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Where is Turkey headed?

Crucial Bridge between Occident and Orient

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“I see what you do not see. And that is Turkey.” Western, and particularly European observers of Turkey are obviously finding it difficult to really understand the situation in that country. The essence of this society is difficult to grasp with mere observation and rational judgment – difficult because Turkey, like the Orient in general, has its own cultural mentality and political identity. Pride, honor, shame and respect are the primary categories driving political action; they have the same value as they do in the West, along with such clichés as “effectiveness” or “persistence.” Also involved, however, is irrationality, or “*delikanli*”, which translates as “crazy blood” – that is to say, the behavior of young men in puberty. *Delikanli* is used not only for young men who do crazy things out of their awakening sense of manhood. It also serves as an explanatory excuse which is used when men, whether out of anger or the lust for power, beat their wives, or shoot indiscriminately, or pursue the politics of emotion.

While there was a painfully embarrassed silence at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos over the appearance and swift departure of Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan, thousands of Turks cheered their *delikanli* Sultan Erdogan upon his return as a hero who had shown the Israelis and Europeans what’s what. Turkey today seems to have become an insecure society which sees itself as misunderstood and hence is eager for such signs of strength. A recent BBC poll showed that more than 50% of Turks currently mistrust the EU and better than 60% are suspicious of the USA, convinced of the adage that “Turkey’s only friends are the Turks.” Back in the 1950s, writing about the Germans, Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich used the term “psycho-social immobility”, because the deeper causes of Germany’s malaise lay in its undigested history. The same diagnosis could be applied to Turkey today. It is a country which still does not openly confront its past history or its present problems.

Turkey is a country full of historic sites and traces of Greek and Roman antiquity – but it cannot or will not comprehend its splendid historical resources as national capital. Even the complex legacy of the Ottoman Empire is transformed and portrayed in the history books as if there had been no other ethnic groups in the area before the emergence of the Turkish nation. Yet “Turkishness” was defined only by late 19th-century German and Hungarian ethnologists, who were persuaded by the Young Turks – using the full range of the Oriental storyteller’s art – to elevate the term to the level of a national doctrine. The Turkmen tribes, which were more a serving than a ruling class under the Ottoman Empire and constituted barely half the population, were transmogrified into Anatolia’s ancestral tribe, and their history was presented as formative.

The role of other ethnic groups in the history of Anatolia was suppressed. Armenians and Greeks were slaughtered or driven out, Kurds and Circassians resettled, Sunni Islam forced upon Alawites and Shiites, Aramaeans and Christians – all the country's minorities were marginalized. And all of that was based on the idea of creating a nation and maintaining Anatolia as a unified entity. Perhaps the reason why the Turks of today are so nationalistic is that, deep down, they have the feeling that only their flag holds this multi-ethnic country together.

In the early 20th century the Young Turks pursued a resettlement policy aimed at making sure that no non-Turkish ethnic group would constitute more than 10% of the populace anywhere in the country. In addition, industrialization brought the start of an ongoing migration and flight from the land. The result was that fully half the population now lives in a different place from where the previous generation was born. In many respects, the Turks are a people without roots. Peasants casually abandon their land for an apartment in one of the metropolitan areas. The largest internal migrations were toward the large urban agglomerations around Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. Today nearly five million Turks live outside of the country. Atatürk's other innovations were truly revolutionary as well. From the language to the alphabet and to the introduction of the Swiss legal code in Turkish, his regime turned Turkish society upside-down. Islam came under state control, replaced after Atatürk's death by "Kemalism" as the official doctrine.

Since 1950, the governing period of subsequently-executed Prime Minister Menderes, Islam has again been on the march. Kemalist policy is being dismantled bit by bit, and the Muslim religion, formerly under government control, is once more becoming the predominant culture of the Turks. But there is one thing that Atatürk did not take over from the Europeans: the idea of the individual as personally responsible, the concept of the civil society. If you read the Turkish constitution, what you find is that it contains all the basic rights laid down in Western constitutions, but with a certain fundamental qualification. The basic rights are valid, but under the de facto reservation that family, country and "Turkishness" are not harmed. Patriarchal structures, archaic customs, control of the individual by the group, the family, the clan – all that was not called into question after Atatürk. As a result, Turkey's "we" has remained the pre-democratic structure of Ottoman society, the overriding communal entity – the *umma* in Muslim religious terms, the social identity.

Atatürk was the model of collective republicanism. This Kemalist *umma* is now being replaced not by a civic movement, as had been hoped in the West, but rather by another supreme patriarch, the model of the Prophet Mohammed. The Islamist movement comes from below and operates with certainties which need no justification and remain unquestioned. The fact that this movement adheres to democratic rules and does many things better than the sated Kemalists is certainly to be welcomed, but it should not mislead us into assuming that this constitutes some progress toward

freedom. Nor should we deceive ourselves that something should be approved of merely because it is legal. The fundamental mistake of the Turkish Republic was – and is – that it depends not on the individual citizen, but on the collective. That robs many Turks of the chance for personal development and the rights of genuine freedom. And we must also keep in mind that freedoms can be used to do away with freedom.

