Complicating Youth in Contemporary Turkey:

Cultural Activism and a New Muslim Youth Identity

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The topic of youth and being young in modern Turkey are frequently expressed in narratives that are either fragmented or totalizing, and frequently reductionist. In a time of resurgent youth politics globally, and in the Middle East-North Africa region and Turkey especially, the ways youth and being young has been talked about, and the youth groups which are forming and beginning to act today, deserve to be complicated. In this paper I engage in both a discussion of the ways youth has and has not talked about, and provide a case study, that of the young people of the Mavera Youth Movement, who defy and complicate traditional narratives about what being young and politically active in Turkey means.

The discussion of youth in contemporary middle east studies is both burdened and liberated by the fact that no single coherent narrative on the subject has emerged. Canonical works which approach the subject comprehensively are few (although this is changing), and attempts to to produce scholarly genealogies of how youth has been discussed in middle east studies have subject-specific, limited to short literature reviews, or both. Authors approach the topic drawing from their own discipline and country/regional focus alone, neither drawing from nor producing a coherent literature on youth and young people in the middle east. Despite this fragmented scholarship, the idea of youth is never discounted or treated as window dressing; all authors who deal with the category consider it to be a crucial category, but crucial in what way and to what end?

In 2009, Linda Hererra, in response to a prompt in the International Journal of Middle East Studies, wrote "*Is "Youth" Being Addressed in Important and Distinctive Ways in Middle East Studies?"* which in a pre-Arab Spring world posed several sharp questions and observations to the discipline of Middle East Studies as a whole. Detailing the "state of the field" such as it exists, Hererra observes that, in both the optimistic and profit minded developmental literature as well as in the wary, instability and security threat-fearing political science literature, youth "tend to be treated more as

objects than as agents of social and political reform and economic development.[1]"

How did youth scholarship come to this point? A short look at the history of the idea of "youth" in Middle East Studies is important for demonstrating how scholarship on youth has found itself in it's present state, regarding youth from the outside, as either opportunity or threat, with a small (yet growing) number of scholars attempting a more holistic approaching which ascribes social and cultural agency to young people.

Speaking in the broadest possible terms, although youth has existed in nationalist-political discourses since the 19th century, youth (and more specifically "youth culture") emerges as an autonomous category of critical sociological study only in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Although development-oriented research treating youth as implicit threat began in the 1950's with the Chicago school's ethnographies of youth gangs, the idea of youth as an identity category in the social sciences first emerged in the 1970's, most prominently advocated by scholars associated with the Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies. Synthesizing Marxism, second-wave feminism, and the emerging field of postcolonial studies, the iconic works of the Birmingham center[2] attempted to describe "Youth Sub-cultures" as social phenomena.

The Birmingham Center's work has been criticized on a number of points which resonate in work on youth in the Middle East: the Birmingham school-style approach has been attacked in turn as overly deterministic- theorizing hegemonic social forces in a way that strips youth subjects of agency- fixated on resistant and marginal groups, youth violence, and the notion of sub-culture in general, and, if not ignoring young women, then viewing them through the eyes of male ethnographic subjects[3]. To the scholar of the Middle East, the fixation on marginal sub-cultures ("radical" Islamists, "westernized" liberals), deterministic factors (Islam, "culture" "the youth bulge") and problematic approaches to

1 Hererra P. 3

2 See: Resistance through rituals : youth subcultures in post-war Britain (Hall and Jefferson 1975)

3 Huq P.11

gender (talking "about" women, the headscarf fixation) are all too familiar. Works from the 1970's in the style of the Birmingham Center relating to the Middle East are rare, with youth primarily written of as poltical radicals, although Şerif Mardin's paper *Youth and violence in Turkey* does take up some Birmingham-style concerns relating hegemonic authority, (political) sub-culture based hero worship, and alienation. However, although inflected with these concerns, Mardin does approach youth as a possibly threatening political category[4] operating withing the context of developmental and world-systems theory. He is among the first authors to write about youth in the middle east from this perspective, but he will not be the last.

Developmentalist and International-Relations oriented literature on youth in the broader Middle East *could* be read as part of a tradition of youth scholarship descending from the Chicago School's gang ethnography, running counter to the Birmingham Center's work. As appealing as it may be to set up such a scholarly dichotomy, this analysis is not particularly useful for two main reasons: Firstly, very little development-oriented work self-consciously places itself into a tradition of social sciences scholarship, instead producing actionable, policy-oriented in response to perceived crisis or need. Secondly, these forms of youth scholarship are disparate in discipline and sporadic in production; there are works but not a coherent "body" of developmental scholarship. The main output of this type of scholarship are NGO-issued development studies and papers put out by organizations such as Gallup[5], the World Bank[6], and the Konrad Adenaur[7] foundation. These works are not wholly statistically driven, and do in fact approach a number of issues facing youth from a rather holistic perspective. However, what multidisciplinary perspective exists does so in order to provide answers for the policy-driven goal

4 Considering that Mardin was writing this paper in 1978, this is not an unfair position to take, considering the political situation in Turkey. However, the turbulent nature of youth politics in Turkey and the broader Middle East quickly overwhelms other possible perspectives for exploring youth.

5 http://www.muslimwestfacts.com/mwf/108028/Young-Arabs-Poised-Maximize-Their-Potential.aspx

6 http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2004/06/03/000012009_20040603143832/Rendered/PDF/288150PAPER0Unlocking0employment.pdf

7 See the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, Turkish Youth 98: The Silent Majority Highlighted (Ankara: Tasarım, 1999)

of the parent organization.

A descendant or sub-set of this holistically positioned but academically disengaged scholarship is a small but growing body of liberal, pop-culture oriented works on youth in the greater middle east focusing on the intersection and supposed contradiction of social liberalism, consumerism, and Islamic identity performance. In books like Allegra Stratton's Muhajababes: Meet the New Middle East - Cool, Sexy and Devout and the works of popular columnists such as Thomas Friedman and Fareed Zakaria, the subject of youth in the greater middle east is approached in an outwardly sociological way which examines public behaviors only, taking youth at face value only as decontextualized, ahistorical "new" subjects.

Youth is, first and foremost, a category. No matter if seen as a demographic category, a liminal space for social behaviors, a potential locus of sub-culture formation, or as a time of special and inspired political action where young people shape and defend their society, youth is a stage, a state which is entered into and, at some point, left. Youth is bounded in a way many other social cateories like race, gender, and class are not. Life stages begin and end, and when and how they do so are often the most important milestones in any one persons life.

But who decides how and then? How is a category like "youth" bounded and defined? Asking this question in the context of modern Turkey leads any investigator on a roundabout but thematically deeply connected journey through both the institutions of the Turkish state and the process of shaping Turkish society.

This is not to say that "youth" is a category defined by state and state alone. The presence of circumcision -*sunnet*- for men, occuring in mid to late prepubescent childhood marks the transition of a boy from childhood to a state of not-quite-a-man in traditional settings. In the Ottoman Empire, the term *rushd* – usually translated as "youth" carried with it a whole raft of social implications, with connontations of innocence, purity, sexual desireablility, and virtue.

