

Turkish Delight

by Theodore Dalrymple



Waiting for a flight in Istanbul Airport recently, two policemen with a large black muzzled Alsatian dog walked by at a distance of perhaps twenty yards.

‘That dog is useless,’ said a Turk in his mid-twenties sitting next to me. He spoke excellent American-accented English; his baseball cap was pointed backwards as a sign of his liberation. ‘If it had been any good, it would have smelt me from a mile off.’

‘Oh, yes?’ I said, non-committally.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I’ve been smoking weed all night. It must be all over my clothes’

He spoke as if he were proud of it, as if it were some kind of

achievement.

'I have to smoke weed because the world is so full of idiots. I'm surrounded by them, especially in this country.'

He assumed that, because I was a westerner, I must sympathise with anyone opposed to Erdogan and his Islamisation of Turkey.

'If I were you,' I said, 'I should be a little more careful with your confidences.'

'Nah, the world is changing, man.'

'In which direction?'

He was obviously a clever young man: a little too clever, I thought. He knew everything.

'You have a British accent,' he said. 'You don't even have to try.'

'Try what?'

I moved away from him. I found him extremely unpleasant, unlike all the other Turks whom I met. Whether westernisation had coarsened him, or his coarseness attracted him to the worst characteristics of the west, I cannot say.

The crowd in Istanbul Airport is very interesting to observe. On the one hand are the women who are dressed in a strange fashion that I have not noticed anywhere else in the Muslim world: a kind of long and shapeless gabardine sack of the most negative possible allure in the dullest of shades, that of concrete in the rain, that makes women look like a harvest of potatoes. By comparison with this, the burka is attractive and elegant.

On the other hand are the young men and women bearing tattoos. There has been a sudden explosion in their numbers: I noticed an increase in the last year alone since I was last there.

What is happening? It looks as if people are digging themselves into one of two incompatible identities, rather as they seem to be doing in many other countries. I sense that it will end badly (a friend of mine predicted a Mussolinian end for Erdogan): but a bad end is often also a bad beginning.