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State Homophobia, Sexual Politics,
and Queering the Boğaziçi Resistance

On April 13, 2021, private security officers blocked me from passing through the main entrance to the Boğaziçi University campus, although I am an alumnus and a former professor. It was the hundredth day of what has been termed the Boğaziçi resistance against the top-down appointment of the rector Melih Bulu. As a response to the exuberant spirit of the hundredth day of protests, the appointed rector ordered the security personnel to close the gates to visitors in order to prevent them from participating in demonstrations against his contested position.

While I, alongside several other guests deemed unwanted, was trying to convince the security guards that the purpose of my visit was academic, a queer student showed up and started to yell at the security personnel: the campus belonged to scholars and students, the new rector and his oppressive policies were unacceptable, and we (the visitors) should not listen to or comply with what the security personnel had to say to stop us. When the officers responded angrily with assaults and indecent language about his gender display and sexual identity, the student did not get intimidated or back down as I would have expected. Instead, the student persisted, swore back at them, and said buoyantly, “We’re here to fight with you; we aren’t going to leave this place to you.” This encounter made me recognize the organized countermovement in the Boğaziçi habitat as a form of resistance to the emergent state homophobia in Turkey. The queered public of Boğaziçi is a prism to comprehend the changing sexual politics in the country.

The appointment of Bulu by the president of Turkey, Tayyip Erdoğan, ignited a wave of reaction, criticism, and disdain from the public. Academics

and students at Boğaziçi started protests and called for elections straight away. The unprecedented strong retort to and vociferous rejection of his decision pushed Erdoğan to take the issue as a personal affront, and an affront to the nature of his sovereignty. He stated in a self-absorbed manner that he “had found Bulu as suitable, worthy of becoming the new Boğaziçi rector,” and declared that the students who were protesting were “terrorists” (*Bianet* 2021a). The stigmatization of the students as terrorists materialized when police raided the on-campus office that was used jointly by the Women’s Studies Club (BUKAK) and the LGBTI+ Studies Club (BULGBTI+). Police confiscated rainbow flags and a book that recounts the history of PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party) as what they called evidence of an assumed connection to terrorist organizations and activities.¹

The conundrum I will be addressing in this essay is the following: What made the queer students’ actions and position within the university so central to this particular academic and governmental crisis? What were the conditions that made them so vulnerable and, from the point of view of the state, so illegitimate and threatening?

In this essay, I argue that the LGBTI+ and queer students at Boğaziçi showcase to a certain extent the recent queering of sexualities in Turkey (Özbay 2017) with their destabilizing and nonbinary gender/sexual identities, political struggles against heteronormativity and homonormativity, and recalcitrant demands for creating safe public spaces of performative, intimate, and challenging visibility. State homophobia emerges as a response to the students’ demands and to the institutional culture that enables the making of a queer public through activism and resistance. Beyond aiming to strengthen the gap between straights and queers, state homophobia draws a distinction between acceptable and abject queers. However, as it unfolds in the case of the Boğaziçi resistance, heterosexuals are convinced that if the state is allowed to intrude into the LGBTI+ lives, theirs will be exposed to threats as well. In other words, straights are free only as much as queers are. Hence, the resistance against the appointed rector is queered as the university is queered through the resistance.

Queers on Campus

The recent troubling confrontation between the LGBTI+ people at Boğaziçi and state homophobia is not the first incident of this kind at Boğaziçi. For instance, a conference titled “Queer, Turkey, Identity” to be held at the rectorate building in 2004 had also caused trouble. The president of the Council of

