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Ambiguities of Modernist Nationalism: Architectural Culture and Nation-Building in Early Republican Turkey

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Is nationalism a prerequisite of modernity or is it a project opposed to modernity? Is nationalism about being modern, contemporary, rational and progressive or being unique, distinctive and authentic? Does nationalism involve a refusal of modernism, or does it mean enveloping the modern in a national form (that is, generating modernity within a national mold)? These are issues that have been hotly debated in the last few decades by such distinguished scholars as Ernest Gellner, Anthony D. Smith, Benedict Anderson and Partha Chatterjee.[1] If one were to focus on the Turkish case, a number of additional questions would need to be raised: Is national identity something that joins Turkey to the ranks of other "civilized nations", or is it what sets it apart? Did nationalism work to distance Turkey from western modernity, or did it operate as a key to participation and inclusion in it?

These questions form an extremely complex cluster of issues that compel us to think about the conditions for the possibility of modernity in a non-western cultural context on the one hand, and the possibility of understanding nationalism in the post-colonial world as more than a derivative discourse on the other. An interesting and insightful step in the direction of exploring these issues is found in Sibel Bozdogan's *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic*.[2] Bozdogan looks at the architectural culture in Turkey and specifically focuses on how architecture was influenced by nationalism and the project of nation building. The book covers a long historical span: from the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 to the end of the single party rule (of the Republican People's Party) in 1950. Within this broad time frame, Bozdogan is especially interested in the 1930s when architectural discourse and practice went through a number of critical transformations.

Turkish Studies, Vol. 5, No. 3, Autumn 2004, pp.103–111
ISSN 1468-3849 print/ISSN 1743-9663 online
DOI: 10.1080/1468384042000270344 © 2004 Taylor & Francis Ltd.

The originality of Bozdogan's text lies in the fact that rather than being a conventional history of the architectural styles and fashions of the early Republic, it explicitly and systematically attempts to articulate the relationship between architecture and the Kemalist nation-building project. Thus, instead of a merely formal analysis of the history of architectural conventions and styles, the reader gets a complex picture of the evolving relationship between an art form on the one hand and political and ideological dynamics on the other. In other words, Bozdogan is not interested in approaching architecture only from a stylistic point of view; instead, she wants to understand architecture in relation to the larger political and historical context which in turn involves discussing nation-building and state power within a non-European context. It is for this reason that the functional and technical aspects of architecture are supplemented in the book with the symbolic and representational dimensions. Indeed, it is her approach to architecture as a form of visual politics that makes Bozdogan's book a highly original contribution to scholarship on Turkish nationalism, architecture and history alike.

Bozdogan's book is a thought provoking and well-researched work, which does a deft job of handling multiple audiences (art historians, architects, social anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, Middle East experts and so on) and makes its contribution in multiple fields such as architectural history and studies of nationalism. The book deserves praise both for the rich empirical material that it offers on architectural culture in early Republican Turkey and also for stimulating a theoretical debate regarding the linkages between architecture, nationalism and high modernism. A brief essay cannot do full justice to the range and complexity of issues that Bozdogan tries to tackle. This essay, will confine its interest to what it takes to be the central problematique of the book: the ambiguous and ever-changing relationship between the national and the modern in the architecture of the early Republican years.

The project of nation building in Turkey involved the creation of a new, modern society at the level of "contemporary civilization". Bozdogan traces a number of different articulations of the axial imperatives to be simultaneously modern and national in the architectural grammar of the early Republic. Her chapter titled "*Milli Mimari*: Nationalizing the Modern" is especially pivotal in this regard. On the whole, Bozdogan argues, the potential tension between the ideals of modernity and nationality was pacified by generating two, presumably supplementary, arguments which became

prevalent in the architectural as well as the political landscape of the early Republic.

