CHAPTER 4

The Authoritarian Turn against Academics in Turkey

Can Scholars Still Show Solidarity to Vulnerabilised Groups?

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In January 2016 a group of academics published a petition criticising the human rights infringements against civilian populations in the Kurdish provinces of Turkey (Barış için akademisyenler [BAK] 2016). The launch of the petition ignited a massive backlash from multiple sources ranging from local communities to government decrees impeding the signatories' employment and travel abroad. In a very different context, in 2017 and 2018, the Hungarian parliament passed a bill impeding the possibility of legal functioning of Central European University in Budapest, the institutional home of university access programmes for the Roma minority, as well as refugee students. Soon after, another bill that criminalised helping asylum seekers in Hungary was passed. During the same time span, gender studies programmes came under attack in Hungary, as in other places around the world. Although these situations are markedly different, I argue that they are part of a transformation of the academic profession that is under way to different degrees (almost) everywhere in the world.

In a nutshell, my argument is that academic solidarity with vulnerabilised groups has come to be penalised by authoritarian governments through criminalisation and precarisation of academics (and students). This, in turn, has given rise to public campaigns to defend higher education promoting academic freedom, and has led to practices of transnational precarious mobility of academics and institutions and to spaces of solidarity and democratic knowledge production outside the formal structures of the academe (universities and research institutes). This situation has reshaped academic spaces, contributing to increased pressure (economically, socially and legally) on academics who are in

solidarity with non-majoritarian, marginalised groups, and especially those academics who already were in precarious positions (such as early career, non-permanent researchers, etc.). In the context of institutions unable or unwilling to support those members who displayed solidarity, some of these practices are moved outside of the realm of the university. That is, solidarity practices and meaningful collective knowledge production have been forcibly pushed outside of universities and research institutes. In this, the present chapter relates to the theme of academic displacement explored in this section of the book in two ways. On the one hand, in the wake of the petition crisis in Turkey, academics who showed solidarity with vulnerabilised groups from a precarious position were displaced and pushed to the fringes of the hypermobile transnational academic labour market. This perspective helps to shed light on the intricacies of academic displacement as a phenomenon affecting not only students, but also faculty and researchers. On the other hand, and part of the same transformation, spaces for collectively meaningful knowledge production have also been displaced from within to outside of the formal structures of the academe.

In the upcoming chapter, I will first explore one such situation in more detail: the petition crisis in Turkey. Significant parallels exist to developments in other higher education settings worldwide, most notably in Hungary, but I will only reference these in passing to allow for a more focused account. I will embed my analysis in the transnational, as well as local dynamics set in motion by the 2016/17 turn towards authoritarian pressures on academics. Finally, I will relate the recent developments to theoretical debates about the limits of academic freedom and collective, meaningful knowledge production.

The Petition Crisis in Turkey and Its Transnational Ramifications

On 11 January 2016, a group of academics published a petition entitled 'Bu Suça Ortak Olmayacağız/We Will Not Be a Party to This Crime!' (BAK 2016). This appeal is often referred to as the Peace Petition, criticising the human rights infringements in the Kurdish provinces of Turkey. These infringements had come about after consecutive states of emergencies were decreed in these provinces, as well as violent clashes leading to the deaths of over three hundred civilians and the displacement of 355,000 citizens of the Turkish Republic (Odman 2018). The petition sought to intervene in this process and was initially signed online by more than one thousand people. This was followed shortly by

the harassment and prosecution of the signatories, leading to an almost doubling of the number of signatories (Odman 2018).

Almost five hundred signatories lost their positions through firing, forced early retirement or refusal to extend contracts. In addition, disciplinary investigations were opened by universities against the signatories (see Odman 2018; BAK Solidarity Group 2019). Moreover, signatories were taken into preventive detention, and the academics who had read out the petition publicly were detained for forty-four days (Odman 2018) as exemplary punishment. On an everyday basis, local lynching campaigns were started against signatories (Ilengiz 2016), and signatories were prevented from entering their university workplaces; their pictures were printed in local newspapers or on social media pages, while some were named as alleged 'supporters of the PKK' (BAK Solidarity Group 2019) and confined to their houses or publicly humiliated (Odman 2018). After the failed *coup d'état* in July 2016, signatories were also dismissed by statutory decrees and their passports taken away, meaning that they could no longer leave the country (Odman 2018), *de facto* forcing them into immobility.

