

Farmers to Engineers? Higher Education and Social Change in Neoliberal Turkey

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Political Economy Summer Institute Application

November 15, 2018

What is the role of higher education in mediating the relationships between state, market, and civil society? How does a new university change the lives of people in a small, rural town? To understand the *political economy of meritocracy* in modern Turkey, my dissertation will investigate the effects of higher-educational expansion through an ethnographic case study in the city of Bayburt in northeast Turkey. Along the banks of the Çoruh river, more than a hundred miles away from the nearest major urban center, Bayburt's social trajectory until recently was 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 a larger trend of higher-educational expansion in Turkey, which witnessed an increase in the total number of universities in the nation from 22 in 1980 to 203 as of 2018, a new public research university in Bayburt, specialized in engineering, admitted its first students in 2008. However, while the government and the mainstream media portray the inclusion of previously-excluded students into public universities as a sign of democratization and development, critics have highlighted quality over quantity and questioned the benefits of university degrees by underlying the chronic problem of youth unemployment in Turkey (Bora et al. 2011). My research takes an ethnographic approach to study the complexities of lived experience in the context of a contradictory conjunction of increased social-mobility opportunities with unfavorable economic circumstances (Doner and Schneider 2016). Specifically, it asks: What is the role of the university in manufacturing political consent from the lower-class students in peripheral areas of developing countries? How do students make sense of and account for their experience within the public university system? How does the neoliberal transformation of higher education in Turkey affect young people's social mobility aspirations, educational attainment strategies, and the meanings attached to educational credentials?

Despite the ideal notion of formal education as a meritocratic mechanism of social mobility, scholarship on education and social inequality hesitates to make any direct connections between educational opportunity and equality. In this view, instead of providing a path of upward mobility for the underprivileged, educational credentials can obscure inherited boundaries between

classes and status-groups and thus legitimate the durable patterns of social inequality (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Collins 1979). My research bridges the critical literature on higher education with culturalist approaches in political sociology that emphasize the *symbolic power* states exercise on their citizens to enforce taken-for-granted principles of vision and division (Bourdieu 1989, 1999; Gorski 2003; Loveman 2005; Swartz 2013). Accordingly, I scrutinize educational institutions not only as an elusive mechanism that reproduces social inequality but also as a microcosm where states intervene to create and re-create their own visions of a just and prosperous society (see also Boli, Ramirez, and Meyer 1985; Ramirez and Boli 1987).

In Turkey, the republican elite with a self-ascribed responsibility to discipline a “backward” society of immobile Ottoman subjects into citizens of a modern nation-state used secular education to disseminate systems of signification that organize political thought and control social action (Kaplan 2006). Turkey’s first president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk epitomized the importance of higher education for the nation’s future with the oft-repeated quote “Science is the most reliable guide in life” and led an educational reform process that replaced religious authority with secular principles. Throughout the twentieth century, public universities have prepared an exclusive segment of the population to privileged positions in state institutions and private sector, thereby establishing a symbolic boundary between those citizens who have education and those who have not. Over the last two decades, however, a new political elite who have risen from the ranks of political Islam initiated a campaign to proliferate public and private universities and expanded the reach of higher education to previously-excluded parts of the population within a populist framework that depicts this change as a peripheral takeover of the center. Existing scholarship on Turkey’s recent sociopolitical transformation has reiterated a decades-old rift between the nation’s Westernized secular core and its conservative Muslim periphery (Mardin 1989; Göle 1996; Tuğal 2009; White 2013; Benhabib 2013).

Whereas the scholarship focuses on the ideological dimensions of political and educational reform in Turkey, we know very little about how the students themselves have interpreted these developments on the ground. Considering this, I will study everyday social interaction in and around Bayburt University to understand how political and economic forces impose themselves upon the college and college-prep students in the area and how they in turn relate to, negotiate with, or resist these forces. To do so, I will use the “extended case method” that emphasizes researcher engagement (over detachment), process and context (over reliability and replicability),

and theory reconstruction (over representativeness) (Burawoy 1998). Participant observation will constitute the core of data collection. As an ethnographer, I will follow students for extended periods of time as well as in different places as they navigate educational pathways between classrooms, counseling meetings and career fairs, and private tutoring centers. I will integrate the fieldnotes from a year-long ethnographic engagement with in-depth interviews and focus-group discussion with students, teachers, parents, and other actors in Bayburt's educational field. While interviews will interrogate students' social mobility aspirations and the motivations behind their educational and occupational decisions, participant observation will allow me to uncover contradictions between normative prescriptions that come out in interview situations and everyday practices.

My research will also include an archival investigation of Turkish higher-educational policy through a content analysis of institutional documents from the 1980s onwards. Combining the historical shifts in the higher-education field with ethnographic insights, it will explore discourses surrounding educational opportunity and social mobility and shed light on the sociocultural underpinnings of Islamism and authoritarian populism in modern Turkey. My academic background in political science and international relations (Koç University, BA '13, MA '17) prepared me to situate my field within broader political economic forces that have characterized the region and the country. The PhD program in the at the University of Minnesota has equipped me with the theoretical and methodological foundations necessary to undertake this research project. Courses on political and cultural sociology have introduced me with the key theoretical issues that I will grapple with in the next few years. In addition, I have completed an intensive methodological seminar in ethnography and a directed study in discourse analysis. The program has also given me an opportunity to enrich my conceptual toolkit with interdisciplinary perspectives through courses in anthropology, geography, history, and political science departments. Given my strong interdisciplinary training and, I am well-qualified to be an engaged participant in the PESI 2019 program and looking forward to benefitting from the opportunity.

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