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Author(s): Kabir Tambar
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Historical Critique and Political Voice after the Ottoman Empire

Kabir Tambar

In a famous 1882 lecture at the Sorbonne, Ernest Renan highlighted a certain obligation to forget, even a necessity for historical error, in the formation of a nation. Renan constructed his argument on the basis of what he perceived to be a straightforward empirical contrast apparent in his day. On the one hand, the countries of Western and Southern Europe, such as France, England, Germany, Spain, and Italy, had successfully—if through different processes—established nations on the basis of carefully constructed and selectively forgotten historical pasts. The Ottoman Empire, on the other hand, encompassed an unwieldy motley of ethnic and religious groups, each maintaining separate historical identities. In effect, the empire was a state without an internally cohesive national body.

Renan surely would have felt vindicated by the fact that three-and-a-half decades after his lecture the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and the various successor states that emerged in its wake justified their sovereignty by overtly defining mutually exclusive historical pasts for the nations they respectively claimed to represent. The project of institutionalized forgetting was a key element in one of the most spectacular transitions of political sovereignty in the twentieth century.

The demise of the empire would yield the outlines of a new political geography. The map of the modern Middle East, North Africa, and southeastern Europe is the product of a world brought into being with the collapse of the Ottoman state. Across the region, anxieties about the salience of the Ottoman past have persistently emerged in ways that reveal the essentially unsettled character of modern political belonging. Territorial borders from the Balkans through the Middle East that were drawn up in the aftermath of imperial collapse were never permanently inscribed, often requiring powerful investments of military power to defend. Settler colonial expansion into Palestine and continued militant struggles over Kurdish political sovereignty attest to the ongoing instability of territorial arrangements organized within the past century. Equally important, the ideological and affective conditions of national identity, loyalty, and commitment that various states in the region promoted remain contested and often require repressive state interventions to sustain.
While the legacy of the Ottoman past continues to be felt throughout this variegated geography, the intensity and urgency of political contests over that legacy are experienced perhaps most profoundly in contemporary Turkey. Not only was the imperial center in Istanbul, but the leaders of the late Ottoman Empire, who suffered the dismemberment of their polity, were responsible for establishing the ideological and legal foundations for what would become the Turkish nation-state. The early Turkish Republic overtly disavowed its ties to the Ottoman state it had just supplanting, promulgating narratives of the nation’s heroic emergence only by silencing the often violent events that had shaped the formation of the national state. Despite the official disavowal of continuity with the Ottoman regime, it was undeniable that the leaders who founded the Turkish Republic were part of the cadre that governed the empire in its war-ravaged, final decade.²

It is significant, then, that in recent years Turkey has witnessed a flourishing of debates about its historical past, in which official accounts of the end of empire and the formation of the nation-state have come under rigorous scrutiny. A growing number of commentators have insisted that renewed attention to history is imperative for the future of Turkish democracy. Taner Akçam, a prominent historian of late Ottoman and Turkish republican history, recently offered the following remarks about the public importance of history: “Any effort towards democratization in [the Middle East] today must begin with a dialogue about history and, most important, the ensemble of events that transpired during the transition from Empire to Republic. Only such a process will complete Turkey’s real transition from Empire to a normal Republic.”³ Akçam has written numerous books that focus on the political violence that led to the formation of the Turkish nation-state, and in particular he gained notoriety for being among the first historians of Turkish origin to recognize the killing of Armenians in 1915 as a genocide. This position has not been an easy or a safe one to assume, and some ultranationalists have threatened to assassinate him.

Akçam’s courageous call for historical dialogue has been echoed by the historical sociologist, Fatma Müge Göçek. Göçek explains that suppression of the historical record undermines the process of democratization: “All nation-states systematically develop their own official narratives of history in an attempt to sustain their present rule through the control of the past. . . . In the case of contemporary Turkey, the nation-state has created an imperfect and faulty perception of historical reality. In so doing, it has impeded Turkey’s chances of becoming a truly participatory democracy, because failure to confront the past leads to the reproduction of the patterns of collective violence, prejudice and discrimination contained therein.”⁴ What Akçam refers to as historical dialogue, Göçek more aggressively terms confrontation. For both, history is a privileged discourse of political engagement.
What is at stake in history writing, in these assessments, is not just a particular political position within a broader field, but the very possibility of a “normal Republic” and of “truly participatory democracy,” that is to say, the very possibility of democratic politics. If Renan could assert in the late nineteenth century that “progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principle of] nationality,” critical historians in Turkey today are finding it increasingly necessary to entertain the danger of this knowledge for the sake of promoting democracy.5

Historical criticism, for such commentators, performs two functions at once. First, it denounces the political foreclosures that the modern state historically exacted in the name of nation-building. It challenges state-sanctioned modes of historical memory by producing a counter-historiography that transgresses the limits imposed by official narratives of the nation. Second, and following from the first, historical critique enacts a politics in its own right, seeking in the very act of historical writing to deepen and extend the boundaries of public debate. Akçam and Göçek’s historical critiques perform the participatory dialogue that they argue the state has prevented from emerging. Historical critics in Turkey mobilize accounts of the past in order to intervene in the present, seeking nothing less than a transformation of the conditions of modern political belonging. In the name of democracy, they aim to throw into question the key narratives that have stabilized and secured the national political subject.

