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Landsmann Solidarity among Turkish Citizens

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Abstract

Compatriotship, favoring one's townspeople (Landsmann), is a special kind of nepotism prevalent in Turkish society. People from the same geographical region do come together and enjoy solidarity when they meet one another elsewhere. The idea of belonging carries strong burdens of responsibility along with it. The concept is of feudal nature and is loosening with modernization. Interestingly, compatriotship does not necessarily include favoring his own ethnicity. It also cuts through social classes, as well.

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1. Introduction

The idea of compatriotship represents mutual favoritism of people coming from the same town. An exact equivalent of the original Turkish word with all the same connotations "hemsehri" does not exist in English (1), the word having a strong cultural tone. (The equivalent word in French, "compatriote" is not much better, while the German word "Landsmann" approximates the original Turkish word much better).

2. Reminiscence of Former Times

Favoring of countrymen/compatriots in an organization or in any competitive environment where interests conflict, is a form of nepotism commonly seen in Turkey. Networks of some unsophisticated professions (2) (for

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which little if any expertise knowledge is required, like concierges in apartment buildings in a certain district of a big city etc.) are known to be in the monopoly of men from a certain province.

Indeed, borrowing the words of Altan (September 25, 1998), it is obvious like a plate that the most striking trait of Turks is their being professionless people.

The practice of favoring one's townsmen obviously stems from feudal vestiges and fits more into a *gemeinschaft* than a *gesellschaft* (employing the terms of Tonnies). As a society evolves and departs from primitive ways, all kinds of favoritism automatically diminish.

But, in a sense, the modern society can be more ruthless to many people, especially to those who are culturally deprived and short of talents. Here, some controversy and philosophizing get into the play!

Dr. Tugrul Tanyol in one his chats once said that feudalism is more merciful than capitalism. It is true. After all, a lord must take care of his sick serf; a landowner (agha) must think of his sharecropper who gets crippled. (In Yashar Kemal's novel *The Lords of Akcasaz*, Dervis Bey entices one of his men, Mahmud, to murder for his own cause, his own feud with another landowner. However, does not he bring up Mahmud's son Yusuf, as compensation?). But that is not the matter. The point is that in order to modernize, the feudal structure must come to a halt. As Abdullah Cevdet realized it a century ago, 'there is just one western civilization and there is no other way than accepting this civilization with its thorns and roses!' (Caya, 1996: 30).

In fact, while Durkheim welcomes the modern society, Tonnies does miss the community: "In contradiction to *Gesellschaft*, the synonym for modern society's faceless association, *Gemeinschaft* refers to the small scale communities that predated industrialization. Social life then, Tonnies contends, was simple and stable. Relationships were primary and face to face. Values were stable, norms freely shared, standards respected, and deviance rare. The impact of civil society upon social life was pacific and voluntaristic; [whereas in chaotic *Gesellschaft*] relationships now were specific and formal, interests typically antagonistic, roles ill-defined and norms uncertain and incessantly subject to drastic change...Welcomed by Durkheim as promoting diversity, interaction and the advancement of talent (Durkheim 1955; orig 1893), Tonnies and the classical communitarians perceive the impact of change as a social disaster" (Newman and De Zoysa, 1997: 624).

Though diminishing in strength with time, the concept of compatriotship is still fairly strong for Turks.

Rural people in Turkey are generally cautious towards all strangers. As Bisbee (1951: 170) points out, "the typical attitude in the U.S.A. is, 'trust a person until he proves himself untrustworthy'; in Turkey, as in most Eastern or very old countries, it usually is, 'distrust a person until he proves himself trustworthy'".

"The group can be a family, a school classroom, a close circle of friends, or a *memleket* (the native community □ one's own village, province, or county). Each individual's *memleket* expands as far as he can trustfully identify himself with others "(Bisbee, 1951: 170).

Although it is very inconvenient for a man to go to the army service after he gets married, for the same reason, many rural youths (3) get married before the service like the youths of the Central Anatolian village of Demirciler near Kaman: "It was considered to be very unwise for young men to go into the service without being married first, because they might go running with loose women in the cities near the Army camps [which is not likely for a private to achieve even if he does have such intentions], or perhaps, even worse, they might marry someone from outside the village" (Bisbee, 1951: 42).

