Space and the emotional topography of populism in Turkey: The case of Hagia Sophia

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Abstract: Over the past decade, as ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) initiated Turkey’s authoritarian populist turn, it sought to derive legitimacy through extra-institutional avenues, notably the emotional appeal to the repressed “people”, advancing the party’s socio-political vision, countering the arguments of its political opponents and reaching out to, and inspiring its constituency. Turkey’s urban space, bearing the marks of a century of republicanism, provided fertile ground for the deployment of emotion. This article, drawing on an analysis of the events surrounding the mosque conversion of Hagia Sophia and of the relevant media coverage, as well as on elements of 28 interviews with informants with political sympathies across the political spectrum, constitutes an attempt to contribute to the broader discussion of the emotional topography of populism in Turkey.

Subjects: Political Theory; Political Communication; Urban Politics; Historical Sociology; Theory & Political Sociology

Keywords: emotional topography; populism; Turkey; Hagia Sophia; spatial politics

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Commentators on Turkey talk about “Turkey’s populist turn”. During the past decade, the country’s president Erdoğan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) have been reversing the steps towards democratization Turkey had been taking and gave an end to the peace process with the country’s Kurdish movement. Yet, Erdoğan and his party have been winning elections by arguing they have been restoring sovereignty to the Turkish people while eroding democratic institutions. This article takes a look at the handling by Turkey’s government of the recent (re)conversion of the Hagia Sophia museum into a mosque in order to better understand how Erdoğan’s populism has been resting on the utilisation of emotionally saturated space to theatrically win victories over “enemies” and restore “injustice” and create a sense of momentary vindication among its constituency without challenging the very authoritarian structures he and his party have been blaming all along.

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1. Introduction
On 10 July 2020, the Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya) museum in Istanbul opened its doors to the tourists it welcomes on a daily basis. But, on that day, a different, expectant crowd, not interested in the museum itself, had gathered in the surrounding area, expecting the decision of the Turkish Council of State (Danıştay) that was about to annul a 1934 cabinet decree that had turned the then Ayasofya camii (mosque) into a museum, opening the way for Hagia Sophia to become a mosque once more.

Hagia Sophia, a veritable lieu de mémoire with political and religious meaning for different constituencies within and outside Turkey, is by no means new to controversy; the Byzantine Basilica, a potent cultural icon of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, served as the imperial cathedral until the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmet II in 1453, when it was converted into a mosque, a highly symbolic moment for Turkish Sunni Muslims and nationalists alike (Tezcan, 2020, July 20). And since the alteration of the building’s status in 1935 from a mosque into a museum by the Republic of Turkey, it has served as a marker of the triumph of the Republican project over both the ancien régime and alternative political visions.

In this article, I focus on the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque to explore the links that bind urban territoriosity, political conflict, and emotion in the populist discourse of the ruling Justice and Development Party AKP and the antagonistic interpretive frameworks that the latter generates and sustains. Focusing on the Hagia Sophia debate and drawing on interpretations of its most recent (re)conversion gauged from 28 interviews with respondents situated in various parts of the political spectrum, I will chart the spatialization of the aversive and anxious affectivity the debate around the fate of the landmark has revealed. Furthermore, given that emotions do not arise in a vacuum but are, as Gobert (2009) suggests “emergent products of culture […] constructed in and by social contexts, neither transhistorical nor transcultural” (72), I will situate them in the social-historical contexts in which they arose and were nurtured and assess their potential impact in shaping Turkey’s political landscape in the period presided by the AKP.

2. The mise-en-scène of the return of the repressed
The decision was met with cheers and tears of joy among the crowd, with some chanting “Allahu ekber”—“God is great”. Minutes later, in a carefully choreographed follow-up, president Erdoğan signed the transfer of the site to the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet), paving the way for Hagia Sophia to become a working mosque. From that moment on, an atmosphere of jubilation and of “vindication” prevailed outside Istanbul’s “newest mosque”, but also further afield. A photograph of president Erdoğan’s decree was posted on his official Twitter account with the congratulatory comment “Hayırlı olsun”. Outside Hagia Sophia, a muezzin, already in place, called the jubilant crowd to a thanksgiving prayer, while, towards the evening, hundreds more people joined for prayers. The event acquired prominence on social media platforms, with many users reposting Erdoğan’s tweet, others sharing the recorded call of the muezzin, photographs, and videos from the day. Prominent government members joined this chorus with public statements in the media or comments on social media platforms.

The reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque after 96 years represented an important moment for president Erdoğan and his party. Erdoğan had campaigned for, promised the conversion, and had skilfully cultivated anticipation in the run-up of the Danıştay decision. His Justice and Development Party (AKP) apparatus ensured that the court decision was communicated in a way that appealed to an array of emotions. This was by no means something new. Emotional rhetoric permeated the discourse and practice of the AKP since 2007–8, when the party moved from a “politics of patience”, seeking accommodation with the then politically autonomous military and judiciary, to one of tension (Duran, 2013). Under Turkey’s majoritarian authoritarian turn (Özbudun, 2015, p. 42–55; Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016, p. 505–27; Çalışkan, 2017, pp. 97–111), the AKP pursued legitimacy through populist, largely extra-institutional avenues (Sofos, 2016, July 21), the appeal to “the people”—a malleable category—that had, according to the party narrative,
been repressed under Turkey's republican elite for the best part of a century. In this populist discourse, the *People's Will (Milli İrade*)—an expression frequently evoked in Erdoğan's speeches, echoing Adnan Menderes, another “heretic” leader, deposed by the military and executed in 1961), manipulated and disregarded by “the elites” and their foreign masters, clashed with “liberal democratic niceties” such as respect for societal diversity and individual or minority rights or institutions upholding democratic standards. This anti-elitist stress in populism studies may indeed be a rhetorical feature of populism (see Stanley, 2008, p. 96; Mudde & Rovira-Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 151), yet, as the AKP's discourse suggests, it might be dissimulating a more important feature of populism. As Sofos suggests, the marked, largely rhetorical, anti-elitism of populist politics often overshadows populism’s aversion for pluralism and the representation of particularistic interests, which are deemed to be fostered by elites to frustrate the popular will (Sofos, 2018b). It is this feature of populism that has a significant tangible, material impact on political action and governance—the terrain where actual opponents are excluded, silenced or repressed.

