

The Communications Crisis of the Turkish Society: From Synthesis to Homogeneity

Türkiye Toplumunun İletişim Krizi: Terkipten Tektipe

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Abstract

This article focuses on the aspects, related to the Turks' ability to establish communication and form a synthesis, of the tensions and conflicts, which have escalated during the Republican era in the ideological and political areas despite a more homogenous nation (and) state when compared to the imperial era. In this regard, the effects of the fast transition in Turkey from verbal culture to visual culture whereas the process occurred in the West as verbal/written/visual culture, and of not sufficiently internalizing the written culture have long been debated. Media, which plays a vital role in healthy-functioning communications between institutions and groups and in ensuring social peace, and the signs that it widely uses are discussed while the reflection of the conflict between the written and the visual forms at a philosophical level on social relations and communications is identified as an important factor.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

İletişim,
İletişim Krizi,
Yazılı Kültür,
Medya, İdeoloji,
Toplumsal Barış.

Öz

Bu makale, özellikle imparatorluk dönemine göre daha (tektip) homojen ve bir ulus (ve) devletin varlığına rağmen, Cumhuriyet devrinde ideolojik ve siyasal planda şiddetlenen gerilim ve çatışmaların Türklerin iletişim kurma ve sentez oluşturma yetenekleriyle ilgili kısmına odaklanmaktadır. Bu çerçevede, Batıda sözlü-yazılı-görüntülü kültür süreçleri şeklinde ilerleyen iletişim tarzlarının Türkiye topraklarında sözlü kültürden görüntülü kültüre hızlı bir geçişle gerçekleşmesi ve yazılı kültürün yeterince özümsememesinin etkileri tartışılmaktadır. Felsefi düzeyde yaşanan yazı ile görüntü çatışmasının toplumsal ilişkiler ve iletişim alanına yansımaları önemli bir faktör olarak tespit edilirken, kurumlar ve kesimler arası iletişimin sağlıklı şekilde işlemesi ve toplumsal barışın sağlanması konusunda hayati bir rol oynayan medyaya ve onun yoğun biçimde kullandığı göstergelere de değinilmektedir.

Introduction

On Turkey's lands, a crisis and tension have been known to exist since, according to some, the defeat in the Siege of Vienna in 1683, or, for others, since the Tanzimat Edict, issued in 1839. This situation, related, in one aspect, to the processes of modernization, Westernization and globalization, has manifested itself at home as a communications crisis. However, "practical thinking", "quickly establishing communication" and "forming an appropriate synthesis" have been the distinctive characteristics of the Turks, who have come across numerous different communities throughout their history, including their march from Central Asia to the West. This article focuses on the aspects, related to the Turks' ability to establish communication and form a synthesis, of the tensions and conflicts, which have escalated during the Republican era in the ideological and political areas despite a more homogenous nation (and) state when compared to the imperial era. In this regard, the effects of the fast transition in Turkey from verbal culture to visual culture whereas the process occurred in the West as verbal/written/visual culture, and of not sufficiently internalizing the written culture have long been debated. Media, which plays a vital role in healthy-functioning communications between institutions and groups and in ensuring social peace, and the signs that it widely uses are discussed while the reflection of the conflict between the written and the visual forms at a philosophical level on social relations and communications is identified as an important factor.

From 'Strong-Flexible' to 'Weak-Rigid'

Some people take pride in the fact that the Turks have founded 16 states throughout history while others sarcastically say it also means that there were 15 failed states. Setting aside these arguments which both have merit, the claim that the 16 stars on the Presidential seal represent the states founded by the Turks, generally has failed to please the Turkists and their opponents. Interestingly, there are states, among these 16 states, whose founders or subjects were not Turks while also are there unfortunate states whose both founders and subjects were Turks but were not recognized as one of the 16 stars. Today, the fetishism of "16" has become a myth, which, probably after being determined haphazardly within the framework of the nation state policies, came to be a state resolution and is now believed to be something to be stuck by without discussing its accuracy. When the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) was proclaimed in 1983, there was a brief confusion. The state officials wavered over whether to alter the "16" or to "sell out" – or let's say "to not recognize"- the TRNC. Thankfully, the crisis was overcome quickly by excluding the not-so-well-known Western Huns from the list and adding the TRNC to it.

