

“We”, “Others”, Othering and Discrimination in Turkey:

Perceptions and Trends in the Public Opinion

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The Goal of the Project and the Main Questions Addressed

This project aimed at uncovering processes of othering and discrimination in Turkey. For this purpose, some 40 in-depth interviews were conducted in the span of 2009 and a nation-wide opinion poll was taken between February 15-April 15, 2010, over a sample of around 1800 respondents.

The main questions that were addressed in the in-depth interviews, as well as in the opinion poll, were as follows:

1. What are the major identity choices in Turkish society?
2. Do the individuals conform to the rules and values of their identity groups?

3. Do the individuals defend the rights of the people they consider as “others”?
4. Can the individuals freely reveal their identities?
5. Who is subjected to discriminatory behavior and in what social situations and institutions?
6. Discrimination against women
7. Discrimination against the Alevis
8. What legal and informal means do people resort to in their struggle against discrimination?

Summary of the Basic Findings

The main findings of the research can be summarized as follows.

1. The basis of othering in the Turkish society appears to be a tendency to perceive identity differences as a threat to one’s own life style and values rather than as a source of enrichment. Given the low level of tolerance towards difference and the prevalence of the cultural trait of perceiving difference as a threat, people with different identities tend to conceal their true selves or tend to appear as if they are complying with the majority norms and values. As a result, we have observed a widespread cultural trait of hide self- effacing behavior, self-suppression, secretiveness, and invisibility, which precludes individuation, initiative-taking, transparency, visibility, and in the end an open and honest public discussion about the common good.
2. There is, in other words, an invisible “deterrent power” that is inherent in the Turkish political culture, which precludes those perceived as the “others” to remain in the hiding rather than to come out and articulate their grievances. Othering stems from this invisible yet very effective deterrent power, which operates in the veins of the society. So long as this deterrent power exists, people choose the “exit” or “loyalty” options, rather the democracy-enhancing option of “voice.
3. Because people choose to remain silent about who they truly are, they do not enter into potentially conflictual encounters with those who they think would disapprove of them. As a result, and paradoxically, although there is so much othering, because people avoid revelation and encounters, there are therefore not as many reported cases of discrimination, the latter being an outcome of the meeting of mutually disapproving identities.
4. One positive observation was that, people also want to change. That is to say, they want legal guarantees for different identities; there seem to be a growing public awareness about discrimination against women and the Alevis; and, finally, most people appear to be ready to accept the establishment of new legal institutions, such as the ombudsman, whose specific mission would be to deal with cases of discrimination.
5. What needs to be done is making law. Turkish people need to create new legal and constitutional norms and institutions that would achieve two goals at the same time: the first goal would be constitutional guarantees for the revelation, expression, and articulation of individual and collective

identities; the second goal would be expanding the scope and depth of free speech in general. A “civic space” would thus be created, which would be one in which the “invisible deterrent power of othering” would be countered, offset, and diminished by the power of law. There are reasons to believe that, a “civic space” thus generated and protected by the force of law would supply the individuals with a fertile ground on which they would freely disclose and negotiate their identity claims. One can expect that these free negotiations over identity would help increase interpersonal trust, enhance social capital, and thereby contribute to the consolidation of liberal democracy in Turkey.