Türkiye Through 11 Junctions

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An Unconventional Map

By

Murat Ergin

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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PREFACE

The sociological trajectory leading to the book appears eclectic. Over the last two decades, the research focus has ranged from the macro-level historical construction of race and modernity in the early Turkish Republic to the granular analysis of death announcements in newspapers; from the geopolitics of academic writing to the cultural tastes of the Turkish middle class. To the casual observer, a study on "whiteness" in the 1930s might seem worlds apart from a study on TV soap operas or the architectural layout of a prison.

However, a central theoretical concern has consistently underpinned the path: the formation of boundaries. My work has always focused on how lines are drawn between "us" and "them," "East" and "West," "modern" and "traditional," or "criminal" and "innocent." *Türkiye Through 11 Junctions: An Unconventional Map* is the culmination of decades-long attention to mapping boundaries. The manuscript traces exactly where the macro-level forces I studied in my early career (nationalism, westernization, and state power) collide with the micro-level realities of everyday life I explored in my later work.

In my first book, *"Is the Turk a White Man?" Race and Modernity in the Making of Turkish Identity*, I examined the foundational boundaries of the nation-state. I analyzed how republican state-builders, in close encounters with Western refugee scholars, used history, archaeology, and even biometrics to craft a modern identity. As my research evolved to map social boundaries in everyday life, I expanded the analytical focus to trace how structural boundaries operate far beyond state archives. The dividing lines are actively reproduced, negotiated, and contested in the messiness of daily existence. The divisions materialize explicitly in the "symbolic violence" of education, in the "social immortality" sought through death announcements, and in the distinct cultural geography of Turkish society.

The manuscript relies on an organizing metaphor to navigate the social complexity: the "junction." A junction operates as a critical point of contact, marking the exact coordinate where abstract historical and social currents meet the concrete reality of everyday encounters. The text visits eleven

specific junctions, moving from the cold reality of a mafia assassin's bullet to the digital deception of a telephone scam; from the flashing boards of currency exchanges to the glittering identity of a pop diva; and from long lines in front of bread kiosks to the expensive textboxes announcing prominent deaths in newspapers. Through the eleven encounters, I actively complicate the conventional binaries used to understand Türkiye. The analysis points toward a more complex reality, conceptualized as the "40/30/30 rule." The rule posits that in the ultimate accounting of Turkish public life, morality frequently trumps culture, actively uniting disparate social segments into a powerful "Moral Bloc."

As the subtitle suggests, the project culminates in an "unconventional map." Moving beyond a totalizing, top-down theory of Turkish society, the framework provides a practical guide to the active fault lines running beneath the surface. Decades of sticky boundary-making have shaped the deep divisions, and the text reveals how everyday actors maneuver through the resulting terrain within ordinary encounters. By illuminating the junction of the macro and the micro, the map ultimately prepares the reader to recognize the profound social struggles embedded within daily life.

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I owe a special debt of gratitude to my longtime collaborators and friends. I must especially mention the late Bruce Rankin, whose work on the "Cultural Map of Turkey" laid the groundwork for so much of my thinking on taste and stratification. His intellectual rigor and friendship are deeply missed, and his influence is present throughout the text. I also thank Fatoş Gökşen for her continued collaboration and insight on our shared research endeavors.

I am also thankful to the students and research assistants who have contributed to the data collection and analysis over the years. Their hard work in the field, from coding death announcements to tracking the complexities of everyday encounters, was invaluable.

At Cambridge Scholars Publishing, I would like to thank Adam Rummens for his guidance and enthusiasm for the project from the very beginning. I am also deeply grateful to the entire editorial and production team. I extend

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Finally, I am deeply grateful to my family for their unwavering support. To my wife, Melek Ece Özçelik Ergin, thank you for your patience and encouragement during the long hours of writing and editing.

It was once a fashionable convention to conclude book acknowledgments with the humble declaration that "all remaining errors are my own." Some authors wryly inverted the trope, joking that any mistakes actually belong to the reader. I propose a different framing. Taking neat ownership of all remaining errors assumes a world where a perfectly congruent synthesis is actually possible. Bypassing the assumption, whatever mistakes and incongruences remain in the text operate simply as theoretical "mermaids": the messy, unassimilated bits of reality that actively refused to be disciplined by the conceptual framework. Left undisturbed, the incongruences serve as quiet reminders that lived reality always outlasts the theoretical boundaries drawn to contain it.

INTRODUCTION

Where the Big Meets the Small

The story of a country is often told through its grand moments—its wars, revolutions, and political dramas. We attribute stereotypes to these narratives, envisioning consistent national characters and comprehensive stories that purport to capture the essence of immensely complex places and people. But lived reality lurks beneath these big structures, a symbolic scaffolding that helps everyday actors make sense of their experiences. The small and the big sit in deep entwinement, sometimes in tension, sometimes in perfect sync. Out of the tightly fused reality emerge the encounters between the seemingly insignificant aspects of everyday life and the grand narratives of societal forces. The deepest anxieties and aspirations of a society are often revealed in these encounters at the junctions of boundaries that divide and unite. This is where the big picture is etched into the fine grain of the ordinary. Consider a simple flatbread, the *lahmacun*. In contemporary Türkiye, this humble food is a cultural battlefield. For the urban elite of the "Playful '90s," it became the symbol of an uncouth migrant culture, sparking playful but serious debates over its compatibility with expensive whiskey—a flashpoint in the fraught encounter between a symbolic "East" and "West." Today, it serves as a marker of class, its exorbitant price in a posh beach club becoming an annual source of social media outrage over the nation's vast economic disparities. In other words, a simple food item becomes a nexus where the grand forces of modernity, class, identity, and globalization converge.

