

LGBTQ Movements in Turkey: The People Living in “Other Side”

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Abstract

As well as all around the World, in Turkey, non-heterosexual (lesbian, bisexual, gay, transsexual, transgender, queer) oriented movements and identities are much more visible in public sphere. For LGBTQ people, to be more visible in the public sphere, to manipulate policies and public opinion, to give voice for their freedom and rights, NGOs and initiatives based on sexual orientation out of hegemonic sexual identity have been improving rapidly in the World. Parallel to the global rise, in Turkey LGBTQ movements and NGOs are more and more active today as a new social movement. In the parameters behind the development of LGBTQ movements, totally eight LGBTQ NGOs are active in Turkey's cities Istanbul, Ankara, İzmir, Eskişehir and Diyarbakır. To transform the heterosexist, patriarchal and militarist public sphere in Turkey, the LGBTQ NGOs prepare some activities, demonstrations and the most famous one “Istanbul Pride”. In this study, their propaganda techniques, media tools, projects to effect public opinion, and their relations to other NGOs and initiatives are seen as typically the items of new social movements. Behind the rise of sexual oriented social movements, the decline of national identities, the dissolution of citizenship, class identities and the decline of identities based on production relations play crucial roles.

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Introduction

The transformation of capitalism and rise of consumption based societies and life-style based identities differs LGBTQ movements from the classical mass movements. LGBTQ movements in Turkey have individualistic and atomic character demanding life style based rights rather than class based mass movements like labor unions. However, the LGBTQ movement in Turkey differs in itself from Istanbul to Diyarbakır; and articulates to other movements like Kurdish Uprising in East Turkey, and Gezi Movement in Istanbul. The rising of LGBTQ movement in Turkey is organically a part of the rising Feminist movement in after 1980s. The eliminating of LGBTQ people in public sphere and being pushed of them to the ghettos of cities and public life provoked the LGBTQ movement in Turkey. The organic and collaborative relations between European and Turkish LGBTQ movements gave power to the development of the movement. The violence that LGBTQ people experience everyday is much visible in media and political arena. The identity of LGBTQ people in Turkey is much visible in public arguments as the result of the movement.

The year 1968 uprisings and student movements are generally taken as the starting point for the new social movements many of social scientists and according to some parameters “new” social movements differ from the “old” one. The differentiation between the “new” and the “old” social movements was clarified by two scholars; Alain Touraine and Alberto Melucci (Touraine, 2004 and Melucci, 1980). In the 19th and 20th century, collective and class based movements led by working class were dominant in regards to production relations and redistribution of wealth and surplus value. The working class movements were reaction to the exploitation of workers by bourgeoisie in Europe came to the issue just after industrialization. Industrial capitalism brought social injustice, poverty, lower life standards and exploitation for workers. Around production relations and class based movements, the politics of 19th and 20th century reshaped around production relations. The state became negotiator between capitalists and workers. The rise of welfare state and following rise of neo-liberal state are the result of that negotiator role of state between bourgeoisie and proletariat.

Since the second half of the 20th century till today, new social movements reshaped social and political structures and parameters of any society. New social movements started using new ways of communication such as Internet and social media, new types of organization structures like non-hierarchical-atomic organizations, and new values and opinions based on life styles and individual freedoms. The biggest aims of the new social movements, instead of doing revolution, changing

the system, collapse the political power; building public opinion, increase the awareness, to show identities in the public sphere, and gaining the cultural rights. New social movements are being organized more flexible, horizontal level and articulated some other movements like environmentalists, feminists, anti-war/anti-militarist movements, animal rights.

The 1980s is the midpoint in the rise of new social movements. Global capitalism and neoliberal policies became hegemonic and the representative democracy had big crisis. Nation states are not main actors anymore in the global capitalism, and public sphere and citizenship redefined. The enlargement of service sector, the spread of post fordist flexible working conditions, the transformation of production structures, the spread of urban areas, the rise of micro identities are the new parameters of global age. Identities based on consumption and lifestyles rather than production relations started rising including different sexual oriented identities. The marginalization of non-hegemonic identities and their struggle to re-enter the system and public sphere will be write the world history in the near future.

