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Friendship as a Political Concept: Kurdish Youth Politics in the 1990s

by

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In the 1990s, a new social world was built for the Kurds in Turkey. The Kurdish masses demanded recognition of their existence confronting with death. This led to a period of turmoil, both defined by the governance of death and human will to live. While the Turkish state attempted to repress the resistance by extensive violence, Kurdish lives became even more devalued as human lives. The 1990s was a period of destruction of communities, millions of Kurds lost their homes, and almost every Kurd in Turkey lost a loved one to the war. In the meantime, however, Kurdish society was deeply changed in terms of identity and belonging during the 1990s. Kurdish masses were no longer ashamed of their language, or their accent when they speak Turkish. Millions of Kurds participated to the demonstrations all over Turkey, reclaiming their distinct identity as Kurds. The period of 1990s, therefore, was as a sociological convergence point, not only in terms of being a period of extensive state violence over the Kurds, but also being a condensed moment of revolutionary self-craft of the Kurdish subjects.

The Kurds called the 1990s “the process” (*süreç*) while living in it. According to Serap Ruken Sengul (2013: 246), “the process” denoted “the time of Kurdish national revolutionary struggle.” In this sense, “the process” referred to a special time period with its own requirements stemming from the state of emergency conditions of a revolution. “The process” not only

required new forms of subjects who were ready to fight and die for the revolution, but it also entailed new forms of community building in line with a revolutionary time that is defined both by massive destruction and a reconstruction. It was a reconstruction of a sense of self for Kurdish masses as a collective unity, i.e. it was a process of becoming *the Kurdish people*. Even those who preferred to keep a distance with the national liberation struggle had to face their Kurdishness and take a position in relation to the war. For millions of Kurds “the process” also meant a reconstruction of their daily lives as a community to confront the massive state violence, which included forming large webs of mutual aid and solidarity. During “the process,” the Kurds, as a people, redefined their meanings and values in line with the revolutionary struggle. And, maybe most of all, they redefined *life* and *death* as categories belonging to the community: they confronted *death* together in order to *live* together. From this perspective, neither the call of the PKK, nor state violence could explain the full meaning of “the process.” It was a human experience of a formation of a collective political unity as opposed to their denial by the state and a piece by piece production of life under the governance of death.

“The process” was a reconfiguring of “the political” (Rancière 2001), shattering and reconstituting previous meanings, significations, and definitions and bringing new relations into being. Within “the process” new actors were formed to redefine what was called “the Kurdish question” and to confront it from their newly constituted positions, and, by the end of “the process,” the relationship between Kurdish society and the Turkish state had fundamentally changed, which enabled the very possibility of the current Kurdish movement.

“The process,” as a historically specific time period, produced its own vocabulary. The new vocabulary was constituted to frame the Kurdish struggle as the moral construction of a revolutionary self against the Turkish state. While the state was called *the T.C.*, the initials of the

Turkish Republic (*Turkiye Cumhuriyeti* in Turkish), *the guerilla* was constituted as the antithesis of *the T.C.* And *yurtsever* (the patriot) emerged as a new form of political subjectivity. *The T.C.* was a mode of knowing of the state, signifying a specific and “situational relation to the state” (Gupta 1995: 390, Navaro-Yashin 2002: 165). Calling the state with the initials of the Turkish Republic helped to identify a complex web of relations as a concrete enemy, where subjects organized themselves to confront it. *The T.C.* was an act of naming the enemy, a claim of power to set the war on a more equal basis, where both parties could have a chance to defeat each other. *The guerilla*, another notion that received a new meaning during the 1990s, represented the “outside” of the state as *the T.C.* *The guerilla* was not only a means to achieve national liberation in the future, but it was an already existing place to experience a *new self* where one could do things differently. Situating their individual beings at the threshold between life and death, guerillas confirmed that the Kurdish struggle was more than attaining some nationalist goals, but it was a matter of life and death.

“The process” also produced another term, *yurtsever*, to define a new form of political subjectivity emerged in the 1990s. *Yurtsever*, literally means patriot, but has a larger connotation that blended identification as a supporter of the PKK with a revolutionary sense of the self. To be a *yurtsever* was both a *position* (against state violence) and a *path go* to craft a revolutionary self. This twofold characteristic of *yurtsever* identification defined *yurtsever* mobilization as a *process* of political subjectivity formation. Accordingly, *yurtsever* came to refer to both a persona (as in “*yurtsever* person”) and a mobilization (as in “*yurtsever* youth mobilization,” “*yurtsever* women mobilization,” “*yurtsever* laborers mobilization,” etc.). *Yurtsever*, in fact, crafted herself always within a community. For this very reason, *yurtsever* cannot be approached as an already existing (*a priori*) political subject position participating in political activities as a result of some “rational

decisions,” as it is suggested in some social movement literature on Kurdish mobilization in Turkey.¹

