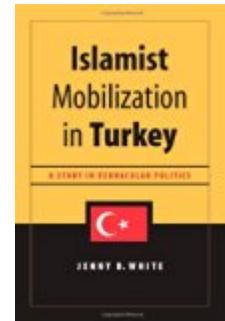


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Politics in the Vernacular

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In her previous work, *Money Makes Us Relatives*, Jenny B. White explored the cultural logic of labor and value in the lives of urban dwellers in the working-class neighborhood of Umraniye in Istanbul, Turkey. In her newly published book, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics*, the author revisits her earlier field site, this time to study civic and political activism in the community, a dimension that was curiously absent in her earlier work even though these neighborhoods were and have been hotbeds of Islamist politics and grassroots organizing. *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey* takes up this missing dimension and offers us a rich ethnographic study of the grassroots Islamist mobilization in urban Istanbul.

The popularity of the Islamist movement across existing social divisions continues to puzzle those who view Turkey as a model of secular modernization. Presenting itself as the only viable political movement that promises a better, more democratic and just society, the Islamist movement has been extremely successful over the last decade and a half in mobilizing different segments of Turkish society. The remarkable development of the movement is reflected today in the composition of the Turkish parliament, where the pro-Islamic AKP (Justice and Development Party) has a majority of seats while the secular Kemalist CHP (Republican People's Party) is the sole opposition party in government: For the first time in Republican history, a pro-Islamic party is governing

without a coalition.

How does one explain the process by which people with diverse cultural, geographical, and socio-economic backgrounds are mobilized into a politics that draws on Islam as its idiom? What gives Islamist politics its edge? What is the relationship between the Welfare Party (the predecessor of AKP) and the social movement it draws its energy from? In addressing such questions Jenny B. White draws on her years-long familiarity with the neighborhood of Umraniye in particular, and Turkey in general. Her ethnographic methods include participant observation and interviews with a rich array of social groups that include local activists, residents, municipal administrators, and party officials. At the center of White's argument is the concept "vernacular politics," which she describes as "a value-centered political process rooted in local culture, interpersonal relations, and community networks, yet connected through civic organizations to national party politics" (p. 27). Following closely the approaches and the strategies of both secularist and Islamist activists in Umraniye, White observes that while both groups of activists draw on interpersonal relations, it is only the Islamists who communicate and personalize their messages in the local idiom of the residents. In contrast, secularists, despite being local to the community, display a cultural elitism that refuses an engagement with the local values. The success of the Islamist mobilization thus lay in its ability to do vernacular politics, which entails an acknowledgment of the role of local cultural norms in political mobilizing. As she in-

sightfully points out, the secularist activists' rejection of local cultural practices means that such a vernacular politics is out of their reach as well (p. 76).

Divided into eight chapters, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey* ranges in theme from the political economy of culture, to the religion and politics of the everyday, to institutional and civil society dimensions of Islamist politics, to generational and gendered perspectives, to the role of secular activism. Through these chapters, White moves elegantly between the everyday and the institutional. Chapter 1, "The Political Economy of Culture," and chapter 7, "Islamic Elitism and Women's Choices," are particularly strong and insightful. In these chapters, the author deconstructs the binary view of the politics of Islam and secularism as exclusive ideologies with discrete class and cultural backgrounds by demonstrating how practices, ideologies, and lifestyles that are associated with Kemalism and Islamism are broadly distributed in society and overlap these categorical boundaries (p. 30). The careful attention to the lived experience of politics highlights the contradictions, the fluidity of boundaries between discourses and identities, and the heterogeneity of the constituents' motivations and social backgrounds. Such differentiations, White rightly points out, remain invisible in analyses that situate a political and cultural Islam opposite an equally undifferentiated secular Kemalism and that focus on the structure and ideology of the organizations (p. 29). In chapter 7, the author pays closer attention to the economic and social divisions within the Islamist movement. She draws attention to the emergence of Islamist elitism in recent years as potentially threatening to the movement's link with local culture (p. 23). Islamist elitism, not unlike its counterpart Kemalist elitism, makes distinctions between an egalitarian, enlightened, new Islam and a traditional, patriarchal, class-bound Islam. White argues that such elitism holds out to non-elite women implicit promises of socioeconomic mobility and professional opportunity only to betray them. She illustrates this contradiction through a detailed discussion of two working-class Islamist women who are caught between their "conscious Islamist political practice and the requirements of their working class cultural environment" (p. 230). In addition to these chapters, the concluding chapter of the book opens up useful lines of further inquiry. One such line of inquiry is to compare the Islamic movement in Turkey with the Christian movements in the United States. Besides contributing to our understanding of religious movements, such an approach would entail a much needed interrogation of a tendency in the scholarship on religious movements

to exceptionalize Islam.

While I believe *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey* is, for the most part, a valuable contribution to the English-language literature on its topic, there are a few aspects of the book which left me wanting more. The first concerns some of the ambiguities surrounding the term vernacular politics. White explains that the term enables her to go beyond the unproductive questions that are generated within predetermined frameworks of western social and political philosophy and its assumptions about the definitions and boundaries of the social and the political. Critical of such binary frameworks that demarcate an artificial sphere of civil society separate from the realm of family and community, she argues that vernacular politics makes an argument for looking at political process "in a new way that makes no assumptions about motivation or form, allowing us to grasp the hybrid nature of modern urban-based political processes" (p. 6).

