

“Critical Approach to International Relations and the Context of Turkey”

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A critical shift has taken over the social sciences and the humanities, one that has also started to affect the study of international relations. As a historical sociologist, I have already witnessed the critical shift in the social sciences. As an outsider here, I attempt to observe the critical shift in international relations. The critical approach to international relations, which is also termed the social constructionist approach or the “Third Debate”¹, was preceded by two approaches, the idealist one that formed at the end of World War I with the intent to understand the reasons of war in order to promote peace, and, due to the failure of this approach as indicated by World War II, the ensuing realist approach that set in to address the realities of power especially enhanced by the emergence of the Cold War and, in doing so, emphasized the immutable political interests of nation-states, often overlooking domestic needs and choices (Steans 1998: 33; McSweeney 1999: 54).

Yet the end of the Cold War and the political reconfiguration that ensued throughout the world fostered new political, transnational organizations such as the European Union and North American Free Trade Agreement, and new formulations such as border-zone identities, spiritualist movements, transnational corporations, international migration. Also connected to this post-Cold War transformation were new technological advances, especially in communication, that led to the phenomenon of globalization which affected all societies, albeit in different forms. Due to these transformations, the concept of citizenship extended beyond national frontiers in a world where the whole world became aware of events in a particular nation-state through the media, and the boundaries of national sovereignty were challenged as parties beyond a particular nation-state intervened in these events with increasing frequency.

Critique of the Realist Approach to International Relations

These developments made the realist approach in international relations, with its employment of the nation-state as the main unit of analysis, increasingly problematic (Mandeville 1999; Anderson and Liam 1999; Clark 1999; Evans 2000; Mahler 2000). It became evident that the realist approach had narrowly viewed security in terms of national security, had only defined human rights in terms of those recognized by the state, and had readily assumed identities to be stable and homogenous, and all citizens equal. Since the state and the nation were thus treated as the one and the same throughout the world, the historical particularities of each state and nation were overlooked. This lack of emphasis on the particularities naturalized the existing status quo in societies and dismissed the varied domestic needs and choices of different social groups (Merle 1987; Krause and Renwick 1996; Smith 1997; McSweeney 1999; Jones 2001).

¹The “first debate” was between idealism and realism during the inter-war years and resulted in the critical turn in international relations, and the “second debate” was between the traditional positivist and scientific interpretative approaches, and produced the scientific turn. The “third debate” is therefore defined as one between neo-realism and its critics over the connection between knowledge and human interests and has led to the critical turn (Linklater 2000).

As a consequence of these tendencies, the realist approach to international relations could not distance itself from the gradually dislocating nation-state and was therefore unable to offer any explanations about the causes of the dislocation (Burchill et al. 1996). Similarly, the lack of emphasis on historicity led the realist approach to treat the Cold War as an immutable feature of the international system, thereby failing to fully explicate post-Cold War transformations.

Scholars such as Thomas Wright Smith (1997) started to criticize the realist approach for resting on an uncritical view of the past which saddled history with more certainty than it could bear; others like Stephen Hobden (1999) took issue with the state-centric emphasis of the realist approach and argued that the approach had to be contextualized in history. This emphasis on the historicity of international relations uncovered, in turn, that the narrative of the realist approach was epistemologically based solely on the historical case of the European Enlightenment (Brown 1994; Vandersluis 2000; Campbell, this volume). Rather than questioning their epistemological and methodological framework in light of these criticisms, however, the scholars of the realist approach set out instead to create “historical myths” in order to prove this immutability. They invoked myths such as that of German exceptionalism and Swedish neutrality to deny change and justify certain policies (Buffet and Hauser 1998: viii, 261). As a consequence, the realist approach moved away from the context of explanation to description and became more and more policy and praxis-driven, and less and less accurate in its predictions.

All these shortcomings of the realist approach led to the emergence of a new social constructionist/critical approach based not on immutability but on historical processes, not on stability and social reproduction, but on change. As one scholar described, even in its social groups within nation-states undergo within a historical context, one where international relations “no longer stays away from society offering generalized universal pronouncements on the state of world politics; it instead has to study aspects of daily political life with a particular emphasis on the problem of ambivalence and resistance (Paolini 1999: ix-x).”