The first argument was that the modern is necessarily national. Many modernist architects articulated a vision of the modern as the search for the appropriate, functional response to context; what kind of materials, building techniques, structural features are appropriate to the climate, topography, and vegetation of the country. Therefore, it is argued, the requirement to be modern naturally led to being national. As Bozdogan points out, it was critical in this regard that context was taken to mean primarily natural, and not cultural, context.[3] Bracketing culture made appeals to context sufficiently neutral for Republican architects so that it could be immanently tied to modernity as an ideal. Understanding context culturally, instead of naturally, would have been problematic because it would have necessitated invocation of the Ottoman and Islamic components of the nation's heritage. The new Republic's double rejection of Ottoman and Islamic cultural traditions caused the frame of the new national culture to be remarkably empty.

Without a concrete referent (derived either from its imperial past or from its present peripheral, folk culture), the national culture that Kemalist nationalism endeavored to create was founded on a conspicuous absence. Two supplementary strategies (an ambitious program of cultural westernization and a project for fabricating a genealogy for the nation) were employed in an effort to remedy this absence. Under the supervision of Atatürk, a number of state institutions (such as the Turkish History Institute and the Turkish Language Institute) were created in the 1930s to produce what came to be known as the Turkish history thesis and the Sun-language theory. The main idea behind such attempts was to create an origin for the Turkish nation which was neither Islamic nor Ottoman. There were two aims that nationalists sought to accomplish by providing a new genealogy for the Turkish nation: to demonstrate how the Turkish nation had ancient roots in Anatolia (which in turn justified the Republic's claims to its territory) and to show how Turkish culture was compatible with modernity.

The second argument used to ease the tension between modernity and nationalism was that Turkish national culture and architecture is already modern and rational because it embodies the same qualities valorized by modernism (such as simplicity, functionality, austerity and lack of ornamentation). In other words, the national was justified on the altar of the modern and rational. It was argued that once Turkish culture was successfully stripped of the layers of Oriental civilization imposed upon it during

the Ottoman centuries, the distinctively rational kernel of Turkish culture would resurface. This recovery of the pure, simple, unadorned, proportional, functional and rational features of Turkish architecture would necessitate the exorcism of the Arabian or Persian influences which encumbered it with Oriental ornamentation, confusion and excess. Turkish nationalists adopted an Orientalist trope and used it against the "Oriental Other" of the Turkish nation in its Ottoman, Islamic, Arabian and Persian guises: Turkish architecture already possessed many qualities exalted by modern architects in the West, whereas other Islamic architectures were Oriental.[4] It is noteworthy that Turkish nationalist discourse distanced and differentiated the Turkish nation from the "Orientals" (that is, Arabs and Persians) by referring to its inherently rational and ultimately western character.

The question of national distinctiveness that preoccupies so many nationalist movements in the post-colonial world was transformed in Turkish nationalist discourse into a question of difference from the Orientals. By placing themselves on the western side of the great divide, Turkish nationalists were able to pacify the questions of authenticity and cultural difference which are of such central importance in the nationalisms of the post-colonial world. Partly by virtue of being heir to a multi-ethnic, multi-religious empire and its strong state tradition, partly by escaping direct colonial domination by embarking on a long series of self-inflicted westernizing reforms (which preceded the founding of the Republic), the dilemma of choosing between modernity and authenticity in the formation of a national culture was not felt as acutely in Turkey as elsewhere in the Third World.

Within this overall problematique of nationalism and modernity, the place of the vernacular in national architecture remained equivocal and ever shifting. As Bozdogan points out, vernacular architecture had multiple references: on the one hand, it referred to urban houses built with timber, featuring pitched roofs. On the other hand, it pointed in the direction of rural houses of Anatolia, built with "cubic" features and typically using mudbrick as building material. Neither of these references to the vernacular was about state power or representation of the state per se. And neither was able to dominate the central agenda of architecture in the early years of the Republic. While an attempt was made to justify and find a place for the vernacular architecture of Anatolia in terms of the rational and functional kernel of its design characteristics, a different tendency also existed that at best ignored (and at worst despised) vernacular architecture. In other words, while there was a temptation to incorporate the

local, "authentic" (be it the timber house with pitched roof or the cubic Anatolian mudbrick house) into the new, national architecture, a far more powerful movement advocated the importation of a stripped-down classicism heavily influenced by central and eastern European architecture, manifesting itself primarily in the form of state buildings and monuments. The relative weakness of the pursuit of the vernacular was due to its identification with folk culture on the one hand, and its private, non-state character on the other.

