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## Teaching Social Conflict in Turkish American Studies

*Stephanie C. Palmer*

Teaching American studies in Turkey involves hazards and opportunities for American scholars hopeful of internationalizing their perspective. The growth of the field in Turkey is one chapter in a history extending more than two hundred years from the adoption of Western-style education in the Turkish Republic and its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire (Davison 1990). Thus it is part of a process that Americans might readily think of as Westernization but that in fact is more complicated. On the one hand, support for American studies in Turkey has come in part from American and British institutions. In 1959 the Rockefeller Foundation donated money to establish the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at what is now Bosphorus University, and the history department there still calls on the American embassy to fund guest speakers. In the 1960s Peace Corps volunteers taught English language and literature in public high schools. Although Turkish faculty taught a few American texts, Americans teaching on Fulbright scholarships were the first specialists in American literature at Ankara and Hacettepe Universities when these universities began to establish the country's first American literature departments in the late 1960s (Aytür 1996).<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, Turkish government officials have initiated much of the support for Westernization in general and for the study of American and British cultures in particular (Davison 1988, 1990; Zürcher 1998; Raw 2000); the Turkish scholars to whom I have spoken do not have strictly ideological motivations for specializing in American literature or culture; and the American funds that helped stimulate Turkish study of American literature, history, and culture are drying up: the U.S. Information Agency has been folded into the U.S. State Department, and every year its funding of the Turkish American Studies Association Annual Meeting is cut a little more. Meanwhile, most active Turkish American studies researchers are interested in examining the problems rather than the "essence" of American culture and nationhood. In my department, we teach students about social conflict and injustice in or around the United States. Most of the department's members were trained in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s, and most have adopted a model of culture as a "whole way of conflict" (Thompson 1995: 185).<sup>10</sup>

The on-line academic catalog's description of the department in

which I teach makes it look politically leftist and oppositional (American Culture and Literature 2000–2001). Faculty specialties are antiracist, feminist, or Marxist. In 1996 required courses had been added in the African American novel, ethnic writing and culture, cultural studies, women's studies, contemporary women's literature, critical theory, and American modernism. In 2000 the courses were reorganized to integrate race, society, and history across the curriculum. This change was motivated in part by faculty who questioned whether this model of culture as a whole way of conflict, and of American studies as a lens through which to focus on social injustice, was the most appropriate model for an American studies program at this university. Despite Turkish and foreign faculty's best intentions, this model often reinforced a passive attitude among most of the students. It allowed them to subscribe to the ideologically distorted "truth" of the distance between Turkish and American cultures and hence between themselves and the concepts, skills, and texts they were studying.

When I first arrived on campus in the fall of 1999, it struck me that when they learned about the conflict between loyalists and revolutionaries in the American Revolution, about the tension between farmers and urban dwellers during the late nineteenth century, or about minority criticism of the dominant literary tradition and second-wave feminists' campaign against sexual harassment in the workplace, my students acted as if analogous social conflicts did not exist in Turkey. Their comments in class suggested that education in the abstract, in any subject, following any methodology, could solve such problems and therefore that these problems did not limit the lives of any Turks but the most ignorant villagers. When discussing social injustice, the students were quiet or uncomfortable. Or they raised the political by lamenting or championing "Americanization" stridently, moralistically, or reductively. For example, in the spring of 2000 several students praised T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" for what they read as its indictment of modernity as symbolized by a woman who has extramarital affairs and thinks about having her teeth fixed because she is preoccupied with her beauty. Tellingly, this reading was a misreading copied uncritically from an Internet study guide.<sup>11</sup> Few students acknowledged their own pursuit of beauty, romance, and conspicuous consumption, which made them not entirely unsympathetic to or discerning of the poem's characters. When I remarked that many people, including some of them, spent money to achieve beauty, they shrugged and denied it. Their moralistic reading of the poem did not lead them to see their culture in a new light. In the spring of 2001, in a course on American success stories, one of

