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Derrida à l'oeuvre: "Doing Theory" Against Inequalities



### Reading the Inheritance of the Unforgivable with Derrida: 'One Nation, One Language, One State' and 'One Religion'

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# Reading the Inheritance of the Unforgivable with Derrida: ‘One Nation, One Language, One State’ and ‘One Religion’

Ebru Öztürk

## Abstract

This article explores the consequences of the Latin alphabet’s implementation in Turkey in 1928 and the imposed homogenisation processes that underwent through the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish nation-state in Turkey. Jacques Derrida’s ‘quasi-concepts’ of inheritance, autoimmunity, democracy to come, forgiving and the mondialatinisation (globalatinisation)—adding depth in discerning Turkish politics—are being discussed. The prevailing political position of AKP, Turkey’s ruling party, is scrutinised to deconstruct the Republican heritage. This paper argues that AKP ‘reaffirms’ the Republican ideology from which it inherits its legacy.

“The Turkish State, with its territory and nation, is an indivisible entity. Its language is Turkish.”

—Article 3 of the Turkish Constitution<sup>1</sup>

When Derrida gave his well-known talk, “La différence,” in Paris in January 1968 after being invited by the Société Française de Philosophie, he started his lecture by saying “Je parlerai, donc, d’une lettre” [I will, therefore, speak of a letter] (3).<sup>2</sup> Je parlerai aussi des lettres (I will speak of letters, too), specifically letters that have been replaced by the Latin alphabet. These letters had, in a swift

and transformative act, ousted the script, which has been a combination of Arabic and Persian letter forms, overnight in 1928 within the boundaries of modern Turkey.

The uprisings conducted by diverse minority groups within the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century, with the goal of achieving nationhood, played a pivotal role in the eventual fragmentation of the Empire. Historically, the Ottoman Empire had adeptly accommodated a diverse array of minority communities, each with its unique linguistic and cultural heritage. However, the early policymakers of the Turkish state embarked on a deliberate reversal of the Ottoman Empire's model of diversity. Under the banner of "national unity and indivisibility," they officially endorsed a policy of monolingualism. This shift was underpinned by a prevailing apprehension that the existence of linguistic diversity within the nation could potentially pose a formidable challenge to the formation of a cohesive national identity. Consequently, the reform-oriented bureaucrats and ideologues of the Republic embarked on a series of Western-inspired reforms, with the most prominent being the adoption of the Latin alphabet in 1928. These state-sponsored measures, including the linguistic transformation, culminated in a profound estrangement of the populace from their own cultural heritage. This imposed Alphabet Revolution (*harf devrimi*), referred to as a "coup de la lettre" by Derrida in his correspondence written during his stay in Istanbul (*For What Tomorrow* 10), while emblematic of the Republic's pursuit of modernity, severed the entire nation from its own cultural traditions and historical continuum, thereby ushering in a collective amnesia experienced at the national level (Sungun 229). These transformations bore particularly distinctive ramifications for the Kurdish population residing within the newly constituted Turkish nation-state.

The primary objective of this article is to critically analyse and engage with this profound transformation by means of an analysis of a letter authored by Jacques Derrida during his sojourn in Istanbul, in 1997, which was addressed to French philosopher Cathrine Malabou. In the analysis of the consequences stemming from the replacement of the Arabic alphabet with the Latin alphabet in Turkey, as illuminated through the reading of Derrida's correspondence, I aim to explore his 'quasi-concepts,' including but not limited to 'inheritance,' 'autoimmunity,' 'democracy to come,' 'sovereignty,' and 'forgiving the unforgivable.' These concepts hold profound relevance for the analysis of the aporias that emerged in the wake of the transition from the Ottoman Empire, marked by processes of Turkification. The analysis will focus on the aspects related to transliteration, collective amnesia, and the subsequent cultivation of nationalism. To explore Derrida's conception of democracy's autoimmunity and

inheritance can offer significant perspectives on the persistent political impasses in Turkish democracy, which is “never present but is always deferred” (Derrida *Specters*). According to Derrida (Borradori in Chérif) abstract conceptual constructs, including gender, ethnicity, and language, exercise a governance over human existence and may, in this regard, be classified as institutions. Deconstruction, signifying the process of recognising and displacing the oppressive framework inherent in all institutions, can be applied, without distinction, to both the concrete and conceptual domains (xiv). Bernstein expounds that Derrida adopts a practice in which he identifies a concept within what he consistently characterises as ‘the heritage’ and subsequently employs a multifaceted analysis encompassing historical, contextual, and thematic dimensions to elucidate the inherent logic of that particular concept (viii-ix). Derrida had indeed linked deconstruction with the notion of inheritance, suggesting inheritance as a plausible definition for deconstruction (Haddad).

