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Caprice Hotel: Transforming Islam on the Aegean Coast

In summer 1996, Turkish newspapers, especially those addressing a religious audience, reported the introduction of a new space of consumption: a five-star hotel in Didim (Aydın) designed on the basis of Islamic rules. Fadil Akgunduz, owner of the hotel, announced in a press release on the opening of the facility that this investment was an attempt to enable religious-conservative people to benefit from the blessings of God and use their right to enjoy the worldly pleasures in accordance with their religious beliefs (*Yeni Safak Daily*, 3 July 1996).



PHOTO: ANONYMOUS

Caprice Hotel,
 Didim, Western
 Turkey.

Being the first organized and institutional attempt to serve leisure to a public with a particular social base, that is, a newly formed religious-conservative upper middle class, Caprice Hotel assumed a symbolic importance in the understanding of Islam in Turkey during the 1990s. It also highlighted the multiplicity of possible trajectories that Islam may take. In this sense, Caprice Hotel symbolizes the autonomization of a particular formulation of Islam by a consumption-oriented middle class from that form which could be called 'intellectual Islam'. Unlike the Islam of Muslim intellectuals which almost always is taken for granted by over-representational and reductionist approaches as the decisive form(ulation) of Islam, the Islam constructed and performed by emergent Islamic middle classes is far from being critical of consumerism. Yet, appropriation of consumer culture by rich Muslims who enjoy the Caprice Hotel cannot be reduced to a mere embrace of consumerism disseminated by globalization. Rather, it requires an ideological justification which accompanies the re-organization of spaces like beaches. As an entrepreneurial attempt, Caprice Hotel finds, in the words of its owner, its discursive justification *vis-à-vis* established forms of construction of Islamic identity. As already mentioned, Caprice Hotel is presented as a natural and legitimate instrument of enabling rich Muslims to benefit and enjoy the worldly pleasures created for them by God.

The beach at Caprice Hotel is divided into three sections. The first section is for males only. The second section is designated as a mixed beach and is called as the 'family

beach'. This section is open to all couples independent of their religiosity and use of headscarves. The third and the most interesting section, though adjacent to the other two beaches, is segregated from them. This part of the beach serves, but is not exclusively for, women with headscarves. Those women who want to swim in female-only beaches also use this beach. Despite expectations of strict moral control of the public sphere by Islam(ism), the case of Caprice Hotel indicates that Islam carves its own space within the existing socio-cultural setting by pluralizing its content. It also shows how the meanings and practices attributed to Islam are contested. Actors from different social and economic backgrounds construct different Islamic discourses.

Discussions over the legitimacy of the Caprice Hotel highlights the tension between the 'theory' of those (such as Ali Bulac and Ahmet Tasgetiren) who attempted to forge Muslim public opinion with an emphasis on piety and solidarity and the 'practice' of the post-1980 religious bourgeoisie which articulated a consumer culture in harmony with Islamic principles. Ahmet Tasgetiren, a columnist of the *Yeni Safak Daily*, argued that as far as the sufferings of Muslims in Chechnya are concerned, the practices introduced by Caprice Hotel are not morally acceptable for Muslims. (See A. Tasgetiren, 'Can you see the Chechnya through the windows of Caprice Hotel?' *Yeni Safak*, 16 August 1996). By juxtaposing Chechnya with the Caprice Hotel, he concluded that the latter is not compatible with the basics of Islam. Despite the criticisms of opinion leaders of Turkish Islamic polity, the Caprice

Hotel is no longer the only – though it was the first – five-star hotel to serve religious Turks. A dozen hotel complexes, among them Gulnihal and Sah Inn hotels, followed suit as a response to the boom in the market of Islamic-oriented spaces for leisure.

By emerging as the locus of a new Islam cooperating with consumerism in the age of globalization, Caprice Hotel is a challenge to the construction of Islamic identity based on discourses of exclusion and oppression. It also problematizes the Kemalist understanding of Islam and challenges its version of modernization by symbolically introducing alternative trajectories of be(com)ing modern. ◀

Research on Caprice Hotel was conducted by Mucahit Bilici within the framework of a workshop directed and supervised by Professor Nilüfer Göle. Workshop papers were later edited by Nilüfer Göle and published in Turkish as *İslamin Yeni Kamusal Yüzleri (New Public Visibilities of Islam)* by Metis Publishers in Istanbul in January 2000.

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