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## **‘East’ and ‘West’ in contemporary Turkey: threads of a new universalism.**

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### ABSTRACT

The tired old civilisational categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’, loosely identified with ‘Islam’ and ‘modernity’, are alive and well, nowhere more so than in contemporary Turkey. The Justice Development Party (AKP) currently in government employs them assiduously to political advantage but they have a long history, having defined the parameters of societal identity and political discourse throughout the history of the Turkish Republic. The paper takes the strength of the categories as its starting point but moves beyond them by asking if discourses, narratives and identities, individual and collective, exist in Turkey which question, overcome and ultimately undermine the categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’. The paper starts by investigating the evolution of ideas about East and West since the late Ottoman period and accepts that they are still dominant. However, since the 1980s in particular, they are being undermined in a *de facto* way by cultural developments in literature and music, new trends in historiography and novel ways of relating to the past. In some ways in contemporary Turkey, the paper concludes, culture trumps the inherently essentialist idea of ‘civilisation’ and Turkish society is ahead of its political and intellectual elites.

### KEYWORDS

East; West; Turkey; civilisation; culture; Islam

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## **Introduction**

The tired old categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’ have powerful purchase in contemporary global affairs. Islamist terrorists and their obliging opponents raise the spectre of a perennial and immutable conflict between them. A civilisational discourse, with its inescapably essentialist characteristics – even when the talk is of civilisational ‘dialogue’ instead of a ‘clash’ – has gained ground over the past two decades. It is underpinned by a resurgence of religion and identity politics which has partly replaced or – more accurately - has been superimposed on the political conflict between right and left in many parts of the world.

Nowhere do the categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’ appear more alive and well than in contemporary Turkey. Political discourse over the past fifteen years of rule by the Justice Development Party (AKP) has become increasingly defined by them, with its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, depicting both domestic politics and Turkey’s foreign relations in terms of ‘us versus them’. The categories employed by Erdoğan, however, have a long history, going back to the late Ottoman and Young Turk eras and the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923. The later Young Turks and Kemalists introduced a robust conception of the Turkish nation – in fact, theirs was a project of nation-building – within which they consciously sought to ‘transpose’ the Turkish nation from the ‘East’ to the ‘West’. The result, according to a widely established view, was only half successful. Samuel Huntington was expressing a long-standing characterisation of Turkey when he described it, in his ‘The Clash of Civilizations?’ as a ‘torn country’.<sup>1</sup>

This paper takes the analysis above as its starting point but moves beyond it. The question it deals with is straightforward: are there discourses, narratives and individual and collective

identities in contemporary Turkey which question, overcome and ultimately undermine the categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’? In the context of Turkish Republican history, East/West has conventionally been taken to coincide with secularism/Islam, reason/tradition, state/civil society, and centre/periphery.<sup>2</sup> The paper investigates the extent to which these binaries still hold water.

In its first part, the paper outlines the emergence of the ideas of ‘East’ and ‘West’ within the broader discourse on ‘civilisation’ since the late Ottoman era. It then traces the changing meanings of the terms through the decades leading up to the present time and argues that they have great bearing in both intellectual debates about civilisation and in political discourse. In its second part, which deals with Turkey mostly from the 1980s onwards, the paper focuses on literature, music and in historiography and shows that, in aspects of culture at least, and in how at least some historians and intellectuals navigate the past, the idea of ‘civilisation’ – which is inherently essentialist – loses its relevance.

Two caveats are in order, pertaining to the paper’s object of enquiry and its purpose. This is an exploration of ideas and discourses in themselves, abstracted from their origins or contexts. The many socio-economic and political transformations which Turkish society and politics have undergone in recent decades,<sup>3</sup> and which are inextricably linked with – and to some degree explain – the emergence of these ideas, are not part of the paper’s remit. Nor are the theoretical implications of the argument for the debate on Islam and modernity.<sup>4</sup> I have engaged more extensively elsewhere with some of the theoretical debates which underpin the questions I address here but this paper carries out an empirical investigation.

The shifting meanings of the key concepts which constitute my focus, particularly ‘East’ and ‘West’, are traced through the discussion but I have not carried out a wider analysis of their history or significance beyond Turkey.<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I define ‘universalism’ quite narrowly, as overcoming of the idea that East and West are immutable entities and conceiving of a world where these categories are alien and irrelevant.

### **The categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’ in Republican Turkey**

‘East versus West’ defines the history of Republican Turkey. This is a simplistic statement but it is, at one level, a true one. The late Ottoman Empire witnessed – similarly to Europe – the emergence and spread of civilisation as a universal concept. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, ‘civilisation’ also came to refer to particular civilisations as collective identities. This was a quintessentially modern idea – even though it projected civilisations back onto the depths of history – because it rested on the notion that civilisations had identifiable ‘characteristics’ which could be observed by the human subject. The group of intellectuals who later came to be called ‘Young Ottomans’ introduced the idea of the ‘Muslim world’ although for them Islam could be reconciled with a universal civilisation and the principles of freedom and constitutionalism. During Abdülhamid’s period, the categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’ spread and hardened, driven by the sultan’s own political Islamist designs.<sup>6</sup>

Recent scholarship has criticised the tendency in Turkish historiography to read history backwards and retrospectively project onto the late Ottoman period latter day categories, specifically those of secularism versus Islam.<sup>7</sup> The criticism has been applied particularly to studies of Ziya Gökalp.<sup>8</sup> However that may be - and even though Gökalp’s perspective was a universalist one in that he saw no contradiction between universal civilisation (*medeniyet*) and

Turkish culture (*hars*) - the categories of 'East' and 'West' can already be discerned in his thought and were juxtaposed to one another as clearly distinct entities.<sup>9</sup> They became rigid in Young Turk thought as it developed around the time of the independence struggle.