Since September 2017, the criminalisation process has also involved regular trips to the Istanbul Çağlayan Justice Palace for the first round of petition signatories (1128) as defendants in trials for terrorist propaganda[1] (Odman 2018). As of 2 September 2020,[2] ninety-one trials were still ongoing. The trials are considered to lead to the acquittal of all signatories (until 2 September 2020, 622 of the 822 trialled signatories had been acquitted), since with a near tie vote on 26 July 2019, the General Assembly of the Constitutional Court ruled that the petition fell within the limits of the freedom of expression and that thus the conviction for propagandising for a terrorist organisation on the basis of having signed the petition is a rights violation.[3] While the ruling of the Constitutional Court offers a welcome resolution to the legal prosecution of the signatories, it does not indicate an end to the other forms of prosecution that the signatories faced, prompting BAK academics' demands to be reinstated.[4]

The individual negative consequences of the petition crisis were unevenly distributed along class and status lines, primarily affecting early career researchers (doctoral students from provincial universities migrating to more prominent universities in academically well-developed cities, academics based at universities in conservative rural areas, etc.), whereas signatories based at transnationally relevant high-status universities in metropolitan centres were spared disciplinary inquiries by

the universities (Odman 2018). While lists of names attached to statutory decrees (after the attempted *coup d'état* in July 2016) were necessary to dismiss those academics who had secure public servant positions at public universities, non-permanent limited contract academics were the first victims of dismissals (Odman 2018).

As Elif Birced (Birced and Kocak 2019) convincingly argues, in the petition crisis the government became an agent in the precarisation of scholars. In this sense, the authoritarian backlash against academics that followed the signing of the 'Bu Suça Ortak Olmayacağız / We Will Not Be a Party to This Crime!' petition (BAK 2016) re-articulated the neoliberal precarisation of critical scholars who chose to make their solidarity with the victims of war visible. In this sense, the story of Mehmet Fatih Traş (see Özkirimli 2017) provides biographical evidence. A recent PhD graduate, Traş could not secure an academic position due to the professional marginalisation of signatories. After attempting to move to a number of different cities and universities in Turkey and abroad, he took his own life (Özkirimli 2017).

The opposition to the dismissals and prosecutions has mainly been organised around the demands for academic freedom and freedom of expression, which in the end yielded precious fruit through the Constitutional Court's ruling, reading the Peace Petition as an act within the boundaries of freedom of expression of academics. Yet, as Ilengiz (2016) convincingly argues, the discourse of freedom of expression and its transnational corollary of academic freedom also further shifted the boundaries of solidarity by limiting the boundaries of political inclusion, while at the same time re-articulating Orientalist visions of the West versus East and working to make the ongoing violence in the Kurdish regions less visible (Ilengiz 2016).

Such responses have been institutionalised in the forms of academic fellowship programmes, such as the Germany-based Academy in Exile.[5] This type of programme offers a welcome continuation of academic life for persecuted academics, outside of Turkish state borders, provided they can obtain a visa/passport. Yet they are necessarily selective, reinforcing neoliberal standards of performance, alongside a newly created category of vulnerability standards. Moreover, these programmes are, per definition, limited in time (generally up to two years; CARA in Britain also offers three-year fellowships), whereas the political reality of academic persecution in Turkey does not have a foreseeable end. These positions foreground the 'at risk' status of the scholars, placing them outside of the regular academic labour market of the host countries and

obscuring their position on the margins of the global academic market (Vatansever 2020: 3f, 53f). Once faced with the end of fellowships, these transnational scholars will yet again be faced with a precarious position as immigrant, cheap, flexible labour in the international academic market (Tören and Kutun 2018), becoming part of the 'floating' academic reserve army detached from institutional environments, as well as having to move between countries (Vatansever 2020: 48f). Changing this situation would imply solidarity struggles for changing working conditions within academia worldwide (Tören and Kutun 2018). These struggles need to be built on transnational or global networks of solidarity that on the grounds of the precariousness of academics in exile cannot be initiated by them alone (see Vatansever 2020: 128–29).

This form of academic displacement is grounded in being forced into transnational mobility in the international academic job market. Precarious as it may be, academic displacement is also a form of privilege, since through the cancellation of their passports or the rejection of visa applications a series of BAK academics (including Mehmet Fatih Traş) were forced into immobility. At the same time, those forced into immobility had little or no prospect of access to stable employment and income in Turkey.

