CHAPTER 7

Theoretical Reflections on the Study of Turkish-German Relations, Past and Present:
Methodology, Critical Issues, and Research

Albrecht CLASSEN*

*University Distinguished Prof., University of Arizona, Dept. of German Studies, Tucson, AZ, USA
E-Mail: aclassen@arizona.edu

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ABSTRACT

This article intends to lay the theoretical groundwork for the subsequent detailed studies addressing the relationship between Turkey (the Ottoman Empire and the successor state) and Germany (also with a rather checkered history) throughout time, focusing on literary and other documents. Differences between languages, religions, and cultures have always been difficult barriers, but we know of a long history of contacts, exchanges, and a mutual learning process. In order to understand the phenomena addressed in this volume, this paper reflects on the notions of xenology and xenophilia and indicates the various avenues to explore this interdisciplinary field of investigations.

Keywords: Xenology, Xenophilia, Turkish-German Relations, Interdisciplinarity, Otherness, Migration
Imagology and xenology are major theoretical approaches of great significance in our postmodern world, shedding intriguing light on virtually all cultural and literary manifestations past and present. They are most useful for a better understanding of the negative or positive interactions between peoples, cultures, language groups, ethnic groups, military forces, immigrants and a host country, and so forth. It has never been enough to study the history of one country or one culture alone during one period because all developments in human existence have been determined by internal and external forces, by exchanges, influences, and cooperation across all borders. Even in the case of splendid isolation, the ‘negative’ relationship with the outside world matters in many different ways, otherwise, that attempt to establish isolation would not make sense. Self-imposed isolation is the result of fear of the external world.

Xenology constitutes the critical approach to all those phenomena, and the fields of history, literature, anthropology, but also musical and art history have certainly deeply profited from examining both the awareness and fear of foreign cultures and the attraction that the foreign world exerted. Throughout time, poets and artists have reflected profoundly on cultural tensions, exchanges, and influences, which also concern and determine the long history of Turks and Germans although they have never shared a common border, here disregarding the Habsburg Empire extending deeply into the Balkans. It has consequently been a logical step forward to explore the notion of globalism in the pre-modern world, and our present volume contributes to this phenomenon as well tracing the connections between the Ottoman Empire and the Holy Roman Empire since the fourteenth century and up to the very present. Linguistic, historical, iconographic, cinematographic, and literary evidence enrich the endeavor.

The last decades have witnessed tremendous movements of many different people from across the world, mostly as a result of economic hardships, military threats, and religious strife in the home countries. Scholars in many different disciplines have examined the causes of this massive migration from Africa, Asia, and Southern and Central America to Australia, the United States, Canada, and Europe. The global South is pushing its way to the global North. Germanist scholars in particular have been challenged to come to terms with the topic of migration since the history of German-Turkish relations goes back at least to the

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1 Three major publications have strongly shaped this field. See the contributions to Wierlacher, A. (Ed.), 1985; Wierlacher, A. (Ed.), 1985; Goetz, 213. See also the contributions to Bremhey (Ed.), 2004, or the study by Schmied-Kowarzik, 2017. Cf. also the contributions to Classen (Ed.), 2013.

2 See now the contributions to Classen (Ed.), 2023. The relevant research is reviewed both in the extensive introduction and in the individual contributions. For a more specialized angle, see Murphy (Ed.), 2023; cf. also Cagle, Herold, and Maier (Ed.), 2023.
fourteenth century when the troops of the German emperor Sigismund (1378–1437) clashed with Ottoman forces at various places in the Balkans. While the Turks were most successful during the first centuries, the military tide turned against them since the seventeenth century, and by the nineteenth century, Turkey was commonly called ‘the sick man of Europe’ (Uyar and Erickson, 3rd ed. [orig. 2002]; 2018); Ágoston, 2021). Moving fast-forward, since the 1950s, a large number of Turkish guestworkers has arrived in Germany, and ever since they have formed a formidable and sizeable population group with ever-growing roots in that new country, although the connections with the home country have certainly not been cut.

Turkish politics have had a huge impact on the social, economic, and political conditions in Germany until today. The centuries between the late Middle Ages and the last hundred years or so have been shaped by different types of contacts and exchanges, but despite various waves of Turkophilia in the West, the dominant concept has often been determined by fear, ignorance, and stereotypes, and this certainly on both sides. Even though the current situation seems to be much improved, with a high degree of inculturation of Turks into German society, nationalist feelings on both sides continue to constitute unnecessary barriers and make integration still rather problematic and difficult, if that is even still desired.

