

“We Should Be Ourselves before Being a European”: The New Curriculum, New Textbooks and Turkish Modernity

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Abstract

Globalization and transformations in nation-state structures require developing a new social-political language that would allow a peaceful coexistence for various identities and interests. This entails revising the link between local histories and the “universal.” Education can play a crucial role for developing this language. This paper examines the new curriculum and textbooks in Turkey on the basis of this problematic. The Ministry of National Education states that the new curriculum aims at preparing Turkey to the information age and the European Union. However, new textbooks still take an apologetic, essentialist, and nationalist stance toward Europe due to the historical-psychological background of Turkish modernity. Textbook authors reconstruct local history in the mirror of the West and imagine a homogenous ‘Us’ which is presented as the source of modern universal values. This stance is a manifestation of historical desire to break down the perceived hierarchy between Turkey and the West. It, however, reproduces such a hierarchy by placing the West ahead of Turkey along with a linear conception of history. The paper suggests a new frame for curriculum developers and textbook authors to recontextualize the link between Turkey, the West and modernity. This frame needs to be developed by taking a distance from both local experience and the West.

Key Words

New Curriculum, Turkey and Modernization, European Union, Non-Western Modernity, Textbooks.

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Turkey has been undergoing a major social and political transformation due to various internal and external developments. Non-Turkish and non-Muslim ethnic and religious minorities, submerged during the nation-formation process, are gaining public visibility and claiming their right to recognition. New conservative groups have recently achieved an upward mobility and attained new public and political roles with their Islamic identities. In addition, Turkey has started accession negotiations with the European Union in 2005. As a result of these developments, Turkey is facing its past and questioning the borders of “us” along with an aim to devise a new social and political framework in order to include newly emerging different groups and interests.

New attention on identity is not unique to Turkey, but is a global phenomenon since globalization and new technological developments have put different cultures in contact and made them interpenetrated more than ever (Göle, 2009a). New contacts have led every culture to reflect upon the question of “us” and “others.” Today’s central question, thus, is to develop a social and political language to respond to new identities and citizenship forms. It is not, however, easy to develop such a comprehensive language in an era of what Bauman calls “liquid modernity” (Bauman, 2000; Bauman 2001). The nation state, today, seems to be too big to include diverse groups (Benhabib, 2004, pp. 4-5). Yet, groups searching for a new framework still speak with a nation-state imaginary (Appadurai, 2003). What is needed today is a universal language that would allow new local, national, and supranational identities in a peaceful coexistence.

This paper explores Turkey through the new curriculum reform of 2005 and new textbooks prepared by the Ministry of National Education. The basic questions of the paper are as follows: How do the Ministry of National Education officials conceive of transformations in the world and in Turkey? How do textbook authors link “the local” and “the universal?” How do textbooks situate Turkey and the West? And how can education construct a social and political identity responding to different demands and sub-identities?

These questions are not only related to the field of education. Discussions over the curriculum, as Young notes, are always discussions about the past, present, and future of a society (Young, 2000, p. 9). This is also valid for Turkey where the curriculum has been revised and new textbooks have been introduced in 2005 “in the light of new develop-

ments in the world and in Turkey" as the Ministry states (Talim ve Terbiye Kurulu Başkanlığı [TTKB], 2009). The major problem with new textbooks, however, is that they still adopt an exclusivist, essentialist, nationalist, and apologetic stance toward the West. The paper argues that this stance derives from the history of Turkish modernization that has been characterized with an awareness of staying behind the West and a wish to catch up with the modern civilization. The paper draws on Nilüfer Göle's approach to non-Western modernities and suggests a new framework for textbooks in handling the topics of local and national identity and the West.

The new curriculum in the way to be both "Us" and "European"

Basic questions regarding a curriculum seem to be so simple at first glance: What and how should we teach our children (Avenstrup, 2007). Yet, there are no easy answers to these questions since no curriculum is politically neutral (Apple, 1993; Bernstein, 1975). Every curriculum reform involves a discussion on society's past, present, and future. This also applies to Turkish context (see Kaplan, 2006).

The Ministry of National Education introduced new reforms including redesigning the whole curriculum on the basis of constructivist paradigm and developing new textbooks with a "student-centered" approach (Avenstrup, 2005; Aşkar, et.al., 2005; Sahlberg, 2005). The reference points of the new curriculum, stated by the Ministry, are as follows: According to the first reference point, the new curriculum "draws on our country's cultural, historical, and moral tenets and aims to maintain Turkish Republic." The second notes that the new curriculum adopts "the norms, aims and educational stance of the European Union" (TTKB, 2009).

