

Prisoners of Ourselves: Totalitarianism in Everyday Life

By Gündüz Y. H. Vassaf
İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2011, 275 pages,
ISBN 9789750509629.

Turkey and the Dilemma of EU Accession

By Mirela Bogdani
London and New York: I. B. Tauris & Co., 2011,
234 pages, ISBN 9781848854598.

Towards a Social History of Modern Turkey: Essays in Theory and Practice

Edited by Gavin D. Brockett
İstanbul: Libra Kitapçılık ve Yayıncılık, 2011,
184 pages, ISBN 9786054326426.

ALTHOUGH written from a variety of perspectives at different points in history, all three books reviewed here offer penetrating insights into Turkish politics past and present, as well as commenting on how they are interpreted both inside and outside the country.

Written in English, while he was guest professor at the University of Marburg, Germany (having quit his post at Boğaziçi University in protest at the law curtailing academic freedom), Gündüz Vassaf's *Prisoners of Ourselves* comprises a series of meditations mostly written between October 1986 and March 1987. His basic thesis is straightforward enough: although human beings consider themselves members of the free world, they are actually subject to totalitarian rule. He surveys some familiar binaries—for example, madness and sanity—and shows how they are used to cur-

tail individual liberties. Western historians have conventionally accepted that the Nazi period in Germany was one of collective madness. However the validity of that judgment can be called into question in the light of Adorno and Horkheimer's research, which discovered that anti-semitism in the United States was much higher than it had been in Germany after Hitler came to power. Vassaf concludes that everyone is part of that "collective madness," in which one nation is willfully prioritized over another as a means of sustaining power (p. 35). Anyone questioning that notion is abruptly silenced.

Vassaf believes that this kind of discrimination—which he terms a "we against them" paradigm—dominates all nations, classes, and religions. It lies at the heart of the west/east binary, in which an individual's affirmative choice—to embrace "democratic values," for instance—implies a condemnation of others (p. 124). The belief also influences those who might have been members of "the other" at another time and place; those who once inhabited "the east" might subsequently turn out to be "the east's" strongest critics after they have decamped to "the west." For Vassar pluralism is nothing but an illusion propounded by those prioritizing one lifestyle over another: "Organisations that we form in the name of freedom often end up limiting our ability to see the limits of our own freedom" (p. 127). He cites the example of humanitarian initiatives originating in the west for the purpose of helping Third World countries.

The constraints placed on human freedom are also apparent in one's personal life. From an early age human beings embrace a goal-oriented view of life, in which "success" depends on obtaining a good job with prospects so as to support a family. Actions undertaken for their own sake—writing poetry, creat-

ing paintings or sculptures—are considered inconsequential. Vassaf takes a swipe at the so-called “personality inventories” drawn up in some American secondary schools that determine how learners should fit one of the professions of the given social order. Once the goal and the person fit each other “the profession and the person become merged” (p. 181). Diplomats learn to suppress their natural instincts in the service of their country. This might seem a particularly pessimistic view of the world, but Vassaf believes it is characteristic of the “scientific West,” wherein people’s lives have become “more and more regulated, more and more subject to a thoughtless/ emotionless routine” (p. 204). Such lifestyles are even more predetermined that the lives associated in the western psyche with the “Mystical East,” dominated by fate and kismet (p. 204).

Yet *Prisoners of Ourselves* is not an anti-western polemic, but rather a meditation on how societies worldwide limit human freedoms. Vassaf experienced such treatment in the wake of the 1980 military coup, which led to his resignation from Boğaziçi University. The experience proved traumatic: Vassaf could no longer enjoy those moments of revelation, such as the time when he discovered that one of his learners, a blind boy called Emin, possessed the kind of innate abilities denied to his fully sighted classmates. Vassaf understood at that moment how Emin was “just as beautiful and as necessary to the species as everyone else is [...] we all indeed need each other” (p. 221). Herein lies the clue to Vassaf’s real purpose in writing the book; he does not denigrate one lifestyle in favor of another, but instead calls on all human beings to understand how true freedom consists of setting aside all cultural constraints and embracing “each passing moment that permeates our lives” (p. 250). This might sound

over-idealistic, but Vassaf is sincere in his plea for spontaneity and for individuals to accept one another on their own terms, irrespective of nationality, ethnicity, or religion. *Prisoners of Ourselves* offers a powerful defense of individualism, as significant today as it was when it first appeared a quarter of a century ago.

Mirela Bogdani should have read Vassaf’s book before she embarked on her polemical book *Turkey and the Dilemma of EU Accession*. Although the back cover describes her as a so-called “specialist on EU issues with a focus on EU enlargement,” the text betrays a quite staggering lack of specialist knowledge of contemporary Turkish politics and their impact on Europe. Bogdani rehearses familiar stereotypes in support of her argument: the Republic of Turkey “lags behind democratic standards in freedom” (the word “democratic” automatically identified with western standards), while remaining economically backward (pp. 29-31). It is self-evident in her opinion that “a reallocation of resources to Anatolia would seriously strain the EU economy, and that Turkey’s entry will disturb the balance of the EU budget drastically” (p. 31). Note the use of the verb “will” in the last sentence, implying that the EU as we know it will be irreparably destroyed if anyone is foolish enough to offer full membership to the Republic. Bogdani’s text provides a prime example of what Vassaf terms “collective madness,” in which long-established prejudices prevent individuals from making up their own minds about a given situation.

