

On Nationalism

With Ferhat Kentel, Meltem Ahıska and Fırat Genç

Interview by Siren İdemen

The Tumult Beneath the Surface¹

Talking about nationalism from the comfort of an armchair is one thing, but discussing nationalism after having traversed Anatolia and conducted face-to-face interviews is quite another. Let's turn our attention to Ferhat Kentel, Fırat Genç, and Meltem Ahıska, who have conducted a seminal study titled *"The Indivisible Unity of the Nation: Nationalisms That Tear Us Apart in the Democratization Process."*²

What were the intellectual premises of your study on nationalism?

Ferhat Kentel: This research was the last of a series of research projects conducted under the auspices of TESEV.³ Probably the common aim of these projects was to unearth answers to questions beginning with "how" rather than "what." TESEV's "Democratization Program" provided the overarching framework for these studies focusing on various fields such as the state, family, laicism, and nationalism in relation to the democratization process in Turkey. Etyen Mahçupyan was the coordinator of the project and our research was his brainchild. The departure point for our foray into nationalism was the simple observation, or claim, that, "In recent years, nationalism has been on the rise." We searched for answers to such questions as "is this really the case?" and "how so?" There was also an hypothesis that went something like: of course the era we live in has certain peculiar characteristics, but there were waves of nationalism on September 6-7, 1955, and there were fresh bouts during the Cyprus crisis. Moreover, ever since the rise of the Kurdish issue, people have been talking increasingly about turbulent waves of nationalism in Turkey. We set out with the questions regarding how this so-called rising nationalism was adopted and embraced, and what kind of language is being used to talk about it.

Meltem Ahıska: In the TESEV research series, mentality structures were emphasized. Yet "mentality structures" is not a very explanatory concept, as it can be twisted in any number of ways. Generally in Turkey, nationalism is understood as something like a kind of latently existing mentality or way of thinking that goes through fluctuations of prominence. With this research we sought to shake up this assumption. Rather than searching for something at the level of culture, in structures of mentality, we asked the question, "How is nationalism produced and consumed in a particular historical and social context?" Rather than producing a static picture of society, we tried to understand what existing perceptions and structures of mentality are influenced by, how they are mobilized, and what they contain. Expressions like "obstructions to Turkey's development and modernization" and "elements resisting democratization" are commonly thrown around. A plethora of labels such as "backward," "resistant," "conservative" and "traditional" are applied to groups of people. Based on the assumption that perceptions and structures of mentality are not particular to certain cultures, locales, and groups of people, but are products of certain strategies on the macro level, we looked at how these strategies are reproduced simultaneously as they are being consumed as a part of the social process. Therefore, the project was oriented towards historicizing these perceptions and mentality structures without pigeonholing them in fixed categories.

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² Ferhat Kentel, Meltem Ahıska, Fırat Genç, *"Milletin Bölünmez Bütünlüğü": Demokratikleşme Sürecinde Parçalayan Milliyetçilik(ler)* (İstanbul: TESEV Yayınları, 2007). An English summary of the book is available at: http://www.tesev.org.tr/UD_OBJS/PDF/DEMP/ENG/MilletinBölünmezButunlugu-Summary.pdf

³ The Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation, an NGO founded in 1994 in Istanbul. TESEV is a think tank that promotes, among other things, research and discussion on culpable governance, foreign policy, transparency and democracy.

Kentel: Actually, the key concept is problematisation. There are certain “lifestyles” which the modernization politics of the Republic perceives as problematic and tries to overcome by a process of “othering.” But these “others” are actually “non-existent others.” In other words, no such thing exists – the politics of modernization renders them as “other,” that’s it. You render them a problem, and this becomes the basis of your own constructed identity. This supra-discourse, these mental structures, become the air we breathe and live in. What we tried to do is problematise this. Generally, studies on nationalism and laicism become slaves to the discourse itself, and in thus end up reproducing the its tenets. Maybe we wanted to claim that this discourse is not real, and to take a look at things upwards from below, and thus reverse the process. Within reality, defined and stabilized,, lies what is actually a much more complex world with different human, psychological, sociological, and cultural facets, lifestyles and habitus. This complexity needs to be illustrated, and it needs to be talked about. And this will lead to us to very political conclusions.

You mentioned that you are indebted to Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and especially Michel de Certeau for the theoretical framework of this study. What is the theoretical and conceptual framework within which the study is situated?

Kentel: The common ground these thinkers share is the concept of “everyday life,” the complexity and creativity of everyday life. Everyday life is continually under the threat of becoming enslaved by certain discourses. Power structures enslave everyday life; so, for example, fascism can become firmly established by becoming normalized and commonplace. When such is the case, it is necessary to re-think everyday life as a sphere of resistance to discourses which seek to enslave it. This is the common point between the thinkers just cited . For example, there is the concept of “strategy” utilized by Michel de Certeau. According to him, strategy is not something appropriated by a group and continually presented and produced as an ideology. For strategy to exist, it must be interpreted and entered into personally by the people below; strategy is the space in which people move. Theoretically, de Certeau and Foucault are kin. When we live in everyday life, we are simultaneously moving around inside strategy and thereby reproducing it. But what we reproduce is not the same thing as what the Ministry of Education, the Sun Language Theory, the Turkish History Thesis or the Republican People’s Party (CHP) instituted. Laicism, nationalism, Atatürk, law, family – all become different things through our interpretation as we reflect on them via our traditions. As soon as we say this, we move from a realm in which people move around like strategy, to a world of tactics carried out by individuals, social actors, and groups. While strategy defines space – the geography of Turkey, the borders of the national pact, Ankara – tactics are more time-based: my needs today, my feelings today, the news I watched today. I interpret Turkey and nationalism through my tactics. There can be some cunning involved as well. After all, I’m just trying to make life under this strategy liveable. And as I do this, the strategy is torn apart, altered and demolished, but at the same time reproduced.

