

Local Negotiation of Change: Historiography of Modern Turkey and the Study of Provincial Anatolian Towns

Modern Türkiye'nin Tarih Yazımında Anadolu Taşra Şehirleri

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Abstract

The article reviews the scholarly bibliography on provincial Turkish towns during the Early Republican Period with a specific emphasis on the study of the negotiation of social change at the provincial level. The article discusses the strengths and limitations of a body of work published since the 1960s and evaluates their position and contribution in the historiography of modern Turkey. Up to the late 1990s and the opening of the State Archives of the Republican Period, a tendency occurred to overlook the study of provincial towns in favor of major cities and villages. Post-2000 historiography that addresses sociopolitical change increasingly produces works that consider provincial towns; nevertheless, space is mostly regarded as a necessary spatial container of the process under study and, as such, rarely receives critical engagement. The article considers the dominant periodization of the literature, which truncates the history of modern Turkey before and after 1923, as extremely limiting in scope. Thus, it suggests that the narrowing of the spatial– geographical perspective (*going local*) and the widening of the time frame beyond the 1923–1950 period are promising directions for the research on sociopolitical changes during the late Ottoman Empire and republican Turkey.

Keywords: Early Republican Period, Provincial towns, Historiography, Negotiation

Öz

Bu makale, Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türkiye taşrasına ilişkin akademik literatürü gözden geçirmektedir. Makale, 1960'lardan bu yana yayımlanan çalışmaların sunduğu katkıları ve sınırlılıklarını tartışmakta ve modern Türkiye tarih yazımındaki yerini değerlendirmektedir. Bu makalede, 1990'ların sonlarına ve Cumhuriyet Dönemi Arşivi'nin açılmasına kadar, büyük şehirler ve köy çalışmalarına kıyasla taşra kasabalarının incelenmesinin göz ardı edildiği ileri sürülmektedir. Sosyo-politik değişimle ilgilenen 2000 sonrası tarih yazımında ise taşra kentlerini ele alan çalışmalar giderek artmakta, ancak bu çalışmalar sosyal mekanı nadiren eleştirel bir şekilde ele almaktadır. Makale, modern Türkiye tarihinin 1923 öncesi ve sonrası olmak üzere literatürde iki ayrı dönem olarak kabul görmesinin oldukça sınırlı olduğunu ileri sürerek, mekânsal-coğrafi perspektifin daraltılmasını ('yerele inmek') ve ele alınan zaman diliminin 1923-1950 döneminin ötesine genişletilmesini önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi, Taşra, Tarih yazımı, Anadolu

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This article offers a number of thoughts on the state and prospect of the historiography of modern Turkey with special reference to the study of provincial towns in the first half of the 20th century. They are inevitably partial and incomplete, based on personal reading and research preferences, and merely aim to offer a discussion in relation to the spatial choices made by the historical literature on Turkey. I begin with the argument that the study of provincial towns is inevitable if we are to examine stasis and change, the continuities that persist and transformations that occur in every field (e.g., economy and infrastructure, society, culture, and politics) in the Republic of Turkey and from a perspective that favors negotiation and a society-up instead of a state-down approach. For greater emphasis, the provincial town was the primary space next to a few big cities up until the 1950s on which the social engineering project of the state was implemented. The rest of a vast countryside and its thousands of small settlements lay practically outside the infrastructural grip of the state, perhaps even its eventual interest. My argument is that the study of the reception and negotiation of reform projects of state elites (Kemalist/Unionist) necessitates spatial contextualization, especially around the (unit of the) provincial town. With reference to recent pioneering literature, I argue that a conscious spatial contextualization renders the study of state–society relations during the period more insightful and promising compared with work/research in which space is more or less taken as a given and is less critically engaged with. In this spatialization, the provincial town emerges as the focal point of research for a number of evident reasons. Available sources rarely enable in depth –if any– research beyond the provincial town, which renders the rural countryside largely beyond legibility. A less self-evident reason is the status of the provincial town as a meeting ground, –following the conceptualization of Migdal– of *facts and fiction*, that is, as the ground upon which state projects reach their targets in society.¹

In what follows, I firstly draw a sketch of the previous literature that explicitly focuses on provincial towns or on various aspects of continuity/change related to (actors and processes in) provincial towns. The basic inquiry is related to the manner in which provincial towns have been treated in the historiography of the late Ottoman Empire and the early republican Turkey. I then present a discussion of the strengths and blind spots of the literature and conclude with a number of suggestions regarding the trajectories of prospective research. Specifically, this article advocates the narrowing of the spatial (going-local) and the widening of the chronological frame (beyond the 1923–1950 period) as promising directions for the research on sociopolitical changes during the late Ottoman Empire and republican Turkey, such that micro can be productively linked to macro.

Early Literature

During the first decades of the Republic, local scholars produced several works on local history. This genre commenced during the interwar period and, in the majority of cases in the space under study, provincial towns. Within the context of Turkish nationalism and

¹ J. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying how States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

the movement *Halka Doğru*,² institutions, such as the Turkish Hearths³ and the People's Houses,⁴ promoted, through their activities and publications, works on local history and folklore. As a result, local scholars, who were predominately teachers, compiled several amateur works of local history. Nevertheless, as these works were compiled in the 1930s and 1940s, the space allocated to the post-WWI and Republican periods (post-1923) was minimal, which typically consisted of a few pages at the most.

