Introduction to the Special Issue:
"Turkish Perspectives on Social Problems"

Murat Şentürk (PhD), Associate Professor[1]
Istanbul University, Department of Sociology, TURKEY
Email: murat.senturk@istanbul.edu.tr

Glenn W. Muschert (PhD), Professor of Sociology
Khalifa University of Science & Technology, UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
Department of Humanities & Social Sciences
Email: glenn.muschert@ku.ac.ae

This special collection, as is the case of most academic work, began as an interpersonal conversation between scholars, in this case over many small glasses of tea in a Turkish *kahvehane* (tea house). The nature of the discussion involved the idea that Turkish sociology was relatively under-appreciated among Anglophone sociologists, and that in the current period of globalization, it would serve the interests of sociologists in Turkey to garner greater attention from international scholars, just as it would be beneficial for scholars worldwide to know more about Turkish sociological perspectives on the types of social problems currently faced within Turkey (or the Turkish diaspora). The editorial team, Dr. Şentürk and Dr. Muschert, are very pleased to present this work, and to have played a role in bringing it from conceptualization through to completion. However, it would be remiss to fail to acknowledge that the project is a collective endeavor among editors, contributors, reviewers, and others who have offered support. In the spirit of inclusiveness, we offer our sincere thanks to those whose names do not otherwise appear in this collection, including our skilled cadre of blind peer reviewers, our skilled editorial assistant Dr. Sadia Jamil, and those at the Center for Open Access in Science (COAS) in Belgrade, Serbia, who publishes this journal. We clarify that our selection of *Open Journal for Sociological Studies* was deliberate due to its Open Access model, which fit our intention to bring the scholarship included here to the widest audience possible. Finally, our decision to publish in English language was similarly strategic as the language has become one of the most broadly used in global academic discourse.

Thus, this project is an attempt to bring the sociological perspectives of Turkish scholars and studies of Turkish social problems to an international audience. While Turkish scholars and those who study Turkish society may be well-aware of the breadth and depth of Turkish sociology over the last century, this is perhaps less-known beyond the boundaries of Turkish intelligentsia. In presenting Turkish perspectives on social problems in English and for an international audience, this project is a modest effort to broaden the exposure of the dynamic sub-field of Turkish sociology and its research into the social problems in contemporary Turkey.

---

[1] The authors are Guest Editors of the Special Issue.

As one of the main interests of sociology, the study of social problems and strategies for coping with these problems can differ with respect to societies even though the origins of both the scholarship and problems may be similar. By addressing social problems, social structure can be understood, and problems that appear to be individual can be addressed in a social context. Further, suggestions for solutions can be developed, and such strategies can be communicated among different societies forging greater understanding of social dynamics and leading to applied knowledge.

C. Wright Mills' *Sociological Imagination* has an important place in addressing social problems, specifically because Mills emphasized the most important indicator of the ability of social imagination to be "the difference between the understanding that sees the encountered problems as problems from the individual's narrow living environment with the understanding that addresses these problems as public problems of the social structure".[2] For example, marriage partners may be confronted with personal problems experienced in marriage, but if 250 marriages out of every 1,000 end in the first four years, this means marriage has a problem related to the marriage institution and the other social institutions supporting marriage as an institution. Social problems can be more deeply understood as sociologists assess the values and circumstances in their respective milieu, and these situations may reveal which contradictions in the social structure.

In order to reveal social problems, Mills[3] underlined the need to be aware of three trends related to methodology: those based on propositions that develop in the context of historical theory, piles of concepts that have a more static and abstract approach, and understanding and conceptualizing the facts and problems through empirical analysis. He critiqued those scholars who confine their analysis to one of these three areas. According to Mills,[4] the components of the three types of problems that sociologists will seek answers to are: (1) the basic features and structure of society, its social relationships, and the differences and similarities in societies; (2) the places, locations, changes, and processes within the historical perspective; and (3) humans, human nature, the nature of human behavior, and typologies. In order to answer these, the theoretical framework of sociology, the historical and social perspective, and the empirical data need to be worked.

