

# Turkey's Queer Times

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Today Turkey is one of the few Muslim-majority countries in which same-sex sexual acts, counternormative sexual identities, and expressions of gender non-conformism are not illegal, yet are heavily constrained and controlled by state institutions, police forces, and public prosecutors. For more than a decade Turkey has been experiencing a “queer turn”<sup>1</sup>—an unprecedented push in the visibility and empowerment of queerness, the proliferation of sexual rights organizations and forms of sociabilities, and the dissemination of elements of queer culture—that has engendered both scholarly and public attention for sexual dissidents and gender non-conforming individuals and their lifeworlds, while it has also created new spaces and venues for their self-organization and mobilization. At the point of knowledge production and writing, this visibility and the possible avenues of empowerment that it might provide have been in jeopardy: not only do they appear far from challenging the dominant norms of the body, gender, and sexuality, but queerness, in all its dimensions, has become a preferred target for Islamist politics, conservative revanchism, and populist politicians.

Turkey's queer turn, at least in its visible forms of sexual (and human) rights activism and public culture, has been interrupted. Through this rupture this dossier examines the visibilities, struggles, and marginalizations of sexual minorities in Turkey under the conditions of neoliberal authoritarianism, political and cultural polarization, increasing geopolitical insecurity, and the

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- 1 As every scholar from within distinct research traditions, theoretical orientations, and activist engagements chooses a different version of the concepts, or an abbreviation of letters and symbols, to signify sexual minorities and gender nonconformisms, we did not try to standardize the usage throughout this special dossier. Here we use “queer” as a counter- or non-normative umbrella term and “LGBTI” as the abbreviation of represented groups in an interchangeable fashion to refer to the array of sexual minorities and gender nonconformisms at stake in contemporary Turkey.

fraying of borders of the nation-state. Despite ruptures, the persistent uncertainties of Turkey's political, economic, and social life, and its growing insecurities and precarious conditions, differentiated spaces of otherness and selfness unfold—as the articles in this dossier explore in detail.

The field of gender studies in Turkey has flourished since the late 1980s and it has effectively demonstrated how patriarchy and men's power over women are inscribed in various social institutions, situations, and discourses, including but not limited to the political domain and “state feminism,” gender inequality in labor relations, feminist social movements, and family, marriage, and kinship.<sup>2</sup> However, scholars who deliberately interrogate intimacies, sexualities, sexual identities and communities, and the emergent sexual politics in Turkey had to wait until the 2010s to form an autonomous intellectual and theoretical framework, develop an independent research agenda, and find accommodating places across academia.<sup>3</sup>

The history of the Turkish Republic is also a history of attempted homogeneity in all spheres of life, and hence the marginalization of certain religious, ethnic, and cultural minorities and social groups. Members of these groups have often been excluded from the country's founding narratives, its citizenship practices, and from what we can call the social and political mainstream. More often than not they remained unrecognized, often ignored, and sometimes denied by the scholarly community. This is all the more the case for the country's sexual minorities, whose visibility in the social sciences—contrary to the realm of popular culture as manifested in novels about sexual life in the Ottoman Empire or the cases of genderbending or transsexual artists like Zeki Müren, Bülent Ersoy, and Huysuz Virjin<sup>4</sup>—has been severely limited well into the 2000s.

The title of this dossier, “Turkey's Queer Times,” refers to the decade of increasing queer presence, recognition, organizations, and webs of empowerment that were facilitated by the brief period of swift but ultimately inconclusive democratization and legal reform initiated by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) of the early 2000s to accede to the

2 See, Feryal Saygılıgil and Nacide Berber, eds., *Feminizm: Türkiye'de Modern Siyasal Düşünce 10* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2020); Serpil Sancar, ed., *Bir Kaç Arpa Boyu: 21. Yüzyıla Girenken Türkiye'de Feminist Çalışmalar* (Istanbul: Koç Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2011).