The evaluation of a statement [in the form of a Likert-scale] asked to university students, gave the following result: 48 % chose the reply "I agree"; 25.5 % chose the reply "I don't agree"; 26.5 % chose the reply "I am undecided". [The statement was the following: "If somewhere a person stays or works with his fellow townspeople, this is generally more positive and leads to better psychological consequences than the case when one stays and works with other people]. Tezcan (1974, appendix) interprets the result of his own research himself: As it can be seen here, those who agree with the given statement, which expresses the value of compatriotship, are in the majority; we can thus say that compatriotship value is in high esteem among students, also.

3. Affiliation Goes with Responsibility

The sense of belonging to a group invariably goes with a sense of shared responsibility. Indeed, it is known that violent acts are mostly directed to one's own close circle rather than total strangers. My own university memories second the above judgement also as an interesting case history:

In the spring of 1976 one evening two students at Bosphorous University fought with each other. (Ironically they were both from the same county of the province of Amasya. One was an undergraduate senior, the other a master student. Both were from humble socio-economical backgrounds. Here, we can see close interaction leading to a conflict very much like a family quarrel. At that time there was a student boycott and nerves were tense on the campus).

A group of other boarding students witnessed the fight. An athletic undergraduate from the city of İzmir sympathized with the post-graduate (who was of smaller stature and generally better liked than the other, his opponent) and intervened, taking on the role of a hero. Then the senior “partner” of the fight left his opponent and turned his attention to the new-comer, this time pulling out his pocket-knife beside his own fists! The athletic boy, upon the sight of the knife retreated and escaped. In the following uproar in the canteen, the İzmir-boy collected his own group of close friends and started a discussion about a collective retaliation of some sort.

“The evil man” had to be subdued! Then another senior (the son of a physician and thereby from a higher socio-cultural milieu than the two fighters) from Giresun, a Black Sea coastal city, approached the İzmir-boy and gently but firmly and advised him to forget the incident. He pointed out that the pursued student was from the Black Sea in a sense (Amasya, though not a really coastal city, was still in the vicinity and the Giresun-boy felt himself hit home!) and so he could not tolerate his persecution.

This was a very striking event for me as an observer. The cultural climate of the Bosphorous campus was quite different from the rest of Turkey. It was an “ivory tower” with its own norms and value judgements. There, being a hick (hanzo) was the worst stigma for a student. Especially students coming from provinces were constantly preoccupied with such ideas and were always over-anxious to disprove their possibly alleged hickishness! Still, there was the idea of compatriotship, proving its impact! Feudal values (4) can be stronger than they seem and this even in unexpected environments.

Obviously the responsibility (5) and solidarity feelings go hand in hand when uniting compatriots while any display of individuality accordingly diminishes tremendously. He who enjoys the favor and benefits of his compatriot-group must always be ready to pay for a related sanction, in case his behavior is not approved by compatriots.

As another case history, I vividly remember a scholarship student from Gaziantep at Robert College Lycee Prep class. The notables of the city considered him as a representative in İstanbul and “submerged” him with gifts of all kinds (clothing, laundry, stationary and an expensive bed-couch) on his departure. They praised his achievement and urged his success. I personally envied his situation at first glance, as another scholarship student from a western region. But I later saw that he was coping with crushing feelings of gratitude.

The poor boy was really subject to considerable sociological pressure, at least as he conceived it. On one occasion when he took a low grade, he could not help saying: “What answer shall I give to my benefactors at home, who had been so generous, so kind to me? I am thankful to those people and I shouldn’t disappoint them! What shall I say to the ‘owners’ of all those good things? I really didn’t deserve all those gifts”.

He sometimes went without the free food supplied to full scholarship students. He did this as a means of self-punishment or some sort of mortification. Some of his friends were even teasing him, repeating his constant rhetoric “I don’t deserve this and I don’t deserve that”.

