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THE PSYCHOPOLITICS OF THE ORIENTAL FATHER

Between Omnipotence and Emasculation

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*Also by Bülent Somay*

THE VIEW FROM THE MASTHEAD

# The Psychopolitics of the Oriental Father

Between Omnipotence and Emasculation

Bülent Somay

*Istanbul Bilgi University, Turkey*

palgrave  
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*For my mother,  
the exemplary 'Republican sister'  
who wouldn't have approved but nevertheless understood*

*And for 301 coal miners  
who were killed in a mining 'accident' in Soma, Turkey,  
on 13 May 2014,  
showing us once more that it was class against class  
and not tradition against modernity or East against West*

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# Foreword: If Praying and Shopping Is Not Enough, Read This Book!

John Jay Chapman (1862–1933), a half-forgotten US political activist and essayist, wrote about political radicals:

The radicals are really always saying the same thing. They do not change; everybody else changes. They are accused of the most incompatible crimes, of egoism and a mania for power, indifference to the fate of their own cause, fanaticism, triviality, want of humor, buffoonery and irreverence. But they sound a certain note. Hence the great practical power of consistent radicals. To all appearance nobody follows them, yet everyone believes them. They hold a tuning-fork and sound A, and everybody knows it really is A, though the time-honored pitch is G flat. The community cannot get that A out of its head. Nothing can prevent an upward tendency in the popular tone so long as the real A is kept sounding.<sup>1</sup>

One should emphasise here the moment of passivity and immobility: in Kierkegaard's terms, a radical is not a creative genius but an apostle who just embodies and delivers a truth—he just goes on and on with repeating the same message ('class struggle goes on'; 'capitalism engenders antagonisms'; etc.), and although it may appear that nobody follows him, everyone believes him; that is, everybody secretly knows he is telling the truth—which is why he is constantly accused 'of the most incompatible crimes, of egoism and a mania for power, indifference to the fate of their own cause, fanaticism, triviality, want of humour, buffoonery and irreverence'. And what this means is that, in the choice between dignity and the risk of appearing a buffoon, a true political radical easily renounces dignity.

Somay's book is a lesson in how such a buffoonery can function as an act of radical subversion. Among other examples, he mentions the weird incident which occurred in the Kemalist Turkey in 1926. Part of the Kemalist project of modernisation was to enforce new 'European' models for women, for how they should dress, talk and act, in order to get rid of the oppressive Oriental traditions—as is well known, there

indeed was a 'Hat Law' prescribing how men and women, at least in big cities, should cover their heads. Here is a passage from Somay's book:

[...] in Erzurum in 1926 there was a woman among the people who were executed under the pretext of 'opposing the Hat Law'. She was a very tall (almost 2 m) and very masculine-looking woman who peddled shawls for a living (hence her name '*Şalçı Bacı*' ['Shawl Sister']). Reporter Nimet Arzık described her as, 'two meters tall, with a sooty face and snakelike thin dreadlocks [...] and with manlike steps'. Of course, as a woman she was not supposed to wear the fedora, so she could not have been 'guilty' of anything, but probably in their haste the gendarmes mistook her for a man and hurried her to the scaffold. *Şalçı Bacı* was the first woman to be executed by hanging in Turkish history. She was definitely not 'normal' since the description by Arzık does not fit in any framework of feminine normalcy at that particular time, and she probably belonged to the old tradition of tolerated and culturally included 'special people' with some kind of genetic 'disorder'. The coerced and hasty transition to 'modernity', however, did not allow for such an inclusion to exist, and therefore she had to be eliminated, crossed out of the equation. 'Would a woman wear a hat that she be hanged?' were the last words she was reported to have muttered on the way to the scaffold. Apart from making no sense at all, these words represented a semantic void and only indicated that this was definitely a scene from the Real, subverting the rules of semiotics: she was first emasculated (in its primary etymological sense of 'making masculine'), so that she could be 'emasculated'.

How are we to interpret this weird and ridiculously excessive act of killing? The obvious reading would have been a Butlerian one: through her provocative trans-sexual appearance and acting, *Şalçı Bacı* rendered visible the contingent character of sexual difference, of how it is symbolically constructed—as such, she was a threat to normatively established sexual identities. My reading is slightly (or not so slightly) different: rather than undermining sexual difference, *Şalçı Bacı* stood for this difference as such, in its traumatic Real, irreducible to any clear symbolic opposition; her disturbing appearance transforms clear symbolic difference into the impossible-Real of an antagonism.

But Somay is no less aware of how obscenity can also function as the ultimate hidden support of the state power. The royal example is here provided again by the Kemalist regime in Turkey, this time by

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself, the founding father of the modern Turkey. On 25 April 1915, before the battle with the British-Australian forces on the Gallipoli peninsula, Atatürk told his troops: 'I don't order you to fight, I order you to die. In the time it takes us to die, other troops and commanders can come and take our places.' This 'passion to die' is the last great example of the Thermopilaie-Alamo logic of consciously sacrificing oneself to enable one's forces to regroup for the decisive battle, the last great temptation to be resisted, the last mask in which a non-ethical attitude disguises itself as ethics itself. During the long rule of Kemal Atatürk, the 'father' of modern Turkey, from the end of the First World War till his death in 1938, there was a persistent rumour among the Turks that, in contrast to his official image of ascetic leader working night and day for his country, he was a great serial seducer, sleeping with the wives of all his collaborators. However, those in the know claim that, at least from mid-1920s onwards, the real Atatürk was having sexual function problems due to excessive drinking and his preferences were mostly in the other direction—the rumour about his serial seductions was a carefully propagated official myth. The interesting feature is here that, although this rumour was officially denied (one was even in danger of being severely punished for talking too much about Atatürk's sexual promiscuity), it was discreetly propagated by the very authorities who ruthlessly punished those who besmirched Atatürk's official image by spreading stories about his erotic adventures, and it played a crucial role in sustaining Atatürk's aura. One can easily imagine an embarrassing situation in Turkey in 1930: at a public meeting, an official Kemalist speaker attacks those who spread filthy rumours about the leader's promiscuity; an unknown man from the public stands up and fully supports the speakers, emphasising how everyone knows that rumours about Atatürk's sexual prowess are utterly false—although he only confirmed what the official speaker claimed, he thereby denied the obscene obverse of the official ideology. That is to say, when the official speaker was attacking rumours about Atatürk, everyone knew that he did that just *pro forma*, effectively confirming their truth as something that one should not talk about in public.

