Theorizing Contemporary Turkey with Village-Life Nostalgia
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Introduction

At public elementary schools in the vast metropolitan sprawl of Istanbul, children learn lyrics to a well-known song, “Over there is a village, far away. Even if we don’t visit, even if we don’t travel about, that village is our village,” (Timiroğlu 1980; Üstüner and Holt 2007). This practice in urban classrooms illustrates one way in which a “village identity” is encoded within Turkish children, who are taught to recall a past that none has likely experienced. The song has been sung in elementary schools for at least a couple generations, yet the cultivation of an affinity for village life began much earlier in the national history, during the republic’s founding. While Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Turkey’s founder and ideological architect, unapologetically envisioned the nation as a progressive, urbane society, he also knew that success required the inclusion of the villager majority. At that time, in the 1920s, roughly three-quarters of Turkey’s population lived in village or rural locales. Even as Atatürk led the country into a “modernist” project along Western-European models, he simultaneously valorized villagers and village life. This is brought to light by certain well-known declarations attributed to Ataürk, including, “Turkey’s real owner and master is the true, productive villager,” (Sarı 2016, N. Young translation) and “The villager is the master of Turkey.” These statements continue to be invoked in the present, and like Ataturk’s other proclamations, are remembered and recited with a reverence usually reserved for religious texts. These social-cultural observations in combination with my own ethnographic work suggest that narratives of modernization, urbanization and development upon which the republic of Turkey was founded and nostalgia for village life and lifeways are imbricated, co-constitutive and dialectically constructed. In this paper, I demonstrate that theorizing Turkey through the lens of village-life nostalgia, leads to the following insights:

1) In Turkey, flows of people and resources are not merely mono-directional from villages to cities but are far more circular, 2) Business people and vendors in Turkey capitalize on embedded notions of village nostalgia within national and personal discourses to re-purpose and re-vitalize local economies, 3) Nostalgia can be used as an analytic tool to assess perceptions of purported global forces and 4) Instances of nostalgia encountered in village life can contribute to literature demonstrating nostalgia's productive uses.

Background and Research Sites

I conducted fieldwork in the province of Izmir, located in Turkey's West, next to the Aegean Sea. Izmir is more commonly known as a city, the third-largest in Turkey, within the eponymous province. I spent time in several villages around the city-center, focusing on four villages that roughly ringed the city according to the cardinal directions, Cavuş (north), Kavaklıdere (east), Yeşilköy (south) and Bademler (west). In the selection of these villages, I looked for populations between 500 and 2000 people. When I initially set out to do fieldwork I was not looking for imbrications and intersections between village-life nostalgia and Turkey's "modernization" narratives. Rather, my questions were concerned with examining how changes in village occupations are attended by simultaneous changes in village traditions and lifeways. Undergirding this project was the assumption that villages were essentially in a state of decline as villager populations emptied into urban contexts. Indeed, agriculture and livestock in the form of small-scale family operations are waning, at least in Turkey's Izmir province. However, I quickly began to discover that characterizations of rural-urban dynamics as mono-directional flows from rural to urban spaces, while broadly descriptive of demographic trends in Turkey, have been over-simplified and have neglected other important phenomena. Even in instances

were village populations are in decline, city-dwellers continue to maintain emotional connections to village lifeways via a variety of strategies and practices.

Circular Flows, City and Village

Village-situated ethnography quickly revealed that populations flows are far more complicated than the simple notion that people relocate from village to urban spaces. Turkish villages are led by a *muhtar,* who is an elected official similar to a small-town mayor. Dursun Genç, the *muhtar* of Yeşilköy, informed me that up to 70 percent of the current village population are retirees. Furthermore, a notable portion of this demographic moved into the village from urban Izmir. A prevalent trend in Turkey, observable for decades is the movement of individuals from villages to cities in pursuit of education and employment opportunities. However, according to Genç's testimony, at the time of retirement, people are seeking to return to their village roots. In Turkey, retirement can begin in one's early 50s. Mehmet Uysal, the *muhtar* of another village, Bademler, personally exemplified this trend. He was born in Bademler, worked in Izmir as a policeman, and after finishing his career, returned to his hometown where he eventually became the *muhtar*. Interestingly, of the four villages surveyed, only one *muhtar* had maintained continuous residence in the village of his birth. Two *muhtars* had been born outside the villages they were now serving and one, Mehmet Uysal, had lived outside the village during his professional life.