In the highly polarized political field characterizing Turkey (Erdoğan & Uyan-Semerci, 2018), (urban) space and political contestations have frequently been mapped onto each other. For the AKP leadership, space has become a vehicle for narrating its vision of a new Turkey, but also for recounting its version of republican history and of contemporary politics in terms of binary divides invested with narratives of betrayal, frustration, resilience and vindication. It is this nexus of emotion and space that constitutes AKP’s field of choice for advancing its social and political programme, countering the arguments of its political adversaries and reaching out to, and inspiring, its constituencies.

3. The AKP’s spatial politics
During the AKP tenure, the state took a lead role in the intensification of neoliberal capital accumulation processes that had already been altering the socio-spatial fabric of Turkey’s cities since the late 1980s, subjecting urban planning to the logic of urban rent ( Şengül, 2013) and accentuating class and socio-spatial inequalities in the form of urban displacement and alienation. Under authoritarian policies geared towards the “forced marketisation” of public resources noted by Kuyucu and Ünsal (2010)—especially of public land and buildings leased or sold to developers, the dispossession brought about by “gentrification” and “redevelopment” schemes without consideration of the historical, cultural or environmental value of the targeted areas and sites rendered urban space a locus of contestation. At the same time, urban space was seen as a canvas on which AKP governments experimented with redesigning Turkey’s cities in the image of their vision of the Republic. To this end, alongside their marketization logic lay a cultural imperative of grafting their New Turkey on the country’s cityscapes through marking urban space with emotionally loaded projects. The gigantic Çamlıca Mosque, Erdoğan’s signature project located in Üsküdar, was, just like other similar interventions in the urban environment, intended to dominate the Istanbul cityscape. The construction of a giant mosque in the historic Taksim Square, across from the site where stood the modernist republican landmark of the Atatürk Cultural Centre, and close to the Greek-Orthodox Hagia Irini Church with which it competes in terms of perceptibility was yet another such project intended to transform the urban texture of Istanbul. Such interventions have been partly vehicles for altering the lived experience of Turkey’s cities—especially Istanbul. This overwhelming transformation of the urban environment deeply impacted on communities, alienating those opposed to, or negatively affected by the AKP urban vision. On the other hand, the bitterness and resentment were framed by Erdoğan and his party as Kemalist discrimination against “the seventy million” as he often refers to those that felt excluded under the Turkish Republic over the best part of the past century. AKP government interventions, notably gentrification and commercialization projects, often heralded as flagships of its vision, such as the redevelopment of the Tarihi Kapalı Çarşı (Beşiktaş, 2018; Tuominen, 2013), or the proposed Gezi commercial development (Sofos, 2018a; Toktum & David, 2015), as well as attempts to “moralize” space such as the Ankara Metro campaign (Sofos, 2017) have often given rise to passionate protests by citizens who felt physically and emotionally marginalized and dislocated and saw their lifeworlds shrinking. Erdoğan has repeatedly referred to such interventions in
emotional terms evoking pride, honour and vindication, while demeaning his critics and the movements that have sprung out of discontent, suggesting that their only motivation is their determination to frustrate the country’s “victory” as he characteristically said on the occasion of the June 2014 ceremony marking the start of the construction of Istanbul’s new airport (Hürriyet Daily News, 2014, June 7).

In this context, the case of Hagia Sophia and its polysemy for different publics provides a clear instance of the intersection of space, emotion and politics in Turkey today. Drawing on Smith (2007) I argue that, throughout its history, Hagia Sophia has acquired meanings that gave and give tangibility to the values that underpin different communities and has been mobilized to assert and affirm them. As a place—a landmark in the Istanbul cityscape and in the city’s social and economic life, and part of a symbolic geography ingrained in the national imaginary, it has proved a potent affective resource with the potential to persuade and mobilize meaning (see Edelman, 1985), and a key element of what I call the politics of emotion in Turkish politics.