While social problems take place among the most important topics in Western Europe where sociology first emerged and in North America where it developed in the post-World War II era, they are also an important agenda item in non-Western societies. Perhaps more in the sociology of social problems than in any other sub-field of sociology, the precise and embedded nature of the objects of study (i.e., the historically-bound iteration of social problems) mean that to understand specific scholarship, one must also understand the context in which it has developed. The social problems formed by the economic, political, and social changes experienced since the 19th century have long been one of the main interests of Turkish sociology. A social transformation began to be experienced as a result of the Industrial Revolution and the technological developments and economic and political changes that accelerated in connection with it. Social problems that have emerged within this transformation, and quickly have become some of the basic pursuits of both the administrators of public policy as well as among and intellectuals who investigate social issues.

---

[2] Mills, C. W. (2000). *Toplumbilimsel düşün* [The sociological imagination]. (çev. Ü. Oskay). İstanbul: Der Yayınları, 20,22.

[3] *Ibid*.: 46-49.

[4] *Ibid*.: 17-18.

The need to address the social problems that would emerge with these social changes had become so intense that the first sociology department outside of the West was established in Istanbul University at the considerably early date of 1914 by the renown Turkish sociologist Ziya Gökalp. The Turkish sociologists of this period were generally focused on the topic of Turkish society being in a crisis of transition from the centuries-long Ottoman period which ended after World War I, and through the establishment of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923. The main goals of early Turkish sociology were, thus, to determine which social institutions are essential to the establishment of modern society, and to facilitate the development of those that were necessary for this transition.[5]

In a practical sense, early Turkish sociologists studied the social change occurring in internal and external dynamics in Ottoman social orders. On one hand, the development of technology and the numerous changes happening at that time, including the rise of industrial capitalism in the West and the establishment of political changes based on civil liberties, caused many changes in traditioal Ottoman society. The view that the state and society, which had lost its power through the changing material and ideological influences coming from the West, would regain its former glory were widespread among intellectuals only in relation to the need to preserve existing culture in order to prevent the social problems assumed to come from the deterioration of traditional society. For some, avoiding the changes that these innovations would bring was nearly impossible. The main topics of discussion that lasted in Turkey from the last quarter of the 19th century until the middle of the 20th century were therefore concerned with how the state would regain its strength, including what role social institutions would play in this process. In other words, the focus of early Turkish sociology was determining how to ensure the social order needed to keep the state strong. Analyses based on field research directly related to social problems were limited, and thus the suggestions or solutions to be developed were also limited.

Aside from some of the earliest studies mentioned above, a corpus of sociology based on empirical data related to social problems did notably develop until the mid-20th century. Some of the main reasons for this situation were the intensification of immigration to the city from rural areas and the beginning of the acceleration of urbanization processes, as for example, studies on change in rural areas began to emerge in the mid-Twentieth Century,[6] as a means of understand the social changes brought by urbanization and accelerating modernization. Many social structural problems accompanied the urbanization process, such as obtaining housing, unemployment, poverty, education, and health, were the increasing social problems in areas like family life, alcohol and drug addiction, social deviance, and crime. The change in social solidarity networks and interaction patterns that accompanied urbanization caused significant social problems in Turkey. Sociologists, whose number had increased in Turkey through the 1950s, collected empirical data on social problems by doing more field research with the funds they received from the state and international organizations. In this period, the field research method which had been widely used in the Chicago School tradition in the USA in particular, contributed to the development of the empirically based sociological perspective in Turkish sociology.

---

[5] Gökalp, Z. (1917). Mukaddime [Preamble]. *İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi, 1*(1), 2-3.

[6] For example, see Berkes, N. (1942). *Bazı Ankara Köyleri Üzerinde Bir Araştırma* [Research on some villagers from Ankara]. Ankara: Uzluk Basımevi. Boran, B. (1945). *Toplumsal Yapı Araştırmaları* [Social structure research], Ankara Üniversitesi DTCF Felsefe Enstitüsü Sosyoloji Serisi. Ankara: TTK Basımevi. Ülken, H. Z. (1941). İçtimai araştırmalar [Studies on social life]. *İstanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi*, *2*(1), 271-320.