Ahiska: Historically, nationalism is an ideology founded on a supposition that obliterates differences in experience and temporality. In the words of Benedict Anderson, nationalism is an ideology which imagines that people living in a particular timeless locale all have the same identical experiences at the same identical moment. When we take this alone to be the reality, we take nationalism perhaps too seriously and begin thinking in its terms. Yet the important question here is “how?” What people invest in, or to use de Certeau’s terms, how people use certain strategies, and how they move around within those strategies, are important. The thinkers mentioned have tried to find the nexus between subjectivity and objectivity. They explain how subjectivity is produced and how it becomes differentiated in this process, and claim that it can carry potential for resistance. What we have tried to do is to understand different temporalities and different experiences, both in their relationship to dominant representations and on another level.

How did this theoretical framework work out in the field?

Firat Genç: The concept of experience played an important role in the book even if it was not as frequently referred to as the concept of everyday life. As social subjects, we are experienced about social constructions. Experience also includes macro situations such as globalization. But there is always a gap; for instance, we never appropriate word for word the nationalist discourse which we believe the state has produced. There is always a difference of interpretation. In our research we formulated this as reproduction in the act of consumption. Everyday life is fundamentally crucial for our theoretical framework precisely because of this gapped structure and because it functions as a surface which allows for occasional shifts. In our fieldwork, rather than confirming the answers we sought, we tried to extract answers from people's narratives.

Ahiska: Just as nationalist strategies restrict certain experiences and different ways of thinking and living, certain academic assumptions or theories also have the power to restrict. You try to situate what you find in whatever model you have in mind. Our findings related to the subject of everyday life and the gaps that Firat mentioned also problematise these models themselves, so that what we have is a self-critical method which seeks to hear that which lies beyond representations. Here, methodology and theory converge.

Kentel: In the end, we too are people who exist within the field of the strategy, and who are nourished by the strategy of science, but underneath, there are different modes of knowledge production, and it is via that knowledge that people are able to make life liveable. It was our intention to remove any hierarchical differences between their knowledge and our knowledge. Of course such a task cannot be carried out in absolute terms. Because we are intellectuals, what we say is nourished by the books and research we read and new conclusions we reach. Perhaps there is no utopian solution that could remove this discrepancy altogether, but the intention to do so is nevertheless important. When I talk to people, I take what they say seriously. When they explain to me their understanding of nationalism, I have no right to say that theirs is "a warped way of thinking." While someone from Kars explains nationalism in one way, someone from İzmir may say something very different; the things they say and the things I say, are all on the same level. In this study, we tried at the very least to overcome this dichotomy, or not to fall into that trap.

Ahiska: The aim of overcoming this dichotomy is not to point at pluralism or relativism or to simply say something like "everybody thinks differently, there are a multitude of voices." On the contrary, our goal is to reveal how different strategies, representations, and models, which are actually very small in number, are used in various social relationships. The issue is not just pluralism and relativism. The goal was to show how – depending on many factors like class, region, gender, being Kurdish, being Turkish, being Muslim or not being Muslim– people relate to these representations, how these representations are reproduced and how they are "performed."

Within this complexity what were some of the points in common you observed?

Kentel: There are a lot of things and I think they're all interrelated in some way. Actually, there is no such thing as nationalism! There is a set of representations which people call nationalism and which imprison people. Even though people use this strategy, and move within it, what they're actually trying to explain is something else entirely.

In the introduction to your book you state: "Nationalism is becoming a concept which exists everywhere yet is tangible nowhere; which is infused with meaning according to the situation at hand, its contents later being emptied out and then replaced once again. And with its ever-changing contents, nationalism is becoming a concept which at once explains everything, and for this very reason, ultimately fails to explain anything at all.. So much so that, although nationalism continues to exist as the founding ideology of nation-states, as times change, it begins to conceal within itself a multitude of very different realities." Could you expand this a little? What are those concealed realities?

Kentel: It conceals class differences, social injustice, humiliation, exclusion, insecurities, and fears, rendering them invisible. In this way, actually, it conceals “opposition.” No matter how much people talk in nationalist terms, and even use racism on occasion, there are very different things they would like to express.

How does this concealment work? Why can't people express their problems directly?

Kentel: They can't – this is the strength of the strategy, as if the language of the strategy constitutes the only means of expression.

Because the strategy creates a totalitarian discourse?

Kentel: Despite tendencies towards totalitarianism, it never becomes totalitarian. Just think of the most intense manifestations of totalitarianism in the figures of Hitler and Mussolini, or in the concept of the German race. But in Turkey, the strategy contains nothing like that; some people talk about the “Turkish race,” some about “Turks from Central Asia,” some start with 1923⁴, others speak of a “Turkish-Islamic synthesis,” still others say “Turkish nationalism doesn't murder, it is a positive force.” Some say, “I don't acknowledge the ‘other.’” There is no potential in these stories to become totalitarian.

Ahiska: We shouldn't think of the language of nationalism solely as a veil. That language, that structure of mentality and action ultimately produces certain practices. And those practices push people into a certain channel. We mustn't fall into the duplicity of, “There is a veil, now let's just pull it back and we'll surely find pure, genuine, beautiful things underneath.” We are talking about fractured experiences, most of which cannot be expressed; but when they are, they speak and act from within the language of nationalism, sometimes even erupting into aggressiveness and violence. We are not concerned with trying to justify such acts. People use this language differently according to their own particular context. While some use it rather brazenly, some find it more difficult, and those furthest on the periphery are more or less unable to use it. When we say, “There is no nationalism,” we mean

nationalism as a *monolithic* ideology does not exist. However, the language of nationalism, nationalistic representations, and the language of otherization, is used in different ways by different people.

