Review - Notes on a Foreign Country

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SIMON A. WALDMAN, APR 29 2018

Notes on a Foreign Country
By Suzy Hansen
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017

Novelist, essayist and social critic, James Baldwin was no doubt one of the giants of twentieth century American literature. It is well known that it was not in his native New York that Baldwin wrote some of his most famous novels and essays. Baldwin spent much of his life in France, either by the Left Bank of the Seine or soaking up the sun by the French Riviera. However, Baldwin also spent many years in Istanbul, a city he adored and even penned some of his most influential works (Zaborowska 2009). Apparently, Baldwin felt more comfortable as a black and gay man in Istanbul than in Paris or New York.

The discovery of Baldwin's tenure in Turkey inspired budding journalist and recent college graduate Suzy Hansen to apply for a research grant to travel to the banks of the Bosporus to learn about Istanbul. She continued her tenure in Turkey as a journalist, contributing reports and insights to an array of prestigious outlets. Ultimately, Hansen's ruminations on Turkey, the Middle East, and especially her native America, would become the basis of*Notes on a Foreign Country*, a deeply flawed, troubled and exceedingly well-written volume heavy in anti-Americanism, but light in substance.

Throughout his works, Baldwin made many important claims and observations about the human condition and the abysmal state of race relations in his native country. Hansen, is inspired by Baldwin's assertion in*No Name in the Street* that white people in America, owing to the fact that they are products of an unjust society based on the country's terrible racial history, "grow up with a grasp of reality so feeble that they can very accurately be described as deluded – about themselves and the world they live in" (p. 91). Hansen takes Baldwin's message to heart together with that of University of Chicago philosophy professor Jonathan Lear who Hansen quotes, "Those who, at least on the surface, profit from injustice tend to be brought up in the ways that encourage insensitivity to the suffering on which their advantage life depends".[1]

And so, Hansen follows on that American foreign policy, derived from an unjust internal racial order, has dominated and subjugated the world in a manner that was and continues to be either nefarious, ignorant or just plain wrong. What is more, Hansen, critical of American exceptionalism, claims America is an empire in decline (p. 21-24) and is a witness of this decline from her vantage point in Turkey. While overlooking the shores of the Golden Horn, Hansen berates America for the world's misfortunes, including those of Turkey and the Middle East, both now and historically throughout the twentieth century.

But the idea of America in decline is under-developed by Hansen. Would that be relative decline or absolute decline? Is America experiencing a period of isolation and international fatigue or simply an end of its post-Cold War unipolar moment? Hansen has no answers to these questions. She seems unaware of them.

And the nature of identity, ethnicity and international affairs is more complicated than Hansen lets on. Harry S. Truman, the 33rd President of the United States of America, for example, was the first and only world leader to have used a nuclear weapon. He was also alleged to have had a brief flirtation with the Ku Klux Klan (Gordon 2017).

However, it was Truman who enacted Executive Order 9981 in 1948 to desegregate and abolish racial discrimination within the US armed forces, an important civil rights milestone (Taylor 2013). Truman also displayed a genuine and consistent concern for Europe's displaced persons, most especially the Jews who had survived the Holocaust and languished in camps wishing to enter Palestine (Radosh and Radosh 2009). Truman also helped establish the United Nations in 1945. Take another example, John F. Kennedy, the 35th US President. Kennedy was of Irish-Catholic extraction and, despite some reluctance, at the time was America's most sympathetic president to the civil-rights movement (Livingston 2017). Still, Kennedy nearly risked a global nuclear fall-out during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and it was his administration which sent troops to the soon to be quagmire of Vietnam. More recently Barack Obama came to office on a platform of change. But while he spearheaded unprecedented healthcare reform, he enhanced US extrajudicial killings and warfare using drone technology especially in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In other words, identity, domestic policy and foreign policy are not so easily and observably linked.

Hansen resorts to blaming America for pushing around smaller countries in order to serve US interests, often by quoting her interviewees without challenging their veracity, thus confusing narrative with history. But Hansen's main case study of Turkey is misconceived. America didn't force its will on Turkey as Hansen suggests, far from it. Turkish politicians of all stripes wanted and courted US support at different periods. The government of Ismet Inonu (1938-1950) was certainly not reluctant to accept US aid under the Marshall Plan and Truman Doctrine during the post-war period. After the fall of the Inonu government in 1950, his successor Adnan Menderes, representing a more conservative and even pious support base, volunteered to send troops to Korea and eagerly joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation in 1952 (Hale 2013).

Two main developments contributed to anti-American sentiment in Turkey. Following the Cuban Missile Crisis, the US administration removed Jupiter nuclear missiles located in Turkey in return for Soviet guarantees to remove nuclear warheads in Cuba. Although reluctantly accepting, Ankara felt betrayed and vulnerable against its powerful neighbour to the north. The storm could have been weathered but President Lyndon B. Johnson issued his 1964 letter to Ankara demanding that Turkey desist from plans to invade Cyprus (Guney 2008). In other words, the roots of Turkish rage against America was Washington's attempt to diffuse a deadly nuclear standoff and preserve the independence of a sovereign nation-state. Hardly the evil empire Hansen makes it out to be.

Turks and other peoples of the Middle East are not hapless victims of a nefarious American scheme for world domination. By blaming America for everything, Hansen denies Turkish policy makers agency. Ten years after Johnson's letter, Turkey invaded Cyprus. This incurred international condemnation. The choice to invade Cyprus was a terrible decision for which Turkey is still paying the price, and it is Turkey's politicians and military who should be accountable. The same is true for Turkey's 1980 military coup and the 1997 intervention against the Islamist government of Necmettin Erbakan. They were a result of Turkey's dysfunctional civil-military dynamic. Turkey's men in uniform needed little cajoling from Washington. Blaming America for the crimes of Turkey's generals simply won't do.

What Hansen also fails to recognise is that the foreign policy of the current Turkish government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) led by the authoritarian Recep Tayyip Erdogan, of whom Hansen does not criticize enough, is inspired by its own imperial past. Turkey's interventions in Syria, its involvement of Kurdish Iraqi politics, Ankara's emotional support for the Palestinian cause and its assertiveness in the Eastern Mediterranean, are justified and legitimised by Turkish politicians on the basis of the country's Ottoman history. Some have called it neo-Ottomanism, a terrifying development for many in the Middle East. But Hansen does not appear to have noticed. She is too concerned about America's sins.

Still, Suzy Hansen can certainly string a sentence together. It is beautifully written so you will either nod your head approvingly or enjoy disagreeing with *Notes on a Foreign Country*.

References

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[1] Lear was making an analysis and interpretation of South African Nobel Prize laureate John Coetzee’s 1980 short novel “waiting for the Barbarians”, see Jonathan Lear (2017), *Wisdom Won from Illness: Essays in Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 80-102.

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