4. Place and emotion

Although systematic attention to the affective dimension of society and politics is a fairly recent development, it has enriched our understanding of the political and enabled us to probe to some of its hitherto unexplored aspects. Interest in the ways in which emotion intersects with place, its contextualization, “feeling in place” or “being out of place”, can be traced to work within humanistic geography and its phenomenological heritage. One of the first scholars within this field who stressed the importance of emotive topographies was Raymond Williams (1977) who discussed them under the rubric of “structures of feeling”. A year later, Ley and Samuels (1978) provided hints on the close interrelation between feeling, knowing, constructing and experiencing place. Tuan’s pathbreaking monograph on fear (Tuan, 1979) demonstrated the inextricable links between experience and knowledge of place, displacement and emotion. Among the scholars that shaped the field in politics and sociology, Marcus (2000) points out that “emotion’s role … is pervasive both because it enables past experience to be encoded with its evaluative history and because emotion enables contemporary circumstances to be quickly evaluated” (221). Ahmed (2004) turns her attention to the productive nature of emotions, asking, not what emotions are, but how they prompt action, stressing the significance of exploring how emotions are invested in the material world, how they “stick” to objects and sustain affective economies (8) implying that emotions, understood in this way, have a culture, history, and economy.

In geography, and the sociology/anthropology of space, this turn to emotions and affect has yielded extremely interesting work, roughly at the same time as Marcus and Ahmed wrote. Anderson and Smith (2001, pp. 7–10) were among the first who suggested extricating emotions and affect from the confines of the private and focusing on their interpersonal dimensions and their constitutive role in the very composition of the social. Davidson, Bondi, and Smith (2007) concur arguing that an “emotional geography attempts to understand emotions—experimentally and conceptually—in terms of its socio-spatial mediation and articulation rather than as entirely interiorized subjective mental states” (3).

More recent research explored the ubiquity of affect as a vital element of city life and its centrality in shaping urban activity (Thrift, 2004), suggesting that emotive topographies constitute an important layer of the geography of the city. Research on emotive topographies by Sofos and Tsagarousianou (2012) focuses on the emotional investments Muslim residents in five European cities make in the process of constructing a sense of community and rendering essentially “alien” urban spaces familiar, while Tsagarousianou (2007), reflecting on the Cypriot and Turkish communities of London demonstrates how the mobilization of emotions by marginalized migrant communities supports processes of placemaking and a sense of rootedness. Emotions in the city and their relationship to citizenship permeate Anna Secor’s ethnography in Istanbul (Secor, 2004). Her narrative of her informants’ “feelings” and their intermixing with the spatial practices of everyday life, her discussion of feeling uneasy, “out of place” or “at home” are part and parcel of her
exploration of the ways citizenship, as a hegemonic process of identity formation, disciplining space, and sustaining power relations is encountered and contested. Turam's (2013), study of the multipolar conflicts stemming from the tensions generated by the demographic transformations of the secular Istanbul neighbourhood of Teşvikiye unravels the complexity of the emotional and “rational” and their interface of the “mundane” with national politics writ large as this is reflected in the responses of residents to the immigration of religious Muslims to their neighbourhood.

Emotions provide a crucial layer of experiencing one's place in the world, as they have a productive capacity—emotional topographies can make, or undo “place” by investing it with particular qualities that circumscribe or enhance the relationship of societies or particular groups with it or render it devoid of meaning or resonance. Particular emotional encodings of place can empower or disenfranchise, dislocate and alienate, while the differential emotional geographies applicable to different social actors are never devoid of power relations and can be mobilized in antagonistic or dialogic ways.

4.1. Contested narratives, contrasting emotions

The 1934 decree turning the former Byzantine cathedral and Ottoman mosque into a museum needs to be seen in the context of the ontological insecurity (Croft, 2012, p. 220–3; Kinnvall, 2004, p. 27) shared by the architects of the Turkish Republic in the aftermath of WWI: the ambient anxiety members of the Kemalist republican elite felt with regard to the effectiveness, reliability, and survival of their state in a rapidly changing world, and the dread of falling behind the Western world seen by them as the locus of progress, development and a model for emulation. To be sure, this is by no means an exclusively Turkish predicament—Nalçaoğlu (2002) points out that the self-identity of societies where modernization is attempted in a non-Western context is most often overdetermined by a sense of “being late”. The exotization of the Ottoman Empire and its invocation as the “Sick Man of Europe” reinforced the binary opposition between western modernity and the “Orient” that underlay the worldviews of the Republican elite and the perceived need to “catch up” (Kadioğlu, 1996) and informed the normative manual they employed to understand and address the “pathologies” of Ottoman society. Converting Hagia Sophia into a museum reflected their determination to “dissociate” the new state that emerged after the Ottoman collapse from its imperial predecessor, sever its links with Islam and “oriental” backwardness, and steer Turkey into the “club of modern nations”.

The new status of Hagia Sophia was a “localized”, yet highly symbolic instance of the “othering” of the Ottoman past. For the republican regime, secularism (laiklik) constituted a key aspect of this process. The desecralization of the Hagia Sophia mosque (and of other iconic Ottoman mosques—formerly Byzantine churches—in İzmir (Sabah, 2011, November 6), Trabzon (Hürriyet, 2013, June 29) and İstanbul (Yackley, 2019, December 3)) and their transformation into museums—secular spaces were used by the Republic to project and affirm its decisiveness and power. Just as the transformation of the original Christian churches into mosques in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries confirmed the dominance of Islam over Byzantine Christianity, the transformation of these emotionally loaded locations into museums symbolically relegated the Ottoman order, to, at best, a historical footnote in the route of the Turkish nation towards modernity and served as a reminder of the victory of the Kemalist Republican project in the struggle over the national imaginary. This antagonistic encoding of Hagia Sophia constituted part of a broader colonization of those who were interpellated as “the people” of the Republic, encompassing a series of reforms, from banning traditional dress codes, adopting a modified Latin script, scripting a new history, Turkifying placenames and surnames, subsuming Islam to a largely secularist national narrative and instrumentalizing it (see Özkirimli & Sofos, 2008).

