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Alevism and Neo-Ottomanism

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Summary

One remarkable, recent transformation in Turkish public life, roughly corresponding to the rule of the rule of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, has been a reevaluation of the role of Ottoman history and the Ottoman past in contemporary Turkey. Neo-Ottomanism now occupies a plethora of domains in Turkey, ranging from foreign policy to consumer culture. However, the subtle forms of exclusion that Neo-Ottomanism entails for Alevis have yet to be appreciated.

Ottoman Redux

In recent decades, collective memories of the Ottoman Empire have expanded rapidly, reorienting public life in multiple ways. Television serials recast sultans as soap opera heroes; Ottoman-style mosques sprout up like mushrooms across Turkish cities; nostalgic images of Ottoman “multiculturalism” occupy academic texts and tourist brochures alike. Neo-Ottomanism has emerged in tandem with the rule of the AKP, though its permutations extend beyond their specific policies and political vision. As statecraft, Neo-Ottomanism is especially associated with former AKP Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (Öktem 2023). Neo-Ottomanism has played a role in everything from the efflorescence of “Ottoman” cuisine to the reconversion of Hagia Sophia/Aya Sofya from a museum to a mosque. Neo-Ottomanism has also initiated a shift away from Kemalism as state ideology in Turkey, in particular in relation to the legacies of the Ottoman Empire and their desirability as precedents for contemporary political and cultural life.

Assymetrical Collective Memories

For Alevis, Neo-Ottomanism entails subtle forms of exclusion from public life and national culture. While Sunni Turks are able to celebrate and identify with the glories of the Ottomans, Alevis typically view Ottoman nostalgia with understandable skepticism. Neo-Ottomanism risks reviving, in postmodern fashion, the Ottoman-era association of Kızılbaş Alevis with both Shi’ism and the Iranian Safavid (and later

Qajar) Empire. For many Alevis, “Ottoman collective memory” boils down to recollection of the mass slaughter of Kızılbaş during the reign of Sultan Yavuz Sultan Selim (1512-1520) in the context of Ottoman-Safavid confrontation. It is no surprise, therefore, that a variety of Alevi groups protested the naming of the third bridge over the Bosporus after Selim, when the AKP announced the decision in 2013 (the bridge opened in 2016) (Çapa 2013). Rather than a heroic statesman that Sunnis and the AKP envision, for Alevis, Yavuz Sultan Selim remains a figure of oppression and violence, akin to the villain of the Battle of Karbala, Yazid I.

Neo-Ottoman Istanbul and Alevi Exclusion

In Istanbul, especially, Neo-Ottomanism’s romantic image of architecture and imperial-era multiculturalism excludes Alevi residents almost entirely. Alevis resided almost exclusively in rural Anatolia throughout the Ottoman era, and therefore do not possess notable monuments in the city that might compete with Mimar Sinan’s mosques or the imperial palaces. The only partial exception to this absence of Alevi sites in the city is Karacaahmet Cemetery in Üsküdar, due to the fact that Karaca Ahmet was a Bektaşi. Nonetheless, as a nostalgic geography of the city of Istanbul, Neo-Ottomanism has little to offer Alevi residents of the city, and little ability to accommodate them.

Conclusion

Neo-Ottomanism has been celebrated in a variety of forums as a welcome opening to a previously neglected past, yet it is not an innocent form of collective memory. In particular, Neo-Ottomanism risks silencing the violent legacies of the empire, both in relation to Alevis and in relation to other non-Sunni and/or non-Turkish communities. In this respect, Neo-Ottomanism demands interpretation as a facet of Sunni hegemony in contemporary Turkey, which excludes Alevis in both overt and subtle ways.

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