

ROUNDTABLE

DYNAMICS OF DISRUPTION: ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

## Dynamics of Disruption: Ethnographic Practice in Contemporary Turkey

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This roundtable explores how recent social and political upheavals in Turkey have impacted ethnographic research in and about the region. We propose that an analysis of ethnographers' experiences in contexts of disruption and uncertainty can offer important insights into both research methodologies and contemporary politics and society in Turkey. The past twenty years have been a time of transformation and, arguably, disruption in the Republic of Turkey. In 2003, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP) rose to power under the leadership of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. As the following decade heralded a period of rapid economic growth and development, social and political changes also began to reshape institutions in consequential ways. In 2008, top military leaders were charged with participating in a conspiratorial deep state in what would come to be known as the Ergenekon trials. While these prosecutions were framed by the ruling party as critical to securing democratic governance in Turkey, they also marked a turning point in the AKP's efforts to secure and consolidate its hold on the state. After the AKP won its third general election in 2011, their efforts to consolidate power grew, and over the following decade Turkey would devolve from being recognized as a model Middle Eastern democracy to an illiberal democracy and finally an authoritarian regime.<sup>1</sup> This political transformation was punctuated by key events, from the 2013 Gezi Park protests and the attempted coup of July 2016 to the resumption of armed conflict with the Kurdistan Worker's Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê PKK) in 2015 and the government's crackdown on Academics for Peace.<sup>2</sup>

As Karabekir Akkoyunlu and Kerem Öktem observe, "taken together, these turning points portray a clear trajectory, at least since 2011, towards the personalization of executive power, weakening of democratic checks and balances, less free and fair electoral competition, the imposition of stricter constraints on freedom of expression and civil liberties and the growing use of the state's coercive capacity to suppress various forms of non-violent, as well as violent, dissent."<sup>3</sup> In addition to these national-level changes, more localized

<sup>1</sup> Gülay Türkmen-Derivoğlu, "Turkey: From 'Role Model' to 'Illiberal Democracy,'" openDemocracy, 11 December 2015, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/turkey-from-role-model-to-illiberal-democracy>; Zafer Yılmaz and Bryan S. Turner, "Turkey's Deepening Authoritarianism and the Fall of Electoral Democracy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 5 (2019): 691–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1642662>.

<sup>2</sup> Nihat Celik, "The AKP-Era Higher Education Strategies for Establishing Hegemony over Turkish Universities," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 3 (2023): 520–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823001034>.

<sup>3</sup> Karabekir Akkoyunlu and Kerem Öktem, "Existential Insecurity and the Making of a Weak Authoritarian Regime in Turkey," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 505–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2016.1253225>.

events have reshaped both the physical and social landscape of Turkey, ranging from the dramatic expansion of urban renewal projects in major cities to natural disasters such as the 2011 earthquake in Van and the earthquakes in southern and central Turkey in early 2023, all of which caused widespread internal displacement. These events and their reverberations have played out against the backdrop of a migration crisis resulting from the Syrian civil war, a 2017 constitutional referendum that dramatically expanded both the duration and scope of Erdoğan's powers, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

Among the many consequences of these events, one that is particularly notable is the erosion of trust throughout Turkey. As Ayşegül Sert wrote in *The Atlantic* in 2023, "Turkey's trust in government has turned to dust."<sup>4</sup> In her essay for this roundtable, Zeynep Ozgen quantifies this phenomenon, noting that a 2022 Ipsos survey showed that fewer than 15% of the population of Turkey agreed with the statement that "most people can be trusted." Similarly, the 2022 World Values Survey showed that only 14% of respondents in Turkey agreed with the statement, "most people can be trusted," whereas 84% responded that people "need to be very careful." This rate of mistrust is echoed in other surveys, which consistently place Turkey as having among the lowest levels of social trust of any nation in the world.

These social and political upheavals have also shaped researchers' topics of study and research methods, including our own. Danielle's dissertation fieldwork in Turkey spanned 2010–12, a time of great optimism and hope for Turkey's future. However, disruption ended up defining her research experience when the focus of her project had to shift from the cultural life of a particular neighborhood in Istanbul (Sulukule) to the displacement of that community by a destructive urban renewal project. Following the end of her dissertation project, every year seemed to bring news of another crisis in Turkey. Later, as partners in the field in 2019 and 2020, we were unable to complete our research as planned when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Danielle's research shifted to Turkey's international diaspora. Eric was prompted to abandon fieldwork altogether. Inspired by conversations with Danielle and in dialogue with her throughout, Eric undertook a project based on interviews with scholars who had themselves conducted long-term fieldwork in Turkey.