Yet to the extent that historical critiques aspire to be intelligible as political interventions, the exercise of critique must in some measure operate within, or with reference to, the available terms of political address and abide by the existing conditions of political vocality. If historical critique is efficacious as a kind of politics in the present, then it presupposes particular illocutionary conditions that define its field of effectiveness—conditions that it neither determines nor controls but inherits from the very political milieu it aims to disrupt. Indeed, history has become a powerful discourse for questioning institutional power precisely because its forms of knowledge have long been empowered by the state. Its potency, I maintain, is also the source of its complicity with the powers it would scrutinize. What, we might ask, do critical histories owe to the present they seek to destabilize? In what ways are hegemonic formations of national citizenship confirmed, troubled, or remade in acts of historical critique?

In this essay, I examine several uses of historical discourse in contemporary Turkey and investigate the field of political intervention presupposed in each case. Rather than privilege the writings of professional scholars, such as Akçam and Göçek, I emphasize the wide social and political reach of historical discourse and chart its deployment among variously positioned socioreligious movements. The analysis examines the invocation of history
as a social practice, one that requires certain forms of subjectivity, contexts of performance, and techniques of enactment. To the extent that history has emerged as a central discourse for democratic critique, the political potential and limits of its uses warrant analytical scrutiny. My contention is that available modes of critical discourse, particularly those that are heralded as a necessary means for democratization, ought to be subjected to critical analysis in their own right.

**Political Belonging after the Ottoman Empire**

Centering on the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the politically troubled birth of a post-Ottoman world of nation-states, historical critics today confront key contradictions that have shaped modern political authority in the region. Rights of citizenship were brought into being amidst a tremendous amount of violence, territorial reorganization, and forced population displacement. In order to understand the stakes of historical critique in Turkey today, it is worth starting with a brief sketch of the history in question.

The transition from empire to republic, which in the long historical view extends from the mid-nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth, was marked by a number of concurrent and sometimes contradictory trends. It was during this period that the Ottoman state undertook legal and administrative reforms that promoted political values often seen as crucial to the development of modern citizenship. A series of imperial proclamations, from the Gülhane Rescript of 1839 to the Constitution of 1876, progressively asserted protections of life and property for all imperial subjects, regardless of religious affiliation. At various points in the late Ottoman period, certain state officials and members of the intelligentsia sought to encourage the heterogeneous population incorporated within the empire to identify with the encompassing political banner of Ottomanism.

Yet beginning in the 1870s, the Ottoman state experienced a series of catastrophic military defeats that would dramatically impact imperial political culture and the ideals of political belonging espoused by its leaders. The Treaty of Berlin (1878) granted independence to former Ottoman territories, such as Serbia, Romania, and Montenegro, and it led to the emergence of a new Bulgarian state. Other territories came under the control of rival empires: Bosnia and Herzegovina were occupied by Austria-Hungary, the British took control of Cyprus, and Tunisia was handed over to the French. Several years later, the British succeeded in establishing a controlling political presence in Egypt. In a very short period of time, the Ottoman Empire had lost nearly one-third of its territory and a large percentage of its Christian populations—territorial and demographic transformations that would only accelerate in the early twentieth century. The Balkan Wars (1912–13) were particularly devastating for the empire, as they led to the loss of eighty-
three percent of the empire’s remaining European territories and sixty-nine percent of the population inhabiting the European provinces. Just as the Ottoman Empire was losing segments of its Christian population, it was gaining Muslim refugees from the Balkans.

One consequence of this remaking of the empire’s geographic and religious landscape was that during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ottoman administration began to conceive of political citizenship in terms that suited its new demographic reality of a growing Muslim population. Two further events dramatically catalyzed and consolidated the growing consensus that Muslims were the principal citizens of a state (first Ottoman and then Turkish republican) that otherwise proclaimed legal equality regardless of religious affiliation. Between 1915 and 1916, the Ottoman leadership decided to relocate Armenian Christian populations of eastern Anatolia to the Syrian desert—a relocation that would lead to the massacre of a massive number of Armenians. The Lausanne Treaty of 1923, which secured Turkey’s independence as a sovereign nation-state, led to another wave of population movements: Greek Orthodox communities in Anatolia were “exchanged” by international decree with the Muslims of Greece.

The transition from empire to republic, as a protracted historical phenomenon, reveals a profoundly troubling ambivalence: on the one hand, the development of constitutional government and proclamations of equal citizenship, and on the other, the rapid escalation of racialized and ethno-sectarian violence that were constitutive of assumptions about who deserved legal protection in the first place. The birth of the Turkish Republic out of the violence of Ottoman collapse exemplifies the impasse that Hannah Arendt famously announced for a democratic political tradition that espoused the rights of man but proved, in the course of the twentieth century, unable to secure such rights for those who most needed its protections: masses of displaced persons, refugees, and stateless populations who had been expelled from existing states. Building on Arendt’s formulations, Giorgio Agamben suggests that the refugee is a disquieting figure in the system of nation-states because it breaks “the identity between the human and the citizen. . . . The refugee . . . unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory.”