This colonization of “the people” who were to be part of the Republican experiment made many to feel “out of place”, dislocated in their own land, expected to live lives scripted for, yet effectively alien to them. Given the intensity of the social transformations underway at the time, the status of İstanbul's Hagia Sophia (and other Byzantine churches/Ottoman mosques) was encoded with
meaning and emotions that were to be interpreted markedly differently by the forces that had coalesced around the leadership of the Republican project and were keen to impose their own values and interests, as opposed to those inspired by alternative visions, or not moved by Kemalist values. The latter were effectively exiled in their very own cities, villages and neighbourhoods, having to live in the midst of radically changing cityscapes devoid of previously familiar points of reference. Although, in time, the museum standing in the old peninsula of Istanbul lost its nostalgic, or emotional significance, for many, it remained the subject of contention among conservative and Islamist circles ever since. The polyvalence of Hagia Sophia, as the building is important for both Orthodox Christianity and Islam (Eldem, 2015) made the mosque a particularly potent and charged symbol, a reminder of the ownership of Istanbul and, at a symbolic level, of the sovereignty of the Turkish people.

For, those giving primacy to Turkey’s Islamic character, the 1934 decree that closed the doors of Hagia Sophia to the faithful represented the denial of the “rootedness” and superiority of Islam and, for non-Kemalist nationalists it symbolized the attainment of an incomplete sovereignty, circumscribed by the Kemalist elite and the victorious Western nations at the end of WWI (Gültakin, 2020, June 11; Özbekkeç, 2012). The removal of Hagia Sophia from the religious topography of Istanbul was articulated by opponents of Mustafa Kemal’s politics as an enormous scar for the nation. For them, the sense of “lack”, which Hagia Sophia stood as a powerful reminder of, was complemented by their relative marginalization and suppression under the Republic. As religious conservatism and non-Republican nationalism were viewed with suspicion by the Republican regime, opportunities for these groups to challenge the latter were restricted; exclusion and censorship constituted a source of bitterness and resentment that sustained particular injustice frames (Gamson, 2011) reinforcing their experience of politics through the prism of a historical wrongdoing.

Such was Hagia Sophia’s symbolism of injustice, that it became a central, powerful element in the discourse of Necmettin Erbakan, Islamist leader and Prime Minister from 1996 to his removal from office by the military in 1997. Erbakan, keen to challenge the secular establishment, would close his Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) speeches giving an oath to reopen Ayasofya and calling his audience to emulate him (Gültakin, 2020, June 11). Yet, perhaps no one has expressed more eloquently this sense of injustice and resentment shared among conservative Islamists and nationalists, than Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, one of the most prominent outspoken conservative intellectuals who shaped the political outlook of several leaders of the AKP, including Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as well as the broader conservative political class of today.7

For Kısakürek, Kemalist republicans were “nominally Turks”, as they privileged an essentially amputated version of Turkishness in exchange for their authorship of modern Turkey. They accepted the loss of empire, abolished the caliphate, and suppressed pious Muslims as part of a ruthless program of social engineering. Kısakürek articulated his opposition to Kemalist secularism through his journal Buyuk Dogu (established in 1943) in which he shared his blueprint of an “Islamic revolution” and “the full reversal of Kemalism”. His resentment at the marginalization of religious conservatism coloured his narrative of the early Republic (Kısakürek, 2008)—his accounts of the abuses of the Republican People’s Party’s (CHP) single-party system reduce the ethnoreligious complexity of Turkey’s society into a binary divide between an “anti-Islamic” regime and “a pious people” subjected to untold sufferings and humiliation. In this Manichaeian frame, Hagia Sophia encapsulated the conditional sovereignty of the Turkish “people” and their alienation from their spiritual heritage. In 1965, in an emotional televised address to the National Turkish Student Association, he articulated the function of Hagia Sophia as a repository of aversive affectivity:

Ayasofya is being torn from its spirit by the hands of so-called Turks. From its walls the name of Allah and his prophets’ sacred names are being scraped; the interior plasters are removed to expose the heathen images [the orthodox mosaics covered during the reign of Ahmed I in the early seventeenth century]; and it is being turned into a museum to expose the
greatness of the cross rather than the crescent, in other words, it is being turned into a sarcophagus where Islam is buried. 8

And, later on in the same speech, Kıskıkürk put his finger on the intangible, yet very “real”, meaning of Hagia Sophia: “Ayasofya is neither stone, nor line, nor colour, nor volume, nor the synthesis of these. It is just meaning, only meaning …” (Hürriyet, 2020a). For Necip Fazıl Kıskıkürk, Hagia Sophia’s importance has to do with its symbolic role as the reminder of conquest denied, a confirmation that the victors of the war of independence have ended up being the repressed and of the cancellation of their sovereignty. This highly emotional rhetoric of loss, of the whole array of emotions and meaning Ayasofya represents, of adversity and resentment developed by Kıskıkürk and other conservative ideologues has been central in the political socialization of conservative activists and politicians and has shaped the debate on Hagia Sophia. More broadly, it has symbolized the imperative to radically redefine the Turkish Republic, seen as a state in the hands of “so-called Turks” serving heathens and displacing the true “people”.

