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The search for a new ground. Interview with Zeynep Gambetti

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The search for a new ground. Interview with Zeynep Gambetti

Zeynep Gambetti

I. Interview

Interview conducted by Marie Le Ray, Istanbul, 30th October, 2006

EJTS: Could you introduce yourself and detail your academic career in Turkey and outside?
Can you tell us how and when you got interested in the Kurdish question as a scholar?

[2] ZG: I studied economics as an undergraduate at Boğaziçi University between 1983 and 1987. After graduation, I worked as a journalist until 1992. I first became a correspondent for Arts and Features. I spent my time going to the movies, shows, the art exhibitions, etc. But I slowly got a sense of what was happening in Turkey. These were the years when the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) was actually starting to make an impact as a political actor. Journalism made me take up an interest in politics and urged me to go back to Boğaziçi to do my graduate degree in Political science in 1990. I did not have more knowledge of the Kurdish question than the average 'man on the street', so to say, in those years. It is only when I went to France to do my PhD that I got a sense of the human tragedy, of what was happening there.

[3] EJTS: What happened in France? What were you studying there?

[4] ZG: I first studied political sociology and then political philosophy at Paris VII Denis Diderot University between 1992 and 1999. There I met other students from Turkey, some of whom

were Kurds. That is how I actually started learning about the details of what was happening in Turkey, because it was only in France that we could talk about certain things without censure, or that they could talk to me without censuring themselves.

[5] EJTS: What about Kurdish students in Boğaziçi?

[6] ZG: In Boğaziçi, at that time, of course there was no organization of Kurdish students. In addition, when I was an undergraduate, we still felt the impact of the 1980 military coup, you know, the silencing of every alternative movement, of the student movement and so forth. The university was more like a desert than anything else. We just attended the courses, studied, took the exams and came back home. There were some leftist organizations at the university after 1980, but they were practically inactive. The 1980 military coup had primarily eradicated the Turkish left; that was its first major act. So there was not much going around me, intellectually speaking. I mean I was working, in the newspaper, with people who were activists before 1980. But they were more concerned with issues of human rights and general problems. They were struggling against the articles 141, 142 and 163 of the Turkish penal code. Today, it is the penal code article 301 which punishes intellectuals for anti-Turkish thought. There were also other issues like conscientious objection, which was a new issue in Turkey. But this was also the Özal era, the era of neo-liberalism, of money, of exports and imports. And I guess I never got into contact with anybody who could really talk to me about the Kurdish question. Therefore, it never occurred to me to go and look at it in a different way. The PKK was a terrorist organization and all that was happening there was a bloody operation. It was only in France that I got the sense of the social, economic, political, ethnic dimensions of the Kurdish question.

[7] EJTS: What was the subject of your PhD research? Is there a way to link your interest in the question to your previous researches?

[8] ZG: Actually my research had nothing to do with the Kurdish question. But it was on something very dark, about the dark side of politics. The exact title was *Mensonge et politique: les enjeux de la visibilité* (Lies and Politics: The Implications of Visibility). I worked under the supervision of Miguel Abensour, the former president of the Collège International de France and the editor of the *Collection Critique* at Payot Publishers.

[9] EJTS: When did you finish your PhD?

[10] ZG: In 1999. I went back to Boğaziçi as a full-time instructor at the Political Science and International Relations department in 2000. Because I teach political theory, I did not envisage doing empirical work at first. Besides, I do not have the adequate methodological training for that. But I think that being in Turkey makes it impossible for anyone to remain in the theoretical sky. So, sitting beside the Bosphorus with my colleague, Şemsa Özar, one fine morning of 2002, we started talking about the Kurdish question. It was already the cease-fire period. We said to ourselves: 'We never looked into this question really'. This was actually a reproach, we felt guilty of not having done anything, academic or otherwise, concerning the Kurdish question. We decided that day to set up a team to undertake research in the Southeast. I would never have embarked on this project alone. But Şemsa has experience with empirical research, since she is an economist. We set up an interestingly interdisciplinary team together.

[11] EJTS: Was there, at that time, such a circle within the university where scholars were able to talk about the Kurdish question?

[12] ZG: At the time we were talking about it, there was nobody, except Kemal Kirişçi, from the Political Science department in Boğaziçi University. But after that, I got to know other people who were actually working or had started working on the Kurdish question.

[13] EJTS: When you started studying on the Kurdish issue, what were your readings? In which languages? How did they influence your theoretical approach of the issue?