While many social problems disappeared with the improvements experienced throughout the entire 20th century in terms of the economic, political, and cultural aspects in Turkey, new social problems surfaced in almost every period or at least they become more apparent. Alongside the increase in urbanization levels in the 1980s, Turkey faced new social changes brought on by opening up political, economic, and cultural life more to outside influences. Significant social problems were experienced, such as difficulties of modernization, urbanization, the decline of the countryside, changes in work and family life, and competition for housing. Micro-level studies on addressing social theory and the social problems in Turkey in connection with the changes in sociological thought and research methods had started to gain importance in this period. For example, research attempting to address the different modes of sociality and urban problems became more common in the 1960s.

The modernization process that continued in the 1980s in Turkey accelerated with the arrival of the 2000s, which coupled with rapid changes in communication technologies, brought great changes to social life. The changes the new millennium opened the way to the emergence of new problems, and during this period qualitative research method was used more commonly to study social problems. With its increasing and demographically aging population, immigration into Turkey became more common, and the population became more diverse. New forms of discrimination faced members of ethnic groups, notably within contexts new interactions of urban and rural settlements, the variations connected to new communication technologies and media usage, and determining the different aspects of unemployment and poverty.

Sociology since its earliest iterations has always been a discipline concerned with understanding social dynamics within changing times, and its permutations depend upon the types of societies that exist, and notably the types of social problems which characterize specific eras. The aim of this special issue is to address social problems from the perspective of contemporary Turkish sociology. What is the perspective of Turkish sociology? Certainly the power of a single sociologist to answer such a question will not suffice, as this exceeds the limits of any article, special issue, or scholar. The original studies presented in this issue attempt to show the contribution the Turkish sociological perspective has made to the topics they address. Yet, these efforts obviously have to be limited because the perspective of Turkish society is to continue to attempt to establish tight ties with the theoretical and methodological knowledge in sociology, which is still a comparatively young discipline. On the other hand, the Turkish sociological perspective is not exactly new, as it has been contributing to research on social problems for over a century, has the potential to provide contributions to the social problems not just of its own society but to those of different societies.

The origins of social thought in Turkey date back further than the last quarter of the 19th century. From this perspective, although it has different content and methods, it possesses an accumulation of social thought. In terms of non-Western societies, it has been the direct and most important addressee of significant events that have changed world history like the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. Because it has been the mandatory interlocutor, it possesses a world of thought where many ideas have developed on how radical social changes will be realized; whether they succeed or not is not important. Turkish sociology has established relations since as early a period as can be counted with the tradition of sociological thought that developed in the West on level with the founding fathers (Marx, Weber, Durkheim). Turkish sociology has been influenced by the various traditions of sociology such as the social philosopher, historian, methodologist/empiricist, and it has experienced differentiation within itself. These divergences have provided the opportunity to debate the topic of what the methodology of sociology needs to be in Turkey. Saying that these debates have developed a new sociological perspective is difficult. However, discussing the main points of a

specific sociological perspective on the historical, social, and cultural conditions based on criticisms of Western knowledge and technique in non-Western societies will be a significant foundation in future pursuits.

The six articles are contained in this special edition are written from the perspective of Turkish sociology, whose basic features we have tried to describe, and each attempts to address the social problems that appear significant these days. We wish this issue to be a modest contribution to the discovery of the Turkish sociological perspective in addressing social problems. The colleagues contributing to this special issue have actively engaged with the social problems subfield of sociology, and in each case have produced an original piece of research focusing on some aspect of Turkish social life. The aim is to bring Turkish sociological perspectives and empirical studies of Turkish social problems to the international audience. In particular, each contributor has been asked to clarify how their empirical studies and perspectives not only shed light on the social problems on which they focus, but more generally how such findings can be relevant beyond the institutional, geographic, conceptual, and linguistic frontiers of Turkish sociology. While each article summarizes the relevance of research concerning a concrete social problem within its respective sub-field of sociology, as a whole the special issue will allow readers to access findings accessible to academic sociologists, and are intended to be accessible to those generally versed in sociology and other social science disciplines.