



Uluslararası Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi
The Journal of International Social Research
Cilt: 10 Sayı: 52 Volume: 10 Issue: 52
Ekim 2017 October 2017
www.sosyalarastirmalar.com Issn: 1307-9581
Doi Number: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17719/jisr.2017.1901>

ANALYSING NATIONALISM(S) IN TURKEY THROUGH SCULPTURE: AN ETHNO-SYMBOLIST APPROACH*

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Abstract

Sculptures at public spaces represent more than art; they constitute the symbols of nationalism of the particular state. They visualize myths that help to strengthen national feelings; scenes from wars or scenes that recall the emotional bounds that form the nation. Looking from the ethno-symbolic framework, sculptures help to form common myths, recall common historical memories and become a part of the public culture, renewing national emotions in a daily basis of public life.

This paper focuses on the role of sculptures in the formation of Turkish nationalism, arguing that, sculptures can be battleground for competing perspectives of nationalism. Particularly when the common ground for different societal segments is shaken, each segment has a different interpretation for the common myths and memories. Then, sculptures can have positive or negative meanings depending on the point of view. Turkey is an illustrative case, there are three different perspectives to nationalism: secular, Islamist, and minority views. This paper discusses the role of sculpture as representation of common myths, forming and contesting nationalism referring to these segments.

Keywords: Sculpture, Representation, Common Myths, National Symbols, Public Culture, Nationalism, Turkey.

1. Importance of Symbols in Smith's Nationalism

As Anthony Smith emphasises, nationalism is not only about politics, but it is as much about culture (Smith, 2013: 11). It is not only a political but also a cultural phenomenon, takes its roots from the public culture and re-establishes itself in the public through culture. Representation of a nation occurs through language and symbols (Smith, 2013: 15). Symbols have two functions; differencing the self and the other and meanwhile creating the self (Smith, 1998: 182). Plastic and visual arts are among the tools to connect the nationalist symbols with the nation. And among the different mediums of art, sculpture, particularly monuments in open public spaces, are direct mediums for the transfusion or representation of nationalist discourse. Monuments represent a persistent identity with their existence for a long time, as if they have witnessed the existence of the nation through ages (Smith, 2002: 239).

Smith gives importance to language and symbolic representation of nationalism, which contains national monuments and war memorials (Smith, 2013: 17). Through these, a visual representation of the nation takes place; defining, glorifying and unifying the nation (Smith, 2013: 19). The nation is "made real", "tangible and accessible to all" by the symbolic creation of abstract concepts like nation and national identity (Smith, 2013:171). Remembering Ernst Renan's definition of nationalism as "an everyday plebiscite", the monuments help to remind the nation of its identity and values in a daily basis, reminding the national identity and solidifying it every day (Renan, 1882: 26). National monuments also function as visual representation of common culture, myths, beliefs, sharing a common history, thus a common identity. As solid structures, monuments also stand for continuity, their immortal nature equates with the everlasting conception of the nation. Therefore, monuments represent and reproduce the national identity, helping the adoption of this identity by the general public.

Although not sharing ethno-nationalist perspective but following a modernist approach towards nationalism, Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger also mention the importance of sculpture. They mention it as a tool to invent traditions; sculptures represent the preferred image of the state, nationalism and history (2006: 315). Even though sculptures do not necessarily invent a tradition independent of the existing cultural motives and myths, they have power as a symbol in the formation of competing nationalistic views. The power of the symbol here comes from its connection with the sentimental aspect of nationhood according to ethno-nationalists (Smith, 2013: 118). Sculpture is a tool used for representing ethno-symbols of the nation like culture, memory, history, symbols, myths, traditions, etc. It is particularly used effectively for the

* I would like to thank to Istanbul University for the support in preparation of this article (BAP project number: BEK 24262).

