TOWARDS A NEW PATTERN OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION

Youth participation is one of the controversial issues all over the world. The legacy of the 1968 generation has been replaced by generations whom are supposed to be global consumers. Perceptions of the youth are colored with prejudices and negative attitudes. The less society understand the youth, the more they tend to oppress youth, and the less the youth participates meaningfully. A number of new methods and unconventional patterns of participation should be implemented to foster youth participation. An example of such an initiative is Gençnet, a project and a forum fostering youth participation in Turkey.

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Although it is relatively a new issue in political, social, and cultural studies, age is supposed to be a significant marker of political and social paradigm. Youth, all over the world, is ambiguously defined by adults as a social and biological category of individuals that should be subordinated, controlled, and disciplined. Additionally, despite the cliché of carrying hopes for the future, and an active role in economic dynamism for the progress of the society, youth has always been considered as inciting fear and concern. This is due to the historical fact that youth used to be the symbol of delinquent political engagement, denial of mainstream values, and enactment of divergent social and political ideas and behaviors in late 60s and 70s. Consequently, although it may change from society to society, or culture to culture, in general youth is prevented from being closely involved in decision making processes.

The status of youth in society is usually low compared with that of older age groups. It is true that, in part, youth-related problems can be traced to young people's position in the social structure and to inequality of status. Therefore, most young people strive for adulthood instead of involving themselves in politics and social issues. This also means striving for better positions in society and is itself enclosed within a wider framework of social structure and age stratification.

The problems of youth are almost the same all over the world: unequal education opportunities, unemployment, and lacking overall civic participation. This is the same for Turkish youth, and Turkey, a young country, and almost three-quarters of the population are under 35 and almost one-fifth are young adults between the ages of 15 and 24.

Turkish youths have deep-rooted problems that are very much consequences of sociological, cultural, economic, and political factors. That's why, it is very hard to resolve these problems in the short run, and moreover a number of new methods and unconventional patterns of participation should be implemented to foster youth participation in Turkey.