With the advent of the Tanzimat reforms and the project of state-building in the 1830s, the state began to define and bound the idea of youth through various instituions and categorizations. The first secular school system established in the Ottoman Empire were termed *rushdiye* schools. The linking of definitions of youth to state institutions such as the educational system was something that took place from the very beginning of the state-building project. Often the lines between youth and state/nation would be blurred, as the "Young Turks" of the 19th century Committee of Union and Progress placed an emerging Turkish nationalism alongside other "young" recently-formed nations such as Germany and Italy. If the nation defined itself as young, then the youth it created would in turn have to define the nation.

When the Turkish Republic established itself in 1923 it quickly began with the task of (among other things) explictly bounding and defining "youth" as a category which would simultaneously be created by and fight to uphold and preserve the state. The history of the Turkish Republic's relationship to youth has been explained by Leyla Neyzi as consisting of three rough eras. In the first, stretching from the beginning Republic into the era of multi-party democracy (1923-1950) a veritable cult of youth was at work.

This early attitude is exemplified by Kemal Atatürk's speech to the Turkish youth, in which he tasks "the youth" with safeguarding the Turkish nation and it's independence, entrusting them to fight on even if Turkey's political leadership does not. "The youth" were to be the vanguards of a new nation and a new kind of Turk. This production of youth was manifested in the new educational system, "Village Institutes" and the regimented and nationalist "Youth and Sport Holiday".

Neyzi defines the era between 1950 and 1980 as the transition from "Vanguard to Rebel"[8], describing the shift of "the Youth" to radical politicization as fundamentally a continuation of the earlier narrative of "youth as saviors". Despite the prevalence of anti-systemic radicalism among young

8 Neyzi P. 418

people in the 1970s and 80s, this radicalism was usually expressed in a fundamentally nationalistic manner, usually along with a desire to compare the social struggles of the 70's and 80's to the independence struggle experienced by previous generations.

Post-1980 youth, born in a period described by Neyzi as “turning the corner” are cast into a social void in which young people are imagined as apolitical, self-absorbed consumers. Neyzi states: “...existing categories just do not seem to fit. The denigrated “individualism” of young people seems to be about their hesitancy in linking their subjective identities and lifestyles to a single national project. Youth, like Turkish society as a whole, seems to be fragmenting into identity-based enclaves.”[9]

Although contemporary Turkish youth are described by several authors as existing in a vague, depoliticized, almost deconstructed state, the absence of an overarching state-backed narrative about what youth is and should be should not be construed to indicate a lack of state involvement in the construction of youth as a socio-political category. Ironically, in an ostensibly post-political time, it could be argued that now, more than ever, the state and it's institutions have a role in producing the life-stage of “youth”.

First and foremost out of these bounding institutions is the Turkish educational system. The modern Turkish education system was formed, embryonically, before the foundation of the republic itself. During Turkey’s independence war, in an Ankara under threat from foreign armies, the Turkish nationalist movement convened an Education Congress in 1920 to “give a national direction to education”[10]. The educational system was tasked with “(securing) political, economic and cultural independence” as well as “creating the consensus necessary to secure a free state”[11]. As soon as the republic was founded, the patchwork of Ottoman religious, state, and private schools were all placed

9 Neyzi P.425

10(Altinay P.120)

11(Kazamias p.115)

under the control of the National Ministry of Education, with the notable exception of the military schools and academies, which were run autonomously under the Ministry of Defense.[12] The ideas of national defense, modernization, and youth were inextricably linked, and it is worth noting that the education and defense ministries are the only two ministries with "national" in their names.

The primary education system, recently overhauled by the AKP government's controversial "4-4-4" reforms, broadly functions in the following manner; government-run education in Turkey begins at age six, and elementary school lasts for four years, being followed immediately by a second level of primary school roughly analogous to American middle schools. In the classic European model, there are several types of high school, some of which are university-track, some of which are not.

After taking the High School Placement Test (Turkish acronymn LYS) students then, based on their score, qualify for one of several types of high school; either vocational schools (*Meslek Lisesi),* "general" high schools (*Genel Lisesi),* or the university preperatory high schools (*Kolej).* Of special note are the *İmam-Hatip* religious high schools, which have historically been a type of vocational school whose graduates were historically limited in terms of which university departments they could attend- for several decades, *İmam-Hatip* graduates were only able to enroll in divinity faculties, although that restriction has been lifted for some time. Although the changing status of the *İmam-Hatip* schools has been discussed as a part of larger debates about the role of religion in Turkish public life, the changing status of these religious high schools also paralells the changing role of vocational high schools in general, with university- or at least more university departments- becoming accessable to larger parts of the educational system.

For those Turkish young people who do intend to enroll in university, the primary mechanism for entrance into university is a single standardized test. Currently known as the Higher Education

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12(Kazamias P.118)

Entrance Test (Turkish acronymn YGS) the test is the most important critera for entry into both private and state-run universities. Preperation for the YGS (previously known as the ÖSS) is the central goal of the last year of many student's high school careers. Traditionally the maximum number of allowable sick days is taken, usually with the collusion of a family doctor who issues obviously fraduent notes excusing the student from class. It is around this time – or perhaps even earlier- that students begin to attend private course-prep schools called *Dershane.* Frequently, *Dershane* attendance is much more important than the official high school classes, with students neglecting their coursework once a minimum passing grade has been achieved, instead opting to prepare for the university entrance exam. Some students take an entire year after high school to prepare[13].

Although the university admissions system is ostensibly equal and democratic (high-scorers from rural villages and remote parts of the country are frequent TV guests when results are published) the existence of a huge and private test-prep industry does mean that more well-to-do students whose families can afford the more reputable *Dershanes* do have a leg up when it comes to university entrance. The array of test-prep resources is dizzying, and frequently is an area where an entire (sometimes extended) family will mobilize it's resources to insure that students get the best possible chance at university acceptance.

The educational system in Turkey, especially in the post 1980 era of reform and restructuring, has evolved to allow for progressively greater and greater levels of individual choice and institutional flexibility. In good neoliberal fashion, however, this move towards openness- the condoning of private universities, the opening up of more and more university majors to vocational school graduates, and the reform of the university entrance exam- is coupled with an expectation that the young person at the cener of this process will be adaptive and proactive, shaping themselves enthusastically to the demands of the system and mobilizing social and market resources to get ahead.

13 For a documentary relating to this process, reference the film “Uç Saat” (2008)

A young man in Turkey today, for example, does not face the event-driven timline of maturation common in previous generations (adolescence beginning at circumcision, university entrance exams after high school, then military service, then marriage, etc) but rather must negotiate their own relationship to the time in their lives and it's markers; Which *dershane* to attend? How will military service be delayed or exempted? Should a prep year be taken after high school?

When taken in light of Neyzi's model of "generations" of Turkish youth, this educational model points towards a new construction of youth; away from something bounded by state categories and towards a youth subject which navigates a liminal life stage strategically and precariously.

