

**Producing Luxury Fashion, Skilled Workers, and Good Housewives  
The Girls' Institutes and the Histories of Labor and Consumption in Turkey<sup>1</sup>**

The formative years of the Republic of Turkey (1923-1938), also known as the “Kemalist Period” after the president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, were characterized by the efforts to create a modern, European, secular (albeit implicitly Sunni Muslim) and Turkish nation-state with an authentic national essence. In Turkey’s nation-building program, women were regarded as the key actors who could bring the Kemalist utopia to life. First of all, as wives and mothers, women were required to continue the biological reproduction of the nation, transform the domestic spaces to create the new Turkish household, and raise the new generations according to the Kemalist ideals. Second, women were expected to participate in the economy, not only as workers but also as entrepreneurs. This was particularly important because Turkey experienced a shortage of labor and entrepreneurship as a consequence of the wars that had led to the emergence of the nation-state as well as its atrocious population policies, including the 1923 population exchange with Greece, the Armenian Genocide and the related yet much less discussed massacres against the Empire’s other Christian minorities, Assyrians and Pontic and Anatolian Greeks. Finally, in the patriarchal context of Turkey, women were perceived as the symbols of the nation. The public visibility of women’s bodies, purged of the signs of Islam, would differentiate the Republic of Turkey from the Ottoman Empire as well as the Muslim Middle East.

In order to facilitate women’s participation in the nation-state building efforts, the government appropriated some demands of the Ottoman and Turkish feminist movements. They created a “state feminism” by granting women certain civil and political rights as well as educational and professional opportunities. At the same time, women’s active engagement in feminist politics was curtailed, as most dramatically seen in the rejection of the Women’s People’s Party’s [Kadınlar Halk Fırkası] petition for authorization in 1923.

An important site for the transformation of women’s bodies and subjectivities in the service of the Kemalist nation-state utopia was the girls’ institutes [kız enstitüleri]. These schools were established in the 1927-28 academic year by restructuring the girls’ schools of sartorial arts and crafts built in the late Ottoman Era. They combined the basic postelementary school curriculum with an intensive home economics education. The graduates would be ideal

---

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the generous support of the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET).

housewives adorned with what was conceptualized as “the scientific knowledge” and “the modern taste,” deemed necessary to transform their families and thereby the society. Since they were believed to prepare girls for their role as comrades of men in constructing a powerful nation-state, the institutes were preferred by the Muslim middle class, especially bureaucrats and soldiers, for their daughters. In the Southeast of the country, the girls’ institutes contributed to the nation-state project by facilitating the Turkification of Kurdish and Armenian girls. Particularly in their evening schools, the institutes also educated working-class women, providing them with professional skills. Many of the graduates took part in the statist industrialization efforts or worked in the growing service industry as qualified blue-collar labor. The middle-class graduates of the schools also became entrepreneurs, again especially in the service industry, and joined the ranks of the emerging Muslim bourgeoisie. As a consequence of their social and economic importance for the country, the number of the girls’ institutes increased to fourteen by the 1939-40 academic year, thirty-three by 1944, and forty by 1947.

The vocational courses offered by the girls’ institutes varied, but fashion was a central component of the curriculum at institutes across the country. This emphasis on sartorial education was not simply a response to the demands of the market; it reflected the attention paid to the regulation of bodies in the young nation-state. Beginning in 1923, a series of laws progressively limited the use of clothing items that connoted the empire and Islam. With the Hat Law that passed in 1925, civil servants, regardless of gender, were required to wear a hat with a brim and Western-style suits while nonclergy men were prohibited from donning the religious garb. The transformation of the bodies of public employees aimed not only to create role models for the people but also to mark the transformation of statecraft and to distinguish Turkish state and society from the Ottoman Empire and the rest of the Middle East. In this context, the girls’ institutes aimed to train women in the sartorial codes of desirable citizenship, and increase the availability of the clothes and accessories that had become necessary for the everyday performance of citizenship.

