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Rediscovering Istanbul's Cosmopolitan Past

FLORIAN RIEDLER

In attempts to market their capital, Turkey's political and business elites present Istanbul as cosmopolitan, and welcoming in outsiders as managers of global corporations or simply as tourists. Yet before the 1990s, when the Turkish public began to rediscover and reevaluate its rich multicultural history, Istanbul's now much vaunted cosmopolitanism was all but forgotten. Among the many publications to nourish its rediscovery are the memoirs of the Turkish-Armenian author Hagop Mintzuri. His last work, *Istanbul Memories*, presents a firsthand

account of the author's life in Istanbul, where he arrived as boy when the city was still the Ottoman capital.¹ It was Mintzuri's first book to be accepted by a mainstream Turkish publishing house, though it was only published in 1993, some fifteen years after his death. *Istanbul Memories* consists of a series of articles, previously published individually in the 1970's by a small Armenian newspaper based in Istanbul. Only when

these articles were translated from Armenian into Turkish, and then gathered in book form, did the public gain access to Mintzuri's unusual and valuable recollections of the city. While the book serves as a timely reminder of the tragic loss of diversity suffered by Istanbul during the first half of the twentieth century, its recent publication is ample proof of the current desire to resurrect the idea of Istanbul as a historically, and thus somehow intrinsically, cosmopolitan setting.

To the modern reader, *Istanbul Memories* presents a lively and colourful picture of the Ottoman capital around the year 1900. Mintzuri moved there, at age twelve, from a village in Eastern Anatolia to work alongside his father, grandfather, and uncles in the bakery the family had leased. They belonged to thousands of poor villagers – among them Albanians, Greeks, Turks, Kurds, and Armenians – who had migrated to the Ottoman capital to earn a living. As

seen through the eyes of a boy from the countryside, the city was full of new, strange, and exciting things: the sultan's palaces, trams, cafes and beer-gardens, department stores, and book shops. At the same time, the book portrays the intimate social relationships of the immigrant craftsmen, shop owners, and workers with whom Mintzuri lived and worked. According to Mintzuri, regardless of their origins, these workers treated each other with respect and cordiality.

In the nostalgic reminiscences of an old man, the rising ethnic tensions and intercommunal violence that characterized the late Ottoman era of his youth play no part. Mintzuri could ignore these tensions, because, like other Mediterranean port cities of the day, late Ottoman Istanbul seemed like an unusually peaceful place if one were to consider the violence of the transitions ahead (as Turkey was recreated from the debris of the Ottoman Empire as a national state). Writing in the 1970s, Mintzuri had seen his once famously diverse capital turn its back on this diversity. This process was drawn out over a period of almost half a century.

While Mintzuri's nostalgic accounts of Ottoman cosmopolitanism mesh perfectly with recent social and economic trends, the book lays bare certain contradictions between contemporary and past discourses regarding the realities of cosmopolitanism in Istanbul. One of the most pertinent of these contradictions concerns the often troubled relationship between diversity and migration.

The image of Istanbul as capital of one of the world's greatest empires is often used to emphasize its cosmopolitanism, a convenient marketing tool in today's global economy. Just as historical monuments are used to remind the tourist of Istanbul's role as the cradle of civilization, the claim to cosmopolitanism employs the notion that, in Ottoman times, many religious and ethnic groups coexisted peacefully in the city. Yet in repackaging Istanbul in this way, certain signs of diversity are championed while others are notably passed over.

Marginalization

During and immediately after the First World War, when it was occupied by the Entente, Istanbul remained a shelter for an Ottoman world soon to be demolished by the emerging forces of national Turkey. Mintzuri himself survived in Istanbul and was spared the deportation and murder that befell his family and the Armenian community of his village in Anatolia. In his own words, it was these events that first compelled him to write about his home and people.

In the early years of the Turkish Republic, the city went through a process that may only be described as paradoxical. On the one hand, the government settled in Istanbul those non-Muslims it thought would not integrate well into the new Turkish nation, the numbers of Greek, Armenian, and Jewish inhabitants of Istanbul swelling as a result. At the same time, however, a process was set in motion by which the same incomers were gradually rendered socially invisible. During the 1920's and 30's, the new regime followed a policy of cultural homogenization. Language and dress of all its inhabitants were to be uniform, at least in public. Large sectors of the different minority communities agreed to, and even supported this policy. In their view, cultural Turkification was the price they must pay to become equal citizens of the new nation.

The government's promise of equality was not kept, however. Legal discrimination of minorities remained widespread and led to the emigration of many individuals. Eager to sponsor a new Turkish class of entrepreneurs, the state subjected all minority communities to economic marginalization. In 1942, this trend peaked with the so-called Wealth Tax (Varlık Vergisi), which ruined the livelihoods of these communities' businessmen and small craftsmen.² Worse was yet to come, the pogrom of 6 and 7 September 1955, against the city's Greek Orthodox community, marked the deathblow of communal diversity in Istanbul. Following conflicts over Cyprus, a mob supported by the government destroyed Greek property and churches. Almost all Istanbul Greeks left the city as a result.

