



# Introduction - Rethinking Power in Turkey through Everyday Practices

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# Introduction

## *Rethinking Power in Turkey through Everyday Practices*

Élise Massicard

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**Abstract:** In an increasingly authoritarian Turkish context that precludes any serious chance of making tangible political gains, challenging common conception of 'the political' may expand our understanding of power dynamics. Attempting to track power relations outside the most official, legitimate, conventional and formalised forms of politics provides alternative and sharper insights into how the political is being reframed and how actors retain, uphold, perpetuate or transform their capacity for agency. In an interdisciplinary perspective, but drawing mainly on anthropological literature and methodology, the issue addresses four questions – both empirically in the Turkish case and more conceptually: politicisation, visibility, social stratification and domination.

**Keywords:** domination, everyday, invisibility, politicisation, resistance, Turkey

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The political science literature on Turkey and the wider region has long been dominated by top-down and macro approaches, focusing mainly on national institutions, political leaders, public discourses and legislative texts. Over the past few decades, however, many disciplines have sought to challenge the institutional and formal definitions of politics, particularly anthropology, but also history, starting with the Italian *microstoria* and German historical anthropology (*Alltagsgeschichte*). In the same way, subaltern studies, cultural studies and gender studies have questioned classical definitions of 'the political' and have called for broader conceptions: 'By challenging the view of the political as understandable only from speeches, marches, and elections, studies of everyday resistance encouraged and expanded understanding of the dialectic of compliance and opposition that takes into account the concealed as well as the visible, the scattered as well as the organized, the small as well as the massive' (Fox and Starn 1997: 3). Broader conceptions of the political have also been



employed in studies on Turkey, mostly by historians of the Ottoman Empire (Lévy-Aksu 2013; Quataert 2008) or the early Turkish Republic (Atabaki 2007; Lamprou 2015; Metinsoy 2011), as well as by anthropologists (Ekal 2015; Navaro-Yashin 2002; Tajali 2014; White 2002). While these works have addressed questions of power and the state, their impact on political science and research on ‘high politics’ has been minimal.

Yet, these perspectives appear particularly relevant in understanding the transformations that have taken place in Turkey over the past decade. Political science and political economy currently focus on growing authoritarianism (Öktem and Akkoyunlu 2018), neoliberalism and new forms of domination under the rule of the conservative Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) (Akça et al. 2014; Buğra and Savaşkan 2014; Özbay et al. 2016), and, to a lesser degree, on organised resistance movements. However, by incorporating less visible actions and less obvious settings, broader conceptualisations of the political may expand our understanding of how the political is being reframed and how power balances change. Approaching politics from a broader perspective may also enable us to grasp how actors retain, uphold, perpetuate or transform their capacity for agency when the political context precludes any serious chance of making tangible political gains. This approach is also inspired by a Foucauldian conception of power as not only located in institutions but also dispersed throughout society.

This issue begins by placing value on the links between politics and everyday life experiences, and highlights the political potential of ‘normal’ people’s ordinary actions and their broader effects. James C. Scott (1985) was one of the first to look at how individual economic practices had a major impact on power relationships. This dimension is also crucial to Asef Bayat’s (2009) ‘quiet encroachment of the ordinary’. For Jenny White (2002), the vernacular links everyday practices with more institutional politics, whereby local idioms and cultural norms – such as mutual indebtedness – enable the popularisation of a political message and, in the end, mobilisation. In the same way, the articles in this issue show to what extent ideological orientations may influence even everyday practices (like domestic aesthetics) and impact friendships – or even kinships (see D’Orsi, this issue). They also show how political practices are entangled in everyday, presumably non-political, phenomena such as personal networks, affective relations or norms like trust and morality, and to what extent institutional policies may also rely on such phenomena (see Woźniak, Maritato, this issue).

This issue, therefore, arises from a need to challenge common understandings of ‘the political’ by examining politics outside of its most official, legitimate, conventional and formalised forms. It seeks to analyse collective or individual practices whose political dimensions are neither clear nor explicit, but that manifest power relations with their ambiguities and contradictions. The contributions, therefore, account for a wide range of actors: not only decision makers, leaders, ‘professional’ politicians or activists but also lower

bureaucrats, citizens, consumers, residents, shopkeepers, gays, lawyers, informal workers and so on. They also account for a wide range of practices – not only elections, street protests or public declarations but also consumption, migration, gossip, sexuality, memory, dream interpretation, everyday aesthetics or sociality. As a whole, the issue questions how looking at everyday and vernacular practices challenges and expands our understanding of power dynamics in a contemporary and increasingly authoritarian Turkey. Various conceptualisations – from Scott’s ‘infrapolitics’ to White’s ‘vernacular politics’ – have been proposed in order to address close phenomena. This issue does not favour one specific approach but instead utilizes these various conceptualisations and the different, although related, dimensions they highlight, to address – both empirically in the Turkish case but also more conceptually – four main questions: politicisation, visibility, social stratification and domination.