4. Being “Ostracised” is Horrible!

In some extraordinary circumstances, let alone the common city, the common country means a lot. Then the compatriotship concept expands to “circumscribe” one’s country. While on a training course in Texas, we a few Turkish trainers, always kept an eye on one another. Everybody helped one another but also, everybody corrected one another’s mistakes and misbehavior and urged good manners to one another. Each felt himself somehow responsible for the other, almost like in a family. The feeling of identification with the group was fairly strong. One could boast with the academic success of another to the outsiders.

In such closely-knit groups, probably the biggest sanction is being “ostracized” from the in-group. The feeling of exclusion, the idea of being “unwanted” has a very strong negative effect on the so-called “social animal” indeed. Case history:

While in Texas for the above-mentioned course, some of the trainers from various countries had an official trip to Houston (We were stationed at San Antonio). Our bus had been hired by the administration and our hotel fees had also been paid by the administration in advance. But single rooms were either not available at the chosen hotel or else they were too much of a luxury to be enjoyed. Only double rooms had been booked. While approaching Houston, our tour-guide, an authoritarian lady, explained that now it was time to determine the roommates. She took the alphabetical list of participants and began reading aloud the names one by one. When a name was read aloud, the person's would-be roommate went to the front seat and submitted the identification card of that very person. So those two were to share the same room (The female trainers had their own two-by-two combinations).

If the name of a person was called out and nobody brought his identification card, then a laughter broke out in the bus. There was a lonely, unwanted individual! The owner of such few names were really embarrassed as they became the laughing stock of the bus. The pairings formed, as expected, mostly on the basis of nationality. But, sometimes one nationality was represented by an odd number of trainers (like, for instance, one Spaniard, three Egyptians, five Algerians etc.). Then one was excluded. Later, the excluded ones were re-arranged into the remaining double rooms by a small lottery (and for that matter on a compulsory basis).

In Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs, from lowest to highest, we see physiological needs (hunger, sex, thirst), safety needs (absence of bodily threat), social needs (affection, friendship, affiliation), esteem needs (self-respect and respect from others) and finally self-actualization (becoming all that one chooses and is capable of becoming) (Maslow, 1979: 139).

Compatriotship makes up for the third and partly the fourth need mentioned above, in certain environments. Sometimes an interesting price one pays for affiliation is a necessary tolerance of being teased by one's associates. Over-proud individuals therefore have difficulty in establishing social attachments, including acceptance into compatriotship circles. This is because sometimes the closeness of the in-group members manifest itself by resorting to ritual insults (employing swearing words as a form of address and greeting like in the following typical dialogue: — "How're you doing, you son of a bitch? Haven't seen you for ages!" — "I'm O.K. bastard! What about you?" etc.).

5. Mutual Benefits

Since vested interest is at the basis of compatriotship, when a more immediate vested interest is at stake, compatriotship may automatically "dissolve"! This does happen when two compatriotes find themselves in open rivalry. We can clearly see this in the following case histories:

While a boarding student at Bosphorous University (1975), a student from another university once approached me on the terrace and asked if I knew A. I said "sure I know; if you just sit in the canteen for a few minutes, I'll go call him for you". He gave his name and said: "I wonder if you are a country-boy, because you are as humanistic as any villager!" This was the first sign of his political views. I went to the dormitories and notified A. (He was from Antalya and had rightist political views). A. Made an unhappy grimace and said: "That communist is supposed to be my compatriote and my former classmate from junior highschool! So, here he is again, bothering me!"

University student A. was from Adana. He was a surveillant at a state boarding school in Eskişehir in (1977) and had rightist political views. His close friend N., another university student and a surveillant at the same school, once told about him the following story: Last year A. got badly beaten by a group of fierce communists and whom do you think was their leader? A student who comes from the same neighborhood with A. from Adana! My former boyhood friend from Manisa became a leading socialist leader in İstanbul, too. A strange world it is, if you come to think of it!