Neyzi states: "...existing categories just do not seem to fit. The denigrated "individualism" of young people seems to be about their hesitancy in linking their subjective identities and lifestyles to a single national project. Youth, like Turkish society as a whole, seems to be fragmenting into identity-based enclaves."[14] Significantly, most of the phenomena associated with what is termed the "consuming youth" (*tüketici gençlik)* emerge not in the immediate post-coup era, but in the 1990's, as the economic effects of the initial wave of neoliberal policies are felt, and also as neoliberal technologies of government are beginning to be developed.

Increasingly, the ways that the intersection of neoliberalism- both as a set of policies and as a way of knowing ("technology of government" in the Foucaultian sense) has come to influence and to an extent define the social category of "youth" in modern Turkey. Among the most interesting activists interviewed during my fieldwork are Islamist youth organizers who find themselves at odds with the ruling populist-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) over what they see as the AKP's promotion of social inequalities and culturally bankrupt consumerism To further explore the phenomenon of Islamism's neoliberal turn- in Turkey and globally- as well of possible Islamisms which could form after mainstream Islamic politics (in Turkey's case, the electoral tradition most recently

14 Neyzi P.425

embodied in the AKP) embraces neoliberal tactics of co-option, depoliticization, and fully embrace identity-as-consumption. The term emerging to describe these new Islamic identities is "Post-Islamism"

Two authors have contributed the most to this idea: Oliver Roy and Asef Bayat. It is tempting to see these two authors on either side of an oppositional spectrum, at loggerheads over the precise definition of Post-Islamism. but it may be more useful to place their works on a time line, with Roy's conceptualization of Post-Islamism growing out of the thesis of his 1998 book "The Failure of Political Islam", and Bayat's use of the term evolving out of several works published post-2007. Roy discusses Post-Islamism in the context of "failure" - that is, the failure of Islamist movements founded in the 1970's to seize state power through street revolution. Asef Bayat's definition of Post-Islamism does not, broadly, conflict with Roy's. Bayat, however, locates Post-Islamism in a much more theoretically useful way. For Bayat, Post-Islamism is a "condition and a project[15]" It is in Bayat's synthesis of personal positioning and political action where "Post-Islamism" becomes a crystallized idea. Political Islam is not simply a reaction against the failure of previous movements, nor is it defined by an abandonment of party politics *per se* but it is seen as a movement towards producing a personal Islamist subject who operates within a discourse of rights, freedoms, and responsibilities. Post-Islamism is often co-incident with democratizing projects but is not necessarily caused by them.

In my own research, the term is both helpful and problematic. Helpful because my research subjects, by any given definition, are "post-Islamist" activist. This type of Islamist youth organization in Turkey had previously lacked any scholarly background or theoretical model, and does not fit well with the existing scholarship on Turkish youth organizations, which replicates or inverts Turkish statist narratives of youth as a social category, or is grounded in Birmingham school theories of the subaltern

15 Bayat P.243

sub-culture operating in the realm of identity politics.

I had arrived in Turkey with the intention of researching youth activism from as broad a range as possible and from as wide a diversity of organizations as possible. As I began my research in the autumn of 2011, I was interested in exploring youth organizations which complicated the mainstream (and sometimes scholarly) notion that youth were "no longer political" or that broke with preconceived notions of what youth politics was or had become. I had initially become interested in a group known as *Gençler Meydana*[16] who explicitly engaged with the rhetoric of Occupy Wall Street and frequently invoked the Arab Spring while exhorting young people to make Taksim square the next Tahrir. However, rather than being an especially prescient forerunner of the Gezi Park protests, upon attending their national conference it became clear that *Gençler Meydana* were in fact doctrinaire Leninists who were themselves a front organization for a small socialist party's youth organization, deploying the rhetoric of contemporary movements in the hope of attracting new members. Far from the transformational rhetoric they employed, *Gençler Meydana's* actual politics were an attempt to harken back to the policies of the 1970's. The second group I made contact with was *Genç Siviller,* a liberal organization which had gained much attention in some circles for it's opposition to militarism and conscription. After one extensive interview with the group's main coordinator and several promises to include me on the group's email list I wound up exhausting my leads, although I was invited to attend their "civil doctorate" lecture series on the history of modern Turkish politics, during visits to one of which I would encounter *Mavera*. During the winter of 2011 and spring of 2012, I was a participant-observer in the occupation of the Bogazici University Starbucks. During this time I made many contacts who were politically active and, after to the fracture in the occupation between social-justice oriented Islamists and LGBT groups, consequentially became aware of and interested in Islamic social

16 "Youth to the square"

justice and Islamic left politics. It was through contacts made during the occupation that I eventually came to meet the anti-capitalist Islamist group *Antikapitalist Mucadele Derneği*, who I had several interviews with over the course of Summer 2012. In this paper, due to the amount of data I gathered about the Mavera Youth Movement and also due to Mavera's larger and more nuanced and "moderate" position as an emergent youth Islamic group, I will focus on my experience with the *Mavera Genclik Haraketi.*

I first came into contact with *Mavera Genclik Haraketi* in February of 2011. Unlike my initial contact with other groups, my first interaction with *Mavera* occurred quite by accident. While attempting to attend a lecture series put on by the civil society registered association *Genç Siviller* I found myself on the way to the Asian side neighborhood of Üsküdar. This particular trip was the last in a long comedy of errors relating to attempting to seriously attend *Genç Siviller's* courses; in the fashion typical of many activist groups, several contacts gave conflicting information about where and when events would take place, and clear information about times and dates of lectures seemed only to be circulated on the group's internal mailing list rather than posted on the public website. In the previous week, I had been given the wrong time for a lecture, showing up as the talk ended, only to be told that the entire series could, in fact, be found on YouTube. I asked myself repeatedly during the long, grey commute just why, then, I was continuing to attempt to attend. The answer was simple; Üsküdar.

One of the more established Asian-side neighborhoods, Üsküdar had a reputation for both low cost of living as well as social conservatism[17], and the use of the Üsküdar municipality's cultural center's as the site for *Genç Siviller's* lecture series was taken as proof by several liberal friends of mine of that groups crypto-Islamist slant. I hoped that I might, in attending the "civilian doctorate" lecture series, be able to make contact with some of these more devout youth who were assumed to populate

17 While many of my University friends mentioned that they found Üsküdar to be a charming, cheap area to live, but all, without exception, listed the neighborhood's conservatism as a reason for not moving there.

Üsküdar.

While traveling to the Altunızade cultural cente (one of three large cultural centers run by the Üsküdar municipal government) this received wisdom was not challenged by anything that I saw. The Altunızade cultural cente was nestled next to a new luxury housing development, located one block behind the “Capitol” shopping mall and one block west of Marmara University's (large, new, and under construction) divinity faculty. A better poster child neighborhood for the AKP's brand of Islamic-Capitalist populism could not be found. Walking into the building, I found all conference rooms save one totally empty, and quickly surmised that I had little research to conduct at an awards ceremony for retiring municipal workers. After wandering the deserted building and speaking to the front desk staff, I was assured that, although they had never even heard of *Genç Siviller* or any lecture series, and that although no such group or lecture appeared in the very high quality glossy February events flier (which detailed a series of history lectures, classical guitar concerts, and play performances), I should at least go to the Bağlarbaşı cultural center and ask the staff there.