Elements of the Alternate Critical Approach to International Relations

The revised formulation the critical approach to international studies proposes is based on the following premises (Edkins 1999; Paolini 1999; Linklater 2000; Jones 2001): The classical approach to international studies contains the epistemological principles of the functionalist paradigm whereby the present functioning institutions that comprise the status quo is naturalized and taken as a given. Methodologically, quantitative analysis dominates, giving analyses a false precision that often does not hold true in practice. The emphasis is on causal explanations that rely on the rational, objective, positivist functioning of political structures. While these premises do indeed explain certain political processes, they fail in the case of emerging events that do not fit classical definitions and boundaries of institutions and structures. A revised formulation therefore proposes to define as its unit of analysis not institutions, but instead human agency. It is also human agency that not only emphasizes functions, but also sources of tension and conflict in societies – hence it brings in the analysis of social power as a significant component of analysis.

In order to understand the newly emerging processes, this revised approach focuses on their evolution through history (hence historicity becomes a founding principle) as well as on the spectrum of meanings these processes have assumed through time (hence repertoire of meanings becomes another founding principle). Methodologically, qualitative analyses that can capture these varying temporalities and meanings take precedence. The resulting critical paradigm is therefore reflective, whereby it frequently questions its positionality vis-a-vis its subject matter; it is culturalist in that it focuses on the variety of meanings structures and institutions are attributed in society by different social groups, processual in that it assumes these structures and institutions

are not fixed in time but rather continuously get transformed, and contingent in that rather than providing causal explanations, it emphasizes the way in which certain events, structures and processes come together through time. Ultimately, the ideal approach ought to combine elements of both the classical and the critical thereby capturing political and social processes more fully.

Contextualization of Turkey within the World Order

Now let us turn to assessing the location of Turkey within the new world order, given the theoretical parameters of the critical approach to international relations cited above. The first premise necessitates the contextualization of Turkey according to contemporary historical conditions and power relations. As such, Turkey is principally affected by two structures, the United States world hegemony and the European Union regional influence.

The United States world hegemony has brought forward an increasing emphasis of Antonio Gramsci because of the increasing inequality in power relations between states. Indeed, even though American scholars often talk on behalf of the Anglo-Saxon world, they often term Europe continental and do not include countries such as Canada, New Zealand and Australia in their discourse (Crawford and Jarvis 2001); the lesser societies and states are not even taken into account. Turkey can be defined, along with many others like it, as one such subaltern state that is affected by the economic, social and political policies of the United States. Currently, the current foreign policy of the United States is based on its own historical precedents. The United States was historically formed as an immigrant society in opposition to its European past, fighting the war of independence fought against Britain and its hierarchical class system; in its subsequent rhetoric, the United States also valorized the connection between capitalism and the Protestant Ethic² thereby prioritizing the freedom of religious belief as well as the liberty to consume.

These historical antecedents have led the United States to develop a moral, emancipatory impulse in its foreign policy, one dominated by the rhetoric of democracy and human rights. As a consequence of this stand, the international relations criteria have shifted from the realist “real politik” approach emphasizing the political interests of nation-states to identity representation and an “apology ethics” whereby all nation-states are expected to apologize for their oversight and oppression of particular social groups in their societies. Such an apology ethics has been criticized by scholars for the inconsistencies embedded within it; for instance, Robert Vitalis (2000) points out that even though United States interventions throughout the world have been executed to abolish inequalities across caste and power, there has always been silence and evasion in this respect on poor race relations within the United States itself. Likewise, Rolph Trouillot (1999) argues that even though the call of the United States for apology may be noble, it is unclear as to who should apologize to whom on whose behalf and to what ends. If the nation-states themselves issue the apology, this should not absolve them from all blame since there has to be recompense to the oppressed groups. Yet the nature of this recompense is still unclear and hotly debated. Whether nation-states apologize as stated above or do not, they have no accountability for their actions because there are no superceding structures that oversee nation-states and that also have world-wide legitimacy.