Derrida’s understanding of ‘inheritance’ is crucial in examining the complexities of Turkish republican ideology and the transition from the Ottoman Empire, as the prevailing popular opinion that “the conservative Islamist AKP<sup>3</sup> (Justice and Development Party) governments, in opposition to the secular republic ideology, initiated anti-republican transformations in Turkey” represents a misconceived perspective, largely born out of historical oversimplification and collective memory distortion. Through deconstructing the republican heritage, I aim to critically engage with the past and to identify the inheritances and legacies that continue to shape the present especially through the AKP and its political position. In *Rogues*, Derrida argues that democracy is a constantly evolving and unfinished project, always striving for a future state of justice and equality. This concept of ‘democracy to come’ resonates with the experiences and aspirations of Turkish democracy, which is in a state of flux and constantly grappling with the tension between its past and future. According to Derrida, democracy is subject to the governance of an autoimmune logic, as elucidated by Michael Naas in “One nation...indivisible,” and this logic assumes a significant role in the concept of ‘democracy to come.’ Derrida’s assertion that democracy is autoimmune implies that democracy faces internal threats and self-destructive tendencies arising from its own inherent logic. This concept elucidates the paradoxes and self-destructive tendencies inherent in Turkish politics, not only concerning the annihilation of Kurdish identity but also the profound collective amnesia that has permeated society due to the alphabet change, leading to a historical disconnection which can be described as a manifestation of rootlessness. A rootlessness that has been driven

by “a primitive conceptual phantasm of community, the nation-State, sovereignty, borders, native soil and blood” (*Specters* 102). The rootedness, as Derrida contends in *Specters of Marx* (103), is rooted primarily in the memories or anxieties of displaced people and it disrupts not only the flow of time but also the spatial dimensions of identity, highlighting the complex interplay between temporal and spatial dislocation. In his exploration of the interplay between democracy and sovereignty, Derrida posits that sovereignty and democracy are intertwined yet fundamentally contradictory elements. He asserts that the concept of sovereignty, with its theological origins, inherently assumes ‘indivisibility’ (*Rogues* 109). This assumption necessitates an unyielding critique of both the state’s logic and that of the nation-state. This perspective will also be examined in the context of the post-ottoman period and the ensuing challenges posed by the concept of a sovereign nation-state and its mission, which aims to preserve the territorial integrity of the Turkish Nation, ensuring the indivisibility of the country.

I only think of that, I mean of her, of it, of the letter. In this case, of that of the Turks, of the transliteration that befell them, striking them full in their history, of their lost letters, of the alphabet they were forced so brutally to change, a short time ago, from one day to the next, on the orders of an extravagant, lucid, but cruel emancipator of “modern times”, as you know, the brilliant military hero (s.g) K.A.,<sup>4</sup> who brought his subjects into step with modernity. En route, onward, on with the grand voyage! Forward march! How traumatic. Imagine such a thing happening to us: The President decides that starting tomorrow we will have to use a new writing system. Without changing the language! And any return to yesterday’s letters is forbidden! But perhaps this coup de la lettre, this chance or blow is struck against us every time something happens one has not only to undress but to leave, to set out again naked, change bodies, convert the flesh of the words, of signs, of every manifestation, while pretending to stay the same and to remain master of one’s own language. The violence of this transliteration lays siege to all my Istanbul streets, it superimposes its scars on everything I decipher, on displays of merchandise, faces, architecture, everywhere I take a walk or where, by means of so many signs, my memory of Algiers is revived, my Moroccan, Greek, Palestinian, and Israeli memory also. Turkey is different again, but I had a certain “memory” of it even before arriving here. I “recognize” everything, fatally, for one can recognize without being cognizant, whence the principle of ruin at the heart of travel (Derrida in Malabou 11).

According to Derrida, trace is “the necessary violence of any mark, and, thus of any institution” (Beardsworth 50). Through drawing inspiration from

Derrida's letter, this article will undertake an analysis of the traces left by the shift from the ethnically diverse Ottoman Empire to the ethnically and religiously homogeneous Turkish Republic. While analysing these ruins, the foremost aspect of my inquiry pertains to the phenomenon of collective amnesia induced by the adaptation of the Latin alphabet. Derrida in "Faith and Knowledge," which is dedicated to unravelling the resurgence of religion ('abstractly') and the latent influence of Latinity on the historical trajectory of religion, introduces the concept of 'mondialatinization.'<sup>5</sup> The transition from Arabic script to Latin in post-ottoman period can be construed as a manifestation of the broader process of adopting a Latin-centric worldview, particularly in terms of secularisation perceived as inherently Western. Thus, the adoption of Latin script represents not merely a linguistic change but also a powerful embrace of Latinity, encompassing all its institutions, aligning with Derrida's framework of mondialatinization. Subsequently, my attention is directed towards the Kurdish demographic, particularly afflicted by the multifaceted consequences of this linguistic transformation. Particular emphasis is placed on the experiences of Kurdish women, who find themselves disproportionately subjected to the processes implicated in the construction of this amnesia, primarily through the policies aiming their enforced assimilation. And lastly, the attention is directed to the ruling party AKP, who has delineated Islam as being conformed to the parameters prescribed by the official ideology of the Turkish state.

### **Deconstructing that comes "before us": THE IMPOSED HERITAGE**

As articulated by Derrida in *For What Tomorrow*, one bears responsibility not only for that which is yet to come but also for that which precedes them. Hence, "it is necessary to draw on the heritage and its memory for the conceptual tools that allow one to challenge the limits that this heritage has imposed up to now" (19). Thus, I will commence by attempting to elucidate the aporias witnessed in the transition period from Ottoman Empire to Turkish nation-state that bear a remarkable connection with the historical trajectory of the Republic of Turkey and present-day Turkey.