Kurdish youth have been one of the main carriers of *yurtsever* identification alongside Kurdish women. They formed the *yurtsever* youth mobilization inside the Kurdish movement in the 1990s and they were organized with the idea of self-making for the revolution. In their journey to become a *yurtsever*, they played a pivotal role in the building of a new social world. The *yurtsever* youth mobilization was formed on the ground of a struggle for recognition, where recognition refers to the acknowledgment of one’s being in the world as a valuable life. The PKK’s fight with the Turkish state in the 1990s provided conditions for possibility for the formation of *yurtsever* subjectivity, but these conditions did not produce this form of subjectivity in a deterministic way. *Yurtsever* subjectivity was a product of human will and human dedication who carried the burden of the conditions that made this subjectivity a historical possibility. Their struggle was formed under extreme political violence. In their experience of struggle, however, they not only risked their lives but also created alternative forms of connecting with each other against the physical and symbolic violence of the state. Particularly, *yurtsever* youth formed strong friendship relations where they imagined and experienced revolutionary possibilities.

This paper focuses on the constitutive power of friendship in the formation of *yurtsever* youth mobilization. Friendship relations provided the *yurtsever* youth of the 1990s an alternative ground for mutual aid and solidarity inside state space. In their friendship relations, they appreciated the worth of each other as unique individuals and they recognized each other as valuable beings. This form of recognition provided a core ground for them to craft themselves as political subjects who believed in their power to change things. Friendship, as a human bond of

¹ A well-developed example of this approach can be found in Watts (2010).

joy, playfulness, and love, created not only a ground to form a struggle for recognition, but it was also a space for an everyday production of life under the domination of death. Furthermore, friendship relations of the *yurtsever* youth of the 1990s informed their understanding of revolution and revolutionary activity.

My discussion relies on the field research that I conducted for my dissertation project in Diyarbakir, Turkey between January 2015 and January 2016. In my field research I examined the formation of *yurtsever* subjecthood in Ziya Gökalp High School, a preeminent state school that turned out to be one of the main centers of *yurtsever* youth mobilization in the 1990s. Ziya Gökalp High School is in Diyarbakir, the largest city in the Kurdish region of Turkey with more than a million population, the political and symbolic center of the Kurdish movement, and hence the unofficial capital of the Kurdish homeland. Diyarbakir has also been central city for the Turkish state in their attempts of Turkish nation building among the Kurdish population. I interviewed former students of Ziya Gokalp High School to understand the processes that made them receptive to the PKK's call for struggle. I mainly focused on those who were actively involved in the *yurtsever* movement in the 1990s. This year, I also conducted archival research and explored newspapers and journals published by the PKK to analyze the PKK's strategy for mobilizing youth from the issues the PKK emphasized in these efforts. Lastly, I used auto-ethnographic methods to better understand what Aretxaga calls "the deep plays of subjectivity" (1995: 125). I experienced this process of *yurtsever* subjectification myself in the 1990s, although I lived in western Turkey.

Before conducting my field research, I was aware of the strength of friendship relations between the *yurtsever* youth in the 1990s, but my respondents pointed at something formative about their friendship ties. I understood that friendship served as a political ground in the school

to form a collective identity and a sense of belonging among *yurtsever* students. Friendship was formative in their mobilization by being a space for crafting a revolutionary self, practicing a sense of mutual recognition, and producing worldly forms of community building. The loss of friends further shaped their being in the world as those who remained. My attempt at understanding the experience of *yurtsever* students in Ziya Gokalp High School in the 1990s, therefore, impelled me to rethink friendship as a political concept. An ethnographic analysis of the experience of the *yurtsever* youth of the 1990s shows us that friendship should be considered as a critical and powerful political concept, which may inform us to imagine alternative ways of social recognition, and hence, alternative ways of politics of difference.

The concept of Friendship and Politics

In “Politics of Friendship” Derrida (1993) examines the political history of the idea of friendship. He points out the feature of friendship restoring a number of oppositions such as, singular/universal, private/public, familial/political, secret/phenomenal (1993: 385). Friendship occupies a blurred space between these oppositions and this makes the idea of friendship a thought-provoking philosophical concept. Aristotle, Cicero, Montaigne, Nietzsche, Kant, and Blanchot are among the philosophers who reflected upon the idea of friendship. Derrida (1993: 361) notes that in the canonical work on friendship, true friendship (perfect or complete friendship) has been generally referred to as a *telos*, “toward which one must strive even if one never attains it.”