[14] ZG: I think that among the first books I read, after Kirişçi's of course, was Martin van Bruinessen's. And then I read Mesut Yeğen's. And, that was also important, the volume on nationalism edited by İletişim in which there were articles on the Kurdish question. So those were more or less the sources in Turkish. I read Bruinessen in Turkish first. But then I started reading academic texts in English, mostly political science books and articles. Slowly, from these political science readings, which focused more or less on the international dimension of the Kurdish question, I moved towards sociological readings. By that time, a number of people were starting to conduct research in the region and I was getting to know them. This provided me access to their findings. In addition, at Boğaziçi, I was advising a student club who asked me to present the preliminary findings of my first visit to Diyarbakır. I started meeting students who were either doing research on the

Kurdish question or who were Kurdish and therefore interested in the question. There was a snow-ball effect, so to speak.

[15] EJTS: When you started to research the question, what did you work on? What was your own subject? How and why did you choose it?

[16] ZG: In the research project, we assumed that conflicts are not confined to hostile relations between identifiable actors, but are complex and dynamic networks of antagonistic relations. The overall task was to understand the scope and nature of the conflict in the Southeast without reducing it to neatly defined dichotomies such as 'the PKK vs. the Turkish state' or 'Turks vs. Kurds', and to be able to determine what sort of transformation is taking place in this new phase. We assumed that conflict had become a habitus for the local population and were interested in looking beyond the claim that peace had finally arrived in the region. Within this framework, I pursued one of my own theoretical questions, that of the public sphere. I was interested in looking at the flourishing civil society activism in the Southeast, particularly in Diyarbakır, to detect the dynamics through which new spaces of existence and of expression were created. The research questioned the relevance of the Habermasian scheme of a rational-deliberative public sphere in accounting for the emergence of spaces of contact and communication. There was a continued struggle for control over sites such city squares, civic platforms, neighborhood locales, local media and art and handicraft centers in Diyarbakır. These struggles played a crucial role in the construction or reconstruction of social and political actors. Because Diyarbakır itself was sufficiently complicated to analyze, I dropped my ambitions to repeat the same fieldwork in other part of the region and concentrated on this city alone. What I was after was understanding how a public sphere could emerge there despite the ongoing antagonism.

[17] EJTS: How did you conduct fieldwork within this research project? In which languages? Which channels did you use to enter the fieldwork? How did you select and meet with your interlocutors?

[18] ZG: Actually, we formed the team with Şemsa. Because this was such a vast question and we were still limited in our knowledge of the past and present of the region, we felt the need to form a team of interdisciplinary scholars to try to put pieces of the puzzle together, each one looking at one piece and doing interactive work. This meant that we would not be doing individual research,

on our own to come together in an edited volume of articles, but that we would continually talk to each other in workshops, relate our findings and questions to each other, so that we could actually contribute to each other's perspective and get a picture of the totality. So we had team members looking at different aspects of what we called the '(trans)formation of conflict' in the region. We were not investigating the past, actually, but were looking at the period in which the armed uprising had ended. Our aim was to see if conflict, in all its different forms, had really ended in the region. Or was it transforming into something else, was it shifting in other directions? Was there really peace? Was there really harmony? Was there really 'democratization'? Actually, I should not be using that term, since as a team, we decided not to contribute to what has been called 'democratization studies'.

[19] EJTS: How did you actually choose the title of this research program: '(Trans)formation of Conflict: Changing Power Configurations and Path to Democracy in South-eastern Turkey'?

[20] ZG: We did not want to refer to a certain literature; that is for sure. The literature we did not want to use was the liberal mainstream political science literature. We did not want to do away with the ideal of democracy either, but felt the need to reconstruct the ideal of democracy in a more inventive and maybe a much more socially weighted sense. Our framework and our methodology owe mostly to Foucault. We did not want to go to the region and say: 'Look, now they are not fighting, they have elected mayors, their elections are free, and there are several parties in the region; therefore, this is democracy!' We did not want to think with the categories of formal-institutional politics. We wanted to look at the power structures, into more invisible and subtle manners in which power might be reconfigured.

[21] EJTS: So why did you feel obliged in some way to use the expression 'path to democracy' rather than 'governmentality' for example?

[22] ZG: To get funding! (laughing). We knocked on several doors but, in the end, we decided that we did not want to be funded by a private corporation or any private funding institution. We applied to different consulates, academic-oriented foreign institutions in Turkey. But apparently nobody had funding, because we were a team of eight people and it was a big project that would last for two years. So, in the end we got the money from Boğaziçi University, which is, I think, a merit of that university.

[23] EJTS: Could you please retrace for us the history of your research program? Who are the teachers and students who took part in this? On what topic did they work and with which theoretical approaches?

[24] ZG: There were only two teachers and all the other members of the team were master or PhD students. We started with a core group of mainly political science research assistants, who then spread the word out to others. Here again there was a kind of snow-ball effect. But actually the team changed during the course of the project. The team we ended up with had nothing to do with the team we started with. It was either because the students who were in the team originally went to the United States to do their PhD – their focus changed or they were too much engulfed in work –, or there was also a piece of research that could not materialize. So the final team was different.