Kentel: They are used differently at every level. And that being the case, nationalism ceases to be an overarching ideology, that is, an ideology at the supra-identity level, capable of pulling everyone in. One of the most conspicuous examples of this was a person we spoke to in Çorum, who said, “I am a Çorum nationalist.” Another spoke of being “a Hatay nationalist.” Sometimes the term nationalism is used when what is really meant is devotion or dedication to the hometown or region, not necessarily “the nation” per se.

You write, “The ideology of nationalism, so prominent in the last two centuries and so instrumental in the founding of nation-states, is undergoing important changes in the face of globalization and its impacts.” How does globalization influence nationalism?

Kentel: Globalization is a process with both economic and cultural dimensions. In order to understand globalization, you first have to look at capitalism. As capital is no longer confined to the boundaries of the nation, cultural processes are also globalised. The ability of the time-revered “national home” to exercise control has also been shattered. The most neutral way to explain globalization is the disappearance of economic, capitalist, cultural etc. boundaries. However, when we look at the positive and negative aspects of this process, we see two phenomena, which we can call “hard globalization” and “soft globalization.” When this process creates negative results for certain people, we can call this hard globalization. In a world

⁴ The year that the Republic of Turkey was founded.

dominated by wealth, capital, and power, certain people are deprived of the protective mechanisms of the welfare state. The globalization process harms individuals, institutions and the nation-state.

Nation-states may weaken and fall into retreat in some respects during the process of globalization, but at the same time, don't they also become more powerful especially due to security issues?

Ahiska: Rather than the disappearance of nation-states, we can talk about the transformation of their functions. Once, the ideology of the nation-state or nationalism, which was also reflected in art and culture, was constructed with images of a romantic home and belonging. Now, as the nation-state becomes more and more of a police state and the issue of national culture is in a crisis, we witness the failure of the ideology trying to interiorize anti-capitalist opposition and to re-build a sense of belonging. What is produced today is violence and aggression; not much is left of that old romanticism. This is true in many places, but especially in Turkey, the search for a “home,” the search for belonging, has emerged as a merciless arena of conflict. The language of nationalism has perhaps become more intensely and widely used than before, but when we look at what lies beneath it, we see an astounding amount of conflict and disintegration.

Kentel: Actually, I think the entire “package” has ruptured. The industrial revolution, industrial society, modern society, citizenship, secularism – the state secured a feeling of unity on the national level for all of these... These are all in a complementary harmony with one another. As a whole, they constitute a single package. With globalization, this package has ruptured. Now, it is more difficult to talk about a national economy, a national bourgeoisie...

Ahiska: They all become legends, their supposed foundations undermined. For example, parts of OYAK⁵ are sold to foreigners. The national culture, national economy etc. are now myths. But still, the language of nationalism is in use. One interesting example of the change in the function of the nation-state is the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. We didn't perceive this as a political process; rather, it was regarded as another step towards Turkey's economic development. In order for the pipeline to pass through Turkey, the Turkish government legally relinquished control over the land surrounding the pipeline. Therefore, it is now primarily BP, together with the other private companies working on the project, and *not* the Turkish government, who are the legal authorities there. Ultimately, it is a process which shatters and punctures the legal, cultural and social limits of state power. All of these are part of the process called globalization. In the same process, the mobilization expected of the Turkish state to provide security in that region, and the focus on its role as a military and policing power, continue, while at the same time its role in terms of juridical, economic, cultural, and social politics is partially diminished.

Kentel: From the point of view of classic orthodox Marxism or neo-Marxism, if we think about the debate over whether the state belongs to the bourgeoisie or whether it has relative autonomy, perhaps that thing called relative autonomy is becoming definitively independent. In all this commotion, it is becoming an obvious separate and powerful element. What we have now is a state with its memory shaped by all of the functions historically ascribed to it, but without the capacity to carry out those functions. This state, as an element of a modern strategy, comes into conflict with the strategy of globalization. Take as an example a businessman from Trabzon, who believes he is the bedrock of the Turkish state – a nationalist through and through. But this man's thoughts and economic life are completely global. “Ankara is just the tip of the iceberg,” he says, “I want to build bridges between the Turkish world and Russia.” He no longer thinks inside “these boundaries.” If we go back to the distinction between hard and soft globalization, this is an example of “soft globalization.” The former is perceived as a threat, and the latter as a possibility, an opportunity for expansion. Many people experience both processes at the same time, and this of course generates entirely different combinations. An interesting example from Adapazarı

⁵ OYAK is the Armed Forces Pension Fund.

comes to mind. At the time when Öcalan⁶ was detained in Italy, Italian goods were boycotted – refrigerators were burned, shirts were torn up... A local follower of the Nationalist Action Party (MHP) who was the owner of the Benetton store in Adapazarı, found himself on the horns of a dilemma. Naturally, he couldn't close the store. The ways the language of nationalism is consumed and utilized can vary depending on differences in class, opinion and geography. A businessman or an unemployed person can both use this language, but they do not talk about the same thing. While one uses nationalism to rebel against oppression, the other uses it as a means to adapt to a new era. They speak from class positions and talk about different things. One is rebelling, while the other wants to garner power by using certain words that belong to the nation state strategy. In our conversations, the issue of class does not come up frequently, but for instance being from the city of Çorum does. Somebody says: "They built an airport in Amasya, but the state hasn't lifted a finger here." Here, above and beyond a class position, what is at stake is a sub-identity peculiar to a city and a community.

Genç: The man in Çorum realizes that in a global economy, cities have taken on a new function. He realizes that historically, Çorum has been looked down upon and excluded by the state authorities. He says, "Ankara hasn't done a thing for us, so from now on out just keep out of our business; but, we need an airport – we're going to do business."

Was the man you spoke to a businessman?

Genç: No, not at all.

Perhaps he will never use that airport...

Genç: Definitely. But a macro-economic perception informs the construction of his identity as a person from Çorum. Actually, there is a class aspect that perseveres within all such urban narratives.