Oddly, Western scholars tend to indulge in self-incrimination, regularly exposing European poets, philosophers, or artists as biased, colonialists, imperialists, if not racists, which is a fairly easy operation because even the most famous writers, for instance, from the time before World War II are suddenly judged and evaluated through the lens of contemporary categories, certainly a highly political move by the current generation which is thus committing egregious historical injustice and perpetuates its own cultural bias. In many situations, those terms might apply, but we would have to be careful in our critical examination of race relationships, ethnic conflicts, and the history of stereotypes if we do not want to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater (see, for instance, Classen, Blacks in the Middle Ages, 2023). Concomitantly, many scholars have impressively outlined the history of Antisemitism, and now of Islamophobia, especially in the West, while the East has witnessed strong anti-western sentiments in response to anti-Islamic outbursts in Denmark or Sweden, for instance, such as the burning of the Qur’an or caricatures of the Prophet. In fact, similar forms of xenophobia and racist attitudes have also exerted their influence in the East, where strong expressions of anti-Christianism, such as in Pakistan, have taken their deadly toll. Internecine strife in many Asian and African countries underscore this universal problem.

We are all people, and as such we are subject, unfortunately, to many external influences and easily become victims of political propaganda, often simply because we are insecure, feel afraid, and worry about our own economic and political standing. Nationalist positions have always served the purpose of providing the individual with a sense of belonging at the cost of the others who are then excluded, repressed, or simply eliminated (genocide). The ancient Greeks rejected the Germanic immigrants and enemies from the north as ‘barbarians,’ the Romans deeply feared the hostile forces north of the Alpes, and the Christian Europeans were always terrified about the Muslim attacks from the south, first coming from the Iberian Peninsula against the Frankish empire in the eighth century (Arabs), and later originating in the eastern parts of the Mediterranean (Turks, or Ottomans).

Everyone in the West, but also in other parts of the world, feared the Huns, Avars, Magyars, and then the Mongols. Northern Europeans were severely threatened by the Vikings from the Scandinavian countries from the seventh until at least the tenth and eleventh centuries. The history of warfare extends, however, to all parts of the earth, and there have hardly ever been extended periods of time when there was not a war somewhere being waged on the globe directed either at an external enemy or a minority group within the own country (e.g., Nigeria, Burundi, but also Kosovo, and now the war by Russia against the Ukraine since 2022). The struggle to repress military or other forms of violence continues until today, and often it seems a hopeless endeavor. However, literature has always served as a major platform or mouthpiece for intellectual protests, philosophical and religious strategies to contain violence, and for efforts by individuals to establish peace (Classen and Margolis (Ed.), 2011; Classen, “War and Peace,” 2023).

In this regard, the history of the relationships between Turks and Europeans has always been part of the larger picture of tensions, conflicts, attacks, and open wars so characteristic of all people throughout time. One of the most important causes for these seemingly endless aggressive encounters seems to be the fear of losing one’s own identity and of being forced to give up the role of the majority, or of being the hegemon, while a previous minority might rise to the top level of society. Rampant racism in the United States today, for instance, and the widespread struggle against Critical Race Theory indicate clearly deep-seated fear by the white majority that they might lose their traditional privileges and would have to share their resources with a hated black minority. Similarly, in many European countries and elsewhere we observe the reemergence of strong negative sentiments (stereotypes) against the Sinti and Roma and, once again, Jews. Tragically, the latest battle cry against a social minority seems to be directed against homosexuals and transgender people, and this in many countries across the world, and then also against women, once again. Whoever the target might be, it is always a
sinister strategy by the majority to hold on to its identity and power by means of racialization and politicization social, ethical, moral, and also religious issues.

But there have always been two sides to a conflict. If we consider the global situation and return to Turkey as a greatly feared enemy of Christian Europe and also, at least in later times, as a highly potent ally for some Western countries, we recognize the dichotomies and dialectics of xenophobia and xenophilia. In the case of the Turks, the strongest sources of conflict were the differences in religion and the Ottomans’ relentless expansionist policy which led to hundreds of years of military confrontations pitting both sides against each other. At the same time, since the sixteenth century, European powers endeavored to align themselves with the Sultan in Istanbul as a global partner, whether France or England, all depending on the political circumstances. It also deserves mention that the Ottoman Empire became a relatively safe haven for Jews expelled from Spain in 1492.

Egypt, by contrast, has hardly ever been considered a major challenge for Europeans, if we disregard the Seventh Crusade (1248–1254) led by the French King Louis IX directly against Mamluk Egypt and which ended with his capture by the enemy forces. The Eighth Crusade in 1270 was directed against Tunisia and quickly ended with a whimper after King Louis IX’s death of dysentery. The real and serious threat to Christian Europe resulted from the Ottomans, and they proved to be highly successful over several centuries, getting closer and closer to the European heartlands, although the sieges of Vienna in 1529 and in 1683 failed, after which Christian armies managed a major but not complete rollback in the Balkans over the next few centuries. Constantinople, or Istanbul, after it had fallen to the Ottomans in 1453, has continued to be a major Turkish city until today.