The impossibility of attaining true friendship is famously expressed by a saying attributed to Aristotle: “O my friends, there is no friend!” In this saying, Derrida (1993: 368) comments, friendship appears as “something yet to come, to be desired, to be promised,” and by this way, the idea of friendship continuously refers to the distinction between potentiality and act. Yet

friendship as an idea keeps its presence in a solid way as it does not say “there is no friendship,” but rather says “there is no friend.” It seems that this is one of the key points for Derrida that he appreciates a strong similarity between the idea of friendship and the idea of justice. In his “Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” Derrida notes that “even if it [justice] does not exist (or does not yet exist, or never does exist), *there is* justice” (emphasis is original, 1992: 15). For Derrida (1992: 25), the idea of justice is “infinite” because its presence is not reducible to specific moments. Therefore, the idea of justice keeps its presence even if it is impossible to say that “I am just” (Derrida 1992: 10).

As Derrida further elaborates in his “Politics of Friendship,” the presence of an idea does not only refer to the “experience of waiting” for a *future* possibility to come, but it also reflects on the *past* when a hopeful moment is experienced. “Without this absolute past” when “a sort of friendship had already been sealed,” Derrida notes (1993: 368), “I could not, for my part, have addressed myself to you in this way.” This point opens a passage from the idea of friendship to the experience of friendship, not only to observe what is excluded in the canonical work on the idea of friendship, but also to re-think friendship as a political concept.

In the canonical work, friendship is not an issue of practical political activity, but a virtue, “a path along which to go” (Derrida 1993: 361). The path of friendship is defined by love and respect, and it must be equal and reciprocal (Derrida 1993: 380). Friendship is not only linked to virtue and justice but also to moral reason and political reason. As in Kant’s definition, for example, “every friend should be the ‘friend of man’” (Derrida 1993: 381). The friend, as “another self,” in the words of Aristotle, therefore, restores the opposition between the singular and the universal in the friendship relationship. However, Derrida (1993: 383) also draws attention to the notion that the great philosophical canonical discourses on friendship exclude

friendship between women and friendship between a man and woman (1993: 382-383). The exclusion of the feminine, for Derrida, is related to the tradition of political philosophy which reserves “politics and public space for man, domestic and private space for woman” (1993: 384). The exclusion of the feminine, in fact, discloses a tension within the idea of friendship, where a form of human connection is framed as the “alliance of brothers.” Derrida, thus, suggests adding “democracy” to the concept of friendship that goes “beyond the homo-fraternal and phallogocentric schema” of previous theorists (1993: 388).

The abstraction of friendship as an idea, in my opinion, limits the concept not only by excluding the feminine, in relation to this, but also by precluding thinking about the political importance of many different ways of experiencing friendship. Friendship is one of the basic human bonds and its experience almost always teaches us that we are, as subjects, not as autonomous as we might think we are. The blurred location of friendship between the self and the other provides a ground to reflect upon not only who we think we are but, also what we expect from the other as human beings. Friendship, in this way, refers to both subjectivity formation and recognition. As I discuss in detail below, the mobilization of *yurtsever* students in Ziya Gokalp High School also signaled the vital importance of friendship ties in subjectivity formation and recognition, which proposes an approach to friendship as a *political concept*, more than suggesting a *politics* or *morality* of friendship.

Friends touch each other’s hearts to heal their injuries. And to make meaning of these injuries while healing them, friends enjoy the specific position of their friendship located in the blurred realm between the public and the private. As C. Wright Mills (1959) reminds us with the concept of “sociological imagination,” “personal troubles” are deeply related to “public issues.” Friends help each other to understand public aspects of their personal troubles even at the very

moments when they share their most secluded problems. The feature of friendship addressing personal injuries on a social level and the healing power of friendship stemming from its in-between position can be traced in the accounts of revolutionaries all over the world. The autobiography of Huey P. Newton, the co-founder of the Black Panther Party, provides a very impressive example in this regard. In the early pages of *Revolutionary Suicide* (1995), Huey P. Newton mentions his schooling experience in the following words:

During those long years in Oakland public schools, I did not have one teacher who taught me anything relevant to my own life or experience. Not one instructor ever awoke in me a desire to learn more or to question or to explore the worlds of literature, science, and history. All they did was try to rob me of *the sense of my own uniqueness and worth*, and in the process nearly killed my urge to inquire (Italics added. 1995: 22).

Newton, later in the book, tells the reader about his discussions of “non-possessive love” with his friend Richard. Here is how Newton (1995: p. 61) vividly remembers their understanding of non-possessive love and expresses it with enthusiasm: “Non- possessive love is based upon shared experiences and friendship; it is the kind of love we have for our bodies, for our thumb or foot. We love ourselves, our bodies, but we do not want to enslave any part of ourselves.” Newton and Richard, together, imagine a new human bond, “non-possessive love,” which works as a bridge to connect “the self” and “the other” on a new basis. It restores the distortion on “the self” caused by some specific social relations by means of building a new connection with “the other” based on “shared experiences and friendship.” “The other” in non-possessive love is no longer oppositional to “the self” and no longer hurts it. But we should also pay attention that “the other” in non-possessive love is not a mere extension of “the self,” either. Otherwise, it could not probably heal “the self” who was robbed of “the sense of his own uniqueness and worth,” in the words of Newton. For it is hard to heal a social injury only on a personal level, even if we were ever able to define such a level. Friendship, located between the public and the private, is the

perfect ground for public recognition of one's injury and one's worth together with their uniqueness.

