The Radical Habitus and Agency: Refugee Narrations of Political Activism in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

The population of leftist activists in Turkey in the second half of the twentieth century has long been an under-researched community. Many members of this diverse group of people fled the country after periods of post-military coup clampdowns, with a large percentage settling as refugees in various European countries. Within this community, there is ideological variance under the broad category of “leftism”, as well as significant ethnic, religious, and socio-economic differences. By drawing on in-depth interviews I conducted with both Turkish and Kurdish refugees living in Switzerland, this article addresses the following research questions: What types of agency do we see (if any) in individuals recounting their entrance into political activism, particularly in high-risk political environments? How do these individuals conceptualize and communicate their views on their own agency in the context of the interview? I pair these research questions and participant responses with a critical exploration of the work of theorists of habitus and agency. In so doing, I argue that these narrative accounts reveal a shared critical disposition towards state institutions, the political order, and societal conventions. Their engaged outlook is key to understanding why these refugees became politically active in the first place, as well as how they view and narrate their agency many years later.

Introduction

Although there is variance across national and cultural contexts, political activists are often distinguished from other individuals in society by their critical dispositions and willingness to engage in direct protest against powerful institutions. While conducting thesis research on the collective diasporic identity of Turkish and Kurdish former activists from Turkey living in exile in Switzerland, I asked the interviewees the following question: “Why did you get involved in political activism?” While their answers raised interesting theoretical issues regarding agentive behavior in highly politicized environments, what remains significant are the ways in which people view and narrate their own agency after the fact. Some research participants expressed the “naturalness” of their being a leftist since they were born into a context of such extreme contention.
with the state that it left them, as they claimed, with “no other choice”. Others steadfastly maintained their conscious decision to be involved in a social movement. Still others pointed to the heady political atmosphere within the context of university activism and the social freedom they felt in activism. Finally, some indicated psycho-social conditions as playing a major role. Most often, respondents mentioned several factors that at times seemed contradictory to one another. In other words, their responses indicated tension between claiming a strong sense of agency in choosing a path of activism and a lack of choice in entry into political action. The tensions within these narrative accounts are the subject of my analysis here. By “agency” I am referring to the “socio-culturally mediated capacity to act” (Ahearn 2010:28). This is a broad definition encapsulating many forms of action beyond just explicit intentionality or resistance (Ahearn 2010:29-30). Individuals may be agentive in reproducing structures of domination as Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens suggest, in expressing intention through language (Duranti 2004), in attempting to subvert subjectification by utilizing the mechanisms of domination (Butler 1997), or by resistance to power structures (Sewell 1992). My aim in using this “barebones definition” (Ahearn 2010:29) is to allow for multiple readings of agency by exploring the work of a number of scholars and analyzing how their theoretical findings illuminate my research data. In particular, I will focus on Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, Nick Crossley’s (2003) further exploration of the “radical habitus,” and Sherry Ortner’s (2006) conceptualization of agency-as-power and agency-as-projects.

By drawing upon these theories and informant interviews, I will address the following questions: What forms of “agency” do we see (if any) in individuals narrating their entrance into political activism, particularly in high-risk political environments? How do these individuals conceptualize and communicate their views on their own agency, i.e. the meta-agentive level, in the performative space of the interview? I will argue in turn that these meta-agentive accounts reveal a shared critical disposition towards the state, societal institutions, and even past activism. The participants reveal their agency in challenging dominant structures with active resistance and the critical and questioning worldview that led them to political activism. Their narratives also problematize an overly deterministic view of human action as merely reproducing structures of domination.

The personal accounts highlighted in this article all reflect how research participants view their own agency and political identity through their memories of political activism. This paper draws upon the understanding that identity exists “as a ‘production’, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation” (Hall 1990:222). How we understand ourselves often occurs through processes of representation and narration (Somers 1994:606). Research participants and I, as the interviewer,
enact multiple forms of identity through the space and time of the interview, which is itself “a social context, embedded in other contexts, all of which lend meaning to and are independent of the question itself” (Burawoy 2009:36).

I begin the paper with a section briefly detailing the demographic nature of my research, a short history of the leftist movement in Turkey, and the context of refugees’ exile. This will help to situate the theoretical and empirical discussion on Bourdieu, Crossley, and Ortner that follow. After an in-depth analysis of both their work and participants’ narratives, I conclude with a short discussion on how this research further qualifies the literature on agency.

The Context of Research

In the summer of 2009 and winter 2010 in Zurich, Bern, Geneva, and Neuchâtel, Switzerland, I conducted in-depth interviews with twenty-three refugees from Turkey currently living in Switzerland. Nearly all had been active in the leftist movement and fled after the 1980 military coup. Thirteen were Turkish and ten were Kurdish. Likewise, thirteen of the participants were Alevi while ten were Sunni. The ages of the eighteen men and five women I interviewed ranged from forty to fifty-five. With the exception of two participants, all came from leftist family backgrounds, where relatives have been involved in labor unions, left-leaning organizations, or political parties. The interviews revealed other relevant findings. First, all the refugees became involved in political activism from a young age, with some starting as young as middle school and most starting in high school continuing into young adulthood. Second, with the exception of one participant, most came from villages and towns in central and eastern Anatolia, a region with fewer metropolitan areas and traditionally home to peasant and rural communities. Only three people were born in the major cities of Ankara and Istanbul. Their parents, however, came from various towns in Anatolia. Third, sixteen of the participants were actively involved in leftist organizations in Turkey, though their ties were to these organizations remained loose. Only three had been active in an official political party or labor union in the homeland and significantly, two respondents had not been actively involved in any political organization or party but instead faced repression because of their Kurdish and Alevi status and became active later in their exile.