### *What is Youth: A Political and Sociological Approach*

According to Karl Marx, *The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.*[1]
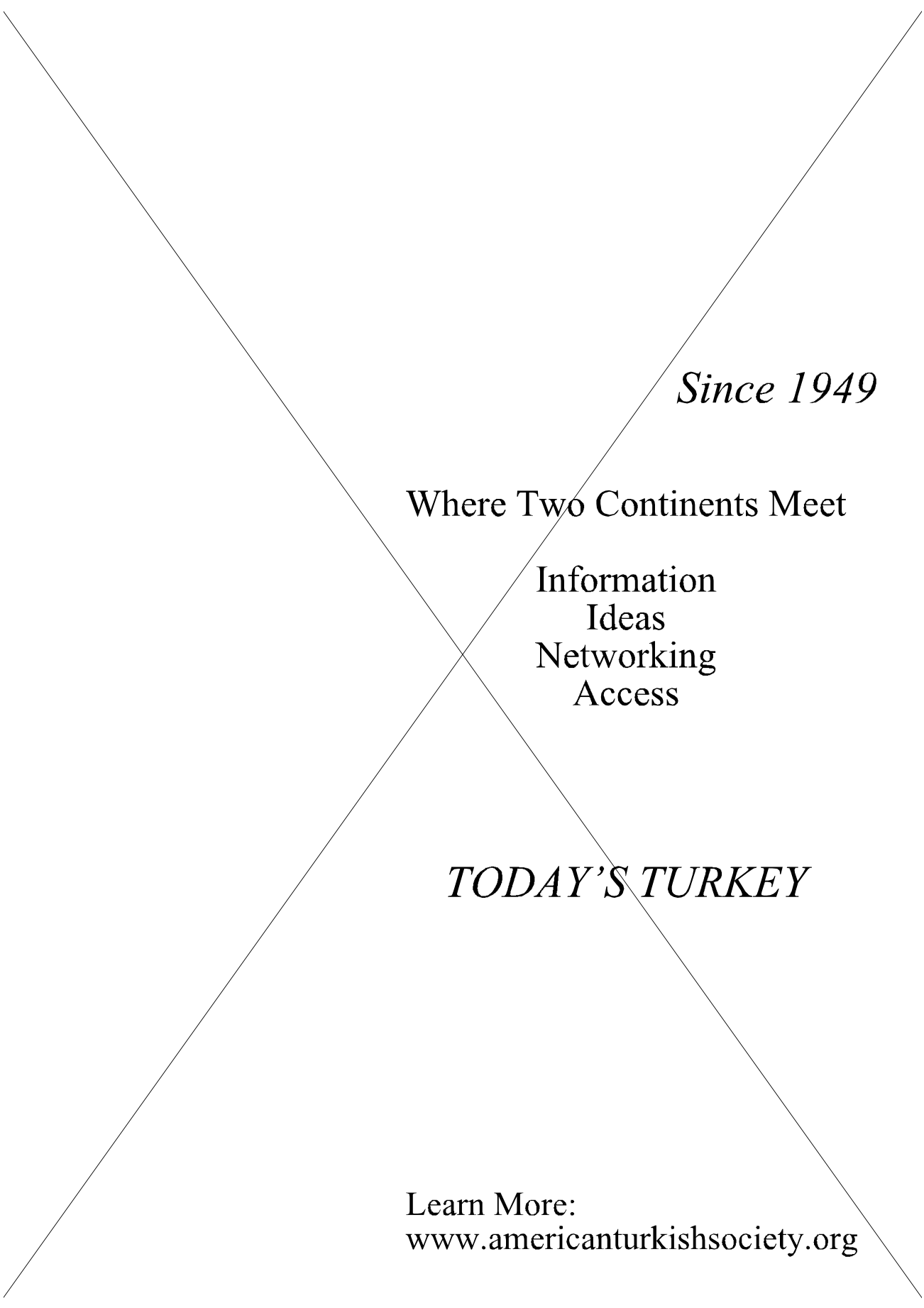
It is an exaggeration to say that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of struggle between the old and the young. However, the history of youth, that is to say, the history of emergence of youth as a sociological category is the history of modernity.