This book is a journey through eleven such junctions. Its central argument is that the story of the making and remaking of Türkiye is found at the precise point where personal experience collides with the deep structures of history and power. To embark on such a journey, however, requires resisting the temptation to view a country as a monolith that can be neatly summarized. A country is too large, too contradictory, and too complex to be captured in a capsule of fundamental and often stereotypical truths—a simple, essentialist formula that claims to distill its entire character into a few core principles. Instead, it is more useful to think of a country as a playground. A playground, unlike a capsule, is not about a static essence but

about dynamic interaction inside symbolically demarcated terrains. Within the boundaries of the emblematic playgrounds, actors, objects, and symbols engage in a dynamic and frequently contentious interplay, a game governed by a set of unwritten rules that participants intuitively understand. The tale of *lahmacun* is just one example of how the invisible but solid link between the big picture of social patterns and the lived world of everyday existence populates this emblematic playground. By following the footprints of such encounters, this book will reveal the contours of that playground and uncover the deep, often invisible, rules that govern it.

The Playground and Its Boundaries

The most important patterns within this social playground are the very dynamics that unite and divide it. This book aims to map the primary fault lines of division and identity in contemporary Turkish society by asking a fundamental question: where are the fences in the playground, and who chooses to build them? The answer lies in a powerful paradox: what unites must divide, and what divides must unite. Every group simultaneously creates a line that defines a "them" while forming a sense of "us." Identities, after all, only emerge through exclusions that gather insiders and outsiders under imaginary flags of similarity. To understand this process, we must examine a society's *symbolic boundaries*: the conceptual markers that distinguish and classify people, objects, and actions. The symbolic lines that divide and unite are not merely abstract; they interact in powerful ways with *social boundaries*, the relational distinctions that define group membership, produce inequality, and determine who gets to play on which side of the fence.

At the core of the Turkish symbolic landscape is a framework this book calls the *trinary of incongruence*. For the past two centuries, Turkish modernity has been an elusive and unmarked category, a nebulous ideal defined primarily by what it is not. It has been shaped in constant, anxious opposition to two marked extremes: a despised past and a feared future. The first extreme is tradition, a category that was "invented" by Ottoman and Republican modernizers as a backward foil against which to define their own progressive project. On the other end of the spectrum lies ultramodernity, which represented the peril of an excessive and inauthentic mimicry of the West. The trinary is a powerful, but mainly implicit, system of cultural borders that defines the extremes of the continuum as inappropriate, vulgar, or condescendingly humorous. Being "properly" modern means striking a balance between the regressive pull of tradition

and the enticing excesses of ultramodernity. The trinary framework determines what is compatible and what is not—whether a certain food goes with a certain drink, a style of music is legitimate, or a way of speaking about God is politically correct. It is by tracing these symbolic divides that we can map the contested terrain of Turkish identity.

This rigid framework, which policed the boundaries of Turkish identity for most of the twentieth century, has not gone unchallenged. In recent decades, the entire symbolic edifice of the trinary of incongruence has come under a sustained, two-pronged attack. The first assault came from the commercialized popular culture of the "Playful '90s," a bottom-up, pleasure-oriented phenomenon illustrated by Ottomania, a marketable revival of the past. In a landscape where anything could be sold, the old, strict hierarchies of taste began to erode as formerly unthinkable combinations were celebrated for their playful and profit-oriented aesthetic. Neo-Ottomanism, a state-sponsored, top-down revival of the Ottoman imperial past, illustrates the second, more decisive assault. In this project, "tradition," once the despised and dismissible other, has been vigorously brought back to the center of public life by a new conservative elite that no longer accepts its peripheral status. Much of this book, then, is about tracing the slow crumbling of this old republican trinary and the fierce cultural battles—waged between the irreverent pleasures of Ottomania and the official piety of neo-Ottomanism—to define a new symbolic order in its place.

A Brief History of the Present

Because symbolic boundaries are constantly shifting, it is important to track how they have changed over time. This poses a challenge: how can we effectively divide the past without succumbing to the allure of hindsight? Studying a historical event means knowing how the story ends, which can make the past seem deterministic and erase the contingency that defines human lives. When explaining why something happened, we are tempted to spin a story that explains why it had to happen that way. To resist linear narratives, it is important to recognize that every historical moment is a product of both discontinuity and continuity. Even the most radical revolution builds upon the remnants of what came before, and the ghosts of the past continuously haunt the present. At the same time, for anything to "happen"—for a change to be observable—we must be able to identify a shift in the preexisting social order. Both forces are indispensable. Periodization plays a crucial role in managing this complexity. While

creating distinct periods inevitably disrupts the fluid reality of human experience, it allows us to discuss social change in smaller, more manageable pieces. The following six historical eras, therefore, should be understood not as rigid boxes but as a map for navigating the complex terrain of the chapters that follow.

The Classical Ottoman Period is not featured in this book but serves as the historical baseline for our story, representing the world before the nineteenth century, when the anxieties of modernization had yet to emerge as the dominant factor in statecraft and culture. It is the imagined source of the "tradition" that would later be both scorned and rehabilitated, the vast and complex past against which all subsequent transformations would be measured.

The Late Ottoman Period corresponds to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time of existential crisis defined by vexed encounters with the West and the efforts to revive the empire. Military setbacks, territorial losses, and economic weakness spawned rival visions—Ottomanism, Pan-Islamism, and Turkism. The dynamic and volatile intellectual atmosphere created the core tensions of Turkish modernity, including the trinary of incongruence.

