



## Cenk Saraçoğlu

*Kurds of Modern Turkey: Migration, Neoliberalism and Exclusion in Turkish Society.* (Tauris Academic Studies, 2010, ISBN: 9781848854680, 256 pp., £56.00)

Being a national security issue since the establishment of Turkish Republic in 1923, the Kurdish question has several and deep rooted connotations for politics and society in Turkey. Even if it was excessively securitized and long classified as a national taboo by the Turkish state, the Kurdish question has increasingly occupied a central status in Turkish politics since the 1980s. As a consequence of excessive securitization, academic or otherwise any work problematizing the official state line was subjected to silencing, marginalization or even ban. The intellectuals, academics, civil society activists demanding recognition of a separate Kurdish identity and cultural/collective rights of the Kurds were often blamed as being traitors and prosecuted and punished in some cases. In the 1980s and 1990s researching and publishing on the Kurdish question amounted to assuming grave risks or confronting fierce public reaction for researchers. Thus, there was an acute lack of academic research concerning the most important issue of Turkish politics.

This book, first of all, is an invaluable attempt to remedy this gap which still manifests itself today to a certain extent. Yet, its originality and uniqueness mainly lies in its attempt to understand how and in what ways some macro and micro-level dynamics interact in the classification of Kurdish migrants as ethnic others and in their social, political and discursive exclusion. The book, bringing the social back into the analysis, also deserves to be distinguished from the dominant academic and media discourse, where the Kurdish question is often considered as an issue of political tension between the rights of Kurds and the Turkish state. As Saraçoğlu demonstrates, in the mainstream literature, the Kurdish question has mainly been discussed with respect to two contradictions: “the contradiction between the democratic political system and authoritarian state tradition and the contradiction between Turkey’s candidateship to European Union (EU) and the problems in its democracy” (p. 2). Thus, the Kurdish issue is mainly reduced to the problem of democratization that may be regulated through political and legal reforms enhancing the rights and freedoms of the Kurds. These prevalent approaches fail to explore “social relational dimensions” of the conflict, i.e. rising anti-Kurdish discourses and the social-historical processes through which these discourses have been produced and reproduced within Turkish society. This book, contextualising the Kurdish question into the post-1980 neoliberal transformations in Turkish politics and economy, sheds some light on the societal aspects of the issue at hand.

The first four chapters are dedicated to the discussion of main theoretical and methodological premises guiding Saraçoğlu’s research as well as the introduction of the term “exclusive recognition”. This term is operationalized by the author both to identify the ways in which Kurdish migrants are treated by the middle class İzmirli (middle class people living in İzmir) and also to emphasize how it differs from Turkish state’s conventional “nationalist and assimilationist” policies on the issue. Chapter four also presents us a detailed and historical analysis of Turkish nationalism and the



ways in which the Kurdish conflict was represented in the official discourses of the Ottoman and the Turkish republican states (pp. 38-59). In the fifth and sixth chapters the author respectively sets the micro-level dynamics (the transformation of urban life in İzmir), and three macro level dynamics which are neoliberal transformation of Turkish economy, the armed conflict between the PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan) and the Turkish army and Kurdish immigration into western Turkish cities. These national dynamics, argues the author, structure the social and political processes whereby exclusive recognition has emerged and been reproduced within urban everyday social in İzmir. The chapters seven and eight focus on the socio-economic and spatial segregation of Kurdish migrants in İzmir and the discourses justifying different forms of isolation of Kurds as well as their ethnicization as a distinctive and homogeneous group of outsiders. Socio-economic segregation shows us how Kurdish migrants are subjected to unfavourable labour relations and living standards that are highly different from those of middle class İzmirlis. Spatial separation “refers to the residential concentration of Kurdish migrants in specific quarters of the city” (p 107). In the ninth chapter Saraçoğlu turns his eye to the role of outside factors, i.e. political developments in the Middle East reinforcing ethnicization and otherization of Kurdish migrants.

