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CROSSING THE SACRED/ SECULAR DIVIDE; UNRAVELING TURKISH IDENTITIES

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Abstract

This paper unpacks the ideas in the poem "Pull Down My Statues" by Süleyman Apaydın, to examine some common descriptors in use about modern Turkey. Taking his inspiration from Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish republic, Apaydın ponders the success of Atatürk's vision, based on the idea of a secular/sacred divide. Combining this with the way travel in Turkey is heavily promoted using the same themes, I explore how this divide, with its underlying connotations of West versus East and modernity versus tradition (as found in Turkey's Ottoman past), is applied to Turkish identity. Turks are commonly portrayed as a homogenous people only differentiated by their degree of religiosity, but I argue that this analysis is too simplistic. Turkish identity has never been based on a single clear cut model, and this is becoming obvious as more traditional Islamic ways of life are being reworked by new forms of Islam based on capitalism. Consequently, although it is important to acknowledge Turkey's past, looking to history for a way to steer through the complexities of the present is no longer useful or even relevant.

Keywords: Suleyman Apaydin, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, sacred secular divide, Turkishness, Turkish identity

The first time I came to Turkey it was by chance. I knew little about the country, having forgotten even the scant military history I'd been taught. My imagination was a blank slate. Nonetheless, the Turkey I fell in love with was the Turkey of the past. As much as I came to admire Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish republic in 1923, and his efforts to make Turkey a modern and progressive country, I was drawn to the nostalgic longings of the locals. The ancient and majestic monuments of past civilizations, the exotic and mysterious rituals of Islam, the very foreignness of the people and the language, all spoke to me of a distant and somehow better version of the world.

Ironically, the Turkey I envisioned was the Turkey about which Süleyman Alpaydın wrote in his poem "Tear down My Statues." He writes as though he were Atatürk, looking back on his achievements and musing,

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If you have missed the fez, missed the face veil,
If you would rather have dark night than daylight,
If you still hope for miracles,
From the sheik, the devil and the dervish,
If healing comes
From the amulet, the healer and the charlatan,
Then forget all I have said unto you,
And pull down all the statues you once put up.

Alpaydın contemplates a Turkey in which the people look not forward, but back. He posits that should this become a reality, Atatürk would have considered himself to have failed, and demanded the removal of all his statues. These likenesses can still be found the length and breadth of the country, from the smallest and poorest of village squares to the grand and solemn bureaucratic capital city of Ankara. They were erected as a testament to the work and achievements of this one man, who replaced the sultanate with a parliament, Arabic script unintelligible to most with a language based on the Latinate alphabet, and ignorance and subsistence with schooling, medical aid and development for all.

Such was Atatürk's influence, love him or hate him, seventy eight years after his death the country will stop at five past nine on the morning of 10 November to remember him. Bus, car and taxi horns honk, ferry sirens wail, and people stand silently and unmoving out of respect. I too respect him for his determination to pull Turkey out of an Ottoman imposed dark ages. However, I have to wonder whether his vision was based on too simplistic a framework, and therefore doomed to failure.

Usually, the desire to travel comes from imagining, but the images the mind creates are not always the same as those we see in reality. When actual experience contradicts the dream, it's often more comforting to re-form the vision, rather than to accept what we see. Although Turkey is not an Islamic state it is a Muslim country, so the obvious signs of religious devotion are everywhere. Mosques dot the countryside, with the spiky presence of their minarets and the insistence of the call to prayer five times a day. Yet at the same time Istanbul, the cultural capital, is host to numerous bars, restaurants and clubs. Istanbul residents boast that Beyoğlu, a small inner city suburb, has over a thousand eating, drinking and dancing establishments in an area little bigger than a postage stamp. There, and in swankier, more upmarket suburbs along the shores of the Bosphorus, the skinniest of Botoxed bottle blondes drape themselves over pectoral baring men, wearing the most indecent of micro minis and the tightest of jeans.

I studied sociology at university so these contradictions fascinate me. However, I'm also someone who likes things to be literal, because I don't

interpret nuances easily. When what I see or experience confuses me, I need several attempts to unravel the meaning. Living in a country not my own, in a culture I didn't grow up with, and negotiating daily life in a foreign language I have only imperfectly mastered should exacerbate this, but surprisingly this is not the case. Istanbul is a very popular tourist destination and I get a lot of requests to take people sightseeing. These outings mean I can re-visit my impressions of the city, and try to better understand what I see. Going with other people makes me braver than usual so I happily ask question after question, without becoming self-conscious at my lack of instant comprehension. My Turkish is only enough to understand and be understood, but not to assume. Consequently I learn a lot I might otherwise miss out on, because my questions aren't carefully designed to obtain specific answers. The everyday Turkish vocabulary range only runs to a few hundred words, and suits my very direct way of thinking and talking. In addition, Turkey is an oral culture, so it is normal for people to ask for information verbally and not write anything down. I am seen as conforming to a cultural norm when I repeat the same questions in a different way, rather than regarded as merely simple.

