

Review - Women and Civil Society in Turkey

Written by Sule Toktas

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SULE TOKTAS, FEB 16 2014

Women and Civil Society in Turkey: Women's Movements in a Muslim Society

By: Ömer Çaha

Surrey: Ashgate, 2013

Women and Civil Society in Turkey: Women's Movements in a Muslim Society is a book by a male writer and researcher on the feminist movement in Turkey. One might consider a book on feminism by a male author somewhat irrelevant; yet, this is the reason that the author, Ömer Çaha, in the preface, offers an explanation regarding his gender and the topic that he deals with in the book:

...the reflection of my sense of justice that I owe to women as a man in a Muslim society. This is perhaps an attempt to pay a debt of conscience to my own sisters. (p. x).

Feminist methodology has often been concerned with the gender of researchers claiming that the research produced (the product) is closely connected and even a byproduct of the researcher who cannot be divorced from his/her gender. In other words, feminist critiques argued that the making of science is a heterogeneous process where many subjective factors, like the gender and the gendered worldview of the researcher, are involved. The author seems to present a study in the book where his gender is minimized. In this regard, first and by foremost, through the perspective of women's emancipation, feminist research, feminist methodology, etc., the book can be considered to be a successful example of a study on women by a male researcher.

Chapter One of the book provides a philosophical background on the topic of civil society and women. The author traces the conceptual ideas on civil society and its feminist critique. Prof. Çaha starts with ancient Greek philosophy and covers many philosophers, including Aristotle, John Stuart Mill, Carole Pateman, Betty Friedan, Zilla R. Eisenstein, Iris Young, Carol Gilligan, Luce Irigaray and many more. He also discusses various theories, such as the social contract theory, modernization theory, structuralist theory, post-modern theory, etc., concluding with contemporary political and feminist thought. In doing so, he elaborates specifically three principles: – the equality principle among citizens, the diversity principle and the autonomy principle – as well as the three waves of feminism – the first, second and the third waves. The chapter is a well-organized review of the fundamentals of civil society theory and feminist reactions to it.

Chapter Two of the book brings into focus Turkey and its Ottoman roots. Prof. Ömer Çaha provides a political history of the development of civil society in Turkish lands and the contribution of the women's movement in enhancing the boundaries of the civil sphere vis-à-vis the central state. Islam, in the author's analysis, divided society into two sub-worlds – the world of men and the world of women. In such a gendered worldview and hence social order, although women in the Ottoman Empire were part of the pious foundations dealing with social issues and charity, the state always had an eye on the women's world. By the 18th century, women were consumers of western textiles and with their outlook, by the 19th century they began to be viewed as a link to western civilization. Prof. Çaha also gives an account of the women's movement starting with the first wave at the turn of the 20th century when the number of women's publications and associations increased. The women of that time demanded the right take part in public life through education, work and equal rights with men in family life. With the founding of the Republic in 1923, women came to be viewed as symbols and guards of the Republican regime. Women's demands were partly answered by

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Kemalist reforms and what's more, women's participation in the public sphere became a matter of prestige for the Republican elite. When it came to the 1970s, with its ideologically polarized environment, women took part in political movements and an image of 'sister' (similar to comrade) emerged.

The book evolves into a contemporary analysis of women's movements in Turkey where *Chapter Three* covers the period after the 1980s and the revival of civil society in the country. Themes like air pollution, health, environment, education, human rights, religious and/or ethnic identity, the European Union process, all start to circulate in the public sphere with new social movements as well as related media appearances. The author also gives an account of the rise of the feminist movement after 1980, the third military coup, and summarizes the main themes of the different feminist wings in Turkey. Prof. Ömer Çaha not only identifies the similarities and differences between liberal, radical, social feminist stances in Turkey but also lists the actions, campaigns and protests that feminists participated in during the same period.