3 See, for example, Cüneyt Çakırlar and Serkan Delice, eds., *Cinsellik Muamması: Türkiye'de Queer Muhalefet ve Kültür* (Istanbul: Metis, 2012); Cenk Özbay, *Queering Sexualities in Turkey: Gay Men, Male Prostitutes, and the City* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017); Sibel Yardımcı and Özlem Güçlü, eds., *Queer Tahayyül* (Istanbul: Sel, 2013); Berfu Seker, ed., *Başkaldıran Bedenler: Türkiye'de Transgender Aktivizm ve Altkültürel Pratikler* (Istanbul: Metis, 2013).

4 Cenk Özbay, “Same-Sex Sexualities in Turkey,” in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James D. Right (Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), 870–5; Rüstem Altınay, “Reconstructing the Transgendered Self as a Muslim, Nationalist, and Upper-Class Woman: The Case of Bülent Ersoy,” *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3–4 (2008): 210–29.

European Union.<sup>5</sup> This expansion of queer social and physical spaces was exemplified on the streets, during the LGBTQI Pride Parades in the heart of Istanbul, which attract close to 50,000 participants at the last permitted march in 2015, and also in popular culture. The queer turn in Turkey simultaneously refers to the reflection of these events and forms of becoming in the academic literature, which has equally seen an impressive expansion that builds on the early pioneers in the field: Arslan Yüzgün's article in English on police oppression against homosexual men and transgender people in the 1980s and the early Hüseyin Tapınç's research about the production of a "modern" gay identity shaped by globalization and the anxieties of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.<sup>6</sup>

In this dossier we look at two directions research has taken. The first direction points to the emergence of self-identifying sexual minorities and groups of gender nonconformists as present and acceptable, if not legible, objects of social scientific research (and, to a certain extent, socio-behavioral analysis) in academia. By sexual minorities we mean groups of individuals who do not identify as cisgender and/or heterosexual and instead define themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, non-binary, intersex, or curious. Thereby they position themselves socially, politically, affectively, bodily, and relationally out of the prevailing systems of sexual and gender normativities. This is a significant break with the preceding "myth-making" and fantasy writing about the sexual cultures of the ancient Greek civilization, the Roman and Ottoman empires, as well as the "scientific" approaches through medicalization and pathologization of homosexuality and transgenderism.<sup>7</sup>

The rendering of queer groups and their precarious lives as research objects, and hence willingly decentering normativities and the scientific authority via postmodern and poststructuralist approaches in the social sciences and humanities, have eventually generated a process of queer subjectivities and epistemology regarding those who live outside the norms pertaining to categories such as the self, gender, sexuality, family, and other ways of embodied intimacies. In this sense, "why" questions concerning difference, or "deviance," were transmogrified into "how" questions about the queer lifeworlds and

5 There is a long-standing debate as to whether this phase of "Europeanization" under the AKP was a sincere effort or an opportunistic strategy to diminish the Kemalist resistance to political Islam in the country's institution. The current course of authoritarianism as well as the literature strongly suggest that the latter was the case. See, Lisel Hintz, *Identity Politics Inside Out: National Identity Contestation and Foreign Policy in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

6 Arslan Yüzgün, "Homosexuality and Police Terror in Turkey," *Journal of Homosexuality* 24, no. 1 (1993), 159–69; Hüseyin Tapınç, "Masculinity, Femininity, and Turkish Male Homosexuality," in *Modern Homosexualities*, ed. Ken Plummer (London: Routledge, 1992), 39–51.

7 See, for example, Arslan Yüzgün, *Türkiye'de Eşcinsellik: Dün ve Bugün* (Istanbul: Yüzgün, 1986); Pınar Çekirge, *Yalnızlık Adasının Erkekleri: Psiko-Sosyal Açıdan Eşcinsellik* (Istanbul: Altın, 1991).

meaning- and self-making processes. How do these people identify themselves? How do they live under conditions of heteronormativity, homophobia, and transphobia? How do categorizations and identifications change over time? Which concepts and classifications do we refer to when we talk about difference? And eventually, how can we transform society to be a more tolerant, democratic, and inclusive one?