On one such sightseeing expedition my guest was a woman whom I'd met through couch surfing. She was from Austria and was over in Istanbul for a week to qualify as a yoga teacher. On that score we had nothing in common, but our shared love of travel, wine and good food was enough to make the connection. Her course was extremely taxing so on her day off I'd planned a gentle downhill wander through one of the more conservative suburbs on the Asian side of Istanbul. I hoped to find a mosque famous for the workmanship of its interior tiles, but as it was tucked away in a somewhat obscure side street, I didn't make any promises. The only certainty I knew was which bus to catch.

After a short sharp trip on a crowded overheated bus we found ourselves standing on the pavement trying to work out where to go. I've lived in Istanbul long enough to know that outside tourist areas, maps and street names are largely conceptual. When the street exists it never goes where it says it does according to the coordinates, and if you do find the place you want it is rarely where you thought it would be. After orienting myself according to a few local landmarks, a bakery and another mosque, we set off in what I hoped was the right direction. As we descended through the small quiet streets, I was able to use occasional glimpses of the Bosphorus as a point of reference. It was a beautiful spring day after a long cold winter so we were happy to meander without intent. Our faith was rewarded when we stumbled across a transport museum housing old trams with their destinations written in Arabic, an ornate and beautiful abandoned *konak,** that is, a traditional old wooden house, and a still active Armenian church where a service was in progress. We hovered uncertainly at the entrance for a moment, before carefully taking seats at the

back of the lofty space dimly lit by light shimmering in through the side windows. The priest wore elaborate robes and his assistant waved a censor full of incense from side to side. The congregation was very small but sang with grand passion. It was interesting to see how they prayed with their hands palm up and held away from their sides, much as Muslims do in their prayer ritual. After watching for a while we quietly slipped out and went off in search of the mosque again.

When we finally found it the doors were firmly closed so we went to look around the grounds. The grim mossy grey of the tombstones was picturesquely framed by the colourful blooms of hollyhocks. The distant noise of the traffic was accompanied by the constant buzzing of bees, with a background rhythm being tapped out by the clacking of worry beads. These belonged to the old men sitting around in the courtyard, enjoying the weak April sun, feeding stray cats and drinking tea. They told me the mosque wouldn't open for another thirty minutes but when I said that was too long for us to wait they called out for the gatekeeper. While he went to find the *imam*, the Muslim version of a pastor or priest, the old men ordered more tea and bade us sit alongside them on a slightly damp and mottled sandstone wall.

I knew before we spoke, that for them life is simple. Allah is the path and if they can go to Mecca at least once in their lifetime, they will die having fulfilled all five tenets of Islam. More romantically called the five pillars of Islam, the first two tenets, *şahadet* and *namaz*, are the ones all tourists come to know, as the sounds and actions which form these tenets create a new pattern for their day. The *şahadet,* the major part of the *ezan* or call to prayer, proclaims there is no God except Allah, and Muhammed is his messenger. The sound first unfolds across the empty and silent Istanbul skies early in the morning. Each mosque begins its call to prayer at a slightly earlier time from the next, resulting in a modern version of a medieval madrigal sung in rounds. Without even understanding the words I find this call beautifully and hauntingly melodic. Yet many tourists resentfully complain of broken sleep and being locked out of mosques while the devout complete their prayers.

This is *namaz*, the second tenet of Islam. This ritual is performed five times a day when believers recite set prayers in Arabic, and perform physical movements which in combination represent submission. The next tenet is *zekât*, giving a specified percentage of one's savings to the poor and needy. The fourth tenet is observing *oruç* during Ramazan. At this time Muslims fast for a month, not eating, drinking or smoking anything in daylight hours. They must also exert self-control over sinful pleasures of the flesh. The final and most longed for tenet is to complete the *hac*, the pilgrimage to Mecca. To die when on *hac* automatically guarantees one a place in heaven. It is a possibility that is greatly welcomed and looked on positively, rather than something to be feared. Looking

around at the broad hands and worn faces of these men, ornamented with stubble and the wrinkles of time, I knew it was their greatest hope.

When the *imam* arrived he introduced himself as Dursun, a Black Sea name meaning "Let him stop". Most Turkish names have meanings, but unlike the more poetic such as '*Ayşegül*', 'Ayshe's rose' or '*Işık Nur*' meaning 'Holy Light', Dursun is often the name given to the last male child of a family where there are already too many children. Similarly, '*Yeter*', meaning 'enough', is a name given to a newborn girl whose mother has already produced too many girls, rather than a longed for son.