During the historical period commonly referred to as the "Turkish war of independence" (Demirel 51), which laid the foundation for the transition from an Empire grounded in religious principles to a republican state predicated upon secular nationhood, a complex dual administrative dynamic emerged (51). Concurrently, a multifaceted situation unfolded, characterised by the challenges

posed by the power vacuum engendered by this transition. Following the Armistice of Mudros, and subsequent to a note verbal from the British High Commissioner in Istanbul, that was about to resolve the disorders in Eastern and Northern Anatolia (58), Mustafa Kemal was designated by the Ottoman government as an inspector of the Ottoman army tasked with addressing these concerns. Notably, his constraints for remaining in occupied Istanbul were effectively removed, prompting his departure from the city in 1919 as he embarked on a journey to Anatolia. However, despite his initial appointment as an Ottoman inspector, Mustafa Kemal resigned from military service and assumed a pivotal role in the Erzurum Congress, a seminal assembly that would pave the way for his leadership (60), this time as a civilian. Mustafa Kemal's participation in the Erzurum Congress of 1919 initially encountered resistance due to perceptions that he had not unequivocally opposed the Istanbul government, which held authority over the Ottoman Empire from 1919 to 1922 (61). However, his participation in this congress transpired after persuasive negotiations led one of the delegates of Erzurum to withdraw and his election as a delegate of the Erzurum constituency ultimately conferred legitimacy upon his role within the power struggle of the period. It is noteworthy to emphasise that, during the collapse of the Empire, in a period characterised by growing nationalist sentiment, a promise made in the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), which offered the Kurds the possibility of a future homeland, was met with hesitation by the Entente Powers, particularly Great Britain and France. These nations recognised the challenges of enforcing this treaty due to the rugged geographical landscape, and they refrained from committing to military intervention. Notably, by January 1923, Mustafa Kemal continued to advocate for local autonomy within regions inhabited by the Kurdish population (McDowell 33). The Treaty of Lausanne, signed on July 24, 1923, which has been an important part of Turkey's foundation myth as a nation-state, and demarcating its territorial boundaries, evidently omitted any reference to the Kurds, and the Kurdish demographic was absent from any classification as a minority group. Instead, references to minority status within the treaty pertained solely to non-Muslim communities, particularly in the context of religious affiliations. Nevertheless, Article 39<sup>6</sup> of the treaty ostensibly afforded linguistic minority groups, irrespective of their religious affiliations, the prerogative to employ their native languages in domains encompassing trade, religious practice, journalism, print media, and public assemblies.

Notably, Mustafa Kemal, who legitimised his power as a civil deputy from Erzurum, a region characterised by a predominantly Kurdish and Armenian population, through the support received from Western powers during the

Lausanne Conference orchestrated the abrogation of the 1921 Constitution, which had contained provisions outlining the establishment of Kurdish autonomy. Subsequently, the 1924 Constitution has been implemented and embarked upon the establishment of a unitary nation-state. This transformation from the ethnically diverse Ottoman Empire to the ethnically homogeneous nation-state of the Turkish Republic is emblematic of the imposition of a mythical doctrine emphasising “one state, one nation, one flag, and one language.” This doctrine has served as a symbol of the coerced assimilation and erasure of minority cultures.

In the contemporary milieu, Turkish governments persist in asserting that their approach to ‘minority affairs’ adheres rigorously to the precepts delineated within the Treaty of Lausanne and the nation’s citizenry uniformly enjoys equitable rights, and there subsist no minorities, whether defined ethnically or nationally, excepting those of a religious complexion. However, Turkish collective consciousness remains profoundly influenced by the traumatic and protracted dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, an experience that engendered an enduring specter of insecurity and humiliation. Turkish nationalism, born in the ordeal of territorial loss, is irrevocably tethered to these historical vicissitudes. Consequently, it is imbued with an amalgamation of fear, reflexive hostility towards ‘external forces’, an almost instinctive tendency for defensive violence, an aggressive disposition stemming from a complex interplay of inferiority and superiority complexes, and a xenophobic penchant for exclusionism.

In the emerging stages of the 1920s, the Turkish state embraced the conviction that modernisation necessitated a comprehensive civilisational shift from the erstwhile ‘backward’ and ‘traditional’ societal framework of the Ottoman Empire. The guiding ethos that would underpin the fundamental characteristics of the Republic of Turkey became known as Kemalism. Central to the Kemalist project was the aspiration to effectuate the transformation of the religiously and socially heterogeneous Ottoman Empire into a secular, homogeneous nation-state characterised by linguistic and ethnic homogeneity.

In this context, nationalism which is construed as a consequence of the disruption of traditional modes of existence and the obliteration of tribal, ethnic, and linguistic affiliations engenders a reconfiguration of personal and collective identity when prior identities have been rendered obsolete due to profound societal transformations (Fishman 114, 139, 286). The emergence of a national identity transpires in tandem with the establishment of a nation-state and, consequentially, the consciousness of the populace undergoes a heightened politicisation. Henceforth, nationalism, that manifests as a deliberate and



structured entity, exerts its influence beyond the confines of the national sphere towards objectives that encompass the realms of politics, economics, and religion.

