

Uneven and Combined Development and the Kemalist synthesis of nationalism and laicism

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the conjunction of nationalism and laicism in the making of the Turkish Republic through Leon Trotsky's theory of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD), as reformulated by Kamran Matin. The analysis situates Kemalist Turkish nationalism within the broader pressures of global capitalism, arguing that the formation of the modern Turkish nation-state was not a linear process of modernization but a combined outcome of international geopolitical competition and domestic transformation. Drawing on historical sociological analysis, the study demonstrates how the "whip of external necessity" and the "privilege of historic backwardness" compelled Turkish elites to merge nationalism and laicism to construct a secular, capitalist-oriented state. This synthesis was not a derivative of European secularism but a coercive amalgam shaped by late Ottoman backwardness, coercive nation-building practices, and the dissolution of religious authority. The findings reveal that, in Turkey, nationalism and laicism preceded capitalist development and acted as ideological and institutional mechanisms to produce the conditions for it. Thus, the Kemalist experience inverts modernist theories of nationalism by showing how ideological transformation can function as a precondition rather than a byproduct of capitalist modernization within an uneven international order.

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Introduction

Laicism is one of the Six Arrows of Kemalism, alongside republicanism, populism, nationalism, statism, and revolutionism, the founding ideology of the Republic of Turkey. Kemalist laicism drew heavily on France, where both states enshrined it constitutionally as a pillar of ideology and national identity (Peker, 2016, p. 2). Beyond laicism, European models of modernization shaped non-European nations, particularly Turkey; and especially, post-revolutionary and post-Napoleonic France was the central example to becoming modern as "to have a strong, centralized state based on an industrial society" (Atabaki and Zürcher, 2004, pp. 1–2). However, can these historical patterns of influences, similarities, and patterns of transmission lead nationalism scholars to make direct comparisons and generalizations for a general nexus of nationalism and laicism? Matin (2020, p. 439) argues that nationalism studies are constructed by the methodological procedure that its universal categories are produced by analysis of and references to "that

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are internal to a given society” and cannot escape being unilinear by theorizing internal patterns as universal patterns of development, but social sciences, in general, is lacking the international as a dimension of social reality due to the innate methodological nationalism.

Turkish nationalism is commonly understood as a modernization project to establish a capitalist, westernized modern state (Cizre Sakallıoğlu, 1996, p. 234). Yavuz accurately highlights the economic foundation of laicism and its relatedness with nationalist tendencies. According to this perspective, in European instances of secularism during the Industrial Revolution, the bourgeoisie championed secularism against the church and its allies. However, in the Turkish example, the dominance of non-Muslims in economic activities due to the *millet* system prompted the young Republic to establish its own national bourgeoisie to defend its secular values (Yavuz, 2019, p. 61). In a similar vein, Çağaptay (2006, p. 39) highlights the significance of the legacy of the *millet* system but portrays it as a cultural mindset transferred to Kemalist elites, shaping their perception of Christians as a “separate ethno-religious community,” distinct from the Turkish nation. However, Turkish nationalism and secularism are often portrayed as outcomes driven solely by internal dynamics. Peker (2020, p. 321) calls for further studies in secularization literature to highlight the capitalist aspect of nation-state building by underlining nationalist elites’ push for secularization to establish a globally connected national-capitalist market. This involved struggling against former ruling classes and replacing Islamic norms with Western laws. This paper complements prior research by stressing how nationalism and laicism intersected with industrial capitalism as an international factor.

In this article, the term secularism is used to refer broadly to processes of separating religion from politics in comparative or theoretical terms. Laicism is reserved for the historically specific and ideologically codified form of state secularism in Turkey, which differed both from Ottoman reformist secularization and from European liberal secularisms by placing religion under state authority as part of nation-building. The term “laicism” is chosen to address the specific form of state secularism or top-down secularism that took place during the foundational period of Turkey. This choice analytically isolates laicism as a distinct amalgamation, which is constructed under the influences of Uneven and Combined Development (UCD): the whip of external necessity and the privilege of historic backwardness. Also, this approach is developed from Parla and Davison’s (2008, pp. 62–69) argument of Kemalist laicism as a particular kind of laicism: Kemalist laicism solidified the state’s political authority over religion within its institutions, but Kemalist laicism diverges from European anticlericalism by integrating clerical personnel into the state apparatus, designating them as state employees with significant social influence. Also, Kemalist laicism intended as a framework to shape the citizenry along the lines of Islam in “truest” forms and ruling elites made “true Islam the second in command after nationalism in the Kemalist identity” (Parla and Davison, 2008, p. 71).

Nationalism in Turkey historically developed in close conjunction with laicism, shaped by the Ottoman Empire’s geopolitical position as a neighbor to early industrializing Western European states. This paper therefore analyzes the intersection of nationalism and laicism in Turkey through the theoretical lens of Kamran Matin (2020), asking: What specific historical conditions and factors necessitated their conjunction in Turkey’s state-building process, and how did these ideologies reinforce one another in shaping the nation’s identity and trajectory? By extending Matin’s framework, the analysis situates Turkish nationalism

and laicism within the international dimension of Uneven and Combined Development, rather than reducing them to outcomes of internal social mechanisms.

It is argued that nationalism had to be combined with laicism to realize the erosion of old belief systems by eroding their social, political, cultural, and economic influences, thereby facilitating the capitalist transformation of the country. While nationalism, secularization, and capitalism are certainly interrelated processes, as modernist theorists suggested the rise of industrial capitalism in Europe triggered the emergence of nationalism, aiming to replicate industrialism in non-European countries (Nairn, 1981, pp. 332–39). The abolition of the *millet* system was deemed necessary to dispel foreign influences, standardize the societal structure, and foster the creation of modern institutions. The *millet* system fostered resentment among CUP and Kemalist elites toward non-Muslim minorities, given economic dependency and the lack of a Turkish bourgeoisie.

Historical unevenness and geopolitical competition triggered nationalist tendencies, and as a social amalgamation Kemalist forms of nationalism and laicism are combined as a coercive form of nation-state formation and capitalist transformation. Unlike modernist theories – such as those of Ernest Gellner or Benedict Anderson – which locate nationalism in the preconditions of industrial society, the Turkish case reveals a state-led project of nationalism and secularism forged precisely in the absence of a fully developed capitalist class. Confronted with imperial collapse and foreign invasion, elites fused nationalism and laicism to construct an nationally unified, secular, and capitalist-oriented nation-state.

