



LGBTQ Activism in Turkey During 2010s

Queer Talkback

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To Idris

PREFACE

Writing my dissertation was a frustrating process. If I were to take a wild and perhaps a risky guess, I would most likely claim that I am not the only one who feels that way about their dissertation. My dissertation was mainly about the ways in which nationalists and those who identified as anti-nationalists – it is broadly a *conservative vs. liberal* distinction in US terms – debated social issues on social media. I picked the most controversial social issues in Turkey – Armenian Genocide, oppression of Kurdish people, and the invasion and subsequent separation of Cyprus. I was tracing the intertextuality in these debates, examining how the lexicon and semantic structure of liberals and conservatives were similar despite their counter positionality. They were using the same rhetorical tropes to argue counter points. They were citing the same nationalist texts to suggest their point was right and the opposing point was wrong. In a sense, they were *talking within* the same ideological framework, although they were truly convinced of their opposition. It was 2012 and Turkey was not short of social issues. I defended my dissertation in early spring of 2013. About few weeks later, the largest protest movement in the history of Turkey, Gezi Park protests, took place.

Because I was actively looking for work in the US, unfortunately I was not able to go back to Turkey to witness the protest movement first hand. However, I spent that year collecting all the data I could about the protests. I tracked the protests live, communicated with the protestors, followed their street by street movements and their clashes with the police. During this time, data I collected had a wide range – it spanned everything from

social media group discussions that supported as well as detested the protests, comments underneath the news posts on news websites, hashtags, blog posts, images, history books, magazines, and pretty much everything I could get my hands on.

What struck me about the data I was accumulating was the lack of LGBT voices and presence in the histories of the protests written by the protestors themselves or publications who supported the protests with great enthusiasm. The reason why this stood out particularly was not that identity politics was especially popular during 2010s and missing LGBT voices and concerns meant that a movement faulted in living up to a contemporary standard of being inclusive – although that argument has its own merits and pitfalls. Historical narratives of the protests written by protestors or supporters of the protests that lacked LGBT voices was striking because I knew from personal accounts and from conversations with LGBT activist friends – who were at the frontlines of the protests since its inception – the protests themselves did not lack any LGBT voices.

The discrepancy between the reality on the ground and the narratives that were circulating as accurate histories deemed further exploration. However, the more I explored, the more the pattern fit into a larger pattern of discrimination – erasure of LGBT voices and concerns even among those who consider themselves anti-authoritarian progressives. Homophobia, transphobia, sexism, heterosexism, and an appeal to generic tenets of patriarchy among the protestors was indeed disappointing; however, it was not at all surprising. This work is a response to that discrepancy, at least in part.

In another part, this work is a response to the rising tide of authoritarian politics in Turkey since 2007. Seeking an ideological base for populist authoritarianism is pointless since it juxtaposes many contradictory ideological elements to push for whatever rhetoric is effective to consolidate further power in a given timeframe. In Turkey's case, this juxtaposition of contradictions took the form of an authoritarian neoliberal state based on nationalist, neo-conservative, and Islamist ideals that wants to be a regional imperial force. Depending on the context, the state was able to use and highlight whichever piece of that assemblage was fitting to maneuver existing social crisis and consolidate more power. Again, it was disappointing yet unsurprising that such consolidation was at the expense of women, LGBT individuals, and anyone they marked as a deviant or an 'other'. This was a hallmark of such regimes throughout history.

The two aforementioned social forces that operated in unison – despite their apparent opposition at a first glance – posed, and keep posing, an existential threat for anyone outside of their circle of acceptable citizens. In the face of such erasure, it is vital not only to narrate a counter history of events from the perspective of the marginalized, but also to document the ways in which they have endured, persisted, and existed despite everything. This is the main goal of this work. In doing so, I hope that the framework and practice of talkback I outline in this work will serve as a guide to others who might be in similar situations.