Especially after the early 2000s, a number of descriptive as well as journalistic accounts on different aspects of Turkey's sexual minorities appeared, many of them nonjudgmental. They dealt with homosexual and bisexual men,<sup>8</sup> lesbians and bisexual women,<sup>9</sup> transsexual bodies,<sup>10</sup> and the country's first "out" football referee, Halil İbrahim Dinçdağ.<sup>11</sup> Around the same time, widely known literary figures published novels with queer protagonists and proved to be commercially successful and critically acclaimed. A popular crime novel series of seven books on a trans, amateur detective by Mehmet Murat Somer;<sup>12</sup> Perihan Mağden's love story between two young women,<sup>13</sup> and between two young men;<sup>14</sup> Duygu Asena's gay male romance<sup>15</sup> as well as Yalçın Tosun's<sup>16</sup> and Niyazi Zorlu's<sup>17</sup> queer stories have to be mentioned among numerous others.

These contributions, as well as other forms of cultural representation and frames of discursive acts, such as queer figures in popular culture, or the director Can Candan's documentary film *My Child* in 2013,<sup>18</sup> established same-sex sexualities and non-conforming gender identities and their social, political, and ethical dimensions not only as a marginalized minority but as an issue of society at large. Representations, even in the form of unapologetically heterosexist television shows' news coverage or weekly magazines claiming to demonstrate the painful "reality" of homosexuality,<sup>19</sup> reified queer questions, possibilities, and the undeniability of queer existences, and moved these subjects from the reign of the unspeakable to the publicly speakable. These representations, then, constituted the diversity of sexual and gender identities as "real" and actually existing,

8 Murat Hocaoğlu, *Eşcinsel Erkekler: Yirmi Beş Tanıklık* (İstanbul: Metis, 2002).

9 Cenk Özbay and Serdar Soydan, *Eşcinsel Kadınlar: Yirmi Dört Tanıklık* (İstanbul: Metis, 2003).

10 Selin Berghan, *Lubunya: Transeksüel Beden ve Kimlik* (İstanbul: Metis, 2007).

11 Burcu Karakaş and Bawer Çakır, *Erkeklik Ofsayta Düşünce: Futbol, Eşcinsellik ve Halil İbrahim Dinçdağ'ın Hikayesi* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2013).

12 Mehmet Murat Somer, *Jigolo Cinayeti* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2003a); Mehmet Murat Somer, *Peygamber Cinayetleri* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2003b).

13 Perihan Mağden, *İki Genç Kızın Romanı* (İstanbul: Everest, 2002).

14 Perihan Mağden, *Ali ile Ramazan* (İstanbul: Doğan, 2010).

15 Duygu Asena, *Paramparça* (İstanbul: Doğan, 2006).

16 Yalçın Tosun, *Dokunma Dersleri* (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi, 2013).

17 Niyazi Zorlu, *Sehriçi Öyküleri* (İstanbul: Metis, 1998).

18 Cüneyt Çakırlar, "Transnational Pride, Global Closets and Regional Formations of Screen Activism: Documentary LGBTQ Narratives from Turkey," *Critical Arts* 31, no. 2 (2017), 44–60.

19 Özbay, *Queering Sexualities in Turkey*.

embodied, undeniable phenomena—even if they were rarely shown as legitimate and hardly celebrated.

“In this configuration of same-sex sexual cultures, tolerance and intolerance, respect and intervention, freedom and restriction, grassroots diversity and superimposed uniformity amalgamate by the participation of the state, the heterosexual public, and gay men and lesbians as condoned exceptions.”<sup>20</sup> Ironically, these channels of representation and discursive formations have rendered queer subjects’ heterogeneous, complicated, and resilient lives bona fide and nonfictional, and inspired a new generation of social scientists to conduct research on these alternative forms of sexual and gendered becoming outside the boundaries of heteronormativity and cisnormativity. This started with the pioneering scholar Deniz Kandiyoti’s account on transgender sex workers’ struggles for identity and survival;<sup>21</sup> Gül Özyeğin excavated the coming out stories of young gay men to understand the related family dynamics;<sup>22</sup> Cenk Özbay researched the male prostitution scene and its connections with masculinities, class, and urban life.<sup>23</sup> While Evren Savcı studied activist and non-activist queer people through the intersection of identity categories and knowledge;<sup>24</sup> Rüstem Altınay looked closer at the effects of class, religion, and nationalism in the story of Turkey’s most famous trans woman;<sup>25</sup> Tarık Bereket and Barry Adam explicated the contested role and limits of Islam in reshaping gay male lives;<sup>26</sup> Alp Biricik<sup>27</sup> and Oyman Başaran<sup>28</sup> wrote on how homosexual men deal with compulsory military service and the so-called “rotten report” (*çürük raporu*) which is required for exemption; Aslı Zengin explored the social, legal, and medical processes trans women experience in their transition period;<sup>29</sup> Volkan Yılmaz and İpek Göçmen

