CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Salmon Swimming Against the (Political) Current

Art and Censorship In Turkey

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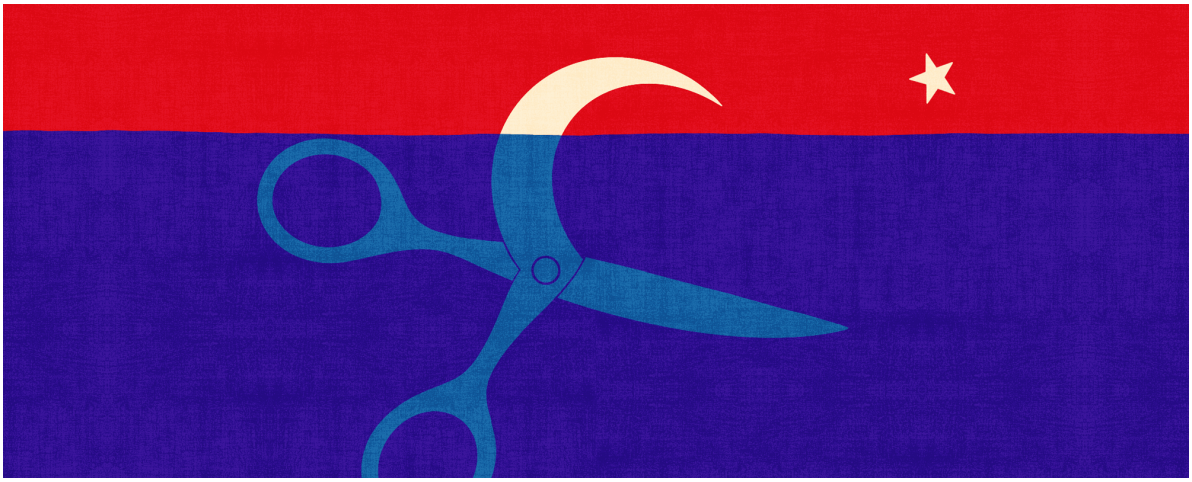


Illustration by Carole Hénaff

"There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in"
Leonard Cohen

Turkey has been under the firm rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP, in Turkish) for nearly two decades. A rhetoric of democratization catapulted AKP and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to power in 2002, after elections by a Turkish public traumatized by long-standing crises in economy and democracy.

The AKP rule was typified by power grabs and a crescendo of autocratic governance, however. In 2018, a presidential system designed to concentrate political power hollowed out the democratic institutions. Although the elections are still in existence, they are no longer free and fair but serve instead an instrumental function to create an illusion of democracy and legitimize the rulers [1].

The shrinking of the public and political space by the government accelerated after the Gezi Park protests in 2013. The arts and cultural space, too, suffered from the populist autocratic turn in the country.

Lust for power

Unsatisfied by political and economic power alone, AKP expanded its right wing populist rhetoric to secure cultural hegemony as well. In a public speech at the Istanbul Congress Center, Erdoğan underscored that “it is one thing to be in political power, and another thing to rule in the social and cultural domains. Although we have been in power without interruption, we still have not realized social and cultural rule in the country” [2].

Targeting what is, in view of the AKP and its leaders, an “elite and westernized” arts community and minorities in the country, “native and national” cultural policies began to be implemented. In the words of the esteemed communications scholar Prof. Sevilay Çelenk, “there is a heavy populist manipulation of the cultural space in Turkey”. The critical members of the arts and literature community have been, sadly, under attacks by the governing rulers with claims of “selling-out their country through mind-boggling reductionism, and being ignorant of their native and national values” [3].

> In Turkey, the critical members of the arts and literature community have been under attacks by the governing rulers with claims of selling-out their country

Orhan Pamuk, one of Turkey’s prominent novelists and recipient of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature, has been accused of selling-out his country simply by expressing his opinion and political opposition in response to a question asked while he was traveling abroad. Pamuk’s novels creatively examine the East-West tensions, not to mention the opaque cultural rivalries and jealousies endemic in the country. Attempts for paving the way for a culture of critical cultural studies do not bode well with the AKP rule and are actively suppressed.

Auto-censorship: a cancer of the human agency

The adverse political-economical and anti-intellectual climate in the country causes many scholars and artists to perform, consciously and unconsciously, auto-(self)-censorship.

Auto-censorship, we argue, is akin to a cancer of the human agency; it undermines human freedoms and ability to shape her/his environment in the arts and cultural space. Unlike most cancers that usually do not spread from person-to-person, the practice of auto-censorship is socially and politically infectious, however, and creates cultures of fear and suppression.