[25] EJTS: What are the difficulties the program encountered whether within or outside the academic world?

[26] ZG: None. The project was internal to Boğaziçi and funded by Boğaziçi. I do not think a lot of people really noticed this team work because we did not publish a report. In the end, we did not publish the book we wanted to publish, which was supposed to be an edited volume with all the contributions. Hande Sözer and Nilay Özok wrote PhD's. Nilay produced a paper from her thesis and published it in *New Perspectives on Turkey*; Hande did not have the time, she went to do her PhD in the United States. So it was very difficult to get a book out. Had there been a book maybe, the research would have had more impact. But publishing individual articles in *New Perspectives on Turkey* did not produce the same effect.

[27] EJTS: As far as I understood, the project is now over. Are you prolonging this research program in any way?

[28] ZG: Not in the same manner. We have contacts now in the region and Şemsa is an advisor to a local development centre in Diyarbakır. She is still involved in research, but with a very practical objective. She is surveying the condition of the forced migrants there, by creating interactive relationships with them. The centre collects data and then presents this data to the migrants and local social workers themselves.

[29] EJTS: Was it/Will it be possible during this research program to build relationships with other universities and with which ones?

[30] ZG: I think it would have been possible, but we did not. Actually, it needs a lot of effort to build a common perspective. Once we constructed ours, other people joined in, but we did not seek new contacts. New students came in and that is why the composition of the team changed. You have to speak a certain common language to be able to do this kind of research. And it is through doing this research that we realized that other people also speak the same language. But the research was over by then. We met these people, working in other universities, while doing the research, not before.

[31] EJTS: What about the publication?

[32] ZG: Actually, it was New Perspectives on Turkey who asked us to edit a special issue on the Kurdish question. The end product was different, though. All of the research done did not get published. One remained as an unpublished Ph.D. thesis. And the others never materialized. Şemsa wrote a report for the UNDP, but did not publish an article. Also other research, not belonging to our team, appeared in this issue.

[33] EJTS: Do you think that a similar issue may have been published earlier or is it something which is only possible now?

[34] ZG: I think it was only possible now. I do not know whether it would be possible in the future, however. We started conducting the research in 2003. People were pouring into the region between 2000 and 2006. But in 2006, the presentation of a TESEV (Türkiye Ekonomik ve Sosyal Etüdleri Vakfı) report on forced migration got attacked by nationalists. Maybe we're at a turning point, but I do not want to speculate.

[35] EJTS: What about the fieldwork the team did?

[36] ZG: We had different approaches. For example, Hande was a student of sociology who undertook anthropological research. So she was doing participant observation, in-depth interviews and collecting life-stories. She was doing her research on the ÇATOMs (Çok Amaçlı Toplum Merkezi, Multi-Purpose Community Centres) in Mardin and lived there for two months. This was different from me going to Diyarbakır three or four times and conducting interviews each time. Sinem Özer, another

student on the team, accompanied Şemsa. Her focus was more economic, concerning the practice of micro-credit. She collected data as a participant observer. So the methodology was different, the fieldwork was different. Nilay, working on the GAP (Güneydoğu Anadolu Projesi, Project of Southeast Anatolia), mainly did archive work. She made use of the official resources in Ankara. But her work was also enhanced by observations made by others on the field.

[37] EJTS: How did you manage to get contacts locally to do your fieldworks?

[38] ZG: The first fieldwork was conducted in Istanbul, with journalists, businessmen, activists who had already been in the region.

[39] EJTS: Businessmen?

[40] ZG: Osman Kavala. He was the one who helped found the Diyarbakır Sanat Merkezi, an important cultural centre in Diyarbakır. He was working with the municipality, initiating social work concerning children in the street. So we talked to him, we talked to Nadire Mater. We talked mainly to journalists who have been in the region, mainly Ruşen Çakır and Ahmet Şık. We organized workshops with them, asked questions, got contact addresses from them. Our first contact in Diyarbakır was Şeyhmus Diken, also a journalist, writer and advisor to the Metropolitan Mayor, who then indicated other people. And in any case, we had a list of institutions we wanted to begin contacting. I was looking into civil society activism, so I went to the civil society associations, one by one. But from there, of course, in two years, the field evolved...

[41] EJTS: Can you tell us more about the way you concretely 'entered' the fieldwork?

