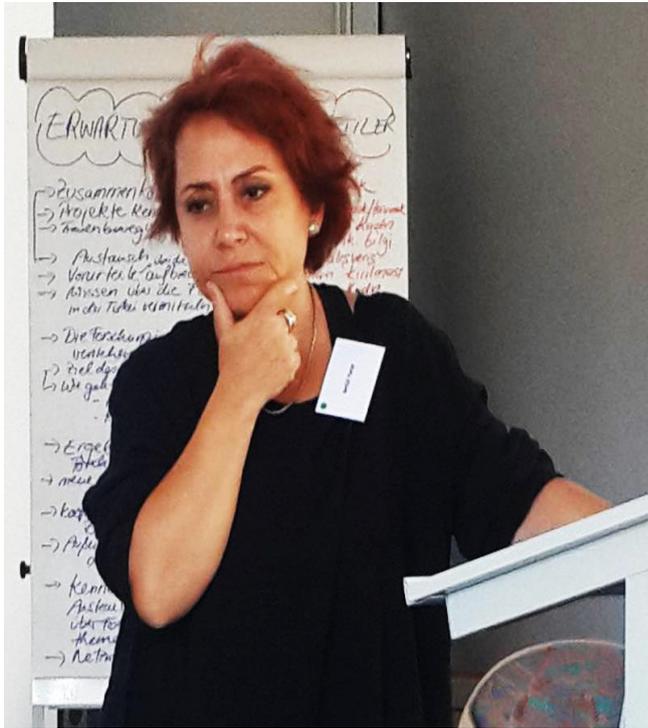


Academic work as a ‘survival strategy’ and a ‘political act’ for exiled academics



Interview with Prof. Dr. Betül Yazar, *Philipp Schwartz* Fellow at the University of Bremen

Prof. Dr. Betül Yazar graduated from the Department of Sociology, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey, in 1991. Later, she received her MA degree in sociology, at the University of Essex, UK. She finished her PhD in sociology at the University of Lancaster, UK.

After her academic studies, she started working as an assistant professor at the Department of Sociology, at Abant İzzet

Baysal University, Bolu, Turkey. She then moved to the Faculty of Communication at Gazi University, Ankara, Turkey. Before receiving her professorship in 2012, she had worked there as an associate professor.

Her main research fields and academic interests include Neoliberalism, New Right, Popular Culture, Visual-Cultural Communication, Body Politics, Gender, Feminist Theory, Women's Movement and Modernisation Process in Turkey.

Charlotte Binder: When and why did you have to leave your professorship at Gazi University in Ankara?

In Turkey in January 11, 2016, an initiative called “Academic for Peace” (BAK) published a petition “we will not be a part of this crime” with a press declaration. The petition was signed by 1 128 individuals, a majority of whom work in academic institutions in Turkey. But this was first round, after critical and aggressive attacks of the government against these academics, nearly one thousand more of our colleagues joined in signing the declaration, hence, the total number of signatories reached to 2 212. To my understanding, the petition was an urgent call for the government to stop the military involvement into Kurdish cities in Turkey and to return back to the peace process. The military attempt were damaging lives of

civil people and violating their rights of living in security and peace. So signing the petition was only a minimal and ordinary thing to do against all these.

In the days following the press conferences, signatories from 89 universities across Turkey faced accusations such as “supporters of terror”, “traitors”, “straw or copy intellectuals” in public statements made personally by the President of the Republic, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, over nationally broadcasting television and radio stations, in addition to several other government authorities, such as the Council of Higher Education (CoHE), the Inter-University Council, and by the presidencies of various universities.

In some cities lynching campaigns against academics were held which included many instances of threats, intimidation and targeting, putting the life of our colleagues at risk. I was one of them. Working in an university where ultra-nationalist groups present among both students and teachers, I also received some threats from these kind of groups and students. The door of my office was painted with a red cross and there was a statement on the door saying that “we don’t want Betül Yazar in our University” signed by *Gazi İletişim Ülkücüleri* – an ultra-nationalist group at the University of Gazi Faculty of Communication. In addition, some university administrations taking the statements of the President of the Republic as orders initiated disciplinary interrogation processes on individual academics, some taking full responsibility in such extra-legal practices as firing, “preventive suspension”, “ban on entering the university campus”. In several cases, individual academics were called to the local police or the prosecutor’s office to give their statements as to why they had signed the declaration. The whole process reflects the further deterioration and dissolution of freedom of expression, academic freedom and autonomy in Turkey. Later the signatories have been called to court under Article 7 of the Anti-terror Law (*Terörle Mücadele Kanunu*, TMK) for “propagandizing in favour of the terrorist organization” and/or under the Articles 301 and 216 of the Turkish Penal Code (*Türk Ceza Kanunu*, TCK) for “insulting Turkishness”.

At first I came to Lille with the invitation of Science Po Lille. I came to Lille together with my ten years old son. I had given seminars-conferences in the summer school program of Science Po Lille from 7th until 23rd of July in 2016. I was also provided a scholarship by the Embassy of France in Ankara for two months from September 1. On the basis of this scholarship, I was planning to conduct a research program in connection with CRESSPA (*Centre de Recherches Sociologiques et Politiques de Paris*). Then I planned to start my program with EHESS (*École des hautes études en sciences sociales*).