Promising forms of resistance have also emerged as solidarity academies have appeared in several Turkish cities (Kocaeli, Mersin, Eskişehir, Ankara and others), explicitly looking to establish new loci for collectively, socially and politically relevant academic research and teaching (Bakırezer, Demirer and Yeşilyurt 2018; Özcer 2018; Odman 2018; Aktaş, Nilsson and Borell 2019). What these initiatives share is a drive to overcome hierarchical relationships and create alternative pedagogical models (Özcer 2018), as well as an educational model that is a feasible alternative to the market-driven university models (Bakırezer, Demirer and Yeşilyurt 2018). These experimental spaces have gradually come to institutionalise themselves, taking different forms, organising discussion platforms, several semester-long seminars and summer schools (Odman 2018). Moreover, since March 2017, there have been coordination meetings among the solidarity academies dealing with such topics as alternative pedagogies (Odman 2018).

Yet these spaces also risk institutionalising forms of precarity, informality and lack of access to formal certification and associated status privileges, because the financing and credentialisation of such initiatives is still part of the struggle (see Bakırezer, Demirer and Yeşilyurt 2018).

Transformation of the Limits of Academic Freedom

Mainstream readings of academic freedom understand freedom in terms of academic autonomy to conduct research, whether it is socially meaningful or not, and irrespective of its relevance for broader social actors (see de Sousa Santos 2010). Nevertheless, even before 2016/17, the debate surrounding academic freedom included a relatively marginal, yet very important discussion on the limits of academic freedom within the neoliberalisation of universities worldwide (see Ivancheva 2015), the limitations imposed on specific positionalities within the neoliberal university, such as those of women and other vulnerable and caring academic subjects (see e.g. Davies et al. 2005; Grummell, Devine and Lynch 2009; Lynch and Ivancheva 2015), those of non-tenured academic staff (Stergiou and Somarakis 2016), and those imposed on epistemologies in search of equality (Brown 2011; Bendix-Petersen and Davies 2010; Lynch, Crean and Moran 2010). Of those epistemological limitations, from today's perspective, the most significant appears to have been the impossibility to undertake research on subjects of collective interest and create new avenues for collectively meaningful research (Lynch and Ivancheva 2015).

This epistemological limitation, which was previously incorporated in the logic of how universities and academic institutions operated, took on a different form in the wake of the turn discussed here. The drivers of these limitations were no longer circumscribed to the academic milieu; governments became actively involved in curtailing the spaces for academic freedom and solidarity. Thus, possibilities for meaningful knowledge production in relation to and in solidarity with specific vulnerabilised groups (civilian victims of violence in the Kurdish provinces in Turkey, in the case discussed here) by academics became limited. At the same time, as visible above, previously academics were marginalised on the grounds of positions they inhabited and from which they produced knowledge, most significantly those of vulnerable and caring individuals (see e.g. Davies et al. 2005; Grummell, Devine and Lynch 2009; Lynch and Ivancheva 2015). The turn seems to have accentuated and extended this development by bringing about the marginalisation, criminalisation and precarisation not only of specific positionalities, but also of the solidarity publicly manifested by academics with vulnerabilised positionalities outside of academia.

This process of curtailing spaces for solidarity intersected negatively with another process, namely the precarisation of the academic profession. The precarity of the academic profession, characterised by a

decades-long steep decrease in tenured positions (Stergiou and Somarakis 2016) and increased pressure on junior scholars to put up with flexible low-paid contracts and recurrent transnational migration (Ivancheva 2015), created a generation of academics that due to low income and job instability appear to have taken the higher education route into more precarious employment rather than out of it (see Kendzior 2014). This transformation has had its negative effects, yet it has also narrowed the distance between marginal populations and the academics who research them (Ivancheva 2015). Academic freedom thus no longer operated to ensure a privileged stance as far removed from those of marginalised groups, though it remained a position of relative privilege. In this sense, the neoliberal transformations of the academic field imposed limits on academic freedom well before 2016/17 and set the ground for this transformation to unequally affect those academics who were already precarious.