The post-ottoman period marked a discernible shift towards the politicisation of a singular ethnic identity and the concomitant erosion of other ethnic and religious groups. The emerging Republic undertook hegemonic policies with the aim of dissolving the Islamic and traditional identities ingrained in the erstwhile Empire. This endeavour sought to assert control and reinforce the primacy of ‘Turkish nationality’ and ‘Turkish nationalism.’ A land once inhabited by diverse ethnicities and religions underwent a transformation into the territorial domain of a singular Turkish nation, as envisioned by Turkish establishments. Practices of genocide and forced deportations emerged as the most extreme political tools deployed in the construction of Turkish nationalism. Populations that had historically cohabited within the Empire in relative harmony, such as the Armenians, Assyrians and Kurds found themselves categorised as fundamentally unassimilable. Consequently, “undesirables’ of Turkish nationalism” (Altuğ 184) became subjects of targeted annihilation or compelled relocation. This tumultuous process culminated in the tragic events of the Assyrian genocide (Sayfo) in October 1914 and Armenian Genocide in 1915, and the Pontic Genocide in 1916 characterised by mass deportations and resulting in the loss of more than one and a half million Armenian, a quarter of a million Assyrian lives (Gaunt 2021) and hundreds of thousands of Pontians.<sup>7</sup>

### **“Reshaping ‘Turkishness’: Kurdish Women as a target in Dismantling Kurdish Identity”**

So, out of sheer perversity, in order to confirm my illiterate prejudices, I will limit myself to one remark, to a political “metonymy:” as I told you to begin with, since my arrival I have been obsessed by what must have been going on in the head of the handsome Kemal Ataturk when he decided to impose a new form of writing on his “subjects:” “Okay, to work, it’s done, there is a new alphabet! Let’s set out on the road to new letters!” On the pretext of entering modern culture a disciplined people thereby become as it were illiterate, no longer capable, from one day to the next, of reading centuries of memory. There you have it, a terrifying way of leaving one’s country in search of who knows what adventure, the most monstrous but perhaps the only way of doing so, by means of amnesia! Learning to write differently, to write an unpublished letter (this one and not that one, totally, (s,23) unique but a borrowed letter, one that seems borrowed in the brand-new

novelty of its address). Under the threat of whip, of the dictatorship of time, under the constraint of an apparently arbitrary discipline, but one which, as always provides the best reason, in the world for what it does. Isn't this the necessary and malevolent condition, this machination, for something to happen? for a leaving (sortie) to take place, that is to say without return? Who knows? (Derrida's letter from Istanbul, 10 May 1997, 25)

One of the initial actions within the Turkish nation-building project was the prohibition of the myriad languages spoken within the republic, a fact that manifest in a series of constitutional provisions. For example, Article 88 of the 1924 Constitution<sup>8</sup> stipulated that "Everyone in Turkey is called a Turk without discrimination on the basis of religion or race." Subsequently, in March 1924, in alignment with Turkification policies, Article 66 of the Turkish Constitution reinforced this concept by asserting that "Everyone linked to the Turkish state through the bond of citizenship is a Turk." The designation "Turkish" was enshrined as the exclusive and official language of the Turkish Republic. The official language of a state serves as a symbol delineating those included within the ambit of national policy. Cultural racism (see Balibar), deeply ingrained in the foundational ideology of the Turkish Republic, resulted in curtailed language rights, restricted access to native language education, hindered socioeconomic mobility, and, ultimately, the forced assimilation of specific populations into the Turkish national identity.

Language occupies a paramount position in uniting individuals into a cohesive group; it serves as a foundational element underpinning the concept of a shared state or destiny. To obliterate an ethnic group within the state, the initial step necessitates the suppression of their language. The Turkish ruling elite, as part of their oppressive measures, mandated that the Kurdish population sever their linguistic ties, provoking strong resistance in response. Since the 1920s, the official ideology of the Turkish Republic has consistently sought to negate the existence of the Kurdish people within Turkey. The objective of this policy was to politically, culturally, and socially assimilate the Kurds into the Turkish identity. In 1930, İsmet İnönü, the successor to Mustafa Kemal, declared, "Only the Turkish nation is entitled to claim ethnic and national rights in this country. No other element has any such right" (White 78).

Language has been, and continues to be, a tool of ideological control over Kurdish society in Turkey, wielding significant influence in the exercise of hegemonic power. The National Assembly introduced government decrees that prohibited the use of the Kurdish language in both public and private spheres. Concurrently, the toponym "Kurdistan," in use since the 12th century, was

proscribed and replaced with “Eastern Anatolia.” These policies were accompanied by state-sponsored scientific research. In 1934, a new law known as “Resettlement law”<sup>9</sup> authorised the relocation of non-Turkish speakers into Turkish-speaking regions. In 1938, the Kurds were rebranded as “mountain Turks,” and over 20,000 Kurdish settlement names were substituted with Turkish equivalents. It is pertinent to acknowledge that Kurdish as a language has faced significant pressure due to its utilisation of the Arabic script, as seen in other regions inhabited by Kurds such as Syria, Iraq, Kurdistan, and Iran. The potential resurgence of the substantially altered Arabic script through Kurds’ usage of it might exacerbate the pressures faced by the Kurdish language even further.

