

Benjamin Fortna, *Learning To Read in The Late Ottoman Empire and The Early Turkish Republic*, Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011

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In the nineteenth century, a relationship between states and their subjects became increasingly necessary for the changing state structure in the wake of modernization. In the context of this relationship, states used various instruments to monitor, control, and shape their subjects to ensure the survival of the state machinery. Education became of pivotal importance in order to shape subjects according to state policies. To that end, research into the history of education in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic focuses on the education policies of the state, as well as the development and limits of the relationship between subjects and the state during the modernization process. Inspired by the study of reading, which has recently become a field in itself, Benjamin Fortna's *Learning To Read in The Late Ottoman Empire and The Early Turkish Republic* offers an alternative window on the relationship between the state and its subjects by emphasizing a link between reading—the fundamental pillar of education—and modernization.

As the title of the book proposes, Fortna has chosen to focus on how this relationship carries over from the late Ottoman era to the first decade of the Turkish Republic. Though the book puts forth both the continuities and the changes over the two periods, Fortna does refuse to narrate the birth of the Turkish Republic as a break, and sees modernization as reaching across the two periods. Fortna also aims to use a study of changing reading materials to present the relationship between state formation and education policies, including a deep analysis of their significance for the periods. The book starts with the 1880s with the beginning of mass schooling and hence of archival sources and ends with the 1930s, when the Turkish Republic began to move towards new education policies.

Yet Fortna does not limit the study to these fifty years, and his observations and interpretations also cover a longer period; from the declaration of the Tanzimat in 1839 to the 1950s-60s. Drawing on bibliographies, a wide range of reading materials—including magazines, textbooks, books and newspapers—and the Ottoman and Republican state archives, Fortna touches upon the interaction between reading and modernity, the content of reading materials, binary concepts in reading texts, the commodification of reading texts and its economics, and the individualization of reading.

In the introductory chapter, Fortna compares the development of reading in France, China and Russia to that in the Ottoman Empire. The second chapter, "Reading Represented", traces how the activity of reading

was presented in reading texts in the context of socio-political continuities and changes. In both periods, the texts emphasized that reading was a serious, social activity and a critical process and thus needed to be taught at state schools instead of at home by family members. In this manner, Fortna shows how reading texts raised issues of state control, the notion of discipline, and the glorification of schools as pillars and agents of the modern nation. Yet this discourse created an internal tension between an emphasis on learning reading as a collective, school-based activity intended to build the nation and as a private, individual activity intended to increase participation in a modern society.

In the third chapter, “Context and Content,” Fortna explores reading texts in detail via four binary concepts. Through the religious-secular binary, he emphasizes a continuing struggle between religious and secular institutions, with secular discourse increasing during the Young Turk era and the Republic, paving the way for secular dominance in its strongly emphasized foundation principles. Through the family-state binary, Fortna emphasizes the involute position of family and state in both periods. On the one hand, family needed to be withdrawn from the educational area, but, on the other, was given a preliminary and supportive role in the preschool and school-age phases. The old-new binary includes both breaks and continuities; while “old” reading materials continued to be used in the Republican regime, they acquired new messages simply by inserting the word “new” into their texts and titles. For Fortna, this shows the new regime establishing itself over the old through “new” messages and values. Finally, Fortna examines the ever-changing balance between “global” and “local” over the period. For Fortna, the late Ottoman reading texts made strong endeavors to establish a balance between internationalization—using reading texts as a “window” on the wider world—and the preservation of local values—shifting to an increased emphasis on unique cultural identity in the Republican period. This binary also addresses the effort to create the feeling of belonging over and above the dividing lines between “us” and “them,” which became more clear-cut as the stable boundaries of the Republic replaced the ever-changing Ottoman borders.

The fourth chapter, “Mechanics: Text and Image”, employs a literary analysis, relating texts and images in terms of their content and messages. Here, Fortna returns to the first step of learning to read; the alphabet. He scrutinizes alphabet pedagogy and how the use of images became a means of policy in both periods. He demonstrates how images served as bare illustrations of the messages emphasized in the texts, and how they served to control the way the children should think. He also differentiates the use of images and text in the reading materials produced by the private sector, discussing the limits, domain, and contradictions of authority during the two periods.

The fifth chapter, "Commodification and the Market", discusses the socioeconomic features of reading and literacy. The state's dilemma was to control the development of the reading process and promote the individual reading practice necessary to modern society while largely relying on independent individuals to supply the reading materials since there was no state publication organization. Thus, for Fortna, in its desire to encourage modern reading habits, the state was forced to encourage the private sector. This dilemma carried over from the late Ottoman period to the Republican one, though in the Republic it became much more evident. Fortna seems to suggest that the development of the private sector was inevitable, since, in the absence of a state organ, private individuals could make their voices heard through schoolbooks, creating the necessary environment for private entrepreneurs to flourish. Fortna presents the ways the emergent private sector exploited the conditions of the developing market to make their products attractive. He discusses the mutual relationship and tensions that arose as private actors developed outside state authority, and even undermined it over time.

The sixth chapter, "Lives of Reading and Writing", is based on individual case studies, and examines reading as a private journey. Fortna chooses cases to reflect the aspects of the two periods, basing on which he stresses the common characteristics of the two periods. Fortna emphasizes that he tried to select his sample from families of different socioeconomic backgrounds to show reading expanding out from the domain of the elite and becoming a more popular activity. Thus, he shows the activity of reading as both a private journey that differs from one person to the next, and also as a social phenomenon affected by the social environment and its living practices in the family and neighborhood.

The themes and debates in Fortna's book are very important for the history of education, paving the way for new questions and debates. To incorporate the recipients of education into the field of education history, he privatizes education by looking at the process of reading—the origin of education—in the late Empire and early Republic. In so doing, he propounds the persistence of modernization across the two periods and counterbalances a statist emphasis by underlining the private sector growing outside of state control. Nevertheless, if we note that we cannot talk about a widespread education across all the territories of the Ottoman Empire and Turkish republic, his work only partially represents Ottoman and Republican societies, in which education was the product of a narrow relationship between the state, private sector, and a limited number of recipients. Despite these criticisms, his work is especially important for introducing a new actor in the history of education; the reader, with his/her private world, values and morals. In this way, Fortna presents a more general outlook concerning the education process including the state and private sector as providers of the

education on the one hand and the recipients of this education on the other. Thus, Fortna has opened a new field of research in the history of education in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic.

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