The passion inspired by Hagia Sophia sustained the demand to open it to worship by the religious and nationalist right, albeit not necessarily one that was able to become a concrete goal and resonate beyond a relatively small constituency. It was only after the emergence of the AKP, and more specifically, after the party abandoned its “politics of patience” and embraced a polarizing and antagonistic discourse (Duran, 2013, p. 98; Sofos, forthcoming) that a favourable opportunity structure emerged for Hagia Sophia to decisively enter public debate and become the focal point of campaigns and, eventually, court action by the Sürekli Vakıflar Tarihi Eserlere ve Çevreye Hizmet Derneği (T24, 2018, September 12), a civic organization working for “the protection of buildings of historical value” that had also previously petitioned the courts for the reconversion of the former Byzantine church of the Holy Saviour/Kariye/Chora museum (Yackley, 2019, December 3).

It is in that period that AKP governments supported the mosque reconversion of the two museums housed in the former Byzantine church of Hagia Sophia in İzmir, and its Trabzon namesake, that had served as mosques until the establishment of the Turkish Republic. İzmir’s Hagia Sophia museum was transferred, after the completion of restoration works, from the Ministry of Culture to the Directorate General of Pious Foundations (Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü—VGM) and was reopened as a mosque in November 2011 (Hayden et al., 2019). Trabzon’s Hagia Sophia served as a mosque until 1962, when after a University of Edinburgh restoration project revealed its thirteenth-century frescoes, it was reopened as a museum, only for the VGM to reconvert it to a mosque in 2013 (Hürriyet Daily News, 2017, January 18). Although these buildings are not as nationally visible as their Istanbul namesake, they nevertheless have recently been integrated into an AKP strategy of cultural interventions, reversing previous government decisions, thus drawing a boundary between Kemalism and the new Turkey (Yeni Türkiye) which the party is the self-proclaimed custodian of.

4.2. “Feeling” and “Performing” populism: Hagia Sophia as a performative space

On 10 July 2020, the Danıştay decision turned Hagia Sophia into a theatrical stage where emotions were rehearsed, shared and televised. The anxious anticipation of the crowds that had converged in the area effectively made tangible a Turkey pervaded by the divide between the “Kemalist elite” and “the marginalised” who were denied their rights and demanded vindication and restitution. Finance Minister, Berat Albayrak, tweeted Kıskıkürk’s 55-year-old televised address to the Turkish youth of the time, foretelling the reconversion of Ayasofya to a mosque and reinforcing the sense of loss, longing and vindication.9 Pro-government journalists followed suit,10 as did cultural personalities, including a host of actresses11 and actors12 starring in Ottoman period drama television, who, linking the “cinematic” with the “drama” unfolding outside Ayasofya celebrated the decision as the restitution of popular sovereignty.

In the days that followed, a politics replete with emotion unfolded with government supporters relishing this victory that allowed the “repressed” nation to regain the sovereignty denied to it.
Critics, like novelist Orhan Pamuk, depicted the decree as a move to wound Turkey’s secularist heritage and referring to “millions of secularist Turks crying” due to this “affront”. This argument was echoed in novelist Aslı Erdoğan likening it to “a slap in the face of those who still believe that Turkey is a secular country” (Le Monde, 2020, July 13). Interestingly, with the exception of the pro-Kurdish HDP (Democratic Party of the People), the opposition, recognizing the danger of alienating potential swing voters, chose not to render the Hagia Sophia mosque conversion a point of contention (Tezcan, 2020, July 20). Such is the power of the politics of emotion deployed by Erdoğan’s party that Istanbul’s mayor and RECEP TAYYIP Erdoğan’s potential challenger in the forthcoming presidential elections, Ekrem İmamoğlu, after his initial silence, stated that, in his “conscience, Ayasofya has, since 1453, been a mosque” (Hürriyet, 2020b), at the very time that Meral Akşener, leader of nationalist, second largest opposition İYİ Parti, welcomed the conversion, and former presidential opposition candidate, Muhtarrempınçe, declared he was to attend the first prayer at the Hagia Sophia, which indeed he did, albeit choosing to pray outside with those not lucky to have a reserved place inside (Milliyet, 2020, July 24).

On 24 July 2020, the anniversary of the Lausanne treaty, a foundational moment of modern Turkey and a day of paying homage to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Hagia Sophia became the stage for a final ritual where the conservative ideologues’ identification of the location with the conquest of Constantinople, its denial and the final vindication of “the people” and its will were rehearsed. The adjoining area was flooded by a crowd out of tune with the solemn character of a religious ceremony. The mood of those gathered was unmistakably celebratory. The long and turbulent history of the site was drowned in the excess of Turkish nationalist and Ottoman symbols—flags, banners, placards and the occasional nationalist slogans colouring the soundscape. The prayers and recitations from the Quran were almost instantaneously displaced by rhetoric and ritual raising another set of issues: conquest, victory, rightful ownership and its usurpation.