²It is no historical accident that Max Weber wrote the Protestant Ethic on his return from a trip to the United States.

The regional influence of the European Union likewise draws from its own historical past whereby the political units that were once united under the Carolingian empire are once more united in order to withstand the political influence of larger states such as China, Russia and the United States. Even though they have finally been able to unite the currency and develop legal codes and passports that crosscut European nation-states, many national practices still persist; Euro currency coexists with national currencies and usually a bi-legal system exists with the national and European courts trying separate cases. There is also no defined rules for inclusion, other than the rhetoric of democracy, human rights, and equal participation; indeed Jennifer Welsh (1994) criticizes the European self-definition that she argues is based on the idea of an inner enemy that derives from its own history: European policy with respect to refugees and foreign nationals residing in Europe is based on exclusion, one still espousing to the realist approach to international relations whereby such groups are seen as a threat to the cohesion as well as the military security of the European Union. In spite of these shortcomings, the European Union also espouses for the identity, representation and apology ethics in its foreign policy, often citing these as criteria to nation-states which want to join the European Union. Within this context and due to the end of the Cold War, Turkey is no longer a geopolitically significant buffer state. In addition, the processes of globalization, European integration and democratization necessitate that Turkey redefine its location in the changing world order.

The Existing International Relations Approach in Turkey

Fuat Keyman (this volume) describes the existing international relations approach in Turkey as containing the following four premises: i) international relations is not differentiated from foreign policy; the lack of boundaries between these concepts often leads to the formation of conspiracy theories that emerge to paralyze society; ii) international relations is not differentiated from area specialties; scholars therefore only discuss the particular context and do not concern themselves either with practices elsewhere, or with theoretical formulations underlying their area expertise; iii) the realist approach to international approach fits in perfectly with the hegemony of the state-centered model in Turkey, both in the contemporary context and in history.

These premises produce a paradigm where the Turkish state functions as the container of all policy, and the state assumes full correspondence between society and the state. It therefore becomes very difficult the interests of the state from those of society; the nation and the state become one and the same. Acting in accordance with the realist approach to international relations, the state privileges territorial integrity – this power oriented, interest driven stand necessitates the privileging of stability and normalization in society. As a consequence, individual principles, choices, and economic development within society as well as democratization do not become significant issues. Since the civil society organizations that would foster these issues are also controlled by the state in the name of stability, the status quo created and dominated by the state sustains itself. Yet the aftermath of the Cold War and the processes of globalization challenge and undermine the policies of the Turkish state; the lack of societal forces that would create alternatives and develop coping mechanisms makes the development of alternate policies impossible. The starting point of a new policy making process in Turkey needs to commence with a critique of the existing practices undertaken here; the next step would then comprise the development of an alternate critical approach.

An Alternate Critical Approach to the International Relations of Turkey

What would be the narrative of such a critical approach to international relations in Turkey? Let me attempt to point out the general parameters here. The focus on historicity would necessitate that the narrative be based on how the historical development of the Turkish

Republic has shaped Turkey's international relations. And it is crucial that such an assessment not be made from the perspective of state interests, but rather of societal concerns. Turkey as a country has been born out of a series of wars culminating in a successful war of independence. These wars were fought by a military cadre of the former Ottoman empire among whom one, Mustafa Kemal, emerged as the leader to found the republic. Even though Kemal turned civilian after fighting the war of independence, he nevertheless continued to rely on the military both rhetorically and literally to preserve the republic he founded. He convinced many of his fellow officers to make a similar transition into politics thereby changing the composition of the Turkish national assembly. This historical contingency positively affected the relative strength of the military institution in the Turkish republic; military priorities set Turkish international relations both because of this precedent of being founded as a consequence of a series of wars, and due to the strong presence of the military in Turkish political life. The ensuing international relations approach was therefore realist, defining Turkey's interests primarily in terms of real politik. This outlook was further enhanced by the Second World War which Turkey did not actively participate in, and then during the Cold War era whereby Turkey's proximity to the Soviet Union led the United States to develop an active interest in Turkish politics.