LGBTQ Movement in Turkey

In 2003, it was the first time for a pride in Istanbul and there were only 30 people joined the pride in the last Sunday of June. Istanbul Pride got bigger annually and in 2010, 5000 people and in 2011 10000 people joined the Pride. However, Istanbul Pride 2013 was held by more than one hundred thousand people since the Pride was held at the same time of Gezi movement, and the demonstrations within the Pride were articulated to the Gezi Movement protests. (BBC Turkish, 30 June 2014).



(A scene from Istanbul Pride 2011)

LGBTQ movement in Turkey started to organize around some associations after 1980s. In 1980s the concepts of gay, homosexual lesbian, do not exist anymore and men who act feminine called as “zenne” (male belly dancer in oriental cultures). Gay people could find jobs mostly at night clubs as singers or sex labourers. Gay or trans singers were acceptable by the society, and Zeki Müren and Bülent Ersoy were the most popular singers in Turkey. The marginalization of gays and trans enabled them from being visible in public sphere. They were in marginal areas, such as night clubs and ghetto neighborhoods in Istanbul like Tarlabaşı. The obstacles for them in from of educational and occupational opportunities pushed them to entertainment sector. The juridical structure did not define non heterosexual identities, therefore, gays, trans and lesbians tended to take medical operations to change their biological sexes. The society forcedly redefine the LGBTQ people either male or female (Gürsu and Elitemiz, 2012).



Bülent Ersoy



Zeki Müren

(two popular singers as LGBTQ individual in Turkish entertainment sector and popular culture)

In social life and professional life, gays and lesbians were oppressed to hide their identities. However in 1990s, identity and difference policies gained importance following the political and ideological changes in the world. New type of capitalist economy reflected itself in all aspects of life and neo liberal policies affected social movements deeply (Adam, 2002: 18). New social movements reconsidered culture ground identities and minorities within the context of modernity. Movements based on class, race and national identities explored minor identities and daily life issues in the classical understanding of modernity. The new context of modernity and movements reflected themselves in Turkey in 1980s and 1990s as the result of the closed ties between American and European societies with Turkey. In Turkey, gays and lesbians created their own habitans in the ghettos of metropolis cities in Turkey and articulated themselves to other organizations for their public voice. The feminist movements and organizations were shelter for LGBTTTQ people until the establishment of unique LGBTTTQ organizations (Toktaş and Altunok, 2003: 40). Although homosexuality was defined as sickness in the West in 20th century, in Turkey, positive or negative there is not any definition or accept about LGBTTTQ people. Today there is no definition or rights about LGBTTTQ individuals in law including discrimination in Turkey. The discrimination against LGBTTTQ people is indirectly by Civil law codes and professional life. In other words they are invisible in both public and juridical level. For transgender individuals medical operation is the only way to get new identity after medical operation.

The movement aimed to increase awareness about the public discrimination on sexual orientation and gain the legal rights to their life. General idea about homosexuality in Turkey is psychological disease or perversion. Transgenders and transsexuals are the most visible individuals out of heteronormative identities. Therefore trans individuals come face to face with wilder discrimination in public sphere and police stations. There is no job for them and most of them work as sex workers and the physical violence is part of their daily life (Öner, 2015).

LGBTTTQ Organizations in Turkey

1990s is the turning point for the LGBTTTQ movements in Turkey, since KAOS GL, was established in September 1994. Until the establishment of that organization, gay activists were working at Human Rights Association in a subdivision which was working on gay rights. On 20th September 1994 the first magazine for gays was published named KAOS GL. In 2000 KAOS Culture Center was opened to prepare activities, panels, film shows and festivals. Later the first LGBTTTQ library was established in this foundation especially for recording the violence against gays (www.kaosgldernegi.org, official web site of the foundation, 16 Febr. 2015).

KAOS GL was legally recognized as an NGO on 15th September 2005, however, later Ankara Governorship applied to Ankara Attorney Generalship to close to foundation, since the foundation is illegal according to Turkish Civil Code as being against communal morality. After application of the Ankara Governorship, the Attorney Generalship of Ankara took decision against the Governorship and KAOS GL became the first legal LGBTTTQ foundation of Turkey (Radikal, 30 May 2013). The foundation has strong collaboration to feminist and antiwar movements both in Turkey and Europe. The political support from the EU to the foundation maintains the existence of foundation and its budget.

