

CYCLICAL–SITUATIONAL TEMPORALITY IN THE TURKISH UNDERSTANDING OF TIME AND MODERNITY

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Abstract

The article offers analysis of the relationship between the Turkish people's understanding of Time and their philosophy of social self-organization and state-building. In this context, “modernity” is interpreted as a reality shaped in every historical period through the Turks' attainment of harmony with the world.

It is emphasized here that the Turks were historically able to optimize the ratio between temporal cyclicity and dynamic situational temporality. This is tied to the Turks' preference for living according to the formula society–nature–world. Hence, modernity for the Turks is a reality shaped in the triad of past–present–future within the harmony of the world. Turkish societies have preserved these characteristics into the 21st century.

Here, a synergetic methodology is applied in the historical context of Time, prioritizing the methodological principles of synergetic social formation and dynamic integration. System analysis is used as the primary method.

The main conclusion is, as follows: Since ancient times, the Turks have possessed a unique understanding of Time. As a society, they have formed within this framework. Their philosophy of state-building developed in accordance with this

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reality. Harmony between social formation and the philosophy of state-building was established on the basis of the interplay between cyclical temporality and situational temporality.

Keywords: *socio-cultural self-organization, temporal cyclicity, synergetic approach, dynamic integration, “Turkic cultural milieu”.*

Introduction

In contemporary scholarship, examining the history, law, and philosophically aesthetic thought of the Turkic peoples within modern scientific approaches has become increasingly relevant. Within this scope, understanding the place and role of the Turkish concept of Time in collective consciousness and lifestyle is of particular philosophical importance. Naturally, the study of cyclical–situational temporality in the Turkish understanding of Time within the context of modernity is necessary and unquestioned. Here, several philosophical aspects of the Turkish notion of Time are analysed in this regard.

Before proceeding, we should provide an explanation – the term “cyclicity of time” in this article refers to the preservation of substantive and functional characteristics of collectively accepted values within a particular temporal segment of society. “Situational temporality”, on the other hand, expresses the processual manifestation of socio-cultural dynamics in specific situations within local time – i.e., the uninterrupted dynamic rhythm of processes in a synergistic sense.

To date, many studies have explored the formation of Turkic ethnoculture, statehood, and society. These explore the formation history, law, cultural traits, public life, state-building culture, and self-formation processes of the Turkic ethnos from various perspectives. Among these, important contributions from A. Toynbee, J. Hamilton, G. Clauson, J. P. Roux, W. Radloff, and the Vienna School (R. Grebner, B. Ankermann, O. Menghin, and others) can be noted. Turkish scholars such as S. M. Arsal, I. Kafesoğlu, A. Tutar, İ. Altaylı, F. Erdemgil, M. Kaşkarlı, H. Z. Ulkən, H. Cin, A. Akgunduz, O. Bağdatlı, O. Turan, A. Pamir, and many others have also made valuable contributions.

In Azerbaijan, essential works dedicated to Turkish history, culture, and state-building have been produced by scholars such as F. Ağasıoğlu, A. Rahimoğlu, N. Nasibli, F. Mustafa, Y. Oğuz, R. Rzayeva, F. Alakbarli, among others. In Southern Azerbaijan (Iran), Cavad Heyat’s research is especially notable.

However, neither Western, Turkish nor Azerbaijani scholars have sufficiently examined the philosophical dimensions of Turkish societal thought, communal living, and state-building as a unified phenomenon. In particular, there is no

thorough philosophical analysis of Turkish thought and life organization within the continuum of time and space.

This article attempts to fill that gap by proposing a philosophical perspective on the mutual relationship between the Turkish people's self-organization and their state-building culture through the lens of Time. The approach is interdisciplinary. Self-organization and state-building are analysed within the historical context of Time through synergetic methodology, using system analysis as a method.