This paper therefore situates the material origins of Kemalist nationalism and laicism within the framework of Uneven and Combined Development, tracing their evolution across the *longue durée* from the late Ottoman Empire to the early Republic. Rather than isolating one historical moment, it highlights the continuities and transformations of structures and ideas across both contexts. The genesis of Turkish nationalism coincided with a decisive turning point: the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire and the founding of the Republic of Turkey as a modern nation-state. Any exploration of Turkish nationalism inevitably delves into this critical epoch (Georgeon, 1996, pp. 1–2).

Theoretical underpinnings

Methodological nationalism

Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002, p. 302) argue that the social sciences, shaped by the centrality of the nation-state, have long treated it as the natural and primary form of social and political organization. As a result, the nation-state remains the dominant unit of analysis. Skocpol (1994, pp. 44–45) similarly emphasizes that all societies are receptive to “foreign influences,” which are never merely accidental. She calls for moving beyond the universal and linear assumptions of modernization theory toward a paradigm that situates social change within a web of economic, social, and political interactions among multiple societies. Yet, under methodological nationalism, societies are often studied as self-contained units, with social change explained mainly through internal dynamics. This approach privileges the nation-state as the central unit of analysis while relegating external and international influences on the margins, thereby creating epistemological boundaries that narrow the scope of explanation.

Wimmer and Schiller (2002, p. 303) also note that Marxist frameworks – particularly Wallerstein’s World Systems Theory and Dependency Theory – sought to overcome

methodological nationalism by placing capitalism at the center as a global system that shapes both internal dynamics and international relations. However, by dividing the world into core, semi-periphery, and periphery nations, these approaches still echoed the modernization thesis, implicitly endorsing a universal path of development. Even though post-World War II Marxist theories incorporated capitalism's global influence, they often retained the nation-state as the main unit of analysis, focusing on colonial and postcolonial processes to explain nation-building (Wimmer and Schiller, 2003, p. 580).

Modernist approaches to nationalism studies have highlighted the close connection between nationalism and capitalism. They argue that nations and nationalism are historically novel phenomena, emerging in the last two centuries alongside industrialization, secularism, bureaucracy, capitalism, and urbanization (Özkırımlı, 2017, p. 72). In this view, nationalism is a product of modernity. Gellner (1983, pp. 111–113) situates its rise in the transition from agrarian to industrial society, driven by urbanization, mass education, advances in communication, and bureaucratic standardization. Similarly, Benedict Anderson's (2006, pp. 116–119) concept of "imagined communities" attributes the emergence of nationalism to the decline of religion, the rise of vernacular languages, and the expansion of print capitalism. For Anderson, the Industrial Revolution, coupled with a growing demand for publications in national languages, enabled individuals to imagine themselves as part of larger communities: "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." Despite their differences, both Gellner and Anderson link nationalism to capitalist and social development, ultimately presenting a linear path of modernization.

Tom Nairn's modernist theory connects nationalism and capitalism from a dynamic perspective. Drawing on World Systems Theory, he emphasizes the dominance of industrialized nations over non-industrialized ones. Nairn characterizes industrialized countries as the core of the capitalist world system, compelling peripheral elites to pursue reforms and technological advances. Their motivation stemmed both from the pressures of global competition and from local demands, which together fueled the rise of nationalism:

Since they wanted factories, parliaments, schools and so on, they had to copy the leaders somehow; but in a way which rejected the mere implantation of these things by direct foreign intervention or control. This gave rise to a profound ambiguity, an ambivalence which marks most forms of nationalism. (Nairn, 1981, p. 339)

Despite this dynamic approach, Nairn's analysis shares many features with modernist theories that assume a unilinear path of development for all societies (Özkırımlı, 2017, pp. 73–77). Matin (2020, pp. 437–439), however, argues that nationalism studies have struggled to address the Janus-like nature of the nation—its simultaneous modernity and antiquity. This difficulty, he suggests, results from the internalism and methodological nationalism embedded in social science. For Matin, capitalism and the nation must be understood as interrelated phenomena, shaped by the international dimension of social reality and the interactive development of multiple societies. Accordingly, the theory of UCD offers broader explanatory power. By incorporating societal multiplicity and the global dimension of social reality, UCD provides a framework to move beyond both internalist and methodological nationalist limitations in the study of nationalism.

Uneven and Combined Development

Leon Trotsky (2017, p. 13) introduced the concept of UCD to explain the paradoxical character of the Russian Revolution of 1917. Contrary to the expectations of classical Marxist analysis, the first socialist revolution emerged not in advanced capitalist societies but in semi-feudal Russia, where remnants of feudalism coexisted with elements of capitalism. Marx (1982, p. 90) had described England as the *locus classicus* of capitalist development, marked by distinct class formations within the capitalist mode of production. On this basis, socialist revolution was expected to erupt in Western Europe, where capitalism and class struggle were most advanced. Yet the upheaval occurred instead in czarist Russia, whose hybrid structure combined feudal and capitalist features.

As discussed in the section on methodological nationalism, classical Marxism portrayed development as a unilinear, universal process—an assumption widely criticized for its teleological orientation. Rosenberg (2016, pp. 22–23) argues, however, that this linear conception of history was not unique to Marxism. Postwar modernization theory likewise envisioned a progressive trajectory in which “Third World” nations would eventually “become like the West.” Both approaches thus endorsed universal laws of development rooted in European experience, reproducing an inherently Eurocentric framework.

