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The Promise of Authenticity: Neo-Ottomanist Historicity and Politics of Youth Culturing in Turkey

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Abstract

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of politics of youth culturing in contemporary Turkey. More specifically, it analyzes the politics of temporality that characterized the youth culturing program of the ruling Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/AKP) over the decade of 2010s. On the one hand, it focuses on the discursive, organizational, affective, and material dimensions of the AKP's youth-oriented efforts. On the other hand, it explores what it means to go through the life stage of youth in the AKP-dominated conservative and lower-class milieus in contemporary Istanbul.

The AKP has dominated Turkish politics since the turn of the century and its strongman leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has become the longest-ruling as well as the most consequential leader of modern Turkey since its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Initially a peripheral political movement, the AKP has gradually consolidated its power and moved to the core of Turkish state structure. The decade of the 2010s has been marked by the AKP's ambition to establish cultural power, which has manifested itself in the form of forceful interventions into the fields of education and youth culturing, among others. As part of this effort, it has mobilized massive state resources alongside its non-governmental network of organizations to promote certain notions of history and practices of piety among young people. This dissertation analyzes these efforts and how they resonated in the lives of young people. Its conceptual focus is on the interplay of multiple temporalities that shaped the uneven space of interaction between the governmental power and situated young subjects.

The analysis is grounded in a two-year, multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three districts of Istanbul; namely Esenler, Fatih, and Üsküdar. These sites include youth culture centers, youth-oriented events such as seminars, festivals, and trips, an Ottoman language course,

and several Ottoman-themed spaces such as cafes and bookstores. Through the analysis of ethnographic data, I argue that at the core of the AKP's youth culturing efforts is a governmental historicity that works to condition youth's orientations to historical time. I outline the powerful techniques, narratives, spaces, and promises that were mobilized to recruit youth into this collective historicity, yet I also show how recruitment is an always ongoing process that is contingent upon youth's constantly recalibrated aspirations.

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Introduction

This dissertation is about governmental attempts at rendering predictable youth cultural and political practices within a highly polarized national context marked by frequent political crises and rapid change. As a matter of course, it is about how young people, coming of age in such a context beyond their control, navigate the life stage of youth in the face of demands and promises that are specifically aimed at them. It is thus about politics of youth, through which it is constructed both as a future-oriented life stage as well as a collective political agent within an unequal space of interaction between the governmental power and situated young subjects.

More specifically, this project examines the politics of temporality that characterized the youth culturing program of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi*/AKP) in Turkey over the 2010s. It is an account of how concepts of history and practices of piety are deployed in the AKP's youth-oriented efforts aimed at shaping young people's temporal orientations, recruiting them into a political generation, and mobilizing them as part of its collective future-making project. Likewise, it is the story of how young people from conservative and lower-class backgrounds, who fell within the purview of this program, sought to construct meaningful lives through their engagements with incessant calls to historical collective responsibility as well as promises of upward mobility and moral clarity. It is also a study of politics of national time, negotiated via cultural debates over how to remember the past authentically and how to raise future generations, at a time period marked by unprecedented political crises and dramatic shifts in social hierarchies in Turkey. In this respect, it is a story of a decade of social upheaval and political tumult, in which one of the few constants in Turkey was

the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the strongman leader of the AKP, and the unwavering backing he consistently garnered from among large segments of the society.

On one level, this project seeks to understand the relationship between state-sanctioned histories and the making of political collectives in times of rapid change, by focusing on the role of alternative historical narratives in the AKP's youth-oriented efforts. In order to reveal how these narratives become instrumental for the recruitment of young people into a political collective as well as their mobilization as part of it, I go beyond these narratives' communicative contents, and explore the organizational and affective characteristics of the interactive contexts in which they are presented to young people. In doing so, I maintain that recruitment into a political collective begins with recruitment into a collective historicity, which prescribes particular modes of orientation to historical time. This collective historicity informs the ways in which individuals make sense of present events and circumstances and anticipate potential futures. Focusing on several moments of crisis, this project explores the governmental potential of the AKP's collective historicity by analyzing the kinds of affects it mobilized as well as the modes of political action it incited in such moments. In doing so, it seeks to offer a nuanced account of how an increasingly authoritarian AKP managed to mobilize widespread popular support not only in elections but also in times of crisis such as the Gezi Park Uprising in 2013 and the averted coup attempt in 2016.

On another level, this project seeks to understand what it means to go through the life stage of youth in Sunni conservative and lower-class milieus in contemporary Turkey, which are largely -if not exclusively- under the AKP's influence and control. I explore how young people relate to the ideals of piety promoted in the AKP's youth-oriented spaces, how they negotiate their individuality in relationship to the kin, moral-religious, and political collectives they find

themselves in, how they make sense of their positions within socioeconomic hierarchies, how they negotiate the powerful promises of upward mobility and moral clarity specifically aimed at them, and whether and how they aspire to alternatives. I do so by paying careful and consistent attention to how they form, perform, and reform their commitments and aspirations, which I address as two interrelated cultural modes of orientation that bridge the individual and the collective. I look at, for example, how some youth astutely shift between different self-expressions across different contexts, how others experiment with alternative styles, or how they provisionally commit to the AKP's youth collective only to invest into their capacity to aspire while waiting to make an aspirational move when they can. While a focus on youths' individual trajectories reveals the limits of the AKP's efforts to control youth, this project also shows that such *failures* are already recognized and incorporated into the AKP's governmental historicity, which constructs the historical present as a deviation from the authentic course of history and youth as a hard-to-control demographic category that is particularly susceptible to that present's corrupting influences.

Historical Context and Ethnographic Present

On May 28, 2013, several dozen environment activists set up tents at the Gezi Park, one of rare green spaces in central Istanbul, to protest and prevent the park's demolition, which the government planned would pave the way for the revival (*ihya*) of an Ottoman-era military barracks in the form of a shopping complex. The images of violent police crackdown that day on social media would shortly spark one of the most spectacular popular protests in modern Turkish history, known as the Gezi Park Uprising, during which people from a wide variety of social and political backgrounds voiced a plethora of demands and grievances; all aimed at the rule of then-

Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*/AKP).

The next day, on May 29, while the number of protesters was still in the hundreds, prime minister Erdoğan had a busy schedule. In the morning, he spoke at the groundbreaking ceremony of one of his signature grand infrastructure projects, the third bridge on the Bosporus.[1] He proudly announced that the bridge would be named after Ottoman Sultan Selim I, waving off the widespread objections that it would be socially divisive, as the sultan was a controversial figure indignantly remembered in the Alevi tradition[2] as responsible for the massacre of thousands of Alevis[3] during his reign.[4] He also declared that his government would continue with the redevelopment of the Gezi Park, sneeringly advising the protesters to start respecting and learning more about History. As May 29 marked the 560th anniversary of the Ottomans' conquest of Istanbul, the next in Erdoğan's schedule was to see the pompous commemoration spectacle on the Golden Horn. In the afternoon, he was to attend the opening ceremony of *Okçular Tekkesi*, or the Archers' Lodge, yet another project of reviving an Ottoman institution[5]. The complex, led by Erdoğan's son, Bilal, whom he had recently tasked with the coordination of the party's youth

[1] The bridge project was one of the main environmental issues that the Gezi Park activists protested against, as they saw it as part of a wider scheme to open up northern Istanbul, then scarcely populated and largely made up of forests and wetlands, for urban development.
[2] I should note here that there is no single, coherent "Alevi tradition" as "Alevism" emerged as a constructed religious/sectarian identity in the modern period blanketing a multiplicity of genealogies dating back to at least the fifteenth century. Notwithstanding this historical complexity, in contemporary Turkey, "Alevis" constitute the largest sectarian group after Sunni Muslims, although with no legal minority status.
[3] Again, a more historically accurate designation would be "Kızılbaş." On how the Kızılbaş were re-signified as "Alevi" through nationalist and religio-secularist discourses inherent to the project of modernity; see: (Dressler, 2013).
[4] The timing of the naming was significant, because Alevis participated heavily in the Gezi Park Uprising and all the six youths killed during the protests were Alevis, which led some to call them an "Alevi revolt." However, for a critical commentary on why the Gezi Protests were much more than an Alevi revolt; see: (Karakaya-Stump, 2014).
[5] The tekkes were gathering places of Sufi orders until they were declared illegal in 1925 as part of what is known as Atatürk's Reforms aimed at converting the newly-founded Republic of Turkey into a secular and modern nation-state. In Ottoman times, they functioned as social institutions, rather than simply physical buildings.

culturing efforts, would serve as a youth center aimed at not only promoting traditional sports like Ottoman archery but also offering courses on subjects ranging from Ottoman Turkish to calligraphy.

The showdown that characterized those two days was a harbinger of events that would be consequential for years to come, and this dissertation project was conceived during that fateful summer. The unassuming environmentalist sit-in at the Gezi Park would grow into a full-blown national uprising. While at first dismissive and largely on the defensive, Erdoğan would soon counter-mobilize his base at "Respect to the National Will Rallies," held in alternative venues across the country, as an unbending show of popular backing against the ongoing protests. Millions of people were on the streets and squares, not unlike in many other parts of the region in the early-2010s.

I was at the Gezi Park as a protester, but I also attended one of the pro-Erdoğan rallies that summer as an avid *observer*. At full display during these alternative public spectacles were at least two contrasting visions of the national collective, which were manifest in the youth cultural practices and political discourses that characterized them. Decades old cultural divisions and conflicts were being expressed anew by a new generation that was coming of age. Competing claims to legitimacy were expressed through notions of history, readings of the present situation, and visions of the future. That is, at stake was not only the country's future, but also its past. Yet, the conflict was complex, and the playing field was uneven.

In addition to riot police – armed with tear gas canisters, water cannons, and rubber bullets – the government had at its disposal the power to set the terms for entitlement to legitimate political voice, which it defined in terms of cultural authenticity. During the counter-rallies and afterwards, Erdoğan repeatedly dismissed the protesting Gezi youth as "a bunch of

vandals" manipulated by foreign media, who were therefore far from representing "the authentic youth of the nation," which he defined as respectful of the people's will and conscious of their civilizational roots. Delegitimized, intimidated, and violently suppressed by the state, the protests gradually died down, eventually succeeding to save the park but failing to force down Erdoğan, and his party, from power.

The Turkish state's extensive use of its coercive power in the face of youth dissent was all familiar from earlier periods, but what were the more positive governmental techniques that it would now mobilize under the AKP's domination with the aim of shaping youth's political and cultural practices? How would such a divisive political rhetoric manifest itself in youth-oriented policies? What was the promise of cultural authenticity to young people?

Erdoğan's deployment of cultural authenticity as a legitimizing tool in his power games, his unbending[6] stance towards the protests, and his supporters' unreserved backing were long in the making. Two years earlier, in 2011, Erdoğan had won his third general elections with the AKP. Using an analogy drawn from the three-staged path from apprenticeship to mastership in traditional craftsmanship (*çıraklık-kalfalık-ustalık*), Erdoğan heralded the new era as his *ustalık* (mastership) period. It was a largely open-ended yet highly effective promise to his electoral base towards a more assertive and less compromising way of conducting politics. For its critics, 2011 was the year when the AKP turned authoritarian. Erdoğan's response to the Gezi Uprising was enough proof for both his supporters and opponents to solidify their convictions.

The AKP had come to power in 2002 only a year after being founded by a new generation of formerly Islamist politicians. In its first decade (2001-2011), it had remained

[6] One of the most popular pro-Erdoğan slogans in this period chanted by his enthusiastic supporters in his rallies was *"Dik Dur Egilme, Bu Millet Seninle*" ("Stand Tall, Don't Bend; The Nation's Got Your Back").

largely on the defensive against an antagonistic state establishment by consistently reassuring the public that it had no ties to political Islam and no issues with the Republican principle of *laiklik* (laïcité/secularism). In this period, it prioritized achieving rapid economic growth and development, forming wide-ranging alliances[7] and investing into its domestic and international legitimacy through policies favoring accession to the European Union, seeking peace with the Kurdish movement, and furthering the integration of Turkish economy into global markets[8].

Still, it faced two closure cases as well as a military memorandum in this period on grounds that it was undermining the secular foundations of the Turkish state. Its most crucial ally in this period was the Gülen Movement[9]; a religious community that had long been building what would later be called a "parallel state[10]" by encouraging and enabling – often by clandestine means – its followers to infiltrate the crucial institutions of the state structure such as the military, judiciary, and the police. Under its control was also an expansive media and education network, which formed the backbone of its recruitment machine.[11] While the movement always pursued its own agenda, it joined forces with the AKP in their common fight

[7] While the majority of the AKP's electoral base always consisted of pious Sunnis, it received crucial support from a much wider political spectrum united in their opposition to the state establishment. This support helped the AKP to mobilize a narrative of progress towards a more pluralist and prosperous future at the expense of the oppressively-secularist, staunchly-militarist, and backwardly-nationalist Kemalists.

[8] For more on Turkey's neoliberal restructuring and integration in this era; see (Öniş and Şenses, 2013).

[9] For an extensive study on what the Gülen Movement was as well as its cooperation with the AKP; see (Seufert 2014).

[10] As I outline below, the AKP and Gülen Movement would turn on each other after 2013 and the AKP would emerge victorious out of the fierce power struggle. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact size of the Gülen network, which was by the time a massive transnational network with hundreds of educational and civil society institutions across the world, a Foreign Policy (2019) report on the geography of Gülenism in Turkey gives an idea as it provides the following numbers on the crackdown on the movement after the coup attempt in 2016: "Ankara has shut down about 800 companies, 1,100 schools, 850 dorms, and 1,400 civic associations. It has jailed over 38,000 people and terminated over 100,000 civil servants in the police, judiciary, education, and health sectors. Workers in the business, financial, and media worlds have been caught up as well." (Online: https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/18/the-geography-of-Gülenism-in-turkey/)

[11] I wrote an MA thesis on the recruitment methods of the movement as well as its power concerns in 2009, when it was still considered a legitimate social and political actor in Turkey and abroad; see: (Özipek, 2009).

against the Kemalist state establishment. As a result, not only did the close allies survive the attacks coming from the military and judiciary, they also struck back by prisoning hundreds of high-profile secularists, including the former chief of the general staff, on terrorism charges, and amending the constitution several times to facilitate and legitimize their hold on to power.

Erdoğan's promise to be more assertive in his *ustalık* period came after such a contentious decade. Underlying this promise was to push a more conservative agenda in the field of *culture*. Such a resolve to exert power over culture[12] foretold both a higher degree of autonomy to religious groups in their cultural and educational activities, and a more direct governmental interference and control over fields such as the media, arts and culture, and education. In particular, Erdoğan's vow to "raise a pious generation"[13] in this early period stirred a heated sociopolitical controversy, creating excitement among his Sunni conservative base while alarming religious minorities and seculars.

The overarching principle that guided this effort was the rediscovery and revival of the authentic Turkish-Islamic (i.e. Ottoman) *medeniyet*[14] (civilization), which in practice amounted

[12] The AKP officials as well as pro-AKP intellectual circles have addressed the issue through notions like "cultural power" ("*kültürel iktidar*"), "intellectual power" ("*fikri iktidar*"), or "cultural hegemony" ("*kültürel hegemonya*") (cf. Bora 2018).

[13] Chapter II addresses in detail the piety aspect of the AKP's youth culturing program. For more on the emphasis on piety in the AKP's educational policy in this period; also see (Lüküslü 2016, Alemdaroğlu 2018, Gençkal Eroler 2019).

[14] Etymologically rooted in the Arabic word *madanī* (lit. of or belonging to the city) and began to be used in Ottoman Turkish in the mid-nineteenth century as a counterpart of the French concept of *civilization, medeniyet* has been one of the key concepts that anchored the AKP's cultural and educational discourses. In parallel with its troubled history in Western languages and contexts as a marker of difference and hierarchy between different social groups -within a nation, between different European nations, and between the "civilized" West and the "barbarian" others- (cf. Elias 1978, Williams 1983, Braudel 1995, Schweder 2002, Duara 2004), it has a fraught history as a marker of inter- and intra-group distinctions and hierarchies in Turkey -between Turkish nation and the constructs of East and West, between Ottoman court and Kemalist republican class of bureaucrats, between secular Kemalists and conservatives, and between upper and middle class city-dwellers and rural people living in the countryside or the lower-classes in urban peripheries- (cf. Gole 1996, Deringil 2012). In direct opposition to its semantic twin "*uygarlik,"* which was invented in the 1930s as a neologism as part of the early-Republican efforts to purify Turkish language, it has become an indexical of the alternative, anti-Kemalist conception of civilization and its inherent connotations concerning the authentic individual and national identity as well as of the authentic course of material and moral development, proper civility, and cultural refinement (Davutoglu 2014, Ardic 2014, Gurcan 2015).

to raking up the past and opening the sensitive nation-state historiography up for discussion. As I will discuss below, both the popular nostalgic interest in Ottoman cultural forms and meanings and the mode of remembering the Ottoman past as a political horizon preceded the AKP. However, in this new era, it turned into a power-centric alternative history project backed by the governmental power, leading to the emergence of a diverse array of discourses, institutions, actors, and practices; widely referred to as "neo-Ottomanism[15]." Refusal of this incipient "cultural power" project was one of the defining characteristics of the Gezi Uprising, whereas the very real threat it posed to the AKP's rule was enough proof for its policymakers that they were lacking in "cultural power."

Soon after the uprising, the popular anti-government sentiment would be hijacked by an unlikely culprit, the Gülen Movement, which launched an anti-corruption probe into top AKP figures including Erdoğan and his family, using its domination in the judiciary, police, and the media. Until then, the Gülen Movement had been the most privileged constituent within the AKP's political network, and by far the most dominant conservative group in the fields of education and youth culturing. It became apparent that the two close allies had been at odds with each other behind closed doors after they were convinced that they had conclusively defeated their common enemy. While the disagreement between them had multiple and complicated facets[16], one of the main areas of contention was the field of education and youth culturing, as they apparently had competing visions for the future of the country.

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[15] Neo-Ottomanism is a catch-all designation that is often used critically to describe the AKP rule under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Easily dismissed as expansionist, authoritarian, exclusionary, anti-secular, and backward; it is mostly evoked with an alarmist tone by those critical of the AKP's policies, often to imply that the AKP has a hidden agenda of undoing the secular and Western-facing character of the Turkish nation and state.

[16] While it is difficult to draw a complete picture of the conflict due to its non-transparent nature, it is safe to maintain that it was mainly a dispute over how to share the political and economic spoils. The regional context of Arab uprisings and the Turkish government's involvement in them further complicated the issue. In particular, the rising prominence within the AKP of Islamists, who brokered close ties between the Turkish government and

This time it was a strike from within, but Erdoğan would survive yet again leaning on his popular support and managing to mobilize a new power coalition with nationalists from the right and the left against a common enemy, the Gülenists. He would soon strike back taking on the movement's massive education and media network as well as its followers' presence within the state bureaucracy. The next two years would be marked by a fierce power struggle over the control of the state, culminating in the notorious coup attempt in 2016[17], a challenge that Erdoğan and his supporters managed to avert yet again.

This was the background that led to my long-term fieldwork, and it inevitably shaped how it proceeded. The coup attempt happened two weeks after I arrived in Istanbul to start my long-term fieldwork. I witnessed the horror of that night and the instability that followed marked by frequent terror attacks, unprecedented even for a country like Turkey.[18] The *field* that I anticipated to work on was undergoing a radical transformation, just like everything else in the country. I spent the initial months pondering over whether my fieldwork would be feasible anymore, eventually deciding to put this intensive uncertainty and chaotic change at the very center of my research. More specifically, I wondered how the conservative constituents of the AKP would respond to such a *stab in the back* by another religious group, how they would fill the void left after the crackdown on the massive Gülenist education network, how the AKP – and Erdoğan – would defend itself after working closely with and effectively enabling the rise of the

political groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, especially in Syria and Egypt, uneased the Gülenists, who favored a more pro-Western approach.

[17] Shortly before the attempted coup, the Gülen Movement was officially designated as a terrorist organization. While the Gülenist purge was already under way, the coup attempt led to the declaration of a state of emergency and facilitated the near total removal from social life of its' followers.

[18] Euronews has a timeline of terror attacks in Turkey by the end of 2016: https://www.euronews.com/2016/01/12/timeline-of-terrorism-in-turkey

Gülenists for so long, and how young people, many of whom previously attended Gülenist schools, would make sense of these events and navigate the uncertainty in their individual lives.

For the next twenty months, I tried to capture these transformations through a multi-sited ethnographic research mainly in three districts of Istanbul; Esenler, Fatih, and Üsküdar. My ethnographic sites included youth culture centers, youth-oriented events such as seminars, festivals, and trips, an Ottoman language course, and several Ottoman-themed, youth-oriented spaces such as cafes and bookstores. My interlocutors were mainly AKP-affiliated youth culture workers and young people from Sunni-conservative and lower-class backgrounds, who fell within the purview of the AKP's youth-oriented efforts.

The Gülenist legacy and the coup attempt haunted almost all my interactions with people as well as the events I attended. The nationwide state of emergency, declared after the coup attempt, lasted for two years, neatly overlapping with my long-term fieldwork. Especially the first year of fieldwork was conducted under an atmosphere of intense interpersonal mistrust in social settings shaped by frequent stories of suspected Gülenists and obligatory anti-coup and anti-FETÖ[19] public performances. On the one hand, this gave me the chance to observe how some people negotiated their previous affiliation with the Gülen Community, often through exaggerated performances of commitment and loyalty to the state and to the AKP's collective, but also sometimes through expressions of dismay, confusion, and repentance, especially in private conversations. On the other hand, I got the chance to observe how the total purge of the Gülenists created excitement among many youths as it meant new opportunities for them in terms of job and promotion prospects. More importantly, I could experience and observe the felt

[19] After its designation as a terrorist organization, the Gülen Community, previously referred to as the "*cemaat*" began to be called "*FETÖ*," short for Fethullahist Terrorist Organization.

intensity of everyday anxiety caused by this uncertain context, and people's coping mechanisms in the face it, which – I must admit – often gave me the courage and resilience I needed to go about my fieldwork and my daily life.

Like everyone else, I was also a suspect and had to assure the people I interacted with that I was not a Gülenist or a coup sympathizer. The fact that I was coming from an American university for research only added to the suspicions, as the widespread public perception was that the US government had in some capacity supported the coup-plotters. For this reason, especially for the initial six months, I mostly limited my fieldwork to attending public events and finding contacts through alternative networks of trust and establishing rapport with a handful of key interlocutors. Even after this initial low-intensity phase, there were limits to how far I could go in my participant-observation as well as what questions I could ask during my interviews. While it definitely was a delicate balance to strike, it was also a highly instructive ethnographic experience, as I was amazed to see how much people wanted to talk when someone was there to really listen and how they opened up especially during my one-to-one interviews after they felt they could trust me.

Still, this atmosphere determined the nature of the data I could use for analysis, as most of it came from my interactions with several key interlocutors with whom I established close friendships, as well as individual interviews and public, youth-oriented events. This is both a limitation and strength for this research: while it limited the range of my field-sites and the depth of some of my interactions, it simultaneously gave me the chance to establish deeper and longer-term rapport with certain young people. Since the main thrust of this project is its attention to attempts at stability in the face of rapid change on multiple levels, this gave me the crucial

chance to observe in the long-term the changes in the lives of young individuals as well as how they coped with and made sense of the changes at the macro-level.

Each of the following chapters discusses in more detail some aspect of the post-coup, post-Gülenist context and how it shaped my field and my ethnography. I also often provide my reflections on my positionality in context as a US-based researcher, but also as someone from a conservative and lower-class upbringing in Turkey. In the following section, I provide some more relevant historical background as I introduce in more detail my analytical perspective as well as some of the key conceptual categories that I employ and propose in this dissertation.

Neo-Ottomanism as Governmental Historicity

"Neo-Ottomanism" is one of the most common terms that come up in academic and journalistic discourses as well as popular political narratives on the AKP's rule under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Especially over the past decade, it has acquired critical connotations as it is invoked, for example, to describe Erdoğan's *autocratic* tendencies, Turkey's *ambitious* and *expansionist* foreign policy moves, the AKP's *anti-secular* cultural and educational policies, the rising popularity of Ottoman forms and figures in Turkey's booming TV industry, or the sartorial fashion trends popular among the upwardly mobile conservatives in Turkey. As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, the Ottoman past features heavily in the AKP's political discourse and particularly in its youth-oriented activities saturating narratives, objects, spaces, and events. However, alongside its semantic load as a label, the -ism of "neo-Ottomanism" implies that it is a coherent political ideology, which, when addressed in the context of the AKP's youth program, situates young people as its passive recipients.

I argue in this dissertation that the governmental concern inherent in the AKP's uses of Ottoman pasts is less about imposing it as a political ideology but more about recruiting youth into a collective generation that orients to historical time in a particular way. Before I explain this argument in more detail, I want first to historicize the political uses of the Ottoman past both to explain why history, especially the Ottoman history, is such a contested domain in Turkey (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002, Silverstein 2005, Özyürek 2006, Tambar 2013) and to further contextualize the particularity of the AKP's contemporary deployment of historical notions.

A short history of useful Ottoman histories

The modern nation state of Turkey was founded in 1923 following a successful War of Independence fought against the Allies that occupied much of the territories of the Ottoman Empire after World War I. Although Turkey inherited many of the institutions of the collapsed empire, its founding elites envisioned it to be a secular and democratic nation-state. This goal, in their view, necessitated a radical distancing from the Ottoman past. The widespread, top-down reforms of the early Republican period were ambitious and profound; all aimed at building a modern secular nation on the basis of a re-invented Turkish identity out of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious monarchic population.[20]

These top-down efforts aimed at the creation of a distinct Turkish nation involved not only a radical break with many of the cultural forms and practices that characterized the Ottoman society but also the invention and imposition of a collective identity based on early-twentieth century notions of ethnic/racial, historical, and linguistic distinction. A whole new conception of

[20] For the history of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey; see: (Ahmad 1993, Zurcher 1993).

national geography and historiography was manufactured by the early Republican elite, in which the foundational emphasis was predominantly on the pre-Islamic, Central Asian roots of the Turks who are now imagined to constitute a secular, Western-oriented nation.[21]

However, Turkey's Kemalist founders did not reject the Ottoman past in its entirety; instead, they reinvented and appropriated it into the new national imaginary, in which "powerful sultans from the empire's Golden Age such as Fatih Mehmet II were transformed into secular, pro-Western revolutionaries," while "the Ottomans" in general were celebrated "for their military might and supposedly self-evident Turkishness" (Danforth 2016:6). In this secular-nationalist narrative, the later periods of the empire were seen as those of decline, corruption, and of failure to keep up with modernity, which, thus, justified the radical reforms of the Republican period.

The Ottoman Empire endured for six centuries and its territories spanned three continents at the peak of its power. Thus, there has been no shortage of useful Ottoman histories for different political ends: Secularists emphasized Ottomans' refinement and Europeanness, nationalists took pride in their Turkishness, liberals celebrated their multiculturalism and tolerance, conservatives longed for their piety, and Islamists lamented the loss of their political leadership through the Caliphate over "the Muslim world[22]" (cf. Danforth 2014). These conceptions and narratives have lived side by side and often not neatly separate from one

[21] The early Republican efforts aimed at re-defining the Turkish collective identity included a new narrative of national history (Keyman 2007; Keyder 2005), in which archaeological and anthropological research (Aydin 2010) as well as museums (Savino 2012) played crucial parts.

[22] Cemil Aydın, in his book *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (2017), argues that the Caliphate gained global prominence as a political symbol only in the late-nineteenth century, partly because the "Muslim world" emerged as a geopolitical concept that was constructed as the antithesis of Western Christian civilization in the dominant theories of colonial white supremacy, and partly because Muslims themselves, the majority of whom now lived under the rule of European empires, began to increasingly imagine themselves as part of a global political community, the "Muslim world," and recognized the Caliph in Istanbul as the unifying political leader of a scattered "nation."

another. Furthermore, they have changed over time as a result of shifting political and cultural dynamics, and they have been deployed within different modes of engagement with the past with implications for ways of making sense of the present and imagining the future.