[42] ZG: The first time we went to Diyarbakır, we were a group of five women researchers. We were staying at the Dicle University guest house. The first day, we interviewed Şeyhmus Diken. And then each of us found our own interviewees, did our own surveys. In the evenings, we got together to talk. That was the pattern that would repeat itself every day. We talked, we talked and we talked about what we had heard or observed, simply to understand what we were experiencing! This was an experience that was mind-opening. We were all under the influence of the media. There was very little research done in the region and on the region, except for general, broad categories. You know, you could find economic statistics concerning the region, you could find historical accounts from both sides concerning what had happened. We had also read the sociological findings of such

writers as Bruinessen and Lale Yalçın-Heckmann. But there were so few reports or news of what was happening in the region available in the mainstream media. The region was unknown by the media, closed to the media. The media were simply relating the press releases of the officials and only a few journalists were doing real investigative work. That was why the region was a whole new world for us.

[43] EJTS: You were staying at Dicle University. Did you contact any teacher or student there who would have been interested in your research program?

[44] ZG: I found the name of a research assistant at Dicle University. She had done a survey in the region, on Diyarbakır. But I could not contact her. We did not do any interview with the professors, either.

[45] EJTS: What were your relations with non-elected and elected local authorities? Were they facilitating or hindering your researches in any way?

[46] ZG: I faced no obstacles. During the project, there was only one research that proved very difficult to do and it was about the village-guards. The team mates who wanted to do it finally decided they couldn't continue. But mine was quite accessible and people were very happy talking and taking me to places and making me meet others. But I was not able to talk with the very high elected or non-elected authorities at the time. Feridun Çelik was the Diyarbakır Mayor, but I could only talk to his advisors.

[47] EJTS: What about local political parties?

[48] ZG: I didn't go to political parties branches because my work was on civil societies. But I did go to cultural centres or social centres affiliated to political parties. The Mesopotamian cultural centre, for example, has relations with the municipality and with DEHAP (Demokrat Halk Partisi, People Democratic Party), but this is not a party branch. And Selis, a women's organisation, is also affiliated with DEHAP. The first time I came to Diyarbakır, I attended a workshop on women's labour. Şemsa was the one who was invited; I merely accompanied her. The GAP-GIDEM was organising the workshop on how to improve the social conditions of women through integrating them into the production sector. The participants were mostly all women, not only from Diyarbakır but also from other GAP projects, from Mardin for instance. This was the first time that almost all of the regional associations working on the issue of women's employment came together in Diyarbakır.

[49] EJTS: What was interesting for you in that conference?

[50] ZG: It was revealing because, first of all, I went there to look at the Kurdish question, which is a political question, and the first aspect of it that I saw was the problem women face in the region, of the rate of unemployment there and the lack of income sources. And of course, the coming together of activists that had been polarized for many years, that was very interesting as far as my research objective was concerned! None of these women, including those coming from Ankara, were speaking the same 'language'.

[51] EJTS: The 'Kurdish issue' is more than often spatially (and politically) associated with the Southeast. In your opinion, is it possible/legitimate to study the issue in Istanbul for example? If so, how and to what extent?

[52] ZG: Actually, Istanbul is the biggest Kurdish city in the world. But I think one must go to the region because the region, first of all, is different socially, culturally and economically from the rest of Turkey. And one must actually see it, observe it, and become even a participant observer to be able to understand how different it is and how complex the variables are. To be able to understand why there is such a thing as a Kurdish question in Turkey, going to the region is essential. I do not think one can do that in Istanbul.

[53] EJTS: Would studying on Kurdish migrants in Istanbul be a way to ask the question?

[54] ZG: I think you can study aspects of the Kurdish question in Istanbul: migration as you say or even, you know, the strictly political aspect of the question. You can study it by talking to Kurdish opinion leaders here or party members, who will also tell you a valid story. But it won't be the whole story, I think. In our research, we wanted to bring in all of these various dimensions of the Kurdish question into the picture. And that is why it was so difficult; that is why we had to have a team. Because this is not just a political question, it is not just an ethnic question, it is not just an economic question. The Kurdish question incorporates all of these at the same time, but goes beyond. It is also a cultural question... And therefore, going to the region is essential to see what the dynamics are and how these various dimensions link up to each other.

[55] EJTS: Would you think about the Southeast as a specific political and public sphere with its own dynamics?

[56] ZG: Own dynamics, maybe not, but with different dynamics than the rest of Turkey, because the region has been excluded for so long from the national public sphere and from the allocation of resources from the centre, from the allocation of educational resources. And, plus, it has suffered from outright oppression and a war. I think it has certain dynamics that do not exist elsewhere in Turkey.

[57] EJTS: A lot of researchers in Turkey working on the Kurdish issues seem to have gone through foreign and especially American universities. Is studying outside Turkey a facilitator? If so, why is that?

