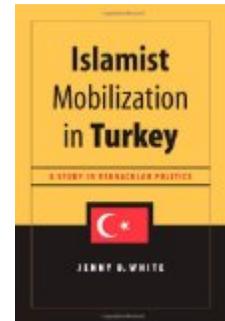


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jenny B. White. *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2002. xi + 299 pp. \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98291-5; \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-295-98223-6.

Reviewed by Lale Yalcin-Heckmann (Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle)
Published on H-Gender-MidEast (June, 2004)



Vernacular Politics

In the eyes of many western observers, the Turkish Republic's experience with democracy has been surprisingly fluctuating and enigmatic. The fact that democracy has been interrupted several times by military coups and that the polity still seems to be under strict control of the military and Kemalist elites has been seen as weaknesses of Turkish democracy, hindering the development of civil society. Yet when existing civic organizations seem to be at their strongest, when they are mobilizing urbanites around Muslim ideals and values and support for an Islamic form of polity, the same critical western observers are uneasy about identifying this civil mobilization as "civil society." Islamic mobilization in a country with western democracy as the ideal seems to be a contradiction in itself. Jenny White's study of the vernacular politics and Islamist mobilization in Istanbul, the most cosmopolitan city of modern Turkey, is an important contribution to understanding this crucial political element of Turkish society, namely understanding how and why urban people in modern Turkey are mobilized around Islamic ideals. This book is the third volume of the University of Washington Press's Studies in Modernity and National Identity series, which examines "the relationships among modernity, the nation-state, and nationalism as these have evolved in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." Accordingly, the book has an interdisciplinary framework, even if the author's expertise derives from her anthropological research. In fact, it is Jenny White's second book on urban Istanbul; in her first study she examined urban home production and gender in a neighborhood of Istanbul.[1] For her second book, she returns

to the same neighborhood some ten years later and examines the texture and processes of political mobilization and the meaning of Islam in it. Such a research strategy, needless to say, requires the development of a deep knowledge of the background of families, persons, institutions, landscapes and discourses, which White skilfully uses to underline or challenge the new and old personal and political knowledge and understanding of social processes.

Jenny White's knowledge and experience with Turkish society and politics is richly demonstrated with episodes from a period of twenty-five years of visits and longer stays in Turkey. She reminisces about her university years in Ankara in the 1970s and her experience of the violence of political conflicts at that time (pp. 38-40). She then takes the reader to another time and context, a visit to the families of two wealthy business partners in Istanbul in 1991, one a new elite *nouveau riche* family, the other a member of the old elites, and describes plastically how class differences were displayed through different styles and modes of appropriating social capital (pp. 45-47). She then describes a political interview with Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the then mayor of Istanbul and later Turkish prime minister, on an Islamist television channel, and describes how Erdogan hijacked the program despite the preparations made by the host, a left-wing Turkish woman journalist. White participates in the preparation as well as in the debriefing after the TV program (pp. 139-142). At another place in the book, the author shares her impressions and assessment of Erdo-

gan's political views, whom she interviewed during his term as mayor of Istanbul, asking him about women's participation in political and economic life (pp. 235-236). Apart from such episodic descriptions of the author's encounters and engagements with various sections and personalities of Turkish society and Istanbul's urban population, she also offers a more systematic study of urban institutions, civic associations, women's organizations, administrative bodies and individuals and different types of families from Ümraniye, the neighborhood under study. On the whole, the depth and breadth of her study is indeed impressive.

The main arguments of the book are related to understanding social and political processes in modern urban Turkey, and more specifically in Istanbul, through the lens of "vernacular politics," a term she defines as "a new vision of 'politics' in societies" and a rethinking of "the terms we use to understand how people are mobilized to be active participants in public life" (p. x). The concept of vernacular politics is developed throughout the book: to begin with, White states that the term allows "us to grasp the hybrid nature of modern urban-based political processes" (p. 6). Somewhat later she defines the basis of vernacular politics in Turkey as "local networks of people united within a complex set of norms of mutual obligation. These widely shared norms require people to assist one another in open-ended relations of reciprocity, without calculating immediate return" (pp. 20ff). The form of mobilization in this network producing trust is through action, through "cells" (hücreler): "Cells are based on preexisting networks. Linked to one another, clusters of cells easily constitute a mass movement" (p. 21). The interesting aspect of this type of mobilization is that "people involved in local network politics perceive themselves as practising community, not just doing politics" (p. 22). This aspect seems to be the strength but also the weakness of vernacular politics. The strength and perhaps the freshness of this process are in its challenge to "the authoritarian, centralised, top-down paternalism of the political system" (p. 22). The existing paternalistic style of politics works through party institutions and civic organizations, which was a common characteristic not only of the Kemalist, social democratic and liberal conservative parties but also of earlier Islamist parties. The new generation of politicians using the vernacular political forms manage to establish a more populist and egalitarian type of relationship between the party and constituency. Yet, as White points out, this process entails its own endemic dangers as well. "This autonomy from institutional mediation comes at a price: party

