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Turkey's Future State (of) Theatre

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With the inauguration of the presidential system in Turkey, theatre as an institution is at a historical crossroads. By 15 July 2018, just before the controversial emergency law was lifted, two decrees restricting the autonomy of artists working at state theatres, operas and ballets were issued. The first decree replaces a law from 1949 which secures autonomy over budgeting and programming.[1] The second places all state theatres under direct control of the president. During the summer, the institutions were temporarily closed until they were *harmonized* with the new political system. With this structural change, a lengthier political process of shifting powers and centralization is being consolidated. But there has also been a more fundamental epistemological shift going on in Turkey's ideological consciousness, which is deeply rooted in a history of the public sector and of state institutionalism.

This latest institutional rite of passage is worrying for at least two reasons. First of all, the president, government officials of his party (the AKP, aka 'Justice and Development Party') and pro-regime news media have occasionally used theatre artists as part of a strategy to discredit any attempt to criticize the present government's policies. Such populist attacks have partially paralysed the professional theatre sector in Turkey and desensitized the public to the point where the current restructuring could be executed without much resistance. Second, plans to completely restructure art institutions had already leaked in 2013, just before the Gezi Park protests erupted.[2] The draft foresaw a re-evaluation of public art funding, as well as the abolition of the structure of state theatres, symphony orchestras, and opera and ballet companies, with the exception of a small specimen of each institution being preserved and/or privatized.[3] It became clear that the AKP government was preparing for substantial changes that would ultimately pave the way for privatization of long-standing institutions. Moreover, a new board of state-appointed members would decide all arts funding. This would turn artists into subcontracted workers under tight government control. The bill was met with great concern: nationwide street demonstrations (the largest one on 25 May 2013, three days before the Gezi Park protests erupted), and a trumped-up media campaign ensued which mobilized public debate before the bill could even pass through Parliament.

The ill-famed bill has not to this day been enacted but the grounds for today's restructuring were prepared. Now that state theatres fall under the responsibility of the presidency, changes can be implemented without much opposition. Lemi Bilgin, who was the State Theatres' director general between 1998 and 2013, has recently stated that one could always say no in the past.[4] This has now become impossible.[5] Besides, an informal space of anxiety and uncertainty was created, which intensified after the attempted coup (2016), when an indiscriminate witch-hunt blazed through

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state institutions. Ever since, the state art institutions have been in limbo, with interim deputies who did not know how to gauge future prospects regarding repertoire choices or even job security.[6]

On one occasion after the attempted coup, twenty permanent artists of the Istanbul Municipal Theatre were suddenly dismissed, yet fifteen were reinstated after loud public condemnation. Other targets were less lucky: almost all academic teaching staff at Ankara's oldest theatre department were dismissed at the beginning of 2017. Across Turkey, artists who were arrested were practically all Kurdish,[7] or were involved in the Kurdish peace process.[8] Kurdish art institutions were raided or closed down, including the Mesopotamia Cultural Centre and all its branches, the Kurdish Institute of Istanbul (an NGO), the Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality City Theatre, and Batman and Hakkari's municipal theatres.[9] Yet recently Turkish artists have also been sentenced for publicly criticizing the government.[10]

What is in fact at stake today is freedom of the arts/artists and the position of theatre as a space for art production, critique and education autonomous from the political realm. These ideals have already been under increasing pressure in the past few years.[11] For example, in 2012 the mayor of Istanbul amended the regulations concerning City Theatres run by the Metropolitan Municipality 'to increase the influence of civil servants in selecting the repertoire and to better control the artistic content of the theatre'.[12]

The political establishment has also systematically targeted state artists in the press, thereby creating a climate of caution and self-censorship, even when the state theatres still had reasonable sovereignty over the repertoire and artistic programmes. A significant example manifested when, in 2012, an anonymous visit by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's daughter Sümeyye to the Ankara State Theatre's production of *Genç Osman* (Young Osman) led to a public statement against the 'arrogance' of the theatre establishment, which is ideologically 'Kemalist' (in the once revolutionary, republican spirit of founding father Mustafa *Kemal* Atatürk).[13] That the play directly refers to an Ottoman past before the Turkish republic through the figure of a reformist sultan as protagonist, who rails against the military and religious leadership in favour of the security of the Turkish people, adds an extra dimension for the Erdoğan family. Erdoğan has often portrayed himself as a reformer of the republic by pushing the military back into the barracks, while part of his and AKP's political success is a narrative of neo-Ottomanist revival.[14] Sümeyye seemed to be triggered when state actor Tolga Tuncer heckled her in an improvised skit for chewing gum during the show. She stormed out of the theatre and wrote a public letter that condemned them for allegedly discriminating against her because of her veil. Her father in turn took the opportunity to heckle the privileged position of the Kemalist artists by warning them not to 'bite the hand that feeds them'.[15] The then minister of culture, Ertuğrul Günay – who later fell out with Erdoğan – also emphasized that theatre artists had 'no right' to 'interact' with their audiences. He did say that the AKP is in favour of artistic freedom, but that this freedom has its limits when it comes to what is deemed 'proper decorum'.[16]