During the post-WWII period, however, an increase in scholarly interest in rural areas was observed. Political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists examined rural areas under the influence of modernization theory. The majority of researchers explored villages, although a few works focused on small provincial towns and sub-district (ilçe) centers. These researchers investigated contemporary politics and economic and social development in an explicit attempt to gauge changes at the local level without much reference to the past or archival research. Kıray (Ereğli), Mansur (Bodrum), Magnarella (Susurluk), Szyliowicz (Erdemli), Benedict (Ula), Ayata (Develi), Leder (Saruhanlı), and Ubenhaun (Datça) explored socioeconomic and political change (i.e., political integration and clientelism) in a number of small provincial towns in Turkey. Their population in the 1960s–1970s ranged from a few thousands to 15,000. For their brief account of the pre-WWII period, these scholars were restricted to oral sources.⁵ In the majority of cases, the choice of small localities of no more than a few thousand residents aimed to facilitate micro research that could encapsulate as many segments of the local society as possible. Researchers were consciously selecting the smallest possible residential unit/community in which the state and local society were to meet. The areas scholars studied were mostly in the sub-province level (ilçe) and, depending on the focus, could be a small town or a big village.

Under the influence of modernization theory, sociologists and anthropologists initially attempted to study socioeconomic change. Meanwhile political scientists (Ayata and Ubenhaun) during the 1970s turned their attention to the study of political integration of the rural periphery through political networks and clientelism.⁶ The literature on patronage and clientelism examined the relationship between local and state elites in provincial towns. Provincial notables were traditionally operating as intermediaries between the state and local population, with which they retained multiple ties. By the beginning of the 20th century and the establishment of parliamentary politics, provincial urban elites, such

2 İlhan Tekeli and Gencay Şaiyan, "Türkiye'de Halkçılık İdeolojisinin Evrimi," *Toplum ve Bilim* 6–7 (1978), 44–110; Zafer Toprak, "Osmanlı Narodnikleri: 'Halka Doğru' Gidenler," *Toplum ve Bilim* 24 (1984), 69–79.

3 Füsün Üstel, *İmparatorluktan Ulus-Devlete Türk Milliyetçiliği: Türk Ocakları 1912–1931* (İstanbul: İletişim, 1997).

4 Alexandros Lamprou, *Nation-Building in Modern Turkey: The "People's Houses," the State and the Citizen* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015).

5 Mübeccel Kıray, *Ereğli Ağır Sanayiden Önce Bir Sahil Kasabası* (Ankara, 1964); Fatma Mansur, *Bodrum: A Town in the Aegean* (Leiden: Brill, 1972); Paul Magnarella, *Tradition and change in a Turkish town* (Halsted Press, 1974); Güneş Ayata, *CHP Örgüt ve İdeoloji* (Ankara, 1992). Szyliowicz and Benedict's research was on smaller provincial towns that can also be described as big villages. J. Szyliowicz, *Political Change in Rural Turkey, Erdemli* (The Hague and Paris, 1966); P. Benedict, *Ula, an Anatolian Town* (Leiden, 1974). A. Leder, "Kemalist Rule and Party Competition in Rural Turkey: Politics and Change in an Anatolian Community," unpublished PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 1974. H. Ubenhaun, *Türkiye kırsalında kliyentalizm ve siyasal katılım. Datça örneği* (Ankara, 2006) [translated from German, 1994].

6 Sayari, Sabri, "Interdisciplinary Approaches to Political Clientelism and Patronage in Turkey," *Turkish Studies*, 15/4 (2014).

as merchants, landowners, and professionals, became members and local representatives of emerging political parties.⁷ In their study of local politics, political patrons, brokers, and networks and their role in the local negotiation of change and state–society relations in general, Meeker and Ubenhaun also favored very small provincial towns (e.g., Of in the Black Sea and Datça in southwestern Turkey). However, they both differed from previous scholars in that, although they are not historians by training, they consider the study of a locality’s past as indispensable and thoroughly explore it.⁸ It is very unfortunate that, in contrast to research conducted after 2000, they could not have used archival sources for their account of the republican period.⁹ Since the late 1990s the availability of new archival sources has contributed to new research that places emphasis on local societies, state-society relations, local history, and bottom-up perspectives. This new research complements the work by political scientists, sociologists, and anthropologists since the early 1950s on rural areas, especially villages and small provincial towns, but also studies of politics in the post-WWII period of multi-party politics.

Archival Stimulus: State–Society Relations, Minorities, and Demographic Engineering

Since the late 1990s, the opening of several archival collections at the state archives in Ankara¹⁰ as well as the employment of new theoretical perspectives significantly influenced the research on state–society relations during the Early Republican Period. Currently, we have a host of works, especially in the field of social history, that exceed the previous literature in many ways. In a sense, historians have been liberated from being obligated to primarily use published state documents and memoirs of state officials. For the last 20 years, secret state and party reports, ego-documents, petitions, complaints, and denunciations are accessible by the thousands.