The intellectual formation and development of the Young Turk movement was decisive for the subsequent history of the Turkish Republic which they dominated, in effect, until 1950.<sup>10</sup> A split between the so-called Unionist and Liberal camps became apparent in the 1902 Conference of the movement. The Unionist camp embraced Westernism within which Turkism was latent: for them 'adoption of national identity was regarded as a prerequisite to being Western'.<sup>11</sup> The Liberals were represented by Prince Sabahattin, who advocated laissez-faire economics and decentralisation in politics.<sup>12</sup> He 'envisioned individualism in the form of freedom from the state'<sup>13</sup> and saw a role for religion within that liberal context of power coming from below. However, following 1902, the Liberal wing was marginalised and the centralist, corporatist wing prevailed. The latter shaped the future mind-frames and politics of the Young Turks and ultimately of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk).

For Mustafa Kemal, East and West clashed irrevocably; even though he insisted that Islam was a 'rational' religion, he did not believe that Islam could be incorporated within universal civilisation and sought to expunge it from public life. For Kemal, the East was associated with Islam/religion and backwardness and the West with secularism and modernity; and Turkey should belong to the West.<sup>14</sup> The Young Turk secularist, modernising mind-set, even if it was attacked from 1950 onwards by those who argued it violated Turkey's 'authentic' identity, had already defined the parameters of debate in terms of 'East' and 'West'.

This is not to say that the meaning of the concepts of ‘East’ and ‘West’ was static during the Republic’s early decades. At the time of the independence struggle, the ‘East’ continued being associated with Islam but also became the standard bearer of anti-imperialism, particularly following the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.<sup>15</sup> In the 1950s, the United States, as opposed to Europe, started being perceived as the core of the West; this was partly as a result of the Democrat Party’s liberal-conservative conception of the nation which approximated more closely to the American model.<sup>16</sup> In the Cold War era, in Turkey as elsewhere, the ‘East’ also referred to communism, of course.

However, by the 1970s, as a result of an ‘Islamic’ revival in the post-1950 period, the identification of the East with ‘Islam’ became the most prevalent view. The intellectual who set the tone for this shift by asserting the claim that Turkey belongs to the East, rather than to the West, was Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1904-1983). In the political arena, Necmettin Erbakan (1926-2011), the doyen of Turkish Islamism, claimed as part of his *Milli Görüş* outlook that the history of mankind is the struggle between two civilisations, the Western one (which he identified with ‘power’) and the Islamic civilisation (which he identified with ‘right’).<sup>17</sup> A next generation of Islamist intellectuals from the 1980s, which included Ali Bulaç (1951-) among others, approached the issue from a different perspective – focusing more on the early time of Islam as the ideal period - but also iterated the superiority of Islamic civilisation and Turkey’s natural membership of it.

Alongside these rigid formations, there were intellectuals in mid-twentieth century Turkey who seemed to question the categories of East and West or, at least, presented interesting ways of thinking about them. Cemil Meriç (1916-1987), for instance, argued that ‘those who try to show East and West as separate worlds are gravely mistaken’; and that ‘If West is (thought of

as) the motherland of independent thought, then at times East turned out to be West'.<sup>18</sup> He sought 'the universal meaning of rationality', in contrast to 'other conservatives who ascribe moral superiority to Islam and see the Christian West and the Islamic East as unbridgeable civilizations'.<sup>19</sup> Another thinker, Peyami Safa (1899-1961), in his book *East-West Synthesis*, portrayed Turkish thought and nationalism as a combination of the achievements of the East and West.<sup>20</sup> For him, the West was not one thing and he associated Turkish reform with that aspect of it which was mythical and opposed to its positivism. He argued that there is no civilisation without religion<sup>21</sup> but his starting point was that Islam was always open to reform.<sup>22</sup>

Although more profound and nuanced thinkers than most who dealt with the subject, both Meriç and Safa remained, nevertheless, ultimately constrained by the intellectual parameters of 'East and West'. Meriç built on Gökalp's corporatist social engineering approach and treated society as an organic whole (he had some sympathy for Nazi ideas, at least early in his career). He had a great influence on conservative intellectuals of the 1980s such as Ali Bulaç<sup>23</sup> who remained essentialists. Safa's novel *Fatih-Harbiye*, a precursor of his *East-West Synthesis*<sup>24</sup>, superimposed the East-West dichotomy on to Turkey as a symbolic order. In fact, Safa can be situated within an established tradition of Turkish intellectuals who both established the dichotomy between the East and the West and developed descriptive and normative accounts of it.<sup>25</sup>