Professor Belli; my former "boss" at Cukurova Faculty of Medicine, Legal Medicine Chair in 1981; had been a specializing trainer of psychiatry under the supervision of late professor Adasal in Ankara. He once narrated the following story about Adasal, who had been an immigrant from the island of Crete. Belli vividly imitated the Cretian accent, adding extra flavor to his narration:

Adasal had a rival professor in the Chair of Microbiology, another immigrant from Crete. They disliked each other. The microbiologist talked about him likewise: "When Rasim was a child, he looked like an abnormal, maniac boy! Indeed, he grew up to become a lunatic-doctor". Adasal used to retaliate by the following information: "When

that man was a boy, he was always filthy and snotty and he used to play with horse-shit in the streets. Now that he is a adult, he is still stirring shit in Microbiology!”

A government official, E., once talked about his boyhood friend, with whom he had went to Ankara to take the entrance examination of a boarding school. His friend then flunked the exam. But years later, he became a rich business man. He invited E. to his domicile only once, just to make an ostentatious show of his wealth. E. commented: The bastard even kept wild foxes in his garden in a cage!.

Vice versa; vested interests escalate feelings of compatriotship where they are normally of little and no importance (like in the case of districts of İstanbul):

[Yesterday we experienced a good example of solidarity in İstanbul]. The third suspension bridge over the Bosphorous, which [some milieu] want to build by force, hit against the compatriotship-solidarity! It was snowing in İstanbul yesterday. But in spite of the snow, people did gather in Arnavutkoy to protest against the construction of the third bridge. Thousands of people kept coming there, all day long. It was like a fair/exhibition of solidarity of the district of Arnavutkoy! (Gogush 1999).

6. Landsmanns Cooperate Readily

Besides, the general education level of the population in the country is known to be about five years. So, the average citizen is hardly a primary school graduate (Nevertheless, the common sense and the practical mind of the average Turkish citizen, including the peasants, is remarkable. Nowadays the Turkish voters come to prove this fact by using their votes in a very unpredictable manner, merely making much of this civil right as a message-delivering or penalizing or rewarding instrument in political area.).

When men come together, common topics uniting them are not likely to be philosophical debates or professional discussions. The simplest, the most easy-to-find common denominator almost invariably is common geographical origins. Everybody has a home-town anyhow. People search benefits in associating with familiar people, rather than strangers.

People are more honest towards familiar people. Such a person may pass the good or the bad word on to others. Many bullies (kulhanbey) are known to behave themselves in their own neighborhoods (mahalle) and display their toughness, playboy ways and other vice elsewhere. Indeed, Social Psychology experiments verify that in anonymous conditions helping behavior (altruism) diminishes.

When all those social factors combine, compatriot-feelings are amplified in any new, uncertain or stressful environment.

The first social associations and gatherings tend to be on this basis in a new newly constructed neighborhood, in a hospital among patients, in military service among conscripts, in any business dealing etc.

For people on an equal footing, the concept of compatriotship has many advantages. But a person in a position of power may abuse it, distributing benefices unjustly. Sheltering behind compatriotship, one might even get far with a government official (6).

Many administrators tend to favor compatriote-subordinates openly. They indulge in this practice without even questioning its ethical rightness. They simply seem to take it for granted that such a behavior is socially accepted, proper and appropriate. Here, a very interesting point is that the concept of compatriotship, as a common denominator, may even unify different social layers strongly! It proves to be stronger than class consciousness and educational gaps.

7. The Old and New Ways Compete

It is true that Turkey has a young population and the country is in rapid change. Urbanization rate is high. While many rural values are carried away to cities (resembling them to large villages rather than actual cities), urban values are also striving ahead, especially among well-educated young people.

Paradoxically, as Erkal (1978: 129) points out, one of the reasons why people leave the rural areas and arrive in cities, is the purpose of joining the already gone compatriots! So, we can see neighborhoods of compatriots growing in big cities.

Nowadays, when questioning a young person about his hometown, it is getting more and more common to get an answer like: “I am originally from Ardahan, but we live in Ankara” or “my birth registration was in Erzurum, but don’t remember the place; I am from İzmir” or “My family is from Diyarbakır; I am an Istanbulite”. What is more important is that such replies are understood and accepted by his interlocutor, another private like him.

Until about a few decades ago such replies were not well received, at all! Angry replies were given to the owners of such statements by fellow privates, in the following manner: “What the hell does it mean that you work and live in İstanbul? So you deny being a Trabzonite? He who denies his origins is a bastard, don’t you know?” (This is an old Turkish saying: “Aslini inkar eden pichdir !”). Needless to say, on those days, enmities and fights between two privates could ensue, following such dialogues.