These reference points reflect the historical dream and inherent paradox of Turkish modernity: to create and maintain a distinct national identity while being a civilized (read European) nation (Kadioğlu, 1996). Turkish modernizers who were aiming at creating a distinct Turkisness were well aware of the fact that Turkey was behind the European standards. They identified modern civilization with the West and introduced many social, legal, and cultural reforms to westernize the country.

An analysis of the republican history, however, demonstrates that national identity has been formed on the basis of Turkishness and (a state-controlled) Sunni-Muslimness. Ethnic or religious differences

have sometimes been suppressed or denied (Altınay, 2009; Bora, 2009; Öztürk, 2009). Recent research on textbooks demonstrates that textbooks are imbued with a narrow definition of nationalism and citizenship (Çotuksöken, Erzan & Silier, 2003; Çayır, 2009; Tüzün 2009; Bağlı & Esen, 2003). It is not anymore possible, however, to maintain a supposedly monolithic national culture in the face of globalization and the European Union accession negotiations. Reforming curriculum in the way to European Union brought to the fore the question of national identity and treatment of domestic differences in Turkey.

Quicke (1999, p. 2) notes that two interrelated aspects need to be taken into account when assessing a curriculum of a democratic society: (i) moral, political, philosophical position: ideas such as liberty, equality and justice are a central concern, (ii) theory of society assumed: what is assumed about the way society is changing at the present time. In this context, what are the basic moral, political, and philosophical position and theory of society that new the curriculum reform of 2005 draws on?

The official documents of the Ministry list several reasons for reforming the curriculum. One major reason is Turkey's poor figures in schooling and financial funds of education compared to the European Union countries. The second expressed reason is the onset of the "age of information" (TTKB, 2009). Several academic works and particularly the official papers on Turkish education have repeatedly pointed to the fact that 21st century is the information age and the West has already adopted itself to this age (Hesapçoğlu 2001). Turkey, on the other hand, is presented by educators in the official journal of the Ministry of National Education as a country still drawing on the educational paradigm of industrial society. The new curriculum reform in this line is presented with phrases such as "reaching the information age" or "reforming the education according to the requirements of the age" (Arslan, & Eraslan, 2003, p. 1). These phrases imply a linear conception of history and situate Turkey behind the age. Curriculum reform in this respect signifies Turks' historical ideal to catch up with the civilization.

Such phrases also point out to the fact that the problem in education in Turkey is not only limited to figures but involves deep-seated emotions regarding the modernization process of Turkish identity. A new textbook articulates this situation as such:

"The Turkish nation has established great civilizations and contributed to humanity in ancient times. However, the Turkish nation- not because of its own fault -fell behind the West because of varied political and social reasons in the last few centuries. It was a fact that once the West was behind the Turks" (Kurt et al., 2007, p. 32).

This is a concise explication containing the narrative of the Turkish modernization and nationalism shared by various sectors of society. The West emerges as one of the key elements of the narrative of civilization in the Turkish context. Will to civilization, in other words, requires Turks to face with the West since modernization was equated with Europeanization. This is also the case in advisory meetings where various academics and civil associations expressed their positions about how to reform the curriculum. The notion of the West again emerged as key element during discussions. An academician, for instance, claims that the new curriculum is to be designed to raise world citizens with multiple identities. Another one (signifying the dominant discourse) replies: "We have to be 'ourselves' before everything... We have to be 'ourselves' before being a European" (TTKB, 2009).

This expression can be read as part of an attempt to imagine or construct a self-respecting social identity. It, however, implies a prejudgment: There is, on the one hand, a complete, mature (modern) European identity. The "us", on the other hand, is conceived of as immature and not fully formed. Such a linear conception of modernization situates Europe ahead of Turkey. Thus, the above excerpt from a textbook and the response of academician seeking an "us" seem to respond to the perceived European supremacy but ironically reproduces the hierarchy between the West and 'Us.' They exemplify the situation of actors of non-Western societies. For Nilüfer Göle, non-Western modernities have been characterized by an awareness of staying behind the West and a will to civilization. Non-Western actors, for her, always situate themselves in the mirror of the West (Göle, 2009a).

The Ministry of National Education states that the new curriculum adopts the standards of the European Union countries. Curriculum developers and textbook authors, however, seem to still hold the position of Göle's non-Western actors. This is visible in new textbooks which are written with an apologetic stance toward the West. Textbook authors even claim that universal values such as human rights were developed by "us" before the West.