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[1] Karl Marx and Frederich Engels, *the Communist Manifesto in* Robert Tucker (ed.), *Marx Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton&Company. Inc, 1990), p. 335.
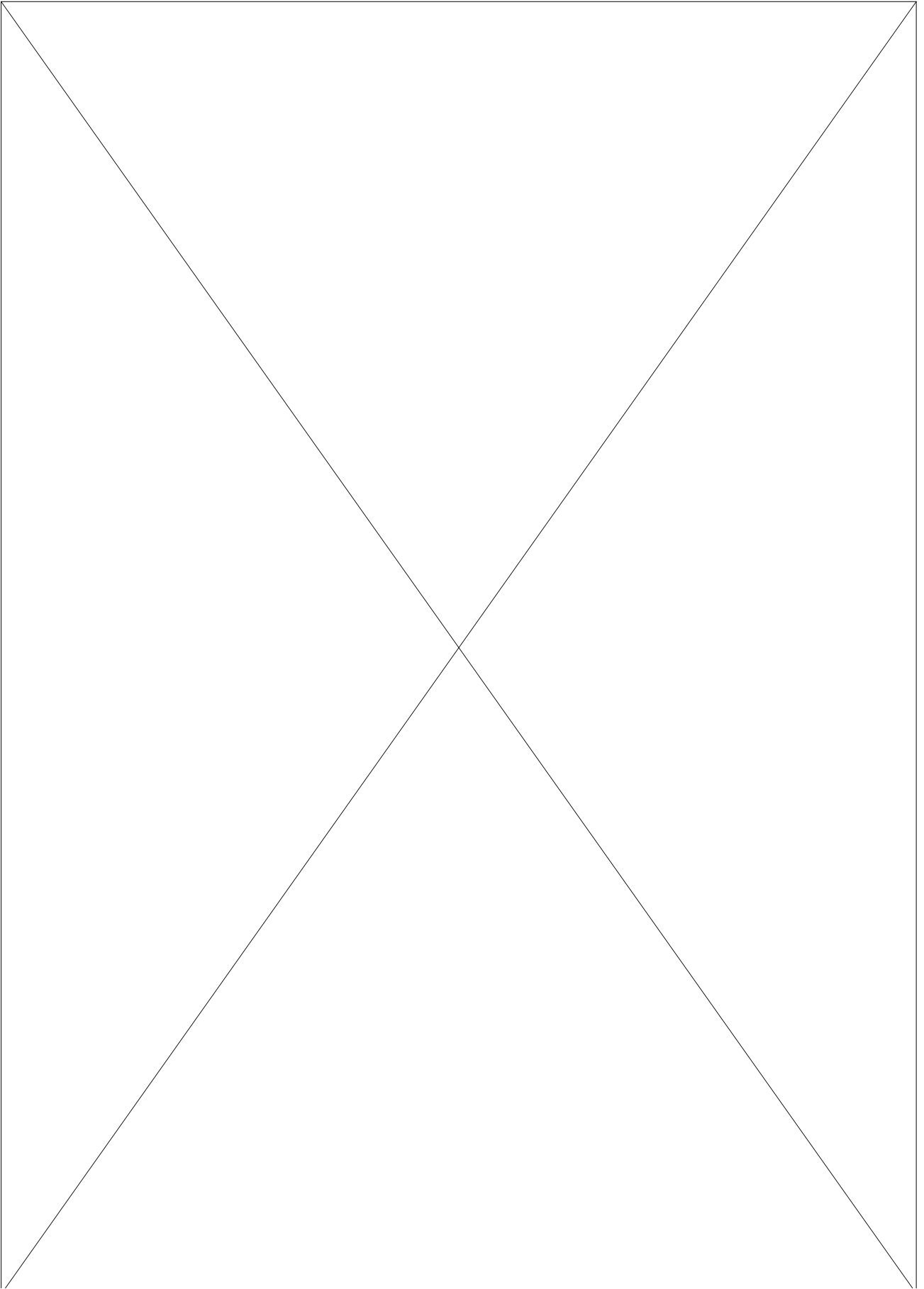
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The general cultural and social understanding tells us that youth is predominantly an age in human life between adolescence and adulthood, a specialty in human condition that is very much determined by biology. Although the biological determination of youth seems to address a reality, it is inadequate in social and cultural theory.

As American sociologist Parsons (1942, 1963) points out youth is not a universal category of biology but a social category which emerges with the changing roles of family relations forced by development of capitalism via modernity.[2]

Before modernity, youth was marked as a passage through life from childhood to adulthood. No specifics were determined for this process. However, as modern society emerged, a new social structure took place that required new social roles and interactions. This structure simultaneously started up a differentiation between the family and the society. Society needed to fill up the discontinuity caused by that differentiation. As Chris Baker mentions, "this marked not only 'irresponsibility' between childhood and adulthood which allowed youth culture to emerge and whose functions were essentially socializing.[3] Hence, as a consequence of this process, a number of aspects were attributed to youth, and youth were defined as neither adults nor kids but a particular social category that has certain identifiable characteristics.

Alongside biological and sociological definitions of youth, there is a psychological point of view, as Svetlana Klimova argues that the strains closely related to the social transition to adulthood, partly originate from physiological processes.[4]

All approaches, in an unintended manner, contribute to the ambivalence of defining youth, and consequently impossibility to understand the identity crisis and problems of youth. This allows prejudices and negative attitudes to grow towards youth. Therefore, as society fails to understand the youth, the more they tend to oppress youth, and it remains subject to adult control, or better put, is an oppression that paves the way to youth resistance to authority and mainstream- hegemonic-political, social, and cultural paradigms.