leaders must allow community politics to lead, not follow [which] means pulling the sometimes unruly local groups with their contradictory positions and goals to an effective national political agenda" (p. 22). A key point of argument White refers to throughout the book is the use of vernacular politics for a successful political mobilization for the Islamist politics as exemplified in local and national elections in the last decade, and its absence from and lack of success in the politics of the Kemalists and the secularists. Although she cites her informants and acknowledges that vernacular politics have been very well used by social democratic politicians in the early 1970s, she cannot satisfactorily explain why they are now missing from contemporary social democratic and other secularist politics. Jenny White is indeed aware of the complexity and fluidity of social and political structures and texture; the overlapping of personnel, relationships and even attitudes of the secularists and Islamists are amply demonstrated. Yet, given this fluidity and hybridism, it is still not easy to grasp the uniqueness or permanence of the relationship between norms and values (hence culture) and the successful political mobilization by Islamist forces. One is tempted to ask if similar methods have been used by other political forces (e.g. Ecevit's social democrats in the 1970s) and if norms and values in poor, urban quarters of Istanbul have been taken into consideration by these other political forces at other times as well. The particular success of Islamist mobilization may be less due to their use of vernacular politics but simply to a historical coincidence at a very particular political, economic and social juncture. Such an interpretation of White's material would furthermore suggest that the junction between Islam and vernacular politics is neither unique nor permanent and would be open to challenges and to the pressures of institutionalized politics, as it seems to be the case with AK (Justice and Development Party) politics which have been ruling Turkey since 1999.

The strength of White's work lies in her rich and multi-sited ethnography, her sensitive approach in reflecting people's voices as well as embedding them in their economic and social settings, plastic descriptions of complex social and institutional formations in Istanbul's and modern Turkey's urban setting. The analytical power of the book, however, suffers from the multiple structural switches between the local, national, ethnographic, literary and historical dimensions of the complex relationship between Islam and secularism in Turkey. There seem to be quite a few repetitive passages and questionable analytical passages on Turkey's various

historical episodes, such as the 1950s or the 1980s, where the author, perhaps due to the difficulty of giving a fair description of contested political eras, seems to rely on too few authors, hence missing the contested nature of the political events of these eras. Finally, a reference to a study of urban Islam and a community of “conscious Muslims” in Ankara, which could have been very fruitfully compared to her community of migrants in Istanbul, is curiously missing.[2] Even if Saktanber’s seminal work also appeared in 2002, her study has been carried out during the 1990s, and White seems to have been aware of it, since she contributed to the volume edited by Kandiyoti and Saktanber.[3]

Nevertheless, Jenny White’s book is a must-read for anyone interested in—and ready to accept no simple solution or analysis of—urban modern Turkey’s contested space for and processes of Islamist politics. It is an inspiring and enjoyable book, also recommended to readers

of civil society and civil political movements in the Middle East and relevant for countries with similar political struggles of modernization and fundamentalism. Jenny White’s comparative framework and broad view takes her to similar political processes and civic movements such as the Protestant mega-churches in the United States, and this is rightly so.

Notes

[1]. Jenny B. White, *Money Makes us Relatives: Women’s Labor in Urban Turkey* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994).

[2]. Ayse Saktanber, *Living Islam: Women, Religion and the Politization of Culture in Turkey* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

[3]. Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayse Saktanber, eds. *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2002).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-gender-mideast>

Citation: Lale Yalcin-Heckmann. Review of White, Jenny B., *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. June, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9487>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.