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POSITION PAPER

# 'Welcome to Europe': A Bridge East of Architectural History

Kıvanç Kılınc

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This position paper examines the complex boundaries that separate Europe from both its constructed margins and those of its imagined Others. Where exactly do we enter the Continent and where does it end? Is it while crossing the world-famous bridge on the Bosphorus, for instance, that one receives the first impression of Europe, or is it somewhere farther west — past a 'wall' protected by a strong border regime? To address these questions, this paper tells two concomitant stories about the practices of urban governance and architectural design in Turkey in the early twentieth century by providing snapshots of numerous encounters and negotiations between multiple actors: American public health specialists, European-trained local bureaucrats, and a French city planner. While Turkey's dubious position between the West and the East provides the potential for rethinking the boundaries of the Continent, the paper uses the Turkish case primarily to unpack the idea of 'Europe' as both a fluid entity and a fixed location, an uneven terrain upon which canonical discourses of identity are constructed. In doing so, it points to the interchangeability of subject positions, which often result in competing narratives of modernization, urban design, and the whereabouts of the line separating Turkey from Europe.

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## Introduction

This short paper tells two stories. Both stories relate to practices of urban governance and architectural design through which the boundaries of 'Europe' are put to question. The main goal is to complicate the uneven terrain upon which canonical discourses of identity are constructed, dividing Europe from its Others. The site of inquiry is Turkey in the early twentieth century, a country whose dubious position between the West and the East has the potential to both extend and redefine the boundaries of the Continent.

The first story re-situates French planner Henri Prost's master plan for Istanbul (1937) in relation to his practice in North Africa. The second takes snapshots from several encounters between European-trained Turkish bureaucrats and American public health specialists such as Ralph K. Collins, who was the representative of the Rockefeller Foundation to Turkey and Bulgaria and the founding dean of the Service School of Hygiene (1932) of the Central Institute of Hygiene in Ankara. Both focus on a gray area of in-betweenness, a vaporous geography of the mind where none of the international actors could become unequivocally certain whether they were seen as the bearers of Western civilization (which the others could only imagine catching up with) or as paid consultants employed provisionally by the Turkish government to help carry out its modernization program. What makes the Turkish case more interesting is its imperial heritage. The fact that the late Ottoman Empire acted both as

'colonizer' and 'colonized', (or, rather, not properly as either) further complicates this scholarly inquiry.

## 'Borrowed' Postcolonialism?

In 'They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery', Selim Deringil argues that in the 19th century the Ottoman Empire, anxious about losing its provinces, borrowed methods and tools of governance from European colonialism (e.g., census, transportation, education, press, and public institutions) to establish a stronger presence in its 'peripheries' which it 'came to conceive ... as a colonial setting' (Deringil 2003: 311–12). Yet the Ottomans were never a colonizing power per se. In fact, at the turn of the 20th century the Empire showed the symptoms of a 'quasi-colony',<sup>1</sup> its economy in trouble and massively in debt to major European countries, and by the end of WWI, at the brink of a total collapse (Hanoğlu 2008).

The significance of Deringil's intervention is that it extends the scope of postcolonial criticism, reminding us of the potentially significant contribution of the late Ottoman Empire to the literature, from which it has been almost completely absent (including Said's *Orientalism*) (Deringil 2003: 313). But why, exactly? Is it because of the fact that for the majority of postcolonial studies, the lack of geographical proximity has been a prerequisite for the condition of postcoloniality, or that it only functioned as a 'long distance radiation'?<sup>2</sup> What about, for instance, 'societies which were subject to imperial power, but not *formal colonies*' (Sidaway 2000: 596)? Where could we place nation building or Westernization in relation to 'colonial modernity' (Dirlik 2005: 21–22)? By critically addressing these questions, contemporary scholars have argued

that there are 'multiple postcolonial conditions' and that postcolonial 'also signifies a set of theoretical perspectives', rather than merely referring to 'a condition that succeeds colonial rule' (Sidaway 2000: 591, 595; McClintock 1993: 84–98).