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'sacred' features of nation (Smith, 2013: 195): devotion to the sacred territory represented through statues of the heroes, wisemen, or mausoleums; golden age myth represented through statues, monuments, and architecture; and collective destiny of the nation represented through heroes, martyrs and unknown soldier statues. Statues recall the 'watershed events, dramatic incidents or symbolic crises' and turn them into semi-sacred happenings, 'creating a point of grand force, respect, and historical connotation' (Smith, 2002: 241). To create these impacts the monuments are placed in public spaces like schools, university campuses, in front of public buildings or in public squares where as much people can see them and keep them in their visual memory. In these sculptures, the size is mostly grand, so that the visualised event or person is made more impressive. If the monument is in a public square, the city planning and architectural elements are designed in compliance with the aimed message of the monument, such as the 'republic square's in most cities. With these monuments, the nation becomes defined in space and time (Smith, 2002: 241). Nations's history, victories, special characteristics are defined through these symbols. The sculpted persons or stories can be altered in appearance and meaning to have better coherence with the present values and their aimed targets (Smith, 2002: 247). For instance, Antonio Canova's Napoleon sculpture which glorifies the national leader by visualising him as the mythological God of War, Mars, statue in 1811 or Bertel Thorvaldsen's Napoleon bust in 1830 resembling him to Roman emperor Sezar, carry clear political messages and utilise art as a tool of propaganda (Huntürk, 2016: 162).

Sometimes different actors of the same event can gain importance in different time periods according to the nationalist interpretation or same event can be evaluated differently as time passes (Smith, 2002: 248). So they are context dependent; like removal of previous nationalist leaders when they are overthrown because the history is re-written. Sometimes sculptures can be a battleground for different segments of the same nation if there is a division among these segments regarding the definition of nationalism. Moreover, they can serve as a tool for the group that holds the power, to disseminate their nationalism perspective as the dominant one, which will in turn create conflict and that conflict can be traced through the sculptures. The following sections will discuss these situations through modern Turkey's sculptures.

2. Sculpture as a tool in forming and contesting nationalism: Turkey

The highly segmented composition of the nation in Turkey poses challenges to the nationhood if we compare it with the nation pattern that Smith describes (Smith, 2013: 160). The segmented composition of the people is not compatible with the requirements that the population needs to be unified socially and there should be a common, unified history with shared memories and myths. With the increasing polarisation in the society, the social unification has been considerably destroyed and instead a highly "segmented society" has emerged (Eckstein, 1966: 34). Usage of symbols for creating a national identity in a segmented society with competitive versions of nationalism, results in creating otherness among the society itself. In this manner, symbols function not only against an external other, but also against an internal other for the sake of creating a particular version of nationalist identity. This contesting nationalism can be followed via sculpture as a public entity.

History of sculpture does not date back to early times in Turkey or the Ottoman Empire. It can have a connection with the Islamic tradition of not welcoming figurative arts, either as painting or as sculpture, due to its connotation with idols or paganism (Başoğlu, 896). Even though Fatih Sultan Mehmet era tried to catch up with Renaissance of Europe, that effort was left aside after his reign and during the following conservative rulers, not figurative or realist arts but abstraction of Islamic tradition was followed (İpşiroğlu, 2005:13). That was the reason behind Ottoman sultans not having figurative sculpture until Abdulaziz, who got himself a bust and a monument done in 1871, after a visit to Europe (Tekiner, 2014: 35). Public appearance of figurative sculptures could only become widespread after the establishment of the Republic, and that was in the form of Atatürk statues.

However, during the beginning of the republic era, due to the conservative and religious approach towards figurative arts, there was a lack of sculptors. As a result, the sculptures of that era were commissioned to foreign sculptors, mostly from Germany (i.e. Heinrich Krippel, Joseph Thorak), Italy (i.e. Pietro Canonica) and Austria (i.e. Anton Hanak). When we consider the political context of the post-World War One era in these countries, the rise of ultra-nationalism, fascism and nazizm in the 1930s, the artistic reflection of these ideologies to the sculptures were significant. The figures were muscular, emotionless, masculine, strong men, representing the Roman past, warriors and strong states. As the sculptors were mostly from these cultures, the first statues in Turkey were created in coherence with this ideological and artistic trend (Demir, 2017: 34).