20 Özbay, “Same-Sex Sexualities in Turkey,” 871.

21 Deniz Kandiyoti, “Pink Card Blues: Trouble and Strife at the Crossroads of Gender,” in *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayşe Saktanber (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 277–93.

22 Gül Özyeğin, *New Desires, New Selves: Sex, Love and Piety among Turkish Youth* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

23 Özbay, *Queering Sexualities in Turkey*.

24 Evren Savcı, “Who Speaks the Language of Queer Politics? Western Knowledge, Politico-Cultural Capital and Belonging among Urban Queers in Turkey,” *Sexualities* 19, no. 3 (2016), 69–387.

25 Altınay, “Reconstructing the Transgendered Self.”

26 Tarık Bereket and Barry D. Adam, “Navigating Islam and Same-Sex Liaisons among Men in Turkey,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 55, no. 2 (2008), 204–22.

27 Alp Biricik, “Rotten Report and Reconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity in Turkey,” in *Conscientious Objection: Resisting Military Society*, ed. Özgür Heval Çınar and Coşkun Üsterci (London: Zed Books, 2009), 151–65.

28 Oyman Başaran, “You Are Like a Virus: Dangerous Bodies and Military Medical Authority in Turkey,” *Gender & Society* 28, no. 4 (2014), 562–82.

29 Aslı Zengin, “Violent Intimacies: Tactile State Power, Sex/Gender Transgression, and the Politics of Touch in Contemporary Turkey,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 12, no. 2 (2016), 225–45.

investigated labor conditions, housing, and health care options for the LGBT population;<sup>30</sup> Maral Erol and Cenk Özbay focused on aging and gay men's embodied strategies against andropause;<sup>31</sup> and Haktan Ural and Fatma Beşpınar explained class dynamics in the formation of what they call a "gay male habitus" in Turkey.<sup>32</sup> An increasing number of monographs and edited collections published in Turkish deal with various aspects of LGBTI and queer lives, politics, art, and bodies as well. Taken together, and with an array of as yet unpublished studies and completed dissertations, we can safely conclude that despite the increasingly illiberal political climate<sup>33</sup> and the rising cultural conservatism<sup>34</sup> throughout the last decade, sexual minorities and queer lives in Turkey have become a relevant and promising topic for scholarly investigation that denotes the significance of shifting understandings about the role of the margins in social, cultural, political, and even public health analysis.

In recent years Turkey has been undergoing a number of multifarious and multiscalar social, cultural, and political transformations. The country's strategic orientation to Europe and the United States has, in some measure, been reversed by the foreign policy elites of the ruling AKP. Membership in the European Union is not a government policy anymore and hence has lost its anchor for the country's democratic forces to a large extent. And the global liberal order itself entered a period of rising insecurity and disorderliness, raising questions regarding the future of Western domination and US hegemony, and Turkey's place in this new period of relative insecurity.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, signs of multiple crises—economic, political, social, moral—undeniably emerge as neoliberalism, populism, Islamism, and the new right came together and produced a polarizing, toxic political milieu, resulting in unprecedented

30 Volkan Yılmaz and İpek Göçmen, "Denied Citizens of Turkey: Experiences of Discrimination among LGBT Individuals in Employment, Housing, and Health Care," *Gender, Work & Organization* 23, no. 5 (2016), 470–88.