Lambda Istanbul, the first organization was established in Istanbul in 1993, one year before KAOS GL. Lambda Istanbul focused on psychological advisory for gays and their families, health advisory, cultural activities to upraise awareness, and opened the first gay radio program took place at Open Radio on Sundays between 24:00-01:00 on 5th May 1996. Lambda Istanbul is the main actor to prepare Istanbul Gay Pride, and they have closed relations to women organizations, antiwar and antimilitarist initiatives, and HIV-AIDS organizations (www.lambdaistanbul.org, official web site of the foundation, 16 Febr. 2015). Some members Lambda Istanbul established another foundation in 2011 called as Spod. Spod is focusing on social policies about gender discrimination. The main aim of Spod is enlarging the struggle against discrimination in a wider area including social policies, more than identity politics (www.spod.org.tr official web site of the foundation, 16 Febr. 2015)

After the establishment of the LGBTTTQ foundations in Istanbul and Ankara; the movement spread around Turkey to other big cities. Siyah Pembe Üçgen Foundation was founded in İzmir, the third biggest city of Turkey, in 2001. Followingly, Morel Foundation was founded in Eskişehir in 2007. Both Siyah Pembe Üçgen and Morel are active in cultural festivals, seminars, gay literature review collection, and demonstrations. Like the foundations in Ankara and Istanbul, generally members are LGBTTTQ individuals at younger ages including both employees and university students (www.siyahpembe.org and moreleskisehir.blogspot.com.tr; official websites of the foundations, 16 Febr. 2015). In april 2010, like KAOS GL, Siyah Pembe Üçgen Foundation was also seen as a movement against communal morality to be closed.

The LGBTTTQ movement spread to the East part of Turkey, where Kurdish people are living. The LGBTTTQ movement in Kurdish geography followed a different direction. Heburn, the LGBTTTQ foundation of Kurdish gays, was founded in 2011 in Diyarbakir. As the result of Kurdish movement for ethno-cultural rights, the people are aware about being activist. However, Kurdish geography of Turkey is the geography of one honor killing of women is sometimes tolerated within the heteronormative tribal relations. The Kurdish geography, where traditions are still heavy on people, is now hosting a LGBTTTQ movement. The members of Heburn (the meaning of heburn is "being") define themselves as being other of other. Not only Kurdish identity but also LGBTTTQ identity bring them a double discrimination. Most of the members are, at the same time, active in Kurdish nationalist movement and parties; although they claim Kurdish nationalist movement is still heterosexist (www.t24.com.tr, 16.02.2015). While the LGBTTTQ movements and foundations in the West part of Turkey articulate themselves to the feminist movements and struggle for cultural rights, the Heburn movement of Kurdish gays articulate themselves to the Kurdish national movement and focuses on antiwar and antimilitarist movements. For Kurdish gays, heterosexist system of the society and the militarist policies of the state coincide each other. Any militarist policy of the government is discriminating both their Kurdish and LGBTTTQ identities.

Analyzing LGBTTTQ Movements in Turkey: New Social Movements Perspective

Some characteristics of new social movements underlined by social scientists are hold by the LGBTTTQ foundations in Turkey. All LGBTTTQ foundations in Turkey firstly use social media effectively. To give their voice, to effect public opinion, to share their ideas, and to organize any activities, social media is the first and most effective way of communicate among the members and with the public. The classical ways of communication and media, such as TV, newspapers, and radio channels are dominated by big companies and the government. The social media is far from state control and market domination compared to classical institutions of media.

Secondly, different from the classical social movements, there is not a rigid hierarchy among the members. In the demonstrations and preparing process of activities, all members are involving the decision making process. Taking decision is generally done after group meetings in the foundations.

Thirdly, unlike labor unions and revolutionist movements, LGBTTTQ movements in Turkey are aiming to manipulate government policies and juridical structure for cultural and identical rights, instead of changing political system and ideological transformations of political structure.

Fourth; the LGBTTTQ movements in turkey articulate themselves to some other movements. From environmentalists, to feminists, from antiwar movements to human rights associations, LGBTTTQ movements have several collaborations and relations to other movements. Unlike classical movements, the LGBTTTQ movements have not enough members effect state policies alone; therefore they have to collaborate to some other movements.