The Turkish Leftist Movement

A brief summary of Turkish state-society relations is helpful in understanding how the leftist movement came to be perceived as a threat to the state, and the key role the 1980 military coup played in suppressing it. Throughout its history, the
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leftist movement in Turkey has been characterized by heterogeneous membership. While several ideological strains exist within the movement, the movement is also characterized demographically by a mix of Sunnis and Alevis, Turks and Kurds, middle- and working-class individuals, young and middle-aged participants, and men and women. The generation of activists of interest to this study who migrated in the aftermath of the 1980 coup, however, is unique in its high number of Kurds, Alevis, women, lower middle-class individuals of Anatolian origin (i.e. a largely non-urban population), as well as its youth membership. This listing does not reflect the obvious overlap of ethnic, religious, and class identities. Leftist and revolutionary movements throughout the 1960s around the world influenced activism in Turkey as well. The 1970s were a politically dynamic time characterized by societal cleavages along left-wing and right-wing lines. In the words of one participant and echoed by many others, “1968 came late to Turkey”—the 1968 protests led by workers, students, and other activists in Europe and other regions greatly influenced the activism of the 1970s in Turkey.

As a whole, the leftist movement in Turkey has been characterized by contention with the state, particularly since the founding of a secular Republic in 1923. I utilize Begoña Aretxaga’s (2005:397) conceptualization of the state as a series of discursive practices that exert power in a variety of realms, rather than as an atomized power apparatus wielding the legitimate use of violence in the Weberian sense. The ongoing reference to the state as a unitary actor strengthens its power as “a collective illusion, the reification of an idea that masks real power relations under the guise of public interest” (Aretxaga 2005:400). The history of the Republican Turkish state can also be examined in terms of this “public interest.” In this case, the state has defined itself, and been defined as, a strong actor in the public sphere. As the primary defender of political sovereignty, secularism, and economic modernization, it promoted a unified civic nationalism based on Turkish-Sunni hegemony. This state ideology, also referred to as Kemalism, has largely negated a class- or ethnicity-based reading of society and its transformations. The history of the leftist movement then, is characterized by contention with the Kemalist state apparatus because of the movement’s ideological emphasis on class conflict and economic exploitation. The three coups in Turkish Republican history, in 1960, 1971, and 1980, along with numerous constitutional amendments, partially laid the groundwork for the emergence of military, legal, and political infrastructure capable of suppressing leftist activity. Attempts by the leftist movement to mold an approach suitable for the “special” case of Turkey were confounded by an openly hostile view towards leftist activity on the part of both state apparatus and hegemonic national discourse.

As Raymond Williams (1977:108) points out however, hegemony is never a static process trapped within the constructs of ideology. Rather, it is a dynamic process characterized by “specific and dominant meanings and values” (Williams
Though often suppressed, counter-hegemonic voices and movements often emerge as “independent and original” (Williams 1977:114). In the case of Turkey, the leftist movement presented a political, social, cultural, and generational break with the social order, though often periodically quelled.

**The 1980 Coup Era**

The 1980s encompass the period of migration relevant to my research as most of the refugees actively involved in leftist political parties, unions, revolutionary groups, and socio-cultural organizations were active during the late 1970s, which was a period characterized by right-left clashes in Turkey. Many of the various leftist groups of the 1970s, including extremist ones, featured loose and nonhierarchical membership structures and were formed in reaction to state repression. Repressive measures such as imprisonment and torture did not succeed in shutting down these social movements; on the contrary, many became more hardened by prison time and a seeming failure on the part of the democratic system to effect change. A weakened economy and the growing urban, industrial population also saw a growing trade union movement willing to exercise its right to strike. The executions of youth movement leaders in the 1970s led to discontent among the left and served to further inflame conflict between youth left and right factions, which grew particularly heated in the late 1970s. The state sought to marginalize the left even further than before, resulting in increased rates of imprisonment among activists.

The changing demographics of the leftists of the 1970s meant that this largely youth movement depended greatly on “friendship networks, family ties, political committees, and commune-type living arrangements,” all of which played a large role in the political socialization of activists in this era (Sayari 1985:4). The heady atmosphere of campus politics spread throughout the country and the legacy of the 1971 coup further radicalized many on the left. Key events also played a role in drawing young activists to the movement. The bloody police crack-down on protesters at May First labor day celebrations in 1977, the massacres in 1978 in Kahramanmaraş of leftist and Alevi residents by Sunni right-wing factions, and the coups of March 12, 1971 and September 12, 1980 all played an important collective role in the lives of political activists, including many in these interviews. When the coup of September 12, 1980 occurred, large swathes of the country thought that it would stop the fighting that had claimed at least 4,500 lives and injured approximately 20,000 up until that point (Sayari 1985:1). In this case however, the military response was fiercer, more organized, and, more importantly, more ideological than previous interventions (Ahmad 1981:6). The ferocity of the military response, particularly towards leftist
groups—the vast majority of whom were not involved in any form of violent struggle—soon became apparent. In the communiqué announcing the takeover, General Kenan Evren painted the state through a patriarchal lens, rendering activist groups “powerless” and “impotent” (Ahmad 1981:5). The military regime immediately implemented widespread imprisonment, torture, extrajudicial executions, forced exile, and general repression.

The treatment of Kurds on the part of the state during this era was particularly harsh. The negation of Kurdish identity and linguistic rights had been an ongoing project of the Turkish state since the founding of the Republic. It is a process that has inflicted further transformations on the physical topography of the country. Although Ottoman official discourse referred to the physical landscape of what is today southeastern Turkey as “Kurdistan,” this changed in the early years of the Republic. The process of “spatial Turkification” undertaken by the state involved the “nationalization” (or seizing) of the land (Zeydanlioğlu 2008:162). Mountains, hills, schools and official buildings were inscribed with symbols of the Turkish flag, the crescent and star, as well as nationalist slogans such as “How happy is the one who says I am a Turk.” For many Kurds this spatial, linguistic, and existential repression played a large role in their distrust of the state. Though Kurds were clearly more marginalized during this period, as a whole the leftist movement suffered resounding defeat and trauma.