First, there is an expanding body of research on *local* history in Turkey, which has benefited from the recent opening of several archival collections. Based on easily accessible archival documents and typically originating from previous MA or PhD theses in Turkish universities, many articles and books on the People’s Houses or the political and social life of Anatolian towns draw a descriptive and frequently superficial image of the province/town under study.¹¹ They do so, because they tend to simply reproduce official sources and more often than not offer little or no analysis. Based as they are on sources written by and for the state (elites), most works tend to reproduce the classificatory perspective of the state archive, which creates as it is an image of provincial societies and towns as viewed through the narrow lens of Ankara and state elites. Perhaps

7 Balistreri, Alexander, “Turkey’s Forgotten Political Opposition: The Demise of Kadirbeyoğlu Zeki Bey, 1919–1927,” *Die Welt des Islams*, 55/2 (2015), pp. 141–85.

8 M. Meeker, *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2002).

9 Another example of a collaborative, this time, work on a provincial town is the book on Mardin by Suavi Aydın, Kudret Emiroğlu, Oktay Özel and Süha Ünsal, *Mardin. Aşiret-Cemaat-Devlet* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2000).

10 To give the example of only one archival collection, the archive of the ruling Republican Peoples Party contains an unmatched, in extent and diversity, corpus of documents (thousands of petitions, reports, investigations, and statistical data) from across Turkey up until the early 1950s.

11 A simple search at the National Theses Archive of the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) suffices to show the extent: <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/>.

with a slight exaggeration, several of these works should more accurately be entitled “Ankara’s perspective of the People’s House of x” or “of political and social life of y.”¹² Notwithstanding the *documentarist* and typically superficial nature of this literature, it continues to constitute an expanding body of work in Turkish that needs to be considered and critically engaged with.

However, a more innovating strand of recent literature has been making more original use of the new archival material. The archive offers perspectives that exceed the programmatic nature of the majority of official sources from the period, because it hosts many documents produced by local social actors, that is, primarily middle and upper-class urban strata from provincial towns. The illiterate countryside-peasantry is not really there, perhaps maybe even the urban lower classes. Thus, the focus of recent innovative work on provincial local elites and middle classes, state officials, and institutions in the provinces; their voices and experiences of (novel forms of) socialization and local politics; and their incorporation into local and trans-local/state economic, political, and cultural networks is, therefore, not a coincidence. The major contributions of recent scholarship then are primarily observed in social history with pioneering works on sociocultural changes, gender identities, cultural and political capital formation, and labor history, among others.¹³ Local actors in provincial urban societies produced the bulk of the sources used. The same stands for many recent works on local politics that explore the social bases of politics, political networks, and the dynamics of state–society relations in the provinces in general.¹⁴

Lastly, works on the acts and experiences of violence, ethnic cleansing, and

12 Evidently, not all works of local history share a shallow perspective. See for instance Ercan Çağlayan, *Cumhuriyet’in Diyarbakır’da Kimlik İnşası 1923–1950* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2014); Serap Taşdemir, *Tek Parti Döneminde Sivas’ta Siyasal Hayat 1923–1946* (Ankara: Siyasal, 2014); as well as the series of collective volumes and monographs on the recent history of provincial towns published by İletişim: M. Güntekin (ed.), “*Ta Ezelden Taşkıdır ...*” *Antep* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2011); Ercan Çağlayan (ed), “*Dünyada Van*”: *Niğfus, Etnisite, Tarih ve Toplum* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2019); Ali Karatay, *Demir Çelik Karabük: Bir işçi kadınının Hikâyesi* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2018); A. Nevin Yıldız (ed), *Bir Ahir Zaman Babil’i: Urfa* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2021).

13 A few examples that were roughly published in the last decade: Nurşen Gürboğa, *Mine Workers, the Single Party Rule, and War: The Zonguldak Coal Basin as the Site of Contest 1920–1947* (İstanbul: Ottoman Bank Archives and Research Centre, 2009); Meltem Karadağ, “Taşra kentlerinde yaşam tarzları alanı: Kültür ve ayırım,” *Toplum ve Bilim* 118 (2010): 6–91; Hale Yılmaz, *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey 1923–1945* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2013); Meltem Türköz, *Naming and Nation-Building in Turkey. The 1934 Surname Law* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Alexandros Lamprou, “Political Petitioning, Denunciation and State–Society Relations during the Single-Party Period in Turkey,” *Turkish Studies* 18:3 (2017): 514–541; Deniz Parlak, *Laikleşme Sürecinde Camiler: Geç Osmanlı’dan Erken Cumhuriyet’e* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2020); Murat Metinsoy, *The Power of the People: Everyday Resistance and Dissent in the Making of Modern Turkey, 1923–1938* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Sevgi Adak, *Anti-Veiling Campaigns in Turkey: State, Society and Gender in the Early Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022); Mehmet Kendirci, *Eğlencesiz Eğlence: Erken Cumhuriyet Türkiye’sinde Eğlence ve Siyasal İktidar* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2022).