The oppression of youth by adults might be regarded as the main factor why youth became an actor in political, social, and cultural changes especially in 1960s and 1970s. There are a number of studies translating the notion of socially-politically oppression to parent-youth conflict. According to K. Davis (1973), parents play primal roles in young people's lives as socializing agencies in times of rapid social change. What puts pressure upon youths and stirs up a generational

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[2] Talcott Parsons, *Age and Sex in the Social Structure of United States*, American Sociological Review Vol. 7 (1942). Talcott Parson *Youth in the Context of American Society*, American Sociological Review Vol. 27 (1963).
[3] Chris Baker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice,* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 319.
[4] Svetlana Klimova, *Youth, Socialization, and Social Change: A Social Agenda*, 2005.

conflict is when `cultural via social and political content' parents have experienced is applied to their children and they are forced to adapt.[5]

Youth, Politics, and Social Change: Why Society is Scared of Youth

Political and social activities of youth are biased towards the society for a number of historical, political, and cultural reasons.

First is the general acceptance that there is a universal concept of youth despite the fact that there are differentiated characteristics of youth. Overcoming the ambiguity of youth is hard to deal with. For instance, legal definitions are uneven. The ages at which a person can buy alcohol, go to particular movies, vote, or to be elected are not uniform. This forces youth to remain a contested ambivalent classification wedged between the boundaries of childhood and adulthood. The ambivalence of defining youth as a social category is one of the reasons that cause youth characteristics to be associated with delinquency, violence, and radicalism in politics and social issues. Youth is suggested as a sort of ideology that is feared by the mainstream political, social, and cultural establishment as a threat to the existing system.

All the political and social action of youth are regarded as delinquent, namely, absolute denial of mainstream values, enactment of divergent social and political ideas and behaviors. So, when the study of youth attracts a great deal of attention by social scientists, it is due to several reasons, as Klimova argues, including a tendency to assume that youth is a traumatic time of biological and social changes; that youth is often rebellious and poses a threat to the existing social structure; and that youth is a metaphor for social change.[6]

The youth resistance is subject to historical analysis. It appeared in the late 50s as a political, social, and cultural indispensable phenomenon. In those years, the Marlon Brando look stylized with leather motorbike leather jacket, white t-shirt, and slim cut Levi's became the symbol of the cultural resistance for youth. James Dean and his legendary image in Nicholas Ray's *Rebel without a Cause* initially constituted the one of the first examples of youth resistance. However, all these remained as rebel without any political, or idealist cause but notably psychological due to the social and psychological oppression over youth, and ambivalence of youth as a social category.

Youth was believed to express its resistance through rituals, and this involves the expression of the difference forms and stylized figures such as football hooligans, street corner gangs, which lead people to associate youth with crime, delinquency, and violence. As the sixties progressed, so did fashion, too. The scene in the 60s

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[5] Kingley Davis, *The Sociology of Parent-Youth Conflict*, in H. Silverstein (ed.) The Sociology of Youth: Evolution and Revolution, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1973), p. 89
[6] Klimova (2005)

and 70s was based upon sex, drugs, music and politics. Some of these were undoubtedly features, but not all simultaneously. Alternatively, youth has been assumed to be as subject to control, good boys who listen to what they are told, study lessons, wait their turn to be a citizen, and to constitute the continuance of mainstream political and social structure. Youth was expected to obey the rules, and never to question them.

The subjection and oppression of youth paved the way to youth resistance to authority, main stream political, social, and cultural establishment, and allowed youth to be the leading figure in political and social changes. 1960s and 1970s were the decades of youth resistance hegemonic culture.