But Somay's book reaches its high point in its final pages which describe and provide an outstanding analysis of the mass protests in Turkey which threaten to undermine Prime Minister Erdoğan's Islamist regime. The motto that united the Turks who protested on Taksim Square and the adjoining Gezi Park in the heart of Istanbul was

‘Dignity!’—a good but ambiguous slogan. The term ‘dignity’ is appropriate insofar as it makes it clear that protests are not just about particular material demands, but about the protesters’ freedom and emancipation. In the case of the Taksim Square protests, the call for dignity did not refer only to corruption and cheating; it was also and crucially directed against the patronising ideology of the Turkish prime minister. The direct target of the Gezi Park protests was neither neo-liberal capitalism nor Islamism, but the personality of Erdoğan: the demand was for *him* to step down. Why? Which of his features was considered so annoying that it made him the target of secular educated protesters as well as of anti-capitalist Muslim youth, the object of a hatred which fused them together? Here is Bülent Somay’s explanation:

Everybody wanted *PM Erdoğan* to resign. Because, many activists explained both during and after the Resistance, he was constantly meddling with their lifestyles, telling women to have at least three children, telling them not to have C-sections, not to have abortions, telling people not to drink, not to smoke, not to hold hands in public, to be obedient and religious. He was constantly telling them what was best for them (‘shop and pray’). This was probably the best indication of the neo-liberal (‘shop’) soft-Islamic (‘pray’) character of the JDP rule: Erdoğan’s utopia for Istanbul (and we should remember that he was the Mayor of Istanbul for four years) was a huge shopping mall and a huge mosque in Taksim Square and Gezi Park. He had become ‘Daddy knows best’ in all avenues of life, and tried to do this in a clumsy patronising disguise, which was quickly discarded during Gezi events to reveal the profoundly authoritarian character behind the image.

Is ‘shop and pray’ not a perfect late-capitalist version of the old Christian *ora et labora*, with the identity of a worker (toiling peasant) replaced by a consumer? The underlying wager is, of course, that praying (a codename for the fidelity to old communal traditions) makes us even better ‘shoppers’; that is, participants in the global capitalist market. However, the call for dignity is not only a protest against such a patronising injunction to ‘shop and pray’; dignity is also the appearance of dignity, and in this case the demand for dignity means that I want to be duped and controlled in such a way that proper appearances are maintained, that I don’t lose face—is this not a key feature of our democracies? Walter Lippmann, the icon of US journalism in

the 20th century, played a key role in the self-understanding of the US democracy; in *Public Opinion* (1922),<sup>2</sup> he wrote that a 'governing class' must rise to face the challenge; he saw the public as Plato did, a great beast or a bewildered herd—floundering in the 'chaos of local opinions'. So the herd of citizens must be governed by 'a specialized class whose interests reach beyond the locality'—this elite class is to act as a machinery of knowledge that circumvents the primary defect of democracy, the impossible ideal of the 'omni-competent citizen'. This is how our democracies function—with our consent. There is no mystery in what Lippmann was saying, it is an obvious fact; the mystery is that, knowing it, we play the game. We act *as if* we are free and freely deciding, silently not only accepting but even *demanding* that an invisible injunction (inscribed into the very form of our free speech) tells us what to do and think. As Marx knew it long ago, the secret is in the form itself. In this sense, in a democracy, every ordinary citizen effectively is a king—but a king in a constitutional democracy, a king who only formally decides, whose function is to sign measures proposed by executive administration. This is why the problem of democratic rituals is homologous to the big problem of constitutional democracy: how to protect the dignity of the king? How to maintain the appearance that the king effectively decides, when we all know this is not true? What we call 'crisis of democracy' does not occur when people stop believing in their own power, but, on the contrary, when they stop trusting the elites, those who are supposed to know for them and provide the guidelines, when they experience the anxiety signalling that 'the (true) throne is empty', that the decision is now *really* theirs. There is thus in 'free elections' always a minimal aspect of politeness: those in power politely pretend that they do not really hold power, and ask us to freely decide if we want to give them power—in a way which mirrors the logic of a gesture meant to be refused. So, back to Turkey, is it only this type of dignity that the protesters want, tired as they are of the primitive and openly direct way they are cheated and manipulated? Is their demand 'We want to be cheated in a proper way, make at least an honest effort to cheat us without insulting our intelligence!', or is it really more? If we aim at more, then we should be aware that the first step of liberation is to get rid of the appearance of false freedom and to openly proclaim our un-freedom. Say, the first step towards feminine liberation is to throw off the appearance of the respect for women and to openly proclaim that women are oppressed—today's master, more than ever, does not want to appear as master.<sup>3</sup>

From these brief notes, one can already see that Somay's book is much more than an excellent social and psychoanalytic examination of the impasses of the modernisation of Turkey. I learned from it nothing less than how ideology effectively works in today's global world order. So, not just those interested in Turkey but EVERYONE should read the book.

*Slavoj Žižek*

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