I also want to note that, while I have been working on this project for the good part of 2010s, I have finalized this book during 2020, while Sars-Cov-2 was still ravaging the US and just as 200,000 people had died. There are countless discussions I have had with students and colleagues about the mind-bending perception of time and sanity within the context of this global pandemic. The common thread is how the days feel long and slow while the weeks and months pass in a flash. Time simultaneously feels elongated and shrunk. The amount of time we have spent indoors – either by ourselves, with our partners or pets – highlighted the pure emptiness and unnecessary of our performativity of a responsible good economic subject under neoliberal temporality: schedules, deadlines, due dates, and whatever else constituted a marker of productivity. We have experienced firsthand how capitalism relies on continuous motion that consistently seeks to exploit labor time. Disruption of the movement that normalizes such regulation of time – presented as the necessary and (falsely) sufficient condition for individual achievement, which is the ultimate form of self-expression according to logic of neoliberal subjectivity – meant that our perception of what is important to us was being challenged all the while we were still expected to operate within its logic. This has been frustrating, for many reasons.

Moreover, I am not sure if we have learned the right lessons from this bitter experience. Sadly, but predictably, I have come across colleagues who treated the *pandemic time* as a space of even further productivity. Now that we are stuck at home, they argued, we could do even more things – check more work off the list, add more lines to our CVs. That is what we are told life is about, after all. I hope this work shows that our agency does not have to be chronically in line with such logics, but if we seek to change the constituents of our context through collaboration and interdependence, we can challenge – dare I say we can *talkback* – against the shadows such logics cast on our psyches and on our lives. On that

note, and with infinite gratitude to all my therapists, I hope as a society, we can leave this period behind while learning what I will humbly claim as the right lessons from it. Specifically, our relationship to nature, both the process and product of our labor, each other, and ourselves are not functions of what we can maximally produce from each one of them.

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This work would have been impossible without the moral and tangible support of my family. I am incredibly grateful for mom and dad for providing me with opportunities, early in life, to pursue my passions and to learn about caring for everyone. My partner in crime, Joris, without whom many things I care about in life would not be possible (including at least some of my sanity). I am very grateful for all the support you have provided through this weird journey (in the wise words of Homer Simpson, “so far”). I am thankful to Idris, who will most likely read this book, if he does at all, in fifteen or so years, and without whom this work would feel emptier. I am forever grateful to Peppercorn (I hope he is resting peacefully in wherever kitty heaven might be) and to Sugar. They have taught me the value of being slower and more deliberate and taking breaks to appreciate the breeze. I also thank Maple. Although she came in to my life at the end of this journey, not only she taught me a lot, she also provided a much needed moral support during whatever 2020 had been.

My students and to my teachers have special places in my heart. I got to work with William Leap and William Starosta at the end (height?) of their careers and they have been major influences on my work. I am grateful that I was able to (at least I hope I was able to) learn from their wisdom and knowledge. I would like to acknowledge all the students who have helped me find my voice as a scholar and a teacher. They have helped me, in no small way, better the way in which I communicate my ideas. One of my philosophy professors, when I was studying towards my undergraduate degree, said something along lines of “I will count myself lucky if I was able to teach you the half of what I learned from you” when

I sent him a thank you e-mail as I was graduating. I get it now. With outmost respect and humility, I extend the same gratitude to my students. I am constantly striving to be a better human being, not as a function of a commitment to an ethos as a scholar but to one as a teacher. Thank you for showing me the way.

I am indebted to Boston College, our department, department Chair Matt Sienkiewicz, and my colleagues who supported this project, gave feedback, and shared their ideas and concerns. I am thankful for my friends for the support they have provided. Especially to Efe and Evren. I apologize profusely if I am missing your name here. You are in my heart, regardless.

I am very thankful to KaosGL and to all LGBT groups, organizations, and individuals in Turkey, who are striving to exist in a space that constantly denies them the mere right to be. LGBT groups and individuals receive horrible treatment at the hands of authoritarian and totalitarian governments and face repression not only at the hands of state's forces, but also within the society and culture at large. Turkey is just a single example. This work aims to live up to the resilience and hope LGBT groups and individuals display in the face of such blatant erasure. I hope this work does justice to their struggle, even slightly.

