From Dissensus to Conviviality: Cultural Politics of Difference in Turkey

Oliver Kontny

Political developments in Turkey have sparked unprecedented international media attention after the failed coup d'état in July 2016. Coverage tends to focus on the draconic crackdown and restrictions that include academic work and cultural production. This article highlights articulations of dissensus from among the vivid community of cultural producers and takes a look at the uneasy relation between cultural politics, cultural policies and *Kulturkampf*. Drawing on work by Paul Gilroy, Homi Bhabha, Jacques Rancière and Cornel West, I attempt to discuss the theoretical dimensions of a new cultural politics of difference in Turkey that seeks to negotiate alterity and work towards a culture of conviviality in the face of ever-increasing adversities.

Keywords: Cultural Politics; Conviviality; Alterity; Dissensus; Turkey

Troubled Attempts: Writing About Culture in the Face of a Witch-Hunt

The following article is the result of a troubled attempt to discuss the concept of culture in the context of contemporary Turkey. During the months I have been drafting the original article for this journal, the situation in Turkey has been deteriorating rapidly in front of my eyes. While a number of cities in the Kurdish East were literally razed to the ground in the course of a military campaign (DW,18 May 2016),[1] reckless suicide bomb attacks have repeatedly hit the heart of the major urban centres of Western Turkey. The elected parliament has largely been bypassed by the ubiquitous president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has relentlessly orchestrated crackdowns on opponents and dissidents, inculding Kurds, the left, secularists and the followers of his former ally, the preacher Fethullah Gülen. The German political analyst Burak Çopur argues that present-day Turkey must be classified as a full-fledged dictatorship (Spiegel, 21 July 2016). Novelist Orhan Pamuk wrote in an article for *La Reppublica* that "freedom of thought no longer exists. We are moving from the rule of law towards a regime of terror at a rapid pace" (Zeit,11 Sept. 2016). In September 2016, the central administration appointed 'trustees' to replace the elected mayors of twenty-eight munici-

palities and act on behalf of the central government (Reuters, 11 Sept. 2016). Can Dündar, a senior news editor and publicist now living in exile, warned in an opinion piece in the *Guardian* less than a week after the government's concerted reaction to the attempted coup on 15 July 2016 that the mass dismissals, suspensions and arrests of civil servants amounted to "the biggest witch-hunt in the history of the republic" (Guardian, 22 July 2016).

Dündar's seeming hyperbole was in fact well-founded and can now be thoroughly backed by figures. More than 100,000 civil servants have been suspended or permanently dismissed (BBC, 2. Sept. 2016). Among them are at least 2,346 university staff, including forty-four who signed a petition for the resumption of peace talks between the government and the Kurdish guerrilla forces half a year before the failed coup (BBC Türkçe, 2 Sept. 2016). The first wave of purges focused on individuals accused of affiliation with Fethullah Gülen's vast network, or *cemaat*. In a second wave, 11,500 school teachers were suspended in the wake of Erdoğan's "largest operation against Kurds" (DW, 8 Sept. 2016). Among this latter group range notable writers like the Kurdish poet Lal Laleş, the award-winning storywriter Murat Özyaşar, Kemal Varol, author of acclaimed graphic novels, and the prominent novelist Yavuz Ekinci (KültürServisi, 12 Sept. 2016; Gazeteduvar 9 Sept. 2016). Özyaşar was held in detention on fuzzy terror charges for one week (Hürriyet, 7 Oct. 2016).

Doubtlessly, many readers of this journal will personally know people affected by the purges. As we receive news on a daily basis about colleagues, friends and esteemed public figures who have been prevented from leaving the country or forced into exile, removed from their positions or imprisoned, it becomes increasingly impossible to write about cultural production, cultural policies or cultural politics in the ordinary sense. I have therefore decided to change the focus of my article and look at the stance that some prominent scholars and culture practitioners have been taking in their respective fields, which are increasingly defined by resistance and repression. Scholars who look at the cultural production of Turkey through the lens of Cultural Studies are thus invited to take a leap from reading and critiquing works of art or scholarship for their political implications towards reading and critiquing, and where possible supporting, very mundane and concrete acts of political defiance for what they also and perhaps essentially are: vibrant and volatile expressions of *cultural practice*. Departing from a discussion of a functional concept of culture, I will try to contextualize Paul Gilroy's 'culture of conviviality' within present-day Turkey. I will then have a look at articulations of cultural practitioners against the backdrop of Rancière's concept of 'dissensus' and finally read the position some prominent and incriminated public intellectuals in Turkey have taken within the framework of Cornel West's 'new cultural politics of difference.'

