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**Higher Education and the Political Economy of Meritocracy in Turkey**

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**Abstract:** In modern societies, much of the work of socioeconomic stratification, knowledge production, and legitimation is relegated to universities. On the one hand, universities provide sorting mechanisms for individual status attainment; on the other, they work to produce and reproduce classificatory schemes that organize legitimate principles of social vision and division, ultimately constructing social and political identities. In Turkey, higher education has been central to the project of nation-building at different stages of republican history: first, as a web of associations linking geographically dispersed and ideologically diverse citizens into a national educational field; and secondly, but no less critical, as a site for the renegotiation of institutionalized social classifications and political truth-claims. By analyzing the dynamics of contention around access to and control over the organizational infrastructure and curricular content of the higher educational field in the post-1980s Turkey, I seek to understand the social and cultural foundations of the recent authoritarian-populist shift in the country. To make salient the interplay between state-mediated discourses on meritocracy and the individual strategies of social mobility, my research is based on multi-sited fieldwork that includes participant observation and semi-structured interviews in two newly-founded and differently-located public universities, as well as archival research in the capital city of Ankara.

**Introduction**

Post-truth politics, where personal feelings trump logic and facts, became a catchword to describe the authoritarian-populist turn in global politics. (Bruff 2014; Hall 1985; Özyurek, Özpinar, and Altındiş 2019) While the public debate around post-truth tends to attribute blame to the advancement of social media and the emergence of fake news, my project tilts the frame to the institutional site of putatively “real” knowledge-production – the university. Analyzing higher education not only as a credentialing mechanism of individual status-attainment (Collins 1979) but also as a contested terrain of social and political conflict (Karabel and Halsey 1977; Bourdieu 1996), my dissertation queries the role of universities in the formation of political and social identities. I trace the institutional and discursive shifts that have transformed the Turkish higher-educational field as a case study to understand how contentious politics in other areas of social life diffuse into educational spheres and how universities take part in reconfiguring social, economic, and cultural contention. How do the authoritarian-populist shift in Turkish politics and the mass expansion of higher education inform one another? What role do Turkish public universities play in mediating the relationship between state and society? What is the role of higher education in legitimating state power and manufacturing political consent? And how, in turn, do individuals from a wide variety of social backgrounds make sense of their experience within educational institutions, that is, in what particular ways do people come to internalize the roles (ideologies?) universities offer? What is the interplay between state-mediated discourses on meritocracy and the individual strategies of upward mobility?

Much of the work of modern socioeconomic stratification and knowledge production is delegated to universities. On the one hand, universities provide sorting mechanisms through which individual life-chances crystallize (Coleman 1988); on the other, they work to produce and reproduce classificatory schemes that legitimize principles of social vision and division (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), ultimately constructing social and political identities (Binder and Wood 2013; Khan 2011; Willis 1977). As such, higher education has been central to the project of nation-building at different stages of modern Turkish history by facilitating the state’s jurisdiction over the cultivation of competent citizens and workers. It acts as an associational web linking geographically-dispersed and ideologically-diverse citizens into a national educational field; but also, and no less critically, as a site for the renegotiation of institutionalized social classifications and political truth-claims (Kazamias 1966; Kandiyoti and Emanet 2017).

In consequence, higher education has become an institutional field where at least two kinds of struggle occur at different domains. At the micro-level, peers compete to be included in the hopes of attaining upward social mobility, while some are left out due to disadvantages based on economic, ethnic, and/or religious inequalities. At the macro-level, social and political movements with antagonistic visions and interests clash over controlling the organizational infrastructure and curricular content of knowledge-production. By studying the university as a key institutional setting where the production of ideas and the manipulation of meaning for the public take place, I aim to trace the shifting discourses and practices that overall constitute what I call the political economy of meritocracy.