The large-scale rural-to-urban migration over the 1960s and 70s and the subsequent rise of anti-secularist politics in Turkey brought a particular mode of engagement with the Ottoman past into greater visibility and political significance. In this mode, the Republican modernization of the early twentieth century is portrayed as a brutal form of "institutionalized forgetting" (Silverstein 2005:144), which forced people to break ties with their authentic civilizational heritage. The reforms aimed at the creation of a secular modern nation[23] such as the closing down of religious schools, banning of religious orders and Islamic garment, abolishment of the Caliphate, and the changing of the script from Arabic to Latin are listed as evidence of a grand conspiracy aimed at the de-Islamization of the nation. However, this view of the Republican reforms in relationship to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire remained largely *underground*, partly because "insulting the memory of Atatürk and the Republican revolution" has been defined as a crime in Turkish Penal Code and interpreted somewhat inconsistently by judges in different historical periods. As a result, this particular view of history remained part of a "hidden transcript" among those who opposed the Kemalist reforms on religious grounds.[24]

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[23] At the core of these reforms was a rush to catch up with the Civilization, and they were aimed at fundamentally transforming the population to create a modern society. Göle (1996:60), for example, suggests that in the early Republican period "the Occidental way of life represented the symbol of civilization to be attained and was incorporated into official ideology," noting that a civilized ideal Republican individual was defined by rituals such as "wearing neckties, shaving beards and moustaches, going to the theater, eating with a fork, exercising, the practice of husbands and wives walking hand in hand in the streets, dancing at balls, shaking hands, wearing hats in the street, and writing from left to right." When announcing the so-called "Hat Reform" to citizens in 1925, Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) urged the people of the young Republic "to prove their state of civilization with their family life, lifestyle, and their outer appearance from head to foot" (Göle, 1996:60). Two years later, addressing the National Assembly, he would justify the hat law in unequivocally civilizational terms and declare the old *fes* to be "an emblem of ignorance, negligence, fanaticism, and hatred of progress and civilization" (Bozdogan, 2001:59).

[24] Chapter 2 discusses in greater detail the alternative spaces of pedagogy that conservatives carved out over the course of the second half of the twentieth century in order to circumvent the strictly secularist system of education.

Turkey's experience of neoliberal globalization that began in the 1980s[25] and peaked in the 1990s made governmental control over alternative views of history (thus, of conceptions of individual and national self) increasingly difficult for state actors. In response to the heightened visibility of alternative national imaginaries, the secularist, modernist, and nationalist foundations of the Turkish Republic and its symbols became objects of private, nostalgic consumption (Özyürek 2006) for those who wholeheartedly believed in the principles of Kemalism. The secularist state establishment desperately fought in the 90s to contain the rising political Islam and Kurdish separatism, which led to major political and economic crises by the end of the millennium. Following this tumultuous period, the AKP came to power in 2002 with widespread popular support as an antidote to the restrictive and obsolete politics of the military-bureaucratic establishment.

The AKP's neo-Ottomanism in its first decade

As I suggested earlier, the AKP's rule shifted significantly after 2011 as Erdoğan heralded a more assertive way of doing politics, and this shift clearly manifested itself in the modes of engagement with the Ottoman past that it promoted. In the first decade of the AKP rule, neo-Ottomanism was largely confined to Islamic civil society organizations (Walton 2010), whereas for the policy-makers it meant the celebration of Ottoman multiculturalism (Mills 2010) and commodification of the Ottoman aesthetic and architectural heritage (Öncü 2010). The

[25] The decade of the 1980s in Turkey began with a violent military coup, which, among other seismic sociopolitical shifts, brought about a new constitution aimed at reconfiguring state-society relationship as well as the definition of the ideal citizen-subject in order to make sure the radical political activism of the 70s would not repeat. The new official ideology enshrined into the constitution by the military and implemented by subsequent civil governments was the so-called "Turkish-Islamic synthesis," a blend of selective views of Islamic and Turkish culture thought to be amenable to social control under authoritarian politics. For more on "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" as an intellectual as well as a policy doctrine, and how it facilitated conservative politics; see: (Akın and Karasapan 1988, Eligür 2010).

embodiment of the neo-Ottomanism of this period was MiniaTürk, a theme park inaugurated in 2003 by Erdoğan himself and has attracted many researchers' attention (e.g. Türeli 2010, Öncü 2011, Walton 2016). MiniaTürk features miniaturized versions of architectural monuments across Turkey as well as from former Ottoman territories. Türeli (2010) observed that the theme park struck a difficult balance between different time periods, geographic locations, and ideologies of history, and that its primary message was that of multiculturalism. She quotes the tour guide on the symbolism behind the Mausoleum of Mevlana Celaleddin (Rumi) being the first model in the theme park: "it was chosen to be the monument that greets the visitors in Miniatürk because of the love and tolerance we can hear in the call of Mevlana 'Come, come again! Infidel, fire-worshipper, pagan/Whoever you are, how many times you have sinned, come!' This monument bears witness to the multicultural nature of Anatolia" (*ibid*, 110).

The first decade of the AKP rule also appeared to be a deviation from the earlier political Islam that the AKP originated from in terms of the political uses of the Ottoman past. Alev Çınar (2001) and Esra Özyürek (2005) noted the emergence of the collective celebration of the Conquest of Constantinople (Istanbul) by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II as an alternative national imaginary by the Islamists of the 1990s. When Erdoğan became the mayor of Istanbul in 1994 as the candidate of the Islamist Refah Party (RP), Öncü (2010:12-13) observed that his supporters' celebration of Erdoğan's victory as "the second conquest of Istanbul" amounted to "a nightmare scenario of 'Islamic takeover' for Istanbul's secular elite and middle classes." However, as the AKP absorbed the radical challenge of Islamism into existing power structures (Tuğal 2009) and the Islamist political elite became the champions of neoliberal entrepreneurial ideology, Öncü (*ibid*, 13) remarked that "the metaphor of conquest has lost its relevance, in part

because the Islamic movement itself has been transformed into a neoliberal, religious-nationalist establishment."

The ultimate center of neo-Ottomanist nostalgia was Istanbul, which was selected as the European Capital of Culture in 2010. The main concern of its AKP-affiliated mayors in this period was to transform all the historic spaces and landmarks of the city into tourist places for display, which effectively made them inaccessible to the party's conservative, lower-middle class support base. To overcome this paradox, the mayors needed to offer them "alternative times and spaces where 'unity and harmony of Islam' can be imagined and lived in the fabric of the city" (Öncü 2010: 13). While one of such attempts was to organize subsidized trips to sites like MiniaTürk, another significant one, as Öncü observed, was the "Tulip Campaign," as part of which three million tulip bulbs were imported annually from the Netherlands and put on display in public spaces across the city, to celebrate the so-called Tulip Era in the Ottoman eighteenth century. "Unlike the celebrations of Istanbul's *conquest*," Öncü (*ibid*, 15) remarked, "the institutionalization of a *Tulip holiday* in the public calendar aim[ed] to recreate a mythical moment of peace and tranquility in the history of the city, when Ottoman-Islamic art, architecture and music flourished."

In short, the dominant mode of engagement with the Ottoman history over the AKP's first decade was primarily concerned with conjuring multiculturalism, tolerance, and touristic value from the past, in line with its (neo)liberal, pro-EU political positioning. While this mode certainly did not disappear with the onset of the new decade, the AKP's resolve to accumulate cultural power and Erdoğan's determination to pursue a more confrontational politics domestically and abroad paved the way for a more power-centric engagement with the past. The regional context also played a major role in this shift, as the government's decision to get

actively involved in the Arab uprisings quickly brought into prominence the Islamist constituents within the AKP's political network. These AKP-affiliated Islamists helped broker close cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned political groups across the region.[26] Finally, the rush to fill the void left by the Gülenists in the fields of education and youth culturing as well as the media opened a path for a multiplicity of groups, including political Islamists, anti-secularists, proponents of the Caliphate, and Sufi communities (*tarikats*), to claim their place within the new framework.

Neo-Ottomanism as governmental historicity

As I show in Chapter I, one particular group that emerged and flourished in this new period was what I call "alternative history-tellers," who prospered by taking advantage of the massive resources channeled to the fields of arts-and-culture, youth culturing, and media. While the historical narratives they peddled sometimes differed in terms of their content, they all predicated upon and reproduced a particular temporal infrastructure, in which the Republican period is constructed as a forced deviation from the authentic course of history, whereas the AKP period under the leadership of Erdoğan is portrayed as a progressive episode leading ultimately towards the resumption of authenticity. In other words, the extended historical present is constructed as an intermission separating ideal pasts from ideal futures. While alternative history-tellers applied this temporal infrastructure to Turkish political history, I show in Chapter II that this mode of orienting towards historical time has a much wider scope and deeper roots in Sunni-Muslim narrative traditions that are inherent to pedagogies of piety and practices of community building.

[26] For an overview of 2011 Arab uprisings and their post-2011 trajectories "from promising democracy to authoritarian regimes" in comparison to that of Turkey; see (Cook, 2017).

I argue that this antagonistic orientation towards an undesired historical present is what the AKP's youth culturing program aims to cultivate. It is where *nesil*[27] (generation) as a transformative political force takes its culturally specific meaning as a constructed category. In all the youth-oriented discourses, young people are interpellated as transformative agents who, as a collective, are tasked with overcoming the challenge of the present and bridging the gap between the past and the future. Throughout the chapters, I provide examples of youth-oriented narratives that call on them to see themselves as part of a "transitional" or a "vanguard" generation. However, the ideal, authentic future is seldom specified as, in fact, it is never meant to arrive. What matters instead is seeing oneself as part of a collective that is believed to be working towards that kind of a future. Chapter III, in particular, focuses on a pervasive "failure talk" that constantly reproduces this antagonistic orientation towards the historical present by constructing it as something that must be conquered yet also as unconquerable. In short, what gets reproduced and transmitted intergenerationally as a tradition is specifically this collective temporal orientation, regardless of the particular circumstances that characterize a given time period.

Thus, I address the AKP's neo-Ottomanism as a governmental historicity to better understand this complex temporal nexus of past-present-future. As Hirsch and Stewart (2005:262) write, historicity describes "a human situation in flow, where versions of the past and future (of persons, collectives or things) assume present form in relation to events, political

[27] Cultivation of an ideal, transformative generation that will overcome the challenge of the present has a long history in Turkish conservative/Islamist thought. Many Islamist intellectuals envisioned their own version of ideal *nesil* that should be cultivated and would save the Turkish nation, and the wider Muslim *ummah,* from its plight, such as Mehmet Akif Ersoy's "Generation of Asim," Sezai Karakoc's "Generation of Taha," and Fethullah Gülen's "Golden Generation" (Ozipek 2009; Gurcan 2015).

needs, available cultural forms and emotional dispositions." Stewart (2016:86) explains the fine difference between temporalities and historicities, by suggesting that the former, "which may be inchoate orientations" become the latter, "which build on that temporality by adding experiences and cultural models, and then another, further step to the production of histories involving characters, events, and morality-infused emplotment." Throughout the chapters, I present examples of such histories that are continuously produced in the encounters between youth culture workers and young people to create meaning and to condition actors as members of a collective by relying on and reproducing the underlying collective temporality.

I call it a *governmental* historicity, not only because it is promoted by a government, but also because 1) it is deployed to mobilize collective affects and to incite certain political actions; and 2) embedded in it are promises and demands that structure youth's individual trajectories and aspirations. I make the first point clear particularly in Chapter I, where I discuss how the collective temporality that is reproduced through incessant repetition of alternative historical narratives during *normal times* crystallize in political slogans in *times of crisis*, which, as "critical thresholds" (Bryant 2016), demand urgent political action. I focus on the AKP's counter-mobilization during the Gezi Park Uprising and the 2016 coup attempt as such moments of crisis, during which the AKP's governmental historicity worked to produce a "cultural proximity" (Knight 2012) between past events and the present situation to mobilize individual and collective fear by tapping into the sense that the present has consequences for both the past and the future (cf. Roitman 2013).

The distinction between *ordinary* and *crisis* times is central to my analysis of the governmental aspect of the neo-Ottomanist historicity, because it enables me to go beyond an understanding of pedagogy in which the youth are positioned passively on the receiving end of

instructions, and to develop the two key concepts, *recruitment* and *mobilization*, that I work with throughout the dissertation. In Chapter II, I discuss how recruitment into the collective generation occurs in affectively charged settings where the emphasis is on the cultivation of dispositions towards authority (of texts, persons, and ideals) and the imagination of a collective of shared feelings and aspirations. I address such settings as pedagogical spaces where youth are educated to think and feel in a particular way (cf. Masco 2014), which forms the basis for their mobilization through affective incitement to particular political actions during times of crisis. Thus, I argue that the recruitment of young people into the AKP's imagined youth collective is first and foremost about their recruitment into its collective governmental historicity.

Governmental promises and youth's aspirations

Recruitment into and remaining committed to this governmental historicity is always ongoing, and contingent on whether it can continuously shape young people's individual aspirations and absorb them into its temporality. Throughout the chapters, I try to show both how powerful the appeal of the AKP's youth culturing program is especially for youth coming from lower-class and conservative backgrounds, and the conditions of possibility for its transgression. In line with my consistent attention to the interactive space between the governmental power and situated subjects, I work with two concepts, *promise* and *aspiration*, to better understand the dynamic and always contingent nature of this relationship.

On one level, as I discussed earlier, the primary promise inherent to the neo-Ottomanist governmental historicity is a meaningful life with a sense of purpose and moral clarity. It calls on young people to see themselves as part of a collective with a historic mission. In doing so, it collectivizes individual actions and adds temporal depth to them, thereby producing a sense of

distinction and privilege for those who commit to it compared to *others*. Throughout the chapters, I demonstrate how such distinction-making is discursively and organizationally inherent to the AKP's youth program. In particular, I show how embedded in the discursive construction of youth is a specific popular trope regarding young people's penchant for unruliness and presentism, which is frequently deployed in youth-oriented discourses to distinguish the addressees as young people who are oriented to the future in a proper way.

Another central promise that is particularly pronounced in the AKP's youth program is that of upward mobility. As I suggested earlier, the AKP came to power garnering significant support from the urban peripheries and Anatolian conservatives. Its continuous two-decade rule since then brough about large scale upward mobility to many of these people who had ties to the AKP's massive social and political network.[28] While it is a thread that runs through all the chapters, Chapter IV particularly focuses on the material promises of the AKP's youth program. This promise is especially powerful for youth from lower-class and poor families, to whom commitment to the AKP's youth collective promises not only the means to acquire the required qualifications within the competitive education system, but also the right kind of connections and the command of cultural markers and shibboleths that are necessary for professional attainment within a labor market dominated by the state and its clientelist networks.

However, the unstable political atmosphere, exemplified by the rapid transition of the Gülen Community from the most privileged constituent of the AKP political network to a terrorist organization, renders long-term commitments highly risky, given the fact that the AKP's grip on power is constantly challenged, as I discuss particularly in Chapter I. I maintain that this

[28] For more on the AKP's clientelist networks and its continuing appeal among the urban poor; see (Dogan 2017, Kurt 2018).

is simultaneously a strength and a weakness for the AKP's youth program, as it demands from youth unwavering commitment to its political collective. While it backs its promises of political certainty and a predictable career trajectory with its power to set the terms for entitlement to legitimate political action as well as professional attainment, I show that in the lives of many young people commitment is provisional, ambivalent, and often performative. I make this argument by paying long-term attention to how young people form and constantly reassess their aspirations, which I address as "navigational capacities" (Appadurai 2013). As aspirations are inherently tied to individuals' senses of self-location, which informs their ideas about what is possible, probable, and desirable, I demonstrate, for example, how some young individuals begin to aspire elsewhere once their senses of self-location change, or some others continuously invest into their "capacity to aspire" while actively waiting to make a move. Thus, I address aspirations and commitments as agentive modes of orientation through which young people navigate the life stage of youth in the face of governmental demands and promises specifically aimed at them.

Plan of the Work and Chapter Summaries

This project ultimately aims to describe and theorize the always emergent and dynamic, albeit unequal, interplay between the governmental power and situated young subjects. As such, it strives to describe this interactive space without overemphasizing the government's ability to structure youth subjectivities or young people's agentive power in the face of domination. Instead, it focuses on and tries to reflect the elusiveness of the field that it describes. Thus, a central concern that runs through each chapter is to work with dynamic concepts in order to better understand the dynamism of the field on multiple levels.

Chapter I explains the rise of what I call the alternative history tellers and examines the role of the incessant repetition of such histories in recruiting young people into the AKP's governmental historicity. It describes several instances of collective time reckoning and demonstrates how individuals' orientation to historical time becomes susceptible to governmental manipulation within the interactive space opened up by this historicity. Focusing on several instances of the AKP's counter-mobilization against challenges to its rule, this chapter demonstrates how the collective historicity worked to mobilize affects and incite political actions.

Chapter II focuses on the increasingly prominent role of informal gatherings called *sohbets*, which have roots in Anatolian folk traditions of community building as well as Sufi rites of companionship, in the AKP's youth recruitment efforts. As a specific genre of speech-event, *sohbets* work as affectively-charged contexts of influence in which certain authorities are upheld and a community of shared feelings and aspirations is imagined. While this chapter also provides examples from narrative contents of *sohbets* that rely on and reproduce the underlying collective temporality, it proposes that the role of pious pedagogy in the AKP's youth program is primarily manifested in *sohbets*.

Chapter III focuses on an instance of youth dissent at an AKP-sponsored youth festival to discuss the failures of the AKP's youth culturing program and demonstrates how such failures are absorbed by the collective historicity that prescribes an antagonistic orientation to the historical present. Arguing that this pervasive "failure talk" is highly productive, it outlines a specific youth culturing project aimed at "cultivating a vanguard generation."

Finally, Chapter IV addresses the AKP's governmental historicity as a regime of aspiration and discusses extensively how several young individuals engaged with its material

promises as they navigated the life stage of youth. It argues that the AKP's youth project promises to young people a predictable aspirational horizon along with the tools and qualifications that make one entitled to it; however, youth's commitment to it as a regime of aspiration is often provisional, since aspirations are highly dynamic as they are constantly recalibrated in the face of uncertainty and change.

Throughout the text, I use pseudonyms for my interlocutors, and all translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

Chapter I
Neo-Ottomanism as Governmental Historicity: Collective Time Reckoning in Times of Crisis and Opportunity

"Are you mad or resentful towards us (contemporary Turkish youth)?" asked a teenager in an emotional yet equally deferential tone to Nilhan Osmanoğlu, also known by her brand name Nilhan Sultan[29], during the Q&A session that followed her loosely structured talk on "what we have lost" with the end of the Ottoman Empire. A young entrepreneur in her late twenties, Nilhan Sultan is the fifth-generation granddaughter of one of the most controversial Ottoman sultans, Abdülhamid II (1876-1909), the last to rule the empire as an absolute monarch. Nilhan Sultan had recently rose to fame among the supporters of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and occasionally appeared on pro-government media to present the *authentic* Ottoman point of view. She was also highly sought after as a speaker within the pro-government *kültür-sanat* (arts and culture) network and frequently gave seminars in youth- and women-oriented spaces.

This time, the event was part of the seasonal arts and culture agenda of the municipal government of Esenler, a lower-class AKP stronghold on the European part of Istanbul. In the audience were those affiliated with the women's and youth branches of the municipality who had boarded subsidized buses from the district to *Otağ-ı Hümayûn*, an Ottoman-era royal kiosk (*Hünkâr Kasrı*) where sultans camped and held meetings on military tactics before embarking on expeditions to Europe. The fifteenth-century building, which had undergone numerous alterations including its use as a military torture camp in the 1980s, was renovated by the Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture Agency to be used as a cultural venue. Now in this

[29] In contemporary and Ottoman Turkish, "Sultan" is the imperial title used for both men and women.

domed building with walls tiled Ottoman style (Figure 1), the note-taking and *sâlep*[30]-sipping working-class young audience was listening to Nilhan Sultan talk about youth culture and education with occasional insider references to the Ottomans' way of life, including her own.

Figure 1. Nilhan Sultan's Seminar. Few men in the room, including myself, sat in the back row.

"If I cared only about myself, I would have left Turkey long time ago," Nilhan Sultan responded, keeping her selfless demeanor that was only fitting for an Ottoman princess. "It [how the members of the Ottoman dynasty have been treated in the modern Turkish nation-state] is the

[30] A drink made with milk and tubers of orchid, which was popular in the lands of the Ottoman Empire. It is now increasingly offered in neo-Ottomanist spaces of consumption as part of the "affective atmosphere" of authenticity (cf. Anderson 2009).

main reason why most others from the dynasty live abroad[31], but I don't think this issue is only about me," she continued, implying that her choice to live in Turkey, despite all she has gone through, was part of a cause that is bigger than herself. She recalled being reprimanded by a teacher on her first day at school because she failed to sing the national anthem, which led to a "family decision" to pull her out of that public school and send her to a private one. "So, our youth have been educated by these kinds of teachers. This is why I am neither mad nor resentful towards our youth as it is not their fault. All I am working for is to help future generations to learn about their real history, which is not about simply collecting information about what happened here and there at this and that time but about embodying the "spirit" (*rûh*) of the entire Ottoman civilization."

It was around six months after the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016. Speaking from a lineage of authority that, as the popular narrative goes, "ruled over three continents for six centuries," she remarked that the coup attempt showed once again that "this land has always had and will always have both traitors and heroes." The youth who took to the streets to resist the coup-plotters embodied "the spirit that we thought we had lost," and it was the biggest testimony to the fact that "we are going through a period of returning to our authentic essence" (*özümüze dönme dönemindeyiz*). The period she was referring to is the one dominated by the AKP rule under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

In order to contribute to this process of revitalizing the authentic spirit among younger generations, Nilhan Sultan outlined the project that she had recently come up with and tentatively called "Presidential Schools" (*Başkanlık Okulları*), ostensibly alluding to the

[31] Members of the Ottoman family were sent into exile after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. Some family members were later allowed to return to Turkey to live as private citizens. Although they generally kept a low profile, Nilhan Sultan is the first member of the dynasty to craft a public profile as a princess.

presidential system that Erdoğan was then campaigning for. These schools would take inspiration from the Ottoman Enderûn School system that trained statesmen for the Empire. However, unlike the Enderûn Schools that primarily recruited Christian children across the Empire via the *devşirme* system, Nilhan Sultan's schools would recruit kids on the basis of being Turkish and Muslim, because, she remarked, this (people who are not authentically Turkish and Muslim in positions of power) was the root cause of all our problems.[32]

A rather confused high school boy in the audience asked whether "we were too late" for our targets for 2023, the aspirational horizon frequently pointed by Erdoğan's AKP to youth, because of the "attacks from inside and out to our progress." "It is an ongoing battle that is just starting," Nilhan Sultan replied by referring to her "latest research" on "what 2023 means for *them*;" which included some abjad calculations of several verses from the Quran, the year of the first Zionist Congress (1897), the numeric value of the word "Zion," and the year of "Hitler's persecution (*zulüm*) of the Jews (1942); which all led her to conclude that 2023 is the year of the Battle of Armageddon and that it is a significant date that "*they* are anticipating, too." Concerned that she was not making much sense, she wrapped up by saying, "ours is a transitional generation and Insha'Allah you are the ones who will have better days as long as you have the consciousness of this long-time struggle."

The above scene offers a glimpse into how the AKP-led youth culturing program takes shape amidst the profound social and political transformation that Turkey has recently been going through. *A member of the Ottoman dynasty addressing high school youth without needing*

[32] Nilhan Sultan's vision has not materialized since, but Turkey Youth Foundation (Türkiye Gençlik Vakfı/TUGVA), a pro-government umbrella organization founded in 2014, launched its "Enderun School" in 2019 for high school students with the aim of introducing them to the fields of Law, Diplomacy, Psychology, Medicine, Engineering, and Architecture so that they could choose majors in college in a more informed manner.

much self-censure at a lavishly renovated Ottoman military camp during an event organized by a local government; such a scene would have been unthinkable a decade ago, and if we go back a decade further into the 1990s, it would have been a powerful spark for fervent Kemalist panic as well as probably a reason for a public prosecution (cf. Özyürek 2005, Öncü 2010). Yet in 2017, it was only one of hundreds of similar events and Nilhan Sultan was only one of dozens of "history-tellers" who claimed to present the authentic history of the nation within the AKP-sponsored arts and culture and media networks.

As I detailed in Introduction, neither the challenges to the official nation-state historiography nor the popular and political interest in "useful" Ottoman pasts are new in Turkey. However, especially in Erdoğan's "ustalık" period, characterized by a more assertive domestic and international politics as well as a campaign to establish "cultural power" (see Chapter III, in particular), alternative history became a state-sponsored industry. "History-tellers" like Nilhan Sultan, who claimed to tell the untold history of the nation, made lucrative careers writing books and columns, regularly appearing as pundits on dozens of TV programs[33] within the ever-growing pro-AKP media network[34], working as advisors for popular historical TV productions[35], organizing and guiding tours to sites of Ottoman memory inside Turkey as

[33] Sometimes supported by visuals in documentary format, these programs featured history "experts," some of whom had relevant degrees, and almost always proceeded in an "echo chamber" form. Each pro-AKP network had its own periodical alternative history program(s) with titles such as "Unconventional History" ("*Siradisi Tarih*"), "The Unknown Face of History" ("*Tarihin Bilinmeyen Yuzu*"), "Off-The-Books History" ("*Kayit Disi Tarih*"), "Deep History" ("*Derin Tarih*"), "Social Memory" ("*Toplumsal Hafiza*"), "Remember!" ("*Hatirla!*"), "Never Forget!" ("*Unutma!*"), and so forth. While the majority of them offered alternative accounts to the official historiography especially with regards to the late-Ottoman and early-Republican periods, some programs were dedicated to more recent times preceding the AKP's rise to power with the aim of creating a contrast between then and now.

[34] While the mainstream media in Turkey, since its inception in the early 1990s, have always had close ties to the economic and political elite, the AKP significantly transformed the media landscape in the 2010s through direct and indirect means. For a critical overview of this transformation; see: (Özvarış, 2020. Online: https://red-thread.org/en/the-transformation-of-turkeys-media-under-the-akps-authoritarian-turn/).

[35] Turkish TV dramas, or the *dizi*, constitute one of the fastest growing industries in Turkey and are highly popular across the world. A sub-genre of these are historical dramas, most of which depict some form of a glorified and

well as to former Ottoman territories such as Palestine and the Balkans, and circulating between arts and culture events organized by local governments and the AKP's local branches, high schools and universities, cultural associations, and youth-oriented NGOs.

Beyond their obvious function of legitimizing the AKP's hold on to power, what political work does the incessant repetition of alternative historical narratives do? As I argued in more detail in the Introduction, these historical narratives rely on and reproduce a particular temporal infrastructure that forms the basis of what I call the "neo-Ottomanist governmental historicity." In this respect, the campaign to cultivate a political generation that characterizes the AKP's youth program begins with the recruitment of youth into this governmental historicity, which prescribes how to authentically remember the past, experience the present, and anticipate the future, as a collective.

Emerging within the above-described political-economic context, this intensive *alternative history work* has an inherent pedagogical agenda. As exemplified in Nilhan Sultan's narrative, it envisages a national collective made up of subjects that have what is interchangeably referred to as authentic "historical consciousness," or "civilizational consciousness." This emphasis on the cultivation of historical consciousness is particularly pronounced when such alternative historical narratives are aimed directly at children and youth.

What does the authentic "historical consciousness" promoted in the AKP's youth culturing program entail? What kind of youth subjects does the "neo-Ottomanist historicity" aim to create? What forms of political action does it incite, and how? To answer, these questions, this chapter focuses on moments of political crisis and significant turning points for the AKP's political power

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romanticized Ottoman past. While at first sight they seem to be intended for domestic consumption, they are finding surprising audiences especially among Muslims across the world, which led to their banning in some of Turkey's regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt.

in which the governmental aspect of the neo-Ottomanist historicity became apparent and relevant as a semantic source to make sense of the present situation and to incite particular forms of political action.

Moments of crisis are significant in that, as Rebecca Bryant (2016:20) writes, they endow the present with "the status of a threshold [as people] acquire a sense that what [they] do in this present will be decisive for both the past and the future." The present thus becomes heavier with the weight of the past and the future, creating a sense of time as outside of ordinary, normal time (cf. Roitman 2014). I suggest that in such moments, experienced as critical thresholds, the tirelessly-repeated alternative historical narratives during "normal" times, like that of Nilhan Sultan, become more than simple *stories* and gain political relevance insofar as they can absorb the challenge of the present into their map of meaning.

Throughout this chapter, I present instances of collective time reckoning[36] to explore what the neo-Ottomanist governmental historicity entails. I anchor my discussion around Nilhan Sultan and Buğra, an active member of the AKP's youth wing who proudly had *the authentic* historical consciousness. I begin with outlining why he thought the Ottoman history mattered, how it should be remembered so that it could be presented to young people as an inspirational horizon.