Kentel: Yes, sometimes class manifests itself overtly, and sometimes it is interwoven with other things and expressed culturally. Two examples of nationalism concerning the east-west and traditional-modern dichotomies in Turkey come to mind. Let's think of two men, one from Çanakkale who defines himself as Muslim but at the same time as modern, and one man from Kars who emphasizes Islam. One positions himself against fanatical interpretations of Islam and religious superstition, saying, "I drink alcohol when I have to." At the same time he shares other discourses, such as, "Missionaries are trying to divide Turkey." His position on wearing headscarves at school is very clear: "The school is a state territory, don't wear headscarves there, the issue of headscarves is part of a foreign conspiracy, anyway." A tire-seller from Erzurum, for example, nationalist to the core, said: "We children of Anatolia shed our blood for this nation, and if we have to, we'll do it again." He then went on to complain, "They don't let my daughter into school because of her headscarf, and the state doesn't show me any respect." These narratives are not derived from class positions, but they articulate class differences because there is a certain perception about "Turkey's west". When he says "west", he is expressing his objection to the structure and groups that make all the decisions, consume all resources and position themselves as secular. In doing so, he employs a set of religious references.

How do you interpret the recently very visible nationalism of educated upper-middle classes living in metropolises? When these groups unfurl flags and get fired up during Republican People's Party (CHP) rallies, what are the concerns and desires they express?

Kentel: It is most likely the issue of lifestyle that leads them to action. They were included in that secular "package" of the Republic and therefore benefited from the advantages of the social state. Those who rose as a class based on their education among other things until the neo-

⁶ Founder of the PKK, the Kurdistan Workers Party. In 1998 the Turkish government requested his extradition from Italy.

liberalism of the 1980's experience today the crisis of the package. As new social classes with new cultural values are on the rise through new social movements, the former are afraid of losing their lifestyle. An "enemy culture" has emerged. The "enemy culture" does not only threaten their culture, but also social status and class position. In Turkey we have always experienced class struggle culturally. We have always discussed class in terms of culture. With the arrival of a different culture, people's unconscious conception of class is shaken. It is expressed completely in terms of culture: "provincial," "puritan" etc. Because their class position has been threatened, they turn to the most commonly shared nationalist symbols like Atatürk and the flag to protect their style of life.

Is it predominantly a fear of Islamists and Islamic religious law that is troubling these groups? Among them, there is an increasing number of people opposed to the European Union, and even Europe in general. What does the E.U. mean for them? Having traditionally considered themselves European and prided themselves on this, have they come to find out, during the process of E.U. accession, that they are not actually European after all? What motivates this reaction both towards Europe and almost everything Islamic? Is there a connection between these two things?

Ahiska: When we say globalization, we are talking about a process involving intense conflicts, impoverishment, and polarization. We see the insufficiency and weakness of unifying symbols and discourses in the face of these conflicts. While the upper-middle classes try to distinguish themselves spatially and culturally from others, they feel the threat of those they have distanced breathing down their necks. Nationalism imagines a unity that ignores the polarization created by capitalism. Nationalism is redefined as a means to maintain and secure their existing identity, lifestyle and culture. As for those positioned further down, living in increasingly impoverished conditions, nationalism can bear hope for achievement and improvement. Perhaps now, as never before, nationalism is being used as a common language. However, below the surface, there are hundreds of conflicts, hundreds of different needs and different motives. In the 1970's socialism was able to generate a different language in Turkey. Since socialism lacks such a language today, nationalism is viewed as though it is the only valid language people could employ to defend their rights and sustain their lives. For the upper-middle class, this means constructing a common imagination, redefining the boundaries that belong to "us," and defending their position from within those boundaries. And so this language is propagated via constant provocation and rendering of new enemies. As for opposition to the E.U., it is embedded in resentment. By instigating xenophobia, they try to formulate their own sense of belonging, an identity performed by being both Western and anti-Western. It is inflected by feelings of inferiority and resentment. And by positioning anti-Western Western-ness as a form of "authenticity" it tries to transform this inferiority into superiority and foil those who threaten it. I call this "Occidentalism."

Kentel: That thing I call the "package" – the modern nation created in reference to the West and in opposition to a religious, traditional world – in a way means "approaching the West." But at the same time, we could refer to this as approaching or imitating an enemy you have failed to conquer. There is a middle class created by Turkish modernization. They were the ones who most thoroughly adopted and internalized the representations and ideals of modernization because it was mostly they who were educated at schools. At school they learned what is "right," "good," "modern," and "contemporary." They more than anyone else were indoctrinated with these representations. Thus, when this package ruptures, they are possibly the most likely to experience a crisis. And as the middle class is in a crisis, there are a number of social groups eyeing their position. The most important tools of cultural struggle these aspirant groups have are religion, Islam and Islamism. On the other hand, this same middle class is also negatively impacted by globalization, perhaps more than any other group. The others, with their particular cultures and traditions, create a number of hybrid conditions, but the hybridity of the bourgeoisie now in crisis has been emptied of content. Having struggled so vigorously with their own pasts, and, ashamed of anything deemed embarrassing to the Republic, they have rigorously repressed

all of this. It is almost as though they are struggling against an internal other. Today the E.U. says, "There will no longer be any sheltered realms of the modern middle class." And along with all of capitalism's projections, globalization too is saying the same thing. This feeling of pressure, of being stuck, also explains one aspect of the reinforcement or reappearance of the language of nationalism in Turkey. They use a "pure" Turkish (*Öz Türkçe*) word "*ulusalçı*" to refer to themselves as nationalists and therefore mark 1923 as the starting point of their historical narrative, rather than using the word "*milliyetçi*" which would be a reference to the Ottoman period and imply a continuity.