To the extent that an attempt was made to incorporate vernacular architecture into national architecture, it was based less upon a claim for expressing a distinctive Volkgeist and more on a rationalist account of how vernacular architecture's "utility, simplicity, constructional honesty, conformity to local materials, climate and resources" represented "the same basic qualities and criteria that modern architecture sought".[5] Therefore, one can conclude that the early Republican era's central problematique was not primarily about the formulation of a truly distinctive and unique architectural style to represent the nation. Rather, it was about the Turkish state's mission to create a modern, secular, and rational new society. On the whole, vernacular architecture remained, at best, at the margins of the Republic's new architecture. The main interest instead was in symbolizing the state's transformative power through a modernist style that remained predominant at least until the 1950s.

It is within this modern/national nexus that Bozdogan presents her case opposing the conventional understanding of Turkish architecture of this period. Bozdogan's contention is that rather than explaining the shifts in architectural style as a result of changing architectural fashions, one has to understand them as different articulations of a continuous, underlying nationalist agenda. While the manifestations of this fundamental agenda varied (for example, vernacular, international, classicist architectures), the underlying motivation continued to be the desire to express the simultaneously revolutionary, modernist and national character of the young Turkish state. Bozdogan's point is that, in the final analysis, it was not the autonomous dynamics of the architectural profession but the broader context of a modernist nationalism that was decisive for the changes in architectural style and preferences:

> What gives this period [1908–50] its coherence, its deep structure under the surface of visible stylistic shifts, is the strong political and

> ideological charge of architecture in the service of nation building. During this period, style was not an autonomous aesthetic realm. It was a powerful vehicle through which political leaders and professional architects sought to imagine the nation where it did not exist. This is a point frequently missed by architectural historians, who tend to divide the early Republican period into three stylistically defined phases: the first national style (Ottoman revivalism), the international style (the New Architecture), and the second national style (vernacular and classical references). These terms, which suggest a switching back and forth between the poles of a national-versus-international dichotomy, obscure the fact that regardless of changes in formal expression, *nationalism* was the driving force of Turkish architectural culture between 1908 and 1950.[6]

While Bozdogan's point regarding the underlying continuity and motivation provided by nationalism is sensible, the fact that such political will did not have a clear-cut, unambiguous expression in the realm of architecture should be kept in mind. Being modern variously meant being national (rather than imperial/Ottoman), secular (rather than Islamic), contemporary (rather than traditional) and progressive (rather than backward). How the project of creating a modern nation was to be represented in architecture did not admit to a single, unequivocal answer.

The deep ambivalence that the Republican elites displayed regarding the stylistic attributes of architecture hints at a lacuna that interspaces political will and architectural expression: experimentation in the field of architecture (as observed in the rapid succession of revivalist, international and national styles), in politics (single-party, corporatist, multi-party models) and in the history and language (where there was experimentation with such views as the Sun-language theory and the Turkish history thesis) was not accidental but fundamental to the process of constructing a modern nation in Turkey. The continuous shifts in architectural style and the rapid pace of its transformation points to the importance of the debates and practices within the architectural field. One could argue that instead of architecture simply registering the nationalism of the elites, it has to be understood as a dynamic field of interaction between political will on the one hand and the specific grammar of architectural expression on the other. Attempting to explain the latter by referring to the logic of the former would run the risk of impoverishing our understanding of the matter. Further, one should

keep in mind the ambivalent character of the nationalism of this period (1908–50): rather than treating nationalism as a given, unproblematic factor whose properties remain the same throughout, it would be more insightful to treat it as a variable whose changing character is itself in need of explanation.

On the whole, Bozdogan's work is successful precisely because it refrains from the temptation to give a reductionist account. Her analysis is rich with the nuances of the debates in the architectural community which reveal the historically contingent and limited options, ideas and styles that were available and the eclectic and sometimes inconsistent way in which political will was translated into architectural discourse and actual buildings. Unless one recognizes the lacuna that critically intervenes and separates political will and architectural representation, one would have difficulty in explaining how nationalists can embrace "international style" with such enthusiasm in the 1930s only to radically turn away from it in the following decade.

