

Sena Karasipahi, *Muslims in Modern Turkey: Islamism, Modernism and the Revolt of the Islamic Intellectuals*, London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009

Yan Overfield Shaw

Sena Karasipahi's study is a critical and comparative survey of the anti-Kemalist, anti-Western, Muslim discourse of six leading Turkish public intellectuals; Ali Bulaç, Rasim Özdenören, İsmet Özel, İlhan Kutluer, Ersin Nazif Gürdoğan and Abdurrahman Dilipak. The study frames its observations about their role in modern Turkey's secular society around structured interviews undertaken in the summer of 2003. The book is published by I.B. Tauris, self described as "the leading publisher on the Middle East and the Islamic World," and is part of their sizeable Library of Modern Middle East Studies. No doubt with a canny eye on the vast market for academic books about Muslims and Islamists of all stripes created by 9/11, the publisher's jacket blurb strikes a sensational chord, describing Karasipahi's selection as "a strong intellectual elite dedicated to the overthrow of secular modernism." However, Karasipahi insists that the Muslim intellectuals she studies are "moderate," "non-revolutionary" and "should not be put in the category of the Islamist radicals, or fundamentalists" (7). The politicised prefix in the term "Islamist-intellectual" is one which Karasipahi carefully avoids using throughout, on the insistence of the intellectuals themselves, who prefer to be described and defined as "Muslim"; that is, as intellectuals who are first and foremost "true believers" (56).

The book is divided into four chapters. The first presents a narrative of the rise to hegemony and subsequent "crisis" and breakdown of Kemalist ideology and its modernizing project. Karasipahi's arguments against the "Jacobin" and "despotic" (20-21) attitude of Kemalism as a hard-line, state-sponsored ideology draw both on the rhetoric and viewpoints of the Muslim intellectuals and on the secular, liberal scholarship which she actually cites. The chapter presents three social forces behind the de-legitimation of Kemalist "modernism": the forced and inorganic nature of Kemalist social modernisation; the failure of infrastructural development through import substituting industrialisation; and the return of traditional, rural Islamic values to Turkey's burgeoning urban centres through migration (30-33). Karasipahi's understanding of the conditions of the emergence of the Islamic revival is also political and historical. The Muslim intellectuals' rise to public profile and influence in the late 1970s and after the 1980 coup was a product of the state's new "tolerant" attitude towards Islam (35). In the cold war, post-coup environment, the state's adoption of the right-wing ideology of a "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" and the consequent "Islamization of secularism," whereby

the state further nationalised Islam itself, and began to permit the operation of more-or less openly Islamic schools, trades-unions, and civil society institutions, was both effective electoral strategy and good anti-communist policy (34-5).

In the second chapter, Karasipahi begins by defining the concept of “the intellectual” generally, outlining the scholarship on the subject (41-7). She briefly sketches the history and development of Turkey’s intellectuals from the Young Ottomans, through the one party era, to the wave of leftist intellectuals who finally started to break the Kemalist mould of patrician and “state-oriented and bureaucratic” intellectual production in the late empire and early republic (47-51). She then moves on to define her own chosen group of intellectuals as a “single, coherent school” which understands Islam as a total system and singular solution to the social, moral and epistemological ills that “Western civilisation” has transmitted, like a disease, to the contemporary world (68-9). The group are defined as “apologist,” for their attacks on Western modernity, their defence of Islamic principles and their nostalgia for and glorification of the Islamic past (59-60), though they are also described as theologically flexible, being influenced by the esoteric tradition of Sufism (*tasawwuf*). Working as popular, consciousness-raising, public intellectuals, they seek to provide the young and disillusioned with “true, realistic and *healthy* information” about Modernity and Islam (58, *Bulaç*, my italics). Karasipahi’s historical and dialectical criticism of their work as a whole is that the Muslim intellectuals actually owe their existence, effectiveness and even their audience to the very modernity and secular education they criticise. Karasipahi’s brief biographies of the intellectuals (53-56) tell parallel tales of conflicting secular and religious educations in provincial high schools, and later migration to the intellectual heartland of Istanbul in the 1970s, whether to a university radicalisation or self-made business success. They are educated to graduate level in the social and human sciences, and some have artistic ability as poets and novelists. Most speak foreign languages, and a few have overseas educational or professional experience. They thus attack Western thought and culture armed with an impressive, if hardly encyclopaedic, familiarity with it garnered through the secular state educations they share with their audience, who can thus appreciate the “learned” references in their discourse. Finally, as public intellectuals in the media and academia, the Muslim intellectuals exploit the features of modernity available in present-day Turkish society – communication technology, uniform public culture, civic space and relative freedom of the press – in order to propagate their Islamic discourse, even as they decry modernity itself, and even these very features of it, as foreign influence incompatible with Islam (66).

