From Environmentalism to Transenvironmentalism

The Ethnography of an Urban Protest
in Modern Istanbul

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Introduction

Collective actions against the state or private interest companies have become an increasingly common phenomenon in both developed and developing countries. From local grass-roots to national and transnational campaigns, such actions problematise the concepts of politics and democracy in terms of not only who has the right to decide, but about what and for whom. Decisions to initiate large-scale projects such as hydroelectric dams, highways, mines and power plants are often met with opposition from the members of the community in which these projects are planned. Collectivities of individuals publicising their concerns about the effects of the projects on the health, social life and economics serve to motivate the formation of opposition campaigns. Social scientists from a variety of disciplines (social anthropology, sociology, political sciences, geography, urban studies, economics) who have studied these collective actions have contributed to the understanding of social mobilisations and their influence on social change. Examples of research about major civil protests against the construction of hydroelectric dams include studies of the Movimento dos Antigidos por Barragens (MAB) in Brazil (Cummings 1990; McCormick 2006; Spyridaki 2007), the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) in India (Arundhati 2000; Spyridaki 2007), and organisations in Turkey (KHRP 1999, 2000; Ingatow 2005, 2006). Other mass actions include the M11 link road protest in East London, UK (McKay 1996; Derek 1999), the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Campaign in Australia (Kenny 1998), and the Bergama mobilisation in Turkey against the operation of a goldmine (Sachs 1997; Öncü and Koçan 2001, 2002; Arsel 2003; Özdemir 2003; Beşpınar-Ekici and Gökalp 2006).

This book presents an anthropological study of a grass-roots protest group in a neighbourhood of Istanbul, Turkey. The mobilisation began following the announcement of plans for the construction of a third

bridge over the Bosphorus Strait which would connect the Asian with the European shores of Istanbul. In opposition to the construction of the bridge, the residents of the European neighbourhood (Arnavutköy) in which foundations of the bridge would be placed organised an initiative called Arnavutköy District Initiative – in Turkish, ASG (*Arnavutköy Semt Girişimi*). According to the participants of ASG, the reasons for their resistance concerned the destructive effects that the construction of the bridge would have on the area's natural and cultural assets as well as on the life of its residents. The neighbourhood provided an ideal setting for my ethnographic fieldwork in order to explore the ways in which anthropological perspectives on local protest actions and organisations can contribute to an understanding of social movements.

An anthropological examination of mobilisations such as the ASG has the advantage of reminding us that every similarity hides more than one difference (Appadurai 1996: 11). Social movements are not homogeneous collectivities; they are rather what Arjun Appadurai would describe as 'neighbourhoods'; that is, 'social forms in which locality as a dimension – is constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity and the relativity of contexts – is invariably realized' (ibid.: 178). Nevertheless, 'however deeply a description is embedded in the particularities of place, soil, and ritual technique, it invariably contains or implies a theory of context – a theory, in other words, of what a neighbourhood is produced from, against, in spite of, and in relation [to]' (ibid.: 184). In cases like the one this book focuses on, the collective action of the neighbourhood of Arnavutköy can be seen as a result of changes taking place from the effects of economic and cultural globalisation[1] (Psimitis 2006). These effects can be seen in any number of social movements organised around, for example, human rights, feminism, consumers' rights,

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1   According to Habermas, in an undoubtedly globalised world – economically and subsequently culturally – there is an increasing awareness of capitalist penetration in areas of life, traditionally protected by it and detached from the values of capitalist society (in Psimitis 2006).

ethnic–religious–cultural minority rights, sexual emancipation, community participation, urban action, and environmental issues.