During the Cold War era, two rival social orders advocated by the United States and the Soviet Union were pitted in a global competition that was very pervasive (Cronin 2000; Gaddis 1992-3). This competition played itself out mainly in the economic sphere with disparate economic development models promoted by the two powers. While both rivals claimed the moral superiority of their model, the United States emphasized democracy to be the foundation stone of theirs. Yet in both instances, political interests preceded domestic needs and choices. The interests and priorities of the United States thus started to increase their influence in Turkey, whereby an active domestic policy focused on eradicating all social factors in Turkey that would potentially ally themselves with the Soviet Union against the United States. Very similar to the McCarthyism that effectively liquidated socialist critical thinking in the United States, Turkey in the 1950s through the 1970s eradicated the Turkish left and the critical thinking embedded within. The promotion of religious interests in Turkey was also supported by the United States as a panacea against Soviet socialism; religion started to politically come to the forefront at approximately the same time period with religious maxims appearing on the agendas of opposition parties in general and the formation of parties with an explicitly religious character in particular.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, United States interests also underwent a transformation. No longer politically and militarily threatened by the Soviet Union, the United States started to actively promote political participation throughout the world; it was no accident that such a change would increase capitalist market penetration as more and more social groups joined the public arena of consumption. The ensuing identity politics³ and representation have led the United States to expect Turkey to promote religious and intellectual freedom of expression. Even though among these two, Turkey – and indirectly the United States – has been more supportive of religious freedom, because of the theoretical premise that religion often supports the status quo, in practice religious freedom has challenged the Turkish Republic more. Since the Republic was founded on the premise of secularism to distance itself from the Ottoman empire headed by a sultan who was also the caliph of all Muslims, religion always formed a potential political rallying point in Turkish politics, one that currently continues to have the potential to assume political power in Turkey.

³Indeed, scholars argue (Law 1996; Ismael 2000) that all identities in the Middle East have evolved in their specific historical context.

Intellectual freedom, as a consequence of the active decimation of leftist intellectuals in Turkey during the Cold War era, has taken the form of identity politics, the most significant of which has been the Kurdish demands for political participation in southeastern Turkey. However, since the Turkish Republic was historically founded on the premise that all citizens in Turkey politically and, by implication, socially equal, ethnic differences were disregarded in spite of their strong presence in Turkey. As a consequence, the Turkish republic has had problems in recognizing the Kurds' demand for education in their own language as well as political representation through their ethnicity. The apology ethics promoted by the United States has also led to an interest in getting Turkey to recognize the Armenian genocide which once again forms a politically more challenging threat to the republic because many of the founding elite of the new Turkey are potentially implicated in participating in the Armenian massacres and deportation that occurred around the founding of the Turkish republic. Hence the prevalence in Turkish international relations today of the Islamic, the Kurdish and Armenian issues are a consequence of the shift in United States policy and its hegemony in the world today.

Another significant group that has been adversely affected by the new world order throughout the world is women. Even though the pioneering work of Cynthia Enloe (1990) on critiquing international relations from a feminist perspective had been largely ignored in the field, succeeding studies have found a more receptive audience (Steans 1998; Peterson 1998; Jabri and O'Gorman 1999, and Kardam, this volume); women in Turkey are not adequately recognized and represented in the public sphere as well. In addition, women's issues also intersect with modernity and religion in Turkey around the political sanctions against veiled women participating in public institutions of the state, a condition that makes full gender participation in Turkey even more problematic (Göçek 1999). These issues have presented Turkey with significant political problems because of their historical precedent, whereby all three necessitate altering the Republican founding principles of secularism in the case of the Islamists, equal citizenship in the case of the Kurds, and historical accountability in the case of the Armenians.

The critical approach to international relations is thus able to explain further why the Islamist, Kurdish and Armenian issues in particular and the freedom of expression in general dominate Turkish international relations today. This approach also opens up new sites of research and inquiry in Turkey that have previously not been studied in depth. The main site concerns identity formation: understanding the historical development of identity in Turkey across the various regions, especially the dynamics behind the ensuing divide between the "civilized, advanced, more secular West" of the country as opposed to the "backward East" as well as the differences between the "North" and the "South", becomes urgent. How the economic resources of the Turkish republic, as well as its legislation and policy formation, affected this consequence needs to be studied in depth. Similarly, the effects of globalization on Turkey has to be researched regionally to explain instances such as the economic and political challenge provided by the Central Anatolian businessmen who started to directly participate in the world economy bypassing the Western regions that had been economically dominant in Republican history.