In the following years, foreign sculptors were replaced by the Turkish sculptors however the public monuments did not show a great variety of personal artistic impression easily. Most of the sculpture in public places in Turkey has been implemented as state commissioned monuments. Through these monuments, the state ideology is reproduced and transferred to the public. Sculpture in the public space functions as a political tool to draw borderlines and put notes to the social memory (Ergin, 2010: 60). Therefore, great artistic freedom could not be expected in state commissioned monuments.

As Smith mentions (Smith, 2013: 57), Turkey is one of the nation states that gives considerable emphasis on national symbols, particularly martyrdom, as nationalism in Turkey functions as a substitute to religion; intensely emotional and sacred. Within this scope, political and military leaders gain special importance in Turkish political culture. Political leaders, particularly whom created a significant societal transformation, are given an almost sacred, semi-messianic position (Smith, 2013: 57). As a result, monumentalising the leaders in public places became significant in Turkey (Tekiner, 2014: 22). Therefore, reading nationalism through Ataturk sculptures, as the most preferred symbol in public monuments, is illustrative in exposing the contesting narratives of nationalism in Turkey. First, as an important component of ethno-nationalist analysis, golden age myths of Islamist and secular segments in Turkey will be discussed in order to clarify the point of difference among these segments. After that, contestation against secular nationalism, which can be equated with state policies for the most part of the republic, from Islamist and minority segments will be reviewed through attacks on Ataturk sculptures.

Golden age myth(s) of different segments in Turkey

As Smith mentions, nationalism resembles religion in terms of adopting differing forms through different periods of time, that nationalism can have competing myths (Smith, 2013: 197). So to say, talking about Turkish politics, there is not one golden age myth, but are competing versions depending on from which ideology to look. From the point of view of the Islamists, the golden age was the most successful period of the Ottomans, while the secular perspective perceives the Ataturk era as the golden age. The minorities however, did not seem to win completely at any scenario.

For Smith, the relation between the past, present and the future can be re-interpretable, through highlighting glorious past, brave leaders or important thinkers which belong to the 'golden age' of the nation (Smith, 2013: 121). However this selection and re-interpretation process needs a sensitive balance to mobilise the nation rather than creating antagonisms. As ethno-symbolist perspective suggests, focusing on the views and interests of the current generation in shaping the history carries grave dangers (Smith, 2013: 119). Unfortunately, Turkey has experienced these dangers. In order to mobilise the dominant segment of the nation, some common myths have been challenged and their symbols are overthrown. Thus, it can be said that, politics of antagonism was in use to increase political consolidation of only one segment.

The golden age myth of the Turkish republic had been perceived as the war of liberation that secured the establishment of modern Turkey. After the establishment in 1923, a series of modernisation steps have been taken such as using Latin alphabet, suffrage right to women, secularism, etc. The leading figure behind the liberation war and the reform movement was Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. He has been accepted as the father of Turks, the war hero, leader of Turkish modernism and values like modernism, freedom, secularism, republicanism were embodied in his figure. Therefore, image of Ataturk has been the most implemented sculpture throughout the history of modern Turkey beginning from 1926, with Heinrich Krippel's Ataturk monument in Sarayburnu, Istanbul (Uzun Aydin, 2016: 229). His image has been and is the symbol of modernity, secularism and republicanism. Sculptures of him aimed to immortalise the republic, its reforms and adoption of its ideology (Uzun Aydin, 2016: 227). However, another segment of Turkish society perceives this image as a symbol of dictatorship, unfaithfulness to religion and traditions of the society. Smith mentions this tension between secular and Islamist tendencies in Turkey by reminding the independence war of Turkey; despite Ataturk was a secular leader, the war was perceived as a victory of Islam or ethno-religious community of Anatolia (Smith, 2002: 240).

