

# Global Istanbul and The National Imaginary

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The endlessly rich symbolism that developed around the polarity of Ankara and Istanbul has been one of the central axes of modern Turkish history and culture. Ankara is a product of twentieth century nationalism, at once the home and the symbol of a new official culture associated with it. Its growing prominence as the capital city of a new nation can be portrayed as the clearest realization of the Turkish mode of modernization. By contrast, Istanbul is the archetypal “imperial city”, representing all the cosmopolitan forces that flowed through Ottoman life. Its dramatic decline during the inter-war decades signified more than the death of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious empire. It became emblematic of Ottoman decadence, pollution, miscegenation, against which the purity of a new national culture – located in Ankara – could be imagined. Since then, the polarities between the two cities have been continuously elaborated and reconstituted in modern Turkish literature, music as well as cinema, as a way of articulating competing political ideas as well as alternative visions of the past.

In its broader contours, this story reminds us of similar polarities in other parts of the world, between such cities as Beijing and Shanghai; St Petersburg and Moscow or Alexandria and Cairo for instance. The historical trajectories of all these cities have been re-shaped by the ruptures and dislocations of twentieth century nationalisms. The dissolution of empires – classical or colonial – have meant the eclipse of “world cities” such as Shanghai, Alexandria or St Petersburg. The consolidation of modern, centralized states has enhanced the power of national capitals such as Beijing, Moscow or Cairo. And in each case, names of these cities have become suffused with cultural-political meanings and become emblematic of such binary oppositions as progress and backwardness, tradition and modernity, past and present.

At the same time, the semiotics of Ankara and Istanbul in relation to Turkish nationalism is a particular one, a product of the specific political events and power struggles. The distinctions between these two cities are not cast in stone, but given the power relations implied in them, subject to contestation and negotiation over time. Thus their differences have been continuously valorized and redefined in the battleground of contending forces in Turkish politics.

Over the past two decades, visions of a ‘global’ Istanbul have become the centerpiece of Turkey’s aspirations in the transnational arena. The politics of, and claims to, a global identity for Istanbul have challenged the power relations implied in its relationship with Ankara. In as much as Istanbul’s future has become an extension of Turkey’s projected role in the global arena, its multiple pasts have been mobilized by different political groups to justify and legitimize their claims to the present and to the future of the city. What follows is a brief (hence inevitably schematic) attempt to capture how Istanbul’s ‘history’ has become the negotiating ground in ongoing controversies over ‘whither and whence’ of the city, and of the nation.

## ISTANBUL IN THE BIOGRAPHY OF THE TURKISH NATION

Istanbul’s illustrious history as an imperial capital – initially as the “Nova Roma” of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, then “Sacred City of Islam” during the Ottoman era – spans more than fifteen centuries. Throughout this lengthy history, it was always a ‘cosmopolitan’ city, a crucial point of passage and hence meeting ground of cultural flows across continents.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when the economic and political powers of the Ottoman Empire were on the decline, Istanbul’s stature as a cosmopolitan center was enhanced in its new role as the nodal point of commercial and trade networks with Europe. It had always been the major consumer market of the empire, its bazaars the final destination of trade routes which stretched from the Middle East to the Balkans. In the process of integration with the European Economy, it became a major port of entry for steamships and imports from Europe. The social composition of its population was always heterogeneous, divided into three major religious communities – Muslim, Christian, Jewish – mirroring the multi-ethnic, multi-religious mosaic of the broader empire. During the gradual integration with European markets, the classical balances of power and hierarchy between the ethno-religious communities of the city were transformed. The Christian population of the city rapidly moved into positions of prominence and control in the expanding trade with Europe, the Armenian and Greek communities prospered at the expense of Muslim and Sephardic-Jewish populations of the city. Thus new power constellations, symbolic of a quasi-colonial order, were articulated with the traditional axes of differentiation along ethnic lines. Despite increasing European penetration throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century however, Istanbul escaped the ravages of direct colonization. The Ottoman administration survived through an intricate set of alliances between the imperial palace and the increasingly wealthy indigenous non-Muslims subjects of the empire who shared the economic benefits of given to Western tradesmen and investors by commercial treaties. Istanbul’s special blend cosmopolitanism and heritage of religio-ethnic diversity, while changing form and content, remained its dominant feature. This also meant however, that the rising tide of nationalism in the aftermath of WWI was directed as much against Istanbul’s indigenous non-Muslim populations, as against the foreign occupation of the city by allied forces between 1920-22.