31 Maral Erol and Cenk Özbay, "No Andropause for Gay Men? The Body, Aging, and Sexuality in Turkey," *Journal of Gender Studies* 27, no. 7 (2018): 847–59.

32 Haktan Ural and Fatma Beşpınar, "Class and Habitus in the Formation of Gay Identity, Masculinity, and Respectability in Turkey," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 13, no. 2 (2017), 244–64.

33 Kerem Öktem and Karabekir Akkoyunlu, *Exit From Democracy: Illiberal Governance in Turkey and Beyond* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

34 Dilek Cindoğlu and Didem Ünal, "Gender and Sexuality in the Authoritarian Discursive Strategies of New Turkey," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 24, no. 1 (2017), 39–54.

35 Joseph S. Nye, "The Rise and Fall of American Hegemony from Wilson to Trump," *International Affairs* 95, no. 1 (2019), 63–80; Doug Stokes "Trump, American Hegemony and the Future of the Liberal International Order," *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2019), 133–50; 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.

violations of citizenship and democratic rights in Turkey.<sup>36</sup> The state and the political elites of the AKP have not only failed to resolve Turkey's two core cleavages which make a democratic polity impossible, but they have actively engaged these cleavages in their quest for power maintenance. The country's largest ethnic minority, the Kurds, and the largest religious minority, the Alevis, remain marginalized and are excluded from social and political fields, often violently,<sup>37</sup> while Turkish nationalism and political Islam have gained ground as powerful frames of identity-making, and as reference points of making sense of queerness—as some of the articles in this dossier demonstrate.

The 2010s also witnessed a major opposition movement against the AKP government, culminating in a noteworthy public mobilization that stands out in the history of the republic due to its grassroots character, the Gezi resistance.<sup>38</sup> While the Gezi movement in 2013 was ultimately subdued, its importance as a moment of aggravated societal mobilization particularly for sexual minorities cannot be overstated. If the 2010s are marked by the mass mobilization of Gezi, they are also shaped, at least as decisively, by the military coup attempt in 2016, whose exact causes, actors, and objectives remain opaque, but whose effects in terms of human rights abuses and destruction of state capacity are arguably more severe than those of the 1980 military coup. The 2016 coup attempt was successfully exploited by the AKP government for the ends of regime consolidation, a regime change to presidentialism without checks and balances, and finally for increasing suppression of the opposition.<sup>39</sup> The resulting political moment of weak authoritarianism and hyper-presidentialism provides the context of any rights-based movements as well as for the life of members of sexual minorities.

As a direct consequence of the changing geopolitical landscape, Turkey has also faced the biggest movement of refugees and migrants of its history, particularly from Syria and Afghanistan. As the country with the largest refugee

36 İsmet Akça, Ahmet Bekmen, and Barış Alp Özden, eds., *Turkey Reframed: Constituting Neoliberal Hegemony* (London: Pluto, 2013); Simtem Coşar and Gamze Yücesan-Özdemir, eds., *Silent Violence: Neoliberalism, Islamist Politics, and AKP Years in Turkey* (Ontario: Red Quill Books, 2012); Cenk Özbay, Maral Erol, Ayşecan Terzioğlu, Z. Umut Türem, eds., *The Making of Neoliberal Turkey* (London: Routledge, 2016).

37 Mehmet Bardakçı, Anette Freyberg Inan, Cristoph Giesel, and Olaf Leisse, *Religious Minorities in Turkey: Alevi, Armenians, and Syrians and the Struggle to Desecuritize Religious Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Zeynep Gambetti and Joost Jongerden, eds., *The Kurdish Issue in Turkey: A Spatial Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

38 Isabel David and Kumru Toktamış, eds., *Everywhere Taksim: Sowing the Seeds for a New Turkey at Gezi* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015); Efecan Gurcan and Efe Peker, eds., *Challenging Neoliberalism at Turkey's Gezi Park: From Private Discontent to Collective Action* (London: Palgrave, 2015); Özbay et al., *The Making of Neoliberal Turkey*.