The robust insistence on status-quo regarding the "16", a simple symbolic sign, in Turkey and the dulling of historical debates through nonfactual ideological interpretations are justified with the aim of building a nation and a nation state. If we go back to the relation between the Turks and the state, it would not be wrong to say that the Turks have established numerous states in the classical sense even though they are not defined as a "state" by modern state theorists - which is the product of another ideological attitude- and have a history, closely familiar with such concepts as state, power, institutionalization

and organization. Actually, the Turks, who adapted their hierarchical structures which had been developed during nomadic life to the circumstances of settled life, and reinterpreted and then put into action the customs and practices of the different cultures they came across, may be considered equally successful in both founding a state and bringing it down. However, it is a distinct difference that the Turks had a strong-flexible political organizational style compared with the Mongols who were a strong-rigid community. One of the reasons behind the fact that the administration in Ankara, which symbolizes the Republic of Turkey with all its civilian and military institutions, cannot find lasting and exact solutions to the problems it encounters both at home and abroad today can be sought in the recent abandonment of this organizational style. We may even take a step further and call it the “Mongolization of the Turks” if we take into consideration the Republican era nationalists’ admiration for Genghis-Timur. However, there is a slight difference between the static Turkey, embodied in this work in Ankara, and the strong-rigid Mongols of the 13th and 14th centuries: That Turkey is strong-rigid at home but weak-rigid abroad. In any case, the Turks have lost their flexibility despite the efforts in the last few years to make up for it through multi-dimensional diplomacy based on historical, geographical, cultural and economic experience. Although it has a factual basis due to the daunting era which begins with the Vienna defeat in 1699, augmented in the 19th century and ended with the First World War and the War of Independence, the validity of fear-based conditions in the 21st century should be reviewed. In this regard, it may be useful to briefly survey the Turks’ history while keeping in mind their flexible characteristics and communication skills.

From Empire to Nation State: Synthesis Collapsing

The Turks have always displayed a subtle tolerance, free of any complexes, towards the other. The traces of complex-free and internalizing communication styles can be found in the marriages of Turkish khans with Chinese princesses and Ottoman sultans’ with Byzantine princesses, in the conversion to Islam, in Alp Arslan and his son Malik Shah’s appointment of Iranian Nizam al-Mulk as their vizier, in the practice of the devshirme system, in the fact that the Ottoman language is comprised of Arabic, Farsi and Turkish and in many similar situations. Besides, it is expectable for a constantly mobile nomadic people to engage in cultural, economic and political exchanges and to possess a more flexible and open identity than that of settled societies, which thus paves the way for a socio-political organization ready to coalesce with the “other”, to share practical and intellectual experiences, to live together and to resolve, with a synthesizing approach, the problems that may arise while living together. In terms of the government style, this organization is best represented by the Ottoman model. Its civilization’s fundamental paradigm was based on Islam and the ability to internalize the other reached its peak during the empire. More clearly, it was a synthesis, to which the ethnicities living in the Balkans, the Middle East, North Africa and in the Caucasus, with their Turkish, Greek, Arab, Kurdish and Farsi identities, contributed in accordance with their original features.

The Republic of Turkey, founded in 1923 on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, adopted the aim of building a nation and a nation state. In this sense, the imperial structure and the Turks' synthesizing nature, which had begun to grow weaker as nationalism spread across the empire, were interrupted with the proclamation of the nation state at the level of the government even if not in the social area. The Republic of Turkey, which, to a great extent, preserved the technical, personnel and schematic elements of the Ottomans' imperial experience, made a completely different choice historically, politically and philosophically: a (unitary) state based on a single nation.

