Turkish Neo-Ottoman memory culture and the problems of copying the past

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This chapter explores Turkish official practices of copying and re-enactment of the Ottoman past in the civic sphere, illustrating the ways in which governmentality is enmeshed in mimetic and memorial practices. We view these in relation to arguments about the ontology and existence of the past which, while longstanding, resonate anew when related to copying in contemporary memory practice. The ruling Justice and Development Party's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*: henceforth JDP) use of the Ottoman past in contemporary politics is often characterised as governmental proposition that Turkey will be 'magnificent' again as in Ottoman times (Yavuz 1998, 23), underpinned by a state-sponsored form of Sunni Islam. This is part of 'Neo-Ottomanism', which has been characterized as a nostalgic, revivalist phenomenon associated particularly (but not exclusively) with the conservative-Islamic political, religious and moral orientations (Çolak 2006; Öncü 2007, Carney 2014, Furlanetto 2015: 160-162; Girard 2015, Moudouros 2014, Zencirci 2014).

The Ottoman age spans several centuries, but official evocations tend to bluntly homogenise it; they constitute not just a celebration of it, but a project of selective engagement in which ideas of reversion, recouping, reassembling and copying aspects of the past elide in official or officially-sanctioned representations and rhetoric. The images of the past that result have an instrumental purpose to foster identity positions and to create an imagined future predicated on a constructed past. We explore the contests that occur when a particular account of the past, infused with governmental agendas, is presented as *the* past. This past becomes the sole 'original' to be copied, restored, or reverted to, and in whose image a nation state and its cities and subjects should refashion themselves. Opponents resist this with accusations of inaccuracy and fakery that undermine the hegemonic authority claims. In turn, hegemony actors strike back, in a political contest in which ideas of original and copy are fought over precisely because the 'original' is only ever a matter of apprehension. Memory practices, it turns out, are full of copying behaviours: revivals, re-enactments, restorations, reprisals and attempts to refashion the past into a model for the present. We suggest that it is not always helpful to separate and parse these, but rather to understand their fluid intermingling in the making of relations between time, place, identity and power.

For many, Neo-Ottomanism represents a break with the previously dominant memory culture of Atatürkism ('Kemalism', in some forms), in which secular ideals for the organisations of state and society prevailed at the cost of Islamist identity and were bolstered by a phenomenally ubiquitous public imagery celebrating and disseminating Atatürk's cult of personality. This iconic culture is by no means extinct, and both the memory of Atatürk and his political legacy are of key importance to groups who seem, at least at the ballot boxes, to make up a large minority. It is thought that the JDP was supported by an aggrieved Sunni

Muslim majority in Turkey partly because of its promise that 'our relationship with the past would finally be mended' and its implicit antagonism towards secular and Atatürkist memory and identity (Temelkuran 2015:11). A crucial and highly public manifestation of this was the Istanbul municipality plan to 'restore' a long-gone Ottoman building in one of the key public spaces of Istanbul.

Restoration and reconstruction of the Halil Pasha 'Topçu' Barracks

The 2013 'Gezi' protests in Turkey generated worldwide media attention and a large body of explanatory scholarship. The protests were sparked by a harsh police crackdown on peaceful protestors camping in Gezi Park, which was due to be razed to make space for a reconstruction of the late-Ottoman barracks building that had stood on the same site until its demolition some seventy years previously. In the protests and civil disorder that followed, tens of thousands mobilised against the state, police violence led to casualties and fatalities and further government intransigence. The real causes of the protests are generally understood to be complex and varied, ranging across environmental concerns about the elimination of green space in Istanbul to civil matters of voice, representation, biopower and oppression in an autocratic state incorrectly and disingenuously identified by its administration as democratic (White 2014, Yeğenoğlu 2013).

Competing understandings of the past and its value in the present were also conspicuous both within official actions and in civil protests (Whitehead and Bozoğlu 2016). In one view the protests themselves were catalysed by an act of copying, in the form of the reconstruction of the barracks on the site of Gezi Park in Taksim Square.[1] Gezi Park is an early Republican invention, which took the place of the barracks after their demolition. This was part of the urban westernisation of the city pursued by Atatürk with the hired help of French town planner Henri Prost from 1936. Gezi park is a part of a kind of copy or transposition of western-European urban landscape and the social practices implicated within it: social walking in green spaces within the city, promenades, vistas and so on. But in the first decades of the 21st century the JDP has taken what can at best be termed an ambivalent view of the

secular civil and civic legacy of Atatürk, seeking to efface its visual traces and, often, to remake public space in reference to the Ottoman age as an alternative past, but also as a model for the present and future.