On methodology

The first contact

Although this book eventually evolved to be about an urban 'transenvironmental' (Kousis and Eder 2001) protest, with only a few references to bureaucracy, in my first year as a PhD candidate my intention was to investigate the perceptions of bureaucrats about the environment compared to those of other citizens. Therefore, I began searching the Internet to identify cases of disputes between the Turkish state and its citizens which led to the discovery of the 'Third Bridge' conflict. Initially, I reviewed this conflict to determine if and how the Turkish government engaged in environmental discourses. The first thing I read was that Arnavutköy, according to a government decree, was one of the sites designated for special protection (SIT area), as is the whole Bosphorus Strait. Bearing this in mind, I was taken by surprise when I found out that in that specially protected area the Turkish Ministry of Public Works and Settlement (*Bayındırlık ve İskan Bakanlığı*) was planning to construct a concrete and steel suspension bridge. My previous impression was that a protected status does not allow any intervention that would dramatically change the character of an area, and, in my mind, a huge suspension bridge would definitely to do exactly that.

My subsequent research discovered that this was not only my impression, but apparently a complaint of the residents of the area, supported by the fact that they had organised a protest to address the issue. I decided to visit the area and see if it would be suitable for my fieldwork. I travelled by bus from Taksim Square with an American friend and we went directly to the American Research Institute in Turkey (ARIT) – which was coincidentally based in Arnavutköy – to ask whether there was information about

the issue. The director was well informed and he gave me some telephone numbers of people actively involved with the anti-bridge campaign. Before contacting them, we strolled in the neighbourhood where we saw banners hanging from rooftops declaring the residents' opposition to the construction of the bridge ('No to the interests underlying the bridge!' (*Çıkar köprüsüne Hayır*) '3rd Bridge: Hayır, No, Nein, Non' (*3. Köprü: Hayır, No, Nein, Non*); see Figure 6). I contacted one of the participants[2] of the initiative who later became one of my main informants and I told him that I was interested in their protest as well as that I was seriously thinking of focusing my PhD research on the matter. He was very eager to talk to me, as was almost everyone I approached during my fieldwork, and we scheduled an appointment a few days later. After the appointment ended, I was convinced that Arnavutköy would be the site of my fieldwork.

Doing fieldwork in a city

In 1975, Jack Rollwagen wrote that in order for the study to become significant anthropologists must place their investigations 'of one social form, of one neighbourhood, of one city, and/or of one region within a nation, into the context of the nation-state or a region larger than the nation-state' (Rollwagen 1975: 4). I find his comment quite relevant to my study as I believe that the Arnavutköy initiative should not be seen as isolated from larger geographical, historical and political contexts, but as part of what Kemper calls 'international urban systems through time and space' (1991b: 374). After all, Arnavutköy is part of one the largest cities on the planet, Istanbul; according to the 2000 census, the main city's population is listed at 8,803,468 inhabitants, and 10,018,735 if the peripheral provincial areas are included (http://en.wikipedia.org). In addition, as Moore (1996) argues, there are certain organising principles shared by all cities which create

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2   In order to protect the privacy of my informants, any name used in the text is not the actual name of the person discussed in each section.

an urban network of distinctive social–cultural and political–economic domains (Kemper 1991b: 374).

Keeping in mind the similarities which Istanbul and Arnavutköy, as part of it, share with other large metropolitan centres, in socio-cultural as well as political and economic domains, my methodological approaches during fieldwork followed a pattern wherein ethnography moved from its conventional single-site location contextualised by macro-constructions of a larger social order (such as the capitalist world system) to multiple sites of observation and participation (Marcus 1995: 95). Even though my fieldwork was centred on Istanbul, I also saw it as a global city (as it had always been in my mind), where the dynamics and processes which became territorialised were also global (Sassen 2001: xix). This means that ASG should not be seen as a unique case of a protest action but as one of many protests occurring around the globe in cities with similar socio-economic and demographic development.

