CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Banality of Disruption: Diagnosing Order

Erol Köymen

Division of the Humanities, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA
Email: egmkoymen@uchicago.edu

In a seminal essay, Lila Abu-Lughod addresses "The Romance of Resistance," suggesting that widespread scholarly interest in unlikely and quotidian forms of resistance is romanticizing. Rather than identifying resistance as proof of the ineffectiveness of systems of power, she contends that scholars might more productively consider how resistance is embedded in, and can serve as a diagnostic of, power. Writing in a Foucauldian vein, she reminds "where there is resistance, there is power."[1] If Abu-Lughod cautions against romanticizing resistance, in this response I take up a similarly critical stance toward disruption. Following Abu-Lughod's formula and drawing on my own experience as an ethnographer of music and sound in Turkish modernity, I suggest that where there is disruption, there is order, and that disruption might therefore become a site for diagnosis of order.

The Fish Stinks from the Head

In my research on secularist listening, embodiment, and urban belonging in contemporary Turkey and Turkish diaspora, I consider how disruption increasingly contours the lifeworlds of Turkish secularists even as it affords the apprehension of emergent order. This diagnostic approach is illustrated well by a boardroom coup that rocked the venerable Istanbul Philharmonic Society toward the end of my extended fieldwork on practices of listening to Western art music and secular embodiment in Istanbul. Founded in 1945 by the Turkish Five composer Cemal Reşit Rey, the Istanbul Philharmonic Society was controlled by members of the traditional Turkish secularist elite during most of my time in the field. In late 2021, however, an ambitious but controversial member of the board, embattled by accusations of sexual harassment, called a special meeting in an unusual location to which a number of new members were invited. At the meeting, the board member mobilized the new members to claim the presidency and depose the existing leadership. As accusations flew that the new president would lead the society to ruin and that, moreover, they didn't even know who Cemal Reşit Rey was, the meeting devolved into physical violence. Many longtime members left the organization, saying that they had witnessed in miniature precisely those strategies and tactics routinely deployed by the current Turkish regime. There is a Turkish idiom, "the fish stinks from the head" (*balık, baştan kokar*), meaning that corruption starts from the top and then proceeds to consume the body politic. On that December 2021 day, my interlocutors no doubt found that an unpleasant smell disrupted their ostensibly elite lifeworlds. I myself gained new insight into the regime of disruption that reigns in 21st-century Turkey.

---

[1] Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 42.

Check for updates

Between Gezi Park, the coup attempt, natural disasters, state violence, rising authoritarianism, economic collapse and, of course, the pandemic, disruption has become ubiquitous in Turkey and in Turkish studies. Indeed, in the introductory essay to a 2019 special issue of the *South Atlantic Quarterly,* titled "Decline of the Republic," Bülent Küçük and Ceren Özselçuk describe a regime of disruption. They contend that the contemporary political climate is marked by a "double-breakdown"—the simultaneous demise of the secular nationalist republican imaginary and fraying of the current regime's liberal-Islamic synthesis. These have been replaced, they argue, by an aura of sovereignty cloaked in neo-Ottomanism and defined by transgression of law.[2] In other words, it is systematic disruption that now gives order to Turkish public life.

Disruption requires something to be disrupted—order. Order has obviously been one of the central concerns of modern social theory. The initial formulation is often attributed to Hobbes; subsequent theorizations of social order can be heuristically grouped along (Durhkheimian) culturalist and (Marxian) economic axes; perhaps the most widely cited account of order of the past half-century has been Michel Foucault's episteme theory.[3] An assumption of order, as represented by the ongoing centrality of extended ethnographic fieldwork through which local cultural and social dynamics might be systematically and rigorously apprehended, has also arguably been central to ethnographic research. I would submit, moreover, that this centrality persists, despite models of fragmented ethnography and the ethnographic study of social disruption, fragmentation, and change that have been at hand for several decades. A back of the envelope survey of recent ethnographic monographs on Turkey and the Middle East in anthropology and ethnomusicology that have significantly influenced my own work reveal a mostly unquestioned reliance on extended ethnographic fieldwork.[4]

With the increasing frequency and intensity of disruption over the past several years, however, the orderliness of ethnography has been called into question--most notably, the COVID-19 pandemic forced widespread disruption of field research. Nevertheless, my argument here is that ethnographers should be cautious about disrupting their fieldwork. I suggest that moments of disruption might become particularly fruitful sites at which to understand the operation and shifting of order. By resisting forces that would disrupt their fieldwork practices, while training their focus on discourses and processes of disruption, ethnographers might gain otherwise elusive insights into their field sites.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates this claim: it has been widely acknowledged that the disruption of the pandemic did not so much introduce radically new orders as further embed and accelerate the unfolding of already existing ones with their entrenched inequalities along lines of race, class, and gender.[5] At the same time, the pandemic is considered to have brought to widespread attention heretofore obscure foundations of social, economic, and political order, such as the indispensability of "front-line" workers and the complexity of global supply chains.