This study mainly aims to explore the socio-economic and historical processes through which the Kurdish migrants were classified as ethnic others by the middle class people living in İzmir. It also clearly depicts how they are socio-economically and spatially segregated and/or subjected to discrimination in different walks of urban life. The author further examines the ways in which the othering strategies are discursively framed and justified through some pejorative stereotypes and labels. While implementing these tasks, the author conceives national and micro-level dynamics in “constant dialogue” and ventures to analyse the ways in which these dynamics interact. Transition to a neoliberal form of capital accumulation, (p. 79) the armed conflict between PKK and the Turkish state (p. 88) and immigration of Kurds into the Turkey’s western cities (p. 95) constitute the national level dynamics which are all attributable to early 1980s. They have been structuring the social context of “exclusive recognition” in tandem with some micro-level factors such as daily encounters between Kurds and middle class Turks in the urban social life of İzmir.

This study is also informative about the living conditions of the Kurdish migrants concentrated in shanty towns and certain poor neighbourhoods in İzmir. Most of Kurdish migrants make their living through some informal jobs such as mussel-selling in the streets, running a stall in bazaar, or shoe-polishing. They are not regularly paid, and are not eligible to the most of the social security benefits of the state. This socio-economically isolated and even degraded status of the migrants strengthen, rather than weaken ethnicizing and exclusionary discourses of the middle class İzmirlis towards them who often work in regularly paid formal jobs (pp. 19-20).

Saraçoğlu explores the sources of anti-Kurdish sentiments in western Turkish cities through in-depth and semi-structured interviews (p. 28) with 90 people who have developed “exclusionary and antagonistic attitudes” vis-à-vis the Kurdish migrants. The author selected the interviewees from among the middle class İzmirlis who



have been continuously living in the city at least for 20 years with references of their “friends, colleagues, and relatives”. To the author, these interviews suggest that the middle class İzmiris recognise the Kurdish migrants as a distinct ethnic group (the Kurds) and identify their Kurdishness “with such pejorative stereotypes as benefit scroungers, ignorant, disrupter of urban life, invader, and separatist” (pp. 21-24, see also p. 133-160). Yet, a substantial methodological vagueness creates some confusion for the reader: whether the discourses of exclusive recognition and hostility towards Kurds should only be associated with the interviewees or should be taken as a common approach of the middle class İzmiris vis-à-vis Kurdish migrants. It is possible that the reader may reach different conclusions in different parts of the book and this vagueness constitutes the main weakness of the study at hand. Given the very selective and narrowly defined nature of interviewees, the author’s claim that these approaches may be generalizable to Western Turkish cities may be even more problematic.

Saraçoğlu defines exclusive recognition as a “social phenomenon” (p. 35) and an ideological “form of social consciousness that arose in the urban social life of İzmir” (p. 94, see also p. 171). It is a “coherent and systematic mode of thinking” and practice ethnicizing migrants from Eastern Anatolia “on the basis of certain stereotypes and labels” (p. 183). Hence, the ethnic identity of the migrants is not denied, but rather is emphasized to imagine them as a distinct and monolithic community. For the author, this attitude is “qualitatively different” from the positions of the Turkish state or Turkish nationalist parties vis-à-vis Kurds drawing mainly on “non-recognition and assimilation” (p. 5, see also p. 37). However, when considering different strands of approaches by varying Turkish nationalist groupings and changing nature of the state discourses vis-à-vis Kurds, this argument does not seem entirely persuasive. Inarguably, rejection of the existence of a distinct Kurdish identity and denial of collective rights to Kurds is still a prevalent approach of the various nationalist civil societal and political actors. Yet, one might also observe diversification of the Turkish nationalist attitudes towards Kurds as well as the state’s partially changing outlook on the issue. It may even be argued that exclusive recognition is increasingly gaining ground in Turkish public discourse rather than being unique to middle class İzmiris.

Overall, the book is easy to follow and well-structured in accordance with its purposes. Yet, some avoidable repetitions observed throughout the text obstruct sharpness and the clarity of the messages it conveys. This book is of direct relevance and interest not only to researchers of Turkish politics and Kurdish question, but also to students of migration studies. It is an interesting and appealing read about the identity dimensions of the complicated nature of the Kurdish question. Yet, it is just a preliminary research on the issue rather than being an authoritative one.

Asst. Prof. Alper Kaliber

Yaşar University, Izmir