

From Jinns to Genes:

The Emergence of Psy-sciences and the Modern State in Turkey

Kutlughan Soyubol

My first and foremost project as a Zvi Yavetz or Thomas Arthur Arnold Fund Postdoctoral Fellow at the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies would be to revise and develop my doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Sciences of the Soul: The Emergence of Psy-sciences and the Modern State in Turkey*, into a book form for publication. The dissertation examines the epistemological and conceptual formation and (re)articulation of madness, sexuality and selfhood in the context of creating a modern Turkish nation (1923-1960). Three inter-related themes run through the study. First, the emergence of new and often contested medical discourses on mental health that engaged with and participated in the construction of healthy secular subjects within the imaginary milieu of the Kemalist nationalist project. Second, the processes through which psy-sciences, armed with scientific rationality, came to engage with and appropriate the language and the terrain once occupied by religion. And third, the intricate discursive fluctuations over the definition of the soul and psyche as they came to unfold within the temporal and spatial settings of early republican and postwar Turkey—which by implication challenged the post-enlightenment myth of a universal and linear progression towards a teleology of science.

The project is predicated on an interdisciplinary approach that utilizes different bodies of knowledge, including but not limited to the intellectual history of the Middle East, history and philosophy of science, and historical anthropology. Borrowing from Michel Foucault, Ian Hacking, Arnold I. Davidson, and Timothy Mitchell among others, it engages with the present debates in these fields via a critical evaluation of the human sciences, particularly psychiatry and

psychology, their efficacy as a tool of governance, and their effect in creating a new nation and new subjectivities. To substantiate its arguments, the study draws on a wide array of primary sources including psy-scientific books and journals, memoirs, correspondence, and other popular writings of the period, as well as archival sources from the archives of the Bakirkoy Psychiatric Hospital, and the Association of Metaphysical Studies and Scientific Research in Istanbul.

The emerging medical discourses on mental health are addressed here through a thorough study of the works of three experts who held competing and conflicting views on madness and the role of psy-sciences in the formation of normative and healthy Turkish subjects. The three experts are Mazhar Osman [Uzman] (1884-1951), Izzeddin Sadan (1895-1970s), and Bedri Ruhselman (1898-1960), who represented three different psy-scientific trends: descriptive (biological) psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and neo-spiritualism.

Studying these three agents and their different views on what it means to be a mentally healthy, productive subject sheds ample light on the convoluted relations between the psy-sciences and the formation of the early republic. It also discloses the particular characteristics of an overly zealous secular state, which while consciously severed all ties with its “Islamic” past had unconsciously continued an almost imperceptible conversation with structures and categories inherited from the past. Put differently, I argue that this overtly secular nationalist state has been continuously haunted by its past—by shadows from the past that were not necessarily discernible even to its controlling and regulatory gaze.

It is of utmost importance to recognize that all these experts—and their often clashing approaches to madness and Turkish subjectivity—were themselves a product of their own times, as well as the ambiguities and contradictions of their eras. One cannot ignore, for example, the ways in which the modernizing project of the Kemalist era opened new opportunities and spaces

for the production of a new officially endorsed scientific language and discourse. It engendered, at the same time, a counter knowledge of the soul and psyche that partially challenged or else resisted the early republican vision of an ultra-secular, ultra-nationalist project of Europeanization. As I argue in my dissertation, these three experts have contributed differently to the translation of the project of modernity in Turkey, with a particular emphasis on the engineering of mentally healthy and normative Turkish subjects. Following the future careers and knowledge production of their disciples, furthermore, displays the epistemological fluctuations and contingencies rather than the linearity expected of the authorized psycho-scientific discourses.

Secondly, by questioning the binarism of the secular and the religious, this study, while not looking at religious and secular discourses per se, focuses on the processes of the secularization of subjectivities as well as the replacement of Islamic discourses in defining the normative in society. This intervention involved the redefinition of Islamic beliefs and practices on “madness” and “sexuality” as non-rational and non-modern and therefore harmful to modern subjects, a process, I maintain, involved the psy-scientific discourses redefining themselves through their opposite, i.e. religion. In other words, this study does not take psychiatry and other psy-sciences as given or as naturally progressive but a part of a historical process that bound these discourses to enter into multilayered relations and conversations with older forms and practices, including religion and religious traditions. An analysis of such intricate structures and relationships, I argue, would contribute to the overall discussions of modernity, particularly within Ottoman-Turkish studies.

I also have plans for a second research project, which was conceived when I came across vital research material during my research for the final chapter of my dissertation. This new

project will focus primarily on the Turkish neo-spiritualist movement and its connection to contemporary Sufi (Islamic Mysticism) movements such as the *tarikats* of Ke'nan Rifai. I want to explore the many ways in which Turkish spiritualism and certain modern Sufi movements intertwine and overlap with each other over the commitment to modern scientific discourse, which they indisputably took as compatible and commensurable with their religious and metaphysical belief structures and cosmologies. It is important to note that both the Rifai and Turkish spiritualist movements never became targets of an ultra-secular Turkish state. To the contrary, both movements were semi-officially recognized by the early republican state—a state that was known for brutally dismantling all independent religious institutions and structures in the country, including the *tekkes* and *zaviyes* associated with Sufism. I believe that an analysis of the mutual, and inter-constitutive relationships between the ultra-secular state of Turkey, the Turkish spiritualist movement, and the *tarikats* of Ke'nan Rifai will complicate our interpretation of the secular and religious, as it will lead to a more nuanced and multilayered reading of one of the most ferocious, top-down secularizing projects in the early twentieth century.

My academic interests fit well with the strengths of the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies in Ottoman-Turkish history, intellectual history of the Middle East, and history and philosophy of science and medicine. I also consider this year's post-doctoral seminar theme, "Values, Materials, and Interests: On Cultural Encounters and Historical Memory" a great match with my first project, which, as discussed above, scrutinizes the encounters between western secular and Islamic discourses and forms of rationality on mental issues as they were unfolded within a Turkish cultural context. Being a postdoctoral fellow at the Zvi Yavetz School of Historical Studies will thus provide the perfect research setting as well as a vibrant intellectual environment that will help me to pursue my research interests and projects. In return, I believe

that I would be able to contribute to the TAU community by offering a new set of interdisciplinary research questions and approaches grounded in the intellectual history of the late Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey, as well as the history and philosophy of science in the Middle East.