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Ramadan in a hot June: Slowing Work in Fasting Time

Turkey has been going through difficult times since last year when the first bombs started exploding in metropolitan cities. Still, since Çorum is a small provincial city and less likely to be a target, people here were worried but feel relatively safe. Only after the loss of two persons from Çorum in the attack to the peace rally in Ankara on October 10, 2015, there were protests for a week. But in general people were calm. Last year the Peace Process¹ came to an end and military operations in Kurdish towns restarted. Most people in Çorum are indifferent to the destruction of these towns and believe that the operations are more or less legitimate; on the other hand, there was serious concern and anger in general as 'martyr funerals' (as they are called, i.e. funerals of Turkish soldiers who are killed in action) in Çorum have become more frequent than before. Almost a month ago, when people saw the coup attempt live on television, they started gathering in front of the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) building and since then every evening there is a crowd of mainly AKP supporters but also some supporters of other parties in the centre of Çorum. They chant, wave flags, blow horns; last weekend a folk singer gave a concert to the crowds. As the coup danger faded away, the protests have turned into a social event.



After the recent coup attempt in Turkey, 'Democracy Watch' demonstrations in Çorum, 16 July.

Nonetheless, none of the political developments in the last year have disturbed the rhythm of regular working life. People followed the news on social media all day at work and took slightly longer breaks than normal during work hours to discuss about what is going on. But the workday routine was not interrupted. It was only during the month of Ramadan in June-July

that I realized some business owners were planning to change the organization of the working day, according to what they think is more suitable to the fasting hours. In this short blog, I want to set aside the extraordinary political situation in Turkey and focus on irregular work arrangements and time apprehension specific to Ramadan every year.

In his seminal essay, "Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism" (1967), E. P. Thompson argues that the transition to industrial capitalism is marked with a shift in the apprehension of time from task orientation to time discipline. He shows that in a pre-industrial context, the craftsman or the peasant mastered their own time, enjoyed work in its natural rhythm and carried on their rural customs. Later, small workshop manufacturing was still conducted in a task-oriented manner, accompanied with irregular labour patterns and the working year was punctuated by traditional holidays. With the changes in manufacturing techniques, which demand greater synchronization of labour and a greater exactitude, and with the diffusion of clocks, a distinction between the employers' time and workers' time appeared. Early rising, punctuality, regularity and order have been imposed as the new virtues against idleness and laziness. The employers now applied the rule of the "time-sheet, the time-keeper, the informers and the fines" (82) so that time was not wasted or passed but spent productively. The transition Thompson is describing is accompanied by a stark demarcation of work and life, individualization, loss of sense of a community but at the same time with great advancements in society and class solidarity to gain back their "own time".

Thompson's arguments have been very influential in both historical and anthropological studies of work and labour. Many scholars have followed his framework and revealed other and further aspects of work discipline, while others have critically engaged with some of his arguments. I want to bring forward two of the critical voices that are relevant to my case. One is Whipp (1987) who argues that the transition from task orientation to time orientation might not have been so straightforward. He asserts multiple time-reckoning systems have continued to operate simultaneously in industrial capitalism and suggests studying the multiplicity of these time reckoning systems and their degrees of imposition at the levels of sector, community and enterprise. Second is Gutman's (1988) point that workers did carry on their pre-industrial traditions and customs to the modern factory system and that these habits played a crucial role in helping them adapt to the modern factory system. In my case, I do not mean religious customs are necessarily pre-industrial, but the fasting hours in question here are determined according to sunrise and sunset, which correspond to the prayer calls made from mosques. In this respect at least, the fasting schedule is based on a pre-industrial time apprehension and therefore incompatible with the work hours of the modern life. Hence a variety of arrangements is invented that differ, based on sector, community and enterprise.

In Islam, as in many other belief systems, fasting is regarded as a religious duty. The purpose

of fasting is to discipline the body and to strengthen the faith. Those who follow the Sunni tradition, fasting during the month of Ramadan, as indicated by the Hijri calendar², means restraining from all worldly pleasures such as eating, drinking, smoking and sexual behaviour, from sunrise to sunset. The unorthodox Muslims, Alevis, on the other hand, fast in the month of Muharrem for 20 days. This follows the same logic as in Sunni fasting, but in addition to the fasting Alevis do not drink water³ for the whole 20 days, commemorating the Caliph Ali's son Hüseyin's army having been left thirsty for days and slaughtered by Ummayyad Caliph Yazid. Alevis rarely fast during Ramadan and there is a significant percentage of Sunnis who do not fast. Still the majority do fast and the municipality organizes Ramadan celebrations with prayers and social events in the evenings, unlike during the month of Muharrem which is never reflected in public life.



Nostalgic horse carriages for tours during Ramadan.