Ankara was a small provincial town in the arid Anatolian plains, used as the headquarters of the liberation army during the war of independence. Its designation as the capital of the new nation in 1924, rather than Istanbul, marked a dramatic rupture with the Ottoman past, and affirmed the possibility of new beginnings. Nationalisms of the twentieth century have been driven by a profound belief in the idea that societies can be radically reshaped, molded and steered in new directions, once freed from despotic monarchs and exploitative colonial

powers which has smothered them. Wars of independence, marking dramatic ruptures with the past, have been followed by a variety of practices instantiating the newness of new nations. In the biography of the Turkish nation, the inauguration of Ankara as the capital city was the first among a series of social engineering projects which reinforced this consciousness of new beginnings. Nationalist historiography traced the common genealogy of Turkic peoples into a distant past, originating in pre-Islamic Central Asia. The war of liberation thus marked the rebirth of the nation in secular time, starting with a new Roman calendar and Latin alphabet. To purify the Turkish language of its centuries old Ottoman accretions, Arabic and Persian words were replaced with resurrected Euro-Altaiic words of 'Turkic' origin. This 'new' Turkish, fixed in Latin alphabet, was assiduously cultivated by state institutions and disseminated through a range of dictionaries, encyclopedias, government sponsored publications and school textbooks, as well as the state radio. In the nationalist canon of Turkish literature promoted during the high tide of Republican reformism, Ankara was portrayed as embodying a reinvented Anatolian tradition (referring to the pre-Islamic past), open, honest, rational and secular. Istanbul was its antithesis, often portrayed as a relic of an Ottoman past, an image evoked only to remind modern Turks of what they had to forget: a world that was irrational, absolute and "Islamic". An analogous process took place through music, giving birth to a reformulated musical tradition based on Anatolian instruments and genres, modernized and rationalized through performance with large orchestras and choirs. A wide variety of musical genres thriving in Istanbul, some confined to an intellectual elite, others more widely appropriated, were variously labeled as 'hybrid', Ottoman, or Islamic and excluded from public life. Thus within a single generation, Ottoman imperial culture and literary forms acquired connotations of traditionalism and conservatism, and linked in opposition to the organizing symbolic order of a modern, secular frame of reference, emanating from Ankara.

#### ISTANBUL AS THE SITE OF "DISTORTED" CAPITALISM AND ITS "PATHOLOGIES"

Istanbul's marginalization in the economic geography of the Turkish nation was short-lived. From the mid-1950s onwards, it became the privileged location of a new generation of large-scale, private manufacturing enterprises, encouraged through financial incentives and protected from foreign competition through tariff barriers. Istanbul's metamorphosis into an industrial metropolis brought with it concentration of wealth, as well as of population. As the growth pole of Turkey's of exuberant import substituting economy, it city became the locus of attraction for the mass movement of peasantry from the Anatolian countryside. Thus by the 1970s, Istanbul had acquired all the characteristic features associated with "Third-World" cities – explosive population growth, increasing polarization of classes, proliferating informal activities and vast tracks of shanty towns. Its chaotic expansion defied the master plans emanating from Ankara; its deteriorating infrastructure and declining financial resources failed to generate action on the part of national governments. For Turkish scholars, planners and intellectuals, Istanbul now symbolized the "pathologies" and "distortions" emblematic of uneven capitalist accumulation.