The Early Republican Period is the establishment and institutionalization of the Turkish Republic as a single-party regime. This was an era of radical, top-down modernization driven by a "secular conversion narrative" and a vehement rejection of the Ottoman-Islamic past. It was defined by the state-led project of secularism and by an ambitious attempt to forge a new national identity through the Turkish History Thesis, a breathtaking work of historical engineering designed to prove the "whiteness" of a new, secular Turk.

The Democratic Transition (1950-1980) begins with Türkiye's first free elections following the single-party period and is characterized by the rise of mass politics, rapid urbanization, and the emergence of the conservative "periphery" as a major political force. It was the era that gave birth to the cultural phenomenon of *arabesk* and was shaped by a state-led economic model of Import Substitution Industrialization.

The Playful '90s begins in the mid-1980s, following the 1980 military coup. It reflects the profound influence of neoliberal policies that opened the economy to "hot money," the explosion of private media, and the rise of a consumer culture that began to challenge the rigid symbolic boundaries of

the old republic with playful, incongruent combinations like *lahmacun* and whiskey.

The New Country came into being in 2002 with the election of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). This period, which the party's supporters themselves call the "new Türkiye," is defined by a revanchist rehabilitation of the Ottoman-Islamic past through neo-Ottomanism, increasing cultural polarization, the fusion of neoliberalism with a powerful religious patronage network, and the consolidation of competitive authoritarianism.

The Eleven Junctions: A Roadmap

With this framework in place, the book embarks on a journey through eleven symbolic "junctions"—specific, tangible encounters where these large historical and social forces become visible. Each chapter starts with a small, everyday "thing" to unpack a big social dynamic, moving from the concrete to the conceptual. The junctions we will explore are a diverse collection of cultural artifacts and social dramas: a flatbread, a song, a television series, a political formula, a history textbook, a loaded question, a monumental building, a bread kiosk, a mafia assassin, a transgender Diva, and, finally, a death announcement. The following summaries offer a brief roadmap to this unconventional journey.

Chapter 1, "*Lahmacun*: Symbolic Boundaries and Moral Belonging," begins with a humble flatbread to introduce the book's central analytical tool: the trinary of incongruence. In the first part of the chapter, we see how a seemingly innocuous dish, served in both casual eateries and upscale beach clubs, becomes a powerful emblem of cultural and social stratification. It then explains that to understand the playful but serious debate over pairing *lahmacun* with whiskey, one must grasp the symbolic codes of Turkish modernity. The chapter argues that for two centuries, Turkish modernity has been an elusive, unmarked category defined against two marked extremes: a tradition that was "invented" by modernizers as a backward foil, and an ultramodernity that represented an inauthentic mimicry of the West, embodied by the satirical figure of the "*alla franca* dandy." The chapter concludes by showing how this trinary framework provides the invisible but powerful cultural codes that determine what is compatible and what is not, creating a contested terrain of Turkish identity that the rest of the book will map.

Chapter 2, "*Arabesk*: Music and the Contested Sounds of Modernity," examines the contentious musical genre of *arabesk* as a cultural

"mermaid"—a hybrid form that defied the rigid symbolic boundaries of the early republic. Examining the historical origins of the conflict and focusing on the symbolic hierarchies of the "desirable" (Western high culture), the "reformable" (purified folk music), and the "dismissible" (the "diseased" Ottoman and Eastern heritage), the chapter traces the decades-long battle between the state's top-down project to impose a Westernized "aesthetic truth" and the bottom-up appeal of a popular culture of pleasure and fatalism that resonated with millions of new urban migrants. Finally, it frames the spread of *arabesk* via cassette tapes and shared minibuses as a form of "quiet encroachment," a symbolic invasion of the periphery into the sanitized cultural spaces of the modernizing elite, which ultimately heralded the collapse of the trinary of incongruence during the "Playful '90s."

Chapter 3, "*Magnificent Century*: Tradition Rehabilitated," investigates the battle for the nation's past through the lens of two rival television dramas that captured the national imagination. It begins with the worldwide phenomenon of *Magnificent Century*, a lavish series that offered a glimpse into the opulent court of Sultan Süleyman but ignited a firestorm at home for its focus on harem intrigue and its depiction of a fallible, passionate sultan. The chapter traces the clash between the official backlash from a new conservative elite who demanded a more pious history and the show's commercial success, which triggered a wave of popular, pleasure-oriented Ottomania. The state-sponsored answer was *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, a drama that presented a stern, masculine, and didactic vision of the past, scrubbed clean of impurities. The clash between the revanchist state ideology of neo-Ottomanism and the commercialized pleasures of Ottomania heralds the "rehabilitation of tradition" in the post-2000s era.

The story of Ahmet, a poor man who nevertheless shows great respect for the "educated and cultured people" of a world to which he has no access, opens Chapter 4, "The 40/30/30 Rule: Cultural Boundaries and Moral Belonging," which examines the moral and cultural fault lines of modern society. Ahmet's paradox allows us to examine the power of "education-as-myth," a legacy of the republican modernization that consecrated education as a marker of inherent worth. Overloading education with symbolic value results in a powerful type of symbolic violence in which the underprivileged validate the cultural structures that exclude them. The chapter then introduces the 40/30/30 rule to map the divisions between three key groups: the globally oriented and culturally omnivorous "engaged cosmopolitans," the locally oriented and morally critical "engaged provincialists," and the vast sea of the culturally inactive "disengaged." The chapter's central argument is that while the two engaged groups may spar in the cultural

arena, a powerful Moral Bloc unites the provincialists and the disengaged, explaining the enduring success of conservative politics in a nation where contests over moral visions ultimately trump cultural tastes.

