

UCLA

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Review: The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey by Sam Kaplan

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8kv5d1hr>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 4(1)

ISSN

1548-3320

Author

Rexhepi, Jevdet

Publication Date

2008-02-08

DOI

10.5070/D441000616

Peer reviewed

The Pedagogical State: Education and the Politics of National Culture in Post-1980 Turkey by Sam Kaplan. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006. 254 pp. ISBN 0-8047-5433-0.

Turkey has long gripped the fervent imaginations of imperial policymakers and colleagues in Western academia,¹ where the country and region are often conceived of in dualist terms—Islamic fundamentalist or Western modernist (Munir, 2007). With an amenable disposition towards various imperial geo-political intrigues, steady arms purchases, and perhaps most emphatically, forced secularity in the erstwhile home of the most recent Islamic Caliphate, Atatürkism² has been good for the West and is thus the lauded regional example of Westernization *par excellence*. *The Pedagogical State* by Sam Kaplan draws substantially on the historical links among groups and their particular ideologies in Turkey to tease out the multiple and often overlapping identities existing across time and to show how they influence the debate on Turkish education. Specifically, Kaplan seeks to address how the military, secular industrialists, and religious nationalists promulgate their respective worldviews in schooling.

Discourse on the convergence of these views in the Turkish public sphere is framed within an eclectic sociocultural milieu (amid a vast Ottoman-Islamic legacy) by a range of complimentary and antagonistic groups. For example, secular and religious groups continue to voice great displeasure with an economic future mortgaged to the whims of global debt capital,³ brutal regional military occupations (e.g., Iraq and Palestine), and a corporatized school system which, for many Muslims, further relinquishes Islamic teachings and values to a profit-driven secular humanism (Ramadan, 2003). Conversely, significant portions of the electorate, particularly those in the employ of the military-industrial complex, unconditionally support Turkey's sociopolitical maneuvers and strategic alliances with the West.

The Pedagogical State is designed around a multi-layered analysis of the power relations inflecting Turkish schooling since 1980. Kaplan highlights Turkey's religious and political threads using a contextualized historical lens. This helps focus his rendering of Turkey's conceptual socioreligious chassis, the secular Turkish Islamic Synthesis:⁴ “only religion can effectively link an ever-changing material culture with an invariant native essence” (p. 77). From this Foucauldian reference point Kaplan engages two interrelated issues: the notion of *governmentality*—extrapolating how groups contest the politics of education with their world views—and the notion of *subjectivity*—how mass schooling prepares students to participate in the public sphere (p. xvi). Kaplan's textually driven approach synthesizes these issues, providing insights into ways that identity and sociohistorical transformations develop across generations in a specific village

scenario on the one hand, and influence the deployment of mass schooling in a contemporary Muslim nation on the other.⁵

For Kaplan, schooling is a means of social reproduction, and this conception mitigates interactions between individuals and institutions, which are to some degree mutually constitutive (McDonough & Nunez, 2007). In terms of the politics of education enacted among citizens and between citizens and the state, the resultant discourses variously attend to this reproductive duty. In Turkey these include, among the groups noted, the promulgation and maintenance of secular nationalist views and ideas; the production of a secular, technocratic worker/consumer class to profit free markets; and the reconstitution of schools and society reflecting Islamic teachings and values. Kaplan emphasizes a productive framework that captures state and citizenship discourses and, by extension, pedagogical practices as they are refracted in everyday consciousness and activity. Avoiding what he describes as a Kantian predilection for “coherence,”⁶ Kaplan’s scholarly posture is flexible, attuned to speech and the social “noises” which help deduce potentially “multiple and conflicting” social and political imaginaries that variously disrupt the authorized discourse (p. 27).

The Pedagogical State benefits from extensive fieldwork, personal interviews, and substantial archival research which fortify its contextualized, historiographic underpinnings. The case study using Yahya village provides a valuable prism to show how national secular and religious forces intersect on a local level⁷ (i.e., the interplay among groups and individuals in the public sphere), mitigated externally by a contemporary process like neoliberalism, all within the rubric of secular Turkish governance.