It was also in the 1960s and 1970s that Istanbul's popular music and film industries began to thrive on what became known as *arabesk* genres. The epithet *arabesk* denotes impurity, hybridity and designates a special kind of kitsch. The word was first coined in the late 1960s to describe a hybrid musical genre that emerged and acquired immense popularity among recent immigrant populations of Istanbul. Immediately banned by the state broadcasting agency for defying the established canons of both classical and folk Turkish music, by intermixing rhythms and instruments from popular Western and Turkish music, *arabesk* music soared in the expanding cassette market of the 1970s. Films featuring

famous *arabesk* singers as the star-popular hero achieved immediate box office success in local movie houses on the urban fringes of Istanbul and provincial Anatolian towns. This was before television antennas had begun to sprout on every roof in the sprawling informal neighborhoods of large cities in Turkey; the program fare of the single state monopolized television channel (in black and white) remained limited to official-ceremonial news and educational programs, with few concessions to "light entertainment" catering to popular taste. So it was Istanbul's commercial film industry which capitalized on the "hybrid" speech forms, cinematic and musical genres grounded in the experience of migrant populations on the fringes of large cities.

The trashy comedies and melodramas churned out by Yesilcam (a district of Istanbul which became synonymous with Turkish film industry) throughout the 1970s, transgressed the boundaries of national 'high-culture' by using colloquial speech forms and intermingling popular ersatz (ie. Arabesque music) with folkloric music and Western 'pop'. But the narratives they told remained highly formulaic. Stories of young girls seduced by the glittering nightlife of Istanbul, or young men who fall prey to the get-rich-quick schemes of crooks, are of course familiar. In the Yesilcam versions, Istanbul's moral degeneracy, highlighted by powerful-wealthy-corrupt villains, served to underscore the honesty of plain folk (of rural background) whose humble lives are enriched by close family ties, neighborliness, and friendship loyalties. The very familiarity of this formula for the predominantly lower class audiences on the fringes of Istanbul, allowing them to enjoy the lavishly decorated 'wealthy' settings, as well as a colorful array of stereotypical characters in more modest surroundings, ensured box office success for innumerable films through the 1970s. In the process, the 'pathologies' of Istanbul were continuously reproduced.

#### "GLOBAL ISTANBUL" AND RESURGENCE OF THE OTTOMAN PAST

Over the past decade and a half, Istanbul has made a dramatic entry into the national imagination. In the neo-liberal ethos of the 1990s, Istanbul's "global" stature has become the symbol of Turkey's aspirations as a major player in the world economy - envisaged as a bridge not only between Middle Eastern and European business communities, but also between Europe and the emerging Central Asian markets. Since the liberalization of Turkey's financial and commodity markets from the mid-1980s onwards, Istanbul has attracted most of the incoming transnational business investments, and absorbed the benefits of expanding consumer markets. The city's rapid integration into the global networks was facilitated by a series of massive urban renewal projects, subsidized by the Ankara government. Thus the 16<sup>th</sup> century 'historic' peninsula of Istanbul, with its ancient mosques and churches, was cleared of unsightly buildings and small businesses which had accumulated around them over the centuries, and re-created as an "open-air museum". Large tracks of the city's 19<sup>th</sup> century urban core were bulldozed to build thoroughways, underpasses and overpasses, to ease traffic congestion and provide easy access to the high-rise office towers and deluxe hotels sprouting one after another in the new internationalized business center of the city. Amidst frenzied construction activity, rumors of fortunes changing hands in the awarding of lucrative municipal contracts, and of unprecedented corruption in city hall, Istanbul emerged as the showcase of Turkey's integration into the global economy. In the neo-liberal rhetoric of the 1990s, it is now Ankara, with its overblown bureaucratic apparatus, cumbersome state enterprises and inept (if not actually corrupt) coalition governments, which stands between Turkey and the opportunities offered by the new world order.

Istanbul's new stature has brought with it a resurgence of interest in the city's Ottoman past. Invoking continuities with a legendary past - however contentious or ambiguous that past may be - enhances Istanbul's claims as a "city of culture". But 'history' is not simply as a

cachet to be promoted in global markets through heritage industry. It is also as a kind of symbolic capital which can be appropriated by different social and political actors to justify their claims to the present. Below I will briefly touch upon how competing narratives of the Ottoman past are currently valorized in public, popular discourses, to justify and legitimize alternative political visions of a 'global' Istanbul.