the theoretical readings was Hélène Cixous's "Sorties," and as I explained that Cixous was concerned with philosophy, not law or economics, one of my best students interrupted with a filibuster: He agreed with Antonio Gramsci (whom he had read in another course) that economic hegemony always preceded cultural hegemony. Men have become superior to women, he said, because since early agrarian times they have brought the money home and naturally controlled the family unit. Therefore women should concentrate on gaining economic independence before they struggle for cultural voice. For example, students read American literature only because America is the richest country in the world. If Turkey were the richest country in the world, we would be reading Turkish literature. And American culture is swallowing up Turkish culture. Now everyone wears jeans. A hundred years ago the Turks did not wear jeans.

The comment was ineffective at fostering discussion, but not because it was not partly correct: there are many economic barriers to women's equality in Turkey, and many Turks are interested in things American because they want to acquire American-style personal wealth.<sup>12</sup> Rather, the *form* of the comment made discussion impossible. When others tried to challenge his ideas or refute them, the student refused to listen; he just raised his voice and repeated himself. Everything in his rhetoric was good and evil and winners and losers and shouters and the shouted at.<sup>13</sup> So it seemed, when I began teaching here, that values and politics were addressed either not at all or in a mostly counterproductive manner.

This passive and/or reductive approach to learning is not unique to Turkish students, foreign-language students, or students outside the United States. After all, the students copied their reading of "The Waste Land" from an American Web site. By discussing some problems that arise when one relies too heavily on "culture as a whole way of conflict," my goal is not primarily to "solve" them in my classroom. Problems can energize student and teacher alike. In fact, it would be disingenuous to write only about problems for which I, the good teacher, found perfect solutions; this topos is repeated again and again in articles about teaching abroad, and I seek to avoid it. At the same time, I seek to avoid suggesting that these problems are intractable, "essential" problems. My purpose is to analyze a problem that may be relevant inside or outside the United States so that other teachers can develop their own, necessarily provisional strategies in their own classrooms.

Faculty members at Turkish universities have suggested to me many reasons for the students' passivity and reductiveness:

1. American culture and Turkish culture are too different from each other. Until they get to late-twentieth-century texts and issues, Turkish students legitimately view American culture only at a distance. My question, then, is, why teach it? Students who use their imagination should be able to find meaningful connections to their own culture.
2. The students who enroll in American literature and culture departments are simply not good students; they are the ones who have scored lowest on the national university entrance exam. The best students in Turkey go into engineering or the sciences because of parental and social pressure to enter a prestigious, “useful” field. This phenomenon illustrates the status of the humanities in Turkey, but it does not explain why departmental students on scholarships (awarded on the basis of high entrance exam scores) also find values and political issues awkward.
3. Unlike public university students, the private university students with whom I work are lazy rich kids who think that they can pay for a degree they do not deserve. Private universities have existed in Turkey only since 1984. Like the newer higher education options in England and Germany, they are viewed by some people as lowering educational standards, because they have made it possible for a higher percentage of the population to attend a university. Perhaps, but a student at a neighboring public university has complained to me about a similar lack of engagement among American culture students.
4. In my class students must discuss in English. If they discussed in their own language, they could do so in a nuanced, well-substantiated manner. The problem with this reason is that the university’s official language of instruction is English, and the students have had years of English-language training. Some aspect of this training is not serving the students well if they cannot fully grapple with ideas in the language.
5. Turkish culture does not value the opinions of youth; according to a Turkish colleague, young people are not listened to in their community until they complete their military service (compulsory for men only). Turkish primary and secondary school is based exclusively on memorization and respect for the teacher.
6. It is an apolitical moment in Turkey. In the 1970s students took the initiative to read about Marxism, capitalism, and fundamentalist Islam because their campuses were often closed to avoid further killings in the name of these ideologies. Now everything is handed to the students on a silver platter: they have peace on campus, and their parents have made money in the new, rapidly industrialized economy, so they feel no need to examine, question, and learn.