14 Indicatively, Yiğit Akın, “Reconsidering State, Party, and Society in early Republican Turkey: Politics of Petitioning,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39:3 (2007): 435–457; Ayşe Durakbaşa, “Taşra burjuvazisinin tarihsel kökenleri” and Gül Özsan, “Eşraf ailelerinin statü kazanma mücadelelerinde kadınların rölü,” *Toplum ve Bilim* 118 (2010); Belge Ceren “State Building and the Limits of Legibility? Kinship Networks and Kurdish Resistance in Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43:1 (2011): 95–114; Senem Aslan, “Everyday Forms of State Power and the Kurds in the Early Turkish Republic,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43:1 (2011): 75–93; Alexandros Lamprou, “Local Politics and state–society relations: State officials, local elites, and political networks in provincial urban centers in the 1930s and 1940s in Turkey,” *Turkish Historical Review* 10:2–3 (2019): 252–273; Eyüp Öz, *Serbest Cumhuriyet Fırkası ve Ege* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2019).

demographic engineering form a significant part of the recent literature on the Unionist period (1908–1950). In this strand of literature, the provincial town is examined as the site of nation-building through population politics. In this respect, it has been the towns and border areas where ethnic difference was more pronounced and ethnic cleansing more absolute that have mostly drawn the interest of researchers. For instance, the majority of the presentations in the conferences organized and proceedings published by the Hrant Dink Foundation on the history of a number of provincial towns¹⁵ address the presence and destruction of minorities up until the end of WWI. The pioneering work of Ümit Kurt is another case in point in which a provincial town provides the necessary context for an in-depth study of ethnic cleansing and its perpetrators at a specific period.¹⁶

In addition, a strand of *minority literature* exists that investigates Jewish communities in several towns in the 20th century. Anti-minority policies targeting Turkish Jews, such as the Property Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*) or the violence against the Jews of Thrace in the infamous Thrace Events of 1934 (*Trakya Olayları*), occasionally form the center or part of the narrative.¹⁷ The recent accumulated research on Dersim is another example in which ethnic difference and state violence become more or less the *causa causans* that underlies the research focus on the specific place, which consequently defines the manner in which the region is historically contextualized.¹⁸ A number of studies that explicitly relate demographic engineering, dispossession, and anti-minority politics with the emergence and/or enrichment of local Muslim middle classes and elites form another particular strand in this trajectory. The recent book of İlkyay Öz on Edirne is exceptional in that the author consulted local land registry records (*Tapu Kadasto*), access to which has been consistently denied to researchers elsewhere.¹⁹ Masterfully combining archival/state with local sources, the book by Levent Duman is another example of pioneering research on nation-building in a border town/region (i.e., Antakya, which officially became part of Turkey in 1939).²⁰ In this literature trajectory, the provincial town forms the background of research on victims and, recently, perpetrators, site of destruction, ethnic cleansing, and dispossession, and through these processes, the foundational ground of nation-building and the concomitant emergence of Muslim middle classes and economic and political elites.

15 *Diyarbakır Tebliğleri: Diyarbakır ve Çevresi Toplumsal ve Ekonomik Tarihi Konferansı* (İstanbul: Hrant Dink Vakfı, 2013); *Mardin Tebliğleri: Mardin ve Çevresi Toplumsal ve Ekonomik Tarihi Konferansı* (İstanbul: Hrant Dink Vakfı, 2013); <https://hrantdink.org/en/activities/projects/history-program/2066-the-social-cultural-and-economic-history-of-kayseri-and-the-region>.

16 Ümit Kurt, *Antep 1915: Soykırım ve Failleri* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2018). See also Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey. Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

17 Indicatively, Rifat Bali, *1934 Trakya Olayları* (İstanbul: Kitabevi, 2008); Erol Haker, *Edirne Yahudi Cemaati ve Alyans Okulları 1867–1937*, translated by Lizet Deatado (İstanbul: Gözlem, 2007); Mehmet Pınar, *Tek Parti Döneminde Trakya'da Siyasi Hayat ve Yahudiler* (Ankara: Grafiker, 2016).

18 Indicatively, İlhami Algör (ed), *Ma Sekerdo Kardaş? "Dersim 38" Tanıklıkları* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2018); Şükrü Aslan, Songül Aydın, Zeliha Hepkon (eds), *Dersim'i Parantezden Çıkarmak* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2013); Gürdal Aksoy, *Dersim: Alevilik, Ermenilik, Kürtlük* (Ankara: Dipnot, 2012).

19 İlkyay Öz, *Mülksüzleştirme ve Türkleştirme: Edirne Örneği* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2020). There are other similar works, but few with a specific local focus: Uğur Ümit Üngör and Mehmet Polatel, *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). Nevzat Onaran, *Osmanlı'da Ermeni ve Rum Mallarının Türkleştirilmesi (1920–1930): Emval-i Metrukenin Tasfiyesi-I*; and idem., *Cumhuriyet'te Ermeni ve Rum Mallarının Türkleştirilmesi (1920–1930): Emval-i Metrukenin Tasfiyesi-II* (İstanbul: Evrensel, 2013).

20 Levent Duman, *"Yatan" in Son Parçası Hatay'daki Uluslaştırma Politikaları* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2016).

