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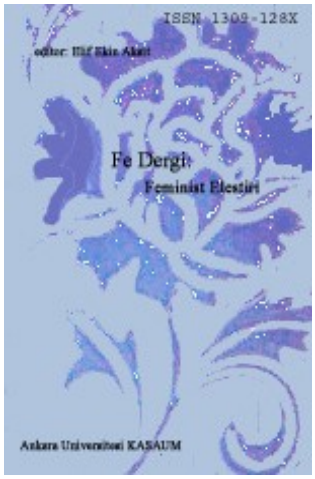

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Satirical Assemblages of Urbanity, Nation and Gender in Istanbul
Amy Mills

Çevrimiçi yayına başlama tarihi: 24 Aralık 2013

Bu makaleyi alıntılamak için: Amy Mills, "Satirical assemblages of urbanity, nation and gender in Istanbul" *Fe Dergi 5*, no. 2 (2013), 4-7.

URL: http://cins.ankara.edu.tr/10_2.html

Satirical Assemblages of Urbanity, Nation and Gender in Istanbul

Amy Mills[*]

This is a short piece that analysez a cartoon from Akbaba in terms of being and Istanbulite, nationalism and the street. A short discussion of the exclusionary spatiality of national belonging reveals different assamblages of urbanity, nation, gender and modernity.

Keywords: Headscarf, Satire, Istanbul, cartoons, modernity

Kentlilik, Millet ve Toplumsal Cinsiyetin Satirik Birliktelikleri

Bu yazı ile Amy Mills Akbaba dergisinden bir karikatürün, İstanbulluluk ve milliyetçilik kurgusu ile biçimlenen sokak dolayımıyla bir okumasına girişiyor. Ulusal aidiyetin dışlayıcı mekansallığı üzerine kısa bir tartışma ile kentlilik, millet ve toplumsal cinsiyet kategorilerinin farklı birlikteliklerini açığa seriyor.

Anahtar kelimeler: Başörtüsü, Satir, İstanbul, karikatür, modernlik, Akbaba

Akbaba, 26 September 1940, 349(12): p. 12.

In 1940, *Akbaba*, the longest running Turkish satirical journal (published nearly continuously from 1922 to 1977), printed a cartoon in 1940 depicting a headscarved woman and a traditionally dressed man riding in an automobile in Istanbul.[1] "Go slow, my boy! It's my first time riding in a car!" she says. "Don't worry, Teyze, it's my first time driving!" he replies. Bystanders, two men in suits, wear expressions of surprise, and their European-style hats fly off their heads. Like the presumed audience of *Akbaba*, they are urban Istanbulites and secular Turks; like the writers, they are men. The cartoon conflates urbanity, signified by familiarity with driving a car, with secular, national identity as marked by modern dress. An elitist voice tells the joke, ridiculing rural migrants for their confusion, and also poking fun at the modern Istanbulite men, in their surprise. The figure of the woman is necessary for this joke about rural rubes in the city because her headscarf and her general appearance inform the reader right away that the people in the car are not modern urban Istanbulites. Although gender does not appear at first to be the fundamental subject that generates humor in this image, reading the cartoon as an assemblage illuminates the mutual constitution of gender and material and social environments, and the gendered nature of Istanbulite urbanism in the nationalist era.

Satire is a particular genre, whose gendered discourses and images gather meaning in complex ways. In Turkey, satire has long held an important role as an important voice of political critique, especially during periods of heavy state censorship. *Akbaba* inherited its mantle from *Aydede*, a journal edited by Refik Halit Karay which was closed, in 1922, when he was sent into exile along with other literary and political figures on the infamous "150 List".[2] Orhan Seyfi Orhon, one of the former editors of *Aydede*, worked together with Yusuf Ziya Ortaç to edit *Akbaba*, and their journal was only closed briefly twice during its long history: I argue that *Akbaba* was able to maintain successful publication of political critique through a seemingly innocent focus on mundane urban issues. Indeed, caricatures in Turkish satire in the nationalist era focused heavily on representations of daily life, and included many images of women.[3] This cartoon about the headscarved woman and the automobile is

[*] Amy Mills is an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography at the University of South Carolina. She is the author of *Streets of Memory: Tolerance, Landscape, and National Identity in Turkey* (University of Georgia Press, 2010), an ethnographic study of cultural memories of Istanbul's cosmopolitan past. Her new project examines the cultural production of urbanism in Istanbul in the late Ottoman/early Republican era.

political in the sense that it calls state-authored narratives (and reforms) of secular, modern national identity into question by suggesting that not everyone would, or could, be modern.

Any dedicated reader in Istanbul would have ample familiarity with the stylized images that promoted a European female body as a modern ideal. Articles, photographs, advertisements, and cartoons in magazines and newspapers employed those images in a discursive, gendered linkage between modern urban identity and Turkish national identity.[4] Secular nationalist reforms aimed to modernize the Turkish nation by symbolically modernizing women's roles and appearances, even while retaining a traditional ideal that located female social roles primarily within the family.[5] Urbanist discourses used images of the 'modern' woman to convey the modern nature of the city, locating her in landscapes characterized by contemporary urban planning and architectural forms.[6] In this context, the cartoon about migrants – urbanity's 'others'[7] – relies on the presence of the woman, as she is the largest figure in the scene, and an alter-image to the European dress-wearing, short-haired, uncovered woman so frequently represented in satire of that era.[8]

It is not only her dress, however, that makes the joke function, but the way in which her figure is situated in the context of the urban landscape, resonating with the meanings conveyed by the other elements – the men, their hats, the sidewalk, the automobile - of the scene. As a visual form, satirical images work through the intertextuality of figures in a visual composition, whose meanings collide to create humor. In this way, satirical images are like urban assemblages, as "urban actors, forms, or processes are defined less by a pre-given property and more by the assemblages they enter and reconstitute. … It is the interactions between human and nonhuman components that form the assemblage."[9] Because the joke is accomplished through an assemblage, the entire scene is gendered through the intertextual relationships between the figure of the woman and the other elements that resonate with one another in a visual constellation of meanings.