Like many other ethnographers working in Turkey over the past decade or so, my own ethnographic fieldwork has been forged in dialogue with disruption. In the remainder of this essay, I reflect on three ethnographic disruptions that helped me "diagnose" longstanding and emergent cultural, political, and social orders in Turkey and Turkish diaspora.

[2] Bülent Küçük and Ceren Özselçuk, "Fragments of the Emerging Regime in Turkey: Limits of Knowledge, Transgression of Law, and Failed Imaginaries," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 118, no. 1 (2019): 1–21.

[3] Dennis H. Wrong, *The Problem of Order: What Unites and Divides Society* (Free Press, 1994); Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994).

[4] Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Denise Gill, *Melancholic Modalities: Affect, Islam, and Turkish Classical Musicians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Jeremy Walton, *Muslim Civil Society and the Politics of Religious Freedom in Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[5] Theodore Powers and Jeremy Rayner, "Pathogenic Politics: Authoritarianism, Inequality, and Capitalism in the COVID-19 Crisis," *Open Anthropological Research* 1, no. 1 (2021): 159–66.

I first consider some ways in which the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic helped me clarify aspects of order at my primary field site. I then turn more briefly to earlier moments in which my ethnographic practice was contoured by disruption. I conclude with some reflections on the political intersections of ethnography and disruption.

Disruption of Ethnography

I was halfway through a planned year of fieldwork in Istanbul when the world stopped in March 2020. My focus was on practices of listening to Western art music in connection to questions of secular embodiment and urban belonging, and my principal research practices included participant observation at Western art music concerts across the city and face-to-face interviews with listeners and performers. Fieldwork thus ground quickly to a halt with the pandemic lockdowns. Nevertheless, not wanting to abandon my field site and return to the United States, I resolved to pivot my fieldwork toward the virtual, and I quickly dove into participant observation at the many live social media performances that mushroomed. However, I found this research to be of limited utility and, frankly, soul-sucking.

Fortunately, thanks to several factors—including Istanbul's mild summer climate, its many splendid outdoor concert venues, and, perhaps, the Turkish government's dubious COVID policies—concerts were back on within a few months and face-to-face interviews became possible once more. Back in the field amid the ongoing disruption of the pandemic, I had joyous reunions with many interlocutors. At a September 19 opening concert of the 2020 Istanbul Opera Festival in the garden of the Istanbul Archaeology Museum, for example, I was thrilled to see my interlocutor Mehmet Bey, a colorful and inveterate listener.[6] No matter where I went in Istanbul, how obscure the performer or venue, Mehmet Bey was always there. On September 19, he confided to me that he was at the concert illegally—he was referring to an evening curfew that was still in effect for people over 65 in Turkey. But, he said, he took the risk because there was a good train connection from his neighborhood. Anyway, he said, looking up at the façade of the archaeology museum, "I love this atmosphere."

In the weeks and months that followed, I found that atmosphere seemed to come up again and again. Indeed, in summer 2020 the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality organized a new series of Western art music concerts in a supremely atmospheric venue: the restored open court of the Byzantine Tekfur Palace. Speaking about concerts at Tekfur, my interlocutor Canan described her experience in highly atmospheric terms:

> In the open air, an old building. I wonder if there were people here who listened to this music? You know how concerts are usually held in the evening? With the darkening sky it's like a return to nature for me. It's the only time that I look around and I feel happy. It's a moment that you can't pin down, it's like, how nice that I caught it again.

When I asked her about the sources of the pleasure that she took from listening at Tekfur, she mentioned how it helped her to clear her mind and how she felt removed from Istanbul in the old building. She also noted that:

> There is the happiness of sharing a common pleasure and also perhaps the conceitedness. Like: we are together with the handful of people who think like me, come, let's be nice to each other. It could also be a kind of vanity of weakness. After all, we Turks are not people who have grown accustomed to this culture. I mean, classical music is something that came to us from outside. It has its roots in the Tanzimat. It didn't reach down to the people, either. Now, with the economy this embattled, and having lost so much

---

[6] I have given my interlocutors pseudonyms to protect anonymity.

social position, having possession of a pleasure and taste for something that didn't lower to the people might even seem like the only thing that we have.[7]

Music, of course, they could have at home, but the experience—the *atmosphere*—produced by listening together in particular Istanbul contexts was what many longed for and were willing to risk sickness and lawbreaking to reach.