In summary, the literature of the last 20 years has augmented previous knowledge by emphasizing the negotiation and collusion of state with local agents on the one hand and by elucidating collision and conflict between state and local agents/societies taken. All its strands together, the recent literature on the Early Republican Period displays a remarkable multitude in which both scales of gray and black-and-white contrasts have been considered. Instead of uniform representations, recent literature lays out regional variations of nation-building, political integration, and state–society relations. Sites of conflict, negotiation, and multiplicity were observed in the provinces. The themes of the recent scholarship on the Early Republican Period (e.g., local politics, local and center–local dynamics, resistance and negotiation, gender, flexibility of state, continuities in many fields, such as minorities and Turkification, among others) have been studied within provincial urban contexts, primarily on the bedrock of provincial towns. In this sense, these strands of recent literature portray the provincial town as the site not only of state–society relations and social changes, local politics, and sociopolitical integration but also of dispossession and ethnic cleansing and its aftermath.

Common traits of recent literature on provincial towns during the early republican period

In their exploration of sociopolitical change in the first half of the 20th century, recent studies share a set of common traits pertinent to the study on provincial towns. First, in their attempt to enrich their studies and contextualize archival sources produced by the state regarding each locality, scholars share a novel sensitivity toward local sources, such as local publications, newspapers and periodicals, memoirs of local social actors, and oral history sources, which were previously considered the domain of local scholars instead of academic historians. In this sense, Brockett’s observation 12 years ago, that is, “scholars have almost entirely privileged metropolitan print media over those produced in provincial centers”²¹, is no longer entirely valid. This tendency to *go local* is directly related to the conscious endeavor to challenge state and statist biases and critically read the narratives and perspectives from/of agents of the center. This aspect is evident in the preference of the literature for *history from below*, bottom-up approaches, and the study of negotiation, resistance, and compliance. Equally and in contrast to previous scholarship on state and elite politics, I observe a preference toward the study of local politics, of the local articulations of state and local forces, and the *social basis* of Muslim/Turkish nationalism.²² Concomitant is the employment of theoretical insights that aid in this endeavor, such as the history of everyday life, *weapons of the weak* by James C. Scott, *state-in-society* by Migdal, as well as the *politics of informal people* and *quite encroachment* by Bayat,²³ among others.

21 Gavin D. Brockett, *How happy to call oneself a Turk: Provincial newspapers and the negotiation of a Muslim national identity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 1.

22 Doğan Çetinkaya, *The Young Turks and the Boycott Movement: Nationalism, Protest and the Working Classes in the Formation of Modern Turkey* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 38.

23 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak. Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1985); Idem, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1990); Idem, *Seeing Like a State. How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 1998); J. Migdal, *State in Society: Studying How States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Asef Bayat, “Politics of Informal People,” *Third World Quarterly* 18/1 (1997); idem, “Activism and Social Development in the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 34 (2002).

Limitations

With regard to the temporal framing of the majority of studies within this recent literature, there seems to be a clear tendency to practically follow a periodization that truncates the history of modern Turkey before and after 1923. Interestingly enough, there is a strong recognition among scholars that a periodization going back to 1908 or even earlier is more suitable in the analysis of continuities and ruptures in the transition from empire to nation state. Yet we still have very few works that consider WWI (and/or the period before) together with the Early Republican Period.²⁴ To put it more emphatically, given the fascinating recent works on WWI, we finally know more about the destruction that preceded the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, but the literature on how these destructive transformations shaped the country since the early 1910s remains scarce. Works that challenge this temporal framing in practice are nearly exclusively related to the fate of Anatolian Armenians and the consequences of their removal.²⁵ Meanwhile, the research on the local repercussions of the exchange of population between Greece and Turkey, for example, has yet to incite similar attraction among scholars. Thus, the research required is one that places the periods before and after 1923 into the same frame of analysis and examines continuities and ruptures beyond the *dark side* of nation-building.²⁶

In terms of spatial imagination, the literature prior to the opening of the state archives in the late 1990s, especially works composed within the modernization paradigm, overlooked the study of the provincial town, which is seemingly lost between the city and the village, which were the privileged sites of research since the 1940s. With the primary objective to explore change, the modernization literature has, since the 1950s, favored the study of the village, in which the *pure* and *authentic* yet *backward* and *traditional* essence of the Turkish society was supposed to reside. Cities, such as Istanbul and Izmir, were considered not only *modern* and *western* but also *degenerate* and *international*. This contrast and ambivalence between *the international but modern* city and the *national but backward* village (and the tension therein) were explicit in many ways, particularly in well-studied examples of discourses on gender and public morals.²⁷ What was not explicit at all though was the exile of the provincial town from the spatial imagination of

24 E.J. Zürcher, *The Unionist Factor: The Role of the Committee of Union and Progress in the Turkish National Movement 1905–1926* (Leiden: Brill, 1984). To think of two recent exemplary local monographs, Erol's work about Foça and Hatzioissif's work on Mustafapaşa both end in 1922. Emre Erol, *The Ottoman Crisis in Western Anatolia: Turkey's Belle Époque and the Transition to a Modern Nation State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016); Χρήστος Χατζηιωσήφ, *Συνασός: Ιστορία ενός Τόπου χωρίς Ιστορία* [Hristos Hacıiossif, *Sinasos: History of a place without History*] (Heraklion: Crete University Press, 2005).