If the late- and post-Ottoman geography reveals the impasse proclaimed by Arendt and later echoed by Agamen, it also presents tensions of political belonging that are far more disturbing than the notion of an unhinging of state-nation-territory suggests. It is worth recalling that the nation-states that succeeded the Ottoman Empire emerged in precisely those decades that Arendt claimed to be witnessing the “decline of the nation-state.” In such contexts, the presence of refugees and other politically divested populations not only augured a crisis for a political tradition that identified democracy with national sovereignty, but was part of the presupposed ground on which
that sovereignty was founded and given definition. By the time of the birth of the Turkish Republic, it became difficult to disentangle two seemingly contradictory tendencies at the heart of modern statecraft: at once the promotion of liberty and equality for all citizens, and the formation of a state that reserved the authority to decide with violent means who counted as deserving of such protections and who needed to be expelled from political belonging as such.

Historical critics who seek to promote democracy in Turkey today are centering their concerns on the turbulent era in which the empire was dismantled and gave way to the production of the republican nation-state. Critics are re-examining history in order to interrogate the legacies that the empire bequeathed to a republic that claimed radical rupture from it, and in the process they attempt to ascertain the limits imposed by established modes of political belonging.

To the extent that such critics seek in their discourses to enact a politics of democratization, we should ask of such discourses, what kind of political subject is embodied in acts of historical critique? To what extent does that subject undermine or reproduce the terms of political belonging violently imposed in the emergence of the nation-state?

**Ethnographic Locations**

In order to attend to these questions, I want to locate the use of history in contexts where its pragmatic purchase—as both presupposing and embodying a certain formation of the subject—is rendered visible. I propose two methodological points of departure. First, the locus of historical criticism is neither exclusively nor necessarily within sites of professional historical scholarship. I take a deliberately broad understanding of “critical history,” one which encompasses the efforts of a wide range of social groups and movements that seek, in the act of historical narration, to contest statist norms of national belonging. Such political interventions often rely upon but do not always remain loyal to the criteria of knowledge-production disciplined by the academic profession. What is analytically required is what we might term an ethnographic perspective that identifies a landscape of positions from which projects of historical critique are launched. These various positions are sometimes convergent but also potentially competing.

Second, an ethnographic perspective is not primarily concerned with the validity of the historical claims made by the actors in question. The point is not epistemological—that, for instance, final historical truth is illusory or simply outside of the limits of possible human knowledge. Rather, the aim is to interrogate the kind of political subject presupposed by practices of historical critique or refashioned in its enactments. The content of historical argument is not unimportant, but for our purposes it is subordinate
to the pragmatic work performed in the enactment of the discourse. The significance of historical argument is defined by the practice that enables its enunciation.

The emergence of a new wave of historiographies of the birth of the republican state over the past two decades has been bolstered by a concomitant proliferation of locations of historical discourse. Here, I juxtapose two different efforts currently underway to mobilize history as a mechanism for gaining political purchase on the present. In both cases, I suggest, the appeal to history serves at once to create the grounds for political criticism and establishes limits to that critique.

**Islamist History**

I want to begin with what is perhaps the best known project of critical history, organized by a growing network of Islamist intellectuals and organizations. The actors in question are by no means coordinated by a single organizational structure or a single ideological aim. Where some Islamist intellectuals and groups have strongly denounced the secularist orientation of the early republican regime, others have attempted to show how Ottoman-era Islamists supported the formation of the Turkish Republic. What brings this otherwise variegated set of actors together is a shared concern to renarrate the historical formation of national identity in ways that challenge official historiography.

The Islamist project of historical narration was most boldly asserted in public commemorations of events that republican historiography meticulously elided, including political victories of the Ottoman state. During the era of the early republic, political leaders were careful to distance their own present from the Ottoman past. For much of the republican period national holidays involved celebrating events that transpired after the collapse of the empire, largely focusing on key moments in the struggle to establish a national Turkish state. In the 1990s, Islamist groups in Istanbul pushed back against the narrative elision of the Ottoman past, orchestrating public commemorations of the fifteenth-century Ottoman conquest of Constantinople.

The project of renarrating the nation’s history has remained responsive to political transformations in the present. Commemorations of the Ottoman past were sparked by the electoral success of the Welfare Party—a political party that was commonly glossed as Islamist. In the late 1990s, however, the Welfare Party was forced to step down when the state’s National Security Council deemed that it had violated the fundamental principle of secularism. Islamist activists shifted tactics in a context in which their room for maneuver was increasingly restricted, but without relinquishing the struggle to challenge official accounts of national history. Instead of overtly laying claim to a historical moment that the republican state had largely occluded
(that of Ottoman conquest), some Islamist actors began to appropriate and redefine the history of the early republic that the state had volubly recounted and whose interpretation it had tenaciously controlled. The aim of this appropriation was to resignify early republican leaders and policies as Islamist, and thereby to undermine the claim that secularist politics in the present day adequately represented the founding principles of the republic. They sought to turn the secularist narrative of the republic’s foundation on its head.

For instance, in 1998 on the occasion of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the republic, an Islamist daily, Akit, published a photograph of Atatürk standing next to a religious leader and engaged in a collective act of prayer. Atatürk’s portrait is widespread in Turkey, often displayed standing next to the national flag or addressing groups of students. In pictures hanging in government offices or in statues erected in public squares, he is commonly represented as the father of the nation. The image of Atatürk in prayer did not challenge his status as leader of the nation but defined it as pious. Esra Özyürek argues that the portrait “turns the tables, casting Islamists as the true republicans and secularists as people who diverge from the original aims of the republic . . . In those days, [the editors of the newspaper] argue, Islam was central to the newly founded state, but today, oppressive state officials have diverged from the foundational spirit.” Mining the depths of the photographic archive, Islamists managed to exhume representations of Atatürk that facilitated a repurposing of his iconicity.