Ahıska: I see things a little differently. The new upper and middle classes that came into being after 1980 should also be taken into consideration. Nationalism is also the way that this group operates under these conditions. The classes generated by the post-1980 liberalized economy are not the same as the upper class elites who tried to create a Kemalist nation and a national culture in the 1930s. This group jauntily refers to itself as "white Turks," demonstrates stronger racist tendencies and can be far more aggressive. Rather than taking into consideration the society as a whole and developing a political agenda encompassing all strata of society, they opt to operate beyond and outside of the state. The nationalist (*ulusalçı*) demonstrations that you referred to are a way in which these classes, and especially the women of these classes, exert themselves politically.

Kentel: We can also describe it as a step towards public sphere. Nothing is guaranteed. By taking to the streets, they are trying to do something to protect themselves.

Ahıska: And it is more and more intertwined with racism. Perhaps this is the modernization process in Turkey; democratization did not take place in Turkey, but modernization did. Isn't this the modernization process that Western thinkers have described: becoming homeless, losing the ground you stand on, the loss of villagers' land, proletarianisation, the crumbling of job security, increases in cultural mediation and uncertainty, and the shifting of conflict onto a similar symbolic plane? Thinking in terms of history of capitalism, we see that modernization takes on the meaning of a loss of home. It seems like modernization is finally happening in Turkey after giving us such a hard time and creating many dead-ends. Since our concept of modernity has been charged in a different way, it may be hard to perceive this. It is not democratization, but modernization that is taking place in Turkey...

The nationalist language that is supposed to be a means of unifying the nation is being used as a "weapon" by all groups . Why is nationalism essentially functioning to divide and fragment society internally, rather than being directed towards the "outside"?

Kentel: A strategy is a line that cuts from the very top to the very bottom, and is in fact a method of proceeding along this route. The strategy has fundamental watchtowers, fundamental rules of grammar (describing strategy as grammar is a metaphor that Michel de Certeau uses a lot). We violate the rules of this grammar on occasion, using the same language to swear, to tell our love. But this language has a set of taboos which define as transgression things that should never be said and things that should be said. And the primary watchtower of nationalism is probably the definition of borders: the nation... This country belongs to the Turks; others, Bulgarians, Greeks and so on, are outside of its borders. If you use this language in the most critical moments of everyday life, in order to overcome your insecurities and to express your revolt; and you learn its rules – what it considers a transgression or a good deed, what are its absolutes and sacred concepts –; then you have taken it to the very depths of life. If Turkey has enemies at the most macro level, scale it down: Nişantaşı also has enemies, and so do the Sunnis and Alevis. In every aspect of their lives people reproduce the language based on the same rules and under the control of those watchtowers. And that's how "nationalisms tear us apart."

And is it this disintegration that creates the need for communities (cemaat)?

Ahıska: Again I will refer to the post-1980 era, when political language became so impoverished. In the 1970s the political language spoken was much richer. Nationalism was constructed as a language and propagated by the media, primarily television, and the culture industry. Ultimately, it has become a model, a structure. This structure is presented almost as a commodity, as something you can adopt and use in any way you wish. But actually it is extremely hollow and baseless. For instance, take the flag: it is hung everywhere, manufactured in record-breaking sizes, but it has been pulled in so many directions that its power to unite has disintegrated and it has weakened as a symbol. A bitter struggle ensues: "I'll manufacture an even bigger flag," or "I'll fly even more flags." They have come to be used as weapons to destroy one's enemies and their symbols: in other words, a means to keep one's footing. I think that in this way nationalism – as a system of belief overtaking religion – as well as the ideology which renders it sacred, have gone bankrupt. In Turkey nationalism does not constitute a hegemonic language which will attract people; on the contrary, it is produced just like any other commodity, like a weapon, marketed through provocation and made available for consumption.

Nearly all of the quotes in the book, from the diehard nationalist from Trabzon to the neo-nationalist (ulusalçı) from Nişantaşı, share a common point, they include negative descriptions of Turkishness: "We are lazy, inept, filthy, we flare up quickly." If there is anything at all for Turks to be proud of, it is buried deep in the past. There is no mention of the positive qualities of Turks today...

Ahıska: This is a serious crisis, isn't it?

Kentel: We can probably explain this by referring to the home metaphor again. Even if people are told, "Look, we have made you a wonderful home, go on, move in," they don't really feel comfortable inside.

Ahıska: This is exactly what I mean when I say modernization. Those old homes have been torn down, existing bonds disintegrate rapidly. There are new types of bonds that can replace them, but nationalism is presented as the new counterpart. However, nationalism is not surrounded by an imagination about how people living together can become a community. The utterly impoverished language of nationalism is insufficient to express conflicts, contradictions, needs, and desires.

That brings to mind Marx's well-known maxim on religion: "Religion is...the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation." It seems as though nationalism is a candidate to take up this role.

Ahıska: Yes it does seem that way, but it can't. Nationalism presents itself as a candidate, tries to provoke the aforementioned role, yet at the same time it fails to provide the necessary basis.

So it cannot be the opium or the remedy...

Ahıska: Right, it can't kill the pain; on the contrary, it exacerbates the pain, rubs salt into the wound.

Kentel: But religion can still do this, at least to a certain degree, and that's one reason why nationalism is becoming more and more inflicted with conservative religious terms. Nationalism tried to supplant religious experience, but couldn't entirely eradicate it. That's why most people inflict their readings of nationalism with religion. The strategy is also becoming religious and infused with the sacred holies, the kabaas and the temples.

Ahıska: But religion too is becoming something other than itself.

Among the upper-middle classes, Atatürk has almost become a religion. What was the impression your fieldwork yielded in this regard? Is there an emphasis on Atatürk among the lower classes as well?

Ahiska: Everybody has a different Atatürk.

Genç: Well, even if not expressed as Atatürk, nationalism displays its religious character in the rituals and ceremonies. The image of Atatürk, as a symbol, is not as explicitly expressed amongst the lower classes as it is amongst the upper classes, I'd say.