In the process of establishing the Turkish Republic, the advancement of women’s rights and the pursuit of gender equality constituted a central avenue for articulating a novel national identity that contrasted with the Ottoman Empire and its Islamic heritage (Kogacioglu). Mondialatinization (globalatinization), which aimed to influence all institutions, also targeted educated, unveiled women who embraced secularism and Western values. The embodiment of the “modern” woman within the Republic came to epitomise this significant transition from a perceived “backward” and “traditional” past toward a reimagined and “modern” future (Göle). The idealised image of the modern woman was one who embraced secularism and discarded the remnants of what was seen as a ‘barbaric and repressive’ Islamic heritage. She was actively encouraged to participate in the construction of a modernised Turkish national identity (96). While the prevailing Kemalist ideology ultimately proved unsuccessful in the endeavour to assimilate the Kurdish population into the fold of ‘civilised’ Turkish citizens, it specifically targeted Kurdish women as a means to maintain their ‘subordinated’ status by perpetuating culturally racist discourses. Within this paradigm, gendered power dynamics were constructed around the premise that ‘native women’ primarily needed to be liberated from their ‘primitive’ native language, i.e., Kurdish. These women were expected to be educated in Western values through schools that employed the official language of the Turkish state. The Kemalist objective was to ensure that all aspects of women’s existence and actions were conducted exclusively in the Turkish language, a linguistic stance that underscored and epitomised the ‘modernity’ of the Republic.

Illustrating this intent, “The Reform Plan for the East” (Şark Islahat Planı), drafted by the government immediately following the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925, included a 14<sup>th</sup> article emphasising the imperative of establishing girls’ schools, thus signalling the Republic’s strategic policy to curb

the Kurdish rebellion (Simsir 302). Kurdish women, being perceived as the “bearers of culture, traditions,” and the Kurdish language, were targeted for removal from their protected domestic spheres and places of cultural reproduction. This controlled educational approach sought to initiate a process of “cultural, traditional, and linguistic interruption” among young girls. The reconfiguration of ‘Turkishness’ was to be achieved by dismantling Kurdish identity, with the active involvement of Kurdish women.

An exemplary case illustrating this approach is the widely acknowledged educational initiative titled “Haydi Kizlar Okula” (Let’s Go to School, Girls), which spanned from 2003 to 2018.<sup>10</sup> This program demonstrated the Turkish state’s enduring commitment to shaping the lives of Kurdish women, grounded in the same rationale that underpinned the early days of the republic, framed as a “civilizing mission” (Sungun 229). Officially launched as “Haydi Kizlar Okula! (Let’s Go to School, Girls!),” this initiative is led by the Turkish Ministry of National Education in collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund. This extensive cross-sectoral campaign marshalled the resources of various organisations, governmental agencies, and individuals, all in pursuit of bolstering girls’ enrolment rates and achieving gender parity in primary education attendance. At the inception of the campaign, an initial assessment revealed that 273,447 school-age girls had enrolled in educational institutions. However, by the campaign’s conclusion, only 6,239 girls had managed to attain passing grades, with the majority failing to meet the requisite academic standards. Initiatives like the “Let’s Go to School, Girls” program that significantly impose Turkish as the language of instruction in all educational endeavours were deemed crucial steps in the institutionalisation of Turkish education in Kurdish urban centres. However, the limited number of Kurdish girls successfully making the transition to the Turkish educational system (6,239 out of 273,447) provides a telling insight into the outcomes of the campaign.

**REAFFIRMATION OF THE HERITAGE THROUGH AKP: “We didn’t say one language; we said one flag, one religion, one state!”<sup>11</sup>**

The act of reaffirmation according to Derrida (Derrida and Roudinesco 3) involves more than mere acceptance of an inherited legacy; instead, it entails a process of reconfiguring (*relancer*) it in a different manner while actively preserving its vitality. It does not involve choosing the heritage outright, as a defining aspect of heritage is the absence of a deliberate selection; rather, “it is

what violently elects us” (3), it involves a deliberate choice to ensure its continued existence. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to elucidate, through illustrative instances, how the AKP ‘reaffirmed’ the Republican ideology from which it inherits its legacy.

Almost after a decade coming to power, in 2012, when Erdoğan asserted, “We have delineated four fundamental principles as our non-negotiables: ‘One state, one nation, one flag, and one religion,’” he effectively substituted ‘one language’ with ‘one religion.’ This manoeuvre, while ostensibly aimed at distinguishing itself from the preceding Kemalist ideology, paradoxically aligns with the legacy of the ‘one language, one nation, one state’ doctrine it has inherited, rather than adopting a fundamentally divergent stance. During the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey, the concept of ‘one religion’ held significant importance, primarily owing to the monist nature of the republic’s foundational principles. Historical significance of ‘one religion’ within the framework of the Republic’s ideology, becomes most conspicuous through an examination of Mustafa Kemal’s endeavours in 1920 to obstruct the participation of individuals from various non-Muslim religious backgrounds in the formation of the constituent assembly in Ankara (Demirel 82), emphasising the prominence accorded to a ‘one religion’, namely Islam. The articulation of “one religion, one flag, one State” (seemingly indicative of the AKP’s recognition of the Kurdish language rather than the Kurds themselves), resonates with Jacques Derrida’s notion of reaffirmation. This is due to the fact that the AKP’s handling of the legacy inherited from the Republican ideology not only involves a distinct interpretation but also sustains certain aspects of that legacy. The shift from “one language” to “one religion” underscores a change in perspective towards linguistic diversity within the nation—only in a condition wherein there exists a ‘one religion’: Islam. However, it is vital to note that this shift does not necessarily amount to comprehensive recognition or full inclusion of Kurdish identity, culture, and rights within the political and social framework. Rather, it signifies a more instrumental acknowledgment of language. In the case described, while the AKP may appear to depart from the strict ‘one religion’ of Republican heritage, it retains elements of that legacy and interplay between past and present to preserve its vitality.