Doing Culture, Doing Democracy: The Functional Approach

Cultural Studies paradoxically offers no handy definition of culture. Prominent authors in the field mostly discuss the extension and intension of the concept of 'culture' in its relation with other concepts such as ideology, identity or power. Accordingly, I have focused on a selection of juxtapositions, namely *convivial culture*, *cultural production*, *cultural policy* and *cultural politics* that all place 'culture' in the context of the recent political conflict in Turkey. I shall suggest that 'culture' can be regarded, to adopt some terminology coined by the neo-Kantian philosopher Ernst Cassirer in 1910, not as a *Substanzbegriff* (a concept describing the essence of its object) but as a *Funktionsbegriff* (a concept that seeks to describe objects in their relations with each other). Cassirer, departing from a discussion of

numbers, was drawing attention to the fact "that there is a system of ideal objects whose content is exhausted in their mutual relations," and the "'essence' of the numbers is completely expressed in their positions" (60).

As a case in point, the popular politician Selahattin Demirtaş, head of a group of controversially impeached representatives of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democracy Party (*Halkların Demokrasi Partisi*, HDP), gave a lecture at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin about "Democracy in Turkey in the Wake of the EU's Refugee Deal" on 13 April 2016. He authoritatively condemned the human rights violations committed by the Turkish security forces. He answered an audience question about his position on human rights violations perpetrated by the Kurdish guerrilla movement Kurdistan Workers's Party (*Partîya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) by referring to a 'culture of democracy' or 'democratic culture' that all political players, including the Kurdish movement, would have to adopt so that human rights violations diminish and the conflict could eventually be resolved through peaceful means.

While he qualified that both formal and non-formal education would have to commit themselves to building this culture of democracy, thus locating 'culture' chiefly in the ambit of arts and education, it is obvious that in his reading, an armed political conflict can hinge on a specific kind of shared *culture* that various sections of Turkish and Kurdish society commonly partake in across existing boundaries: either a culture of hatred and *othering* that would perpetuate the conflict, or a culture of understanding and confidence-building that might help put an end to the conflict. I did not get the chance to ask him what exactly he meant by 'democratic culture'. But I can only surmise that the exact quality of 'democratic culture' would likely be defined, in its turn, through its functional capacity to facilitate peaceful conflict resolution and instil mutual respect for the human rights of the Other. I posit that this requirement, however, does not necessarily amount to an instrumentalist view of 'culture,' subordinating it to political strategies and vested interests, but rather opens up to a functional reading of what culture is and what culture does (or how one does culture)[2] through its multiple relations with intersectional social issues such as ethnicity and race, gender, class, religious diversity, sexual minority rights, etc. All these are on the HDP's agenda since it established itself as a platform with a gender quota of 40%, on which, next to liberationist Kurdish politicians, LGBTTI activists and ethnic Armenian, Syriac, Greek and Roma representatives got elected into Turkish parliament. The functional approach can be opposed to an essentialist notion of what "Turkish culture" or "Kurdish culture" should normatively be, or can be employed as an alternative to the widespread invocation of a performative such as "our common Islamic culture." It corresponds with the anthropological interest in "the ongoing creation of new forms in the modern world Culture of cultures" as expressed by Marshall Sahlins (Sahlins xx), "with cultures disappearing just as we are learning how to perceive them, and then reappearing in ways we had never imagined." (Sahlins xxi)

Building the Present in the Future: Conviviality as Proleptic Movement

Demirtaş's particular mention of 'democratic culture' as a priority task for policy makers and grassroots activists seems to correspond with the idea of *convivial culture*, as suggested by the renowned Black British Cultural Studies writer Paul Gilroy as an antidote to what he diagnosed as *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005): the failure of Great Britain to mourn the loss of its empire, resulting in a condition that reproduces in the present an imperial impulse directed against immigrants. British postcolonial melancholia, to be sure, cannot

be equated with the overt nationalist aggression and religious zeal that have been unleashed in Turkey since the renewed escalation of the armed conflict between government forces and the PKK in summer 2015 and the unprecedented frequency of terrorist attacks on civilians that are rapidly destroying the prospects of living together. But at the heart of both phenomena lies an unwillingness to accept a fundamental reality: that historical power relations render the desired homogeneity of imagined communities impossible and turn into an existential imperative the day-to-day negotiation of alterity.[3] The concept of conviviality refers to "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" (Gilroy, *Melancholia* xv). Gilroy describes 'convivial culture' as a conscious way of building upon everyday practices ordinary people have, in the past, been employing to negotiate alterity and solve interpersonal conflicts in diverse neighbourhoods for decades. The idea of convivial culture is rooted in acknowledging