The youth movements which emerged in 1968 were massive social upheavals, involving millions of young people throughout the world. In 1968 students all over the world became increasingly disenchanted with the policies of governments, and the attitudes of society. Many were dissatisfied with their lives. This dissatisfaction and the anger led to open protests, sit-ins in university classrooms, riots and large scale demonstrations on the street. What began simply as a protest against the government policies at university education, escalated rapidly to a full- scale revolution: the workers, intellectuals, and those who dreamt of changing the world joined the students.

The events following the 1968 riots brought a repressive authoritarian response. The youth recognized that they were not allowed to change the world in the manner they had envisioned. The slaughtering of four university students at the University of Kent at Ohio during the riots in 1973 demonstrated how cruel authorities could be when mainstream values and social institutions were attacked by student movements.[7]

There have been differing interpretations of these times. Some characterize the *68 Generation* as courageous visionaries. Some say they were genuine revolutionaries and idealize their slogans, such as "*make love, not war,*" "*the whole world is watching,*" and *"never trust anyone over 30"*. According to some, they were romantic utopians. Ex-members of 68 Generation believe that 1968 was a genuine challenge to authority in a pattern likening 1789 or 1848 or 1917. However, some say it was nothing more than clever rhetoric designed for immediate hedonistic consumption. In any case, many changes all over the world, that occurred following these movements, would not have taken place if millions of students had not had the determination to foster values of freedom, equality, and civic initiative.

One might argue that the legacy of the 68 generation overshadowed the future of youth in politics. Obviously, the politicization of youth, namely, youth

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[7] *The Story of Music Documentary*, 70s Episode, Vh-1 2005

engagement in political, cultural, social issues reached its peak in late 60s and early 70s. After 1968, youth politics began to decline, and the profile of youth in politics has not risen since. The politically and socially engaged youth of the 1968 was replaced by apolitical generations

Turkish Youth: Problems and Solutions

In Turkey, despite progress in democracy and the spread of civil society especially after the earthquake in 1999, the position of youth in politics and society has not changed. Youth is assumed to be a social category under the strict control of adults. That is to say, Turkish youth is caged by a triangle called "Iron Triangle" that is constituted by the political system, school, and family.[8] All these institutions prevent young people from taking initiatives in political and social issues either relevant or irrelevant them. Additionally, youth has been sanctioned in legal and political system in which their legal rights to be elected is limited.

All old fashioned assumptions based on youth still exist. It is still believed that the youth's mission is not to lead, or change but to obey the existing values, belief systems, behavior patterns, and attitudes of society. Social roles assigned to young people include student, and assistant to experienced professionals and executives. Any young person who is ambitious in politics or social issues is sanctioned, and reminded of the "bloody and turbulent" days of 1970s, the period defined as 'the days brother-murdered-brother'. Although these days imposed very negative effects on Turkey's future, we have to realize that the world has changed since the 1970s.

In 2002, a debate to reduce the age requirement to be elected was just an example of attitudes and assumptions towards youth in Turkey. Despite civil society initiatives, and strong lobbying activities, the Turkish parliament did not pass the resolution on this issue.

This recent failure once again showed that the conventional methods and efforts are not sufficient to change the position of youth in Turkey. Therefore, unconventional methods to empower youth and to foster participation among young people must be found

Turkish political culture has no long-standing tradition of the civil initiative, so any great calls for the participation of Turkish youth in conventional methods of participation might fall on deaf ears. Turkish youth's problems are manyfold and will not be solved immediately

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[8] In 1999, STRATEJI|MORI, IRI (International Republican Institute) and the ARI Movement implemented a project to determine the participation level of the Turkish youth, obstacles of participation and possible strategies to eliminate these obstacles. A survey with a sample representing the Turkish youth was conducted, which was followed by focus groups and public participation meetings in which findings were discussed. A book was published in May 1999, titled "The Turkish youth and Participation" in which several authors evaluated and discussed in detail the findings of this survey. For details, see Emre Erddo€an, *Turkish Youth and Political Participation 1999-2003*, in Bulent Tunga Y›lmaz (ed.) *Turkish Youth and Participation:Participate and Create Your Future II* (‹stanbul: Toplumsal Kat›l›m ve Gelifllim Vakf›, 2003), p. 28.