From the way the old men greeted the *imam*, this Dursun was much loved. Over tea he asked us the usual questions, where we were from, whether we liked Turkey or not and why we were at his mosque. Unlike most Turks he expressed no particular surprise that I had come all the way from Australia to live in Turkey, but was excited to learn I had a degree in sociology. It turned out he too had graduated in sociology, having studied through the Anatolian Open University scheme. This path is open to students who fail to gain entry into university by more conventional routes. Our conversation quickly turned to Marx and the other grand daddies of the discipline. Next to us the old men continued to suck on their sugar cubes and noisily slurp their tea, looking on in awe as we talked of "*kapitalizm*", "*komünizm*" and "*anarşi*". Dursun clearly explained that he thought Marxism was a useful model for society in which all is shared and all are equal. He equated Marxism with modernity, and felt that religion and education could work together to create a better future for people.

Seen from his point of view, Marxism and Islam have a lot in common. As with Marxism, the community of the mosque is the foundation from which the moral and social order of the wider population is developed. Everyone is part of something, be it a congregation, neighbourhood or society in general. I don't know whether the old men really understood the topics Dursun had studied at university but they clearly respected him. There is no secular or sacred divide for them. There is only Dursun, their young, respectful, government appointed and well-educated *imam*, who is both their moral guide and spiritual leader. To use a common Turkish expression, "*Bu kadar*", that's enough. It's not necessary to know or want more.

My Turkish on the subject exhausted, I asked Dursun about the beautiful and heady scent wafting around us. Thinking it must be from the flowers in the cemetery he told me it came from the old man sitting next to him. He was wearing his own choice blend of *hacı yağı*, the scented oils favoured by pilgrims to Mecca. The man nearest to me put a sample on my wrist, and then two more men did the same. The competition to share their individual scents was fierce, so when they asked me which I thought was the best, I said they were all too beautiful for me to choose just one.

Everyone was satisfied with my answer, and with nothing more to discuss Dursun offered to show us around the mosque. Having left our shoes outside under the watchful eye of the gatekeeper, we passed through a rather austere porch to the interior. We admired the famous tiles and asked permission to take photos. After he checked I had taken all my shots, finished examining the designs and had no more questions of my own, Dursun asked me to help him with his English. He wanted to be able to explain the process of worship to the few foreign tourists who did manage to find the mosque. He told me how on ordinary days the *imam* stands on the carpet in front of the *cemaat*, the congregation, but that on Fridays the prayers are more formal. First he delivers a half hour sermon standing at a small corner pulpit. Then the *ezan* (the call to prayer) is heard and the normal prayer or *namaz* follows. Finally the *imam* gives a shorter sermon from the *minber*, the tall and often elaborately carved wood or stone pulpit found in almost all mosques. All sermons must be approved by the Religious Affairs Directorate. At the end of the tour we thanked Dursun, refused the offer of more tea, and formally farewelled each of the old men in turn.

I met Dursun several years ago and even though little patches of humanity such as I found in the mosque garden do remain, with seemingly conflicting ideologies existing peacefully side by side, I doubt he is so vocal in his personal beliefs these days. Religion remains ever present in Turkey, but recently the strict division between secular and sacred is being crossed more openly in the political arena. Government-funded television stations and state employees have begun to preach unquestioning obedience, and referring more and more to the past and the teachings of the Koran.

All over the country, but particularly in Istanbul, buildings are being torn down in a frenzy of urban renewal, under the guise of providing earthquake proof dwellings for the population. Scratch the shoddily applied shiny new paint however, and you will see that the historical layers of graft and corruption are still in existence. There is a lot of money to be made and the worship of Mammon is vying with other religious beliefs. Unaccounted for cash has been discovered hastily stuffed into shoeboxes in private homes, and telephone wiretaps prove crimes have been committed by those in high up positions. Yet as quickly as these allegations are verified, the findings are overturned. The very people tasked with bringing wrongdoers to account, the police and the judiciary, are themselves being accused of breaking the law. Most people in the general population are without power and influence. Some of them rail against the distorted picture of a unified Turkey as portrayed on television, echoed in a print media sector which is equally closely monitored and tightly controlled. Everyone can see that the divide between rich and poor has grown out of all proportion. The popularity of television means the ‘have nots’ are very aware of what they are missing out on. Old men such as those I met, happy with simple pleasures, are now in the minority. The financially poor hanker after the wealth

flaunted on popular soap operas. Easy credit and a fatalistic attitude to the future mean that a large proportion of the populace is seriously in debt. The economy is a pack of cards waiting for the first one to fall and factoring companies have begun to set up, ready to reap this new harvest. The pinch is already being felt with upmarket shops closing down and being replaced with restaurants offering cheap meals, real estate sales slowing down and more people begging on the streets.