These actions of the feminists, which started as small but effective street protests and political campaigns such as 'March Against Violence', 'Purple Need', 'We Want the Nights', 'Whistle', 'Women in Black' and 'Saturday Mother's', over time, resulted in the establishment of institutions thanks to the gains of the flourishing and deepening women's movements. Thus, the author illustrates how these actions turned into actual bodies and institutions in *Chapter Four*. The *Women's Library and Information Center*, the *Purple Roof Women's Shelter Foundation*, the *Flying Broom*, the *Women for Women's Human Rights – New Ways Association*, the *Women's Legal Rights Commissions* at bar associations, the *Women's Rights Implementation Center*, *Women's Counseling Center*, the *Van Women's Association*, the *Association for the Support and Training of Women Candidates* and the *Women's Center* are all examples of women's organizations both at national and regional levels founded in light of the feminist movement. The author also provides examples of feminist publications that started to appear in the 1990s and 2000s like *Cimbiz*, *Kadın Postası*, *Dolaşan Mavi Çorap*, *Eksik Etek*, *Çağdaş Kadın*, *Kültür ve Siyasette Feminist Yaklaşımlar*, *Kadın Bülteni*, *Pazartesi*, and *Amargi*. The legal reforms such as the introduction of a new Civil Code and a new Penal Code in the 2000s as well as the growing research interest in academia on women's issues supported by the establishment of gender and women's studies research centers and graduate programs at the universities are also covered in this chapter.

As women's movements in Turkey formed new organizations, publications and institutions, the differences between various feminist positions proliferated resulting in the birth of new branches within feminism in Turkey – the Islamic and the Kurdish women's movements. *Chapters Five* and *Six* of the book examine these movements. Regarding the Islamic women's movement, Prof. Çaha provides a detailed account of the protests against the ban of the headscarf in the public sphere which triggered the emergence of a separate Islamic women's movement in the post-1980 period. The increase in the public profile of Islamic women continued with the foundation of various organizations that serve in the area of aid and assistance (the *Ladies Association for Science and Culture*, the *Ladies Foundation for Education and Culture*, the *Hazar Association of Education, Culture and Solidarity*, etc.) or that are active in the political arena (the *Women's Rights Association against Discrimination*, the *Association for Free Thought and Education Rights*, the *Association of Imam Hatip High School Graduates*, *Istanbul Rainbow Women's Platform*, the *Capital City Women's Platform* and etc.). Various magazines also began to circulate (i.e. *Ayçe*, *Woman's Identity*, *Sena*, *My Family* and etc.). Islamic women also became active in Islamic political parties specifically in their women's branches. The Islamic women activists mainly held dual identities – religious and gender and their way of doing politics reflected their synthesis of these identities.

The Kurdish women's movement, which is discussed in *Chapter Six*, also has its own achievement of protests, campaigns, organizations (*Jiyan Women's Cultural House*, *Kurdish Women's Association*, *Dicle Women's Cultural Center*, *Saturday Mothers*, *Peace Mothers* and etc.) and publications (like *Roza*, *Woman and Life*, *Jujin*, *Free Women in Life*, *Free Women's Voice*, *For the Emancipation of Women*), as well as a separate agenda from that of other feminist stances. The Kurdish women mainly struggled against two establishments: one being patriarchy, male dominancy and the suppression of women as a collectivity, and the other being Turkish women who often ignored the Kurdish women's special issues and problems as they encounter dual oppressions and victimizations. The ethnic identity of Kurdish women activists, according to Ömer Çaha, triggers their politicization and the demands they develop in the public sphere. The book ends with concluding remarks on women's movements and feminine civil

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society in Turkey. In this section, the author outlines the distinguishing features of Turkish feminism characterized by a strong desire for equality and demands to participate in the public sphere.

The book, written by Ömer Çaha who is a professor of political science and who has been working on women's issues and women's movement for many years, is an in-depth summary of the development of the civil society in Turkey and the role that women's organizations and feminist movements played in this growing civil sphere. Students of political science, women's studies and sociology might specifically benefit from the book. Since the title is *Women and Civil Society in Turkey: Women's Movements in a Muslim Society*, one also wonders about the development of civil society and feminist ideas in other Muslim societies. Turkey is a country of at times contradictory worldviews – one more oriented towards the west and European mode of enlightenment and life style and the other being more oriented towards Islam and the Middle East. A comparative analysis of civil society and women's activism in Turkey with experiences in other countries and regions would definitely necessitate the substantial data provided by the author through his wide and historical coverage and exploration of the subject matter.

About the author:

Sule Toktas is a professor of Political Science at Kadir Has University, Istanbul. Her research interests include women's studies, Turkish politics and foreign policy, minority issues and international migration. She has conducted research projects funded by TUBITAK and UN Population Fund and Turkish Academy of Sciences (TÜBA). Her publications have appeared in academic journals including Middle Eastern Studies, Women's History Review, Ethnic and Racial Studies, and the Muslim World. She has co-authored three books on the documentation of immigration in Turkey, Syria-Afghanistan politics and think-tanks and foreign policy making in Turkey. Her latest book on gender relations in Turkey will be published in 2014.