### Narratives of Istanbul's 'Cosmopolitan' Heritage

Among Istanbul's newly affluent entrepreneurial classes as well as intellectual circles, the 'cosmopolitanism' of 19<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul has become the focal point of reference within which the hereafter of a 'global' Istanbul is envisioned. The monumental objects of this history are the mosques and churches which 'naturally' grace the landscape of the city and comprise gratifying testimony to a harmonious multi-religious past. Infused with the spirit of globalism, Istanbul's 'cosmopolitan' heritage becomes a portmanteau term to designate an imagined past of harmonious cultural co-existence, one which offers the potential of 'openness' to cultural flows from across the world, without fear of contamination. It also creates a space, in Istanbul's contemporary corporate circles, to appropriate and display a distinctive 'high-culture' that is different from its 'Western' counterparts. As Sakip Sabanci, one of Turkey's most prominent corporate tycoons explained in an impromptu press interview:

*Outside Turkey, when talking to my partners, I ask 'How much is your capital? How many people you employ?' The man talks about culture. I ask 'How many subsidiaries? They tell about their art collections. So it is not enough to have money in transnational markets, money is banal. Business life cannot be one sided. It must be combined with culture, education and art. My Japanese partner invested what he earned into art, established museums, I saw them. I said I must also begin. (Hurriyet, March 30, 1999)*

The occasion which prompted these comments was the opening of an exhibit featuring Sabanci's collection of Ottoman headgear. In Istanbul's increasingly transnational corporate culture, sponsoring innumerable exhibits, concerts, performances by artists of 'world stature', is something more complex than promoting a company image. It is an implicit assertion of involvement and contribution to the (re)creation of a 'cosmopolitan' Istanbul – one which celebrates its Ottoman heritage of 'multiculturalism' as its distinctive mark of identity in transnational space. In its more consumable and popular versions – as told in a multitude of photography books, novels, autobiographies, or performed by swirling derivatives and classical musicians – this is a narrative which condenses the entire chronological expanse of Ottoman history to highlight what is referred to as "cosmopolitanism of 19<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul". And in the chaotic ethnographic present of Istanbul, the multiple valences of the word 'cosmopolitanism' come into play – such as an ability to acquit oneself, to behave well, with elegance and civility – to invoke a lost past (located in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) which describes what is lacking in the present, and worth striving for in the future.

Needless to say, my own rendering above glosses over the complicated nuances of political standing and social distinction embedded in narratives of Ottoman cosmopolitanism which circulate in contemporary Istanbul. What is of immediate import is the way this narrative transgresses the canons of official historiography, without however threatening to expose its silences. The 'cosmopolitanism' of 19<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul is no longer to be understood as cultural domination by the foreign, but a rich blending of cultures which lends credence to utopian visions of 'globalism' for the city, and for the nation. But at the same time, of course, the traumas of massive population displacement, ethnic cleansing and forced deportations which separate the "real" from the "mythical" past are deleted from memory. As such, narratives of

Istanbul's cosmopolitan past, as mobilized by different groups to underwrite claims to a 'global' present and future, remain tied to nationalism in its core.

### Narratives of Istanbul's 'Second' Conquest

Much more populist in their appeal are political narratives which invoke the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottoman armies in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, to underwrite utopias of a second, equally far-reaching 'conquest' of Istanbul five hundred years later. In current Turkish politics, the uses of this story are quite varied, ranging from the aggressively chauvinist claims of right-wing populism, all the way to counter-politics of Islamic populism. In its 'right-wing' versions, told in the militant and mobilizing language of 'conquest', 'victory', and 'glory', Istanbul acquires mythical significance as "the gate to Europe" through which the Ottoman armies marched all the way to the Vienna. Its seizure signifies a moment of glory – among numerous others – in mythical saga of Turkic peoples' expansion, originating in time immemorial from Central Asia, and extending to the heart lands of Europe during the golden age of Ottoman conquests. Thus fantasies of Istanbul's 'second' conquest – after 500 years – summon expectations of a not-so-distant future wherein not merely Istanbul, or the Turkish state, but the brotherhood of Turkish nations will again emerge as transnational actors in the world arena. In present-day Istanbul, frequent official visits and annual summits which bring together heads of state from Central Asian Republics seem to lend credence to this far-fetched scenario, resuscitating the rhetoric of 'brotherhood' to assert Turkey's role as "big brother" in the family of Turkic nations.