The first question concerns politicisation dynamics. The aim of this issue is not to suggest an alternative definition of the political but rather to provide a more nuanced understanding of the reconfigurations of power dynamics. Defining the political is an acute problem – especially as an exogenous label – when external observers, rather than the actors themselves, deem an activity political. The aim of this issue is, rather, to open up this question in line with constructionist approaches that have suggested that there is nothing essentially political but that ‘the political’ is in fact constructed and contested. This drives us to question the shifting boundaries of the political or, in other words, processes of politicisation. What topics are contested as a political domain – for example, as spheres of public policy and public contest? How do actors reframe issues or activities as being political or not? To what extent do political institutions or ideological cleavages interfere in new spheres of practice such as the economy, professions, lifestyle, morality, reproduction or even everyday sociality and friendship (see Maritato, D’Orsi, this issue)? This issue also questions to what extent broader political developments – AKP rule, growing authoritarianism – impact the political dimension of everyday practices. For instance, to what extent has AKP rule led to new forms of state intervention in areas such as religion or the family (see Maritato, this issue)? Does growing repression or authoritarianism lead to the politicisation of social phenomena, or, on the contrary, does it lead to depoliticisation dynamics – or maybe both at the same time? While dream stories are becoming increasingly political, these are discussed in closed circles and remain hidden from public debate (see Hartmann, this issue). Does growing authoritarianism impact ways of doing politics, for example, triggering alternative forms of vernacular politics, such as the informalisation of politics? The political limits of the legal profession in Turkey are being contested again, prompting comparisons with one of the country’s most politicised periods during the 1970s (see Parslow, this issue).

The second question is linked to invisibility, that is, what passes politically unnoticed. This dimension is key to Scott’s (1990) ‘infrapolitics’, which

encompasses the acts, gestures and thoughts that are not quite political enough to be perceived as such and that operate insidiously, beneath the threshold of political detectability. For Scott, 'hidden transcripts' are critiques of power that escape the notice of the dominant and stand in contrast to the 'public transcripts' of power relations. In most infrapolitics scholarship, actors operate below the political radar due to a lack of opportunities to use institutional or conventional channels. Scott asserts that the evasive capacity of infrapolitics is critical to its efficacy: the less clearly its message can be pinned down, the more effectively it can undermine domination. However, the articles in this issue argue that invisibility is not always constrained. Ida Hartmann shows that keeping things discreet can, in some instances, also be a strategy. Anonymity is a key component of gossip and creates spheres of semi-publicity (see also Woźniak, in this issue). Samuel Williams shows how semi-private spheres of alternative sexualities go semi-public under the influence of business strategies. As a whole, this issue suggests that invisibility should be taken not as an assumed characteristic of everyday politics but rather as a possibility among others. Furthermore, it questions the changing dynamics and incentives of concealment and disclosure.

The third question concerns the crucial matter of social stratification. Vernacular or everyday politics have been mostly analysed as politics by the poor or from the margins. Cultural studies have focused on subordinate groups. Subaltern studies have examined the political dimensions of the disenfranchised. In the same way, the conceptualisation of 'politics from below', or *politique par le bas* (Bayart et al. 1992), highlights the role of small people without power in inventing original forms of the state, even in authoritarian situations. Again, this is linked to the idea that actors who lack opportunities to use institutional channels are first and foremost outsiders and that these actors tend to resort to unconventional practices. However, to what extent is everyday or vernacular politics exclusively politics from the margins? While this issue follows the mentioned conceptualisations' engagement with a broad range of practices in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of power relations, it does not share their (exclusive) focus on the 'small' but rather seeks to question it. Turkey's current situation – where the oppressed nowadays are not necessarily the poor but mostly the educated middle classes, where domination and wealth do not necessarily overlap and where domination changes side over time (see White, this issue) – provides an interesting opportunity to address this question. Can we observe forms of everyday, vernacular or informal politics among other segments of Turkish society? This issue identifies cases among the middle class, urbanites, the educated youth, lawyers, street-level bureaucrats, nightlife traders and Gülenist opinion leaders.

This leads to the last, and equally crucial, question of domination. Vernacular or everyday politics has often been analysed as a form of contention, resistance or subversion. This is obvious in Scott's (1985) 'everyday forms of resistance',

which focuses on avoidance, evasion, foot-dragging and intimidation tactics. In the same way, cultural studies have focused on resistance exerted through cultural practices and discourses. However, we should be wary of naive enthusiasm and consider that alternative practices do not necessarily mean resistance or emancipation but may in fact consolidate domination. While everyday politics have mostly been studied outside institutions or organisations, one should keep in mind that even state institutions may resort to less formal politics and channels as an alternative to formalised rules. The Gülen movement, as an informal movement based on individual engagement and solidarity, has long been consolidating domination by the state. What are the effects, then, of everyday politics in terms of domination? To what extent does it fuel resistance, accommodation or consolidate domination (see Maritato, this issue)? More generally, should we frame everyday politics only in the framework of oppression versus resistance? In fact, this binary framework tends to deny the agents' capability of autonomous creation and agency. If we are to follow Michel de Certeau (1980), we should take seriously a multiplicity of 'ways of doing things' (*manières de faire*) that the simplistic alternative of domination vs. resistance fails to account for.

The articles in this issue not only provide new insights on the changing power relations in contemporary Turkey but also aim to reflect more broadly on the tools of social science in investigating grassroots and alternative politics. This issue brings together vibrant new research, enriched foremost by anthropology literature and methodology but also spanning the different disciplines of sociology and political science. All the articles in this issue are based on extensive fieldwork, using a variety of methods ranging from multi-sited ethnography, semi-structured interviews and participant observation to critical analysis of unpublished official material. Most were first presented and discussed at the second international conference of the Consortium for European Symposia on Turkey, entitled 'Politics from Below in Turkey and Beyond', held at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales in Paris, 2–3 December 2016.

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