Within the ideological hegemonic cultural interventions of the AKP rule, a shared denominator defines the arts communities under attack: “being *not* a supporter of Erdoğan”

specifically, and of AKP more generally. This results in broad segments of the society being insidiously as well as directly targeted and culturally suppressed. This amounts to nearly "the other 50%" of the society that the AKP right wing populism cannot buy out.

Apart from long-standing suppression of critical arts and culture, there are also direct and overtly violent ways of censorship in the country. Some prominent examples include artists such as the rapper Ezhel; art funders who have provided enduring support and advocacy for democracy and civil society in Turkey (e.g., Osman Kavala who has been unjustly imprisoned since 2017); writers and journalists (e.g., Can Dündar and many others) who are either in exile around the world or in prison in Turkey. The protest music band Grup Yorum member İbrahim Gökçek has sadly died on a hunger strike that he began, asking the rulers to lift the concert ban and discharge of his music band members held in prison [4]. Formerly imprisoned Kurdish painter Zehra Doğan is another example [5].

The culture of cronyism

The suppression of arts has another, equally ominous dimension, of crony and sycophant artists who help the government to create a mirage of democracy, and are rewarded by the rulers in return. The sycophant art and artists cause intergenerational damage by reproducing the false narratives and official history over and over again, thus retaining and extending the power asymmetries across time, space, and generations in the country.

The instruments of domination

The instruments by which the current regime in Turkey operates and dominates within the cultural field, specifically in the arts, are manifold, and noteworthy as well.

Chief among these instruments of oppression is the firm and near-total control of the government funding streams for the arts community. Not surprisingly, allegiance to the AKP mission, not only subtly but overtly, is a key requirement to secure funding. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, private theatres were supported by the government but not those who are not sufficiently 'native and national' in content and ethos. The criteria for being native, national, and conservative is often elusive, however, and subject to the whim and mood of the government funders. Democratic checks and balances or appeals to funding decisions are not existent or remain a futile effort if pursued. Consequently, according to independent theatre community, (native and national) theatre performances with dubious artistic scholarship and content have been funded in the course of the pandemic, performances consistent with the conservative worldview of the AKP and Erdoğan [6].

We shall note that although being native and national is not necessarily a negative point in terms of local capacity building in arts, such framing becomes an oppressive instrumental

force when it is used as a pretext for jingoism and silencing of dissent, minorities and human rights.

Government support for critical/independent arts has been limited in Turkey before the AKP rule as well. But an already bad situation became worse and the support for critical arts declined to its lowest point with the AKP. Instead, government funding of the sycophant art projects has become a mainstay; this also speaks to the clientelism endemic in the country, especially over the past half decade.

An additional tool of domination in arts is neoliberalism and a pervasive culture of commodification that have begun to transform the arts community. Commodification and neoliberalization can be effective tools for co-option of both the actors (artists, musicians, writers, etc.) and the culture in the arts sector as it has been evident throughout the world since the 1980s in particular. This is now further accentuated with the rise of populist authoritarian governance in Turkey and globally, not to mention with the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Of course, not everyone submits to co-option by the twin darkness of neoliberalism and right wing populism in Turkey. But it is unclear how long the remaining pockets of artistic resistance and free thinking can be sustained. To this end, a final blow has been the merging of the Culture and Tourism Ministries under the roof of a single ministry with a neoliberal mission in Turkey, thus claiming a price for any and every piece of creative production through the tourism industry as well.

In fact, many neoliberal regimes pursue similar merging of the ministries or their missions with a market and product-based culture of unchecked consumption, including in the healthcare sector; medical tourism and surgery for hair transplant and body sculpting are some other prominent examples of commodification cultures that cut through arts, public space and healthcare in Turkey.

What happens when independent arts are greatly dependent on private funding?

There is yet a subtle, often overlooked, and vastly deleterious impact of the lack of public funding for critically informed arts and culture in Turkey: subordination and co-option of the arts by the private sector and ‘culture-making’ by a few select families and large companies with money and influence. This is a significant threat to democratization of arts

in the country.

In fact, most of the large scale art events or galleries or museums are funded by a few bourgeois families and large companies. On the surface of it all, it seems as though they create opportunities and ostensibly a censorship-free space where artists feel like they can breathe within this private sector dominated arts environment. But in fact, what is not considered at the moment is that this shift in arts funding streams has long-term adverse impacts.

The censorship of the private sector might appear as 'soft' compared to that of the ruling regime in Turkey but the former operates on a sinister and subtle level such as leaving certain topics and the critical meta-narratives out of the arts discourse. This begs the question:

"What happens to civil society, arts, democracy and critical public space if culture is produced by a few families and large companies?"