I do not intend, of course, to outline, once again, the entire history of Turkish-European relations. What matters for us, however, pertains to the long-term frictions between Christians and the Muslims. ‘Otherness’ proves to be a key component, creating both fear and attraction. The current situation in German-speaking lands with millions of immigrants and their families does not suggest that the legal hurdles and especially the cultural barriers have been overcome for the recent immigrants. Certain sections of the traditional population in the host countries continue to distance themselves from the Turks who have by now lived in those foreign countries over several generations. However, this is not a unique situation since various forms of racism also affect minority groups in other countries, such as Japanese or Chinese Americans in the US, North Africans in France or Germany, Syrians in Sweden, and so forth. Nevertheless, the relationship between Turkey and the German-speaking lands has been a long and rich history, both constructive and destructive, both hostile and mutually enriching.
Xenology as a theoretical model allows for in-depth analyses of the tensions, conflicts, or friendship between different cultures. Overall, there is little wonder that people have always looked for forms of regional, territorial, or national identity, which, almost by default, required the identification of minority groups that could be rejected, whether Jews in the Middle Ages and the early modern age, Sinti and Roma throughout time, or Turks as European enemies or, later, immigrants to European countries, especially to Germany (Wenninger, 2023). Our volume attempts to come to terms with this long, complex, often contradictory history of German-Turkish relations by offering specialized studies highlighting major contacts, exchanges, influences, and also conflicts.

Studying this troubled history does not only shed important light on a long-term relationship between those two peoples, cultures, languages, and religions. We also believe that the collaboration between the various researchers has made it possible to build numerous bridges, first across historical periods (from the Middle Ages to the present), and then across completely unnecessary cultural divides. The entire idea of globalism would not make much sense if it were not associated with and predicated on personal contacts between people of very different backgrounds. Even though our volume seems to unearth mostly negative aspects, i.e., old stereotypes, hatred, fear, miscommunications, and misrepresentations, the scholarly impetus for all contributors has been the desire to uncover this long history of German-Turkish relationships. This altogether promises to be a small puzzle piece in the large picture of globalism both in the late Middle Ages and the present world. Understanding the many different perceptions from throughout time might eventually contribute to better understandings, more integration, and the building of more social networks across languages and cultures (Classen [Ed.], 2023). Tolerance is, of course, the ultimate goal so that we can build a new society in a level, or equally shared field, both economically and scholarly.

If we consider the significant role Turkish textiles, food, movies, literature, the arts, among others, in German culture today, and if we keep in mind how much Germany and Turkey have profited from each other throughout the centuries, then it becomes understandable why this current volume seems to be of such great importance. Both historians and literary scholars are called upon to explore the past and present of globalism, which entails the sharing of and exchange ideas, values, and also objects.

There have always been problems and conflicts, often driven by religious differences, but in the end, after a careful analysis of the history of Turkish-German relations, the mutual give and take has been highly productive for both sides, at least in the long run. In this sense, this volume promises to give us hope for the future, if we ignore the day-to-day political
squabbles, personal sentiments, and emotional reactions on both sides. Turkey is still waiting for membership in the EU, but currently major differences in politics have prevented that although it would be highly beneficial for both sides and a strong boon for democracy. Whether democracy, however, still represents a political ideal within this larger debate increasingly seems doubtful.

Turkey, and by the same token, Germany, is currently transforming in a variety of ways, and only the future can tell whether this will lead to progress or decline in the relationship with Europe and Germany in particular (Cagaptay, 2017; Bechev, 2022). But those are political issues, whereas historians, literary scholars, art historians, and others have long endeavored to establish networks and to explore the connections between both cultures and peoples. The famous German-Jewish scholar Erich Auerbach, for instance, Professor of Romance languages at the Philipps-University of Marburg, found refuge in Istanbul after he had been forced into exile by the Nazis in 1935. He wrote his famous *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), during his tenure as the chair of the faculty for Western languages and literatures at Istanbul University from 1936 to 1947 (Konuk, 2010).

Today, for instance, Turkish-German contributions to the textile and food industry, the world of cinema, literature, music, and many other aspects are critically important, but this is not a completely new development, as various authors have already pointed out, and so here as well. This volume adds to our understanding of those networks both in the past and the present and hopes that it will be another building block for future collaborations across those linguistic or religious barriers (cf. also Bayraktar, Calik, and Schönig, 2020). Studying the history of past conflicts and contacts paves the way for future development, so this scholarly volume has, at least implicitly, also a political message for both countries and peoples. Xenology is only the study of the creation of cultural barriers; the current effort aims at bringing down those barriers.

**References**