[58] ZG: I might say that it is a facilitator. In my case, it is obvious because I actually became aware of the question when I was studying abroad. But I think it also provides a distance vis-à-vis, first of all, the internal domestic camps and sides. Therefore it allows for an approach that more or less can look at the issue with new lenses, with fresh eyes. Even taking sides, you are not taking the same sides, in the same terms as others. And you are not carrying the weight of all the things that have been said, the accusations that have been made, and the tragedy that has occurred because of action or inaction, because of past errors. I think more young people are going to the region actually, more young researchers. And I think being in a foreign country distances also the Turkish academics mind from the grips of the ideology that has been implanted since 1980. This is liberating for the mind.

[59] EJTS: How does this (and the works of foreign scholars as well) affect the way Turkish scholars are asking the 'Kurdish question', the way they choose analytical categories, theoretical frames?

[60] ZG: There were times when I was found insolent. People hated me for saying certain things, because I was not speaking with the same loaded language as others and therefore I hurt people's feelings. When I was using the term 'middle ground' for example, it was like an insult! First of all, people could not understand, and maybe I was also expressing it incompletely. The problem was, when you say 'middle ground', it is as if you were talking from a liberal perspective, saying 'let's become reconciled, let's forget the past', or from a sort of more or less formal standpoint of law and human rights, which has nothing to do with lived experience and lived tragedy. Especially the Kurds could not take that word. But I was not using it in that sense actually. I was trying to refer to a ground

which is beyond the axis of polarization, a new ground in which something new can be said, a new experience can be obtained, a new political solution can be found. Instead of outright fighting or remaining squeezed within the dichotomies dictated by the available power structures, I meant to imply the search for a new ground that would serve to bind the new social and political actors in the field. I do not understand, even today, why it was so insulting. But the term was taken as the negation of the conflict and of the suffering behind it. It was the wrong term to use, actually. Later on I tried to use 'third ground' instead, implying the possibility of creating collective action around a position that was neither identical with the thesis (the Turkish state) nor the antithesis (the PKK). Another example would also drive in the point, maybe: in the talk I gave at Boğaziçi, I was saying that the situation of the women in the Southeast is different from that of women in Istanbul, since in the Southeast, it is a question of life or death. We know that all over Turkey women are violated or beaten or exploited. But in the Southeast, this becomes a vital question, literally speaking. Women are killed because of so-called honour. A woman researcher was very angry at me. She said: 'How can you, a western woman, look condescendingly on the Kurds and say that their condition is tragic, when yours is as well, although in a different way'. I think these exchanges were necessary, although they were difficult to handle. But this is exactly what I mean by 'middle ground'! (laughing). Trying to understand and being confronted with your own, maybe, prejudices, makes you open up a field that you could never have imagined before and you come to a place where communication becomes possible.

[61] EJTS: Could you analyse for us the genesis and conditions of emergence of this topic within the Turkish academic field? Can you see some specific breaking lines or moments? Is it possible to link it to changes affecting universities and the academic system at large? Or much more to changes readable within Turkish public and political life?

[62] ZG: After 1980, there was not much written on the question, except maybe by Kurds living outside of Turkey. But we did not have much access to that stuff. I mean, Turkish academics did not have access to those books or texts, because there was no internet, no real communication at the time. So the Kurdish question did not appear in any academic journal until well into the 1990's, I think – if we are talking about the post-1980 period, of course, because before that, as you know, İsmail Beşikçi and others have written on the question. But after 1980 and especially with the ban on the Kurdish language and a year later, the beginning of PKK's war against the Turkish State, it became a taboo question. Well into the 1990's, the question could not become a question for the

Turkish academia or an interest for Turkish intellectuals as such. This taboo is a very complicated phenomenon which carries the effects of the 1980 coup. The effects of the 1980 coup are very under-researched in Turkey, maybe even less than the Kurdish question I'd say. And, surprisingly, it never became an interest even for foreign academia. The coup is equally important, however, because it is at the cause of a lot of bottlenecks in Turkish politics, in activism and also in the academia. Kemal Kirişçi and Doğu Ergil were the first in Turkey to write about the question after 1980. I think that was a breaking-point in that it broke a taboo. But I do not think any academic had the courage to go to the region and do fieldwork in those times; it probably was much too dangerous. I do not know if you would be allowed to do it, even if you had the permission. So, there was the problem of access to the region. And when that problem was eliminated, the fact that the people could go to the region and could re-establish contacts there, became a second turning-point. Not in the minds only, but also physically. To be able to go there changed the academia's attitude to the region and to the Kurdish question.

[63] EJTS: Do you see some evolutions - in time and space - in the 'trendy' way to ask the Kurdish question within Turkey - from macro reflections on ethnic identities and right to self-determination to micro considerations on poverty alleviation in the Southeast for example?-, and outside Turkey as well?