The last two explanations are the most convincing, but all of them might be relevant in certain contexts. In this essay I am primarily interested in suggest-

ing some modifications to the U.S. American studies model in order to address the intellectual passivity or political reductiveness of Turkish students.

First, working in Turkey has made me careful about using the word *political* to describe scholarship or education. Here *campus politics* has the connotation of shootings instead of sit-ins or student-centered composition courses. There were intermittent periods of politically motivated violence between 1960 and 1983 (Davison 1988; Zürcher 1998). Right-wing, left-wing, secular, and Islamic political organizations attacked each other, and hundreds of student activists were killed. In an effort to restore order, the military staged three coups and each time, before it relinquished authority to the civilian government, arrested hundreds (in one case, thousands) of intellectuals for inciting class conflict or violence. After the third coup, in 1981, many university professors were fired or forced to accept short-term contracts. The military formally relinquished power in 1983, and since 1994 the universities have gained some autonomy from the government.

The university where I work was established after the third coup, and its student handbook explicitly forbids students from forming political organizations or making political statements on campus. Furthermore, until 1999 foreign instructor and professor contracts forbade participation in political activity for the length of the contract. This fact was on my mind the summer before I arrived, as I was designing the course I would teach, "Introduction to Women's Studies." It appeared contradictory that a university should forbid students and faculty from participating in political activity and then require a course in feminism. Now I see that in this usage *political* refers to electoral politics and to the social struggles tied to domestic terrorism and local ethnic strife. UNICEF and the organization of students against child labor (Çocuk İsciliğiyle Mücadele Klübü) regularly set up booths on campus, and students in the women's studies course showed me newsletters from Flying Broom (Uçan Süpürge), a women's organization in the city. Classroom discussions about "feminine" political issues, like women's rights, women's liberation, child labor, traffic safety, globalization, and environmentalism, are permitted. At the same time, rules are sometimes viewed in Turkey as things to be broken, so there is more leeway than the university's directives make it appear.

Nevertheless, when students are hesitant to respond to a politically sensitive reading, I usually respect their silence. Some students who do not participate in discussions may be complacent with regard to the status quo, but others may be trying to decide whether the course material offers a useful

perspective on it and what fruitful statements they might make in the future. Since I arrived, the university's push toward teaching writing as a tool for original thought, in which I participated, has achieved marked success, and students have become accustomed to writing for the purpose of trying out new ideas. Now I often assign ten-minute free writes, which are sometimes turned in or discussed but are never graded or treated as the students' final word on the subject. In this and other ways I try to provide students with opportunities to think for themselves in class, because they, not their teachers, are the ones who will need to find and implement solutions to local problems.

In U.S. humanities departments, by contrast, to be political in scholarship often means to *reflect* on the connection between scholarship and power inequities, and to be political in pedagogy means to teach students how to *question* authority and make sound, original claims. For many active humanities scholars, to be apolitical means to have overlooked something crucial in an analysis, or simply to be cowardly. My point is not that U.S. humanities departments have become too far removed from "the world" but that reflection, hesitation, and quiet conversation are worth cultivating. When I arrived, the students reading early American literature in the survey of American literature impressed me with their praise for characters (like Wohpe in "Wohpe and the Gift of the Pipe" or Powhatan in John Smith's *General Historie*) who stood for peace, not war. By contrast, although they do not do so programmatically, many U.S. American studies scholars associate dissent, contestation, and social transformation with justice and aesthetic pleasure. But these words are abstractions, and the activities they designate can impede as easily as enact justice. Therefore, thinking about American studies in this context makes me appreciate the way that causes are corrupted as their proponents jockey for power. A quiet atmosphere in which no one is suspended or fired for his or her political actions helps people extend and deepen their thinking. Ideally, the student who prefers Gramsci could make his point yet consider Cixous's ideas and determine why they do or do not prompt him to revise his views. He could also learn from Cixous and other authors why culture can ready people's minds for the economic changes he is calling for.