One of the main problems of youth in Turkey is the question of unemployment. Today 25 percent of young people in urban areas are unemployed. This situation is deeply rooted in the economy and under these conditions young people naturally focus on themselves rather than caring about political and social issues.

A second major problem is that Turkish youth is not provided high standards of education to compete at the global level. This is due to both problems associated with the economy and the issues relating to content/curriculum. Turkey, as the second youngest country among OECD members after Mexico, has a student population the size of a big-sized European country. For a developing country like Turkey, it is almost impossible to provide high educational standards to this huge youth population. 1 student out of 8 is able to continue his or her secondary and college education. A mere 10 percent of the young people who take the central university entrance examination have the opportunity to enter a university

Schools, as Feride Acar and Ayfle Ayata point out, are not only institutions of education, which transmit knowledge, but they are also agents of social and cultural control.[9] That is to say, Education is a state apparatus in an Althusserian sense, which strives for constancy, unity, and incorporates strong elements of official world-views. The educational system is the most efficient medium of reproducing traditional values, and controlling youth.

A third problem for youths in Turkey is the lack of participation in civic activities. Turkish youth not only lack participation in the political decision-making process but also in the social and economic fields. Although the level of participation is affected by a number of variables such as education, working status, socio-economic and socio-cultural background, and rural or urban status, it is generally assumed that the level of participation of youth in Turkey is very low at the national level.[10]

A follow up study carried out in the framework of the Human Rights for All Project[11] yielded the same results. This study shows that the participation of youth declined throughout the years. For instance, voting, the most conventional pattern of participation, declined from 62 percent in 1999 to 51 percent in 2003. Despite the fact that the 2002 general elections was characterized a by low turnout, that of youth was lower than their parents. Moreover, this study also points to the fact that Turkish youth is not aware of its responsibilities and does not pay attention to local, national, or global issues.

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[9] Feride Acar and Ayfle Ayata, *Discipline, Success and Stability: The Reproduction of Gender and Class in Turkish Secondary Education,* in Deniz Kandiyoti and Ayfle Saktenber (ed.) *Fragments of Life: The Everyday of Turkey,* (London: IB Taurus, 2002), p. 90.
[10] Erdo€an (2003), p. 29-46.
[11] www.hiih.org

Gencnet: an Unconventional Solution to Youth's Problems

Gencnet is the biggest youth platform in Turkey. For six years it has aimed to encourage the structural and philosophical change of Turkish social and political life by inculcating the fundamentals of participatory democracy in the lives of Turkish citizens and policymakers. Targeting young people in Turkey between the ages 18-25, its mission is to create a new youth-based understanding of public service and volunteerism, and to promote the growth and leadership of a strong civil-society. The project serves as a forum for Turkish youth to increase their civil participation through numerous workshops, conferences, and publications.

The project was designed, conducted, implemented, and sponsored by the ARI Movement[12]; and the International Republican Institute (IRI)[13]. These two institutions adhered to the belief that political participation and a robust civil society are *crucial* to a healthy and vibrant Turkey, and the youg people should be the active figures of the emergence of a new civil, society and political understanding.

The first step in the project was to launch a survey in 1999 to gauge the civic participation and interest levels of Turkish youth. The survey concluded that along lack of participation, they also lacked overall self-confidence to participate in the decision-making processes because of obstacles, and barriers. Those who were aware and interested in local, national, and global issues, felt unable to surmount perceived obstacles to participation, such as familial attitudes, official bureaucracy, peer pressure, and obstinate public officials.[14]

The second step in the project was to conduct regional workshops in order to allow Turkish young people to discuss local and national issues of concern and develop projects on selected social problems.