World System Theory has extensively analysed the global character of economy from which European capitalism resulted, beginning in the fifteenth century. As theorists of the World System School (Wallerstein 1974) and those influenced by it (Featherstone 1990) claim, concentrations of capital are centred in cities and, in fact, create cities (Kutsche 1989). In this sense, the ASG protest should be seen as a protest against a certain kind of capitalist development related to processes of globalisation. This perspective has two advantages. First, it allows for the examination of a development project (such as a bridge in a developing nation) as a construction produced by transnational corporations. This is applicable to the present case, since the construction of the Bosphorus bridges was assigned to foreign companies. Secondly, it privileges an analysis which attempts to depict the full complexity of social life in cities (Sanjek 2004). In this sense, it enables multisited research (Marcus 1995) since it inevitably considers the anthropologist's main subjects of study – the people and, in this case, the ASG participants – as involved in a multilevel discourse produced in several different locales (local and global).

Following Marcus' techniques of multisited ethnography, my research revolved around various aspects of the same issue. My fieldwork in Turkey lasted eighteen months, eleven of which I spent in Arnavutköy. As mentioned

above, it began as a preliminary investigation mainly through the Internet. After the first meeting in Arnavutköy, I settled in the area, initially in the ARIT guesthouse and later on, in the house of one of my informants. I continued my research after I had left Istanbul by keeping in contact with my informants, receiving newsletters by ASG and keeping up emerging events related to the issue of the bridge through the electronic press. While in the field, the main methods of my data production were multilevelled, including participant observation, interviewing, collecting news articles, travelling within the country, and keeping the classic ethnographic diary.

It would be misleading to claim that my fieldwork was directed by a detailed research plan. Apart from travelling in Turkey to become familiar with the country and settling in Arnavutköy, all the other parts of the field research emerged during my residence in Turkey. Soon after my arrival, I came to realise that conducting ethnographic research on the 'particular discourse of policy requires different practices and opportunities than to do just fieldwork among the situated communities such a policy affects' (Marcus 1995: 100). Since my focus was the conflict between the Turkish government and the residents of Arnavutköy, I needed to take into account the point of view of both sides. In order to obtain this kind of information, I needed to use totally different research techniques for each side. While I would not claim that my book constitutes an ethnography of Turkish bureaucracy, I did devote a large part of my time to interviewing bureaucrats from a variety of locations. They were from Arnavutköy and the surrounding administrative districts (*muhtarlıks*); the Municipality of Beşiktaş (*Beşiktaş Belediyesi*) to which Arnavutköy administratively belongs; and the Ministry of Public Works and Settlements. I kept in mind that a study of bureaucracy constitutes a different research domain; thus, my investigation followed a different pattern and looked for different signs.

The difference between interviewing bureaucrats and participants of ASG or residents of Arnavutköy is illuminated when it is realised that for the latter, interviews with journalists (some of them residents of the neighbourhood) had become virtually part of their daily culture; in fact, giving interviews had been one of their main opposition strategies. Consequently, 'interviews' about the opposition to the third bridge were actually participant observation. Even though interviewing is usually seen as a secondary

technique to produce data to supplement participant observation which is the primary method, in this case I used interviewing as a way of participating in the neighbourhood's life. Hence, participant observation was also multi-sited. It concerned both participation in everyday life through my housemate, participation to ASG's weekly meetings and its other activities (dinners, demonstrations, discussions) and also interviewing them. Apart from these activities, I also had the chance to interview visitors of the area, scientists, NGO members, representatives from the Chamber of Architects, artists and activists.

George Marcus's multisited ethnography consists of techniques which he entitles 'following'. In my research I engaged in activities that he designates as 'follow the metaphor'. His suggestions include observing the circulation of signs, symbols, and metaphors relating to the subject of study. Therefore, aside from the interviews, I followed the Third Bridge issue as it appeared in the popular press. Through the archives of the ASG, the Istanbul Chamber of Architects (*İstanbul Mimarlar Odası*), the electronic records of national and international press as well as the hard-copy national press, I collected articles referring to the Third Bridge issue. My aim was to identify the verbal practices and the rhetoric used to speak about the issue. In Marcus's words, I tried to 'trace the social correlates and groundings of associations that are most clearly alive in language use and print or visual media' (1995: 108). Keeping a diary while I was living in Arnavutköy was not only for writing down things to remember for future reference but also to incorporate my informants' biographical data in a more coherent way than the interview text. This technique helped me create an ethnographic space in which the issue of the conflict over the construction of the third bridge was seen – as possible as this can be – through the eyes of the people opposing the bridge. Finally, travelling in the country made clear for me the existing differences between Istanbul and the rest of Turkey and helped me see the larger picture to which Istanbul and Arnavutköy belong.