Chapter 5, "Central Outlines of Turkish History: Race, Modernity, and the Forging of the New Turk," uncovers the early republic's audacious attempt to rewrite its own origins, beginning with a French geography textbook that classified Turks as a secondary "yellow race." The chapter argues that this moment ignited a state-sponsored project to forge a new national history, one that was secular, national, and, above all, racial. It details the creation of the Turkish History Thesis, a breathtaking work of historical engineering that leapfrogged over the Ottoman-Islamic past to claim that a "white, brachycephalic" Turkish race from Central Asia was the cradle of all world civilization. This ambition, the chapter shows, was pursued through two twin sciences: anthropometrics, the past-oriented project of measuring skulls to scientifically "prove" the whiteness of the Turkish people, and biometrics, the future-oriented project of eugenics, which aimed to protect and improve the hereditary stock of the nation for generations to come.

Chapter 6, "'Where Are You From?': Minorities and the Limits of Belonging," listens to this simple but loaded question to map the racialized boundaries of the nation. It opens with the paradoxical story of Ömer Besim Koşalay, a Black athlete on Türkiye's first Olympic team, to illustrate how the Republic was constructing an ideal of whiteness at the very moment a Black man was representing it on the world stage. The Republic's obsessive quest for modernity in whiteness required a racialized other against whom a modern, Europeanized Turk could be defined, a role often assigned to Arabs and Africans. The chapter compares the experiences of three groups: non-Muslims, who were officially recognized but perpetually treated as conditionally loyal foreigners trapped in a double bind of assimilation and exclusion; Afro-Turks, a predominantly Muslim minority whose history of enslavement and visible racial difference rendered them largely invisible in the national narrative; and Kurds, whose decades-long journey from forced assimilation under the fiction of being "Mountain Turks" has given way to a new and dangerous racialization in the urban centers of western Türkiye, where cultural stereotypes have hardened into perceived immutable differences.

The disputed status of Hagia Sophia serves as a springboard for comprehending the distinctive characteristics of Turkish secularism, or *laiklik*, in Chapter 7, "The Mosque in the Museum: Secularism, Religion, and the Battle for the Nation's Soul." The chapter traces the building's three

great transformations—from Byzantine cathedral to Ottoman imperial mosque, to secular republic's museum, and back to a mosque in 2020—arguing that each conversion was a symbolic statement about identities. Turkish *laiklik* was never a separation of church and state but a project of control over religion, a "secular conversion narrative" designed to forge a new, modern citizen by subordinating Islam to the will of the nation-state. This was institutionalized through the creation of the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which gave the state a monopoly over religious life. The chapter concludes that this top-down project provoked a powerful, revanchist Islamist counter-conversion, a decades-long struggle to reclaim the nation's soul that culminated in Hagia Sophia's recent reconversion, the ultimate symbol of the "rehabilitation of tradition" in the New Türkiye.

Chapter 8, "Bread Kiosks and Currency Exchanges: The Political Economy of a Nation," charts the anxieties of Turkish economic life through two potent urban symbols: the long lines for subsidized bread at the *Halk Ekmek* kiosk and the worried glances at the glowing numbers of the *döviz bürosu*, or currency exchange. To understand the landscape of widespread precarity and vast inequality, one must trace the historical legacies that have shaped Türkiye's contested political economy. It explains how the nation's path was defined by "two great absences" (a powerful landed aristocracy and a native capitalist class) which resulted in the creation of a state-dependent bourgeoisie for whom proximity to power was always a more reliable route to accumulation than market competition. The chapter traces the country's journey through state-led Etatism, populist Import Substitution Industrialization, the neoliberal turn of the 1980s, and the AKP era's fusion of a debt-fueled, construction-based economy with a powerful religious patronage network.

The two spheres of crime in contemporary Türkiye are discussed in Chapter 9, "Assassins and Telephone Prosecutors: Crime and the National Imagination," through two contrasting examples: the public killing of a foreign mafia boss and the property violation of a phone scam that targeted an elderly woman. The first part explores the remote, unaccountable violence of the "deep state" (*derin devlet*), following its development from covert Cold War operations to its current status as a thriving illicit economy that conflates statecraft and criminality. Events such as the Susurluk Scandal and the widely circulated claims of fugitive mafia bosses have occasionally brought this reality to light. The chapter compares the deep state to the visceral, personal threat of street-level fraud using the infamous government impersonation scam, which preys on a cultural paradox—a society with low interpersonal trust but a deep, ingrained obedience to state

authority. The main contention of the chapter is that the public's unreasonable moral outrage at interpersonal property crimes can be explained by ingrained cultural norms that place a higher value on the defense of an individual's sacred rights (*kul hakkı*) and the results of their hard work (*emek*), which are felt more deeply than impersonal offenses against a far-off and frequently mistrusted state.