"In These Times:" Historical Consciousness and How to Remember Authentically

In late May of 2018, Buğra, a young man in his early 20s who was active in the youth wing of the AKP, sent me a video ad prepared by the Presidency of Turkey to commemorate the upcoming 565th anniversary of the Conquest of Istanbul. The video combined computer

[36] While I use the notion of "reckoning" in its specific, temporal sense; I am inspired by Winegar's (2006) treatment of the concept as a dynamic, agentive, and processual cultural practice.

animation with heavy visual and sonic symbolism to depict a linear historical procession beginning with the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II who conquered Istanbul and ending with the current president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with select -all male- historical figures in between.[37] "This is how we should remember our history!" Buğra commented, referring to an earlier conversation between us on why the Ottoman history mattered and who "our ancestors" were.

We had met at an Ottoman language class in the historic district of Fatih, which was named after the Fatih Mosque at its center. The mosque itself was named after Ottoman Sultan Fatih (The Conqueror) Mehmed II, who, after capturing Constantinople (Istanbul), commissioned a Greek architect named Atik Sinan to build a mosque that would bear his name as the iconic legacy of his reign. A couple of weeks prior to his sending me the video ad, we were on a field trip as part of the Ottoman class, which included both the Fatih Mosque and a small masjid nearby which was home to Atik Sinan's tomb. While the purpose of the trip was to practice Ottoman by reading the *kitabe* (epigraphs) of Ottoman monuments including tombstones; Esma, our Ottoman teacher whose story I tell in more detail in Chapter IV, often gave anecdotal information during these trips, which usually led to lively conversations and occasionally to heated debates. Atik Sinan's story sparked one such debate, and it was the primary reason why Buğra sent me the video to follow up.

Atik Sinan's tombstone mentioned that he was "martyred in a dark dungeon by the sea." Esma recounted the story that he was executed because Fatih got disappointed and angry seeing that the mosque's dome was not as high and grand as the Hagia Sophia Cathedral, which was

[37] This mode of chronotopic visual production is emblematic of the AKP's youth-oriented media efforts. For another example, a 2020 video ad named "Who Are You?", prepared by the AKP's youth wing, directed a similar inspirational message at youth, showing a succession of historical figures accompanied by the voiceover "You are {the name of the figure!}." This video included more figures from more recent history and also some females; all culminating again in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Watch online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NspLgJleHxY

built nearly a millennium earlier and converted to a mosque following the conquest. Atik Sinan's defense was that what Fatih wanted would make the structure vulnerable to Istanbul's frequent earthquakes. That failed to appease Fatih, who thought that if it had been possible to build a structure as grand as the Hagia Sophia a millennium ago, there was no reason to believe that it was not now. "Well, History seems to have proved him wrong," Esma continued, mentioning the fact that the mosque was completely destroyed by a major earthquake two centuries later and then rebuilt in its current form.

Visibly uneased as he was standing right beside me, Buğra expressed his suspicion on the veracity of this story saying that Fatih is known for his just rule and the fact that Atik Sinan got to have a tomb like this indicates that something else must have happened. He pulled out his phone and started googling to find the "true story" of what happened. Pleased to have found something, he started reading out loud an alternative story, which recognized Fatih's anger at the not-high-enough dome of the mosque, yet it only resulted in his order to get the architect's hands amputated. The story had a further twist: Atik Sinan immediately appealed to the city judge, who ruled against Fatih's decision and recognized the architect's right to demand the amputation of Fatih's hands in return. Impressed with the Muslim justice and seeing that the Sultan was ready to submit to the law, Atik Sinan ended up not only pardoning him but also deciding to convert to Islam. "That is also possible since there is often contrasting stories about historical events especially when there is little record," Esma responded, clearly avoiding confrontation with her student, and said we should move on to our next stop.

In the vast yard of Fatih Mosque when we took a prayer break for those who wanted to pray, Engin Bey, an engineer in his late thirties who was then spending his time learning Ottoman after he was given a paid leave from his job at the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality

following the July 15 coup attempt for reasons no one knew about, decided to reignite the conversation. "After all, only Allah can know what really happened some five centuries ago. All we can and should do is practice *husn-u zan* (give the benefit of the doubt) when it comes to our ancestors," he said in his usual 'wise man' style, which was not yet quite appropriate for his age despite he was the oldest in the group. In an attempt to underline her authority, Esma said she agreed with him yet also added that engaging with history required a certain degree of objective distance. It was Buğra's turn, who was also kind enough to say that he agreed with both, yet he believed that the label "objective distance" could sometimes be used by "some people" to disguise their "malicious intentions" (*art niyet*) to smear our ancestors, and that "we should be careful not to fall into their trap." He glanced at me while rhetorically asking what could be gained from remembering them badly. It was now my turn, the anthropologist, and I did what I often did in such situations and expressed my opinion accompanied with questions. I said I also agreed with them in that the act of remembering was largely a matter of the present, and that there was nothing wrong with remembering ancestors with gratitude as that is what many other cultures did, yet the question was who our ancestors were. After all, we all knew that none of us was coming from the Ottoman lineage, and maybe *our ancestors* did not really like their royal contemporaries or they were even oppressed by them.[38]

[38] I knew very well that in the contemporary Turkish context conversations about history were rarely about what really happened. I realized shortly into my fieldwork that most of my interlocutors did not have such a *naïve* orientation towards history, either. In the age of populist identity politics, spectacular consumption, and contested truths; I observed that people were less interested in what things really are than what (they think) they seem within an economy of representations. If there was a Turkish word of the year, or word of the decade for that matter, it probably would have been "*algı*." *Algı* literally means "perception," and the specific sense that has become part of everyday discourse especially among the AKP-supporting conservatives in the past decade comes from the term "perception management" that has originated in the US military's information warfare efforts. In this decade in which the most fundamental national truths/fictions were opened up for scrutiny and the fiercest political battles were fought with hyper-mediatized visibility through the recruitment of millions of ordinary people, the inherently political nature of truth claims became a matter of everyday discourse. Therefore, as an anthropologist who is in the business of representation, I was both a suspect and someone whose ideas mattered.

Even though Buğra appreciated my question, his concern was different. In his view, the Ottoman history mattered because it contained sources of inspiration for not only the Turkish youth but also the Muslim youth all around the world. “Of course,” one could find in the Ottoman history that spanned six centuries all kinds of human behavior, but “in the age we were living in” we needed powerful figures so that Muslims could be united and self-confident against “the Western domination,” because only “we” could alleviate the pain of “all the oppressed people of the world.” “You see the situation of the majority of our youth,” he invited each of us to reflection before effectively driving the conversation to a dead end: “So in my opinion the only way to save them from the evils of this age is to remind them of who they are and where they are coming from!”

I was familiar from our earlier conversations with his tendency to speak from outside the category of “youth.” His careful and conscious quest to distance himself from *other* youths was evident in his style, extending from the way he dressed and decorated himself to the way he talked and moved in space. He was into Ottoman history and international politics, even though he was open to reading from a wide spectrum “including, for example, the Communist Manifesto or Mein Kampf,” to learn about other perspectives without losing “the consciousness of where you are anchored.” That is why he was also learning Ottoman.

He dates the formation of his “historical consciousness” back to his high school years, prior to which he had “a period of searching for his identity” in which he tried to be “like other youths” by doing things like experimenting with different hairstyles or learning to play the guitar. As he grew up, he gradually found his style in Ottoman hats and rings, picked up hobbies such as horse-riding and archery, alongside developing an interest in learning about history from what I refer to in this chapter as “alternative history-tellers” such as Mehmet Sevket Eygi and

Kadir Mısıroğlu[39]. He especially revered the latter and regularly attended his weekly history *sohbets*[40].

These alternative history-tellers not only exposed him to the "untold history of the nation," but also helped him situate his own family history within it. Buğra's grandfather was a pious man but also a representative of the CHP, the political party founded by Atatürk and ruled during the single-party period between 1923 and 1950, in the small southeastern town that his father's side is from. He frequently mentioned this fact as an evidence of the extent to which ordinary people were deceived (*kandırılmak*) by the Kemalists back in the day, because they were ignorant (*cahil*) people who neither had the education nor the vision to be able to tell what actually was going on. Thanks to a handful of pioneers such as Mısıroğlu, who were educated urbanites and dared to challenge the "fictions" imposed by the Kemalist state, Buğra thinks we are now able to be "at peace with our history" ("*tarihimizle barışık"*), as they paved the way for later generations to learn about the real history of our ancestors and feel attached to "our authentic tradition/civilization."

[39] Kadir Mısıroğlu, arguably the most prominent and equally controversial of the alternative history-tellers, died at the age of 86 in May 2019. One of the most provocative opponents of Kemalist reforms and supporters of the Caliphate, he has published numerous books, gave hundreds of conferences, and played an active role in the creation of several revisionist history publications since the 1950s. Throughout his career, he has been an ardent supporter of *İttihad-ı İslam* (Unity of Muslims), organized conferences, took part in the earlier Islamist political movements, prosecuted by legal authorities due to his anti-Atatürk statements and activities, fled to Germany after the military coup in 1980, and lived in the UK until 1991 as an asylum-seeker. Upon his return to Turkey, he founded the *Osmanlılar İlim ve İrfân Vakfı* (roughly: The Ottomans Science and Education Foundation) and gave seminars to youth every Saturday until his death. He also frequently appeared on pro-government TV networks after 2011. Known for his signature combination of a fez and a tie that, as he explains in one of his seminars, he wore as symbols of his allegiance to the Ottoman vision of progress, and his unrelenting provocations as well as occasional absurd statements, such as his assertion that Shakespeare was in fact a secret Muslim whose actual name was *Sheikh Peer* (lit: the old sheikh), he has been an object of ridicule, outrage, and disgust among the secular Kemalists as well as the ultimate symbol of reactionary bigotry.

[40] I analyze *sohbets* in more detail in Chapter II as central to the AKP's youth recruitment efforts. While in that chapter my focus is specifically on the piety aspect of *sohbets* and how they are integrated into the AKP's youth culturing program, *sohbet* is a wider and fluid genre of speech event.

This *historical consciousness* shaped and informed how he viewed the world by enabling him to establish connections across time and space. Sometimes bordering a conspiracy theory mindset, he views the entire world being for long under the assault of the "Western cultural imperialism," which "anaesthetized" the Muslims in particular for the past two centuries. However, while the system of cultural colonialism is still very strong, he is optimistic about the future because; firstly, "Allah is stronger!" and second, there are signs that there is a nascent awakening in the non-Western world; augured by the rise of powers like China, the growing popularity of non-Western culture industries, the Arab uprisings, and the aversion of the coup by the people in Turkey, as well as the internal turmoil "within the West" such as the one in the United States.[41] His self-consciousness as a Turkish-Muslim political subject as well as his orientation to Turkish domestic politics, including his conditional commitment to the AKP's political project, take their meaning within this temporally and spatially expanded framework, which enables him to distinguish himself from other youths who he thinks view the world through an individualistic and presentist lens.

Ultimately, for Buğra, remembering the Ottoman history mattered only insofar as it functioned as a source of strength and inspiration for young people, who face the challenge of living authentically "in these times." Only through that young people could understand what the real fight is about, know how to resist the insidious temptations of cultural imperialism, and fight this *historic* fight as a collective. This was the primary reason why he supported the AKP as he

[41] He referred in this particular interview to the presidency of Donald Trump, who he called "a total fascist," as a sign of "some upheaval within the US," although he half-jokingly asked me not to include such parts about the US as well as some of his views on Western cultural imperialism from the final dissertation as it is "a work going to America."

thought it enabled efforts to cultivate authentic historical consciousness particularly in its youth program, in which he also took part.

In our many conversations, he repeatedly emphasized that having the authentic historical consciousness did not amount to blindly committing to the dictates of a political project, but having an active orientation towards what is going on and being always ready to take action. He liked to cite from the poem titled "The Address to Youth" of a prominent Islamist ideologue and poet, Necip Fazil[42], in which he described the ideal youth generation as made up of individuals who would each step forward without hesitation when asked "Who is in?". Thus, the measure of authentic historical consciousness is readiness to take action when needed. This is why he cited - just like Nilhan Sultan whose narrative I opened this chapter with- the people who took to the streets during the coup attempt as a sign of "awakening." This particular temporal orientation, which is expressed in such narratives as being awake or readiness, is the subject of the next section. More particularly, I focus on instances in which the neo-Ottomanist historicity enabled the AKP's governmental power to affectively incite subjects into political action.

"Not This Time!": The AKP's Crises of Power and Popular Mobilization to Prevent History from Repeating Itself

> *When I saw the president on TV that night calling on the people to take to the streets, I did not hesitate even for a moment. I took my father's pistol, asked my mom's blessing, and with my cousins we drove to the airport. By the time we got there the people had mostly taken over the airport from the traitors, so I did not need to use the gun. Soon after, we got the word that the president's plane had landed. It was insane; we stayed there until the morning along with thousands of people like you and me; and we were totally unafraid! I would never have imagined this kind of a thing to happen.*

[42] Necip Fazil Kisakurek (1904-1983) was a poet and playwright, whose ideas heavily influenced later generations of Turkish political right in general, and Turkish Islamists in particular. "The Address to Youth" is one of his most famous works and a deliberate rebuke of "Atatürk's Address to Turkish Youth."

This is Buğra's account of the night of the coup attempt in July 2016, launched by a faction within the Turkish military a couple of weeks after I arrived in Istanbul to start my long-term fieldwork, creating some of the most dramatic scenes in recent Turkish history including the bombing of the Turkish parliament by the F16 jets that belonged to its own air force. The coup attempt failed within hours; leaving hundreds dead, thousands injured, and millions on the street for the following months who took part in the "democracy watch"[43] rallies to defend the AKP government (Figure 2).

Figure 2. One of the Democracy Watch rallies in the Taksim Square in central Istanbul (July 30, 2016).

[43] For a detailed analysis of the coup attempt, as well as the "democracy watches" and the new security paradigm that emerged in the post-coup era, see Şen (forthcoming).

As a shocking and heavily spectacularized event, it was the hottest topic of conversation over the course of my fieldwork. “How did you hear the news that a coup was underway?” “What were you doing then?” “What did you do after?” “Where did you attend the ‘democracy watch’ rally?” Many people perfected their personal accounts of what they did that night as they kept repeating them in different contexts. They also heavily shared on social media their pictures taken on the night of the coup or at one of the rallies that went on months after the coup failed. Unsurprisingly, nobody admitted in such conversations that they were too afraid to go out or that they waited that night for a while to figure out who the winning side was. Through often exaggerated and embellished accounts, most people signaled their courage and commitment to the political collective.

Notwithstanding such post-coup everyday performances of courage and commitment, however, millions of people did indeed take to the streets responding to Erdoğan’s call. They did so in many other occasions, including the Gezi Park Uprising, which was another major challenge directly aimed at Erdoğan’s power. In this section, I address such times of political crisis as critical moments when the governmental power of the neo-Ottomanist historicity became apparent and instrumental in affectively inciting people into action.

Times of (political) crisis are experienced as “critical thresholds,” which give a sense to people going through them that what is done in the present “will be decisive for both the past and the future” (Bryant 2016:20). In other words, they reveal with affective intensity that things could be otherwise (Roitman 2014). I show below that people had already been familiarized with that “otherwise” via their constant exposure to the alternative historical narratives that recruited them into “the neo-Ottomanist historicity.” I focus on two political slogans that were highly

instrumental in mobilizing the affect of collective fear by simplifying to people what was going on and what was at stake through a particular mode of conjuring historical events and figures.

In the summer of 2013, as the Gezi Park protests grew in numbers and intensity and spread across the country, Erdoğan did not back down and mobilized his followers for counter-demonstrations, during which an image became the most popular pro-Erdoğan and anti-uprising symbol online and offline. In the image, Erdoğan was shown as the successor of two former heads of the state, Adnan Menderes, who got executed after a military coup in 1961, and Turgut Özal, who died in 1993 allegedly of poisoning which has never been proved. Under Menderes' picture it read "*Astınız*" ("You Hanged"), under Özal's "*Zehirlediniz*" ("You Poisoned"), and under Erdoğan's "*Yedirmeyiz*!" ("We Will Not Let You [to overthrow him]!)"[44] (**Error! Reference source not found.**). The image, as well as the last part of the slogan, "*yedirmeyiz*!", were so powerful and concise that they have since become two of the most common symbols of pro-Erdoğan activism.[45]

[44] A more literal translation of "*yedirmeyiz*" into English can be "we will not let you devour him!" The expression has colloquial resonance and obviously much more concise than its English translation that makes it suitable for a political slogan.

[45] An addition to one of its later versions read, "Our grandfathers were behind Menderes, our fathers were behind Özal, and we are behind Erdoğan."

Figure 3. Billboards in Ankara during the Gezi Park Uprising (source: http://www.haber7.com/guncel/haber/1036608-baskentte-Erdoğani-yedirmeyiz-afisleri).

The slogan, by its very nature as a political slogan, overlooked historical particularities and emphasized the parallels that could be drawn between these leaders, which were more than enough to rally Erdoğan's supporters. Adnan Menderes became the prime minister in 1950 after the first free elections in modern Turkish history and remained in power for a decade until a military coup deposed and executed him. During his tenure, Turkey became a NATO member, and with the financial assistance from the US as part of the post-War Marshall Plan, the agriculture was mechanized and the economy grew rapidly. Turgut Özal, on the other hand, came to power in 1983 as a result of the first elections held after another military coup in 1980. A US-trained economist, he became the champion of Turkey's integration into global markets as part of the wave of neoliberalism. He also stayed in power for exactly a decade, until his death reportedly of heart attack, which his supporters have always suspected was an act of poisoning executed by "the deep state." Similar to Menderes and Özal, Erdoğan oversaw a period of economic growth, and the main source of legitimacy for his power was the popular support he

received. The Gezi Park Uprising in 2013 marked his tenth year in power, and he convinced his supporters that history was repeating itself in the form of an organized attack directly aimed at his power rather than a spontaneous expression of widespread popular dissent.

Notwithstanding the historical differences between these leaders, the slogan's clear message was that supporting Erdoğan meant being part of a decades-old struggle. Not only did such a framing add temporal depth to a contemporary political issue, it also demanded urgent support by making reference to the earlier leaders whose supporters obviously failed to protect them from the evil, anti-democratic[46] forces. This is a particular mode of engagement with history, in which what these historical figures really did is overshadowed by what happened to them after. I argue that such conjuring of historical figures to mobilize a sense of emergency that calls for unconditional commitment to the leader and to the political movement is a key feature of the second phase of the AKP rule in Turkey. In conditions of intense political uncertainty, the memory of what happened to such figures provide an outline of potential undesired futures, or the "otherwise that things could be." They are brought into the present and mobilized in cautionary narratives, like political slogans, that call for pre-emptive action.

Three years later, during the post-coup-attempt "democracy watch" rallies, it was the memory of a controversial Ottoman sultan that was brought into the present to mobilize Erdoğan's supporters. The slogan this time was "We Will Not Leave You Alone Like Abdülhamid" ("*Seni Abdülhamid'in Yalnızlığına Terketmeyeceğiz*"). The logic behind the

[46] In the Turkish conservative discourse, notions like "democracy" and "people's will" stand for the demographic majority that Sunni conservatives historically had. The constant emphasis on such notions is a result of the perception that despite their majority they have repeatedly been denied political power by the establishment. Notwithstanding historical particularities, the popular narrative is that conservatives won whenever there were free and fair elections.

catchphrase was the same: it warned against potential drastic futures and demanded unconditional commitment.

One of the most controversial political figures in Turkish/Ottoman history who would later be damned in the nation-state historiography, Abdülhamid II[47] oversaw a period of decline that lasted for more than three decades until his dethronement shortly after the 1908 Young Turk Revolution. Known for his pan-Islamist ideology, the notorious armed groups named after him as the "Hamidian Regiments" that he formed to tackle the "Armenian Question," the grand infrastructure projects aimed at modernizing the collapsing empire, and his authoritarian rule that alienated even some influential Islamist figures of his time; his memory was now mobilized as a source to draw historical lessons from to makes sense of, as well as to legitimize, the political present. Similar to Menderes and Özal, parallels abound drawn between him and Erdoğan.[48]

Moments of crisis, Knight (2012:350) argues, may lead individuals and collectives to "understand current events based on accounts of the past, whether experienced firsthand or not." Some past events may become "culturally close" and enable people to make sense of the present situation. I argue that such "cultural proximity" between distinct events in terms of linear historical time can also be produced by governmental power to mobilize people for particular political ends by activating affects. In the case of the AKP's responses to the Gezi Park Uprising and the July 15 failed coup, the "cultural proximity" produced between past events and the

[47] The 33 years during which Abdülhamid II was the Ottoman Sultan and the Caliph escape any kind of simplistic characterization. The Ottoman state under his reign fought wars on multiple fronts, lost territories to nationalist movements as well as to European Empires, established political ties with Muslims outside Ottoman territories while trying to ensure the loyalty of its non-Muslim subjects at times through violent means, and strived to suppress internal dissent and demands for freedom and civil rights. He came to be increasingly identified with pan-Islamism, which made him a significant historical figure for many Islamists and anti-Kemalist conservatives in Turkey, as well as for many of those across the "Muslim world" who remained committed to the idea of a united Islam. For more on Abdulhamid II; see: (Deringil 1998; Aydin 2017; Georgeon 2019).

[48] Needless to mention, he is the ultimate source of legitimacy and authenticity for Nilhan Sultan, who constantly refers to him as "my grandfather" (*dedem*).

current situation mobilized individual and collective fear by tapping into the sense that the present has consequences for both the past and the future. By extracting undesired futures from the past and deploying them in cautionary narratives, the AKP governmental power demanded urgent and unconditional commitment from its subjects so that not only the present but also the past and the future can be saved.

I argue that the tireless alternative history work carried out by "history-tellers" such as Nilhan Sultan during "normal times" is instrumental in order for such governmental manipulation of people's temporal experience to be effective in moments of crisis, which is experienced as outside of "normal" time (Bryant 2016). They make potential dangers and threats familiar to ordinary people, since, as Joe Masco (2014:14) points out, they "must be educated to think and *feel* a particular way about [such potential threats and dangers, as] one can be afraid only of that which one knows to fear." Thus, the constant exposure of young people to the temporal infrastructure that underpin these alternative historical narratives, which call on them to cultivate in themselves "the authentic historical consciousness," recruits them into "the neo-Ottomanist historicity," which collectivizes individual temporal experiences thereby rendering the accompanying affects susceptible to governmental incitement during times of crisis.

In terms of collective affect, fear often goes hand-in-hand with hope and expectation. So far in this chapter, I described how a particular orientation to the historical present, expressed in terms of readiness or being awake, turned into collective action to avert imminent dangers and prevent potential drastic futures. What kind of positive futures are inherent to the neo-Ottomanist historicity? In the remainder of this chapter, my focus will be on hope and expectation as more positive modes of temporal orientation that characterize the interaction between the AKP's governmental power and situated subjects.

"Is it Time Yet?": Deferred Hopes to Redeem Interrupted Futures

On a warm June evening in Istanbul during the Ramadan of 2018, I arrived at Nilhan Sultan Mansion (*Nilhan Sultan Köşkü*) in the neighborhood of Çengelkoy, a café/restaurant with a nostalgic paraphernalia section owned and run by Nilhan Osmanoğlu, aka Nilhan Sultan. Pompously named, the restaurant is one of many consumption spaces that cater to upwardly mobile conservatives. With tea glasses adorned with the increasingly-ubiquitous Ottoman coat of arms, food and drinks prepared and served in the Ottoman palace style, perfumes that not only scent the place but also are put up for sale as those that were supposedly used by select Sultans and their wives, and the mild Turkish classical music played before and after the call for prayer; the mansion represents the highest level of authentication for commodified neo-Ottomanist aesthetics.

As I mentioned earlier, Nilhan Sultan is the fifth-generation granddaughter of the Ottoman Sultan Abdülhamid II, who had recently become a central figure in the AKP-led neo-Ottomanist historical narratives. It was a Friday evening, so the latest neo-Ottoman blockbuster Payitaht Abdülhamid (The Last Emperor) was airing that night on TRT 1, the primary TV channel of the Turkish state broadcaster. The show depicts the final ten years of Abdülhamid II on the throne, and since its premiere it had constantly achieved top TV viewer ratings. It depicts Abdülhamid as an omniscient, compassionate and pious strongman who has to constantly deal

with attacks from within and outside.[49] Nilhan Sultan's father was an advisor to its script[50], and she regularly organized community gatherings at her restaurant on Friday nights to watch the show together (Figure 4). With Abdülhamid II's giant portrait looking down from the wall on the patrons of the place along with his contemporary dramatized version on the LCD screens, I got seated on a previously-reserved table and started waiting for Esma and Buğra, with whom I had met at an Ottoman language course during my fieldwork.

[49] The show begins with a caption that says its script was inspired by historical events and figures, rather than stating that it is fiction. While several historians, conservative and liberal, pointed to the historical inaccuracies portrayed in the show, its producers are very clear from the beginning that their primary concern is the present situation rather than historical accuracy: the very first scene of its premiere shows an Abdülhamid parading in Istanbul, and at some point the group of soldiers who are supposed to protect him turn their guns towards the sultan, ostensibly alluding to the recent coup attempt.

[50] Orhan Osmanoglu is another one of what I call the alternative history tellers in this chapter. In an interview, he gave the following response to a question on "the rising popularity of drawing parallels between Abdülhamid II and Erdoğan:"

The same country different names! Nothing has changed! Germany was then a foe that appeared to be a friend, and it is the same now. There always was an enmity towards Islam among them, I mean the European states, and this is why they formed Crusader alliances against Islam. Just like Abdülhamid, our president Erdoğan is also a lonely man with no friends. The similarity between them is so strong that it is a typical case of history repeating itself. Glance at their newspapers, they call our president a dictator. Back then, they called Abdülhamid the "Red Sultan." Our power is unacceptable to Europe (read: the West). They unleashed all their dirty tricks again. They succeeded with Abdülhamid, because the people were manipulated into seeing him as an evil Sultan. Journalism was yet quite a new industry [in the Ottoman realm], and Jews along with the Europeans misused it to portray our Sultan as an enemy of the people. Now, however, they are going mad, because this time they are failing to do the same. The people now are behind Erdoğan and ready to even take to the streets when needed. May God protect him as our leader!

(Figure 5)

Asked of Abdülhamid II and the TV show, Erdoğan himself echoed Osmanoğlu's views in a televised interview two days before the constitutional referendum that would grant him vastly expanded powers: "The same schemes are carried out today in the exact same manner … What the West does to us is the same; just the era and actors are different." Quoted in: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/05/15/a-turkish-tv-blockbuster-reveals-Erdoğans-conspiratorial-anti-semitic-worldview/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.eebe60d33105

Figure 4. Nilhan Sultan Mansion (June 2018).

After they arrived, with the all-out neo-Ottomanist attack on our senses in the space, it was impossible not to talk about history, especially for a party consisting of the three of us. The details like the silverware or the tablecloth adorned with several food-related Ottoman words provided the material for small talk, which smoothly evolved from table manners "in the Ottoman times" and the drinks consumed in the palace to where to find the best *nargile* tobacco in Istanbul and that people "back in the day" gift exchanged snuffboxes that I learned are called "*enfiye*," which Buğra said he had one at home even though he did not smoke.

Eventually, Buğra brought up politics. Being the person at the table with the closest connections to the AKP inner network, he announced that the soon-to-be-inaugurated airport, which was planned to be the world's largest, will be named after Abdülhamid II (Figure 5). One

of Erdoğan's signature grand infrastructure projects, it is part of a long-standing government policy aimed at better exploiting Turkey's unique location and turn it into a logistics and transportation hub.[51]

Figure 5. Abdülhamid II was given the nickname "The Red Sultan" by the European press of the time especially after the Armenian Massacres of 1894-96. He was often portrayed as ghoulish, barbaric, and bloody. These representations are very well-known among conservatives and circulated widely as proof of Western bias against Turks and Muslims.