Friendship relations are important for building and protecting political communities. Revolutionaries, who frequently live in emergency conditions, have relied on their friends while organizing their struggles. Also, quite often, friendship bonds have been essential for their survival especially when other bonds are not available or reliable for security reasons. My respondent Bilal, for example, told me that he has always found shelter in his friends' places when he was being searched for by the police. The police would first look at his family's place and his comrades from the party were also under surveillance. His numerous friends, however, provided him secure places to stay during his long revolutionary life experience.

Friendship relations, with the above features, have a potential to disrupt institutional relations by pointing out other possibilities of community building. Foucault (1997), in his short interview "Friendship as a Way of Life," locates friendship relations at the center of building a new "mode of life." According to Foucault (1997: 138), because of its "slantwise" position in the social fabric, homosexuality includes forming new ways of relating the other. Friendship, for Foucault (1997: 138), is a modality where homosexuality gains an insight to create a way of life. "To be 'gay,'" Foucault (1997: 138) comments, "is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life." Creating "a way of life" is important for Foucault (1997: 138) because it "can yield a culture and an ethics," and hence, it can dismantle existing institutionalized social relations. Friendship, however, is not a fixed relationship to replace the other relationships, but is "a relationship that is still formless," it is a "movement" that carries two people to each other (Foucault 1997: 136). Probably because it is a movement rather than a state, friendship, for Foucault, reopens an

imagination that things could be different. After all, as Foucault (1997: 140) reminds, “what exists is far from filling all possible spaces.”

Friendship, as a *lived experience* is thus a relationship pertaining to communities rather than being a concern of two people as expressed by the idea of *true friendship* in the philosophical canon. However, similar to the idea of friendship, the experience of friendship continuously refers to *something yet to come* and that things could be different than what exists now. While referring to other possibilities, moreover, rather than being an island to escape from existing social relations, friendship serves as an interior space within them for building new communities with a culture and an ethics. The strength of friendship, in this sense, does not stem from its invitation to a sacred bonding between two people to take them away from the wickedness of the earthly relations. On the contrary, friendship bonds are woven from the most mundane relations in everyday life. Friendship, building a bridge between the self and other, allows friends to re-think the social life that surrounds them and to imagine a new life which would no longer be hostile but instead be a friendly space. In my understanding, this is the point that makes friendship an extremely political concept. From this point of view, I approach the *yurtsever* youth mobilization in 1990s not as an exceptional experience of friendship, but as another glimpse of other possibilities of community building inspired by friendship relations.

Sinan’s Friends

I interviewed Sinan in the Diyarbakir Branch of Education and Science Worker's Union - *Eğitim-Sen*. I did not know him beforehand and we had no common friends. He accepted my invitation to interview him only after observing my yearlong visits to the Union. The walls of the Union were covered by the photographs of teachers who lost their lives in the 1990s, the majority of whom were the victims of unidentified murders. During the interview, we could hear

police vehicles signaling that the clashes between police and Kurdish youth were going on in the city. It was my impression that after avoiding me for a long time, now, in the middle of the recent war, he decided to tell me about the 1990s. Probably he finally trusted me, but more important than that, he made it clear to me that he wanted to make a record of his experience by means of my dissertation.

Sinan graduated from Ziya Gokalp High School in 1992. He was one of the pioneers of *yurtsever* youth mobilization in the school. He lost about a hundred friends to the war in the 1990s, among them, his dearest friend, Ronahi. Sinan and Ronahi were friends from the first year of middle school in 1986, they shared the same school desk for six years. Ronahi was a natural leader of the *yurtsever* youth in Ziya Gokalp High School during in 1991 and 1992 and Sinan was his right hand. Ronahi's family was from Eruh, Siirt, a town where the PKK initiated their first armed attack in 1984, and his family became supporters of the PKK as early as the 1980s, when the PKK was not widely known by the people of Diyarbakir. Sinan learned about the PKK from Ronahi while they were in middle school. But Sinan and Ronahi knew the PKK as *Apocular*,² not with the name of PKK. They thought that they were supporting a group other than the PKK, as Sinan told me laughing. They also felt close to Dev-Sol (The Revolutionary Left), a Turkish Marxist-Leninist party known for their armed attacks of state security forces in the late 1980s.

