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We Have Met the Enemy and the Enemy is Us: An American's Early Impressions of Life, Work and Education in Modern Turkey

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I was recently invited to Istanbul by the MÜSİAD organization to speak at their workshop on vocational education [February 18-19, 2011] with an emphasis on social justice and equality. I was at the workshop for two days and in Istanbul for four-and-a-half days total. Participants in the workshop included members of the MÜSİAD organization, other business leaders, academics, school teachers and at least one senator. The appearance by the Turkish minister of education created quite a stir, with attendant local and national news media coverage and a phalanx of her followers—bureaucrats and toadies.

I was asked to write up my reflections, whatever impressions came into my head, for this journal in the hopes that we might all learn something from my experience. I must state, upon embarking on this reflective exercise, that this is only my second time in Turkey and that I do not know the language (I had the generous use of an interpreter, an intern at MÜSİAD, who, herself was finishing university in Istanbul and making application to take up post-graduate studies at a university in the UK; she has my special appreciation as, first, she had to put up with me and my eccentricities, and, second, she worked tirelessly each day of my stay and did so without being compensated by MÜSİAD). I would like to say, in my defense, that I have studied and practiced as a cultural anthropologist and, as I like to term it, an observer of the human condition. In fact, and for those readers who don't know me, I work in the area of educational leadership, employing a critical sociocultural lens, and teach qualitative research methods at the doctoral level at my university. For those who are interested, the title of my talk, a keynote address, was "Reflections on Changes in the World, on Life, Human Dignity and Social Justice: With Implications for Schooling and Work." (I will gladly make copies of my

presentation available to those who care to inquire via my email address found at the end of this essay.)

Triumphal Beginnings

Though I know there was an incredible amount of work that went into the planning and execution of this conference (my host, the secretary general of the MÜSİAD, told me that they'd been discussing this conference for about a year, but that they had worked at it intensely for the past two or three months), for me, the conference/workshop started on the first day. Many of us took a van to the MÜSİAD headquarters building in Istanbul from the hotel. The building, a modern, well-appointed edifice of some five floors, occupies a prime piece of real estate on the shores of the Golden Horn. In actuality, the conference wasn't allowed to begin until the minister of education arrived with her entourage, including a strikingly tall and lethal-looking blonde and a demure driver. The minister's car pulled up with lights flashing (no siren) and everyone seemed to jump into action. Photographers descended on her, and once someone felt enough photographs were taken, she was ushered inside. We were all told to move inside to begin the conference with what I have learned are called protocols—the long speeches by those in the top ranks of the organization (at least, not knowing the language, they seemed long to me). I imagined that each underling expelled a lot of hot air singing the praises of the next higher bureaucrat and functionary above him (for there were no other women speaking than the minister of education), until, finally, the secretary general took the stage, singing the praises of the minister of education. On and off, media types were scurrying around with cameras—both still and moving—and adjusting the positioning of their microphones on the podium.

Now, I must tell you that I have been fortunate enough to, if not meet a queen, at least see a queen; that is, to be in her presence. It happened like this: I presented a paper at another professional conference, the year's meeting of the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM), which, that year, happened to be held in Sweden. The queen of Sweden opened that conference. You know of this queen, even if you don't know her. You might recall the ABBA song *Dancing Queen*. It was written about this queen. Anyway, the queen of Sweden arrived with only one body guard, arrived on time, and with no other fanfare, and no one waited for her to arrive. Well, actually, the preamble to the conference, rather than being speechifying, was taken up

by a high school ensemble playing jazz and popular music. The queen actually looked a bit embarrassed when, as she entered the auditorium, the group of students broke into the ABBA song. After a brief introduction, she took the stage and addressed the audience in English and spoke of her vision of education for her nation and extolled the work of the educators there assembled. She had only one body guard, and, after her remarks, she took a place in the front row of the auditorium to listen to the rest of the opening lecture, an academic presentation by a well-respected Norwegian (woman) scholar. We were advised to be ready, for the queen was planning to stay after lunch and just might drop into any of our sessions, which, I understand later, she did, choosing to attend a session whose topic dealt with women in educational management. In contrast, not only did the minister of education not stay for any of the afternoon sessions (admittedly, I was disappointed she didn't stay to hear my general session remarks, for I had built myself up, steeled myself, for that occasion), she didn't stay for lunch. Her toadies and the bureaucrats who wanted to see and be seen with her, and the media as well, left after her remarks. Obviously, there was no dialogue here—the communication, if you can call it that, was entirely one-way. Perhaps ABBA's Turkish equivalent will pen a song in tribute to this minister and title it something like *The Skipping Minister*.

So, it wasn't until after lunch that I was permitted to give my remarks, as the whole program had been shifted later and later as the protocol speeches got longer and longer. If you haven't visited the MÜSİAD building, you should go just to see for yourself. The steel and glass edifice is new, only about four or five years old. We passed through metal detectors upon entering, and there were two security guards at all times. Lunch was served by a staff of white-coated young men; and other support staff—women in head scarves and men in jacket and tie—worked the sound system and did administrative duties (and host duties, I imagine). The logo of the MÜSİAD was printed on everything. I was impressed to see that even the china was imprinted with the MÜSİAD logo. One of the coffee breaks took place on the terrace on the third floor, and the view of the Golden Horn was stunning.

Other Impressions and Random Thoughts

I noticed that there was an obvious status hierarchy among the drivers who were assembled in the parking lot, waiting on their charges.

Besides the five meals served to the more than eighty-five guests and numerous support staff (one who worked the audio system told me, when I asked, that he wasn't eating then, but had to wait until everyone else was done, as he said he was third class).