The stories of migration to Switzerland and subsequent political activism in the hostland highlighted by my research varies from person to person, although nearly all informants retain leftist political sympathies in the present day. Swiss citizenship status varies as well. More recent arrivals maintain a tenuous residency status while others who left in the immediate aftermath of the 1980 coup have received citizenship. Issues of ethnic and religious background, class, gender, and time of arrival to the hostland complicate a singular and homogenous understanding of collective experience in both Turkey and Switzerland. However, from within this context of activism, precariousness and exile, certain shared sentiments and narratives emerge. I will analyze these in the following sections, starting with a theoretical overview of Pierre Bourdieu’s work on \textit{habitus}.

\textbf{Bourdieu and the Radical \textit{Habitus}}

Pierre Bourdieu’s (1977) theory of practice has long been useful for scholars wishing to understand how social and cultural structures are reproduced through time, in particular how individuals within those larger structures reproduce processes of marginalization. The notion of \textit{habitus} is particularly useful in this regard. Bourdieu (1977:78) defines \textit{habitus} as the largely unconscious dispositions of individuals who, through their own historically-shaped practices,
reproduce external objective structures. Bourdieu’s structuralist background influenced his perspective on how humans enact political, economic, social, and symbolic change through time. His theory is less concerned with agency per se than with explaining how structures of inequality persist through time and space. The “objective structures” of society that are intrinsic to habitus constitute the economy, language, education, political institutions, and so forth (Bourdieu 1977:85; Crossley 2003:43). Habitus plays a key role in reproducing these objective (i.e. external) structures “more or less completely” (Bourdieu 1977:85) through unconscious practices of language, embodiment, and other forms of physical demeanor.

These practices, which are often exploitative of the people reproducing them, go largely unrecognized by individuals. Bourdieu terms doxa as the “consensus on the meaning” of these practices (Bourdieu 1977:80). Doxa is the taken-for-granted aspect of conceptualizations and practices that individuals engage in. This is a key concept within Bourdieu’s theory—it explains how dominant relations within society appear self-evident and are reproduced through normalizing everyday interactions, spatial organization, and linguistic and bodily practices (Bourdieu 1977:81). According to such a theoretical perspective, what roles do marginalized individuals in society play? Are political activists who work to change the system, particularly in contexts fraught with danger, unique in their ability to challenge doxic assumptions? Or, are they merely engaging in practices that likewise reproduce the structures of social fields that surround them? How shared is habitus across varied yet dynamic and often overlapping ethnic and political identities, if at all? I would argue in fact that the concept of habitus fails to singularly account for forms of agency that political activists display. Instead, the reasons Kurdish and Alevi respondents offer for becoming politically active suggests the need for a more nuanced understanding of habitus, and the role it plays in orienting individuals towards activism.

Kurdish and Alevi Identity

As highlighted earlier, the hegemonic ideology of Kemalist nationalism in Turkey has historically marginalized Alevis and Kurds. As a result, many members of the community retain oppositional dispositions towards the Turkish state and military, with large numbers joining the leftist movement. In what ways does their political activism reflect the habitus of their upbringing? Does such activism challenge doxic assumptions about the political order, nationalism, and economic change? When I asked participants why they become interested in political activism, their answers raised experiences of marginalization, exclusion, and even shame. The
following excerpts from participants’ narratives highlight their contentious relationship with the state:

Being Kurdish and Alevi means you’re both political and a minority. You have no relationship with the state, there are no relatives in the police or military. Automatically you’re in opposition by the nature of who you are. My family was left-leaning but not too much. My mother and father are illiterate.

(Ali, Alevi Kurdish male, early forties, Marxist debate club member, university graduate)

When you think about it, I was Kurdish and Alevi. You’re automatically in the leftist wind. You go to school and get influenced. As a kid you were in this and with a bit of intellectual influence, you become politicized. You know there are three K’s that have been considered dangerous since the beginning of the Republic: Kürtler (Kurds), Kızılbaşları, and Komünistler (Communists). I only chose one of those, I was born the other two.

(Yavuz, Alevi Kurdish male, late forties, Marxist-Leninist movement and later leftist Kurdish movement member, high school graduate)

For Ali, although his parents were not political per se, he voices being born into an Alevi and Kurdish family as “automatically” placing him within a type of politicized environment that viewed the state with suspicion. In fact, using the term “no relationship” and referencing illiterate parents connotes a deeper marginalization, one characterized by an almost complete lack of access to state-provided educational resources. Yavuz similarly describes the experience of being born into a certain ethnic and religious status that the state deems threatening. The phrase “automatically in the leftist wind” echoes Ali’s earlier comment. However, Yavuz also offers an opinion behind the process of becoming political. He states that he was born Kurdish and Alevi, but chose to become leftist, revealing a more complex perspective on his own agency.

I argue here that this habitus is unique to the doubly marginalized Kurdish and Alevi population in Turkey that operates within the institutional and social fields of Turkish-Sunni hegemony. Names, accents, skin color, educational background, the national I.D. card indicating where one is from—these are all factors that play a role in tipping off individuals and organs of the state that one is most likely Kurdish and perhaps Alevi as well. One literally becomes the embodiment of the Other from the minute one is born. Nearly all Kurdish-Alevi respondents echoed this aspect of being born into a politicized context and a contentious relationship with the state. Many recounted stories of family members
being arrested and growing up within an environment of insecurity. Even among ethnic Turks, being Alevi brought with it certain dispositions characterized by Othering and repression, as demonstrated by Zerrin on how and why she became politically active:

I think it’s because I come from two different cultures. My mother came from a rich family while my father was poor. We were also Alevi and that had an effect. Hiding it created conflict. It pushed me to question things. During my summer holidays I would go to the mosque and pretend I was Sunni. I learned Aleviness in Europe actually. My grandma wouldn’t fast so I would lie for her. xvi There would be fights in my neighborhood between Sunnis and Alevis. These were the basic reasons.

