

Varol Akman

letter from ...



Varol Akman on the Turkish war against mediocrity and cliché

“It’s so hard to be a saint in the city,” sings Bruce Springsteen in a ballad released 35 years ago. Judging from the national popular sentiment about the matter, he could have been talking about the complexity of being a philosopher in Turkey.

The troubles start with – what else? – a naming problem. Philosophers in Turkey would prefer to state that they are philosophy-ists (*felsefeci* in Turkish) rather than philosophers (*filozof*). For the latter description evokes in the mind of the average citizen a bizarre figure who is probably bearded, shoddily dressed, and half-crazy, and who watches the heavens for fun in his spare time.

The typical feeling is expressed well by a popular tune – the kind that finds the most listeners in underprivileged and uneducated segments of society – with a punch line that goes: “Do not philosophise!” (And prior to that line it warns: “Keep your views to yourself.”) Sound advice, eh? Then again, it is mildly consoling to hear, from none other than the editor of this magazine, that “if you want to be taken seriously,

you’d be advised not to use the p-word at all” in the UK either.

This surely looks like a bleak picture. However, the situation is fortunately brighter than this depressing anecdote suggests. For all practical purposes the history of philosophy in modern Turkey should start with the adoption of the Latin alphabet exactly 80 years ago, one of the colossal contributions of Atatürk, the founder of modern Turkey. As the *Encyclopedia Britannica* observes, “Education benefited from this reform, as the youth of Turkey, cut off from the past with its emphasis on religion, were encouraged to take advantage of new educational opportunities that gave access to the Western scientific and humanistic traditions.” Atatürk himself made his truth-seeking stance plain when he said: “I am not leaving a legacy of dogmas, unchangeable petrified directives. My legacy is science and reason. If those people who wish to follow me after I am gone take science and reason as their guides they will be my true spiritual heirs.”

Hasan Âli Yücel, who became the Minister of Education immediately after Atatürk’s death, set off another key reform when he initiated the translation of Western classics into Turkish. He formed a translation society and hired the finest

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Atatürk Memorial in Ankara

translators. This period saw the translation of almost 500 books in all, including signposts of Western philosophy. Upon his death in 1961, *The Times* wrote: “Deeply read in both Eastern and Western literature, Yücel was one of those who, in a true sense, could form a link between two civilizations. The rapid spread of Western ideas in Turkey during the past 20 years is largely due to his work and it can be said that he did much to carry forward Atatürk’s ideal of making Turkey into a Western nation.”

That ideal is still in the making. Several (private) universities have recently started up new-fangled philosophy programs. My university (founded in 1984) broke new ground in this regard. (The name Bilkent is an acronym for *bilim kenti* – Turkish for “city of science and knowledge.”) Bilkent’s philosophy program was initiated in 2003 and for some years almost 80% of the students admitted had full scholarships awarded by the university.

This year’s full scholarship students came from the top 1.5 percent of the more than 1.5 million applicants. Similar scholarship programs exist in other private institutions such as Koç University or Yeditepe University. Esteemed state schools like Bogaziçi University and Middle East Technical University also admit competent

philosophy majors via the aforementioned university entrance exam.

The Bilkent philosophy curriculum is broad-based in that the students are required to complete courses in a number of academic fields in addition to philosophy, in addition to English which is the language of instruction throughout the university. Since the curriculum provides each student with a substantive grounding in sciences and humanities, the student is able to confront the way they are practiced with some understanding. In philosophy courses, it is required that students come to terms with the texts themselves (such as *The Republic*, *Leviathan*, *Second Treatise of Government*, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*), rather than commentaries. Discussion-based class work, tutorials, and essay-based assessment are essential and are applied without making any concessions.

A large number of philosophy books are published in Turkey every year. Most of these are translations of European bestsellers with a clear bias towards continental and post-modern philosophy. One does not spot many Freges, Russells, Quines, Davidsons, Fodors out there but lots of Foucaults, Derridas, Adornos, Žižeks. Visitors to Bilkent have included Donald Davidson, Bernard Williams, Tim Williamson,



Roy Sorensen, Jonathan Dancy, Jerry Cohen, Sarah Broadie, and Keith Lehrer, but overall analytic philosophy does not appear to be fashionable in Turkey, at least judging from what publishers offer.

A good proportion of Turkish high school and university students have always been deeply interested in politics (especially topics like freedom, discrimination, inequality, secularism) and economics (especially topics like globalism, multinationals, distribution and public welfare) and at least for a while – in the sixties and the seventies – their views were shaped by Marxist works. Thus, during my college years (1974-1979) a “classic” that every university student was supposed to endure was *Elementary Principles of Philosophy* by one Monsieur Georges Politzer. (That reminds me of a line from the renowned Craig Raine poem “A Martian Sends a Postcard Home”: “Only the young are allowed to suffer openly.”)

Even when one somehow came close to a correct philosophical fountainhead, it was still easy to go astray. When I was a senior in high school I happened to acquire a Turkish translation of Russell’s *War Crimes in Vietnam*. Stunned by it, I wrote in broken but intense English to the peace organisation he founded and asked for the relevant brochures – which I duly received, to my great surprise and delight. It simply did not occur to me for another couple of years that the great man had countless other, much more substantial and influential philosophy books.

Finally, a fleeting overview of the philosophical scene. Few people would remember that John Dewey visited Turkey in 1925 and prepared a report, which offered valuable advice on a course of action towards

setting up a fresh educational system. On the other hand, several philosophers who visited Bilkent knew, to my enchantment, that Hans Reichenbach lectured in Turkey from 1933 to 1938. (He was escaping the alarming atmosphere of pre-war Germany.) He worked at the University of Istanbul and published his landmark *Wahrscheinlichkeitslehre* (The Theory of Probability) in 1935. Today Turkish philosopher Teo Grünberg, through his technically accomplished work in logic and philosophy of science – and encouraged by none other than the late W.V.O. Quine – is still producing state-of-the-art output in the precise spirit of Reichenbach.

Brilliant philosophers like Berent Enç (1938-2003), Arda Denkel (1949-2000), and İham Dilman (1930-2003) were also able to raise central and critical questions, and leave a precious heritage behind. It is reassuring to know that versatile young philosophers like Güven Güzeldere and Murat Aydede are creating influential works with a distinctive analytic flavour.

To the best of my knowledge, the earliest piece of writing by a Turkish philosopher to be published in the respected quarterly *Mind* was the 1964 paper “What is a philosophical question?” by Nermi Uyğur. Uyğur’s chief purpose in that paper was to describe the salient characteristics that define a philosophical question; he wished to throw some light on what is contained in such a question. Surely, his was an analytic research model: “a paradigm in which numerous individual researchers make small contributions to the solution of a set of generally recognised problems,” as Brian Leiter observes. Today the goal of many Turkish philosophers and their aspiring students remains the same.