This revisionist critique of official history has not proceeded primarily through the discourse of professional historians. It has sparked the participation of political officials, grassroots activists, and ordinary citizens alike; it has operated through a range of practical activities, such as parades, public concerts, conferences, symposia, and newspaper editorials—a diffuse terrain of action that produces what we might describe as public, rather than strictly professional, history.

Even within the more restricted domain of academic history, a new generation of pious scholars has begun to reevaluate the historical record in ways that contribute to the broader political project of remaking public sensibilities toward the past. Some such historians are appealing to the late Ottoman archive in order to demonstrate that Islamist intellectuals of the time supported nationalist and modernist reforms, finding Islamic forms of reasoning to support the emergence of the republican state. Such historical reappraisals, as Brian Silverstein demonstrates, reveal “the structural and emotional ability of contemporary Turkish Muslims to reconnect with these earlier subjectivities.”

These sorts of Islamist narratives of history do not question the propriety of the nation-state as the form that the political body should adopt or the long-standing project of modernization pursued by that state. Rather,
Islamist historiography negotiates the terms on which both nation and modernization might be conceived, creating new conditions for identifying with those projects on Islamic, rather than secularist, grounds. Historical critique, in this location, projects an alternative vision of legitimate national governance from that offered by Turkish secularists. It attempts to fashion a new political subject within the given frame of the national political body.

Alevi History

I want to shift, now, to a second ethnographic location, one that has emerged in the past two decades among Turkey’s Alevi community. Alevi constitute approximately fifteen percent of Turkey’s total population in a state whose majority is Sunni Muslim. Alevi religious identity is defined by a number of elements: certain central Alevi rituals and religious narratives are drawn from Shi’i Islam, while others are drawn from mystical Islamic traditions associated with the Bektaşi Sufi order. For most of the twentieth century, Alevis inhabited rural regions of Anatolia, but beginning in the 1960s and accelerating with each successive decade, Alevi villagers participated in the sweeping urban migrations that transformed Turkish metropolises and provincial towns alike. In the process Alevis began to adopt characteristically modern forms of social and political organization, including the formation of a short-lived political party and numerous civil society organizations that coordinate a raft of activities including ritual performances, after-school youth groups, and political protests.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the Alevi encounter with political modernity has been deeply ambivalent. On the one hand, many Alevis today praise the formation of the Turkish Republic, claiming that it enshrined rights of secular citizenship that protected Alevis from legalized persecution by the Sunni majority. It is common to hear Alevi leaders and intellectuals claim that the community is a “foundational element” (asli unsur) or a “cornerstone” (temel taşı) of the secular republic. On the other hand, the history of the republic has not been peaceful for many Alevi communities. It has been strikingly violent, perpetuating rather than preventing the political vulnerability of Alevis. If secular national citizenship is commonly touted by Alevis today as a necessary prerequisite for political liberty and equality, the actual history of secular-national modernity has instigated considerable hostility and violence against Alevis.

In the past several decades, Alevi intellectuals and civil society organizations have made use of the discourse of history as a way of publicly representing their religious identity. The mobilization of history reveals the ambivalent modernity experienced by many Alevis. Publicly narrating the historical religious identity of their community is one method adopted by Alevi intellectuals to contest derogatory stereotypes and demand political
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protections that would ensure the legitimacy and viability of communal practices. The social and political resources provided by historical discourse have allowed Alevi to loosen the narratives of the nation that have long conflated Turkish nationality with Sunni Muslim identity. However, the genre of history—its narrative forms, discursive tropes, and institutional anchors—has been organized and disciplined by the nation-state itself. Hence, Alevi are creating spaces for participation within national publics that have long been premised on their exclusion, but in the process are positioning themselves within frames of reference monitored and regulated by the state.24

There are a number of different sites where Alevi are appealing to the discourse of history as a mode of defining and representing their communal identity. Most evident is the rapid proliferation of texts in which Alevi religiosity is narrated as a social historical phenomenon. The texts are composed by Alevi intellectuals, who are often highly educated, sometimes possessing degrees from Turkish universities, but are very rarely professional historians with academic appointments. The texts are generally oriented by narrative conventions that emplot Alevi religiosity across a set of epochs and dynastic states, which follow the migratory movement of Alevi from Central Asia into Anatolia, alongside the rise and fall of several Turkic states, up through the Ottoman Empire and into the national republic. The trajectory of the narrative does not counter the institutionalized historiography of the nation; in its historical reference points and state-centered periodization, it replicates the narrative form of official Turkish history.25

In addition to the production of a new corpus of texts, the mobilization of historical discourses among Alevi has contributed to the formation of contexts of public ritual performance. In ritual contexts, the genre of social history is affixed to certain images, icons, forms of speaking and rhetorical address, and modes of spectatorship. History, in such contexts, helps to establish the conditions of a legitimate Alevi presence in public space.

Public Alevi gatherings often reveal a polyphonic mode of address: on the one hand, they serve to recreate for Alevi residing in towns and cities rituals that were once performed in rural villages; on the other hand, they address a heterogeneous audience, including not only Alevi, but also state officials, representatives of political parties, journalists, academics, and officials from the European Union. Alevi who organize these events carry the burden of performing their religiosity for those who claim outsider status, watching from a distance.