Ethnographic encounters demonstrated another facet of urban-to-village flows. From talking with shopkeeper Ayşe Hanım, I learned about new housing developments on the outskirts of her village. Clustered together like a suburban enclave and sometimes featuring a gated driveway, Ayşe commented that these homes were not intended for current villagers who could not afford them, but rather for urban professionals who presumably prefer to commute to their

jobs and then retreat to more peaceful village-situated residences in the evenings or on weekends. Not surprisingly, this village is near a major highway. Asphalt roads and reliable public transportation clearly "shrink" distances between villages and cities in Turkey, transforming village spaces from isolated, insular communities to desirable suburban locales subject to gentrifying forces of the middle and upper-classes.

Finally, while many villagers relocate to Turkey's big cities in order to find jobs, in the village of Bademler, I encountered a team of women who worked in a local greenhouse cooperative. All of the members of this work group had come from some location outside of Bademler, demonstrating that at least in some cases, work can be found in and around villages. One woman's story in particular caught my attention. She had migrated here from the east of Turkey where pressures had prevented her from working outside the home. While east-to-west and rural-to-urban movement are expected, her choice to move into a village challenges the norms regarding Turkey's migratory flows. According to one Bademlerian, thirty percent of the present village residents are non-locals. Beyond this particular village, I talked with individuals from two other villages who claim that their locals have also become locations for migratory resettlement. One such resident of Kavaklıdere lamented that this influx had significantly altered the communal fabric of village life that she recalled from the past.

These stories illustrate my first assertion. While it is indisputable that there has been a rapid influx of villagers to Turkey's urban contexts, there is nevertheless a much smaller, though not insignificant movement of people moving the other direction. Because of such flows, the populations of these villages are stable and even growing. Ethnographic work examining these trends will elucidate critical insights regarding perceptions of land, hometown and even

employment opportunity. As if to illustrate that village property is in high demand, at the entrance of Yeşilköy a gleaming real estate office stood amidst the ramshackle village buildings.

Village Nostalgia and Local Economies

"Are you from Izmir, abi?" I asked Ali, the proprietor of a little store by my apartment, addressing him with the informal but respectful term for older brother. "No, our family only moved here when I was a child. We even have another house outside of city. You should come with us sometime!" he answered. I learned that Ali's place outside of Izmir was not in his hometown, but by virtue of being outside the city seemed to remind him of his rural roots. In 2018, I learned that Ali and his wife had closed down their convenience store and opened up a small restaurant on the same street. But if he had the means, Ali said, they would forsake Izmir and move out to the countryside. Another individual, Serkan, worked as our apartment manager, living on the first floor of the building in Izmir since the 1980s. He regularly spoke of his hometown with great fondness, "When I retire, I'm going to return to Afyon." Serkan exemplifies what Carol Delaney, anthropologist who conducted extended fieldwork in a Turkish village in the 1990s, writes about the importance of hometown, "The first question asked of a stranger is 'Where do you come from?'—where were you born, where is your *memleket* (native soil) [emphasis and clarification hers]."[1] Later, I learned that Serkan had already purchased farm land and built a house outside of Afyon, in the village in which he grew up. His wife hailed from the same village, and he said that even after thirty years in Izmir, he still knew all of its residents. While living and working in Izmir, Serkan would regularly travel to his lands in order to tend to his crops. Our apartment building was located on the corner of a major intersection, and Serkan had spent decades navigating the hustle and bustle of urban life as well as the demands of being

[1] Delaney, Carol. 1991. *The Seed and the Soil: Gender and Cosmology in Turkish Village Society*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. p. 148.

the on-site manager of a large apartment building. For him, retirement to rural life meant having the chance both to relax (*kafa dinlenmek*, literally "to rest one's head") and to work his land. Additionally, he would keep another property in one of the inexpensive parts of Izmir, and thus be able to spend summers in Afyon and winters in Izmir. Conversations with Ali and Serkan characterize interactions that I regularly have with Turks in Izmir. Though they have lived in the city for years or even decades, they often did not consider themselves truly Izmirian. In many instances, they continue to maintain hometown affiliations through family members and friends, and at times take an occasional trip back to their hometown. And some, like Serkan, have acquired property.