It is this constellation of meanings that makes satire a social form which reproduces an imagined community by relying on shared understandings of urban culture: indeed, to share in the humor, a reader must hold an Istanbulite urban knowledge.[10] In this way, satire is a powerful medium for reproducing urbanism, the shared social norms that regulate belonging and exclusion in the city. John Kasson argues that urban norms in nineteenth century America, articulated in various media, including satire, sustained structures of social domination in an era of rapid transformation that disrupted the formerly existing social order.[11] Social norms emerged that regulated what had become a kind of urban chaos. Bringing his observation to Istanbul of the Republican era suggests that urban satire both regulates and also illuminates the chaotic friction particular to urban life in 1940: secular Turkish nationalist social policies had begun to cause major waves of non-Muslim minority emigration which caused an overall decrease in urban population; the development of urban infrastructure had begun to integrate formerly distant parts of the city and bring diverse people into encounter; the class system had become imbued with new tensions as a new Turkish nouveau riche arrived amidst the ongoing problems of urban poverty in a struggling national economy;[12] and, finally, while the city had long received migrants and refugees from former provinces of the empire, it also began to slowly receive the rural migrants that would, after 1950, begin to transform the urban landscape in greater numbers. All of these major transformations occurred in the context of a strong state nationalist project with imperatives to create a Turkish, secular, modern, and culturally Sunni Muslim nation.

The joke about the woman with the headscarf, then, is funny not only because of how her body is brought into assemblage with other urban elements on the page, but because of the ways in which the car, the sidewalk, the hats, and the street each resonate with the larger cluster of urban social, economic, demographic, and political tensions circulating through Istanbul at the time. On one level, depictions of rural migrants as unknowing helped produce a sense of urban identity for readers of satire. Importantly, however, in Istanbul, urbanist discourses are not confined to the scale of the city but are structured with the language of secular Turkish nationalism. The street space is also national space, and gendered urban encounters reverberate with nationalist discourses. By the late twentieth century, urban belonging would become a powerful frame with which to enclose boundaries of nationalist exclusion and inclusion as they are instrumentalized in Istanbul. Images of headscarved women would become central to the cultural politics of national belonging, mediated through urban space.

[1] Turgut Çeviker "Ana Çizgileriyle Türk Karikatür Tarihi" in *Karikatürkiye: Karikatürlerle Cumhuriyet Tarihi 1923-2008, I Cilt*., ed.Turgut Çeviker (İstanbul: NTV Yayınları, 2010),15-30, 21; A*kbaba* 349 no.12, 26 Eylül 1940,12.

[2] Sedat Bingöl, *150'likler Meselesi: Bir İhanetin Anatomisi*. (İstanbul: Bengi Yayınları, 2010), 84.

[3] Sezai Dumlupınar, *Tek Parti ve Mizah.* (İstanbul: ATİ Yayınları 2011), 4.

[4] Zehra Arat, "Introduction: Politics of representation and identity" in: Zehra Arat, ed. *Deconstructing Images of "The Turkish Woman"*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 1-34; The focus on women's dress as a signifier of Western modernity is present in satire dating back to the late Ottoman era: Nora Şeni, "Fashion and Women's Clothing in the Satirical Press of Istanbul at the end of the 19th Century" in *Women in Modern Turkish Society*. ed. Şirin Tekeli (London: Zed Books, 1995), 25-45; Palmira Brummett, "Dressing for Revolution: Mother, nation, citizen, and subversive in the Ottoman satirical press, 1908-1911." in *Deconstructing Images of the Turkish Woman*, ed. Zehra F. Arat (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 37-64.

[5] Yasemin Gencer, "We Are Family: The child and modern nationhood in early Turkish Republican cartoons (1923-28) *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32 no.2 (2012): 294-309.

[6] For example see Sibel Bozdogan, *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic*. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 85.

[7] Ayşe Öncü, "Istanbulites and Others: The cultural cosmoplogy of being middle class in the era of globalism" in: *Istanbul Between the Global and the Local*. ed. Cağlar Keyder (New York: St. Martins, 1999), 95-210; 98.

[8] Ayhan Akman, "From Cultural Schizophrenia to Modernist Binarism: Cartoons and identities in Turkey (1930-1975)" in *Political Cartoons in the Middle East*. ed. Fatma Müge Göçek (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1998),83-132. Also see Gencer, "We are family", and Öncü, ibid.

[9] Colin McFarlane, "Assemblage and Critical Urban Praxis: Part one" *City* 15, no.2 (2011): 204-223; 208.

[10] Öncü, "Istanbulites and Others", 98-100.

[11] John F. Kasson, *Rudeness and Civility: Manners in Nineteenth Century Urban America*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990),3.

[12] Öncü, "Istanbulites and Others".

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