In the following parts of this paper, I aim to extend Deringil's discussion to the context of the early Turkish Republic. My argument is that Turkey adopted the tools that the Ottomans had 'borrowed' from European colonial powers in the 19th century, similar to the way postcolonial states mobilized colonial strategies such as 'authoritarian social engineering' during decolonization (Bonneuil 2000: 259–60). The new cadre that established the Turkish Republic in 1923 rejected the Ottoman heritage and wrote a constitution for a western-oriented, secular nation-state. From then on, Turkey, considering itself geographically situated on the margins of Europe but politically desiring to be at the very center of it, looked to its own 'margins' – such as the war-racked villages in Ankara and the old neighborhoods of Istanbul – as backward places in need of development. Architectural, legal, and cultural reforms, including model village projects and public health campaigns, were part of the broader agenda for 'internal colonization'.<sup>3</sup> Foreign experts, directly or in an advisory capacity, played an important role in most of these undertakings (Bozdoğan 2001).

### Scene One: Henri Prost's Istanbul

As the administrative, economic, and cultural center of the Ottoman Empire for centuries, Istanbul housed a diverse population. To the newly established republic, the urban heterogeneity of the city symbolized its imperial and Islamic past; the governing elite sought to build a model that would replace this imagery (Keyder 1999: 3–10). While Ankara, the new capital, was built by a group of Austrian, German, and Turkish architects (Bozdoğan 2001), Istanbul's planning was delivered into the hands of the French planner Henri Prost. A follower of Camillo Sitte and colleague of Tony Garnier and M. Leon Jausseley, Prost graduated from L'Ecole nationale des beaux arts in Paris (Akpınar 2003: 55–60). Like his peers from the Beaux-Arts tradition, he 'agreed on the civilizing action of town planning and of urban aesthetics' – a formula that fit perfectly with French colonial endeavors at the time (Amygdalou 2014: 3).

In the 1920s Prost developed master plans for several colonial cities in North Africa, where he combined the idea of the *ville nouvelle* as the European quarter with his interest in 'urban archaeology'. While a new, 'modern' city was constructed next to the old one, these plans protected both major historical monuments and traditional dwellings (Wright 1991: 102, 115; Bilsel 2004: 2).<sup>4</sup> There were two main reasons why such a protectionist attitude was taken. The colonial administration did not want to give the impression that it was antagonistic toward vernacular customs, as the architectural heritage of the colonies was seen as a bridge to communicate with the locals. The protectionist attitude also helped to strengthen the Orientalist image of the Middle East in the minds of the Europeans. Once preserved and restored, the existing

buildings were 'made more pleasing to the Western eye, in order to better reflect the desired image of the unchanging Islamic culture' (Wright 1991: 120, 108–9).

The Prost plan for Istanbul projected a similarly protectionist vision for the future development of the city, but with a nuanced approach to old neighborhoods. According to Cana Bilsel, the planner 'based his Master Plan of Istanbul on three fundamental issues: transportation (*la circulation*), hygiene (*l'hygiène*), and aesthetics (*l'esthétique*)' (Bilsel 2011: 105). The idea of a modern road network that would connect major districts, together with building urban parks and public promenades, was in line with the secularist ideology of the new republic (Gül and Lamb 2004: 65). As Bilsel has also argued, for Prost, the main objective in Istanbul's planning was to modernize the city, which was in the process of a total social transformation. This principle included the city's historical buildings. While preserving major Byzantine and Ottoman monuments, the planner 'adopted a highly interventionist attitude towards the historic urban fabric' (Bilsel 2004: 4–5). Apparently, Prost's decision to emphasize the protection of historical monuments had several incentives. The first one was that as a planner he adhered to his Sittean principles in Istanbul as much as in other cities. He also tended to see these buildings no longer as the internal organs of the old city, but as world heritage. When it came to vernacular architecture, however, Prost's attitude was entirely different; the ancient monuments of Istanbul were restored at the same time that the 'less significant' structures, such as traditional timber houses surrounding them, were stripped off. In Akpınar's view, concerns for hygiene and aesthetics were behind Prost's decisions (Akpınar 2003: 83–84). Furthermore, old neighborhoods formed a contrast to the newly built modern settlements of the city; they belonged to the Ottoman past, which the new nation-state was determined to leave behind.