Higher Education (YÖK, the national bureaucratic authority that supervises universities in Turkey) called the then rector and inquired about the event that was publicized by the press. Embarrassed and angry, the rector went to the conference room and strove to interrupt the presentations about sexualities and intimacies. The professors who organized the conference resisted, and the rector had to leave without being able to cancel the event. In 2015, the Boston Gay Men Chorus performed at Boğaziçi University after their Istanbul concert was canceled at the last minute as a result of political pressure. In 2019, a student from BULGBTI+ adapted the Turkish national anthem's lyrics to queer slang in a humorous way in an email sent to club members. When the email came out publicly, the club was accused by the Islamist, pro-government press of ridiculing and disrespecting national values. The student faced a minor disciplinary penalty, and the rectorate demanded that the student club apologize and keep a low profile. The then rector (also selected by the president) prevented the Boğaziçi Pride Parade from marching between the two campuses on the street and confined the event to the university premises. After a while, the university administration asked the queer students not to shout sexually explicit (indeed playful and mocking) slogans, such as *faşizme karşı bacak omza*—meaning, “leg to shoulder [the piledriver] against fascism.”

There have been many other examples of the perturbing relation between queer students and the previous university administration, especially since the former emerged as an active and visible group in Turkey in the last two decades. However, the situation has never been so bleak as in the days following Bulu's appointment. Bulu and his associates attacked the visibility and culture of LGBTI+ students to reinforce and legitimize his contested post. Meanwhile, the rector canceled BULGBTI+'s “candidate student club” status, which implies its formal closure. The closure was announced by the president's office—which added to the unending series of procedural flaws and malpractices to the process.

Indeed, Bulu might not be acting alone. Following Erdoğan, the Islamist press was claiming that the BULGBTI+ were “sympathetic to terrorists.” The Istanbul Governorship released a press statement claiming that among students detained at the protests were members of the “LGBT-I.” By using this hyphenated spelling, the governor's office was metamorphosing the struggle for sexual freedom into an illegal or antistate organization (most underground leftist or Islamic group acronyms have a hyphen, as in DHKP-C or IBDA-C). The interior minister declared that “four LGBT deviants that disrespected religion at Boğaziçi University were captured.”² During the

students' pretrial hearing for the accusation of disparaging religious (Islamic) symbols on campus, the judge asked them if they were "members of the LGBT," suggesting that it was an insurgent organization. Inspectors from the Interior Ministry went to municipalities governed by opposition parties to ask if they had any "LGBT activities" to report. The minister of Family and Social Services posted a tweet saying, "There is a global movement that wants to normalize homosexuality and make it a norm." The dismissed imam of Hagia Sophia,³ who happens to be a theology scholar, made a public call for the founding of a "national social media platform," in which people "could exercise the freedom to criticize Israel and LGBT"—Israel being the traditional enemy of the Islamists, and LGBT being the new, emerging one to be apprehensive about.

President Erdoğan also retorted that "Turkey's youth" was loyal to national and moral values and were consequently not LGBTI+ (*Bianet* 2021b). After Erdoğan's vilification, state and government organs, official spokesmen, and their so-called troll accounts on social media reiterated his hostile attitude. One direction that these discursive attacks took was to frame the students and demonstrations as an LGBTI+ insurgence and describe the issue as a moral crisis. This frame aimed at stigmatizing the protestors as abject and the protests as illegitimate, criminal, and unlawful, while simultaneously serving to consolidate an imagined, pro-government moral majority that is assumed to be positioned automatically against the LGBTI+ rights and sociability.

Boğaziçi University is often seen as a liberal and empowering place for minorities. The multiplicity of active student clubs is a very important aspect of this environment. Thus, the closure of BULGBTI+ had a huge impact on the inclusive and pro-diversity philosophy and reputation of the university.

I talked to four Boğaziçi students (whom I will quote from farther below) from a variety of backgrounds, majors, political views, and gender and sexual identities in order to learn about their experiences and feelings. They emphasized how BULGBTI+ meant possibilities for meeting, socialization, networking, self-confidence, and *gullüm* (joyous fun time). They said the club is their "home at Boğaziçi," it provides a "safe space" on campus, and it is crucial for the formation of political consciousness, identity, and activism. BULGBTI+ gives "a *queer* education, not just gay, but strange" (Bollen 2020: 260; emphasis original), for the students who strive to live in a relatively less homophobic and more embracing environment. The closure of the club thus reveals the desire to silence queer students and erase the accumulated knowledge and affective experiences.⁴ In this sense, Boğaziçi University is intentionally turned into a target of state homophobia enforced by

the appointed rector with the support of the state—including its ideological apparatuses and law enforcement units.

