Ayşe Kadıoğlu and E. Fuat Keyman, eds.


*Symbiotic Antagonisms: Competing Nationalisms in Turkey* explores the role of a variety of nationalist currents in Turkey’s politics. The title of the book is certainly striking and thoughtful, in that it refers to the phrase ‘symbiotic antagonisms’ introduced by Barrington Moore (1966, p. 237) to describe the relationship between the Japanese merchants, landowners (*daimyo*), and the warrior aristocracy (*samurai*) in the early nineteenth century. In this context, while being in a conflictual relationship, the former two classes needed the protection of the latter in the process of the rice of the landowners being turned into cash by the merchants. The editors argue that the coexistence of various competing nationalisms in Turkey might be similarly viewed as an instance of ‘symbiotic antagonisms,’ since Turkish, Kurdish, and Islamic nationalisms are rival ideologies, yet are constantly both reproducing one another as well as forming a hegemonic discourse over politics (“Introduction: Understanding Nationalism...,” p. xv).

The editors underline that though being a protean ideology emerging in a large variety of forms, nationalism in general has two basic characteristics. Firstly, it has a flirtatious nature, allowing it to ally with many different ideologies throughout history. Accordingly, it was initially associated with liberalism in the era of the French Revolution, stressing self-determination and popular sovereignty. However, things changed in the second half of the nineteenth century when nationalism came to terms with conservatism, this time opting for the preservation of the new status quo formed after the transformation of peoples into nations. Yet another flirtation occurred between nationalism and Marxism from the early twentieth century onward, this time on the basis of Lenin’s conceptualization of ‘nationalism of the oppressed’ against imperialist powers.

Secondly, nationalisms tend to be the products of a modern construction process shaped by the national intelligentsia, rather than being naturally evolved phenomena. Accordingly, throughout the selected articles it is demonstrated that both Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms are constructs of the nineteenth or early twentieth century.

The articles in this collection successfully depict the six ‘family resemblances’ of nationalisms mentioned by the editors (“Introduction: Understanding Nationalism...,” pp. xv–xvi). To begin with, it can be observed that the various nationalisms in the Turkish context are all products of a social, historical,
ideological, anthropological, and political construction. It is especially evident in Mardin’s (“Turkish Nationalism...”) and Kadıoğlu’s (“The Twin Motives of Turkish Nationalism”) pieces that the obsession of various Turkish nationalisms with the preservation of the state originates from the fact that these ideologies all find their roots in a construction primarily aimed at the preservation of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, Özoğlu (“Does Kurdish Nationalism Have a Navel?”) contends that despite references to literary texts and revolts in the earlier centuries that claim otherwise, the emergence of Kurdish nationalism in real terms has occurred as late as after the end of the First World War.

Secondly, it is thoroughly depicted that nationalism focuses on appearances rather than the structural causes behind them. For instance, Bora’s article (“Nationalist Discourses in Turkey”) on different Turkish nationalisms successfully illustrates that the liberal nationalism that has emerged in the 1980s has adopted some aspects of prosperity chauvinism and class racism. In this context, while the appearances and lifestyles of urban upper-middle classes are praised as being ‘progressive’ or ‘European,’ the lower classes are stigmatized as being ‘backward’ or ‘reactionary.’

Thirdly, as expressed by the editors, “the nationalist discourse is very powerful in constituting the relationship between the subject and the other, the subject and nature, and the subject and herself/himself” (“Introduction: Understanding Nationalism...,” p. xvi). In connection with this comes the fourth trait of nationalism, that is, its potential to establish and reproduce a feeling of insecurity against ‘the others.’ As an illustration of this phenomenon, both Bora (“Nationalist Discourses in Turkey”) and Özkırımlı (“The Changing Nature of Nationalism in Turkey...”) point to the ‘Sèvres syndrome’. Accordingly, the historical memory of the nationalist movements of the Christian Balkan peoples during the late Ottoman era and the Sèvres Treaty envisaging a partitioning of the last remaining Ottoman territories among the Western powers have created a skeptic stand among Turkish nationalists against demands of both the non-Muslim minorities and Kurds, as well as Western advice on implementing human rights. Nevertheless, this constant state of skepticism and fear has, as rightfully pointed out by Keyman (“Nationalism in Turkey...”), driven Turkish nationalism into a vicious circle of paranoia. Ironically, the harsher Turkish nationalism becomes, the more the movements challenging it flourish (such as in the case of Kurdish dissent), which in turn further increases the fears of Turkish nationalists and radicalizes their discourse. This vicious circle is perhaps one of the most crystallized forms of the ‘symbiotic antagonisms’ touched upon throughout the book.