Topçu Barracks were built in 1896 in a western orientalist style (making them already a kind of

CONSTANTINOPLE — Caserne d'Artillerie du Taxim, apres le combat du 24 Avril 1909.

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[1] The plan to restore the barracks was subsequently derailed by the protests, but at the time of writing, official plans to resurrect the Barracks are once again afoot.

copy). The JDP municipality's intention to rebuild the building was publicised in 2011 in the through a digital animation of Taksim Square shown at a 'Turkey on Target' showcase event, and then much used in news reports, not just in Turkey but the world over, after the onset of the 2013 protests. The animation was a 3D 'flyover' video, beginning with a phased montage of historic photos of the Barracks, transitioning to Gezi Park (then treeless), before the appearance of a digitally reconstructed Barracks building and the public plazas in and around it.[2] Indeed, the 'new' building planned in 2011 was not to be used as a barracks, but as a shopping mall. The projection of Taksim Square was one that refracts backwards and forwards in time, modelling urban space based upon a nostalgic return to the Ottoman city, the strategic and gauged erasure of uncongenial Republican history. The projection of the animations involved the pursuit of an ideal, re-found past-present continuity. Vehicle traffic was routed underground to remove from view historical impurities, discontinuities and ruptures, achieving at once a syncretic global-city-style shopping mall and an apparently Ottoman cityscape. The ideal use or consumption of such urban space is also a syncretic mash-up, where one might drive a car under Taksim Square, only to emerge as a pedestrian in the past (as it were), then to enter the modern capitalist logics of the mall, a temporal and psychic switching made possible by the gaps, cuts and fillings of the past-as-model.

At first glance, and taken as a discrete case, this may seem a superficial matter – a common story of ignorant, nostalgic architectural revivalism, best consumed by equally ignorant subjects. But this is firstly to underestimate the power of surfaces to shape perceptions and construct realities, and secondly to detach the visual, mimetic and historical from the political. The Barracks project was situated within an ecology of copying practices that were (and still are) strategic and governmental uses of the past that aim to build identity stories, embody values, norms and ideal behaviours in the present. Not just bricks and mortar, the copy of the building had automatic intertextual significance and moral coding, and ultimately, in the 2013 protests, this became matter for people to resist with alternative articulations of the past in the present in urban and cognitive social space. Taksim Square was once, for nearly four centuries, the site of an Armenian cemetery, before becoming the primary target in Istanbul of early Republican modernisation and, later, developing symbolic importance as a place of Leftist and alternative-subcultural activity. Protestors used references to alternative pasts as a form of resistance, from showing off their Kemalist tattoos to building makeshift Armenian gravestones from cardboard, to remind people of those that had once marked the site, or practising Sufi rituals in an alternative claim to presence and an alternative imprint, however temporary, on urban space (Whitehead and Bozoğlu 2016, 131). All of these involved copying and the making of continuity, links between what was and what should be in a symbolic space of conflict and control.

Copying the Conquest of Constantinople: 1453 in public culture

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[2] The original video including the photomontage has been removed from the Istanbul Municipality's YouTube channel; some of the original footage can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GOK9ufHyLUM between 2.07 and 3.07.

Meanwhile, under JDP rule, big public commemorations associated with the Republic have given way to religious (Islamic) festivities, such as the week-long celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Commemorations of events like the Conquest of Constantinople of 1453 have been accorded a central place in the calendar and in the public sphere, through celebrations, festivities and museums (ibid; Çınar 2001; Bozoğlu 2017). Since Erdoğan assumed the position of overall Mayor of Istanbul in 1994, followed by his roles as Prime Minister from 2002 and President from 2014, celebrations of 1453 have gained more stridently Islamist character (Zurcher 2016), and their staging has become increasingly spectacular and expensive to the public purse. In these celebrations, men wear Ottoman military costume and fake mustaches, play *Mehter* (Ottoman military music), and drag boats on the banks like Sultan Mehmet's soldiers did, to bypass the boom-chain that once defended the Golden Horn. In this way, they 'perform the conquest again' (Çınar 2001). There is also a re-enactor who plays the role of Sultan Mehmet on his white horse, 're-entering' the city. On the 563rd anniversary of the Conquest in 2016, attended by (now) President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, the Conquest was 'revived' with the 'world's largest' 3D stage onto which spectacular animations of the Conquest were projected in a massive open-air spectacle, transmitted live on the JDP-supported TV channel A Haber.