During the Ramadan daytime, however, most places are like a ghost town. Here in Çorum, most restaurants and cafés on the main streets are closed until the evening prayer, except for a few student cafés in city centre and those few in the Alevi neighbourhood and the upper district where mainly middle class people live. These latter are full from the breakfast time to late night, especially in lunch breaks, probably making the best profit of the year. Others, on the other hand, organize evening meals to break the fast, called *iftar*, and so compensate for their loss in daytime.

The special situation this year was that the month of Ramadan started on the 6th of June and ended on the 5th of July, when the seasonal length of daytime was the longest of the year (from 3-4 AM to 8-9 PM) and it was around 38 degrees Celsius all day. People who don't work and do fast spend most of the days at home sleeping throughout the hot day, as they go to bed only after their last meal at 3 AM. Those who work in the normal workday hours from 8 AM to 6PM are exhausted. You can observe the movements of such people as slowing down; they think slower, talk slower, postpone appointments, only deal with things they find necessary or utterly important. The ones who have the luxury to slow down are mostly the bosses, but it is inevitable for workers to slow down as well. Of course, there are people who do not fast; especially in the small industrial zone it was my impression that many did not. They eat and drink in some of the open restaurants and smoke less and secretly.





Modest lunch during Ramadan in the industrial zone.

One of the car repair shop owners who doesn't fast, for example, was complaining about his business slowing down because other workplaces and clients fast and that people rarely come for car repair in normal daytime. I argue that where there exists a cultural/religious time apprehension simultaneously with time discipline⁴, the one seems to make the other very difficult. In fact, religious time apprehension seems to sabotage the profit-making urge that is crucial to the time discipline. I want to give three examples for alternative work arrangements from three firms in different sectors, ran by people from different communities (Sunni and Alevi in our case) to portray how multiple time reckonings coexist.

Changing the work hours in Ramadan is not only specific to restaurants and cafés, it is also practiced in the industrial zone of Çorum. The general attitude in this zone, where there are mainly middle-size factories, is to shorten the work hours by 2-3 hours and let the workers go home early. I heard in some workplaces, the bosses have their workers work 2-3 hours more in the previous month to compensate the missing hours in Ramadan, but this is a rare case and might be a rumour. Obviously, the work in these factories depends on the use of physical labour and so cultural/religious time apprehension seems to lead to an ethical stand on the side of the bosses.

In one specific example of a machine producing-factory I observed, the work hours were shortened and adapted to the fasting hours. The daily 8 AM-6:30 PM was shifted to 4 AM-12AM for the blue-collar workers and 8 AM to 5PM for the white-collar workers. At the same time, daily lunch service was cancelled for a month, the cook and the tea serving personnel were given a month long paid holiday⁵. The idea behind this arrangement is to utilize the workers' most efficient and productive hours, and to have them start work just after the early morning prayer which follows the early morning meal (*sahur*). According to this arrangement, it is believed that working while fasting would be less exhausting and respecting the workers' customs would play a role in helping workers adapt to the modern factory system,

as Gutman suggested. When I spoke to most of the workers, they seemed to like this arrangement, because they get to sleep after work until the evening prayer and then get up to eat the first meal (*iftar*). However, there were other workers who were complaining not about hunger or not being able to smoke, but sleeplessness. One was saying: "My eye lids start falling down, when I see the sun rising around 6" and other, who was an operator, was saying: "Well, I cannot sleep in daylight, so I sleep when I start the operator, put my head down and sleep, if the manager warns me, I say sorry." I have also heard from other workers that for example one disappears for almost 20 minutes with the excuse of going to the toilet or the prayer room and sleeps there. Not only the blue-collar but also white-collar workers including the manager rest in the prayer room during the noon prayer. One day, the accountant came back to the office in a rush saying that he fell asleep in the prayer room, another day I heard that the woman in the technical drawing department disappeared for almost 2 hours sleeping in the kitchen. So, the lunch break, which is not an hour but shortened to half an hour in Ramadan, is prolonged for those who fast.

The reason I underline "for those who fast" as a phrase is because idleness, laziness, and time passing would otherwise never be allowed in this workplace in the normal routine. This was a shock to me since I know the workers check in and out of the workplace every morning and evening with their ID cards, being late or absent without notice is fined by deducting the hours from the annual leave days, and using cell phones or chitchatting among workers is not allowed in the manufacturing area nor in the offices. Rules were strict and wasting time was not tolerated during the months of my observation in this workplace. However, now all of this was not only seen but tolerated. What is not considered in this arrangement is the possibility that some blue or white-collar workers might not be fasting. I only know that one of the blue-collar workers declared he did not fast due to health reasons and I can imagine that none of the others would dare to say he/she is not fasting in conditions where everyone is and there is no food or water, even if one does not fast. There is an almost visible pressure that one should fast, if of Sunni belief, otherwise people would disapprovingly comment with a facial gesture: "Hmmm..." The exceptions to this are two Alevi white-collar woman workers, one of them is the secretary, the other is the accountant, and thirdly, the partner to the company, who himself is a non-religious Sunni, and fourth, his recently graduated son who just started working in the factory. They were the only people who did not fast openly; nevertheless, they had no lunch being served for a whole month. The reason why one of these partners and his son had to endure hunger a whole month was because the other partner, who is a devout Sunni, recruited most of the workers from his village of origin and was also in charge of managing them, creating most of the workplace rules. The non-religious Sunni partner dealt with the engineering work. Nevertheless, he, his son and the two Alevi women workers had to order lunch or just eat some feta cheese, tomato and bread behind a closed kitchen door for a