Kentel: Education plays an important role here. It is clear why the slogan "education is essential" appears everywhere. Among the upper classes, symbolic narratives of Atatürk and the Republic are more concise and a little better reinforced.

You've dedicated the book to the memory of Hrant Dink. In the foreword you write, "If Hrant Dink were alive, it would have been possible to write and read this book in a different way." An analysis of Hrant Dink's assassination could greatly help us understand many different issues: the population currently residing in those parts of the country previously inhabited by the Greeks, the cult of weapons, unemployed and desperate youth, the Armenian question, the effects of the media's provocative language concerning the Armenian question, and the relationship between the state, nationalisms and nationalists. How do you situate Hrant Dink's murder in the framework of your study in regards to these various elements?

Kentel: Hrant Dink's murder was probably one of the most difficult things this study attempted to comprehend. It was actually an a posteriori effort. Hrant Dink was murdered a few months after we had completed our interviews. But in the interviews we conducted, the Armenian question and hatred towards the Armenians had surfaced. In the case of Hrant Dink's murder, roughly speaking, there are three overlapping levels. The first is masculinity and its founding myth, heroism: "We weathered war, we died, we were murdered, we resisted, we fought bravely." Thus, there is a heroic essence attributed to Turkishness. Masculinity is probably the most concrete way that this is experienced. The reinterpretation of the belligerent militarism of a patriarchal culture by the modern nationalist culture, symbols of masculinity... A large part of society, or in fact, perhaps all of society thrives on this discourse of masculinity. Men are just as much, maybe even more so, the victims of this masculine discourse as women, just as masculinity is something imposed upon women by men. The strategy reproduces this type of "masculinity" through various terms like martyrdom and heroism. At the second level, there is ennui, social passivity, and even a sense of uselessness and desperation. In classical terminology, we would call this situation a social problem. Between this social problem and the consumption of masculinity is the field of popular culture. There is a cultural production which, by filling the gap between dissatisfaction and discourse, facilitates the adoption of this discourse and gains popularity. The most symbolic example of this is the TV series "Valley of the Wolves" (*Kurtlar Vadisi*) which produces symbols and representations about how those good-for-nothing people can become useful and valuable. Heroes like the protagonist Polat Alemdar, who act outside of the law, commit murder and wear black trench coats, inspire awe. This popular culture is neither national nor local; rather, it is a completely American narrative. And then added on to these three components is O.S.'s situation.⁷ He is from Trabzon's Pelitli district. Trabzon is a place where guns are as commonplace and easy to get hold of as bread and butter. And so there we have the fusion of two things: a "masculine" man, a consumer of popular culture and a killing tool sold and used with the same ease as bread and butter which can make him a hero. However, there are many people who share the same frustrations, who just watch television and go to soccer games, but who wouldn't do what O.S. did. For example, we spoke with two young men, big fans of guns, who work in a pharmacy; there's no way they would ever have anything to do with death or murder. So popular culture alone is not enough, masculinity alone is not enough,

⁷ Ogün Samast, Hrant Dink's murderer.

frustration alone is not enough to explain that murder. There was a kid from Çorum, exceptionally bored, with absolutely nothing to do. It was unbelievable, you wanted to just hug him; he was so innocent and well behaved. Surely murder will never cross his mind. One of the interviews we conducted in Trabzon was very instructive on this point. Trabzonspor⁸ was slated to play the Greek Cypriot team Apoel in the European Cup. On Fenerbahçe's web site, incendiary comments had been posted to the effect that people from Trabzon are actually Greek: "You are going to play your brothers." A young man from Trabzon told us, "This is maybe one of our biggest problems – an older buddy of mine told me the same thing. Maybe the reason we've become so nationalist is in order to cut ourselves off from our Greek heritage." Perhaps what is known as Trabzon culture has paved the path to nationalism, via guns and masculinity. In order not to be "Greek momma's boys," you construct yourself as a handgun-toting, real man. This is just speculation of course. In the end, just having a gun isn't sufficient motive for murdering Hrant Dink. And that's exactly why the whole matter is so complex. To answer the question, "Why did he murder Hrant Dink?" by saying "Because he was a nationalist," just doesn't cut it. This kid is a multitude of things all at once. He's immersed in all kinds of things; there are all kinds of aspects that make him who he is. The same is true of tactics; tactics take on all kinds of appearances. We mustn't think of tactics merely as positive means of resisting a strategy. Tactics utilized to give meaning to life also carry great potential to generate results that are by no means positive.

Ahiska: Hrant Dink's assassination was a turning point. It brought to the surface a number of associated issues going way back in time. No longer would it be easy to deal with these issues within the framework of the official ideology. For example, from the beginning, defining Turkishness in opposition to the non-Muslim community was a building block of identity construction. Throughout history "Turkishness" continually merged with the concept of being Muslim. During the period of transformation between the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, non-Muslims were viewed by Turkish Muslims as part of the West, even as pawns of the West, and occasionally conflicts flared up, some more blatantly obvious than others. Hrant Dink's murder disclosed how the state was directly involved in this and therefore how invalid the term "deep state" actually was, and how it had been organized by much more familiar networks. Secondly, a hundred thousand protestors marching under the slogan "We are all Armenian" marked a historical moment and constituted a serious threat. These people were embracing history in an entirely different way, and that was a cause of concern.

But at the same time, after the murder, a crowd of fans at a soccer game unfurled banners proclaiming, "We are all Ogün Samast" and shouted slogans to that effect. The whole mass of them very blatantly and proudly claimed the murder and the murderer, to be one of their own.