There are not a lot of constants in life, true. However, I have had the privilege of having some constants through this process that helped me with my overall well-being (which was helpful when I was trying to finish this work): music and video games. Unfortunately, two of the musicians who helped me the most are no longer alive. Leonard Cohen and J. S. Bach. However, Rene Aubry and Juno Reactor are still very much alive at the time of this writing and I thank them for their music that helped me in the writing process. I apologize to music purists who are jarred and offended by the genre transgression they have witnessed here. I would also like to extend my gratitude to developers who made amazing video games like the Civ, Persona, Dragon Age, Fallout, and The Pillars of Eternity series – and indie developers who made games like Faster Than Light, Papers Please, Thea, and Seven Grand Steps. Playing these games have not only been a true joy but also an incredible way to keep sane and balanced.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Theorizing Talkback

The first thing I would like to do in this book is to argue why we need the theoretical framework of ‘talkback’ to understand the different moments of activism that I will present in the following chapters as case studies. Why do we need a new framework at all? Is it not possible to understand talking back as just another way of saying ‘resisting’ to power or authority? Social sciences and humanities are overflowing with different theorizations or notions of resistance. Why add another to the pile? What good would it do? Is it not a mere neologism, would it not lack anything of substance?

These are some of the questions that I kept asking myself since I began this research in 2013. Indeed, scholars in social and political philosophy, social sciences, and humanities have been trying to systematize theories and practices of resisting to different forms of oppression in various forms. Perhaps the most influential strand has been rise critical theory that stretches back to Marx and Engels. Since then, we have witnessed the rising influence of Frankfurt School, Postcolonial and Subaltern studies, Critical Race Studies, Feminist, Queer, Crip theories and methodologies—just to give a few examples. All these studies and theories began with the observation that unequal distribution of power in the world along the lines of race, gender, class, desire, ability, country, is a problem—it is a social ill that the hitherto historical conditions have created and must be scrutinized, questioned, examined, resisted, and corrected. These studies

look at different problems from different lenses but the common denominator is the aforementioned problem. And, of course, all these theories and methodologies have been influential on my work.

While it is impossible to give an exhaustive list of such scholarship—some of which I refer to throughout the book—I argue that the cases I deal with do not fit into any one of those boxes of existing theoretical frameworks. There are two important reasons for this: (1) the cases I am examining are not moments of a social movement or contentious politics. They are not about a well-organized group of people finding their way into the social and political sphere to have an impact on the society in one way or the other. It is about an oppressed identity group trying to survive under an authoritarian regime. The groups I examine are loosely organized, most of the time they do not communicate with each other, and frequently they rely on supportive actions of individuals who are not formally affiliated with the organizations. Their purpose is not to cause social change, which would ideally be the case, however, the sociopolitical conditions makes that dream impossible. Rather, they are merely trying to survive and not let the context diminish and erase their existence.¹ (2) The loose organization of these groups and individuals makes it necessary for them to rely on modes of communication that can bend the rules around time, space, censorship, and state/cultural authority. Consequently, they are overly reliant on social media as well as other online channels of communication to make sure their voices are heard. This is different than, say, handing out flyers, publishing pamphlets in underground printing presses, starting a radio channel, etc.—tools that many movements, and moments of resistance have used well until 2010s. The reliance on online communication makes the verbal analysis of what is being said is as important as tracing the history of acts of resistance against oppression.