Nonetheless, the historical progress is not formulated as a unilinear path by Trotsky, rather it constitutes unevenness and combined development together. In the UCD, unevenness is situated as the most general law of history, since stages and paths of development can be various in the multiplicity of several societies as a result of differences in the availability of sources in the world, their geographical position, and their distinct historical backgrounds, but the historical unevenness drastically changed at the 18th century in consequence of the rise of industrial capitalism in Western European countries. Hence, Western Europe emerged as the dominant force when compared with other non-industrialized societies. However, these societies constantly influenced one another. On the contrary, societal multiplicity brings constant interaction, and these societies take some features from others, combine their existing features with new ones, and this interaction leads to “an amalgam of archaic with more contemporary forms” (Trotsky, 2017, p. 14). Trotsky’s UCD offers a decisive break from this linearity. It challenges the idea of linear stages in societal evolution, proposing the possibility of intermediary steps that are not universally followed. According to UCD, societies can sidestep these steps based on their unique social, economic, and cultural capacities, diverging from a predetermined linear path (Trotsky, 2017, p. 15).

Rosenberg (2020, p. 268) established a “general abstraction” of UCD, arguing that unevenness and combination are intrinsic not just to capitalist development but to historical development *per se*. This transhistorical extension provided a solution to the theoretical insufficiency of social thought by challenging the ontological separation of the social and the international. In Rosenberg’s (2020, p. 273) systematic formulation, the international realm is reconceived, not as a realm of states under anarchy, but as “that dimension of social reality which arises specifically from the co-existence within it of more than one society.” This approach grounds geopolitics in the social world and emphasizes that the interaction of different and differently evolved human societies profoundly influences how they are constituted (Rosenberg, 2020, p. 280).

Furthermore, Rosenberg (2020, p. 282) defended UCD against charges of Eurocentrism, clarifying that Trotsky’s use of the term “backwardness” primarily refers not to cultural

inferiority but to the chronological fact of arriving later than earlier participants in a shared historical process. This chronological unevenness is what generates the imbalance of power, creating both the compulsion (whip of external necessity) and the capacity (privilege of historic backwardness) for combined development, allowing latecomers to skip stages (Rosenberg, 2020, p. 282). The historical unevenness among countries imposes an external pressure, the “whip of external necessity,” on late-comer societies. This compels their ruling elites to emulate more advanced industrial countries, yet coexisting societies can selectively import and adapt technologies without adhering strictly to the same developmental trajectory. This “privilege of historic backwardness” allows them to adopt features from early industrializing societies, resulting in diverse amalgams of backward and advanced features within a society (Rosenberg, 2016, p. 23).

Through UCD, latecomer societies like Russia, as analyzed by Trotsky, did not replicate early industrializing societies’ exact developmental paths. Instead, their coexistence within the global landscape led to a blend of various societal types and their characteristics. In Russia’s case, Rosenberg (2016, p. 24) explains that the czarist elites did not aspire to emulate Western liberal models such as England. Rather, they were compelled to build a modern industrial sector in order to withstand external pressures, “whip of the international” as he calls. This led to what Trotsky termed “combined development,” featuring a state with semi-feudal, anti-liberal traits coupled with advanced capitalist production techniques.

Matin explicitly deploys UCD to overcome the intellectual root of modernization theories: Eurocentrism, which rests on a singular ontology of society, thereby reducing global history to a series of discrete re-enactments of Europe’s autonomous experience and rendering non-European patterns as “anomalous or pathological exception” (Matin, 2013, p. 9). Matin’s approach, therefore, centers on an ontologically plural conception of social reality, asserting that societal evolution is “intrinsically interactive and multilinear” (Matin, 2013, p. 10). The framework focuses on international relations as the “interactive coexistence of all historical forms of social coherence in mutually recognized integrities” (Matin, 2013, p. 10), allowing the analysis to de-exceptionalize latecomer experiences. Matin (2013, pp. 74–75) extends this framework by categorizing latecomer societies of the nineteenth century. Countries like Prussia, Japan, and Russia, which had earlier connections with capitalist geopolitics and partial industrialization, were able to respond more effectively to the external whip. They also benefited from exposure to earlier forms of nationalism and state formation in England and France. As a result, their efforts to narrow the industrial gap were pursued in tandem with processes of nation-state consolidation and economic modernization. By contrast, societies such as the Ottoman Empire, China, and Iran exhibited lower levels of industrialization and retained semi-feudal or absolutist political structures. For them, the establishment of a strong central nation-state became a prerequisite for industrialization, rather than its byproduct. This distinction is vital for the analysis, as it demonstrates that the Ottoman Empire’s backwardness and existential geopolitical vulnerability provided the structural necessity for the Kemalist political and ideological project to be coercively established prior to the maturation of the capitalist economy.

Nairn (1997, p. 71) captures this dynamic through the concept of the “modern Janus.” He argues that nationalism in the age of capitalism represents the attempt of “backward societies” to harness the benefits of modernity. Nations had to “discover” nationhood from their history, fostering a coexistence of modern ambitions with a continual quest to unearth specific historical features of their nationalism. Hence, in the age of capitalism, nationalism

is an effort to catch up with early-industrializing societies, and it constitutes the forward-looking face of Janus since they aspire to move forward, but nationalism also includes a backward-looking face since they are constantly reformulating their history to find vindications. Nairn (1997, p. 72) highlights that nationalism's ties with capitalism embody historical ambiguity, emphasizing its complex relationship that cannot be studied in isolation. Matin (2013, p. 340) suggests resolving this ambiguity using UCD, as it can analyze different amalgams resulting from the mix of modern and archaic elements, both domestic and foreign.

Also, Alexander Gerschenkron's influential work on economic backwardness implicitly resonates with Trotsky's UCD by rejecting unilinear capitalist development and recognizing the potential for latecomer nations to leapfrog stages through the "advantages of backwardness." According to Gerschenkron (p. 26–30), is that the greater a country's economic backwardness, the more essential state or institutional intervention becomes to substitute for missing economic prerequisites like capital, a functioning labor market, or entrepreneurial initiative. This observation strongly parallels the statist approach of *milli iktisat*. However, the approaches diverge critically. Gerschenkron's framework remains fundamentally focused on identifying optimal economic substitutes within a national, comparative context. UCD, derived from a historical materialist tradition, emphasizes the role of the international system as a constitutive social relation and focuses on the broader sociological and political amalgamation required for modernization. Fundamentally, while complementary in their anti-unilinear stance, the two represent opposed approaches to human development, especially concerning the potential for non-capitalist outcomes and the role of labor.

