

Workshop

Popular Culture and Lifestyle Politics in Erdogan's 'new Turkey'

Academic Workshop, November 25-26, 2014

Time: 9:00 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Marburg

The workshop aims to critically explore and understand the ideological dimensions of contemporary power struggles in Turkey by focusing on (counter-)hegemonic lifestyle discourses as represented in contemporary popular culture and the media. Media and popular culture will be treated from a perspective of resistance and power, assuming that cultural practices are not only an effective means to initiate political resistance and change, but also a powerful tool toward establishing political and cultural hegemony. Popular culture and (social) media are seen as terrains of ideological struggle in which social norms and values are constantly being (re)negotiated and the state of democracy in Turkey is being determined. The workshop aims at bringing together doctoral and post doctoral researchers in order to discuss academic approaches towards studying the above-outlined research objectives and possibly develop a joint research project.

Since Turkey's new Islamic elites came to power, religiously sensitive themes such as alcohol, sexuality, abortion, evolutionary theory, and religious plurality (especially as far as non-Sunni interpretations of Islam are concerned) have become contentious issues in everyday politics. The question of how a person lives—or, more particularly, how a person displays his or her way of life publicly—has turned into an ideological battlefield where much demonization of the ideological “other” occurs. Different lifestyles may reflect religious and political cleavages, yet, at the same time, they function as markers of societal change and cultural pluralism.

In early 2011, Turkish then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that his government aims to raise a new “religious generation” whose pious lifestyle would then transform society for the better. In doing so, the government has taken measures to foster religious education in state schools and to prevent the young from alcohol consumption, depictions of nudity, religious criticism, evolutionary theory, or other potentially ‘harmful’ things. To (re)educate the next generation and shape their ways of life in accordance with Islamic ideologies appears to be of central concern; not least, because the younger generation has been the driving force behind last year's nationwide anti-government protests.

Last year's Gezi Park protests did (and still do) have an enormous impetus to cultural production. In the struggle for power, popular culture has been used by protestors and political leaderships alike, either as a strategy of containment or as tactics of resistance. Even more recently, after the street protests have widely come to an end, a second wave of cultural production can be observed. Numerous artists, intellectuals, and ‘non-professional,’ committed individuals discovered popular culture not only as a means to convey political messages, but also as field of ideological confrontation and a tool to challenge the government's monopoly over the interpretation of political events. Comic strips, paintings, animated films, short stories, rock songs, etc., are being used to narrate and remember political events and challenge opposing narratives. The impetus to cultural production is further being facilitated by the younger generation's access to modern media and communications systems and their capabilities to use new digital tools of cultural production.