I found the Bağlarbaşı cultural center easily enough; getting off the local bus there was a significant amount of foot traffic flowing towards the building, at least half of which was young women, in groups, wearing headscarves and long coats. As I turned the corner into the courtyard I was immediately struck by what an Islamicized public space I had entered. While the Altunızade cultural center building was impressively nondescript, the Bağlarbaşı cultural center was much larger, much more visually striking, and self-consciously Islamicate in it's architectural style.[18]

As I walked into the center I was immediately struck by two things; the crowd, perhaps eighty percent young women, all of whom were in headscarves and long coats, who were standing about in

18 The building was impressive on several levels; flanked on one side by a large Tekke-style meeting hall and dominating a large, marble square offset from the street. The building's style was not Neo-Ottoman and incorporated few “classical” references, instead having what seemed to be a Persianate entrance and impressively geometric, faceted walls. All this symbolic vocabulary was styled in a very typically late 1980's to early 1990's style of darkened glass, flat, unadorned geometric surfaces, and minimalist color.

small groups, and the huge tables covered in books and posters which filled the cultural center's foyer. Attracting a few stares as an obvious foreigner, I proceeded to the front desk and was told by cultural center staff that, while *Genç Siviller* was nowhere on their sign-up sheet, another youth group was holding a book fair. Notebook in hand, I walked back to the foyer and began to take stock of what was being sold. Prominently, a large banner advertised the first year anniversary of the "*Mavera Gençlik Hareketi*[19]"

At this point any sense of disapointment I had felt at missing the lecture series had vanished; the demographics of the members present was fascinating in and of itself. Most, roughtly eighty percent, were women, all of whom were visibly in their late teens or early twenties. All wore headscarves. Most of them were attending in groups of three to four peers, although a few came paired with young men.

Although fashion cannot be taken as any concrete identity statement, I was also interested to see that there was no evident seperation in socialization between those who dressed in colorful and ultra-modern styles and those who wore the more plain *tesettür* or yet more conservatıve all-black *çarşaf.* The demographics and appearance of the event staffers was also intriguing; there was a more even gender balance (roughly fifty-fifty) among event staff, although all were in the same age range as the event attendees. I realized that with all male members were wearing what could be called "Islamist casual"; there were no skullcaps, short pants, or prominent beards, although all clothing was loose and, after looking, I realized that all men wore trimmed, understated beards and only one or two were wearing shirts with collars.

Occupying the center of the book display were severally easily-recognizable works of the Turkish Islamic canon; Saidi Nursi's *Risal-i-Nur* prominent among them, alongside Bosnian leader Alija Izetbegović's modernist, Pan-Islamist (and explicitly anti-Ataturk) *Islamic Declaration*, as well

19 "Mavera Youth Movement"- I leave the term "Mavera" untranslated for the sake of brevity. The best translation I can currently come up with is "realm beyond the seen", a term which native Turkish speakers frequently mentioned had a heavily Islamic charge.

as many religiously themed books on major Muslim historical figures and Koranic interpretation.

To either side of the central display, which consisted of a large, commercially printed vinyl banner proclaiming the one year anniversary of the movement, the collection became much more eclectic. One young man was, alongside religious texts and Ottoman pop history books, also selling very sleek, well-designed inspirational posters with pictures of Muslim figures from Hassan Al-Banna to Malcom X to Muhammed Ali[20], each with an inspirational quote from the same. While Muhammed Ali expressed pride in being a Muslim, and Ayatollah Khomeini's photograph was paired with a rather tame exultation to feel Islam in one's heart. This light and inspirational tone had some jarring exceptions, however; one poster of a grim-faced Chechen guerrilla informed the reader that "how we die is not important; what is important is that we die with honor".

To the other side of the main table, the selection became more eclectic. There, several young women curated a table of primarily literary works. About half were various Turkish language poetry collections, most of which were religiously themed or seemed to be written by Muslim poets[21] although there was- interestingly- a smattering of significant western poets and authors, with a few Virginia Woolf books very prominently displayed.

Aside from literature, these young women were also selling a number of books about contemporary Turkish politics. Conspicuously, the selection was limited to the most current and contreversial issues; one purporting to explain "the truth about Uludere massacre[22]" sat next to at least three books about the life and murder of prominent Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink. This was, for me, considerably more surprising than the presence of a modernist, feminist author in the reading list of what seemed to be a solidly Islamist organization. Both the Uludere massacre (which had taken

20 The American boxer, not the 19th century Egyptian leader of the same name.

21 The Mavera Youth Movement is especially fond of Nuri Pakdil, Mehmet Akif İnan, and Cahit Zarifoğlu, among others. Zarifoğlu actually published a literary journal called "Mavera Magazine" in the 1970's although the group does not seem to be related.

22 The Uludere massacre was an airstrike by the Turkish air force against what were thought to be Kurdish militants which killed at least 34 civilians, many from the same family.

place scarcely a month before this research took place) and anything related to Hrant Dink can be very incidiary issues in public discourse in Turkey, and both topics- state violence against Kurds and the fate of Turkey's Armenian minority- are far outside the comfort zone of, and even contradictory to, the sort of nebulously Islamicized Turkish nationalism put forward by many mainstream religious organizations close to the ruling AKP.

By this point incredibly interested, I made brief, polite small talk with the young women staffing the table, and asked the occasion for the event. The young women responded that, while it was a pity that I had missed the main event (proving once and for all that I could not be punctual when travelling to Üsküdar, even on accident), I would be more than welcome to attend further events and even set up an interview with members through their website.[23] With the event breaking up and feeling rather cold and self-conciously foreign, I proceeeded home and sent a short introductory email to the address provided on their website. It would be several months before I received a response, from one of the group's main organizers, a young man named Sinan[24] who invited me to Üsküdar that weekend for tea, and to answer any questions I might have.

Sinan meets me at the Uskudar dock and immediately and politely apologises for being late. In terms of dress, appearance, and age he is broadly similar to the young men who were in attendance at Mavera's earlier events. He invites me to go to a local cafe with him, although in small talk he says that he does not live in the central part of Uskudar or even go to this particular cafe often. This meeting location, then, is obviously for my benefit. Sinan is not a university graduate, but instead works as a web designer and has several independent web-based projects of his own. Although simply dressed and not a university graduate, Sinan is constantly busy on his top of the line Iphone[25], making one or two

23 http://www.maveragenclikhareketi.org/
24 Not his real name
25 Due to high tariffs on electronics imports, Iphones are incredibly expensive in Turkey, and owning one would suggest that Sinan's web work pays quite well, and that he, like any young web professional- and dispite his otherwise plain dress- treats his high-end phone as a status symbol, albiet an excuseably necesscary one.

short calls to other members of the youth group before we sit down. He is quite friendly and polite and soon after sitting down asks me in a matter-of-fact tone what I would like to know about his group. Sinan did not speak english, so our meetings were always conducted in Turkish.