**Historical Context**

In July 2018, Fahrettin Altun, the director of communications of the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, sparked a public debate on the politics of cultural production and reception in Turkey. Altun walked into a bookstore on the iconic İstiklal Street in İstanbul and took a picture of the best-selling books section. He later posted that picture on Twitter, where he has 87.6K followers, with the caption “Enough! Isn’t a local-national [yerli ve milli] cultural politics long overdue?” Among the books in the picture were The Art of Overthrowing the Dictator, written by an outspokenly-leftist member of parliament from the main opposition party; a collection of memoirs by the Academics-for-Peace activists who have been dismissed from their positions in public universities; and a storybook authored by the jailed co-chair of a left-liberal, pro-Kurdish political party. Altun provocatively reignited the notion that, although Turkey’s pious-conservative actors have accumulated significant amounts of political and economic capital in the last two decades, incorporated as they were to the “center” of the political system, their voices remained weak in spaces where cultural capital has retained its relative autonomy from political capital.

This research seeks to explore the social and cultural underpinnings of the “passive revolution” (Tuğal 2009) that has swayed the Turkish politics and society in the past two decades through the lens of universities and higher education. The modern republic of Turkey, founded in 1923 in the wake of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, is often depicted as a bridge that connects Europe with the Middle East, therefore the West and the East, not simply because of its geopolitical position, but also due to its long history of experimentation with the European (and later, American) models of social and political reform in an otherwise non-European society (Huntington 1993). Scholarship on the nineteenth and twentieth-century modernization movements in Turkey mainly operated within the center-periphery heuristic rooted in structural-functionalist thought (Mardin 1973). This framework, now defunct, theorized social change on the basis of a deep-rooted battle between the military-bureaucratic elite with a secular ideology versus the provincial actors. As the former centralized power in secular state institutions, the latter lost the authority they previously claimed over the organization of social life, thus found themselves peripheralized. Starting with 1994 local elections, however, a new political elite with organic ties to the political-Islamist movement have gained control over various branches of the government (Tuğal 2009; Yavuz 2006). Since assuming power over the central government in 2002 general elections, the Justice and Development Party, under the leadership of Erdoğan, used its electoral mandate to pursue an autocratic agenda, creating a new regime a new that has been alternatively described as "competitive authoritarianism," "authoritarian neoliberalism," or "authoritarian populism" (Levitsky and Way 2010; Özden, Akça, and Bekmen 2017; see also Hall 1985; Jessop et al. 1984).

In the higher educational field, the authoritarianism of the Erdoğan regime manifests itself in state-mandated violations of academic freedom, strict governmental surveillance over the content of research and teaching, as well as in the rising currency of anti-intellectualist discourses advertised as anti-elitism. In the meantime, Turkey has witnessed a rapid higher educational expansion under the Erdoğan regime, in which the number of universities (public and private) almost tripled (from 76 in 2002 to 203 in 2018), and the percentage of the population with access to higher education doubled. Official rhetoric portrays this expansion in two different ways. First, the mass expansion of higher education is depicted as a redistributive mechanism whereby state resources are put to the service of the Turkish subaltern ⎯ individually pious, socially conservative lower and lower-middle classes at the “periphery” ⎯ who were previously excluded from the project of modernization. Second, in addition to the redistribution of material state resources to his supporters, Erdoğan claims to be pursuing a struggle for symbolic recognition. The regime asserts that the academic institutions, which were hitherto controlled by the republican elite, sacralized and inculcated a system of knowledge that were at odds with the worldviews of “ordinary” Turks. By probing how the counter-elite “passive revolution” in Turkey has over time transformed into an attempt at a “permanent revolution,” my dissertation analyzes the vicissitudes of the discourses on knowledge, higher education, and meritocracy in order to shed light on the role of the university reform in reproducing class and status hierarchies and the social and cultural underpinnings of the authoritarian-populist turn.

**Theoretical Framework**

This project mobilizes insights from the critical literature in the sociology of education and cultural approaches in political sociology to understand how the symbolic power of the educational institutions is produced and challenged in modern Turkey. In today's knowledge society, the growing salience of academic credentials increase demand for access to higher education and further expectations from the public universities all around the world (Collins 1979; Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992; Schofer and Meyer 2005; Frank and Meyer 2007). Despite the popular notion of educational opportunity as the primary mechanism for meritocratic social mobility, critical social scientists question the direct connection between educational attainment and individual prosperity over the life course. In this view, instead of providing a path for upward mobility for the underprivileged, credentialism works to obscure inherited boundaries between classes and status-groups, hence reproduces durable patterns of social inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1996; Willis 1977; Lareau 2003; Khan 2011). While influential, the theme of social “reproduction” that overshadows the work of Bourdieu and his followers, as well as the Birmingham School in cultural studies (Hall 1982), cannot fully illuminate the Turkish case, given that the latter is characterized by instability and turbulence more than stability.