39 Ates Altınordu, "A Midsummer Night's Coup: Performance and Power in Turkey's July 15 Coup Attempt," *Qualitative Sociology* 40, no. 2 (2017), 139–64.



population in the world in absolute numbers, and more than 5 percent of refugees/migrants in the population, Turkey's demographic fabric has been significantly altered. This phenomenon has the potential to destabilize the already tense connections between labor dynamics and unemployment, urban poverty, capital accumulation, citizenship rights, nationalisms, socio-spatial relations, and regional inequality.<sup>40</sup>

Alongside this conventional sense of social and political "crisis tendencies"<sup>41</sup> and the shifting grounds of the political sphere as well as the contradictory undercurrents of society, the meaning and position of gender and sexual minorities in Turkey has not been satisfyingly conceptualized or theorized yet. We argue that this shortcoming can be the starting point of a new normative/political project. Contemporary societies and the nation-states that come to represent them are ranked and compared not only in terms of their gross national products, the Gini coefficient, their levels of democratic participation, their educational attainments, or their criteria for gender equality. The status and rights of LGBTI or queer communities, and their visibilities, spaces, freedoms, and safety compared to their heterosexual and/or cisgender counterparts, is used to locate a country within the context of changing geopolitical and democratic hierarchies. This new prerequisite for Western liberal democracy as inclusive of hitherto marginalized sexual minorities is conceptualized as "the globalization of sexuality,"<sup>42</sup> "sexual" or "intimate" citizenship,<sup>43</sup> "sexual democratic rights,"<sup>44</sup> "queer public sphere,"<sup>45</sup> or "sexual states."<sup>46</sup> In Jaspir Puar's words, "this historical moment is homonational, where homonationalism is understood as an analytics of power [ . . . ] [this] means that one must engage it in the first place as the condition of possibility for national and transnational politics."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, researching LGBTI populations and theorizing queer possibilities in Turkey is not only critical for those enduring multiple hardships. This axis of research appears most promising when it connects to wider desires and collective efforts geared at overcoming populism and authoritarian centralization, reestablishing democracy, and making Turkey a more inclusive and welcoming country that is connected with

40 Feyzi Baban, Suzan Ilcan, and Kim Rygiel, "Syrian Refugees in Turkey: Pathways to Precarity, Differential Inclusion, and Negotiating Citizenship Rights," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43, no. 1 (2016), 41–57.

41 Raewyn Connell, *Masculinities* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

42 Jon Binnie, *The Globalization of Sexuality* (London: Sage, 2004).

43 David Bell and Jon Binnie, *The Sexual Citizen: Queer Politics and Beyond* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000); Ken Plummer, *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).

44 Amy Lind, *Development, Sexual Rights, and Global Governance* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

45 Rafael de la Dehesa, *Queering the Public Sphere in Mexico and Brazil: Sexual Rights Movements in Emerging Democracies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

46 Jyoti Puri, *Sexual States: Governance and the Struggle over the Antisodomy Law in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

47 Jaspir Puar, "Rethinking Homonationalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45 (2013), 338.



the rest of the world. In this sense, the effects of talking about queers and pushing queer issues are not limited to the minority (sexual, bodily, moral, cultural) and its subjects; yet it is a way of thinking, producing knowledge, and reflecting about society, culture, nation, time, and space, if from a structurally peripheral position.

The significance of a queer turn in Turkish studies unfolds in this context. The second direction of Turkey's queer times then points to the possibilities and openings as we incorporate some of the theoretical principles of queer studies into asking questions and looking for answers about the existing social issues, cultural dynamics, and political problems in Turkey. Simply, as Jacqui M. Alexander has put it, "heterosexuality is at once necessary to the state's ability to constitute and imagine itself, while simultaneously marking a site of its own instability."<sup>48</sup> What could be the ways to look for these kinds of instabilities? In this sense, seemingly irrelevant, unrelated, or disconnected topics, themes, and incidents may well be implicitly or explicitly linked and interpenetrated in the worlds of imagination, representation, or relations. The constitution of public discussions may move from the long-established binary thinking, which is organized especially around the majority–minority paradigm, to the fragmentation, diversification, and temporalities of shifting experiences, expressions, and subject positions. Holistic approaches about the state and monochrome views on society will need to be rejected. Not only forms of discrimination but ways of exclusion and abjection (hidden or otherwise) could be included through the unraveling of social structure(s) and directions of change in Turkey. Instead of the given, traditional, saturated social identities and political collectivities, new ways of being, belonging, feeling, and relating in society could be examined and taken into account. An intersectional analysis, while discussing its limits, might be acquired alongside experiential claims to truth. Normativities, regimes of normalization, what constitutes the center, resistant acts, boundaries, and contestations not only between but also *within* the majority and minorities can be scrutinized and manifested. Trajectories of solidarity and conditions for coalition politics can be studied against the bureaucratization and projects-and-funding-addicted mood of civil society and non-governmental organizations.