Second, most Turkish students find it difficult to compare U.S. social injustice to Turkish social injustice, because so many American teaching materials focus on race as the most important type of social hierarchy. Many materials imply that race is primarily a matter of skin color and a unified oppressor (whites) subjugating a unified oppressed (blacks). Students who have just learned about American slavery for the first time and who are struggling with a foreign language are often willing to use this model without

assessing it. But the model can be terribly counterproductive: students feel pity for U.S. racial minorities, particularly blacks, but are led to believe that where there are no differences in skin color, there are no human problems. Students may come to view ethnic literature as political and social but “great” American literature (Hemingway or Faulkner) as aesthetic and personal. This attitude demeans the ethnically marked American authors it would seem to champion, because they are all analyzed as if they belonged to a single category. Students may come to fallacious conclusions that leave social injustice unchallenged: all cultures have evil in them, and no one can avoid his or her culture’s evil; American culture is perfect except for its racism; or American culture is so demonized that, strangely, the students’ own culture is exonerated from the social injustice under discussion.<sup>14</sup> Students choose to believe that Turkey has no “race problem” because it has no “race”—because it has no people of different races. In part this belief stems from an American model of race and ethnicity based primarily on skin color, which does not work in an area of the world in which social groups are discriminated against for their religion, language, or rural origin. But in part it voices the ideology of the Turkish Republic, according to which all citizens share a unified Turkish ethnocultural heritage, and any group that claims another heritage opposes the modern spirit of the state. Recently, Turkey’s relations with its Kurdish population and its Greek neighbors have become more conciliatory—evidence that a culture can change—but it still seems that focusing on racism against blacks in Turkish American studies can reproduce the country’s exclusionary national ideology.

Even when faculty emphasize that the distance between Turkish and American cultures is ideologically distorted rather than natural and unchangeable, it is difficult to make students see racism in the United States as related to problems closer to home.<sup>15</sup> In my courses the most effective method has been to teach the students how to feel implicated in the idea of race. Whenever we discuss race, I conduct careful discussions. For example, when students say that a poem is about “blacks and their difficult conditions,” I ask where exactly they see that in the poem. I like teaching Langston Hughes’s parody of an advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria (“Come to the Waldorf-Astoria”), because it speaks to and of urban poor of every color and ends with a call for socialist revolution. I always ask my students to articulate whom the text speaks to or on behalf of so that we *demonstrate* the lack of evidence that Hughes means primarily blacks. I also like teaching Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” because it mentions the Euphrates, which the students can think of as a local river, as part of a Negro’s heritage. In the class



period before we discuss the poem, I give them a world map and tell them to trace the routes of the rivers Hughes mentions. The Euphrates is the one that they are most likely to misidentify, because its Turkish name does not resemble the English one. That way, again, students who assume that Hughes is tracing a history of Africans and Americans alone can begin to question their assumptions even before they get to class. In the spring of 2001 the students suggested that Hughes was tracing the history of civilization rather than the history of the transatlantic slave trade. This is a more productive interpretation, I think, because it enables them to consider Hughes another human being instead of (in their mind) an other. Finally, I try to include readings about Latino/a culture because of its historical similarities to Turkish culture (both cultures are settler societies and are both colonizer and colonized). In Latino/a texts the students recognize an emphasis on obedience to elders and are excited by the unfamiliarity of Catholic confession.

