

A lot of *meze*, no main course

Nilüfer Kuyaş

As I closed the cover on Stephen Kinzer's book, *Crescent and Star. Turkey Between Two Worlds*, I remained puzzled for a while. It was full of home truths, I had reasonably enjoyed reading it, and yet something was missing. What could it be, I asked myself.

Here is a thoughtful book on Turkey by a well informed American journalist, clearly in sympathy with the country where he has worked for a number of years as the first Istanbul Bureau Chief of The New York Times.

Many of his judgements are based on first hand observation, he has approached his subject with great understanding, and the book has a pleasing organization, whereby chapters on important political issues alternate with sections relating anecdotes from his own personal experience. Even on the difficult political realities, he brings problems alive by keeping the reader in touch with ordinary people and attitudes.

It is, in short, a surprisingly light read on a heavy subject, the future of

Turkey. He has tried to picture a very complex country at odds with itself, "entering the most profound period of self examination in its history". Any serious minded person who visits Turkey after reading this book would have an easier time finding his or her bearings. Quite an accomplishment.

So, why am I disappointed?

I feel that the reading is perhaps just a little too light, as well as being just a little too judgmental. So many conclusions and so many judgements are delivered on Turkey's present political ailments that one inevitably looks for an equivalent extent of analysis to back it. What one gets instead is quick background surveys to all problems, with little depth or perspective. It is an account that skims the surface, even though it does that very well.

Mr. Kinzer's book is a sharply observed report on how democratic institutions are not working well in Turkey today. It is the chronicle of a liberal mind trying to make sense of an

illiberal democracy. In terms of political behaviour and ideological currency, it conveys the present situation in Turkey with considerable surface accuracy. This is journalism at its best. But it is still journalism, and makes up for its lack of depth with journalism's usual generalizations and cliches.

One such cliché is the use of superlatives. "Turkey will astonish the world by becoming the most audaciously successful nation of the twenty first century" Mr. Kinzer assures us, if only its citizens found a way to break free of the authoritarian mind-set in which its ruling elite is stuck. Turks, he claims, "can become a force that will help shape the new century", if only "they manage to transform their country into a modern democracy". He then proceeds to show what horrors that authoritarian mind-set is capable of and in what ways the democracy is not modern. But we have no inkling of what factors already present should warrant such a promise of success, once democratic conditions are fulfilled. Here the ground is thinner.

*Stephen Kinzer, *Crescent & Star: Turkey between two worlds*, New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2001, Hardcover 272 pages.

We just have Mr. Kinzer's word for it. With what assets can this country be so successful, even if it were democratic?

Is it the economy? Mr. Kinzer gives us no perspective on the strengths or weaknesses of the Turkish economy. Is it resources? There is no indication in the book as to what kind of land this is, how well or how badly its resources, natural and human, are mobilized. Is it the idea that Turkey is poised to become "the world's first Islamic democracy"? The reader is provided with no clues as to what has made the Ottoman-Turkish way of Islam so different from other Islamic traditions and so amenable to secularism, or what external as well as internal factors encouraged its politicization in recent years. Is it, finally, the long frustrated promise of membership in the European Union? Mr. Kinzer mentions but does not even briefly discuss why Turkey was invited to join the European Community along with Greece in the 1970s, nor what factors induced Bülent Ecevit, then as now prime minister, to refuse. Nor are we told why each side changed its mind, to the consternation of the other, in the 1980s, or even why Turkey was impelled to sign a Customs Union agreement with the EU in the 1990s despite being refused full membership back in 1989.

Ultimately, Mr. Kinzer has come up with such a forceful survey of Turkey's present political ills that, unless we are to take this as a technical report on human rights abuses in Turkey, which it obviously isn't, the reader expects either a serious political study, in which case more historical context and analytical depth would have been in order; or a personal journalistic essay, which is more in line with what we have here, but without the more modest, more exploratory approach that would have been fitting. As it

turns out, the book is insightful but not meaty enough to fulfil its ambitious political reach, and on the personal level, it is too reticent.

In terms of politics, the book mainly presents us with facts, but again there is little analysis. We are told how things stand here and now, quite vividly and in detail, but there is no contour to the picture, no dynamics. Mr. Kinzer mentions "the structural weakness of the political system". Quite right. But what are the factors that have weakened it? Has Turkish democracy regressed, or was it always this bad? His generalization that Turkey's political system "has produced remarkably poor leaders" is on the whole correct, but what is the reason for this dearth? Why has Mr. Ecevit proved to be one of "modern Turkey's gravediggers", or why did Mrs. Çiller turn out to be "a scatterbrained rogue"? His discussion betrays a healthy contempt for the Turkish political class, but displays very little insight into its shortcomings.

Mr. Kinzer, again rightly, points out that Turkish democracy suffers from its failure in "subordinating military power to civilian control". No doubt, Turkish democracy is today under military tutelage and Mr. Kinzer devotes one of the best and most sensitively written chapters of his book to this issue. There is no mention, though, of the fact that precisely this democratic ideal was encoded in law and put into practice between 1949 and 1960, but was overthrown and has never worked since. It is impossible to understand what is happening in Turkey today without even superficially analyzing the first military coup in 1960 and its aftermath. Once again, the picture is accurate, but the perspective is lacking.