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The campaign was clearly meant to curb the privileged position of state artists rooted in secularism and Kemalism in a time when powers within the state were already shifting.[17] As was expected, the psychological consequence was complicity to remain silent. However, complicity as common survival tactic has a longer history of interiorization in the ideological state apparatus of Turkey, creating its own set of limitations to artists' *response-ability* vis-à-vis political interfering. In fact, in the Levinasian ethical meaning of the word, *response-ability* is the understanding that criticizing or opposing power is not only an exposure of self/me to the other. The self is also, in a way, *hostage* to the other, and its responsibility 'so absolute that I am responsible even for the other's responsibility'.[18] Hence, when faced with Erdoğan's populist shaming, many state artists may have felt the need not only to protect themselves, but also to feel responsible for the whole community, and thus to hold their tongue until the agitation blows over.

On a deeper sociopolitical level, scholars and journalists have tried to explain and criticize the compliance of state institutions through other concepts, such as *postmodern authoritarianism* based on electoral *majoritarianism*, in which 'the majority legislates a particular way of life and uses the state apparatus to impose its choice of morality, lifestyle and value system'[19] through top-down passing, and (statist) *communalism* – a shared sense of social *morality* based on the state's hegemonic attitudes. The latter has been defined in different contexts, mostly antagonistic to the nation state context.[20] According to Özkırımlı, however, 'statist communalism' has shaped Turkey's hegemonic political culture. The 'unity' that is created is artificial but not permanent, which creates an environment where *difference* is at best 'endured' but any individual or collective attempting to seek autonomy, inside or outside society, is seen as an existential threat. Because of internal competition between communities to get close to the state in pursuit of power and privilege, individuals restrict their viewpoints, while mistrusting any outsiders.[21] This would tentatively explain why journalists, scholars and artists, particularly in state institutions, who have criticized the state are currently targeted, pressured to leave or under surveillance even by their colleagues and peers.

Communalism within Kemalist history could be said to function as a social contract that, at certain times, xenophobically excluded specific ethnic and cultural identities, such as Armenians and Turkish Kurds, but also religious Sunni Muslims – which Erdoğan's daughter appealed to earlier – to secure (and impose) a predominantly secular society. But from its inception it thereby also nurtured autocratic tendencies that could turn against Kemalism itself. In such a deeply rooted political culture, nonconformity spells real risk for artists when they speak back against wrongdoings. One Kemalist dance artist remarkably managed to speak back without retribution: Erdem Gündüz resisted and escaped the regime's coercive tactics through his legendary Standing Man act in the midst of the Gezi protests.[22] Looking back at it today, it seemed in the first place an admonition and a call for introspection among Kemalists. In a rather nonchalant pose with his hands in his pockets, Gündüz stared right back into the eyes of Atatürk, who was depicted on a huge banner draped across the facade of the Atatürk Cultural Centre (AKM) on Taksim Square. The latter

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building – once a pivotal symbol of Kemalism and secularism – was already reduced to a carcass of the past, closed for renovation since 2008, but there were already strong rumours that it would be destroyed (which happened in May 2018). It was at the time also used as a makeshift police station overseeing the area. Gündüz was not arrested, as no law prevented his peaceful individualistic vigil. Despite the surrounding police coercion, the state seemed to muster the tolerance to *endure* his dissenting act. Its strength was the subsequent adaptation and multiplication by thousands of people in various other locations.

Gündüz's gaze towards the lone founding father should not remain unobserved. He stood there as if he was beseeching him for an urgent reply, to break the silence once and for all, as if he were asking, *how did we get here?* Or even more pressingly, *how to move from here?* These questions can and should be asked in the present context of a disintegrating state theatre in Turkey. The challenge will be to redefine theatre as an institution from *within* its own complicit history with that of an autocratic state. One thing is clear, however: Turkey has already come a long way and although the future seems uncertain, a new generation will step up. Artists will find new ways to relate to audiences, even if the state prohibits it.[23] The problems will not be solved when we only focus on the day-to-day policies of an art-unfriendly regime. We need a discursive and epistemological change in the theatre that focuses again on *making* a society rather than confirming the status quo of polarized and opposing communities. State institutions may disintegrate, but theatre and performance have the potential to redefine their communal outlines. It is in crisis that theatre artists in Turkey will find each other again. Now is the time!