I design syllabi to highlight ethnicity and class as much as race. Once a class of third-year students claimed that they had never heard the word *ethnicity*, even though I knew that they had studied Eastern European and Asian emigration to the United States in several second-year courses. Now I make my students responsible for understanding the term, with reference to events of the last ten years in the Balkans, whose nearness to them renders them a familiar point of comparison. I identify stereotypes of people of different religious or linguistic backgrounds whenever they appear in the course readings. (The first time I did this, a student asked in astonishment, “You mean the Irish were treated like blacks?”) I point out the phenomenon of racial othering between disadvantaged groups in addition to that between an oppressor and an oppressed. I encourage students to identify with being an unwitting oppressor in some zones and being unwittingly oppressed in others, and I give examples of real people in *every* period of American history who have taken some control over their ideas of race. My favorite example is William Dean Howells, who despised the Irish yet found African American culture romantic, was a member of the NAACP, and, having listened to Jews and whites who complained about the ethnic stereotypes in his writing, revised his ideas about them over time (Banta 1970; McElrath 1997). The lesson students learn is that no culture is monolithic or unchangeable.

Teaching several kinds of social hierarchy or social affiliation as potentially central and powerful in different contexts is the most appropriate solution. Sometimes American studies scholars’ claims that may be acceptable in an American context are not in a Turkish, or in a global, context. For example, antipathy between the urban elite and the rural poor in America is often

read as a disguise for deeper, more urgent conflicts over race or immigration status (see Nash 1982; Brodhead 1993; Kaplan and Pease 1993). But in Turkey family, class, and urban-rural differences are extremely powerful (see Kandiyoti 1988; Kâğıtçıbası 1996), and many elites are apathetic about rural peasants and recent migrants to the cities. Following modernization theory, most Turkish students assume that education and economic development will eradicate social inequality and social injustice on their own, without the active participation of people who are already educated and economically advanced. They assume that eastern Turks will become educated eventually and, as a natural result, that poverty, illiteracy, and discrimination against women will disappear. When discussing nineteenth-century reform movements, therefore, I not only elaborate on their social control aspects but emphasize that the reformers were trying to address the problems of poverty over opposition from their own communities. When my students invoke the power of education, I ask them what they, as well-educated, talented, intelligent students, will do about the barriers to education that they see in their country.

### Notes for Reflections on Teaching America Abroad

1. This reflection has benefited from the generous criticism of Peter Falkenberg and Benton Jay Komins. The productions that provide the material for this research were supported in part by a University Research Grant, by the Department of American Studies, and by the Department of Theatre and Film Studies at the University of Canterbury.
2. The Jewish population of New Zealand is generally estimated at thirty-one hundred, mostly concentrated in the North Island cities of Auckland and Wellington (Levine 1997: 79).
3. In an e-mail correspondence Te Rita Papesch, a prominent Maori artist and scholar, notes the nineteenth-century linguistic distinction between *dark* and *fair* and adds: "With the influx of many different peoples to this country Pakeha became the term to mean all other white skinned peoples. We Maori would use the term Maori for any other indigenous peoples that settled here e.g. Africans would be Maori from Africa" (10 October 2001). Where this leaves hybridic imports, such as African Americans, is unclear. See also Radhika Mohanram's (1998) provocative essay.
4. Hal B. Levine (1997: 117) concludes his chapter on Jewish ethnicity in New Zealand as follows: "Implementing the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and working out the interrelationship between Maori and pakeha occupies almost the entire landscape of contemporary ethnic politics in New Zealand. . . . Jews become part of an amalgamated pakeha category by default, and find their (not undesired) invisibility reinforced by yet another condition of New Zealand social and cultural life."
5. *The Laramie Project* was created by Moisés Kaufman, in collaboration with the Tectonic Theater Project, in response to the murder of gay student Matthew Shepard in Laramie,

Wyoming, in 1998. It premiered at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts on 26 February 2000 and went on to a successful run in New York; a film is in the works (see [www.wbr.com/laramie](http://www.wbr.com/laramie)).

