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Interview with Neclâ Aytür

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Professor Doctor Neclâ Aytür is the head of the Department of American Culture and Literature at Ankara University. She is a senior scholar in the field of American culture and literature, and has contributed to the education of many Americanists in Turkey. She was also the first president, as well as one of the founders, of the American Studies Association of Turkey. The following interview took place at the Reflat Aktan Lounge of the Turkish-American Association, Ankara, on November 27, 1995.

How did the first American Language and Literature departments emerge in Turkey? Who organized and administered the first attempts? How were the first American Language and Literature courses accommodated into existing departmental systems in the Faculties? Were they departments or individual courses?

In 1953-1954, Mr. Sidney Burks gave the first American Literature lectures in the English Literature and Language Chair (Note 1) at Ankara University. He was a young American whose major field was English literature; he worked for USIS. He may have been the cultural attaché or the director of courses. He and his wife stayed in Ankara for two years.

The first Fulbright scholars began to be posted in Turkey in the mid-fifties, during the Cold War and Marshall Aid years. A Fulbright scholar was appointed to teach American literature in the English Department at Ankara University in 1954. Robert Hamilton Ball was the author of a book entitled *Elizabethan Drama*. He and his wife stayed in Ankara for two years. It was Prof. Ball who initiated the foundation of an American literature chair (Note 2) at Ankara University.

The administrative composition of Turkish universities and the foundation of an American literature chair: (Note 3)

Under the University Act current in 1957, Turkish universities (three, I think, in number then) were divided into Faculties and those into chairs. (Note 4) Students

enrolled in chairs (Note 5) and graduated from them. In 1957, the head of the English Chair (Note 6) was Prof. Hamit Dereli. He was senior by a few years to the other Turkish professor, İrfan Şahinbaş, and since it was customary to elect the senior professor to the chairmanship each time his term was up, it appeared that he was going to be the chairman until his retirement. That was probably why, when an American literature chair (Note 7) was founded, Prof. Şahinbaş was elected as its head, to remain there until his retirement in 1982. He was a drama and Shakespeare man. American literature courses were taught by American scholars until 1965.

Fulbright Scholars:

American scholars posted at Ankara University had everything to do with the awakening of an interest in American literature among the faculty and the students. (Some of their names were Ray B. West, author of *The Short Story in America*; Alexander C. Kern, co-editor of *The American Renaissance*, Kemp Malone, a well-known linguist; and Warren S. Walker, a Cooper specialist and a folklorist who later on founded the Archive of Turkish Folklore at Texas Tech University. The last Fulbright scholar in this group was E. M. Socola, the first specialist in American Studies, who received his Ph.D. under Robert E. Spiller at Pennsylvania State University.)

Beginning in 1966 and lasting about fifteen years, there was a halt in the flow of Fulbright scholars to Ankara University. Prof. Şahinbaş, who was the head of the Fulbright Commission in Turkey, thought that, since there was a Turkish specialist in the field, Fulbright scholars should go where they were more needed. And so they did, namely to Hacettepe University, which was in the process of being founded.

The Turkish specialist he was talking about was myself, but I must say I had nothing to do with the foundation of the American Literature Chair. (Note 8) I was not even there at the time. I had been away on a scholarship at Minnesota University, doing research for a Ph.D. dissertation (on Alexander Pope) in the English Department. I received my degree in English from Ankara University. When Prof. Şahinbaş asked me to transfer to the newly founded American Chair, (Note 9) I was glad to do so. For at Minnesota I had taken some graduate courses in American literature and been deeply impressed by its vitality.

An anecdote I've been telling all these years illustrates the distance covered by American Studies since then. I went to Prof. Dereli's office to ask his permission, so to speak, to change my field from English literature to American. Hamit Bey, who was a classicist and a Shakespeare scholar, lifted his glasses to his forehead and asked, "Is there such a field?" He wasn't joking.

I then went back to the States to learn more about American literature and to do research for my Associate Professorship thesis. This time I was working on an

American author, and in the American Studies Department at Yale, under Norman Holmes Pearson, the editor of the *Oxford Anthology of American Poetry* and one of the initiators of American Studies in the US. Later I spent a year in New Orleans, teaching American literature at Louisiana State University.

*The foundations of American Literature and Language Chairs*¹⁰ (Note 10) at Ankara, İstanbul, and Hacettepe Universities follow a similar pattern:

From 1957 onwards, American literature was offered at Ankara University in a joint program with English language and literature. It must have been in the early sixties, when university entrance exams were centralized, that a limited number of students began to be admitted into the American Literature Chair. (Note 11) A graduate program in American literature was started in 1966. Belma Ötüş (later Baskett), who had an M.A. from Berkeley, received the first Ph.D. degree in American literature in 1968 on the strength of her dissertation, "The Concept of Death in Ernest Hemingway's Novels."

