

**Review:** Nicholas L. Danforth, *The Remaking of Republican Turkey: Memory and Modernity since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire*, Cambridge 2022: Cambridge University Press, pp. 251.

On October 29, 2023, Republican Turkey marked its centenary. This event was an excellent opportunity to reflect on the history of modern Turkey. It encourages current scholarship to make a new summary and objective insights into the political, religious, cultural and intellectual development of the last century.

In trying to articulate their vision researchers engage in a process of rethinking. This process is recursive because it involves constant reflection and revision. There are many scholarly works which refer to the rethinking, remaking, rediscovering, reimagining of Turkey's past from different angles, including its engagement with modernity.<sup>1</sup> Memory and historical awareness appear here as important categories that help us explain who we are through the narratives we create about the past. As Charles Taylor puts it, "to have some idea of who we are, we must have some idea of who we have become and where we are going" (Taylor, 2001, p. 94).

In this context Nicholas Danforth's book *The Remaking of Republican Turkey: Memory and Modernity since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire* is an interesting revisionist study, which connects modern Turkey to the dynamics of specific time and space. The book creates the opportunity to re-discuss the historical dilemmas of Turkey. It examines Turkish encounters with modernity, its achievements and failures and raises broader questions about cultural memory. In the end, it facilitates an assessment of today's outcomes and to some extent anticipates future trends.

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<sup>1</sup> To mention only two of them: *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*. 1997. Sibel Bozdoğan and Resat Kaşaba (eds.), Seattle: University of Washington Press; *Remaking Turkey: Globalization, Alternative Modernities, and Democracies*. 2007. Fuat E. Keyman (ed.). New York: Lexington Books.

*The Remaking of Republican Turkey* is Danforth's first book and a collection of his previously published articles. Danforth, received his M.A. from the School of Oriental and African Studies and his B.A. from Yale. He completed his Ph.D. in history at Georgetown University. He has published research's works on American modernity propaganda in Turkey, the use of the Ottoman past in Turkish politics, and reviewed academic literature about history writing on modern Turkey in journals like: *Diplomatic History*, *Middle Eastern Studies* and *Nationalities Papers*.<sup>2</sup> As a policy analyst he has written about Turkey's history, foreign policy, U.S. relations with Turkey and Middle East, for publications including: *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Foreign Policy*, *The New York Times*, *War on the Rocks*, and *The Washington Post*.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, he has covered the issue of Turkey's foreign policy for Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), the German Marshall Fund of the United States, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and the Bipartisan Policy Center.<sup>4</sup>

Here Danforth's book *The Remaking of Republican Turkey* is a fine guide to delve deeper into the issue of the Turkish modernity. A major insight of the book concerns the logic of modernization – full of multi-layered paradoxes, political inconsistency and social tensions. Moreover, the book tells the story of perpetual struggle between different versions of modernity: authoritarian and democratic, imposed and adjusted. The main theme, besides modernity, is memory culture that demonstrates contrasting representations of the national past by consciously created continuities as well as ruptures with the historical legacy.

The author provides quite a complex picture of mid-century Turkey, taking the considered period 1945–1960 (the beginning of the multiparty era and the country's first coup d'état) as an important turning point in the history of Turkey's social and political development. Danforth explores the historic legacy

<sup>2</sup> Danforth's selected publications: 'Malleable Modernity: Rethinking the Role of Ideology in American Policy, Aid Programs, and Propaganda in Fifties 'Turkey'. *Diplomatic History* 2013, 39 (3), pp. 477–503, DOI:10.1093/dh/dhu012; 'Multi-Purpose Empire: Ottoman History in Republican Turkey'. *Middle Eastern Studies* 2014, 50 (4), pp. 655–678, DOI:10.1080/0263206.2014.892481; 'The writing of modern Turkey'. *Nationalities Papers* 2013, 41 (6) pp. 1136–1146. DOI:10.1080/00905992.2013.801418

<sup>3</sup> For example: 'The Outlook for Turkish Democracy: 2023 and Beyond'. *The Washington Institute. Policy Analysis*. March 2020, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/outlook-turkish-democracy-2023-and-beyond> (Accessed: 11 November 2023) ; "The End of History and the Last Map". *Foreign Policy*. 14 February 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/14/map-cartography-shaped-war-peace-end-of-history/> (Accessed: 11 November, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Nicolas Danforth's biography available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/person/nicholas-danforth> (Accessed: 11 November 2023).

of that period to examine how Turkish thinkers embrace and consolidate the idea of democratic modernity in Turkish political discourse (p. 37). Moreover, he claims that “the Turkish and American experiences of the early Cold War period reveal that both the power and persistence of modernization discourse depended upon its flexibility” (p. 39).