The picture that emerges is this: Sinan is one of the founding members of the Mavera Youth Movement, which started informally about a year and a half before the interview took place. He explains that the event I stumbled upon at the community center was a celebration of the group's one-year anniversary, and proudly announces that they have recently opened a center in the European-side neighborhood of Fatih. He then, with very little prompting, explains the origin story of the Mavera Youth Movement.

The Mavera Youth Movement's story is in many archetypal for Islamically-oriented youth movments in modern Turkey. Mavera started as a reading group of like-minded friends who “already knew each other” from other activism and discussion groups. Without a center, initally, they met in houses and cafes to read and discuss literate, poetry, and religious issues. This tradition of reading groups and salon-based lessons is the bedrock of contemporary middle-class Islamic mobilization in modern Turkey. When I mention as much to Sinan he nods, but immediately qualifies my statement by declaring that “there are a lot of movements right now, but a lot is not being done.” He says that he got involved in Mavera because he wanted to create “a new structure” in how these types of study groups organize. Although he pointedly avoids speaking ill of any other Islamic groups- past or present- he does finish his statement by saying that “We don't do things to fill salons.”

After clearly explaining how he saw Mavera as primarily offering a new way forward, he enthusiastically began to describe the various projects the group had already undertaken, most ambitious among these being the one-year anniversary concert and the organization of a tour for 120 young people of the graves of famous authors who were buried in Istanbul. Sinan always couches his activities and opinions in a rehtoric of teaching, education, and exposing youth to new or different

ideas. He states that he “wants to provide youth with possibility”.

Although initially Sinan was mostly interested in explaining the acitivities and histories of the Mavera youth movment to me, it was this turn towards a discussion of “the youth” which prompted his increasingly politicized statements. This turn was not entirely unprompted; as the conversation progressed I did attempt on several occasions to bring up several subjects pertaining to youth politics and contemporary Islamic issues and events in Turkey. Sinan did not immediately jump into a politicized discussion using any sort of set vocabulary, but rather preferred to associate solutions to cultural issues facing Muslim youth in Turkey with the activities of Mavera, and articulate what he saw as problems in his own, personal voice.

It was one idea which allowed Sinan to translate between his promotion of Mavera's literary and cultural activities to a more politicized discussion about the nature of Islamic youth politics in modern Turkey. Sinan repeatedly mentioned the idea that attitudes among many Islamic youth were “poisoned”. He referred at least three or four times to the idea of “the problem of poisoning” among young people (presumably, from the context of the conversation, Muslim-identified young people). When I pressed him to explain what exactly he meant by “poisoning” he, after a pause, began to explain via anecdote. It was only through anecdote or example that he began to articulate the, for lack of a better term “anti-establishment Islamism” ideology which I had noticed present at Mavera's book fair.

“The Iranian revolution” said Sinan after a pause, “was the ideal revolution. You can't have a gun versus gun revolution; the soldiers came with guns, and the people brought flowers.” Sinan totally eschewed violence or any sort of militant attitude, but nevertheless was deeply discontented with the fate of political Islam in Turkey and several times wished that a more radical and transformative spirit held sway in the country. “We had a revolution here[26], we organized and became cadres, and it's been

26 Here Sinan seems to be referring to the electoral victory of the Islamic-populist Justice and Development Party (AKP).

ten years and what, we have headscarves in universities?" Sinan was dissappointed with the mainstream Islamically-oriented parties in Turkey and with the attitudes of many of the newly affluent devout middle classes.

Sinan declared that "there's a new Kemalism founded by Muslims" in Turkey, and voiced his dissapointment with continuing state supremacy in public and personal life. "If there is violence in the family, for example" Sinan gave as an example "what does the state do? It comes in and takes the children. The extended family should solve this problem." Although not by any means an uncommon idea for Islamists or social conservatives in general, this attitude manifested in several examples given by Sinan of ways in which Turkish Muslims had put the state before spiritually aware piety in their private and family lives. When I asked him how he felt about the phenomenon of Islamic banking and Islamicized consumerism, Sinan returned to issues of personal piety and individual religious engagement within the family; the example of Islamic daycare was also given- "people pay money for others to teach their children" Sinan said, wondering how this made somebody a good Muslim.

Although he explicitly criticized the AKP government and political figures, and lamented contemporary attidues, at no point did he lay out specific attacks against specific people. Instead, Sinan, while profusely claiming that he did not want to speak ill of other Muslims, expressed a sense of dissapointment with mainstream Islamic organizations, especially the more established *Cemaats*- he did not name which specifically- who he felt were ossified and stifled genuine religious feeling and universalist spirit in spite of the upswing in public religiosity. "Malcom X was changed by his Hajj, but nothing like this happens anymore."

When I asked about what Mavera's specific ideological or political solution to this situaton was, he again stepped back from explicitly political language. "We don't believe in politics" he said, "Muslims have had ten years for politics.", again expressing disillusionment with Islamic party politics. Speaking of Turkish Muslim youth he commented "We've become conservative...we don't take risks".

Neither he nor any other member of the Mavera Youth Movement self-identified as a conservative. Sinan claimed that he wanted the Mavera Youth Movment to be “relaxed” and to function “without any ideology”. Although constantly venturing into the political sphere for sources of discontent, Sinan always articulated Mavera's vision as one which strove to create a space for self-articulation and cultural education, as a space for providing education and guidance to young people who he felt were being misled into inauthetic, ossified patterns of Islamic belief. For Sinan and the leadership of the Mavera Youth Movment, culture and literature are important in and of themselves.

I asked then why, if Mavera wasn't explicitly political, they had decided to call themselves a “Youth Movment”- a term which has political connontations in Turkey. Sinan chucked when I asked him this and replied “that's just some jargon we used.” The founders of Mavera, he implied, wanted to set themselves apart from other Muslim groups by adopting a less outwardly conservative, more dynamic attitude. Sinan spoke of the kind of person he wanted to be attracted to Mavera; “When you look at an 18 year old, they want to save the world- but how is that going to go?” Sinan expressed displeasure with sloganeering or groups which mobilized young people for mobilization's sake, laying out what he saw as the important task of Mavera; “a person who reads poetry is a good person.”

As a closing question, I ask Sinan about the predominantly female crowd I had seen at the book fair. I asked him what exactly motivated so many young women to become involved in Mavera? “Well” replied Sinan “you should really ask one of our female members!”. He then offered to set up an interview if I had any questions for young women involved with Mavera. He told me that there were a great many of them who contributed a lot, but he wanted them to be able to express their opnions themselves. He reassured me that a meeting would be fine, and that men and women should interact and discuss together, at least within a semi-public setting. While clear that one-on-one meetings alone

together were improprietous, Sinan was very clear that female participation and opinion mattered to Mavera's organizers.