25 Üngör and Polatel, *Confiscation and Destruction*; Oya Gözel Durmaz, "City transformed: War, demographic change and profiteering in Kayseri (1915–1920)," PhD thesis (Ankara, 2014); Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*; Ayça Akarçay, Nurhan Davutyan and Sezgin Polat, "Economic Consequences of Demographic Engineering: Turkey and World War I," (2021), <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3828518>.

26 Philipp Ther, *The Dark Side of Nation-States: Ethnic Cleansing in Modern Europe*, translated by Charlotte Kreuztmüller (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014). In the recent debate on "post–post-Kemalizm," İlker Aytürk argued that the emphasis of "postkemalizm" on the *original sin* of ethnic cleansing and the insistence on a *lachrymose narrative* about the recent past ends up functioning as a distorting lens that exiles from our vision whatever lies beyond this dark side of nation building. İlker Aytürk, "Post-post-Kemalizm: Yeni bir paradigmayı beklerken," *Birikim* 319 (2015), 43–44.

27 Levent Cantek, *Cumhuriyetin Biliş Çığı. Gündelik Yaşama Dair Tartışmalar 1945–1950* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2008), 83–8; Deniz Kandıyoti, "Slave Girls, Tempresses, and Comrades: Images of Women in the Turkish Novel," *Feminist Issues* 8:1 (1988): 38.

the research, as the provincial town remained obscure in the academic literature on the *modernization* of Turkey.²⁸

Conversely, the post-2000 historiography that addresses sociopolitical change circa 1900–1950 includes works with an explicit focus on provincial societies and towns. However, one continues to feel that the local monograph or the history of a provincial town has been, until very recently, implicitly and perhaps unconsciously considered *passé*, that is, something scholars used to do 50 years ago under theoretical schemes considered obsolete today or, perhaps, something to be left to the proverbial local schoolteacher. The recent literature is mostly interested in various themes and processes (e.g., gender and socioeconomic change), while the geographical context is of secondary nature, a necessary spatial container within which a more significant process is occurring. In a sense, the spatial unit(s) of research are not very clearly critically engaged with, but rather form a necessity of research.

This typical lack of critical engagement with the spatial aspect of the research is reflected in the frequent geographical delimitation of the subject under study, explicitly or by implication, by state borders. In other words, although excellent recent works on the relation of architecture to nationalism, gender, and the introduction of state policies to the provinces typically use data from or in relation to specific localities (e.g., provincial towns), their findings are, more frequently than not, presented as if they were inclusive or representative of the entirety of Turkey. Regional difference is only highlighted either as the register of folklore/culture or in the context of nation-building and its dark side (e.g., ethnic cleansing and dispossession). One may even suggest that the reproduction of a spatial imagination that corresponds to the nation state unconsciously offers a homogenizing viewpoint that obfuscates difference and limits vision. For instance, studies on the reception of state policies can lose their analytical and explanatory value once removed from local contexts, that is, provincial towns, and placed under one undifferentiated national context. Nevertheless, this evident truism is frequently glossed over. Compared with the extremely limited and limiting corpus of sources (e.g., published memoirs and the local press) scholars had to work with 25 years ago, the recent abundance of documents from the state archives has rather ironically nurtured a perspective that creates a unifying picture of provincial towns. This is very much the perspective of Ankara- or Istanbul-based bureaucrats posted to provinces, a viewpoint that closely resembles the *taşra bunalımı* in modern Turkish fiction, that is, the proverbial view of the Anatolian provincial town as a cultural wasteland.²⁹

The provincial town and its hinterland, *kasaba* and *taşra*, are ubiquitous in modern Turkish literature more often than not as the object of scorn. The writing of novels and short stories on Anatolian villages and small towns (e.g., R. N. Güntekin, Sabahettin Ali, Tarık Buğra, Cevdet Kudret, Karaosmanoğlu, Kemal Tahir, and Orhan Kemal) coincided

28 Sezai Ozan Zeybek, “Small Towns in Turkey: Footnotes in Somebody Else’s History,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 24:1 (2011).

29 This image of the provincial town is extremely widespread to be even reflected in ground-breaking scholarly work. For Keyder, for instance, the loss of their non-Muslim inhabitants made post-1923 Anatolian towns revert “to their sleepy incarnation as administrative centres,” because the remaining Muslim bourgeoisie was disinterested in continuing “with the cultural traditions of enlightenment” that the non-Muslim middle classes were supposedly linked with. Çağlar Keyder, *State and Class in Turkey*, pp. 80, 82.

with the *discovery* of Anatolia by intellectuals.³⁰ In this respect and even today –consider the novels of Hasan Ali Toptaş or the films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan– this one-sided portrayal of Anatolia and its inhabitants from the perspective of big-city intellectuals creates and sustains the topos of the *taşra bunalmı*. This ‘countryside depression’ depicts provinces and small towns as the backwaters of change, as small, dirty, and deficient places full of boring people triggering a continued longing for Istanbul and big-city lights. A déjà vu sensation of a single undifferentiated provincial town instead of different provincial towns is invoked in common jokes such as the one in the *Black Book* by Pamuk. The context pertains to the ubiquitous Atatürk statue in any given Anatolian town: where does Atatürk point to? The response is: to the bus station, which recommends an immediate getaway from that place.³¹ Perhaps this literature says as much about the provinces as it says about their authors’ despair for being there. Ahmet Alkan argues that *taşra* is an invention of the Tanzimat intellectual, at a time when Istanbul-based bureaucrats began to be posted to the provinces. For Ömer Türkeş, the Turkish novel defines *taşra* as the *other* of modernization always from the outside.³²