[64] ZG: I think the Kurdish question has definitely evolved for Turkish academia doing fieldwork, definitely evolved from a legal question or an international political question, like you just said, into a more sociological question. I am not sure if this is very innocent, though, because I think the sociological question is much easier to investigate. I'm not saying this is not of importance. But, let's say, doing research on the situation of women in the region can be backed through various funding agencies or various universities. Such research does not disturb the political authorities and it does actually open up a new perspective on the situation in the region. But it somehow does or can have the effect of depoliticizing the Kurdish question, turning it into a question of the region, the Southeast. All depends, of course, on the researcher and the research agenda. There are a lot of funds available for going to the region now and these funds are given mainly in the social and economic domains: poverty alleviation, the plight of the migrants – without the question being asked of why they immigrated, thus freezing the situation in the aftermath of the migration and not looking at the reasons why... And not asking the question of whether the government's scheme of going back

to the villages is functioning or is desirable... The region is accessible to researchers as any other field is now. If people do not want to ask the political question, they do not ask it. They may ignore it or refuse to make the necessary links. This is not to say such research is not important; environmental studies are made in the region, also studies on the tourism potential of the region. But all these tend to cover up the fact that the solution has not yet been reached. That is why we wanted to entitle our research project 'the (trans)formation of conflict' and not 'the end of conflict'.

[65] EJTS: You have underlined the way the passage through foreign universities and the funding type of the researches may contribute to shape the terms in which the Kurdish question is asked. Can you think about other factors?

[66] ZG: Whether you have a critical standpoint or mainstream standpoint makes a lot of difference. Mainstream standpoints usually want to avoid disturbing authority or question the normative elements underlying the mainstream framework: is democracy really democratic, for example... (laughing). It is very possible, for instance, to believe that Diyarbakır is a civil society paradise. But civil society in has now become a sector. Therefore when you look at Diyarbakır, if you want to see that activism is actually very democratic, you will see it. Because there is plurality, because there are a lot of voices, because there are a lot of actors and a lot of activity going on, looking at only the form of activity, you will conclude that a democratic transformation is under way. But if you go more into the detail and ask critical questions – has it really transformed certain power relations, has it really changed the minds of the people, has it really brought the government to accept the fact of the Kurdish population and of Kurdish culture – then the answers are much more ambiguous and a researcher can prefer to ask those questions or not.

[67] EJTS: Do you see the emergence of a new generation of scholars? Would the way fieldwork is conducted be a determining factor/identifier? Can we talk about clashes between an 'old class' of scholars, permeated with what would be 'national', if not 'official' rules and frames of thinking, and a new generation of young scholars, freed from that, notably/possibly thanks to their 'transition' through foreign universities and/or appeal to qualitative methods on the fieldwork? Or is it much more complex than that?

[68] ZG: There is definitely a new interest among the young generation, among people who are doing PhD now in foreign universities, but also doing the research in Turkey, or among those who

plan to do a PhD. They are definitely more and more interested in going to the region and looking at different aspects of the Kurdish question. And I definitely think the academic field that has opened up the possibility of looking at the Kurdish question differently is anthropology, not political science. Anthropologists find ways of seeing transformations that political scientists are oblivious to and cannot even see. But now that anthropology has infiltrated political science, even political science students want to do qualitative instead of quantitative work. That is, instead of just surveys and collecting statistical data, they go and do in-depth interviews and take their time and become participant observers, which is very important. This is all the more important, given that a part of the research in the region was only done in the form of questionnaires. Questionnaires don't reveal a lot they are framed in a certain manner. With more and more funding availabilities, some researchers also embark on something like an 'academic package tour': a three-day spot fieldwork with 10 people interviewed per day! But other researchers are telling me that they either are staying in the region for weeks or intending to do that. So that will surely change the academic field.

[69] EJTS: And you could see these evolutions through these last five or six years?

[70] ZG: This is more recent, I think. For the past three or four years only.

[71] EJTS: Is there any dialogue at all between what would be generations of scholars (talking about theoretical traditions and approaches), but also between the different universities and research centres all over Turkey you would know about (for example between İstanbul/Ankara on one side and 'peripheral' universities, such as Diyarbakır or Konya on the other)? What are the bridges for scientific cooperation?

[72] ZG: There is some dialogue. It can be initiated by people who have done research and want to present their findings, people working in research centres like TESEV or Sabancı's research centres. In Boğaziçi, we have centres such as the Social Policy Forum. Actually, since the Kurdish question has become accessible in recent years, researchers interview the same people more or less. So we all know who is at GÖÇ-DER (Göç Edenler Sosyal Yardımlaşma ve Kültür Derneği, Migrants' association of culture and social solidarity), we all know who is in İHD (İnsan Hakları Derneği, Association of the Human Rights). All of these institutions that have helped us to do the research or were the interviewees themselves provide the links between us. So, there is dialogue. And even the more mainstream research – I am not talking about research done before the 1990's, I

am talking about the new generations of scholars, in that new generation, between the more mainstream and the more critical stream – there is dialogue. Even if you criticize the work done, it is not taken badly.

