The book continues with four studies that more specifically address cultural aspects of the modernity debate in Turkey. These essays focus on current popular reactions to official modernism and examine the historical context of such reactions. Architecture, music, and popular culture are taken up in these essays with the underlying conviction that these fields are not autonomous and self-referential but are related to one another in meaningful ways as aspects of a larger cultural phenomenon. The predominance of architecture in this section, either directly or by implication, is neither arbitrary nor inconsequential. Apart from its being a recognized discipline and profession, we have viewed architecture (and its implication of a "rational structure") as a powerful metaphor for the project of modernity itself, in Turkey as elsewhere. The architectural terminology of the current postmodern debate is revealing: it is the mod-

ern "project" that is under attack; designs and blueprints are discredited as inherently oppressive and authoritarian; instead of construction, deconstruction occupies the cutting edge of critical thought; and architecture itself, as a metaphor for knowledge, is replaced by the archaeology of fragments.

In chapter 9, Sibel Bozdoğan presents a historical overview of the predicament of architectural modernism in Turkey through three distinct periods: its introduction in the Kemalist 1930s, its proliferation in the 1950s, and its rejection in the 1980s. She elaborates the discussion of modernity/postmodernity as it manifests itself in the discipline and profession of architecture, and she offers a visual stage-set for the following two contributions. In architecture, Bozdoğan argues, the problem lies less with the initial precepts of modernism, in the way it emerged as a critical, universal, and liberating discourse in architectural culture at large, than with the way it was reduced to an ideologically charged exterior form and scientific doctrine in the service of the nationalist modernizing elites in Turkey. At the same time, she suggests that the more recent postmodern celebration of liberation from the facelessness and sterility of modern architecture needs to be approached with caution, in order to avoid a standardless stylistic pluralism as an end in itself.

In his essay, Michael Meeker analyzes the seemingly opposite ideological and architectural statements of two state monuments, the Atatürk Memorial Tomb and the Kocatepe Mosque in Ankara—symbols of secular reason and religious faith, respectively—in terms of an underlying shared language of "popular intersubjectivity." From folktales to the "stories" that monuments tell, from the constitution of personhood to that of nationhood, this shared language constitutes a sort of collective imagination. On this basis Meeker rejects common binary oppositions that are typically employed to characterize the project of modernity in Turkey, such as nationalism versus religion, modernity versus tradition, and state versus society.

The last two essays in this section, written from the fields of architecture and music, respectively, look at the most phenomenal challenge to official culture in Turkey in recent years—the challenge coming from or informed by the experience of marginalized people in squatter settlements around major cities. In chapter 11, Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoğlu looks at the architectural sites of encounters between urban and rural Turkey, specifically those between city dwellers and peasants and nomads. She calls for the opening up of a cultural and architectural space of difference irre-

ducible to either of the poles of this binary opposition. Nalbantoğlu fo-
cuses on architectural (re)constructions of rural dwellings, from early re-
publican model villages to the ingenious dwellings and tactics of survival
put forward by rural migrants on the urban fringes today. In these she
finds critical tools and disruptive moments that have been excluded from
or silenced by the established architectural discourse and practice in Turkey,
including the worn-out advocacies of regionalism and contextualism.

Meral Özbek's essay addresses the relationship between modernization
and popular culture in Turkey through the example of *arabesk* music,
which, emerging out of the discontents of squatter populations in the
1960s, has become the most prolific form of popular entertainment in
the 1980s for millions of people of all classes and backgrounds. Taking
issue with "modernizers of both the right and the left," Özbek challenges
the characterization of *arabesk* as the vulgar, fatalistic, tasteless, and cheap
culture of manipulated masses. Instead, she defines it as the site of both
submission and resistance to dominant groups by real people who are at
once the source and the consumers of this culture. Focusing on the work
of Orhan Gencebay, the undisputed "King of Arabesk," she takes us through
the historical processes in the making of the prominent examples of this
genre of music. Özbek argues that *arabesk* lost its initial resistant and
utopian dimension in the 1980s as it became absorbed by the hegemonic
ideology of the Özal years in Turkey.

In the last section of the book, three authors whose primary special-
izations lie outside Turkey look at the Turkish case from their respective
vantage points and make some comparative and theoretical observations.
Ernest Gellner, in chapter 13, returns to a general theme that inspired
many early writers on the history of modern Turkey: the successful trans-
formation of the Ottoman Empire into a secular and modern republic.
Instead of simply asserting this success, as was frequently done in earlier
writings, Gellner explains it by arguing that both popular Islam and the
scholar-elites in late Ottoman and early republican Turkey were better
positioned to adjust to the requirements of modern life. For the same rea-
son, argues Gellner, there is a basis for remaining optimistic about the
future of Turkey, especially in comparison with its less fortunate neigh-
bors to the north and south.

Roger Owen and Joel Migdal approach the topic from a more specifi-
cally Middle Eastern context. In chapter 14, Owen argues that modernity
became a political project in the Middle East under the uncertain condi-
tions of the postcolonial and postimperial years of the early twentieth

century. Most states and societies in the region undertook to advance certain values, characteristics, and standards in their respective societies. The mechanisms through which these models were imposed, as well as their impacts, varied across the region. Nonetheless, Owen argues, they have transformed local circumstances to such an extent that today modernity should be seen as an irreversible reality in the Middle East. At the same time, he reminds us that this is an incomplete reality, or rather an unfinished project, and as such it leaves much room for human intervention and interpretation.