At one event that I attended, a professor of religious history was invited to deliver a lecture about Alevism. The lecture was given just prior to an enactment of an Alevi ritual. Both lecture and ritual were elements of a single event, each performed on an elevated stage facing an audience. The professor did not present himself as a participant in a devotional ritual but as an academic
intent on historicizing the rituals in question, highlighting the development of such traditions in the history of medieval and early modern Anatolia. Here, the discourse of history was not an external commentary on the ritual event; it had become integrated into the staged performance itself.26

More common at such events than formal academic lectures is the use of pictorial icons, specifically, images of Ali ibn Abi Talib (the Prophet Muhammad's cousin), a medieval saint named Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli, and the leader of the early Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This conjunction of images cuts across a variety of historical moments, creating a narrative series only through discontinuous jumps: while Ali is a seventh-century figure from early Islamic history, Hacı Bektaş is best known as a mystic from medieval Anatolia, and Atatürk is generally seen as the founder of the modern, secular Turkish republic.

The image of Ali is the least surprising in this setting. Ali is a figure honored by most Muslims, but is given special reverence by the Shi’a and, within Turkey, by Alevis. The portrait of Ali, in this sense, is an emblem of Alevi identity. What is more surprising than the presence of Ali is the conjunction of his portrait with that of Atatürk. As mentioned above, the image of Atatürk is intensely politicized in Turkey, appearing in government buildings and public squares throughout the country. Portraits of Atatürk in Alevi settings are never those in which he is captured in a religious posture, as in Islamist portrayals, but are the standard, official depictions. The medieval saint, Hacı Bektaş, is also not an incidental figure here, nor an archaic one. In addition to being the eponymous saint of the Bektaşı Sufi order, which has strongly influenced Alevi religiosity, Hacı Bektaş has been championed across the twentieth century by ideologues of the Turkish nation-state as a crucial contributor to Turkey’s national spirit.27

In this iconography, an emblem of Alevism in the figure of Ali is sutured both to a potent diacritic of national history (Hacı Bektaş) and to the least ambiguous icon of the modernist nation-state, Atatürk. Communal particularity is made publicly legible in conjunction with an index of the nation and anchored in the last instance by the single most authoritative sign of the state.

Unlike Islamists, Alevis have not excavated alternative political subject positions from the Ottoman archive that might challenge those entrenched by the republican state. In part, the problem is that the archive does not provide adequate representations of Alevi identity. The archival presence of Alevis is subaltern: they are referenced only rarely and almost exclusively in denigrating terms.28 One would have to read radically against the grain of the Ottoman archive in order to identify and isolate something akin to a coherent Alevi subjectivity. In the final years of the Ottoman Empire, certain nationalist intellectuals and ideologues began to write anew about Alevis, this time championing them as tokens of national folklore and culture.29 To
the extent that a viable image of Alevi identity is available in select writings from the late imperial period, it confirms rather than rivals the state-sanctioned national political subject.

If Islamist critique has sought to redefine the national subject, Alevi uses of history have sought to create an inhabitable location for the community within the existing narratives of political belonging. Hence the ambivalence of their political purchase: even as Alevi discourses are challenging the rigid majoritarianism of nationalism, they are marked by a return to the icons and tropes of official history. The Alevi strategy is understandable, given the violent excision of entire populations deemed in the twentieth century to be foreign to the nation (particularly Armenian and Greek Christians), as well as the persistent discrimination and episodic violence to which Alevis themselves have been subject in the past several decades. History has provided a mechanism for leveraging a collective political voice, even as it has required that Alevis abide by narrative norms authorized by the state.

The Limits of Political Voice

In these examples, the significance of history does not lie in the set of methods and procedures it offers for investigating the past—methods and procedures that are ostensibly neutral with respect to context, available for employment in any location and with respect to any social object. Rather, the key questions to which I have drawn attention are, what kind of work can history be put to performing and what ends can it be mobilized to attain? The invocation of history, as a practical exercise, is defined by contextual determinants; its conditions of effectivity are not singular or uniform.

Additionally, the tone and tenor of historical discourse is variable. Among Islamists, historical enterprises are bold, challenging, and transgressive. Alevis, by contrast, often deploy historical discourses in ways that are more hedged, asserting collective identity but tending to conform to nationalist expectations. The tone of Alevi history is evocative of the political vulnerability experienced by the community.

I have used broad strokes for characterizing Islamist and Alevi histories in order to highlight differences between them. In both cases, there are exceptions to these general trends, and in some instances the exceptions push against the limits of historical practice available within each community. Here, I want to elaborate one such exceptional instance among Alevis that aims to produce a critical history, but does so for the sake of scrutinizing the social conventions and political pragmatics that undergird the practice of history. It queries the conditions of effectivity that determine the point and purchase of Alevi history.

In November 2011, the parliamentary representative of the province of Tunceli, Hüseyin Aygün, publicly remarked on the violent political history
that shaped Alevi experiences of Turkey’s past. Largely inhabited by Alevi Kurds, the province of Tunceli lies in the heart of a territory once referred to as Dersim. The region is mountainous and hard to access. It was notoriously difficult for the Ottoman state and then the Turkish state to control. With the aim of homogenizing Anatolia’s ethnically and religiously diverse population, the republican state extensively bombed the region between 1937 and 1938. Tens of thousands of local inhabitants were killed or forcibly evacuated. The Dersim events constituted one of the early republican state’s most repressive military attacks.\textsuperscript{30} Speaking as an official political representative of the region, Aygün commented on the dissonance between official state narratives of what transpired and what actually took place. He claimed that the events escalated to the point of genocide.

