Citizenship as a Communitarian Nation Building Project in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The concept of universal citizenship embodies both the basis upon which liberal nation-states build their 'different yet equal' societies, and the foundation upon which republican nation-states base their political, communitarian and social reforms. Turkey, one of these republican nation-states, has encountered some setbacks in its modernization project based on universal citizenship. The author argues that neither de-stratification nor equality has been attained thus far in Turkey, and that rather than focusing on claims of universal citizenship, states should be concentrating on evaluating the actual condition of membership in their societies.

The nation-state's claim to unite a diverse group of people within the same community rests on the concept of universal citizenship. This provides not only the legal framework of who can be member of the community but also a social and political framework within which members of the community seek representation. One of the main promises of universal citizenship of civic republicanism is equal representation before the law which assumes that despite differences within the private realm, individuals are located in the public sphere as equals in terms of fulfilling their potentials and participating in their own affairs. There are, of course, variations between modern societies and the way they organize their citizenship regimes. In countries such as Britain or the United States, where the liberal tradition has historically been dominant, the citizenship regime focuses on the primacy of the individual and diversity rather than the communitarian aspect of the republican tradition.[1] Different as they may be, citizenship regimes usually function as a derivative of national narrative and contribute to homogenization.

Turkey for instance is a good example of a republican regime where citizenship practices played a central role in consolidating the national identity. The republican citizenship regime as an integral part of nation building project has not been hospitable to the idea of diversity and has usually adopted the position that diversity is detrimental to national unity and social cohesion. Notwithstanding the historical connections between the Ottoman Empire and France, the French style, Rousseauian citizenship regime, with its clear distinction between the public and the private, and its assumed role of the state as neutral institution, became a natural model for the citizenship regime in Turkey. The republican regime defined its political project as creating a modern national community and the citizenship regime became the central site through which such community is created. Over the last decade, however, the republican political project has come under scrutiny by groups who claim that their values and aspirations have been excluded from the conditions of membership in the republican project. While Kurdish nationalism has expressed itself in a separatist movement, Islamist groups have addressed the question of citizenship both in terms of political representation and cultural politics.

Citizenship as a Nation Building Project

The modernizing elite in Turkey identified group-based membership as one of the biggest obstacles standing in the way of creating a socially integrated national community. Universal citizenship was important for creating a new self and society because it was the site of all that which was deemed to be new, modern and progressive. The republican elite considered the community defined by ethnic and religious loyalties as one of the biggest obstacles standing in the way of realizing a modern national *gesellschaft.* Mardin argues that the Kemalist elite saw the communitarian organization of the traditional Ottoman society as a serious obstacle to the creation of modern society.[2] The republican modernizing elite knew that in order to create a modern nation state, they had to break with the traditional communitarian system by introducing a series of reforms ranging from education to the control of religion.[3] Universal citizenship became the medium through which these reforms were established as part of the nation building project. The properties of this universal citizenship were rationalism, progress, the modern nation, and secularism, whereas those relegated to the private realm were ethnic identities, religion, and traditional social relations.[4] The citizenship regime in Turkey had the specific mission of representing a modern and rational society, while

the habits of traditional society were left to the private sphere. What is important to emphasize, however, is that the modern project did not seek to eradicate tradition from the heads of the people. Rather, the universal citizenship practices simply worked to confine tradition to the private realm.[5]

As mentioned earlier, the Turkish Republic based the legal framework of citizenship on positive law, where all citizens are equal before the law, while establishing a modern bureaucracy to provide services to all citizens. The principle of populism proposed that no difference exist among citizens, refusing 'preferential' treatment to any group, class, family or individual. The modern reforms were detailed enough to ensure the impartial public life where the state treats citizens as equals. Toprak defines the neutrality of the citizenship regime in Turkey as follows:

> Turkey is among the few non-Western countries which was not colonized and which inherited a bureaucracy and an intellectual milieu already under the influence of universal legal forms. The reforms of the early republican period laid the foundations for a secular legal system which recognized gender equality, secular education, and a conception of public service, both within the bureaucracy and in the political arena, which did not rest on class differentiation, ethnic background or kinship ties. Thus, the political and the bureaucratic establishment never belonged to a specific ethnic group, family, clan or people of the same class. This is important for state-society relations. A conception of the public sphere which is value neutral in terms of ethnic or kinship ties and which rests on universal criteria does not exist in many parts of the developing world and perhaps explains the unique position of Turkey in the Middle Eastern context…[6]