When I was in Lille, there had been the Coup d’etat attempt in Turkey. So I could not go back to Turkey and I stayed in France. Later around the beginning of August I learned that I was

suspended from my work with the decision of the Presidency of Gazi University. While I was expecting this mistake would be clarified, I learned that the government has banned 40 thousands civil servants from their job without any explanation, examination or investigation. I was one of them. This was done by one single special decree (*Kanun Hükmünde Kararname*) in one single day, September 1 2016. After I finished my program in France, I came to Bremen University, Germany as a *Philipp-Schwartz* Fellow provided by Alexander-von-Humboldt Foundation.

Charlotte Binder: Under your current circumstances, (how) is scientific work still possible?

It is not an easy task. There is a real psychological barrier first of all. All of a sudden, our daily lives have been upside down. You had to change your country and resettle somewhere for two years. And you don't know exactly what will you do next. As a single mother of a child, I feel extra responsible for my son, too. I have to help and support him to pass this period without having deep psychological trouble. Despite all these negative dimension of our present working conditions, I should admit that this is a very good opportunity that is provided to me among many others who could not get out from the country and led to survive with a limited support and aid. For those who had to stay in Turkey and survive there without real chance to work, academic works have to be carried on under a lot more heavy political and economic pressure. You know most of academics are not allowed to leave the country. Their passports have been confiscated. So I have to shamefully feel myself lucky and feel that I have to work harder in return for all these. Work has got now another meaning for me. It is a kind of survival strategy since you got to proof yourself to the new academic circles where you might catch new future opportunities to go on. But it is also a political act, since the government wanted to prevent us producing more works. As opposed to this aim of political elites, I feel I must work.

I consider applying to different opportunities in Germany. The most common way of staying in academia is through permanent positions or research projects. In Germany, it seems that the neoliberal system is highly strong. In fact no one can easily get permanent positions. If you are a professor, it is a lot more difficult to get professorship position in any university. The system here is highly different from the one in Turkey. In Turkey people work for either part time or full time or on the basis of the level of teaching requirements you fulfil. However, here people work for a 65 percent position for instance. This I never heard before. But I certainly don't know how an academic work can be measure in numbers and percentages. What I mean is that here the system is new to me and it seems truly highly competitive in

neoliberal sense of the term. For a professor like me, the level of competition is more condense than in any other level of academic positions. I think the best solution is to conduct a research project. This is also not easy. Of course even if I get a research project grand for 1 or 2 years, I still have a problem of thinking about what to do next. These are the same problem that we share with native German academics. But for us worries and the level of insecurity is rather higher since we cannot go back to our country and we have no citizenship to use some advantages of the system here to feel a little more secure. For instance after two years of scholarship, we don't know where to go. Our residence permission is going to finish by that time. We might be asked to leave the country in two years. So it is not only a matter of finding a job, we need a longer period of residence permission to do that in Germany. One can consider searching for positions in other countries. But there is another problem that I realised in my short experience in Germany. This is the problem of shrinking academic market at the global level. I don't know whether you can follow but recently, the brain drain and academic mobilisation or immigration is getting higher between countries due to increasing pressure over immigrant identities in other countries where authoritarian regimes and discriminative public discourses are getting stronger. For instance, there is a recently developed mobilisation and brain drain from America – as a result of the Trump Regime – to more secure countries including Eastern European ones, where you might think that competition is less pressuring there.

Charlotte Binder: Are scholarship programs, like the Philipp Schwartz Initiative, suitable to continue your academic career?

Yes, since they are specific programs for academics under risk, these are really important opportunities for the academics in this kind of situation. For instance, Bremen University is very well organised for receiving such scholars and they are very welcoming. They are taking care of these scholars and dealing with all their daily life matters in detail. For instance, one of us became father while being here. His wife had given a birth and now they got a small baby who is born in Germany. The international office staff personally involved into this process and supported them. I also had the chance to get to know more about Germany and German academy. I had been in England and France before. But for me this is the first time I have been in Germany in academic sense. I met good academics with whom I work together and exchange ideas. I feel that I can contribute also in German academy, since I have new perspectives, questions and ideas as “being an outsider”. These are positive sides of these grants and our experience of being exiled in Germany on the basis of academic scholarships.

In fact this is true for all other fellows. I think this is a good opportunity for German academia. This might create a new dynamic in the academic context.

However, the problems I feel about these programs are not related directly with the programs themselves. But there should be more holistic approach to our cases. In order to rescue ourselves from a lot more insecure environment where we have no job and have to live under threat, we have get into a context where there is another type of insecurity waiting for us. We don't have any status other than "being scholars at risk" unless we apply for asylum. This is a problem which has not only to do with these types of grants for two years that we have received for instance from the *Philipp Schwartz* Initiative which I am very thankful to. The main question for me is what I will do next as I mentioned before. And the problem of feeling insecure in your whole life process is very very strong in our cases. For instance, while I am working on my research project with which I applied to the grant I have now, there is high level of time pressure over me. While I am adapting myself and my son to this totally new environment, I have to learn German too. I have to make further publications, join into conferences and carry on my research project since there is a need for proofing and making yourself known to the academia in Germany. Also you got to start considering what to do next in the mid of your scholarship and find out a new topic which is more related to the new cultural and political context you are in. This requires you to read and learn more about German context. And of course this means extra effort, too. Consequently, all these create extra pressure, worry and led you to concern about time. And feeling of uncertainty about your future keeps you in trap sometimes. You are not an ordinary citizen who is part of the security system here. You are living under hard pressure of feeling totally insecure. Meanwhile you are not able to go back to your country and your loved ones. I have to admit that there is a heavy feeling of insecurity that keeps following us while we are researching or teaching in return for our scholarships. We have to survive in this neoliberal and authoritarian world as "immigrant" and "exiled" academics.

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