As soon as the 1990s began, Sinan and Ronahi learned more about the PKK and became active supporters of them. They started to organize meetings in the school which were initially composed of only five or six students. A couple of students already had connections with the Kurdish mobilization in Diyarbakir and they introduced Sinan and Ronahi to the only bookstore

² *Apocular* is a Turkish word for "followers of Apo" (Abdullah Ocalan).

in the city where they could secretly buy the publications of the PKK. They also provided them with books, journals, and newspapers affiliated with the Kurdish struggle. Soon after their number in the meetings reached about twenty students. Now they were holding meetings in a teahouse in addition to the empty classrooms in their school. Their school activities became overt when they decided to sell postcards in order to support the expenses of *Ozgur Ulke* (Free Country), the pro-PKK newspaper at the time. Ronahi entered almost every classroom in the school to make a speech about the importance of supporting the newspaper. At the end of their campaign, they were surprised by the fact that almost five hundred students gave them money. “Even the ones we would never expect, gave us money,” Sinan said. This campaign was a sign for them to understand the vast potential of the PKK among the students.

Sinan and Ronahi were in their second year in the school (a year before their final year), when they started to call themselves *yurtsever*. Sinan recollects it as follows:

When we set in overt political activities we began to call ourselves yurtsever...After we got affiliated with the Party, we started to define ourselves as the ones who had a political stance...Then it started things like ‘yurtsever wouldn’t do this, yurtsever wouldn’t do that.’ The ban on alcohol was imposed, the ban on having a girlfriend was imposed. And this ban and that ban.

Then I asked Sinan how he managed the bans and if he had romantic relationships in the school, he replied by laughing at me, “I had a lot of girlfriends!” He often found himself in trouble with other *yurtsever* students because of not obeying the ban on romantic affairs but Ronahi always stood up for him.

Ronahi, however, stayed away from romantic relations despite the fact that he was very popular in the school and especially so after his speeches in the classrooms. According to Sinan, his speeches increased his charisma even more: “Ronahi was very tall, like 190 cm [6’2”]. I was as you see (pointing out that he is short). Together we were like *Nokta ile Virgul* [Punctuation

and Comma, a Turkish comedy duo composed of a short man (Punctuation) and a tall man (Comma)]. He was very good-looking, and the boy had a charisma. Also, because he rejected the approaches (of women) he gained an aura.” Once the sister of a military officer wanted to join their group because, as Sinan and others understood, she had a crush on Ronahi. Not trusting her because of her brother’s occupation, initially they tried to avoid her. She did not give up and continued to seek them out. Then they tried to intimidate her by giving her the most radical books and other publications of the PKK to read. And she read them but became even closer to them. “We did not know what to do,” Sinan tells me, “there was only men’s bathroom left for us when we wanted to talk about a hidden political issue.” One day her brother found her reading one of the prohibited books of the PKK. After beating her very badly, he contacted both the police and the administration of the school. She did not turn them in despite all the pressure they put on her and claimed that she had found the books in the classroom. Later, however, she did not have any chance to contact them again. When I asked Sinan, “you didn’t trust her because she was Turkish?” he replied to me by saying “Military officer! Sister of a military officer!” At that point of the interview I did not know that Sinan himself was also Turkish.

I learnt that Sinan was Turkish only when he told me this confusing sentence: “Once I was beaten by the police when I didn’t speak Kurdish in the police station.” Together with his friends, Sinan was detained by the police waiting outside of the school just after they held an illegal demonstration. When in police custody, a Kurdish police officer spoke to each of them in Kurdish. When it was Sinan’s turn, Sinan responded to the police officer in Turkish telling that he did not understand what he was saying. Here is how Sinan remembers the rest of the conversation: “He [the policeman] asked me, why don’t you understand? I told him, I don’t speak Kurdish. He asked me, you are going to found Kurdistan and you don’t speak Kurdish? I

said, I am not going to found Kurdistan, I am Turkish anyway, I am not Kurdish. He asked me, so what are you doing here? I said, I don't know, a policeman told me to come and I came, I didn't do anything." Sinan was hoping that he would be released soon. But the policeman talking to him called another policeman to ask why they picked up Sinan. The second policeman, unfortunately, knew Sinan from the school and confirmed Sinan's involvement in the demonstration saying that "Of course he was there, no any demonstrations without him!" "They didn't give even a single flip to anyone," Sinan continued, "but they beat on me very badly. They said, you are Turkish and you are together with them! They beat on me very bad, it took maybe twenty-twenty five minutes. Everyone walked out [from the police station] in ease but every part of my body was bruised and bloated. They walloped me because I didn't speak Kurdish (laughing)."