[73] But we are not talking about publications yet. When it comes to publishing, certain of the openings we are talking about here disappear and have to be left out of the picture. Certain comments get to be deleted from published reports, the wording becomes much more cautious. Certain data remain unpublished.

[74] EJTS: Are private universities playing a specific role in the emergence and development of the Kurdish question?

[75] ZG: Of course. It is much more difficult to do independent, unbiased research in state universities. Apart from Boğaziçi University, I do not know of any state university where such a research program has been launched. So, private universities effectively opened up the path for more research. They had, maybe more than others, the taboo breaking and the trend-setting function.

[76] EJTS: Do you know of any equivalent of your research program within private universities?

[77] ZG: Not that I know of.

[78] EJTS: To sum up in a way, do you think universities offer enough possibilities and freedoms to work on this issue? If not, through which media does the research about Kurds have to go?

[79] ZG: Actually, it was possible to write about the Kurdish question from Turkey, but to a foreign journal or publishing house. I think now it would be much easier to publish on the Kurdish issue in Turkey. I am not sure whether the universities will open up or not. Certain universities have opened up and are, I hope, receptive to this issue, but I don't know if all the universities will follow suite. I'm not sure about that. Because other things are happening, you know, after the flag-burning crisis in March 2005¹, Kurds were stamped as 'would-be citizens' and again the whole enmity inherent in nationalist discourse has poured on the Kurds. So, renewed interest in the Kurdish

¹ In the course of the Newroz celebrations, some Kurdish children were caught burning a Turkish flag in front of TV cameras. Nationalist reactions burst out and lasted for weeks following this event.

question by people who have not yet opened up might be difficult. It all depends on whether the students now doing their Ph.D.s on the Kurdish issue take up positions within other universities than the ones who have already 'opened' up.

[80] EJTS: Concerning more specifically the Kurdish question, what has been the place given in time to scientific expertise (if there was any) by governmental authorities?

[81] ZG: I'm not sure if they have any impact on government policy, but the government is funding a lot of research in the region. The more technical ministries - agriculture, economy - are funding and assigning research in those domains. The GAP administration is paying for a lot of research, holding conferences in the region as well. And also, we have not mentioned foreign funding yet. The European Union has initiated a lot of research, let us not forget that. And actually the coming and going of EU officials or European parliamentarians and western NGO's to the region also opened the path to research. A lot of funding is going to civic associations.

[82] EJTS: You already underlined the role of think-tanks like the TESEV foundation. What is the role of civil society actors in mobilizing scientific expertise? What do you think of initiatives such as the Kurdish conference hosted by Bilgi University this year, and organized by Helsinki Yurttaşlar Derneği?

[83] ZG: This was a courageous and timely initiative. One might criticize the way the conference was organized or the reasons why certain speakers were chosen instead of others, or the way the discussions were conducted. But the event was path-breaking. TESEV's studies were also. But, in the end, what happened? We cannot just change the world through academic research or through conferences; because of other factors, political factors, I think the path is closing again. Or we need to refresh our courage to continue doing things like this. We must also consider the role political activists played in opening up the academic field. The insistence of the Mothers of Peace movement, of İHD or of Eğitim-Sen, the union employees in the education sector, broke the taboos. Baskın Oran's report to the Turkish Commission of Human Rights (İnsan Hakları Komisyonu) was the first to use the word *Türkiyeli* instead of *Türk* for Turkish citizenship. Baskın Oran, also an academic in Ankara, was severely criticized by some, but protected and defended by others. This mobilized the whole academic field three or four years ago. But now, it's not that the field is closing, but there is a potential of closure, because of the political situation.

[84] EJTS: You have been involved, as a scholar, in different societal issues: you've been to Diyarbakır with a team of students. You are part of a contestation movement against the 'new law against terror'. You write in newspapers. How do you see this engagement? Is it part of your duty as a scholar? Do scholars have such a breathing space in Turkey today?

[85] ZG: Scholars have a breathing space. Because of the possibility of doing research and being able to touch issues that are politically sensitive in a much more academic and calm-headed manner, they are actually able to say certain things. I do not think of it as a duty, but as something that you simply cannot help doing. But again, this breathing space has its limits. A scholar from Dokuz Eylül University, in İzmir, supported the students and the personnel who demanded better conditions. He is a Marxist scholar. He engaged in their struggle and was thrown out of the university by the rector. At Muğla University, a professor² who protested Kenan Evren's speech at the University, this September 2006, was also punished. Again it depends on what you are saying, which university you belong to and how protected you are. It is still not a very safe environment. But the intellectuals and the activists are the ones who are the path breakers in Turkey in any case, not the politicians.