One of the other prominent thinkers of UCD, Sam Ashman has extended the utility of UCD by applying its framework to the contemporary dynamics of neoliberalism and financialization. Ashman, Fine and Newman (2011, p. 177) employed UCD as a conceptual tool to analyze the specific, variegated nature of capitalism on a world scale. For the Turkish study, this approach provides a valuable comparative lens, showing how external pressures (the "whip") are mediated by local structural inheritances. In South Africa, financialization created a "particular combination" where short-term capital inflows were combined with massive long-term capital outflows by large corporations, and this combination resulted in "jobless form of growth and the persistence of mass poverty for the majority" (Ashman, Fine & Newman, 2011, p. 178), illustrating a complex sociological and economic amalgamation driven by global financial dynamics interacting with the specific local structure known as the Minerals-Energy Complex. This application shows UCD's relevance in explaining complex contemporary economic and social outcomes beyond initial state-formation.

The nexus of nationalism and secularism

To understand the nexus between nationalism and secularism, it is necessary to first examine the relationship between nationalism and religion, a subject frequently addressed in nationalism studies. Anthony Smith (1998, pp. 20–21) argues that the nation constitutes the primary political bond among its members, while other allegiances, such as religion, must be subordinated to the overriding loyalty to the nation-state.

In analyzing nationalism and modernism, Smith (1998, p. 21) further contends that traditional religions often hindered nation-state formation. They were perceived as obstacles to social change and to achieving the developmental level envisioned by modern

nation-states. Therefore, it implied that traditional religion was an obstacle to creating a social change and reaching the level of social development that conceptualized by the nation-state of the modern era. Thus, with the corrosion of traditional religion in the age of rising nationalism, “national self-government was the only way to harness the social and political resources necessary for social development” (Smith, 1998, p. 21). For Smith, the modernization paradigm of nationalism and nation-building therefore required weakening traditional religion to ensure the autonomy of citizens and to create conditions conducive to political participation and self-government.

Yet, this dichotomous framing does not imply a complete separation of religion and nationalism. Smith (2010, p. 154) emphasizes that nations often assume a quasi-sacred character, drawing on myth-making and symbolic resources akin to religion, presenting themselves as “the only viable salvation drama in a rationalist age.” Thus, in the modernist paradigm, while traditional religion is positioned as a potential threat to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the nation-state, nationalism itself may take on religious-like qualities.

Examining the Middle East, Smith (1973, p. 43) highlights how Arab and Jewish nationalisms illustrate this duality. On the one hand, nationalism—being secular and politically grounded—requires breaking apart traditional ethnic and religious communities in order to forge new solidarities. On the other, to diminish religion’s social influence, the nation must provide alternative sources of cohesion and allegiance. This explains why “secular nationalists [often] utilize religion for non-religious ends.” In this sense, the relationship between nationalism and religion is two-sided: nation-states must neutralize traditional religion to consolidate legitimacy, yet they may also appropriate religious forms or symbols to reinforce their ideological projects.

The conjunction of nationalism and laicism in the late Ottoman Empire

Including the Ottoman Empire in the analysis reveals that non-European nations, particularly Japan after the Meiji Restoration and its 1905 victory in the Russo-Japanese War, were also seen as models of modernization. Toward the late 19th century, Ottoman elites—largely CUP members—acknowledged their empire’s weakness vis-à-vis Western powers and looked eastward for alternatives. They recognized the “superiority” of Western social thought, and their perceptions of “civilization” and “modernity” were shaped by Western understanding and concepts (Worringer, 2004, p. 221).

Ziya Gökalp held a central place in Ottoman debates on “civilization.” Alongside Yusuf Akçura, his works marked an epistemological shift from Ottoman patriotism to Turkish nationalism (Üngör, 2011, pp. 27–30). Both emerged from the same intellectual milieu as the Young Turks, CUP, and later Kemalist elites, ensuring ideological continuity. In other words, they established a paradigm that shaped the ideology of both the CUP and the Kemalist regime. To illustrate, Gökalp (2019, p. 51) cites the example of Japan: “For instance, the Japanese left the Eastern civilization and entered the Western civilization.” He goes on to explain, “Japanese entered the Western civilization by preserving their religion and nation. By this means, they reached the level of Europeans in every aspect” (Gökalp, 2019, p. 64).

Thus, CUP elites’ interest in Japan—a non-Western power that had defeated a Western one through modernization—reflected an attempt to address the empire’s decline and its

“uneven” position vis-à-vis the West. Modernization in the late Ottoman Empire was shaped by international power dynamics, particularly economic competition and wars with early-industrializing Western states. To “catch up,” Ottoman elites adopted developmental patterns imposed by the external necessity of rising European capitalist powers.

Matin (2013, p. 55) argues that backward states can employ defensive modernization as a response to growing existential challenges. This concept leverages the privilege of historic backwardness, allowing states to adopt advanced production methods, political, and social models from more developed counterparts. Yet full implementation threatened the material and cultural bases of precapitalist elites. As a result, defensive modernization remained selective, emphasizing economic and technological reforms while limiting deeper social and political change (Matin, 2013, p. 56). The concept of defensive modernization expanded also by Eren Düzgün’s in conjunction with UCD. Düzgün (2022, p. 10) offers an alternative interpretation by contending that the Ottoman/Turkish experiment with modernity until the 1950s was characterized not by “peripheral or statist capitalism,” as conventionally presumed, but by a “historically specific Jacobinism.” Jacobinism could be defined as “an elite led and top-down process of nation-building, war-making and subject formation.” and he argues that the French Revolution produced an alternative (geo)political economy (“Jacobinism”) which served as a “blueprint for other modernization projects” (Düzgün, 2002, p. 8). This “Jacobin” project is defined as a mode of modernization that consciously substituted the systematic commodification of the means of life, which is the hallmark of capitalism. Instead of the market, the state utilized non-market mechanisms, such as the “citizen-soldier” and the “public school” to engineer new forms of mobilization and appropriation (Düzgün, 2022, pp. 5–12). Also, according to Düzgün (2017, p. 256), backward societies have the capacity to surpass the limitations of their already existing social structures by selecting and imitating relatively more developed societies. This interaction between multiple societies from different levels of development subsequently leads to the theoretical possibility of the “emergence of an infinite number of ‘combinations’ of the ‘domestic’ and the ‘foreign,’ which, in turn, reacts back on the ‘international,’ leading to the transformation of the initial conditions of unevenness” (Düzgün, 2017, p. 256).