> "the fact of that kind of creative and intuitive capacity among ordinary people, who manage those tensions", in other words "the fact that there were spontaneous ways in which many of these problems, the problems that we're now told are inevitable features of a clash of civilisations, cultures and outlooks, that those same problems melted away in the face of a kind of clankingly obvious sense of human sameness." (Gilroy, *Crimes* 6)

On the other hand, the project of convivial culture must be rooted in acknowledging that the *denial* of structural racism at work can sometimes be a bigger problem than the racism itself, because people can find spontaneous ways to deal with its consequences for interpersonal relations *unless* they choose to explain it away (6).

This seemingly vernacular definition contains a number of noteworthy aspects: (1) Convivial culture is nurtured by memories and positive experiences that "ordinary people" have already made with negotiating alterity. Unlike some government-devised diversity programs, it does not come as a novel policy superimposed on clueless segments of society. (2) Convivial culture is not exhaustively constituted by existing (or remembered) practices; it is not a revival of tradition, but a project oriented towards a more liveable future that must be built around conscious decisions. (3) Convivial culture, while putting emphasis on the successful elements of conviviality in a given society and cherishing the "creative and intuitive capacity" of humans to celebrate a "sense of human sameness" vis-á-vis differences and alterities, rejects romanticist notions of sameness, which might downplay or obliterate actual structures that oppress, exclude and discriminate against certain social groups irrespective of what might be called the realm of good intentions.

Gilroy's usage of 'culture' as a set of everyday practices and resources that ordinary people have access to reverberates with Richard Hoggart's famous description of culture as "the whole way of life of a society" (Hoggart 3)—a phrase that was seminal for British Cultural Studies—and yet leads towards a complex philosophical issue. Gilroy's 'culture' is not a mere set of givens, but an aspirational project pursued as a future solution to presently emerging conflicts (very much like Demirtaş' 'democratic culture'). In both cases, the project hinges on the concrete struggle of a disenfranchised minority group that seeks recognition for their aspiration of rights. In the case of Gilroy's postcolonial Britain, it is the people of colour that co-constitute a post-migrant society after the demise of the Empire, and in the case of Demirtaş' multi-ethnic Turkey, it is the Kurds and other minority groups demanding equality in the face of an aggressively expanding hegemony of the Turkish-Islamic religious right.

In his recent discussion of recognition (e.g. of the rights of a minority), Harvard philosopher Homi M. Bhabha asserts that "the aspiration of rights" on the part of "a group that seeks to empower its new collective identity […] should be read as a proleptic movement" (4). The proleptic is a rhetorical figure that basically posits as established something (a set of rights) that will yet have to be realized (fought for and granted) in the future.

> "It is the power of the proleptic to 'retrieve' into the 'present' what has been excised, excluded or oppressed—the heterogeneity of harm—as if it ensured and protected the 'future' of those whose pasts have been traumatised or terrorised. In this heuristic and humanistic act, rights are ideally one step ahead of their legal or instrumental efficacy." (4)

Consequently, the project of *culture*—as in convivial or democratic culture—can be claimed for a 'proleptic movement' centred around 'the aspiration of rights' of all disenfranchised groups, which builds on "what has been excised, excluded or oppressed" as much as it can draw on everyday practices ordinary people have already been employing in the past. If we follow Bhabha's argument, an articulation on the part of dissenting individuals that has 'democracy,' 'peace' or the 'fraternity of peoples' for a point of reference may employ the rhetorical figure of the proleptic rather than pinpointing positive law in Turkey or 'European standards.' Such a speech act in itself is a performative[4] that, by virtue of its being uttered in public, contributes to building the kind of ‚culture' it desires and reinstating experiences, memories and narrations that have been excised or suppressed.