It was a controversy at the time what the airport would be called. The symbolic stakes around the controversy were high, as it was planned to replace Istanbul's main airport, which

[51] Since its planning stage, the airport has instead become a hub of controversy ranging from cruel labor conditions and worker deaths to its devastating impact on the environment, which was one of the criticisms raised by the Gezi Park protesters. In fact, a conspiracy theory widely popular among the AKP supporters is that Germany was one of the sponsors behind the Gezi Park Uprising because they were alarmed by Turkey's ambitions to become a transportation hub, embodied by the new airport project, which would steal most of Germany's transportation and logistics revenues.

was named after the Republic's founder, Atatürk. Curiously, the new airport's name was not announced to the public until the day of its inauguration in late 2018, which incited a lot of people to anticipate and speculate. For months, even the traffic signs on Istanbul's highways directed cars to "The New Airport." Some AKP supporters, like Buğra, thought it was finally time to start being bold and removing the ubiquitous icon of Atatürk from public spaces. Some thought it should be named after Erdoğan, since, after all, he was the visionary behind it. Some opponents lamented it *would* definitely be named after Erdoğan, because, after all, the Republican period was already over, and no one could do anything about it. Based on the insider *intel* that he endorsed, Buğra thought that Abdülhamid II was the apt choice, because he represented the ultimate Islamist/conservative vision of progress with Istanbul at its center. He supported his opinion by citing some of Abdülhamid II's ambitious infrastructure projects such as his famous railway line project connecting Istanbul, by way of the then-Ottoman-controlled Jerusalem, to the Hejaz region in present-day Saudi Arabia that is home to the holiest Islamic sites, as well as his rail tunnel project under the Bosporus, which Buğra pointed out remained unrealized "until Erdoğan built Marmaray[52]" that became operational in 2013.

However, Erdoğan eventually announced the name of the new airport as "Istanbul," arguably the country's most valuable global brand and a neutral middle ground in a highly polarized society. I asked Buğra after the announcement about what he made of it. He cited the "complicated political situation" as well as the economic problems that the country was facing as the likely causes behind why Erdoğan ended up choosing a neutral name for the airport. However, he was hopeful that "one day" it would be time to be more assertive.

[52] Another one of Erdoğan's signature infrastructure projects, Marmaray is a rail tunnel that goes under the Bosporus Strait.

This type of a careful cultivation of expectations and then delivering them or deferring them to an indefinite future is a crucial governmental tool aimed at ensuring subject's commitment to the political collective. It is inherent in Nilhan Sultan's allusion, as a member of a "transitional generation," to "better days to come" for the younger audience in the opening vignette of this chapter, in Erdoğan's vague promise for his *ustalık* period in 2011 that "the time is coming" to be more assertive, and in Buğra's anticipation of "more appropriate times" for his dreams to be realized. As seen in Erdoğan's deliberate reticence about the name of the airport until the last minute, expectation as an active anticipatory state is cultivated, yet the realization of what it may entail is often deferred. On the other hand, when the future is constructed in terms of the threats it can pose, it gets rendered much more immediate and palpable through an allusion to the earlier episodes when things went wrong.

"A more appropriate time" would eventually arrive two years later when the AKP government announced that the museum of Hagia Sophia would be re-converted into a mosque. I will conclude this chapter with a brief overview of what this decision meant for the collective time-reckoning that characterize the AKP's popular mobilization.

Conclusion: "It is Time! Now, What is Next?"

In July 2020, President Erdoğan announced that Hagia Sophia would be re-designated as a mosque. Originally built in the sixth-century as the patriarchal cathedral of the Roman Empire and converted into the imperial mosque of the Ottoman Empire after the conquest of Constantinople in the fifteenth-century, the Republican founders of Turkey converted it into a museum in 1935 as part of their efforts to secularize the country. Since then, it has been at the center of the anti-secularist view of history that I have been describing in this chapter as the

biggest evidence that the secular Republic's agenda was to de-Islamize the country and forcefully break the nation's ties to its authentic civilizational heritage. Cohorts of young people since the 1950s, among whom many of the AKP's current political elite, organized student protests demanding it to be re-converted into a mosque as they saw it as the ultimate symbol of Turkey's (and Istanbul's) Muslimness.

After Erdoğan announced the decision, his supporters were jubilant. Thousands of people traveled from across the country and abroad to celebrate the moment of its re-opening as a mosque on July 24, 2020. The re-opening event was a proper spectacle, televised live on almost all national TVs with the climax of Erdoğan reciting from the Qur'an leading to the Friday prayer. It was saturated with symbolism, including the Head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) who led the prayer delivering his sermon with a sword in his hands, reportedly an allusion to the Ottoman imperial tradition of Sultans delivering the Friday sermon in this manner.

I visited the area several times over the next week, yet I was able to get into Hagia Sophia only once, because only a limited number of people were let in due to the Covid-19 social distancing measures with hundreds of people waiting outside to get in. Hagia Sophia is at the heart of Istanbul's tourist quarter, yet I was still amazed at how many non-Turkish Muslims were also excited about it being a mosque again. A street vendor I talked to, who was selling neo-Ottomanist and Erdoğanist paraphernalia such as bandanas with the Ottoman flag or with Erdoğan's face with the caption "Ottoman grandson," was a little disgruntled that some tourists did not get the symbolism of the goods he was selling, but also optimistic that "we are all one as Muslims and Insha'Allah they will also be on board soon."

In one of my visits, I met some of my interlocutors from the Esenler Youth Center, who came there as a group on a subsidized bus around midnight before the Eid al-Adha and spent the night in the area so that they could get in for the Eid prayer in the morning. When I joined them for breakfast, they were tired but prideful. The cohort of students was different but Emrah was still one of the youth guides and he gave a very short *sohbet*. His tone was celebratory; he thanked God and "our leaders" ("*büyüklerimiz*") for making this long-held dream come true. His admonishment to the youth was that they should work even harder and take this accomplishment even further, without specifying what that would be. In private, however, the talk of the town, with varying degrees of loudness, was that the next target was the re-institution of the Caliphate, which is another institution abolished by the early Republican elite. What is certain for now is that that dream will be much more complicated to realize than the Hagia Sophia's re-conversion into a mosque.

Chapter II
Recruiting Youth into A Community of Companions: Sohbets at the Intersection of Piety and Politics

One of my early days at *Esenler Gençlik Merkezi* (Esenler Youth Center/EGM), Emrah showed me around the four-story building, which until recently had been a Gülenist prep school. The upper two floors were classrooms, and the second floor was largely allocated to teachers and administrators. The first floor was designed for the "socializing" of the youth who attended the center. They called the relatively large hall the "*kafeterya*," which included several tables and sofas alongside a bar with tea and coffee machines. Emrah told me with enthusiasm while pointing to the table-tennis and table-soccer tables that the *kafeterya* was so designed that the youth would relax and socialize in between classes and events drinking their brewed tea for free that was made sure to be available throughout the day (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The kafeterya at the Esenler Youth Center

There were only a handful of youth at the *kafeterya* as it was the class time. One of them, Murat, a high-spirited teenager who I would later learn was one of the most loyal and active

students at the center, greeted us while pouring tea into two glasses. Emrah teased him by questioning why he was not studying and idling around there. “Brother, we are working on the *sohbet* this afternoon with Cemal Hoca,” he responded. “Is it for your school group?” Emrah asked, referring to the students at Murat’s public school who come to the youth center for test preparation. “No, this is a *sohbet* for a special group; it would be too much for those kids,” he replied cheekily before rushing out with the tea glasses.

With a confused and prudent smile, as he did not yet know me very well, Emrah turned to me and remarked how rambunctious and sharp (“*zehir gibi*”) “some of our brothers” were at the center. “By the way, let me show you our *divan*,” he continued, walking me to a garish door with a faux-Ottoman style archway look. The door opened to a dimly lit room with an edge-to-edge carpet and a u-shaped sitting furniture (also called “*divan*” in the specific sense of the term) laid against the walls. We took our shoes off and stepped in as Emrah explained to me that this was the place for praying and holding *sohbets*.

A *sohbet* is typically a communal gathering in which someone with socially recognized authority delivers a talk on subjects of faith and piety. As a particular form of speech event, it is distinct from sermon (“*vaaz*”), seminar (“*seminer*”), or public lecture (“*konferans/ders*”). Literally meaning “conversation,” it is a culturally specific practice of cultivating companionship and solidarity through shared presence in a locutionary medium, with historical roots in Anatolian folk traditions of community building as well as Sufi rites of companionship. The outlawing of Sufi orders in the secular Republican era, the rise of political Islam, and the emergence of new media, among others, have contributed to the historical transformation of its formal and semiotic qualities. Modern communities of Sunni Islam (“*cemaat*”), especially the

Gülenists, have repurposed *sohbets* in their efforts to recruit and mobilize followers as they enabled informal, intimate, flexible, and -if need be- secretive forms of sociality.

I was aware from my earlier research on the Gülen Community of the centrality of *sohbets* in their pedagogy and organizing, yet we were now in 2017 and the Gülen Community was now designated as a terrorist organization following the failed coup a year earlier. In the new context, the Gülenist educational institutions were now shut down (mostly confiscated by the government and allocated to its various constituents or its allies like the *Esenler Gençlik Merkezi*) and its followers were now almost entirely purged from professional life including the nearly a dozen who used to work as teachers or administrators at the EGM. Yet, their methods, which had proven highly effective in recruiting and mobilizing youth especially from lower class backgrounds, seemed to be enduring in this new context.

As I progressed in my fieldwork, I repeatedly witnessed the central role that *sohbets* occupy in the AKP's youth-oriented agenda. Although new media technologies forcefully provided alternative modes of construction to such Islamic discursive practices in Turkey and elsewhere (cf. Hirschkind 2006; Silverstein 2008), my interlocutors made a great effort to keep *sohbets* as face-to-face, unmediated, and exclusive discursive contexts. At the EGM, *sohbets* were the primary tool in the hands of the youth culture workers to reach out to, influence, recruit, and mobilize young people in their search for the cultivation of certain moral, ethical, and political dispositions in them.

The center was innovative in terms of using *sohbets* to their full potential; it had a passenger bus, allocated by the local government and converted into a mobile *sohbet* venue, that toured around the district to specifically target those youth who normally remained out of its reach (Figure 7). The "*SohbetBus*" was designed as a gateway to the youth center; the youth

guides ("*rehber öğretmen*") who worked in shifts in charge of the bus were required to make the best use of their limited time in talking to youth who get on the bus. Their ultimate aim was to stir up interest in the youth center through their informal *sohbets* mostly on the most common-sensical and uncontroversial moral virtues. Youth were offered some warmth or cool -albeit temporary- depending on the weather outside, as well as some soft drinks and snacks. If successful, their contacts are taken and they are invited to the youth center for more proper *sohbets*, courses, or just to hang out.

Figure 7. President R. T. Erdoğan alongside the Mayor of Esenler on the SohbetBus during a campaign visit to the district

Back at the EGM, *sohbets* are held in the *divan* (Figure 8). The most frequent high-profile speaker is Cemal Hoca, the head of "The Department of Women, Family, and Youth Services" at the Esenler Municipality, which also oversees the EGM. More regular *sohbets* are

led by the available youth guides depending on their credentials that usually overlap with their professional ranks. Occasionally, senior students who are somewhat fluent in religious values and aspiring public speakers or leaders are given the chance to lead a *sohbet*. In more special circumstances, "*sohbet* hodjas" ("*sohbet hocası*") are invited to the center through their affiliations with various religious groups that are favored by the AKP leadership.

Figure 8. A male-only sohbet at the EGM's divan

Despite the peer pressure, attendance in a *sohbet* is voluntary. Although most *sohbets* are expected to follow a specific discursive structure, the makeup of the audience plays a major role in determining the topics covered, how they are delivered, and whether any reference to contemporary politics is made or not. As I will detail below, *sohbets* operate with different layers of access depending on gender, age, and level of commitment to the shared ideals; and are instrumental in creating exclusive groups and moral/political hierarchies among their young

attendants. This exclusivity is what Murat, briefly introduced above, was alluding to when he referred to the upcoming *sohbet* as one that "would be too much" for some other students.

This chapter examines *sohbets* as a central practice in the AKP's so-called project of raising pious generations.[53] The AKP's youth policy in Turkey, especially since 2010, has been critiqued domestically and abroad as a reactionary project aimed at undermining the secular foundations of the republic based on a strict separation of religious matters from public life. In line with the general aims of this dissertation, this chapter interrogates the situated and contingent ways in which the AKP's youth culturing project recruits and mobilizes young people. Focusing on a cultural practice with deep roots in the history of Sunni Muslim practices of community building, it explores *sohbets'* pedagogical potential at the increasingly blurry intersection of piety and political mobilization in contemporary Turkey.

Not limiting the analysis to the informational content that *sohbets* mediate to their audience, this chapter focuses ethnographic attention to both their generic and contingent qualities to understand what makes them effective pedagogical contexts in the AKP's youth culturing program. As a pedagogical cultural practice, *sohbets* hinge on the idea that moral virtues and communal values are best transmitted through shared presence in an atmosphere of influence. Thus, the emphasis is on emulation of such virtues through repeated and regular participation. In practice, they become contexts where commitment to the political collective is established and constantly reaffirmed.

The first part of the chapter focuses on the affective power of face-to-face *sohbets* in the AKP's youth culturing program to recruit young people into a generation that it aims to cultivate.

[53] For more on the project of cultivating pious generations, see (Lüküslü 2016, Alemdaroğlu 2018, Gençkal Eroler 2019).

It demonstrates that the face-to-face and informal relationships made possible by *sohbet* contexts become tools of influence in the hands of youth workers to establish trust and cultivate individual desires to morally transform; which then provide the basis for imagining a community of shared values and aspirations. The second part addresses repetition as a central requirement of *sohbet* attendance and explores the formal and narrative patterns that repeat across different *sohbet* contexts. It shows that repeated and regular exposure to such patterns are more central to *sohbets'* pedagogical objective to shape individual judgments and orientations than the informational content they mediate. Throughout, the chapter argues that recruitment of youth into the political collective through *sohbets* occurs through influence enabled by shared presence in affectively-charged contexts in which certain authorities are upheld and virtues are performed.

Cultivating Desires to Get Influenced: *Sohbet* as a Pedagogical Cultural Practice

At the *Esenler Gençlik Merkezi,* the most frequent extracurricular activity offered to youth was the *sohbets*, mostly led by Cemal Hoca, the head of "The Department of Women, Family, and Youth Services" at the Esenler Municipality, which also oversaw the EGM. Cemal Hoca was in his fifties with a degree in Theology who had spent nearly two decades in Germany as a "family and youth counsellor" and a registered preacher (*vaiz*) tasked by the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) to serve the Turkish-German Sunni community before returning to Turkey a couple of years ago. His experience in guiding youth on issues of morality and traditional Turkish-Islamic moral values as well as on navigating the modern secular life made him a popular figure within the EGM circles. He covered a wide range of themes and issues in his *sohbets* including effective ways of Muslim organizing, traditional civic values, how to avoid sins and be good Muslims, how to form and maintain a good marriage and family, and so forth.

On a Thursday evening towards the end of the month of Ramadan in 2017, I joined around two dozen male high school students at the EGM's divan for Cemal Hoca's *sohbet* on the characteristics of the Muslim personality. Except for a few, most of us chose to sit on the floor, and when Cemal Hoca arrived he also decided to sit on the floor that evening because it felt more "brotherly and sincere" ("*samimi*"). After making sure little chats were over and everyone was ready, he began with reciting several verses from the Quran in Arabic, followed by a story of a sick Jewish boy who was visited by the Prophet Muhammed. After asking how he was and praying for him, Muhammed invited the boy to become a Muslim. The boy was perplexed; he looked at his father standing beside him as though he was asking for his opinion. The father urged his son to accept Muhammed's call, and the boy declared he converted to Islam. The Prophet prayed for the boy, and then left his residence. The moral of the story, as Cemal Hoca set out to explain, was that the Prophet was such a moral authority in his time that even a non-Muslim father would allow his son to convert to Islam out of his respect for Muhammed. It was more about how he embodied his message as a human being than about what he told.

"A Muslim is a role model for others with his actions and morals," he rephrased his first point, and for us to become such role models we needed to follow the example of the Prophet and his companions. To do so, we first needed to become good human beings. In line with his general style of giving *sohbets* in which he tried to engage the listeners as much as he could, he asked the audience how Allah in the Qur'an defined human's original nature, by starting the well-known verse "Lekad halaknel insane fi…" and pausing before the end so that the audience would complete it. After several incorrect jabs, one of the students gave the correct answer; "*ahsen-i takvim*." "We created Man in the best stature," he repeated the verse in Turkish, and asked us to think about it for a second. He explained that it was only the potential given to us by

creation and we as Muslims were supposed to act on that potential and aspire to become better. "You know, when you are born, you are zero km, you are original," he liked to go back and forth between an Arabic-heavy, scholarly language and a more contemporary and youthful one. "This is why you should be mindful of what you do with what is originally given to you and adorn your life with good morals ("*güzel ahlak*"), and the best measure of it would be whether you can inspire others to the right path through your actions as well as your way of being."

Typical of most *sohbet* contexts, he invited the listeners to introspection, both as individuals and as a community of believers. This is often accomplished through negative examples from contemporary Muslim behavior. He had lived in Germany for nearly two decades as a family and youth counselor and he liked to tell stories and give everyday life examples from his time there. This time, it was an anecdote about a Turkish-German bank employee's exchange with his Turkish friend in the presence of a "Western-looking" customer. The two Turks were conversing in Turkish while the "non-*schwarzkopf*" (he occasionally threw in German words like "schwarzkopf" followed by its Turkish translation both to stir curiosity among the audience and to establish authority) customer was waiting for his turn. The employee kept ignoring the white customer to the point his visiting friend got uncomfortable and warned him that he was waiting. "Let the infidel ("*gavur*") wait; they kept us waiting for too long," he dismissed his warning in Turkish. As this went on for a while, the white man pulled a book from his pocket, the Qur'an, and started reading a passage on proper Muslim morals in Arabic followed by its German translation. "Now, I don't know its Turkish translation, but you should be able to understand what it is talking about here," the white man calmly seized the moment. The Turkish employee got embarrassed by being lectured on Islamic morals by an infidel and he had to stop waiting him. The anecdote was over and the message was clear; Muslims should always act like good

Muslims as prescribed to them by the religious sources and only this way they could become role models for others.

As it was a Ramadan evening and those who wished needed to go to the tarawih prayer, Cemal Hoca would keep the *sohbet* a little shorter than usual. He elucidated the moral of his anecdotes towards the end. He said that there were around a hundred and fifty thousand young people in Esenler[54], and urged the attendants to feel responsible for these youth. "Even now, even on a Ramadan evening, you know that many of your peers are doing other things (i.e. engaging in sinful or immoral acts) but you are here! So, you are privileged, and you are supposed to feel that responsibility to guide them into what is right." "This is our duty to our homeland, our nation, and our state," he interjected his only overtly political message in that night's *sohbet* at the very end before praying for all of us to become better Muslims so that we could be role models to others.

Some of the themes and anecdotes that Cemal Hoca told at the *sohbet* were familiar to me from his other *sohbets* that I attended. One of the ongoing "seminar series" that year had the theme of "City and Civilization" ("*Şehir ve Medeniyet*"), and Cemal Hoca gave several *sohbets*/seminars as part of the series when there were no guest speakers. In one of them, the audience was a group of young women attending an Imam-Hatip school in the district. Since it was a larger and more formal event, it was held at the conference room of a nearby culture

[54] As described further in Chapter 4, Esenler is one of the densely-packed districts of Istanbul that received huge influx of internal migration from different parts of the country after the 1960s. Its fast exponential growth turned it into a municipality of its own in 1994 and it has a population today that exceeds half a million. Although there was not district-specific age-based population statistics available, the administrators at the Esenler Youth Center estimated that there were around a hundred and fifty thousand youth in the district that they were responsible for and they liked repeating that figure. The category of youth in this context included those who were schooled from the primary school to the college level as well as those under the age of 25 who were unschooled. Accordingly, the youth branch of the municipality tried to design different programs for youth at different levels of education and based on whether they were employed or unemployed.

center, the facilities of which the EGM occasionally used. It was thus called a "lecture" ("*Şehir ve Medeniyet Dersleri")* and I was able to attend as a male since it was not an informal, exclusive *sohbet*.

The conference room had a stage and stepped seating with the Turkish flag along with the banner of Esenler Municipality in the background. After being formally introduced by a host, Cemal Hoca stepped up into the stage and began talking with good wishes and prayers for the audience in Turkish. This time, there was no reciting of the Quran or prayers in Arabic, and he delivered his lecture standing and walking around the stage with a microphone in his hand.

The theme of the lecture was again embodying good morals in an exemplary way, but he had longer time (45 minutes) and his audience was mostly young women. In line with his style, he tried to engage his audience by asking questions and make his speech as "youthful" as possible by making references to youth's lives and "speaking youth's language" with sentences like "being a Muslim needs to be *non-stop*" or "God's grace is always *online*." He told the anecdote about the Turkish-German bank employee again; but this time he added the message that "we should be able to read the word of God," since his audience was students from an Imam-Hatip High School with curricula heavy with Qur'an and Arabic courses.

"You are Imam-Hatip students!" "We are Muslims!" "You are young ladies ('*hanım kız'*)!" He frequently used exclamative statements like these aimed at defining the audience as part of a collective thereby calling for them to feel responsible as required by what that identity is thought to entail. As this was a longer lecture with the specific theme of "living in the city in a civilized[55] way," he elaborated on his message on embodying good morals by focusing on cleanliness especially when using the urban space.

[55] See Introduction and Chapter 1 for how the notion of *medeniyet* is articulated in such discourses.

Similar to his *sohbet*, he relied on examples of negative behavior *of others* to construct the audience as a collective of privileged and, thus, responsible subjects: "I see young people in our district idling around on street corners and when you pass by them you see piles of garbage around them; beverage bottles, sunflower seed shells, packing wastes, everything;" he distinguished the audience before turning to his admonishments: "But you are young ladies from Imam-Hatip (*'İmam-Hatipli hanım kızlarsınız'*) and you must know the hadith: 'cleanliness comes from faith.' Your classrooms, for example, should be spotlessly clean! The cleaning staff in your school should fail to find anything to clean up in the spaces you use!" In line with his narrative method of going back and forth between different time periods and places, he wrapped up his point on cleanliness by again telling an anecdote from a non-Muslim context, Germany. "Let me tell you a story so that it sticks in your minds better. You know Germans like to drink this alcoholic drink called beer. One night when I was there, I saw a drunk man lurching on the sidewalk towards me. You naturally get nervous when you see such a person because you don't know what they are up to. But this man surprised me by stopping and leaning against the wall when somebody was about to pass by him to signal that he was no danger. I was impressed and wanted to follow him for a while. I saw his bottle was empty, but he did not throw it out on the street; he kept it until he found a garbage can and threw it in it. You see, even a drunk man has such respect for others living in his town. Why can't we be like him? We as Muslims should do even better."

Each *sohbet* context might lend itself to a detailed analysis as a particular speech event, yet my interest in this chapter is primarily in the patterns shared across different *sohbet* contexts to explore why there is so much emphasis on *sohbets* in the AKP's youth culturing program and what is accomplished through them. As detailed in Chapter 3, the self-described mission of the

Esenler Youth Center is to cultivate a "vanguard" youth generation ("*öncü gençlik*," or as in its attempt at branding: "*Mihmandar Gençlik*"), which underlines the emphasis in the AKP's youth program on the need for a large-scale transformation in youth cultural and political practices. I observed that *sohbets* are seen as the primary tool at the disposal of youth culture workers, which is hoped to bring about such a transformation. The EGM's rather poetic tagline on social media demonstrates the importance attached to *sohbets*: "We work for the youth of national and moral character knot-by-knot through *sohbets*" ("*ilmek ilmek sohbetlerle milli ve manevi özellikli gençlik için çalışıyoruz*"). How are *sohbets* instrumental in instigating individual and collective transformations?

First and foremost, *sohbets* provide venues for recruitment. At the EGM, attendance in *sohbets* is seen as an indicator of where a young person stands in relation to the center's mission. In other words, it is of value in and of itself as a sign of one's openness to become part of the collective of youth that the center aims to cultivate. In their meetings with student representatives, teachers/guides carefully document who in their schools or grade levels attend the *sohbets*, and encourage the representatives to invite more students to them.

The EGM's SohbetBus (Figure 9) functions for the same purpose of luring more youth into *sohbets*. In fact, in the wider conservative Sunni community in Turkey, the very act of frequenting *sohbets* is regarded as a measure of one's piety, whereas regular attendance in a particular *hoca*'s or t*arikat*'s *sohbets* is seen as the prime indicator of one's allegiance to a certain religious path or community. With the AKP's increased dominance and control over religious groups especially after 2011 (see Chapter 1), the pedagogical function of *sohbets* has been increasingly integrated into its youth culturing agenda.

Figure 9. A youth sohbet on the SohbetBus

For example, *sohbets* form the backbone of community-building activities at the local level offered by the umbrella organizations such as Turkey Youth Foundation (*Türkiye Gençlik Vakfı*/TUGVA) and Turkey Youth and Education Service Foundation (*Türkiye Gençlik ve Eğitime Hizmet Vakfı*/TURGEV) that the AKP formed to control the field of informal education, which had previously been dominated by the Gülen Community. Along with dozens of other organizations affiliated with various religious groups, they oversee hundreds of student dorms across the country and regularly organize youth-oriented events like summer camps, school visits, trips, or contests, which often feature *sohbets* on subjects of piety. While these organizations are formally separate from the public school system, they also increasingly

cooperate with the Ministry of National Education and public universities, and hold *sohbets* in public schools, which occasionally draw backlash from some secular students and parents.[56]

Why are *sohbets* so important and how are they different from similar speech events like a conference or a lecture? On its international website, the Rifai Sufi Order provides the following description:[57]

> *The literal meaning of the word 'Sohbet' is conversation. In Sufism (tasawwuf), Sohbet is an essential spiritual practice. It is a spiritual transaction between the murshid and the murid, which relies on ancient oral storytelling traditions and practices. Mystical knowledge and devotional love is transmitted during Sohbet in such a way that it attempts to go beyond the knots of the rational mind and connect the hearts of the seekers. Sohbet is a spiritual transmission, a cleansing of the soul and a meeting of the hearts. It is held in total sincerity, respect and trust. Sohbet with the murshid heals, educates and matures the murid. Through Sohbet, the murshid works on his murid like a gardener tending to his garden with utmost care and compassion. From the metaphysical to the very physical, Sohbet helps us reflect on our daily lives and our inner states, to guide us in our search for a sense of unity with Allah.*

In his ethnographic study on the *sohbets* performed in a particular Naqshbandi Sufi order in Istanbul, Brian Silverstein (2008) defines a *sohbet* as a discursive practice oriented towards disciplining its participants (i.e. cultivating moral dispositions in them) through companionship. Although in contemporary Turkish *sohbet* literally means conversation, the term derives from the same Arabic root as the word *sahaba*, "companions," which emphasizes co-presence and companionship over speech. Thus, Silverstein translates *sohbet* as "companionship in conversation" (2008: 121). Drawing on anthropological work attentive to the pragmatics of language, he addresses *sohbet* as a "discipline of presence," arguing that it is not adequately

[56] In one of such instances, students at the prestigious Kadikoy Anatolian High School organized a demonstration during their lunchbreak to protest "the pressure to attend religious *sohbets*" coming from some of their peers allegedly backed by the school administration. See: (http://www.diken.com.tr/kadikoy-anadoluda-dini-sohbet-baskisi-ayaklanan-ogrencilere-okuldan-atma-tehdidi/)

[57] https://www.rifai.org/sufism/english/sufi-practices/sohbt/

analyzable in terms of the information conveyed in the speech involved. With this Sufi order's adoption of radio as a *sohbet* medium, Silverstein observes that *sohbet* on the radio "becomes simply a lesson" (2008: 142), as it is now freed from its disciplinary function that relied on shared presence in a *sohbet* context and the shared background of Islamic norms supposed to be taken for granted by its participants. In other words, the entire context of a *sohbet* is transformed when it is broadcast on radio and its quality as disciplinary discourse turns into simple Islamic content.

The youth guides at the EGM had an intuitive sense of why attendance in *sohbets* mattered. The information conveyed through *sohbets* is surely of importance, yet it is secondary to *sohbets'* function of bringing people together in an intimate environment. I witnessed several times youth, faced with insistent invitations from youth guides to attend a scheduled *sohbet*, asking for it to be recorded so that they could listen to it in their convenient time. Such demands were declined, not necessarily because the youth guides did not trust them that they would sit down and listen to the *sohbet* later, but because they knew that coming together at the same time and place was more important than the informational content of a *sohbet*. This is why regular attendance in *sohbets* were always encouraged, and the short *sohbets* on the SohbetBus almost always ended with invitations to the more proper *sohbets* at the center.

