

## Review: Technology and National Identity in Turkey. Mobile Communications and the Evolution of a Post-Ottoman Nation

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*Burçe Çelik. Technology and National Identity in Turkey. Mobile Communications and the Evolution of a Post-Ottoman Nation. I.B.Tauris: London / New York, 2011. ISBN 9781848854291. 224 pages.*

*Technology and National Identity in Turkey* is a social study of technology or, more precisely, of the cultural, historical, social, psychological and individual contexts, attitudes, and practices connected to and resulting from the use of mobile phones in Turkey. It also looks into the ways this technology has been ‘domesticated’ or ‘nationalized’ and links it to the shaping of national identity.

With its huge and rapidly expanding market in mobile technologies, comprising 67 million users and 100 million machines in use as of 2010, one can only wonder why this issue has attracted little attention by scholars so far. Çelik’s excellent work successfully undertakes the task of filling this gap and offers a solid theoretical framework for the study of this phenomenon, while also supplying the reader with fascinating details about every-day practices of cell phone users in today’s Turkey.

In contrast to previous studies, the book tries to go beyond the instrumental and symbolic value of mobile communication. It analyzes cellular telephony as a social practice, as an object of collective attachment and addiction in Turkey, which should be situated also “via desires, imaginations, inclinations, wishes, purposes and sensations that it responds to and reproduces” (p. 9).

The study is very well researched and solidly rooted in a wide variety of theoretical approaches. The author's primary sources include print media research, blogs, websites, ads, interviews with cell phone users of different social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The sheer extend of scholarly studies quoted and drawn on - from philosophy of technology to sociology, from literature studies to cultural analysis and psychoanalysis - is just impressive, at times maybe even having a tinge of over-theorization. However, once the reader has digested a heavy load of theoretical concepts, contemplations, and references to other scholarly works dealing with technologies, they will be rewarded with a highly sophisticated reflection on the relation between technology and society in Turkey, not matched by any other work written on a similar topic.

Çelik is totally right by claiming that the bulk of research on Turkish modernity does not take into account the technology's role in the formation of national ideals and that it does not view it as integral to the dreaming of modernity in Turkey. Technology was both part of the nation's imagination and also a memento of its 'historical guilt': in the reformist rhetoric, the disintegration and backwardness of the empire were caused by the lack of technology. Reversely, technological progress, or successful adoption of new technologies was seen as a proof of the nation's 'modernization credentials' and served as a source of national pride. The failure to appropriate and/or produce technology only lead to further bitterness, resentment and embarrassment of not being able to close the technological and temporal gap between Turkey and the most advanced nations of the West.

The origins of Turkish people's affective attachment to cellular telephony are, according to Çelik, to be found in historical melancholia. She argues that melancholia determines the way people engage with technologies. Referring mainly to Sigmund Freud and Judith Butler's definitions, she understands 'the melancholia of bodies' in Turkey as both an affirmation and denial of the loss of the ideality of empire, as the "very product of the historical organization of hegemonic power" which has not allowed for the presence of socio-political conditions for mourning over this loss (p. 19). It was only after 1980, with the end of military state power's interference with public life and the ensuing de-politicization of society, the advancement of

economic liberalism of the Özalp era, the opening of Turkey to the wider world, and, more importantly, the extremely rapid rise of consumerism that “historical melancholia became conscious and turned into a cultural institution, which affects people of Turkey in different ways across all aspects of life” (p. 40). The eager embracement of mobile phones, products of a global technology, was according to Çelik preconditioned by this penetration of nostalgia and collective melancholia into the public space and its commoditization. Cellular telephony, introduced to Turkey in the mid-1990s, enables one to “experience imaginative movement or departure from where the body is” (responding to the yearning of especially the Turkish youth to be ‘somewhere else’), and “as a communication technology whose well-known promise is ‘connecting to people’” it speaks to melancholia (p. 48).

Though very well anchored in theoretical literature, especially psychoanalytical conceptualizations, the idea of melancholia being instrumental in the creation of the ‘post-Ottoman nation’ would have deserved a little bit more explanation. The concept of the ‘melancholic’ nature of modern Turkish nation seems to be supported mainly by Orhan Pamuk’s reflections on *hüzün*, or collective melancholia, which Pamuk situates in and limits to Istanbul, and Taner Akçam’s references to historical amnesia / history of traumas. Yet if *hüzün* was conditioned by the loss of the ideality of the (eastern) empire and the inaptitude to reach the (western) level of progress (mourning for the lost past and lost future), it would be possible to argue that all collapsed (non-western) empires would be stricken by such a melancholia. How much is it possible to generalize about a ‘collective melancholia’ in a society so diverse and even polarized - ethnically, religiously, socially, politically - as Turkey? Or is it something applicable only to urban middle and upper classes of Western Turkey? It is not easy to answer these questions, as no conclusive psychological research about melancholia in the Turkish society has been done.

Çelik aptly observes that it would be misleading to claim that the expansion of the technoscape - and cellular telephony as its part - once and for all reduced distances between people and regions and ‘connected people,’ to use the mobile advertisers’ slogan. The rise of the technoscape has been accompanied by the creation of new global asymmetries, by the recreation

of distances and insertion of new boundaries and barriers. Moreover, the quality of the technospace and “the degree of its absence or presence marks differences between regions, countries, or even collectives” (p. 52). The global imbalance in the production, distribution and consumption of the technospace might help to explain the stunning success of cell phones in less developed countries, fuelled by the desire of the population of these countries to become part of the global community and avoid being excluded from the networked world and global history. The inability of adopting newest technologies brings about the stigma of belatedness, of being too local in a globalized world, being left on the peripheries of modernity.

The social meanings of mobile phones, grounded in popularity, in its image as a cool and fashionable object symbolically representing desirable western and mobile lifestyles, its association with a modern-urban lifestyle might partially explain why cell phone became an object of collective attachment in Turkey. Through mobile phones, the peripheral “third worlds” of Turkey, as Çelik terms them in reference to Nurdan Gürbilek, can become “agents capable of asserting and claiming their share from the technospace” (p. 88). It gives these people a feeling of movement, departure, migration to another time and space. Since technological progress in the less-developed part of the world is inevitably measured against the ‘standards’ of the developed world (‘the West’), the keen adoption of mobile technology in Turkey can work two ways. It can have an impact both in the direction of empowerment and a means of national pride (when ‘domesticated’ or ‘nationalized’ and/or approved and applauded by the imagined western gaze), yet at the same time, knowing that cellular technology is part of the global network “whose felt and perceived center is not Turkey,” it can further historical resentment, inferiority complex, anger, or melancholia (p. 147).

The last chapter concludes with the very apt remark that cellular telephony has become

“a specific social practice and collective attachment in Turkey in particular because it opens up a site where the imagination, sensation and experience of a crowd is possible. In this crowd (...) each body feels connected to others and so part of the same large force; these bodies sense

and even see progress towards an illusionary self-proper - in which the people of Turkey become a felt collective inhabiting the space of global cellular telephony where movement and mobility are ideally open to all” (p. 164).

The book under review is an original and elaborate contribution to the study of Turkey’s modernity, the dynamics of its ‘post-Ottoman’ society in the 2000s, and the relationship between society and technology. It has the potential to open a wider discussion on the role of technologies in today’s Turkey, and by its firm grounding in cultural theory and solid research, it can serve also as a reference work for scholars reflecting upon mobile phones in other national contexts.