Toprak's description of the citizenship regime in Turkey as unique in the Middle Eastern context is a correct assessment. Yet the implementation of universal citizenship in Turkey is also different from the Western experience. Contrary to Western tradition, based on exclusionary practices and a long history of painful political struggle for inclusion by marginalized groups like ethnic minorities or women, Turkish citizenship was inclusionary from the beginning. In order to create a socially integrated national community out of heterogeneous groups of people, Turkish modernization included various ethnic and religious groups under the umbrella of universal citizenship. However accurate Toprak's account of the neutrality of Turkish citizenship, it fails to recognize the double problematic of the citizenship regime, which is that the very principle of universal citizenship is centered around a notion of the common good. This depends on creating a homogeneous national identity, resulting in other forms of exclusionary practices which hinder the representation of particular groups and identities. This particular understanding of citizenship regime assumes that the neutrality of the public sphere is sufficient to ensure the existence of a democratic and inclusive political system. Furthermore, it assumes that the differences and complexities of the private realm can be offset by the public sphere as long as its neutrality can be preserved.

In stratified societies, as Fraser has argued, the institutional framework produces inequality among citizens and the idea of a single, neutral public does not address these existing inequalities. Furthermore, disadvantaged groups and identities do not have a real chance to participate in the public sphere no matter how neutral citizenship practices may be. Even in a multicultural society, the single, neutral public does not provide justice to all groups and identities within society because the framework of the public is defined by the culturally dominant group.[7] In sum, the institutional neutrality of the citizenship regime does not also automatically lead to economic and cultural neutrality. Power imbalances emerging from economic and cultural differences will exclude some groups from full participation such as the representation of their cultural identities and limit others from participating in it altogether. The neutrality of the citizenship regime, therefore, does not guarantee equal participation, nor that people can engage in peaceful negotiation of differences.

The cultural, not to mention economic, differences that existed in Turkish society thus rendered meaningless any institutional neutrality in the citizenship regime. The principles of a state-controlled secularism, nationalism and rationalism framed the boundaries of membership in such a way that its citizens could only be equal, and the operation of the citizenship regime could only be value neutral, within the boundaries of these principles. In the case of state-controlled secularism, where secularism was not only a principle of the regime but also part of the regulative aspect of everyday life, the issue of dress, such as women's dress or male hats, became an important source of exclusion.[8] Similarly, where national identity constitutes the basis of citizenship, the existence of other particular groups in the public realm could turn into a crisis. Like any other nation state, Turkey contained, and still contains, different cultural and ethnic groups. By assuming that there was a single public sphere whose authorized identity was the national one, the modern project eliminated the possibility that other groups would participate in the public with their own identity. This strictly crafted and controlled public sphere, which ensured the unity of the people and the state, not only operated as a strictly communitarian project, but it was also based on the exclusion of the other(s) whose values and aspirations were not in harmony with the general will.

Citizenship, Change and Democratization

The key defining characteristic of the post-1980 political landscape in Turkey was the multiplication of identity positions and their struggle for inclusion in the public sphere. Kurdish nationalism and political Islam have presented the most important challenges to the boundaries of universal citizenship, and its homogeneous representation of national identity. By drawing attention to the exclusionary nature of the national identity, Kurdish nationalism poses a serious challenge to its privileged position of Turkish identity. Political Islam represents another challenge to secular citizenship and unlike Kurdish nationalists, however, Islamists were able to establish themselves in the public sphere as political actors and to question the fundamental aspects of citizenship and national identity.[9] Islamists have consistently

attacked the equation of modernity with secularism and Westernization. The growing urban Islamist population, which has considerable economic power and an intellectual background, demand that a religious life style be included in the public sphere. Islamists have been particularly successful in organizing themselves in civil society.[10] The Islamic bourgeoisie, with very efficient and active business organizations, and the Islamist intellectuals, with their vibrant publishing community, have been extremely crucial in opening up space in the public sphere.[11]

Central to both Islamist and Kurdish challenges to citizenship is the attempt to question the conditions of membership in the national community. Universal citizenship in Turkey rests on the exclusion of group identities from the public sphere, privileging national identity as the only legitimate identity. It, therefore, functions as a basis for social integration, or as I argued earlier, fulfils the role of realizing the aims of the modernization process. In this way, citizenship is not just simply a set of legal codes, defining the boundaries of membership in the national community, but also a set of cultural practices, representing modern national identity. Ethnic and religious concerns reveal universal citizenship's limits in that having the same legal status does not necessarily satisfy the demands of groups and identities who have specific claims of representation. Tensions in the Turkish case run particularly high as citizenship has the specific mission of realizing and representing the premises of the modern regime.