Residents of villages near Izmir engage in economic practices that facilitate the connections that exist between urban dwellers and village life. For example, some villagers have transformed their modest homes into boutique restaurants, adding patios, awnings and dining rooms. They offer dishes advertised with monikers such as "organic" and "hand-made" and especially emphasize *köy kahvalatısı*, a phrase meaning "village breakfast." Such meals feature several varieties of cheeses and jams, olives, fresh-baked bread and egg dishes. Dining patrons enjoy this fare against a bucolic backdrop overlooking farmland and olive trees. It is obviously commonplace to promote the resources of a given locality to stimulate a tourist economy. Yet these villages are not catering to international tourists or even out-of-town Turks on holiday, but to Izmirians who are nostalgic for past village life. By reconstituting notions of traditional village experiences, urbanites have an opportunity to rehearse their village roots and to maintain ties to their own alleged pasts, without having to go more than 5 or 10 kilometers.

Bademler provides a specific example. Here, residents weekly stage a village farmer's market or *pazar* in Turkish. Many neighborhoods in Turkey continue this customary practice of

closing down a street once or twice a week to allow local vendors to sell produce and other household items. Historically, *pazars* served local buyers and sellers by giving them a market opportunity within walking distance of their homes. But Bademler attracts patrons from outside the village. On Sundays, Izmir's urban-ites drive up to an hour to come here. This is not because it meets a practical need, as they could get all these items at their local grocery store or their own neighborhood *pazar*. Certainly, part of the impetus to shop at a village *pazar* is in reaction to the thriving supermarket chains that now dominate Turkey's rural landscape and the packaged products that they offer. City folks increasingly desire to consume organic and locally-sourced products. However, I argue that this is not the whole story: there seems to be a simultaneous desire to return to roots, to origins. The practice of visiting a village pazar is linked to the "villager identity" that has been encoded, nurtured and rehearsed. By coming to the village, urbanites are able to re-enact, perform or connect with a village-affinity. Bademler has become a site that nurtures and promotes a nostalgia for village lifeways. Four years later in 2018, I learned that two other nearby villages, Ulamış and Sığacık, were emulating Bademler and had started their own pazars. On a Sunday in March of 2018, I observed a tour bus bringing women from Izmir to visit two of these three pazars. One Bademlerian said that though Ulamış had began their pazar only recently, they were now surpassing Bademler. In the midst of this encounters, villager residents stand to benefit economically. These ethnographic examples illustrate my second finding: Villagers capitalize on nostalgia for village life embedded within Turkish imaginaries and use them to their advantage to re-vitalize local economies.

Nostalgia and Globalization Theories

Beyond their significance within the immediate Turkish context, village trends in Izmir serve to evaluate theories of globalization. A critique of early globalization theories was that they