The 1971 undergraduate manual of Ankara University records two different Chairs, (Note 12) American and English, on an equal footing within a Department of English Language and Literature. A similar structure was adopted by different universities as they started their American literature programs.

In 1975 or so (1978 at Hacettepe) the English departments were restructured and the two chairs, (Note 13) American Literature and English Language and Literature, were made independent of each other. This arrangement was kept at the three universities until 1982, when the new University Act created Departments of Western Languages and Literatures, American literature included in these, under the heading of American Language and Literature *Anabilim Dalı*. (Note 14)

This lasted until 1988, when the name was changed to American Culture and Literature *Anabilim Dalı*. This last change of name had a different impact than the others, for it called for a totally new curriculum and methodology, especially if it meant what everybody thought it meant: American Studies. In short, we were caught unprepared.

How did American Studies begin and develop in the United States? Are American Studies departments in the United States different from departments of English?

Debates concerning the definition, objectives, content and methodology of American Studies as an independent discipline had been heated and long in the United States. The general objective was, I suppose, to create sophistication about culture. In the fifties, whether a multidisciplinary or an interdisciplinary approach should be adopted was the main concern. In these early years, inspired by the

melting-pot concept, such comprehensive questions as "What is the American character like?" were addressed. In the sixties, comparatively more specific issues such as the black experience and black anthropology were considered important. In the seventies, the melting-pot idea was all but discarded; precedence was given to regional studies and folklore, in the light of slogans such as "Make the world safe for diversity." In the eighties, the idea that no unified culture exists led to the study of social history, demography, minority groups and mass culture. Today, multi and interdisciplinary approaches are used together. The American Studies departments offer some of the courses themselves, and send students to different departments for others.

Relations between English departments and American Studies departments in the United States:

Following the European tradition, English departments in the US had adopted a historical approach to literature. Under the impact of the New Criticism, this approach later fell into contempt. Textual analysis became the preferred method of the day. Where and when American Studies departments were founded, English departments continued to teach American poetry and novels as works of art, but with an added historical consciousness. Historical consciousness and historicism are, of course, not the same. An American Studies that embraces historicism sees literature as a cultural product and part of the material to be analyzed by the historian. From this angle, the concept of good and bad art undergoes a change, and so does the evaluation of the literary canon. Dime novels are valuable historical material, perhaps the more so because they represent the preferences of a greater part of the population than the readers of, say, Hawthorne and James.

Consequently, in the United States, literary criticism, which is the business of the English departments, and American Studies are seen as different disciplines. Both literary criticism and American Studies can degenerate into insignificance or flourish, depending on whose hands they are in. Critical theory in America has been, in recent years, especially vigorous, leading to new insights, as well as competing and collaborating with critical theory in France. American Studies has, too, in the hands of capable researchers, produced vitally important work in many fields of American civilization including literature.

As the American Culture and Literature departments were being established in Turkey, was there a preliminary planning stage? Were objectives, methodology, and logistics discussed?

In Turkey, in my own experience of studying and teaching English and American literature, the study of literary history was never dominant, simply because the study of a literature in a foreign language necessarily involves a great deal of *explication de texte*. Moreover, it was thought to be preferable to bring students

into contact with original works because, unlike American students, Turkish students had not read any of the basic books. Formalism and New Criticism not only brought additional incentive to concentrate on novels and poems as discrete art objects, but also introduced additional methods of understanding and interpreting literature, adding to its enjoyment. American Studies, with its emphasis on historicism, was, therefore, more of a novelty than it was in the United States. Through their authors, literary works are linked, of course, to the time and place in which they are produced; and they cannot be fully understood or appreciated without a consideration of these. There was, therefore, a definite gain brought by American Studies, a fresh air and a wider angle, opening up whole new horizons for the enjoyment of literature.

However, as I said before, the American Literature departments at Ankara, İstanbul and Hacettepe Universities were caught unprepared when they suddenly became American Culture and Literature departments. In Turkey, where American Studies was to be studied as a foreign culture, the issues valid for the United States had to be reconsidered. Prior to the establishment of these departments, there had been no consultation among specialists or at YÖK. (Note 15) Practical questions such as the following called for discussion: Was "American Culture and Literature" the same as American Studies? If so, was the study of literature as art being discarded altogether as a discipline, to be replaced by American Studies? Since instruction in Turkey in the departments of history, sociology, folklore and others was not geared to the United States, students could not be sent to those departments. What then was to be done about training qualified staff to teach American history, American sociology, American folklore? Which disciplines were to be included in American Culture and Literature departments? The same as American Studies? Which approach was more suitable to the Turkish university system? What were the possibilities of employment for graduates?