Although the uniqueness of the 1950s and the significance of the Adnan Menderes era (the first democratically elected prime minister of Turkey) are widely acknowledged among the wider scholarly community and have already been analysed profusely, Danforth provides a fresh perspective on that period. He argues that “present-day thinkers misunderstood what was so unique about the country’s mid-century politics” (p. 1). As such, he encourages readers to adopt a more nuanced analysis and interpretation of Turkey’s relationship with Western modernity than those offered by the more established standard historical narratives on the mid-century Turkish transformation.

Danforth’s inquiry focuses on the interplay between democracy and modernity. Readers follow Democratic Party’s (DP)<sup>5</sup> modernisation efforts interwoven with the American plot of ready-made modernity. In Danforth’s assessment standard narratives are sometimes too simplified and entangled in a binary approach with well-known dichotomies such as Eastern tradition and Western modernity, Muslim versus secular, benighted masses contra enlightened elites. By recognising the incoherence of the modernity discourse in Turkey (its internal heterogeneity, contradictory attitudes towards Westernisation), Danforth sheds new insights on the “creative confusion” within a performance of Turkish modernity, where the past and space are constantly remodelled and appropriated.

The book addresses this intellectual ferment (*fikir humması*) by examining the ideas and views of mid-century politicians, artists and intellectuals who made efforts to overcome tension between Islam, democracy and modernity. In their expressed outlook, they tried to reconcile contradictory vision of Turkey’s Eastern and Western identities. In fact, being aware of the widely recognised, but at the same time questioned binary/duplicity, they articulated a kind of constructive and unique model of synthetic modernity.

Although at the first glance subtitle of the book *Memory and Modernity since the Fall of the Ottoman Empire* appears too broad for the selected period of research, it is justified by Danforth’s references to the ideas and politics of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Turkey and his exploration of the historical significance of the late Ottoman period. He deftly moves between close-ups of the 1950s and a broader perspective on the beginnings of the Republic of Turkey, as well

<sup>5</sup> Democratic Party was the first political force that gain power from the Kemalist Republican People’s Party (CHP).

as contemporary attachment to “updated” Ottoman past. All that is set in the historical framework of the long-term Westernisation process and debate.

Moreover Danforth’s book is also a perspectival recount on memory. Though the category of memory itself is not considered theoretically, Danforth through the politics of memory and commemoration illustrates how the empire’s memory was politicised. He explores competing national stories, its alternate reading through the century and explains today’s attachment to the past and Ottoman nostalgia. Danforth provides examples from popular culture and a broad range of Kemalist historiography. All of these are enlivened by interesting historical anecdotes and supported by citations from press reports from those years.

The book consists of seven chapters. Through each chapter Danforth carefully examines different aspects of mid-century Turkish modernity, which - according to him - has been misunderstood, such as: democracy, American policy and US modernisation propaganda, Westernization debate, different readings and appropriation of the Ottoman past, Orientalism, regional identity and relations with the Arab world. In the last chapter he explores religious change perceived as a “self-consciously modern religious revival” (p. 9) in the post war era as a part of a global phenomenon.

In his wide ranging and ambitious work Danforth is deftly channelising his scientific and journalistic background into the writing process on the remaking of Turkey’s story. As a historian he uses a range of primary and secondary sources retrieved from archives and libraries, including diplomatic documents, diverse newspapers, magazines and periodicals, published works as well as political cartoons. In the introduction (p. 9) Danforth makes general remarks about sources and the richness and significance of Turkish periodicals and newspapers, which he quotes extensively. However, it would be useful to explain why the author selected and considered particular titles of newspapers and magazines as useful sources for his historical inquiry. Additionally, brief information on each newspaper and magazine (the publishing period, socio-political profile and circulation if known) would put matters right. For example, in chapter three and subsequent ones, Danforth refers to the *Akbaba* (Vulture) magazine and depicts its cartoons, and only in chapter six does he describe its general profile.