were construed as impersonal, top-down forces that impinge, unimpeded upon localities (Anna Tsing 2000). Rather, Tsing postulated that global movements necessarily take shape in local containers. The forms of local containers define the way in which a global force can become evident. Accurate theorization of world-wide flows, therefore, requires one to look at local manifestations. Cooper adds that global forces, however they are perceived, can result in the intentional production of local specificity in order to assert its own uniqueness and authenticity (Cooper 2005). Specific localities thus respond to perceptions of global "flattening" by producing a heightened particularity. Once an entity or activity achieves status as a singular representation of authenticity, circulations in forms of advertising, accessing or promotion leverage this local "uniqueness" for economic gain. Actors at such specific localities enter this cycle by expending even more conscious effort to demonstrate the authenticity of their space or product. Instances of simulated local realism carry psycho-social benefits because they mollify those who feel they are losing their distinctions and economic benefits because they attract outsiders looking for "genuine" experiences. Following Cooper, I claim that as shopping in Turkey becomes dominated by both domestic and international supermarket chains,[2] villages like Bademler, Ulamış and Sığacık respond by creating unique village pazar experiences which begin to define the essential "Turkish Pazar." In a sense, Badmlerians (and others) are declaring, "This is what a pazar is, what it does and what it means." Shopping at a pazar can symbolize a specific life-practice that gives meaning to practitioners. The greater the villager's ability to maintain and claim the pazar's authenticity, the more likely it is to be patronized. Nostalgic re-creation can therefore be understood as a situated reaction against the rapid transformations that globalizing forces appear to initiate, especially as technologies modify or threaten "old ways" of doing and

[2] Izmir currently hosts at least three major international stores: Ikea (Sweden), Carrefour (France) and Kipa (run by the UK's Tesco). There are also burgeoning domestic chains, found on nearly every major street: Migros, Bim, Pehlivanoğlu, to name just a few.

being (Cashman 2006). Yet is it likely that some people at the pazar have little or no individual memory of village life. For them, shopping at a pazar may produce a nostalgia even for things not remembered (Appadurai 1996). Like singing about villages in primary school, the village pazar maintains and encodes a kind of rural identity. This is the third assertion of this paper: By examining local, specific nostalgia projects like the Bademler Pazar, we can refine abstract discourses of globalization, rooting them in the local.

Nostalgia's Productive Possibilities

Until recently, nostalgia has been theorized as a negative phenomenon: demonstrating disintegration with the present (Starobinsky 1966), exhibiting longing for a pre-lapsarian utopia (Stewart 1984), driving kitschy consumerism (Lowenthal 1985) or fueling nationalism (Boym 2001). More recent work, however, shows that nostalgia may also be productive: mitigating trauma, enacting resistance or incorporating fragments of history with lived experience (Mills 2010; Cashman 2006; Özyürek 2007; Boym 2001). Ray Cashman, for example, theorizes "critical nostalgia" as recollection of a past conciliar existence between Catholic and Protestants in an Irish community, which charts a vision of increased tolerance and openness in the future. My study draws from this recent "productive turn" in nostalgia studies to consider how reminiscences of past village-lifeways can be analyzed to understand the present moment. Consider a story circulated in Bademler and told by 88-year-old Hüseyin Amca in 2014:

> One hundred years ago, both Turks and Greeks lived in this village in peace. Uncle Suleyman's family who was Turkish and Yorgi's family who was Greek were neighbors. One day Suleyman came home. But before he entered the house, he called out to one of his daughters, 'Who is inside?' 'It's the unbeliever,' she replied. Not understanding what she could possibly mean, Suleyman looked through the window only to see his Greek neighbor Yorgi, whom he loved as a member of his own family. For Suleyman, this was neither a Greek nor an unbeliever, the man inside was his beloved neighbor. The townspeople began to say about Suleyman, "He sees

neither religion nor race."[3]

Hüseyin Amca's account is an instance of how nostalgic recollection for an alleged past explains and interprets a tragic episode in the village history, the time immediately before Greeks left the city, either driven out by the Turkish army or else deported to Greece as a result of Atatürk's population exchange polices. While I have only given Hüseyin's version of the narrative here, nearly every villager I encountered is familiar with the story. Nostalgic recollection gives residents a cultural reference point to a past that is lost but not forgotten. This tale, which has become part of the community's collective memory, allows Bademlerians to stake a claim for being fair-minded and accepting, despite historical vicissitudes that rendered the village homogeneous, mono-ethnic and mono-confessional.[4] The factual nuances of this episode in the village's history are less relevant then the way in which it is remembered and told. The story gains power simply by maintaining a presence within the village's collection consciousness. Through its recitation, villagers express both how they aspire to treat outsiders and how they want outsiders to think of them. My interpretation of the posture of Badmerlerians vis-à-vis their past follows Amy Mills' work in the Kuzuncuk neighborhood of Istanbul. Presently home to a predominantly Turkish community, residents remember their past as a time when Jews and Muslims lived together and "got along." Mills claims that the collective memory of this era, which is embedded in local architectural features, helps current residents allay the trauma of losing the neighborhood's cosmopolitanism. The final assertion of this paper, therefore, is that certain instances of nostalgia for village lifeways in Turkey can be evaluated