NOTES

1 There were two laws that regulate the state theatres. Law no. 5441 concerned the Foundation of State Theatre (dated 10 June 1949) and Law no. 5225 regulated the Promotion of Culture Investments and Initiatives (dated 21 July 2004). The latter largely describes the responsibility of the state to protect the 'national culture'. See Serhan Ada and H. Ayca Inci, *Introduction to Cultural Policy in Turkey* (Istanbul: Bilgi University, 2009). Relevant parts have been summarized in 'Laws on State Theatres', at www.culturalexchange-tr.nl/mapping-turkey/cultural-laws/law-state-theatres, accessed 25 June 2016.

2 The so-called 'TÜSAK' proposal (the Turkish Arts Council law) was published in the periodical *Tiyatro*, June 2013, at www.tiyatrodergisi.com.tr/detay.php?hng=3829, accessed 10 September 2018.

3 Merve Erol, 'The Future of Theater in New Turkey', 26 March 2015, https://tr.boell.org/de/node/2237, accessed 25 May 2016.

4 Ece Göksedef. 'New Drama: Turkey's State Theatre Freedoms Curbed under Presidential System', *Middle East Eye*, 17 July 2018 (last updated 15 August 2018), at www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkish-state-theaters-are-not-autonomous-any-more-under-new-presidential-system-51210182, accessed 10 September 2018.

5 In fact, they did say *no*. At the time of the draft bill, Lemi Bilgin was dismissed and replaced by Mustafa Kurt as attorney to the General Directorate of State Theaters. The latter resigned on 31 May 2013, during the early days of the Gezi protests, because of censorship regarding two theatre plays, *Sun Is Even Large during Sunset* (by Kazım Akşar) and *I Gave Up, but the Theater* (by Yeton Neziray), allegedly due to 'abusive and erotic expressions'. Kurt had also strongly condemned the draft bill, since it would eliminate the directorate entirely. See the report prepared by the CHP EU Representation, 'CHP Report on the

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Turkish Government's Culture and Arts Policies – 2014: Oppression and Censorship', 25 February 2015, at https://chpbrussels.org/2015/02/25/chp-report-on-the-turkish-governments-culture-and-arts-policies-2014-oppression-and-censorship, accessed 24 June 2016.

6 Erol, 'The Future of Theater in New Turkey'.

7 See Kedistan, 'Artist Fatoş İrwen also in Jail', *Kedistan.net*, 3 October 2017, at www.kedistan.net/2017/10/03/artist-fatos-irwen-also-in-jail, accessed: 15 January 2018. Also see Vanekspress, 'Xece Herdem Gözaltına Alındı', *Wanhaber,* 16 January 2017, at www.wanhaber.com/xece-herdem-gozaltina-alindi-216744h.htm, accessed 15 January 2018.

8 Ari Akkermans, 'Prominent Members of Turkey's Art Community Released after Arrest at Peace March', *Hyperallergic*, 1 January, 2016, at www.hyperallergic.com/265559/prominent-members-of-turkeys-arts-community-released-after-arrest-at-peace-march, accessed 15 January 2018.

9 Elif Ince and Siyah Bant, 'Turkey's State of Emergency Puts Kurdish Theatre in a Chokehold', *IFEX*, Defending and Promoting Free Expression, 5 January 2017, at www.ifex.org/turkey/2017/01/05/kurdish_theatre/, accessed 12 July 2017. Mahmut Bozarslan, 'Is Turkey Wiping out Kurdish Institutions during Lengthy State of Emergency?'. *Turkey Pulse*, 11 January 2017, at www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/turkey-emergency-rule-wipe-out-kurdish-institutions.html, accessed 26 December 2017.

10 Among the Kurdish artists are Zehra Doğan, Xece Herdem, Fatoş Irven and the renowned Zaza-author Fadıl Öztürk. Pınar Öğrenci, Atalay Yeni, Arzu Erdemir, Pınar Ercan and Aziz Kılıç were detained in December 2016 for organizing the I Am Walking for Peace march (*Barış İçin Yürüyorum*) from Bodrum to Diyarbakir. Turkish novelist and columnist Aslı Erdoğan, who wrote for the pro-Kurdish daily *Özgür Gündem*, was in jail for alleged links with Kurdish militants. Activist philanthropist Osman Kavala was arrested on 1 November 2017 (and is still in jail) for his alleged support of the Gezi uprising, although through his work with the Anadolu Kültür foundation he is also known for his support of exchange with Kurdish artists. His arrest sent a shock wave through the independent theatre scene, particularly in Istanbul. On 20 February 2019 a weighty indictment against him and fifteen other civil rights defenders, including theatre artists, turned into a complex political trial.

11 The Independent Experts' Report by the Council of Europe in 2013 (the year of the Gezi Park uprising) reported on and warned against political interference in the theatre. See CDCPP Report, 'Steering Committee for Culture, Heritage and Landscape. Review of Cultural Policy in Turkey: Independent Experts' Report', presentation of the Cultural Policy Review of Turkey, submitted 9 October 2013, prepared for the 4th Meeting of the Bureau, Strasbourg, 16–17 October 2013 (Council of Europe, April 2013), p. 41.