Practical concerns such as the need to pay the rent and food by struggling independent artists create not only a culture of fear but also cultures of realpolitik and instrumentalism. A triad rhetoric of efficiency, immediacy, and saving the day, rather than independence, long-term thinking and critical studies in arts, trumps the concerns to buttress democracy and prevent culture-making by a narrow lens of privileged rich families and companies.

An endangered species

The critical studies in arts are endangered species of intellectual inquiry, pretty much around the world, including Turkey.

Ironically, the transformation of the arts funding from public to private space feeds —discursively— into the victimhood rhetoric of the AKP and the current ruling regime. Linkage of art and its private funding by the rich families helps the AKP rhetoric that the art in Turkey is detached from the public and does not serve the poor people.

Interestingly, the identity politics and related subject matter appear to find a space in the privately funded arts sector in the country but worker rights, or questioning the modes and tools of culture production are usually 'out of bounds' in the privately funded arts domain. The latter topics threaten the unchecked power and privilege of the funding families and companies.

Some might be surprised to hear that the private sector funds some art work ostensibly critical of the corporate extractive actions on nature. The "Seventh Continent" was a theme of the 2019 İstanbul Biennial of Art, referring to the garbage and waste islands on the planet, while "Anthropocene" was its theoretical focus. Artists from all corners of the world displayed works featuring ecological critique. The biennial theme indeed had a critical

stance [7]. That being the case, some of the leading fossil fuel industries in Turkey were also the sponsors of the very same event.

The apparent pseudo-liberalization of art occurs only at the periphery of core freedoms, however, and serves an instrumental purpose for the rulers when they are exposed to the international context in arts, and need legitimacy in the eyes of the outside world. Pseudo-liberalization at the periphery attempts to assure, albeit in an unconvincing way, the international arts community that freedoms exist in arts in Turkey, but without commitment to the core freedoms, and imposing censorship at the same time.

Historically, such strategies and deception to contain the opposition and preëmpt critique are well known in the corporate world; the best way to control the publics is to allow some dissent to prevent larger scale opposition. This gives a false sense, an illusion, of democracy, be it in arts, science or healthcare in the country.

Thinking locally through the lens of arts in Turkey, does this mean the Turkish private sponsors and extractive industries have noble aspirations despite causing ecological harms at the same time? We think not.

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In a neoliberal mode of governance, the private institutions harness the scale and resources of their large portfolio of projects. Seemingly investing in arts, on the one hand, helps build good optics for corporations which is used to preëmpt criticism of other projects, e.g., those with an extractive focus in the larger portfolio of a neoliberal business ecosystem. That is, giving to the arts with a small spoon and extracting with a tractor elsewhere in the meantime.

In an already fragile and funding deprived arts ecosystem, this can worrisomely pave the way for co-option and further endangerment of critical studies in arts. Nevertheless, such phenomena playing out in censorship of arts in Turkey locally, as well as on a planetary scale, are often neglected. Yet they are poised to be important political economy analysis pillars in contemporary art history currently in the making.

Recalling Juan Goytisolo

As the novelist and poet Juan Goytisolo puts it while referring to the damage the Franco regime left on intellectuals in Spain, the internalized censorship is the most debilitating. Internalized censorship is difficult to detect and certainly more difficult to eliminate, even

long after an autocratic regime is gone.

Goytisolo has eluded to the byproducts of the Franco regime in Spanish society such as a compulsion to read between the lines, sensing the constant presence of a censor as an uninvited disrespectful visitor to the human soul, thus blunting and blinding freedom of expression and storytelling, not to mention a constant sense of self-surveillance, self-control and auto-censorship. Goytisolo also noted the painstaking hard labor needed to get rid of that capture of the human soul by censorship [8].

Looking through the specific case of Turkey, a similar hard labor will be essential to cleanse the individual and collective inner psyche of artists and intellectuals in the years to come. Yet, while the censorship in arts and all public life domains continues and deepens in the country, reimaging alternative futures and imagery can help build resistance and resilience against censorship, self-inflicted and/or externally-imposed by the rulers.

Which brings us to the very point made in the title of our article – can independent artists, despite and against the above oppressive political climate, “swim upstream against the current” like a salmon? Salmon do swim upstream afterall, and very successfully so.

We think the metaphor of a salmon is an apt, timely and inspiring imagery to help cultivate democracy and buttress the efforts of the arts community to remain independent, critical and emancipated. This seems important more than ever in a time of global populism, neoliberalism and the COVID-19 pandemic.

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