(Zerrin, Alevi Turkish female, mid-forties, participant in a communist party, some high school)

When I came to Istanbul from the Elazığ area, xvii I didn’t know any Turkish. People looked down on us. As kids, people would call us Kurds or kiro xviii to insult us and we would deny it, “No, we’re not!”

(Hüseyin, Alevi Kurdish male, late forties, teachers’ association and center-left party member, university graduate)

Many refugees noted the need to hide an aspect of their identity, or pretend to conform to the majority culture. For them, the need to “play the game” of the hegemonic Turkish-Sunni culture in their homeland, and the childhood shame they felt, were driving forces behind their involvement in the movement. Pretending to be something one was not, as Zerrin and Hüseyin did as children, has the effect of reproducing the social practices (e.g. fasting, going to the mosque, and negation of ethnic identity) that privilege certain power structures within society. Their responses also demonstrate issues of class. Zerrin’s case represents an intra-familial clash of rich and poor, while Hüseyin’s represents the migration from the poorer Anatolian town of Elazığ to the big city. Further, the name-calling of kiro was an interpellative act (Althusser 1971:173) that introduced a reality of attributed identity to Hüseyin by evoking a past reference to lower-class Kurds. His denial of that status likewise reproduces unequal structures in a society that further marginalizes Kurds and Alevis.

As former activists, their memories and narrations of these events indicate a consciousness in regards to their own marginalization. Rather than a doxic assumption, these refugees are in fact making sense of the social fields they navigated in childhood. They negotiate their identity within a particular habitus of both hegemonic (e.g. denying Kurdish background and pretending to be Sunni) and counter-hegemonic practices (e.g. realizing one’s minority status and
becoming a leftist activist). These counter-hegemonic practices were also undoubtedly influenced by the milieu in which they grew up.

*Early Socialization*

Considering the critical disposition towards state structures and dominant national discourses that can accompany the *habitus* of minority populations, is Kurdish or Alevi status enough to guarantee entry into leftist political activism? This is most likely not the case, as many Kurds and Alevis never become politically active, and many Turks and Sunnis do. What other factors were vocalized by participants as playing a role in becoming political active? Significantly, a majority of participants were born into politically left families, something that has been shown to greatly affect political ideology and activism (Crossley 2003). With the exception of two former activists who came from politically conservative backgrounds, all had immediate or extended family members actively involved in trade unions, student organizations, or leftist parties. In fact, being born and socialized within an environment of political activism was described by several refugees as “falling into politics.” Such associations led many to be present at famous events in leftist history in Turkey, such as the bloody events of May 1st of 1977 or the Kahramanmaraş massacres of 1978.\(^{xx}\) Many were born in, or lived in, areas known as leftist strongholds at the time such as Artvin, Dersim, Ardahan, or leftist neighborhoods in Istanbul such as Kartal. Numerous study participants also drew from experiences of meeting relatives, writers and activists famous within the leftist movement. The early socialization of many of these refugees within a left-oriented perspective appears to have influenced their later activism:

My family were supporters of RPP\(^{xx}\) and were leftists. My father was a teacher and a socialist. Artvin was known as a leftist area. Before 1980 it was a very active time so I was affected by that. My father was actually left of the RPP line and was active in Turk-Der, the educational union. In fact, my father was arrested for a very short period, a day or so, after the 1980 coup. Lots of people were arrested. That affected us of course. It was a schizophrenic time. We were all affected by it. Being 16-17 also affected it of course, being young. It all came together. The social injustice we saw, the poverty. It all pushed me towards it. There was also the issue of coming to the city and seeing urban life for the first time. I brought that provincial culture with me. There was a conflict of identity for me that mirrored the conflicts going on outside. I was upset at the urban life. I guess there’s
a certain amount of having an inferiority complex in this also. Over
time, though, you come to terms with it.

(İsmet, Sunni Turkish male, early forties,
Marxist-Leninist movement member, university graduate)

İsmet’s narrative account of becoming politically active seamlessly
weaves together family influence, the “schizophrenic” nature of the political
environment at the time, youthful zeal, his rural-to-urban migration, and even the
psycho-social process of identity conflict reflecting the injustice he witnessed in
his everyday life. What is particularly relevant here is how İsmet perceives his
family influences as playing a role, though as only one influence among a
complex mosaic of factors that “pushed” him towards activism. His narrative
suggests a consciousness of the role of the larger society around him, though his
own personal agency necessarily contributes to his political activism as well. For
many respondents, family influences played a large role in drawing them towards
activism, as the following excerpt reveals:

I don’t know how much was conscious or sub-conscious. I don’t
know. My father was a social democrat. He was a worker and a
member of DISK. He tried to unionize and bring it to where he was
working. He belonged to the board of directors. He wasn’t literate but
was a hardcore member of RPP. I grew up in a time of parliamentary,
anti-fascist fronts. The students’ movement was ongoing. This was not
everyone but a minority of people. It took time for the ‘68 students’
movement to hit Turkey, which happened in ’71. Defeat isn’t an
ideology, defeat is physical. It’s easy to be on the side of the oppressed
when you are new migrants from Anatolia. It’s already in you.