The anthropologist and the field

As a Greek citizen, choosing Turkey as the country where my fieldwork would be based held personal significance. My paternal grandfather was born in Dikilli, a town on the Aegean coast of Turkey. His father, who was professionally active both in Asia Minor and on the island of Lesbos, decided to move to the island which at that time was part of the Ottoman Empire. My family's migration to Greece (before Lesbos became part of it) was not, as in many other cases, a violent one; hence our memories are not bitter towards the opposite coast or *karşı* (even today, many inhabitants of Lesbos use the Turkish term *karşı* for 'opposite' in general, not only to refer to the coast of Turkey.) When I was a little girl I discovered that our family name was in fact of Turkish origin, with a slight Hellenised touch: Voulvouli is derived from *Bülbül*, which is a common surname in Turkey and literally means 'nightingale'. From my part, there had always been the curiosity to visit the *karşı*. From the few times I had been to Turkey, I realised that visiting as a tourist was not enough to satisfy my curiosity and I decided that at some point I would go there to live for a while and learn Turkish. It was my belief that by doing that I might be able to discover my roots, an idea which faded while I was an undergraduate student in the Department of Social Anthropology at the University of the Aegean. Even though my studies in anthropology directed my interest in the country to more 'scientific' pathways, it was during that time when I began to envision a way to stay in Turkey for more than a few days. I would go as an ethnographer.

Given the historically hostile climate between the two countries, I was aware that there were presuppositions on both sides regarding the other. Even though I grew up in a family where nationality was never the most important symbol of identity, I was a little afraid that being Greek could be a hindrance to my research. Nevertheless, I considered it as a challenge to discover how I would interact with Turkish people on a long-term basis and how they would react to my presence as well. My fears disappeared after the first weeks of my residence in the country. What I faced in Turkey was simply what any other researcher or foreigner faces. In fact, I often felt that many Turkish people saw Greece as an example to be followed

(especially as for its integration in Europe) and that the Greeks were the 'good' neighbours of the West as opposed to the 'bad' neighbours of the East.³ However, the issue of why I did not wear a veil gave me a contradictory message.

Occasionally, when in the company of women in a private home, I was asked if I veiled my head when in public. 'Are you covered?' (*kapalı*) I was asked sometimes. They were surprised when I explained that as far as I knew women in Greece cover their heads for a number of aesthetic and practical reasons but it is mainly the elderly women (and rarely) who cover their heads for religious purposes and mostly in church. One woman who did not wear a veil commented to me, 'I thought that Greek women were like us' but the context of 'us' referred to the veiled Muslim women of Turkey, not herself. In other words, she saw Greek women as primarily non-Western as she did Turkish women who wore the veil. On another occasion, while a guest for dinner, I refused to taste a *meze*⁴ cooked with wine. The lady of the house (a clearly secularist house), said, 'Oh, I will never understand those religious habits,' and was obviously relieved when I told her that I was actually agnostic, but unfortunately, allergic to wine. The above incidents suggest that there were indeed preconceptions of me. However, those preconceptions were related to my religious preferences rather than my ethnic origins and I must admit that as a person who has always felt a bit different in my own culture, particularly with respect to religious issues (separation of church and state in Greece has never been fully achieved and 95 per cent of Greek population are Orthodox Christians), during my stay in Turkey I often felt annoyed with fanatically secular individuals. It was easier for me to identify with the marginalised believers than the dominant secularised.