In this sense, *sohbets* produce "affective atmospheres" (Anderson 2009) of which their informational content is only one component. When I asked for their reflections on *sohbets*, the youth often stressed how *sohbets* made them feel rather than what they learned from them. In general, they particularly liked Cemal Hoca's *sohbets* as he made sure the listeners did not get bored and they left the *sohbet* "feeling better." His everyday life examples were widely

appreciated and his general style that the youth felt "closer to the language of young people" was praised by many of the youth I talked to throughout my fieldwork.

"He understands the youth's language," was the most common and frequent commentary on Cemal Hoca. *Sohbet* participants rarely commented on the informational content of a *sohbet*. Rather, judgments on whether one is a good *sohbet hocası* or not were made on the basis of their *sohbet's* affective power. When the youth talked about Cemal Hoca and his *sohbets*, they mostly expressed how they liked him as a teacher or how his *sohbets* made them feel better, peaceful, inspired, energized, committed, responsible, and so forth. The fact that he could "understand and speak the youth's language" was often interpreted as a sign of his sincerity ("*samimiyet*"), which is a highly important cultural value[58]. The opposite of a *samimi sohbet* would be one in which the speaker comes across as too distant, scholarly, inaccessible, domineering, admonishing, or lecturing.

Cemal Hoca also occasionally held *sohbets* for the youth's parents. As I also discuss in Chapter 4, some parents in Esenler have different expectations from their children or are skeptical of the youth center. Many youths told me that their parents were affected particularly by Cemal Hoca's *samimiyet* and agreed to send them to the EGM. His *sohbets* were also often credited for influencing youth to start praying regularly or to pick up the hijab ("*kapanmak*"). In all these instances, it was primarily the affective power of his *sohbets* rather than their informational content that instigated such transformations.

At the larger scale, the collective that youth are thus recruited into is a *sohbet*-participant community, within which they recognize themselves as individuals, and which, through repetitive participation, cultivates in them certain ways of recognizing authority as well as

[58] For more on "*samimiyet*" as a central social value in interpersonal relationships; see Lewis 2020.

engaging with authoritative statements. After all, growing up in a conservative Sunni environment, the youth *know* that a good Muslim *should* pray or fast during the Ramadan, but for them to embrace such practices they need to be *influenced*. An effective *sohbet* provides this atmosphere of influence when an adult authority figure performs their authority in a youthful and sincere manner.

For example, Serdar, a second-year college student who had attended the EGM for test preparation in high school, continued to attend the *sohbets* at the EGM even though he was not a regular EGM student anymore. He told me he had another regular weekly *sohbet* (of a Sufi tariqat) that he tried to attend as much as he could. He liked to continue joining the EGM *sohbets* because they were specifically aimed at young people. When I asked him about *sohbets*, he responded as follows: "I honestly feel the need for *sohbets*. The college life may get exhausting at times and estrange you from spirituality ("*maneviyat*") because the majority of youth there are so much interested in vanities ("*batıl işler*"). So, I try to go to *sohbets* even if I am not invited to, because otherwise I feel like I am also exposed to sins and vanities. I mean, I feel like *sohbets* protect me as someone trying to practice my religion."

Similarly, Fatma, a high school student at the EGM, told me the following: "My father regularly attends *sohbets* but I never thought they were for me until some friends here invited me to *sohbets*. Especially the *sohbets* of Cemal Hoca and Saliha Hoca (a popular female *sohbet hocası* who also wrote books and regularly appeared on conservative TV networks) have been quite influential on me. Of course we learn things in *sohbets* but more than that I feel peaceful and relaxed ("*huzurlu*"). Sometimes I feel like the angels are there with us because unfortunately we became quite self-centered [in modern age] but in a *sohbet* you are with others and you feel for them without expecting anything in return. It is such an interesting feeling I cannot quite

describe. After I started regularly attending *sohbets*, it became easier for me to practice the requirements of Islam."

This power attributed to *sohbets* in influencing people to transform their practices became clear for me when I one day joined Emrah on the SohbetBus parked in the main square of the district. He invited a group of high school students on to the bus as they were spending their after-school time idling around the square. After some small talk and introductions while tea was being served, Emrah led the conversation by anchoring it with some open-ended questions about their coursework, their future plans, whether and how they prepared for college exams, how they spent their leisure time, and how they used social media. Perplexed but also curious, the youth (three males and two females) slowly opened up as the conversation turned into their introspective talk mostly among each other. In general, they were pessimistic about their school success and future prospects as they listed various reasons from their family environments to economic obstacles or not being studious enough to succeed in school. Emrah saw the opportunity to talk in more detail about what they do at the EGM for youth like them.

"Most of our brothers and sisters were like you," he tried to assure them that their circumstances were not unique, before moving on to promoting the youth center: "But when they join our *ortam* (lit. environment or milieu) they see over time that they can actually accomplish certain things. It is always good to have others around who are in a similar situation and you get influenced from one another. If nothing else [i.e. material gains such as exam success], they get to hang out with good people and improve themselves from a spiritual angle (*manevi*[59] *açıdan)*. Otherwise, there are the attractions of earthly vanities that can easily keep you from focusing on

[59] In Turkish, *manevi(yat)* refers to anything other than that is material and earthly. In everyday speech contexts like this, it connotes spiritual, moral, and often religious aspects of life without specifically mentioning religion or piety.

yourself and your duties." To emphasize his point, he asked the rhetorical question, "for example, we are Muslims, right?" which met with nods of agreement. "We all are, alhamdulillah; but how many of us do you think can fully practice the requirements of our faith?" "Very few!" he answered his question this time before expecting a response from them. "It is because we forget to, or get distracted, or enticed away by other things. We *know* that we are supposed to do the good deeds and avoid sins, but we often don't. It is quite normal! But we should at least try to do our best and the best way is to surround yourself with good people."

At that point, he noticed the youth were getting slightly bored and uncomfortable and he did not want it to come across as a sermon, so he toned down a bit and made a joke about the still almost full tea glass one of the young women held. "If you don't like tea we also have instant coffee here or if you are lucky some days we may have some fruit juice," he said before wrapping up his short *sohbet*: "You are always welcome; we are here for you. As I said, you can come visit our youth center to see if you would like it there. Even only to hang out. I promise we have much better *abis* and *ablas* [older brothers and sisters] there than I am. We also have *hocas* who know what it is to be like a young person in this age. Our brothers and sisters especially love the warm atmosphere ("*samimi ortam*") of our *sohbets* there. If you feel like you want to change certain things in your life but find yourselves unable or unwilling to do so, then I would suggest that would be a good start." He gave them the EGM's address description and urged them to check out its Instagram page while seeing them off.

To sum up, *sohbets* are instrumental at the local level in recruiting young people into the collective of youth that the AKP's youth culturing program aims to create. Deeply rooted in the history of Sunni Muslim practices of community building, the face-to-face and informal relationships made possible by *sohbet* contexts become tools of influence in the hands of youth

workers to establish trust and cultivate individual desires to morally transform; which then provide the basis for imagining a community of shared values and aspirations.

So far in this chapter, I argued that *sohbets* as a form of cultural practice are integrated into the AKP's youth culturing agenda for purposes of youth outreach and recruitment. In the next section, my focus is on repetition as a central requirement of *sohbet* attendance, which I argue is where their political pedagogical appeal lies for the AKP's youth culturing agenda. More specifically, I argue that any specific information, story, or admonishment that an individual *sohbet* involves derives its meaning from being articulated in a structured medium, in which the emphasis is on the cultivation of subjective orientations rather than on conveying information.

Consistency and Repetition in *Sohbet* Participation

As spaces of pedagogy, *sohbets* not only introduce to its participants the authoritative texts, statements, and persons; they also instill in them, through repeated participation, certain ways of recognizing, judging, and engaging with such authorities. In this sense, they are distinct from a lecture in which the emphasis would be on the teaching and learning of certain subjects through cognition. They also rarely involve rational discussion or deliberative questioning and answering, except for sometimes in *fiqh* issues such as if something is *halal* or *haram*. This is because a pedagogical *sohbet* is meant to be a medium not for rational debate nor for sharing information, but primarily for the cultivation of judgements, sensibilities, and orientations through repeated exposure to its medium. Repetition is thus essential to *sohbet* attendance in terms not only of reaffirming the shared values and ideals but also of cultivating sanctioned ways of orienting towards them.

Anthropologists have noted the importance of local-level and face-to-face sociability in the ways of organizing of Islamic communities in Turkey especially when these communities were under strict control of the secularist state institutions in the pre-AKP period (Meeker 2002, White 1996). Following the Aristotelian theory of practice and moral education (MacIntyre 2013), anthropologists of Islam viewed pedagogical practices of piety akin to the Sufi *sohbets* as those of cultivating virtuous dispositions aimed at constructing ethical selves (Mahmood 2011, Hirschkind 2006, Silverstein 2008). Yet, despite having extensively intermingled with and radically transformed the religious groups in Turkey (Tugal 2009), the AKP remains to be primarily a political organization with specific interests within the political and state system of Turkey. Thus, the AKP-led youth-oriented *sohbets* raise important questions regarding the relationship of politics and piety in contemporary Turkey. Are such *sohbets* instances of "politicization of religion?" or "sacralization of politics" (Yabanci 2020)? Despite operating under the auspices of a political party, would they still be considered part of the Islamic discursive tradition (Asad 2003)?

I have argued so far that the affective, context-creating power of face-to-face *sohbets* are used in the AKP's youth culturing program to recruit young people into a political collective. How do the narrative contents that *sohbets* mediate contribute to the AKP's youth agenda? How do the AKP-led youth-oriented *sohbets* differ from those of Islamic -Sufi or otherwise- groups?

In the majority of *sohbets* I attended, there was little or no direct mention of contemporary political issues, and whenever there was, the issue was always covered from a religious and/or moral perspective. Such deliberate blurring of the boundary between religion and politics was apparent in the *sohbets* conducted by Cemal Hoca that I described earlier. His emphasis on self-discipline and cleanliness as well as his call to image-consciousness aimed at

influencing others through *being* rather than *saying* can easily be interpreted as discursive attempts at forming responsible subjects who embody civic virtues and subjectively respond to calls to political action. Yet such admonishments are almost always conveyed within discourses that are, at least on their surface, about correct forms of piety and being good Muslims.

The following vignette illustrates the potentials and limits of such an imbrication of politics and piety in AKP-led *sohbets*. Around two months after the *sohbet* of Cemal Hoca with which I started this chapter, I joined a *sohbet* by Ali Abi, a lower rank youth guide at the EGM in his late-20s, with a small group of male high school students at the EGM's divan. It was the week dedicated to remembering the averted coup attempt that happened a year earlier, and the EGM organized several activities in that vein. The theme of Ali's *sohbet* was "martyrdom."

In an unusual move, he began by announcing the affective atmosphere that he wished to create in his *sohbet* that day: "Brothers, as you know, I normally crack a joke or two and we laugh, but today that is not going to happen, because I want you to listen carefully in a serious manner ("*ciddiyetle*") and try to feel the weight of the stories and people that I will tell you about." Thus setting the tone of the *sohbet*, he began, in line with common practice, telling stories from the time of Prophet Muhammed. The first story was about a group of young boys who were enthusiastic about going to battle alongside the Prophet, yet he denied them "because they were underage," despite their insistent pleas. They wanted to go to fight and desired martyrdom so much that one of them tried to "trick" the Prophet by stepping on a stone so that he would look taller and grown-up enough to avoid getting denied joining the fighter squad due to his young age. Without elaborating what happened to him, Ali transitioned to the story of another *sahabe* by emphasizing those youth's bravery and desire to get martyred.

This time it was a young man named Nevfel, who was "a little eccentric," and was also apparently rather playful with the Prophet. According to Ali, one day Nevfel came to the Prophet and made him to promise that he would say "Amin!" to the prayers he was about to do. Muhammed agreed; and then Nevfel started praying, "Oh Allah, leave my wife a widow and my kids orphans." The Prophet was confused, yet he said "Amin," because he had promised to do so and probably figured out what Nevfel was praying for was martyrdom. Nevfel was so unflinching and brave that he always fought in the front ranks. On return from one battle, everyone thought that he was left martyred in the battlefield, yet no one had the nerves to give the bad news to his wife who was waiting to reunite with him. Whoever she asked about his whereabouts, they directed her to another fighter coming from behind. When this cycle came to an end and there was no one else coming from behind, all of a sudden Nevfel appeared from a distance on his galloping horse. Astounded at the sight of this miracle, everyone attested once again to Nevfel's bravery, who would later get martyred at another battle and thus be called "the twice-martyred *sahabe.*"

Ali was not as experienced and eloquent as Cemal Hoca in giving *sohbets* and his narrative did not flow as smoothly as he wanted it to be. It was clear from his performance that his was a prepared speech, and the youth did not seem to be radically moved by his stories either, yet he continued tying together different stories from different time periods to underscore his main message that we should aspire to desire martyrdom as those young people did. His other stories were about some youth who took part in the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the teenagers who defeated the Allies in the Dardanelles during the World War I, and an Azeri fighter who fought against Armenia during the Nagorno-Karabakh War in the early 1990s.

Similar to those of Cemal Hoca and most other *sohbets*, he contrasted these idealized stories with contemporary behavior: "Unfortunately, when you see news of martyrs on TV these days, they are simply mentioned in passing as mere numbers. Or parents pray 'God forbid!' when they send their children to the military. Why would you ask God to deny your son such an honorable status?" Surprisingly, he only briefly mentioned "the bravery of young people" during the popular resistance against the coup-plotters in July 15 of the previous year when he was praying at the very end of his *sohbet* for "us young people to take inspiration from such exemplary characters and to desire martyrdom as they did."

Despite his intentions he announced at its beginning, Ali's was not an example of an effective *sohbet* in terms of creating an atmosphere of strong emotional resonance. The content of his narrative can be analyzed as symptomatic of the "nationalist turn" of the AKP especially after the failed coup attempt of 2016 in that he included an Azeri figure in his chronotopic list of idealized figures. In isolation, his speech may even resemble one in an indoctrination camp or a call-to-arms harangue. However, my argument in this chapter is that a *sohbet* as a single speech event becomes meaningful and effective only when considered as part of a much wider genre of *sohbets*. In other words, the pedagogical power of a *sohbet* comes not from its individual narrative content but from it being part of a cultural practice that works through repeated participation.

In this sense, even if Ali's *sohbet* was not powerful in terms of instigating an immediate visceral response from the audience, it still was effective in terms of exposing the young audience to a narrative that laid out what one should aspire to and hold in high regard as a member of the wider community of believers. It was a reaffirmation of *the sohbet* as a venue to cultivate subjectivities, of the authority of the *sohbet hocasi* as someone authorized to speak, of

martyrdom as a religious and civic virtue, of the Prophet and his Ashab as ideal figures and moral guides, and of membership in the imagined community of believers as the source of meaning to one's actions.

Thus, Ali's *sohbet* fulfills a pedagogical function primarily as an instance of an endlessly repeated cultural practice rather than a single lecture. In this sense, while one function of *sohbets* is laying out what values and practices one needs to aspire to and avoid as lectures, their pedagogical appeal comes primarily from their power to cultivate the desired subjective orientation (i.e. aspiration or avoidance) towards those values and practices. That is, the ultimate transformation expected to occur through repeated attendance in *sohbets* has less to do with whether one embodies these values and practices or not than with whether one becomes part of the imagined community of shared orientations.

While different *sohbets* mediate different narrative contents, they often share a common temporal infrastructure. Along with the generic qualities of *sohbet* contexts discussed in the previous sections, this temporal infrastructure is central to the repetitive pedagogy of *sohbets* that is aimed at community building. In youth-oriented *sohbets*, as exemplified by the *sohbets* that I analyze in this chapter, an ideal state (most typically from the time of the Prophet Muhammed but also occasionally from different -mostly Ottoman- periods of Muslim glory and/or moral superiority) is contrasted with the plight of contemporary Muslims or negative examples from contemporary Muslim behavior. The vast distance between the ideal and the actual is emphasized; and the audience is positioned right in that gap. Through narrative techniques that invoke the collective "we" that interpellate the audience into certain taken-for-granted identities, the audience is often distinguished from "some others" who are less conscious of ideal moral

values or are in outright ignorance. The desired effect is to orient the audience towards the ideal and away from the actual.

As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 3, the identification of a troubled present that needs to be overcome along with the constant discursive emphasis given to the imperfections and failures are significant techniques employed in the AKP's youth culturing program to recruit young people into a political generation. This temporal infrastructure of *sohbet* narratives derives from and reproduces the historical master narrative, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 1, that is aimed at delineating a political collective thereby giving meaning to individual actions.

In short, while different *sohbets* often differ in their narrative content and affective power, it is primarily their generic, context-creating features that make them effective pedagogical tools in the hands of the AKP's youth workers. More specifically, the organization of authority (of persons, texts, and ideals) as well as the narrative infrastructure that are repeated across different *sohbet* contexts are what define them as primary tools for youth recruitment into a political collective.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined *sohbets* as a form of collective cultural practice that stands at the intersection of piety and politics as articulated in the AKP's youth culturing program. I argued that the political appeal of *sohbets* lies less in their narrative content and more in their organization as a distinct genre of speech event that opens up an affectively charged space in which consistent and repeated participation is essential. Thus, *sohbets* become voluntary contexts of influence in which certain authorities are upheld and a community of shared feelings and aspirations is imagined.

The community thus imagined is a *sohbet*-participant community, which the AKP positions itself within as its main political agent. As a particular form of collective cultural practice that has much deeper roots than the AKP itself, *sohbets* offer face-to-face, unmediated, and exclusive contexts that make them prime venues for recruitment in the AKP's youth culturing program. As they operate on the basis of consistent participation, *sohbets* also become contexts in which commitment to the political collective is constantly reproduced and reaffirmed. Ultimately, this chapter argues that *sohbet* contexts lie at the core of the intricate relationship between the AKP and deeper-rooted Sunni religious communities in Turkey, as well the AKP's project of cultivating a pious generation.

Chapter III
"Unfortunately, We Have Failed to Establish Cultural Power:" Failure as A Productive Discourse and The Push to Cultivate A Vanguard Generation

"All that we try to accomplish is expand these kids' horizons," told Erhan, a 35-year old history teacher with mid-level administrative duties at the youth culture center in Esenler, a working-class district on the European part of Istanbul. We were discussing the "culture trips" and the "leadership course" he was planning to organize for the upcoming year. "Unfortunately, most of our parents are very narrow-minded. I mean, they are decent and pious people but sometimes it is very difficult to convince them that what we are trying to do here is good for their kids' future. Most are reluctant to send their daughters to school or want their children to start working and earning money as soon as possible. Okay, they are poor, but they also have this limited traditional mindset."

The parents Erhan was referring to are first- or second-generation rural-to-urban migrants. Esenler is one of the largest and densely-packed districts of Istanbul with a population exceeding half a million that became a municipality as recently as in 1993 following the waves of large-scale migrations from different parts of the country. It is one of the strongholds of the AKP, which consistently received above sixty percent of the vote in the district.[60] The parents that Erhan critiqued are predominantly Sunni conservatives who generally sympathized with the youth center, because it was run by the AKP-led municipality. However, Erhan saw their inability to grasp why their kids need education and cultural uplifting as an obstacle in front of the youth center's mission. "We talk about the richness and glory of our civilization and how we

[60] The AKP has historically had a strong appeal among the urban poor, especially Sunni-Muslims. For the relationship between the AKP's grassroots mobilization and urban poverty, see (Delibaş 2014, Tuğal 2009, Doğan 2016, Şentürk 2016).

need to rediscover it, yet we are still dealing with this provincialism," he continued his rant before shifting his critique to the young people themselves: "Sometimes I am really disappointed. I mean, there is the metro line and all kinds of transportation, but we come across youth who have never been to central Istanbul or to the Bosporus. We try to show them what is beyond their limited environments. We organize these trips and take them to different places but what is more important is to change their mentality." He then added that the mission to "expand youth's horizons" and to "change their mentality" requires control and guidance: "But also, they need guidance. I mean, you cannot just let them go different places and explore what they want. The world is filled with a lot of bad things that are really tempting and these young people would be ruined if they don't learn how to distinguish between good and bad. That is unfortunately what happens with most of them."

Erhan's analysis above neatly outlines the main concerns and tensions that characterize the AKP's youth culturing program. As members of a power-centric political movement viewed by many of its followers as a pioneer for the Muslim world, AKP-affiliated culture workers like Erhan see their task as training well-qualified and competitive generations who are also pious and loyal to the AKP's political ambitions. However, as diagnosed by Erhan above, this is a very difficult task that often fails to yield desired outcomes. Focusing on ethnographic instances in which the terms and measures of success and failure of conservative youth culturing are reflected on and negotiated by both youth culture workers and young people themselves, this chapter demonstrates that "failure" as a diagnostic discourse is an integral, productive part of the AKP's youth culturing program.

The AKP's nearly-two-decade rule has been a period of upward mobility for many Sunni conservatives[61], and an accumulation of unprecedented levels of political power and economic wealth for its elite. However, the dominant narrative among this elite is that the progress made in the political and economic fields is unmatched with that made in the fields of culture and education.[62] In Gramscian terms (1971), this oft-repeated self-criticism points to the AKP power-holders' desire to fully conquer the social mechanisms of consent as they have done with the means of coercion.[63] Along with such elite concerns over hegemony, this narrative also underscores the perceived need to have well-educated and qualified subjects who are also loyal to the AKP's political collective. Even though the AKP has consistently managed to collect the majority vote in elections, its supporters have felt that they were in the minority in influential positions, especially in the media and state bureaucracy, in comparison to the Kemalists, nationalists, and Gülenists.[64] Erhan's desire to *liberate* youth from their parents' "traditional" attitudes stems from this collective self-perception of relative weakness in terms of cultural influence and educational qualification.

This urge to convert political power and economic wealth into cultural influence led to the channeling of massive state resources to a myriad state-sponsored projects ranging from art

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[61] Although Sunni Muslims formed the backbone of the AKP's support base, it consistently achieved garnering support of larger coalitions (cf. Tuğal 2015).

[62] Especially since the Gezi Park Uprising in 2013, this rhetoric has become commonplace. President Erdoğan lamented his political movement's "failure" in culture and education at almost any related event since then (HaberTürk 2015, AlJazeera Turk 2017, EuroNews 2018, Cumhuriyet 2019, Bianet English 2020).

[63] Within the pro-AKP intellectual circles, the issue is addressed through the notions of "cultural power" ("*kültürel iktidar*"), "intellectual power" ("*fikri iktidar*") or "cultural hegemony" ("*kültürel hegemonya*") (cf. Bora 2018).

[64] While this has been the dominant perception, it is impossible to find statistics on people's political commitments within the state bureaucracy. However, the massive purge that followed the failed coup in 2016 revealed some insight into the depth of Gülenist presence across government sectors as well as geographical regions. See *Foreign Policy*, The Geography of Gülenism in Turkey, March 18, 2019. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/18/the-geography-of-Gülenism-in-turkey/

For a couple of studies that addressed the community from a critical distance, see (Hendrick 2013, Turam 2007). For the coup attempt and its aftermath, see (Dalay 2016, Yavuz and Balci 2018) and the new security paradigm that emerged in the post-coup era, see (Şen, forthcoming).

biennials and media outlets to universities and youth-oriented organizations.[65] As I outlined in more detail in the Introduction, the AKP turned less willing after 2011 to share power and more assertive to transform society in order to ensure its future survival. Its efforts to transform the field of education is dubbed a project of "cultivating pious generations," whereas its cultural agenda is called neo-Ottomanism that predicates on the ambition to revive the authentic Turkish-Islamic civilizational (*medeniyet*) values. Since then, it has mobilized certain notions of Islamic piety and cultural authenticity in its youth-oriented policies in the hope that they would help train youth subjects who would defend, legitimize, and perpetuate the "material progress" achieved by the Islamist-conservatives in the past two decades.

However, recent reports indicate that these projects are *failing*, in the sense that they are producing results that are different from what they promised to achieve. That is, they fail not only to enact the desired universal transformation in youth cultural and political practices but also to adequately appeal even to the youth from conservative backgrounds. For example, two recent reports released by the pro-government Social, Cultural, and Economic Research Center (SEKAM 2016, 2018) warned about increasing levels of drug and alcohol consumption and decreasing levels of religious morality and piety among Turkey's youth. Similarly, the independent polling agency KONDA (2019) found that the ratio of youth who identified as "religious conservative" has declined from 28 to 15 percent over the past decade and that atheism and deism are on the rise. Furthermore, the AKP continues to score lower among youth in elections compared to other age groups (Özipek 2015, Alemdaroğlu 2018). In Erhan's analysis I presented above, these figures attest to the culture workers' *failure* to properly guide and control what young people aspire to.

[65] For an extensive study on seventeen AKP-affiliated youth organizations; see (Yabancı 2019).

Yet, they also affirm the general conception of history that underlies the conservative ideals of raising pious generations and reviving Turkish-Islamic civilizational values. In this conception, Muslims and Turks -represented at their highest strength and refinement by the Ottoman Empire- forcefully lost their "history-making power" within the last two centuries or so. This was due to their inability to adapt to changing times in the face of external assaults (i.e. Western imperialism) and internal betrayal (i.e. Westernism). Even though the AKP's rule in the past two decades is seen as a progressive episode, the present situation is far from perfect since Western political and cultural imperialism still reigns, not only through its attacks from outside but also through its corrupting influence within the imagined Turkish-Muslim collective. *Naturally*, youth and children are particularly susceptible to such influences and, thus, they need to be trained to be able not only to shield themselves but also to feel responsible for giving new life to the lost civilizational essence.

As I discuss in more detail in Chapter 1, the AKP's youth culturing program -and its politics of culture in general- relies on a constant repetition of historical narratives that I call the "neo-Ottomanist governmental historicity," which prescribes a certain sense of time thereby conditioning actors as individuals and members of a collective. The common feature of these narratives is that they construct the present as a deviation from the authentic course of history, separating the authentic past from an ideal future. The problems that Erhan identified above feed into this sense of problematic present that needs to be overcome. However, this is a major challenge that can only be unraveled through collective solidarity along with patience and persistent determination that extend over time.

In this chapter, I address the relationship between this collective temporality and the AKP's youth culturing program. Grounding the analysis in several ethnographic instances, I

interrogate what the AKP-affiliated youth as well as youth culture workers think of the present situation in terms of the success of the conservative youth culturing. In particular, I demonstrate how a collective sense of *progress* is intricately bound with that of *failure*, which as a diagnostic discourse[66] is an integral part of the AKP's youth culturing program. The widespread "failure talk" leads to a sense of urgency that calls for a stronger commitment to the collective cause so that the problematic present could be circumvented. I demonstrate that a common response to this perceived failure is focusing on raising the "vanguard generation" ("*öncü nesil*") that will take up the challenge to pave the way for a better future.

Istanbul Youth Festival: A Great Achievement or a Spectacular Failure?

In May 2017, a consortium of pro-government youth organizations led by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's Youth Assembly organized the second Istanbul Youth Festival, the largest of its kind in Turkey. For three days, more than three hundred thousand youth visited the festival space.[67] Sponsored by numerous public and semi-public corporations such as Turkish Airlines and Turkish Radio Television (TRT), it was inaugurated by President Erdoğan and visited by prominent AKP figures who are active in the field of youth culturing, most notably Bilal Erdoğan, the president's son, and Berat Albayrak, the president's son-in-law who was also the Minister of Finance. Participation was free of charge and voluntary, although most of the visitors, especially high school students, were bussed to the festival from their schools.

The space where the festival was held had symbolic resonances. The Yenikapı Meeting Area ("*Yenikapı Miting Alanı*") is one of the AKP's signature urban projects in Istanbul. Located

[66] I take my clue here from James Ferguson's (1994) analysis of the productivity of a dominant failure discourse inherent to the practice of development in Lesotho.
[67] https://Gençlikmeclisi.istanbul/Istanbul-Gençlik-festivali-ziyaretci-rekoru-kirdi

in Istanbul's historical peninsula, its construction began in 2012 and was completed within two years. It was heralded as a larger, safer, and cleaner alternative to the city's historic spaces for gathering and demonstration, mainly the Taksim Square. In fact, when the Taksim Square was occupied during the Gezi Park Uprising in 2013, the AKP held its counter-demonstration here. A huge area that could bring together more than two and a half million people[68], it has since become the AKP's show-of-force space where it held major gatherings such as the 2016 counter-coup rallies (Figure 10) and Istanbul's conquest commemoration festivities[69] (Figure 11).

