As part of the research colloquium Memory, Discourse and Diversity organized by Dr. Irit Dekel, Dr. Bernhard Forchtner and Prof. Dr. Gökce Yurdakul:

A summary of the colloquium presentation:

“Staying Home after Forced Migration: Armenians in Post-Genocide Turkey “

by

Dr. Lerna Ekmekçioğlu (MIT School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences)

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On the November 20, 2014 as part of the research colloquium Memory, Discourse and Diversity from the Department of Diversity and Social Conflict, Dr. Lerna Ekmekçioğlu from MIT School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences visited the Humboldt University. In conversation with Prof. Dr. Bilgin Ayata from FU Berlin Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft, Dr. Lerna Ekmekçioğlu gave an insightful speech titled as "Staying Home after Forced Migration: Armenians in Post-Genocide Turkey".

Our speaker, Dr. Lerna Ekmekçioğlu’s research interests are ranging from Modern Middle East focusing on majority-minority relations to the role of women in developing world. Being the main reason of her visit to our university, she is also a historian focusing on Turkish and Armenian lands in the beginning of the 20th century. Her research agenda offers us a gendered and age-specific perspective of the Armenian genocide while trying to build a link between genocidal and post-genocidal periods. In this scope, her research is looking at how minority groups relate to the majority in the post-genocide era. In term of the colloquium, the center focus was the Armenian society who stayed and built a life in Turkey after the 1915 genocide.

Dr. Ekmekçioğlu’s recent work is concentrated on a monograph titled as Surviving the New Turkey: Armenians in Post-Ottoman Istanbul where she speaks about the ways in which survivors of the Armenian genocide who continued living inside the border of the Republic of Turkey crafted themselves a new presence to be able to co-habit peacefully with the perpetrator society. Her main question is “How did survivors of 1915 Genocide continue living in Turkey after 1920 and how did they reconstituted their identity in the post-Ottoman era?’” In this scope, she first talks about the creation of the Turkish nation-state on a heritage of the Ottoman Empire and then shifts her focus on the post-genocidal life of the Armenian minority in the newly established state.

As in her first work, Dr. Ekmekçioğlu started to talk about the role of the Turkish state. Its creation as a nation-state in an era where Wilson principles were the global determinants for newly emerging nation states, she told the story from the side of suppressed. Having accustomed to listen to heroic stories about the establishment of each and every nation-state, our mindset is ably challenged after looking at the same story from her window. It is exactly the same story, as real as the mainstream one but not that visible. The uniqueness of her work, first of all, comes from this perspective.

Dr. Ekmekçioğlu gives insightful historical narratives from Armenian people’s lives and takes us to the backstage of the Turkish nation-state establishment. Then, we see that the creation of a nation does not necessarily bring everyone together around an “us” definition but strategically takes some people out of this definition by becoming “others” . Armenian people had taken out of the Turkish definition of nationhood since, according to the republican ideology, they have been representing the unwanted history of the Ottoman legacy. As much as built on the idea of nationhood, the Turkish Republic was also built after and as opposed to the Ottoman Empire and its principles. The influential role of the religion, authoritarianism, and non-Western ideology were tried to be replaced by a secular, democratic, and modern (rhetorically equivalent to being Westernised) nation-state.
The special position of Armenian people in the history of the Turkish Republic is also crucial. Ekmekeçioğlu mentioned about the transition from the Ottoman times to the republican era where the nation was tried to be “cleansed”. While doing this, Greek people in Turkey were agreed to be exchanged with Turkish people living in Greece. Muslim communities were considered as natural minority groups in the republican context. However, Armenians are not Muslim; they cannot integrate through a common religion. Armenia was also under the control of the Soviet Union and the Turkish government did not want to make an agreement with Moscow. Therefore, they could not be subject to exchange. This is why Armenians’ situation was different and they were treated differently. The male population of Armenians were strategically targeted to prevent this nation to increase in number in the future while female Armenians were kept and forced to marry Turkish and Muslim men. Dr. Ekmekeçioğlu’s gendered and age-specific explanations find their roots in history as such.

In the light of this background, Ekmekeçioğlu brings the discussion to the second part: the co-existence narratives of Armenian people in the post-Ottoman/newly emerged Turkish Republican era. Collecting historical memory from the representatives of the Armenian society by going to very first witnesses, Ekmekeçioğlu narrates a national history of survivor Armenians. Her main objective is simply to understand how Armenians co-existed with the Turkish people through reconstructing their national identity. The outcome is very open and brave.

Proofs from the media channels of Armenians which consistently approves the Turkish state’s ideology, the weakness of the feminist movement among the Armenians, and increasing visibility of Turkishness among Armenians shows that Armenian people chose to be highly aligned with being Turkish. To put it in her own words: “Homogeneity is not a bad thing for Armenians as long as it means inclusion.” Therefore, three main collective responses can be clarified for Armenians who wanted to stay in the Turkish territories: loyalty, security, and invisibility. Her narratives reveal the changing role of the Armenian representation both by the Patriarch and by the societal dynamics in the transition era from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic. The result of findings mostly proves that the idea of the genocide in 1915 “reached its objectives” in ideological terms that Armenians were made Turkish except for their private spheres and in families.

As a highly debated topic in Turkey, the Armenian Genocide in 1915 has always been ignored. Instead of accepting it as a cleansing of a nation, Turkish authorities presented it as a normal loss in war situations. So did even most of Armenians. This is the precise reason why Ekmekeçioğlu’s work is valuable since she reveals a reality which has been even ignored by its victims. Due to this, it is important to ask whether terms of survivor and denial belong to post-genocidal discussions or not. When the “performance of obedience” becomes the main attitude of a victimized nation, can we consider them as survivors when they are all fashioned by the perpetuators’ approach? Should we perceive denial as a post-genocidal debate or another step of the genocidal ideology when the victimized people live under denial?

As Prof. Dr. Ayata also pointed out, Germany and Turkey actually have commonalities regarding their past experiences as perpetrator states. Where the German rhetoric look at the post-genocidal era from the perspective of acknowledgement and justice, it is pointed as a symbol of remembrance. Dr. Ekmekeçioğlu addresses the issue of Armenian genocide from the survivors’ point of view whereas Turkey acted as the symbol of denial. Ekmekeçioğlu’s research can be examined in her new book “Recovering Armenia: The Limits of Belonging in Post-Genocide Turkey” by Stanford University Press in January 2016.

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