A member of the major opposition party, the Republican People’s Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), Aygün continued his remarks with a stunning assessment of his own party’s involvement. The CHP was the party of Atatürk. By and large, it was the only political party that existed for the first decades of the republic.\textsuperscript{31} Aygün asserted that the CHP must and, indeed, is beginning to “face up to its own history.”\textsuperscript{32} Almost immediately, various members of the CHP called for Aygün’s dismissal from the party. Faced with a crisis within the CHP, the leader of the party, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu—himself of Tunceli origin—called for party leaders to stop discussing the matter publicly.

The issue of Dersim did not, however, go away. Seizing the political moment, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Turkey’s Prime Minister and chairman of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), stood before parliament and offered a public apology on behalf of the state for the Dersim massacres. Erdoğan referred to the massacres as “the most tragic incident of our near past.”\textsuperscript{33}

Much could be made about the politics of this historical apology. A taboo subject had been officially broached, a historical silence finally broken. Along the way, Erdoğan managed to score tactical political points by exploiting tensions within a rival party. What interests me, however, is not the politics of the apology itself, but the difficulties faced by many Alevis in responding to the apology. Many Alevi have staunchly opposed the AKP, viewing it as an expression of political Islam rooted in Sunni revivalism, and have long been supporters of the CHP. Here, the AKP had seized the moral high ground, apologizing for violence against an Alevi community, and the CHP appeared completely fractured in its willingness to even acknowledge the scale of repression. The chain of events led certain Alevi groups and intellectuals to explicitly question the support that the community has offered to the party. Even more powerfully, some Alevi began to question their support of the founding narratives of Turkey’s political modernity, especially with regard to the process of nationalization. If nation-building was premised on the
violent repression of certain Alevi communities, then would it still be valid
to maintain that Alevis were foundational elements of the Turkish nation?

One Alevi intellectual from Tunceli, Cafer Solgun, raised the question
directly. Solgun, who published a book on the events of Dersim, was inter-
viewed after Erdoğan’s apology. After discussing the events that took place
in Dersim in the 1930s and then offering his opinion on the politics of the
apology, Solgun turned his critical gaze inward, toward the Alevi commu-
nity’s relationship to Atatürk and the Kemalist project of nation-building: “In
order to avoid death, in order to stay alive, in order to protect their children,
our elders thought that there was only one available path, and they named
their children, that is they named us, Kemal and İsmet.” The names in ques-
tion refer to leaders of the early republican state, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk
and İsmet İnönü. Solgun continued that now that the events of Dersim were
coming to light and entering into explicit public discussion, it will no longer
be possible for Alevis, or anyone else, to hold on to the myth that Atatürk
was unaware of the events transpiring in Dersim; evidence suggests that he
ratified the operations. Prodded to respond to the fact that Atatürk’s picture
is often hung next to that of Ali in Alevi ritual halls, Solgun answered deci-
sively, “Atatürk’s portrait will definitely be removed.”

Solgun’s historical critique was not only directed outward, at institutional
bodies that constrained, repressed, or otherwise maligned Alevis in the past.
He pursued, rather, an immanent critique that implicated certain Alevi social
practices in tactics of state control. His critical targets were precisely those
practices by which Alevis have inscribed themselves into statist narratives
of Turkish modernity in the course of the twentieth century: practices of
naming and practices of iconographic display.

Solgun’s critique resonated with a comment made by Aygün, the CHP
parliamentarian whose public statements first initiated the controversy
about the Dersim events. In those remarks, Aygün did not restrict himself to
a denunciation of the early republican state and the commanding role
of the CHP in those events. He also indicated the outlines of a historical
critique of the Alevi practice of displaying the photograph of Atatürk: “In
all of the policies pursued during the period, Atatürk was the head of state.
However, in order to separate Mustafa Kemal from [the political activities]
of the period, in order to not allow a shadow to fall upon his identity as ‘the
great leader,’ Alevis hung his photograph next to Ali. They made themselves
believe that he was unaware of the massacres.” Aygün sought to historicize
and thereby denaturalize the presence of Atatürk as an element of Alevi
collective belonging. Solgun and Aygün’s efforts were directed at dislodging
Alevism from the dominating iconic trope of Turkish political modernity.
Their comments inaugurated a historical critique aimed at exposing the
contentious emergence of practices that have been naturalized as definitive
of the Alevi present.
This nascent project will not be easy to develop. The risks it assumes are of a particular sort, which are different in kind from the risks confronted by the Islamists discussed earlier. Aygün and Solgun are both attempting a historical critique of state practice, and in particular of the conditions of political belonging the state has enforced, and in this general sense are developing a critique whose aims are similar to those pursued by Islamist critics in the past several decades. Alevi critics, however, are not excavating alternative subject positions from the historical record and thereby leveraging a political ground that distinguishes itself from that which the state has authorized, as is arguably the case with Islamist groups. The emerging line of Alevi criticism is questioning the conditions of political belonging in the nation-state, but without the assurance of a consolidated counter-political identity that credibly rivals institutionally stipulated forms of political subjectivity.