In Chapter 10, "The Diva and the Drill: Gender and Sexuality," the celebrated transgender artist Bülent Ersoy and the pathologized gay conscript, who must go through a humiliating medical ordeal to obtain a "pink certificate" (*pembe tezkere*) that diagnoses his identity as a disorder in order to avoid the military drill, provide a powerful opening contrast that explores the paradoxes of gender and sexuality in contemporary Türkiye. Following the historical trajectory from the early Republic's top-down "state feminism" to the emergence of independent feminist movements and the current neoconservative drive to reinterpret gender roles in light of the Islamic concept of *fitrat* (innate nature), the chapter first examines how the female body has long served as a symbolic battlefield for conflicting national visions. Comprehending the strong moral boundaries established against the abstract, symbolic category of the "homosexual" in order to define the parameters of national belonging is essential to resolving the opening paradox. The Diva's acceptance is a highly conditional and exceptional patriarchal bargain, granted due to her unique artistic status and her careful performance of a conservative public persona, which separates her from this threatening category. The conscript, in contrast, is stripped of his individuality by the state and placed squarely within it, officially branded as unfit for full membership in the national community.

Finally, Chapter 11, "Eternal Life as Privilege: Reading a Nation in its Farewells," concludes the empirical journey by analyzing nearly 300,000 death announcements as an "unaccounted ledger" of social history. It demonstrates how these small, textual goodbyes provide a granular, quantitative record of Türkiye's grand transformations, revealing the shifting nature of its elites, the fault lines of its culture wars, the redefinition of the self, and the stubborn resilience of its patriarchal hierarchies.

This book, then, is not a conventional history or a simple collection of cultural essays. It is an act of sociological cartography. Like mapmakers, we set out to chart a fascinating symbolic terrain, identifying the invisible but powerful boundaries that shape the landscape and tracing people and things that populate the space with unequal claims to power and access to resources. The eleven junctions that follow are an attempt to draw an

unconventional map of this territory, revealing the deep structures of power, identity, and meaning that lie just beneath the surface of the everyday. To read this map is to reject the simplistic binaries that often define discussions of the country—East versus West, religious versus secular, modern versus traditional. The reality, as we will see, is far messier and more interesting. The terrain we will traverse is one where the language of secular modernity has become entwined with the intimate language of personal loss; where the tools of the free market have become the primary vehicle for a religious revival; and where the state's most ambitious projects to forge a new future are haunted by the ghosts of a past it can neither fully embrace nor escape. By tracing the junction of the big and the small, we can begin to understand the unwritten rules of the playground and the powerful, invisible fences that continue to shape a nation. Let us begin.

CHAPTER 1

LAHMACUN: INCONGRUENCE AND THE ART OF THE BALANCING ACT

***Lahmacun* Goes Well with Whiskey**

If you are looking for *lahmacun*, the famed flatbread topped with minced meat and onions, your best bet is a small neighborhood restaurant with bright neon lights, little tables, and lively conversation. This is real fast food, as everyone in the restaurant will be in a hurry. Dreadful acoustics in these small establishments amplify and distort even the smallest sounds. Interactions become strained, the music unintelligible, and the feeling of urgency increases. You might see the chef flattening the dough, adding toppings, and sliding the round pieces into a stone oven with a wooden scoop. The server will bring you condiments to garnish your meal, such as raw onions, parsley, and tomatoes, before the freshly prepared *lahmacun* comes to your table. Customers roll the freshly baked flatbread with parsley and tomatoes and eat it like a burrito. Eating out requires a certain level of trust, which is a rare commodity in this culture. You might worry about what's in the topping, given the frequent controversies over meat quality or the presence of pork—a highly taboo ingredient. However, *lahmacun* is cheap, and for many, worries about hygiene or healthiness are simply luxuries. The modest local restaurant is only one of the places where you can enjoy *lahmacun*. The humble flatbread has an uncanny ability to adapt to different cultural and economic circumstances. But *lahmacun* is an economic and cultural chameleon, equally at home in a posh Mediterranean beach club—if you can afford the high entrance fee. Here, amid loud pop music and watchful bouncers, Istanbul's bourgeoisie flaunt their wealth, toned bodies, and cosmetic enhancements. The same affordable flatbread that feeds the working and the hurried now serves the affluent and the beautiful on a slow beach vacation, its simplicity unchanged, save for the exorbitant price tag.

Our ability to navigate daily life depends on an economy of attention. We pay heed only when necessary. At both the humble eatery and the posh beach club, customers detach themselves from the fleeting stimuli of their sensory environments. A similar selective inattention holds true for the complex webs of cultural scripts that envelop our existence. Locals intuitively understand the symbolic framework surrounding culture, yet they seldom explicitly acknowledge or describe it. The humble *lahmacun* is a dish full of symbolic connotations, woven into complex cultural narratives and exhibiting significant variation depending on the context in which it occurs. In one setting, it means cheap and fast food, placing an individual into a lower-middle socio-economic standing. For cultural critics, its association with the rural East can represent the invasion of an uncouth migrant cuisine into urban centers, a sign of high culture's decline. In another twist, it can also symbolize the futile efforts of the nouveau riche to flaunt their wealth, as the steep price of *lahmacun* in Mediterranean resorts becomes a flashpoint for social media debates about economic disparities.

