Many voices of a Turkish state factory: working at Bakirköy Cloth Factory, 1932-50

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SUMMARY

Many Voices of a Turkish State Factory looks at the shop floor dynamics of a state-owned textile factory in Istanbul in order to understand the connections between the living and working conditions of its workers, their consciousness and their political language between 1932 and 1950. It conceptualises this national factory, where the institutional relationship between the apparatuses of factory and state tended towards fusion, and where labour and state came into direct contact with each other, as a microcosm of state-labour relations in the early Republican period. It is a micro-historical actor-centred study of the working and living conditions, and the development of the political consciousness and language of Bakırköy Factory workers. This first systematic archive-driven study of a factory in early Republican Turkey introduces a whole new perspective on the study of working-class formation in Turkey in two ways. First, it analyses the relations between the politics of production and the larger framework of state politics in the contexts of a national factory, a factory that was run by the state as part of its efforts to complement its recently acquired political independence with economic sovereignty. Second, through a close reading of workers’ experiences of shop floor activity and politics, it examines the discursive structuring of class consciousness as the infusion of two different discourses: the discourse of nation-building and citizenship, and the discourse of labour politics. Thus, it tries to establish the interactions between the processes of nation-building and of industrial proletarianisation by means of examining the fluid boundaries between class and citizenship. Covering such a dynamic period of social change from the perspective of social history, it deals with multiple levels of working-class formation, including its social and cultural dimensions, thus conceptualising class formation as much a discursive as a material process.

This study pushes the boundaries of Turkish labour history in three ways. The first line of distinction concerns the unit of analysis. Different from studies on state enterprises or the industrial working class, I reconstruct the experiences of a workforce at the site of production: the factory. This allowed me to see the details of the process of working-class formation that had previously been overlooked in the sweeping generalisations. When factors such as the labour process, social relations at the level of the shop floor and their interactions with social relations outside the factory site are included in the analysis, a more nuanced understanding of working-class behaviour and politics becomes possible. The second difference concerns the centrality of the experiences of rank-and-file workers in the narrative. By building upon the
accounts of actual people in real social formations, I documented their crude and concrete experiences of the process of proletarianisation. The study of the biographical instances of the process of working-class formation not only challenges the overly-generalised conclusions on state workers; it also brings the particular aspects to the foreground against the theoretical inclination of specialists in this field to go for the more general explication. Last but not least, this study makes use of a vast collection of archival material, some of which is being presented for the first time. By bringing together state-produced material with workers’ own accounts, I question the former and contextualise the latter.

The analysis starts from an experience-distant level and gradually moves towards the study of the dynamics of the self-perceptions and representations of Bakırköy workers through the examination of petitions they wrote, speeches they gave, and personal accounts they left. First, the structure of capitalist economic development of early Republican Turkey is analysed with an emphasis on the historical roots of state-led industrialisation of the 1930s and 40s. By means of providing a bird’s-eye view of the constellation of nationalism and state-led industrialisation, Chapter 1 illustrates how the former shaped the latter. The practical applications of etatism, such as the first five-year plan and the establishment of Sümerbank, are also analysed in this chapter, within the framework of the reproductive effects of state power. The analysis here explains the process of the young Turkish state’s assuming the role of the employer in the field of industrial production. A section on the historical background of the Bakırköy Factory narrates the story of this original Ottoman enterprise that came to be an economic space defined through the Republican ideology. In a nutshell, this chapter argues that Bakırköy Factory was designed as a national factory; i.e. a factory that would be in the service of the nation, and thus its workers were expected to be diligent and enthusiastic in doing their duty towards the homeland.

This structural analysis is followed by an investigation of the main characteristics of the context of work at Bakırköy Factory. Together with the working and living conditions of workers, the relations in production, i.e. work-place social relations, are portrayed in this part of the study. Chapter 2 provides detailed information on the factory’s policy of recruitment, systems of remuneration, the managerial control of the labour process, the reproduction of labour power, the provision of social welfare and the strategies of the workers to cope with problems. Workers’ lives outside the factory are also partially analysed here, especially pertaining to their housing conditions and their rural ties. In fact, this chapter brings together a variety of archival material in order to reconstruct the working and living conditions of
Bakırköy workers and engages in a dialogue with assumptions on state workers of the early Republican period.