The story of cubic houses is typical in demonstrating the deep ambivalence that the Republican elites felt regarding certain forms of modernism and the lack of a definite formula to marry modernity with nationalism. While cubic apartments were hailed as the foci of progressive and modern living throughout the 1930s, shortly thereafter they were criticized for signifying an alienated, individualistic, corrupt and cosmopolitan lifestyle. Indeed, on the whole, "Republican ideology was willing to take modernism (and cubic architecture as its stylistic expression) on board for its scientific and progressive connotations but was deeply uneasy with its urban, cosmopolitan and international signifiers".[7] The ambivalence that Kemalists experienced regarding cubic apartments was endemic to almost all other modernist forms as well. How cubic houses can become the ideal, modern homes for the families of the young nation at one point and became prime targets of criticism as foreign and alienating architectural forms soon afterwards cannot be explained by referring to a nationalistic ideology that was present throughout both of these periods. Rather, it has to be sought in the murky intersection of modernity and nationalism understood as an elite project of top-down cultural transformation.

Bozdogan's discussion of the calls for the "colonization of the countryside" (in Chapter 2) is instructive in detailing the character of the project of top-down cultural transformation. Couched within binaries of old/new, modern/traditional, rational/obscurantist, progressive/reactionary, the

project for the "internal colonization" of the countryside was to be achieved in part through the creation of a new village architecture (*köy mimarisi*) that would radically alter the social, political and cultural parameters of rural life.[8] It has to be remembered that rather than the countryside, the civilizing ambition of the nationalist elites found its most powerful translation into built reality in the cities where the display of state power was most ostentatious. Despite this, however, the projects produced for a new village architecture are significant in so far as they reveal the kind of civilizing and secularizing agenda that the nationalist elites possessed. Architect Aptullah Ziya's design for a Republican village is typical in this regard; it includes a geometric ordering of the whole village in a linear pattern (recalling the layout of a military camp rather than a village) and assigns spaces for the village chief's house, gendarmerie, village union, market, school, museum, village common room, and bank as well as the villagers' homes. Within this comprehensive design, however, there is a conspicuous absence: the mosque, which traditionally constitutes the center of the villagers' civic life, along with the coffeehouse. The marriage of a severely disciplinary and rationalist ordering of village life with an underlying secularizing intent was not accidental but lay at the heart of the nationalist regime's policies.

On the whole, the specific articulation of modernity and nationalism found in the Turkish case suggests not just modernization in the service of nationalism but a distinct, modernist form of nationalism.[9] Rather than using modernization instrumentally (as a necessary yet not *inherently* desirable tool for strengthening the nation), Republican elites used nationalism in the service of their goal of reaching "contemporary civilization". The aim of modernist Turkish nationalists was not limited to industrialization and economic development, but included the creation of "civilized," westernized, and *modern* subjects. Rather than aspiring to be an ethnocentric project of authenticity, Turkish national identity was primarily a modernist project of total cultural transformation. Thus, national identity was subservient to the project of modernity (understood as westernization). In other words, modernity was the ultimate ideal and the national form was important and necessary as a requirement of *that* modernity. Because modern societies were nation-states, rather than multi-ethnic empires or city-states, Turkish nationalist cadres consciously and deliberately adopted the nation-state as the appropriate matrix within which a thoroughly modern, rational and secular society could be built.

NOTES

1. See Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983); Anthony D. Smith, *National Identity* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 1991); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); and Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).
2. Sibel Bozdogan, *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001).
3. Ibid., p.259.
4. Ibid., p.248.
5. Ibid., p.255.
6. Ibid., p.294.
7. Ibid., p.234.
8. Ibid., pp.97–106.
9. For a detailed elaboration of the concept of modernist nationalism, see, Ayhan Akman "Modernist Nationalism: Statism and National Identity in Turkey," *Nationalities Papers*, Vol.32, No.1 (March 2004), pp.23–53.

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