The Alevis of Turkey present many conundrums to Western observers. Who exactly are they? What constitutes their social identity—ethnic, religious, cultural or political factors? How did these develop over time? What are their historical relations with the Kurdish national movement or with the Kemalist political elite? This volume attempts to comprehensively address the ‘Alevi issue’, while discussing the social and political formation of modern Turkey. As the authors make clear, this question, together with the ‘Kurdish issue’, is one of the most explosive issues in contemporary Turkey, which leaves no aspect of life unaffected. Nevertheless existing books on the Alevis in Turkey in any European language are scarce, let alone in English, dealing mainly with religious matters and, to a lesser extent, with political and ethnic questions. This book covers the ‘Alevi question’ from all its aspects and seeks to contribute significantly towards constructing a coherent picture.

In the book’s first part, Hamit Bozarslan and Paul J. White discuss the social research agenda. In his essay, Hamit Bozarslan unravels three myths of research on the Alevi in Turkey. The first of these is what he calls the ‘long-term history’ myth that invented Alevism as an eternal social category featuring a constant opposition to the state. The second one is the myth of the ‘Kemalist discontinuity’. This is the myth of Alevism as a natural ally of the Kemalist Republic. The third myth is that of the democratic culture of Alevis, as if there is an unshakeable link between Alevism and democracy. Finally, Bozarslan underlines the necessity of a sociological revaluation of Alevism. In his contribution, White debates the identity of Alevi Kurds as one example of the difficulty scholars have in discussing the concept of identity and the processes of ethnic differentiation. He deconstructs the myth of Alevism as a single undifferentiated identity and sketches the multiple identities of Alevis in general and Alevi Kurds in particular. He shows that the debate on the identity of the Alevis is not just of scholarly importance, but an issue of fierce political debate and struggle among Alevi themselves and between the Alevis, the Turkish state and the Kurdish national movement.
In part two, David Shankland examines responses to modernization in an Anatolian Alevi village. Shankland’s investigation reveals variegated patterns of ongoing change in contemporary Alevi communities. He also shows differences in social structures in Alevi villages from Sunni villages. Shankland stresses, however, that the dynamic processes in Alevi villages are still evolving with great speed. Finally, Shankland argues for further fieldwork in Alevi villages, so that ‘reasoned, properly contextualized evaluations of the Alevi “revival”’ can be undertaken.

In part three of the book, Kriztina Kehl-Bodrogi and Joost Jongerden discuss relations between the state and the Alevis. In ‘Atatürk and the Alevis: a Holy Alliance’ Kriztina Kehl-Bodrogi discusses the historical and political developments that made Atatürk appear to the Alevis as a liberator, but also the voices critical of that attitude. Joost Jongerden elaborates on the issue of legal discrimination and organized violence in the 1980s and 1990s against the Alevis in Turkey. He argues that the history of modern Turkey has been dominated by the attempts of the political and military elite to create social cohesion by the invention and re-invention of a Turkish national identity and the imposition of this particular identity on its citizens. He discusses some historical characteristics of identity politics in Turkey—in particular the development of a Turkish ethnie and the discourse and political influence of the Türk-Islam Sentezi. He also examines the repercussions of this Sentezi for the Alevis and the violent political incidents in the 1930s and the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The Alevi Renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s is discussed in part four of this book. Karin Vorhoff’s contribution on the understanding of this revival deals with processes of Alevi community formation. This Alevi revival, Vorhoff argues, is not about reviving Alevi culture, but about reformulating and reshaping it. She discusses attempts to unite Alevis as a Turkish social and political force and those who consider Alevism as a culture, without racial dimensions. In ‘Zazaname: Media and Music in the Alevi Renaissance’ Leyla Neyzi elaborates on the role of new media in the emergence of a Zaza-identity. She discusses the case of the music group Metin-Kemal Kahraman and the rediscovering of a Dersim-Zaza ethnic-religious and regional identity. Elise Massicard takes the annual Hacıbektaş Festival as case study in order to, as she writes, ‘try to understand, if not what Alevism is, at least how it works’. Massicard analyses the Festival as an example of a ‘productive misunderstanding’ that is contributing towards
masking differences towards a diversity of actors in the Alevi community and with relation to the state.

Ayşe Betul Çelik examines the revival and convergence of Alevi and Kurdish identities among Kurdish migrants in Istanbul, which have interacted with home town/village identity (hemşehrilik) among Alevi Kurds from the 1970s up to the present day. Çelik investigates how exclusive the three identities are in each period, and how each alternatively reinforced and challenged each other. She also notes the effect of Turkish state policies on the mushrooming of Alevi consciousness in the late 1980s—expressed in the resurgence of Alevi cultural manifestations and Alevi publications. By the 1990s a real change occurred, she argues, in which Kurdish aspects of identity began to dominate over Aleviness among Alevi Kurds. Paradoxically, this embracing of Kurdishness did not result in the withering away of hemşehrilik, since the three identities have tended to intermingle in practice. In her view, the hemşehri associations therefore continue to function although their continued existence is less guaranteed in the face of new, external pressures.

Isabelle Rigoni investigates the path towards Alevi identity of Alevis in Europe. She argues that it was this European Alevi revival that initiated the resurgence of Alevi identity within Turkey itself—although the European Alevi renaissance was itself deeply influenced by events in Turkey such as the 1980 coup and more recent violent anti-Alevi incidents. Rigoni believes that European Alevi’s self-conception has altered significantly since the early 1960s; these Alevis are now more willing than they were initially to refer to themselves as Alevis. She also stresses that Alevi migrants in Europe are more accurately understood ‘more as a migratory group with a strong identity and political consciousness . . . than as a diaspora’. . . Transterritoriality is nowadays a part of Alevism.

Part five of this book deals with the relations of ‘the Alevi’ with the Kurdish national movement. Michiel Leezenberg elaborates on the ambivalent relationship between the ‘Alevi-Kurds’ (or Kurdish Alevis) and the Kurdish national movement. Leezenberg refers to discussions about the Dersim rebellion in 1937–1938, which had long been claimed by Kurdish nationalists to be a Kurdish rebellion against the Kemalist State. Since the 1990s some Alevi Kurds began claiming that this revolt had been of a Zaza-nationalist character, with others claiming the rebellion was ‘Zaza-Alevi’. Leezenberg also argues that the Alevi revival forced the PKK to take a more accommodating
and pluralist position towards the Alevis. Hans-Lukas Kieser’s contribution deals with the relation between Alevis, Armenians and Kurds in the era of Atatürk, 1908–1938. Kieser argues that the Alevis hoped for an enhancement of their status with the seizure of power by the Young Turks, but were bitterly disappointed with the development of an exclusive Sunni-Turkish identity of the movement. Kieser describes how the Republic preferred excessive violence and assimilation above pluralism and analyses the major revolts by the Alevi Kurds of Dersim.

In part six of this volume, Emma Sinclair-Webb discusses the relations between the political left and the Alevis. She refers to the self-identification of many Alevis with the political left in Turkey, but also to the MHP ultra-nationalists, who portrayed Alevis as the natural allies of the left. Sinclair-Webb argues that this is not a question of an ‘organic’ relationship between the two, but as a historical convergence of interests between the political left and the Alevis.

Together, the collected articles not only give a comprehensive portrait of Turkey’s ‘Alevi enigma’. They also contribute to a better understanding of the development of social identities in Turkey and of the formation of modern Turkey.

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