Moreover, as I argue throughout the book, there is an interconnectedness between time, space, and affect—themes I analyze in each empirical chapter. Talkback refers to challenging the ways in which normative discourses cohere on these three aspects to exert power. In this sense, talkback is not merely *talking back*, it is not just to resist, or engage in an act that runs against existing power structures. While the sense of anti-normativity is indeed an important aspect of talkback, what differentiates talkback is the emphasis on taking time, space, and affect together as an assemblage. This stems from the idea that the status quo as a system does not engage its subjects from a single perspective. We are not just confined in terms of temporality to schedules and deadlines. We are not just

restricted with our passports, or our zip codes. We are not just coerced to feel pride or shame or guilt or anxiety or joy in the face of national symbols or when we witness transgression of these symbols. All of these things happen simultaneously and they feed each other. Consequently, we need a framework that understands them together and how they work in unison as a tool of governmentality. And we need a framework of activism that responds to this assemblage by offering alternative ways of being in the world. When we use the framework of talkback and pay attention to the when, where, and the affect of discursive agency, we necessarily engage not only with the agent, but also with the context, and the audience. Consequently, *talkback is a framework of discursive agency that relies on understanding how this assemblage works to dismantle normative discourses*. In this sense, talkback is a framework simultaneously of scholarship and activism and does not perceive one separate from the other.

I am constructing this framework from the standpoint of queer theory. For this framework, utilizing queer theory is not only useful, but also necessary. It is not only because my cases are about LGBT groups and individuals at the margins of the society. More accurately, queer theory best captures the concerns of these LGBT groups and individuals by paying attention to intersections of how certain desires are privileged and others are oppressed in a given context, how these dynamics reflect in other areas of social interaction such as language, politics, economy, laws, etc. Additionally, queer theory centers the voices and the concerns of the marginalized. As such, it becomes necessary to use queer theory to formulate the framework of talkback.

TALKBACK AS ANTI-NORMATIVITY

Talkback, as a category, emerged as a result of my previous studies that analyzed various ways in which contrasting ideological groups in Turkey communicated over social media. Of course, anyone who is even mildly familiar with the ways in which communication over social media operates knows that opposing ideas over social media very quickly take the form of petty insults, threats, and other position-related back and forth. However, that was my interest. More specifically, I wanted to trace the discursive elements in these oppositional discourses to their ideological roots. To my surprise, it turned out that what appeared as oppositional discourses shared the same foundational nationalist texts. Consequently, I concluded that such communication was not, in fact, a form of talkback. Rather, different

sides were *talking within* the same ideological framework, sharing the same source material, just citing it different ways. As a result, I argued there must be discourses that do not share the same source material, that do not align with the broader ideological concern while appearing oppositional. That framework is the foundational understanding of talkback.

At this point, queer theory and the framework of *talkback* align. Queer activism and theorizing establishes its resistance on the grounds of anti-normativity—which take the “forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity.”² As Stryker notes, such anti-normative reflex stemmed from identifying the normalizing as well as marginalizing processes of biopolitical and necropolitical apparatuses of the twentieth century governance.³ In this light, understanding the meanings as well as pathways of resisting these reflexes becomes vital not only to build sustainable means of deconstructing state violence and various social normativities, but also—and perhaps far more importantly—it is a means for survival. This is the main goal of this book: not only how do we understand resistance that enables LGBT individuals to survive, but also how do we understand and explain the conditions and contexts that enable resistances to be sustainable so that they cannot either be assimilated into the fold of power or be destroyed. To accomplish this goal, this book examines the decade of queer talkback in Turkey during 2010s—from Gezi Park protests to jailing of LGBT leaders to two biggest cities indefinitely banning LGBT events to living under a state of emergency. How did LGBT activists in Turkey understand and talked back against these instances of oppression, how did they forge their resistance, and how did they keep existing in a context that constantly did not recognize their existence and imagining a future where oppression did not take place? To do this, I will first theorize agency and the conditions that sustain it, since agency is the basic requirement to talk back to resist and even to desire a different future.

Before its association with the protests that took place throughout the summer of 2013 in Turkey, Gezi Park was, and still is, a well-known cruising spot in central Istanbul for gay men and trans women. One such man, who calls himself *Hayaterkeşi*, chronicles his sexual adventures on his blog.⁴ The name’s transliteration is ‘life-man’. It is a neologism and a word play, imitating the Turkish term *hayatkadını*, which transliterates into ‘life-woman’, a common term in Turkish for a woman who is a sex-worker. The imitation takes on the shame inflicted on sex-workers through well-known