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The Contrast Between Conventional and Formal Issues, in a Modernising Country

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Abstract

Turkey, is undergoing a fast modernization process on one hand; but people still cling to traditional ways, on the other hand. This dual character makes it difficult for the formal and informal aspects of social life to go in parallel. There is a gap between anything officially on paper and the actual social reality of the real world out there.

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1. Introduction

Official structures and policies in a society may not necessarily coincide with the unwritten informal practices. Sometimes full or partial overlappings do happen. But sometimes formal and informal tendencies may be diametrically opposite and even come to compete with each other (1).

For a country which has not attained complete modernization, conflict between official structures/directions and traditional values and virtues of all sorts, is even more prominent. Even in a modernized country certain sections like ghettos of some subcultures display strong distrust against almost anything official.

In Turkish folk tales, which are like mirror images of historical and cultural realities, the suspicion towards anything official, can easily be detected:

The people and the government appear to be two distinct, opposite ends. When an old woman finds a useful talisman, the government-men deprive her of this talisman by force...The people do not believe that the government-

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men will act in justice...The sentry, the watchman of the quarter, the village-chief, the executioner can all be bribed and led astray (Tugrul, 1969: 109-110).

2. The Visible and the Invisible

Official numbers (2), though they look good and “scientific” in print, are not always as telltale as a deep qualitative inquiry when it comes to investigate social aspects of a given society. Especially a traditional society, when it comes to detect problems and delicate (heikel, épineux) areas, it is not easy to find honest informants (3) and the researcher at best should rely on his own observations and Feststellungen rather than given out replies.

It is said that Turkish people do not talk, but rather mumble when it comes to express their complaints (“*Türk insanı soylemez, soylenebilir*”). Indeed, in all tradition-rich societies the grapevine absorbs the complaints. Gossip continues in full swing. But nobody stands up to make a straightforward proclamation.

As Larson (1973: 31) puts it, even if a sociologist would have designed excellent measurement devices he couldn't have applied them extensively due to ethical and other limitations.

Those “other limitations”, when they come into play, could be of considerable weight. It is almost impossible to “extract” the genuine attitudes and the real thoughts of subjects in some kinds of research. Financial issues are usually taboo, for instance. Turks are proud people and addressing a research question may invoke the feeling of being given an exam. The fear that one's ignorance will be revealed is a horrible experience for some.

Here is a case history: In 1975 a social research was designed by Bosphorous University in some shanty towns (bidonvilles) of İstanbul. Some students were employed in the project. One of them was a friend of mine, Erkan. One of the questions was “what do you understand from the word ‘referandum?’” The injured prides of many respondents put Erkan, a sensible young person, in an uneasy position. Sometimes he had to say “I, personally, don't know this word, either!” One of the respondents whom he visited was a grocery owner. To the question “what is your monthly income?” the man gave the reply with a derisory sum! Erkan insisted for a realistic figure, which the respondent firmly refused to say so. Finally the grocer “fainted” and the researcher had to take his leave! One of his respondents had been an army sergeant. Erkan later commented with a sigh of relief that while questioning this sergeant, he had felt as if he had been at home. (To the hypothetical question “in whose place would you wish to be?”, the sergeant had replied as follows: “I wish I were a well-known labor leader, somebody in charge of a big union!”).

As another case history regarding the authenticity of answers to a questionnaire, I remember the following incident: While a lycée student (at Robert College), one Monday morning in the big assembly hall right after the recitation of the National Anthem, they distributed to us questionnaire forms about the food in the cafeteria. One of the questions was open-ended: “If there are no changes in the existing food varieties, would this affect your future attendance to the cafeteria?”

The student sitting next to me wrote: “No, because I am a scholarship student and I am Obligated to eat there”. (I, also a scholarship student, was glad of the food anyhow). Then the school principal said: “Please put your names on the papers”. (We had first had the impression that the answers would be anonymous). Immediately the above-mentioned student excitedly asked for an eraser to soften his reply!

3. Getting Ahead with Informal Ways

It is interesting to note that on a macro-scale this discrepancy between people and the government can be seen in local politics. A certain political party member may stigmatize the opponent party as a “state party”, while praising his own as a “nation's party”, thereby contrasting state (which represents an official concept) with the nation (which represents the aspirations of plain people).

Things set out in written form may assert what is widely different from the actual practices. In the Turkish Law, it is stipulated that any contract / transaction where deceit is involved, is legally null and void. This statement comprises wedding acts also. Now, in reality, in provincial Turkey many would-be grooms lie about their professional, social and financial (4) situations to the would-be brides; just to win those girls! A technician may pose himself as an engineer or a health-official may pose himself as a doctor and so on. (Years ago, in the Cay county of the province of Afyon, a foreman introduced himself as a technician [a technician had higher status than a foreman

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