

Mike Mandel and Chantal Zakari: *The State of Ata: The Contested Imagery of Power in Turkey* Reviewed by Arzu Ozkal



The State of Ata: The Contested Imagery of Power in Turkey brings an almost taboo subject matter into discussion. Mike Mandel and Chantal Zakari, an American and a Turk, travel from towns to small villages to major cities conversing with seemingly diverse people about the communal experience of living in the ubiquitous presence of Ata.

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk or more affectionately, Ata, is the founder of the Turkish Republic (1923). He formed the nation-state of Turkey through the War of Independence (1921 - 1922), introduced a series of legal, social, cultural and economic reforms, and gave the nation its secular status and western outlook. In 1934, he approved a legislation prohibiting women from wearing religion-based clothing in public spaces. This was a major step in the country's modernization efforts. Prior to the garment reform, women had to wear headscarves, most of the time a black veil *karaçaraf* and were forced, by strict rules, to cover their body. Although, many women embraced the new outlook willingly, for some it was a contradiction of right to freedom of religion and democracy. They argued women should have the right to choose what to wear. Even today, the headscarf debate still continues between the two major ideologies coexisting in Turkey: secular vs. religious. The power struggle between the followers of Ata, *Kemalists* and pro-Islamist

groups, causes extreme polarization in the country. The tension has been rising since 2002, when the religiously affiliated AKP (The Justice and Development Party) became the ruling party.

Today, one might notice glorious monuments of Atatürk embellish every major public square; his portraits decorate walls of office rooms; his figure sparkles on suit jackets, women's and men's. Many people enthusiastically display an Atatürk figure to demonstrate they are still following his fundamental principles, and are ready to fight to defend the secular democratic regime. On the other hand, women in colorful silk headscarves and trench coats appear more often in public spaces. The headscarf is also a potent symbol; it is not only a declaration of devotion to Islam, but also a counter-revolution against the Western infidels.

Mandel and Zakari illustrate this tension on the cover of *The State of Ata* with a powerful juxtaposition of a woman fixing her headscarf while standing in front of a portrait of Atatürk. They look in opposite directions: East and West. Atatürk is a phenomenon, a myth whose meaning is unquestionable: he is the father of the Turks, the nation's leader, a military hero, and a visionary. With the changing social milieu, the headscarf becomes another myth, a symbol of political Islam. Myth, according to Roland Barthes, is 'an illusory reality constructed in order to mask the real structures of power obtaining in society' enabling maximum control by groups wanting to hold power with minimum conflict.

Dani Cavallaro states in *Critical and Cultural Theory*, 'all cultures and traditions of thought relied upon symbolic and mythical constructs which people have been required to assimilate and internalize.' In Turkey, in the first five years of elementary school, classes begin with a pledge that is repeated every morning – all together by every student, Turkish or not. The pledge affirms the Turkish-ness of the group. Students line up in a military fashion facing the direction of an Atatürk sculpture or portrait, and recite the following sentences: 'I am Turkish. I am just. I am a hard worker. My principles are to protect the young and to respect the old, and to love my country and my nation more than my own essence...' All

through grade school students memorize Atatürk's heroic life story, from being born into a poor family to becoming a military officer and the savior of the nation. After all, 'Every Turk is a born soldier', and this is the mindset that is inculcated into students from a very early age.

One of the most interesting incidents from the book is when Mike Mandel acts as a substitute teacher at a small public elementary school in Susurluk for a day. At first, he fascinates the students with his knowledge of Turkish history and Atatürk. The students are proud that a foreigner knows so much about their culture. But after a while, Mandel starts discussing critical issues in the class, such as the representation of heroism in portraits of Atatürk. The response to this discussion is a fascinating read. This encounter clearly illustrates problematic issues in the Turkish educational system, like the emphasis on rote learning and the discouragement of critical thinking.

Mandel and Zakari deconstruct Turkish cultural myths during their unconventional journey chronicled in the pages of *The State of Ata*. It is a stunning collection of photographs (mainly taken by the couple), memoirs, interviews, documents, and documentation of small-scale interventions. The book represents not only the major ideological groups: Kemalists and Islamists, but also a wide demography of people from various backgrounds, belief systems, and ethnicities. The writers create the frame for a transdisciplinary dialogue among theologians, sociologists, historians and artists.

The State of Ata is the result of a series of detours. The route Mandel and Zakari follow during their ride differs from the classic notions of a journey. Their next destination is often determined through the people they meet and stories they hear. It is a playful exercise in geography and its inhabitants, inspired by Guy Debord and the Lettrist International's concept of psychogeography, where a journey does not have fixed points of entry or exit. Geographer David Pinder explains psychogeography as a state allowing: '... participants to drift from their usual activities and to become more aware of their surroundings while simultaneously seeking





out ways of changing them.' In this way, one would emancipate oneself from the environment and become aware of the symbols repeated in the background to the point where they become banal and almost invisible to the eye of the locals. Sculptor Cengiz Çekil explains in his interview that for many people in Turkey the word 'sculpture' literally means Atatürk sculpture, therefore people expect all sculptures to be of Ata, and they become yet another bronze mass through this desensitization. Mandel and Zakari also foreground the Atatürk sculptures to provoke a dialogue with the reader's personal relationship with ideology.

At one point, Mandel and Zakari encounter a demonstration of extreme Islamists in religious garb, marching at a public square in Ankara. In response, Zakari holds up an Atatürk picture to the men and women walking down the street. This almost instinctual micro-protest turns into a spectacle that results in a sequence of complex situations; the image of her holding up the portrait becomes a dominant meme throughout major newspapers and TV broadcasts all over the country. At first, the Kemalist press calls her a hero: "Beautiful girl of the Republic," "Defender of the nation," ...But when Zakari refuses to state the party line denouncing

the pro-Islamist ideology, the press gets confused. She states clearly that she believes in democracy, and universal freedom of speech, regardless of race, ethnicity, or religion. The Turkish media, like the elementary students, is also ill-equipped to deal with critical thinking. It is used to the Kantian black-and-white model of being for or against an issue, with little room for moral ambiguity. The celebratory headlines quickly fade into accusing questions of her being a provocateur, Jewish CIA agent, or any number of other wild speculations.

Perhaps *The State of Ata: The Contested Imagery of Power in Turkey* is Mike Mandel and Chantal Zakari's reply to these speculations. Yet, instead of providing an answer, they take the reader through the paradoxical landscape of contemporary Turkey. *The State of Ata* challenges the reader to reconsider Turkish cultural and social stereotypes while being open to the multiplicity of voices that they have heard. Mandel and Zakari cherish this diversity of public discourse through the documentation of their journeys, and it makes for a wonderful volume.

- 1 Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972
- 2 Cavallaro, Dani. *Critical and Cultural Theory: Thematic Variations*. London: The Athlone Press, 2001
- 3 Pinder, David (ed.), *The New Europe. Economy, Society and Environment*. New York: Wiley, 1998

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