The order depicting East and West in rigid terms achieved its renaissance in the early 2000s with the AKP's electoral victory, according to Nurdan Gürbilek.<sup>26</sup> The degree to which this was indeed the case from the beginning of the AKP's establishment (2001) and its period in government (from 2002) is the subject of controversy. For some, the very fact that the AKP was a product of a shift to the political centre and represented at least the partial abandonment

of Erbakan's *Milli Görüş* discourse, presented an opportunity for bridging the gap between East and West, if not abolishing the categories themselves.<sup>27</sup> For numerous others, such as Gürbilek, the AKP did not really signify such progress. It is true that Ahmet Davutoğlu<sup>28</sup>, one of the AKP's major ideologues who explicitly focused on the question of civilisation and its role in international relations, argued against Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' and for co-operation between them. However, even though the emphasis was on co-operation rather than conflict, the categories of 'East' and 'West' themselves were not challenged. In Davutoğlu's works, an essentialist understanding of these civilisations is in evidence.<sup>29</sup> The AKP government was a sponsor of the 'Alliance of Civilisations' project at the United Nations, which indicated that, for them, civilisation had a substantive presence in the international arena. When political strains increased in the late 2000s and early 2010s the AKP, and in particular Erdoğan, reverted to a rigid and exclusionary use of the terms 'East' and 'West'. During the same period, and partly caused by heightened political polarisation, there has been a growing self-segregation of Westernised, secular Turks and conservative Muslim Turks at the popular level.<sup>30</sup>

### **Aspects of culture: music and literature**

The hardened intellectual and political discourses about East and West outlined above exist, but they do not constitute Turkey's entire reality. Aspects of Turkish society and culture reveal a richness and complexity in conceptions of identity which do not fit within the categories of distinct Eastern and Western civilisations. I define culture here in the sense of artistic culture and take it as an expression of human creativity in the context of social change; in what follows, I look at music and literature<sup>31</sup> as significant and representative aspects of Turkish culture.

The enormous transformations that Turkish society has undergone over the past decades have reduced the relevance of the rigid civilisational categories of East and West, and have even in some cases done away with them; this is revealed in musical and literary cultures. Changes were profound and continuous in the twentieth century but the 1980s was a turning point in cultural terms.<sup>32</sup> In that decade, after the 1980 military coup, the market-driven reforms carried out by Turgut Özal's government caused an opening up of Turkey to the forces of globalisation<sup>33</sup> and a cultural explosion that led to pluralisation and Kemalism's loss of its monopoly on modernity: 'groups unable to express themselves began to speak, groups that had no place in the Kemalist modernity design: Kurds, minorities, Islamists – in sum, the provincial population. But it was not only them; women too found a new voice. Homosexuals too.'<sup>34</sup> This 'unravelling of modern identity' as it had been constructed by Kemalism was praised by some as cultural pluralisation and castigated by others as a 'rural invasion' and a 'cultural degeneration' that took the particular form of the 'return of religion'.<sup>35</sup>

We see this in the controversies surrounding Turkish music. For example, Martin Stokes, in his study of Arabesk music in 1980s Turkey, observes an 'explosion' of popular culture but questions its easy association with the East and the Turkish 'periphery'. Already from the 1960s, "Arab", Turkish, popular classic, Turkish folk, and Western pop and rock were mixing in a hybrid popular music style later dubbed arabesk'.<sup>36</sup> Arabesk was seen as the reaction of a disenchanted 'periphery', culturally and economically excluded, against a powerful central reformist tradition; it was also linked to 'Islamic reaction' and the government of Turgut Özal.<sup>37</sup> However, Stokes disputes the representation of Arabesk as 'a timeless expression of an Eastern passivity and pessimism' and sees it, instead, as the result of the stresses and strains of modernisation.<sup>38</sup> He notes that religious authorities in fact condemned it because of its association with sex and drinking.<sup>39</sup> Arabesk continued to be described as *gecekondu* (shanty

town) music of the people from the southeast<sup>40</sup> but it was not listened to in the *gecekondus* more than anywhere else, nor were its musicians primarily from the southeast of Turkey.<sup>41</sup> The centre-periphery concept ‘of a transcendent state tradition and an authentic cultural level associated with civil society’ has little use in the analysis of Istanbul musicians.<sup>42</sup>

Stokes argues, more generally, that the history of music in Turkey from 1950 onwards subverts the ‘conventional’ understanding of a conflict between an authoritarian, secular centre and a liberal, Islamic periphery.<sup>43</sup> Turkish popular musical cosmopolitanism has usually looked West, from the operetta in the Ottoman era to Eurovision and hip-hop nowadays, but also looked East, to Arab musical practices.<sup>44</sup> Similar ambiguities can be observed in the areas of *halk* (folk) and *sanat* (art) music. Stokes argues that the creation of *halk* music was part of Kemalist attempts to displace ‘popular’ tastes in music, which were seen as reactionary and Eastern, in favour of a reformed Turkish music.<sup>45</sup> He points out that ‘anthropologists have criticised this duality in a variety of ways’ by showing the local identification with the state; *halk* music, specifically, which was associated with Kemalist reforms and propagated by the official TRT agency and State Conservatories ‘has been appropriated at a mass level in Turkish cities’.<sup>46</sup> *Sanat* music – different from *Arabesk* – emerged in the official airwaves and was seen by critics as evidence of the undermining of Atatürk’s reforms. This, again, is a monolithic reading; Stokes mentions as an illustration his music teacher, an army officer, who was also deeply committed to Ottoman and Islamic music and culture.<sup>47</sup>