In the 1990s, the cultural debate about what *lahmacun* represented reached its peak. According to a group of critics, the confused nouveau riche of the time ate it with a sip of overpriced whiskey to emphasize their social positions and conceal their lack of cultural knowledge and tastes. According to this argument, the 1990s were a time of great financial opportunity, but many were unsure how to show that success in a culturally "appropriate" way. *Lahmacun* quickly became emblematic of the country's rapid transformation, highlighting the contrast between cultural standing and financial success. The supremacy of high culture, aggressively fostered by state educational institutions in previous decades as a vital instrument of Turkish modernization, was eroding in the face of neoliberal opportunities centered on popular cultural pleasures and showy aesthetics. The cultural transformation was reflected in the tongue-in-cheek public debates about the (in)congruence of *lahmacun* and whiskey. In 1997, the daily newspaper *Hürriyet* published an interview with a whiskey specialist. The cheeky headline conveyed the expert's endorsement of the combination: "One can drink whiskey with *lahmacun*." The subtext of the article, however, was the humorous encounter of the humble local flatbread with the epitome of American popular culture and an expert's attention to this issue. How was it that people instantly grasped the strange implication that pairing *lahmacun* with whiskey was a symbolic conundrum, a pairing that once signified new and uncultured wealth, but was now challenging those very critical narratives? To appreciate the cultural references implicit in the debate, we must embark on a journey through the country's symbolic codes of cultural incongruence. Once understood, *lahmacun* acts as a versatile key

to examining the figurative matrix of modernity within Turkish culture. But first, we must explore the function of binaries and trinaries as mechanisms of classification.

The Missing Male Drivers?

One of the peculiarities of Turkish society is that there are no male drivers—at least in everyday talk. However, female drivers regularly appear in conversations, as shown by the widespread use of the curious expression *bayan şoför* (woman driver). The expression is most commonly used when a male motorist spots a mistake in traffic, sighs noticeably to catch the attention of passengers, and murmurs, "It's a woman driver." The phrase has become ingrained in the cultural lexicon, and everyone understands what it means. Observers rarely object to the concept's stereotyped empirical claim—that female drivers are bad drivers because they tend to drive less aggressively, which is seen as poor driving. Interestingly, feminist critics frequently target the specific vocabulary used rather than this sociological fallacy. The word *kadın* (woman) sounds too direct for conservative sensibilities, prompting them to substitute it with the supposedly more polite *bayan* (lady). This substitution is a perpetual source of frustration, as *bayan* should only function as a formal address, never as a descriptive adjective. As a result, encountering the term *bayan şoför* in everyday traffic is doubly irritating: it reinforces a sexist trope while employing patronizing language.

What is intriguing about the gendered driving discourse in Türkiye is the existence of two distinct and exhaustive categories: drivers and female drivers. If a driver who commits a grievous error turns out to be a man, this individual becomes a generic driver, and his gender appears irrelevant to the concerned. In these situations, people may talk about the driving culture of the country, the absence of traffic enforcement, or the shortcomings of the educational system, but the maleness of the offender often goes unmentioned. Finding out that the bad driver is a woman takes the discussion to a different level. A woman driver seems to eliminate the need for any contextual explanation for her lack of driving skills. Instead, her gender alone becomes sufficient to explain the situation. The expression *bayan şoför* is used in these situations as a shorthand for highlighting women's marked status in contrast to the generic personhood of men. Even daily newspapers that report on traffic accidents are not exempt from this linguistic binary. In news reports, as in everyday conversation, a person involved in a traffic accident is portrayed either as a generic driver, with no

gender specified, or explicitly as a "woman driver." When behind the wheel, men are not men.

When we create categories, we not only observe reality, but also shape it, and this influence is inherently arbitrary. After all, the same jar of olives might end up in the "gourmet" section of a grocery store in the United States, while in Italy it is relegated to the discount store; jazz music, once viewed as a lowbrow genre associated with decadence in the 1930s, evolved into a respected art form over the course of a few decades; and the recent reclassification of Pluto illustrates that even scientific categorization of celestial bodies can change and be influenced by human judgment. Humans often classify social phenomena into *binaries* (e.g., men and women) and *trinaries* (e.g., low, average, and high IQ). The perception of life based on categories is so deeply rooted that human thought can hardly function without them. But categories are not neutral. Whenever we create a socially significant boundary, the categories take on a life of their own and often lead to the formation of hierarchies.

What distinguishes dominant categories from subordinate ones? Typically, the dominant category gains its power by remaining unmarked. For example, the term "man" has denoted all humans for centuries. When American astronaut Neil Armstrong quipped as he stepped on the Moon, "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind," the "mankind" he referred to encompassed more than men. But while the marked category "woman" highlights a specific gender, the dominance of "man" makes it a generic category that remains subtly in the background as a symbol of all humanity. Similarly, the invisible category, the missing male drivers in Turkish society, acts as the core and taken-for-granted component. Given the prevailing assumption that almost all drivers are male, there often seems to be little reason to identify their gender. In contrast, the statistically atypical category of "woman driver" within the Turkish context appears to require special attention and emerges as a subject of daily conversations.

In his call for a "sociology of the unmarked," Wayne Brekhus outlines the features of social marking in the following manner:[1] (1) The unmarked (for example, male driver; average IQ; white US president) remains implicit, but the marked (for example, "woman driver"; low or high IQ; Black US president) elicits attention and sparks debate. (2) The marking process naturalizes the arbitrary differences between social categories. (3) The

[1] Wayne Brekhus, "A Sociology of the Unmarked: Redirecting Our Focus," *Sociological Theory* 16, no. 1 (1998): 34–51, https://doi.org/10.2307/202213.

marked receives attention even when its membership is minimal (for example, crimes committed by minorities) in comparison to the unmarked groups and categories. (4) The internal complexities of the marked are often neglected, portraying the category as a homogeneous entity (for example, female drivers are viewed as identical, but male drivers demonstrate a variety of driving styles). (5) The conduct of an individual from an unmarked group is often ascribed to personal attributes, whereas the conduct of an individual from a marked group is generally perceived as indicative of group traits (for example, a male driver's inadequate driving is regarded as a personal deficiency, while a female driver's driving may be attributed to her gender).