Yet, as I looked back over my prepandemic field notes, I noticed that the term "atmosphere" and other similar concepts had surfaced consistently throughout my fieldwork. They had been particularly prevalent at concerts held in spaces that index European presence in Istanbul, such as the city's Protestant and Catholic churches. With these insights, I gained greater understanding of several layers of order. Drawing on a growing literature on sonic atmosphere, I was able to theorize how listening to Western art music produces new, atmospheric modes of belonging to the city of Istanbul for secularists amid its reshaping according to a neo-Ottoman order.[8] More than a focus on "the music itself," listening in these atmospheres produces a multisensory feel of Europe distinct from the surrounding city. At the same time, my interlocutor's invocation of the exclusivity of these contexts in contrast to "the people" also helped me understand the interaction of practices of listening with shifting class dynamics under right-wing populist social, cultural, and political regimes. In this way, the very disruption of my fieldwork—concerts in an unusual venue under precarious circumstances—helped me to grasp an important dimension of the work my interlocutors were doing by listening in an emerging social, cultural, and political order in Turkey. This was disruption *of* fieldwork that helped me grasp order.

Ethnography of Disruption

I arrived in Berlin in spring 2019 planning to investigate music and Turkish secularism in Berlin. Within a few weeks of my arrival, though, I became aware of a disruption to the status quo: an emerging community of predominately highly educated and professional migrants from Istanbul to Berlin identified as "New Wave" to mark a distinction from Berlin's long-standing Turkish diasporic communities. The discourse that I encountered accounted for this community in terms of the disruption of its lifeworld in Istanbul, resulting in a "brain migration" (*beyin göçü*) of urban professionals, academics, artists, and intellectuals unable or unwilling to continue their lives and careers in Turkey and attracted by Berlin's dynamic artistic and intellectual atmosphere, and, in many cases, its large queer community.[9]

---

[7] Author interview, 5 December 2020, Istanbul, Turkey.

[8] Jeremy F. Walton, "Practices of Neo-Ottomanism: Making Space and Place Virtuous in Istanbul," in *Orienting Istanbul: Cultural Capital of Europe?* ed. Deniz Göktürk, Levent Soysal, and İpek Türeli (London: Routledge, 2010): 88–103; Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2017); Patrick Eisenlohr, *Sounding Islam: Voice, Media, and Sonic Atmospheres in an Indian Ocean World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2018); Friedlind Riedel and Juha Torvinen, *Music As Atmosphere: Collective Feelings and Affective Sounds* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2020).

[9] "Almanya'nın yeni dalga göçmenleri," Deutsche Welle, 3 February 2020, https://p.dw.com/p/3XDIB; M. F. Çömlekçi and E. Bozkanat, "Alternatif Diasporanın Sosyal Medya İletişimi: 'New Wave in Berlin' Facebook Grubu Örneği," *Gümüşhane Üniversitesi İletişim Fakültesi Elektronik Dergisi* 7, no. 2 (2019): 932–52; Özlem Savaş, "Affective Digital Media of New Migration from Turkey: Feelings, Affinities, and Politics," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 5405–26; Gülay Türkmen, "'But You Don't Look Turkish!': The Changing Face of Turkish Immigration to Germany," Reset Dialogues on Civilizations, 27 May 2019, https://www.resetdoc.org/story/dont-look-turkish-changing-face-turkish-immigration-germany; Yusuf İkbal Oldaç and Nigel Fancourt, "'New Wave Turks:' Turkish Graduates of German Universities and the Turkish Diaspora in Germany," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 69, no. 5 (2021): 621–40; Özlem Savaş, "Rakı Table Conversations of Post-Gezi Migration from Turkey: Emotion, Intimacy and Politics," in *Material Culture and (Forced) Migration: Materializing the Transient,* ed. Friedemann Yi-Neumann, Andrea Lauser, Antonie Fuhse, and Peter J. Bräunlein (London: UCL Press, 2022), 171–91.

Taking stock of this disruption in the field, I decided to pivot my research to focus on New Wave Turkish performance and quickly dove into participant observation and interviews. However, as my research progressed, the position of disruption in my questions changed: I came to understand that a discourse of disruption was instrumental in constructing a New Wave Turkish migrant public along particular lines of order. One interlocutor, whom I encountered at the "Displaced-Replaced" festival that featured performances from recent Turkish migrants, explained to me how they chafed against the festival theme of displacement:

> The principal reason for my being [at the festival #disPlaced-#rePlaced] was to perform and to exhibit my work. . . . it was . . . as if we were flagellating ourselves . . . as if we were all in the position of captives. . . . I didn't come here as a refugee, I didn't come here as a captive, I didn't come for political reasons. . . . This is what we knew about the [festival] context: artists from Turkey. . . but I personally didn't know that it would be presented in such an absurd and extreme way as the art of people who have fled from Turkey for political reasons.[10]

In a resulting article, I argued that performance configured according to an aesthetics of displacement performatively situates New Wave migrant bodies and publics on counter-pathways between Istanbul and Berlin and between the discourses of hegemonic German society and an elite migrant background.[11] In other words, I claim that disruption was here discursively integral to upholding an order contoured by long-standing unequal power dynamics. However much displacement and novelty were emphasized on the discursive surface, the possibilities of identity and expression of recent migrants from Turkey to Berlin were constrained by this order. Through this fieldwork *on* disruption, I came to understand the work that discourses of disruption can do to maintain orders of social hierarchy and inequality.