Theoretical basis and method

The theoretical basis of the article consists of three aspects. First, it includes ideas proposed by Western researchers regarding the Turks. Specifically, the approaches of J. Hamilton [1993], G. Clauson [1972], J. P. Roux [2007], W. Radloff [1999], R. Grebner [1905], B. Ankermann [1905], and O. Menghin [1929] are considered. Additionally, a thesis from the Vienna School – the concept of “warrior shepherds” (*Hirtenkrieger*) [see: Kafesoğlu 1997: 220] – is included in the theoretical framework. The general features common to these Western researchers form the foundation of this aspect. The shared ideas in the works of J. Hamilton, G. Clauson, J. P. Roux, W. Radloff, and the Vienna School (especially O. Menghin) may be summarized, as follows:

- The Turks are an ancient people with a unique method of social formation.
- Their development from family to tribe, clan, people, and nation followed clearly defined social, cultural, legal, and demographic self-formation processes.
- Three types of law have always played a central role in Turkic history: the law of the ruler, the law of the council (*Divan*/Parliament), and customary law (*Yosun*).
- The culture of “warrior shepherds” played a significant role in the Turkish philosophy of self-organization and state-building.

It should be noted that some scholars have not always clearly understood the role of law in Turkish self-organization and state-building. In some cases, they even ignore it. For example, W. Radloff describes the Turkish state as an “empire devoid of legal rules” [Radloff 1999]. We will address this point in the section of this article below dedicated to discussions. What matters here is that Western scholars acknowledge the Turks' distinctive process of social formation and development.

The second aspect of the theoretical basis includes ideas from Turkish, Iranian, and Azerbaijani scholars concerning Turkic communities. The works of I. Kafesoğlu [1997], H. Cin [2024], A. Akgunduz [2024], F. Erdemgil [2015], O. Bağdatlı [2007], A. Pamir [2019], O. Turan [2014], A. Tutar [2002] from Turkey; F. Ağasioğlu [2014], A. Rahimoğlu [2022], N. Nasibli [2022], F. Mustafa [2025], Y. Oğuz [2009] from

Azerbaijan; and Cavad Heyat [2011] from Iran are consulted for their insights into the socio-cultural, historical, political, moral-ideological, and psychological characteristics of Turkic peoples.

The third aspect involves the use of synergetics – one of the modern philosophical-scientific forms for studying the ways how societies form, acquire unique qualities, and self-organize. The main theoretical premise here is that society is a complex, open, nonlinear self-organizing system with numerous elements, characterized by transitions from chaos to order and from one level of order to another via “gestalt processual transitions” [Qurbanov 2023: 109–143].

Based on these three theoretical pillars, the methodological principles of the article are defined. The principle of synergetic social formation expresses the philosophical-scientific understanding of society’s self-organization in each historical stage. The principle of dynamic integration allows us to determine the synergetic mechanisms that ensure society’s wholeness as a complete, open, nonlinear system.

Accordingly, the method used in the article is system analysis.

Discussions

The study of the Turks as an ethnos and society encompasses various aspects. Sources indicate that Turkic communities possessed unique socio-cultural structures, economic practices, and systems of communication. However, scholarly assessments of this uniqueness have differed, leading to long-standing debates.

Some researchers describe the development of the Turkic ethnos as a continuous process of expansion from simple to complex, where the basic family model broadened consistently without contradiction.

Others argue that despite historical continuity, Turkic communities exhibited different social structures and demographic growth depending on the geographical regions in which they settled. Debates between these two viewpoints continue to this day.

For example, J. Hamilton claims that the transformation of Turkic communal life can be conceptualized as “family → union of families → tribe → confederation (‘el’).” These stages represent evolving forms of social structuring, communal functionality, and modes of communication [Hamilton 1993]. Researchers sharing this view consider the entire process to be a gradual expansion and increasing complexity of the Turkic family model [Kafesoğlu 1997].

Within this approach, cyclical temporality is seen as a process renewed at each stage of social evolution. Situational temporality corresponds to the rhythm of changes within each stage. However, other studies show that even within a single analytical framework, conceptual differences may arise between cyclicity and situationality. This

is especially true when evaluating the relationship between social self-organization and the philosophy of state-building.

Nevertheless, an “underlying line of evolution” is widely accepted: Turkish history shows no deviation from its fundamental trajectory. Thus, cyclical temporality may be regarded as the optimal ratio between social self-organization and state-building. Examples from research support this thesis.