In the counter-politics of Islamic populism, the rhetoric of Istanbul's (re) conquest once again operates at several different registers. Most obviously, it invokes memories of Ottoman hegemony over the Islamic world, when Istanbul was the 'Holy City of Islam', and the jewel of the Islamic Universe. Thus its subsequent decline becomes a story of moral and spiritual degeneration, of progressive contamination by Western cultural values. Most important however, is the complicity of the Jacobin-Republican elite in this process, whose attempts to repress or suppress Islam in the name secularism, robbed Istanbul of its Islamic identity. In this sense, the promise Istanbul's remaking as an Islamic city becomes a powerful tool of political opposition, while simultaneously bolstering future aspirations for a more 'global' role in the future.

What was formulated as "the second taking of Istanbul, in the sense of bringing light to onto darkness" by Istanbul's first pro-Islamic mayor, Tayyip Erdogan (Hurriyet, December 26, 1993) has been an accomplished fact since 1994. The ways in which Refah Party has successfully promoted the ideal of 'global' Istanbul, wherein Islamic norms of fairness and justice (for Muslim inhabitants), and Islam's tolerance and generosity (for foreign visitors/tourists) are intertwined, remain beyond the scope of this short paper. It is important to keep in mind however, that in the populist-fascist reincarnations of this narrative, allusions to Istanbul's past hegemony as the "jewel of the Islamic Universe" are shot through with imperialist fantasies of furthering the glory of Islam across the world, under the banner of Turkish leadership.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Over the past two decades, the idea of a 'global' Istanbul has become the site and symbol of Turkey's aspirations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Future visions of the city and of the nation have become inextricably bound in public, popular and scholarly discourses. This has challenged prevailing power relations between Ankara and Istanbul, not only as cities but also as central tropes in the cosmology of Turkish nationalism. Claims to a global future for Istanbul have breached the canons of official historiography, calling forth new interpretations of its Ottoman legacy.

In the process, Istanbul's multiple and multi-layered pasts have come under intense debate as the negotiating ground for alternative political projects, not only for the city, but for the nation as well.

By way of concluding, a number of broader points seem worth reiterating. In Istanbul of the 1990s, "history" is produced, reconfigured, and disseminated in host of commercialized forms, from tourist brochures and auction houses, to news broadcasts and political summits. This is obviously very different from 'history' as written and disseminated by the Turkish state. Hence my emphasis was on a number of competing public narratives which circulate, in endlessly commodified forms, to mediate between the past and the ethnographic present of the city. These are 'political' narratives in the sense that they mobilize alternative versions of the past, from different social-cultural locations, and address different audiences. Narratives of Istanbul's cosmopolitan past are produced and valorized through discourses and practices of what might

be termed the city's cultural elite, i.e. groups who have become integrated into transnational economic-cum-cultural networks. By contrast, narratives of Istanbul's 'second conquest' have broader popular appeal, as the recent success of right-wing as well as Islamist political parties in local and nation-wide elections seem to suggest. But they also bring into play and accentuate identity claims to supra-national collectivities. However different the political and social locations from which they are imagined and narrated, prevalent discourses of 'cosmopolitanism', 'Islamic unity' or 'brotherhood of Turkic peoples' commonly accentuate forms of belonging, or yearning to belong, to a wider cultural configuration that the territorially bounded nation state. At the same time of course, they reveal how yearnings for collective identities beyond the nation state are shot through with the kinds of essentialisms we tend to associate with nationalist rhetoric.