State Homophobia

The state in Turkey has merged with the consecutive AKP (Justice and Development Party) governments in the last two decades and produced a compound, seemingly inseparable end product. What is experienced at Boğaziçi reminds me of Katherine Verdery's (2018: 21) formulation of the state, which "has organizational, territorial, and ideological aspects. On the one hand, it has a very material existence. . . . On the other, extensive ideological work by groups within it goes into creating the impression that a state is a real actor, which 'does' things." The party-state in the liminal and polarized context has evolved into a *real actor* embodied in security officers, rectors, ministers, imams, judges, governorships, the police, social media trolls, and all others who echo them. What we have witnessed at Boğaziçi University and the statements made by *state actors* are both an intensification and stabilization of state homophobia in Turkey.

The early conceptualization of homophobia was problematized as individualizing and psychologizing the circumstances instead of underscoring the systematic "sexual oppression in general" (Plummer 1981: 62) and hiding that it was a "political problem rooted in social institutions and organizations" (Kitzinger 1987: 154). Recently, homophobia was retheorized (sometimes as *political* or *official* homophobia) through the constellation of social and political structures and complex cultural logics that undergird violent and abusive practices and expressions that target queers across different social situations (Mendos 2019; Murray 2009; Weiss and Bosia 2013).

I argue that state homophobia refers to a series of articulated hatred, fear, disgust, and dehumanization discourses regarding LGBTI+ and queer identities, communities, movements, and politics by various organs of the state and representatives of the government in an organized manner. Rooted in a secular policy and modernizing orientation, the Turkish Republic has never officially made queer individuals illegal or imposed punitive measures on their same-sex sexual acts despite its unquestionably heteronormative tendencies (Özbay and Öktem 2021; Savcı 2021). But public authorities have repeatedly rejected, marginalized, and condemned queer bodies, visibilities, and actions via religious, nationalist, fundamentalist, traditionalist, and statist grounds despite the fact that discrimination among citizens is forbidden by the constitution in Turkey.

The recent increase and systematization of homophobic assaults (depicting them as sinners, terrorists, or deviants) and the denial of the existence of queer citizens by state officials point to dangerous and daunting circumstances that may legitimize and cause in-person attacks, risk, and harm as well as a possible rollback of democratic gains, rights, and mechanisms that must be secured in an inclusive and diverse society. In this sense, recent positive examples may provide a more balanced and even optimistic understanding that is flourishing in society against state homophobia. The Republican People's Party (CHP) and People's Democratic Party (HDP), for instance, put forward LGBTI+ candidates in national and local elections; some municipalities celebrated Pride Week on their official Twitter and Facebook accounts with the now-banned rainbow flags; many queer student clubs, formal associations, and NGOs have been legal and active for almost two decades; the popular hashtag “#LGBTIhaklariinsanhaklaridir” (#LGBTIrightsarehumanrights) has been shared on social media by many intellectuals, public figures, and opinion leaders, including even some right-wing politicians. And despite the recent state-led wave of homophobic criminalization and demonization at Boğaziçi University, neither students (irrespective of political stance) nor most of the student clubs rejected or condemned queer students.

Respected Citizens versus Terrorist Queers

The encounter between the Boğaziçi University protests and state homophobia transmuted into a symbolic opposition between the state's “desirable” (heterosexual) citizens and the “rebellious,” “unruly,” “immoral,” and “terrorist” queers. The underlying state logic in this opposition is that one cannot choose to be queer but can choose not to be aligned with social and political others of the state. Supporting this logic, President Erdoğan had once declared, “Those *marginals*, who appear in the streets of Beyoğlu, can stay in this country as one of its colors if they remain *within moral boundaries*” (*Cumhuriyet* 2018; emphasis mine). The Beyoğlu district Erdoğan referred to is home to Gezi Park and Taksim Square, where queers wanted to celebrate the LGBTI Pride Parade as they were able to do before it was banned in 2015. Although Erdoğan didn't explicitly say so, it is possible to interpret the president's words as a warning against queers who demand equal rights and public visibility through challenging, destabilizing, and unapologetically performing their identity against the compulsory heteronormative matrix. Thus, this was a tacit threat to the queers to remain within the limits of acceptability, respect, and tolerance.