To create the political consolidation of the dominant segment in the last decade, a new golden age myth has been recalled. The glorious past of the Ottoman Empire was stressed with particular attention on Sultan Fatih Mehmet the conqueror of Istanbul, Suleiman the Magnificent and lately Abdulhamid. The commemoration of the conquest of Istanbul began an annual ritual. Soap operas, which most of the population follow regularly, increasing borrowed scenarios from the Ottoman past, particularly of the popular sultans of the ruling party. In the representations of these Ottoman rulers, their civilised relations with European counterparts, their interest in Western art and music were not mentioned. Rather, an image that is close to the present Islamo-nationalist discourse was dramatised. On the other hand, celebration of republican holidays has lost significance compared to previous eras. Thus, the common values of the nation



are represented primarily as being conservative and religious in general, rather than the previous representation as primarily sharing the Western values and being a secular society with Turkish nationalism that covered all citizens around Turkish-ness.

Therefore, analysing ethno-symbolic components of nationalism in Turkey, such as golden age myth, leadership myths, common values, history, traditions and religion, reveals the facts that there are more than one nationalism at hand and these are monopolised by competing societal segments. Each segment wants to re-shape the society according to their preferred symbols and golden age myths. The real story behind these is not vital, what is important is the meaning it represents in terms of moral values and characteristics of the national revival (Smith, 2002: 255).

Symbolism of Ataturk Monuments

The Ataturk image in the sculptures carried different symbolic meanings in the first period of the republic and after the 1980s. The first period was the time when the Ottoman past was tried to be changed into a modern and secular Turkey, facing towards the Western world, welcoming European values. Thus, these sculptures were composed as multi-figured monuments, carrying an ideological message to the masses. Ataturk image was sculpted as a strong, healthy, muscular figure, sometimes in uniform and sometimes even half naked. The very muscular 'Ataturk beating the enemy' sculpture in Afyon, Victory Monument, made by Heinrich Krippel in 1936 is very illustrative in this strong image. His strong figure in monuments represented the strong determined leader that would transform the old society into a new, strong nation which would be a proud and equal part of the modern world. The ideological framework of the new republic was transfused through these sculptures. Physical power and endurance represented the features of the Turkish people during the independence war and difficult years afterwards (Parten&Yavuz, 2005: 151). The multi-figured monuments usually staged heroic scenes from the independence war; reminding the nation of their glorious war, their victory, and aiming to create the nationhood around this war. In other monuments, like Taksim monument made by Pietro Canonica in 1928, he was depicted with the women, fighting for her country, in solidarity with the soldiers, or with the youth, reminding the youth of Turkey that the future of the country is entrusted in their hands by him (Yasa Yaman, 2011: 75). Through these monuments, new republic and its modernisation reforms would be embraced by the people, most of whom were illiterate so the visual information was of great importance (Parten&Yavuz, 2005: 150).

After 1960 military coup, image of Ataturk in the public sphere began to be more compatible with the image preferred by the military and in order not to forget him, sculpture-making has been increased (Yasa Yaman, 2011: 78). However, the early enthusiasm and aim of modernism has been lost during 1970s (Bakçay, 2007: 59).

It is also essential to note that, until 1973, most of the sculpture implementations in the public space were of Ataturk monuments. One of the first major incidents that allowed the artists to implement their own artistic expression in the public space was the 50th Anniversary of the Republic event of Istanbul municipality. Twenty statues by different artists were placed in different points in Istanbul. Unfortunately, most of the sculptures were broken or lost as they were not taken good care of (Bakçay, 2007: 120-136). However, the most significant incident about these statues came out to be political. The Islamist political party in the coalition government has opposed one of the statues as it was visualising a naked woman, which claimed to be obscene and inconvenient to Turkish culture and tradition. As a result, the statue, named *Güzel İstanbul* of sculptor Gurdal Duyar, was removed from its place in a lively street in the centre, got lost for some time, and installed in a remote park later (Demirkaya, 2008; Türeñç, 2004). From this incident on, many other similar incidents have been experienced where sculptures in the public space were under criticism of politicians from religious or nationalistic perspectives. Sculptures in the public places are expected to abide with the conservative moral codes and taboos, be consensual and submissive to the state ideology (Ergin, 2010: 61).