Setting aside the positive and negative aspects of this choice and what it meant back then, a vast majority of the society did not interpret the transformation, taking place at the administrative level, in the way the revolutionaries intended, and they wanted to maintain their old habits. Therefore, the newly-proclaimed Republic of Turkey found itself in the middle of tensions, crises and threats in both domestic and foreign policies from the moment of its inception. Surely the empire, too, had faced domestic and foreign threats and had numerous difficulties but its cosmopolitan capital city of Istanbul used to manage crises while the ethnically homogenous capital of the Republic, Ankara, was busy having/parrying crises. For example; it is almost impossible to find a public demand for regime change throughout the Ottoman history. Behind even the most radical demands lied disturbance over a person within state hierarchy or over an action, which was resolved when the sultan replaced that person or changed that action. The Republican Turkey, however, gave meaning to its existence through a psychologically-dominant mentality of fear that the regime was constantly at risk and used the security perception as one of the key elements of the regime. This official policy, which placed, when deemed appropriate, the Sunni majority, the Alevites, Kurds and minorities within the framework of the concept of domestic threat, also assessed Turkey's neighbors, which are smaller than one tenth of Turkey, in the enemy category. Perhaps it would be too encumbering to a state system, built upon such an ontological basis, to expect it to be open, constructive, stable, strong-flexible and tolerant to differences. In this regard, the aphorism "Peace at home, peace in the world", first part of which was respected in the official policy, was significant in the perspective of the status quo in Ankara concerning the country and the world but it also shows a contradiction with the second part with regard to the world: The phrase "One Turk is worth the entire world" can be explained by wishful thinking or as an element of solace or national motivation but the fact that a nation state, which transformed from a flexible-strong empire and became rigid, still talked about "peace in the world" was probably because its leaders were also Ottoman officers. Besides, there is almost no attempt by the Republic aimed at "bringing order to the world" actually or voluntarily up until 10 years ago except for sending troops to Korea and the Cyprus operation.

Here, we should also note a significant difference between Ankara, the capital of the modern nation state experience, and Istanbul, the capital of synthesis: The decision-making mechanisms in Istanbul, which served as the capital of mostly monarchies, were not as complex as those of the nation state, which incorporated numerous bureaucratic institutions and political powers that conflicted overtly or covertly over the control of the state. In Ankara, on the other hand, the presidency, the government, the opposition, civilian-military bureaucracy and sometimes even the national media may chant "We are

losing the regime!” at the same time against each other. The Republican modernists, who instead of synthesizing a “Turkish-style political model” inspired by modern regimes, mainly adopted the French model in a formal approach, failed to prevent the difference between the state and the nation from getting wider. The incoordination between institutions in Ankara played an important role in the country pursuing hawkish and homogenous policies at home and dovish and meek policies abroad especially during the Cold War and in the 1990s. Classifying a substantial part of the society as “separatist and backward” threats from the very beginning not only caused domestic social, economic and political instability but also led to outcomes that weakened Turkey’s position in foreign policy. In this respect, reviewing the phases of communication processes before the modern era would be helpful to identify the shortcomings in the Turks’ experience.

Transformation of Communication Processes

The tools of communication, which inevitably have taken center stage in modern life practices, have today become, with the support of technological progress, tools of production in addition to being tools of entertainment, information transfer and propaganda, widely used in building national identities. In becoming more than a tool, from which we receive news, in a way that made its ontological nature disputable, media has undertaken the function of serving as the “production” place of news and the reality. For example; the value attributed to the reality is in proportion to its “visibility”. In other words, “If you are not visible, you do not exist”. And life is as satisfying as your visibility (=existence) in public. Here the harmony between the old, simple and, allegedly-solid arguments by those who do not believe in a creator or metaphysic elements such as “I do not believe what I cannot see” or “If it exists why can’t I see it?” and the image fetishism of the modern communication technology is noteworthy. Anyone, working in the communications industry, regardless of their views, recognize it as an unchanging standard that no incident without image can be presented in news format or appear on media. Even if it does appear, it is merely a filling material for written and visual media. It is accepted in advance that it will not attract much attention from citizens of consumers. To media, the envelope takes precedence over what is inside it, style over content, profit over ethics, therefore image over reality. Therefore, in order to understand modern communication processes and tools and in a way the media, its language and symbols should be well-known.

Image and Writing in Basic Communication Process

Media (from Latin word ‘medium’ meaning ‘middle ground or intermediate’) generally means today mass communication tools or in general the press and it points to the instrumental aspect of communications. The first thing that should come to mind in all communications where the adjective “mediatic” is used is that in the basic communication process, there is an intermediary (of message) between the sender and receiver or between the source and the target. Depending on the circumstances under which the communication takes place, the message may take the form of voice/sound, alphabet, or any sort of image. Given that both have dominant visual aspects and share similarities at mental perception

stage, the written message, formed when the letters in the alphabet make up a meaningful whole, can be described as an image. Despite the functional correlation between writing and image, it would be more useful to examine written communication with the verbal one, to which it owes its ontological origin. Because when examined periodically, it can be seen that writing is a tool of communication which emerged as a natural result of the verbal and that it often conflicts with the visual which emerged in a similar way.