However, we can consider this literature on Anatolia as a form of a literary *junction of state and society*.³³ These literary works are sources produced upon the meeting between city and province and between the bureaucrat with the small town clerk or artisan. Scholars endeavor to decipher this meeting in their studies of the introduction and negotiation of state-led reforms in the provinces. Moreover, the provincial town is the essential space in which the social engineering project of the state essentially occurred before 1950. It is foremost for this reason that the scholarly literature needs to struggle with this ubiquitous understanding of the provinces and the provincial town simply as an unmoving wasteland.

There is a recent attempt to relate different spatial contexts with specific historical trajectories in the Ottoman case of the transition from empire to nation state. In the explicit spatial imagination about three distinct trajectories of modernity during the late Ottoman Empire by Emrence,³⁴ Anatolian provincial towns seemingly correspond to the *interior trajectory*. In this scheme, the interior trajectory depicts the experience of inland towns in which a firm state presence was unchallenged by foreign intervention, and the strong presence of coalitions of Muslim middle classes fostered non-contentious consensual politics. However, compared with the two other trajectories in the analysis by Emrence (e.g., port cities and the frontiers), this inland trajectory and provincial towns are seriously understudied. I believe two large groups can be formed out of the literature that considers provincial towns. On the one hand, an extensive list of fascinating works on the

30 A. Y. Yakın, “Proust Redux: ‘There is a village somewhere out there’: Representations of Anatolia as Terra Incognita,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 20 (2007): 182–199; Gözütok, Türkan Kodal, “Refik Halit’ten Cumhuriyet Dönemi Hikayecilerine (1919–1940) Kasaba Olgusu,” *Modern Türklük Araştırmaları Dergisi* 4/2 (2007): 73–93.

31 Orhan Pamuk, *Kara Kitap* (Istanbul: Can, 1991), 335.

32 Ahmet Turan Alkan, “Memleketin Taşra Hali”; Ömer Türkeş, “Orda Bir Taşra Var Uzakta,” in Tanıl Bora (ed), *Taşraya Bakmak* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2005).

33 Joel Migdal, “The state in society: an approach to struggles for domination,” in J. Migdal, Atul Kohli and Vivienne Shue (eds), *State Power and Social Forces. Domination and Transformation in the Third World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1–30.

34 Cem Emrence, *Remapping the Ottoman Middle East Modernity, Imperial Bureaucracy and Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

Mediterranean littoral and port cities is available.³⁵ On the other hand, pioneering works on ethnic cleansing and demographic engineering during the late Ottoman Empire and the early Republic recently increased. The geographical background of these works is the sites of ethnic cleansing, which mainly occurred in the fringes of the east and south. Therefore, we have fascinating works on the economic, demographic, and political dynamics in the transition from empire to nation state that works essentially correspond to the coastal and frontier trajectories, that is, the port city, and the border zones of ethnic cleansing. The in-between *interior trajectory* is not that auspicious in terms of the preference of scholars. We somehow return to the timeworn boring, dusty, and ugly Anatolian *kasaba* where nothing happens. One may even argue that the inland trajectory seems to be hastily crafted out of the *remains* of the geographies between port cities and frontiers.

Conclusion: Prospective Avenues of Research

The narrowing of the spatial–geographical perspective (going local to examine change and continuity related to procedures beyond the local) and the widening of the timeframe are promising directions for the research on the formative years of Turkey. The choice of period can vary according to the research questions and geography under study, but perhaps the first half of the 20th century can serve as a conventional time block. These two directions enable the examination of the impact of changes that had been in the process in many local societies even before 1923 or 1914 (e.g., redrawing of borders, roads, communication networks, and demographic change).³⁶ The works moving in this direction are mainly limited to the study of ethnic cleansing. In situating the demographic engineering of the last years of the Empire and the first ones of the Republic on the geography of specific provincial centers, this literature has been able to relate provincial spaces with something that transcends the image of boredom, provinciality, and repetition, which were habitually projected upon provincial spaces in both fiction and scholarly work.

The recent literature focused on the social bases of politics, the reproduction of urban elites through property allocation, preferential treatment, chances for upward mobility and political empowerment, and the processes through which local power blocks were consolidated and cultivated relations with the state.³⁷ Thus, provincial towns can serve as case studies and the basis of the necessary context for the exploration of the (re)shaping of linguistic, religious, cultural, and regional identities. Locally-consolidated work with a mixture of ethnographic detail would be welcome. The prospective areas to be examined may include youth groups and cultures, the local negotiation of gender,³⁸ crime, urban poor and job migration, as well as the spaces they occupy.