Our own experiences of disruption have ultimately been minor compared to those faced by friends, colleagues, and the many scholars both in and of Turkey who have suffered repression and precarity as a result of these broader trends. During the course of Eric's interviews with ethnographers of Turkey, a majority of the sixty scholars he spoke with shared stories about how social and political changes in Turkey had reshaped or truncated their fieldwork in the country. Based on these interviews, Eric published an article that explored the methodological implications of fieldwork disruptions.<sup>5</sup> Conversations that emerged from this project provided us with the initial motivation to bring together the scholars who are participating in this roundtable to reflect on and share their experiences with the "fluid and fast evolving" social and political landscape of contemporary Turkey.<sup>6</sup>

Contributions to this roundtable offer rich and incisive insights into the methodological, theoretical, and personal consequences of conducting fieldwork in a period of widespread social upheaval and extremely low levels of social trust. Contributors' fieldwork experiences span 2010 through 2022 and cover multiple cities and regions. Moreover, their disciplines and areas of study are diverse, including anthropology, ethnomusicology, sociology, and women's and gender studies. Consequently, the authors of these essays speak to widely varying dimensions of social and political processes in Turkey. Despite this diversity, there also are important commonalities across ethnographers' experiences that point to important takeaways for scholars conducting fieldwork in Turkey.

<sup>4</sup> Ayşegül Sert, "Turkey's Trust in Government Has Turned to Dust," *The Atlantic*, 8 February 2023, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/02/earthquake-turned-turkey-cemetery/672988>.

<sup>5</sup> Eric W. Schoon, "Fieldwork Disrupted: How Researchers Adapt to Losing Access to Field Sites," *Sociological Methods & Research*, 18 May 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00491241231156961>.

<sup>6</sup> Akkoynlu and Öktem, "Existential Insecurity," 506.

In her contribution, Zeynep Ozgen focuses attention on disruptions that are endogenous to the field site. Specifically, she explores the disruptive possibilities that emerge from contexts defined by extremely low levels of social trust. Detailing how a variety of multinational surveys show Turkey as having among the lowest levels of generalized trust in the world, Ozgen uses diverse examples from her fieldwork—which took place from 2010 to 2012—to highlight how high levels of suspicion, mistrust, and belief in conspiracy theories shaped her access to field sites and interactions with interlocutors. She notes that many of the situations she faced and the tools she used to manage them are familiar to any ethnographer. However, as she writes, “Low-trust environments can augment these factors, leading to major disruptions to fieldwork or requiring extended introductory periods.” As she highlights various challenges that have resulted from Turkey’s notably low levels of social trust, she does not simply list these challenges. Rather, she offers theoretically and historically informed explanations for the conditions that have produced low levels of trust and builds on this to detail how the challenges she faced ultimately led to unanticipated opportunities that enriched her research.

In the next essay, Anoush Tamar Suni shares her experiences of conducting fieldwork in Van from 2014 to 2018, a period that spanned the relative stability ushered in by peace negotiations between the Turkish government and the PKK, the subsequent violence and instability that erupted in 2015 when the peace process abruptly ended, and the dramatic escalation of fear and anxiety that emerged in the wake of the 2016 attempted coup. Beginning with her experience of peacetime fieldwork, Suni notes that her preliminary research went largely according to plan. Arriving with a “romantic vision of what fieldwork might look like,” her experiences in 2014 closely tracked with those expectations. However, within days after returning to Van for long-term fieldwork in July 2015, the armed conflict in southeastern Turkey resumed and Suni had to reevaluate her methods to remain in the field and continue her research under wartime conditions. By documenting the atmosphere of fear and mistrust that gripped the city and fundamentally shaped her personal relationships and interactions, Suni’s reflections highlight the personal and psychological costs of large-scale social disruptions for researchers in the field. Her stories point to the interactional dynamics of uncertainty that emerged around these events.