For instance, let us examine the approach of the “Vienna School.” Turkish scholar İ. Kafesoğlu writes that the Vienna School does not rely on simplistic or baseless assumptions; rather, its foundation lies in *ethnographic factors* [Kafesoğlu 1997: 37]. The scientific value of this approach becomes evident as the discussion proceeds further, for it clarifies several issues that have historically hindered an accurate understanding of Turkish self-organization and state-building.

According to the Vienna School, the Turks possess a distinct “cultural ecology” (cultural system, cultural environment, cultural domain). Within this cultural ecology, the Turks not only have developed themselves as a society but also influenced the surrounding regions in a structured, organized manner – rather than as a dispersed nomadic mass.

The “cultural ecology” used by the Vienna School effectively refers to the *cyclical temporality* of Turkish socio-cultural evolution. Situational temporality, meanwhile, corresponds to the local, context-specific rhythmic changes arising from geography, politics, economy, ideology, and other factors.

Other researchers from this school adopted similar perspectives. As examples, consider the following:

Beginning in the late 19th century, F. Grebner (director of the Cologne Museum) and B. Ankermann (from the Berlin Ethnographic Museum) developed the idea of “cultural ecology”, eventually formalizing it in 1905 [Grebner 1905; Ankermann 1905]. The central principle of this view is the existence of “cultural centres” from which cultural movements and systems expand into surrounding regions. This idea was later elaborated by W. Schmidt and U. Korösi, and further developed by O. Menghin and F. Flor, giving rise to the Vienna School [Kafesoğlu 1997].

In the 1940s, U. Korösi emphasized that terms like “Turkicness” or “early Turkicness” carry a meaning that is broader than their ordinary usage [Korösi 1941]. From here, he transitions into the historical, ethnological, and cultural significance of the concept of “warrior shepherds”, tracing its roots to Ural–Altai culture.

O. Menghin, a prominent figure of the Vienna School, systematized these ideas further. He argued that world history contains *twelve cultural zones*, one of which is the “warrior–pastoral” cultural milieu, observed among the Turks. According to Menghin, this cultural type originated around the Ural–Altai region and spread outward [Menghin 1941].

Other European scholars support this classification. For instance, French scholar G. Gontandon identifies a “pastoral cultural cycle” as one of the major cultural environments. Slovak researcher J. Darkó emphasizes that the features, diffusion routes, and influence zones of the “Turan cultural environment” have become “well clarified”.

Thus, European researchers conceptualize the Turkic cultural milieu as a well-structured, stable, and continuous process. This indicates that both cyclical temporality and situational temporality are relevant to Turkish self-organization and state-building. Cyclical temporality is rooted in Turkish geography, demographics, and cultural–political space, while situational temporality expresses the concrete manifestations of Turkic evolution in specific time–space contexts.

Philosophically, an important point arises: The geographic environment inhabited by the Turks shaped temporal perception as an interplay of “mountain–steppe” (vertical–horizontal) unity at every situational moment.

Most Turkish scholars accept this viewpoint, including the notable representatives – İ. Altaylı, F. Erdemgil, A. Tutar, Ö. Turan, A. Pamir, and others.

İ. Altaylı stresses that, although Turks created history, it was often written by others, causing contradictions. Therefore, he argues that Turks must now write their own history [Altaylı 2019]. He acknowledges the existence of a uniquely Turkish cultural system that continuously improves itself.

Fethiye Erdemgil writes that the Turks have long distinguished between their physical and spiritual-moral existence. Throughout history, they maintained certain modes of communal life and built states. They left a mark as “true warriors”, possessing a 12 000-year-old character [Erdemgil 2015]. This character forms a strong unifying factor in social cohesion.

Adem Tutar, relying on Mahmud al-Kashgari’s explanations of justice, law, order, and custom, argues that although specific laws change, the *society endures*: “il kalır, törü kalmaz” (“the state remains, customs may change”) [Tutar, 2002]. Thus, he emphasizes the continuity of the Turkic cultural milieu.