There are numerous theories which define the basic communication process as simple or complex. All theories share three imperative elements even though they may be named differently: Source-message-target.¹ In any case, there must be a sender, a message and a receiver in order for communication to take place. The success of the communication depends on establishing a partnership of meaning between the sender and the receiver. In order to deliver the message to the receiver (r), the sender (s) first encodes the message and sends it via a channel. Then, the receiver decodes the encoded message to be able to understand it right. Following the decoding process, the receiver, in accordance with the message's meaning, encodes his/her own message and sends it to the sender via a channel. The "s" who was the sender before is now the receiver and the "r" who was the receiver before is now the sender. And as a result of them switching their roles, communication takes place. If the process occurred unilaterally and the receiver did not encode and send his response back to the sender, it would have been possible to call the process not communication but transmission.

Words, writing and images are the plainest instruments, people, as social and interactive beings, have been using since the "primitive" eras. When at least two people share their thoughts and feelings or when one notifies the other in line with the chain of command and the other either accepts or refuses it, the process is called speaking. Speaking is the act of saying a word and when one person says words to himself/herself, it is different from grumbling. "In the process of speaking, the styles of speaking tools and vehicles, the selected sounds (which we call phoneme in scientific language), word forms and their arrangement all depend on what have been previously spoken. They are formed in accordance with the examples in our memories."² Word is not independent from the mind. And writing, as another ancient tool of understanding, is a more detailed, more concrete derivative of the verbal form, visualized by using material styles other than phonemes and more resistant to time. In this regard, writing is a natural extension of the verbal form and there has not been any case of contradiction or conflict between these two mutually and constructively complementary tools of communication in history.

The Conflict between Image and Writing

When we add image, as a tool of communication, to the equation above, the situation changes to some degree. In pictures, used to express feelings and thoughts since "primitive" eras and also in iconography, miniatures and the Renaissance-style modern pictures, known for their perspective, the meaning is much more complicated and indirect than it is in written and verbal forms. Even if we exclude pictures as an art form since it is not certain whether they concern about conveying a message, image as a tool of

1 Sedat Cereci, İletişim, Şule Yayınları, İstanbul, 1997, p. 16.

2 Necip Üçok, Genel Dilbilim=Lengüistik, Ankara 1946, p. 4.

communication and understanding, remains insufficient in terms of providing healthy information at the decoding stage of the communication process because an image, whether it be moving (Television) or static (Photograph), cannot fully convey a reality on its own. However, it can imitate reality within a limited framework and in a rather vivid way, which makes it more convincing and also, in a paradoxical way, more deceptive. That's why the scriptures are not the visual but the written form of the word (revelation). Allah speaks to people through his prophets (The Word of Allah);³ however, he is not visible to the people. In fact, the Word is another name for Quran;⁴ writing and pen are among the words that are sworn on.⁵ In monotheistic religions, word and scripture are praised while pictures and sculptures are disapproved as elements of paganism. The widely used icons of Saint Mary, Jesus and Archangel Gabriel in the Christian world originate from not the religion itself but from the fact that its followers were closely intertwined with the pagan culture of Rome.

The most critical point regarding the conflict between image and writing is that while the verbal and written forms attempt to describe the reality, image often causes the impression that it is the reality itself. That is to say, while the word and writing serve as humble explanations, image claims to supplant the reality it represents or is perceived as such by the individuals participating in the communication. It is interesting in this respect that Picasso said "It is not a fish, it is a drawing" about one of his sketches when a lady touring the exhibition asked "what sort of a fish is that." The artist is aware of the difference between the reality and its visual interpretation. However, the art-lover, attending the exhibition, cannot realize the trick the reality perception in his mind is playing on her. The word and writing serve as instruments for understanding the reality while pictures and especially sculptures go beyond being tools of communication and may cause ontological illusions in primitive minds. For example; since children aren't developed enough to tell the difference between image and reality, a child considers his/her mother's image as her mother herself and reacts to the photograph the same way as he/she does to his/her real mother. Therefore, idolatry is characteristic of archaic societies, whose perception of image and reality is not developed enough.