Disruption As Ethnography

I did not realize that I was doing fieldwork as I sat in my family living room in Texas on the afternoon of 15 July 2016—one of many humdrum days during the summer preceding my move to Chicago for doctoral study in ethnomusicology. As soon as I became aware of a coup attempt in Turkey, however, I commenced anxious monitoring of Turkish and international media outlets: I watched the forced abandonment of the CNN Türk news desk, heard bombs hit the Turkish Parliament during an interview given from inside the building, and listened to Turkish officials try to reassure the public that the government was still in control. I was concerned about family and friends in Turkey, but, as a proto-ethnomusicologist, I was also increasingly fascinated by the state's mobilization of Islamic calls to prayer to motivate Turkish citizens to take to the streets, resist the coup, and restore order.

In the weeks and months that followed, songs and marches thematizing the coup resistance resounded in urban squares filled with millions of citizens taking part in "democracy watches," leading up to a massive "democracy meeting" in Istanbul on 7 August 2016. During this period and for several years thereafter, an ongoing state of emergency afforded drastic interruptions to Turkish public life. Indeed, the 2016 coup attempt was a key moment for the consolidation of a new social, cultural, and political order by the right-wing populist Turkish regime—a "New Turkey," in the Turkish president's own formulation—and sound played a key role in this process.

---

[10] Author interview, 16 May 2019, Berlin, Germany.
[11] Erol Koymen, "'Really, We Should Have Been Playing Saz in a Little Room': 'New Wave' Turkish Migrants, Performance, and Counterpathways of Incorporation in Berlin," *Ethnomusicology* 67, no. 1 (January 2023): 72–95.

A few months later, I would mold my virtually mediated experience of the coup attempt into my first major publication. In the article, I drew on ethnography forged in dialogue with disruption to analyze how Islamic calls to prayer indexing pious bodily attunements forged resistance to the coup and transformed Turkish urban spaces.[12] I did not realize it at the time, but this was the first fieldwork I ever conducted, and the ideas I developed then about listening, embodiment, and urban sound and space continue to be central in my research. I had participated—albeit, from my computer—and my observations informed my subsequent work. Even as I came to understand how sound helped herald a new order on 15 July 2016, I was myself forged as an ethnographer, becoming attuned to the profound role music and sound can play in the shaping and contesting of social order. This was disruption *as* fieldwork, in which I as ethnographer was forged in dialogue with disruption in real time.

Conclusion: Ethnography *As* Disruption?

Working out the permutations of my typology, what about ethnography *as* disruption? Anxiety over the disruptions that ethnographers might cause in the contexts in which they work, and calls to mobilize ethnography toward aims of political intervention, have grown common over the past several decades. This is the case not least in studies of music; music has often been romanticized as a site of resistance that might somehow lie outside the bounds of order. No doubt there is much to be said in favor of asking what ethnographers can do to help the often-marginalized communities with which they work, using the fine-grained, bottom-up, affectively textured knowledge that they produce.

Nevertheless, this is not the stance toward disruption that I advocate—at least, not in the case of contemporary Turkey. I maintain that there is more to be gained by working through than by wielding ethnographic disruption. In making this claim, I do not mean to reify existing order or evince a conservative attitude toward change. Rather, I follow thinkers like Caroline Levine and Wendy Brown, who point out the ubiquity of order in any change and affirm the crucial role of scholarly deliberation as counter to formless, antinomian, and nihilistic modes of postmodern and poststructuralist politics that have often dominated academic critique in recent decades.[13] However violent, disruption in Turkey and elsewhere has become ubiquitous—banal, even—and ethnographers have more to contribute by treating disruption as a site for diagnosis of order.

---

[12] Erol Koymen, "From Coups That Silence Ezan-s to Ezan-s That Silence Coups! Sonic Resistance to the 2016 Turkish Military Coup," *Current Musicology* 101 (2017): 99–124.

[13] Levine, Caroline, *The Activist Humanist: Form and Method in the Climate Crisis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023); Wendy Brown, *Nihilistic Times: Thinking with Max Weber* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2023).