3   To that, among other things, I believe that contributed the efforts of the two countries for 'good neighbouring' as politicians call it and the effort of Turkey to join the EU.
4   *Meze* is a selection of appetisers or small dishes taken with alcohol, which can be served either alone or as the first dish of a meal. In Turkey, *meze* is served with *rakı* and usually consists of cheese, spicy aubergines, various salads, *cacık*, meatballs and *dolma.*

My above comments are relevant to what Gefou-Madianou (1998) points out about the fieldwork experience: As a culturally informed subject, the individual ethnographer always carries his/her identities from which it is impossible for him/her to disengage while in the field. Moreover, in my case it was the pre-existing familiarity with the 'other' which triggered my interest in conducting research in Turkey. In addition, even the choice for the content of my research stemmed from my identities and, dare I say, political convictions. Therefore, I agree with those who claim that objectivity in anthropological writing is not possible. On the contrary, in the analysis of my data I tried to be as self-reflexive as possible even if not explicitly, in order to be consistent with the conclusions prompted by my theoretical background; namely that the ethnography of a conflict cannot be seen separately from the historical and political contexts to which both the ethnographer and the informants belong. After all, as Cunningham (1999: 5) claims, 'while anthropologists are in the process of discerning globalisation as an analytical phenomenon, they may also be located in – and therefore subject to – the processes of it'.

This brings into discussion another aspect of ethnography relating to the closeness of ethnographers to their informants. In her discussion of 'anthropology at home', Gefou-Madianou (1998) states that conducting fieldwork in the home culture (or place of the researcher's origins) involves moral and political issues. An ethnic identification between the ethnographer and the informants poses some difficulties which can be translated into a sense of responsibility of the ethnographer towards the informants. Shared opinions between ethnographer and informants, or feelings of gratitude towards informants for opening their homes can also create feelings of responsibility. How could I be objective in writing about the conflict over the bridge when I, silently but nevertheless, supported their struggle? How could I write something less in favour to the protest when the people had opened not only their houses but also their hearts and minds to a foreigner who did not even speak Turkish very well? I soon realised that I could not. As Paré (in Edelman 2001: 26) writes about his fieldwork in rural Mexico:

> For many of us it turned out to be impossible to record acts of repression and forms of exploitation and to witness the difficulties the peasant organisations had in making their voice heard without taking sides [...]. Participation – whether directly in the organisation, in advising groups, in collective analysis with the organisations themselves, in negotiations, in publicity, in solidarity, in communications, or in the government as a planner, functionary or technician – necessarily implies taking a position, a 'committed' vision.

Therefore, I decided to turn to what Marcus describes as a 'circumstantial activist, a condition which results from working in a variety of sites, where the politics and ethics of working in any one reflects on work in the others' (1995: 113). As far as the second ethical dilemma is concerned, that is, the gratitude I felt and still feel for ASG participants, I decided that the only way to feel less guilty for any potential misjudgement of their battle against the construction of the bridge was to do exactly what I stated at the beginning of this methodological account. Any generalisations that follow concern neither ASG nor Arnavutköy as a unique case of protest. This is about the social mobilisation of people defined by multiple dynamics namely cultural, national and socio-political. After all, as Hannerz (1996: 78) reminds us, the multiple, the complex, the ambiguous, the diverse are also socially organised.

On theory

Theories of collective action such as the one developed by Talcot Parsons during the 1920s and the 1930s have examined revolutionary movements as anomic or deviant collectivities (Merton in Psimitis 2006). The symbolic interaction approach of the Chicago School viewed social movements as mechanisms of positive social transformation (Edelman 2001). The Marxist approach linked collective action to the system of production and suggested that it be seen as a protest of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie, while a more individual-oriented approach has been proposed by the Rational Choice School, claiming that the motives of collective action are private.