(Hüseyin, Alevi Kurdish male, late forties,
teachers’ association and center-left party member, university graduate)

Like İsmet, Hüseyin points to family as an influence but that attribution is
not without ambivalence. As he states, he himself does not know how conscious
or sub-conscious becoming politically active was. Rather, through his physical
evocation of defeat and the oppressed nature of being a migrant from Anatolia in
the big city, he points to strong emotional (“it’s easy to be on the side of the
oppressed when you are new migrants from Anatolia”) and embodied (“it’s
already in you”) motivations as playing a role in his activism. Likewise, the
earlier examples of being called kiro or attending mosque services to deflect
attention and “fit in” represent a type of symbolic violence that the dominant class
has inflicted upon young activists (Bourdieu 1977:190). These are essentially
euphemized versions of social violence against ethnic, religious, and class
identity.
How can we further qualify Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* and *doxa* to account for the agency of political activism? Are there certain *habitus* that are geared more towards political activism? Do these include counter-hegemonic voices, while also reproducing hegemonic structures (Williams 1977:113-114)? What would it do to Bourdieu’s theory to conceptualize *habitus* as multiple, internally contradictory, or overlapping? Would a Turkish-Sunni, urban, highly educated male active in the leftist movement somehow be more questioning of *doxa* than a poor Kurdish, Alevi male from Dersim? Is the Turkish-Sunni male more agentive? Such an argument remains too simplistic and disregards the highly thoughtful and critical nature of these accounts. There are multiple reasons for becoming involved in political activism, including being in high-risk situations. Individuals do not merely reproduce dominant structures, but also actively shape new understandings, discourses, and practices. What is shared across these refugees’ early entry into activism and their narration of such activism is a critical disposition, or a counter-hegemonic perspective. The next section examines this argument in further depth.

**A New Conceptualization of Habitus?**

Sociologist Nick Crossley’s (2003:44) notion of the “radical *habitus*” attempts to retain important aspects of Bourdieu’s insight into the reproduction of structures, while allowing for social agents to be actively and purposefully involved in social transformation. Insofar as social fields are always “sites of struggle” over allotted forms of unequal capital, open challenges to doxic reproduction of structures only occur during moments of “crisis.” In such a scenario, *habitus* un-align with the fields in which they operate due to a short-term suspension of *doxa* in certain critical periods (Crossley 2003:44). In other words, “when the ‘fit’ between objective structures and subjective expectations is broken, the opportunity for critical reflection and debate upon previously unquestioned assumptions is made possible” (Crossley 2003:47). Bourdieu’s theory, however, provides little explanation for how “radical social movements,” for instance, may openly challenge existing political structures and create new opportunities for social transformation. In that respect Bourdieu “tends to view radical political activity and movements as an exception to the rule, and even as an exception to his own theory” (Crossley 2003:45).

Rather than viewing *habitus* as totally suspended during times of conflict or crisis, Crossley (2003:48) suggests that social habits instead interact with explicit forms of critique:
Both during crises and during periods of social stability, these [social habits] are mutually reinforcing aspects of practice. Certainly the former cannot exist without the latter: the capacity to reflect is an acquired skill, the tendency to do so an acquired disposition, and the foregrounding of issues within the reflective process necessarily presupposes a background structure of pre-reflective, habitual assumptions.

While his article focuses more on the post-1968 New Social Movements largely concerned with issues such as environmentalism, women’s rights, gay rights, mental health rights, and other forms of identity politics (Crossley 2003:51), I would argue that this perspective can help to inform how participants in the Turkish leftist movement engaged in direct protest and later reflect upon their agency as well. It is the “radical habitus,” or the set of dispositions that arise through experiences with protest, movements, or “whatever unrelated contingencies bring it about in the first instance,” that contributes to a further likelihood of activism (Crossley 2003:50). I would further add that it is a disposition that carries on through activism and post-activism practices—nearly all the former activists I spoke with remain involved with left political causes, though to varying degrees.

In the case of the refugees in this study, their entry into political activism is narrativized through accounts of ethnic and religious repression, familial involvement in the leftist movement, emotional reaction to injustice, as well as ambivalence with regards to their own agency. On the one hand, their accounts reflect the external, unequal structures that have affected their upbringing, and the ways in which they themselves have contributed to these structures through their habitus. On the other hand, there is also a realization that contention with the hegemonic order was a part of that upbringing as well. In other words, a radical habitus developed, in which activism became more of an acceptable path to channel this stark recognition of inequality. In fact, rather than use the term “ambivalent” to describe their accounts, it is perhaps more useful to read their accounts of entry into political activism as reflecting the complicated nature of power and agency within social life itself. The next section highlights theories that have attempted to do so.

**Agency-as-Power and Agency-as-Projects**

Though Bourdieu does not address agency directly in his theory of practice, Sherry Ortner has re-worked practice theory to include an explicit and nuanced treatment of agency. She argues that individuals all partake in “serious games,”
which she defines as “the intense play of multiply positioned subjects pursuing cultural goals within a matrix of local inequalities and power differentials” (2006:129,144). Through this definition it is possible to analyze how individuals are able to exercise a type of bounded agency within the constraints of larger power structures, while still contributing to the reproduction of those structures.

The concept of serious games delineates the multiple forms agency can take in the lives of social actors (Ortner 2006:17). More specifically, Ortner’s (2006:145) notions of “agency-as-power” and “agency-as-projects” conceptualize agency in relation to larger constraining forces and other more localized concerns, respectively. Agency-as-power refers to the multiple forms of resistance and domination that arise out of repressive situations, as “people in positions of power ‘have’—legitimately or not—what might be thought of as ‘a lot of agency’” (Ortner 2006:143). Returning to Aretxaga’s conceptualization of the state, while the state cannot be viewed as merely an atomized institution, the effects of discourse surrounding it have given strength to the many arms of the police, military, judiciary, and parliamentary system. Activism against the state then functions as a form of agency-as-power, operating within a relationship of domination and suppression with more powerful forces. At the same time, focusing only on resistance can be problematic in its over-emphasis on the challenge to power and in its denial of the mundane ways in which people “infuse life with meaning and purpose” (Ortner 2006:145). Accordingly, agency-as-projects relates to notions of grounded intention and the types of cultural actualizations people wish to realize through personal projects (Ortner 2006:143). This conceptualization gives space to the localized concerns, value systems, and emotional goals of being involved in the leftist movement that emerged in the narratives of this study’s interlocutors. According to the refugees that I spoke with, political activism was not only about challenging power structures, but also a site of social and ethnic identity formation for young revolutionaries. Ortner’s (2006:143) separation of these concepts for heuristic reasons implies that they feed off one another. Building upon this understanding, I hold that examining emerging activist involvement in the leftist movement through these refugee voices necessitates viewing these two concepts as intertwined.

