



SPECIAL FOCUS: SPOTLIGHT ON PEDAGOGICAL PERSPECTIVES AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Studying Turkey through a Graphic Lens

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Abstract

In *Turkish Kaleidoscope*, social anthropologist and novelist Jenny White has expanded her repertoire to the graphic novel format to create an account of the violence and political chaos that pervaded Turkey in the late 1970s.² White builds here on her academic work and her own student experience at Hacettepe University in Ankara. Artist Ergün Gündüz has created visual interpretations of place, space, events, and emotions that bring the story to life. This review is a collaborative class exercise for “Turkey: From Atatürk to Erdoğan” at Brandeis University in the Spring 2021 semester. It reflects on the novel as a text for Turkish history; the format of the work; the aesthetic choices of artist and author; and the experience of encountering this work in the contemporary historical moment. The review incorporates student comments as direct quotations. It was co-authored by Chris Martin, a student in the course.

Keywords: Turkey; pedagogy; political parties; violence; student activism; 1970s; graphic novel

In *Turkish Kaleidoscope*, social anthropologist and novelist Jenny White has expanded her repertoire to the graphic novel format to create a uniquely compelling account of the violence and political chaos that pervaded Turkey in the late 1970s. White builds here on her long academic engagement with modern Turkey and her own experience of being a student at Hacettepe University in Ankara in the 1970s to tell this story from the perspective of

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² Jenny White & Ergün Gündüz, *Turkish Kaleidoscope: Fractured Lives in a Time of Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

the students on a Turkish university campus. Artist Ergün Gündüz has created visual interpretations of place, space, events, and emotions that bring the story and its characters to life.

This review was composed as a collaborative class exercise in the course “Turkey: From Atatürk to Erdoğan” (HIST 185b) at Brandeis University in the Spring 2021 semester. With the agreement of the author, Jenny White, Princeton University Press provided access to the proofs of *Turkish Kaleidoscope*. We also had a Q&A session with the author. In exchange for a pre-release look at the book, we offered to review the book as a course text. The review offers critical reflections on the novel as a companion text to the historical study of Turkey; the format of the work; the aesthetic choices of artist and author; and the experience of encountering this work in our own specific historical moment. The review incorporates student comments as direct quotations signaled by quotation marks and italics. Comments by different people on the same topic are also marked with square bullets (■).

Turkish Kaleidoscope is not a historical narrative of the 1970s: rather, it offers readers an opportunity to immerse themselves in the lives of young adults who clashed over politics and ideology across Turkey’s college campuses and city streets in the late 1970s. White and Gündüz portray in vivid detail the political turmoil and violence that pervaded Turkey in those years, the result of ineffectual coalition governments and sustained economic challenges. The central characters are an imaginary quartet of students based on people White herself knew in Ankara at the time, as well as dozens of people she interviewed for the project. Each of the four main characters – three men (Orhan, Faruk, and Yunus), and one woman (Nuray) – comes to Ankara to attend medical school. Together with their personal stories, each represents a different political position along the increasingly fragmented ideological spectrum. In our Q&A with her, White pointed out that much has been written about these years by people on the left, but far less from the perspective of those on the right, and so she deliberately includes characters who articulate positions on both the political right and left.

Although the novel never strays far from verifiable historical events, it is clearly not intended to offer a coherent history lesson. Students recognized this: “*This graphic novel is better read as a series of memories and vignettes about life in Turkey for university students (and others) in this period, than [as] an actual narrative driven by plot and investments in the characters.*” However, they also found that the novel offered valuable insights that their more academic readings did not. These readings included relevant chapters from the more linear narratives by Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 4th ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017) and Yeşim Arat and Şevket Pamuk, *Turkey Between Democracy and Authoritarianism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2019), and topical chapters from Reşat Kasaba, ed., *The Cambridge History of Turkey*, Vol. 4: *Turkey in the Modern World* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

As the course instructor and someone familiar with Turkish history, I was better able to keep track of political parties and fill in the narrative gaps in contemporary Turkish history than the students. However, I agree with the students that the book and its introductory material would not quite suffice

to orient readers to the situation in Turkey in the 1970s, even as it supplied the human stories missing from academic texts. As one student pointed out, *Turkish Kaleidoscope's* utility as a teaching text comes from its bottom-up exploration of 1970s Turkey: "Instead of the top-down view of parliamentary politics and the interpersonal squabbles of the elites, we get the perspective of the ordinary people in the [Ankara] streets, who faced the consequences of the ideologies promoted by the politicians. The action in the book highlighted the increasing polarization of Turkish society and politics that spilled into violence. . . . After reading *Turkish Kaleidoscope*, I have a better understanding of the scale of the violence and how desensitized people would have become. . . ." Reading a graphic novel instead of a textbook enabled students to immerse themselves in an unfamiliar world where people become real instead of mere words and numbers, helping them remember, as one remarked, that "all of history happened to people just like us."

