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Book Review
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Faces of the State: Secularism and Public Life in Turkey

by Yael Navaro-Yashin. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. Pp. xii + 247; index. ISBN 0-691-08845-4

(Reviewed by Zehra A. Beyli, Research Institute for Law, Politics and Justice, Keele University, December 2006)

Faces of the State is a far-sighted anthropological study analysing the production of the political state in the public sphere of people's lives in Turkey in the 1990s. The main question of this study is how Turkish people understand the "political state" of Turkey. Yael Navaro-Yashin analyses the use of secularism in the "public life" of people by making Istanbul the main site of her ethnographic study. She studies Istanbul as a complex city without boundaries to show the reader the distinction between spheres of "power" and "resistance" in public life. The writer studies the reception by the people of the Islamist Welfare Party's victory in Istanbul's municipality elections in 1994. She argues that the public (referring to both the people and the state) produces the political arena. "The notion of the public in public life enables us to analyse people and the state, not as an opposition, but as the same domain" (p.2).

Yael Navaro-Yashin explores the concept of fantasy of state by following Žižek's reading of Lacan as a "psychic symptom that survives analysis, critique, or deconstruction" (p.4). She believes that the political and the state endure and survive deconstruction. She argues that the concept of fantasy helps to study the enduring force of the political. She uses "cynicism" as a central structure of feeling for the production and revitalisation of the political. In contrast to Žižek, the writer uses cynicism as a feeling of political existence in a realm of Turkish state power.

The book takes the apparent division between secularists and Islamists as one of its topics; for the writer the problem is secularism in itself rather than religion because secularism is the most dominant force that forms the basis of public life in Turkey. Therefore, the relationship between secularism and Islamism is the major aspect of this book. The author argues that there is dialectic between "secularity" and "religion" and that it is important to understand the meaning of secularism.

In the first part of the book, Navaro-Yashin studies the cultural politics in which "humour, rumour, imaginary stories, projections and irrational fears as intangible sites for the making of the political in Istanbul's public life" (p.16). Her own experiences as a female researcher in Turkey help the reader to understand the cultural differences between secularists and Islamists. Navaro-Yashin uses a historical explanation for secular Istanbulis' mapping their difference with Islamists especially in relation to the public practices of women.

She shows the reader the contested regionalism of Turkey by posing the question, "where does Turkey belong?" She questions the place of Turkey in the world; is Turkey a Middle Eastern, European or a Mediterranean country? For the writer, the region that secularists and Islamists occupy is the same, but their perception of this region is different, so there is an instability in the meaning of region and the narratives of belonging. She skilfully profiles two ordinary middle class women who experience Istanbul differently from each other. Their perception of secularism shows the reader the mindset of secularists.

In her chapter "Buying and Selling Secularity and Islam," Yael Navaro-Yashin discusses consumerism in the social life of Turkey. She believes that there is a commodification of culture, which is a consuming culture both for Islamists and secularists. In another chapter, she explores how public rituals and national sports activities produce a statist culture in Turkey.

In her last chapter "The Cult of Atatürk", she follows Michael Taussig's notion of "state fetishism" and changes it to "Atatürk fetishism". Navaro-Yashin explores the ethnographic and political context for the use of the image of the founder of modern Turkey Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The image of Atatürk is associated with institutions and rituals of state. This has alternatively been called "secular ritual" to point out the religiosity of state practices. Her point

is the similarity of visits to Ataturk's mausoleum to visiting a sheikh's tomb as an expression of devotion and support. She builds upon the work of anthropologists who studied formalised and secular state ceremonies as forms of ritual comparable to religious practice. There is an aura around Ataturk, which is supported by legal and state legislation. Secularism is not only a "reified modernity", but it is also a form of mystical, ritualistic and religious "excessive expression".

Faces of the State is a valuable contribution to understanding the split between secularism and Islam in modern Turkey based on the personal observations of the writer. It is a great work especially for those who want to study Turkish secularism and statist culture.