The core of Karasipahi’s study is a presentation of the ideas of the Muslim intellectuals, which she groups under the following twelve sub-headings; West European civilization, democracy, human rights, secularism

and laicism, modernity, modern ideologies (communism, Marxism, socialism, capitalism, liberalism), Kemalism, state and nation, science and technology, religion, Islam, and, finally, history. What strikes the reader about their overall criticism of modernity-as-Westernisation is its parallels with the key analyses of 19th century sociology (Durkheim, Weber), which shared their concerns about industrialisation, urbanisation and the waning of the moral guarantee and social cement of religion. If their analyses follow familiar patterns, their conclusions are often surprising. The Muslim intellectuals' most striking critique is against the necessity of democracy for eastern, Islamic societies. In line with well-rehearsed Liberal and even Marxist critiques, they characterise democracy as the dictatorship of the majority at the expense of plurality, as prone to totalitarianism, and as favouring already-established and power-elites at the expense of a manipulated majority. More distinctively, for the Muslim intellectuals, democratic legitimacy is culturally Western in essence, deriving sovereignty from a majority of secular and profane human beings and not from God, the only legitimate legislator. Finally, they argue, Islam contains a "distinctive political theory" in the Medina Contract, an ideal of a perfect, pluralist democracy designed to guarantee minority protection by divine law (76, Bulaç). Yet this apparently far-reaching critique of representational democracy is rather undermined by İlhan Kutluer's pragmatic and reformist pronouncement that "Democracy is the most suitable regime among other 'cahiliye' regimes that can be transformed into virtuous rule" (75).

The final chapter of the book reflects Karasipahi's more recent work on comparative studies of Islamic movements. Firstly, she provides an overview of the key figures of the Islamic revival since the 19th century. She traces the political evolution of successive revivalisms through an admiring urge to catch up with the Western powers by social and technological modernisation, disillusionment and rejection of the West's declared ideals, Pan-Arabist resistance to Western imperialism and comprador rulers, and the final turn to imagining Islamic national and intellectual alternatives to westernisation. The next section gives an outline of the thought of four contemporary Muslim intellectuals, working outside Turkey in academic contexts: Muhammed Arkoun (1928-, Algeria, France), Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1933-, Iran, the U.S.), Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid (1943-, Egypt, the Netherlands) and Abdolkarim Soroush (1945-, Iran) (151-78). Karasipahi's argues that these international Muslim intellectuals' willingness to challenge and rethink Islamic precepts and precedents, as well as their theoretical and stylistic sophistication, are products of both their direct experience of political crisis and oppression, and their long residences in the Western academy (179-80). The final section of the chapter places the Muslim intellectuals in the context of the thought and political praxis of two Turkish forefathers – Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960) and Necip Fazıl Kısakürek (1905-83) – and one contemporary, Sezai Karakoç (1933-). These Turkish Muslim intellectuals struggled with the

sharper political divisions and conflicts of Turkey's past, facing imprisonment (Kısakürek) and public censure (Karakoç). In contrast, Karasipahi portrays Turkey's new Muslim intellectuals as "unrealistic ... utopian ... disconnected." For her, their primary concern with "cultural and social issues" instead of "political and practical ones" arises from the fact that the Turkish Muslim intelligentsia is politically decadent and spoiled from working "in a more open, pluralist and democratic environment" (179).

One crucial deficiency of this study is a critical analysis of the concrete *whys* of the Muslim intellectuals' discourse. Karasipahi's declared aim is to focus on the cultural (as against the purely political) aspects of Turkish Islamic resurgence. Yet this focus on the genealogy of the "ideas" of these Muslim intellectuals tends rather to obscure their material social bases and political contexts, a sustained and developed analysis of which could be the base of a far more wide-ranging and explicit critique of "*why* they say what they say." For example, the book makes no mention at all of the governing Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* or AKP). This is a serious omission since defending or critiquing the AKP's electoral strategy and policies, or rubbishing the increasingly shrill claims of its still staunchly Kemalist opponents in the army and political establishment, are surely important loci of current Muslim intellectual production in Turkey. A yet more puzzling omission is an explicit account of the relationship of the Muslim intellectuals to Fethullah Gülen's global "movement" for education and inter-faith dialogue. Other omissions are the intellectuals' interventions in media debates about minority politics (the Armenians, Alevis and Kurds) and the place of women in the Turkish Republic and in Islam, and such concrete questions are rather muted by Karasipahi's selective translations from the their works. Finally, it would greatly benefit students of the second edition of the book if its publisher pays for it to be looked over by an experienced editor, to do justice to the quality of Dr. Karasipahi's original research and the quality of her argument.

That said, this book provides a responsive account of the Muslim intellectuals' critique of Kemalism which goes beyond anxious or knee-jerk dismissal. It is a useful resource for students of Turkish and Islamic intellectual history, providing important insights into the contemporary intellectual landscape in Turkey, both Kemalist and Muslim, and sketching the rich variety of the Muslim intellectual tradition across national and historical contexts.

Yan Overfield Shaw is an MA student in the Department of English and American Studies at the University of Manchester.