Read in this key, the 2016/17 increase in authoritarian pressures on academics and academic institutions has exacerbated a state of affairs that was ongoing. A new generation of academics, who had already lost the privileges of the past generation, also suffered more intensely if engaged in acts of solidarity with vulnerabilised groups. Thus, as we have seen in Turkey, full professors at transnationally recognised academic institutions, as well as public servants, were more protected in the face of the government's backlash, as opposed to graduate students or recent PhD graduates.

Conclusion and Outlook: Collectively Meaningful Knowledge Production and Academic Solidarity with Vulnerabilised Groups after the 2016/17 Turn

As de Sousa Santos (2010) notes, universities have long been affected by a crisis of legitimacy that springs from the contradiction of the university's ethical and knowledge imperatives. On the one hand, the university is expected to produce specialised, hierarchical knowledge, and must thus restrict access to its spaces and the credentials and competences it produces and certifies. On the other hand, there is a demand that the university become a more democratic space of equal opportunity that can contribute to the production of socially meaningful knowledge.

Therefore, a struggle emerges around academic freedom and academic solidarity as differing stances regarding the ethical and knowledge imperatives directed at the university. The production of knowledge that is collectively meaningful, and knowledge production from marginalised

perspectives, were always contested processes within universities associated with institutional and economic precarity, where the guarantees of individually conceptualised academic freedom claims would reach their limits (Lynch and Ivancheva 2015). If understood as researcher autonomy, academic freedom can act as a barrier to the production of collectively meaningful knowledge. The autonomous researcher is free in the pursuit of knowledge and therefore free not to think about the social consequences of the knowledge he/she produces. On the other hand, in this struggle to produce collectively meaningful knowledges from within the university, the partnerships between vulnerabilised social groups and researchers have played a particularly important role. These partnerships rely on academic solidarity with vulnerabilised groups and can be read as a stepping stone to a counter-hegemonic globalising project of redefining the democratic nature of universities (in de Sousa Santos's terms, 2010).

Around the academic year 2016/17, the struggle *against* collectively meaningful knowledge production took on a new form, especially in Turkey, but also in Hungary (see Dönmez and Duman 2020) and elsewhere. The direct response of academics and their allies to the pressures of the authoritarian turn was to demand academic freedom in reference mainly to the first understanding of the term. Yet the transformation also operated to discredit collectively meaningful knowledge production in the academe in solidarity with vulnerabilised groups. This understanding of academic freedom has been addressed less visibly. Nevertheless, this shift also has a global dimension and can be seen, for example, in the move to try and ban gender and other forms of political education in different countries across the world (most recently in Romania [Monitor Civicus 2020]) and in the public attacks against anti-racist and decolonial scholars (most notably recently in France [Ram 2020]).

At the same time, the turn of 2016/17 has brought about new forms of struggle *for* collectively meaningful knowledge production. These struggles can be seen in the creation and extension of transnational support networks for academics at risk, as well as in the creation of spaces for meaningful knowledge production outside of universities. Nevertheless, these spaces and the positionalities from which they are constructed are precarious and contested. They contribute to deepening the cleavages within and outside academia, while, nevertheless, constituting an opportunity to overcome what Wendy Brown has called the 'danger of extinction' of social sciences and humanities (mainly), caused by the growing importance of marketable research and research

metrics in the neoliberal university on the one hand, and the impossibility of articulating publicly relevant knowledge that contributes to the democratisation of society within these metrics, on the other (Brown 2011).

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Notes

1. An English summary of the indictment, which is common to all individual court cases opened against BAK academics, can be found at https://barisici nakademisyenler.net/node/431 (accessed 28 December 2019).
2. The Academics for Peace platform provides a continuously updated information platform on the trials of Academics for Peace, available at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/u/1/d/e/2PACX-1vT05GTWUQMDot1iPfMsie JsWLGBorbNlJyLP5IdtvJVEcKRw8C8qMxFXPighYZkz7pf2ENP2bXZ3DMo/pubhtml?gid = 1873917137&chrome = false&widget = false (accessed 2 September 2020). The data presented in the chapter were updated on 2 September 2020.
3. See https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/case/judicial-harassment-academ ics-peace (accessed 28 December 2019).
4. See https://barisicinakademisyenler.net/node/1727 (accessed 28 December 2019).
5. This programme was set up to support scholars from Turkey facing persecution and is currently being extended to support scholars at risk of persecution in other countries as well. See https://www.academy-in-exile.eu (accessed 28 December 2019).

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