Such an interpretation would encourage queers in Turkey to be homonormative subjects, who don't provoke or disrupt heteronormativity, who accept being a mere color within diversity, and who respect the boundaries of an imagined public morality: a group whose existence is condoned as long as they act "unassertively and accommodatingly" (Özbay 2021: 15). Consequently, the Turkish case would substantiate the claim that "the nation not only allows for homosexual bodies, but also actually disciplines and normalizes them; the nation is not only heteronormative, but also homonormative," in Jaspir Puar's words (2007: 50).

Through the queering of sexualities in Turkey in the last decade, gay orientation and identification shifted toward a more destabilizing, unapologetic disposition with the celebration of gender fluidity, sexual diversity, unfixed identities, and disobedient bodily performances in both intimate and communal spaces. BULGBTI+ has exemplified and even led this trend. By self-identifying as LGBTI+ and queer, these (mostly younger) people were politicized against both the gender and sexual mainstream of heteronormativity as well as the desired proper gay men (and to a lesser extent, women) of homonormative precepts. The "self-responsibilized" homonormative subject is supposed to be complicit with hegemonic structures that legitimize the multilayered social inequality. Reclaiming the heteronormative public space for queer public visibility, performance, sexuality, and safety becomes a significant aspect of sexual politics—which is what the state in Turkey is deliberately against, as evident in the prohibition of the pride parade, the state interventions to the scripts of television series in order to censor gay characters, and the security guards' (another state actor) homophobic assaults on the queer visitors in urban parks (Tanis 2020).

Local and National Queers

In Turkey, the citizens' right and capacity not to be devout, conservative, nationalist/patriotic, or traditionalist, ergo the right to inhabit somewhere outside the discursive justification of the state, has been seemingly on hold in the last decade. The state organs reiterate and exalt the value of being, feeling, or acting on phantasmagoric "local and national values." It is almost a mundane matter to be called a terrorist or a traitor because of the choices one is supposed to have a right to make freely.

As one of the four Boğaziçi students I interviewed, Canburak, puts it, for example, "They [the statesmen, the Islamist press] didn't directly say that we should shut BULGBTI+ down. That's why they planted the book and

called us terrorists. Actually, they don't accept *lubunya* [queers] who are not local and national."

Another, Derya, says that there were no hostile reactions against *lubunya* people at Boğaziçi if they did not go beyond what was allowed: "They call it the threshold of provocation. If you'll provoke us, you'll suffer the consequences. And when it happens, you have to say I'm Muslim, I'm with my state, to save yourself. Know your place and don't transgress. The state retaliates when it thinks that you're not standing with it." What has happened recently at Boğaziçi, with the precursors and the backlash, is the harsh response to the active refusal of homonormative prescriptions by this group of students around BULGBTI+. It is also a response to the institutional milieu and cultural-political context that facilitates the formation of a queer public. This is not a form of simple homophobia generated and disseminated by the state. Going beyond that, it is simultaneously a warning to young citizens who reject being homonormative (respectable, decent, normalized) and instead choose to come out and come together, get organized, turn to activism, get politicized, criticize, and resist. The state in Turkey, with all its power and state actors, does not only communicate the message "don't be queer" in toto; it also conveys the message "don't be queer in the way that we dislike and forbid." Thus, state homophobia emerges not only in the differentiation between gay and straight identities but also in the homonormative hierarchization among queers (Benedicto 2014; Özbay 2021).