Figure 10. People waving Turkish flags at the counter-coup rally at Yenikapı in 2016. Source: https://www.yenisafak.com/7-agustos-yenikapi-mitingine-kac-milyon-kisi-katildi-iste-rakam-h-2507171

[68] Nagehan Tokdoğan (2018), in her study on the affective politics of the AKP's neo-Ottomanism, lists the Yenikapı Meeting Area as one articulation of the AKP's "gigantomanic fantasies," along with other "giant projects" such as the Istanbul Airport and Kanal Istanbul, an artificial waterway project. Also see: (Adanalı 2015, Bora 2017).

[69] For analyses of the conquest celebrations as an Islamist attempt to redefine the national collective and create an alternative national symbolism, see: (Çınar 2001, Özyürek 2006, Öncü 2011).

Figure 11. On the 566th anniversary of the conquest that coincided the Ramadan in 2019, the AKP organized a mass (with the participation of 300,000 people per official numbers) "Ottoman-style tarawih prayer" at Yenikapı, a peculiar and unprecedented mingling of religion and politics in modern Turkish history.

Alongside the pavilions where mostly pro-government youth organizations and youth branches of local governments showcased their activities and made contacts with the visitors, the festival featured concerts, career talks, sports and e-sports tournaments, workshops, and several social media influencers' events. *Medeniyet* arts and sports as well as neo-Ottomanist symbols were ubiquitous; such as the Ottoman archery and wrestling tournaments (Figures 12&13), the Ottoman army band (*mehter takımı*) parade (Figure 14), workshops on marbling (*ebru*) and calligraphy (*hatt*), and an Ottoman language labyrinth in which participants were challenged to complete the track within sixty seconds following instructions written in the Ottoman to win an Ottoman map of Turkey as the prize. Also, it was the first festival after the failed coup of July 2016 and, thus, it contained conspicuous coup-related imagery such as the wax sculpture of Ömer Halisdemir, an officer who would eventually become one of the icons of July 15 after getting killed on duty that night seconds after shooting dead a pro-coup general, that greeted young people into the festival space (Figure 15).

Figure 12. Ottoman archery tournament at the Youth Festival.

Figure 13. I am being taught how to shoot arrows.

Figure 14. Kids' Mehter Band at the Youth Festival

Figure 15. Youth taking pictures with Ömer Halisdemir Sculpture

Despite all the conservative presence at the festival, by far the most popular attraction during the day (except the concerts in the evenings) was the area dedicated to e-sports where the Turkey chapter of League of Legends, a multiplayer action-strategy video game, organized competitive tournaments with the participation of several figures famed in the video game scene. It was a lively and interactive space where visitors not only got to watch the gamers play as well as meet and get autographs from famous ones, they could also win small prizes by participating in the trivia contest (Figure 16). For most of the visiting youth, it was surely the coolest thing at the festival to experience and to show to others on social media.

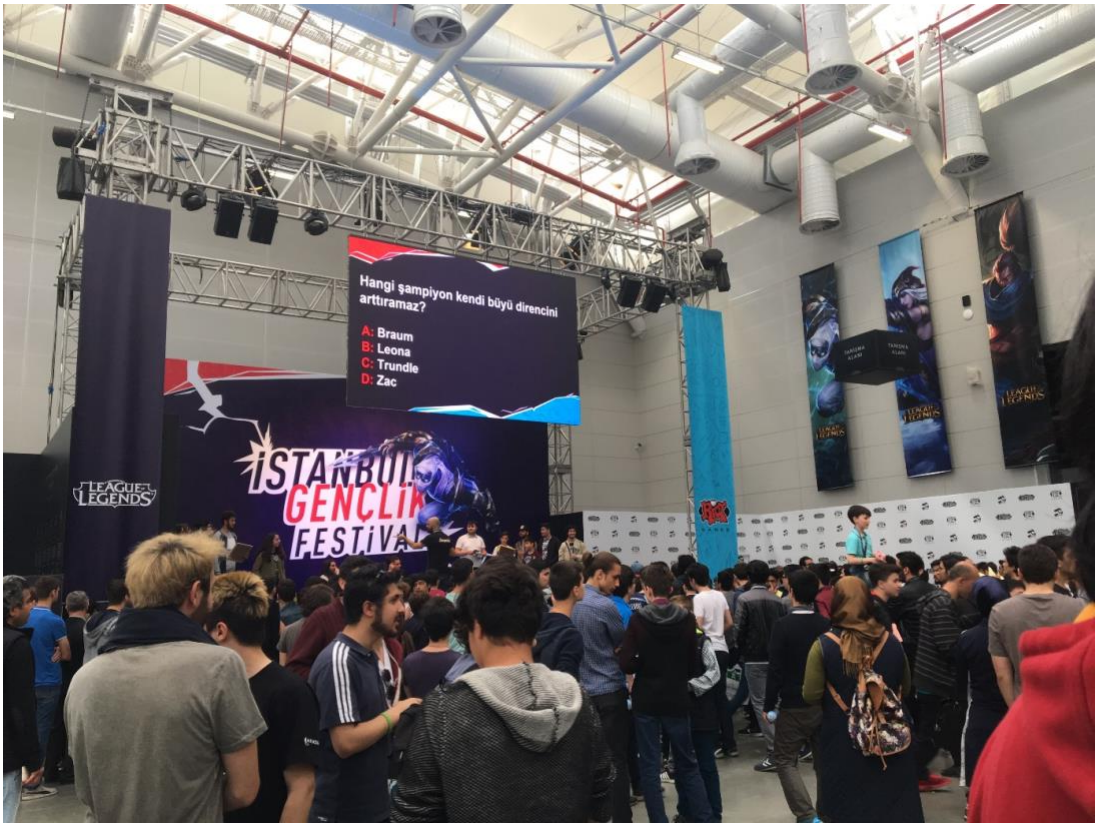

Figure 16. League of Legends Area at the Festival

While there were some other areas allocated to transnational corporations such as Nike and Red Bull, in the great majority were booths assigned to pro-government educational foundations, youth branches of local governments, and several conservative publishers. In one

such booth, I met Furkan, a college student affiliated with *Birlik Vakfi* (Unity Foundation), a prominent conservative foundation founded in the 1980s with roots dating back to the Islamist student movements of the 60s and 70s. As I was checking out their brochures, he stood up and approached me with a "*Selamunaleyküm*[70], my name is Furkan Şahin," making a gesture of respect and respectability as though he was buttoning his jacket. Upon learning I was a researcher of youth culture after some small talk, he invited me to sit down while ordering tea for both of us.

I had known about the historical significance of *Birlik Vakfi* as many top figures of the AKP hailed from its predecessor student organizations and took part in its founding. After we sat down, he briefed me about what the foundation is doing nowadays with regards to culture and education, and invited me to their social events. I learned that he was studying international relations and aspiring to be a politician. He was then active in youth-related activities and told me he regarded events like the festival as a training opportunity for what he saw as one his strengths, "people management," since he got to meet and talk to many people there.

Since he saw himself as somewhat centrally positioned in conservative youth culturing and was aspiring to take on more responsibility in the future, I asked him what he would make of the festival so far. He praised the efforts of those who organized it, seeing it as a step in the right direction. "When we think about it, this kind of an event would have been unthinkable 15-20 years ago," he recalled the pre-AKP period to underline the progress he perceived. He then moved on to the more recent past: "Even five years ago we could not do this. You know, we

[70] Literally means "peace be with you" in Arabic. In Turkish, it has historically indexed non-secular and traditional lifestyles and used to be socially sanctioned against especially in secular public spaces (cf. Navaro-Yashin 2002). One of the transformations in public life with the rise of the AKP has been the more widespread acceptance of such indexicals in the public sphere.

unfortunately had this Gülenist fitnah[71] ("*FETÖ fitnesi*") and they liked to control everything and would not allow "the authentic children of this nation" ("*bu milletin esas çocukları*") like us to do anything. Now this is the only second time this festival is organized. It is of course not perfect, but this is how you build something; I believe it will only get better over time."

Following up on his concession that the festival "is of course not perfect," I shifted the conversation to the apparent popularity of League of Legends among the festival-visitor youth and asked him whether he played the game to learn that he knew what it was but would consider himself as an amateur when it comes to video games. He thought it was a good addition to the festival, because it attracted youth who are "normally out of reach" of conservative organizations. Moreover, in his opinion, no young person would be attracted to an event that is only about spirituality/piety ("*maneviyat*"), and what mattered was the balance. Having League of Legends, thus, was not against the spirit of the festival, although he expressed his optimism that "we would have more to say one day on such fields," meaning that future generations would be able to produce games (and youth cultural products in general) that are more in line with Islamist/conservative values.

Nevertheless, he still had reservations. Lowering down his voice a bit, he made a hand gesture alluding to the other booths and said: "See these men in their seventies chitchatting and sipping their tea! Of course all the youth will hang at the gaming area! I don't blame them. Why would a young person go there? To listen to their admonishments ('*nasihat dinlemeye mi gidecek'*)? I mean, I don't mean to disrespect anyone but after all this is a youth festival; they need to relinquish to younger people." He was careful not to put the blame on any specific booth

[71] A polysemic notion with significant connotations within Islamic history, "fitnah" here refers to a divisive challenge to Muslims' unity.

or fellow organization, yet his general observation that not enough young people are given space and responsibility at the organizational level was his explanation to why most of the visitors spent their time at the gaming area. Implicit in his explanation was his conviction that youth culturing should be more youthful, and he recognized that there was much progress to be made in that regard.

It is exactly that belief in progress was what kept him committed to the imagined conservative collective and its ideals. He considered activities like the youth festival as early steps on a long path leading to a better future. After expressing his reservation, he returned to his general progressive narrative that he constructed through a comparison with the past: "Brother, there is also this: what we may not notice when we look at this event is that there is no alcohol here. Nor is there any organization making the propaganda of their perverse ideologies. Nor any brand distributing inappropriate ('*saçma sapan'*) stuff. Now, even if you look at it only from this perspective, I would call it progress ('*gelişme*')!"

Furkan's language of prevention is informed by a conservative/Islamist agitative discourse directed against "incentivizing of immoral practices" particularly in college campuses and youth-oriented events. Conservative youth activism often organized protests against certain practices in youth festivals and college campuses such as consumption of alcohol, LGBT visibility, or brands occasionally distributing free condoms on grounds that they are inappropriate and impermissible in such settings. As Furkan pointed out, now that the conservatives were more powerful, they could prohibit what they considered politically and morally inappropriate instead of only protesting them. He welcomed this *progress* in the negative sense, while he conceded that positive progress in the sense of shaping what youth desire and enjoy doing required more time as well as more efficient investment of resources.

My conversation with Furkan certainly led me to pay more careful attention to absences. The most conspicuous among them was that of any sign of Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, which would normally be expected to be ubiquitous especially in a youth-oriented "public"[72] space even under the AKP rule. To be sure, the festival occupied a peculiar place in the public-private dichotomy; it was organized under the auspices of governmental organizations and open to *the public*, yet it was dominated by pro-government organizations and excluded other youth-oriented entities that were deemed political outsiders, except for, as I mentioned before, several transnational companies considered beyond politics. Thus, when viewed from the standpoint of Turkish political contests over public visibility, Furkan was right that the youth festival was surely a conservative victory.

However, Furkan's analysis also exposed the AKP elite's anxiety over their ability to convert political and economic power to "cultural power." The organization of the festival space was regulated to make sure that there was no politically or morally subversive practices and imagery. Moreover, at the entrance to the festival space, visitors were required to register with their IDs, and they were x-rayed so that even if they managed to *smuggle* something like a bottle of beer or a rainbow flag into the area they could easily be identified and penalized. All these measures aimed at controlling how young visitors would navigate the space largely succeeded in creating a supervised environment, yet, as in the famous Foucaldian dictum "wherever there is power, there is resistance;" they also incited dissent or, more precisely, they inflected otherwise

[72] The notions of public and private have culturally-specific meanings in Turkey, and have been at the forefront of political contests over secularism and Islam (Göle 2010) as well as over the public visibility of symbols marked as nationalistic, secular, or religious, ranging from flags and statues to headscarves and beards (cf. Göle 2002, Navaro-Yashin 2002).

mundane acts such as kissing in public or consuming alcohol at a concert with subversive qualities.

In what follows, I describe one such instance of dissent during the youth festival before moving on to discuss how such instances are interpreted as tokens of failure by those committed to the ideals of conservative youth culturing. Similar to Furkan's recognition of a *not-so-perfect present* that is nevertheless leading to a better future, such narratives of failure reinforce people's commitment to their imagined collective's progress, which can be safeguarded only by acting in the present in creative ways.

The 'Wall of Dreams:' State Power and Youth Resistance at Istanbul Youth Festival

A couple of hours after I left Furkan's booth and kept touring the festival, the "failure" presented itself in a spectacular fashion. In the outdoor area across the Ottoman archery range, a pro-government organization put up a paper board called "Wall of Dreams" ("*Hayal Duvarı*"), on which young visitors were invited to express their dreams (Figure 17). As I approached to glance at the wall, I overheard one of the college students who oversaw the wall complain to another: "Look at this! We went to get some food and left this (the wall) unattended for like ten minutes and they ruined it!" The Wall of Dreams, as I would learn in a moment, was part of a bigger creative project: First, at least two people would be asked to discuss for a couple of minutes in front of a camera on the kind of future they would want for children and youth; and by the time they think they reached some sort of an agreement, they would be asked to write that dream in a couple of words wherever they see fit on the wall. The idea was to combine the edited footage of the interviews with the final picture of the Wall of Dreams into a media/art project. Yet it was now "ruined," and they did not know what to do with it.

Figure 17. The Wall of Dreams

What did they mean by "ruined?" Apparently, within the "ten minutes" they left it unattended, the Wall of Dreams was briefly turned into an unsupervised surface on which young people freestyled their ideas, commitments, laments, slogans, and also dreams. Many inscribed their romantic love on the wall, some wrote individual aspirations such as "I want a Harley Davidson" or "I want to ride a horse," whereas others just wrote down their names. The dreams

that were expressed in line with the instructions of the project were still visible: “I dream of a course on children’s rights,” “I want to open a science kindergarten,” or “I want to shape youth’s happy future.” Yet, what bothered the organizers most were the politically subversive slogans: “Freedom is everywhere #LGBT,” “Revolution is the only path forward,” “I dream of justice,” “Revolution: For a Socialist Turkey,” “Turkey will be free one day” (Figure 18).

I stuck around for about half an hour to see what would happen. I gave my own interview and wrote down my own dream in the meantime. It was already four in the afternoon, so the youth who were in charge decided to keep it the way it was for another hour or so, and see later what they could do about it. After all, within the larger context of the youth festival, the Wall of Dreams was a relatively humble student project and it being “ruined” for a short period of time did not amount to a huge scandal, particularly because it did not deal a serious blow to the visual order of the festival space.

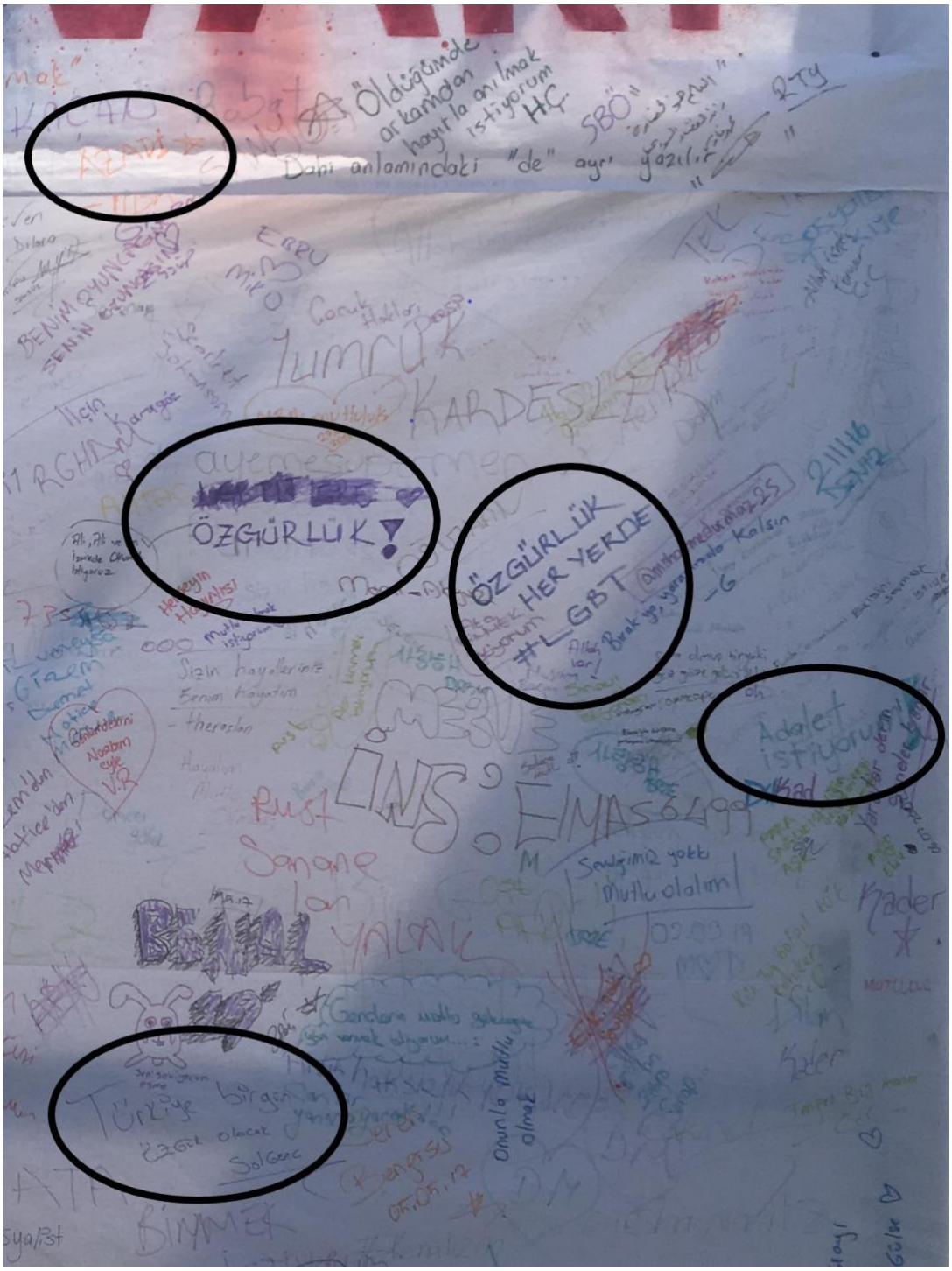

Figure 18. A closer look at the Wall of Dreams. Circles from top to bottom: 1) "Freedom" written in Kurdish with the star sign used by the Kurdish political movement, 2) "Freedom to the LGBTITs" with "LGBTITs" scratched out, 3) "Freedom Everywhere #LGBT", 4) "I Want Justice," 5) "Turkey will eventually be free."

The next day of the festival, I went straight to the Wall of Dreams. I saw that they hung a new paper board and were determined to protect it from unauthorized dreams that day. They had not decided yet what to do with the one from yesterday, because they did not want the dozens of interviews they had recorded to go to waste. They were considering either digitally editing out the "subversive dreams" in the final project or excluding the wall of dreams for that day altogether. I gave one of them my email and kindly asked her to send me the final product when they are done. Unfortunately, I have not heard back.

The Wall of Dreams offered a perfectly concise allegory of youth politics in contemporary Turkey. An increasingly oppressive and authoritarian political system making use of dominant social norms and adult concerns to condition what young people could and should aspire to and dream of. The first chance they get, however, youth voice their dissent and rush to express their unauthorized dreams and aspirations. It is what happened during the Gezi Park Uprising, and for different concerns and with different dynamics, with the Kurdish youth. Similarly, in elections, the AKP's prime measure of success, young people consistently voted against the AKP in much larger numbers than other age groups.

The case of the Wall of Dreams also confirms the AKP elite's anxiety over their failure to convert material power to cultural influence. Similar to Furkan's interpretation that I discussed earlier; while the AKP's political power succeeds in determining and sanctioning what is and is not permissible, the massive economic, political, and infrastructural resources allocated to the project of cultivating docility among youth fail to shape how the majority of young people orient towards the future. How do AKP-affiliated youth culture workers and youth interpret this "failure?" What kind of creative responses does it call forth?

In what follows, I demonstrate that "failure" is recognized by the AKP-affiliated youth culture workers as well as by the AKP-supporting young people. Interrogating the ways in which they make sense of and respond to this "failure," I argue that it is integral to the AKP's youth culturing logic, which inherits from earlier Islamist ideologies a sense of problematic present that could be overcome only by raising a "vanguard generation."

'Living the End Times:' Failure Talk as a Productive Discourse

Two of the people I met and toured the festival with the day I encountered the Wall of Dreams were two young men I had known from the youth culture centers in Esenler and Fatih. We met while I was hanging around the Wall of Dreams, and while we were having tea later, I asked them what they thought of it. Emre, a recent high school graduate who was then preparing for college entrance tests, shrugged at first as he seemed reluctant to talk politics, yet he then conjured up a common trope regarding youth's political practices that young people like to be unruly and go against the norms. He downplayed the political slogans expressing his doubt that those who wrote them would not really know what, for example, revolution meant. I could sense that it had unpleasant connotations for him, and he thought others would not have used it so easily if they had been aware of its weight. In his view, young people choose to express themselves in this way because it is cool, comparing the leftist slogans to the few right-wing and Islamist slogans we saw on the wall.

In Emre's view, it was a matter of education, or in this case the lack of it, as well as young people's obsession with aesthetic considerations (cool vs. uncool). Even though he was also young by any standard (he was nineteen), he constructed his own identity in direct opposition to the youth whom he saw as uninformed and cool-obsessed. "What do you think

needs to be done about this?" I asked. "We are supposed to warn them with soft words ("*tatlı dille*") that their path is the wrong one. You know the saying, 'with sweet tongue and kindness, you can lure a snake out of its hide,'" he responded with a Turkish saying, yet he immediately recalled another one: "But, you know there is this other saying that I heard recently and really liked; 'one who doesn't listen to good advice should be reprimanded, if that doesn't work either he deserves some bashing,'" he said with a humorous smile on his face before getting serious again: "I don't know, brother, they say there is always good and bad people and what matters is which side you are on. But I feel like there is more evil and indecency now since we are living the end times ('*ahir zaman'*[73]). All we could and should do is to make sure we are on the right side and trust the God for the rest ('*gerisini Allah'a bırakacağız'*)."

Hasan, who was majoring in history at a public university, jumped in and opined that it was completely normal to have "those kinds of youth," because in his view not everyone could have the degree of consciousness ("*bilinç*") to resist the temptations of our times: "Brother, all they care about is the opposite sex (*"karşı cins"*) or getting into college or gambling and drugs. I mean, of course not all of them, but this is the majority." The "consciousness" he talked about was exactly the consciousness of living in these times: "I think it is quite normal. Even among the AKP youth [he was active within the AKP's youth organization] I would say the 95 percent are like them. They join for material gain or for networking or because their parents want them to. I would say only five percent are like me; have an interest in knowing who we really are and what we are doing. And I believe five percent is enough. You don't need everyone to have the

[73] Apart from its theological meaning in Muslim eschatology, the idea that we are living in the "*ahir zaman*" is frequently deployed in popular Islamic narratives to explain a range of issues that are thought to be deviations from the ideal Muslim life and to praise the believers' commitment to the faith as it is more difficult to remain committed in the "*ahir zaman*" because of its seductive forces. It is thus a colloquial way of dealing with changing times.

knowledge and understanding (*"ilim-irfan"*); some people are pioneers and the rest are followers."

Both pious young men whose commitment to the conservative ideals are appreciated by their mentors at the youth culture centers, they distanced themselves from "the other youth" who were "corrupted by the seductions of our times." During my fieldwork, I heard such condemnations of widespread moral corruption among youth on numerous occasions. Certainly, such negative portrayals of the category of youth are not specific to the AKP youth or to the AKP-affiliated culture workers. As Comaroff and Comaroff (2005:20) suggest, "youth are complex signifiers, simultaneously idealizations and monstrosities, pathologies and panaceas." Similarly, De Boeck and Honwana (2005:2) suggest that "[children and youth] are often constructed from the outside and from above as a 'problem' or a 'lost generation' in 'crisis'." Valentine et al. (1998:4) highlight how the emergence and conceptualization of youth as a separate category is classed by suggesting that the increased preoccupation in the West of the middle classes throughout the nineteenth century with the need to "control working class youth as well as their own offspring" paved the way for attributing an unruly nature to youth, which resulted in framing youth cultures "in moral panics about 'gangs', juvenile crime, violence and so on." As these accounts suggest, negative portrayals of and moral panics about youth's cultural practices are consequential cultural discourses that are mobilized for certain pragmatic purposes and produce real life effects.

"What did a narrative about the widespread corruption among youth do for Emre and Hasan?" Their recognition that "the majority of young people are not politically and morally conscious" helped them construct their own identities in direct opposition to them. They counted themselves in the conscious and responsible minority, which they saw as quite normal and

natural necessitated by the conditions of the times we are living in. In other words, rather than inciting despair or cynicism, this recognition made them feel more responsible and committed to the political and moral ideals they subscribed to. I argue that this particular sense of being in the responsible minority is actively cultivated in the AKP's conservative youth culturing program. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed that youth culture workers as well as young people themselves constantly deployed the "failure talk" to make the distinction that Hasan made between pioneers and followers. In what follows, I demonstrate one articulation of this distinction in the form of a "leadership program" aimed at cultivating the "vanguard generation" that is hoped to "pioneer" future generations by re-establishing the broken link between the authentic past and the future.

'*Esenler'in Yüzleri*:' Raising a Vanguard Generation

A week later, I sat with Erhan at the Esenler youth culture center to continue planning the leadership program, on which he sought my opinions as I was a "youth expert from the US." We were joined by Eren, a 25-year-old teacher who used to work with Erhan in another district and now had an administrative role in the AKP's Istanbul-wide network for university students. Erhan introduced me to Eren, broadly pitching my research interests. After praising me for choosing to work on youth, Eren started talking about "the many problems" they face in youth organizing. In his view, the biggest problem was that there was not enough room for young people to participate in politics as older people were reluctant to make way for them. He praised President Erdoğan's recent efforts to lower the minimum age to stand for election to eighteen as well as the party's general "rejuvenation" ("*gençleştirme*") campaign, yet he complained that there was much progress to be made. I appreciated his comments and brought up the issue of the

youth festival held the week before to get their opinions on the youth participation in its organization stage.

Erhan said he was not satisfied with the degree of youth involvement in its organization as well as with the general attitudes of other districts towards the festival. “Most of them were there for the sake of appearances,” he lamented and began a lengthy monologue on how he always gave precedence to young people’s choices whenever he did something at the center. At one point, he recalled the advice of the Prophet’s son-in-law, Ali, to parents that God creates every generation for a different time period and that it would be a mistake to dictate and impose one’s own ideas to younger generations as they are meant to live in a different time period that naturally requires different principles and ways of living. “Exactly! How would those old people understand and speak the language of young people? They don’t. Then, they complain about what they do or wear and so on,” Eren weighed in with him. “Because of these problems,” Eren continued, “we are losing our touch with young people. Then they get tempted to some immoralities and wrongs (“*yanlışlıklar*”), you know these things, I don’t have to tell you, or turn towards some political extremes (“*aşırılık*”).”

They both acknowledged that the AKP was struggling with the youth vote. The reasons they presented in this short conversation were about the limited youth involvement in politics and the widespread bureaucratic mentality. Yet, similar to the remarks of Emre and Hasan, the students that I introduced earlier, they conflated their opinions on youth’s political practices with their morality. They saw their task as training young people on moral grounds, which they believed would lead to “correct” political practices. However, when these problems they identified in their youth organization are coupled with the demoralizing temptations that are available to youth, they *fail* to enact the desired change.

Eren left after an hour or so, and Erhan got to talk more about the leadership program that he was planning to organize. The program would target a select group of kids from sixth to ninth grade who would be trained across several years to "lead" not only the other kids in their cohorts but also the upcoming generations. They would get training in arts-culture, sports, and politics to improve their skills in reading and comprehension, public speaking and writing, decision-making under stress, time management, and so forth. The ultimate purpose of the program would be to make them feel responsible for and capable of guiding other youth, because, as Erhan believed, young people are resistant to adults' admonishments. They will be assigned books to read, movies to watch, public figures to meet, and important places to visit. These would be selected in collaboration with "intellectual and influential people such as educators and artists" in line with "our best national and moral/spiritual values" ("*milli ve manevi değerler*"). In short, they would be trained to be the vanguards ("*öncüler*") who would internalize ("*özümseyen*") what our civilization ("*medeniyetimiz*") offered for their present ("*kendi zamanlarına*") so that they could transmit them to future generations.