The action of *Turkish Kaleidoscope* is driven by the rapidly shifting political boundaries that left students unsure of where they were in the fray. At the same time, even as violence and chaos engulf their lives, they have individual personal aspirations, interests, burdens, and families. "Although the political landscape dominated their university environment, we still see the more universal human aspects of their lives: one continues to dream of becoming a doctor, while others fall in love." The novel humanizes the political conflicts of this tumultuous time, and many students agreed that the characters of *Turkish Kaleidoscope* recalled real people. "I found it exciting to recognize characteristics in the characters," one student wrote. "I found myself wondering which of my friends would behave like the characters in the novel." One student commented that these characters helped ground them better in Turkey's complex political environment: "putting faces and personal names to political acronyms helps us more directly connect with the rightist and especially leftist groups." Another student addressed the novel's present-day relatability: "the book sheds light on our own experiences. It managed to shock and terrify me as a reader, but also [provoked] questions about our own, contemporary experiences." A third observed: "This made me very appreciative of my situation seeing that I do not have to worry about getting beat up in the middle of campus because of my political views. I cannot imagine having to be fearful and watchful like that 24/7."

The novel allows a reader not only to understand the ongoing political and societal conflict, but also the circumstances of the individuals the novel spotlights. It suggests that ideological affiliations can be haphazard, rather than deliberate, and the characters illustrate how personal relationships affected their choices of affiliation. "Although the characters here were not analyzed in depth (I realize that was not the point), they helped depict a part of history that is hard to explain with conventional methods. Why do people join certain ideological organizations? Why did Turkish people from different backgrounds join different organizations? I believe *Turkish Kaleidoscope* helped to answer these sorts of questions." White herself says that one goal of the novel is to pose more universal questions about what brings people to sacrifice for a cause or a leader, to engage in violence, and to endanger their own lives, or those of family members and friends.³

³ *Ibid.*, 10.

For students like Orhan, political activism polarized student social life, pitting leftists against rightists. The gathering that Orhan and Faruk attend at the beginning of the novel illustrates the powerful social pressure that accompanies these political alignments, compelling young people to choose sides so that making social connections with anyone else becomes impossible. Orhan's association with Faruk, who belongs to the ultra-right Grey Wolves, unavoidably positions him in opposition to the leftist Yunus. The novel illustrates "the dynamic of inter-student violence and the fact that the people fighting were often in class with each other. Yet, so many were willing to judge each other harshly, strictly on who they were thought to associate with." The message is that in this time of social and political unrest, there was no possibility of neutrality. Either you stood with the leftists or the rightists, or you stood alone. The pervasiveness of the conflict was reflected, too, in the competing narratives about what was going on, who was to blame and how the situation might be resolved. Yet, as one student observed: "Political beliefs and affiliations don't just affect one's values and priorities. They also change one's understanding of history. Politics creates divergent narratives; if people can't agree on the facts, how can they agree on anything?"

Turkish Kaleidoscope illustrates just how fragmented the Turkish political spectrum became, with people on both sides confused about the ideological nuances between parties that led to violence and bloodshed. In sketching the lives and political involvements of several characters, White has consciously imitated the kaleidoscope of the title, in which "the object you observe has been repeatedly reflected and appears to your eye as a fractured, symmetrical pattern. . . creating a regular, but ever-changing, view."⁴ In her introduction, she also points to the intentional fragmentation of the narrative, explaining that she chose the graphic novel format to escape the flattening of stories that occurs in academic analysis, consciously aiming instead to retain the nuances and contradictions in the stories as people lived them.⁵ The success of this approach was echoed in some students' reactions to the novel. "White's graphic novel certainly [offers insight] into Turkey in the 1970s, but its sink-or-swim approach to introducing political groups and movements can be challenging for readers to navigate - a reflection of the confusion experienced at times by the participants." In one student's estimation, this fragmented portrayal of ideology "sometimes [hindered the novel's] ability to depict individuals, but it also [did] a great job of creating setting in the work. There is a [pervasive] sense of paranoia for the reader whenever a leftist and a rightist appear at the same time since it signals the beginning of immediate conflict."

Students in the course also picked up on the shifting moods of the university students toward their political engagement, reflecting how successfully *Turkish Kaleidoscope* sketches the complicated relationship of individuals toward their activists. ■ "Students like Nuray and Yunus had to put their lives on hold and sacrifice everything for the sake of their cause, a situation which confronted me with a completely different lifestyle that is difficult to imagine." ■ "While I'm not sure if this

⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁵ Ibid., 9.

was White's intention, one could potentially draw some lessons about political ideology from the graphic novel, especially when the various characters begin to have doubts about the political groups they're in." ■ "One thing this book brought to light that had not come across for me in our other readings was the fatigue of young activists on both sides."