Therefore, my project queries education not only as an elusive mechanism that reproduces social inequality, but also as a social-engineering tool that states employ to cultivate ideal citizen-workers. National education policy, in this respect, is a resource mobilized by the political elite to disseminate systems of signification that organize political thought and control social action. A cultural sociology of politics demands us to pay attention to the discursive dimensions of state power. Nation-states discipline their citizens not only through the exercise of physical coercion; they invisibly but quite effectively mold the cognitive faculties of those who are subject to their rule. This project scrutinizes educational institutions as microcosms where states intervene to create and re-create their own visions of a just and prosperous society.

**Research Design**

What role does the institutional transformation of the higher educational field play in mediating the broader patterns of social change in Turkish politics and society? How does the discourse of meritocracy, once defined the early-republican model of national education, circulate within the new regime’s educational apparatuses? How does the transformations in higher education field resonate in the lives and minds of the students, their aspirations, and their political socialization? To understand how political and economic forces impose themselves upon the minds and lives of the university students in Turkey and how they, in turn, relate to, negotiate with, or resist these forces, I will use institutional ethnography (Smith 2005). Like other forms of ethnography, institutional ethnography relies on interviews, observation, and documents as data. As an ethnographer, I will follow university students for extended periods in different places as they navigate educational pathways between classes, conferences, club activities, social and professional networking events. I will also observe recruitment and orientation events organized by the university administrations, panels and meetings on national educational policy, job and career fairs.

Case selection: Populist regimes build coalitions with various social intermediaries to implement their policy agendas and maintain support. A single-case study that treats the entire Turkish society as a uniform analytical sphere would obscure the connections between the actors in different social structural positions, hence mischaracterize the strategic contexts in which state-society relations occur. Instead, I use a subnational comparative design to better understand the spatially-uneven nature of political and cultural transformation (Snyder 2001). I have tentatively identified two institutions that would allow me to construct a paired comparison for investigating how hegemonic relations work in different parts of the country. I will study everyday social interaction in and around two new public universities in Turkey (Tarrow 2010). The first, Yildirim Beyazit University, began its activities as a new public research university in 2010, catering to the urban, middle-class students in the country's capital city, Ankara. Given its strong focus on social sciences and humanities, Ankara locals consider it as an incubator for Turkey’s new intelligentsia, that is, the organic intellectuals of the new regime. Whereas Ankara has been the showcase of Turkish modernization throughout the twentieth century, my second case is from Bayburt, a small town in northeastern Turkey. Along the banks of the Çoruh river, more than a hundred miles away from the nearest major urban center, Bayburt has stayed at the margins of the country's economic and cultural development. Its recent history had been marked by insufficient public and private investment, population loss due to consistent out-migration, and heavy dependence on the agricultural sector in employment. As part of the nation-wide trend of higher-educational expansion, a new public research university, specialized in engineering, admitted its first students in 2008.

I will intertwine the evidence from ethnographic fieldnotes with semi-structured interviews and elucidate the contradictions between everyday practices and the normative prescriptions that come out in interview situations. I plan to conduct around 40 interviews in each site, ideally coupled with focus-group discussions, to capture the mental maps and interpret the motivations of students, parents, educators, policy-makers, private investors, and other stakeholders in the higher education field. While interviews with students will interrogate their social mobility aspirations and the motivations behind their educational and occupational decisions, additional interviews with faculty members, administrators, and policy advocates will uncover the shifting discourses around credentialism and knowledge economy.

Finally, to illuminate how social interactions in these institutions are bound up in a broader history of social conflict and change, my research will also include an archival study of policy-related documents (including reports published by the Council of Higher Education, the Ministry of National Education, and the Center for Measurement, Selection, and Placement; parliamentary proceedings on educational reform; newspaper articles; select course catalogs and syllabi) from the 1980s onwards. Process-tracing historical shifts on meritocracy discourse and integrating archival data with ethnographic interpretation, I aim to expand our understanding of the cultural and political processes by which education is reconfigured around the interests and values of different sectors in contemporary Turkish society.

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