Erhan's leadership program would be a more systematic version of what they were already doing with high school students in Esenler. Since there were "dozens of schools and more than a hundred and fifty thousand youth living in the district," which -as he liked to frequently point out- was made up of lower-class and under-educated "traditional" people, what they were able to do for now was only to train a select group of kids, which they alternately called "school/classroom representatives," "guides" ("*rehber*"), or the "special group" ("*has öğrenciler*"). Erhan and his colleagues expected these youth to positively communicate the mission of the youth culture center to the other kids in their cohorts not only through discourse

but also by properly demonstrating their moral superiority ("*lisan-I hal ile*"). Erhan's vision was to institutionalize these efforts through the leadership program.[74]

By the time I completed my fieldwork in Esenler, Erhan's leadership program was still in the planning stage. A year later, I saw a news article[75] titled "*Esenler'in Yüzleri* (Faces or Hundreds[76]) to Become the Vanguard Generation," heralding the launch of a project that was in line with Erhan's vision. In the final project, a hundred sixth-graders were recruited to be given "tailor-made training [for seven years] in the fields of arts, culture, science, sports, and politics [to] pioneer future generations by staying true to their authentic civilizational and cultural values." Their first activity was visiting the tomb of Ömer Halisdemir, the military officer I mentioned earlier (Figure 19).

[74] Chapter II takes a closer look at the internal dynamics and youth training concepts of the AKP local governments' youth culture centers, as well as how they inherit and repurpose concepts and methods from earlier and contemporary Islamist/conservative non-governmental groups.

[75] http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/esenlerin-yuzleri-oncu-kusak-olmak-icin-cali-40907257

[76] In Turkish, the word "*yüz*" (plural "*yüzler*") means both "hundred" and "face." The branding made use of the word "*yüz*" to give multiple meanings: "Esenler's faces" underlines the representative role attributed to these youth as the "vanguards." On the other hand, "Esenler's hundreds" primarily refers to the number 100, because 100 kids were selected to the initial cohort and they will be assigned 100 books, 100 movies, and so forth. Furthermore, "hundreds," not as the plural form of "hundred," makes an implicit reference to the mystical "*gayb erenleri*" ("unknown saints"), referred to as "*üçler, yediler, kırklar*" ("threes, sevens, forties"), revered in many Sufi orders and mainstream Muslim folklore. While these unknown saints are believed to materially live among human beings, their spiritual dimensions are unknown to ordinary people. They are believed to be tasked with maintaining the spiritual order of the world (TDV Encyclopedia of Islam, 2008:81-83). This allusion implies not only that these kids are a choice group but also that they are expected to guide people without them necessarily knowing about it.

Figure 19. "Esenler'in Yüzleri" paying a visit to Ömer Halisdemir's tomb (Source: http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/esenlerin-yuzleri-oncu-kusak-olmak-icin-cali-40907257)

Erhan's plan and the subsequent realization of it as "*Esenler'in Yüzleri*" are responses to the perceived "failure" or -to put it more mildly- inadequacy of conservative youth culturing in properly shaping young people's political, cultural, and moral practices. The idea of cultivating a "vanguard generation" stems from a shared diagnosis of failure that is caused by internal and external factors, such as; the "provincialism and limited vision" of conservative parents who constitute the AKP's support base, adults' inability and reluctance to understand youth's concerns, the bureaucratic mentality that prevents youth culturing from producing desired outcomes, young people's penchant for unruliness and protest, and contemporary global culture that seduces youth to pleasure-seeking and immoral behavior.

Throughout my fieldwork, I heard people listing other reasons or different versions of the above, yet what interests me more than the reasons they listed is the widespread "failure talk." Blaming various reasons, they believe that it is impossible to enact the desired universal change in the present. However, these reasons do not intimidate or frustrate those committed to the

Islamist/conservative ideals. Since the present is so full of problems, the way to tackle them is to focus on training a "vanguard generation" who would bear the responsibility. The "failure talk" thus constitutes the pretext for constantly deferring a meaningful and comprehensive change to an indefinite future. I argue that this deferral lies at the core of the dominant conservative conceptions of youth, generation, cultural change, and education, which inform and shape the AKP's youth culturing program. In other words, what is preserved and transmitted to subsequent generations as tradition is exactly the mode of making sense of and orienting towards a hostile and far-from-ideal present.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that despite the AKP's ever-increased domination over Turkish politics which gave many Sunni-conservatives previously-unimaginable access to political power and economic wealth, a diagnostic discourse of collective failure is consistently circulated by variously-positioned actors with different affiliations to the AKP's sociopolitical network. A major field where such collective failure is the most pronounced is that of youth culturing, which is characterized by a collective ambition to raise generations loyal and committed to the AKP politics. I demonstrated, through various ethnographic instances, that those working in the field of youth culturing consistently complain about their failure to properly appeal to youth listing numerous reasons, while they recognize that the conservatives are much better off materially under the guardianship of the AKP rule.

Since the AKP is first and foremost a political organization with an ambition to fundamentally transform not only Turkish society but also the entire region, its approach to youth culturing is heavily inflected with power and domination concerns. In this approach, I

identified that the main axis of tension is between coercion and consent; or more specifically, sanctioning desired and undesired youth practices using its coercive power while also aiming to shape youth desires, expectations, and aspirations. While these two modes are not mutually exclusive, I demonstrated that the widespread narrative among those committed to the AKP's youth culturing ideals is that they are succeeding in sanctioning certain behaviors among youth whereas they are failing in shaping young people's aspirations.

This chapter focused particularly on the "failure" as well as the "failure talk," discussing both the implications of failure as well as the productivity of the widespread talk of it, which I analyzed as situated actors' ways of reckoning where they stand in the present in relationship to the collective ideals. I argued that failure as a diagnostic discourse is integral to the "neo-Ottomanist governmental historicity" that I analyze throughout this dissertation, by reproducing an antagonistic orientation towards the historical present in the collective temporality that informs the AKP's approach to political and cultural change. When inextricably bound with a sense of progress, it constructs the present as something that must be conquered yet also as unconquerable. This particular conception of historical process, thus, positions actors on a progressive line that is far from its destination as of yet. This way, it demands the defense of collective progress through higher commitment to the political community, while also calling for acting in the present in creative ways to perpetuate that progress. I presented the project of raising a "vanguard generation" as one such attempt to deal with the problematic present situation and to perpetuate the perceived progress recorded by the AKP's imagined collective.

Chapter IV
"The Future Will Be Even More Plentiful Insha'allah:" Navigating Youth in The Face of Powerful Promises and Risky Commitments

In late September 2017, it was a big day at Esenler Gençlik Merkezi (Esenler Youth Center/EGM), as the mayor of Esenler was scheduled to visit the center along with several other high-ranking figures within the AKP's Istanbul organization. Despite having been given a very short notice, the staff of the center were all present very early in the morning, with their nice formal dresses and reverent postures. The mayor finally showed in the afternoon accompanied by around a dozen other people. He toured the center while being briefed by senior administrators about the center's activities. Abdullah Bey, one of the recently-appointed administrators, offered the mayor to have some afternoon tea with a group of students in the center's meeting room, or *divan*. The mayor agreed, although he did not have much time as he said he was expected somewhere else.

The conversation began with some small talk and jokes to ease the nerves of those in attendance. The mayor praised the center's efforts without forgetting to add that there was much more to be done in the area of youth affairs. He distinguished between *talim* (learning/teaching) and *terbiye* (education/culturing/disciplining) and emphasized that it is the latter that is the more difficult -but also the more important- component of youth training efforts. Then, he asked the youth to introduce themselves and what they aspired to become in the future.

The students took turns in introducing themselves and stating what their aspirations. Since it is a question they had to constantly answer in their interactions with adults, their responses were well-articulated as they had rehearsed them many times before. The mayor

listened with occasional affirmative gestures to what the students stated they aspired to, sometimes further inquiring about their reasoning why they did so.

The gendered nature of the stated aspirations was obvious. Among the professions the young women said they aspired to were psychological counsellor, social worker, or a kindergarten teacher; whereas the young men said they aspired to become military officers, politicians, or assume managerial roles. While the mayor praised the students and congratulated their teachers, he made sure to add that "we needed to work harder and reach more youth," since as a nation we were "going through very critical times" and the recent events (referring to the coup attempt a year earlier and the wider Gülenist conspiracy) testified once again to "our nation's need for more of such authentic ["*yerli ve milli*"] youth not only in influential positions but also in every sector of the social life." Before ending, however, the mayor reassured the youth that all they needed to do was "to work hard and not to worry about anything else," as the future will be "even more plentiful" ("*bereketli*") in terms of opportunities for them. After these comments, the mayor concluded his visit by wishing success to the students and their teachers.

I open this chapter with the above vignette, not because it is a particularly extraordinary event, but because it neatly demonstrates the promises and demands communicated to young people in the AKP's youth culturing program. It is an example of many encounters that I witnessed throughout my fieldwork between young people and adults; teachers, culture workers, politicians, or *sohbet* speakers. Over time, I began to notice the pattern that "what do you want to become in the future?" is almost always among the first questions that anchored youth's interactions with adults. Since the youth had to constantly reckon with this question, they knew it is about their professional aspirations although not necessarily specified. Those at the pre-college level, in particular, were regularly incited to think about the question, as one's answer to it is

supposed to inform their decisions concerning what high school to attend, what courses to focus on, what college major to choose, or what skills to cultivate. I also observed how many of the youth, having faced the same question over and over again, perfected their responses over time, in terms not only of their content but also of their delivery and performance.

As I argued in the earlier chapters, the AKP's youth culturing program is aimed at recruiting young people into a collective historicity to govern the way in which they imagine themselves as part of a generation, which is oriented to the future in a particular way. In this respect, the neo-Ottomanist historicity is also a regime of aspiration, which sets the terms for not only how to aspire but also what to aspire to, while going through the life stage of youth. The fact that the spaces such as the EGM are primarily structured around preparation for high school and college entrance tests indicates that their first and foremost objective is to train a generation with necessary qualifications. Thus, at the very primary level, the pragmatic purpose of the constant repetition of this question in adult-youth encounters is the cultivation of future-oriented, aspiring subjects. This is why in such encounters the presentism of those youth "who idled around or succumbed to the temptations of being young" were often made a negative example of (see Chapters II&III).

As exemplified by the mayor's narrative, the incitement to think about the future comes with a promise. By 2017, when the mayor's visit took place, the AKP had been in power for fifteen years with even longer-term control over many local governments, including those of the district of Esenler and Istanbul Metropolitan. This period brought a large-scale upward mobility for many conservatives affiliated with the AKP. The AKP not only controlled the resources of

the government, which is by far the largest employer in Turkey[77], it also coordinated a much larger and complex economic structure, ranging from a vast network[78] of favored companies and semi-public enterprises such as Turkish Airlines to smaller-scale, local-level networks of labor and capital[79]. Moreover, the mayor's visit happened when the widespread post-coup-attempt purge was in full swing: the number of people dismissed from only the public sector was in the hundreds of thousands, whereas the number of private sector dismissals is unknown.[80] That meant hundreds of thousands of new job openings, and this is why in almost all of my interactions with young people in employment age throughout my fieldwork involved some discussion of job openings, application deadlines, qualifications and references needed, or chances of hiring. In short, in a country with very high levels of youth unemployment and youth poverty (OECD 2020) and an established history of favoritism, this promise is quite powerful especially for the lower-class youth.

However, as the mayor's narrative also reveals, this promise comes with a condition; which is being "*yerli ve milli*,"[81] literally meaning "native and national;" a distinguishing label of authenticity that became a buzzword especially after the failed coup attempt. Conveniently ambiguous in terms of its semiotic potentials, the label sets the terms of entitlement to professional attainment. In practice, it amounted to having the right kind of commitments and

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[77] The share of government employment rose during the AKP period and, by 2020, one of every four employees worked for the government; see: https://www.dunya.com/ekonomi/kayitli-calisan-4-kisiden-birinin-patronu-kamu-haberi-482095 (in Turkish) and https://www.sbb.gov.tr/kamu-istihdami/

[78] A commons project named "Networks of Dispossession" maps this complex relationship of capital and political power in Turkey: http://mulksuzlestirme.org/index.en/

[79] For a detailed analysis of the AKP's appeal to the conservative urban poor in terms of its provision of access to employment networks; see Kurt (2018).

[80] See: https://tr.euronews.com/2020/07/15/verilerle-15-temmuz-sonras-ve-ohal-sureci (in Turkish)

[81] In his collection of essays on contemporary buzzwords in Turkish political discourse, Tanil Bora (2018:192-206) provides a genealogy of the notion of "*yerli*" especially within the Turkish political right, and argues that the current combination, "*yerli ve milli*," amounts to the reconciliation of Turkish Islamism with Turkish nationalism and statism.

connections as well as the command of cultural markers and shibboleths. More simply, the condition of being "*yerli ve milli*" means commitment to the AKP's imagined collective, and the AKP's youth-oriented network is where the qualifications for it are obtained.

However, commitments can be risky, as seen in the case of the Gülen Community, whose members had long enjoyed such favoritism until it turned into a "terrorist organization," seriously affecting the lives of even those with the slightest affiliation with it. How do young people navigate such uncertainty and the environment of risky commitments? As I detailed particularly in Chapter I, the AKP's grip on power has been constantly challenged. Although the AKP, and Erdoğan himself in particular, survived them and consolidated its power by integrating such challenges into its governmental discourse of fighting a historical collective cause against sinister enemies outside and within; its constituents as a vast political network have changed dramatically over time, alongside its policies and political priorities. How do young people remain committed when everything is in constant change?

Furthermore, as members of the so-called Generation Z[82] coming of age in the global city of Istanbul, young people have to negotiate between their awareness of what *seems* to be available to them and what is demanded of them in the form of commitment to conservative collective values.[83] Thus, despite the AKP's intentions to dominate every sector of the social fabric, as exemplified in the mayor's narrative, one may simply have aspirations that fall outside what the AKP network favors, or what it can facilitate or provide. How do young individuals

[82] While such generational cohorts have culturally-specific meanings, I use the term to underline the difference of their experience of coming of age from earlier age cohorts in terms of their digital-connectedness.
[83] I take my clue here from Brad Weiss's (2009) ethnography on the popular cultural practices of young men in Tanzania, which he argues were shaped by a tension, brought about by neoliberal globalization, between an increasing awareness of what is valuable in the wider world and of what is actually possible in one's existing circumstances. Although, admittedly, the youth I worked with came of age in a much more evolved -and more effectively controlled- phase of global connectivity, his argument about the defining tension was still relevant to their experiences. Also see (Ferguson, 2006).

negotiate between different aspirational horizons? What happens when different aspirations contradict one another? What happens when they aspire to an elsewhere?

This chapter focuses on the intersection between aspirations and commitments, which I address as individual modes of orientation through which young people navigate the life stage of youth in the face of demands and promises that are specifically aimed at them. I take my clues from Arjun Appadurai (2013), who addressed aspirations as cultural navigational capacities that are unevenly distributed in a given society, and from Samuli Schielke (2015), who suggested that (young) individuals' commitments to higher ideals, or "grand schemes," are often ambivalent, performative, and contingent. In doing so, my aim is to show how the youth in the purview of the AKP's youth program navigated the life stage of youth in the face of socioeconomic limitations and possibilities, political uncertainties, and collective demands and promises.

By focusing on the material promises of the AKP's youth program, this chapter complements the earlier chapters of this dissertation, which primarily analyzed the discursive, affective, and organizational dimensions of youth recruitment into the AKP's political generation. At the analytical center of this chapter are the youth's experiences and perspectives. The first part attends closely to Esenler youth's senses of self-location, and discusses how these reflexive ideas structured what they experienced as lacking and limiting, as well what they perceived as desirable and realistically possible. I show that the AKP's youth program expanded their aspirational horizons and promised to make their aspirations' realization possible, which created the conditions of possibility for the youth to remain committed to its generational project. With a longer durational approach, the second part complicates this picture and argues for a more dynamic and processual analysis to understand why and how youth remain committed -or not- to such a collective project. It does so by focusing more centrally on navigational strategies to cope

with uncertainty and change. Together, the chapter argues that the AKP's youth project promises to young people a predictable aspirational horizon along with the tools and qualifications that make one entitled to it; however, youth's commitment to it as a regime of aspiration is often provisional, since aspirations are highly dynamic as they are constantly recalibrated in the face of uncertainty and change.

"Well, This is Esenler:" Youth's Senses of Self-Location and Aspirational Horizons

Aspirations are simultaneously individual and collective; situated people constantly form, perform, and reform them through a process of reckoning with their personal desires and collective demands, as well as of anticipating what is realistically possible based on their judgment of their existing circumstances. Therefore, aspirations are inseparably linked to the sense of self-location, both as an individual and as a collective. In other words, using a spatial analogy, people aspire *to* somewhere *from* somewhere.

Two months into my fieldwork in Esenler, the expression that I had heard frequently was some variation of "you know, this is Esenler." Students, teachers, and course administrators all had this supposedly self-evident, indexical sense of what kind of a place Esenler was and brought it up frequently in their conversations with me, an outsider. Over time, I began to observe the pattern that it was evoked to refer to two perceived constraints that mark Esenler; that it is poorer, and that it is more conservative. This self-evident understanding of Esenler set the terms of, as well as the limits to, aspirations.

The relationship between this reflexive sense of place and aspirations became clearer to me as I progressed into my fieldwork, during which one of the constant topics of conversation with the dozens of young people I met was their future plans and aspirations. As I suggested in

this chapter's introduction, the youth I worked with constantly faced questions coming from adults about their future plans, and I was no exception in this regard. One of main tasks I assumed at the EGM was to provide informal career consultations to the students, and I conducted half a dozen informal group sessions with mainly high school students, during which I got to learn about their individual predicaments, concerns, and expectations from the future. As a researcher at a major American university coming from a conservative and working-class upbringing, many of the youth enthusiastically sought my opinions about issues such as succeeding in college entrance tests, life abroad, learning a language, the difference between college majors and employment prospects, how I managed my relationship with my parents, and so forth.

Aspirations form in interaction and thus are performative. To the question "what do you want to become in the future?", many of the youth over time crafted well-articulated responses, which they changed according to the context and audience. For example, Büşra, who told the mayor that she wanted to become a kindergarten teacher because she cared about future generations, expressed her aspirations to me in much more personal terms, saying that her primary objective was to gain her financial independence as she did not want to "become like other women in her family who depended on men." Similarly, Hümeyra wanted a career that would make it possible for her to afford a living in a nice neighborhood (i.e. a middle class one) where she would not be harassed or judged for being out on the street late at night or riding a bike with her veil. Underlying such responses was a clear sense of what is lacking or limiting in one's existing circumstances.

While some young women like Büşra and Hümeyra were more open in expressing their aspirations to independence, there were others with more modest expectations. In the same group

conversation, there was a student named Aynur, who was the least talkative within the group. When it was finally her turn to speak, she said all she wanted was just to get into a two-year vocational school to get a diploma, because she had a "large, conservative family" that had various shops in Esenler, and her future job is to work in one of these shops until she gets married, and her family would never let her do anything else anyways. It was obvious from the way she conducted herself that she felt less cool among her peers due to her modest aspirations, yet she nevertheless tried to save face by making the point that what really mattered was to "educate yourself and be a good person."

Young men, on the other hand, tended to express their aspirations in terms more of collective responsibility. For example, Yasin, who wanted to become a military officer, justified his aspiration by alluding not only to his personal preference, but also to his family background as well as what the imagined conservative collective needed: "I want to be a military officer, brother. You saw what happened during the coup attempt; this nation needs honest soldiers. I also think it is a proper job for my personality; I grew up in a family with many soldiers, so I want to be one as well. I think that is our obligation to this nation." Süleyman, similarly, said that he wanted to be a lawyer, because "the conservatives in our country faced a lot of injustice," including some people in his extended family, and he grew up feeling sorry for them. Alper, coming from a "nationalist-conservative" family, said he wanted to be a politician, because "brother, you see what kind of politicians we have." Some others, like Sercan, were more cynical: "you know, brother, everybody is after their own interest. I don't really want anything other than having a stable job. My father is unemployed half-the-year, and my older brother is… who knows what he is up to! I just want a decent job and a decent family; that's it. One needs to know how to be content with less."

Despite the variety of the ways in which the youth expressed their aspirations; ultimately, they aspired to be better off than their parents and have a decent middle-class life with a sense of purpose. A recurring theme in all these conversations was their quest to form their individual aspirations through a constant reckoning process primarily with the relevant model of living that they inherited from their parents. The limits to their freedom to aspire, expressed in economic and cultural terms, created the conditions of possibility for their recruitment into the AKP's youth network. Especially in Esenler, almost all the youth I worked with had parents with no education higher than the five-year primary school level. While compulsory education was extended to twelve years in the late 1990s and university education has become much more commonplace and accessible during the AKP period, many parents still retained the conception of children and youth as part of the household's workforce. Thus, alongside struggling to get the financial backing of parents for their education, some of the students had to work during the weekends and summer holidays to contribute to family income. Unsurprisingly, one of the primary appeals of the EGM was the free test preparation courses it offered to low-income students as well as the access it provided to the wider conservative education-oriented charity network.

Alongside economic constraints, young women faced the additional pressure of gender-based norms pertaining to the government of the life course. While many parents were less open and willing to let their daughters continue their education, compared to their sons, some expected them to get married before they were "too old," in front of which college education was seen as an obstacle as it meant they would be in school until at least the age of 22-23. Even when a young woman succeeded in entrance tests and managed to secure scholarship for college education in Istanbul, strict parental control often continued to impact her life in the form of

curfews, suspicions about friends and schoolmates, selection of college majors and professions, or control over dress and appearance. Thus, to varying degrees, young women had to constantly deal with such pressures and carve out a space for their aspirations in the face of them. Places like a café with Sufi music and gender separation, a youth-oriented event organized by a conservative institution, or a language course run by the AKP local government were generally regarded as "halal" spaces by concerned parents and relatives. Similarly, the ostensible performance of piety that characterized the AKP's youth-oriented spaces provided a safe space for many of the young people without parental interference or veto.

In short, the fact that spaces like the EGM are structured around preparation for high school and college entrance tests indicates that their first and foremost promise is a decent middle-class life, believed to be made possible by college education. This is the reason why youth workers spent considerable amount of time and energy to convince parents who were unable or unwilling to support their kids' school progress, and why the presentism of those youth "who idled around or succumbed to the temptations of youth" were made a negative example of (see Chapters II&III). Such spaces simultaneously shaped youth's aspirations and promised to make their realization possible. Alongside crucial test preparation courses and career guidance, they offered a realistic pathway into the future with the necessary skills and relationships, the main requisite of which is to remain committed to the political collective.

While there are such incentives for remaining committed, commitment is far from being a matter of rational free choice for individuals aimed purely at maximizing one's chances of future success. First, the youth I worked with had already been born into conservative and poor families, which fundamentally conditioned their trajectories. From an early age, they were seen as primary, natural targets for conservative pedagogical institutions. For instance, a number of

the youth were already enrolled in Imam-Hatip schools, a school system with religious curricula that has been widely expanded during the AKP years. Such early life decisions not taken by them inevitably create path dependency for their future trajectories, and significantly condition their aspirations.

Second, in contemporary Turkey, the stakes involved in commitment decisions go far beyond their impact on individuals' career paths. The Gülenist case is a telling example. In a short period of time, the Gülen Movement went from being the most privileged constituent within the AKP network to the enemy within. Even after it was outlawed and totally dismantled, many who remained within the AKP network had past connections to the movement, mainly in their educational record. Alongside the intense social exclusion of suspected Gülenists, who were not already in prison or fled abroad, meticulous background checks for all public service jobs were common during my fieldwork, and they made those with Gülenist connections forever suspects who now had to constantly prove their loyalty to the AKP collective. Those with no connections to the movement closely witnessed how once a privilege, that is affiliation with the Gülen network, turned into a social stigma over the course of a couple of years.

With its emphasis on "widening youth's horizons" (see Chapter III), the AKP's youth program promised not only a wider aspirational horizon, but also a safe and predictable one. The justification for all these efforts was the collective diagnosis that Sunni-Muslim conservatives in Turkey were historically disadvantaged despite being the country's "authentic natives" and, thus, they needed a collective uplifting so that they could occupy influential and important social positions without sacrificing their authentic identities (see Chapters I&III). All the incentives and constraints that I described so far explain why the youth who committed to the AKP's collective

imagination did so, at least for the duration of my fieldwork, yet they also point to the limits of the AKP's youth culturing efforts.

Commitments are contingent, and often contradictory on their surface. As Samuli Schielke (2015) observes in the context of Egyptian youth, individuals in their everyday lives navigate between the demands and promises of multiple "grand schemes," which he defines as "persons, ideas, and powers that are understood to be greater than one's ordinary life, located on a higher plane, distinct from everyday life, and yet relevant as models for living" (2015:13). Examples of such grand schemes may be moral soundness, consistent piety, true love, capitalist consumption, wealth and salvation, a respectable adult life, or a collective political project. However, such ambivalences, multiplicities, or contradictions seldom reveal themselves in the performances of commitment that I analyzed so far in this chapter.

A longer-term attention to individuals' trajectories reveals a much more dynamic process. During my fieldwork, I witnessed several youths seek alternative commitments, not always leading to the anticipated outcome. For instance, Metin, who attended the EGM for test preparation for two years, slowly cut his ties to the AKP network after getting into college and successfully established for himself a community in which he could come out as a gay man. Nurullah, on the other hand, "declared his independence" from his conservative family and community and lived as what he described as "a sinful Muslim" for a couple of years, yet he eventually repented and began working at a youth-oriented association in the conservative district of Fatih as a youth guide who "knew everything that is going on *outside*" and warned the kids against them. In less dramatic cases, I observed young men experiment with alternative styles that uneased their parents and teachers, or craft *fake* online personas to bend the *real life* responsibilities and constraints; or young women's moves to pick up the headscarf, remove the

headscarf, transition from burqa (*çarşaf*) to headscarf[84], or simply selecting a college in a different city in secret from their family so that they could be freer there.

The dynamism and contingency that characterize such decisions and moves require a longer-term attention and a more dynamic conceptual tool to better understand how individuals go through the life stage of youth. Individuals' senses of self-location (i.e. their understanding of what is available and lacking) change, so do their reckonings of potentials (i.e. what is desirable and realistically possible). Aspirations are thus better understood as navigational capacities that "thrive and survive on practice, repetition, exploration, conjecture, and refutation" (Appadurai 2013: 187-189). The act of navigating through risks and uncertainties also involves patience and waiting, often anxious but active, while continuously investing into one's capacity to aspire (ibid, 126-127). Thus, individuals' commitment to a grand scheme, which is the idea of a transformative political generation in my case, depends on their capacities to aspire.

In the remainder of this chapter, I narrate how one of my key interlocutors, Esma, navigated the complexities of being a young woman coming from a conservative upbringing during the AKP-dominated period of intense political and socioeconomic change. As an inevitably selective account, I focus on her reflections on where she stands in the social fabric, how she experienced turning points at the individual and collective scale, her aspirational *moves*, and how she negotiated her connection to the AKP network while trying to establish an adult life for herself.

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[84] Headscarf, or hijab, has long been a controversial subject in Turkey. Veiled women used to be banned from having public jobs and not allowed with their veil into public spaces such as schools or the parliament until the ban has gradually been lifted under the AKP rule. Many secularists continue to see it as a reactionary symbol of political Islam and associate it with being an AKP supporter; an association that is tacitly but gladly endorsed and reproduced by the officials of the AKP, which often portrays itself as the liberator of the headscarf. Such politicization further adds to the already complicated web of indexical meanings attributed to being veiled or unveiled, which make picking it up or removing it a highly significant and often consequential move for women.

Waiting to Make the Next Move: Esma's Story

I met Esma in the summer of 2015 as I was doing exploratory fieldwork for my long-term research the following year. She was an Ottoman language teacher in her early twenties in the conservative historic district of Fatih, working at a language school that is part of a vast network of lifelong learning courses (ISMEK) subsidized by the metropolitan municipality of Istanbul.[85] She was a fresh graduate of Ottoman history and found the job thanks to her family connections to the AKP network. Still, the job did not pay well, so she also occasionally did freelance translations/transliterations of archival documents written in Ottoman. We became good friends, and throughout my fieldwork, she helped me learn Ottoman, meet new people, find out where an event is happening, and learn not only about Ottoman history but also about how people engaged with its neo-Ottomanist popular articulations.