8. Ethnicity is Different from *Compatriotship*

Compatriotship, to rephrase once again, is a way of sheltering in a traditional value, which, especially under stressful and difficult circumstances, provides a common denominator of mutual help. The driving force is merely the prospective benefit of solidarity and solely the geographical region comes into play here.

As for ethnicity, “we may broadly define an ethnic group or grouping as a set of individuals who conceive of themselves as being alike by virtue of their common ancestry, real or fictitious, or who are so regarded by others” (Phillips 1969: 195).

Compatriotship, in its essence, does not mean a favoritism or nepotism regarding one’s ethnicity alone. The concept may, of course, be correlated with or go hand in hand with ethnicity in some or even most cases. However, the two concepts are entirely distinct and are not to be confused. As a matter of fact, just on the contrary, the value of compatriotship may on occasion reconcile different ethnical groups who would normally shun one another! For instance, a patient from Bursa, may find another fellow patient in his ward in an İstanbul hospital. But that chap might be from the “gypsy” (7) neighborhood (which is actually pretty large in Bursa). Both being from the same “toprak” (landpiece, earthpiece), the two are supposed to cling together.

Very probably this will happen. Not only this is expected from them by the entire ward but also they will see each other back at home and they know this. It will not be convenient for them to avoid each other in their common hometown for the rest of their lives. The first patient may have ethnical prejudices or he may come from a prejudiced family.

But, he can always explain it to his own family. Though he normally may not encounter with people from that particular neighborhood, his friend-in-distress, whom he met in the hospital would be different. Each has natural claims over the other. In this particular case, “the soil” outweighs ethnicity tremendously.

The above example, in likewise manner, may be extrapolated to comprise other similar situation (combinations like “Kurd and Turk”, Sunnite and Alewite, Moslem and non-Muslim etc.).

As a matter of fact, the above example is probably the most extreme one regarding ethnical matters since “gypsies” are probably universally the most despised ethnical people (this appears to be an unfortunate fact in the name of humanity) (8). For the other “combinations”, the merging can only be easier!

9. Conclusive Remark

Compatriotship continues to be a very important traditional value in Turkish society for many reasons, despite some weakening tendencies along with rapid changes in the direction of urbanization, higher education and higher rate of professionalism.

Notes

1) In Turkish there are also many words about kinship whose English equivalents are nonexistent. In English only the word “aunt” encompasses such female relatives, while only the word “uncle” encompasses such male relatives. In Turkish more specific words are used however: If you are a female; your “gorumce” is the sister of your husband; your “elti” is the wife of your husband’s brother. If you are a male; your “baldız” is the sister of your wife; your “bacanak” is the husband of your sister-in-law. Whatever your gender is; the wife of your brother is your

“yenge”; the husband of your sister is your “eniste”; your mother’s sister is your “teyze”; your father’s sister is your “hala”; your mother’s brother is your “dayı”; your father’s brother is your “amca” etc. S.C.

2) I remember an article from late 1970s in the magazine U.S. News and World Report whose title was “Police: Under Fire, Firing Back”. There it was written that in certain cities in America for many years certain Italian or Irish groups traditionally kept the local police (in this case a pretty sophisticated profession) in their hands and through their knowledge of bureaucracy prevented outsiders from entering into the force. S.C.

3) The region of Thrace is the only real exception to the rule, the socio-cultural constitution or structure there being different (much more westernized). S.C.

4) When I entered the Lycee division of Robert college, I became friends with another scholarship student coming from a southern province. His father was a farmer, wearing the typical peasant-cap (peaked hat). A week later the father returned to take his son from school. When I inquired into the reason why, my friend kept silent while his father only said that it was a necessity. Later my grandmother, a wise elderly woman, inferred that a family feud was probably in question and this boy was destined to take the revenge, his young age granting a much more mitigated penalty. S.C.