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[3] Young, Nathan. 2014. "İzmir İlinde Bulunan Dört Köydeki (Çavuş, Kavaklıdere, Yeşilköy,Bademler) Mesleklerin Değişmesinin Sosyal Hayat ve Gelenekler Üzerindeki Etkileri," [Occupational Changes in Four Villages (Çavuş, Kavaklıdere, Yeşilköy, Bademler) in the Izmir Province and Their Effects on Village Social Life and Tradition]. Unpublished MA Thesis, Ege University. p. 74.

[4] By stating that Bademler is mono-confessional, I only mean that residents identify as Muslim. The majority of the community is from the Alevi branch of Shia-ism, though the more recent migrants to the village may be Sunni.

according to productive functions that they serve. Bademlerians do not merely long for what has been lost but utilize collective stories to envision an open and tolerant future.

Conclusion

As other scholars have demonstrated, nostalgia is a critical interpretive lens of theorizing Turkey. Esra Özyürek, for example, notes that nostalgia is employed both by Islamists who reframe Atatürk's commitment to Islam and yearn for an Islamic-Ottoman past, and by politicians and entrepreneurs, who invoke Ottoman tropes to promote commodities like homes, art and cuisine (Özyürek 2006, 2007). In 2009, a conference entitled "Memory and Nostalgia" was held at Ege University (Izmir, Turkey). Articles included, "The Politics of Nostalgia and Popular Cultural Practices in Turkey" and "Advertisements and Nostalgia." The topic of nostalgia for village-life, however, was missing from this symposium, and similarly, is largely absent from contemporary scholarship, despite the intertwining of "modern development" and village roots within the nationalist discourse *and* the prevalent identification and affiliation amongst Turks with their place of origin. The neglect of studies on village-life nostalgia is perhaps linked to a general preference for urban projects. Since the 1960s, anthropological studies in Turkey have prioritized urban contexts (Birkalan-Gedik 2011). After all, if flows are going that direction, it makes sense to focus scholarly efforts on cities. In Turkey, the present emphasis on cities, processes of urbanization, and theories about global shifts has led to incomplete and overlooked perspectives regarding citizen attitudes towards the nation's rural past. But this is also part of a broader trend. Rural sociologists Fulkerson and Thomas (2014) use the term, "urban-normativity" to highlight that primary attention, both in popular and academic discourses, is given to urban concerns. The results of my ethnography, however, suggest that movements of people, ideas and resources are not merely happening mono-directionally from

rural to urban spaces, and thus gesture towards the vitality and necessity of village ethnographical work. This is particularly the case for Turkey, as nation-building efforts were tied to the valorization of the Turkish village and villager. In this endeavor, there is no attempt to pursue a positivist approach that would attempt to define the "Turkish village," but rather to use the village, to "think with" (Judt 2005; Liu 2012). As Üstüner and Holt note, nation-building efforts in Turkey have balanced developmental dictates with the importance of rural, village life: "This dialectical discourse—become civilized like the West but always respect your villager roots—made sense in an era in which everyone in the city still had close ties to the village."[5] I argue that this continued hometown affiliation renders the "Turkish village," both as a physical space and as a node within the Turkish imaginary, a critical site for ongoing ethnographic work. Analyses from village vantage points enhances our ability to conceptualize contemporary Turkey.

[5] Üstüner, Tuba and Douglas Holt. 2007. "Dominated Consumer Acculturation: The Social Construction of Poor Migrant Women's Consumer Identity Projects in a Turkish Squatter." *Journal of Consumer Research* 34 (1). p. 41.

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