Agency-as-power and agency-as-projects may also provide a more nuanced means of understanding the ambivalence that comes across in participant responses. As highlighted earlier, respondents pointed to the circumstances of their upbringing. Many Kurdish political activists in Turkey, for instance, were drawn to leftist social movements as a reaction to what they saw as the effects of imperialism and capitalism. At the same time, they were constrained within the leftist movement they had joined due to a pervasive Turkish nationalist discourse that actively negated their ethnic identity. Yet, in addition to these issues of imperialism and ethnic identity, factors such as family ethics, personal traits such
as curiosity and will, local traditions, and youthful enthusiasm also arose through the narrations of both Turkish and Kurdish refugees as playing a role in their entry into activism. Thus, a consideration of both agency-as-power and agency-as-projects can make sense not only of their ambivalence, but also the many personal factors that play a role in the radical habitus.

Ethics and Religion

Of course family was an influence. How should I say- the ethical side, the relationship with money, that’s where you learn such values. How can I explain this? With money and relationships with people. There’s a conflict between what you see at home and reality; your personal identity forms accordingly. The 1968 generation also influenced me a lot. I was in middle school and high school at that time. It was a very exciting time. I became sympathetic to the leftist perspective … But also the Bekhtasi aspect and Melamilik. I learned all this more later. I was part of an immigrant family. I always learned not to give importance to money. The important thing is friendship and having enough to get by. To never treat someone poorly, to help people, and to respect everyone.

(Aziz Dede, Alevi Turkish male, mid-fifties, Marxist-Leninist movement member, university attendance without graduation)

Here Aziz Dede, originally a Macedonian immigrant to Turkey, recounts aspects of his Alevi identity, but more importantly the family culture of ethics over outright politics. The clash between what he saw at home in terms of values and what he saw outside produced a strong reaction, which he then channeled into activism. He later states: “I made a conscious choice to join the movement. I entered very consciously, not coincidentally, not drawn in unknowingly by peers. I did it by reading and researching, very knowingly and iradeli.” His activism was not handed down from his family; rather, his radical habitus was partially influenced by both the agency-of-projects arising from his ethical background and the agency-of-power afforded by a strong sense of societal injustice. These two concepts are married through his utterance of the word iradeli, which assigns a strong agentive role to his entry into activism. While outside influences undoubtedly played a part, Aziz Dede also points to his own choices as playing a key role.

Religion was not always evoked in participant responses, however. Often, the rejection of religion and God reflected the types of generational change that numerous refugees mentioned:
While I was in high school, people following Kaypakkaya came and influenced me. They told us not to tell our elders but that there was no God (laughs). So I rejected God in 1969 … This is not necessarily related to socialism but being a revolutionary means looking suspiciously at institutions, religious ones being the first among them. It eventually turns into a political thing.

(Talat, Alevi Kurdish male, mid-fifties, Marxist-Leninist organization member, high school graduate)

Interestingly, rather than attribute his rejection of God as a youth to socialist ideals, Talat ties it to a critical disposition towards social mores and religious institutions. Many other refugees mentioned the revolutionary or rebellious aspect of joining a movement in addition to the fight against injustice or inequality. Likewise, his expression of atheism was also echoed by other refugees as being part of a youthful process of developing their political identity as leftists. Once again, the act of rejecting God is in and of itself an agentive and counter-hegemonic process in terms of both power and projects, influenced by the social structures surrounding him, but nonetheless narrated quite dramatically as a choice he made. It is arguably also a means through which these research participants distinguish their individual choices from the larger events unfolding around them.

The Emotional and the Local

In addition to family ethics, revolutionism, atheism, personal characteristics and emotions also played a role in turning to activism, as the following participant recounts:

I loved reading—it played a big role. My parents were illiterate. They were good at math but books were taboo because someone got in trouble in earlier times for reading. Only the Koran was allowed … We lived close to the Georgian border. My father had a store selling fruits and vegetables to soldiers. There were always lots of soldiers. We were in the buffer zone against Communism. We didn’t have electricity but you could see them across the border, playing soccer in well-lit fields. My grandfather was from Georgia actually. So I was curious about that land … Under the stationary store the Işçi Partisi and Dev-Sol had offices. We always saw men with beards and women smoking together there. I was scared of that place but I was sent there one day by a friend … They took me and showed me the library, music room, etc. There was so much smoking!! But they
influenced me. They would wrap the books in newspapers and tell me to read it secretly. I would bury it and read it in the outhouse. In the summer I would store it in the well and read it when I had time to myself.

(Kenan, Sunni Turkish male, mid-forties, Marxist-Leninist movement member, university graduate)

Similar to other accounts, Kenan’s story reflects how reading constituted a provocative act within the societal climate of the time. As he goes on to explain, he had to hide books because his family was afraid that their house would be searched if word got out that there were books inside. As a type of cultural actualization of this individual’s personal curiosity, this attitude towards reading and exploring new forms of mediation constitutes a form of agency-as-projects. At the same time, though reading in and of itself was not an act of resistance to larger power structures, its very provocative nature (an earlier townsperson had gotten in trouble after the 1971 coup for just such an act), makes it a manifestation of agency-as-power as well. It also contributed to his growing intrigue at the forbidden spaces in his surroundings, such as the seemingly more developed Communist area over the border and the offices of the Turkish Labor Party and Dev-Sol. This was in addition to the presence of men and women smoking together, which Kenan reported as a provocative act at the time.

Kurdish-Alevi activists also explained their agency as being shaped by local storytelling traditions that emphasized resilience and a discourse of self-taught intellectualism due to the lack of relations with the state and official institutions:

My mother’s side came from a Dede background so my childhood was great—lots of stories. I later realized those stories had similar roots to Greek mythology- with lots of gods and so on. My grandfather was very special for me. Stories were an important part of my life. But for me there was no national identity. For us there was no state to rely on- you needed to be strong, smart, educated, etc. We never trusted the state and we always knew to never let them know your secrets. Dersim is different from other places. I don’t know- something about questioning. To always ask. We were taught that as kids.