The Trinary of Incongruence: Traditional, Modern, and Ultramodern

At the core of the Turkish symbolic landscape is a trinary of incongruence regarding the categories of modernity. The concept of incongruence refers to the mental framework that determines the compatibility or incompatibility of various cultural practices and judges whether things, people, or events fit well into a cultural context. Incongruent outsiders may be castigated for their perceived inferiority and degeneracy, or they may be seen as funny and become the butt of countless jokes. An illustration of the operation of incongruence is the dissonance between whiskey and *lahmacun*—the way seemingly minor aspects of everyday life become entangled in cultural anxieties. The trinary provides a comprehensive framework for the positioning of compatibilities and incompatibilities, their societal context, and their cultural evaluation. The Turkish trinary of incongruence is about one fundamental question: Do they go together?

The function of the trinary is to classify aspects of social life in the broad context of modernity, along with its two opposing extremes: tradition and ultramodernity. These categories are the product of a history of encounters with the West and the subsequent process of modernization. While it is convenient to identify the early eighteenth century as the definitive beginning of Westernization in the Ottoman Empire, the process of encountering the West was gradual and uncertain, characterized by various phases and areas of social change and varying degrees of adoption. Notwithstanding the difficulties of periodization, modernization has a nearly two-century history, beginning with the Tanzimat (literally, "reorganization") reforms brought about by an imperial decree in 1839. The uneven Ottoman modernization, which highlighted the effort to "catch up"

with Europe while maintaining state sovereignty, culminated less than a century later in the Turkish Republic's pursuit of complete integration with modern nations. While 200 years is a significant span of time, it is also essential to recognize that both the Ottomans and republican Turks were "late" (or at least "later") in their modernization efforts, as they initiated this process after the West. This apparently simple observation about arriving late to the party carries significant implications.

Implications of Being "Late"

One of the consequences of late modernization is that it unfolds in a world where a model of modernity (equated with the West) already exists, granting a distinct definitional advantage to its originators and leaving a tangle of paradoxes to its adopters. The Ottomans maintained a long history of contact with Europe, where initial perceptions of the West were characterized by a mixture of mild curiosity and a sense of Ottoman superiority. Starting with the seventeenth century, however, feelings of superiority began to evolve into a mix of rivalry, admiration, and resentment. The Ottomans recognized the military as the first domain of decline, and as modernization began, military reforms became the first source of inspiration from the West. Recognition of Western military dominance led to initiatives to build a modern army and navy, cultivate relationships with European specialists in military training, and introduce advanced military technologies. In addition to the military, the civilian administration also required modernization. The previously decentralized empire began to centralize due to the influence of Western concepts of governance and law. At the forefront of modernization, a professional bureaucracy emerged that encompassed both the military and civilian sectors. The rise of the bureaucracy as an alternative center of power to the palace was crucial because it was the members of this Western-educated group of officials who were later instrumental in establishing the modern Turkish Republic. Educational and cultural reforms accompanied the military and administrative reforms, sparking internal controversies about the speed and substance of social transformation. Another area of interaction with the West was the economy; however, changes were largely a result of Western coercion due to conflict, manifested in the granting of concessions to Western companies and the provision of benefits in trade agreements.

The perceived need for reform made it clear to the Ottomans that an alternative and formidable entity had already achieved the coveted category

of modernity and established the definition of what it meant to be modern. This implied that modernization had to take place on someone else's conceptual turf. While the precise definition of the "West" and the recipes behind its rise to global dominance remained elusive, it occupied a central position in the minds of both Ottoman and later republican elites, positioning it as the ultimate arbiter in cultural debates and effectively equating modernization with Westernization. The result was an ongoing love-hate relationship, a complex and defensive modernization that views the West as both a model to emulate and a rival to be mistrusted.

A second consequence of late modernization is the way it forces late adopters to imitate. Since modernity was already invented by someone else, the process of acquiring it necessarily involved copying what belonged to another, creating vexing problems of authenticity. Given the desirability of the sacred fruit of progress, modernizers had to answer a difficult question: how could they maintain a semblance of selfhood while adopting the components of an alien culture? The puzzle was twofold, involving a protective agenda to identify and safeguard what was essential to the national soul, and a transformative agenda to determine which features of the West were indispensable for achieving modernity. The heated debates about the role of religion, ethnicity, language, and gender highlighted the difficulties inherent in the protective agenda while the controversies surrounding reform attempts illustrated the ambiguities regarding the meaning and characteristics of modernity. The conflict between the two implied incompatible visions of modernity. For example, while the European public imagined a form of women's emancipation as something missing from the modernization ideas of the "East," conservative late modernizers placed existing gender relations on the protective agenda—which had to be protected at all costs—and focused on less threatening proxies such as military technology to be included in the transformative component. These internal controversies were the result of the fact that, unlike those who already called themselves modern, the content of modernity was undefined for the latecomers.

It was clear from the start that there was no definitive solution to the question of what made the West superior. Yet Ottoman and republican modernizers had different approaches to addressing the conflict between conservation and transformation efforts. Ottoman reforms in the nineteenth century targeted the military, administrative, educational, and legal systems. Of course, there were cultural reformers who sought a broader transformation. However, the tacit agreement between elites in the volatile period that led to the collapse of the empire limited the transformative

component in order to appease more conservative sections of society. With absolute political power in their hands, early twentieth-century republican modernizers felt freer to limit protective concerns. In a society with a conservative populace, this led to accusations of modernization from above. An even more significant difference was the Republicans' creative but ultimately futile attempt to reinvent modernity as a Turkish discovery. While the essential instruments of this racially inspired science were Western in nature, the intended goal was to establish Turkish primacy and thus superiority among world civilizations. The fantastic race science of the 1930s aimed to indigenize modernity, which would at once eliminate the conflict between protective and transformative efforts. What was modern was Turkish; therefore, what was Turkish was modern.