Revaluation of the cosmopolitan past

Among both academics and members of Turkey's general public, this period of Turkish history only began to be reconsidered in the 1990's. A new generation of critical historians began to call into question the official silence surrounding the state's treatment of non-Muslim minorities. For the first time, issues like the Wealth Tax and the anti-Greek pogroms of 1955 were examined from a non-nationalist perspective.

In contrast, Ottoman history offered the example of a seemingly more tolerant treatment of the city's minorities and peaceful co-existence of all its inhabitants. Outside academia, the reawakened interest in Ottoman Istanbul concentrated on the city's belle époque at the turn of the twentieth century. The public was particularly drawn to the Europeanized urban culture of Pera (today's Beyoğlu, a quarter north of the Golden Horn) with its cafés, theatres, casinos, hotels, and embassies. The popular imagination was stoked by tourism and media campaigns involving Istanbul's nineteenth century architecture and black and white photos of its once sophisticated denizens. It was not long before these images became marketable: Beyoğlu's nineteenth-century areas have been renovated and fitted with cafes, restaurants, and a luxury shopping mall. Property prices have risen as a result. In quarters originally fashionable among artists and intellectuals for their multiculturalism, nineteenth century architecture has become an asset on the private property market. Likewise, shopping malls, cafes, res-

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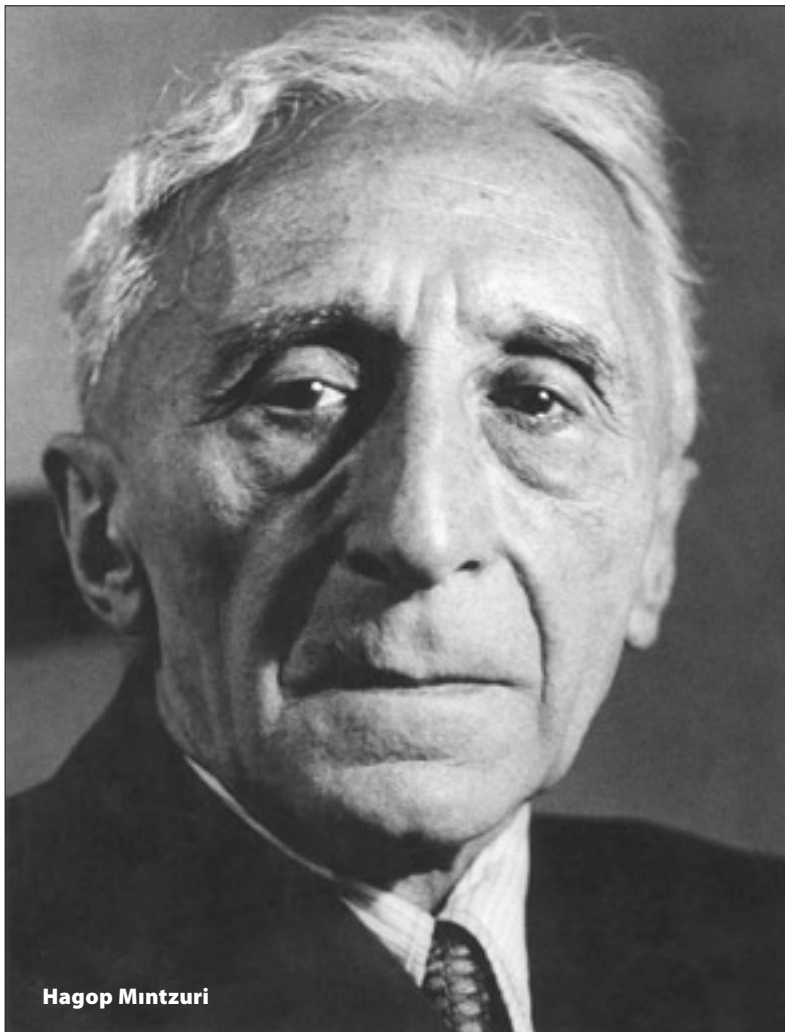
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Hagop Mintzuri

and daughters of rich Armenian traders and Turkish officials at school. Yet, Mintzuri never belongs to their world; he is always excluded on the basis of class and income. Throughout his life, and particularly during Republican times, Mintzuri must struggle to make ends meet (though never explicitly stated, this is presumably due to the economic policies of the time). The author's penury, his feelings of alienation and distress after losing his home and family contribute to the intimacy of his work.