This may at first sound convoluted, and the verbosity of contemporary theoretical prose might lead us to believe that it is rather remote from the working concepts of culture employed by field researchers. However, I contend that it corresponds with the view eminent anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has propounded in his article *What Is Anthropological Enlightenment?* (1999). Discussing the decrease in cultural diversity in the face of homogenizing globalization, Sahlins draws attention to the ever-emerging new forms of culture within the modern world Culture. In lieu of proposing a new anthropological model of cultural diversity, Sahlins quotes Paulin Hountondji, the Béninese philosopher who holds that "culture is not only a heritage, it's a project," and Abdou Touré, the Ivorian sociologist and diplomat who regards (local and regional) "Culture as a philosophy of life, and as an inexhaustible reservoir of responses to the world's challenges." On the perusal of the standard textbooks of Cultural Studies, you might not come across any definition that comes closer to the 'essence' of 'culture' than this; instead, you will learn about the history of the discipline of Cultural Studies and the various, changing contexts in which they have employed words that contain the component parts 'culture' or 'cultural', often motivated by their expressed desire to contribute to "the production of critical knowledge as a practice" (Hall, *Legacies* 264), and one must add here: a *cultural practice*.

Voicing Dissent, Ostracizing Dissent: Cultural Politics Versus Cultural Policies

The very concern of producing and circulating critical knowledge as a *cultural practice* has often been voiced by members of Turkey's beleaguered academia and cultural practitioners. The urgent desire to revive and care for a convivial culture in Turkey and work towards a novel culture of democracy has manifested itself in a variety of practices adopted by scholars and public intellectuals over the last years. There can be no doubt that the production of scholarly articles, films, novels and theatre plays along with the vibrant output of the contemporary fine arts community must all be grouped among these practices and deserve far more interna-

tional attention than they have received. But not only is the reach of these cultural expressions often limited; the very conditions of producing them are being progressively eroded by the political and social circumstances. I therefore suggest that we look at contemporary Turkish 'culture' neither in terms of lore and traditions, nor simply in terms of commodified output (novels, films, music, etc.), but as a Hoggartian 'whole way of life' of cultural producers, including their public visibility and moral choices vis-á-vis governmental cultural policies.

One rewarding example for this outlook in the field of popular culture is the pop singer Sıla Gençoğlu, who refused to perform at the AKP's mass orchestration of the national community under the moniker Democracy and Martyrs Rally (Pamuk/Tattersall) and critiqued the event as a cheap spectacle ("şov") (BirGün, 11 Aug. 2016). Not only was she exposed to massive digital hate speech, but her upcoming shows in several cities were cancelled by both municipal venues and private event organizers. As a reaction, she made available some of her music on the platform YouTube, thus sparking viral patterns of content sharing among oppositional young people (CNN, 9 Sept. 2016). It is not so much the content of her songs or the semiotics of her stage performance that are of interest here for a critical and scholarly reading, but the attitude she displayed by first refusing to be enlisted for the mass orchestration of the sovereign and then defying political pressure.

Two weeks after the failed coup, seven accomplished actors were removed from the ensemble of the İstanbul Şehir Tiyatroları, the long-standing publicly funded theatres of the city of Istanbul. Sevinç Erbulak, whose performance history spans over twenty- five years, dryly commented that "art is no vocation for cowards" (Haber7, 3. Aug. 2016).[5] Theatre producer Hakan Silahsızoğlu points out that everyone in the theatre crowd is certain that the removed actors had nothing to do with the allegedly Gülenist generals who plotted to overthrow the government. On top of that, twenty artists working on temporary contracts for the theatre were fired without any reason. As a result, most productions from the current repertoires can no longer be shown. Silahsızoğlu draws a connection between the dismissals and the government's plans to morph the de-centralized administration of publicly funded theatre, opera and ballet houses, and symphony orchestras into one central decision-making body dubbed the *Turkish Arts Council* (*TÜSAK*). According to a draft bill, the new Arts Council's eleven members would be directly appointed by the cabinet, liable to the president's approval, and act as the sole authority to take decisions concerning any of the publicly funded cultural institutions. They could close down theatres and dismantle orchestras, pick and reject every single artistic position in any publicly funded house (Diken, 30 Jan. 2014) and take decisions on the funding of individual projects (Çuhadar). The draft was leaked in 2014 and swiftly opposed by a number of directors of production houses, including the Turkish State Theatres' director general Mustafa Kurt, who resigned in protest—even though he had been appointed by the government eighteen months earlier to replace his unruly predecessor. The move to concentrate all authority over cultural production in one body under the ultimate authority of the president came after Erdoğan stated his intention to cut public funding and privatize all theatres, which in turn was his reaction to the public protest of over 5,000 theatre and cinema professionals demanding "a theatre free of fear" and an end to political interventions in programming, writes theatre critic Bahar Çuhadar. On 10 September 2016, director Ragıp Yavuz was removed from the Şehir Tiyatroları on the grounds that he had used social media to fuel political conflict about the theatre issue (Cumhuriyet).