Most of the time, however, Sinan and his friends enjoyed the advantages of Sinan's ethnic identity. Sinan's father worked as a clerk in the military commission. In this way Sinan obtained the identity card of the army corps in Diyarbakir. Sinan exploited all the advantages of this identity card in addition to all the Turkish manners of acting and speaking that he knew:

I was able to enter in all the non-permitted places with this card. When the police stopped me, I would show them my ID card. When they asked me, for example, what did your father do, I would tell them that he was a military officer. Actually, he was just a civil servant. But that sentence would open me all the gates... If there was a place to check out, I would go there because I could find a way to come out. I mean it was my role [in the group]. For example, we participate into an illegal demonstration in the city, we must leave the area as hours have passed but there is a possibility of police blockade, now it is my task to check out. I would go to the street, look around, and if there was a problem I would tell the others wait some more. I mean, that was my function.

I asked Sinan the same question that the police officer asked him in the police station, why did you support the Kurdish cause? His answer was very clear-cut and far from any attempt at a political justification. He said, "We were grown up together. We were politically molded

together... We shared the same school desks. They were my friends since the first year of the middle school. We were molded together (*Birlikte şekillendik*)." Later in the interview, he commented on this issue again, "I was there as a Turkish Alevi. But I wasn't there as a Turkish Alevi. I was there as a friend. We didn't have who is Turkish who is Kurdish discussion very much."

Friendship bonds are woven day by day and piece by piece, out of mundane relations of everyday life. Sinan's bonds with his Kurdish friends were not built on "pity" or "compassion," but on a "truthful dialogue," which is, for Arendt, one of the key features of friendship (Nixon 2015). Friendship is not a *form* of solidarity with the oppressed or exploited, although it very much includes solidarity. Friends do not relate to each other as the representatives of any particular groups, but as unique persons. Sinan loved *each* of his Kurdish friends, as people.

The friendship between Sinan and others was also about a utopia as much as about everyday relations. Together they imagined a new social world, where being a Kurdish or Turkish would not divide people. Their friendship ties, in this way, opened a new ground for recognizing each other. This form of recognition is not a mere inclusion of the excluded to the main body, but the *act* of recognition changes the main body. Sinan, for example, did not only recognize the existence and rights of Kurds, but he imagined a totally new society to be built together with them.

Sinan and his friends attended radical protests that explicitly referred to the PKK presence in the school. One of these protests, however, ended up even more radical than they initially planned. On a Friday, Ismail, his friend from their core *yurtsever* group, came to Sinan to tell him about his plans to cover the walls of the school with slogans like, "*Biji PKK*" (Kurdish for Long Live PKK), "*Serok APO*" (Kurdish for Leader/President Apo – Abdullah Ocalan), and

so on. Sinan, who was the responsible person for the money issues in the group, agreed with the plan and gave Ismail some money to buy dye and brushes. Sinan and Ismail were so excited by the idea that on Monday morning, when the students and teachers gathered for the ritual of singing the national anthem (*Istiklal Marsi*), they would come up against the PKK slogans all over the walls! This scene actually happened on Monday, but with an unexpected addition: the red dye planned for the walls was also all over the bust of Ataturk (the founder of the Turkish Republic), too! Sinan was surprised as much as the others: “Ataturk was bright red! I said, what is this? Ismail said, I poured the leftover paint on his head... Then he gave me the rest of the money. I asked him, why did you paint Ataturk? He said, what was I supposed to do with the leftover paint, take it home? I said, you didn’t do good to Ataturk. He said, why? I said, look at them, nobody is looking at the walls, but [instead are looking at] Ataturk.” Indeed, the school administration, teachers, and students were staring in shock at the painted Ataturk bust. Soon after, what was even worse, the school yard was full of police and the journalists taking photographs of the Ataturk bust. Any form of attack on the Ataturk bust, which stood in front of every school entrance in Turkey, was an unthinkable act, but it was there, in front of their eyes, and actually happened.

No doubt, even thinking of pouring leftover paint on the bust of Ataturk displayed that the Turkish state project in the school failed its aim to create sanctity around the figure of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Turkish Republic. However, it was not a planned act of counter-ideology targeting the basic premises of the Republic. While telling this story to me, Sinan could not stop himself from laughing all the time. Sinan remembers painting Ataturk’s bust as a joyful trouble created by a humorous friend: “He [Ismail] was a cheeky bastard (*Firlama bir tipti*). He was good at any kind of artfulness.” For sure, doing something

unthinkable requires courage as much as humor. As a matter of fact, Ismail would eventually lose his life as a high-ranking guerilla. But Sinan did not love Ismail because he was a hero to him. For we may respect heroic acts of people, but this does not make them our friends. Today Sinan mourns after his friend, that he loved, and he lost.