The other site of research concerns population movements within and across these regions. With the changing world order, the borders of Turkey have assumed a new character. While the northern and eastern borders face certain challenges and opportunities, mostly in terms of trade, from Russia, the southern border also contains a political challenge from the Kurds and from Iran and Syria. The Western borders are significant because of the changing relations with Bulgaria and Greece in the foreground and the potential of joining the European Union in the background.

Hence the particular characteristics embedded in these border zones because of the larger political issues embedded within each one needs to be studied in depth. Another issue concerns internal and international migration patterns mostly as a consequence of the Kurdish conflict in the East and the changing world economic order. The political effect of two million Turkish citizens migrating to European countries on both Turkish and European politics, as well as the effect of hundreds of thousands of Kurds migrating from the south east toward the Western regions and especially the large cities is still understudied.

Yet the most important shift Turkey needs to undergo in international relations is in terms of defining its position within the world order. During the period when the realist approach to international relations dominated Turkey, this position was defined in relation to the West in general and the United States in particular because their interests coincided with the political interests of Turkey that always regarded the Soviet Union in the north and the Arab countries in the southeast as the two potentially volatile regions. Also, another founding principle of Mustafa Kemal was that the future of Turkey lay in the West and therefore Turkey had to be always facing Westward while actively rallying to join the ranks of the “civilized Western powers.” Hence Turkey always regarded itself as similar to the West and separate from the East and the rest of the world. As a consequence, Turkey never saw itself as a regional Third-World power.

In general, there is very little research done on the international relations of Third-World countries because the emphasis on the Cold War between two world powers dominated the scientific discourse and relegated all other countries to secondary positions where their stands on international issues were defined through ahistorical, normative assumptions (Neuman 1998: 2). Separateness rather than interrelatedness distinguishes the Third-World in international relations still today (Ayoub 1998; Escude 1998; Neuman 1998). Similarly, the international relations approach makes assumptions and definitions of statehood, sovereignty, and alliance-forming in the context of the Third-World that often do not fit the actual political events (Acharya 1998; Holsti 1998; Puchala 1998). One should also note that the key differences between the West and the Third-World are critically conditioned by culture, a concept that is currently underdeveloped in international relations (Ollapally 1998). In addition, the Third-World contains many “hybrid” institutions and organizations that likewise cannot be understood within the existing categories (Paolini 1999).

Yet the changing world order and increasing political and social inequalities within Turkey and also across the world raises the possibility of Turkish political alliances with countries that are likewise situated – this opportunity is implied in the Gramscian turn in world politics whereby the unity of subaltern groups against the hegemon is promoted. Turkey can assume a more prevalent role in the region if, rather than emphasizing differences, it is able to focus on the similarities it shares with such countries. With respect to similarities in common historical past, Greece, Israel, Armenia and Syria form the countries within the region that Turkey can develop alliances with. In relation to similarities in position within the world order, India, China, Poland and Brazil are countries with which Turkey can develop political alliances. Yet such an approach necessitates more studies on the international relations of these countries which are currently very limited; for instance, in the case of China, capability and culture form the two concepts emphasized in defining Chinese identity. Yet both concepts are grounded in positivism, emphasizing differences between China and the West and thereby overlooking the interaction with the West that actively shapes the international relations of both sides (Pan 1999).

In summary then, the critical approach to international relations that I developed here has provided a number of insights that was missing in the currently dominant realist approach. The

critical approach provides a better explanation for the prevalence of identity politics and the freedom of expression of thought in Turkey's foreign of policy, especially as it takes into account the historical formations of these concepts in U.S. and Turkish history. This approach also advocates further studies in regional differences and migrations patterns as they affect policy formation. In relation to Turkey's location in the world order, based on the premises of human agency and social power, the approach promotes alliances with similarly situated countries.

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