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Personal States: Making Connections between People and Bureaucracy in Turkey

Catherine Alexander (New York: Oxford University Press. 2002)

Some time ago, a reviewer in a Turkish daily newspaper took it as his task to use an ethnography of a Turkish village recently translated from English to attack anthropology as a discipline. His charge was that anthropology is an "unformed" discipline, one without visible norms and standards, in which the ethnographer's task is to force observations into a particular theoretical framework.

The critic unfortunately confused a well-known but highly problematic ethnography with an entire discipline. And yet he was not entirely off base. The author of the translated study is known to have only rudimentary Turkish, and the study shows the author reading large meanings into small things, as is the ethnographer's wont. But there are meanings, and then there are meanings. The local critic's voice charges that anthropology is a discipline that over-signifies, that confuses meaning with significance. And while good ethnography often makes the strange familiar, it also should make the familiar strange, so that the meanings that we find in things also have significance for those whom we study.

The monograph at hand, ***Personal States: Making Connections between People and Bureaucracy in Turkey,*** presents this reviewer with a peculiar challenge. The book purports to describe relations of people and state via a state-owned sugar enterprise in northeastern Turkey. For those interested in the workings of the Turkish provincial bureaucracy, this book provides extraordinary detail about its administration. It contains chapters on factory structure, village brokering, contracts. and privatization. It reviews the literature—familiar to any specialist on Turkey—on the ways in which "family" is metaphorically extended to include work relations, the village, even the state. Many of the details presented about such networks would be familiar to anyone who has lived in Turkey for any period of time. The book also provides quite a lot of information about beet production, sugar extraction, and the contracts that secure relations between farmer and factory. As a type of bureaucratic history, it appears complete.

The book's primary failing is as an ethnography. Its ethnography comes in bits and pieces, often decontextualized and juxtaposed with each other for convenience. I had no sense of who the "farmers" and "engineers" and "bureaucrats" in her study were. Apart from one engineer, Bayram, they all appear as persons in the ethnography only insofar as they represent the categories of "farmer," "engineer," or "bureaucrat." While there may have been some good methodological reason for taking this tack, that reason is never stated or justified in the text.

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Overall, the work appears lo be an outline (rather than a description) of a network, the textual equivalent of a Venn diagram. The book's main theoretical contribution is to assert that everyone sees the state differently, and in ways that often contradict each other and even themselves. While this is a point worth illustrating, it does not seem to this reader to be a particularly interesting point. nor one worth exploring at such length

Some of the most interesting recent work on factory production has shown the potential contribution of ethnography to what has traditionally been a realm of sociological and Marxist theory. Leslie Salzinger's ***Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories*** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003) or Samer Shehata's dissertation, "Plastic Sandals, Tea, and Time: Shop Floor Politics and Culture in Egypt" (Department of Politics, Princeton University, 2000) both illustrate the potential of ethnography to understand the workings of factory production within larger social structures, whether local. national, or global. Salzinger, a sociologist, and Shehata, a political scientist, use ethnography to make the factory and its workers come alive. This makes the lack of ethnographic material in a supposed ethnography even more disappointing. While this work is more concerned with networks than with work itself, it would still aid in understanding the meaning of those networks to have some sense of the farmers', workers', engineers', and bureaucrats' lives.

One consequence of the lack of deep description is the author's tendency to use decontextualized quotations, with no clear indication of the representativeness of the person quoted or that person's capacity to make a statement relating to the point the author wishes to make. This tendency is especially clear in the many places where the author poses several decontextualized quotations from different persons side by side, with the clear implication that comparison will make her point for her. Such techniques appear methodologically questionable to this reader.

However, my more general criticism of this work as ethnography is that the author does not seem particularly interested in her Turkish audience and would. I believe, fall victim to the above critic's charge. My more serious concern, then, is that the author fails to pay attention to the distinction between meaning and significance. Indeed, it appears that this book's rather peculiar project is to make the familiar obvious and the strange an oddity. The effect is an unfortunate orientalizing of everyday life.

This is demonstrated in the author's tendency to put what she clearly thinks are significant examples in ethnographic "boxes" (literally). To justify this charge, I must quote from one such box and will choose the first one, which started this reader off on a had note:

> A farmer in east Anatolia was extolling the virtues of Turkey producing so much sugar that the excess of such abundance could be exported to neighbouring countries. The farmer gestured to illus-

> trate his point. his lowered left hand miming an outpouring of exported sugar his right acting as a raised funnel for the sugar. It was a brief moment, but the farmer's expressive gesture was startlingly like a dervish's tranced movement of receiving Divine Grace in one upturned hand, and allowing it to flow over humankind with the other.

While one might be able to read such a gesture in this way, this interpretation is, to put it mildly, a stretch. For Turkish readers, such an interpretation would not cause a moment of insight and recognition, but rather headshaking about the ethnographer's tendency to oversignify.

Turkey is a notoriously difficult place to do fieldwork because of the many overlays of various traditions: syncretic brands of Islam; a history of imperialism; a modernizing nationalism that bears all the hallmarks of a religion. Women in villages are married early and not allowed an education, while women in the professions succeed to higher positions more easily than in Europe or America. Turkey has long been considered both an exception in the Muslim world and an example for it. Such contradictions and complications are part of what make Turkey such a fascinating site for study, but they also seem to call for a certain degree of intellectual humility.

The book's most interesting sections were where that humility was demonstrated. Where the author discusses her own process of learning. or where she engages in debate with others, the path is opened to other interpretations. Admitting other interpretations also forces one to justify one's own. The work is least successful where the author attempts to impose interpretations of cultural signs, as where she early in the book remarks that kissing the hand (*el öpmek*) is something demeaning. done by children to parents, and describes later in the book how the engineer Bayram ingratiated himself in a particular village by kissing the hands of the elders. Kissing the hand may be demeaning, it may be ingratiating, it may be a sign of love and respect, or it may be all these things at once. For large numbers of people, it remains a common practice. Among the modernizing elite, it is rarer, but some will still kiss the hands of older relatives on holidays. Like any practice, it is complex and needs to be contextualized, and through being contextualized it may be possible to understand its place as one of the habituated signs of hierarchy.

Overall. then, the book is a solid study of bureaucratic structure. It is shakier, though, in its attempt ethnographically to understand bureaucratic practice. The author's conclusion that people analogize the state to the family is hardly a new one for Turkey, though the author does provide ways to understand how that works, structurally speaking, in the lives of average Turks, whether farmers or bureaucrats