Were these issues resolved ; were these questions answered at any point?

Many of these questions have not been discussed yet, let alone answered. The American literature departments had included some cultural and historical material before they became "American Studies" departments. The early student manuals of Ankara University (1971, 1978 and 1981) record such courses as The Sources of American Literature, American English, American History, and History of American Culture. These courses, however, could not be actually offered then, for lack of qualified teaching staff. Now they can be taught, in a general way. However, there is a catch: to study American civilization at an advanced level and yet take over the ideas of American scholars while not being able to see the subject from a Turkish vantage point will not be very useful for Turkey. Also, more narrowly specialized topics, such as period courses in particular regions, or theme courses on popular architecture or demographic movements, dealt with at American universities, are not perhaps very useful and should better be avoided in Turkey. To

address larger issues like the "American experience" and the "historical approach to culture" would be more useful. Above all, these things need to be discussed among Turkish scholars of American Studies.

What about the debate between literary criticism and American Studies? Are they rivals or collaborators? Are literature courses going out of style?

What the American experience clearly shows is that literary criticism and American Studies, treated as different disciplines, gain a great deal from each other. But when one of them supersedes or eliminates the other, confusion begins. Gain turns into loss. There is this danger in Turkey, if we take American Culture and Literature to mean simply American Studies, that is, the study of American civilization. On the other hand, if we see the American Culture and Literature Department as combining the two disciplines, literary criticism and the study of American civilization, and grant each discipline its own methodology, there is much to be gained. The American Studies researcher uses, where they are relevant, the methodologies of different disciplines, such as historical evidence, sociological statistics, folkloric field work and anthropological survey. If he or she does not use any of the existing methods of literary criticism, that is understandable and proper. On the other hand, if the literary critic approaches literature in the light of a critical theory, using a purely literary method of analysis, that should be acceptable, understandable and proper, too. A novel or a poem can also be studied and enjoyed, like a piece of music or a painting, by noticing the artist's manipulation of the laws of harmony and proportion; in other words, his craftsmanship.

So perhaps the rather inaccurate translation of the phrase "American Studies" as "American Culture and Literature" is a blessing in disguise. More material with cultural and historical content can easily be added to the existing literature departments.

Today there are several American Culture and Literature programs in Turkey. I say "programs" because some of them are *Bölüm* s (Note 16) and some of them are *Anabilim Dalı*s. I am using that word to cover both. Do they have similar curricula ?

Now, as my son told me when he was five: "I don't know everything." The information about the universities mentioned above was kindly collected by my young colleague Jülide Çelik at the recent American Studies Conference. (Note 17) The mistakes I may have made are my own and unintentional.

At Ankara University, in addition to the usual literature courses, a course, the first of its kind, is offered in American Culture. Pelin Başçı, our first holder of an

American Studies degree proper, teaches that course. There is also a graduate program offering M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in American Culture and Literature.

At Hacettepe University, in addition to the courses in literature, courses are offered in ethnicity, American art, history, culture, popular culture, and multiculturalism. There is also a graduate program offering M.A. and Ph.D. degrees.

The American Culture and Literature Department of İstanbul University offers a course in cultural history in addition to the usual literature courses. There is also a graduate program offering an M.A. degree.

Unlike the three universities above, the American Culture and Literature Department at Bilkent University started out with that name in 1987. And I suspect it inspired YÖK with the idea for changing the names of all the American Language and Literature departments. In addition to literature courses, Bilkent offers a course in ethnic literature. There is also a graduate program in history that includes American history.

The American Culture and Literature Department at Dokuz Eylül University was established in 1991-1992. Courses are offered in the following subjects : American history, foreign affairs, cinema, constitution, media and institutions, regionalism, and ethnicity.

At Ege University, the establishment of an independent American Culture and Literature department took place in 1992-1993. Courses are offered in American history, politics, international relations, art, and media as well as literature.

The American Culture and Literature Department at Bafkent University that was founded in 1995 is still at the planning stage. The courses for the first two years are designed to provide a general background in literary and cultural studies as well as a strong language component.

At Bođaziçi and Atatürk Universities, where American literature courses have been included in the curriculum of the English departments for a long time, separate departments were never created for the two disciplines. Instead, at Bođaziçi, following the practice of many American universities, and, I suppose, continuing the Robert College tradition, English and American courses were and are offered together, with English literature providing the background for American literature. (Note 18) At Atatürk University they do not offer graduate degrees in American Studies, but American subjects are included in the graduate curriculum.