Reconstructing the Ottoman-Turkish history in the mirror of the West: Mehmet the Conqueror and human rights

Turkey has a multiparty political system since 1950. In this line, messages about modern universal values such as human rights and democracy are conveyed through textbooks for several decades. Topics regarding human rights are also included in the curriculum of new Social Studies, Life Studies, and Turkish subjects. Yet, human rights are handled and presented in an anachronistic fashion. The most common anachronistic reading is the presentation of Mehmet the Conqueror's words within the context of human rights. For example, a short piece in a 6th grade Social Studies textbook, titled "A Human Rights Lesson from the Sultan of the World", states that:

"When Mehmet the Conqueror conquered Istanbul, he first entered the Hagia Sofia. The Patriarch and the people were throwing themselves to the ground crying. Sultan Mehmet gestured them with his hands to be silent. He spoke to the Patriarch: Stand up. I, Sultan Mehmet, tell you and your friends and all the people that from this day on you shall not fear my wrath on your life or your liberty" (Kolukisa & Tokcan 2006, p. 151).

Such a presentation indicates again the historical desire to associate local history (Ottoman-Turkishness) with modern universal values. This is an example of reconstructing local history in the face of the Western values. The author cannot read Ottoman history independent from the West, rather imagines a past that has the essence of modern values. This line of argument goes sometimes to essentialism leading to claim that the Turkish culture has a different essence than the rest of the world. Such a position resembles the East Asian values debate which includes several claims such as human rights existed in Chinese tradition long before the West (Donnelly, 1999, p. 66; Tsai, & Bridges, 1997). Framing Mehmet the Conqueror's above words with human rights and implying that human rights existed in Ottoman history before the West would mean adopting the Western orientalist claim that the East has a different essence than the West. Tolerance toward non-Muslims in Ottoman millet system is noticeable when compared the situation in the West (Kymlicka, 1996). Yet, above quotation confuses communal rights with individual human rights (Tatsuo, 1999). The major reason underlying this is the fact that educators cannot take distance from the West due to historical-psychological background of Turkish modernization.

Taking a distance from the West

What characterizes Turkish intellectuals (be they Islamic, secular, leftist etc.) is their desire to close the perceived gap in modernization with the West. The discourse dominating the new curriculum and textbooks is a manifestation of this long-standing desire. This discourse imagines a distinct and homogenous Europe and aims to construct a national identity with a sense of pride. The new textbooks, however, as exemplified in this paper reproduces this hierarchy due to apologetic and essentialist stance of textbooks authors. This paper suggests revising the link between Turkishness, modernity, and being European.

One striking point that needs to be taken into account in such a revision is the extra-modern forms of Turkish culture. Turkey is usually considered with its lack of modernity, such as its problems regarding gender issues and human rights violations. It is a fact that Turkey has problems in these fields. However, Turkey had also a female prime minister in 1994 or granted women's suffrage rights in 1934, ten years before France. These are examples of what Göle (2000) calls "extra-forms of modernity" signifying the overemphasis put on the manifestations of modernity in Turkish context. Turkey in this respect is not always reactive but also proactive to adopt the forms of modernity. This can provide Turkey with a channel to be active in reinterpreting local history in line with the universal values. To this aim, textbook authors ought to end reconstructing local history in an essentialist way to respond to the European modernity. This requires taking a distance both toward local history and Europe. The case of human rights might exemplify such a distance (Çayır, 2008). Textbook authors assume that human rights are European and try to respond to it by linking Mehmet the Conqueror with human rights. Human rights however are neither Ottoman nor European (see Ignatief, 2001). They emerged in Europe due to certain historical factors. In this regard, human rights, as Donnelly (1999, p. 66) notes, "were foreign to traditional Asian societies as they were to their Western counterparts." Human rights, therefore, need to be handled in textbooks with a distance both toward the West and local history.

There is also no such a homogenous Europe today as textbooks depict. It is a fact that Europe represented universality and civilization for long years. Today, however, several prominent European religious and political figures claim not universality but cultural distinctiveness of European experience (Göle, 2009b). In the field of education, mainly as a

result of increasing visibility of Muslim immigrants in Europe, there are some calls to revitalize and reincorporate Christian roots into education (Avenstrup, 2005). Europe is also asking “who we are?” Replying this question in Turkish context through taking a distance from both local history and West and reframing the history of modernization might open new ways for developing a universal language at both national and international level.

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