Here an interesting rift emerges. As Gwendolyn Wright has argued, in Rabat, Casablanca, or the Kasbah of Algiers, the protection of the old city, ancient monuments, and the vernacular building stock validated the exotic, the untamed, and the fixed traditions of the colony rather than the progressive urbanism of Europe (Wright 1991: 112–13, 120). Not surprisingly then, Prost perceived Moroccan builders not as 'skilled designers' but as 'conduits of a remarkable tradition from which the French could draw at will'. Especially in the design of public buildings, a certain respect for and knowledge of the Other, but still a clear dominance by the West, was visible. To the contrary, in Istanbul Prost was enthusiastic about working with Turkish planners as part of the planning team (Akpınar 2003: 65). Apparently, Prost's perception of Istanbul was different from his perception of North African cities, but it was still connected to his experience as a colonial planner. Here, it was the Turks who modernized the old city of their own accord, and the Turkish planners had the agency denied to local builders in North Africa. Prost must have concluded that whereas such urban interventions 'would ruin the medina's charm' in Rabat (Rabinow 1995: 301), it could only help Istanbul to make headway along its path to Westernization.

## Scene Two: American Experts' Ankara

While major Turkish cities were reshaped by European planners, in rural areas the government channeled its efforts toward reforming villages and 'colonizing the countryside'.<sup>5</sup> Its rigorous development program for a public health service and for social hygiene included establishing small dispensaries, inaugurating vaccination programs, preparing health posters, opening museums of hygiene, and taking cinema projectors to the remotest villages and towns to show educational films (Collins 1929: 9–17). Many aspects of the village law that passed in 1924 consisted of mandatory requirements for the inhabitants to maintain sanitary standards and to keep their homes and water sources clean and healthy. Along with the centralization of a public health system across the country, extensive surveys were conducted to collect statistical information on the population's health.<sup>6</sup>

International philanthropic organizations, such as the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), played a major role in the making of Turkey's new geography of health, from conducting surveys and setting up demonstration villages to deploying experts and providing fellowships (Rose 2001). Many students were sent abroad to train as Turkish 'village missionaries', to borrow a term from Sibel Bozdoğan (2001: 99), who were to carry out public health and social assistance, especially in the areas of bacteriology, sanitary engineering, malaria, child hygiene, and nursing. The RF representatives spoke highly of these students, most of whom were employed in key positions immediately upon their return (Collins 1930: 153–54).

The Central Institute of Hygiene (CIH) was one of the leading public health institutions that used the services of returning students. Established on May 27, 1928, it consisted of three main buildings constructed at different times: the Department of Bacteriology and Chemistry (1928), as well as the Service School of Hygiene and the Serum Building (1932). CIH was intended 'to produce serum and vaccines, provide diagnostic laboratory services, and train personnel in public health work' (Rose 2008; Rose 2001). The RF provided funds for the equipment and the construction of these buildings, including the Service School of Hygiene, which was renamed the School of Public Health in 1936. Dr. Collins was appointed as its first dean (Rose 2008).