It can be said that a fetishism of image, built upon more rational foundations but in essence still based on the primitive and childish perceptions of the mind, reigns in modern era. In fact, if something does not have any images, its reality is disputed. The images, conveyed via mass communication tool, are backed by verbal and written forms and the audience are told that they are faced with the reality itself. Marie-José Mondzain, a philosopher specializing on image, explains the audiences' position in the face of the image of reality transmitted via media by the "Balcony effect" theory:

The media convinces us that what it shows us –a flood, a massacre in Algeria, a strike- is bare facts. Everything is transmitted on the mode of participation in a reality, concealing that there are devices, a montage, a set of constraints that make it impossible to certainly would not have seen the same thing. It is an effect that suggests that we believe what we see through the small screen is the reality. And I call it the "balcony effect".⁶

3 The Holy Quran, 9/40.

4 The Holy Quran, 18/6, 9/40, 56/81, 4/78, 17/41, 6/115, 10/37, 12/111, 69/44-46, 41/44, 42/7, 6/115.

5 The Holy Quran, 68/1, 96/4.

6 Marie-José Mondzain, *Le Monde*, September 8, 1998.

The Leap from Verbal Culture to Visual Culture

Nowadays, symbols have become more important than the realities they represent. For example; a flag, whose signifier is a piece of cloth and some dyes on it and whose signified is a sense of belonging deep-trenched in social memory, takes on a whole new characteristic as a sign. In this respect, nation states, which abandoned in the modern era the concept of legitimacy on the basis of a divine power and leaned toward a secular/external source of legitimacy, are mostly built on symbolic foundations. As seen in the Republican modernization between 1923 and 1945, elements, purged of metaphysics and thus of sanctity, were given a new secular sanctity in order to have a partnership of meaning that will keep together individuals. Among these secular-sacred symbols are national anthems, national days, sometimes funerals, the national education process, the notion of martyrdom on the basis of homeland as opposed to religion, and history, rewritten when necessary in line with the circumstances of the nation state identity.

It gets more and more difficult for human mind to tell the difference between the image and the reality in the images presented by the media, which is used as an instrument that consolidates the nation state, on claim of being the reality itself and, above all, in communications where images are used for manipulative purposes and are supported with sound and writing. In our age, myths are visual as opposed to the verbal and written ones of the past. And ably-selected signifiers are constructed in great harmony with the already-existing information in people's shared memory. The fiction is so successful that when the signified is perceived, a partnership of meaning is formed in a way that does not allow the receiver to think "I have seen that before" or "I remember that from somewhere" and the meaning of the signified is not questioned because of the existence of the image, the allegedly most solid proof of reality, and because questioning the image is deemed equal to questioning the reality. When we examine this situation with the fast transition in Turkish society from verbal culture to visual culture, we might find clues about the roots of the communications crisis between the state-people and institutions and groups with different opinions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, modernity has placed the individual at the center of universe of signs, which thus has brought into prominence visibility rather than the ontology of reality. Therefore, the public area has become a place for the battle of signs which occurred between symbols and rhetoric. And the tools of communication, which should in theory serve as instruments of presentation, has taken their place in this battle as a center which work to reproduce the reality.

In order to resolve ambivalent problems of synthesis and such discords, awaiting urgent synthesis, as state-nation, center-periphery, religion-laicism, Turk-Kurds, history-present, modernity-tradition with which Ankara, the capital of crises, is faced, communication processes, comprising of verbal-written and visual forms, must be analyzed first. No matter which name we embrace; the "Kurdish initiative", the "democratic initiative" or

the “National Unity Project”, it is highly unlikely that Turkey’s most urgent problem can be resolved without benefiting from the imperial experience, which Istanbul embodies. A confident Ankara, reconciled with its nation and history, can overcome the paranoia over regime, useless power struggles and unfruitful conflicts between its institutions. And it can develop solid and long-term strategies on problematic areas such as the Kurdish issue, Cyprus and Armenia. To do that, healthy relations between Ankara and Istanbul’s experience must be established, and Ankara, which adopted a homogenous attitude so far as opposed to a synthesizing one, should turn its face towards the old capital in critical moments. Many of the threats and menaces Turkey is faced with today both at home and abroad are incidental. However, the real great crisis which lay behind most of them and cause them to reoccur is a communications crisis. And the way for the Turks to overcome that crisis is, to a great degree, through applying their historical synthesizing skill to issue.

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