CUP elites advanced a vision of modernization rooted in a selective notion of civilization, viewing nationalism as essential to achieving Western levels of industrialization. To drive the nationalist agenda, they justified the West’s organizational and productive capacity, attributing it to a politically and economically independent national bourgeoisie. They regarded Europe’s development as the product of nationalism and the nation-state, proposing its blueprint could be replicated elsewhere with local adaptations.

Legally, the Ottoman society was divided into the lines of several autonomous religious communities called *millet*, and Sunni *ümmet*. The *millet* system, as Özdil (2024, pp. 101–102) notes, functioned as a non-territorial model of autonomy that allowed Orthodox Greek, Armenian, and Jewish communities to conduct their affairs under their own leaders while maintaining allegiance to the imperial authority. It was “a non-liberal, conservative, and patriarchal model of religious tolerance” where religion was inseparable from public identity and the boundaries between groups were made visible through social and material markers such as dress and architecture (Özdil, 2024, pp. 101–102).

However, during the *Tanzimat* and the First Constitutional Era, the classic *millet* system of the Ottoman Empire was severely downgraded through reforms, and division along with religious affinities meaning of the term *millet* legally nearly disappeared (Zürcher, 2017, pp.

44–45). These reforms were also part of a broader process as the dissolution of “visible religion,” a transformation in which dress and other markers of communal belonging gradually lost their regulatory function as modernization blurred religious distinctions (Özdil, 2021; 2024, pp. 100–101, 129). The fading of the religious meaning of the word *millet* and its transformation into “nation” in the Republic of Turkey reflects not only the decline of Ottoman communitarianism but also what Özdil (2024, p. 129) calls “the negotiation of identity within a rigid socio-political structure,” where clothing, visibility, and modernization intertwined with emerging notions of nationalism and laicism.

These reforms were amended to downplay the religious-based meaning of the *millet* term and to invest a broader Ottoman citizenship to the term. The reforms were also situated in the context of rising nationalism and separatism among various ethnic Ottoman populations, and the ruling elites of the empire formulated reforms to halt the rise of nationalist tendencies and to curb European interventions through nationalism (Zürcher, 2017, p. 45). However, the reforms were including the Janus-like feature since the ruling elite was aiming to reform the state system by emulating Western European ideas and ideals to create more effective governance, but they also tried to emulate these ideas and ideals within the Islamic and Ottoman framework. But the effort to create a broader notion of Ottoman citizenship failed during the reformation era, in a similar vein, Ünlü (2014, p. 59) states that the *Tanzimat*, as an attempt to establish a laicist, constitutionalist contract between the state, non-Muslims, and Muslims ultimately failed. Even though the ruling elites of the state were compelled to reform the system, the conjunction of nationalism and laicism was not fully realized by the ruling elite of the time. According to Berkes (1999, p. 318), the emergence of Turkish nationalism was dependent on two conditions: the dissolution of the Ottoman *millet* system, and the weakening of the notions of *ümmet* and Islamic *din-u-devlet* (the unity of state and religion). Nationalism, as a route to modernity, depends on continued secularization. However, it goes beyond the legislative dimension of secularization that has largely defined public and political debates in contemporary Turkey. The fading of the religious meaning of the word *millet*, and its transformation into “nation” in the Republic of Turkey clearly reflects the close connection between nationalism and laicism.

Even though the religious meaning of *millet* had relatively eroded, one cannot speak of a clear conjunction between nationalism and laicism during the Empire’s Reformation era. Given the failure to establish Ottoman nationalism, segments of the ruling elites—particularly Western-educated bureaucrats organized under the CUP—sought to modernize society by adopting Western ideas and institutions. The CUP consolidated influence by placing its members in key positions, reaching its peak with the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, when it seized government control and restored parliament. Yet their modernization efforts faced strong opposition from other elites, especially clerics and conservatives, who retained significant political and social power (Berkes, 1999, pp. 61–62).

Initially, the CUP advocated political diversity and the inclusion of multiple ethnic groups, but after the revolution it quickly shifted toward exclusionary Turkish nationalism, mobilizing around Muslim Turkish traders in a manner reminiscent of Jacobin ideals (Yadirgi, 2017, pp. 5–6). In the 1910s, under the pressures of the Great War, the CUP pursued a *milli iktisat* (national economy) by confiscating non-Muslim properties to create a Muslim bourgeoisie that could later be Turkified. World War I and the Armenian deportation enabled the large-scale appropriation of capital and property (Ünlü, 2014, p. 63). Thus, the nationalization of the economy relied on coercive measures—confiscation, expulsion, and

redistribution of assets to “reliable” social forces—framed as necessary for capitalist transformation. Following this logic, Ünlü (2014, pp. 65–66) argues that wartime legitimized coercion as a tool of state- and nation-building, and the CUP treated World War I as both an opportunity and a process of nation-building. While the CUP advanced nationalist policies through economic frameworks and influential writings on Turkish nationalism, an official laicist framework never materialized. Instead, as Ünlü (2014, p. 68) notes, a “Muslimness contract” prevailed, aimed at creating Sunni unity to suppress and expel non-Muslims.

The conjunction of Kemalist nationalism and laicism

The origins of laicism in Turkey can be traced to the 19th-century Ottoman Empire. Although laicism and secularization were never dominant priorities for the ruling elites, secularization often appeared as an unintended byproduct of adopting European policies and institutions. With the establishment of the Republic in the 1920s, however, laicism became a central tenet. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk explicitly pursued laicist reforms “to end the political, social and cultural influence of Islamic institutions and to achieve a total dominance of the secular state over those institutions” (Zürcher, 2010, p. 73). While French and Kemalist laicism invite comparison, they diverged significantly. In France, liberal institutionalism mediated between anticlericalism and state civil religion through law and neutral institutions. By contrast, in Turkey, conflicts between political and religious groups were resolved primarily through a top-down approach (Akan, 2017, p. 216).