As we left he excitedly explained upcoming events and concerts, invited me to a “Ezgi Söyleni[27] which would be taking place in a few weeks. Sinan was very excited about the concert, and seemed to be a great fan of music, which he discussed as our interview ended and the conversation became more informal. He claimed that a lot of good hip-hop was being made by Muslims in Turkey, but also was keen on exposing members of Mavera to international music he felt had spiritual or poetic value. He singled out the British singer Adele as an example of valuble western pop music. “A lot of pop is very fake, but Adele sings from the heart.” On that endorsement, we parted ways, but Sinan gave me his assurances that he would set up more meetings with Mavera membership if I so cared.

In about a week I received a phone call from Sinan inviting me to the group's center in Istanbul's Fatih neighborhood to interview some female members and to see the group's headquaters. Sinan was very clear about directions and told me which busses to take from Taksim square in order to get to Mavera's office. Following his directions, I soon found myself crossing the Golden Horn on a city bus, getting off in Istanbul's historic penninsula, scarcely a few blocks away from the Fatih Camii complex. It was at this point that, to put it bluntly, I became lost.

Sinan had given me an address, but I had neglected to note down any sort of street map. Although an inconvenience, it was an impromptu lesson in urban space: I had become lost in the hub of Istanbul's Islamic civil society. On one level this is not surprising, as the Fatih Camii's sprawling 15th century religious complex still functions as a center of Islamic scholarship, and the Fatih neighborhood is considered one of Istanbul's more devout areas.

Yet what I observed in this neighborhood was not only social conservatism and religious

27 Music being seen as un-Islamic, what was a concert of contemporary music was referred to as a “melody festival” and songs performed in it were termed “Ilahis” or “Marches”. Footage from the concert can be found here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFXP4BWyYKw

devotion, but a very high geographic concentration of Islamic *organization.* In the streets immediately around the Fatih Camii, there is an almost uninterrupted succession of book stores, registered associations, and private schools. At least one Islamist publishing house I would later research had it's offices nearby, and just a few blocks away from Mavera's office was the headquaters of İHH, the huge Islamically-oriented charity which had funded and organized the ill-fated Mavi Marmara's trip to Gaza[28]. Much like the Bağlarbaşı cultural center and the neighborhood of Uskudar, the neighborhood around Fatih was a physical space where youth movements such as Mavera could easily find material resources, from books to office space, as well as a physical community of like-minded young people.[29]

Mavera is not an organization which has a social space pre-allocated to it: although roughly half of the activists I spoke with had some level of university education, the other half (including much of the leadership) did not. Mavera could not be termed a campus organization, had no explict campus presence, and did not function within the liminal space provided by the university. Nor did Mavera ever attempt to assert itself in a prominent public space; protest, postering campaigns, or other public manifestations was not part of how it positioned it's activities and beliefs, and neither it's politics nor it's organization pointed the group towards these forms of political and organizational activity. Instead, Mavera sought to create spaces where a certain Islamic youth subjectivity could grow, thrive, and be performed. The nature of these spaces complicates and nuances Mavera's relationship with mainstream or "establishment" Islamic groups; although Mavera's members and leadership expressed consistent discontent with established Islamic organizations in Turkey, Mavera as an organization did not explicitly position itself against these groups, and in fact operated in urban spaces created by these

28 İHH always had a table and donation box present at each of Mavera's events that I attended. As far as I could tell İHH had no official link with Mavera, although there was a great deal of co-membership and the leadership were on friendly terms with each other, İHH's presence seemed to be due to it's status as Turkey's most visible Islamic charity.

29 About half of the Mavera members I spoke to were also active in some other Islamic activist group.

mainstream groups. Mavera's use of the Bağlarbaşı cultural center was dependent on the (at least tacit) permission of the AKP-run Uskudar municipal government, and the presense of it's office in Fatih benefitted in non-tangible but significant ways from the Islamicized urban space created by organizations like the İHH and the government's Religions Affairs Ministry.

Observing this area of Fatih was incredibly interesting and valuable for me, however I was several minutes late and was exchanging text messages with my host, Sinan, the entire time attempting to find the correct street address. I was eventually able to locate the correct street and found Mavera's office. I was not sure what to expect in terms of what the office would be like: my previous experiences with Mavera had all been at the Bağlarbaşı cultural center, in an Islamicate building during an organized event. For this reason, and because of my previous experiences visiting other (non-Islamic) youth organizations in their offices, I was expecting the Mavera offices to be a very ideologically charged place where Islamic youth identity would be scrupulously performed in a reified fashion, conversation and activity would be politicized (or at least presented to me, an outsider, as such).

These conceptions were dispelled as soon as I arrived; the office was in a two story, narrow older wooden building still found in Istanbul's historic peninsula. The building had a yellow and purple paintjob which could only be described as “cute”. There was no obvious sign or billboard announcing Mavera's presence, although Sinan soon came down to meet me at the doorway. We shook hands and I apologized profusely for being late, and Sinan quickly showed me into the building. Mavera had only been in the office for a few months, and the bottom floor was sparsely furnished, with a large (empty) salon and two large bookshelves. Displayed were the visual materials (posters, banners) from the previous Mavera events, as well as a number of books by authors featured at their book fairs. Sinan quickly brought me upstairs and introduced me to a number of young men- a few (but not most) of whom I recognized from other events- who were at the center, quietly working at computers open to design and layout programs. There was a relaxed atmosphere, and the young men were all dressed in

the relaxed, subtly conservative style common to men active in Mavera. After showing me the main office and going through a prefunctory round of introductions and handshakes with the men working on Mavera's website and graphics, Sinan led me up to the office's third floor. Sinan explained that he had specifically asked around on my behalf to find female members to interview.

As we walked up the stairs he admonished me somewhat for being late, explaining that these girls had stayed specifically to talk to me, and that he had made sure that they represented a range of involvement with the group. We reached the third floor and I noticed that it was much more sparsely furnished, consisting of a very basic kitchenette (a small hot plate and sink) with some evidence of recent cooking and a single larger, almost empty, room. Sitting in this room were two young women, Şenay and Fuyla[30]. Sinan introduced us, and wished me luck with my interview, and excused himself.

Sinan did this rather pointedly, and in previous meetings he had made note of explaining Mavera's attitude towards mixed-sex social interaction; "if a man and a woman are friends and are talking, and the door is left open, this is no big deal[31]." In context, he was explaining to me ways Mavera differed from other, more traditionalist[32] religious organizations, using this greater openness to (still regulated) opposite-sex socialization as a way of demonstrating that Mavera was a less "stuffy" organization that trusted it's membership.

Once Sinan had left, I sat down with the two young women. The setting was much more like a formal interview than the participant-observation or personal conversation that I had been engaging in. The two young women sat around a small table, with my seat positioned opposite theirs. I sat down and the interview began.