Hence, the second point we make with Turkey's queer times is not necessarily about the queer sexual subjects, non-normative sexual practices, or politics of intimacy in Turkey. Rather, it is a forward-looking and hopeful call for *queering* the perspectives on modern Turkey, for new ways of thinking and interpretation, and for truth claims we tend to make as social scientists about what is going on in the country. We argue that the social reality in Turkey, as elsewhere, is too complicated, manifold, and amalgamated to be explained with

48 Jacqui M. Alexander, "Erotic Autonomy as a Politics of Decolonization: An Anatomy of Feminist and State Practice," in *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*, ed. Jacqui M. Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (New York: Routledge, 1997), 65.

simplicistic theories, viewpoints, or tools of analysis, most of which emerge from the specific contexts of US society and academia. We testify to an urgent need for novel conceptual tools that make sense of the layers of diversity and the scales of difference that continue to grow in spite of the powers of convention, otherizing, normalizing, stereotyping, polarizing, oppression, and authoritarianism at work in contemporary Turkey.<sup>49</sup>

The articles in this dossier provide valuable starting points for different ways of thinking, framing, and scaling to pose further questions about the forms of social (dis)organizations, structures, and imaginations in contemporary Turkey and under the conditions of contested authoritarianism. However, the possibilities discussed in the articles signify failures as well. These are not total failures as the historian Martin Duberman suggested rhetorically.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, we must reserve our suspicion and curiosity against global developmentalist arguments about the deterritorialized linear progress in terms of queer visibilities and sexual/human rights in the world and then question, in the long journey of the last thirty years of LGBTI struggles in Turkey at least, what these failures have looked like.

Life stories need to be gathered and critical biographies must be prepared for us to have a better understanding of the pasts and present of antagonisms, misrecognition, hostility, homophobia, shame, and other crucial elements that have shaped queer subjectivity in Turkey in its diversity alongside its contradictions and hesitations. The stories of complicated sexual subjectivities and the pasts of queer failures can provide us with the organization of affect as translated into cultural, social, and political forms and manifested in cultural exclusion, expandability, and abjection on the national scale. Further research, alternative approaches and methodologies, bending the genres of doing and writing research, and destabilizing analyses will enrich and expand our knowledge and ways of interpreting Turkey's queer times. This dossier, therefore, does not represent a closure but aims at unfolding what remains hidden, untold, and invisible. In this sense it is an invitation for the further queering of Turkey and Turkish studies.

### In this dossier

What we mean by Turkey's queer times points to the various fields of possibilities—in a Bourdieusian sense, the universe of the thinkable and the feasible, or

49 See, Binnaz Toprak, *Being Different in Turkey: Religion, Conservatism, and Otherization—Research Report on Neighborhood Pressure* (Istanbul: Boğaziçi University, 2009); Cenk Özbay and Ozan Soybakış, "Political Masculinities: Gender, Power and Change in Turkey," *Social Politics* 27, no. 1 (2020): 27–50; Öktem and Akkoyunlu, *Exit from Democracy*; Evren Savcı, *Queer in Translation: Sexual Politics under Neoliberal Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming).

50 Martin Duberman, *Has the Gay Movement Failed?* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018).

the heterodoxa—in which old social divisions are rediscovered, reexamined, and denaturalized. Material practices and objects are juxtaposed and combined with conceptual values, belongings, and symbolic distinctions in order to expose everyday life and to imagine the ways for a collective, empowering future.