When Turks talk about their country, whether among themselves or to outsiders, they always speak of “we”. We won in soccer, we used fewer condoms this year, we’re being insulted – and so on. If one criticizes or inquires searchingly into concrete events or structures, the response in principle is that it isn’t any business of foreigners. There is a block against entering into necessary discourse. The most obvious case in point is the question of the genocide against Armenians; but criticism of the regime is also punished, as shown by Erdogan’s campaign against the Dogan media group. A society which finds it necessary to seek safety against free speech through government power cannot deal with its own problems. It remains incapable of learning, infantile, stuck in a kind of imprisoned consciousness; it does not resolve its problems, but keeps them in check by force and, when necessary, accuses its critics of treason.

I have met Turkish politicians and women’s rights advocates who operate in Turkey under the most difficult conditions, who actively battle against the patriarchy and archaic customs, but who refuse to talk about such things in front of foreigners. At a recent discussion in Istanbul’s Goethe Institute, Turkish writer Ayfer Tunc spoke of the “two faces” of Turks and Turkey. One face is turned outward and defends the country’s unity against everything and everyone, while the other face shows no general social responsibility for its own people but limits its interest to the narrower circle of relatives and acquaintances. One of the difficulties encountered by observers is that there is no open discourse with outsiders, regardless of where they are from, and that Turks feel obliged, as part of their society, not to call into question matters that were decreed by their elders or which belong in the category of the unquestioned and taboo. Turkish democracy is not a civil but a military democracy. Atatürk was a soldier and thought in the military categories of friend and foe; when he spoke of industry it sounded as if he was talking about the infantry. Accordingly, the new Turkish state was organized like an army, governed by orders and obedience. The republic was founded by officers who have exchanged their uniforms for civilian garb and who continue to keep guard over their state even today. The Turkish military is still the most influential social force, a state within the state; it is also the country’s largest entrepreneur and claims for itself nearly 40% of the country’s budget.

The Erdogan regime inherited these structures, and today it is trying to come to terms with the military on the one hand, and to limit its power on the other. The investigations against the forces of the “deep state”, the nationalist group “Ergenekon”, which consists of personnel from the ranks of the police and the military, constitute a lever being used to defeat the nationalists with their own weapons. Since the military no

longer has major political influence at party level, because “its” party, the CHP, has marginalized itself, it is dependent on reaching agreement with the powerful and power-hungry AKP, so that common ground is being sought.

Communal elections are soon to be held in Turkey, and a veritable downpour of social benevolence is descending upon the country’s villages and communes. The governing party is distributing flour and washing machines, drilling wells, building roads and mosques, making promises. Foreign correspondents see no dishonest religious motives or any hidden Islamist agenda in the AKP’s rhetoric and initiatives. But, as is so often the case in Turkey, words and deeds are like two pairs of shoes. In contrast to the republican CHP, the AKP in fact does listen to the people, it makes efforts in the realms of housing construction, health care, the water supply. The results are clearly visible, and the party is sure to enjoy success in the coming elections – in part because it consistently counts on nepotism.

Not that this latter is Erdogan’s invention. It has always been a basic principle of politics in the Orient to serve one’s own clients. Now, in Turkey, the beneficiaries are the brothers and sisters in the Faith. In appointments and hirings, from kindergarten teachers to university professors, from kiosk tenants to pilots, in the letting of contracts and the privatization of state enterprises and departments, care is consistently being taken that the spoils of power get into the right (i.e., religious) hands. Nowadays, there is a prayer room in every inn, factories bidding for government contracts are openly called upon to make donations to the AKP, to establish prayer rooms on their premises, etc. At this level, since Erdogan took office a major program of redistribution has been operating.

In the long term, this religious nepotism will change the country more than adjustments of legislation to conform to EU norms could ever do. But many things will remain much the same. For example: The law stipulates the marriageable age as 18 – but no one in the country worries about that. A survey in a city in central Anatolia revealed that 80% of the girls and women were already married before the age of 18, the youngest at age 12, without any government agency raising a fuss. The marriages were carried out by imams, and were subsequently legalized when necessary.

The AKP’s charitable policy cannot be financed by its or the country’s own economic strength. If all the good works are not to end in the kind of financial disaster experienced back in 2000, Turkey needs donors. Possible EU subsidies and economic relations with Europe might perhaps save Turkey. Although most AKP voters reject both the USA and Europe, the AKP will do everything it can to do business with the Europeans. As to the USA, it has counted on Turkey since the Cuban crisis of 1961. It was Washington that shoved Turkey into NATO, and it repeatedly recommends that the Europeans accept Turkey as a partner. The AKP’s “moderate Islam” seems to fit the requirements of the Obama government just as it did the Bush administration. As the

Turkish journalist Ece Temelkuran has noted, American media no longer refer to Turkey as “the only secular and democratic state in the Middle East,” but rather as “the only democratic state with an Islamist government.”

Several positive factors are converging for the AKP. Geopolitically, the U.S. needs Turkey with its strong military as a force for stability in the Middle East. For financial and economic reasons, Turkey urgently needs Europe. The USA will continue to support Turkey’s application for EU membership, and is assuming that Europe will eventually pay that price. Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül was scheduled for a trip to Brussels in March. It was clear why he was smiling as he went.

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