The whole situation reflects the intricate interplay between *kulturkampf*, cultural policies and cultural politics. The hegemonic religious right increasingly interferes with the content of cultural production, and the vivid protest of professionals prompted the president to declare that "the State should not feed people who raise their voices against it" (Çuhadar). While this polemic attack in itself cannot qualify as an expression of cultural policy, it did set the tone for a reform bill that swiftly redefined the long-standing principles of public funding for cultural institutions and, pending its discussion in parliament, levels the field for a gradual rollback against administrative and artistic staff who voice dissent. On 5 September 2016, the Çanakkale Biennial was cancelled less than three weeks into its opening after the curator Beral Madra laid down her duties as director (Perlson). She had been singled out by AKP deputy Bülent Turan, who happens to be from Çanakkale, for tweets on her personal social media account that were critical of the government's orchestration of national unity after the thwarted coup. In Turan's reading, these utterances amounted to expressions of sympathy for the putschist Gülenists and at the same time betrayed signs of support for the (still legal) HDP. Turan's outraged tweets mobilized a plethora of hateful messages from people who had probably never heard of the Biennial before but wanted to make sure that they would tolerate no event curated by a traitor (Diken, 5 Sept. 2016). Ironically, the theme of the Biennial was migration and the curatorial thread aimed at rendering more visible the plight "of all the people who have been expelled from their homelands." (Çanakkale Bienali)

It is at this point that we cannot fail but notice a sharp conflict between the *cultural politics* pursued by professionals and activists with the aim of critically raising issues that deeply affect the social fabric of Turkey with its over three million Syrian refugees, and the *cultural policies* pursued by the government with the aim of removing these same professionals from any positions from which they can speak.

Dissensus as a Way of Avoiding the Police—Dissensus as a Way of Attracting the Police

So has resistance, under these circumstances, become futile? Political theorist Jacques Rancière points out that "it is the public activity that counteracts the tendency of every State to monopolize and depoliticize the public sphere." (Rancière, *Democracy* 71) Dissensus is indispensable for democracy; it is "the essence of politics," the effort on the part of marginalized groups of getting heard and "making visible the fact that they belong to a shared world the other does not see" (Rancière, *Theses* 24), while "Consensus is the reduction of politics to the police" (32). Police, in the terminology of Rancière, is not specifically an executive institution but rather "a symbolic constitution of the social" or "'partition of the sensible' [*le partage du sensible*]" (20) thereby defining who is authorized to take part in the public sphere and speak, and who will be excluded, not only from rights, but from positions from which to raise their voice. For him, politics is "an intervention upon the visible and the sayable," establishing the agency of subjects who were not meant to be 'partners' in communicative action (24).

> "The principal function of politics is the configuration of its proper space. It is to disclose the world of its subjects and its operations. The essence of politics is the manifestation of dissensus, as the presence of two worlds in one." (21)

Given the oppressive presence of actual police in the public sphere in Turkey, and their crackdowns on cultural producers and other citizens, it might be difficult to follow Rancière's lofty theses. In my submission, however, his thoughts on consensus and dissensus can be instrumental in reading the acts of cultural practice of precisely those artists and scholars who clash with the police. Rancière's understanding