The girls’ institutes also served as haute couture fashion houses and millineries. This was particularly important in the capital, Ankara, where women from the political and diplomatic elite had difficulty finding high-quality fashions in the still provincial city. At a time when the industry was still dominated by non-Muslims, the institutes contributed to the ethnic transformation of the fashion industry both as major fashion houses featuring multiple workshops, and as fashion schools. When Beyoğlu Girls’ Maturation Institute [Beyoğlu Kız Olgunlaşma Enstitüsü] opened in Istanbul as the first postgraduate school of its kind, the

founding principal Refia Övüç's goals included challenging the non-Muslim dominance in the fashion industry and training Muslim fashion professionals.<sup>2</sup> Under a centralized, protectionist economy, the clothes produced at the institutes were also a viable alternative to imported goods.

The haute couture fashions produced at the girls' institutes proposed a unique understanding of luxury. The schools were public institutions that followed the principle of using materials produced in Turkey. Thus, consuming the fashions they produced could be framed as participation in the national economic struggle rather than prodigality. Another factor that legitimized the consumption of these luxury items was the unique style created by the girls' institutes. Atatürk stated that there was no need to search for an authentic Turkish dress, and that "the ordinary modern dress" (i.e., the popular European fashions of the time) was suitable for the Turkish people. Nevertheless, the girls' institutes took the initiative and embarked on creating a national style. These efforts reflected the cultural politics of the era, developed in accordance with the Durkheimian sociologist Ziya Gökalp's works.<sup>3</sup> Gökalp's recipe for successful social transformation required Turks to be disciples and imitators of Europe in terms of civilization while preserving (which in effect meant inventing) an innate national culture. As they embarked on discovering or, rather, producing the "true Turkish culture," teachers and students of the institutes collected garments, fabrics, and patterns from within the borders of the nation-state. Paying little regard to the periods or ethnic differences, they reclassified these diverse dress elements as "Turkish." Ignoring the performances and rituals involved in the processes of production and consumption as well as the unity of dress elements, they combined these "authentic Turkish" designs, materials, and handcraft techniques with "modern, Western" technologies of production and forms of dress. With this design strategy, called "modernization" [modernizasyon], the institutes attempted to create a national style that would amalgamate a constructed Turkish culture with an imaginary European civilization.

Embodying the codes of desirable citizenship, teachers and students of the girls' institutes started organizing Turkey's first major fashion shows in the 1930s. These shows served as the showcases of the schools, depicting their power in transforming women. The students modeling in the shows were presented as the ideal citizens with their secular, European yet Turkish looks as well as their fit bodies and straight postures. At these events,

---

<sup>2</sup> Bağbars, "Cumhuriyet Dönemi Giyim Kuşamında Bir Marka."

<sup>3</sup> Akşit, *Kızların Sessizliği*, 143.

they became known and admired by the community in which the institute was located.<sup>4</sup> Especially in smaller towns, the fashion shows served as a venue where women from the local elite could choose brides for their sons. Through these marriages, students and even teachers could attain upward mobility. When haute couture fashion houses like Faize Sevim and luxury prêt-à-porter brands such as Vakko started organizing fashion shows in the mid-1950s, they recruited the students and semi-professional models who performed in the institute shows. As such, the schools also played a key role in the development of the modelling industry in Turkey.

In the aftermath of World War II, the expectations from the girls' institutes were redefined, reflecting the reconfiguration of power relations on both national and global level. In 1945, the Soviet Union, which had been the cornerstone of Turkey's foreign policy, imposed unacceptable conditions to renew the 1925 Soviet-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality. Hence the Turkish government focused on cultivating closer relations with the Western Bloc. The same year, Turkey signed the United Nations charter. In 1946, a multiparty parliamentary system was established when the Democrat Party was founded by the proponents of economic liberalism within the governing Republican People's Party. In 1947, the government took measures to facilitate a shift from the strictly controlled and autarkist economy to a liberal free-market economy and became a recipient of U.S. aid under the Marshall Plan. In 1950, the Democrat Party won the elections. The party's allure lay in the way it employed populist and Islamic discourses in combination with a more liberal economic perspective. In this context, the primary function of the girls' institutes gradually evolved from facilitating women's ideological transformation according to the Kemalist ideals to training qualified blue-collar labor.