Ahiska: I was heading to that point. This is an insurmountable history, an impassable tumult. If we recall Foucault's account of discourse, it defines the limits of what can be said. At this point, there is a bankruptcy of the official ideology which can no longer define those limits. Meanwhile, the established limits of what has been denied in history can no longer be maintained, due in part to the development of globalization and capitalism. Extreme violence ensues when discourses can no longer conceal or deny conflicts. In one way, this is an utter breakdown of discourses, the onset of muteness. The limits of what can be said can no longer be delineated, because conflict can no longer be concealed. Nationalism is, after all, a rejection of social processes; it is a family construct, a construct of "us" – but this cannot take place, because of the serious conflicts within society. This is a very strange moment.

Kentel: This is not specific to Turkey alone; it too is a kind of Americanization. The U.S. is a symbol of power, and no matter how dressed up in a rhetoric of peace and democracy, everything it does, it does with brute force and violence. They go and occupy Iraq. Even when the nation-state resists, it imitates the United States in its resistance. It is imitating all the

⁸ Trabzon's soccer team.

manifestations of hard globalization. And so Polat Alemdar in “Valley of the Wolves: Iraq” and whatnot, is essentially imitating Rambo. Despite their claims of the national and the local, they are actually behaving like American soldiers.

Isn't the military, which is the primary institution neo-nationalists rely on, the most Americanized of institutions?

Kentel: The American military is the model for everything. From the commandoes who paint their faces and wear bandanas to the uniforms they wear, everything is American. The 1990s was a turning point in this sense.

Genç: In the 1990s several different moments converged: the left retreated, globalization picked up speed, and the Kurdish conflict was at its peak.

Kentel: Liberalism levels the playing field, and from that point onward, a bitter power struggle ensues. Liberalism is based on the belief that everyone must compete as individuals and that the strongest will win. Thus, you have to struggle to be strong. But everyone is in a position to speak. So that's the first moment. That's what 1980 made possible: the strong social movement was eradicated, at least the language of the left was, and the right was rendered invisible. This leaves you face to face with the remaining voices, the most important of which was Islam. In the 1990s, the Kurds and then the Armenians began to speak. If we think of the expression “civil society” so prominent in those years, we can say that civil society, or social movements, began speaking up. When social movements speak up, what is revealed is the potential of different forms of modernization, which are beyond the scope of the modernization project the state has tried to accomplish and control through a kind of social engineering. Other possibilities begin to emerge, possibilities which exist outside of the system that the state tries to control by means of official history, civics, and socialization processes. We have seen the precautions taken by the state in the face of such possibilities. After The Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power and clear steps were taken on the issue of accession to the European Union, the state's conservative politics became even more radical. Becoming an E.U. member would denote the disintegration of the package, the order, all existing structures. And so to protect those structures, an operation was undertaken within the state. These are the politics of a government bent on protecting itself. The attack on the council of state, for example, made many facts blatantly clear. Who was the man who made the attack? A pawn. Clearly this wasn't an Islamist reaction. This is obviously the work of criminal organizations. It was a reaction directed entirely towards social change.

While all of these changes were taking place, if there could have been improvements in the everyday life of the populace, and if there had been a feeling that these efforts were undertaken for the good of the people, then maybe the General Staff's psychological operations and strategic manoeuvring would not have been able to arouse such a response.

Genç: Or if an alternative political vision had been laid out, it may not have turned out as it did. While debating the results of our study, Mesut Yeğen made an excellent point: Globalization is happening everywhere, mobilizing similar dynamics across the world. While there is a similar situation in Turkey and Serbia, why is the situation in Latin America so different? Why is it that there, people express themselves inside leftist movements rather than with fascistic reactions? Certainly there are a number of structural differences cutting across multiple planes between Latin American countries and Turkey, and my point here is not to make an oversimplified comparison like, “why is it like that there, but not here,” but rather to suggest a way to trace the differences between the two paths. I think if we had been able to envision an alternate politics the situation here would have been very different. And I think we can still do this; this state of disintegration or dissolution in fact lays the foundation for the development of an alternate political vision.

Far before us, Latin America underwent a shift to neo-liberalism accompanied by massive political upheaval. Moreover, they lived under much longer and graver military juntas. I wonder if the most notable difference between Turkey and Latin America is that in Latin America there is no opposition between religion and socialism.

Ahiska: In Latin America, the state has a much more unifying character. Laclau makes the following analysis: In Latin America, the principle of citizenship has validity because the state is unifying and inclusive, able to contain differences; while in countries like Turkey and Hungary, a politics of inclusion based on citizenship does not exist, and thus nationalism based on ethnicity and exclusion prevails.

Kentel: In Latin America there is the Bolivar phenomenon, which renders viable the idea of a Latin American Union. A real nationalism doesn't develop in Latin America because you've got the same thing on the other side of a nation's borders: a mix of natives and descendants of European immigrants. As Turkey adopted its model of modernization from France, it also got a system where laicism is opposed to religion. In Latin America, there was no such model opposing religion.

Going back to the economic aspect of the issue, we find that there is increasing impoverishment, unemployment and desperation; at the same time, crucial resources are being sold to foreign capital. This is also a process which probably fosters nationalism. Since the left has withdrawn from the political sphere, would it have been possible for neo-liberalism not to lead to fascism, or reactionary, hard-line nationalism, and xenophobia?

Genç: As long as alternate politics – which, in my opinion, should be termed the left – does not exist, globalization cannot be properly described, and it will be impossible to develop a feasible opposition to globalization, which has not been properly described and therefore cannot be properly understood. And so in short, at the end of the day, what we're likely to end up with is xenophobia if not fascism.

Ahiska: I think hostility towards foreigners and society. When we view and address things using more intimate terms associated with family, or masculinity, etc., rather than viewing them in relation to society and the social, the reactions that emerge also relate to those terms.

