

Bilge Yesil, *Talking Back to the West: How Turkey uses Counter-Hegemony to Reshape the Global Communication Order*, The University of Illinois Press, Chicago, 2024, p. 233


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Bilge Yesil's book, *Talking Back to the West: How Turkey Uses Counter-Hegemony to Reshape the Global Communication Order*, examines how Turkey has reoriented its strategic communication with the west over the last twenty years, as a response to Western hegemony, identity politics, ideological impositions and security threats by investigating English-language communication efforts made by state-run organizations, loyalist actors in the media and civil society aligned with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government. The author attempts to decipher the codes of the communication strategy developed by President Erdoğan's administration, that position itself as the 'voice of the silent.' This is done by tracking the presentation of complex events simplified into a 'us vs. them' discourse to the masses. In this context, the book provides ample evidence for those who want to see the framework of Erdoğan's autocratic structure and communication strategy. While the book is theoretically weak, it appears ambitious due to its fieldwork and series of interviews. Additionally, the author strengthens her arguments with an extensive literature review. Yesil teaches media culture at the City University of New York and is the author of *Media in New Turkey: The Origins of an Authoritarian Neoliberal State*.

In the introduction, the author examines the English publications, reports, and speeches of state and/or non-state institutions established or re-functionalized during

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Erdoğan's administration to substantiate her arguments. These institutions include TRT World, Daily Sabah, Bosphorus Global, SETA, TRT World Research Center, TRT World Citizen, TRT-related and/or sponsored TV dramas, Anadolu Agency, and the Directorate of Communications directly linked to the Presidency. The book's main topic is the discourse and actions aimed at reversing the orientalist, patronizing, and unequal relationship that the West has engaged in with Turkey for over a century, conveyed through these institutions as a response to the West during Erdoğan's administration.

In the first chapter, the author traces the discursive war waged by Erdoğan's administration against the imperialist discourses of Western media. This coincides with the peak periods of Erdoğan's government during the Gezi Park protests and the coup attempt, providing the author with ample data to decode the counter-discourse strategies of the administration. During this period, as 'security' became a survival issue for the government, Turkey's dialogue with the West constantly hit an iron curtain. Finding ways to overcome this involves operationalizing newly established and existing communication actors. Think tanks like SETA are also described as lifelines for Erdoğan's administration in their relentless fight against Western narratives. These institutions are vital for the administration and are too important to be entrusted to random individuals. The author prefers to thoroughly examine the management and structure of these institutions because the arguments of these institutions are consistent with the administration's discourse.

In the second chapter, the author discusses the legitimacy of Turkey's communication model. Within this framework, the narrative highlights how Turkey faces an intense disinformation attack and embarks on a struggle to mitigate and neutralize Western discursive hegemony. The similarities between Turkey's communication model and those of other autocratic regimes are emphasized. This chapter presents extensive reports and field data, detailing Turkey's efforts to break Western hegemony alongside the Global South.

In the third chapter, the author conveys the codes of Erdoğan's missionary politics, which stands against global injustices faced by Muslims. The reflections of Turkey's quest for justice and prestige in foreign policy are examined through institutions operating beyond its borders. The chapter compiles references to Western hypocrisy and Turkey's discursive superiority by targeting live examples like Islamophobia and generating counter-information. By stating that the moral superiority of the "other" is lost and only Turkey stands by the weak, Erdoğan's struggle against the West is highlighted as an inseparable part of his narrative. However, according to the author, domestic issues prevent Erdoğan from escaping the appearance of double standards.

The fourth chapter explains how Erdoğan's efforts to discredit the West are woven into civilizational discourses. According to Erdoğan, the West has failed and lost its civilizational superiority. Therefore, the West has little to say to Turkey. The author observes examples of the West's failures in TRT World's documentaries and news reports. The Syrian refugee crisis is also used as an argument in the demonization of the West.

In the final chapter, examples of promoting Turkey's civilizational and historical superiority to the world are examined. This section focuses on how Turkish TV series, particularly outside Europe, have proliferated during the AK Party era and maps their discursive alignment with Turkey's foreign policy. These series, along with their producers and actors, narrate a new story of Turkey and challenge Western hegemonic discourses. Through these series, Turkey's historical and geographical responsibilities are depicted, emphasizing the possibilities of reconstructing the magnificent past under Turkey's leadership. The author conducts an extensive review of Turkish TV series in this context.

This book has a series of issues as it is written to be utilized by Western academics and think tanks. In terms of its arguments, content, and particularly what it omits, the book itself constitutes a separate example of disinformation.

The author's significant misunderstanding begins with the simplification of intricate phenomena, such as the Kurdish and Palestinian issue. It is evident from the given examples and explanations that the subject is outside the author's area of expertise and that her analyses do not go beyond clichés (pp. XX; pp. 39; pp. 88). Turkey has a terrorism problem, but the Kurds are not the sole perpetrators of this issue. Kurds are a primary and founding element of Turkey, with their social, political, cultural, historical, and geographical aspects. The marginalization and exclusion of Kurds from the system began with the establishment of the Kemalist/Secular nation-state, and the conflict peaked in the 1990s before Erdoğan took the power. What the author fails to convey is that the only government that has risked seeking solutions to the Kurds' cultural, social, and political issues is Erdoğan's administration. During Erdoğan's administration, Kurdish language and literature departments were established in universities, and the TRT Kurdî channel was launched, promoting the widespread use of Kurdish, unlike previous governments where even singing in Kurdish could result in imprisonment. The main reason for the end of the peace process, as mentioned by the author, was the regional crisis that began with the

Arab Spring, in which the PKK<sup>1</sup> cadre tried to turn into an opportunity. The PKK benefits from this conflict and is the party that sabotages the possibility of peace between the Kurds and the state as well as desires the continuation of this conflict. The Palestinian issue, on the other hand, is a matter of imperial geopolitics and needs to be addressed on a completely different basis. Palestinians are fighting an existential struggle. On this matter, the author seems to prefer staying within her comfort zone by adopting widely held views in North America. Criticizing the state and government in Turkey from Western universities has always been a comfortable and productive endeavor. Just as criticizing Western discourses and actions and Western media from Turkey is highlighted in the book as a point of comfort, the author's position abroad is similar.