The following event in the project was to organize a national conference that would be the annual culmination of Gençnet. By the national conferences, outstanding students from each university in Turkey would meet in Istanbul for two days, be able to discuss local and national issues associated to youth.

Within the project, a website (www.gencnet.org) was designed to allow current and perspective participants to learn about different projects and follow their progression. Another aim of the web site was also to serve as a journal for success stories of various civil society initiatives. On the average, the web site is clicked on by approximately 10,000-12,000 visitors everyday.

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[12] www.ari.org.tr
[13] www.iri.org
[14] Erdo€an (2003), p. 29-46

Local and National Projects of Gençnet

Local and national projects are the main components of Gençnet that make it unique. Every year, through the visits and workshops held in different cities all over the Turkey, the practitioners of the project meet with university students, local NGO members and youth leaders. At these workshops, they form teams of young people to design solutions to a problem they have identified in their community. This hands-on and practical approach is designed to allow young people developing their problem-solving skills and provide those tools and the methodology of problem solving. As consequences of these workshops, a number of local projects were materialized.

The most successful of all local projects is MUMKUN (Possible), an integration project between city of Mu€la and the local university. The project should be assumed as one of the best examples of how a group of student can change the city, and make a difference.

The main aim of the project was to strength the communication among people of Mu€la and university students, and overcoming students' problems caused by the lack of communication between the city inhabitants and the university students.

The project included a number of activities as well as civil initiatives. As parts of the project, university students planted trees, organized visits to asylums for aged people and parentless children, gave private lessons poor students. They also organized cleansing and recycling campaigns, and found sponsorships to fund projects would resolve Mu€la's problems.

MUMKUN and the other projects are unique examples in Turkey in the sense that they provide models of how volunteering can play a distinguished role to create such a more participative youth via society, and shows that the lack of participation is not just adults' fault but young people explicitly avoid their roles and responsibilities. They avoid them because they are not aware of their power, and their advantages to foster change, and to affect decision making processes. MUMKUN specifically and Gençnet generally, show that young people have more than one choice on top of being simply consumers or subjects of social and political oppression.

What differentiates Gençnet from other youth projects and conventional participation patterns is their call to youth to become committed citizens. Within the context of Gençnet, not only do young people get informed about their rights but have to step forward, initially, participate, get in touch, and act together.

Conclusion

The question of youth has a significant place on the social and political agenda. This question is associated with unemployment, lack of participation, and low social status. Further, the question of youth raises a number of significant themes, negative attitudes, and prejudices, namely:

• Youth has been ignored by decision-makers via whole society.
• Youth has been marginalized and subordinated in political and social decision-making process.
• Youth culture is structurally located in a different place from this of society. All these are the consequences of some models about youth that galvanize people's ideas about youth:
• Youth are considered as egocentric, namely they are cared for nothing but themselves.
• Youth are subscribed as stranger, that their culture is completely removed from the adult society.
• Youth is understood as neither children nor adults. They are situated in a borderline world of moral and legal restrictions and limitations.
• As moreover, youth is not trusted with democracy, namely, have bizarre political and social point of view, and always remained as outsider, and left out of mainstream politics.

The new methods adopted to deal with the question of youth should be different from those that have been implemented and remained unsuccessful. These new methods should depend on the unconventional in order to attempt to understand we can clarify the major characteristics:

As citizens, young people should contribute in local, national, and international issues towards sustainability. Empowerment of young people to find solutions to their micro problems, and the problems relevant to their daily life is crucial. The significance of this approach would be that the more they are capable of solving the problem, the more they gain experience to participate. Not only do they make society hear their voice but also deem self-esteem and confidence.

Greater participation by young people should be the major priority and inclusive defining feature of projects towards sustainable participation of youth. A more participative society will depend on an established framework for participation, partnership, and corporation. Youth is the indispensable part of the society. Civic and civil interventions should adopt a more complex model of youth including young people from different socio-economic and socio-cultural origins all over the country.