This activity is interwoven with other copying practices that connect the Ottoman age with contemporary civil and infrastructural achievements. Grand projects such as the construction of bridges between Asian and European Istanbul, and the Marmaray metro tunnel under the Bosporus, are couched in official and public discourse as a reprise of Ottoman achievements. The Marmaray, for example, is presented in official adverts in the style of an Ottoman miniature, and Erdoğan himself paralleled the making of the tunnel with the driving of the Ottoman fleet onto the banks in 1453: 'We are,' he said, 'grandchildren of Sultan Mehmet; our grandfather drove the ships on the ground and we drove the metro under the sea' (Erdoğan, in Anon 2015).

The date of the Conquest – the 29th of May – is used as an auspicious one to break ground or inaugurate new grand projects. On the 29th of May 2017, the JDP organized a 'world record' wherein one thousand, four hundred and fifty-three trucks assembled in formation at Istanbul's new airport – itself planned as the biggest airport in the world.[3] This points at once to the Conquest and to the contemporary technical and commercial might, and the global position, of Turkey, creating unsubtle connections between past and present. It is not only

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[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHh2mmASl-s

copying, but also paralleling, continuing and reprising the feats of the Ottomans – as it were, a kind of *re-becoming*. This gives a sense of the complexity of copying as an entanglement of desires which, although top-down in their working, are properly speaking impositions and projects of collective selfhood: a desire to identify, and identify with, the past; a desire to right discontinuities; a desire to both revert and revive, and to be again 'as once'.

The Panorama 1453 museum opened in 2009 with conspicuous JDP support, this is a spectacular painted reconstruction of the breaching of the Land Walls of Constantinople on 29th May 1453, at the very moment of Ottoman victory. Including over 1000 painted figures and replica objects such as weapons and the cannon that bombarded the walls, the victory is represented as the fulfilment of the Prophet's Hadith, in which the fall of the city is foreseen, according the Ottomans the divine right to invade and take it. Among the dramatic scenes of the battle, painted on the 360-degree dome in which visitors observe as if from within the Ottoman ranks, we see Mehmed II giving orders, surrounded by known members of his retinue. His face reappears mystically in a cloud formation above, reiterating the divine predestination of the victory. In a later section of the museum, his fairness and benevolence is highlighted, as he reassures the defeated population that they may continue to practise their religions.

In the panorama, we also see the reconstruction of mythic scenes, as when the figure of the soldier Hasan of Ulubat raises the Ottoman flag on one of the towers, presaging the victory, before dying from multiple arrow wounds. The themes of hard-won victory, religious belief, self-sacrifice are conveyed to visitors as models for the exercise of the self in the present, through a mimetic technology of immersion in a version of the past. This is intended, as one museum text explicitly states, 'to inspire future conquerors!' The politics of copying an event from the past that is set up as crucial for identities emerged in staff interviews conducted by one of the present authors. In these, the museum producers maintained that their representational agency was neutral, that they were presenting the Conquest 'as it was', basing their appeal to accuracy on the authority of documentary evidence and the word of consultant scholars. As one of the museum's producers said in an interview with one of the present authors, 'We decided: 'let's be accurate'' (in Bozoğlu 2017). Their only concession to inaccuracy was to ensure that the violent fighting shown in the painting was not too graphic for family audiences. There is, as one might expect, a stock of documentary evidence that does not accord with the version of the past presented in the museum, such as eyewitness accounts from 1453 by Kritovoulous Imbros or the Venetian Niccolò Barbaro (Rogerson 2011). These, and later accounts, tell the story of the slaughter of the Byzantines after the fall

of the city, the sexual enslavement of youths, and Mehmet II's own debauchery. Citing these is not a matter of disproving one version or preferring another, but of bringing to mind the plurality of existing versions (see also Herrin 2003 and 2007) and the possibility that a 'true' history is not perceptible.

Copying, accuracy and the inaccessible past

In his history of panoramas, Bernard Comment notes that they have tended to represent cityscapes or battles, providing an inhabitable model of an external reality and a privileged viewpoint. He argues that they have been a key technology for fixing in place a version of the past as true, or for controlling a mobile present, as when cities seem to change beyond human control (Comment 2000, 8). They are, in this sense, tools for managing anxieties about our anchorings in space and time. They rely for effect on suggestions of accuracy that bely their real nature as creative assemblages. It is not surprising that this insistence on accuracy is where contest is produced. In the case of Panorama 1453 this emerged in relation to fights over the historical accuracy of the costumes, buildings, colours and details shown in the painting. In response to newspaper reports that identified historical errors, the municipality went to the length of issuing a report, refuting one by one the accusations (anon 2009). What is important here is not so much the detail, or rights and wrongs of the purported errors and refutations, but rather what it says about the anxious and testy relationships between copying, accuracy, authority and power in the public memoryscape.