In her essay, Seda Saluk interrogates key institutional factors that can shape researchers’ experiences in the field. She articulates how large-scale political changes in Turkey shaped her interactions with institutions in the field, and how scholarly institutions whose purpose it is to support research can play a more productive role in mitigating the challenges that ethnographers face in an “unknown moment.” Contrasting her experiences accessing publicly funded healthcare institutions both before and after the 2016 coup attempt, Saluk details how she was locked out of sites that she was planning to include in her research because government functionaries faced widespread uncertainties and personal risks in the post-coup bureaucracy. This experience forced her to draw on existing connections and identify a novel field site for her work. Through her examples, Saluk discusses the dynamics of resilience in ethnographic research. While she emphasizes the importance of personal resilience, she also problematizes the discourses in which such a concept is embedded. Saluk argues that discourses of resilience place the burden for flexibility and adaptation on individuals and contends that, especially in contexts like Turkey where rising authoritarianism has rendered ethnographic disruptions commonplace, support from funding and academic institutions is critical for managing these challenges.

Gökhan Mülayim shares reflections from his experience conducting ethnographic fieldwork from 2018 to 2020 in the private security industry. His essay offers insights into the balance between needing to “treat the field as an already constituted research object” and the imperative to “continuously reframe, remake, or essentially reconstitute this object during the fieldwork.” This challenge was made more acute by the political climate in Turkey, where suspicion and fear were a defining characteristic of his initial interactions. Like Ozgen, Mülayim discusses the various ways that the climate of mistrust—which is, in

no small part, reflected in the meteoric growth of private security contractors—shaped access to the field and his methods, and emphasizes the value of adaptation. For instance, after facing suspicion and rejection in his efforts to gain *entrée* with private security guards and the contractors that employed them, he opted for a more deeply embedded approach and enrolled in a training program to become certified as a private security guard. He details how this and other pragmatic, stepwise responses to the challenges that emerged in the field ultimately allowed him to navigate this social environment, and how the process offered invaluable insights into one of the fastest growing sectors in the Turkish economy.

Building from the observation that disruptions have become a part of everyday life in Turkey, Erol Köymen interrogates how disruption can be fruitfully treated as a site for diagnosing its antithesis: order. Köymen presents examples from three different research projects to explore various dynamics of disruption in ethnography. Each of these examples relies on different methods, and each took place at a uniquely significant moment—from the 2016 coup attempt to the COVID-19 pandemic—illustrating the different roles that disruption can play in ethnographic fieldwork. First, considering the “disruption of ethnography,” he elaborates how the experience of having his fieldwork disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic served to provide greater insight into how listening to Western music (the focus of his research) shapes modes of belonging in Istanbul as the city is reshaped in accordance with a neo-Ottoman vision. Second, discussing the “ethnography of disruption,” Köymen reflects on his experience of conducting ethnography among migrants from Turkey in Berlin, and how the notion of “disruption” in that context was discursively employed to maintain existing power differentials. Finally, considering “disruption as ethnography,” he reflects on his experience watching the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey from afar and how the experience of disruption transformed an otherwise everyday experience of watching the news into a formative ethnographic experience. Köymen uses these examples to encourage ethnographers to both identify and diagnose the contours of a seemingly more elusive sense of order.

Finally, Nihal Kayalı’s essay explores the implications of a context defined by uncertainty coupled with a major exogenous shock during her fieldwork from 2020 to 2022. From the outset, recent changes in Turkish law and the legal residential and employment status of Syrian refugees injected layers of uncertainty into Kayalı’s research on refugee healthcare. Then, shortly after beginning her long-term dissertation fieldwork, the COVID-19 pandemic prompted widespread lockdowns. Kayalı offers insightful reflections on how she navigated these challenges, focusing specifically on how layers of uncertainty and upheaval shaped the medium of her research, the sequence of the tasks she undertook during fieldwork, and the content of her study. Specifically, the pandemic forced Kayalı to conduct her recruitment and interviews virtually. This process was shaped by whether her interlocutors had potential legal status irregularities or, in the case of doctors, precarious employment status. Furthermore, political upheaval related to her university affiliation and a crackdown on foreign research required her to alter the sequence of the tasks she planned to undertake. Finally, these events catalyzed a reckoning with the general conceptualization of the project itself. The COVID-19 pandemic not only affected her access, but also what her interlocutors wanted to talk about and their experiences of the healthcare system. Yet, it also revealed surprising continuities in refugee healthcare. As a result, Kayalı gained deeper insights into the experiences of refugees and healthcare providers in Turkey.