35 Indicatively, Erol, *The Ottoman Crisis in Western Anatolia*; Meltem Toksöz, *Nomads, Migrants and Cotton in the Eastern Mediterranean: The Making of the Adana-Mersin Region, 1850–1908* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

36 For a number of recent works that move to the direction of bridging the *gap* between pre- and post-1923 periods with research thoroughly grounded on local contexts and provincial elites, see Yaşar Tolga Cora, “A Muslim Great Merchant [Tüccar] Family in the Late Ottoman Empire: A Case Study of the Nemlizades, 1860–1930,” *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 19/1–2 (2013), 1–29; Alexander, Balistreri, “Turkey’s forgotten political opposition: The demise of Kadirbeyoğlu Zeki Bey, 1919–1927,” *Die Welt des Islams* 55 (2015), 141–85; Evren Dayar, “Nihayetsiz Bir Cidal”: Antalya Gazetesinin Kurucusu Mehmet Emin ve Muarızları (1878–1928), *Erdem* 75 (2018), pp. 67–98.

37 Balistreri, “Turkey’s Forgotten Political Opposition”; Meeker, *A Nation of Empire*.

38 An interesting work in this regard is Gül Özsan, “Eşraf ailelerinin statü kazanma mücadelelerinde kadınların rolü,” *Toplum ve Bilim* 118 (2010).

Furthermore, the ability to move beyond the entrenched *taşra* syndrome, which depicts provinces and provincial towns as a uniform monotonous space, and link *small places to larger issues* (from micro to macro) can be gained through the promotion of comparative research not only among regions/towns within but also beyond state borders. In the case of the late Ottoman Empire and Turkey, this geography of comparison would refer to ex-Ottoman spaces occupied by the new nation-states after WWI, especially geographical and political units that passed through similar processes. This could be, for example, a study on the pre- and post-1923 trajectories of previously related provincial towns in different sides of the post-WWI border. In general, prospective research can follow a transnational angle and move beyond the frame of the nation state, its source-producing bureaucracy and homogenizing policies. Such an endeavor necessitates collaborative research and the ability to reach sources in several languages and institutional environments.

Another research agenda in which the study of provincial towns can link small places to larger issues is related to the large area of population displacement and settlement that occurred at the end of the empire and the first decades of the republic and, without much exaggeration, shaped post-WWI Anatolia. This cannot but include the study of provincial towns and their hinterland as sites of population movement and demographic engineering (e.g., migration, deportation, and settlement), changes in property relations, and sociopolitical transformations. For instance, several towns were spatially and culturally divided in terms of ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences among locals, *muhacir* and *mübadil* populations, and sedentarized (semi)nomads as a result of demographic change and population politics.³⁹ How did this ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity influence local politics and state–society relations? What is the extent to which and how did displacement contribute to the emergence of new identities that hovered between the old and new hometowns? How did a Muslim from the town of Candia in Crete become a *Cretan* Turk in Mersin or Ayvalık, or how were local communities and individuals incorporated in (or excluded from) the nation-building process?⁴⁰ Here, the possibility of and the appeal for comparison are evident: how did displacement transform outgoing Anatolian Christians into Greeks?

Another promising area of research that can link small places to larger issues is the intersection between religious/confessional identities and politics. The formation of new faith-based identities and groups, and the evolution, in general, of Islam in the local level (e.g., folk, official, syncretic, and unorthodox), such as collective and personal trajectories from Alevi and other local and/or syncretic practices and identities to official Sunni Islam,⁴¹ has rather stayed under the research radar. For example, consider the groundbreaking work of Taşkın on the emergence of conservative nationalist elites since the interwar period. The author recognizes the provincial origin of many postwar

39 The literature that does not overlook this post-WWI ethnic, linguistic, and cultural richness is relatively limited. Indicatively, see recent works on Cretan Muslim refugees to Anatolia: Evren Dayar, “Antalya’da Girit Göçmenleri: Göç, İskân ve Siyaset,” *Toplumsal Tarih*, 279 (2017), pp. 64–73; Elif Yılmaz, “Demirden Leblebi: Girit Ayvalık’a yerleşen Girit Mübadilleri,” *Sosyoloji Dergisi*, 22 (2011), pp. 157–189; Fahriye Emgili, “Tarsus’ta Girit Göçmenleri,” *Ankara Üniversitesi Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, XXV (2006), pp. 35–45.

40 For a fresh perspective on the subject, see Barış Ünlü, *Türklük Sözleşmesi* (Ankara: Dipnot, 2017).

41 Suavi Aydın, “Baraklar: Antep’in İskân Halkı” in M. Güntekin (ed.), “*Ta Ezelden Taşkıdır’ Antep*” (İstanbul: İletişim, 2011).

conservative intellectual elites⁴² but is uninterested in investigating their formation in the provincial town. Instead, the author only examines them from the point they become legible in Istanbul or Ankara as university students, intellectuals, or politicians. In this manner, their unstudied *provincial background* reproduces an image of taşra that is less analytically beneficial, as a space of *stasis* or a site of *tradition*. Perhaps, this notion is an indication of a greater unwillingness to explore the past in the provinces and its people, which is indicative of the frequent equation of the *provincial* with the parochial.

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42 Yüksek Taşkın, *Milliyetçi Muhafazakâr Entelijansiya: Anti-Komünizmden Küreselleşme Karşıtlığına* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2007), 60.

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