

Kurdistan: Crafting of National Selves

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Kurdistan: Crafting of National Selves

By Christopher Houston. Oxford, United Kingdom: Berg, 2008. vi + 186 pp. £ 19.99, US\$ 34.95. ISBN 978-1-84520-269-9.

The Kurdish question as a consequence of the rise and development of the modern nation-states in the Middle East and West Asia since the early decades of the 20th century has drawn the attention of scholars of the social and political sciences. Over the last two decades, the number of academic works devoted to analysis of various aspects of Kurdish societies has seen an unprecedented increase. The latest academic work, which tries to provide the reader with an analysis of the formation of Kurdistan and the way that it has been represented in the nationalist ideologies of the modern nation-states that govern the Kurds (ie Turkey, Iraq, and Iran), is by the Australian anthropologist Christopher Houston.

The book, besides the introduction and conclusion, consists of five chapters and is complemented by a rich bibliography and detailed subject index. The introduction points out the theoretical standpoints, and the first chapter focuses on the “nationalizing origins.” Based on careful reference to modern Turkish historiography and the idea of origins, the author points out how Turkish nationalism is produced and crafted through the various areas of textbooks, parliament, the media, the academy, and popular literary culture. This sense of Turkish superiority and its repeated echo in Turkey in its turn gives birth to the construction of Kurdish identity and its search for its own unique origins. This is a dialectic phenomenon that also occurs in both Iran and Iraq. In the second chapter, Houston explores a more detailed account of the historical events, which have been

influential in presenting Kurdistan and Kurdish identity, stretching from the early 16th century until the early 20th century, and the way in which they have been plotted and interpreted toward crafting the national selves. In the third chapter, anthropological analyses have been applied to an examination of a number of ethnographies about the Kurds, almost exclusively written by Western scholars, with the exception of a work by Turkish scholar Ismail Beshikchi (transcribed according to the Turkish orthography in the book). The fourth chapter attempts to contextualize the discourse on Kurds within the trans-national state political practice and the definition of Kemalism as the dominant discourse and interlocutor of the new discourse of projects of nation-building in the Middle East. The final chapter is titled “Kurdish inhabitation of the ‘Kemalist City,’” in which the author, albeit briefly, describes the spatial organization of the capital cities of the Kemalist state and the ways that Turkish, Persian, and Arab nationalism embed their governing narratives in the built environment and architecture of the Kemalist City as a semiotic power. “Kemalism,” a term used frequently in this book, is described as “a trans-national dominant discourse,” which “constitutes a generic governing project characterizing state politics in Iraq, and Turkey. Islamist Iran, too, has a long and still highly influential Kemalist history.”

The book aims to bring together the process of “the production of knowledge about the Kurds” on the one hand and “the instituting of the nation by the regional states of Iraq, Iran and Turkey” on the other hand. The author, explaining his approach and focus, mentions that he does not aim “to provide a short version of the history of the Kurds” but to identify the Kurdish historiography in “its proper context—the social and cultural revolutions spearheaded” by the Kemalist states of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran.

Although the limits of the study do not allow the author to extend the book “to consider the new crafting of national selves in Iraqi Kurdistan currently under way,” he does not hesitate to refer to the experience of the establishing of “the first Kemalist Kurdish state in history” in Iraqi Kurdistan. It is not clear why Houston ignores the experience of the Republic of Kurdistan in 1946 in Iranian Kurdistan and does not take it as “the first” attempt of the Kurds toward a practice of self-rule. The limits of the study cannot justify such a hasty judgment of a Kurdish quasi-state in Iraqi Kurdistan by labeling it as a “Kemalist Kurdish state.” As in some other recent books on the Kurds (eg Natali 2005; Romano 2006), nothing is said about the Kurds of Syria in this book, and no clarification has been made about this exclusion.

An impressive aspect of the book is the author’s vast use of primary sources in Turkish and their accurate translations into English. However, as far as the sources related to the Kurds are considered, they are exclusively in languages other than Kurdish. On some occasions, the given references for a certain concept are not the originals. As an example, the given source for the “first division” of Kurdistan (p 2), a common point in the Kurdish historiography, can be simply traced back in the much earlier sources in both English and Kurdish. Hopefully, some mistakes, such as limiting the Kurdish areas in Iran to a “Province of Kurdistan” (p 3) and inaccurate dating of the White Revolution in Iran (p 135), will be avoided in future versions of the book. Although it is too general to use one and the same label for the different manifestations of nationalism in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, I think the author is generally right to refer to them as Kemalist projects as far as the imposing of a certain ethnic identity upon other ethnic groups is concerned. However, the differences, though few, must be taken into consideration. As an

example, one can refer to the language policy toward the Kurds in Iraq during the mandate period and even afterward, and its significant differences with the language policy of both Iran and Turkey.

While the author suggests the requirements of de-Kemalization, ie “selected reform in the fields of education, historiography and ethnography” and various cultural aspects of art and language, he does not refer concretely to the forces that can fulfill this important mission. The reader can legitimately raise the question of whether all kinds of reforms in the mentioned fields can result in getting rid of a Kemalist City. The author’s argument about the means of de-Kemalization is promising in stating that, in order to pursue the change, the “scaffolding” of Kemalism must be targeted. Demonstrating the ways of targeting the platform of Kemalism, Houston suggests the modification of the “nationalist history taught in the

schools and universities.” Likewise he proposes “a de-nationalization of the dominant constructions of Ottoman Kurdish history,” the autonomization of public art, and the deconstruction of the “Kemalist ethnography” and its influence over ethnographic discourse of Kurdish society. De-Kemalization of the Kemalist City is possible through “pluralization of the political rules or grammar of Kemalist cities.” Citing the poet Walt Whitman—“I include multitudes”—Houston rightly wonders whether “imagined identities other than national – local, familial, professional, sexual etc.— [should] be accorded an autonomous value.”

Christopher Houston has authored an interesting account of the Kurdish question and the way that it has been produced by the Kemalist ideology through various cultural, social, and political discourses. The book opens new horizons toward the understanding of the Kurdish question as a major

problem in the Middle East, where the continuous reappearance of this question requires a solution. The findings of the book can also be used as a worthwhile frame for nation-building far from any ethnocentric approach. While Christopher Houston suggests de-Kemalization of the Kemalist states as a solution, it remains to be seen which forces can carry out this important task and how.

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