Numerous studies (Akman, 1998; Arat, 1998; Brockett, 2011; Konar and Saygili 2021) have confirmed that content analysis of religious, scientific, historical, political, humorous magazines and journals helps us grasp the different flavors of intellectual orientations of that era alongside its historical significance. As such Danforth draws complexity of modernity by exposing cultural infiltration and ideas diffusion, which was indeed aptly visualized by

the print culture in the analyzed period as well as beyond it. As we know, the 1950s were a decade marked by the development of the Turkish press. The cartoon selected by Danforth from the children's magazine *Çocuk Haftası* (Children's Week) as the book cover image presents a clear visual message of mid-century historical narrative that incorporates the use of the Ottoman past to spark a child's curiosity in learning about Ottoman ancestors.

In the first chapter, entitled *A Nation Votes: Democratic Modernity for Masses*, Danforth presents the DP's model of modernity in which democracy is identified with progress. In the DP's rhetoric, Turkey's political transformation was traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century Tanzimat reforms (social, political and institutional modernisation) to the electoral victory of the DP in Turkey's first free election in May 1950. By analysing the ideological outlook of key Turkish politicians from opposite political parties, like Adnan Menderes and Bülent Ecevit, Danforth focuses on the differences between DP and CHP rhetoric and their understanding of democracy, economy and society (here both sides recognise the seminal role of the intelligentsia and elite in guiding the nation and promoting nationalism through the people's culture).

Thanks to this approach, we are able to trace how history and modernity were used in the name of political and national will and link it to Atatürk's broader legacy as well as the ideological winds of the 1950s. These are important aspects of the Turkish political tradition, which was formed on the axis of the modernisation paradigm and the evolution of democratic ideals. So the first chapter explores to what extent the ruling elites have reworked their attitude towards Western modernity and how Turkish modernity has attuned with the rest of the world, especially with the efforts and propaganda of Cold War America. This theme gains momentum in the second chapter of the book in which Danforth presents the determination of the US government to improve Turkey's modernisation and implant the American version of modernity with all its pros and cons.

For the second chapter of the book Danforth chooses the apt title *Turkey Attends the American Classroom* borrowed from the *Voice of America* show. In this way he emphasizes both Turkish dreams of becoming a "little America" (*küçük Amerika*) under Democratic Party rule in the 1950s, as well as the performative nature of American modernity. Danforth accentuates Turkish and American convergence as well as divergence of thinking about economic, legal and political matters. Here one can find interesting observations about the complexity and multidimensionality of the American modernisation program which accurately reflects the ideology and culture of the Cold War.

Additionally, Danforth guides readers through the often abstruse nature of the American logic of modernisation, which is interpreted as inconsistent but

at the same time flexible/pliable whole. Yet Danforth's argument also shows the profound ambiguity of Turkey's democratic progress. He admits that the US model of democratic modernity was malleable enough and could mean different things for Turkish politicians, but also for Americans themselves (p. 69). As such we could venture to say that modernity's flexibility was also its strength. In the US-Turkish relationship, both sides believed in Turkish democracy and political maturity, but – as Danforth rightly notes – American backing for the DP was not a matter of faith or trust but rather an outcome of mutual benefits and intended (military and economic) goals.

In chapter three, *Asia in Europe, Europe in Asia: The Possibilities of Synthesis*, Danforth meticulously illustrates various possibilities for a civilisational synthesis that would go beyond well recorded binary debates about East and West, old and new, modernity and tradition. His analysis focused on the Turkish intellectual current from this period represented by thinkers who “sought to chart out the middle ground” and embrace their own authentic culture. Danforth compares narratives of intellectuals such as Peyami Safa (whose name is identified with *Türk Düşüncesi*/ Turkish Thought), İbrahim Kafesoğlu (who published in *İstanbul* journal), and Bülent Ecevit (who published in *Ulus*/ Nation – the newspaper owned by the CHP). Even though they represented different intellectual traditions and ideological spectrums, they never gave up on the cultural synthesis of East and West in their visions and discourse. They all tried to break this dichotomy by deconstructing and transcending it. As Danforth rightly noted later in this chapter, Turkish thinkers benefited from their ability to play European and American modernities off against each other. He quotes mid-century travelogues in which Turkish travellers contrasted American and European models of modernity with admiration and disrespect. There is no doubt that in that time the Turks valued the American model more. It can be ascertained that in narratives of mid-century writers the epicentre of modernity changes from the West to America.

In the third chapter, *I am Ashamed of Both of You* (pp. 87–96), named after mocking cartoon of satirical *Akbaba* (Vulture) magazine (p. 89), Danforth raises broader questions about femininity, emotions and identity. He shows the dilemma of being a modern Turkish woman in the context of the debatably Western model of womanhood and the synthetic approach that had its roots in the Kemalist era. Here as Danforth put it, “the Turkish woman appears as simultaneously modern in relation to oriental or Islamic backwardness, but also as chaste and modest in relation to the excesses of European and American sexuality” (pp. 88–89).