The real change in the implementation of Ataturk monuments occurred with the 1980 military coup. After this event, a new period of Ataturk sculptures can be spoken of. The state used the image of Ataturk as a symbol of the ideology of the state and the military and began to place his sculptures all over Turkey, in every main square in every city or town, in every school, university, military base and government building. This extensive project could not be realised by original cast or stone sculptures therefore concrete or polyester/fiberglass copies are used. For instance, the Ataturk monument in Kaş, which was sculpted by Necati İnci, was reproduced 200 times and its copies were distributed all around the country (Yasa Yaman, 2011: 78). This period functioned as not only a vast ideological pressure, but also caused the image of Ataturk to lose its relation with the reforms and ideals of the republic, rather got mythicised (Yasa Yaman,



2011: 78). Ataturk statues became senseless ideological visualisations. A change of meaning of the image has occurred; it began to be equated with the state and military.

Contestation from Minority Segments

As a result of the symbolic change of Ataturk statues, they became symbols of state oppression for the minority populations in Turkey. Ataturk statues have been target of protests for a long time, and for that reason, "a law regarding the crimes against Ataturk" was issued in 1951. In post 1980 period, the state policies, particularly military operations in the Kurdish regions, were protested by destroying Ataturk statues. For instance, as a reaction to legal prosecution against Kurdish organisations, Ataturk statues are destroyed, painted with Kurdish symbols or poster of Abdullah Ocalan was hanged over Ataturk's face (Milliyet, 2014). When the state authorities, with a law order, overthrown the statue of a Kurdish militant in Diyarbakir, the Ataturk statue in the high school garden was burned in response. The video of burning and kicking the Ataturk head was put online and the mob made a statement that 'our aim is not the statues but we did this for revenge of a loss in Lice (a town in Diyarbakir)' (ensonhaber.com 1-2-3, 2014).

On the other hand, state authorities are removing the statues in the Kurdish region which are not compatible with religious and nationalist discourse of the state. Two Assyrian Lamassu statues in the entrance of the town hall were removed after the appointment of state trustee to the municipality. The claimed reason is complaints by Muslim citizens against these 'idols' which are adverse to Islam (Bilge&Temel, 2017). While these sculptures were removed due to religious sensitivities, another sculpture was removed due to nationalistic sensitivities also during state trustee management in another town in the region. Roboski monument was placed to commemorate the civilians who lost their lives by a mistaken bombing from war planes in 2011. The monument was composed of a crying woman figure in the centre and eight standing big size missiles around the sitting figure (Diken, 2017). It is removed in 2017 after the mayor was arrested and state trustee was appointed.

Contestation from Islamist Segments

The second contestation against state ideology and nationalism comes from political Islam. Political clashes between the Islamist and secular segments also resulted in the destruction of Ataturk statues or modern sculpture. The mayor of Ankara, found two statues as obscene, claiming they were evoking sexual feelings, and after saying that 'he would spit in them' removed them from a public park in 1994. After a legal case that was won by the sculptor Mehmet Aksoy, one of the sculptures, named 'Periler Ulkesinde' (In the Country of Fairies), was replaced eleven years later (Erdem, 2005). In another case, a sculpture showing Ataturk holding the hand of a student girl was destroyed in the period of head-scarf discussions in the political scene in 2008 (Hurriyet). During another head-scarf usage in the public life discussion three years later, a statue was destroyed by a man with an axe (Gazete Vatan, 2013). In another case, in 2016, a golden coloured Ataturk statue was painted to black in a school yard, and under the sculpture it was written 'foreign, idol' in a pejorative manner, and 'long live Islam' (Insan Haber, 2016).