The hold of the categories of East and West also appears to have gradually weakened in some strands of Turkish literature. Erdağ Göknaç argues that the novel reveals a more complex story than a conventional reading of Turkish history in which modernisation was a ‘top down’ exercise would allow.<sup>48</sup> The narrative form of the novel appeared in Ottoman cities in the 1860s

confronting forms of traditional narrative that had existed for centuries<sup>49</sup>; it had spread by the late nineteenth century. With the first rumblings of cultural nationalism around the turn of the century, there were calls for Turkification which was taken to mean ‘freedom from – in the widely used term – “linguistic capitulations” imposed by Persian and Arabic, whose vocabulary and some grammatical constructions were integral to Ottoman rhetoric and expression. In essence, the goal was to make the spoken idiom the basis for the written language.’ Eventually, ‘linguistic engineering’ was undertaken, which was also symbolic of nationalisation and secularisation.<sup>50</sup> However, Göknaar argues that literary modernity did not simply involve Westernisation but rather recast ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ cultures from new perspectives as being interrelated and interdependent.<sup>51</sup>

With the rise of Anatolian socialist realism in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a move away from nationalist to socialist ideals which focused on the Anatolian peasant. Some Islamic themes were included.<sup>52</sup> In 1971-80 there was a further development as ‘the individual’ emerged out of collective consciousness, for example in feminist writings and prison memoirs; women authors also increased in number and prominence.<sup>53</sup> Themes involving Islam and lived traditions appeared more frequently and the ‘Islamic novel’ grew.<sup>54</sup> From the 1950s to early 1980s the literary field was almost wholly dominated by socialist ‘or at least progressive’ authors,<sup>55</sup> which forced the right into a defensive role.<sup>56</sup> This changed after 1980.

In the 1980s and 1990s, with authors such as Letife Takin and Orhan Pamuk, Turkish literature began to experience a post-modern turn, which entailed a return to Ottoman/Islamic history, individualism, existentialism and the city, away from socialism, patriarchy and Anatolianism. Turkish postmodernism expressed opposition to early twentieth century modernism and emphasised a plurality of perspectives: ‘It did not, as is sometimes expressed, indicate a

dismissal or failure of modernism, but rather introduced multiplicity to a rigid, universal, Eurocentric hierarchy of progress and development.’ Neo-Ottomanism implied a reassessment and reappropriation of a disregarded cultural history and identity, which included Islam.<sup>57</sup> In the post-1999 period there remained little conviction in monolithic ideologies and there was a redefinition of what it means to be a Turk. Orhan Pamuk in particular rejected the definition of national identity on the basis of a single characteristic.<sup>58</sup> He and others had been uneasy with the rupture with the Ottoman cultural legacy that modernisation and Kemalism had brought about.<sup>59</sup> Letife Takin’s work reflected a new reality, that of the social context of rural-urban migration, and did not fit ‘within the “westernisation-progress” paradigm’.<sup>60</sup>

From the 1980s onwards, literary developments opened up new spaces and offered opportunities for cross-fertilisations, as figures of the literary and publishing world from Turkey’s secular and Islamist milieus attempted to grasp the moment and undermine rigid conceptions of identity. Events such as ‘Imaginary East, Imaginary West: Thinking across Civilisations’, organised at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 2008, aimed to problematize the very terms East and West and promote the view that the problems of our times are universal problems. The focus of such events was Turkey’s rich history of coexistence and they advocated the idea that ‘literature, music, architecture and the arts’ reveal external influences and a vast cultural richness. They claimed that the legacy of historical diversity ‘is still alive in the Turkey of today, more than in any other country’.<sup>61</sup>

Some Islamic literati were also open to postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s, as it introduced repressed themes into public debates,<sup>62</sup> but the Islamic novel developed during those years as a separate genre. Even within the latter, however, as Kenan Çayır’s study shows, there occurred

a fascinating transformation from the 1980s to the 1990s of how the categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’ were understood.<sup>63</sup>

The 1980s Islamic novel was the culmination of a challenge to the modernising worldviews which dominated Turkish literature since the 1950s.<sup>64</sup> The Islamist novelists of that decade, most of whom had a rural origin, had an instrumentalist approach to literature, as a means of developing an Islamic consciousness.<sup>65</sup> They saw Islamic and Western ways of life as incompatible.<sup>66</sup> This brand of Islamic literature started off with a critique of Western-centric modernisation and put forward an imagined ‘ideal Islamic order’ which derived ‘absolute truth’ from the period of the prophet and four caliphs; it employed a ‘we versus them’ discourse and sought to impose a ‘unitary and singular Islamic worldview upon others’.<sup>67</sup> For Islamists, civilisation equalled Westernisation, which in turn equalled de-Islamisation<sup>68</sup>; they therefore sought to reclaim ‘civilisation’<sup>69</sup>, stating that they represented ‘real’ civilisation against the ‘imitative’ Western agents.<sup>70</sup>

What we see in the 1990s, however, according to Çayır, is a set of new developments within the genre: specifically, the emergence of a self-critical, self-reflexive Islamic literature which re-evaluated those rigid categories, produced by a younger generation of Islamic authors born in the 1960s.<sup>71</sup> Although some Islamic groups still maintained a collectivist discourse, several other more self-critical ones took a publicly critical stance toward their old revolutionary interpretation of Islam.<sup>72</sup> This was reflected in a new generation of Islamic novels whose heroes and heroines began to question pre-existing binaries and categories.<sup>73</sup> They pointed to the privatisation of Islam<sup>74</sup> and carried anti-Islamist, as opposed to anti-Islamic messages.<sup>75</sup> A tension was developing between individual and collective Islamic subjects<sup>76</sup>, a tension which represented the new Islamism emerging in Turkey of the late 1990s,<sup>77</sup> more of which below.