The critique of the state, represented by Aygün and Solgun, has required an internal critique, one that proceeds not by defining the outlines of a new political subject but by unmaking the terms of political legitimacy that have facilitated an Alevi presence in public life. To challenge statist authority in Alevi contexts involves questioning the narrative and iconographic practices of representation that have secured a political voice for an otherwise marginalized community. It requires that the critic speak against the conditions of political belonging that have tentatively legitimized public displays of communal identity. As a mode of political action, this form of critique is paradoxical and potentially self-undermining. What, after all, is the status of a political act that puts at risk its own political voice?

The Politics of Critique

In the political geography cobbled together in the aftermath of Ottoman collapse, national citizenship held out the democratic promise of equality and liberty, but only by vigorously repudiating the ethno-religious pluralities that had been required of imperial political belonging. Critics today are increasingly arguing that the task of promoting democracy requires a confrontation with that history. However, apart from this broad claim, about which there is growing consensus, the underlying conception of democracy and the political subject presupposed by it are by no means self-evident. Can, for instance, democracy today be envisioned within the framework of national citizenship without reproducing the violent excisions that historically defined the birth of national sovereignty? What kind of political engagement might query the limits of national citizenship as the reigning mode of political subjectivity? If it is accepted that the historical critique of the modern state is a political enterprise in the present day, then what forms of historical practice might call into question the conditions of political vocality that the state has secured, enforced, and empowered over the past century?
In both Islamist and Alevi cases, the use of history exemplifies the general aims stated by historical critics like Akçam and Göçek, whom I mentioned at the outset. They seek to expand, augment, or otherwise enhance the conditions of participatory democracy. Yet while Islamists have been overtly transgressive of official, secularist narratives of the nation-state’s foundation, Alevis have tended to be far more conservative in their use of history, often conforming to statist narratives of political identity in order to find a stable and recognizable location within them. Despite the apparently conformist pressures placed upon the enactment of Alevi history, or perhaps because of such pressures, it is in this setting that a line of critique has begun to query the parameters of public history and the terms of political engagement they presuppose.

The notion that critique should question the conditions of public discourse is by no means unique to this context. Various traditions of historically minded political analysis, stretching back at least to the nineteenth century, have defined the critic’s primary task in terms of a reflexive inquiry into the categories by which sociopolitical life is framed and formed. What is striking about the case of Alevi critics is the proximity of their own voice to the mechanisms of power they seek to undermine. Their discourse challenges the distribution of political voice that has granted them a location from which to speak. It operates at the threshold of the regnant field of politics, operating within it only so as to question the validity of its ordering.

In a late lecture, Michel Foucault forwarded a comparable notion of critique in which a subject, already formed by the operations of power, comes to question that formation: “If governmentalization is . . . this movement through which individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth, well, then! I will say that critique is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth. . . . Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth.” Foucault’s formulation highlights a constitutive connection between governmental power and social practice that is a key target of Aygün and Solgun’s critical enterprises. They centered their attention on a set of practices, particularly the display of Atatürk’s portrait, that articulates a relationship between power and truth and which establishes conditions of political subjectivity on the basis of that articulation.

Equally relevant to the Turkish context is a tension palpable in Foucault’s conception, a tension he does not resolve. The mechanisms of power that the critic seeks to interrogate are themselves formative of the critic-as-subject. Foucault baldly asserts that the critic gives himself the right to question truth and power, but from what authority does this right derive? What empowers the subject to raise such questions except the field of power being put into
question? As Judith Butler notes in a commentary on Foucault, “To gain a critical distance from established authority means . . . to risk one’s very formation as a subject.” Critique as a desubjugation of the subject, in Foucault’s phrase, troubles the very parameters of action and speech that would render the effectivity of its own enactment intelligible. The critic disrupts—as a political act—the formation of his or her own political subjectivity.

When posed in abstraction from any given location, this form of critique may appear contradictory and untenable as a ground of political engagement. Yet the tension operative in this line of analysis acquires an urgent salience when the critical move is situated within contexts where political subjectivity was given definition by means of tremendous violence, as in many of the national states that succeeded the Ottoman Empire. A critique of this articulation of violence and political belonging demands a form of inquiry that calls attention to the costs of becoming recognizable as belonging to the nation and to the limits of what is sayable within the existing field of politics. This mode of critical encounter invites reflection on how political voice is asymmetrically distributed to populations within the national body.

The questions raised by Alevi critics at the limits of the political field are unsettling to many: in the weeks following the interview in which Solgun claimed that Atatürk’s picture would be removed, he received a number of death threats. These sorts of threats are most likely attributable to extremist nationalists who are ever-ready to attack those willing to critically interrogate Atatürk’s legacy. Such threats are by no means idle and must be taken seriously as a matter of Solgun’s personal security. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, we should nevertheless resist the temptation to circumscribe the purchase of Alevi critique solely in relation to militant nationalism, as that would leave uninterrogated the forms of institutionalized violence and power that have delimited the boundary of “normal” national politics and citizenship.