During the question and answer discussion, a cameraman was filming participants as they spoke, but, it seemed to me, didn't film the sole female respondent.

The vice-minister was in attendance throughout the first day (but not the second, as neither was the secretary general of the MÜSİAD). He took exception, he said, to many of my remarks when he gave his talk to the general session. Interestingly enough, he sent one of the MÜSİAD employees to find me during a coffee break and she suggested I might want to come to take my coffee on the terrace where the vice-minister was holding court with a group of six to eight supporters, bureaucrats, and 'friends.' Again, to my surprise, when the sessions started up again, he invited me to bring my coffee into the nearby office of one of the MÜSİAD leadership, where we sipped coffee and chatted about education, his travels, and his own experiences that supported an earlier point I had made in my talk about how modern life, especially the modern work life, is eroding our privacy. We parted amicably.

Reflection: I told a Turkish colleague later, that the vice-minister's challenging me and my ideas in his speech struck me as a pissing contest, wherein two guys (usually drunk) stand side by side to urinate (piss) to see who could piss the farthest—a type of masculinity contest. It was, in a word, public posturing.

Everyone had cell phones. Some had two. People even took and made calls in the conference room, with something I hadn't seen before: People placed their hands over the microphone and over their mouths in what I took to be an attempt to mute their voice (or, so that their voice was amplified and the ambient noises masked—I'm not sure which). I don't believe people would do this in the US, take or make cell phone calls during a speech. They may mute or silence their phone, and, if they took a call, would immediately leave the room. I wonder if this is a difference in Turkish culture, one which the anthropologist Edward Hall would call a polychronic culture—people doing many things at one time, for example, talking on their mobile and eating or interacting with their immediate companions. My interpreter said that when working at the MÜSİAD offices, her colleagues would call her from their offices in the same building to help provide an English word or longer translation, and were amazed when she insisted on cutting the call to go in person to help, telling me that

translation and interpretation were best done face to face, in order to get the nuance and nonverbal cues (contextual cues) of the person seeking the translation.

To be honest, I must admit that I carried my Blackberry with me, which was marvelous: I was able to send and receive text message, emails and calls. I wondered at the technology of today that permitted me to keep in contact with (or, on the negative side, not escape) my admittedly limited obligations at home. Still, I was able to call my wife occasionally, and this helped me feel connected to her and not as far away.

Where were the women? The Saturday work group I was part of had five women present—including my interpreter, out of approximately twenty people present in the social justice working group. I don't believe anyone else found this strange. Two of the women present never spoke. My interpreter was getting incensed by the comments being made and told me so. I encouraged her to speak up, as she was at the table. At first she demurred, claiming that that was not her role there, but I persisted. She raised her hand to speak, but wasn't immediately recognized. I raised my hand and got recognized, then pointed to her. Passionately, she told me later, she asked the participants why, when discussing education, they didn't ask the students, those like her and those younger. It seemed to me that they dismissed her, even trying to talk her down, or at least talk over her (a show of lack of respect). She told me later that they said that as she worked for MÜSİAD and that they had organized the conference, why hadn't they asked students or invited them to attend? Of course, she told me, her views weren't sought or accepted among the MÜSİAD officers.

During the Saturday workshop, I disagreed, though said nothing, about the seemingly accepted view that educators—those present and educational policy makers generally—ought to ask business leaders what they wanted in the workers that they hired; the idea being that schools would do what they could to accede to the wishes of business in 'producing' workers with the required skills. Those, like me, who were more student centered, suggested that educators look at the abilities of the student to see what he or she was inclined toward and educate her or him accordingly. A great debate broke out over this. I offered this analogy: I have a daughter who has a suitor. Is it up to me to decide if she accepts him? Is it up to the suitor? Or, might I ask my daughter what she wants? As a parent, I do what I can to prepare her for life, to help and guide her and then I must release her, trusting her initiative and ability to make decisions that will complement her and her life's path or journey. So it is with students. As educators, we ought not dictate to them or proscribe their choices and

life paths. The businesses that accept them should likewise work with them, not on them, and offer them a partnership, not servitude.

We are the problem.

I and the other people seated around the table, and those throughout the MÜSİAD, continue to contribute to the oppression of others and that of ourselves, as we are complicit in this oppression. I believe that we will never approach the equality my Turkish colleagues (and others throughout the world) long for until we change ourselves—our ways of thinking and acting. Little oppressions were evident to me through the whole of my visit: status hierarchies being only one manifestation of such oppression. But I don't think these kind-hearted and well-meaning people ken this. Accepting the business, corporatist (the theme of my talk), and capitalist agenda belittles us and subjugates those who we claim to represent, those whom we would champion—the students and others with even less power and, dare I say it, position than us. How can we help others when we can't even help ourselves?

Several times during the conference I heard delegates and 'leaders' suggest that we not discuss the issues, the problems, as these were well known. Instead, these 'leaders' asked for solutions. In conspiracy with my interpreter, I strenuously but privately disagreed with this approach. Why? Because looking only or looking prematurely for a solution is a technicist fix, and a well-worn trope of industrialists and corporations. To do as they suggest means that we accept their presuppositions, that we accept their framing of the issue, the problem, even of our lived world. We must both discuss and articulate the frame and seek alternative frames within which to do our work. Later at a Nargile bar, in a deep philosophical discussion through the smoke, and in answer to a question posed by a fellow traveler, I recalled Albert Einstein's admonition that we can't solve our problems with the same thinking that created them.

We must change ourselves, we must change the thinking of those who would be our oppressors (and the oppressors of others, though they might not see it that way; which is, if you see my point, exactly the problem).

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