Chapter 3 takes an even closer step into the world of Bakırköy workers as I analyse the changes in their self-understanding and perceptions against the labour control regime imposed upon them. My analysis is based on a chronological study of workers’ petitions; that is, written words left by workers illustrating their self-definitions and perceptions both at moments of struggle and adaptation to the factory discipline. In a way, petitions function as an entry point to an understanding of the struggles at the point of production. They illustrate the formation and reformation of identities, the perceptions and strategies of both workers and their supervisors. The analysis of the petitions is also useful in terms of understanding the changes brought about by increasing state regulations of the labour process and the labour-capital relations by means of revealing the practices of managerial discipline, worker-foremen relations and the mechanism of workers’ representatives. Five aspects of these documents are analysed, namely timing, frequency, addressee, content and vocabulary. The analysis focuses on the linguistic aspects of the workers’ presentation of their demands and complaints. On the whole, the analysis shows that workers’ self-perceptions and the representations of that self-perception underwent a dramatic change in the early Republican period. In connection with the socio-political changes in the wider context, workers gradually developed a vocabulary that allowed them to formulate their demands more effectively. This indicates the slow but steady development of a working-class consciousness among Bakırköy workers.

This dissertation presents a renewed understanding of the Turkish labour movement in the early Republican period in two regards. The first distinguishing feature is the emphasis on the individual workers’ experiences. In Chapter 4, I mainly follow the politicisation processes of two weavers from Bakırköy. These two weavers represent two different alternatives to the RPP-steered trade unionism. In terms of reconstructing their experiences on the shop floor, in the trade union meetings and in the arena of formal politics to an extent, I aim to illustrate the changes in their mentality pertaining to their self-perceptions, political visions and ideas of the labour movement. I also analyse the horizontal relations among workers through their interaction on the shop floor as well as at trade union meetings. The difference in how their stories end shows us the limits of dissidence accepted by the dominant ideology.

A second aspect that distinguishes my analysis of the labour movement of the late 1940s from other studies is the attention I pay to its discursive constructions. My aim is to examine the discursive as well as the legislative interventions into the construction of
working-class subjectivity. I argue that the discursive fields are active sites of struggle that produce the hegemonic meanings of political categories and draw the limits of political legitimacy. These are not only the places where self-perceptions and representations are shaped in this field; it is also here that these perceptions and representations exercise their constitutive power. Thus, different from other studies that attribute the process of national identification as a natural by-product of modernisation, I approach it as a process that requires explanation. I address the ways in which the nationalist discourse was internalised, modified and at times used to further workers’ rights as well as the ways in which workers contributed to the reproduction of the nationalist discourse. Since, as a state factory, Bakırköy Factory is a site where the Turkish state faces the Turkish citizen in an employer-employee relationship, the situation of Bakırköy workers perfectly exemplifies the fluid boundary between class and citizenship, and illustrates how permeable the two discourses are. The emphasis I put on this fluidity in my analysis of the trade union movement brings this study closer to a cultural study of nationalism and nation-formation from a working-class perspective.

To recapitulate, there are two analytical axes to this dissertation: the intertwining of nationalisation and proletarianisation on one side, and the relationship between the process of production (broadly defined) and the emergence of a worker as a form of subjectivity in the context of a national factory. In a way, then, this study starts from where labour historians have stopped; it deconstructs their conclusions in order to view the suppressed experiences, alternative voices and political visions of the state workers of the early Republican period. It connects a qualitative analysis of Bakırköy workers’ objective living and working conditions to the subjective structuring of their perceptions and representations. I attend to the changes in meanings and structures as inter-constitutive factors by means of using textual as well as quantitative evidence. For this purpose, a solid historical materialist analysis is combined with a discursive analysis to understand the interrelations between the dynamics of the shop floor and the development of working-class consciousness amongst those workers.