Hale Yılmaz


Although nationalist accounts of the Turkish Revolution and studies adopting the modernization paradigm have long dominated the literature on early Republican Turkey, a third vein of scholarship has emerged in recent years, broadening the scope of the history of this period by taking into consideration the societal transformation which accompanied the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. Hale Yılmaz’s work on the Turkish nation-building process, Becoming Turkish, is a fresh contribution to this emerging scholarship. In a search for a more inclusive kind of history of the early republican period, Hale Yılmaz focuses on the interactions between the young Turkish state and society regarding the implementation of four specific nationalist-modernist reforms, namely the Hat Law of 1925 on men’s attire, attempts to modernize women’s dress, the Alphabet Law of 1928, which introduced a new Latin-based Turkish script to replace the Arabic-based Ottoman script, and finally the promulgation and celebration of new national holidays. These experiences ranged from active promotion and passive reception to outright rejection of the reforms in question by different segments of society. Oral histories, memoirs, local and national press cuttings and archival data compose the backbone of this new attempt to write the history of Turkish modernization and nation-building from below. The book is also pioneering in the sense that it rests on new archival data from the Archive of the Turkish Ministry of the Interior (EGM), an archive not commonly used yet by researchers and scholars, along with data from the Prime Ministerial Republican Archives (BCA), which has become indispensable for studies on the history of Republican Turkey since opening to researchers in the late 1990s.

The body of the book consists of four chapters, each of which is devoted to one of the aforementioned four specific nationalist-modernist reforms. Yılmaz examines the Hat Reform of 1925 within the framework of two centuries of Ottoman-Turkish modernization, arguing that the European hat symbolized Turkey’s decision to adopt European modernity as a whole as well as its leaders’ desire to differentiate the new regime from the ancien régime. Linking the absence of any collective resistance to the law to the harsh punishments by the Independence Tribunals of the period, Yılmaz considers other forms of individual reactions, on the one hand, such as “silent protest in the form of avoiding the public sphere altogether” (p. 33) and cases of active promotion, on the other hand, illustrating these throughout the first chapter through oral
histories, memoirs and archival data. It is also pointed out that, though the reform was intended to be a homogenizing measure, economic and regional differences turned the new headgear of the nation into new symbols of new distinctions — like urban dwellers wearing fedora hats, whereas peasants preferred caps (p. 75). Cases drawn from archival data also suggest that there were tensions between local administrators and the central government, and disagreements even within the government itself, not over the essence of the law, but rather over the use of force in implementing it.

Attempts to modernize women’s dress are analyzed within the framework of past Ottoman modernization efforts. After giving brief examples primarily from the Young Turk era, Yılmaz draws our attention to post-1922 shifts in the public debate on women’s attire. She detects two major shifts: secular justifications for the modernization of women’s dress on the grounds that this is necessary for the nation’s progress and modernity, and attempts “to reach and reshape the entire population, including rural women, in [an] effort to create a modern and unified nation out of a diverse Anatolian population” (p. 87). The leading figures of the new regime and other influential people like Ziya Gökalp challenged veiling and seclusion on the grounds that they were indeed alien customs to the Turkish nation, rather than because they were Islamic practices (p. 84). On the contrary, Yılmaz presents instances of utilization and mobilization of religious functionaries by the regime in legitimizing its campaign against veiling and seclusion. She also remarks that the regime, having learnt from unsuccessful experiences like Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, refrained from mandatory law when it came to women’s dress. However, the unfixed character of state policies and the divergence of individual reactions from passive reception to outright rejection are almost identical to the case of the Hat Reform (pp. 133, 136–7). It is also worth noting that, in contrast with expected homogenization, the same factors were at work regarding the uneven end-results of reform efforts across class and regional differences.

Regarding the Alphabet Law of 1928, Yılmaz suggests one more factor, namely generational differences, to explain wide non-compliance with the reform in question (p. 168). The older generations either experienced difficulties or totally failed to adapt to the new script. In rural areas too, where peasants felt no urgent need to become literate, and in some regions, especially those largely inhabited by Kurds with little or no institutional penetration, the Alphabet Reform proved unsuccessful in terms of increasing literacy levels. Nevertheless, the new regime itself, very much aware of these difficulties, chose to tolerate non-compliance as long as it did not appear as an act of opposition or reaction (p. 177). It was also difficult for the government to enforce in