30 The names are pseudonyms as per the terms of my human subjects application.

31 This is actually, verbatim, a Hanefi-school *fiqh* ruling. Post-Islamists are usually described as using more "fundamental" textual sources as a counterweight to more traditionalist, custom-based religious organizations, and this is a textbook example.

32 I use "traditionalist" here as a catch-all for the social conservatism, doctrinaire religious belief, and emphasis on communal standards (as opposed to individual interpretation of Islamicate textual sources) displayed by the various Islamist civil society organizations, reading groups, and Cemaats which emerged in and around the 1980's and early 1990's. Sinan never laid out such a specific definition- and indeed pointedly refused to ever identify what specifically Mavera was *against*, although his implicit critiques touched on all points used in this definition.

Şenay and Fuyla were cousins, ages 19 and 24, respectively. Şenay was dressed in a yong, hip style, and although she did wear a headscarf, she did not wear any of the identity markers (i.e. long raincoat) of the doctrinaire or conservative religious young woman. If any piece of her clothing was an identity marker, it was her white Converse hi-tops, a near universal type of footwear for city-dwelling Turkish high school and university students. Fulya, on the other hand, wore an all black *Çarşaf* pinned below her chin.

Fulya had been contacted by Sinan about my interest in speaking with female Mavera members, and had in turn asked her cousin to come along, as she said, to give a more varied perspective on being involved in the group. It became clear in conversation that Fulya was obviously more involved in Mavera than Şenay, and I began to have the feeling that a younger relative had been "drafted" into the meeting either to make sure more people came or to provide me with the experience of meeting a "rank and file" member. This is not to say that there was any lack of enthusiasm in the interview on the part of either participant, although Fulya spoke significantly more than Şenay, and significantly directed the conversation, usually with Şenay adding her own interjections and observations to Fulya's overall narrative.

Both young women had some level of university education. Şenay was a current student at Marmara University, studying construction management, a major which she was obviously not very enthusiastic about; she explained to me that she was only in her major because of her test scores[33]. Fulya, on the other hand, was a university graduate, who had, as a distance learning student, recieved a degree in divinity from the European Islamic University in the Netherlands[34]. Fuya's educational

33 In the Turkish educational system university admission for all state universities is determined by a battery of standardized tests (the higher education entrance exam- *Yükseköğretime Geçiş Sınavı or YGS)* higher scores on the YGS will enable a student to attend a better university, but universities also "rank" departments by means of YGS scores required to enter. Therefore a student in, for example, law or engineering can be assumed to have higher test scores than one in international relations or marketing. The exact ranking of departments varies university to university. Unsurprisingly, this creates a situation within university youth space where there is a definite hierarchy of social capital.

34 The university, located in Rotterdam, seems to be connected to the Islamic University of Rotterdam (they share an address). The university is wholly private, appears to be only partially accredited, and is reported to be closely connected with the thought of Turkish religious scholar Saidi Nursi.

expereince was praticularly interesting. Distance learning programs in Turkey are rare, (CITE), but her choice of an Islamic university in Europe made sense; such a school would be free of state control either from the Ministry of Religious Affairs or the Education Ministry. This is not entirely conjecture as to her motivations; many of her comments during her interview would express a deep ideological dissatisfaction with the Turkish educational system and she would state that we she was a child, it was "so bad I couldn't go to school".

I began our more structured interview by asking the both of them what they considered "youth" to mean. Fulya immediately laughed and protestied "I'm 24, I'm not young[35]." When I explained that I, as an American, didn't consider 24 to be praticularly old and would still like to hear what she had to say on the matter, she paused for a moment, and went on to describe youth as first and foremost an unshaped and limial space and expereince. She stated that youth is "a time to learn things" and young people are still uncertain and "not yet aware of things." Very much in line with Mavera's mission, she repeatedly referenced youth as a time when people are exposed to new ways of thinking that shape their worldview, and said that good and thoughtful education was necesscary. Şenay chimed in at this point to say that she thought reading and learning was especially important for young people.

Asking if they were referring to specifically Turkish youth in Turkish circumstances both young women shook their heads "no." and both made statements to the effect that they felt this perspective on youth to be a universal one. As a follow-on, I asked them what they thought the primary task of youth, Fulya answered that they should read and learn attentively and critically. The younger Şenay immediately and with a great deal of enthusiasm added that youth should "rise up" and that "sure, you have to read and learn, but after reading you should demonstrate. We need demonstrations." Şenay felt that existing youth organizations "did not give a response" to the issues posed to young people today

35 I found this interesting, because although neither young woman, when asked, defined youth as a specific, bounded time, Fulya did clearly feel that 24 was no longer "young", indicating at least some implicit temporal bounding for the category.

and said that the way forward was “to form movements.” The responses of these young women aligned with their respective ages and level of inolvement in Mavera- Fulya, older and more commited to the efforts of the organization defined youth in ways strategically related to Mavera's pedagogical project, while the younger “rank and file” Şenay responded mainly with emotionally charged calls for action and organization, tinged with a level of frustration which underpinned her own desire to engage in activism[36].

After discussing their generalized feelings about how they conceptualize activism and categories like youth, I sought to inquire about how these ideas impacted their owns social networks and existences. I asked both women what their families felt about their activities with Mavera. Fulya answered first, saying that her mother and father don't care that much and have never objected to her being active. Pointedly, and possibly as an attempt to stress that her family wasn't reactionary or blindly traditionalist, she said that “my being a girl has never made a difference” in terms of her parent's attitude towards her involvement with Mavera. Şenay answered that, living on campus, her parents were not as close or involved, but that they thought it was “good to believe” in something and that there was a general sentiment of support, although she quickly added that “they do see it as a little dangerous.”

After she said this I asked if it was because of anything their parents specifically experienced, and both young women answered that, in their parent's time, activism of any sort had been potentially dangerous. I nodded in recognition and explained that all the activists I had interviewed has expressed the sentiment that “the seventies and eighties” were a dangerous/serious/more meaningful time for youth activism, to which both young women nodded and mentioned “the eighties[37]” as an era whose

36 This was Şenay's first foray into political activism, having been exposed to Mavera through friends and family when she entered university. Fulya, on the other hand, had been involved in various forms of activism since high school, although when I asked her (rather bluntly) with which groups she bristled and nervously opted not to answer. I dismissed the question and the interview continued.

37 This focus on the 80's is revealing; although *both* the 1970's and 1980's were usually referenced by leftist and secular youth activists, religious youth activists focused on the 1980's and 90's as a heyday of Islamic activism. Historically this

chilling effects still reverberated intergenerationally.

When asked about the effects of becoming politically active on relations with their peer groups, both young women did not report any great affect. Şenay mentioned that she "might have some friends who don't like it, but they don't say so." Fulya added that "friends you make in this environment" are more inclined to want to participate in rather than disapprove of her advocacy. She continued: "20 years ago this was very serious, people would go to prison, but now this isn't serious stuff we're doing".

For both young women, the idea that social or political activism within their broader social circle would be polarizing lied firmly in the past. This could be read as either an endorsement of post-politics (i.e. That nothing "counts" as politics anymore) or a more subtle reflection of subculturization (i.e. That nobody would disagree with your activism because you are already surrounded by an environment which totally supports it).