The Justice and Development Party, in defining Islam within the confines of the official ideology of the Turkish state, demonstrated its unwavering commitment to the principles of the Republic. This commitment was conspicuously accentuated on the February 28 process<sup>12</sup> when the AKP rejected and even censured the political Islamist tradition from which it had originated, mirroring the tenets of Kemalism, which likewise repudiated the values of the

Empire from which it had evolved. In the domain of political economy, the AKP government did not deviate from the Western economic-political paradigm established by the Republic; rather, it deepened its integration within this framework. Concerning matters related to the denial of the Kurdish identity and the denial of non-Muslim minority groups, the AKP staunchly adhered to the established Republican paradigm without differentiation. The AKP sought to solidify its rule through an act of religious pragmatism aimed at the domestic populace, exemplified by the initial converting of the Hagia Sophia<sup>13</sup> cathedral into a mosque in 2020, built by Constantine I in 325 AD, repurposed as mosque in 1453 after the Turkish conquest of Constantinople, which has been a museum since 1935.<sup>14</sup> However, less than a year later, Hagia Sophia was closed, purportedly for a 50-year renovation. This ‘restoration’ amounted to a comprehensive concealment, emblematic of the Republican ideology’s tendency to obscure elements not aligned with its own ethos.

The AKP, in its opposition to Kemalism due to its perceived secularising influence (such as the translation of the Quran and ezan, the call to prayer, from Arabic into Turkish, the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a museum, passing the law regarding the closure of darwish lodges—*tekke ve zaviyelerin kapatılması*—and the alphabet reform), fundamentally posits that the Republic as an idea and a political model can coexist with an Islamic ideology. It espouses a model in which the representation of the people can be realised through ‘legitimate elections,’ akin to the governance structure as seen in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The AKP, because of its position within the state, refrains from adopting a decisive stance against Kemalism, which constitutes an integral component of the Republic. In an effort to demonstrate its alignment with the legacy of Mustafa Kemal, they overuse and instrumentalise a photograph depicting Mustafa Kemal praying during the inaugural session of the First Turkish Grand National Assembly, a ceremony in which the Quran was recited.<sup>15</sup>

The AKP, while diverging from Kemalism in various aspects, remains consonant with the foundational principles of the Republican ideology from which it derives its legitimacy. It stands as a significant political force that plays a crucial role in upholding and perpetuating the legacy of the Turkish Republic.

Indeed, Derrida, displaying keen insight, recognised that in Turkey, openly challenging the deeply entrenched Kemalist ideology at the core of the Republic was a stance that faced reluctance and reticence. In his letter, he subtly hints at his reservations concerning the degree of affection the Turkish populace might hold for Mustafa Kemal:

Here, and everywhere I speak, especially in public buildings, K.A. the “modernizer” rises tall; he is represented standing, as you know, but I am not so sure that the Turks love him, even those who organize the cult of him. Don’t they still hate him for this story of writing (the deepest cut as I see it, in any case, the figure of evil, in terms of every fate it has sealed)? My feeling is that the Turks celebrate, respect, cultivate him-while cursing him. And not only the Muslims! (Derrida’s letter from Istanbul quoted in Malabou and Derrida 13)

Derrida’s rigorous observational and analytical insight enabled him to discern the underlying discontent that arose from—“every fate it has sealed”—the societal disconnection with religion and collective memory during the pivotal transition from the Arabic alphabet, associated with the language of the Quran, to the Latin alphabet. It can be asserted that this discontent constituted a pivotal factor contributing to the ascent of the AKP to political power and its ability to maintain a prolonged tenure in governance. An additional instance of an implied ‘curse’, akin to the concept Derrida alluded to, targeting Mustafa Kemal was articulated at Hagia Sophia during a sermon delivered at a ceremony attended by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.<sup>16</sup> Within the course of his address, the Imam expressed:

These sacred edifices, such as the Hagia Sophia Mosque, were originally constructed and bestowed to endure as places of worship. However, there arrived a period, within the span of a century, during which everything, from this place of worship to the call to prayer, and indeed all religious practices, were prohibited, and the edifice was transformed into a museum. As it is stated in the holy book... “Who could be more unjust and more faithless than them?” “O God, may it not be Your will for such a mentality to befall this nation once more,” he implored.

AKP, from the very beginning, likewise the Turkish republican ideology, appropriates the apparatus of democracy, not as a genuine commitment to democratic principles but rather as a strategic tool, to safeguard its own perpetuation, further bolstering this endeavour through the utilisation of the military, a vestige of the armed forces that played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Republic. The historical examples, such as the 1960 coup d’état, which was purportedly been executed under the banner of preserving democracy, reveal a more self-serving agenda, as these interventions ostensibly intended to safeguard democratic institutions were, in fact, undertaken to preserve the ruling military establishment’s grip on power. Similarly, the events of March 12th, marked by the interruption of parliamentary proceedings and

followed by a series of military coups, were ostensibly justified as necessary interventions to rescue a dysfunctional parliamentary system, but their underlying objective remained the protection of the military's own interests and survival.