Is there any formal or informal research as to careers taken up by the graduates of American Culture and Literature departments? Do we know the

most popular areas of specialization of our graduates? Which sectors do they go to after they graduate?

Curricula of American Studies departments in the United States differ with regard to the career possibilities of their students, although what these are has never been very clear. As one department head told me, American Studies majors learn how to express themselves well in writing and speaking, and they are sought after in such fields where these skills are useful. They are employed both by the industry and the government, and learn the particulars of their special jobs during a short period of in-service training. The students themselves sound more ambitious. More than one student in the United States has told me that he or she majored in American Studies in order to become a writer. "The more you know," one of them said, "the more things you have to write about."

The number of American Culture and Literature departments in Turkey, if I am not wrong, is seven. The approximate number of graduates each year should be something between 35 and 50. Statistics are lacking, but as far as I could find out, they work in exactly the same fields as the graduates of the English Language and Literature departments. Just like graduates of American Studies programs in the United States, the best students know how to express themselves well, and that is a remarkable skill in a foreign language. There is still a great deal of demand in several fields for people with advanced language skills. They are employed by universities to teach English, as well as by banks, import-export firms, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

What has been the contribution of the annual American Studies conferences to the discipline?

They started in this very building and room twenty years ago. As Fulbright scholars and scholarships were very instrumental in training the American Literature and Studies staff at Turkish universities, so were the USIS American Studies conferences instrumental in triggering interest in American Studies. Participants had an opportunity to hear American scholars addressing various aspects of American culture, and to have an exchange of ideas with them and among themselves. For the last twenty years, many aspects of American culture have been treated by American and Turkish speakers. Some of them were American dance, music, art, theater; almost every decade and movement of literature; regions such as the South and the West; sections like the small town; minority groups such as women, blacks, and Indians; the past, present, and future of the American Dream; and even America in the twenty-first century.

From 1984 to 1989, American Studies conferences were sponsored jointly by the USIS and a Turkish university. Since 1989, the American Studies Association of Turkey has been co-sponsor.

Has the American Studies Association of Turkey contributed to the development of the discipline?

Preparations for the foundation of an American Studies association began at one of the American Studies conferences at Abant, when participants were asked to indicate whether they would be interested in joining. It was found that there was a widespread interest in such an organization. Legal procedures began in 1987 and were completed in 1988. The Turkish American Association kindly loaned office space and this lovely room for the activities. During the comparatively short period of its existence, the American Studies Association has organized many activities, bringing together instructors and students from different universities in an atmosphere of friendly discussion. It has also led to the formation of smaller interest groups that meet to discuss such issues as women and Indian culture. The first issue of *JAST (Journal of American Studies of Turkey)*, a semiannual periodical in English, published by the Association, came out last spring, and the second issue is proudly exhibited on the side table today.

Which particular needs should American Studies address in the future? What would be the best or the most rational direction for American Studies education to follow? What particular message do you want to give to Americanists?

I firmly believe that area studies have a definite place in Turkish intellectual life and, therefore, at Turkish universities. Disciplines such as Middle Eastern Studies and Renaissance England existed in England and the United States before American Studies. *Türkoloji*, *Sinoloji*, *Hungaroloji*, *Balkanoloji* are accepted fields of study in Turkey. There is a need for experts in areas that are either neighbors or politically and/or economically important for Turkey. The United States as a super power is a very important fact in many aspects of Turkish life, and there is no doubt that it must be subjected to careful study and analysis. What is needed for the future is perhaps to find a better translation for "American Studies" than "American Culture and Literature." Not in order to change the name of university departments once again, but in order to create an entirely new area of study in the form of a department or an institute for the study of the American civilization in all its aspects, so that expert Americanists can become consultants in different fields of American affairs.

What can the message be but that scholars in the field should get together to discuss the definition, content, and methodology of American Studies best suited to Turkey's needs? In this way, without waiting for new University Acts prepared by people who are strangers to the field, they can begin to work for the foundation of new institutions to fulfill these needs. The meeting ground for such a purpose is ready on the premises of The American Studies Association.

I would like to thank you on behalf of the American Studies Association of Turkey and everyone present here for the effort you put in and the time you shared with us.

Editor's Notes

1 Professor Aytür has in mind the Turkish word *kürsü*. In this instance, this would be the equivalent of a department in the US.

2-3 In this instance denotes program.

4-6 In this instance denotes department.

7-13 In this instance denotes program.

14 Literally "major science branch," in effect program.

15 *Yüksek Öğretim Kurulu* is the Higher Education Council.

16 Departments.

17 Antalya, October 1995.

18 Since the interview, Boğaziçi University has started offering an undergraduate-level interdisciplinary American Studies certificate.