When asked about how they hoped to change society Fulya answered "there doesn't need to be a direct fight", explaining that Mavera sought to raise and cultivate youth and get people to read and engage with ideas. She said that there were "several teachers" who she hoped Mavera would expose young people to. She then listed a series of authors who she felt should be read by Mavera members, first among them the Islamist poet Cahit Zarifoğlu[38], although non-Islamist writers such as the novelists Nazan Bekiroğlu and Sezen Karakoç were also mentioned.

Şenay had a more personal but also more revealing take on the same question: Şenay began to speak passionately of "classification" that happens among young people. She said that "people put you in a category and it is very difficult to clean yourself of it." For her, this "classification" - (Turkish: *siniflandirma)* was something restrictive and imposed from the outside. Fulya nodded her head and

makes sense; Islamist mass activism grew to prominence after the 1980 coup. More significantly for this paper, it shows that there is a separate "history" of youth activism among Islamic youth, one which does not have the same milestones and heroes, or give weight to the same terms ("The Youth") as the hegemonic Leftist-Kemalist narrative of youth as described by Neyzi.

38 Zarfioglu ran a journal in the 1970's called Mavera, although there does not seem to be any-direct-link to the Mavera youth movement.

agreed, saying that “classification” was a big challenge for young people. Şenay continued, saying that when you were young, you were put into discreet groups, and that each group “demeans and denigrates the other” explaining that if you “support one institution, all the others will turn against you” Şenay was genuinely upset at what she saw as outside restrictions on her personal autonomy and imposed effots to make her subscribe to other people's narratives. Her phrasing was fundamentally individualist.

I asked if this was a phenomenon confined to religious groups. Both women answered that they were speaking universally, not just talking about a specific feature of religious organizing but that this phenomenon “happened in religious movements, too.” I then asked if Mavera did consider itself a religious or Muslim movement, and Fulya answered; “we're all Muslims here” but went on to explain how this wasn't something that limited the group or limited it's horizons. She pointed out that although the membership was Muslim, they held many non-Muslim authors to be important and read anything of value, not holding themselves to identity-based choices. It was at this point that I asked if this sentiment was why they had featured Virginia Woolf in the book fair I had previously seen. Fulya simply shrugged and said that she had seen the film “The Hours[39]” and had liked it, so she thought they should have it at the book fair. This statement was quintessentially Post-Islamist: syncretic, intellectually engaged, individualist, and casual.

The interview had, at this point turned more towards ideas of Islamic identity and the goals of activist organizations so I felt comfortable asking more explicitly political questions. Without referencing my conversation with Sinan, I repeated Sinan's comment (saying 'some people say...') about how “Muslims have had ten years and all we have now are headscarves in universities.” Both young women took immediate exception to the idea that being able to wear Islamic headscarves in universities was not a serious victory or was purely symbolic. Fulya, who had obviously made this argument

39 I had not expected this particular film, with it's frank depictions of lesbianism, infidelity, and suicide to be popular with members of an Islamic youth organization, both due to my own preconceived notions but also due to the very real past presence in Turkish media of Islamic morality tale films which often feature female protagonists and are targeted at young women. Due to the presence of a “culture war” dynamic in Turkey over the past decade,

before, did not begin a discussion of individual rights or any sort of argument centered around Islamic virtue. Rather, she began to explain how young women who wearing headscarves was “conciousness and experience expanding” behavior, and how headscarves were important more for the students who met and interacted with headscarved students, hopefully changing their attitudes and breaking down preconceived notions they might have. Fulya saw value in young Muslim women interacting with a broader population, communicating by example.

On the topic of Islamic politics, I asked Fulya and Şenay what they thought of Islamic capitalism and Islamic consumerism, using the example of the new trend of Islamic banking and 200 Lira headscarves I had seen for sale at the designer outlet Vakko in Istanbul's Bebek neighborhood. Fulya's response was immediate: “I am totally against this.”

Fulya said that, while it was the right of every Muslim to be “comfortable” she held that “some people's lives are exploitative” and that Islamic identity performance had lost touch with reality “a two-hundred lira headscarf isn't normal” she said “there are families who live on that much a month.”

Şenay had become progressively less talkative and more withdrawn as the conversation turned more explicitly political, but she did make a very observant and illuminating point: “there is diversity now, but it isn't a good diversity” she said, referring to the broader Muslim experience in Turkey “Muslims can become richer and more powerful but you still have problems” she made reference again to social inequality and simply stated: “power causes this.”

Fulya followed up Şenay's statement by recommending me a book. Her textual references regarding Islamic social behavior and ethics were a far cry from the cosmopolitan and secular literary selection she preferred; Fulya recommended a book from the 1980's by Muhammad Qutb, the brother of the radical Egyptian modernist Islamist Sayyid Qutb. She mentioned that there was a good literature on the subject of “degeneracy” within Islamic movements and that this was a very important issue to

keep in mind.

After this, we spoke for a short period of time about upcoming Mavera events, and I was invited to an upcoming concert.[40] I asked both of them if there were any questions they would like to ask me, and after a few polite questions about my major, my university, and why I was interested in Turkey and learning Turkish, we ended the interview.

Walking away from the interview left me with several overlapping, subtle impressions. The first of which was that, although Mavera always shied away from explicitly endorsing political action, politics- both the politics of Islamic and Youth identities but also the politics of contemporary Turkish economic life permeated the group and what they did. Although they self-conceptualized as providing simply educational and cultural opportunities and as engaging in a fundamentally educational project, what their literary focus and relatively "calm" position on mainstream "official" politics provided them was an opportunity to create a space wherein counter-hegmonic Islamic youth identities could begin to form and find reinforcement.

The second primary observation I had was more of a question to myself: was this something new? The emphasis on reading, cultural activity, poetry, and even the specific authors they found dear were in many ways continuations of the pre-1990's Islamic politics which the AKP's meteoric rise had co-opted and subsumed. It could be argued that Mavera was not a new invention, but instead a returning to old forms of activism. However, the lack of utopian political language, emphasis on secular sources and ecumenical discussion of ethics and values in a non-Islamicized context would lead me to believe that, even if Mavera is a return, it is an accented return. Re-formed and re-oriented in it's own way.

40 In a rare use of jargon, it was called a "recitation"

The Gezi Park protests which erupted in late May 2013 have catapulted Youth activism back into the spotlight of Turkish political life. It is worthy of note that among the first groups to occupy the park off of Istanbul's Taksim square were revolutionary and anti-capitalist Islamists. Although Mavera has not, to my knowledge, yet taken to the streets or weighed in on the uprising, it should be noted that the kind of identity being articulated by Mavera has reached at least one iteration which is committed to street protest against the current government. Whatever Mavera, whatever Selim and Fulya and Şenay do, their methodology of "quiet politics" is finding an increasingly loud voice. It will be fascinating to hear what they have to say.

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