Some Alevi intellectuals and leaders who have supported Solgun have softened, if not blunted, the purchase of his critique by focusing on the idea that photographs of Atatürk do not belong in places of worship because Atatürk was a political rather than religious leader. Basing itself on the characteristically secular-modern categorical separation of the political from the religious, this line of support legitimizes Solgun’s call for removing Atatürk’s portrait, but it does so, in effect, by abandoning the stronger political critique of Atatürk’s actions in the historical repression of Alevi communities. It elides Solgun’s argument that Atatürk’s role in the massive killing and exile of Alevis ought to be interrogated in its own right, and that above all, Alevis themselves ought to interrogate how their own public presence has been sustained only by expressing loyalty and commitment to a regime that exacted extraordinary political violence against them. The new line of Alevi critique is troubling to many in Turkey because it queries
the forms of violence that have sustained the field of politics in which Alevis are today being offered a location.

Alevi critics who are interrogating the costs of abiding by the given conditions of subjectivity are left in a vulnerable position, compounded by the fact that their community already inhabits a marginalized political location within Turkey. Their line of critical inquiry stands in reference to a field of politics they refuse to accept, but they do not possess the authority to reconfigure that field in ways that would stabilize their position.

Efforts to query what Foucault called the politics of truth are particularly crucial in post-Ottoman geographies, where national sovereignty and the rights of citizenship it protected were premised on mass political dispossession. Historical critique in this modality interrogates the institutional mechanisms that, in determining who counts as a citizen, have also allocated, defined, and disciplined political vocality. Democracy, in these contexts, does not only require effective historical critique, but critique that questions the conditions of its effectivity. This modality of historical critique probes the limits of its own political empowerment, not only as a function of constraints that restrict its entry and its participation in public life, but as a function of the discursive and iconographic incitements that provoke and produce it. The paradox of a historical critique that challenges the legitimacy of its political location is perhaps also its strength. It models a form of democratic practice that queries the exclusions of citizenship by contesting the grounds of its own inclusion.

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Kabir Tambar is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Stanford University. He is the author of The Reckoning of Pluralism: Political Belonging and the Demands of History in Turkey, forthcoming from Stanford University Press in 2014.

Notes

1. “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation.” Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?,” in Nation and Narration, ed. Homi Bhabha (1990), 11.

2. For a socioeconomic portrait of the late Ottoman leaders who later established the republican nation-state, see Erik Zürcher, “How Europeans Adopted Anatolia and Created Turkey,” European Review 13, no. 3 (2005): 379–94.


5. Renan, “What is a Nation?” 11.


7. Notions of Ottomanism were always contested by alternative tropes of political affiliation, including pan-Islamism and, especially in the early twentieth century, Turkish nationalism. In a broader sense, the reform process in the late Ottoman Empire involved not only legal transformations and ideological dispute but also massive reforms of the bureaucracy, the educational system, and the military. The process has been the topic of extensive historical study and interpretation. For helpful overviews, see M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (2008); and Carter V. Findley, *Turkey, Islam, Nationalism, and Modernity: A History, 1789–2007* (2010).


13. In using the term “Islamist,” I do not mean to imply any given or singular motivation or aim. Groups that are glossed as Islamist in Turkey are often drawn from different socio-economic sectors, affiliated with different occupations, and may or may not identify with particular political parties or with particular political policies. White offers a helpfully broad definition of Islamism in Turkey that emphasizes the range and diversity it encompasses: the Islamist movement is “a general mobilization of people around cultural, political, and social issues that are presented and interpreted through an Islamic idiom.” Jenny White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (2002), 6.


17. Özyürek, Nostalgia for the Modern, 151–65.
18. Ibid., 159.
20. The Turkish state does not distinguish between Alevi and Sunnis in its census, both being classed simply as Muslim. The actual number of Alevis in Turkey is therefore hard to pin down with any precision.
22. For valuable accounts of the social and political organization of urbanizing Alevis in Turkey and in the European diaspora, see Élise Massicard, L’autre Turquie: Le mouvement alevî et ses territoires (2005); and Martin Sökefeld, Struggling for Recognition: The Alevi Movement in Germany and in Transnational Space (2008).
23. In the late 1930s, extraordinary violence was used in the largely Alevi region of Dersim in order to subdue what nationalist leaders perceived to be resistance to centralized state power. In the late 1970s, following two decades of urbanization, Alevi increasingly became targets of nationalist aggression. Finally in the mid-1990s, a number of episodes of violence against urban Alevi communities capped off an uneasy twentieth century.
26. Ibid., 663–68.
27. Mark Soileau, Humanist Mystics: Nationalism and the Commemoration of Saints in Turkey (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2006).
29. See, for instance, the essays of Baha Sait collected in Türkiye’de Alevi-Bektashi, Ahı ve Nusayri Zümlerleri, ed. İsmail Görkem (2000).
31. The two exceptions were the Progressive Republican Party, founded in 1924 and closed down after nineteen months, and the Free Republican Party, formed in 1930 and closed down after four months.
35. For an elaboration of Solgun’s views on the inscription of Alevism within Kemalist political narratives, see his book-length treatment, Cafer Solgun, Alevilerin Kemalizm’le İmtihanı (2011).
41. Solgun himself argued this point as part his larger effort to interrogate the salience of Atatürk’s image in Alevi settings. For some of the responses by Alevi leaders to Solgun’s remarks, see “Cafer Solgun tepkilere ne dedi?,” Demokrat Haber, December 8, 2011, http://www.demokrathaber.net/guncel/cafer-solgun-tepkilere-ne-dedi-h5497.html.