Western scholars have also noted this phenomenon. For example, Clauson says that the “kagan is the independent ruler of a community” [Clauson 1972]. He implies that justice, sacred mandate (*Kut*), and custom (*Töre*) together represent the criteria of governance.

Osman Turan argues that Turkish society evolved within precise moral and legal boundaries. He identifies a tripartite formula in Turkish state thought: “el = state = peace.” He states that order (*nizam*) has three levels:

- Internal order (personal discipline and responsibility)
- Social order (law, security within the state)
- Cosmic order (establishing divine harmony on earth)

If a ruler failed to maintain these, he would lose his divine mandate (*Kut*).

Hilmi Ziya Ülken also stresses that harmony and peace are essential to Turkish communal philosophy. Without harmony, “the world collapses”. Thus, ensuring unity within society and peace among peoples was a key requirement of Turkish statecraft [Ülken 2018].

Accordingly, Turkish self-organization and state-building always rested on clear moral, ideological, and legal foundations: the Law of the Ruler, the Law of the Council, and the Law of Custom, which together uphold Order, Peace, and Justice.

Another approach also appears in discussions on this topic. Some researchers trace its origins to Plato’s classification of “passionate shepherds” as “wild family groups.” Later, Ibn Khaldun in his sociology expanded this image by portraying nomadic tribes – including the Turks – as culturally primitive communities distant from civilization. This perspective later influenced scholars such as A. Toynbee.

Toynbee classified global history into 20 “developed civilizations”. Outside these, he placed a separate category: the “nomad”. According to Toynbee, nomads are unable to build advanced civilizations. Ibn Khaldun had at least acknowledged the possibility that nomads could establish cities; Toynbee, however, entirely rejects this possibility. He refers to the nomadic community as a “horde”, a cultureless “herd”, implying an unstructured mass of people.

Toynbee adds that although nomads can raise animals – a sign of willpower – this does not mean they are capable of building historically enduring societies. Any group labelled “nomadic”, in his opinion, is without true history. Thus, he calls these peoples representatives of “interregnum”, meaning eras of “lawlessness” [Toynbee 1962: 50, 55–57].

As mentioned earlier, W. Radloff also could not escape the negative “nomad” stereotype when discussing Turkish self-organization and state-building. As a result, he presents the socio-historical development of the Turks in the following distorted manner: “large family → communal property → leader emerging without election (‘ağa’) → oppressive force → family dominion → rule by privileged class → plunder → empire devoid of legal principles” Radloff [1891].

Radloff makes these statements while discussing *Kutadgu Bilig*, which is an extraordinary misinterpretation. Anyone familiar with this work can clearly see the profound legal, ethical, and governance principles of the Turks – how tradition (töre), justice, law, and social harmony are articulated with philosophical sophistication [see Bağdatlı 2007].

Among Western researchers holding such views, J. P. Roux is particularly notable. Although he is recognized as a prominent authority on Turkic studies, his

conclusions regarding Turkish social self-organization and state-building are highly inaccurate. According to Roux:

- The Turks are “traditionally nomadic” [Roux 2007: 46].
- Their culture lacks a stable historical continuity.
- They oscillated between sedentary and nomadic lifestyles.

He bases these claims on speculative interpretations of certain Turkish words, as well as shifts from linguistics to history without methodological grounding. Ultimately, Roux concludes that although the Turks constitute a distinct people, it is difficult to assert that they possess a continuous social and state tradition [Roux 2007: 46–48].

Summary of the discussions

The discussions above permit to draw several conclusions in the context of the Turkish understanding of Time: Philosophical aspects of the issue have been largely neglected. The existing studies often analyse the topic within narrow disciplines, resulting in limited conclusions.

There is little philosophical analysis of Turkish self-organization and state-building within the continuum of Time.