The role of clerics in relation to secularism, laicism, and nationalism further illuminates these dynamics. Atabaki (2004, p. 59) claims that the Iranian clerics played a major role in the failure of Reza Khan’s mission to form a republic, however, the main factors that determined Atatürk’s success and Reza Khan’s failure to establish a republic in their countries were “the performance of the two leaders and the procedures by which the change was conducted in the two countries.” Yet, Atabaki’s argument shifts our focus towards an internalist perspective, influenced by the great man theory in historiography, when considering state formation and the clerics’ role. Rather than the performances and decisions of these two leaders during the process, the conditions that UCD underlies give more analytical capacity to understand. The Ottoman Empire’s geopolitical proximity to Europe, coupled with decades of warfare and economic rivalry, intensified pressures to modernize. Nationalism as an elite project—advanced by the Young Turks, the CUP, and later the Republican People’s Party (CHP)—consistently clashed with clerical authority in the struggle for state power. This made laicism deeply intertwined with Kemalist and broader Turkish nationalism, a connection best understood through UCD analysis.

Nairn (1981, p. 14) argued that Great Britain became the “first state-form of an industrialized nation” due to its bourgeois revolution, which created modern institutions of sovereignty and national integration. Additionally, due to its hegemonic imperial status, ethnic nationalism, which dominated the classical age of nationalism, was not a structural feature of Britain (Matin, 2020, p. 446). However, the rise of capitalism gave Britain an unprecedented competitive advantage by enabling industrial production in combination with the imperial advantage to reach resources, and this posed a threat to non-capitalist states since they did not have the same production capacity to compete with Britain (Matin, 2020, p. 447). The same conditions that compelled the French ruling elite to utilize nationalism and consequently establish a nation-state to be able to compete with English

capitalism were also observable in other societies. German nationalist movement and Germany's eventual unification, as well as various nationalist movements in other European countries, but also in Asia, the Ottoman Empire, and Iran were examples of reactions to the rise of English capitalism (Matin, 2020, p. 446). By 1900, however, the Ottoman Empire's lack of industrial infrastructure underscored its vulnerability. Its railway network measured only 5,759 kilometers, compared to Britain, France, and Russia, which possessed six, eight, and twelve times more, respectively. Coal production was even more disproportionate, with Britain's output roughly two hundred times greater (Zürcher, 2010, pp. 65–66). As a semi-colonial empire, the Ottomans lacked the structural base for capitalist transformation. The Republic of Turkey, formed from the Empire's core Anatolian territories, inherited this infrastructural weakness. In Matin's terms, the rise of English capitalism had already acted as an external "whip" to modernize; by the 1920s, with multiple European states industrialized, that pressure had only intensified.

As a continuation from the late Ottoman Empire, the CUP's *milli iktisat* policy during the 1910s, followed by the appropriation of mainly Armenian properties to redistribute among Muslim and Turkish bourgeoisie, proved to be useful for post-war industrialization under the CHP, but the elimination of Armenians and other ethnicities and effects of these coercion policies on the economic history of Turkey is far from being discussed publicly (Kieser, 2018, p. 273). Also, coercion policies in the form of nationalism of the CUP continued in a similar vein during the Kemalist regime by combining with the effect of laicism as an official ideology. Led by landlords, chieftains, and the recently displaced ulema, certain local leaders rallied Muslim peasants in various ethnoreligious uprisings across Anatolia. The shutdown of medreses, religious courts, and *vakıfs* (pious foundations) in 1924 had stripped the ulema of their primary sources of income, while landlords and chieftains relied on the ulema to maintain their prevailing rural positions (Peker, 2020, pp. 313–314). The abolition of the caliphate this year also highlights the international dimension in shaping the laicist nation-state. The repeated use of Islam as a source of domestic opposition reinforced secularization as a crucial strategy for state-building strategy. In response to the religiously legitimated resistance of the traditional Ottoman bureaucracy and their allied Muslim notables, secular reforms aimed to weaken the old ruling class's capacity to organize and resist, and these reforms were part of a broader, tangible struggle to overcome one of the main obstacles to establishing bourgeois social structures (Peker, 2020, p. 310). Laicist reforms were a response to international scrutiny, aimed at preventing foreign influences from the great powers (Başkan, 2014, p. 68). Additionally, this move severed the transnational connection facilitated by the caliphate, asserting state control over Islam and aiming to embed it with a more Turkish identity.

The Kemalist government's strong reactions to the Sheikh Said rebellion and the Dersim rebellion were precise examples of the nexus of nationalism and laicism. According to Ünlü, previous Muslim contract became useless after the formation of the Republic, and coercion against Kurds and Alevi became one of the main tenets of the Turkification of the country to establish a Turkishness contract that designates the conditions of Turkishness and ethnic boundaries by forbidding mentioning massacres, appropriations, assimilations publicly (Ünlü, 2014, pp. 72–74).

Coercive nation-building practices policies of the Kemalist regime combined with laicism in this context. Even though Kurdish nationalist and Alevi identity contexts of rebellions are frequently mentioned by the elites of the regime, the religious context and its

perceived ties with the caliphate, therefore, with ties with the *ancien regime* is also brought into the discussion as can be exemplified in the words of the president of the military tribunal on the Sheikh Said rebellion:

While some of you have used the abuses of government as a pretext for revolt, some others called people to rebel in defense of the caliphate. However, you are all unified on one goal: the creation of an independent Kurdistan. (White, 1995, p. 78)

One can argue that the Kemalist regime perceived and framed rebellions as a threat to the laicism of the Republic, and in this context, Kemalist nationalism and laicism combined to suppress rebellions to establish its authority in the religious sphere by eliminating influential ethnoreligious actors in the various geographies of the Republic and it is integrated to the Turkification of the country by establishing the Turkish language as the official and dominant language through nation-state institutions. Yusuf Akçura (Akçura in Georgeon, 1996, p. 133), a prominent figure in Turkish nationalism, claimed that feudal and backward social classes actively worked against Turkish modernization, advocating for their elimination in the modernization process. Both Akçura and Gökalp saw non-Muslim minorities as hegemonic economic groups that needed to be controlled or eliminated. They also regarded Kurdish religious rebellions as “backward,” “feudal,” and “pious” forces to be confronted and eradicated. Interestingly, Akçura emphasized the issue of “feudal social classes” in a conference paper shortly after the 1925 Sheikh Said rebellion, revealing the alignment of these stances with the ultimate objective of establishing a capitalist national economy. Hence, by suppressing ethnic and religious rebellions the combination of Kemalist nationalism and laicism projects itself as the “only viable salvation drama in a rationalist age” as Smith suggests.