[86] EJTS: In your case, it seems that your social and political involvement has a reflexive impact and leads you to rethink your approach of scientific research and the way you are conducting fieldwork itself. Could you tell us more about that?

[87] ZG: I think it works both ways. It is also my academic research that fuels my political engagement. I was completely a-political before doing academic research. I was not involved in politics in any way, but simply reflected on politics. It is because, in France, I met a lot of different people, from the left, from the Kurdish circles, but also French activists and engaged people, that, when I came here, I did this Kurdish research, my first empirical one. And that has changed a lot of things in my life. That is why I became more and more engaged. But then, when you are talking about engagement, it is not that I would join any movement at all, but it is then that you start clarifying your mind about the right positions to take, the right political positions. And then you start seeing how other political positions distort perception, distort the lives of people and how actually they can

² Muammer Tuna, Department of sociology, opposed the coming of Kenan Evren for a speech on the 12th September 1980 Coup d'état. Kenan Evren was a leading general during the Coup and became President of the Republic of Turkey from 1982 to 1989.

contribute to maintaining or even aggravating power and oppression. So that is why I started talking more in public spaces than in academic spaces. I think that is my engagement: not being involved in a movement, but saying things elsewhere, not in the nice cosy temples of academia. Therefore I wrote in the newspapers, I went to conferences that are not academic. And I joined in when a new form of activism was initiated, for example by Boğaziçi students, when they decided to organize a series of activities entitled 'What We Don't Want to Know about Diyarbakır'. The title was meant to be ironic, of course. It was a new way of coming to terms with the Kurdish question and with our own fears. Professors and students joined together to hold public lectures, conferences, slide shows and covered the campus with posters. But it was not about belonging to any of the present set of political alternatives or parties: it was a third ground!

[88] EJTS: But did it change your way of thinking about research itself?

[89] ZG: It did help clarify my mind. It actually helped me to add substance to what I had thought about on a much general and abstract level. And maybe owing to this, my theoretical interest has changed also. I take the social question seriously now, for example, whereas for me, the political question was the question. I used to distinguish between politics and society. But now I find myself looking more into the question of identity, the question of everyday life and how power structures are reproduced, and even how they are reproduced in the academic field. I try to warn my students about the power structures inherent in academia, so that they become aware of it. Students and colleagues call you into positions of power as well. Mainstream academics keep trying to redress you, to discipline you. In my reactions towards them, I have become much more nuanced. If I take a radical position, I take it, but not in a blind, reactive, passionate manner anymore. I think all this has also made me realize how thick the world is – intellectually and relations-wise. I was disenchanted with academia, after realizing how power works also in the universities, also in the minds of researchers and professors, and how it is so very difficult to get a critical idea across in an academic meeting. Sometimes non-academics are more open to hearing certain things than academics themselves, which is a sobering fact.

[90] EJTS: Do you think that the present political situation will lead in the short/mid-term to major (positive or negative) transformations of the scientific research on the Kurdish issue, to

transformations of the Turkish academic sphere more broadly? What are the main obstacles remaining?

[91] ZG: In the long-term maybe. In the short-term, things will stay more or less at the same level. I hope they will not recede. There is a possibility of rupture, though. It all depends on the number of students who do research here or abroad. Will they be able to pursue their research interests when they come back to Turkey? There is a new generation of scholars who wants to do research with different questions in mind. But I don't know if the political field and the academic field will allow them to do so in the future. I'm not so sure anymore.

[92] EJTS: What are you working on now? What are your new projects?

[93] ZG: I want to do some research in Latin America. I think there is, in Latin America, this possibility of innovative politics, even grassroots democracy. John Holloway used the expression 'reinventing revolution', which means not thinking of revolution in terms of armed struggle, but instead, maybe, thinking of the power of grassroots organizations, seeing what oppressed people can do with their creative energies and what solutions they can bring to problems that, politically speaking, cannot be solved within the system. I would like to look at that in order to come back to Turkey with a fresh perspective to ask: why isn't all this also happening in Turkey? Why are we going back and forth, you know, one step ahead, one step backwards in this country? Why are we talking now about closure of the academic space, whereas last year I would not have said that? Theoretically and empirically, I want to change my focus in order to make a fresh start.

[94] EJTS: You feel like you need to refresh your look on the issue. Was it, morally and intellectually, exhausting to work on the Kurdish issue? Was it mind-boggling?

[95] ZG: Yes, it was pretty strenuous, not only because the whole question is so complicated that I'm not sure anyone really grasps the whole picture; but also, because the optimism that reigned when I was doing research has waned. The political games being played in this country and the amount of manipulation of public opinion are exasperating!

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