

Review - Turkey and the European Union

Written by J. Paul Barker

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J. PAUL BARKER, SEP 3 2012

Turkey and the European Union
By: Selcen Öner
Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011

In *Turkey and the European Union*, Selcen Öner takes the issue of Turkey and its pursuit of membership in the European Union, which has a long and tenuous history, and isolates for analysis one of the most contentious elements, the role of identity. In doing so, she highlights how the question of Turkey's membership in the European Union (EU) has been a catalyst for driving the debate about what European identity means. This work, which was mostly researched and written prior to 2008, provides an interesting commentary on two issues which remain unresolved: first, what is Europe and what does it mean to be European, and, second, what is the relationship of Turkey to the European Union. These two questions, while in some senses independent of each other, have become intertwined through Turkey's accession process, and Öner notes that "the interactions between Europe and the Turks have been always [sic] influential on construction of European identity and Turkish identity" (192). Thus, Öner's consideration of the construction of identity is a relevant and helpful effort in understanding the current debates over Turkey's accession to the European Union.

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Book Summary

The concept of “Europe” is used in various places throughout history as a geographical, cultural, and a political term, and Öner begins with an attempt to elucidate what the idea of “Europe” is. In early Greek usage, the term marked out Athens and Sparta from other parts of Greece. It was then later expanded to distinguish the continent from Africa and Asia (3-4). By the Middle Ages, Europe became closely connected with the idea of Christendom. At this point, Öner introduces a concept to which she returns multiple times throughout the book: the idea of the “other” being the basis for identity. The “other” of Europe was not a fixed entity and would change during different periods and “especially from the fifteenth until the eighteenth century, the ‘Ottoman Turks’ became the ‘other’ of Europe” (5). In the aftermath of the Enlightenment the idea of Europe moved beyond its connection with Christendom to the European state system. This state system and, in time, the political ideas that accompanied it came to be associated with what Europe was.

In analyzing the role of identity, Öner adopts a social constructivist approach to the issue. She provides a basic introduction to the approach of social constructivism and interacts with the work of Wendt, among others, in showing the importance of identity. For Öner, social constructivism provides the best theoretical vantage point for considering the “transformatory process of integration and helps to understand how the integration process affects states’ identity, interests and behaviour” (41). The process of constructing the European Union in particular is not simply one of integrating institutions but is a construction process of ideas, identities and norms. In the post-World War II era, “Europe” and “European identity” refer primarily to an individual or group’s orientation towards the EU while EU identity is related to the EU’s presence in the world (49). Neither of these is a fixed term but are continually changing through what Öner terms as “The construction process” which for “EU identity refers to [...] a collective identity among its Member States and their level of acting with one voice about different international issues.[...] European identity refers to a collective identity among the citizens of the EU which may be differentiated between civic and cultural European identity” (53). Which of these two identities becomes dominant—civic or cultural—will be an important factor in shaping the future of the EU. While on the one hand the “main characteristic” of Europe in cultural and religious terms is “diversity,” (55) in terms of civic identity and shared values the identity is rather strong (58). Within the EU there is a debate over which of these two provides the stronger or more lasting basis for European identity. This process of cultivating European identity is not meant to replace national identity, but rather there is a need in some sense for the European identity to be incorporated into the identity of the member states (40, 72-75).

These concepts of identity have been cultivated through various efforts and institutions of the EU project. The EU project “has been mostly an elite driven process” and as such there has been a gap between the general public perception and the opinions of the elites as these efforts have met with variegated success. Öner considers the roles of different EU institutions from the European Commission and European Parliament to the European Court of Justice and European Council and Council of Ministers. An interesting observation here is that while younger generations are typically more likely to have positive feelings towards the EU, they also have greater expectations. While the EU project arose in post-War Europe, “the young generations found peace as already given, thus they expect new measures from the EU that can positively affect their daily lives” (108). This has the potential for increased feelings of identification, but if the EU fails to deliver in this regard— and the economic challenges of the past few years have raised this concern— then the value of the EU project may also come under greater scrutiny. Writing almost prophetically of the challenges that Europe is facing at present Öner says “If there will be crucial socioeconomic problems in the EU, it will negatively influence the level of support of the general public to the EU which can be a big challenge for the future of the EU” (114). The benefits of the EU will need to be made more tangible to secure the support of the general public and make up the gap between them and the elites if there is to be an increase in feelings of European identity.