As Turkey reoriented itself within the Cold War global order and the influence of the United States on the country increased, the need to construct the image of a friendly, democratic country with a liberal economy gained utmost significance. In this political context, the fashion show was re-invented as a diplomatic performance genre. The first shows of this kind were organized by the institutes in Ankara and Istanbul for foreign intellectuals and political dignitaries visiting the country. Over the years, the honored guests included Dwight D. Eisenhower, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and his queen consorts Soraya Esfandiary Bakhtiari and Farah Pahlavi of Iran, the Yugoslav President Josip Broz Tito, Queen Elizabeth II, the Prince and Princess Mikasa of Japan, and the Italian movie star

---

<sup>4</sup> Gök, "The Girls' Institutes," 102.

Sophia Loren. Beginning in 1949, the shows were also staged internationally to represent Turkey abroad.

In and through the diplomatic fashion shows, young Turkish women emerged as modern, secular, liberal citizens, serving as proof of the country's modernity. Featuring prime examples of sartorial handcrafts combined with delicate ornaments and high-quality fabrics, the dresses also attested to, or rather participated in the construction of, an authentic and valuable Turkish culture that was compatible with "Western" civilization and lifestyle. Moreover, even though the clothes were produced by and often presented at a public institution, the fashion show as a genre could be interpreted as the sign of a liberal economy. As affective laborers, the models contributed to these diplomacy efforts not only with their stage performances but also, perhaps more importantly, with their everyday performances during the encounters with diplomats, politicians, journalists, and the general public before and after the shows.

With Turkey's integration into the global market economy and the growth of the prêt-à-porter industry in the 1980s, the girls' institutes lost their brand value and their significance as fashion houses. The schools now train their mostly working-class students as qualified blue-collar and white-collar labor in a variety of fields, ranging from fashion and catering to photography and animation. Their workshops primarily do contract manufacturing for independent haute couture designers, especially for labor-intensive collections. The fashion shows, however, have become a staple of Turkey's cultural diplomacy efforts, and the schools still organize shows both in Turkey and internationally. Their design strategy of "modernization" has largely persisted. Nevertheless, the last fifteen years has witnessed a significant change in the institute style.

Since 2003, Turkey has been governed by the economically neoliberal, socially conservative and Sunni Islamist Justice and Development Party [Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi]. The country's new governing elite has gradually redefined the national utopia in terms of resurrecting the Ottoman Empire. In this context, neo-Ottomanism has emerged as a powerful political discourse. The neo-Ottomanist discourse and imperial fantasies have also been employed to legitimize the oppressive political atmosphere in the country. As neo-Ottomanism gained power as a political tool, cultural productions inspired by the Ottoman history and aesthetics have proliferated as well, especially in fashion. In this context, the desire to combine "Turkish culture" with "Western civilization" that characterized the institute style has been replaced by a tendency to produce replicas of Ottoman costumes. Even in the designs produced in the name of modernization, the structuring form is not

contemporary Western fashions but historical Ottoman styles. Today, it is with these designs that the institutes represent Turkey's national identity and utopian desires around the world.

#### **WORKS CITED**

Akşit, Elif Ekin. 2005. *Kızların Sessizliği: Kız Enstitülerinin Uzun Tarihi*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.

Bağbars, Sebahat. 2006. "Cumhuriyet Dönemi Giyim Kuşamında Bir Marka: Beyoğlu Olgunlaşma." *Popüler Tarih Dergisi* 66.

<http://sebahatbagbars.blogspot.com/2009/02/populer-tarih-dergisi-dosya-moda.html>.

Gök, Fatma. 2007. "The Girls' Institutes in the Early Period of the Turkish Republic." In *Education in "Multicultural" Societies: Turkish and Swedish Perspectives*, ed. Marie Carlson, Annika Rabo, and Fatma Gök, 93-105. London, UK: I.B. Tauris.