Despite differing views, the overall scholarly consensus points to a dynamic, continuous, and distinctive Turkish process of social formation and state-building. This process consistently evolved within the triad of:

- Law of the Ruler (*Hökmdar Qanunu*)
- Law of the Council / *Divan* (*Divan Qanunu*)
- Law of Custom / Tradition (*Yosun Qanunu*)

Western researchers, especially the Vienna School, conceptualized this through the idea of “warrior shepherds”. Another important point arises from S. M. Arsal’s writings: Arsal states that the foundation of Turkish social formation is *töre*, meaning “rules of social regulation”. Thus, he argues that Turks possessed clearly defined laws forming the basis of justice:

- Popular/Customary Law (*Yosun*)
- Council/Parliamentary Law (*Divan*)
- Ruler’s Law (*Hökmdar*) [Arsal 2014: 283]

These were precise and functioning systems regulating political, cultural, and social life.

Interestingly, many European scholars have analysed similar forms of customary law in their own societies:

Italians – *Consuetudo*
 French – *Droit coutumier*
 Germans – *Gewohnheitsrecht*

German scholar G. F. Puchta concludes that the internal character of a community gives rise to its customary law, which in turn influences all other branches of law [Puchta 1828].

This fact thoroughly refutes the negative Western claims that Turkish societies lacked legal systems. Ancient Turkic states clearly demonstrate this. For example, the Göktürk inscriptions (of the 6th century) reveal: explicit legal structures, judicial terminology, and references to the three legal systems.

Uyghur state law was even more developed. All three categories of law were institutionalized according to the needs of their time. Social, cultural, and legal life was regulated by detailed legal statutes.

Conclusion

From the conducted analysis, we have derived several philosophically significant conclusions. First, let us emphasize that since ancient times, the Turks have possessed a distinct understanding of Time and corresponding principles of self-organization. These principles were regulated within the framework of three laws – the Law of the Ruler, the Law of the Council (*Divan*), and the Law of Custom (*Yosun*).

In the formation of Turkish identity and the philosophy of state-building, the application of these laws not individually but in unity played a special role. Understanding the philosophy of this unity in the interplay between cyclical Time and situational temporality is extremely important. For each of these laws defined the dynamics of Time in shaping various aspects of the relationship between the individual and society among the Turks.

The Law of the Ruler regulated the situational temporality of Time within the boundaries of cyclical Time in terms of creating harmony between the self-organization of society and the governance of the state. That is, innovations were introduced into governance so that social, political, demographic, economic, moral-ethical, and cultural changes in Turkish society would not exceed the boundaries defined by divine order (*törü*). These innovations were usually of social, political, and legal nature. However, under all circumstances, legal innovations could not contradict the moral-ethical values of Turkish society.

Throughout history, the Turks preserved this “legal triangle”. This was made possible by their ontological view of Time. The Turks’ “ontologization” of Time emerged from the reciprocal relationship between living within Time and “carrying Time within themselves”.

This approach to Time allowed the Turks to optimize, in every historical period, the proportion between cyclical Time and dynamic situational temporality. This was reflected in their aspiration to live in harmony with nature and the world. One of

the clearest manifestations of this was the Turks' continuous pursuit, as a community, of unity among nature, humanity, and the Turkic tribe in every historical period.

The establishment of relations between historicity and modernity within the dynamics of Time among the Turks was realized against the background of this emphasis. In this sense, modernity for the Turks is a reality shaped within the triad of past-present-future in harmony with the world. Through this, the Turks achieved a remarkably interesting synthesis of tradition and modernity within the time-space continuum. In this context, Turkish modernization represents the renewal of state identity within the boundaries of cyclical Time through harmony between the self-organization (formation) of society and state governance.

Why specifically state identity? Because for the Turks, state-building has historically been the primary condition for free existence and communal evolution. However, with one enduring condition: at every stage, the identity of the state must be founded upon the identity of the people!

The main peculiarity of the Turkish concept of Time is that the thesis "first the self-organization of society, then the governance of the state" was not the guiding principle. For the Turks, development followed the principle that "based on the self-creation of society, the governance of the state must always align with societal interests" – in synergetic terms, a "gestalt processuality".

A clear example of this final conclusion is the grounding of the Turkish states on popular sovereignty. In the Constitution of the Republic of Azerbaijan, the issue of sovereignty is classified precisely within this context. Therefore, in the 21st century, the proportion between the cyclical nature of Time and the pace of situational change continues in the Turkish states.

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