Furthermore, the author uses terms like 'Erdoğan Regime', 'authoritarian', and 'emissary' without subjecting them to academic scrutiny, and compares Turkey with Russia, China, and Iran without providing context. However, the author cannot be unaware that Turkey has one of the most transparent elections globally. Indeed, in the 2024 local elections, Erdoğan's nationalist/Islamist coalition was defeated, while the Kemalist/Kurdish bloc achieved victory (also called anti-Erdoğan coalition). Erdoğan has won all elections since 2002 and has succeeded in national referendums as well, making it biased to equate his election processes with those of leaders considered dubious by Western standards. Moreover, positioning millions of Erdoğan's voters as passive, lacking in voting ability, and casting their votes like puppets under Fahrettin Altun's hypnosis reflects a patronizing view, despite the author not directly stating such. Although the author glosses over it in a single sentence, opposition media in Turkey, which is more powerful in influence than government media, remains extremely robust and is one of the most competent elements controlling Erdoğan's administration. These are all challenging aspects to find in authoritarian regimes. Of course, this does not mean Turkey lacks its unique authoritarian formations and practices, but this situation is not exclusive to the current ruling party alone.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the book is its evaluation of the most legitimate criticisms of the West through the lens of Erdoğan and the AK Party. The book may inadvertently contribute to demonizing these legitimate discourses and objections in favor of the West. Such evaluations imply the authoritarian regime cannot have legitimate criticisms against a democratic regime. For example, what is the problem with Erdoğan criticizing the West's silence on the 2012 coup in Egypt?

1 PKK, Kurdistan Workers' Party, is recognized as a terrorist organization by Turkey, the United States, the UN, and the EU.

Or why is Europe criticized for closing its borders to Syrian refugees and then witnessing their drownings in the Aegean Sea portrayed as contradictory discourse and actions? The main idea of the book is not to debate the legitimacy of Western criticism. However, problematizing justified criticisms through Erdogan contributes to their demonization, which may be an unintended but negative outcome of the book.

Turkey is ahead of Western Europe in terms of its approach to Syrian refugees. In fact, Turkey has historically opened its doors to Kurdish refugees fleeing Saddam Hussein's chemical weapons during the First Gulf War. Additionally, the author is well aware that the opposition bloc, led by the Kemalist party, includes segments that propagate refugee hostility and racism in Turkey (pp. 96). It is impossible for the author to have missed this detail. Perhaps the only consistent policy that sets Erdogan apart from the West is his support for Syrian refugees, despite the electoral losses it may cause him.

Another issue is the implication in op-ed comments appearing in pro-Erdogan media that they automatically support Erdogan's statements. Therefore, the conclusion is drawn that these comments should be rejected outright. Independent thinkers and writers can also arrive at similar conclusions as the government, but that doesn't mean everyone is pro-Erdogan. This reductionist approach is one of the implicit outcomes of the book. While the book effectively portrays how Erdogan and his supporters turn anti-Western sentiments into political capital, not every criticism of the West should be labeled as pro-Erdogan or politically motivated.

Moreover, the book makes an inference that millions of people passively accept Fahrettin Altun's propagated narratives without questioning them. Perhaps for the first time in Turkish history, people have attempted to assert their voices confidently and loudly against the West in the past twenty years at the rhetorical level. It is unfair to reduce this to Erdoganism and dismiss it as capitulation to state authoritarianism. Viewing Turkish voters and people as passive recipients is an incomplete analysis. Information obtained from interviews in the fifth chapter also supports this view. Viewers of Turkish dramas formulate their own opinions. These opinions sometimes reject encrypted meanings, accept them as they are, or negotiate messages. Audiences are not passive recipients. Erdogan's portrayal as a God-like figure ruling over everything does not reflect reality. In fact, the message to the West should be more important than who the messenger is. By demonizing the messenger, the author undermines the message itself.

The author's naive comments on the role of Western-funded newspapers, digital platforms, and NGOs in shaping public opinion in Turkey (pp. 43) also point to her partialities. For instance, during the Southeast Anatolia earthquake, a social media

influencer, critical of Erdogan, commented on the X platform that a dam had burst in the city, causing panic and delaying urgent aid to the earthquake victims. When discussing the Ak-Troll army, the author fails to acknowledge similar behaviors from disinformation-spreading opposition groups, which is incomprehensible (pp. 40).

The book essentially conducts a discourse analysis of Erdogan's and his administration's counter-struggle against Western hegemonic discourse and actions in Turkey's new communication model, using state and state-supported institutions and organizations. The author examines English-language publications in particular to substantiate her analyses and explores the conflicting discourses that have marked Turkey's last two decades. While targeting Western readers, the book aims to contribute to the political communication literature. It can be said that the book is notably subjective in its choice of examples and analyses. It exaggerates the influence of Erdogan's communication emissaries and strategists in Turkey's dialogue with the West. Turkey's anti-hegemonic discourses often fail to surpass even Western Thrace, whereas conversely, the West possesses message power that permeates even Turkey's smallest veins. Overall, this book seems to support Western soft power by presenting Turkey's complex communication and political issues in a cursory way and oversimplifies the diverse ideological topography of Turkey in doing so. Perhaps the success of Western soft power lies precisely here: by employing the Easterner to speak in the name of the West in response to the East's criticisms.