

## Reproducing Class: Education, Neoliberalism, and the Rise of the New Middle Class in Istanbul

By Henry J. Rutz and Erol M. Balkan

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*Reproducing Class* is a neatly focused examination of the transformative work of globalization in Istanbul through a focus on the family. With an in-depth study of the educational practices of the upper middle class, inspired by Bourdieu's theories of cultural capital, Rutz and Balkan examine the ways in which this particular social group has developed strategies for negotiating the climate of increasing economic and political instability brought on by Turkey's economic restructuring in the 1980s. Istanbul was a natural site for the study because the city has historically been a locus of economic and cultural transformation, something linked to the historic nature of its selective education. Istanbul elites' global orientation is visible in the European influence in the private, foreign schools that are the most selective, and most desired, for the families in this study. This study of elites and their strategies of social reproduction is important because these same elites have long constituted a privileged class who themselves were the dominant agents of political and social change in Turkey. The fieldwork behind this project was conducted in various stages from 1990 to 1997 (with some follow-up interviews in 2006), and the major survey that provides foundational information regarding the educational, professional, and lifestyle characteristics of the study group was conducted in 1993. As such, this book provides a close analysis of a particular moment that subsequent research has found to be quite consequen-

tial for the largest questions Turkish society faces today in the new millennium.

The introduction to the book sets the stage with a description that engages the reader in imagining the "structure of feeling" that imbues the scene on Turnacı Başı Street in Cihangir, where parents and children wait for the beginning of the fifth-grade exam that will determine access to, or irreversible exclusion from, private middle schools. This pregnant moment is filled with the pressure of many years of private tutoring and parental expectations. This pressure will merely continue through the years of high school and college, as exclusive education is the single most important focus for these families. *Reproducing Class* illustrates that, for these parents, a comfortable and secure lifestyle is increasingly difficult to achieve and maintain, given the rapid and dynamic economic and political transformations in Istanbul, and education is the one thing that they believe has "absolute value" (p.4).

The rest of the book examines the various elements that contribute to the overall context these families face. Chapter one briefly introduces the focus on class as the social and cultural dimension of state-initiated neoliberal reforms and capitalist transformation. Chapter two gives a very informative historical review of the ways in which Turkey has embraced state redistribution and privatization. This chapter also brings the focus to the scale of the city, where we read about the impact

of globalization through the introduction of new private media, commodity forms, and elite districts. The third chapter brings our attention to the educational system, linking its development to the projects of modernity and secular nationalism in the early decades of the Republic. We see increasing global influence and the ways in which it began to create selective education between 1950-1983, with the introduction, for example, of the Fulbright and Ford Foundation programs that brought American teachers and researchers to Turkey.

The link between globalization and social reproduction becomes particularly obvious when, in 1983, the same year that neoliberal reforms were introduced in Turkey, the state also initiated the Selective Middle Schools Examinations as a way to regulate the increasing competition among upper middle-class families for private middle schools. The consequences of these transformations on families themselves is examined in the fourth chapter, where we learn about the changing structure of households, the creation and maintenance of important social networks, and the gendered norms and values that underpin practices of kinship, family, and marriage. We also begin to hear the voices of the people who participated in Rutz and Balkan's study with compelling examples that illustrate the feelings and experiences of different family members. The pressure of this system on mothers as the primary managers of children's education becomes viscerally clear in the following quote. One working mother says, about a tutoring session she attended with her child together with a friend, "The session started at 8:30 and we sat there. I mean, from 8:30 am to 1:00 pm. It's not a short

time. I took notes for two hours and Bilge took notes for two hours and then she said to me, 'This is tough. I've taken a lot of notes, I've studied at Harvard at Wharton, I can write really fast and can follow the class while I'm taking notes but I could almost barely do this'" (p.65). And yet, as the last three chapters illustrate, families experience feelings of incredibly intense competition that lead not to opting out of the system, but instead to developing increasingly refined strategies for trying to pragmatically beat the system with better skills and techniques. This, in turn, has encouraged the growth of a private market system in tutoring and exam preparation.... and the cycle continues.

This study links social reproduction and class formation within a neoliberal economic system to the characteristics and experiences of Istanbul's upper-middle class in the 1990s. This close focus is both the strength and the weakness of the book in terms of its larger contribution to Turkish studies. When the study was conducted, the boundaries of Istanbul's upper-middle class as a secular, cosmopolitan, elite social group may have seemed to be quite self-evidently coherent. And yet, because I am reading this study of the early-mid 1990s from the vantage point of 2011, I desire both to see it within its contemporaneous moment – to understand what it meant in the 1990s – and also to read it against the large body of literature on political, economic, and social transformation in Istanbul that has occurred since. This literature raises important questions that I would have liked to see the authors engage in the conclusion.

In general, we now see the 1990s as the time during which the boundaries of Istanbul's social and economic elite be-

come blurred as Islamist politics and a pious cultural and economic elite begin to play a visible role in the urban economic, political, and cultural scene. This is the same period in which not only secular values, but also Turkish ethnic national identity as the default hegemonic norm was seriously undermined by rural-urban migration, Kurdish activism, and the gradual exposure of the state's role in histories of ethnic minority persecution. From this perspective, perhaps the people Rutz and Balkan studied constitute a particular group that was reacting to an increasing sense of cultural unmooring.

The book doesn't explicitly engage with the secularist ideals that were probably important for the people whose practices are the subject of study. At the time, it was probably taken for granted that secularism was an obvious or fundamental characteristic of both Istanbul's elites and of the nature of the city's globalization. And yet, as Jenny White's *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey* (2002) informs us, the 1990s were the very moment when the Islamist movement, including among the middle class, was gaining ground in Istanbul, and transforming, in turn, the urban context that sets the stage for Rutz and Balkan's book. Reading their cultural-economic study against Özyürek's *Nostalgia for the Modern* (2006), for example, suggests that perhaps the elites we learn about here have an intense focus on education and the social connections it provides not only as a strategy to retain a foothold in an increasingly tenuous economic context but, more importantly, for a less-than-certain secular, Turkish future.

In Berna Turam's *Between Islam and the State* (2006), the 1990s are the context for new and complex relationships between Islamic movements and the Turkish state. One of the chapters of her book addresses education, viewing it as a means through which moderate Islamic groups such as the Gülen movement contested the secular identity of the state in the 1990s. Reading *Reproducing Class* alongside her work makes me wonder, then, about the other meanings contained in the pressure those elites felt to succeed in the competition for foreign private schools. It seems that the people Rutz and Balkan interviewed were probably concerned with far more than maintaining an elite economic status that would provide a "comfortable life" (p.ix). Their concern for "comfort" reflects, perhaps, an intensifying uneasiness with the social and political transformation occurring around them, and the ways in which not just their economic status, but perhaps their inheritance of Turkey's secular identity came into question during this period.

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### Works Cited

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