month. The Alevi secretary had to fill in for the tea lady (who had paid leave), whenever there was a guest who requested tea. All of this created tensions and especially the two Alevi women had to swallow their words for a while and pretend they were not discriminated. What I am getting at here is the fact that just as time discipline is imposed, the religious time apprehension and the ethics that go with it is also imposed on the non-fasting people in the workplace. And that even goes for the boss himself.

My second example is from a marketing company, where the boss is a very liberal Alevi man and he runs the business together with his wife. In this workplace, the working hours are quite flexible due to the nature of the work and do not require continuous presence in the office. Furthermore, some of the accountants and storekeepers occasionally stay late without an off the clock payment, unlike the factory I mentioned above. Still, in this workplace, there is no change in the work hours, because it is not possible as it was for the manufacturing sector. Lunch is served as normal during Ramadan. The only rule they had was not to bring down food or drinks from the dining hall upstairs to the offices downstairs. The idea behind this rule is to show respect to those who fast and not to tempt their desires while they fulfil their religious duty. In this workplace, too, those who fasted were tolerated, when they went to the first-aid room for a short nap during work hours. The boss, who did not fast, would joke about those fasting commenting on their slowness and clumsiness towards the end of the workday, but still he and his wife did not make a big deal out of the naptime. Since this place was a friendlier working environment from the start with less strict rules, I was not shocked as I was in the previous example. Still, here too, existed a multiple time reckoning but without the imposition of the religious time apprehension.

The third example is the one that shocked me most. This workplace is not one of the places I observed at length, unlike the other two examples I gave above. I made observations only in a three-hour visit to the place during an in-depth interview. This place designs windowpanes; it is quite a difficult job that requires physical strength. The boss was devout Sunni running the business with his young son and daughter. They have not changed the working hours nor shortened them, yet at the same time cancelled the lunch service and sent the dining hall staff on vacation. The boss' daughter told me that almost half of the workers were Alevis. At least, in this case, the workplace was not in the industrial zone but in another area, where workers can easily reach some open restaurants, so the non- fasting workers could order lunch for themselves. And those fasting could rest in the meanwhile. The striking part was when the daughter told me: "I am sorry, I don't know if you are fasting, but even if you're not, we cannot serve you tea or anything because we cannot have people drink tea in front of us when we are all fasting." She was so self-righteous, so sure that what she just said was morally correct, I did not reply. This was a striking contrast to the machine-producing factory I mentioned in my first example, where they had at least offered tea or coffee to their guests and had a less imposing

attitude towards those who do not fast, be it their workers or not.

In all the examples above, I found that there is a religious time apprehension during Ramadan. Almost without exception the employers tolerate idleness even if they don't like it, partially because they empathize and partially because they cannot do anything about it. Multiple time reckonings coexist, but as Whipp has underlined it depends on the enterprise, community or sector. I have tried to demonstrate in the three examples above that the manufacturing sector is more flexible in arranging work hours and food service for the benefit of those fasting but might discriminate others who do not. The degree of imposition of religious time apprehension at the work place varies according to which community the bosses belong to; partnership of one devout and one non-religious Sunni, only Alevi and only Sunni. In any case, the month of Ramadan is full of endurance, agony and hunger for all those who fast and who do not. This situation might be framed in a discussion of a Weberian ascetism. For now, suffice to say people have hardly any motivation for working with a growling stomach on a very hot summer day.

References:

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Notes

¹ This included negotiations between the Turkish government and the pro-Kurdish Party PKK (Partiya Karkeren Kurdistane) to end the 30 year long armed conflict.

² The Hijri calendar, also known as the Islamic calendar, is based on the lunar cycle and starts with the emigration of Prophet Mohammed from Mecca to Medina in 622 AD.

³ When they break the fasting, they drink other beverages, but no plain water because of the symbolic meaning explained above.

⁴ The car repair shop or many other workplaces alike operate in task-orientation logic, but at the same time early-rising and exactitude are highly valued, so again the transition is not so straightforward but that is the topic of another post.

⁵ Whereas the official annual leave would be 16 work days.