It is only at this point, after identifying the origins of the idea of European identity and some of the challenges and efforts being made to increase these feelings that Öner turns to the question of Turkey’s membership. The interaction between Turks and Europe has been lengthy. Öner cites a good summary of this history: “Turks have been in Europe ‘geographically since their arrival in Asia Minor in the eleventh century, economically since the sixteenth century as trade routes expanded and politically since the nineteenth century when the Ottoman Empire was included in the Concert of Europe” (117). Despite the long history of interaction, the idea of Turks being European has never been

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widespread. Turks have been excluded from Europe for a variety of reasons, on the basis of religion from the early modern period through end of the nineteenth century, on the basis of civilization from the end of the nineteenth century through the end of World War I and on the basis of culture from the end of the Cold War to the present (118). While at some points in history Turks were constructed as the “other” of European identity that has not been the case since the 1950s, but neither have they been constructed as “European” (119). Rather, in most of the instances and substantiated by interviews Öner conducted Turkey was somewhere in between, seen neither as the “other” nor as being fully European (120-122).

This issue of identity has been one of the major arguments put forward by opponents of Turkey’s EU membership. In order to be granted candidate status it was necessary for Turkey to fulfill the Copenhagen political criteria. In October 2005 it was deemed that Turkey had fulfilled these obligations and formal negotiations were opened. The “Europeaness” of Turkey, however, remains a major question. And “the more Turkey fulfills the Copenhagen criteria and adopts the EU *acquis* to its legislation, the more cultural argument of belonging to European civilization tend to be important in the debate on Turkey’s membership [sic]” (125). As Turkey comes into greater alignment in terms of political institutions and structures the other obstacles to its membership will become more evident. Turkey’s membership has become a focal point for identifying those who are against deeper integration and those who support a more comprehensive level of integration of the member states. As was evidenced in the interviews carried out with a variety of European Ministers Turkey’s membership will be both a “challenge and a contribution” to the make-up of the EU (152-153). The interaction between the two throughout the membership process has been such that neither side has been left unchanged. While there is great focus on the transformation of Turkey to come into alignment with EU norms, the process has also influenced the construction process of European identity (179-180). In Öner’s analysis, if in the end Turkey were to be integrated into the EU, then European identity must be primarily based on a civic basis. If, however, European identity is mainly on a cultural basis, then Turkey will probably not be integrated. Thus the nature of European identity is an important factor in determining the outcome of Turkey’s EU membership process.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The work by Öner offers another vantage point on the issue of Turkey and its pursuit of membership in the European Union, wading into issues of identity politics which oftentimes are under the surface of the political rhetoric she brings those to the surface. In this instance, the issue of identity, while not by any means the only critical factor, is certainly an issue of major significance. Öner interacts with a large number of sources and provides a theoretical grounding in social constructivism for her arguments. This brings a level of credibility and perspective to her arguments. Another major strength is the number of interviews conducted with European Ministers of Parliament from a variety of different national and political backgrounds. These interviews provide a firsthand glimpse into the thinking of some of the decision makers in the EU. Coupled together with the statistics from the Eurobarometer surveys, Öner is able to provide a glimpse at both public opinion and the perspective of elites on the issue.

One of the major issues that the book seemed to lack was a clear voice from the author. The work was well-researched, but in many places the flow of the argument was not well-structured. The reader is left to interpret exactly what the author is trying to communicate at a particular point. In some instances, such as demonstrating the ambiguity of European identity throughout history, this lack of clarity was acceptable, but at other places it seriously takes away from the value of the work. Öner’s work would have been greatly strengthened had the author’s voice and argumentation been more clearly demonstrated throughout the work. Another potential weakness of the book is that it is largely based on a PhD. thesis completed in 2008, though updated and revised for the 2011 publication, and the financial crisis in Europe and around the world, the frantic speed of political events in Turkey, the uprisings in the Middle East among other issues are not accounted for in this work. Obviously, no book will be completely current but the limited references to things that have happened post-2008 is another weakness of the work.

Conclusion

Do issues of identity matter in international politics? In this case, the answer would seem to be yes. Öner provides a comprehensive overview of how the issue of European identity has been a key aspect in the process of Turkey’s EU

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membership and how Turkey has been a key influencer of what it means to be European. While other factors, such as the economic troubles of the Eurozone or questions about the incorporation of a such a large population may eventually be the cause for Turkey joining or not joining the EU, the issue of identity will certainly be a part of the story. One of the key features of this process has been that the question of Turkey joining the EU has been the catalyst to expose what being “European” means. This is a concept that is under continual construction and Turkey is both a challenge and a contributor to that process.

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