12 'Turkish Prime Minister's Bid to Privatize Theaters Stirs Uproar', *Hürriyet Daily News*, 30 April 2012, at www.hürriyetdailynews.com/pms-bid-to-privatize-theaters- stirs-uproar.aspx?pageID=238&nid=19577, accessed 11 September 2018.

13 Kemalists are those who strongly believe in the early Turkish republic's ideals of enlightenment and cultural participation through the arts, as part of a larger nation-building project and modernization (read 'westernization') of Turkey against the old Ottoman Empire. Historically, theatre plays a significant role in the education of the broader middle classes. Theatre practitioners in state institutions are, therefore, still strictly Kemalist and among many of them, the belief lives on that theatre should act against possible wrongdoings of the state.

14 In election campaigns, Erdoğan and the AKP have often referred to their supporters with the slogan, *Osmanlı Torunu* (descendant of the Ottomans), and also in popular culture (mainly television) and state protocol, they have openly supported a revival of Ottoman culture and traditions.

15 'Sümeyye Erdoğan', *Ufilter* blog archive, 26 August 2012, posted on 6 February 2014 by Uden filter, at http://ufilter.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/sumeyye-erdogan.html, accessed 1 September 2016.

16 Fiachra Gibbons, 'Turkey's PM threatens theatres after actor "humiliates" daughter', *The Guardian*, 17 May 2012, at www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/17/recep-tayyip-erdogan-theatre-daughter, accessed 14 September 2015.

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17 Today the CHP (Republican People's Party) is the main inheritor of the Kemalist ideology as well as the main opposition party. Though no longer in power, they are still quite influential in many municipalities across Turkey in supporting the arts.

18 David Farrier, 'The Politics of Proximity', in *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary before the Law* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011), pp. 181–208, here p. 184.

19 Marc Pierini, 'Individual Freedoms in Turkey', *Carnegie Europe*, 9 September 2013, at http://carnegieeurope.eu/2013/09/09/individual-freedoms-in-turkey-pub-52880, accessed 29 October 2018.

20 In fact, communalism is often defined as a political way of organizing and/or practising a way of living together based on federated communes. It can have revolutionary connotations, as in the case of the Kurds, who strive for democratic federalism in the region. Largely inspired by Murray Bookchin's sense of communalism, the Kurds see it as a source for empowerment for citizens through communal self-organization and municipal self-management against the repressions of the nation state. In this part, however, I refer to Kemalism as a nationalist communalist project, based on territorial nationalism, which is quite different. See Murray Bookchin, 'What Is Communalism? The Democratic Dimension of Anarchism', *Green Perspectives*, 31 (October 1994), pp. 1–6, at http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/bookchin/CMMNL2.MCW.html, accessed 24 September 2016. See also Mark Farha, 'Global Gradations of Secularism: The Consociational, Communal and Coercive Paradigma', *Comparative Sociology*, 11 (January 2012), pp. 354–86.

21 Umut Özkırımlı, 'From Semi-democracy to Full Autocracy: "Statist Communalism" in Turkey', *Ahval*, 12 November 2017, translated by Sarah Metzker Erdemir, at https://ahvalnews.com/statism/semi-democracy-full-autocracy-statist-communalism-turkey, accessed 4 April 2018.

22 Standing Man was a peaceful, so-called passive act of resistance during the Gezi protests, initiated and conceived by Erdem Gündüz in the night of 17 June 2013, two days after the Gezi Park occupation was broken. In the midst of constant surveillance by police special forces, Gündüz stood still for more than eight hours in front of the AKM on Taksim Square, adjacent to the Gezi Park. He made a statement afterwards that he was standing for all who are affected by police violence and are generally unnoticed because of a media bias against the protests. This act was quickly copied in the following days by a multitude of protestors in and outside Turkey, adapting it in various symbolic places (near the place where a protestor was shot dead in Ankara's Kizilay district, near a shrine at the Syrian border, near trees or embassies), in different poses (beside empty shoes, or while reading), and with or without meaningful attributes (with taped mouths, Guy Fawkes masks, flags, plaques or gas masks). See Pieter Verstraete, 'The Standing Man Effect', Istanbul Policy Center, Sabanci University, Stiftung Mercator Initiative 2013, at http://ipc.sabanciuniv.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/IPC_standingman_SON.pdf, accessed 29 October 2018.

23 Pieter Verstraete, 'Still Standing? A Contextual Interview with "Standing Man" Erdem Gündüz', in Şeyda Özil, Michael Hofmann and Yasemin Dayıoğlu-Yücel, eds., *In der Welt der Proteste und Umwälzungen: Deutschland und die Türkei* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2015), pp. 121–36.

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