Kemalist elites’ stance to establish their authority over the religious sphere to increase the effectiveness of the central nation-state is highly related to their perception of Islam. They perceived Islam in a twofold manner: to establish a nation-state, Islam could constitute the “fundamental social basis” for unity, also Islam poses the most major threat to the process of establishment of the bourgeois republic; therefore, the path to establishing a nation-state was interlocked with the secularization that includes ethnoreligious class relations that are undertaken from the debris of the Empire (Peker, 2016, p. 207). To be able to catch the early-industrializing societies and to trigger the capitalist transformation of the country the Kemalist elites aimed to establish a nation-state. Through the analytical line of UCD, the Eurocentered expansion of nationalism, which emerged as a reaction to catch up with English capitalism, continued to expand to closer geographical areas by posing a threat to non-capitalist countries. Therefore, Kemalist elites were compelled to previously failed nationalism project to become a capitalist nation through using sources of the nation-state. Matin (2013, p. 75) states that Turkey under Atatürk had a relatively backward agrarian economy with essentially pre-capitalist social classes, and these conditions were inhospitable to nationalist politics. Therefore, the whip of external necessity to implement the nationalist project and to form a nation-state to utilize capitalist transformation preconditioned to coercive construction due to the inhospitable conditions. In the context of Turkey, the path of nationalism was intertwined with laicism. As discussed above, the Kemalist regime crushed rebellions that it perceived as challenges to its “modernization path” that involved nationalist and laicist narratives, it also, exploited coercive nation-building practices to excel in capitalist accumulation and to create ally bourgeoisie that suited its nationalist and laicist narrative.

Moreover, Kemalist Turkey's laicist reforms included the purge of the ulema class by abolishing their *vakıfs*, and ministerial positions, and confiscating their properties were aimed to incapacitate the old ruling class for any possible resistance from them (Yıldızoğlu and Margulies, 1988, p. 15). This purge neutralized the old clerical elite and severed its social base, freeing the new state from traditional guardians of faith. As the late Feroz Ahmad (1993, p. 80) notes, "the next idol to be smashed was the Islamic code of law, the sharia," and by 1926 all personal and family law had been replaced by secular statutes. Therefore, to establish a nation-state, Kemalist elites aimed to eradicate the influence and power of the ulema class, as mentioned in the previous section, modernization efforts were frequently challenged by the ulema class and conservative groups of the society. In the context of Turkey, the ulema class and its continuity in political and social institutions were positioned as remnants of the *ancien regime*, and with the effect of the whip of external necessity nationalism and laicism were combined in state policies to establish the nation-state. In other words, the required capitalist transformation of Turkey brought capitalist erosion of old belief systems through the combined effect of nationalism and laicism.

Secular legal reforms completed the break with the old order. In 1926 the Republic replaced the Ottoman legal regime with Western-style codes: its new civil code was modeled on Switzerland's, its penal code on Italy's, and its commercial code on German/Italian laws (Ahmad, 1993, p. 80). By aligning its statutes with European models, the Turkish state created the juridical conditions for capitalist enterprise. Peker (2020, pp. 319–321) stresses that this sweeping legislative shift from traditional Islamic norms to Western practices and laws was driven by the needs of a national-capitalist market, not just ideology.

Laicism extended beyond law into cultural regulation to synchronize Turkey with European norms. The Gregorian calendar (1926) and the Sunday weekly holiday (1935) aligned time discipline into line with Europe (Ahmad, 1993, p. 80). These reforms synchronized Turkey's working week, numeracy and literacy with Western norms and facilitated trade and communication with Europe. The 1931 Law of Measurements exemplified this approach by mandating the adoption of the international metric system, replacing the diverse and inconsistent Islamic-customary units. This shift was justified not merely as administrative streamlining but as a necessity for integration into the global economy, with parliamentary debate documents highlighting the inefficiencies and commercial losses stemming from multiple coexisting measurement systems of the old system (Peker, 2020, pp. 319–322). In the same way, the Surname Law of 1934, though it appeared to be mainly about culture, also had important economic purposes. By making family names standard, it helped clear up issues around who owned what and who could inherit property since both essential for a modern, capitalist economy. Viewed through Trotsky's framework of Uneven and Combined Development, laicism embodies a top-down "combined development" strategy: under the external pressures of global capitalism (whip of external necessity), the Turkish state leveraged its historic backwardness to import advanced institutions wholesale. In other words, nationalist elites used secularization as a tool to graft Western legal, temporal and technical systems onto a pre-capitalist society, accelerating modernization in a distinctly combined (modern-meets-traditional) fashion.

The establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) in 1924 illustrates the dual character of Kemalist laicism: separation of religion from politics alongside its direct regulation. Through this institution, religion was restructured as a policy tool, reformulated

to align with republican objectives (Peker, 2016, p. 228). Following the purge of the ulema, the state assumed authority over religious life, synchronizing nationalist and laicist reforms to advance the project of capitalist nation-building. The creation of the *Diyanet* thus represents a clear example of the new amalgams generated through UCD.