The book begins with a short introductory essay that sketches Turkish history in the 1970s, tracing the country's trajectories up to the present. White also acknowledges the complexity of Turkish politics of the period by providing a glossary to help readers navigate the alphabet soup of political parties and factions. In order to keep track of the characters, White and Gündüz designed a playbill-like "cast of characters" list, featuring thumbnail images of each. Though students found that the men in *Turkish Kaleidoscope* often blended together, the visual confusion is partially mitigated by their distinct facial hair as drawn by Gündüz as well as the supporting material in the introductory section. All of these foster a successful integrated reading of image and text. Nonetheless, one student remarked: "Even with the introduction, I think that if I did not know anything about Turkish history in the 1970s, I would be incredibly lost."

Any review of this book must mention how White and Gündüz depict violence, using the combination of images and words to evoke a sense of the physical danger and emotional pitch of the times. In a way that a purely narrative account could not, they confront the readers, particularly those who have never known such threats, with a way of life that is shocking, and terrifying to imagine. What stood out above all else was the juxtaposition between horrific incidents and the way they were treated as commonplace once the moment passed. ■ "I found it difficult to imagine anything like this taking place here, with people I know involved. At the same time, I was strikingly unsurprised by the scale of the violence and the ideological conflict, specifically among students." ■ "The graphic novel perfectly conveys these emotions and images. It is easy to be detached from descriptions of violence, but seeing these events drawn as images and the panic and disorder felt by the participants emphasizes the tragedy of these events."

Many students commented on how powerful a graphic novel can be as a mode of storytelling, as a means to create a setting, and as a vehicle to convey human experience in history. ■ "We can read as much as we want in various texts about the era, but there really isn't anything like seeing a visual representation, especially of something like this." ■ "I found in the concept of narrating history from below using illustration an extraordinary means to appeal to a broader audience than students and scholars." A Turkish student in the class emphasized how evocative this novel is: "*Turkish Kaleidoscope* adds the layer of visuals to storytelling and provides a more realistic sensation of being there. From the coffeehouses to the way people ate their food, I felt like I was in Turkey."

The students were attentive to Gündüz's aesthetic choices and how they drove parts of White's narrative. They particularly appreciated the way in which he used color to advance the narrative. The beginning of the book, set in the past, is in black and white. Gündüz exploits the contrast when he adds bright red blood to emphasize how deadly a situation had become. ■ "It was jarring to see red splashed across black and white pages, which helped the

reader understand the horror of living it in person.” ■ “The novel deliberately highlights its most visceral moments [in color], notably the gang in orange sweaters who attack and then disappear.” Curiously, while many students noticed the persistent use of red to emphasize blood and the later full color of the panels, none pointed out the May Day banners also painted red or commented on the color “ID photos” inserted throughout the story as it switches its perspective from one main character to another. Throughout the novel, wherever the images include local street signs, shop names, and political graffiti, all of these are translated from Turkish to English on the same page as the image. A Turkish heritage student in the class remarked that these translations emphasized how familiar these terms are to her as someone who visits Turkey regularly, but also how much a reader might miss without them. These are some of the many artistic choices that give *Turkish Kaleidoscope* its unique look.

The 1980 military coup replaced the chaotic attacks of the 1970s with systematic state-sponsored violence in the early 1980s. At this point, the novel jumps to the 2010s and all the panels become full color as the story finds its coda in the lives of its now-aging heroes and their children. Many students mentioned the importance of a conversation that takes place between the older Faruk and Orhan at the end of the novel, as they look back on their youth. This was a time when many effectively put their lives on hold – foregoing education, marriage, family – and allowed the party and the cause to take precedence over all aspects of their lives. They saw their early aspirations crushed and then were forced to settle for whatever gave them the most stability. Faruk and Orhan’s conversation reflects the period’s significance, but it also hints at a sense of regret or perhaps even catharsis. One student observed: “What moved me about the conversation is that in spite of all the tumult in their college years, they seem to have grown up to live regular lives, not particularly political. When people are young, it seems that their life as it is at that time will endure forever, but it doesn’t. . . . Only one of the entire group became a doctor and lived something like the life he originally planned.”

Much like the time portrayed in the novel, the academic year 2020-21, during which we read *Turkish Kaleidoscope*, bore little resemblance to the years preceding it. The COVID-19 pandemic was profoundly disruptive and created deep uncertainties for people around the world. Meanwhile, in the United States, people across the political spectrum were galvanized by the vigorously partisan 2020 presidential elections and the “Black Lives Matter” movement. Equally fresh in mind as our course began was the violent invasion of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Today’s students in the United States do not lack for graphic images of ideologically inspired activism leading to violence – their own or what they confront in media reports. It is no surprise, therefore, that this book about political violence in 1970s Turkey precipitated student comparisons with violence in the United States and the political, economic, and social dynamics that produce it.

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