(Mustafa, Alevi Kurdish male, late-forties, Marxist-Leninist movement member, university graduate)

For Mustafa, stories represented a way of bridging the gulf between knowledge and access to resources. He attributes the storytelling tradition and emphasis on critical thinking as being partially responsible for his becoming politically involved. Here too we see how something so intrinsic to the
everyday—storytelling—becomes intricately tied to agency-of-power. In a sense this capacity for critical thinking becomes a type of symbolic capital within his own surroundings, something that cannot be understood when divorced from the local context of Dersim.

Many activists also recounted stories of oppression and injustice and even love spurring these same activists on to become involved in political change. According to Talat, an Alevi Kurdish male, courage, dedication, and will were signs of identity within the movement. He observes that “for us in the movement, everything was irade. We were ready to give up everything for the revolution. It grabs people.” This statement reveals a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, he points to will, a type of conscious decision-making, while on the other hand he points to “being grabbed,” as if one is without a choice in the matter. Other similar accounts indicate that the notion of revolution and the context of the times serve as an external force channeling beliefs into activism. That activism, in turn, was largely driven by what the participants viewed as conscious and strongly-willed choices.

We debated everything. We wanted economic justice, and end to poverty, obviously. Also, in our generation we were reacting against family authority, questioning men-women relations (though we didn’t voice it so much as feminism), we were interested in cinema, theater, etc. We really lived in those 2-3 years! We lived so much! For example, I would take a night bus from Aydin to Istanbul to see a play and would come back the next night. I believe ’68 didn’t happen in Turkey-only on the top, among the elites. We lived it later. Men and women lived in the same place together. I had a girlfriend at 17!

(Mustafa, Alevi Kurdish male, late-forties, Marxist-Leninist movement member, university graduate)

It is important to remember that this was largely a youth movement, and becoming politically active at an age where political beliefs are forming meant that social movements such as this provided a “shared set of beliefs and sense of belongingness” (Diani 2000:161). As Mustafa voiced it, rebellion, sexual exploration, and interest in art, i.e. agency-as-projects, were just as important as issues of economic injustice and poverty. Another refugee, Hüseyin, points out that the community of young leftists, both men and women, saw themselves as delikanlı, or “wild-blooded.” This is interesting with regards to its evocative and connotative power in Turkish. It evokes a youthful form of masculine passion and is often used to address young men in an affectionate manner by elders. It nonetheless contains a certain patriarchal justification of “boys-will-be-boys” activities. Hüseyin quite significantly uses it with regards to both boys and girls to
describe the degree of their revolutionary passion. In fact, in Hüseyin’s understanding, youthful naïveté and exuberance were what drove the dynamism of the movement and blanketed the fear that otherwise would have driven young people out of the movement. Part of what gave leftist youth in Turkey motivation to continue political activism at the time were the ways in which they saw themselves as the true representation of the “people” (Neyzi, 2001: 412).

As is apparent in these narratives, refugee perspectives on entry into political activism are nuanced, multi-faceted, and at times even nostalgic. Agency-as-power and agency-as-projects merge together in the backgrounds, traditions, emotions, and personalities of former activists, and this is reflected through their narrations. The amalgamation of these factors points to the existence of a radical habitus formed in the early political lives of these refugees, which is visible through to the present day.

Conclusion

People often ask me what I would do if I saw my torturers face-to-face. I would do nothing. It was his job just like my job was to be a revolutionary! It’s all about context. No one really chooses their role in society. If you’re born Kurdish, Alevi, and a student- you’re a leftist. If you’re born in a fascist environment, it’s natural to become a prison guard! Particularly when you’re so young, you’re not so conscious. They mixed us up with fascists for 5-6 years. They thought it would help us to socialize with one another. We never even talked to each other. For us, they had killed our friends and the same for them. But actually when you dig deeper, we’re not so different. I don’t believe in destiny but people are assigned roles in a way. (You were all politically active.) Yes, we all shared a passion to save Turkey.

(Yavuz, Alevi Kurdish male, late-forties, Marxist-Leninist movement and later leftist Kurdish movement member, high school graduate)

I was always humble. All I cared about was equality. This is political, economic, sexual, etc. Everyone was always labeling me-everyone but me. Freedom, living like a human, equality- that’s what I wanted. Actually, I was more anarchical than socialist (laughs). Socialism was a godly thing that I strove for, something to be reached. Philosophically I agree with socialism but there are problems in implementation. (What do you mean you were more anarchical than socialist?) As a difficult woman, anarchy makes sense. I was hurçunxxix, rebellious.

(Zerrin, Alevi Turkish female, mid-forties,
Both Yavuz and Zerrin were active in the leftist movement, though their excerpts demonstrate varying views on their own agency. Yavuz quite poignantly points out that people are born into certain circumstances that push them towards certain “destinies” or “roles,” thereby exemplifying Bourdieu’s (1977) point that habitus is a pervasive “structuring structure.” Within Yavuz’s statement we can also find the acknowledgement that everyone is involved in one way or another in the reproduction of certain structures through their actions and choices. Zerrin, on the other hand, points to her own individual rebelliousness, hırçın nature, and yearning to be in charge of her own life as playing a key role in influencing her choice to become politically active.

Though seemingly contradictory, I do not see these responses as being so. Rather, I view these accounts as reflecting the complicated nature of human action itself. While people live within unequal structures that they both reproduce and challenge through their agency, they at the same time realize transformations on the personal and collective levels of society. As former political activists, these particular social actors display through their narratives a recognition of the radical habitus which allowed for, and was structured by, their agency-as-power and agency-as-projects. This is the nature of the serious games every individual engages with in his or her everyday life. Family background of leftist sympathies, ethnic and religious minority status, local cultural practices, rural-to-urban migration, and emotional engagement with inequality, injustice, religion, and rejection of God were all factors that activists mentioned in their narratives as playing a key role in drawing many of them to the movement. Such a critical disposition towards the societal status quo was eventually channeled into activism. This activism in turn led to repressive measures taken by the state against the leftist activist community. In many ways, this early critical disposition is directly related to their later activism and narration of that activism. As one refugee pointed out, “If we had been so comfortable in Turkey, we wouldn’t have been radicals.”