Türkiye's turn to race science in the 1930s reflects the third consequence of late modernization. Both exporters and importers of the modern era gave race a central role. The early conquerors of modernity tended to flirt with ideas of race to justify their first-come, first-served advantages. This made modernization exclusive and presented modernity as an achievement only available to European societies. The late modernizers, in turn, responded by taking racist claims seriously and attempting to carve out advantageous positions for their own groups within the global racial hierarchy. The collaboration between Turkish race science and modernization was a clear consequence of these efforts to use race in creative, if clearly exaggerated, ways.

Paradoxes of Modernization

The transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic created a set of identity dilemmas strikingly similar to those found in the post-colonial world, even though Türkiye was never formally colonized. The reasons for this are rooted in the trauma of the empire's final years. The Ottomans' contentious relationship with the West culminated in their catastrophic defeat with the Central Powers in World War I, after which the victorious Entente powers were given license to partition the empire's Anatolian heartland. The triumphant republican regime that emerged from the subsequent liberation movement framed this period as an existential conflict against a Western imperialist coalition. The foundational experience of war with Western powers ensured that the new Republic, for all its radical Westernization, was not immune to the traumas of its predecessor. By seeing the West as both a source of existential peril and a model for civilization, the republican regime carried on and maintained the Ottomans'

long-standing love-hate conflict with modernity. This inheritance placed republican nationalism on similar ground to its counterparts in the postcolonial world.

In *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, Partha Chatterjee offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by postcolonial modernizers.[2] The tensions between the universalizing inclinations of Western modernity and the unique experiences of non-Western subordination entangle late modernizers in a web of contradictions. The "derivative discourse" of postcolonial nationalism, in Chatterjee's view, yields a divided national consciousness and an impossible struggle between the authentic and the imitative. Turkish modernizers faced similar dilemmas. On the one hand, the elite who had just returned from a liberation struggle with Western powers felt compelled to reject the West's cultural hegemony. On the other hand, modernizers saw no alternative but to imitate the West to progress. In the early years of the republic, intellectuals expended great effort to address the conflict between authenticity and imitation.

Chatterjee further argues that defensive modernization often leads to a distinction between the "spiritual" and the "material" domains, roughly corresponding to the Ottomans' protective and transformative efforts. The spiritual realm is the center of authenticity and includes claims to identity, such as religion, culture, language, and family. The material realm is the sphere of Western achievements. Containing the economy, technology, and state institutions, this is where the material manifestations of modernity could be adopted selectively without contaminating the spiritual domain. While Ottoman modernizers often relied on this distinction, their republican successors found it appealing but insufficient. Recognizing that Western modernity was often framed in racial terms that cast "Easterners" as passive imitators, Turkish modernizers embarked on a far more radical project. Instead of protecting the spiritual realm, they sought to remake it entirely. Using the race science of the 1930s, they unironically argued that the Turkish people were the original inventors of Western civilization. This audacious move was designed to solve the authenticity paradox once and for all: if modernity was fundamentally Turkish in origin, then adopting its material forms was no longer an act of imitation but one of repatriation—a simple recovering of the fruits of their own ancient inventions.

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[2] Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Zed Books, 1986).

The Two Ghosts of Modernity: Tradition and Ultramodernity

The modernizers faced extraordinary burdens. They had to struggle with the exact meaning of the West, the necessity of importing a foreign way of life while maintaining a semblance of authenticity, and the pressure to prove their own innate capacity for progress. As with all social categories, the elusive concept of "modernity" proved much easier to define by what it was not. Out of the permanent social conflicts over its meaning, a conceptual trinary emerged with a nebulous but taken-for-granted category of modernity at its center, flanked by two comparative twins that gave it shape: an invented tradition and a feared ultramodernity. Like all cultural categories, these conceptual inventions were human creations under historically contingent circumstances but soon began to be seen as timeless entities.

The "history" of tradition, paradoxically, begins only after the Ottomans encountered the West. Despite the temptation to envision a chronological sequence where tradition comes before modernization, marked categories only surface as tools of contrast, reinforcing the conceptual coherence of unmarked categories. In other words, tradition becomes a concern and a matter of discourse only when the struggle of modernization begins. As Deniz Kandiyoti describes, it was the modernizers themselves who invented the concept of tradition to justify their own project.[3] By focusing on social issues like polygyny and adolescent marriages—practices that were not, in fact, demographically widespread—they constructed an image of a "defective" prior state that was in urgent need of reform. Ottoman modernizers used print media to express their concerns about these social issues, expressing their complaints as the rightful frustrations of modernizing vanguards who declared war on backward practices of an ancient society.

What explains the frustrations about non-existent social problems in an "invented tradition"? In the context of the construction of European nationalisms, the concept refers to the idea that many national traditions and customs, considered ancient, are intentionally created to promote a sense of national unity and identity. Sociologists like to point out that although humans build the world, they behave toward it as if it were inherent, eternal,

[3] Deniz Kandiyoti, "Gendering the Modern: On Missing Dimensions in the Study of Turkish Modernity," in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, ed. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (University of Washington Press, 1997).