To illustrate the desired role model of modernity presented within a synthetic vision, Danforth refers to such newspapers and magazines as the

Muslim newspaper *Doğru Yol* (True Path), *Kadın Gazetesi* (social and political women's weekly) and a humorous perspective of *Çapkın* (literally Womaniser) and *Akbaba* magazines. Although they differed in the manner in which they spotlighted political and social matters, all of them – like a mirror – reflected the atmosphere of those years and gave important clues about competing visions and thoughts on Turkish modernity. Thus, one might draw conclusion that the synthetic model was much needed as long as it sought to overcome a blind imitation of the West as well as absurd hyper-Westernisation attitudes.

Chapter four discusses the legacy of the Ottoman Empire in republican Turkey. As the main part of the title *Multipurpose Empire* tellingly suggests, Danforth guides readers through the meanders of the Ottoman politicised past and national history writing. Thanks to deep commitment of republican academics and the mission entrusted to them to design “proper” historical awareness, readers can trace how the Ottoman past was constantly tailored and re-interpreted. Danforth mentions *inter alia* the legacy of anthropologist Aziz Şevket Kansu and devotes a long passage to Afet İnan – a pioneering women historian and prominent icon of the Kemalist era. In this overview, Danforth juxtaposes competing visions of historical narrations that sometimes reject and at other times glorify the Ottoman legacy in accordance with accepted the historiographical line.

Discussing official historiography in Turkey, Danforth refers to Büşra Ersanlı's “theory of fatal decline” (p. 102) which aptly explains the official periodisation of the empire. According to this approach, the early Republican historians' narrative described two contrasting phases of the Ottoman Empire historical progress: the praised period of rise (namely the Golden Age phase lasting until the reign of Süleyman the Magnificent, 1520–1566) and condemned period of fatal decline and stagnation.

In the subchapter *Fetih 1953*, Danforth interprets the symbolic meaning of the celebrations of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the siege of the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, by Mehmed II (Fatih Sultan Mehmet) and his army on May 29, 1453. He captures the atmosphere surrounding the celebrations by referring to anecdotes and media. Moreover, by tracing various narratives Danforth deconstructs the political rhetoric used around the Fatih's legacy and commemoration of the Ottoman past not only in May 1953 but also today's neo-Ottoman vision.

In fact, the subject of memory explored here brings to mind John Bodnar's famous work on Americans efforts to create public memory, which regularly resulted in tension between popular, vernacular interests and official, elite forces (Bodnar, 1992). Indeed, in the case of Turkey, attempts to build



consensus on historical ideals also provoke such tensions, and the desire to construct a politically useful vision of the past is strong and visible.

For Danforth, there is another important dimension behind Ottoman nostalgia. In the modern world, where there are many conflicts, the multicultural Ottoman past comes to the fore. Danforth persuasively suggests that the Ottoman discourse on religious and cultural tolerance – romanticised and known not only in Turkey – fits perfectly to rhetoric promoted by transnational institutions. As an example he points to the European Union, which since the 1990s encouraged multiculturalism and the new concept of co-existence (pp. 124–125).

In chapter five, entitled *Making the Past Modern: Popular History in Print*, Danforth explores the intersection of modernity and Turkish national historical awareness. He discusses the way in which the past has been transformed and history modernised. Moreover, the chapter examines mid-century Turkish writers and artists' engagement with the culture of popular memory. Danforth follows their determination "to elevate Turkey's history and culture to the level of its Western counterparts" (p. 137). He analyses Turkish efforts to change foreigners' perceptions of Turkey as an oriental country. In this context he discusses the tourist literature, perceived as an important marker of modernity. Unfortunately, as Danforth rightly notes, the architectural rearrangement of the 1950s was not always good. And, by implication, it has served elite or official aims more than democratic purposes. Architects and urban planners undertook a programme of reconstruction and renovation of monuments that they wanted to embed in a modern context at the expense of destroying those considered less valuable. The interplay of space and history, urban landscape and memory in this context seems to be apparent.