Evren Savcı notes that there has been an observable growth of queer organizations in Turkey since the 2000s alongside an increase in social conservatism, authoritarianism, and neoliberalism. These antithetical developments constitute a situation that Savcı explains with the help of the concept “homonationalism” as framed by Jaspir Puar.<sup>51</sup> From this perspective the AKP regime of neoliberal Islamism renders many “previously respectable” citizens illegitimate and outlawed, not only queers. When presented to, or translated into (as Savcı demonstrates), the grammars of the outside world, to what extent does this authoritarian and homophobic/transphobic administration in Turkey contribute to the Islamophobic public image? The imposition of Western values and concepts to non-Western, indigenous domains is an issue when scholars study queer forms of intimacy, identity, and relations in the non-West. In this sense, Savcı underlines the local formations of sexual subjectivities, such as *lubunya*, a contextual position with changing gender and sexual meanings, in relation to the global ones as expressed in the term queer, or LGBTI, in the tight-rope of orientalist-occidental knowledge production. After all, Savcı invites us to rethink the categories and epistemologies on which we build our analyses of sexualities and sexual minorities in Turkey while keeping a vigilant eye on the effects of neoliberalism and Islam.

Deniz Nihan Aktan’s article deals with another field of knowledge, practice, and expertise that has been traditionally constructed within the ubiquitous command of heteronormativity: football. In this case queers do not stay outside and leave the field’s dynamics to reproduce homophobic and heterosexist dogmas. Instead, members of gender and sexual minorities have decided to “queer the field of football” by founding queer-identified amateur teams and organizing alternative, anti-normative leagues. Aktan’s research points out one of the spaces of possibilities that queer approaches can offer to denaturalize and destabilize social life and arrange it otherwise through a more inclusive and participatory manner. These queer gatherings and organizations also promise to subvert the boundaries between knowledge- and theory-making based in academia, activism, non-governmental organizations, embodiment, entertainment, and culture at large. Different forms of hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity, gender difference, and segregation are all legitimate institutional targets for queer action to problematize and unravel as Aktan documents.

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51 Jaspir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

In the concluding contribution of this dossier, Yener Bayramoğlu compares the affective conditions queer existence in Turkey during the military dictatorship of the 1980 coup and the current authoritarian turn after the failed coup attempt in 2016. Based on an “archive of affect,” his article juxtaposes the past and the present in terms of heterosexist and discriminatory pressures while underscoring the implicit strength and resilience that queer hope provides for queer citizens, sexual minorities, and the non-normative bodies. Bayramoğlu states that queer people’s collective optimism regarding life possibilities and aspirations for equality for the future drives them to struggle with the “toxic” presents and develop explicit or tacit tactics to survive, coordinate, and flourish. This resilient affect and optimism empower and enable queer citizens to organize and develop forms of solidarity which may eventually pave the way for a new moment of social change and public visibility.

Taken together these articles present highly original and critical insights and add significantly to our knowledge of queer bodies, lives, and culture in Turkey in the last decade. Michel Foucault says, “the archive of a society [ . . . ] cannot be described exhaustively; or even, no doubt, the archive of a whole period. [ . . . ] It emerges in fragments, regions, and levels.”<sup>52</sup> In a similar vein, we believe the queer archives and histories as well as the multiple queer presents, modes of appearances, and becomings in Turkey unfold gradually in fractured ways. They can only be analyzed in divergent fragments—of which these articles offer a novel glimpse. Following this dossier, the crucial questions that we must ask in order to decipher Turkey’s queer times are: What is normal? How is it defined and circulated? And how are normativity and normalcy attached and co-constituted with a set of institutions, practices, and discourses of social power in the context of heteronormativity, nationalism, conservatism, Islamism, homophobia, and transphobia? These questions have the potential to unravel the possibly queered aspects of social, cultural, and economic life in Turkey not only in terms of bodies, pleasures, sexualities, and identities but also in terms of citizenship, the state, human rights, urban life, market relations, labor, security, and global networks, among others.

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