## **Historiography and challenges to the ‘civilisational’ discourse**

In his study of new trends in Turkish historiography, Leonidas Karakatsanis argues that the ‘discursive dipoles’ of ‘Europe-Turkey’, ‘Islam-Christianity’ and others emerged in the late Ottoman period and were used to construct ideas about ‘selfhood and otherhood’; from this he extrapolates that the changing ways in which events of that period are perceived in contemporary Turkey reveal that identities are currently evolving.<sup>78</sup> Karakatsanis shows that in the official Turkish Republican historiography from the 1920s-30s to the 1980s – mainly Kemalist but also leftist and Islamist or conservative – the dominant categories were of ‘us’ versus ‘them’, with ‘us’ being described in either national or religious terms and ‘them’ being ‘the West’, depicted as ‘the other’.<sup>79</sup> However, from the 1980s onwards, a new generation of historians who worked under the influence of a liberal approach to history, evinced a shift to a wider ‘we’. They ‘examined the nineteenth century and the Ottoman state from more nuanced perspectives’.<sup>80</sup> Their approach to civilian casualties showed changing conceptions of victimhood and an expansion of identity from ‘us versus them’ to ‘the human’.<sup>81</sup> Nora Fisher Onar also points to a wider reconsideration and re-contestation of the Ottoman past, and in particular Ottoman universalism, in a debate between schools of political thought in post-1980s Turkey.<sup>82</sup>

Recent trends within Islamic historiography in Turkey also hint at a new universalism. İsmail Kara, a historian of Islamic thought in Turkey, outlines how, as new conceptions of history formed due the entry of the ideas of ‘progress’ and ‘European civilization’ into the Islamic world from the nineteenth century, Muslim intellectuals were quick to interpret political and military defeats as cultural, social and institutional defeats for Islam.<sup>83</sup> They glorified the

Islamic past and decried present decline and this led to a break with history and a fixation on an idealised golden era, the time of the prophet and the orthodox caliphs. From then on, history started to be seen as a burden, not a treasury, and even the Seljuk and Ottoman periods were ignored. The ideal period was also separated from its antecedents, earlier prophets and monotheistic religions. Previously, Islamic scholars used to see history as the history of humanity with Adam and Eve as its beginning. From then on, actual history was transformed and reconstructed on the basis of a golden age.<sup>84</sup> Kara does not explicitly offer a new or alternative periodisation of history but his critique of Islamic thought, by building bridges with the pre-nineteenth century conception of history when the idea of ‘civilisation’ and the particular categories of ‘East’ and ‘West’ did not exist, offers the possibility of a new universalism.

These recent developments in historiography have arisen alongside strands of an Islamic liberalism, some of which hold an implicit promise of overcoming the East-West binary. It is not possible here to explore the rich and varied recent developments in liberal Islamic thought in Turkey since the 1980s in their entirety; or indeed in Turkish liberal thought more generally.<sup>85</sup> For one, these can be difficult to pinpoint, as new ideas frequently germinate within Turkey’s multiple associations: fora for debate, sometimes informal, often of young people who are frustrated with the existing dichotomies and are searching for alternatives to the stale narrative of ‘East and West’.<sup>86</sup> As stated above, liberalism tends to be a minority position when compared with the dominant essentialist ways of thinking about ‘East versus West’, ‘Islam versus secularism’, ‘us versus them’; particularly as Islamism has been sapped from a lot of the dynamism it had shown in the 1990s, in intellectual terms, because of its post-2002 association with the AKP.<sup>87</sup> However, new trends are discernible and have also emerged as a political reaction against the most significant purveyor of this rigid way of thinking, the AKP.

Liberal Islamic thought in contemporary Turkey comprises a wide range of positions with varied implications for the conceptualisation of the East-West civilisational binary. For example, an individual scholar such as Hayri Kırbaşoğlu<sup>88</sup>, based in the Faculty of Theology at Ankara University, has an enlightened albeit traditional religious approach. He argues that the AKP government represents a corruption of Islam and a concentration on materialism as opposed to the spiritual aspects of religion. His critique is not necessarily one that overcomes civilisational essentialism but, in positing a message of coexistence and toleration, and extolling the values of citizenship, it offers an implicit message of universalism. From a very different perspective comes the critique of the ‘anti-capitalist Muslims’, who put forward an anti-neoliberal discourse, in opposition to the AKP. İhsan Eliaçık, loosely associated with this group, argues that universal values – also included in the Koran – should form the basis of the ideal political, economic and social order.<sup>89</sup>