Following the correspondence between the RF representatives involved with CIH, one can clearly see that the attitude of American experts toward the Turks oscillated between two contrasting poles. At times, their notes acknowledged some of the nationwide governmental successes, such as the campaign against malaria that was carried out without seeking the help of the RF, or effectively building 'small dispensaries in charge of a doctor in many villages' (Letter from Strode to Russell 1928: 51). Likewise, the new Ministry of Health Building in Ankara was praised, since only a few European cities housed such a modern facility (Letter from Gunn to Russell 1927: 143). However, on occasion, the language in official reports acquired a didactic and even derogatory tone. For instance, in his reports for 1926 and 1927, Dr. Collins explained the importance of the study trip organized by the RF for the

high officials of the Ministry of Health to major European countries:

It is felt that this gift of the Board has accomplished a great deal in opening the eyes of the central authorities to the modern developments in European sanitation. It seems not unlikely that these men read considerably in European literature of what is going on, but to have actually seen things has made a very deep impression upon them ... They may have read the annual reports of the Foundation and they have been told constantly of what is being done elsewhere in Europe, but until they actually saw the results of the Foundation's activities nothing came of it all. The Turk is utterly lacking in imagination; he is essentially a copyist ... They want what can be seen and felt – buildings! (Collins 1926: 405–406)

The experts' accounts of the politics of public health in Turkey of the 1930s bear testimony to the fact that there are many similarities between such national modernization programs and post(colonial) practices across the world, where 'hygienic, moral and social terms' (Lorcin 1999: 678) often overlapped. Greater similarity perhaps was in the Orientalist tone employed both by Turkish officers and the RF representatives in describing current conditions in the villages. This is most evident in the inherent belief that the bureaucrats were carrying the torch of enlightenment, modernity, and development to the long-neglected parts of Anatolia through their 'civilizing mission' (Bozdoğan 2001: 99–100).

## Crossing the Bridge: But Is it 'Europe'?

For both Prost and the American experts, Turkey's image was different from that of a European nation, but it was not perceived as a typical 'Oriental' country either; the new republic had positioned itself as a modernizing center dealing with its own 'margins'. While public health specialists and local bureaucrats often swapped roles as 'colonizers', villagers, and at times the same bureaucratic class, were imagined at the receiving end of modernity. From the viewpoint of the Turkish officials, their admiration and suspicion of foreign experts added more layers to this ambiguity. It is true that urban planning and public health alike, as systems of power, served to incorporate the 'ignorant' or 'dissident' groups into the machinery of nation making. In both cases however, the production of knowledge was closely tied to numerous encounters and negotiations between multiple actors. Such interchangeability of subject positions often resulted in competing narratives of modernization, urban development, and the whereabouts of the dividing line between Europe and Turkey – which for the last few decades has been cautiously (and in the last few years, somewhat edgily) resting on a road sign in Istanbul. One would almost immediately notice it after entering the Bosphorus Bridge from the 'Asian side' of the city: 'Welcome to Europe'.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am borrowing this term from James Sidaway (2000).
- <sup>2</sup> Abidin Kusno's phrase, cited from a personal conversation (2004).
- <sup>3</sup> In Turkish architectural literature, *İç Kolonizasyon* first appeared in the writings of Zeki Sayar in the monthly journal *Arkitekt*. See, for instance, Zeki Sayar, 'İç Kolonizasyon', *Arkitekt* 2(62) (1936): 46–51. In the paper, I am using this concept with reference to Sidaway (2000) and McClintock (1992).
- <sup>4</sup> For the French practices of colonial city planning, see Zeynep Çelik's canonical work on Algiers (1997).
- <sup>5</sup> Here I am referring to Bozdoğan's use of the term (2001: 97–105).
- <sup>6</sup> One such example is the *1937 Turkey Anthropometry Survey* published in 1940 (T.C. Başvekalet 1940).

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## Author Information

Kıvanç Kılınç received his PhD degree (2010) in the History and Theory of Art and Architecture Graduate Program at Binghamton University, SUNY. His current research focuses on the transnational connections and their consequences, which shaped social housing practices in Turkey and the Middle East. He currently teaches in the Department of Architecture at Yaşar University in Turkey and is managing editor of the *International Journal of Islamic Architecture (IJIA)*. Kılınç has published in academic journals such as *History & Memory*, *The Journal of Architecture*, and *New Perspectives on Turkey* as well as in edited books.

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