### **Concluding Discussion: 'Future to come' (*à venir*)**

Derrida explores the idea that democracy is never fully present or achieved in a definitive sense; instead, it is perpetually deferred or postponed. When democracy asserts its presence, it inadvertently invokes the concept of sovereignty, which, paradoxically, can lead to the undermining or destruction of democracy itself. In other words, the act of declaring democracy's presence can be a catalyst for its undoing. The term "to come" in this context does not refer to a future horizon of potentiality that democracy must strive toward, as if it were merely an abstract idea to be realised. Instead, it signifies the inherent dislocation within democracy, suggesting that democracy is always in a state of becoming or arriving. It highlights the difference between "the future," which can be seen as something foreseeable and programmable, and "*à venir*" (to come), which denotes an unforeseeable arrival of an event, a rupture or disturbance that is unpredictable and open-ended, lacking a predetermined purpose or knowable destination.

Derrida's use of "to come" implies that democracy contains a transformative and disruptive potential within itself. It signifies a promise of change that can manifest in the present moment, emphasising the unpredictable and dynamic nature of democratic processes. The notion of the "democracy to come," as discussed in Derrida's texts, signifies a democratic future that is not predetermined or easily foreseeable. This perspective prompts a call for active engagement, disruption, transformation, and resistance within democratic processes.

Derrida's view encourages a proactive approach to democracy—one that is not passive or complacent but rather engages with urgency and commitment in the present moment. The emphasis on intervention and disruption indicates a willingness to challenge existing structures and norms within democracy, especially when they become oppressive or exclusionary. It emphasises the importance of actively working toward a more inclusive, just, and equitable democratic system. In sum, Derrida's concept of the "democracy to come" calls for an engaged and transformative approach to democracy, one that actively works to shape a more desirable future and remains open to the unpredictable and dynamic nature of democratic processes.



Politics and justice should be conceptualised through the lens of the “event with no prior grammar,” as articulated by Derrida (21). This perspective recognises that politics is subject to the occurrence of events that lack predetermined structures or established precedents. These events not only shape politics but also transcend it, extending into realms beyond the immediate political context.

For Derrida, democracy, in its effort to immunise and safeguard its existence, inadvertently undermines itself by consolidating, unifying, and simplifying the diversity that originally facilitates the emergence of democracy. The multifaceted nature of the citizenry must be confined and controlled within a sovereign entity, such as ‘the people’ or ‘a nation.’ However, this process invariably leads to exclusions and omissions, transforming a heterogeneous collective into a homogeneous entity. These neglected aspects inevitably resurface and challenge the purported sovereignty of any political community, eroding the community’s immunity to diversity and alterity (Naas).

We belong (this is what we take the risk of saying here) to the time of this mutation, which is precisely a harrowing tremor in the structure or the experience of belonging. Therefore of property. Of communal belonging and sharing: religion, family, ethnic groups, nations, homeland, country, state, even humanity, love and friendship, love, be they public or private. We belong to this tremor, if that is possible; we tremble within it. It runs through us, and stops us dead in our tracks. We belong to it without belonging to it...‘relation without relation’, community without community (‘the community of those without community’) (Derrida 130).

In his analysis of Derrida’s conception of democracy’s autoimmunity and its prospective nature designated as ‘to come’, in the essay he contributes to *Adieu Derrida*, Rancière asserts that democracy encounters a deficiency in alterity, necessitating an external source of otherness. This deficiency leads Derrida to embark on a transformative endeavour aimed at disrupting the self-contained nature of democracy. Derrida according to Rancière achieves this by establishing a conceptual link that extends from the state of pure receptivity embodied by the “khôra” to the introduction of the “newcomer.” The inclusion of this newcomer serves as a defining boundary that delineates the prospective horizon of a ‘democracy to come’ (91).

In a text published in the same volume, Alain Badiou posits that Derrida’s primary objective is to undertake the task of “inscribing the inexistent” (39). In the context of Turkey, the “newcomers,” within the framework discussed above, represent the otherness that has the potential to embrace the risks articulated

by Derrida. What becomes essential “to inscribe the inexistent” is the deconstruction of reaffirmed heritage and its associated memory as conceptual instruments that enable the questioning of the boundaries that this heritage has historically imposed. This deconstruction will represent justice (Derrida “Force of Law”). Derrida, contemplating his own Algerian identity, (which may draw our attention due to its parallels with the interplay between Kurdish-ness and the Turkish language), raises the question, “How could anyone have a language that is not theirs?” Consequently, he stresses the that individuals are destined to speak a language that will never truly belong to them (2). Prior to arriving in Istanbul, Derrida had already experienced a profound sense of the alike sentiment, as he had previously been “a hostage of the French, enduringly [*à demeure*].” He acknowledges that a residue of this feeling lingers within him, regardless of how extensively he travels (17). The concept of justice that Derrida developed through his own experiences can be used to address the justice requirements of the others in Turkey.

One of Derrida’s ‘quasi-concepts,’ forgiveness, deeply rooted in the Abrahamic religious tradition and with an Islamic equivalent called ‘helalleşme,’ which can be interpreted as mutually to give or forgive all that has been unjustly taken or done, holds a fundamental paradox at its core. Derrida through exploring the conflicting notions of unconditional and conditional forgiveness argues that true forgiveness occurs when it appears to be impossible. He asserts that the only thing deserving of forgiveness is the unforgivable. This paradoxical nature of forgiveness is further explored by examining the tension within the heritage. On one hand, there is the concept of unconditional, gracious, and infinite forgiveness, extended even to those who do not repent or seek forgiveness. On the other hand, there exists conditional forgiveness, contingent upon recognising fault, repentance, and the transformation of the wrongdoer who explicitly requests forgiveness (34-35). According to Derrida, this duality poses a fundamental question about the nature of inheritance when the heritage includes contradictory injunctions.