Lastly, the individuals in the LGBTTTQ movements in Turkey are not homogenous like in labor movements. They have also different other identities besides being LGBTTTQ individual. According educational level, ethnic origin, profession, age, socio-economic strata, cultural background, for many demographic and socioeconomic and cultural indicators, the individuals vary widely; and segmented.

On the Cross of Class and Sexuality

The articulation of LGBTTTQ Movement to the other movements is a longer and difficult process. A Trans man, named Aligül Arıkan, ("Ali" is a male name while "gül" is a female name in Turkish society), is a social activist in a famous feminist movement in Turkey called as Amargi. From his personal experiences mentioned in his study (2013) a crossing of two movement can be seen more openly. As he said, like any other feminist movement, Amargi was also built up their arguments on the base of two sexual binary oppositional identities as man and woman. The articulation of the LGBTTTQ movement to the other movements of identity related freedom and rights brought the discussions about the positions and political stand points of the other movements. Within the articulation process, the other movements started criticizing their understandings and views in their agenda.(Arıkan, 2013: 273). Therefore, as being a trans man, it was not easy to be accepted as a member in a feminist movement. While LGBTTTQ movement gets support some other movements like feminism, environmentalism or anti-militarism, those other movements gain different sexual identity and gender views and perspectives. Arıkan had to introduce himself as lesbian in the first times of being in Amargi, since they had no understanding of how a trans man is look like. As much as time is going on in Turkey, non heterosexual identities divers from gay-lesbian to trans and queer identities. This diversity in LGBTTTQ identities brought another segmentation and

differentiation within LGBTT persons. As Arıkan claims that among the LGBTTQ persons, the hegemony of gays and lesbians over the trans persons in social life.

In Öner's study, there are deep interviews with white collar gay persons. From the interviews, it can be understood that also only gays are difficult to homogenize. To live with a different and a "freak" sexual identity and to handle the difficulties and discrimination of being LGBTTQ differs from one person to another. If any gay or lesbian has a prestigious job in the society, s/he can easily handle or s/he faces indirect discrimination mostly than direct one or physical violence, compared to sex laborers or entertainment sector (Öner, 2015: 208-210). Any nonheterosexual person with lower living conditions, with lower education level, salary, being from rural area, cannot handle the discrimination and difficulties. White-collar gays can "hide" themselves in the society and if they can be felt or understood, they come face to face with indirect discrimination rather than direct one or a physical violence. On the other hand, any gay or lesbian committed suicide had lower class background. Some gays who can "hide" themselves successfully may consciously or unconsciously discriminate "passive sexual role" gays or more visible gays in public sphere (Öner, 2015: 178-183).

To defining process of non heterosexual identities is a fluidic process that producing new definitions. Gay and Lesbian movement is spreading to new identities of bisexual, trans, and queer persons. In the LGBT Oral History Project of an LGBTTQ NGO in Izmir, SiyahPembeÜçgen, in the 1980s of Turkey, being gay or trans meant only "dönme" (a meaning of turning back to female identity from male identity) or "zenne" (male belly dancer), and non heterosexual persons were visible only entertainment or prostitution sector. Now in Turkey, non heterosexual identities have diversified and in many other professional sector, there are gays and lesbians working. However, for transgender persons, professional sectors other than entertainment and prostitution are closed strongly. From the oral histories of trans persons, it is seen that even being a trans is also an economic process. To be a trans person, they need money to cover their medicines or operations. Most of them get money from prostitution to achieve their identities with those they will be happy (SiyahPembeÜçgen, 2012). When class and sexual identity crosses, different experiences and diversified discrimination come to issue among the LGBTTQ persons.

In the new social movements, class identities are weakening and life style or consumption based identities come first in the movement. However, it does not mean that class is not a significant parameter anymore. How they live and experience their "otherness" is basically tied to class based conditions. Class identities and sexual identities covers each other and LGBTTQ identities in Turkey are still mobile and dynamic as well as in the World; so the LGBTTQ movements are actively in motion of attaching to other movements, effecting other political views, having diversity in themselves. Although it is hard to define rigidly and analyze clearly, LGBTTQ persons and movements are more visible and determined to shape new Turkey.

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