Those present interviewed by the international media confirmed this shift in the signification of the event and the site. They expressed their happiness and relief at the end of years of “waiting” and described the moment as one of sovereignty and vindication as did the majority of my interviewees. Out of twenty-eight respondents, in the second round of the latest presidential elections, sixteen had voted for, or supported the opposition Nation Coalition (including three supporters of pro-Kurdish HDP), and twelve had cast their votes for the winning People Coalition led by the AKP (four for AKP ultranationalist ally MHP, and eight for the AKP itself). Of the twenty-eight, fourteen (six AKP, four MHP and four İYİ Parti supporters) expressed approval of the conversion and had a positive view of the events of the day. Four more (two AKP and two CHP supporters) found the decision divisive but said a reversal by a future government would be ignoring public sentiment. One “Left”-leaning informer dismissed “the AKP’s power games” and seven opposition CHP supporters (including three card-carrying party members) lamented the decision and expressed outrage at the disrespect towards Atatürk. Supporters of the nationalist, second largest opposition İYİ Parti, whose leader, Meral Akşener, broke ranks with her CHP allies, expressing her joy at the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, expressed no qualms with regard to their parting ways with their electoral CHP allies on this issue—one nineteen-year-old female university student and İYİ Parti supporter said characteristically “if one is a nationalist, there is no dilemma”, expressing her approval of the presidential decree converting Hagia Sophia into a mosque.

Responses described the conversion as one restoring popular “sovereignty”, “long overdue”, a “proud” moment, an “end to being told what to do and how to feel”, the “restitution of our faith and heritage”, “addressing a historical injustice”, “a message to those who sow division”, “a punishment to those who look down on us”, to mention some of the most striking of statements. This cursory examination of reactions to the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque suggests that supporters of the opposition are divided on the issue. Evocations of national and popular sovereignty by the AKP and its nationalist allies were not intended only for their own supporters but constituted a means of a war of attrition towards the opposition that either in an official
capacity as in the case of the İYİ Parti, or in unofficial, individual expressions of dissent within the CHP accepted an element of the AKP’s hegemonic project and challenged the edifice of a putatively united opposition. Apart from finding receptive recipients in the İYİ Parti support base, such evocations resonated with the “Republican” nationalism of some of the CHP supporters who saw the Hagia Sophia conversion as an affirmation of sovereignty or an act of assertion of Turkey vis-à-vis its Western allies and created a space of dissent vis-à-vis their party line, however temporary and localized.

Returning to the Hagia Sophia ceremonies of the day, Diyanet President, Ali Erbaş gave the Friday sermon from the minbar holding a sword, a deliberate use of an Ottoman symbol of conquest and of the benevolence of the conqueror, leaving little doubt as to how he intended the occasion to be framed. President Erdoğan, after the prayer and his recitation of the Al-Fatiha Surah made a short statement encapsulating the meaning of the moment:

After the judiciary saw the truth, this place has returned to what it originally was. Now, it will serve all believers as a mosque again. Also, it is a place that people from all religions can come and visit as a cultural heritage of humanity. Now, let’s visit the türbe (grave) of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, the real owner of this’ (Bianet 24 July 2020).

For Erdoğan, the status of the building was not determined by the court as a matter of legality but of “truth”, while its “origin” was placed at the time of the conquest of Istanbul by Mehmet II. This by no means accidental timeline juxtaposed the Ottoman foundational moment to the alternative one of the modern Republic. The reference to Mehmet the Conqueror as the real and rightful owner of Ayasofya indirectly invalidated Mustafa Kemal’s decision to turn it into a museum—in disregard towards Mehmet’s intentions and, by extension, towards “the will of the people”. In contrast to his affectionate reference to Mehmet II’s violated will, in his statement on the day Erdoğan made no mention of Atatürk just as he had not in his address to the nation on July 10 when he signed the conversion decree. The absence of the founder of the republic, combined with the emphasis ‘on the Ottoman conqueror that Atatürk and his supporters sought to “other”, was an act of symbolic erasure from the place where both historical figures articulated different visions, and, more broadly, from the historical narrative of Modern Turkey imprinted on the building. Erbaş, referring to the 1934 museum conversion decision, went further: “any property that is endowed (as Hagia Sophia was by Mehmet II) is inviolable in our belief and burns whoever touches it; the charter of the endower is indispensable and whoever infringes upon it is cursed” (Hürriyet Daily News, 2020b). Hagia Sophia became the location where suppressed bitterness and anger found their release through a ritual of rebirth and of erasure at the same time.

5. Authoritarian populism and the displacement of sovereignty
One does not need to be a cynic to discern clear political calculations behind president Erdoğan’s handling of the Hagia Sophia case. The Turkish president has proved to be an astute political player with a good grasp of the emotional aspects of the lived experience of politics in Turkey (Sofos, 2016). He has been able to manipulate and accentuate divides within Turkey’s body politic, mobilize the sense of ontological insecurity of many of his compatriots and the array of emotions that surround it (Akkoyunlu & Öktem, 2016; Çalışkan, 2017; Sofos, forthcoming). And he has adeptly used urban space as a medium for appealing to disgruntlement, pain, indignation and upon which he could orchestrate rituals of vindication and popular validation.

After an initial charm offensive, proclaiming his devotion to democracy, Turkey’s European Union accession and resolution of the country’s Kurdish “problem” through peaceful means, he eventually managed to outmanoeuvre a military that had grown accustomed to controlling Turkey’s fragile democracy (Önis, 2015). Yet his growing confidence was matched by an increasing intolerance towards criticism and opposition and a slide towards a majoritarian authoritarianism (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2017; Somer, 2017). Erdoğan and his party thrived in a polarized political system where they represented themselves as the voice of the downtrodden and the repressed, categories that
included the religious conservative constituency of the AKP but proved malleable and elastic, able to incorporate Turkish nationalists and others alienated from the aggressive secularism and illiberalism of the main opposition party, the CHP.