Istanbul Memories represents the voice of poor peasants migrating to Istanbul. It recaptures a past that has all but disappeared from the public memory, which retraces migration patterns back no further than the 1950's. Mintzuri's life story is a reminder that Istanbul's diversity was created by migrants, in Ottoman times as well as today. Despite the popularity of the aforementioned claim to cosmopolitanism, Istanbul's middle classes have not always been as welcoming to outsiders as is now implied. By the 1950s, almost all of Istanbul's non-Turkish communities of Jews, Armenians, and Greeks had left the country under pressure from the nationalist government. They were supplanted by an influx of Anatolian migrants, predominantly from Central Anatolia and the Black Sea coast, among these Alevis and Lazes. Raising its population from one to more than five million in 1980, and thus rendering the city overwhelmingly Turkish and Muslim, these new arrivals struggled to integrate into modern Istanbul. Rather, they were accused of lowering standards of "civilization," and of destroying civic culture and the urban environment with their shantytowns. Migration became a scapegoat for any number of problems, from land speculation to political nepotism. In public memory Anatolian migrants even stand accused of being responsible for the 1955 pogrom.⁴ This is not altogether surprising, it is true for example that, among the shock troops that plundered Greek property, beat up its owners, and torched churches,

there were many Anatolians, some bussed in for the occasion. Newcomers to the city were the natural political clientele of the Democratic Party, which organized the riots against the Greeks of Istanbul. Nevertheless, the claim that it was only the migrants that were responsible for the pogrom's atrocities is unreasonable; without the help of the local authorities and inhabitants such violence would simply not have been possible.

Ultimately, despite modern claims to cosmopolitanism, the arrival of migrants has rarely been welcomed by Istanbul's established population. The injustice of this attitude is worth noting. For, despite the levels of prejudice, the new waves of Anatolian migrants have managed to establish themselves in Istanbul and, in so doing, have returned to the city much of its historically diverse flavour. Moreover, with the economic opening of Turkey in the 1980's and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, still more immigrant communities have started to settle in the city. During the 1990's, the war against the PKK in Turkey's South East also brought in Kurdish refugees. As their numbers soar, the migrant communities increasingly assert their political, religious, and cultural identities. As these displays meet with the global (consumer) culture associated with new businesses and visiting tourists, a peculiarly modern form of multiculturalism, a hybrid of past and present, is developing.⁵ More than a hundred years after Hagop Mintzuri first arrived in the city, Istanbul's cosmopolitanism has been revived conceptually, through a nostalgic appeal to its Ottoman past, and practically, through the arrival of vast numbers of migrants from other areas in Turkey and beyond. As a result, Mintzuri's childhood vision of Istanbul, as a diverse and booming metropole, begins once again to ring true.

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restaurants, and pubs in the inner city entertainment district of Beyoğlu have increasingly used its nineteenth century architecture as a stage for consumerism.³

This repacking of Pera/Beyoğlu, as a cosmopolitan locale *par excellence*, is particularly important because of its resonance with contemporary struggles over Turkish identity. To the city's modern middle classes, the area stands as a symbol of urbanity and sophistication, rooted in a history that is European, modern, and "civilized." Equally, this picture accords with a determinedly secularist vision of the city as a whole. A contrasting view became politically relevant in 1994, however, when the Islamist Welfare Party won the local elections for the first time. To these Islamist politicians, Pera/Beyoğlu's Europeanized multiculturalism carries profoundly negative connotations, ones that speak predominantly of cultural alienation and loss of traditions.

The translation and publication of *Istanbul Memories* must be considered in light of the ongoing reappraisal of Istanbul's cosmopolitan past. At first glance, Mintzuri's nostalgic recollections of turn of the century Istanbul, penned by a member of one of its minority communities, connects very well to the popular imagination today. Old photographs, provided by the publisher, add to its appeal. However, the book has more to offer than the usual clichés on cosmopolitanism. For, Mintzuri's deeply personal eye-witness account of a once multicultural and peaceful Istanbul, prior to the advent of nationalism, is free from the political agenda that so distorted the image of Ottoman cosmopolitanism in later times.

Migrants transforming the city

Mintzuri does not merely present nostalgic visions of Istanbul's cosmopolitan past. He also points to stories of migration which, though easily forgotten by inhabitants of Istanbul with a dislike of "outsiders," remain very much part of the city's character. *Istanbul Memories* was written by a rural migrant, and thus a social underdog. Given this fact, it is not surprising that the themes of poverty and exclusion are here ubiquitous. On first arriving in Istanbul, the author has to buy new clothes and lose his accent so as not to stand out. He lives in a world very different from belle époque Pera, though no less multicultural and diverse. Indeed, in his account, these two worlds sometimes meet. For instance, when he ventures into Pera or sits side by side with the sons

Notes

1. H. Mintzuri, *Istanbul Anıları (1897–1940)*, (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı, Yurt Yayınları, 1993).
2. R. N. Bali, *Cumhuriyet Yıllarında Türkiye Yahudileri*, 2 vols. (Istanbul: İletişim 1993 and 2003).
3. E. Eldem, "Ottoman Galata and Pera between Myth and Reality," in *From "Milieu de Mémoire" to "Lieu de Mémoire"*, ed. U. Tischler (Munich: Meidenbauer 2006), 18–37.
4. A. Mills, "Boundaries of the Nation in the Space of the Urban: Landscape and Social Memory in Istanbul," *Cultural Geographies* 13 (2006): 367–94, pp. 383–5.
5. K. Robins and A. Aksoy, "Istanbul Rising: Returning the Repressed to Urban Culture," *European Urban and Regional Studies* 2 (1995): 223–35.