Turkey and the Dilemma of EU Accession provides a wearily predictable array of reasons why the Republic should not be invited to the EU party. As an Islamic state, albeit with a secular constitution, their attitudes are completely antithetical to those embraced by EU nationals; they do not embrace freedom

of religion and gender equality (p. 71). Since 2001 European opposition to the Republic has intensified due to a combination of factors, including the spread of worldwide political Islam, and the resultant Islamization of the Republic's politics and society. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan comes in for particular criticism as someone fundamentally opposed to the values of a "secular democratic Europe," despite his protestations to the contrary. Hence it is evident in Bogdani's opinion "that Turkey has not yet completed its progress from the religious Islamic past to a secularist European project" (p. 156). This pronouncement is quite breathtakingly orientalist, implying that Islam, a religion of "the past," inhibits rather than encourages secular values. On this view, the Republic's efforts to maintain a secular state since its creation in 1923 have proved futile.

Bogdani's narrative offers a predictable conclusion: as a Muslim country the Republic should be barred from EU membership. Other countries with sizeable Muslim populations, such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania and Macedonia are viewed more favorably by EU mandarins, as these people "do not constitute a major problem" (p. 167). However the prospect of 72 million Muslims polluting the EU is a step too far. Although Bogdani claims to support the *process* of the Republic's application, she fears its *outcomes*. She remains a prisoner of her cultural upbringing, unable to deconstruct the images determining her view of the world.

After *Turkey and the Dilemma of EU Accession*, it's something of a relief to turn to Gavin D. Brockett's *Towards a Social History of Modern Turkey*. Published by the enterprising Libra Kitapçılık in İstanbul, helmed by Rifat N. Balı (author of a series of texts summarizing American diplomatic views of the Republic),

this book comprises four essays written by Turkish and non-Turkish scholars, calling for more pluralistic approaches to writing about Turkish history that give a voice to ordinary people rather than politicians, generals or other public figures. The contributors reject Vassaf's definition of pluralism (where one lifestyle is favored over another), offering instead an approach based on diversity and difference, in which individuals have the right to embrace contradictory or idiosyncratic views. Ryan Gingeras's alternative interpretation of the War of Independence offers an example; rather than concentrating on battles, or the stories of great men, he proposes an approach derived from Mexican historiography that aims to "de-Turkify" Anatolia's past "and bring new voices to the table" (p. 54). He emphasizes the importance of local—i.e. Anatolian—rather than national identities. His framework is a suggestive one; designed to give voice to hitherto marginalized peoples, it consciously challenges the orientalist view of history embraced by Bogdani, by proposing a comparative historiography designed to challenge the east/west binary.

Meltem Türköz's chapter looks at the surname legislation in the 1930s through the paradigm of oral history. Drawing on a series of interviews conducted with ordinary men and women who experienced the consequences of the Surname Law (*Soyadı Kanunu*) from 1934 to 1937, she discovers how Kemalism as an ideology was interpreted very differently by different groups of people, such as doctors, nurses, social workers, and educators (p. 84). Many professionals were highly critical of Atatürk's reforms, which might have looked good on paper but neglected fundamental issues of interest to women, including health, fair labor practices, and access to higher education (p. 78). Türköz believes that by analyzing those voices of dissent during the early

Republican period, she can initiate “a deeper conversation about transnational relations and processes,” that go beyond orientalist historical frameworks positing “a transmission [of ideas] from the West to the East” (p. 96). Most women at that time formulated their own strategies of resistance, unmediated by western-inspired knowledge.

Faith J. Childress is particularly concerned with what she terms “mid-level élites”, those well-to-do pillars of the community whose lives are conventionally overlooked in most social histories (p. 97). She cites the example of Zekiye Süleyman Eglar, who was educated at the two leading American schools for girls in İstanbul and İzmir, and subsequently completed her studies in the United States with a Turkish government scholarship. She spent most of her life as an anthropologist, working in the newly-independent Pakistan from 1949 to 1955. Her life offers a classic instance of how different histories shaped her view of the world, as well as shedding new light on familiar topics such as American-Turkish diplomatic relations during the Cold War.

The task of researching the lives of mid-level élites can be a painful one, requiring scholars to consult a variety of materials including newspapers, school archives, administrators’ reports and government documents. Childress spent considerable time and energy trawling through the American schools’ archives in İstanbul and İzmir; but by doing so she found out about Edith Parsons, a teacher and administrator who spent nearly four decades in the Republic, dedicating her life to institutions she considered “thoroughly Turkish” in which conversations on religion were “neither forced[,] difficult, nor dogmatically Christian” (p. 119). Throughout her career Parsons embraced a pluralistic view of education, while at the same time under-

standing her responsibility to disseminate American values such as democracy and tolerance. Such complexities of view are seldom found in official histories of Turkish education or American foreign policy. Childress concludes: “The experiences of an individual can open up unexpected side roads for a researcher to follow [...] [while] capturing a broader view of the experiences of the reform era” (p. 122). Maybe Parsons’ life should no longer represent an intellectual “side road,” but rather constitute the basis for new mainstream approaches to studying the history of the Republic.

The book concludes with Brockett’s analysis of the provincial process as an alternative resource for historians. His essay is not without its colonialist overtones—as seen, for instance, in the triumphant pronouncement that he, and he alone, discovered a complete run of the Samsun newspaper *Büyük Cihad* in a dusty vault of the National Library in Ankara (p. 138). On the other hand Brockett argues with justification that the provincial press offers a valuable corrective to mainstream views, as expressed in major dailies such as *Cumhuriyet* and *Hürriyet*. Those newspapers have tended to characterize the Republic as part of “the west”—especially during the Cold War period; the provincial press, by contrast, offered views from the periphery that did not necessarily reflect Atatürk’s or his successors’ vision for the country (p. 151).

Towards a Social History goes a long way towards fulfilling Vassaf’s desire for a more liberated social and intellectual environment, in which individuals from different backgrounds can make themselves heard. The four essays offer nuanced interpretations of Turkish history, and how it has been impacted upon (as well as being influenced by) other histories in the west and elsewhere.