Some contemporary Turkish Islamic thinkers deal in their work directly with the civilisational narrative and advocate its demise in contemporary Muslim thought.<sup>90</sup> Halil İbrahim Yenigün, for example, argues that the challenges that thinkers such as Ali Shariati, İsmet Özel<sup>91</sup> and Hamid Dabashi launched on ‘the very concept of civilization have helped debunk this obsolete construct’.<sup>92</sup> Yenigün’s critique targets civilisation in both its universal and particular sense (Muslim civilisation). He refers to the discourse on Islamic civilisation as having ‘essentializing tendencies and intrinsic false binaries’.<sup>93</sup> He asserts that ‘Islamic civilization’ was ‘a defensive discourse constructed by Muslim apologists to counteract the project of the “West”, which constructed “the Orient” to serve as its distinct and inferior “other”’. He argues that ‘a “post-Western”, post-Orientalist overcoming of the categories of “Western”, “Eastern”,

or “Islamic” civilizations is an urgent step that must be taken and that this step is now more feasible than ever thanks to the recent efforts of some Muslim thinkers’.<sup>94</sup>

### **Conclusion: the promise of Gezi**

Turkish identity debates at the current juncture continue to be framed along the lines of ‘East’ and ‘West’. The idea of the split between ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ civilisations permeates both political and intellectual discourses and is constantly being reproduced and reinforced, not least for short-term, politically instrumentalist reasons. However, elements of musical and literary culture and new intellectual developments and trends in historiography provide areas where the East-West binary is being overcome and point to the possibility of a new universalism.

Evidence that this binary is being overcome can also be found in some parts of Turkish society. Even a cursory glance at public opinion polls illustrates the complexity of issues of identity, when one moves beyond a superficial reading. Much has been written about the rise of conservatism and religiosity in Turkey<sup>95</sup>; though others dispute this.<sup>96</sup> Even if we can assume, however, that Turkey is a very conservative and religious society, and becoming increasingly so, at the same time the percentage of Turks favouring EU accession has remained high, ranging over the past fifteen years from 40 to 75 per cent.<sup>97</sup> The reasons for this, naturally, have a lot to do with the expectation of economic advantage but it also shows that, for the majority of Turkish citizens, being Muslim and being European, hence Western, is not in contradiction. As Çayır says, it is not the case that homogenous groups of Islamists clash with monolithic secular groups in Turkey.<sup>98</sup> Many of the Islamic intellectuals who are purveyors of the discourse on Islamic civilisation are themselves cut off from ordinary people, which belies their claim to ‘authenticity’.<sup>99</sup> Notwithstanding the self-segregation of secular and religious Turks,

for some Turkey is becoming ‘a more normal’ country in that, for example, politicians can be photographed with headscarved wives at functions. Overcoming the ‘pro-Western self-loathing’ of the past is celebrated<sup>100</sup> and Turks are ‘negotiating new ways of living together’.<sup>101</sup> From an anthropological and sociological perspective, the idea that Turkey is split along East-West lines makes no sense.<sup>102</sup>

These social trends and developments found a political expression during the so-called Gezi events in May-June 2013; events that threw doubt on the idea that Turkey is a country in the throes of a civilisational split between Islamists and secularists. Berna Turam traces a change over the past few years in Turkey, from the protests against the AKP in 2007 – the so-called Republican Marches – which revealed bitter divisions between secularists and AKP supporters and ‘split urban space into hostile zones’; to the Gezi Protests which had a unifying effect on opposition forces over the defence of freedoms and rights.<sup>103</sup> Turam highlights ‘the power of the urban space’ which derived ‘from its ability to stand above the identitarian or ideological fault lines in the defense of universal values of democratic liberties and rights.’<sup>104</sup> Street, neighbourhood and campus politics should be highlighted in comparison to more formal channels of politics.<sup>105</sup> She argues that Gezi demonstrated a ‘new kind of inclusion and accommodation’ and in particular new bonds and cooperation between the pious and secular residents; and that ‘the axis of conflict was shifting from Islamism versus secularism toward the defence of a deeper democracy versus authoritarianism’.<sup>106</sup> Turam’s ethnography traces ‘spaces where the secular and the religious mix and tolerate each other’, a phenomenon which is concerning to the AKP, much more than the existence of ‘secular’ spaces.<sup>107</sup>

Gürbilek takes a similar line on the events of Gezi, arguing that they challenged the semiotic construction of Turkish identity as an uneasy fusion of East and West, where the two categories

continue to be considered distinct and separate.<sup>108</sup> During the protests, pious citizens broke their Ramadan fasts on the streets and offered food to their irreligious fellow activists, deconstructing the Fatih-Harbiye (equivalent to East-West) dichotomy.<sup>109</sup> Political actors worked to re-impose the old symbolic scheme of opposition between the East and West to make sense of the uprising, with government spokesperson Hüseyin Çelik suggesting that the protests merely amounted to ‘Nişantaşı’s reaction’ (Nişantaşı being an affluent Istanbul neighbourhood). Then-Prime Minister Erdoğan’s statement that the largest square in Istanbul, and hence the one most appropriate for political gatherings is, in fact, the Kazlıçeşme Square, recently created in Yenikapı by filling in parts of the Sea of Marmara, was an attempt to present Taksim and those present there as belonging to ‘Harbiye’.<sup>110</sup> The square and the AKP supporters who attended his rally were implicitly associated with ‘Fatih’, affirming once again the binary opposition.<sup>111</sup> Gürbilek argues that the Eastern identity that the government was able to call to its assistance in the course of the Gezi protests was, in fact, rooted in the East-West dichotomy that had previously been constructed. However, the best way of preventing the East-West dichotomy from blurring our vision is to act as though it does not exist: this requires defending Gezi as a moment that surpassed the Fatih-Harbiye distinction.<sup>112</sup>

In 1986, Emre Kongar argued that Turkey ‘stands a good chance of producing a new cultural synthesis for our times’.<sup>113</sup> This hopeful message appears to have perished under the weight of long-standing polarisations, the present politicisation of identity exacerbated by authoritarianism and short-term political instrumentalism; particularly in the current moment of schism following the failed military coup attempt of July 2016, which appears to have extinguished the spirit of Gezi. However, there still remains some truth in it. Turkish society is in some ways ahead of its leaders. Cultural and social change appears to go against the

essentialist civilisational discourse of East and West and holds an implicit promise of a new universalism and a new Turkey.