Kaplan’s analysis is insightful and well considered, though he neglects to offer a more substantive reflection in two key areas which arguably exert great influence on Turkish education systems. First, he alludes to the informal political role of the Turkish military, but this somewhat timid assessment fails to delineate its generally authoritarian and xenophobic characteristics. According to Amnesty International, over the past 36 years the Turkish military has overturned three governments, suspended three parliaments, hanged a prime minister, and imprisoned thousands of civilians, some of whom are still in jail. Army officers still preside over civilian trials in state security courts, and it is the army which effectively maintains the ban on certain religious attire (for students and public office employees). Second, although perhaps this is beyond the scope of Kaplan’s analysis, his rather nebulous assessment of neoliberalism (e.g., “secular neoliberal industrialists”) alludes somewhat transiently to the totalizing and pervasive qualities of the process, but it summarily fails to provide substantive insight into either the scale at which neoliberalism is being manifested or a more nuanced assessment of the ways various neoliberal reform outcomes (e.g., socioeconomic

stratification and fragmentation of society) are impacting schooling and the experiences of Turkish youth therein.

Nevertheless, Kaplan's analysis poses questions that invite the earnest gaze of social scientists, educators, and policymakers: Who and what is represented in a national educational system (the nation or state), and who formulates the educational needs of a nation? In considering the role of Islam in a modern nation, Kaplan's analysis of schooling shows how some discourses tend toward the Islamophobic, where Islam is the utmost existential danger not only to Atatürk's secular legacy, but also to the country's place in the global capitalist economy and to its successful integration into the European Union. For others, Islamization offers sustainable alternatives to secular neoliberalism, avoiding defensive or reactionary postures (fundamentalisms) in favor of the promise of an Islam operating from strength (Islamic Cordoba).⁸ These multiple actors and worldviews impact Turkish education in dynamic ways, and the continued evolution of this paradigm will certainly be a reflection both of Turkey's continued synthesis of faith and modernity and, ideally, of the desires and wishes of majority rule in a contemporary democracy.

Note

¹ See for example Daniel Lerner (1958).

² Atatürkism (Kemalism) refers to the political, economic, and cultural reforms imposed by Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938), the founder of modern Turkey (est. 1923). Atatürk sought to replicate the West's secular modernization and liberalization policies by auguring in the creation of a new Turkish alphabet (based on the Latin alphabet), extensive political and economic contacts with the West, restructuring the national education system (John Dewey was a consultant), and to effectively manifest his notion of Western secularity, the abolition of the Caliphate and imposition of various legal rulings (e.g., bans on certain dress and legalization of tobacco and alcohol).

³ Globalization as the forced, global inculcation of peoples and nations within neoliberalism's secular, debt capital economy—see Charles Tripp (2006).

⁴ Essentially a compromise, where elites, scholars, and citizens in the 1960s formed a think tank (of sorts), enabling what remains a hotly contested balance between Islamic-Ottomanism and secular modernity (p. 76).

⁵ Kaplan notes that “deconstruction is emphatically not about showing the arbitrariness of our categories; rather, its purpose has been to show that the structures of signification affect their closures through a strategy of opposition and heirarchization that edit, suppress, and marginalize everything that upsets founding values” (p. 26).

⁶ Kaplan avoids convention, where “noises” are translated into coherency by the skills of a scholar (p. 27).

⁷ For centuries Yahya was a nexus between the application of religious law and more esoteric Islamic experimentations. It was later a testing ground for Kemalist Westernization policies (p. 5).

⁸ See for example Turkish Islamic scholar Fethullah Gülen (2004).

References

- Gülen, F. (2004). *Toward a global civilization of love and tolerance*. Somerset, NJ: The Light, Inc.
- Lerner, D. (1958). *The passing of traditional society: Modernizing the Middle East*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- McDonough, P. M., & Nunez, A. M. (2007). Bourdieu’s sociology of education: Identifying persistent inequality, unmasking domination and fighting social reproduction. Chapter 10 in *Critique and utopia: New developments in the sociology of education in the twenty-first century* (C. A. Torres & A. Teodoro, Eds.). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Munir, I. (2007). The subaltern act! Peasant struggles and pedagogy in Pakistan. Chapter 16 in *Utopian pedagogy: Radical experimentations against neoliberal globalization* (M. Cote, Richard, J. F. Day & G. de Peuter, Eds.). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Ramadan, T. (2004). *Western Muslims and the future of Islam*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tripp, C. (2006). *Islam and the moral economy: The challenge of capitalism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Reviewer

Jevdet Rexhepi is a doctoral student at UCLA in the Social Sciences and Comparative Education division (International Studies) of the Graduate School of Education & Information Studies. His longstanding research interests include the persistence of oral histories and ethno-religious cultures in the Balkans, and the ways myth and history converge in the reimagining of modern national narratives and identities across post-communist Albania.