In sum, Derrida’s discourse on forgiveness stresses its paradoxical essence, where true forgiveness emerges precisely when it seems impossible. In his interview with Michel Wieviorka, Derrida discusses why the concept of forgiveness, which has its roots in European and biblical traditions, is being adopted and applied to cultures that have different origins and may not have historically embraced this concept. He observes that, there has been a growing trend in 2000s where heads of state from various regions, including Europe and around the world, are publicly seeking forgiveness from their own populations or from other nations. This trend suggests that the idea of forgiveness, which is

deeply associated with religious traditions like Judeo-Christianity and Islam, is becoming a universal and influential value that extends beyond the confines of traditional state authorities and is shaping the entire geopolitical landscape. Derrida, subsequently, referring to Hegel mentions that “Hegel, great thinker of ‘forgiveness’ and ‘reconciliation,’ said that everything is forgivable except the crime against the spirit, namely against the reconciling power of forgiveness” (109-110).

In conclusion, there undeniably exists an imposed heritage marked by the principles of ‘one state, one nation, one flag, one language,’ alongside an inheritance of ‘one religion, one state, one nation’ which have been reaffirmed by the AKP ideology. However, the decision to forgive whether a crime against their spirits has been committed rests in the hands of those vested with the authority to forgive or hellalleşme.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See the source for the Grand National Assembly of Turkey here: [https://www5.tbmm.gov.tr/yayinlar/prestij\\_kitap\\_ingilizce\\_s.pdf](https://www5.tbmm.gov.tr/yayinlar/prestij_kitap_ingilizce_s.pdf).
- <sup>2</sup> 1982. ‘La différance’ in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. (with additional notes) Alan Bass, pp. 1–27. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Originally published in French as ‘La différance’, in *Marges de la Philosophie*, pp. 1–29 (Paris: Minuit, 1972).
- <sup>3</sup> AKP is the abbreviation of “Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi” (which can be translated in English as “Justice and Development Party.”)
- <sup>4</sup> Derrida refers to Mustafa Kemal here.
- <sup>5</sup> Derrida’s concept of mondialatinization emphasises a sense of the “world” that extends beyond physical space. While Samuel Weber acknowledges the challenges of translating “mondial” into English due to its multiple connotations he proposes “globalatinization”. I mention ‘globalatinization’ for non- French speakers, yet I also opt to maintain Derrida’s original French term.
- <sup>6</sup> See the treaty here: [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/lausanne-peace-treaty-part-i\\_-political-clauses.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/lausanne-peace-treaty-part-i_-political-clauses.en.mfa).
- <sup>7</sup> The precise number of victims among Armenians, Assyrians, and Pontians remain unknown because many people died during the deportation, known as ‘tehcir.’
- <sup>8</sup> See <https://www.anayasa.gov.tr/tr/mevzuat/onceki-anayasalar/1924-anayasasi>.
- <sup>9</sup> See here:

[https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR\\_KARARLAR/kanuntbmmco13/kanuntbmmco13/kanuntbmmco1302510.pdf](https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR_KARARLAR/kanuntbmmco13/kanuntbmmco13/kanuntbmmco1302510.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> See here:

[https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/media/2431/file/TURmedia\\_%20Haydi%20Kizlar%20%20%20Okula%20Brosur.pdf%20.pdf](https://www.unicef.org/turkiye/media/2431/file/TURmedia_%20Haydi%20Kizlar%20%20%20Okula%20Brosur.pdf%20.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Erdoğan: Tek dil değil, tek bayrak, tek din, tek devlet dedik!  
<https://t24.com.tr/haber/bayramlardaki-askeri-goruntuyu-kaldiriyoruz.203216>.

<sup>12</sup> On February 28, 1997, the Turkish National Security Council (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu, MGK) released a set of measures aimed at countering Islamist influence, exerting pressure on the government to assert state authority over public religious practices. These measures included the prohibition of wearing headscarves in public institutions. This period of political intervention, often characterised as the “post-modern coup,” came to be known as the “February 28 process.”

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-53506445>.

<sup>14</sup> See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hagia-Sophia>.

<sup>15</sup> Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Cumhuriyet Arşivi (BCA) BCA, 490.1.0.0/34.141.2, 19 Mart 1920. See [https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Sayfa/KurtulusSavasiMuzesi?TSPD\\_101\\_Ro=08ffcef486ab2000337ef60292d2cc5531a5a028ce3d60648939fc289bcbb47096410f9ec2fecfd08c3991496143000ed39762743d434a9c5c216a47e7842f45967a9b6ede67245e2d08f91f8707ad9101c74e3b5d6f983f84c8c07e9a49ec4](https://www.tbmm.gov.tr/Sayfa/KurtulusSavasiMuzesi?TSPD_101_Ro=08ffcef486ab2000337ef60292d2cc5531a5a028ce3d60648939fc289bcbb47096410f9ec2fecfd08c3991496143000ed39762743d434a9c5c216a47e7842f45967a9b6ede67245e2d08f91f8707ad9101c74e3b5d6f983f84c8c07e9a49ec4).

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/erdoganin-gozlerinin-icine-baka-baka-aturke-lanet-okudu-1840222>.

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