In the comparable case of the rebuilding of the Topçu Barracks, the difficulty of being accurate was also raised. The Turkish chapter of DOCOMOMO (the International Committee for documentation and conservation of buildings, sites and neighbourhoods of the modern movement) opposed the rebuilding project, arranging an online petition to halt it, because the Barracks was 'not a building easy to reconstruct as very little is known of it; there are only a handful of photographs'. The organisation pointed out that the building was orientalist in style anyway, implying its inauthenticity. This was unlike Gezi Park which was truly 'part of public and urban memory' (DOCOMOMO 2013). To emphasise the point about authenticity, a sepia photograph of people using the park in the 1950s was included on the petition website. In response to the controversies and dissent, and to groups like DOCOMOMO interested in preserving the legacies of modernism (in this case Gezi Park), Erdoğan stated bluntly: 'We claim the original; therefore, we will build the historical barracks...It's that clear' (Anon 2013).

Attacks on rival copying practices are evident in JDP and Islamist-conservative criticism of the popular TV serial, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (*Magnificent Century*). Here, the way in which Suleiman 'the Magnificent' is presented – too often in the harem and too infrequently on the battlefield – has provoked the ire of conservative-Islamist Ottomanists who picketed the studio and issued complaints and death threats towards the show's writers and actors. Erdoğan has also criticised the show as inaccurate, and this criticism has a moral dimension, as when he complained that the female protagonist Hurrem's costumes on the show were too revealing (Temelkuran 2015,11-12). Meanwhile, Erdoğan gives public support to a show

that is more amenable to JDP understandings of Ottoman morality: *Diriliş* (*The Revival* - based on the life of Ertuğrul, father of Osman I who established the Ottomans and the namesake of the empire), broadcast by state channel TRT. He has also publicly endorsed the Panorama 1453 Museum, casting both this and *Diriliş* as correctives to skewed, unsanctioned versions of the past that put in question the honour of the Ottoman heroes. At issue here, and in the controversies over details are claims about rightful copying. When opponents to the Panorama 1453 Museum perceived the creep of ideology, they pointed to historical inaccuracy, and when the JDP perceived a threat to their coding of the Ottoman past, they did the same. All of this means that what have been described by one of the current authors as 'memory wars' (Bozoğlu 2017), particularly between Neo-Ottoman and Atatürkist factions, are enacted through techniques of copying and appeals to accuracy and truth. Then come counter-offensives: accusations of ideological purpose that remove authority from copies and give the lie to their gloss of the real, that present them as both unfaithful and in bad faith.

Svetlana Boym's influential explanation of 'restorative nostalgia' as an attempt at a transhistorical reconstruction of an illusory 'lost home,' representing itself not as the imaginative creation that it is, but as 'truth and tradition' (Boym 2001, xviii) is borne out by statements from JDP actors like Erdoğan, who trenchantly posit a true and authentic Ottoman past that they are simply reclaiming and restoring, as if the past had non-representational, pre-social existence to which one can lay claim and which can be reproduced without interference. But as Boym clarifies, the 'danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home and the imaginary one,' and people's investment in this imagination, this 'phantom homeland', can become violently divisive (Boym 2001, xvi). Within the proposed reconstruction of buildings, eras, or events, the physical, televisual and museal copies enfolded a range of other less tangible objects of mimetic interest that concern prescribed identities and behaviours for the present. Moral and political content infuses the copying impulse and copying processes; and the past, is turned 'into a ventriloquist's puppet' (Paul 2015: 128).

Alongside ethico-political concerns about the inflection and governmental use of the past, from some theoretical-philosophical perspectives the very idea of 'copying' from history – in this case a bundle of stories, symbols and meanings, a view of how things went, and why – is to engage with a dizzying fallacy. If any account of the past is but a version of things, and no one of these accounts can possibly articulate the fullness of the past, of 'what happened' – what Peter Munz called the '*res gestae*' (1977, 204), or what Herman Paul calls the difference between, on the one hand, 'the past' that we perceive and represent and, on the other, a no-longer accessible 'historical reality' – then the authority of official history is always fundamentally insecure. Munz explains, in a passage that expresses the entanglements of assembly and copying in (or rather as) history-making:

> The totality of everything that ever happened is immense. Any historical narrative is a minute part of that totality. That minute part does not exist as a part in its own right

but only because somebody has put it together, defined it, delimited it, and by so doing has made it into a recognisable part of the whole. The part by itself does not exist and is not recognisable unless somebody has selected its elements and linked them together. If we have a historical narrative, there is nothing over and above that narrative to compare it with. It would be quite wrong to think that we have on one side a history that really happened and on the other a narrative of it. We have *only* a narrative and nothing else (1977: 204-5).