of (cultural) politics is reflected in the petition that 1,128 academics launched under the title "We will not be party to this crime"—referring to the documented war crimes committed by the Turkish security forces in the process of the full-scale destruction of Kurdish cities during the operations against an uprising of armed Kurdish youths starting in late 2015. They were supported by hundreds of cinema artists, theatre artists, musicians and fine arts professionals, and even a group of 'White Collar Workers for Peace,' thus creating a momentum that clearly amounts to the "configuration of [the] proper space" of politics, "making visible the fact that they belong to a shared world the other does not see" (Rancière, *Theses* 24). Again, it was Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who personally unleashed a harsh campaign against the scholars' criticism of his government's war effort, branding the signees as sinister terrorists who should not be on the State's payroll (HRW; Balyan). Basically, he confirmed the Ranciérian contention that contrary to Habermas' optimism, university staff are not a partner in communicative action, have no right to speak in the public sphere and when they do should be handed over to the police (not the Rancièrian, though, but the *Türk Polisi*). Dismissals, investigations and persecution went hand in hand with waves of threatening messages by loyalist social media users. Many hundreds of the scholars who signed the declaration had to pay dire consequences for simply calling to mind that Turkey was bound by the provisions of international humanitarian law and human rights conventions and that one of the public functions of academics *qua their position as civil servants* is to defend the Rule of Law and criticize impunity. But they have also enjoyed the solidarity of their colleagues abroad and, in September 2016, the initiative was awarded the Aachen Peace Prize (WDR).

The internationally acclaimed novelist Aslı Erdoğan went one step further when she accepted a position on the advisory board of the incriminated, and now banned, newspaper *Özgür Gündem*, an outlet in the long tradition of pro-Kurdish media that has always been the target of security forces for publishing information unavailable in other outlets. She also contributed regular op-ed pieces, thus voicing her own, personal opinion in the often partisan editorial pages of the paper. Aslı Erdoğan arguably left her mark on the changing scene of Turkish prose in the 1990s and 2000s. Her landmark style combined the rational observations of the trained nuclear physicist she was with an expressly female narrator's perspective, interlacing vulnerability with cold-bloodedness and preferring subjects that undermine stereotypical expectations of what Turkish women should write about, such as the diary of a long solitude stay in Rio de Janeiro or an account of the dismal inter-human relations at CERN. Apart from her prose, Aslı Erdoğan has always published essays and op-ed pieces and used her position as a public intellectual for interventions in political debates. She helped form a network of Turkish journalists and publicists who would take turns in symbolically acting as editor-in-chief of *Özgür Gündem* for one day each when the actual editor-in-chief (the famed human rights lawyer Eren Keskin) was imprisoned. Among those who stood in was Can Dündar, the editor-in-chief of *Cumhuriyet*, the grand old secularist daily that traditionally dismissed any Kurdish aspiration of rights as separatist upheaval. As soon as *Özgür Gündem* was closed down in August 2016, Aslı Erdoğan was arrested along with a sizeable group of journalists and intellectuals. On 19 August 2016, an Istanbul court ruled that she remain imprisoned pending trial on charges of membership of an armed terrorist organization (BBC Türkçe, 24 Aug. 2016). Among the evidence the chief prosecutor has presented are four perfectly legal books out of her private library of 3000 tomes, and a number of articles she

had published earlier without precipitating any judicial reaction. While Aslı Erdoğan herself points out that during the court hearing, she understood that the trial was not about her writings at all but intended as retribution for her public support of a dissident media outlet (Avşar), it must be noted that what formally stands on trial here is nonetheless "the production of critical knowledge as a practice" in the precise sense Stuart Hall is postulating. In the first message she was able to pass on to her lawyers, Aslı Erdoğan reconfirms that she had consistently been championing non-violence and saw her pieces for *Özgür Gündem* as a "peace bridge" (Özgür Gündem, 21 Aug. 2016). While the metaphor of the bridge may sound hackneyed to readers of English, it does convey, to readers of Turkish, both a sense of the nearly insurmountable divide between the Turkish and the Kurdish people who are being pitted against each other in a climate of remorseless nationalism, and of the existential necessity to build mutual access to the Other. Nothing else is meant by Gilroy's *conviviality*: We have to acknowledge the divide of structural racism and build points of access to the othered people we are sharing our everyday lives with. It is just that the conditions in Turkey, at present, are a trifle harder. What has caused novelist Aslı Erdoğan to stand trial on charges of terrorism, then, is nothing other than her cultural practice of building bridges towards conviviality.