She grew up in the lower-class Istanbul neighborhood of Yenibosna. Her father was a bus driver and mother did not work for income. They were not very pious, but pretty traditional.[86] She had an old-time nationalist uncle who had some shady business with the state and served time in jail, and when her parents were contemplating how she would continue her education, he stepped in and sponsored her education in private Gülenist schools, resolving the issue of finances as well as of proper education for a girl. As I describe in more detail in previous chapters, the Gülen community, before its falling out with the AKP, had by far the most widespread conservative educational network, and as in the case of many others, Esma's parents

[85] ISMEK (Istanbul Arts and Vocational Training Courses) was founded in the mid-90s when Erdoğan was the mayor of Istanbul. It serves in hundreds of locations across the city offering courses completely free-of-charge.

[86] As in many other Muslim contexts that experienced a religious revival, the distinction between being pious (*dindar*) and traditional (*geleneksel*) is emblematic of contemporary Sunni Muslim religious discourse in Turkey. What she means here is that her parents were not very conscious or strict in their religiosity, yet they upheld certain values and practices because they were part of the local tradition they inherited. Some of those values and practices may be dismissed as ignorant or superstitious -or even outright paganistic- by modern regimes of piety.

reasoned that Gülen network's schools were more appropriate for their daughter as they wanted her to get decent education in a pious environment.

By the time I returned for my long-term fieldwork in the summer of 2016, she had gotten married to Murad, an Ottoman literature teacher who had also worked at the same institution, but his contract had been terminated because they found out he had had a check-in on Facebook at Gezi Park during the uprising. He appealed -unsuccessfully- against his firing by saying that he was there only to see what was going on as he was just a curious person. Now, Murad was unemployed and Esma was the single income source for their newly formed family.

Several weeks after my arrival in Istanbul, the coup attempt happened, followed by a widespread purge of suspected Gülenists, who concentrated in educational institutions. Now, Esma was also worried about her future in her employer institution, since she had previously attended Gülenist schools. Within several months following the coup attempt, Esma told me that more than one fourth of the thousands of staff in the network of subsidized schools she worked at were fired due to their alleged Gülenist connections, and complained about how she had to constantly deal with suspecting questions and insinuating comments during staff meetings. Although she was not a Gülenist, so thought she had nothing to worry about, she was aware that it was an extraordinary environment of fear in which many people were fired from their jobs without proper due process. Moreover, she knew from Murad's experience that such decisions were taken en masse based on certain criteria deemed to indicate some form of connection, so her name might well go into those lists due to her educational background. Thankfully, she survived several rounds of purge and managed to keep her job.

2016 was a turbulent year in Turkey and a tough one for the newly married couple, as they tried to make an independent living in Istanbul with a single and highly precarious income.

Apart from the coup attempt, the security situation in Istanbul was unstable, as the government's involvement in the Syrian civil war was spilling into Turkey in the form of frequent terrorist attacks[87]. Esma and Murad were among many youths in Turkey who wanted to move abroad[88] as they were frustrated with living in Turkey, but they deferred that to an indefinite future, since they did not have realistic employment prospects outside of Turkey as their training was in Ottoman history and literature. So, they were moving on in Istanbul. In the meantime, they tried to remain hopeful and encourage each other to pursue their aspirations while also improving their living conditions.

After around six months of unemployment, Murad found a job teaching Turkish to foreigners. In the wake of the popular uprisings across the region, Istanbul now had a sizable Arab population, mostly Syrians and Egyptians. His new employer was a Turkish-Egyptian running a network of language schools in Istanbul and Cairo, and most of its students were Egyptians living in Istanbul. A month into the new job, an opportunity presented itself as his manager wanted to transfer him to Cairo for six months with possible extension, and they were both excited with the prospect. Unfortunately, the plan did not work out because they failed to get visas due to poor diplomatic relations between the two governments.

Around the same time, Esma applied to a travel grant for Malaysia given by a pro-government organization, TURGEV, one of the two major foundations launched to fill the vacuum left by the Gülenists. The grant would cover the language training costs of 250 grantees for six months in Malaysia, followed by expert counselling to find employment in international

[87] Euronews has a timeline of terror attacks in Turkey by the end of 2016: https://www.euronews.com/2016/01/12/timeline-of-terrorism-in-turkey

[88] A 2020 poll found out that 76% of young people (aged 15-25) in Turkey said they would choose to go to another country for a "temporary" educational or professional opportunity, whereas 62% said they would "leave Turkey for good" if given "permanent residence or citizenship" in another country (MAK, 2020).

companies. Esma got an invitation for an interview and she was excited. However, the interview did not go very well, because the committee was "really obsessed with" filtering out the Gülenists and Esma's educational record was not helpful at all. So, they kept moving on in Istanbul.

In many respects, both of them were part of the wave of neo-Ottomanism, in its narrower sense as a cultural trend. They both were born to lower-class, Sunni-conservative families around the same time as Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was rising into prominence as a political figure who stirred excitement among the marginalized, mostly conservative majority. He kept climbing up the political ladder, during which many people who were part of his political movement experienced rapid upward social mobility. Esma and Murad grew up in this period of optimism especially for Sunni conservatives. Childhood years spent in their conservative environments stirred in them an interest in Ottoman history and culture as a path to cultural refinement, which eventually shaped their education decisions and professional prospects.

Murad was into Ottoman poetry and occasionally wrote his own poems in Ottoman, and one for Esma shortly after they met was his way to her heart. He grew up in an ethnic Zaza family in rural eastern Turkey and he started aspiring to a different life away from home after spending most of his school years in boarding schools, which eventually helped him get into a major public university in Istanbul. He wore a stereotypically-Ottoman moustache, carried his ornamented crook with him occasionally, knew where to find the best pipe tobacco in Istanbul, and had a special interest in old hats. For him, it was a matter of refinement and good taste, as he frequently chastised the superficial and poor taste of what he called "the green capital," a pejorative label that refers to conservative people who in recent decades accumulated economic capital thanks to the AKP yet failed to match this increased wealth with refined taste.

Even though they distinguished themselves from the popular neo-Ottomanism of the larger AKP-supporting community, their employment prospects were largely within the pro-government network due to their qualifications and upbringing. However, perhaps because they had to spend most of their time "among them," they occasionally criticized -in private- what they found problematic within it such as widespread greed and favoritism, or simply their poor taste. Esma, for instance, often questioned the excessive wealth some conservatives accumulated, and disdained their poor taste and lavish lifestyle. As a student of Ottoman history and a teacher of its language, she critiqued "the most people around her" for taking an interest in only superficial aspects of history yet did not bother themselves with learning about it. She occasionally complained about youths starting her Ottoman language class but quitting it after a couple of sessions, because it took dedication to learn a language and what they only cared about was to show off by taking a selfie during the class or to write their names in Ottoman and post it on social media.

However, she was acutely aware that she spent most of her life thus far in protected conservative environments and did not know much about what lied outside[89]. She taught Ottoman at ISMEK and, thus, most of her students were also coming from conservative backgrounds, yet it still occasionally gave her chance to encounter others. She told me about an instance in which a fight erupted in her class after she showed a cover of an anti-Kemalist popular history magazine without anticipating that it might stir the anger of some of her "secular-

[89] The term she used when referring to non-conservatives was "*karşı mahalle*," literally "the neighborhood across." The word "neighborhood" is a colloquial designation for different social groups in general, and for conservatives and seculars in particular. It is increasingly used in contexts where the perceived polarization within Turkish society is the subject.

Kemalist" students. Thus, she often lamented about her limited familiarity with things and people that remained distant.

Her marriage with Murad was her ticket to relative autonomy. She resisted her parents' insistent attempts to dissuade her from marrying him because he was poor, from the East (i.e. not ethnically Turkish), and a little sharp-tongued. For Murad, on the other hand, Esma was someone who would understand and appreciate his interest in Ottoman cultural forms. In the small apartment they were renting in the lower-class neighborhood of Soğanlı, they had a few items in their incipient collection of Ottoman manuscripts and several framed calligraphies a couple of which Esma made herself, along with a fair collection of vinyl records of both Western and Turkish classical music.

In short, in this early-marriage phase, they were both aspiring to establish themselves as adults with better lives, more consistent morals, and more autonomous individualities. Yet they were fully aware that this was a process, which they spent, while "waiting to make the next move" (Appadurai 2013:126), investing into their navigational capacity to aspire.

While their shared aspirational *move* to move abroad was deferred for the time being, another significant move that Esma was waiting for the right moment to make was removing her veil. She had been considering this for a while now, but she could not bring herself to terms with confronting the people in her family and workplace as well as her students. While waiting for the right moment, she was making small *exercises* such as smoking her first cigarette, making secular friends, bringing up more controversial issues about the Ottoman history in her classes such as homosexuality and alcohol consumption, or going to the supermarket nearby without veiling.

The right moment came when, nearly a year into my fieldwork, she was assigned to a new language center that was recently opened within her network of schools. To her, it meant new students and a new work environment, where she would be comfortable introducing herself without the veil, thereby doing away with the anxiety-inducing moment of transition in the eyes of the others. She seized the opportunity and went to her first unveiled workday. She sent me a picture of hers at the end of that day expressing her relief as well as fresh confidence and excitement. It was a very significant milestone in her individual trajectory. She wanted to share her excitement and offered to meet up the next day following her field trip in what is called the historical peninsula with her new group of students.

We met at a café named *Hüsn-ü Ala*, one of several-dozen Ottoman-themed cafes nearby the Süleymaniye Mosque and the tomb of the great Ottoman architect Sinan, where she used to frequent with her group of friends during high school and college, because "these were the places conservative youth hung out,"[90] and that is why she wanted to show me around. She asked me if I knew about "the anthropological research" for which Sinan's skull was removed from his grave to determine his race back in the 1930s.[91] I said it was a time of racist science and that there were

[90] Similar to the leisure spaces catering to conservative Shi'a youth in Beirut that Lara Deeb and Mona Harb (2013) describe, such spaces began to emerge in the late 1990s in parallel with shifting conceptions of morality, leisure, and consumption. The cafes were in a fierce competition to attract the growing disposable income of conservative youth who demanded *halal* leisure spaces. Esma knew about most of the cafes in the neighborhood and had a working system of classification for them; for example, *Sefa-i Hürrem* had great view but cheap aesthetics, *Kubbe-i Aşk* had good coffee and was the perfect place to go with your flirt, or *Nova Şantiye* was popular among some Instagram celebrities that she knew of and a live band with a veiled female member played there on certain evenings. She chose to take me to *Hüsn-ü Ala* not only because it was where she used to hang out and it had decent coffee and a nice view of the Golden Horn, but also because she thought I would be interested in its story as its owners had recently expanded their space thanks to their connections to a *tarikat* and therefore, she was certain, to the political elite.

[91] Sinan's skull was indeed removed in the 1930s to determine his racial identity, but then disappeared and not found since. In 2016, then PM Ahmet Davutoglu announced he was launching a campaign to locate it, which remained so far only as an announcement. For a detailed commentary on the subject; see: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/26/what-the-search-for-a-missing-ottoman-skull-says-about-turkish-politics/

now-debunked ideas about a connection between head shape and racial identity, reassuring her that I was doing a different kind of anthropology. She regularly took her students for field trips to practice their reading in Ottoman and Sinan's tomb was one of the stops. She appreciated my explanation since part of her job was to tell historical anecdotes during these trips, and she wanted now to move beyond simplistic historical narratives that usually glorify the past. Although she would sometimes face resistance from students when she brought up controversial subjects, this particular one was pretty safe since it happened in the Early Republican period which was already a subject of condemnation within the neo-Ottomanist historicity (see Chapter I, in particular).

Even though the café space was now redesigned, it did not stop Esma from remembering the old days she used to hang out here with friends. "It was strict gender separation here back then," she commented on the current "modern" design of the space. She sought eye contact with one of the long-time waiters who did not seem to recognize her, yet she was not sure whether it was because she had not been there in a while or because she was now not wearing a headscarf. I told her that he is probably too busy dealing with all the people at the cafe to downplay the change in her appearance as she was visibly nervous. She started telling me about the field trip and how she felt as if everyone was weirdly looking at her, although, she added immediately, she knew that it was only an illusion and that she would eventually learn to be more comfortable with her new looks. She pulled a pack of cigarettes from her purse and offered me one. After taking the first hit, she started laughing at disbelief. "I would have shrugged if anyone told me that I would be here like this five years ago," she explained, as if seeing herself with her seventeen-year-old eyes. I asked how she felt. "I don't really know. I feel stronger, I guess. You know, life is a journey, and everyone has their own path. I may go back to veiling in the future,

but I wanted to do this. Maybe part of me always wanted it, I don't know, but the time must have come now (*şimdi nasipmiş*)."

Evident in her discourse was an ambivalent self-expression oscillating between what might be called an autonomous agent and a pious subject. That is, whenever she spoke as if she is the acting agent, she often immediately corrected herself by referring to notions like fate and God's will. In the Turkish context, such expressions often have indexical functions through which a myriad of identity markers are communicated ranging from social class to sectarian and ethnic background. Yet, she spoke as if she was now hyperaware of her communicative potentialities as she was trying to come to terms with how she is *read* by others. The notion that everyone has a distinct path (*yol*) is central to Sufism, and even though she was not a Sufi herself, she embraced the notion to negotiate her individual autonomy and to assure herself that she was not doing anything wrong.

Murad joined us halfway through our conversation. After his regular complaint session about the short attention span of his students and the stupidity of school administrators, he brought up the subject of Esma being now unveiled. He said he would always support her decisions, and that headscarf lost its meaning anyways as for many conservatives it was now nothing more than a cover of worldly greed and corruption. It was much better to be unveiled than wearing an expensive headscarf bought by dirty money (*kul hakkı*). Esma agreed, mentioning several people they both knew who had recently "become much better off" thanks to their ties to the AKP network.

After that day, Esma slowly got used to her new, unveiled appearance and she took pride in getting others to respect her move, including her and Murad's family as well as her colleagues, students, and superiors at the workplace. She gradually assumed for herself the role to provide

advice and support to other young women who aspired to a higher degree of independence from what they felt as limiting in their conservative milieus. However, she remained careful "not to stand out too much," since she continued to work and live in conservative environments.[92]

Esma made the "move" to remove the veil after a long process of anxious waiting and reckoning as well as experimentation and practice. It was an aspirational move, since she thought it would not only be a personal statement of independence as a young woman but also a transition that would make possible new attainments and relationships. She aspired to "the outside" of her conservative upbringing, which she expressed as wanting to have more secular friends or in the form of smoking a cigarette or staying out alone late, and removing the headscarf had deeply symbolic meanings for her sense of self and her relationship to the rest of the world. In this sense, like the experiments she made before making the move, removing the veil was also an investment into her capacity to aspire, since it changed not only her sense of self-location but also her understanding of what is possible and probable in the future. Yet, she still had to keep her job and continue her relationships with friends and relatives, so she remained careful not to stand out too much within her communities, while waiting to make the next move.

Conclusion

By the time I was finishing my long-term fieldwork in mid-2018, Murad was unemployed again but Esma had established herself in her new workplace and expecting a

[92] In late 2018, there was a social media trend called "#10YearChallenge," as part of which people combined their current pictures with those that were taken ten years ago. The trend took an interesting turn in the Turkish social media sphere, as many women who removed their veil took part in it, often accompanied by messages in favor of women's empowerment, causing a typically ephemeral but heated social media debate. Esma shared her pictures in a private message group, but not on her public social media profiles. We had a conversation about the trend, and "not standing out too much" was her reasoning to do it this way, although she supported all the other women who were more open.

promotion to a managerial role. The day before I returned to Istanbul a year later, the AKP lost the municipal election in Istanbul to the candidate of the oppositional coalition, which effectively changed Esma's employer. Esma had ambivalent feelings: although she thought the AKP definitely deserved losing the election, she was worried about her job as there was now widespread talk of massive layoffs at ISMEK with the new administration. She was confident of her qualifications and bracing herself for surviving yet another round of purge; yet she was also acutely aware of how things worked, and she knew that the new administration would at the very least not be very keen on subsidizing neo-Ottomanist arts and crafts courses including her Ottoman language class. Also, they were now expecting a child.

Over the next several months, Esma and her colleagues waited anxiously to see how the new administration would reorganize ISMEK, as some administrators resigned or fired, and the opening of the courses kept being delayed. In the meantime, another opportunity presented itself for Murad, again from within the AKP network. Turkish Maarif Foundation, the umbrella organization founded by the AKP government in 2016 to take over the widespread Gülenist network of schools abroad, was hiring Turkish teachers to be deployed in various countries. While the great majority of the countries on the list were "third world" ones that are not in the aspirational imagination of most Turkish youth, Murad and Esma did not care, since, as I mentioned before, they wanted to experience living abroad. Also, the job was paying nearly three times a teacher could make in Turkey, which meant that Esma would not have to worry about the situation at work during her pregnancy. Murad went ahead and applied for the job, and he was assigned to a school in Kabul, Afghanistan.

Within a month, Esma quit her job, they packed up and moved to Kabul. They had a son there, for whom they found an appropriately not-very-well-known Ottoman name, which they

liked to follow with a "Bey"[93] on their Instagram pictures. It was their first adventure abroad as a family, and they seemed to enjoy the experience so far. However, they had no plans to settle there, as they saw it as a move that would pave the way for other moves in the future.

In this chapter, through an analysis of how some youth in the purview of the AKP's youth culturing program made sense of and navigated the life stage of youth, I addressed aspirations and commitments as interrelated modes of orientation that characterized how these youths negotiated the demands and promises of the adult world. I argued that the AKP's youth program, with its massive economic resources as well as political power to set the terms for professional entitlement, promises a wider and predictable aspirational horizon to youth, by demanding their commitment to its future-making project. While this is a powerful promise that appeals to many youths coming from lower-class backgrounds, their commitments are often provisional and contingent upon their aspirational horizons, which tend to escape total governmental control. Prioritizing individual trajectories and focusing closely on agentive acts and processes such as performative commitments, active waiting, making a move, and investing into one's capacity to aspire; I showed the dynamism and complexity inherent to individuals' navigational experience of youth as a life stage and highlighted the limits of political power to ensure their commitments.

[93] Bey is a Turkish honorific widely used in Ottoman times. In contemporary Turkish, it is used as a formal social title for men.

Conclusion

This dissertation has analyzed the AKP's youth-oriented efforts throughout the 2010s by specifically focusing on the politics of temporality that defined the unequal space of interaction between the governmental power and situated young subjects. Rather than addressing this relationship as one of indoctrination and submission, or domination and resistance; it strived to describe and theorize the dynamism and incompleteness inherent to it via notions of promise and demand, through which the governmental power targeted youth, and of commitment and aspiration, which foregrounded the agentive ways in which situated young subjects negotiated such demands and promises as they navigated the life stage of youth.

The point of departure for this dissertation's particular focus on the politics of temporality was the proliferation of alternative historical narratives under the auspices of the AKP; a trend that was particularly pronounced in its youth-oriented efforts. In a sense, this is a familiar story, as states have historically been actively engaged in the production of national fantasies of communitas through the mobilization of essentialized, reified, and bounded notions of national culture (Anderson 1983; Berlant 1993). However, this was mainly the modernist state, and it has become a challenge to theorize the relevance of states as well as their role in the creation of national communities under the profound changes brought about by neoliberal globalization (cf. Wedeen 1999; Das and Poole 2004; Ferguson 2006; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Trouillot 2001; Aretxaga 2003).

On the other hand, youth in many societies is constructed as a future-oriented life stage. The turn-of-the-century height of globalization led many anthropologists of youth to explore the radical shifts in young people's lives initiated by the increased, yet unequal and variegated,

global circulations of media and commodities, and their effects on youth's relationship to time, particularly the ways they reckon with the future (Cole and Durham 2008; Cole 2010; Greenberg 2014; Schielke 2015; Frederiksen 2013; Anagnost 2008; Jeffrey 2010; Allison 2009; Mains 2007; Weiss 2009; Dalsgård et al. 2014). Much of this work focused on how youth imagine, anxiously wait for, or hopefully conjure up the future through their differential engagement in migration, media, markets, and consumption. There has been less attention in this scholarship to the critical ways youth relate to the state and its projects, and the increasingly prominent techniques that states develop to shape youth's cultural practices as well as their temporal orientations (cf. Durham 2012).

This dissertation gets its inspiration from and offers a timely contribution to this body of literature by focusing on a governmental youth-culturing project and how young people related to it at a time period when the states had developed strategies to control the dizzying effects of globalization as they pertain to young individuals' experience of time. It thus joins a growing body of literature that attends to the politics of temporality and affect through an examination of the modes of governance and subjectivity explicitly or implicitly promoted by states through promise of progress (Mains 2012), institutionalization of waiting (Auyero 2012), spreading of fear and anxiety (Masco 2008; Adams et al. 2009), or production of risk-managing and anticipatory regimes (Zeiderman 2013; Choi 2015). My analysis of the AKP's neo-Ottomanism as a form of governmental historicity revealed that the governmental concern inherent in the AKP's uses of Ottoman pasts is less about imposing it as a political ideology, but more about recruiting youth into a collective generation that orients to historical time in a particular way. In doing so, I emphasized the indeterminacy of political power by highlighting its unintended

consequences as well as failures that arose in the process of its mediation, reception, manipulation, or refusal by situated agents.

An ethnographic focus on temporality is a step into an extremely rugged terrain, since time as an object of analysis is highly elusive due to its omnipresence. In this dissertation, I addressed temporality at three main levels: the temporality of historical narratives as well as conceptual constructs such as youth, generation, and civilization; the temporality of the wider historical context with its crises and turning points; and the temporality of human experience that manifests itself in the form of imaginary and affective orientations. My focus on the politics of temporality not only foregrounded the tensions and contradictions between these fundamentally different temporalities, but also directed the attention to how they intersected and interacted with one another as different actors with a multiplicity of concerns and intentions negotiated them in power-laden contexts.

While the first two chapters focused on collective and prescriptive temporalities, the second part of the dissertation addressed temporality more centrally at the micro level of situated individuals. Additionally, the temporality of the historical context imposed itself across the chapters implicitly or -at times- explicitly. While I addressed the neo-Ottomanist historical narratives (Chapter I) and *sohbet*s (Chapter II) as relying on the same temporal infrastructure; namely, a problematic present separating ideal pasts from ideal futures, I should also note an important difference between them. While in the alternative historical narratives the concern is to imagine and construct a national collective by conjuring an original moment in Ottoman pasts, the collective that is primarily imagined through *sohbet*s is a Muslim one, or the ummah, the horizon of which exceeds that of the nation temporally and spatially. My argument is that the shared temporal infrastructure between them is more relevant to the AKP's main governmental

concern, which is to recruit young people into a collective historicity thereby rendering manipulable their orientations to historical time. Yet this difference has the potential to become a source of tension as the collectives they imagine with their concomitant temporal and spatial horizons are fundamentally different from one another, despite the long-standing political and intellectual efforts to blend Islam and Turkish nationalism.[94] My analysis of *sohbet*s in Chapter II hints at this tension by demonstrating that *sohbet* speakers are usually careful not to make explicit references to nation-state politics although the national imaginary occasionally spills into their narratives in the form of their upholding of certain virtues as national and/or civic duties or, much less frequently, through overt nationalist references. One may even reasonably argue that it is in fact the AKP's success in keeping this tension alive is what kept it in power for so long as it travelled from Turkish Islamism to liberal multiculturalism over the 2000s, and then from neo-Ottomanist Islamism to neo-Ottomanist nationalism over the course of the 2010s.

In the last two chapters, I examined how these normative temporalities came into contact with everyday, or micro-level, temporalities. In chapter III, I discussed the diagnostic discourse of failure that was particularly pervasive among the AKP's youth culture workers. While I provided several ethnographic instances as well as some survey data that would support such a diagnosis, my argument instead was that the failure talk is productive in terms not only of legitimizing the AKP's forceful interventions into the fields of education, media, and arts and culture, but also of reproducing an antagonistic orientation to the historical present, which is

[94] I thank Robert Launay for pointing out the different horizons potentially inherent to these different temporalities. I must admit that my attention to the governmental logic of the AKP's youth-oriented efforts led me to focus on the commonalities and to overlook potential divergences. As I was writing this conclusion I noticed that I address the efforts to blend Turkish nationalism and Islam in two footnotes; footnote 25 on "Turkish-Islamic synthesis" that emerged as a policy doctrine following the 1980 coup, and footnote 81 on Tanil Bora's (2018) take on the contemporary buzzword of "*yerli ve milli*" as amounting to the reconciliation of Turkish Islamism with Turkish nationalism and statism.

constructed as something that must be conquered but also unconquerable. Through culture workers' accounts, I demonstrated how the temporal infrastructure that I outlined in the previous two chapters structured the AKP collective's orientation to historical process, informing their ideas about youth and education, contemporary politics, and cultural change. I outlined a project of training a vanguard generation as reflexive of these collective conceptions.

At the core of the final chapter was the temporality of youth as experienced by situated individuals as a life stage. I showed how the AKP's historicity is one of many temporalities that structure youth as a future-oriented life stage through which young individuals are constantly incited to see their lives as following a linear trajectory eventually leading to adulthood. While the AKP's collective historicity imposed itself as a regime of aspiration through its material promises, it showed that the youth's commitment to it was often provisional, since aspirations are highly dynamic as they are constantly recalibrated in the face of uncertainty and change.

Overall, the main thrust of this dissertation was its attention to the complex interplay of multiple temporalities within an uneven space of interaction between the governmental power and situated individuals. Thus, instead of embarking on an impossible project of defining and fixating its objects of analysis, its main concern has been to identify the tensions, tendencies, contradictions, and indeterminacies that characterized how the AKP's youth culturing program evolved throughout the 2010s.

A conspicuous absence in this dissertation may be an attempt at defining the concepts of "youth" and "culture," or "youth culture," despite the fact that these concepts have guided me throughout the eight years of work that went into this project. This is not only because these concepts are notoriously resistant to definition (Williams 1983, Abu-Lughod 1991, Durham 2004, Cole and Durham 2008, Launay 2018), but because my main concern has been to follow

how they were produced as meaningful and powerful categories and deployed in pragmatic discourses and interactions by the people I worked with and the institutions I worked on. In this respect, this is not a study of the AKP youth's *culture*, but an analysis of the politics of temporality that conditioned the interactive contexts in which the concepts of youth and culture, as well as those of generation, civilization, and history, became meaningful categories, and objects of politics. My use of "youth culturing" (cf. Winegar 2014) is an attempt to convey this concern.

Another such indeterminacy pertains to the definition of what exactly the AKP is. On one level, the AKP is a political party with its administrative organs and representatives whose primary aim is to garner support in electoral politics in order to get the popular mandate to control governmental resources and institutions. However, it is also a sociopolitical movement that has a cultural agenda substantiated through its vast networks of informal and non-governmental organizations. In addition, the distinction between a state and a government further complicates the challenge of defining the AKP. While the first decade of the AKP rule reflected a distinction between the government and the state more clearly, as I outlined in this dissertation, such a distinction has gradually become much more difficult to discern in its second decade as the AKP moved to the very core of the state structure. Rather than attempting to resolve this indeterminacy, I tried to keep alive this tension between the AKP's different faces, as it is my contention that it is one of the key tensions that will determine the future trajectory of the AKP rule in Turkey.

In fact, this has been a central concern of mine throughout the work that went into the production of this dissertation. While providing a nuanced account of the historical context with particular focus on contingencies, uncertainties, and indeterminacies, I tried to structure this

dissertation around the trends, tendencies, and tensions that are likely to persist into the future. This has as much to do with the elusiveness of my ethnographic material as with the temporality of academic knowledge production. While the AKP has significantly consolidated its power over the two decades it has ruled the country and Erdogan has already become the longest-ruling leader in modern Turkey, the future still remains wide open in such a highly polarized national context with frequent social and political crises.

However, even if the AKP falls from power, its historicity will likely persist, along with its defining tension between the horizons of the national and the Islamic. Narrators and narratives of alternative history may change, but its temporality will likely persist. The AKP may expand its power even further, yet the failure talk and its concomitant antagonistic orientation to the historical present will likely continue to define cultural practices as well as collective conceptions of historical process and cultural change. Turkey may have a secular turn, but *sohbets* will likely remain at the intersection of piety and politics. Age cohorts and historical circumstances will change, but conservative attempts at raising a vanguard generation will likely persist. In short, this dissertation was, in a way, an account of the presents that some children and youth of Turkey found themselves in. It is my hope that it will help make sense of the futures they are creating.

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