Sinan and Ismail were bound to each other by innumerable moments, where they together experienced joy and worry, fear and courage, excitement and horror, and trust and disappointment. These were the moments upon which their friendship was built. These were also the moments that their subjectivities were formed, especially considering that they were teenagers. These moments, in this way, were like stream beds for the imaginaries of new possibilities, which sometimes, often unexpectedly, would flash in front of them as in the case of painting the Ataturk bust. This is why the friendship between Sinan and Ismail was more political than the calls *both* the state and the PKK directed to them as subjects. For example, when Sinan and Ismail experienced the disenchantment of sanctity of Ataturk together as playful young friends, this moment was probably engraved in their thinking more than both “The Principles of Ataturk and History of Reforms” classes that they took at the school telling them about the holiness of Ataturk as the founder of the Turkish Republic, and the PKK pamphlets calling them to fight for national liberation from the Turkish state and its founder. Sinan and Ismail experienced the *possibility* of making things differently, which is the core of being a political subject and is more political than supporting a certain political idea. The shared experience of Sinan and Ismail, furthermore, cannot be subsumed under any straightforward comprehensive narrative. Their friendship, in fact, creates an excess in the narratives of both the Turkish state and the PKK. No state power can make Ismail a “terrorist” to Sinan and no political

discourse can confine him to the status of “hero.” Sinan remembers Ismail as a humorous friend. And friendship, above all, is a joyful relationship.

According to Sinan, their core *yurtsever* group in the school dissolved when they lost Gulsah in their final year in the school. Gulsah was among a few female students in their core group, which comprised about twenty students in total. Gulsah was one of the first students in the school who built connections with the PKK. She worked on the youth journal of the PKK, *Ozgur Halk* (Free People), both as a representative and as an author. She was also the contact person of the journal and introduced and disseminated the journal to Sinan and other *yurtsever* students in the school. This was very dangerous work considering the police pressure put on the students, but Gulsah continued to do it until she left to join guerillas. She was one of the key persons in the meetings of the *yurtsever* students, no matter the time and place of these meetings and despite the traditional pressure on the female students at the time. Gulsah, together with her sister Gulsen and a couple of additional female students, did not allow the *yurtsever* group to be a boys’ club and actively took part in the formation of the core values of *yurtsever* mobilization in the school.

In the spring of 1992, Gulsah participated in the guerilla forces together with eleven of her friends. They were the first large group to join the guerilla struggle in the history of Ziya Gokalp High School. Gulsah came to say goodbye to Sinan before she left. It was a goodbye in earnest: “I said, I wish all the best for you (*yolun acik olsun*). She said, *serkeftin* [Kurdish for victory], *serkeftin*, I said.” The next day Ronahi came to Sinan to give the tragic news that Gulsah and others, all twelve friends, had been killed by chemical weapons in a cave when the village guards noticed their presence. They were killed just after they reached the mountains, and therefore, they had no weapons yet. In the following days, another friend, who helped the transfer of Gulsah’s group to the mountains, tried to commit suicide by setting himself on fire

with a Molotov cocktail during an illegal demonstration. Sinan thinks that his friend's attempted suicide was a political way that he found to escape the burden that he could no longer carry. The tragic death of Gulsah and others was too much painful to carry as a group, too. "After we lost Gulsah," Sinan told me with a great sorrow, "we were dissolved."

By the time Sinan, Ronahi, and most of their friends graduated from Ziya Gokalp High School, there were already many other *yurtsever* groups mushrooming in the school. And in a very short time, their radicalization reached such a level that painting the bust of Ataturk was thought of as a "naive" act from the past. After graduation, Sinan continued his studies at Dicle University in Diyarbakir. Ronahi, however, was imprisoned shortly after his graduation from the school and as soon as he was released he joined to the guerilla forces. Not long after his participation, Sinan learnt from the newspaper that Ronahi had lost his life. Ronahi's family, who were very dear to Sinan as he spent a lot of time in their place, developed an attitude towards him and cut off contact with him. When I asked him if they blamed Sinan in some way, Sinan explained it to me with the following sorrowful words:

They didn't tell any specific thing to me. But, I mean, I knew that I could have stopped him (Ronahi). I-could-have-stopped-him [dur-du-ra-bi-lir-dim, he spells out this word by emphasizing every syllable]. His ideal was going [to the mountains]. What could I promise to stop him? A house, a job, a marriage, what? If these were the things he wished to, he could have reached them. I didn't have to promise those things to him. What could I promise him? A beautiful future? We didn't have a beautiful future. They shot Baris. He was shot next to us. We together ran into hospital to see him. Gulsah said goodbye to us and the next day we received the news of her martyrdom. It was Ronahi who gave me the news. So, what could I offer to him? His family thought that we were close, and so, I could have persuaded him [for not going]. I-could-have-persuaded-him [ik-na e-de-bi-lir-dim, again he emphasizes every syllable]. I am saying this. I could have [done this], but for how long I could keep him? With what promise? While I was also thinking about going, how could I stop him?

I understood that Sinan could not have asked Ronahi to stay because he knew better than everyone why he was going, as "they were molded together," in his words. I also understood

why he felt guilty for not telling him to stay. “I didn’t die but I don’t know if I lived,” Sinan summarized the feeling of being retained.

