Youth Civil Society Organizations, Neoliberalism and Neoliberal Governmentality in Contemporary Turkey

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There is a considerable increase in the number of civil society organizations, civil poverty relief associations and civil educational service provision organizations in the aftermath of the 1999 Marmara Earthquake in Turkey (Aydogmus, 2007; Bikmen, 2004, Ipek-Can, 2006). The focus of my conference paper concerns the discourses of society, identity and youth of particular youth civil society organizations in Turkey in post–1999 period. In this paper, I will specifically look at the projects, policies and discourses of one civil society organization from Turkey, namely Genc Hayat Vakfi (Young Lives Foundation) and relate them to the larger neoliberal map of political governing activity in Turkey in the contemporary period. This governing activity is conceptualized as the part of a modern regime of governmentality that refers to set of very specific and observable practices and conceptualizations about population in modern period (Lemke, 2001). These practices, conceptualizations and understandings are put forward by an ensemble formed by public, corporate, civil and academic institutions, bodies, groups and they are legitimized and gleaned by several historical discourses -such as economy, health, sexuality, education, science, social development and national advancement- and are also approved, perpetuated and developed by these discourses' field-specific rationalities in order to achieve particular goals, namely create legitimate, proper, normal, healthy, responsible and moral “subjectivities” in modern period (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1999).

Genc Hayat Foundation (GHF) was established in 2008 to assist Turkish youth who are between the ages of 11 and 18. The foundation promotes social and collective consciousness through or via promoting personal and individual growth and works in several neighborhoods of Istanbul by establishing discussion groups, communication skills development collectives with youngsters and their families by cooperating with Turkish Ministry of Education, public schools and municipalities (Genc Hayat, 2009). The foundation, by doing these activities, aims to promote the respect for differences among the Turkish youth. In the discourse of GHF, the difference among the people and citizens is represented in the way in which how people are different from each other in terms of their body shapes, interests, likes and dislikes. However it does not address the very structural practices which produce social differences among different ethnic, racial and class-based groups, and fortify existing inequalities, which needs to be critically delineated.

In this paper, I argue that these activities and projects are informed by particular understandings and practices of neoliberal self-responsibility, difference, creativity, society, individuality, and citizenship in Turkey and these practices are specimens of historical-social and psychological forms of neoliberal conduct. In mainstream academic discourse, neoliberalism is understood as an economic discourse, which promotes “an economic growth, free markets without government ‘interference’ as the most efficient and socially optimal allocation of resources, economic globalization, and privatization” (Harvey, 2005). In my paper, neoliberalism is not only an economic discourse, which promotes an economic policy. It is also a complex map of political and social projects which enable states to refashion themselves financially while creating ‘allies’ to manage ‘risk-inducing groups such as urban poor and ethnic minorities’ with a repertoire of observable practices. This management contains elements of correction, mollification and training of these risk groups in accordance with particular mores and understandings of self, society, individuality, difference, normality and abnormality (Brinn-Hyatt, 2001; O’Malley, 1996). This management activity deploys or relies on various discourses such as medicine, education, health, well-being, gender and society and it makes use of several technologies as well as appropriates particular literatures (in this case self-help literature and popular psychology literature), specific human and labor power (psychologists, donors and volunteers) as well as institutions or fields (academia, public bodies, corporate bodies, civil society organizations) (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999).

This research on the Genc Hayat Foundation is based on qualitative participatory-action research methodology, which combines “critique” with “participation” and based on the research of the institutions through participation and engagement in the organizations. Action
research aims to create change in the institutions in which the researcher participate and observe the organizational, individual and collective discursive and political reactions to the change (Aydogmus, 2007). This research is conducted between 2008 and 2009, when I was employed in the association as a project coordinator. During this period, I designed an urban research project, namely “Writing History from My Street” and through this project I put my particular understandings of society, self, and identity in a critical and constructive dialogue with neoliberalism-inspired ideas of society, identity and youth in the foundation. During my research period, I had the chance to observe how state and civil society relations are constructed and imagined by the foundation, how particular projects are put into practice and applied, and how discourses of society, youth and identity are created and through what kind of mechanisms, relations and networking activities they put into practice. However, my research is also informed by the textual and discourse analysis of soft and hard-copy materials, produced and disseminated by the foundation from its establishment to this date.

In this paper, by analyzing ethnographic and particular construction of neoliberalism by a foundation, I aim to understand how particular civil society organizations in Turkey become constituents of neoliberal governmentality and enact specific neoliberal governmental practices, strategies and techniques to create a moral youth from the rosters of urban poor with the help of the Turkish state, corporate and individual donors, other civil society organizations and universities in the post-1999 period. In other words, by looking at the discourses of identity, society and politics, employed by this particular civil society organization and analyzing its techniques, strategies, action plans over the youth, I aim to understand what kind of governmentality and regime of governing and conducting the population this organization constitutes within contemporary Turkish neoliberal polity.

This task is important since it helps to understand how and why the multilayered civil politics over the particular segments of the population in neoliberal era are important challenge for the future discussions, critical understandings and possible formations of civil society in Turkey. In addition, this task promotes deeper and engaging understanding and research of civil society organizations, which in turn sheds light on the unquestioned assumptions about civil society organizations in contemporary Turkey. This also contributes to the existing critical research on civil society organizations with its emphasis on new forms of governmentality, how practices of everyday life relate with larger politics and understanding the terms and realities of neoliberalism, civil society, class formations and morality through the very examples of civil society organizations (Lemke, 2001).

References


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