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### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?”, 42-43.

<sup>2</sup> Stokes, *The Republic of Love*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: Tuğal, *Passive Revolution*; Hale and Özbudun, *Islamism, Democracy, and Liberalism*; White, *New Turks*.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the controversy which has surrounded Göle, *The Forbidden Modern*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the debate that has raged around Pagden, *Worlds at War*.

<sup>6</sup> Khalid, “Pan-Islamism in Practice”; Aydın, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism*.

<sup>7</sup> Hanioglu, *A Brief History*, 210.

<sup>8</sup> Dressler, “Rereading Ziya Gökalp.”

<sup>9</sup> Davison, *Secularism and Revivalism*, 90-133; Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate*, 25-26, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Kadioğlu, *An Oxymoron*, 174.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Mango, “Atatürk”; Zürcher, *The Young Turk Legacy*, 149.

<sup>15</sup> Berkes, *The Development of Secularism*, 437-439.

<sup>16</sup> Abou-el-Fadl, “Divergent paths, diverging choices.”

<sup>17</sup> Erbakan, *Adil Düzen* [Just Order], 2.

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- <sup>18</sup> Poyraz, ‘Thinking About Turkish Modernization,’ 438.
- <sup>19</sup> Lapidot-Firilla, ‘Introducing Cemil Meriç,’ 126.
- <sup>20</sup> Safa, *Doğu-Batı Sentezi*, 11.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 132-133.
- <sup>23</sup> Poyraz, ‘Thinking About Turkish Modernization,’ 445.
- <sup>24</sup> Ayvazoğlu, ‘Peyami Safa’, 227-228.
- <sup>25</sup> Gürbilek, *Sessizin Payı* [Share of the Silenced], 93.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.
- <sup>27</sup> Heper and Toktaş, ‘Islam, Modernity, and Democracy.’
- <sup>28</sup> Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik* [Strategic Depth]; Davutoğlu, ‘Alternative Paradigms’; and Davutoğlu, ‘Civilizational Transformation.’
- <sup>29</sup> The same can be said about the conception of civilisation by Recep Şentürk; see, for example, his ‘Unity in Multiplexity.’
- <sup>30</sup> Giridharadas, ‘In Turkey.’
- <sup>31</sup> For similar developments in art and architecture see, for example, Bozdoğan ‘Art and Architecture’; see particularly 455-469.
- <sup>32</sup> This questioning of the categories of ‘Islam’ versus ‘secularism’ is very much implicit in anthropological studies of Turkey of the decades already before 1980, most notably in Tapper, ‘Islam in Modern Turkey.’
- <sup>33</sup> Kerslake, ‘New Directions,’ 118.
- <sup>34</sup> Gürbilek, *The New Cultural Climate*, 9.
- <sup>35</sup> Gürbilek describes her essays “not merely as the tale of a far-off land of darkness but of Turkey’s West within” (*ibid.*, 4).
- <sup>36</sup> Stokes, *The Republic of Love*, 19.
- <sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.
- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.
- <sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-120, 126.
- <sup>42</sup> Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate*, 7.
- <sup>43</sup> Stokes, *The Republic of Love*, 9-10. Stokes argues that new Islamist leaders “not only questioned the West’s monopolization of the idea of the modern but showed themselves to be, in many regards, better at being “modern” than the secularists”. I find this approach problematic, as it does not distinguish between being modernist, in the sense of championing the values of modernity, and being modern.
- <sup>44</sup> Stokes, *The Republic of Love*, 18-19.
- <sup>45</sup> Stokes, *The Arabesk Debate*, 36-49.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- <sup>48</sup> Göknaç, ‘The Novel in Turkish’, 476.
- <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 472-473.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 474. Turkish literature has been caught between the perception of being imitative of other traditions, European or Persian, or emphasising an unchanging Turkishness that can be traced to ancient times. These two dominant perspectives of modernity – the “orientalist-nationalist binary” – both ahistorical, plague surveys of Turkish literature (475).
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.
- <sup>52</sup> Göknaç, ‘The Novel in Turkish,’ 489-493. In the 1950s and beyond, the dominant theme in Turkish literature had been ‘westernization and the conflict between East and West’; in the so-called ‘village novels’ for example “the idealist teacher was depicted as “representative of civilization”, with the religious figures seen as sources of backwardness”. An alternative literary construction was produced by Kısakürek and Karakoç, however, in the post-1950 period, in poetry (Çayır, *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey* 5-6).
- <sup>53</sup> Kerslake, ‘New Directions,’ 116.
- <sup>54</sup> Göknaç, ‘The Novel in Turkish,’ 493-495.
- <sup>55</sup> Berna Moran, quoted in Kerslake, ‘New Directions,’ 101.
- <sup>56</sup> Kerslake, ‘New Directions,’ 102.
- <sup>57</sup> Göknaç, ‘The Novel in Turkish,’ 498.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 499-503.
- <sup>59</sup> Seyhan, *Tales of Crossed Destinies*, 6.
- <sup>60</sup> Belge, ‘The Turkish Novel,’ 69 quoted in Paker, ‘Translator’s Introduction,’ 13.
- <sup>61</sup> Gürsoy Sökmen, ‘Statement,’ and author’s interview, Istanbul, December 2015.
- <sup>62</sup> Göknaç, ‘The Novel in Turkish,’ 498.