Even though it is not clear whether the *Diyanet* was modeled after the French *Bureau central des cultes* that observes the implementation of laicism (Akan, 2017, p. 217), it is clear that the perception of laicism was and is quite different between the two countries. In France, *Républicains opportunistes* were cautious of the Catholic Church and religious orders, whereas Kemalist laicists were primarily wary of religious orders (Akan, 2017, p. 218). Thus, the *Diyanet* assumed a distinctive function: it became both a laicist instrument of state authority and a mechanism of social control in the service of modernization and capitalist transformation. This institutionalization of Islam into the state apparatus mirrored the Ottoman practice of integrating the ulema into governance. However, the shift was profound. Rather than operating as an autonomous authority, Islam under Kemalism was subordinated to the state, losing its former significance (Cizre Sakallıoğlu, 1996, p. 234). The *Diyanet* was a critical functionary within this framework to promote an enlightened and Turkified form of Islam while serving as the cement of society and preventing alternative ethnoreligious mobilizations against the central state (Yavuz, 2019, p. 62). In this sense, Kemalist laicism was not a simple transplantation of European secular models. Instead, it combined elements of French secularization with Ottoman traditions of religious regulation, producing a unique amalgam shaped by Turkey's historical unevenness and geopolitical context. The *Diyanet* embodied this synthesis: a laicist institution that simultaneously subordinated and instrumentalized religion, enabling the Kemalist state to consolidate nationalist ideology and drive capitalist modernization.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that understanding nationalism in the Turkish context requires situating it within its conjunction with laicism, a relationship best explained through Kamran Matin's (2020) application of UCD. By employing UCD, the analysis moves beyond methodological nationalism and internalist explanations, instead highlighting how Kemalist nationalism and laicism emerged within the pressures of global capitalism and international geopolitical competition.

The origins of this conjunction can be traced back to the late Ottoman Empire, where the intensifying "whip of external necessity" in the 19th century pushed reformist elites to imitate European models of modernization. There were many reform attempts to save the empire from its demise and the CUP elites envisioned emulating European experiences as a means to modernize, leveraging the privilege of historical backwardness. However, it is argued that the conditions that facilitated the success of the Kemalist elites in establishing the nation-state, specifically the conjunction of nationalism and laicism, were absent during these reformations. On the other hand, Kemalist elites' attempt to establish a nation-state was situated within the heightened whip of external necessity due to the increased capitalist transformation of Western Europe and the further expansion of capitalism to other geographies. In this context, nationalism had to combine itself with laicism to realize the capitalist erosion of old belief systems. Nationalism and laicism worked as two sides of the same coin of capitalist modernization through *milli iktisat*. This combination paved the way for the demographic consolidation and socioeconomic restructuring and economic seizure

of assets belonging to religious and ethnic minorities, which started in the late Ottoman Empire but culminated in the formative years of the Republic. Additionally, this combination served as the regulatory and coercive power of the regime, suppressing ethnoreligious revolts during the Republic.

As previously discussed in the nationalism studies, one can argue that in the context of Turkey, traditional religious practices and the social structures established through the Ottoman Empire's *millet* system had to be either eliminated or transformed by the emerging central nation-state. Therefore, the CUP and Kemalist elites resorted to coercive nation-building practices, confiscations, and assimilations to create favorable alliances and to establish hospitable conditions for a central nation-state.

Through the lens of UCD, the Turkish case reveals a significant inversion of modernist theories of nationalism. Contrary to Gellner's or Anderson's assertions that nationalism emerges as a by-product of capitalist social structures, in Turkey the formation of the nation-state and the ideology of nationalism preceded capitalist transformation and actively produced the conditions necessary for it. Nationalism and laicism were not epiphenomena of capitalist industrialization but preconditions for its eventual realization. This dynamic underscores the specificity of latecomer societies, where historical backwardness and international pressure combined to generate distinctive ideological amalgams.

The unique contribution of the Turkish case to UCD theory lies in its inversion of the modernist sequence. Contrary to theories positing that nationalism and secularism arise as byproducts or ideological reflections of a mature industrial capitalist society, the Kemalist synthesis demonstrates that these ideologies were actively manufactured and deployed by the state to generate the preconditions for capitalist development itself. This finding enriches UCD theory by demonstrating that in contexts of extreme backwardness, the dynamics of combined development force the political and ideological spheres to structurally precede and coercively enforce the basic economic relations required for national consolidation and geopolitical survival. In instances of profound historical backwardness (Matin's classification), the combined ideological-political sphere must be deployed coercively and combine archaic state mechanisms (centralized religious control) with advanced modern imports (secular law, nationalism) to engineer the material and social transformation necessary for geopolitical survival. The Kemalist project demonstrates that, driven by intense international pressure, the political sphere must function as the coercive primary engine for primitive accumulation and social engineering, thereby imposing foundational economic relations and inverting the expected historical sequence of development.

Also, the study of Kemalist Turkey finds a crucial comparative reference point in the recent work by Yalvaç and Mengüaslan (2024), who applied UCD to analyze the sociopolitical transformations in Syria and Libya. The authors argue that conventional analyses of development in these countries are flawed due to their reliance on a Eurocentric and stagist understanding of development (p. 105). Instead, UCD provides an interactive framework that conceptualizes how the 'international' is constitutive of change, focusing on how capitalist expansion and imperialism have articulated with local structures to produce specific socioeconomic and political outcomes (p. 105). Mirroring the structural pressures faced by the late Ottoman Empire, specifically the "long history of external imperialist intervention" and "late capitalist development" (p. 106), the Syrian and Libyan cases demonstrate how UCD dynamics result in a volatile mixture of "patrimonialism, nepotism

and crony capitalism" against a backdrop of significant instability (p. 106). The authors note that both countries pursued similar post-colonial developmental paths, moving from statist/socialist models to import substitution strategies, and finally to neoliberal policies that link them to the contradictions of contemporary capitalist accumulation (p. 107). In comparison to the Kemalist case, which utilized the whip of external necessity to forge a coercive, ideological amalgam before full capitalist maturation, the analyses of Syria and Libya highlight the contemporary destructive consequences of uneven development. These contemporary instances illustrate why UCD is essential for understanding the specific, variegated sociological amalgams generated when latecomer societies strive to "catch up" with developed industrialized states (p. 106).

In sum, the Kemalist synthesis of nationalism and laicism cannot be understood as either a mere replication of European secular-nationalist models or a purely endogenous response to Ottoman decline. Instead, it was an amalgamation forged at the intersection of Ottoman historical legacies, Turkey's geopolitical vulnerabilities, and the structural pressures of international capitalism. Recognizing this dynamic highlights both the material origins of Turkish state ideology and its broader theoretical significance: it demonstrates how Uneven and Combined Development produces distinctive pathways of nation-state formation that defy the assumptions of unilinear modernization theories. Thus, the case of Turkey affirms that nationalism and laicism were not parallel trajectories but mutually reinforcing strategies of survival and transformation, indispensable to the forging of a modern nation-state in a deeply uneven international order.

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