Queering and Resisting

The four students I talked to (Derya, Canburak, Berk, and Ogun) and their friends from the BULGBTI+ network felt terrified and mesmerized when they unexpectedly came up against state homophobia, the rebuke on social media, being labeled as deviant by the minister of interior and terrorist by the president, and police incursions into students' homes. They said they stayed somewhere else instead of their homes for a while during the police attacks, and it was unsustainable to be constantly too scared to sleep in their beds at night. However, these extreme psychological conditions and material hardships did not make them change their minds and move away either from the Boğaziçi resistance or BULGBTI+. They deem themselves at the center of the resistance, the club as a *catalyst*. Berk notes that they have been active since the beginning of the protests with their rainbow flags, hence they are the most visible, most shunned, and most attacked group. Ogun observes that they "were on top of the public agenda because of the art piece that

brings together the Kaaba with the flags of sexual minorities,” although BULGBTI+ declared that the contested artwork was not their production and that they did not know about it until the state-led Islamic circles accused the club members of disrespecting religion.

So far, BULGBTI+ has been stigmatized with scorning national values (by queering the national anthem’s lyrics) and religion (by exhibiting that particular work of art) as well as accused of being related to terrorism because of the PKK book. It has been presented as the perfect other to what is assumed to be national and local (and moral). Still, the now-forbidden rainbow flag is transmogrified into the symbol of resistance as it ubiquitously emerges everywhere, including in the hands of the professors, who stand with their backs to the rectorate building every day to protest. Canburak says that “most of the academics weren’t always so welcoming toward queer politics, they didn’t pronounce the word LGBTI in the past. The resistance made them understand the contours of the struggle and incorporate us.”

Derya underscores a significant point regarding the dynamics between the sexual minority and the heterosexual majority within the university community:

Queers and straights share the same anxieties about what sort of a life we’ll have, how will we be able to use our bodies. The state tried to instrumentalize queers to alienate straights from us and stop the resistance. However, it had the opposite effect: everybody saw that when the state intervenes into queer activity, it signals and justifies that it can intervene in straights’ lives as well. Straight students and professors saw that freeing us means freeing themselves from the state’s bullying.

In Turkey, the rainbow flag was appropriated and used as a symbol for LGBTI+ liberation in tune with global cultural trends in the late 1990s. State organs and actors have recently redefined it as a sign of impropriety and delinquency and hence transformed it into a symbol that belongs to contradictory social imaginations and cultural uses through the “shared significance” (Griswold 2013: 20) that it gathers from both sides. The rainbow flags demonstrated to the public that not everyone in the Boğaziçi resistance was heterosexual and queers were also present. When the state forcefully bans the rainbow flag and takes students under custody—by presuming or presenting them as queers—heterosexual students face homophobic treatment. Derya emphasizes that “this is the formation of a new subjectivity and the queering of Boğaziçi and the resistance.” What Derya means was crystallized in a challenging and transformative event, when several cisgender and

heterosexual students shouted the slogan “We are all trans” (“Hepimiz dön-meyiz”) in front of the rectorate building.

As I am writing this essay, the Boğaziçi resistance is still going on and the university community continues to reject the administration. The resistance has been spectacularly queered by the state’s decision to shut down BULGBTI+ and the queer students’ unfailing tenacity. More importantly, the university is queered through the resistance, as BULGBTI+ and the rainbow flags turned into the symbols of resistance that virtually everyone knows, accepts, and shares.

Notes

- 1 The club members I talked to claimed that the book did not belong to them and that police planted it during the search to blame the BULGBTI+.
- 2 The club members I talked to said that the contested artwork that put together an image of the Kaaba with the flags of sexual minorities wasn’t related to them. They could not identify the four distinct flags on the image during our conversations. They said they did not like the art piece, but they would defend the right to produce and exhibit art freely.
- 3 Built in 537 as a church by the Eastern Roman Empire, Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque by Ottomans in 1453. The modern-secular Turkish Republic transformed Hagia Sophia into a museum. Erdogan reconverted it into a mosque in 2020 in order to satisfy the demands of the Islamist minority and demonstrate his counterrevolutionary predispositions. The imam of the new Hagia Sophia Mosque was symbolically the most important imam in the country.
- 4 Homosexual and queer students at Boğaziçi University got organized around the idea of a social club some twenty years ago (Firat 2001).

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