Kentel: We said that in the 1990s society began to speak, but the language used was cultural. Postmodernism is capitalism's cultural sales pitch. It is the only way in which people are able to express themselves. Global capitalism and neo-liberalism have made it possible for people to express themselves on a cultural level. But in the meantime, we have forgotten the languages of economics and class. And this state of affairs is an amazing boon for liberalism. From the point of view of the powers that be, those who might otherwise rise up as a class and rebel are instead just "hung up on stuff like culture." And so when cultural identities express themselves and make cultural demands, this does not just give rise to a kind of liberation; at the same time, it creates insular, even totalitarian communities. And while cultural identity signifies freedom, nationalism cannot. So what then? Maybe you will plunge into fascism and hit rock bottom. When your nose hits the wall, you'll likely find yourself in a predicament saying, "Alas! I need to find something else, this language cannot save me." Therefore, an alternate language should be the number one priority of the left. We need a language in which the issue of class can be readdressed, though not at the expense of cultural identity, but rather together with it, because no matter how much capitalism has benefited from the sphere of cultural identity, ultimately the latter has been a quest for freedom as well. Perhaps what we need to do is to build a new home, a new community, one that's warm and welcoming and will give shelter to all our stories; this could be the alternative to what we're being offered now. And that's probably the only way to resist. Then we can reinterpret the concept of "community" and imagine it in a whole new way. Richard Sennet comes to mind; for example, the idea that we can re-conceive the city as a model of living together. This city, which both renders me anonymous and saves me from my traditional

community, at the same time, in all that confusion, gives me a new identity. If the words “city” and “community,” which combined seem paradoxical, can be thought of together, then new political visions for the future may also become possible. What modernity taught us is that through urbanization we would be saved from community. We can be saved from that community, but we can also think together with the newly and differently imagined community that we create in the city.

You wrote, “With the collapse of those masculine representations and symbols equated with the imagined nation-state, society becomes visible from below. And this is no longer a society under the hegemony of secular nationalism’s envisaged ‘rational’ and ‘masculine’ symbols. (...) When the varnish on the surface cracks, society emerges in all of its femininity. And society, which until that day had been inculcated with masculine symbols and which had envisaged itself as male, realizes its femininity.” Could you expand a bit on what you mean by this feminization?

Kentel: If the nation-state is an ideology which reproduces itself by means of masculine symbols, then every blow dealt to that ideology threatens masculinity as well. For example, just a moment ago we talked about a widespread complaint: “We Turks always do things poorly.” This signifies a loss of confidence; whereas a man is he who has self-confidence. Nationalism loses its ability to provide confidence, and the disorder of life becomes more visible. Now, everyone is embroiled in complexity. From the male ideological perspective, the nationalist thus comes to correspond to “femininity”. Nation becomes feminized. Unlike a society identified with “masculinity”, this “feminine” society breaks down and cries, loves passionately, speaks from the heart, is sometimes silent and obedient, sometimes rebels with screams, pleads, and is self-contradictory. Just as nationalism insisted that I forget about my religion, my traditions, and my ethnicity, so too did it insist that I forget all about my femininity. The Kemalist woman, who raises robust children for the future of the homeland, is a “manly” woman. But today, in all of this confusion, everyone is over-sensitive and everyone behaves like a woman. On the one hand, this is a good thing: men are experiencing femininity. But on the other hand, I find myself having to deal with this thing inside of me that I don’t want to be there. As society becomes feminized, nationalism becomes more and more masculine, and society plunges into a state of internal struggle.

Between the time that you started the research for this project and the time the book was actually published, did you experience any changes, in terms of your perspective, or your mentality or approach?

Ahiska: I came to realize how important representations are. This doesn’t mean that class struggle or economic structures are insignificant, but by the end of the research, I realized the importance of language, imagination and existing structures. There is a relationship between the production of visions and intellectuals, and I think that we have faltered badly when it comes to the creation of a dissident social vision which opposes power. This is also true both for academic research and the press. I don’t much care for the term “alternative.” I think it was in a letter to Ruge where Marx said, “We cannot teach the world what it ought to do.” In the end, we have to make a criticism from inside historical struggles and find different ways to expose the meanings they embody. We cannot say to social groups, “Stop your struggle, here, this is the truth, now kneel down before it,” we cannot create new modes of thought from nothing. For me, this was an important aspect of our research: being able to see the quests underlying various expressions, and from there to begin imagining a “different” language.

Genç: Though Meltem and I may put things a little differently, I think we stand close to each other. I think that an alternate vision will emerge from experience. Perhaps, in order to emphasize the importance of social experience in this regard, it would be more correct to speak of it as “an oppositional vision.” When we began the research, as a student of social sciences I brashly used such expressions as “appropriating experience,” without fully grasping their meaning. Looking back, I see that now. At the beginning, I thought that our country was very nationalist, and I found this trend of sweeping nationalism discomfoting. During the course of

the research, however, I understood that nationalism was not as powerful and pervasive as it seemed. Thanks to this lack of pervasiveness, I believe that we will be able to arrive at an alternate vision. As Leonard Cohen put it so well: “There is a crack in everything / That’s how the light gets in.”

Kentel: Seeing just how convoluted nationalism is led me to this political conclusion: despite all we saw and the thoughts that they invoked in us, or perhaps even because of them, I have more hope now. This may sound populist, but I felt a certain pity and compassion for this society, of which I too am a part. To be honest, I didn’t think that I would come across such a truly pathetic society. I was expecting to come across groups of hard, calloused people; however, beneath that hardness there is an unbelievable amount of downheartedness and desperation. Only a left which can rethink itself is capable of addressing this condition. There is an extraordinary potential here. People want to talk, and the left should hear those voices. When the sharp divisions and clear colours melt away, seeing the interpenetrations beneath the surface made me think that a new language of the left would be possible, a language which would be able to see these and speak to the tumult in society. I think that by taking in a new set of elements, the left has considerable potential to be reborn. And this gives me hope. It is from this society that I derive the strength to sustain my hope for resistance.

Translated from Turkish by Mark Wyers and Amy Spangler