As the new golden age myth prefers the Ottoman glorious past rather than war of independence period of Ataturk legacy, the sculptures of the last ten years have used the symbols from the Ottoman past, or simply local symbols like gigantic flowers, oranges, or tea-cups (Yasa Yaman, 2011: 78). One of the most preferred symbols is Fatih Sultan Mehmet as he is the conqueror of Istanbul. The first attempt to make a statue of Fatih took place in 2005 with a plan by the Ministry of Culture, to place a 7-8 metre high monument of Fatih in Bosphorus (Gazete Vatan, 2005). The ministry planned to place the monument in the entrance of the Bosphorus, making it visible to the most, making a resemblance to the Statue of Liberty in New York City. However, the preferred municipality, Kadikoy, was mostly populated and locally governed by the secular segment of the society. As a result of the confrontation of the local population to host the monument in their neighbourhood, the plan was withdrawn (Yasa Yaman, 2011: 79). However, using Fatih as a symbol in the public sphere has not taken back. Instead, Fatih monuments started to be intensely placed in other parts of Istanbul, and in other cities (Hurriyet, 2005; Sabah, 2009; DHA, 2012).

One of the most significant contestation of ideologies that could be seen through sculpture and public space discussion has taken place in Rize. It is the city where President Erdogan is from and the city is famous of its tea production. A year ago, the Ataturk monument in the main square planned to be changed with a vast tea-cup sculpture (Cumhuriyet, 2015). After the reactions, this plan has been suspended. After an attempted and failed military intervention in July 15th, the name of the main square has changed from Republic Square to July 15th Democracy and Republic Square. The public resistance against the failed intervention has been glorified by the authorities and the day was declared a public holiday, the people who have lost their lives declared democracy martyrs, and it became a sacred symbol of the new nationalism. As



a result of this symbolic importance, the removal of Atatürk statue could be legitimised (Al Jazeera Turkiye, 2016; Cumhuriyet 2016).

Conclusion

Ethno-symbolist perspective in nationalism studies claim that symbols are functional in strengthening the national identity through creating the self and differencing the self and the other. For this purpose, a golden age myth is build and visualised through different mediums. Sculpture is one of the most influential mediums in this sense as it is placed in public space in the form of monuments and visualise the national sentiments and ideas in the eyes of the public.

However, when the golden age myth is not agreed upon by all the segments in the society, than it can be contested and so the sculptures that represent a particular version of the golden age myth can be the target of this contestation or conflict. in Turkey, the secular, Islamist and minority segments have been contesting over the symbols through the sculpture.

Sculpture in Turkey became more visible in the public space after the establishment of Republic. It was utilised as a tool to introduce the public with the values of the new republic by commemorating the independence war, martyrs and the leader, Atatürk. Therefore, considerable amount of public space sculpture was composed of Atatürk monuments throughout republican history. As ethno-symbolist perspective suggests, the symbolic meaning and usage of sculpture to implement a particular version of nationalism and to create and renew nationalist sentiment in the masses have been implemented vastly in Turkey through these monuments. However, due to segmentation in the population, especially in the last decades, the meaning of Atatürk statues began to differentiate according to from which segment they are perceived. As a result, they have been the target of attack from both Islamist and minority segments. Meanwhile, the state has targeted sculptures of the minority segments which carry symbolic representation that are against the accepted state values or identity. Thus, sculpture has been a battleground for different segments as they carry a symbolic importance.

This paper tried to show this contestation of different segments in Turkey over public sculpture with various examples. In line with ethno-nationalist perspective, the cases showed that symbols are crucial in establishing the nationalist discourse. As a result, the clash among different nationalist discourses are visually reflected in the erecting, removing, and harming the sculpture in the public area with the reasons of new golden age myths, religious or moral excuses and nationalist or anti-nationalist claims.

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