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- <sup>63</sup> Çayır, *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey*.
- <sup>64</sup> Meriç saw the Islamic novel as ‘social sickness’, a result of class conflict; this critical stance continued by others such as Bulaç in the 1980s; he does not deny the importance of literature but argues it should be based on an Islamic vision of the world. Despite these criticisms a group of Islamic novelists emerge in the 1970s (Çayır, *Islamic Literature in Contemporary Turkey*, 6-7).
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.
- <sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, xxx.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-41.
- <sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.
- <sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.
- <sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.
- <sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.
- <sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-151.
- <sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.
- <sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.
- <sup>78</sup> Karakatsanis, “We’, ‘they’ and the ‘human,’” 233.
- <sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 235-236.
- <sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.
- <sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 253.
- <sup>82</sup> Fisher Onar, “Echoes of a Universalism Lost”, 229-241.
- <sup>83</sup> Kara, ‘Turban and Fez,’ 179-83.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* The Islamist view that actual Islamic history was one of decline and had to be overcome was shared between Islamist critics and the secularist Young Turks and Kemalists, for different reasons.
- <sup>85</sup> These emerged partly in synergy between the liberal-left and Islamism in the 1980s, as the former sought to root their ideas in the “real” Turkey; and within a general “post-Kemalist” intellectual context (Aytürk, “Post Post-Kemalizm” [Post-Post Kemalism]). See also Erdoğan and Üstüner, “‘Siyaset Sonrası’ Söylemler’ [Post-Politics Discourses], 658-666.
- <sup>86</sup> One such example is the İstanbul Düşünce Evi [Istanbul Think-House] based in Üsküdar. My lecture there on the topic of this paper in October 2016 attracted a lot of attention. One of the most interesting aspects of the event, however, was the audience of young people who, in terms of dress and style, defied categorisation!
- <sup>87</sup> Author’s interview with Haldun Güllalp, Yıldız University, İstanbul, December 2015.
- <sup>88</sup> Kırbaçoğlu, “İslamcıların Şartı [Conditions of Islamism].”
- <sup>89</sup> Göksel, “Revolution, Liberation, and Islam,” 13.
- <sup>90</sup> One critic of civilisation in contemporary Turkey, from an Islamic perspective, is Bedri Gencer who, in his many writings, castigates civilisation for being a secular term and for essentialising Islam and placing it alongside other religions. He is critical of Davutoğlu’s “conventional” view of civilisation (interviews with the author, İstanbul, December 2015 and March 2016). Gencer is difficult to characterise: perhaps he can be described as an ‘Islamist universalist’ from an anti-modernist perspective. For his views on civilisation see, for example, his “Modern Kültüre Karşı Koymak” [Resisting Modern Culture].
- <sup>91</sup> Özel’s critique of civilisation is wide-ranging; he argued that “a civilisation is a stunted culture” (interview with the author, İstanbul, March 2016). His stance is very different from Yenigün’s, however, because it is anti-modernist position. I am very grateful to Hilal İbrahim Yenigün for helping me clarify a number of these issues, in a personal communication.
- <sup>92</sup> Yenigün, *The Rise and Demise*, 220.
- <sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.
- <sup>95</sup> Çarkoğlu and Kalaycıoğlu, *The Rising Tide*.
- <sup>96</sup> Ertit, *Endişeli Muhafazakarlar Çağı* [The Era of Anxious Conservatives].
- <sup>97</sup> Yılmaz, ‘Conservatism in Turkey’; Eurobarometer surveys; Ekonomik İktisadi Kalkınma Vakfı [Economic Development Foundation], Kamuoyu Araştırması [Public Opinion Survey].
- <sup>98</sup> Çayır, *Islamic Literature*, xxv.
- <sup>99</sup> Author’s interview with İlker Aytürk, Bilkent University, Ankara, March 2016.
- <sup>100</sup> Giridharadas, “In Turkey.”
- <sup>101</sup> Altınay, “This Generation.”
- <sup>102</sup> Author’s interview with Fulya Atacan, Yıldız University, İstanbul, December 2015.
- <sup>103</sup> Turam, *Gaining Freedoms*, 4, 6.
- <sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid, 9-10.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 17.

<sup>108</sup> Gürbilek, *Sessizin Payı* [Share of the Silenced], 87.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.,104-105. On Gezi generally see also the documentary film: *Yeryüzü Aşkın Yüzü Oluncaya Dek* [Love Will Change the Earth].

<sup>113</sup> Kongar in Renda and Kartepeter, “Turkey’s Cultural Transformation,” 61.

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