Trashing the Monolithic: The New Cultural Politics of Difference in Turkey

Aslı Erdoğan's clear position is rife with traits of what the African-American cultural theorist Cornel West has termed *the new cultural politics of difference*:

"Distinctive features of the new cultural politics of difference are to trash the monolithic and homogeneous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity" (West 119) (which she does by championing ethnic diversity and raising her distinct female voice) and to generate "creative responses to the precise circumstances of our precise moment" (ibid.), which comes as a sarcastic description of the cultural practice of going to jail for serving a day on the editorial board of a media outlet under attack. What struck me about her peculiar relationship with the paper that many Turkish intellectuals shun as a Kurdish partisan publication is that it

> "embraces the distinct articulations of talented (and usually privileged) contributors to culture who desire to align themselves with demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized and disorganized people in order to empower and enable social action and, if possible, to enlist collective insurgency for the expansion of freedom, democracy and individuality." (120)

I might be hard-pressed to call the Kurds of Turkey 'demobilized' and 'depoliticized' people, but the focus of West's argument is on the 'desire to align' oneself as a *privileged* contributor to culture with people who need empowerment and by this alignment or synergy 'enable social action.' Chances are that Aslı Erdoğan will never 'enlist collective insurgency' on the part of the disenfranchised Turkish population, neither through her novels nor through her brave stance in the face of devastating prison conditions. But she did inspire a vociferous vigil outside the Bakırköy Women's Penitentiary, where fellow novelists Murathan Mungan, Sema Kaygusuz and Vivet Kanetti spoke alongside Kıvanç Ersoy of the Academics for Peace, Erol Önderoğlu of Reporters Without Borders, and a number of other activists of a civil society that has not yet doubled back on the effort to build a culture of conviviality (BiaNet, 22 Aug. 2016).

Murathan Mungan, whose work emerged in the culturally troubled 1990's, has interwoven queer themes with a penchant for the narrative lore of (non-Turkish) Mesopotamia to make for a very Turkey-ish brand of postmodernity, where the interchangeable encounters in urban gay bars are just

Oliver Kontny

works as literary translator and conference interpreter for Turkish. In 2017, he is a research fellow at the *Research Centre Interweaving Performance Cultures* at the Freie Universität Berlin. He has a background in Turkic and Iranian Studies (FU Berlin) and has worked as dramaturge and author of stage plays and radio plays. He has published and lectured on issues of transculturalism and postmigrant cultural production in Germany and on contemporary Turkish literature.
email: oliver.kontny@posteo.de

one step away from the breathtaking subterranean palace of the mythical queen of snakes, Şahmerân, and both settings frame the eternal conundrum of encountering the Other. In his capacity as award presenter at the Screenwriters' Union (SIYAD) award ceremonies in March 2016, Mungan delivered a searing speech that drives home all the points about conviviality, difference and dissensus:

> "When did we become so alien to one another's lives and stories? Why are those who were owning the stories of Gezi so alien to the stories of Sur, of Cizre, of Amed, of the area called Kurdistan? […] The freedom of speech we're demanding is meant for everyone. The right to live, to exist, is a right we demand for everyone. […] I hope that from now on, cinema and indeed all art forms will open up for us more and better opportunities to cohabitate, to live in fraternity, and to touch each other's hearts, minds, souls and stories. If we do touch one another's stories, we might arrive at a better understanding of our [own and mutual] realities." (Cumhuriyet, 3. Mar. 2016)

Conclusion

While the highly volatile situation in Turkey in autumn 2016 jeopardizes any attempt at writing about cultural production, cultural policies or cultural politics, a closer look at the actions and utterances of a number of important cultural practitioners and public intellectuals shows that defiant articulations of dissensus in everyday life contribute to the production of critical knowledge and allow us to outline a project of 'democratic' or 'convivial' culture in the making. Both carefully worded statements and symbolic actions function as performative acts that define and reinforce the new cultural politics of difference, which seeks to build an alliance between privileged (and often threatened) contributors to culture and the various segments of society that should, in a culture of conviviality, be the government's partners in communicative action.

Notes

[1] This article was submitted on 16 Sep 2016.

[2] Hörning and Reuter understand *Doing Culture* as a catch-all phrase for the 'thicket' of pragmatic usages of culture: doing gender, doing knowledge, doing identity or doing ethnicity. They advocate analysing the practical application of culture instead of its prefabricated cognitive structures of meaning.

[3] See for a discussion of imagined communities Benedict Anderson and for a discussion of negotiating alterities see Oliver Kontny.

[4] While the discussion of performative speech acts has many dimensions, I follow Judith Butler's creative–and now seminal–reading of Austin as expounded in her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990).

[5] All originally Turkish sources are given in my English translation.

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