Citizenship does not constitute an unchanging and static practice but its history in modern times manifests a great deal of struggle by which various groups and identities have sought recognition and inclusion.[12] The current debates around citizenship point to another phase in this process of not only redrawing the boundaries of membership to a national community but also how those members use their citizenship rights. Citizenship debates reflect a desire to broaden plurality and accommodate the life-world of various groups and identities that exist in nation states. In this respect, citizenship practices should not simply be seen as legal practices that define the condition of membership, but as active political struggles that broaden membership boundaries as well as allowing different groups and identities to articulate their differences.

Citizenship debates in the Turkish context demonstrate that universal citizenship is not flexible enough to enable the representation of different identities in the public sphere. However, any alternative that suggests the reorganization of membership strictly on communitarian principles also contains the danger of both segregating differences but also potentially freezing meaning of identities by denying the political negotiation between them. Overcoming this obstacle requires, as suggested by Fuat Keyman, a radical democratization process in which issues of identity/difference cease to be a matter for the private realm but become part of citizenship practices.[13] Rethinking citizenship practices within the context of radical democracy requires a framework that enables the recognition of contradictions as part of the formation of identities. Only here will claims for recognition cease to be a threat to the existing citizenship regime and become practices that further democratize it.

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Notes

1 Engin F. Isin and Patricia K. Wood. *Citizenship and Identity, Politics and Culture.* London: Sage, 1999.

2 Serif Mardin. *Turk* Modernlesmesi. Istanbul: Iletisim Yayinlari, 1992.

3 Ibid.

4 Ilkay Sunar. "State, Society and Democracy in Turkey." *Turkey between East and West: New Challenges for a Rising Regional Power.* Ed. Vojtech Magtny & R. Craig Nation. Westview, 1996.

5 Given the fact that secularism was one of the principles of modern citizenship that received special attention from the modernizing elite, because they firmly believed that society could not be modern if religion played a public role, religion was not banned on a personal level. Comparisons are usually made between the early days of the Turkish Republic's attitude towards religion and those of socialist countries. Unlike the socialist countries the modernizing elite in Turkey did not ban religious practice altogether but paid special attention to eliminate religion's role in public life. The best example of this attitude is probably the role of the state in religious education. With the 1924 law of unification of all education, religious education came under strict control of the state. For more on the relationship between the state and religion see Ali Yasar Saribay, *Turkiye'de Modernlesme, Din Ve Parti Politikasi* (Istanbul: Iletisim, 1985). and Istar B. Tarhanli, *Musluman Toplum, "Laik Devlet": Turkiye'de Diyanet Isleri Baskanligi* (Istanbaul: Afa Yayinlari, 1993).

6 Binnaz Toprak. "Civil Society in Turkey." *Civil Society in the Middle East.* Ed. Augustus Richard Norton. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996. p. 87.

7 Nancy Fraser. "Rethinking the Public Sphere." *Habermas and the Public Sphere.* Ed. Calhoun Craig. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.

8 Nilufer Gole. "Authoritarian Secularism and Islamist Politics: The Case of Turkey." *Civil Society in the Middle East.* Ed. Augustus Richard Norton. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996.

9 Umit Cizre Sakallioglu. "Islam-State Interaction in Turkey." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 28, No. 2 (1996).

10 Toprak. "Civil Society in Turkey." p. 106-22.

11 For the case of Islamist intellectuals see Binnaz Toprak, "Islamist Intellectuals: Revolt against Industry and Technology," in *Turkey and the West: Changing Political and Cultural Identities,* Eds. Metin Heper, Ayse Oncu & Heinz Kramer (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993). and Nilufer Gole, "Snapshots of Islamic Modernities," *Daedalus* 129, No. 1 (2000).

12 Isin and Wood. *Citizenship and Identity.*

13 E. Fuat Keyman. "Globallesme Ve Turkiye: Radikal Demokrasi Olasiligi." *Kuresellesme, Sivil Toplum Ve Islam.* Eds. E. Fuat Keyman & A. Yasar Saribay. Istanbul: Vadi Yayinlari, 1998.