Chapter six, *Ottomans, Arabs, and Americans: Geography and Identity in Turkish Diplomacy*, addresses Turkey's cultural policies and foreign relations in the 1940–1950 period. Here Danforth describes how geography and history shaped diplomatic relations during the early Cold War struggle. He offers a renewed look on the rhetoric behind Turkey's geopolitical interests and its well-known "anti-imperial instincts" (p. 153). This refers to the ongoing discussion at that time about Turkey's membership in NATO and its symbolic meaning in the context of geographical identity. But it also concerns changes and departures from Turkey's previous neutralism in foreign relations (including not joining any alliances) and distancing from the East.

Thus, Turkey's admission to NATO in February 1952 was an act of active cooperation with the West and rapprochement with Middle Eastern countries by appealing to religious and cultural affinity. In this chapter, Danforth examines three cases (the Suez Crisis, nationalization of Iranian oil under Prime Minister



Mohammed Mosaddegh and tensions between the United States and Libya). Citing diplomatic documents, he proves that both American and Turkish diplomats willingly accepted the metaphor of Turkey as a “bridge between the East and the West” (regardless of Turkey’s actual diplomatic importance/relevance in these events), although they understood its meaning differently.

At the end of the chapter Danforth provides a description of caricatures from covers of satirical magazine *Akbaba* that illustrates anti-Arab prejudice. Ironically, the reader can only follow the cartoons’ descriptions and not see the visual elements from the images.

In the final chapter of the book entitled *The Path to Progress and God: Islamic Modernism for Cold War*, Danforth provides insights into the religious sphere seen as another extremely important element of social space, identity and self-determination. In an interesting way he explores debate on Turkish religious revival, the limits of secularism and the shortcomings of modernity in the context of the Cold War. This allows us to see Turkey’s religious transformation as a response to a global challenge.

In order to understand the Turkish experience, we need to see it as being part of a wider, inclusive modernity. Danforth provides fresh insight into the religious debate of the 1950s, allowing readers to grasp the essence of religious change in Turkey as defined and assessed through the prism of the constraints of modernity and Western patterns. It refers to the writings of the theologian Ahmed Hamdi Akseki (1887–1951), who was president of the Directorate of Religious Affairs and promoted the revival of Islamic piety in a modernist approach. Danforth also quotes extensively from religious media, including the magazines *Selamet* (Salvation) and *Islam’ın Nuru* (Light of Islam). What came to the fore in these debates was the need to renew one’s own religious discourse towards a self-conscious approach to Islam and an attempt to grasp the true essence and role of religion in contemporary society.

Compared to its interesting and factual introduction, the ending seems a bit terse. In the conclusion, Danforth basically reviews various perspectives (scientific as well as journalistic) about the essence and nature of the Turkish transformation shown from different angles, pointing at subjectivity, political overtones, partiality and the clash of opinions. Arguably there are manifold ways in which the past shapes the present and is fashioned by present perceptions. Moreover, Danforth points to the potential of new study areas that are shaped by different trends and are becoming increasingly popular among new generation of researchers. The issue he defines is whether they will redefine perceptions of Turkish history by connecting it to shared national version of history or to the dynamics of differentiation and the contemporary condition of modernity? Moreover, will they manage to clarify future experience based

on historical awareness that produces contradictory claims within insight of vernacular modernity?

Either way, Danforth's historical narrative makes readers more critical and sensitive to different flavours and nuances of a constructed and reconstructed Turkish past that is more ambiguous and complex than is often assumed. To summarise, Danforth's book places Turkey in the broader context of geopolitical tensions during the Cold War and bipolar system, which played a formative role in shaping contemporary Turkish politics. It emphasises the importance of the American concept of development and the Turkish willingness to adopt the American version of modernity – but with some flexibility and mixed feelings on both sides. It illustrates the nuances of modernisation in all dimensions and reveals its unclear rhetoric and sometimes not straight logic.

The book is a “must-read” for those trying to understand Turkish struggles, social hardships and compromises resulting from the raw determination of modern development. Danforth reexplores the gripping history of the social and political transformation of the nation that sacrificed and rediscovered its once historical authenticity in favour of a cultural synthesis and still ambivalent symbiosis of “modern selfhood”. Therefore, it is a valuable contribution to existing academic literature on Turkey.

At the end we should consider the validity and contemporary conditions of modernity after 100 years of the Turkish Republic or more broadly reflect on the quality and maturity of Turkish democratic modernity. How strong is the interplay of the values and ideas crafted by Turkey's own political culture and historical awareness? Or the extent to which these values and ideas have been connected and emerged as a consequence and outcome of what Arif Drilik (2017) calls global modernity?

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