Where and how this intervention is likely to take place finds a partial answer in Joel Migdal's concluding essay. He argues that the ultimate character and direction of the project of modernity in countries like Turkey will be determined not by the will of state elites but in that zone where state forces come into contact with social structures which they try to mold after an idealized vision. Because of the larger-than-life stature of leaders such as Atatürk, Ben-Gurion, and Nasser, who dominated political life in their respective countries, it has not been easy to focus on these zones of interaction and untangle these complex relationships. But as Migdal reiterates, the general thrust, the hope, of the arguments expressed in this volume is that the current conjuncture will allow us to lift this veil and arrive at a more open and inclusive assessment of the past and future of the project of modernity in Turkey and the Middle East.

In putting together the essays in this volume, we started with a set of open-ended questions rather than with a clearly delineated, a priori agenda. Instead of trying to resolve the debates over such a complex and contentious history of modernization as Turkey's, our aspiration was to complicate a picture frequently oversimplified not only by the smooth trajectories and universally defined models of modernization theories but also by some of the more recent antimodern and postmodern trends. As we write, events unfolding in Turkey continue to complicate the picture daily. If modernity is a project fraught with uncertainty, as we believe it is, we can perhaps say this much: it is alive and well in Turkey.

Notes

1. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History,* New York: Norton, 1994, 201.

2. Daniel Lerner, *The Passing of Traditional Society,* New York: Free Press, 1958; Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey,* New York: Oxford University Press, 1961.

3. See Mardin's chapter 5, this volume.

4. Chantal Mouffe, "Democratic Politics Today," in Chantal Mouffe, ed., *Dimensions of Radical Democracy,* London: Verso, 1992, 13.

5. Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History,* 282.

2/ Kemalist Certainties
and Modern Ambiguities

REŞAT KASABA

I n 1983, the military junta in Turkey was making preparations to hand
the government over to a civilian administration. Military leaders had
already agreed to hold elections in that year, but they did not want the
democratic process to unfold to its full potential without supervision on
their part. They were particularly sensitive to the possibility that the par-
ties and politicians of the pre-coup era might be returned to power to
undo what the military had tried to accomplish during the preceding three
years.

In order to prevent this outcome, they imposed restrictions and out-
right bans on the activities of a large number of people and organiza-
tions, and they labeled the prominent politicians of previous decades and
their parties the embittered remnants of an old order. Military officials
repeatedly warned the nation that electing these old leaders would bring
the country back to the edge of the precipice from which it had been de-
livered by the 1980 coup. Instead of returning to these "tried and failed"
parties and ideas, or, in state president Evren's colorful language, rather
than "shopping at flea markets," people in Turkey were encouraged to
"walk along the new path enlightened by the floodlights of the new lead-
ers of the new parties."[1]

By describing the 1983 elections as a stark choice between the old and
the new, the military leaders were reiterating a theme that had been cen-
tral to political discourse in Turkey during most of the twentieth century.
According to this theme, Turkey's social, economic, and political prob-
lems were caused by the continuing influence of pre-republican politi-
cal, economic, and social institutions and attitudes. In order to be a se-
rious competitor in the modern world, the argument went, Turks had to
free themselves from this burden and make a clean start by cutting their
ties to their recent (i.e., Ottoman) history. The core policy makers and
ideologues who gathered around Atatürk after the purges of 1925 re-

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peatedly stated such views as their convictions. According to them, any-
thing that was newly attained, acquired, adopted, or built was naturally
desirable and superior to everything that was inherited from the past and
hence "old."[2]

During the early decades of the twentieth century, the tired and de-
feated people of Anatolia were in no position to debate or resist Atatürk's
radical message. Some were even enthusiastic in supporting the national
leader in his determination to remake the Turkish state. By the 1980s, the
situation had changed completely. The Turkish people, few of whom now
remembered the early years of the republic, had grown extremely suspi-
cious of, and downright cynical about, the latest incarnations of the
promises of "enlightened and prosperous tomorrows." Instead of making
further sacrifices for a future that kept eluding them, they were starting
to inquire about the histories, institutions, beliefs, identities, and cultures
from which they had been forcefully separated. This reorientation of the
social compass spread to all segments of the society, not only affecting
people's political outlook but also influencing the way they dressed, which
music they created and listened to, how they built their houses and of-
fice buildings, and how they thought about the history of modern Turkey.

This shift of focus had immediate and profound consequences for Turk-
ish politics. For one thing, as part of the general assessment of Turkey's
status in the modern world, the Kemalist program of modernization—
including its economic policies, secularist tenets, and ethnonationalist
foundations—came under close scrutiny and received increasingly vocal
criticism. The Islamist Refah Party emerged as the standard-bearer of the
anti-Kemalist opposition and within ten years transformed its shaky or-
ganization into the largest political party in Turkey.

The reshuffled political scene in Turkey got a further jolt when the Kurds,
who constitute the largest non-Turkish ethnic group in the country, re-
claimed and reasserted their distinct cultural and ethnic identity and used
it as a basis for organizing an armed struggle against the Turkish army. In
the process, not only did they test the very viability of the state but they
also exposed some of the foundational weaknesses of Turkish national-
ism as it had been conceived by the republican elite.

Putting together the nostalgic turn in tastes, the declining hold of sec-
ularism on everyday life and politics, and the growing precariousness of
national unity, it is hard to avoid the impression that Turkish modern-
ization reached some kind of turning point in the early eighties. The re-
formers, in particular Mustafa Kemal, had envisioned for Turkey an or-