5) In 1974 Bosphorous University Folklore Club went to the eastern city of Malatya, to perform folk dances. While in the city stadium a young man molested one of our girls and the group came to the verge of a fight with this man and his friends. One of the students was from the city X himself. He felt very much ashamed. He shouted to the aggressors: “A university girl does not mean a prostitute; it is high time you learned this!” (Some years later a university would be established there). Then he returned to his university group and said that mischief-maker was not from the city but he lived on the bread of the city (a professional football-player there). This fact was a cause of some relief for him and alleviated his embarrassed situation. S.C.

6) Here is an interesting case history: In 1979 three of my former students from an Anatolian lycee were engineering freshmen in Middle East Technical University. One day I ran into them in Ankara and we talked about this and that. Those were restless times just before the September 12 coup. My former students were studious intellectuals having nothing to do with politics. But the gendarmes used to make frequent busts to the dormitories and search the boarding students). So, they also talked about the latest gendarme-search. They on one occasion related that the gendarmerie soldiers had been very anxious to find some compatriotes among the students. They had asked each student where he came from. While the formal search had been going on, an informal game of determining the number of compatriotes had also been kept up. If a certain soldier had had more compatriotes (or even just one while others had found none) he had gloated over his victory, his superiority! Determining compatriotes had been the most enjoyable aspect of their task there. My former students were relating this somewhat sardonically, but the funny thing is that the three of them were compatriots (as well as friends), all from Eskisehir, and I found them all together strolling through the Boulevard of Tunalı Hilmi! S.C.

7) In Turkish a euphemistic version of the word “gypsy” is “Roman”, whose equivalent is absent in English. (It shouldn’t be confused with the Balkan state Rumania or the ancient Romans in Italy). In October 1998 the Ministry of Education held an examination in Ankara in order to choose qualified music and painting teachers for the newly established Fine Arts Anatolian Lycees (Anadolu Sanat Liseleri), which are few in number.

My brother, a painting teacher, came from Edirne to take this exam and I, living in Ankara, went to see him and boost his morale just before the exam. A talented music teacher was also there. The husband of a female teacher, during the conversation in the canteen, asked this music teacher (very bluntly) if he were a gypsy. The music teacher gave the following reply: “If you ask me such a thing in such a manner, then I take this canteen table and smash it on your head! You could have asked me if I had anything to do with the Romani citizens. That would have been different”. S.C.

8) One reason why “gypsies” are held in contempt could be their alleged proneness to theft (though a statistical comparison of the percentage of thieves in a gypsy population with the percentage of thieves in the larger society is not available). A saying stipulates that the brave “gypsy” lad, while enumerating his superior traits, mentions his ability to steal things (“Merdi Kıpti, secaat arzederken sirkatin soyler”).

One old superstition says that a man who sexually unites with a “gypsy” woman is doomed to stay spiritually unclean (*cunup*) unless he makes the ritual ablution (*gusul*) until a pair of bricks melt down under his feet. The alleged historical propensity of the “gypsy” men for the office of the executioner (*) may have a lot to do with this stigma. But, this, too, can be a chicken-and-egg problem, with the contemptuous/degrading attitude of the larger society urging the “gypsy” man to get even with that society, through a socially condemned but officially upheld act upon a scapegoat of that very same society! Who knows?

It can be said that the “gypsies” are better off in Turkey than in most other modern countries, as far as acceptance by the larger society goes. Many “gypsy” men and women are celebrities in Turkey in music and show business. s.c.

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* The authorities [from the Ministry of Justice] revealed that the last execution in Turkey was carried out by a gypsy in Izmir in 1984 (*Hurriyet Newspaper* June 30, 1999: p.2). The capital punishment, though still in code, was not applied for a long time. Eventually it got eliminated from written code, as well.

Even the famous poet *Nazım Hikmet* says the following in one of his works: “Be assured my beloved / If the spider-like hairy hand / of a miserable gypsy / were to pass / the knot around his neck / those who expect to see fear in his blue eyes / will only look in vain / at Nazım !” (“*Emin ol ki sevgili / zavalli bir çingenenin / killi, siyah bir orumcege benzeyen eli / gechirecekse eger / ipi bogazına / mavi gözlerinde korkuyu gormek için / boshuna bakacaklar / Nazım’a*”).