White lists a number of features to distinguish vernacular politics from conventional, top-down, or institution-based political practices. Doing vernacular politics entails an engagement with local community networks (that is, interpersonal relations, networks of kinship, and neighborhood), local values and norms (such as neighborliness, reciprocity, and trust). And yet, in this discussion of vernacular politics White tends to waver somewhat between the idiom and the form of Islamist politics. Is it the Islamic idiom that is the glue of the movement? Or is it the interpersonal relations of the movement's members? She seems to go back and forth between these two. If it is the latter, what explains the failure of secular activists? The engagement with what White refers to as local cultural norms and values appears to be more significant in explaining this failure, for as White herself points out in her discussion of secular activists in Umraniye, their method of mobilization, like the Islamists', included a grassroots, personalized approach. Yet what they did not do, the author argues, was to situate their message in local cultural values and norms (p. 20). So in this context, vernacular politics is defined as politics that speaks the language of the local. This path leads to a series of questions that are not fully dealt with. For example, what precisely is the local idiom? Does it consist of the set of values shared by the Umraniye residents (which include egalitarian norms such as reciprocity, mutual obligations alongside hierarchical norms pertaining to gender, and age)? To her credit, White is careful to qualify her understanding of these "local cultural practices." First, she cautions us, rightly, against viewing these values as relics of a traditional society,

or “rural holdovers,” pointing out their crucial function in modern capitalism as customs that confer resources and provide crucial backup in the context of economic poverty (p. 77). Second, she emphasizes, these values are by no means limited to the working class or Islamists (p.259). Yet, if this is the case, what makes them “local”? Are we to understand that the modernist idioms of secular activists are not local? [1] In short, what is the nature of the privileged relationship Islamist discourse has established with the local?

At times, White sounds as if she imagines that local practices are somehow autonomous from the social movement she is studying. For example, in her conclusion White describes the Islamist movement as “the awakening of a social movement that is simultaneously a product of local values and ties and broader social and political goals” (p. 266). There seems something misleading about the characterization of the movement as merely a “product.” This line of reasoning suggests a pre-existing and unchanging notion of local that is shared. Such an approach also fails to adequately account for the success of Islamist politics post-1980s. For, after all, Turkey’s political scene since the 1950s has now and again seen a prominent populism that appeals to the local and the people in its efforts to mobilize. This recurrence raises the question of what it is in the 1980s that gave the localism of Islamist politics its critical edge over other political parties and discourses. The answer to this question lies in the political, economic, and social processes in the post-1980s which include the historical legacy of Islam as the idiom of protest, the post-1980s suppression of leftist political activities, the state-led Islamization of public life, and the salience of identity politics replacing class-based discourses in the articulation of social justice issues. To be fair, White mentions all these factors in the chapter on the institutional expression of Islam; however, these institutional and structural conditions are given a marginal role in her argument when she considers them as “mise-en-scene” (p. 103). She contends that an explanation of how Islamist political process works is “ultimately to be found in vernacular, not official politics” (p. 103). I would argue that privileging the everyday and the vernacular leads to a reification of the local. In my opinion, any discussion of the politics of Islam and secularism that refers to local norms as an explanatory category cannot be adequate without at the same time attending to the cultural politics of local and global. Thus, it seems to me that a more effective approach would be to see the Islamist movement as a process through which certain norms are articulated within an Islamic idiom and

are constructed as local. In this vein, I would have liked to see the author engage more fully questions about the construction of the local and the global, questions that have become a vital dimension of current anthropological discussions. Addressing such questions seems especially important given the ease with which the “local” can become reified in discourse. White’s ethnography risks such a reification when local cultural values are assumed to be given, there to be utilized by any political agenda. The local has to be problematized rather than taken for granted.

Such a theoretical strategy would also overcome a few other related issues that remained unresolved in White’s study. One concerns what I see as the inconsistency in a few of White’s conclusions with regard to religion. She writes, “Islamic mobilization may not be about religion” (p. 271). Writing as much, she begs the question “What is it about then?” A page later she refers to religion as a wide parasol that throws differences into shadow and casts a unifying, but ultimately illusory, penumbra. She seems here to be reverting to an instrumentalist view of religion without paying attention to the process of meaning-making. Perhaps, the question whether Islamist mobilization is about religion or not is a misformulated one within White’s own sharp critique of artificial boundaries made between politics, culture, and religion in liberal (my word, not the author’s) political theories.

Similarly, White’s discussion of populism in relation to the vernacular is also somewhat confusing and needs further discussion. In a chapter titled “Populism: Democracy Is Peace of Mind,” White suggests that vernacular politics is different from populism and patron-client politics even though it harbors elements of both. In one place she describes patronage as a core value in Turkish vernacular politics (p. 69), while elsewhere she writes that it has been challenged by vernacular politics (p. 106). This discussion of populism and the vernacular, and the rich ethnographic material in this study in general, begs to be put into conversation with the equally rich theoretical discussions of grassroots social movements and the notion of the popular in cultural studies work that is inspired by Gramscian concepts of hegemony and that is increasingly influential in and outside of academic circles.[2]

These comments are not meant so much as a criticism as they are reflections that are enabled by Jenny White’s rich and productive ethnography. A theoretical discussion of the kind I am suggesting here might have limited

the appeal and accessibility of the book to a broader audience. *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey* has much to offer, especially to an English-speaking audience unfamiliar with the context. It is insightful in its efforts to shift the discourse away from modernist binaries, and when taken in conjunction with her earlier work, it offers a full picture of the complexity of political life in an Istanbul community. The discussion in this study also has a broader relevance than Turkey. It is topical in terms of contemporary global politics, and it is a valuable contribution to the literature on social movements based on religion around the world including the United States.

Notes

[1]. For a critique of the tendency of post-Kemalist scholarship to view secular Turks as misrepresentations of themselves as opposed to Islamists who are privileged as local subjects, see Yael Navarro-Yashin, *Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[2]. I have in mind here the work of Stuart Hall. For an analysis of the difference between populism and popular see Stuart Hall, "Notes on Deconstructing 'the Popular,'" *People's History and Socialist Theory*, edited by Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), pp. 227-240.

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