6. Friends of Israel is very active in Christchurch, holding regular folk dance parties and, when invited, participating in Jewish activities, such as seders, in the community hall.
7. This practice stands in opposition to notions derived from Smith's particular realism. Rayner (1995: 6) claims that "it is the very uncertainty in the speeches that gives the effect of the real. The hesitations, the ums, ers, and stutters, the struggles to articulate, are the living rhythm of language and the social, speaking subject that is in the process of self-articulation." In contrast, Tania Modleski (1997: 63) remarks how Smith's performances "oscillate with great artistry between the desire to capture the real and the awareness of the difficulties and even dangers of attempting to do so."
8. This family caused consternation in the synagogue, in part because its members sat together, men and women, in the men's section of the sanctuary. While they were not necessarily welcomed, and there has been much debate in the community about how to respond to them, their presence has been essentially unchallenged.
9. Departments of American literature were the first university units to focus on American subject matter. In 1987 Bilkent University established an American *culture* and literature department, and the next year the government's Higher Education Council decreed that all American literature departments should be similarly named.
10. American studies departments in the United States have provided a forum in which to criticize aspects of American government or civil society not just since the civil rights movement but since the 1930s, when American studies programs were first established in Europe and the United States (May 1996; Schmidt 2000).
11. Eliot's (1963: 58) lines are

When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said—  
I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself,  
. . . . .  
Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.  
He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you  
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there.  
You have them all out, Lil, and get a nice set,  
He said, I swear, I can't bear to look at you.  
. . . . .  
But if Albert makes off, it won't be for lack of telling.  
You ought to be ashamed, I said, to look so antique.  
. . . . .  
I can't help it, she said, pulling a long face,  
It's them pills I took, to bring it off, she said.  
(She's had five already, and nearly died of young George.)  
The chemist said it would be all right, but I've never been the same.  
You *are* a proper fool, I said.  
Well, if Albert won't leave you alone, there it is, I said,  
What you get married for if you don't want children?

(2.139–64)

The American Internet study guide the students used misinterprets this discussion as “a gossipy barroom conversation about a woman who was unfaithful to her soldier husband during the war and who had an abortion to hide her guilt” (Kathleen McCoy and Judith Harland, qtd. in Hecimovich n.d.). In fact, Lil links the abortion to the number of children she has had already (and to the difficulty of one of the pregnancies), not to their legitimacy, and her friend’s comment about Albert not leaving Lil alone supports this reading. The people who are preoccupied with Lil’s beauty are her husband and her friend. McCoy and Harland’s misinterpretation must have struck a chord with the students, because they copied (without quoting) it again and again in informal response papers and drafts of term papers.

12. The student was repeating a rhetorical move invented (misleadingly) by the modern Turkish state, whose founder had liberalized the legal code in relation to women but had done so without acknowledging or providing political space for the work of the already active feminist groups in the late Ottoman Empire. Therefore, according to state ideology, Turkish women did not need to fight for their rights, because their rights were given to them (see Kandiyoti 1991). In 2001, a few months after this classroom discussion took place, the Turkish civil code was changed: wife and husband are now joint heads of the family, which means that married women are legally authorized to choose where the family will live and what jobs both spouses will take.
13. In an on-line project between New Jersey students and Bilkent management department students, Doris Friedensohn and Barbara Rubin (2002) note a greater inclination toward political argument among the Bilkent students that I have, but again, it is primarily of this polemical variety.
14. Jonathan Veitch’s comments on an earlier version of this essay helped me articulate this point. The earlier version was read at the Twenty-fifth Annual American Studies Seminar of the Turkish American Studies Association in Kusadasi, Turkey. I have also benefited from comments made by members of the audience after I read a slightly different version at the 2000 American Studies Association Annual Meeting in Detroit.
15. In an article about teaching African American novels in Turkey, my colleague E. Lale Demirtürk (1999) outlines her strategies for encouraging students to identify with the struggle of African American characters. Relating American stereotypes of Turks to American stereotypes of African Americans became workable, she writes, only when she transformed her classroom from one in which the students learned certain fixed facts to one in which they participated in a collective effort to invert the colonialist mind-set. I wholeheartedly agree with teaching students to be critical thinkers, but I also try to make students see how they, like most people, may be oppressors as well as oppressed.

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