The existence of such diversity among the population also directly challenged Atatürk's supposition that Turkey is populated by a unified people called Turks, whose identity can be clearly written. When he established the Turkish republic, he forcibly overlaid the idea of a homogenous and imagined community of secular Turks onto the already existing, but crumbling multicultural Ottoman Empire. The dying Empire had built its power on conquering its neighbours, and bringing peoples of different origins into its population via kidnap, marriage or taxation. The famous Turkish janissaries were Muslim converts, sons of Christian subjects taken from villages in the Balkans and other territories. The most beautiful women of the harem, such as Roxelana, were Circassians forced into service as playmates for the Sultans. Over the centuries, they, along with Albanians, Serbs and people of many other different nationalities were brought over from their homelands to Istanbul, to work in a variety of fields, such as laying pavements and other manual work, or as clerks in the public service.

Well before new boundaries were drawn in the wake of World War I, there was a strong Armenian population living in the country now known as Turkey, as well as Turkish-born Greeks, called *Rum*. They, along with Jews and other minority groups, had long been allowed to pursue their lifestyles largely unmolested, until the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century, provided they paid their taxes. Over the centuries, this diverse grouping of people, made up of subsequent generations of former Christian subjects, Armenians, *Rum*, Jews and nationals from all corners of the Empire, became superficially absorbed into the greater 'Turkish' population. Yet despite the passing of time, they still maintained their specific visions of homeland and nation, based on the beliefs and ideals particular to their religion, ethnicity and culture. Even today the idea of *memleket*, that is, hometown, is strongly connected to where an individual's ancestors originated from, rather than simply the place where the individual was born. In the light of this history, the idea there is one definitive version of Turkish identity becomes impossible to maintain.

It's easy to dismiss the anomalies of politics and religion in Turkey as quaint eccentricities of a culture in transition to a modern future. An easy-to-read situation where there are two opposing and clearly defined sides. On the one side

are simple, religious, mono-lingual people embedded in tradition who identify strongly with their community. On the other are complex, well-educated, forward thinking English speaking individuals who shun religion and all its trappings. The people who cover and go to the mosque are the religious ones. The ones who don't are not. However, the so-called divide in the Turkey I've come to know is not clear cut. The country is being run by people who appear to be good Muslims with the dishonest business acumen of the most monstrous of spin doctor creations. Their main opposition, strong in faith but lacking in political savvy and sometimes honesty too, can't get a handle on the majority who in turn identify them as godless socialists. Criss-crossing them and blurring the boundaries even further are multifarious individuals and groupings, loosely and often temporarily based on ideology, age or common interests.

When I first visited Turkey I took home with me an idyllic, almost socialist picture of the country. At first I thought if I just tried hard enough and long enough I'd put all the pieces together one day and sort out all the contradictions. Now, more than twenty years later, having travelled extensively and lived here for nearly ten years, my perspective has changed, along with Turkish society. As the reality of Turkey has moved further away from my imaginings I have become disillusioned. At the same time I have a much better understanding of the complexities of Turkish culture and society, and realise it is unlikely I will ever fully comprehend the whole.

Turkey is steeped in layers of tradition, but it is also trapped in those same traditions. The more you uncover the more you find and modernity and change have become entangled with them in a downward slide. I see a country going backwards, back to a land where 'dark night' rules, rather than 'daylight'. And it is a darkness sculpted from dirt and filth rather than the silky poetry of idealism. Turkey is not polarized by secular and sacred concerns anymore but by the disintegrating fragments of the beliefs of a rich and diverse history being crammed into too simplistic a mould. The ideal of community is rapidly being replaced by an emphasis on individualism, the giving of alms by the consolidation of wealth, and religious observance as a show of true faith has become a show of political allegiance and self-righteous holiness. The five pillars of Islam are being usurped by the five tenets of capitalism – materialism, greed, money, status and power – redefined within a contemporary Islamic framework. Atatürk's statues might remain intact, but his beliefs and the country he helped build will soon disappear from sight. They will be consigned to ancient history and become as relevant as an Ottoman gravestone hidden in the overgrown garden of a long forgotten mosque.

* Turkish alphabet pronunciation guide

a – as *a* in *f**a**ther*

c – as *j* in ***j**am*

ç – as *ch* in ***ch**oose*

ğ – known as soft g, it lengthens the preceding vowel sound. Sounds similar to the vowel sound in *m**oo**n, pl**ea**se*

ı – as *e* in *want**e**d*

ş – as *sh* in ***sh**arp*

ü – as *e* in *n**e**w*