Before concluding we would like to highlight some common themes emerging from this collection of essays—specifically, the dynamics of trust in the field, the weight of uncertainty, the layered nature of disruption, and the potentially productive power of disruption—as well as their broader implications. Taken together, these essays offer important insights into both ethnographic practice and politics and society in Turkey. From the perspective of ethnographic practice, multiple contributors speak to the importance and challenges of building trust in the field. Building trust is critical to ethnography anywhere, and the difficulty of building trust is by no means unique to Turkey. However, the contributions

to this roundtable highlight Turkey as a valuable case for exploring these dynamics. Far from offering a single solution for building trust, these essays emphasize the interactive dynamics that are necessary for gaining access and navigating challenging social environments. For instance, while Ozgen and Saluk emphasize the importance of building on preexisting connections, Suni points to the limits of personal ties in overcoming generalized suspicion. Thus, these contributions suggest that building trust is not simply a matter of who one is connected to, or even necessarily how, but the intersection of these relationships and the broader social environment.

Another common theme related to ethnographic practice is the weight of uncertainty and fear that researchers face in Turkey's contemporary political context. A key element of the social and political developments in Turkey over the past decade is uncertainty. While it is easy to presume that a given situation might change at any moment during fieldwork, it is nearly impossible to know *how* it will change. Along with these essays, a recurring theme in Eric's interviews with ethnographers was that even when researchers consciously tried to choose apolitical topics, they later found their topics politicized as dividing lines were drawn in Turkey's polarized environment.<sup>7</sup> As the contributors to this roundtable share in vivid detail, a critical consequence of this volatility and resulting uncertainty is fear. There are professional fears—such as the fear of being shut out of a field site or being unable to complete fieldwork—and personal fears—such as fear of bodily harm, deportation, or arrest. By articulating the prevalence of these fears and the broader consequences of uncertainty, these authors raise awareness of a critical issue faced by researchers in the field.

A third theme related to ethnographic practice is the layered nature of disruptions and their variable implications. The authors in this roundtable recount local challenges, national events, and global catastrophes and show how these various layers intersected in unique ways to shape their fieldwork. It was not simply the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, that reshaped Kayalı or Köymen's research, but rather the way the pandemic interacted with more localized disruptions. Ethnographers necessarily expect there to be unknowns when they enter the field. However, the layering of local, national, and transnational disruptions that Turkey has experienced makes ethnographic fieldwork in this context simultaneously unique and broadly informative.

Finally, these essays highlight the potentially productive power of disruption. Many of the authors experienced exogenous disruptions—like the attempted coup in July 2016 or the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic—but disruptions also became constitutive of the field itself. Kayalı, for instance, discusses how refugee healthcare was defined by disruption from the outset, and articulates the layered implications of studying that field in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Suni similarly reflects on her experience of navigating field sites in which disruption is an inherent part of the site itself. For their part, Ozgen and Mülayim both discuss conducting fieldwork in social contexts—religious education and private security—that were fundamentally shaped by the large-scale social and political shifts that Turkey has undergone in the past twenty years. As Saluk and Köymen emphasize, thinking of disruptions as constitutive of the field itself reveals possibilities for new analytics and allows researchers to treat disruption as a diagnostic of order.

While these four themes all speak to ethnographic practice, they also help us to understand Turkey more deeply. Scholarship on Turkey over the past decade has struggled to characterize the country and grappled with how to situate the rapid pace of change. The contributions to this roundtable highlight that, while any one transformative event is in its own way exceptional, in conjunction the events discussed here are representative of contemporary Turkey as a whole. Far from being anomalous, disruptions have become the new normal. By shifting our perspective—as the contributors to this roundtable encourage us to do—researchers gain an important lens through which to interpret Turkey and may be better prepared to conduct fieldwork there.

<sup>7</sup> See also Schoon, "Fieldwork Disrupted."

The network of researchers of Turkey with whom we have formed scholarly connections over many years formed the basis for this roundtable. Along with witnessing how ethnographers of Turkey have had to adapt and respond to repeated disruptions in the field, we have also seen how this network has been repeatedly activated to provide support to one another during difficult times. In this spirit of support, we hope this roundtable can contribute to fostering broader conversations and networks of support across disciplines among scholars who study in Turkey.

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**Cite this article:** Eric W. Schoon and Danielle V. Schoon (2024). "Dynamics of Disruption: Ethnographic Practice in Contemporary Turkey." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 56, 114–119. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743824000187>