Sinan’s friends have continued to be in his life even after they departed, as Sinan’s account displays:

If it is flag to relay, I haven’t smeared it. I have never forgotten them in any stage of my life. I have thrown away many photographs but never theirs. I have always kept their photographs. The only thing left for me, which I could still do, was to stand without being defiled. I have tried to do that. There are still people who knew me from that time [1990s]. This includes the ones who lost their bearings. This also includes [those]who betrayed [the cause]. The only thing that even those ones could tell about me is that: “He is not defiled (kirlenmedi).” I mean I haven’t been involved in any dirty things. I am still trying to avoid any kind of unearned advantages. I have neither political expectations nor economical. I am a simple yurtsever. I am working for the Union, for example, but I have never been a candidate for being a union officer.

Sinan, as the one who remained, has kept carrying “the flag” of the departed, both as a political and a moral duty. This has led to an altruistic form of political activism for Sinan, who has worked for the Union for twenty years, but never run for the elections to get a position. The burden of being “a simple yurtsever,” as he defines himself, is heavier than it sounds. For Sinan, *yurtsever* not only refers to a supporter of the Kurdish struggle, but the term is deeply rooted in his youth when he crafted himself as a political subject together with his friends. In the 1990s, the term *yurtsever*, as a form of subjecthood situated at the intersection of the political and the moral, is, for Sinan, one who formed his *sense of being* together with the oppressed and to build a new life with them. Now the term *yurtsever* points out the legacy of his friends that Sinan wishes to keep holding onto. By calling himself “a simple yurtsever,” Sinan once again shoulders a heavy burden, the memory of his friends, to make the world remember about their struggle and their values. He is proud of not getting dirty because it means that he is keeping the memory of

his friends clean. Ronahi, Gulsah, Ismail, and all the other departed friends continue to live in Sinan's life practice of being "a simple *yurtsever*." Sinan, for example, could not stay silent after the recent state violence. A year after our interview, in 2016, he was arrested for organizing a strike to protest the demolition of Kurdish towns.

Rethinking Friendship

The story of *yurtsever* students in Ziya Gökalp High School is part of larger Kurdish youth mobilization in the 1990s. They represent a generation of revolutionaries in a historically specific time, the 1990s. Walter Benjamin (1974) notes that the truth about history *flashes* in a moment of danger *on* the "historical subject." *Yurtsever* youth, as "historical subjects," carried the burden of their time. They sacrificed their lives to such an extent that many refer to them as "the lost generation" because of the large number of lives lost. However, as young revolutionaries, they were not only ones who were ready to fight and die, but they were also creators of alternative ways of doing things. In this paper, I focused on what they created as much as what they lost under the extreme conditions of violence in the 1990s.

The *yurtsever* youth formed strong friendship relations where they crafted themselves as political subjects. Friendship provided them an alternative ground to connect with each other against the physical and symbolic violence of the state. In their friendship relations, they appreciated the worth of each other as unique individuals and they recognized each other as valuable beings. This form of recognition was especially important for those who were excluded and marginalized within the state space. And this form of recognition provided a core ground for them to craft themselves as political subjects who believed in their power to change the order of

things. Their experience points at friendship as a critical and powerful form of human bond in the formation of politics.

Friendship is one of the grounds that we may observe political action as a process of subject formation and as an experience of human will where one imagines new possibilities. Due to its in-between position between the public and the private, friendship provides a special space for the formation of political subjectivities. Friends are close to “the self” enough to understand, appreciate, and love each other, but they are not the extended selves. Friends are “the (public) other” to each other, but different than “the public” represented by the state, they are not hostile to “the self.” Friendship works as a *movement* between the self and the other, and intimacy between friends harbors this movement. Intimacy, by this way, not only allows friends healing each other’s injuries in the realm of public recognition, but it also creates a new ground for friends to question what exists and what is possible. As a movement, friendship refers to a “becoming” rather than a state of “being” as an everyday experience. In my opinion, what makes friendship a critical political concept lies in its feature of being a daily *practice* of imagining other possibilities.

In their friendship relations, *yurtsever* youth also created a space for an everyday production of *life* under the domination of *death*. Friendship was a space for joy, playfulness, and love as much as a dedication for the political aspirations. In my opinion, friendship relations of *yurtsever* youth can be understood as a re-interpretation of the PKK’s call for confronting with death in their struggle for recognition. *Yurtsever* youth showed that their fight as political subjects was not only defined by their readiness to *die*, but also by their experience of the struggle itself as a form of *life*. Friendship relations allowed the *yurtsever* youth reproduce everyday relations on a new basis, a basis that appreciates mutual recognition and solidarity. As

a form of community building, friendship disrupted institutional relations and made new forms of relationships possible even within the state space. If the *yurtsever* youth`s friendship relations did not defeat the death, they provided a space for *breath*, signaling the possibility of life.

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