This may cause official actors to anxious reiterations and reinforcements of the propositions embodied within copies of the past, especially where competing versions are visible; or worse, when historical primary sources encourage contradiction. This is particularly notable in accounts of the Conquest, where even to this day different parties (e.g. Neo-Ottomanist Turks, Greeks, Venetians, Genoese) hold on to different narratives as a line that connects them to a notional deep past in terms of identities and group histories (Herrin 2003).

The theoretical issue we draw from Munz is that if the fullness of the past, or 'historical reality' can neither be grasped nor represented, then there is no 'original' from which to copy, and only an assemblage of features – such as stories and signs – that is an exercise of the present and in no real way 'what happened'. The making of history, in this view, is always fundamentally an act of copying from an inaccessible, incoherent and non-discrete 'original', which itself is nothing more than a sense of the past. This is a generality. But what is at issue in this chapter is the political and social consequences of presenting 'the past' (or 'a past') as an original upon which subjectivities should be moulded and shaped. This captures some of the tensions involved in Neo-Ottomanist mimetic practice, for there is first an identification of a true original (such as the story of the Conquest), which itself involves mythmaking; but secondly, through rhetorics of continuation, reprise and re-becoming, there is a denial of difference between original and copy, between a 'then' and a 'now' and between Ottomans and Neo-Ottoman subjects. Indeed, 'then' and 'now' are often bridged discursively through use of the conceptual device of ancestry (*ecdat*), where the Ottomans are cast as 'our ancestors' or even 'our grandfathers' (Bozoğlu 2017). Within the memory cult of Neo-Ottomanism there is a syncretic tension between imitation and re-becoming, as though one should not 'imitate' or 'copy' but rather *be again* what one 'once was', reverting, as it were, to one's proper state, to a notional 'true' path or self (Bozoğlu 2017). What is presented is a construct of trans-generational sameness, overcoming otherwise inevitable divisions between original and copy, masking 'radical discontinuities in social consciousness' (Cubitt 2007, 17), and glossing over the phantom nature of the original as mere apparition (Boym 2002) of 'hallucination' (Nora 1989).

Through another theoretical lens, Neo-Ottomanism could be seen as a Baudrillardian simulacrum, in a governmental 'order of sorcery' (1981), where representations play 'at being an appearance' of a precise state of things that never was, and are in fact precessional in configuring a past that can only be of the present. This is not to say, for example, that the Walls of Constantinople were not breached in 1453, or that the Byzantine city did not fall to

the Ottomans. Rather, the particular configurations imposed on and through the historical record, alongside occlusions, narrativisations, the identification and framing of events, and symbolic investments in historical actors, tropes and stories, mean that the past as returned in official representations never quite was. This is in essence primarily a theoretical and philosophical and not a political position on history, but because of its literally controversial effects – positing as a basic possibility the deniability of singular narratives of the past – it can quickly accrue political meaning.

In a sense this is about achieving a processual understanding of representations of the past in the present – one that, as Geoffrey Cubitt suggests, 'explores the contexts and productive processes of their emergence, their relationship to earlier representations and to gradually evolving frameworks of understanding, and the ways in which they themselves feed back into the ongoing process by which a sense of the past and of its present significance is always being generated, negotiated, modified, communicated, and put to service as a basis for action, within society' (2007, 22-23). We have put such a processual view in touch with some of the fallacies and paradoxes of Neo-Ottoman relations to the past, in complex and sometimes reactive transactions with other memory cultures (particularly Atatürkist ones) and sliding elisions between myth and truth, authentic and fake, past and present, original and copy, imitation, reversion and re-becoming. In certain kinds of social contest in which hegemonic actors make forceful plays for authority – as we see in contemporary Turkey – the past is remade in the image of desires about what it should have been, accompanied by the resolute exclusion of alternatives. Reconstructed buildings, battles, re-enactments are in this sense primarily copies of desire and will. In governmental memory practice, they set in train a further project of copying, which is to remake the self as a subject of the re-imagined past.

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Figure captions

1. The Halil Pasha 'Topçu' Barracks, shown in a historical photograph. [Unrestricted copyright.] The 'combat' referred to was the '31 March Incident' in which the Ottoman Counter-coup of 1909 was suppressed by the Hareket Ordusu militia commanded by Mahmut Şevket Paşa. The barracks building sustained damage during the fighting.
2. Metro station decoration representing the new Marmaray metro line, 2017, © the authors.
3. A view of the Panorama 1453 Museum, representing the breaching of the Land Walls of Constantinople on 29 May 1453, © the authors.