Notes

1 I conducted the interviews in Turkish and later translated them into English. Please see Appendix A and B for a copy of the interview questions in both English and Turkish. For the purposes of this paper, the narrative accounts featured in this paper refer primarily to my questions, “Why did you get involved in political activism?” All of the respondents were native speakers of Turkish and while some also spoke Kurdish, because I do not know the language, we conversed in Turkish.
Though a more in-depth linguistic analysis would undoubtedly enrich this project, for the purposes of this paper I am focusing more on the particular ways interviewees narrate their entry into political activism and how that relates to agency. 

Stuart Hall (1991:42) quite astutely views the concept of identity as “a point at which, on the one hand, a whole set of new theoretical discourses intersect and where, on the other, a whole new set of cultural practices emerge.” In this paper I take a narrower view of identity and political identity, notably one in which identity is viewed as a dynamic and multi-faceted process through which activists were moved ideologically to collective action. 

Through a process of snowball sampling, I met interlocutors who knew refugees living in these cities. After gaining permanent (residence) status, many immigrants settle in the urban areas of Switzerland, where immigrant networks are strong and jobs more plentiful. Kurds are an ethnic and linguistic group that make up nearly 20 percent of the population of Turkey and live primarily in the southeast region of the country. In recent years economic migration and forced relocation due to the military’s policy of emptying out villages have dispersed that demographic. Kurds tend to be either Sunni or Alevi. Alevis belong to a heterodox religious branch of Islam, with Sufi roots within the Shi’ite tradition. There are thought to be at least 15 million Alevi in Turkey, many of whom are from or currently live in Anatolia. Both Turks and Kurds can be Alevi. Kemalism refers to the national independence and first Republican leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, whose political and symbolic presence in the everyday life of Turkey continues. Kemalism is a multi-faceted ideology but can be viewed as corporatist in nature. Corporatism is a state ideology that Parla and Davison (2004:36) define as the “rejection of the categories of individual, class, and tradition as the core analytical categories of its political vision, though each may play some role within different corporatist articulations. Corporatist formulations derive models of society and forms of political and economic organization from “occupational groups,” professional organizations, or corporations.” At times Kemalism is also referred to as Atatürkism. 

In 1950 the urban population of Turkey stood at 18.4% while in 1981 it had increased to 47% (Margulies and Yıldızoğlu 1984:16). Similarly, in 1950 27.2% of workers were employed in factories, while by 1970 that percentage had increased to 46.4% (ibid:17). Though both coups occurred for different reasons and produced varying legal and political results, both succeeded in marginalizing the left as an organizing force in Turkish society.

Switzerland is only one of many European countries in which tens of thousands of Turks fleeing the 1980 regime attempted to gain residency. The majority of the 83,000 Turkish citizens legally residing in Switzerland actually emigrated as economic immigrants rather than asylum-seekers (Fibbi et al. 2003:221). A more complete picture of habitus would include an examination of embodiment as well (Adams 2006:514). For the parameters of this particular study, however, the interview format allows mostly for an examination of narratives in understanding the habitus of these activists. Space limits an in-depth discussion of how gender is a factor that deserves further exploration in relation to political activism in Turkey and the larger diaspora. 

I have used pseudonyms for all research participants and consciously refrained from listing the names of the organizations they belonged to. “Leftist wind” here is a literal translation that refers to the general environment of leftist sentiment. Derogatory term for Alevis, meaning literally “redhead.” Though practicing Sunni Muslims fast daily during the month of Ramadan, fasting is not part
of Alevi tradition.

\textsuperscript{xvii} Elazığ is a city in eastern Anatolia.

\textsuperscript{xviii} The term “kıro” actually means “boy” in Kurdish but has become a derogatory term in Turkish with connotations of lower-class and Kurdish status.

\textsuperscript{xix} In the former example, leftist demonstrators were shot at by unidentified actors, while in the latter case, predominately leftist, Alevi, and Kurdish neighborhoods were attacked by right-wing forces, resulting in heavy injuries and casualties.

\textsuperscript{xx} RPP, or Republican People’s Party, is the center-left party originally started by Mustafa Kemal.

\textsuperscript{xxi} Devrimci İşçi Sendikaları Konfederasyonu, or the Confederation of Revolutionary Workers’ Unions, was and is the most leftist of the union confederations in Turkey.

\textsuperscript{xxii} The terms Bekhtasi and Melamilik here refer to his Alevi and Sufi roots.

\textsuperscript{xxiii} Here “Dede” refers to Aziz’s status as an Alevi follower and holy man. His friends affectionately refer to him as “Aziz Dede” and he too refers to himself by that moniker.

\textsuperscript{xxiv} The term “irade” can be translated as “will” or “spine” in the metaphorical sense. It connotes a strong certainty to any action associated with it.

\textsuperscript{xxv} İbrahim Kaypakkaya was a radical leftist organizer and thinker who was later executed in prison.

\textsuperscript{xxvi} Turkish Labor Party.

\textsuperscript{xxvii} Dev-Sol, or Revolutionary Left, was a faction that broke off from the revolutionary communist group Dev-Genç in 1978.

\textsuperscript{xxviii} Formerly known as Dersim before the founding of the Republic, Tunceli is a city in southeastern Anatolia populated largely by Alevi and Zaza peoples. The Zaza are considered by many as a separate ethnic group from Kurds that nonetheless speak a dialect of Kurdish.

\textsuperscript{xxix} Here the term she uses, hırçın, can be translated to vicious or shrewish. Significantly, it is used most often to describe women seen as displaying such behaviors.
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