Erdoğan skilfully mobilized emotions to create and maintain the faultlines that kept Turkey polarized (Sofos, 2016, July 21), reminding his conservative, and pious constituencies of the contempt of Kemalist Republicanism for their values, the exclusion of (their) women wearing the headscarf from education and employment, their relegation to second rate citizens as military coups and court interventions annulled their political choices. At the same time, he impressed on his nationalist supporters of the alleged incomplete sovereignty of “the people” and subordination of the country to the wishes of “the West”. His populist discourse mobilized affect as a political weapon to discredit challengers as the people deploying divisive strategies to frustrate the latter’s will.

Beyond Turkey’s borders, he castigated European partners for their mistreatment of their Muslim citizens and accused the US of plotting to undermine. He projected an image of a Turkey fighting against predators inside and around it for its sovereignty and honour. And he sought to deflect attention from the country’s recent financial woes through a controversial hard power projection exercise. Turkey’s involvement in Syria (Tastekin, 2020, May 7), its military presence in Libya (Koseoglu, 2020, June 4), and Iraqi Kurdistan (Aljazeera, 2020, June 17), and its Mavi Vatan (Blue Homeland) maritime doctrine that pits it against several of its neighbours (Hürriyet Daily News, 2020a) have all been presented within the country as evidence of regional strength, but also as reasons for a more disciplined, and united society under a strong leadership.

At home, Erdoğan and his confidants have strived to maintain a polarized political landscape where Kemalism and its excesses can serve as the “Other” against which their diverse constituency—“the people” can be homogenised and consolidated. The composite and malleable character of the divide between “the people” and its “Other(s)” makes it possible to blur the contours of “the people” sufficiently as to encompass anyone with a grievance structured around a perceived exclusion from a public domain of interaction and decision hegemonized by economic, political, or cultural elites” (see Arditı, 2007, p. 75). The AKP has been trying to redraw the country’s cityscapes in line with refashioning Turkey’s identity, by repurposing and renaming as in the case of Hagia Sophia, or through symbolically strategic interventions in Turkey’s urban environment such as in the case of their urban development and infrastructure projects. Their aim has been to project a vision that runs counter to key aspects of the Kemalist one, appeals to different grievances and to graft it on the topography of “New Turkey” and the historically conditioned memories and experiences this sustains and is sustained by.

Hagia Sophia became the setting of such a deployment of emotion to unify the supporters of the AKP but also for the party to claim “ownership” of the issue of sovereignty. The ritual of its conversion to a mosque was intended to resonate among religious and nationalist citizens alike, to many who have seen themselves excluded from reaping the benefits of one hundred years of life in the Turkish Republic. From the atmosphere of celebration among the crowds, to the excess of nationalist and Ottoman symbols mixing with the Friday prayers and Quran recitations, the careful orchestrated performance of Diyanet President, Ali Erbaş that drew on Ottoman imperial ceremonies and evoked the conquest of Constantinople by Mehmet the conqueror, and his “reminder” that the Republican decree that had turned the site into a museum and the architects of the republic who signed it carried a curse, the event was in tune to the atmosphere recreated by numerous television programmes celebrating the Ottoman era, whose casts have been publicly embracing the mosque conversion. Erdoğan’s references to truth and moral order, and his visit to Sultan Mehmet’s grave, the references to whom had eclipsed Mustafa Kemal who would normally be celebrated on the day constituted a means of symbolically enfranchising his supporters and disenfranchising his opponents.
Hagia Sophia provided the opportunity for Erdoğan and his confidants to use this excess of remembrance of the years prior to the Republic, combined with the symbolic erasure of Atatürk, to rewrite a narrative of the Republic as a regime that dispossessed, suppressed those who it was supposed to make sovereign. The pious people, according to this narrative, were deprived of their mosques (with Hagia Sophia being an exemplary reminder of this), those who embraced a nationalism decoupled from the aggressive secularism of the Republic also found a space in this scene, as did those sharing the government’s anti-imperialist rhetoric. The reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque was represented as a restoration, not of the Ottoman past, but of the sovereignty of all those celebrating in their streets and at home, that had been allegedly usurped by the Republican elite at the moment of the foundation of the Turkish Republic. Yet, in the contemporary republic built under the leadership of the AKP, sovereignty has been primarily a theatrical one, one whose alleged loss has been systematically, reminded and lamented, and whose recovery has been “experienced”, “felt” through ceremonies like the one discussed, through political mobilizations celebrating “the people” (Sofos, 2016, July 21, forthcoming, pp. 126–127). Sovereignty is understood as prevailing over “Others”, long gone or conjured up by a regime engaged in a determined effort to curtail political freedoms and human rights while, at the same time, presiding over the dramatic deterioration of the economy, affecting the ability of many of its constituents to make ends meet (Aljazeera, 2021; Sonmez, 2021). This non-substantive sovereignty can be located in the emergence and orchestration by the AKP of “street democracy”—mass rallies during election campaigns, the massive Respect of the National Will (Milli İradeye Saygı) meetings called as a response to the Gezi protests (Biliç, 2018), the calls to “the people” to flood the streets during the 2016 coup to express “their will” and, subsequently, to commemorate this during the Democracy and Unity Day (Demokrasisine Birlik Gün) public events organized every year. The Hagia Sophia celebrations were yet another such instance of “street democracy”, “extra-institutional” rituals through which the regime claims legitimacy, solidifies the unity of the nationalist-populist movement and establishes a “plebiscitary” form of legitimation, parallel to that associated to the weakened representative institutions. These rituals were aimed at expressing theatrically and symbolically an elusive sovereignty, periodically evoked by Erdoğan and his party.