The same pattern applies to other

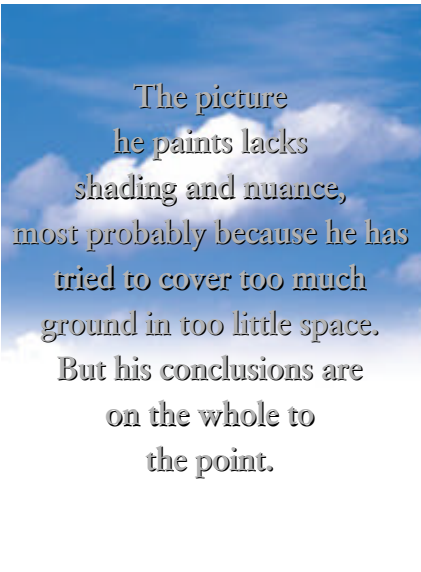
issues. For example, the book takes us through the inevitable litany of human rights abuses that the Kurdish uprising has led to. This is indeed the single most important factor that has eroded democracy in Turkey over the past twenty years. But once again the book is long on results, short on process. We are told that what terrifies the political elite more than anything else is "the challenge of Kurdish nationalism". But the dynamics of that nationalism is missing. In what way, for example, was the religiously motivated Kurdish rebellion of the 1920s different from the Marxist oriented, and initially marginal, insurrection of the PKK in the 1980s? Why has the traditional clan structure of Kurdish peasant culture proved so difficult to modernize? Why have millions of Kurds chosen to migrate and assimilate in other parts of Turkey? What is specific about Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, as opposed to neighboring Iraq, Iran or Syria? The book gives us no clue.

As for the Islamicist threat to the established secularist ideal of the Republic, Mr. Kinzer does not seem to think that here at least Turkey has risen to the challenge any more effectively or with any less damage to democratic principles. He claims that the campaign against fundamentalism is justified but "disastrously unsophisticated". One of the examples he gives is the fact that "no mosque may be built" without the permission of the powerful state agency, The Religious Affairs Directorate. He fails to note however the staggering boom of mosque building by the populace over the past thirty years, still going strong. If not his own eyes, then any ordinary architect, even a pious one, could have informed him of the spiralling quantity and the free fall in quality of mosques in Turkey that has

become a national blight. He devotes a whole chapter to the fateful earthquake of 1999, but does not mention that first among the buildings that "pancaked" in all affected areas were the shoddily built mosques. He also points out that the ministry of education "provides all texts from which religion is taught" but again fails to note the immense surge of commercial religious publishing that has also become a booming industry.

Mr. Kinzer is not unaware that the draconian restrictions on freedom of speech or freedom of conscience in Turkey operate in a complicated manner, with a "striking contrast between freedom and repression" as he astutely observes. "In no other country does so much liberty coexist with such sustained violation of elemental human rights." The picture he paints clearly does not lack understanding. Quite the contrary, he takes pains to be fair and objective. What the picture lacks is shading and nuance, most probably because he has tried to cover too much ground in too little space. But his conclusions are on the whole to the point. He focuses on the stark choices facing Turkey. Accommodate your Islamic fundamentalists and reconcile your Kurdish nationalists, relax your sacred cult of the state and trust your people with more freedoms, Mr Kinzer is saying to the ruling elite. As for the populace, I quite agree with his observation that "For generations Turks have agreed with their leaders that no sacrifice made in the name of stability was too onerous" but that now they are starting "to chafe at the yoke" as it were.

I only wish that the book had given less room to received wisdom and more to genuine analysis. There is little in this book that a careful purveyor of the news media cannot find out for



The picture
he paints lacks
shading and nuance,
most probably because he has
tried to cover too much
ground in too little space.
But his conclusions are
on the whole to
the point.

himself. Moreover, Mr. Kinzer views the traditional mind-set of Turkish politicians with an equally traditional Western mind-set, looking at Turkey as a kind of no-man's-land trying to come in from the cold. Isn't it a bit too convenient to wax poetic about how Istanbul bridges two continents from the tourist's point of view, but when it comes to international relations to declare that Turkey is "between two worlds" and should decide which one it belongs to?

It is clear to anyone who wants to see that Turkey has already decided. Eighty per cent of its electorate vote for secularist parties and seventy five percent of its population, for whatever reason, want to join the European Union. I disagree with Mr. Kinzer over the Turkish nation's "deep uncertainty about its identity and its future". That is a tired cliché. Even the most cursory glance at the art, literature or scholarship produced in this country will show that Turks are proud of their modernizing heritage and will carry it forward no matter what.

That is precisely why the personal level of Mr. Kinzer's book was even more of a disappointment for me. If one were to remove the personal

dimension from his book, any reasonably intelligent journalist who flew in for a week and skimmed through newspaper archives could have made the same political observations. But personal experience over a number of years is a different matter, and here too Mr. Kinzer chooses exotic cliché over deeper reality. He drinks *rakı*, he smokes water pipes, he watches camel fights, he visits antique ruins, he chats with the locals. But he doesn't read novels, nor see films, he doesn't visit art galleries and festivals, or follow debate in universities. His worst experience was a harsh interrogation by the gendarmerie in the southeast, for which the Turkish police clearly owes him an apology. All credit to him, he has not allowed that misfortune to shade his obvious fondness for the country. But I cannot help feeling sad that his best moment in Turkey apparently was a lonely swim across the Bosphorus.

Mr. Kinzer has playfully named "meze", appetizer, the personal sections he has inserted in between the main chapters of his book. He states at one point that in the ritual of drinking *rakı*, that distillation of grapes as typically Turkish as wine is French, a lot of "meze" or appetizers arrive at the table, presumably leading to a main course. But, we are told, "often the main course, like Turkey's supposedly great destiny, never materializes." This is exactly what I felt to be the case with his book as well. I wish he had forgotten altogether about the main course and stuck with the meze in this book. The culinary metaphor is quite fitting. As it stands, the main course that Mr. Kinzer has served is as lacking in some essential analytic ingredients as Turkish democracy is in some essential liberal ones.

Nilüfer Kuyaş is a journalist.