6. Conclusion

Erdoğan’s message promises a strong and effective leadership that will make the Turkish people feel sovereign and restore their pride in a past that almost a century of Kemalism has “denied” them. Yet, in his authoritarian populist vision, popular sovereignty, the sovereignty of the “objects” of the Republic16 for whom the gates of Hagia Sophia had remained shut since 1934, is a “deflected” one. The sovereignty Erdoğan promises to “his people”, is to be experienced solely in the realm of emotion, in the form of solitary instances where a sense of loss, displacement and marginalization is theatrically reversed, and vindication is momentarily enjoyed without challenging the very authoritarian structures he and his party have been blaming all along. How sustainable this delicately orchestrated divorce of emotion from “empowerment” is, remains to be seen. The past, says Gregory, “is always present, of course, in precarious and necessarily partial forms: it has material presence, as object and built form, as archive and text, and it also haunts the present as memory and even as absence” (Elden et al., 2011, pp. 314–5). So do emotions. They cannot be circumscribed or re-scripted in isolation from their materiality, and their separation from it and from the lived experience of politics cannot be sustained.

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Notes
1. Interviews were conducted in the summer of 2020 as part of a project focusing on the ‘Lived Experience of Politics in Turkey’ and were not intended to specifically address the politics of the Hagia Sophia mosque conversion. Out of the forty in total interviews, thirty took place after the
Danıştay decision. Following the original research design, interviewees were asked to talk about their experience of politics, identify memorable instances and comment on them and, out of the thirty, twenty-eight commented on the case of Hagia Sophia.

2. https://twitter.com/RTErdoan/status/1281589428469760000 (accessed 10 August 2020).

3. Hayden et al. (2019), in their discussion of antagonistic tolerance, define “perceptibility” as the ensemble of aspects in the construction of buildings that make them noticeable. Parameters of perceptibility include height (as in the domes of Hagia Sophia and the Süleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul), competitive audibility (such as that between the azaan in Islam and bells in many forms of Christianity or in Hinduism), or sheer size.

4. I use here “dislocate” in the sense used by Laclau when he refers to the dislocation of social relations, or social dislocation (1999).

5. Giddens (1977) uses “dread” in Kierkegaard’s sense: “the prospect of being overwhelmed by anxieties that reach to the very roots of our coherent sense of “being in the world” (p. 37), not a conscious fear or mistrust but rather an “unconsciously organised state of fear” (p. 44). See also (Croft, 2012).

6. It is important to note that the notion of secularism in the theory and practice of the Turkish Republic, and the secular v religious divide, need to be understood in highly nuanced ways that would require much more space than the one available here. Suffice it to say that underlying Republican secularism is an understanding of Islam as a key element of Turkishness, that has rendered the boundaries of the secular and the religious unclear (Özkmir & Sofos, 2008, pp. 55–62). The notion of secularism as this has developed under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk and after has been scrutinized in recent scholarly debate (Akan, 2011; Kuru, 2009; Navaro-Yashin, 2002; Özgülc, 2014; Özyurek, 2006; Parmia & Davison, 2008). In this article, “secularism” is used to denote a continually mutating element of the Turkish political landscape that has been instrumental in dividing/categorizing the body politic.

7. Erdoğan, met Kıskırek, and attended his funeral as a young politician. Speaking on the 30th anniversary of Kıskırek’s death in May 2013 as the Gezi protests were unfolding, he described his life and work as a “guide” for himself and future generations, that enabled his readers to make sense of contemporary Turkey’s past (Singr, 2013, p. 82). More recently, Health Minister, Fahrettin Koca, remembered Fazıl Kıskırek on the occasion of the 37th year since his death by describing him as a pathbreaking intelectual, the nurturer of generations, adding that “[w]hat he called the Great East [alluding to his journal Büyük Doğu and the ideal of an Islamic-Turkish revival] was reborn!” https://twitter.com/dfahrettinikoca/status/1265015124756238336 (accessed 10 August 2020).

8. An audio recording of Kıskırek’s speech, with a transcript in Turkish, can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj67Dw4Fq4Y (accessed 20 May 2021).

9. https://twitter.com/BeratAlbayrak/status/1281546942901768097 (accessed 6 August 2020).

10. https://twitter.com/huseyningulerce/status/1281201049601177689 (accessed 12 August 2020).

11. https://twitter.com/ersobrilbic_tr/status/1281588099138127463 (accessed 10 August 2020).

12. https://twitter.com/ertugrulghazi/status/1282639052727029760 (accessed 10 August 2020).

13. https://twitter.com/OrlaGuerin/status/1281695359108280578 (accessed 10 August 2020).

14. https://twitter.com/meral_aksener/status/1281681351008280578 (accessed 10 August 2020).

15. See, for instance, the interviews featured in the BBC https://www.bbc.com/news/world/europe-53506445 (last accessed 28 July 2020), or the New York Times reports of the day: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/24/world/europe/turkey-hagia-sophia-mosque-prayers.html (accessed 2 August 2020).

16. Beresford et al. (2018), drawing on Tyler (2013, pp. 9–10) use “political abjection” to denote a sustained political strategy wherein opponents of ruling parties are not simply marginalized, but discursively ejected from the “acceptable” sphere of politics and stigmatized.

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